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Article (Accepted version) (Refereed)

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November 14, 2000

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Abstract

In the voting-power literature the rules of decision of the US Congress and the UN Security Council are widely misreported as though abstention amounts to a 'no' vote. The hypothesis (proposed elsewhere) that this is due to a specific cause, *theory-laden observation*, is tested here by examining accounts of these rules in introductory textbooks on American Government and International Relations, where that putative cause does not apply. Our examination does not lead to a conclusive outcome regarding the hypothesis, but reveals that the rules in question are also widely misreported in these textbooks. A second hypothesis—that the widespread misreporting is explicable by the relative rarity and unimportance of abstention in the two bodies concerned—is also tested and found to be untenable.

Misreporting Rules

1 Introduction

This paper is closely related to Felsenthal and Machover (1997 and 2000), but can be read independently of those two papers, whose relevant findings we summarize here.

In Section 3 of Felsenthal and Machover (2000), a curious fact is noted: the decision rules of the United States Congress (USC) and the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) are systematically misreported in the literature on the measurement of a priori voting power.[1]

In each House of the USC, a member has three options in a division of the House: vote 'yes', vote 'no', or abstain; here abstention is a distinct *tertium quid*, which sometimes differs in its effect from a positive vote and sometimes from a negative vote.[2] Similarly, in a division of the UNSC on a substantive issue, each member has the same three options. While abstention by any one of the non-permanent members always affects the passage or defeat of the resolution in the same way as a 'no', abstention by a permanent member is a *tertium quid*, whose consequence may vary: sometimes it may be 'yes' and at other times 'no', depending on how all other members have voted.

Yet almost all writers on a priori voting power who discuss the decision rules of these two bodies ignore abstentions: they report the rules as though in any division a voter who does not vote 'yes' counts as voting 'no'. Among those who misreport these decision rules are some of the most prominent and distinguished scholars in the science of social choice.[3]

What can be the reason for such widespread, apparently systematic, misreporting of the facts? In Felsenthal and Machover (1997 and 2000) it is hypothesized that the explanation lies in what philosophers of science have called *theory-laden observation*: scientists often 'see' what their theory conditions them to expect.[4] In this they are indeed like ordinary folk; theory-laden

[1] For a briefer treatment, see Felsenthal and Machover (1997, Section 4); cf. also Felsenthal and Machover (1998, Section 8.1).

[2] For rare exceptions—procedural divisions in which abstention always amounts to a 'no'—see below, beginning of Section 2.

[3] For references to instances of such misreporting and to the few exceptional correct reports see Felsenthal and Machover (1997); greater detail and some quotes will be found in Felsenthal and Machover (2000).

[4] Cf. Hanson (1958) and Kuhn (1962). Perhaps a more accurate term in the present context is *theory-biased observation*.

observation has been compared to the commonplace phenomenon of optical illusion: we are 'deceived' by our senses into perceiving what our past experience and (usually unconscious) suppositions lead us to expect.[5]

The hypothesis of theory-laden observation seemed appropriate in the present case because the mathematical model that was generally used in the theory of a priori voting power—Shapley's (1962) *simple game*, aka *simple voting game*—is strictly binary: it admits only 'yes' and 'no' votes but has no room for abstention.[6] It was therefore reasonable to suppose that social-choice theorists had inadvertently forced their observations on real-life decision rules into the mould of the binary mathematical model of their theory. After all, according to philosophers of science such theory-biased observations are quite common even in the 'hard' physical sciences.

However, it occurred to us that there might be a way of testing this hypothesis against a rival 'null' hypothesis: that the misreporting in question was due to simple ignorance or carelessness on the part of writers on voting power, reinforced (in the case of later writers) by a lazy tendency to repeat what earlier eminent writers had said, without bothering to check the facts.

A good test would be provided by introductory textbooks describing the workings of the USC or the UNSC. Authors of such books may be presumed free from prior theoretical commitment that would condition them to overlook the role of abstention.

If we could show that these textbooks tend on the whole to give an accurate account of the decision rules in question, this would provide powerful corroboration to the hypothesis that the misreporting prevalent in the voting-power literature is due specifically to theory-laden or theory-biased observation.

If, on the contrary, authors of textbooks on the US system of government and on international organizations—whose business after all is to inform students about the working of the USC and UNSC—were shown to be just as mistaken as writers on voting power, this would provide powerful evidence against that hypothesis and in favor of the null hypothesis.[7]

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[5]Cf. Gillies (1993).

[6]However, Felsenthal and Machover (1997; and 1998, Chapter 8) propose a model, *ternary voting rule*, for theorizing a priori voting power with respect to decision rules in which abstention is a distinct option.

[7]By sheer coincidence, our work on the present paper took place during the Clinton impeachment episode. We noted that the media, including those in the US, tended for the most part to state, incorrectly, that conviction of the President would require the 'guilty' vote of 67 Senators. However, we feel that this does not provide strong evidence against the hypothesis being tested, because journalists are not normally expected to be as meticulous

In the event, the result of this test turned out to be inconclusive. In the sample of textbooks we examined, most accounts of the relevant decision rules were not accurate. So the hypothesis that the misreporting in the voting-power literature is due to the effect of theory-laden observation does not gain any support. If anything, it now seems perhaps somewhat less plausible than before.

On the other hand, the textbook accounts are on the whole not as blatantly erroneous as those in the voting-power literature. Rather, they tend to be vague and misleading: they are typically phrased in a manner likely to mislead the unwary reader, but without necessarily saying explicitly anything that is obviously untrue. It could therefore be argued that the authors of these textbooks are perhaps perfectly aware of the facts, including the role of abstention, but the nature of their discourse—unlike that of the theory of voting power, which demands precise formulations—allows them to be vague. Thus the original hypothesis is not definitely refuted.

Despite the inconclusive outcome of the test as regards that hypothesis, we believe that what we have uncovered about the textbook accounts ought to be of some concern to the political-science community, and should therefore be made public.

Moreover, the present paper also contains a report of a subsidiary test that we have conducted. Seeing that the issue of abstention in the USC and UNSC is ignored in most accounts—both in the voting-power literature and in the introductory textbooks on the USC and UNSC—we conjectured that this might be due to the relative rarity and lack of significance of abstention in the actual decision making of these bodies. If it transpired that abstention was in fact a rare occurrence that had no significant effect on the outcome of divisions, then this would explain (if not quite excuse) the tendency of textbook writers on the operation of USC and UNSC, as well as writers on voting power, to ignore the issue of abstention in their theoretical discourse.

However, upon examination it transpired that this 'rarity hypothesis' is untenable.

The structure of the rest of this paper is as follows. In Section 2 we discuss the precise relevant decision rules of the USC and the UNSC and outline their history. In Section 3 we describe the sampling method we used for selecting textbooks that include an account of these decision rules. In Sections 4 and 5 we outline and classify the kinds of account given in these textbooks

as scholars; therefore we are less surprised when we discover that journalists are careless in reporting facts, or when they copy stories from one another without bothering to check them independently.

regarding the decision rules of the USC and UNSC, respectively. In Section 6 we examine the rarity hypothesis. Our findings and conclusions are discussed in Section 7.

2 The Rules

First, let us consider the USC. Article 1, Section 5(1) of the US Constitution stipulates that business in each of the two Houses of Congress can only take place if a (simple) majority of its members are present. Beyond this, the Constitution itself prescribes the rules of decision on some exceptional matters; but on all others leaves it to the two Houses to fix their own rules.

As far as we know, there are at present only two types of resolution that require approval by a prescribed proportion of the *entire* membership of a House. Senate Rule XXII (as amended by Senate Resolution 4 in 1975) prescribes that in order to invoke cloture (and thus limit debate) at least three-fifths of *all* Senate members—that is, currently at least 60 senators—must approve. Similarly, House Rule XXVII provides that any bill before a committee for longer than 30 days may be brought before the House of Representatives without committee approval, if a majority of the *entire* House—that is, currently at least 218 members—sign a petition that demands such action. (This rule prevents a committee or a committee chairman from 'bottling up' by failure to report a bill upon which the House desires to vote.) Thus in divisions on resolutions of these two types, abstention amounts in effect to a 'no' vote.

But these are rare exceptions. In all other divisions a member has three distinct options: voting 'yes', voting 'no', and abstaining.[8]

In each House, an ordinary bill (as distinct from a decision to override a presidential veto) is deemed to pass if the necessary quorum is present and a simple majority of the members *participating in the division* vote 'yes'. (The Vice President, in his role as President of the Senate, has only a casting vote which he may use to break ties.)

The rules mentioned so far are not prescribed by the US Constitution, but were adopted by the Houses themselves. Now let us turn to the decision rules prescribed by the Constitution.

The Constitution refers explicitly to members *present* in two instances, both concerning the Senate. Thus Article 1, Section 3(6) stipulates that in cases of impeachment the Senate's decision to convict requires the 'Concurrence of two thirds of the Members *present*' (our emphasis). So a President

[8]We use the term 'abstaining' to include also non-participation in or absence from the vote.

could, in theory, be convicted by the assent of just over one-third of all members, against the 'no' of just under one-sixth, with just under one-half of the members absent. Similarly, Article 2, Section 2(2), stipulates that the President 'shall have Power, by and with the Advice and Consent of the Senate, to make Treaties, provided two thirds of the Senators *present* concur' (our emphasis).

In case of a presidential veto, Article 1, Section 7(2) of the Constitution stipulates that overriding the veto requires the approval of 'two thirds of [each] House'; but it fails to say explicitly whether this means two-thirds of *all* members or just of those participating in the division. However, the latter interpretation was upheld by the US Supreme Court on January 7, 1919 (*Missouri Pacific Railway Co. v. State of Kansas*, 248 U.S. 276). Specifically, the Supreme Court ruled:

> "House", within Article 1, Section 7, Clause 2, of the Constitution, requiring a two-thirds vote of each house to pass a bill over a veto, means not the entire membership, but the quorum by [Article 1] Section 5 given legislative power.[9]

In their opinion the justices quoted Mr Reed, Speaker of the House of Representatives, [10] who had ruled in 1898 that:

> The question is one that has been so often decided that it seems hardly necessary to dwell upon it. The provision of the Constitution says, "two-thirds of both Houses", what constitutes a house? ... [T]he practice is uniform that ... if a quorum is present the House is constituted, and two-thirds of those voting are sufficient in order to accomplish the object.[11]

Next let us turn to the UNSC. Here the tale is similar but has an interesting additional twist. A plain reading of the decision rule stated in the UN Charter suggests that abstention counts in effect as a 'no' vote; but subsequent authoritative (albeit 'creative') interpretations of the rule have departed from the plain reading.

During the period 1945–1965 the UNSC consisted of 11 members—five permanent members and six others. In 1966 the number of non-permanent

[9] See *Supreme Court Reporter* (1920, p. 93).

[10] Thomas Brackett Reed (1839–1902), nicknamed 'Czar Reed', was Speaker in 1889–91 and 1895–99; he introduced the *Reed Rules* which provided, inter alia, that members present and not voting be counted for a quorum.

[11] *Supreme Court Reporter*, op. cit., p. 95.

members was increased from six to 10. The (original) Article 27 of the UN Charter stated:

> (1) Each member of the Security Council shall have one vote.
>
> (2) Decisions of the Security Council on procedural matters shall be made by an affirmative vote of seven members.
>
> (3) Decisions of the Security Council on all other matters shall be made by an affirmative vote of seven members including the concurring votes of the permanent members; provided that in decisions under Chapter Six [Pacific Settlement of Disputes], and under paragraph 3 of Article 52, a party to a dispute shall abstain from voting.

In 1966, when the UNSC was enlarged, the word 'seven' in clauses (2) and (3) was replaced by 'nine', but the wording was otherwise left unchanged. Ostensibly, the wording of Article 27(3) of the Charter implies that in non-procedural matters an explicit 'yes' vote by all permanent members is needed to pass a resolution. However, in practice, as of 1946 an explicit declaration 'I abstain' by a permanent member is not interpreted as a veto; and as of 1947 and 1950 the same applies to non-participation in the vote and absence, respectively, of a permanent member. So on non-procedural matters a resolution is carried in the UNSC if it is supported by at least nine (or, before 1966, seven) members and not explicitly opposed by any permanent member. Abstention by a non-permanent member has the same effect as a 'no' vote; but abstention by a permanent member is definitely a *tertium quid*.[12]

3 The Sampling Method

In order to estimate the extent of misreporting of the decision rules in both USC and UNSC in 'ordinary' texts on American Government and International Relations (that is, texts unrelated to the measurement of voting power), we used the following sampling method.

First, we decided to limit our search to introductory textbooks and general reference books written in English, thereby excluding books written in other languages as well as articles published in edited collections or in learned

[12]For details on the interpretation in practice of Article 27(3) of the UN Charter with respect to abstention, non-participation or absence of a permanent member, see Simma (1982, pp. 447–454) and references cited therein.

journals.[13]

Second, of the various decision rules currently used by the USC, we confined our attention here to the rule regarding the overriding of a presidential veto.[14]

We felt that the following sources would be the most likely to contain the kind of textbook we were looking for:

- Suitable course syllabuses developed by the American Political Science Association: namely, the syllabus collection for courses on American Government and Politics, included in Hershey (1991); and the syllabus collection for courses on Introduction to International Relations, included in Brady (1991).

- Books in the Library of Congress (LOC) (catalogued since 1898) whose title contains the words 'American Government'; and those classified under 'United Nations—Charter', or 'International Organizations—Politics and Process'.

- The entry 'United States—Foundations of the Federal Government—Separation of Powers and Checks and Balances' in the most recent edition (1998) of the *Encyclopedia Americana*, the entry 'United States of America—Administration and Social Conditions—Government—Powers of Congress' in the most recent edition (1998) of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, as well as the entry 'United Nations—Security Council' in both these encyclopedias.

In Hershey (1991) we found listed 10 textbooks that addressed the subject of veto override and we included all of them in our sample.

In the LOC catalogue we found (in early December 1998) a total of 228 entries whose title contained the words 'American Government'. ¿From this list of 228 entries we eliminated 143 items that we judged to be irrelevant or redundant.[15] Of the remaining 85 entries we selected a simple random sample

[13]In contrast, the misreporting of these rules that is discussed in Felsenthal and Machover (2000) occurred for the most part in journal articles dealing with the measurement of voting power.

[14]The textbooks that we looked up do not state explicitly how ordinary resolutions are passed in the USC. However, in Section 6 we do provide statistics regarding abstentions in both veto-overrides and divisions on ordinary bills.

[15]We deleted four entries that were identical with four items in Hershey (1991) and so were already included in our sample, eight (new) entries that were already listed in the LOC catalogue but had not yet arrived in the library, 49 entries that are edited collections of articles about American Government (and hence were clearly not textbooks), and 82 entries that were earlier editions or printings of other entries on the list.

of 24 entries. Thus we scrutinized the reports on the rule for overriding a presidential veto in a total of 34 textbooks. These textbooks are listed below (with page references to the relevant passages) in alphabetic order of author's name; items taken from Hershey (1991) are marked with an asterisk.

1. Anderson, A. *American Government* (3rd ed.); Henry Holt & Co., New York, 1946: pp. 473–4.

2. Ashley, R. L. *American Government: A Text-Book for Secondary Schools*; Macmillan Co., New York, 1908: pp. 246–8.

*3. Bailey, C. J. *The U.S. Congress*; Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1989: pp. 99, 102.

4. Bruntz, G. C. and Bremer, J. *American Government*; Ginn & Company, Boston, 1969: pp. 166, 198.

5. Ceasar, J. W., Bessette, J. M., O'Toole, L. J. Jr., and Thurow, G. *American Government: Origin, Institutions and Public Policy* (5th ed.); Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., Dubuque, Iowa, 1998: p. 374.

*6. Danielson M. N. and Murphy, W. F. *American Democracy* (10th ed); Holmes & Meier Publishers, New York, 1983: pp. 325, 328–9.

*7. Davidson, R. H. and Oleszek, W. J. *Congress and Its Members* (6th ed.); Washington, DC, Congressional Quarterly Press, 1998: p. 283.

8. Dawson, P. A. *American Government: Institutions, Policies and Politics*; Scott, Foresman & Co., Glenview, Illinois, 1987: p. 440.

9. Gitelson, A. R., Dudley, R. L., and Dubnick, M. J., *American Government* (5th ed.); Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1998: pp. 54, 60, 320.

10. Hardgrave, R. L., Jr. *American Government: The Republic in Action*; Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, New York, 1986: pp. 65, 394.

11. Haskin, F. J. *The American Government*; J. B. Lippincott Co., Philadelphia, 1912: p. 5.

12. Heineman, R. A., Peterson, S. A., and Rasmussen, T. A. *American Government*; McGraw-Hill Book Co., New York, 1989: p. 217.

13. Holmes, J. E., Engelhardt, M. J., and Elder, R. E., Jr. *American Government: Essentials and Perspectives* (2nd ed.); McGraw-Hill Book Co., New York, 1994: pp. 50, 219–20, 243.

*14. Janda, K. J., Berry, J. M. and Goldman, J. *The Challenge of Democracy: Government in America* (5th ed); Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1997: p. 364.

*15. Jones, C. O. *The United States Congress: People, Place, and Policy*; Dorsey Press, Homewood, Ill., 1982: p. 344.

16. Knownslar, A. O. and Smart, T. L., *American Government* (2nd ed.); McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1983: pp. 118–9.

*17. Keefe, W. J. and Ogul, M. S. *The American Legislative Process: Congress and the States* (9th ed.); Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, N.J., 1997: p. 256.

18. Krasner, M. A., and Chaberski, S. G., *American Government: Structure and Process* (2nd ed.); Macmillan Publishing Co., New York, 1982: pp. 37, 61.

*19. Lowi, T. J. and Ginsberg, B. *American Government: Freedom and Power* (5th ed.); W. W. Norton & Co., New York, 1998: pp. 25, 109.

20. Mackenzie, G. C. *American Government: Politics and Public Policy*; Random House, New York, 1986: pp. 123–4.

21. McMahon, J. *American Government*; D. Appleton-Century Co., New York, 1943: p. 72.

22. Morlan, R. L. *American Government: Policy and Process* (3rd ed.); Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1979: p. 202.

23. O'Connor, K. and Sabato, L. J. *American Government: Roots and Reform* (Brief 2nd ed.); Allyn & Bacon, Boston, 1996: pp. 39, 188, 213.

24. Patterson, C. P. *American Government* (revised edition); D.C. Heath & Co., Boston, 1933: p. 266.

25. Posey, R. B. *American Government* (9th ed.); Littlefield, Adams & Co., Totowa, New Jersey, 1977: p. 95.

*26. Rieselbach, L. N. *Congressional Politics*; McGraw-Hill, New York, 1973: p. 173.

27. Sayre, W. S. *American Government* (15th ed.); Barnes & Noble, Inc., New York, 1962: p. 35.

28. Schuman, D. with Felts, A. A. *American Government: The Rules of the Game*; Random House, New York, 1984: p. 163.

29. Skidmore, M. J., and Wanke, M. C. *American Government: A Brief Introduction* (2nd ed.); St. Martin's Press, New York, 1977: p. 62.

30. Sorrentino, F. M. *American Government: Power and Politics in America*; University Press of America, New York, 1983: pp. 41, 225, 254.

*31. Stephenson, D. G. Jr., Bresler, R. J., Friedrich, R. J. and Karlesky, J. J. *American Government: Brief Edition*; HarperCollins College Publishers, New York, 1994: pp. 280–1.

32. Tannahill, N., and Bedicheck, W. M. *American Government: Policy and Politics* (3rd ed.); HarperCollins Publishers, New York, 1991: p. 210.

33. Volkomer, W. E. *American Government* (7th ed.); Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1995: pp. 186–7, 205–6.

*34. Wilson, J. Q. and Dilulio, J. J. Jr. *American Government: Institutions and Policies* (7th ed.); Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1998: p. 343.

In our sources we found relatively few textbooks and general reference books in English that address the decision rules in the UNSC. Of the books included in Brady (1991) only six addressed these rules. And of the 43 items found in December 1998 in the LOC catalogue classified under 'United Nations Charter' or 'International Organizations: Politics and Process', only two books were found suitable for our purpose.[16] On the other hand, two of the 34 books in the USC sample—namely, items (4) and (22) on our first list—were found to contain accounts of the UNSC rule; so we added them to our second list. Thus, in addition to Simma (1982) and to the entry 'United Nations Security Council' in the two encyclopedias, we scrutinized the reports on the decision rules of the UNSC in the nine textbooks listed here, with page references to the relevant passages:

[16]Of the 20 items that we found in the LOC catalogue classified under 'United Nations Charter', 11 were not in English, eight did not address specifically the decision rules in the UNSC, and the remaining one was Simma's book (1982). And of the 23 items that we found in the LOC catalogue classified under 'International Organizations: Politics and Process', one was not in English, one was a collection of articles and hence clearly not a textbook, 10 were earlier editions or printings of other entries, and 10 did not address the decision rules in the UNSC.

1. Bennett, A. L. *International Organizations: Principles and Issues* (6th ed.); Prentice Hall, Englwood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1995: p. 89.

2. Bruntz, G. C. and Bremer, J. *American Government*; Ginn & Company, Boston, 1969: pp. 551–3.

3. Couloumbis, T. A. and Wolfe, J. H. *Introduction to International Relations: Power and Justice* (4th ed.); Prentice Hall, Englwood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1990: p. 283.

4. Keylor, W. R. *The Twentieth-Century World: An International History* (3rd ed.); Oxford University Press, New York, 1996: pp. 353–4.

5. Morlan, R. L. *American Government: Policy and Process* (3rd ed.); Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1979: p. 393.

6. Morgenthau, H. J. and Thompson, K.W. *Politics Among Nations* (6th ed.); Alfred Knopf, New York, 1985: pp. 323–4.

7. Russett, B. and Starr, H. *World Politics: The Menu For Choice* (5th ed.); W. H. Freeman, New York, 1998: p. 60.

8. Schloming, G. C. *Power and Principles in International Affairs*; Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1990: p. 475.

9. Stoessinger, J. G. *The Might of Nations: World Politics in Our Time* (10th ed.); McGraw-Hill, New York, 1993: pp. 162–4.

4 Accounts of a USC Decision Rule

It should go without saying that textbooks on the US system of government ought to give their readers a clear and accurate account of the decision rules of the USC. The need for this is highlighted by the fact that the media do an unsatisfactory job in informing the general public on this subject. Many examples of this were provided during the Clinton impeachment episode.

A typical instance is a story entitled 'Senators Envision Swift Clinton Trial' by Helen Dewar, published on 28 December 1998 on the front page of the *Washington Post*. The story stated that in the Senate 'a two-thirds majority, or 67 votes, is required to convict and remove the president from office'. This is of course incorrect: as we saw in Section 2, the Constitution says explicitly that conviction requires the 'Concurrence of two thirds of the Members *present*'; and since 51 or more Senators constitute a quorum, the number of votes required for conviction can theoretically be anything from

34 to 67, depending on how many Senators are present. In practice, a high rate of abstention is extremely unlikely when conviction of a president is at stake; but a small number of absences—whether deliberate or unavoidable, say due to illness—could not be ruled out in advance.[17]

A reader's letter (D S Felsenthal, 'Majority Head Count', *Washington Post*, 2 January 1999, p. A17) pointed out the error. But this did not seem to do much good. A similar error was committed a month later by staff writer Spencer S Hsu, in a story entitled 'Sarbanes Shifts to Favor Open Senate Debate on Impeachment' (*Washington Post*, 27 January 1999, p. A9). The story was about Senator Paul S Sarbanes' (Democrat, Maryland) decision to switch his former position and support Senator Thomas Harkin's (Democrat, Iowa) motion to suspend certain Rules of Procedure, so that the Senate debate on whether to subpoena witnesses during Clinton's trial would be conducted openly rather than in camera. Passage of the motion would require the assent of at least two thirds of the Senators *voting*. This is how Mr Hsu reported the defeat of the motion:

> The Senate voted mainly along party lines, 58 to 41, against opening deliberations. Supporters were 26 votes short of the two-thirds majority needed to make it happen.

The figure 26 is of course mistaken: since only 99 members voted—Senator Barbara Mikulski (Democrat, Maryland) was absent due to ill-health—the motion's supporters were only 25 votes short of 66, the two-thirds majority needed.

Since misreporting of this kind is virtually universal in the media, a student reading a textbook on the US government cannot be presumed to have correct prior knowledge of the decision rules of the USC. This makes it incumbent on the author to get things not only right but also unambiguous. The textbook accounts must accordingly be scrutinized in careful detail, to an extent that in other circumstances might seem pedantic.

[17]This was in fact made clear in an article entitled 'With Precedents as a Guide' by Ruth Marcus published in the *Washington Post* (14 January 1999, p. A17). Here is one of a series of hypothetical questions posed and answered by the author:

> Q: Are Senators Required to Attend the Trial?
>
> A: No, but it would look bad if they skipped a lot of it, and a quorum of 51 must be present. In the past, before the Senate switched to having judicial impeachments heard by trial committees, sparse attendance at impeachment trials was a big problem, with wandering in and out of the chamber common.

In our sample of 34 textbooks and two encyclopedias, we examined the accounts of the rule on overriding a presidential veto. We decided to classify them into classes A, B, C and D in descending order of their accuracy on this subject. An account is in class A if it is unambiguously correct, and in class D if it is unambiguously incorrect. Classes B and C are intermediate: books in these classes give ambiguous accounts of the rule. We assigned to class B books whose accounts contain no technically incorrect statement (that is, plainly contradicting the Constitution), but which in our view *could possibly* mislead an unwary reader. To class C we assigned books whose accounts likewise contain no technically incorrect statement, but which in our view are *likely* to mislead an unwary reader.

The criterion for deciding between B and C is the exact form of words used. In our view there is a subtle but significant difference between saying that overriding a presidential veto requires

> ... a two-thirds majority *in* each House,

and

> ... a two-thirds majority *of* each House.

Both formulations are ambiguous, as they fail to make it clear whether 'House' refers to the members *present and voting* or to *all* members. But the 'in' phrase is in our opinion somewhat less misleading, as it tends to suggest *physical presence in* the House. The 'of' phrase, on the contrary, tends to suggest *membership of* the House and is therefore potentially more misleading. Note that the Constitution itself uses the 'of' formulation. Therefore a textbook that merely quotes the Constitution on this point, without providing any disambiguating explanation, should in our view be assigned to class C.

In our sample of 34 textbooks,[18] we found five, (3), (9), (10), (17) and (34), in class A. In (34), the correct rule is stated clearly outright (p. 343). In (3) the ambiguous wording of the Constitution is used in the main text (p. 99), but an endnote attached to the text (p. 102) calls the reader's attention to the Supreme Court's ruling on *Missouri Pacific Railway Co. v. State of Kansas*. In (17) the rule is stated using the 'in' phrasing (p. 256), but an earlier sentence in the same paragraph points out that '[i]n most cases the vote demanded is a majority of a quorum'. Both (9) and (10) contain

[18] In what follows, numerals in parentheses refer to the first list of textbooks in Section 3.

ambiguous statements, which—if read on their own—could be misleading. But in both cases the ambiguity is resolved by a correct statement which appears elsewhere, quite far from the ambiguous passages, in the same book. In (9), there are statements of class C on pp. 54 and 60; but the ambiguity is resolved by an accurate statement on p. 320. In (10), there is a statement of class B on p. 65; but an accurate statement on p. 394 resolves the ambiguity.

We also found three textbooks, (11), (15) and (16), in class D. The first is a very old book, published in 1912—that is, before the Supreme Court ruling on *Missouri Pacific Railway Co. v. State of Kansas*, but after the present interpretation of the relevant clause of the Constitution had been established by Speaker Reed. The wording on p. 5 of (11) unambiguously implies that the votes of two-thirds of *all* members of both Houses are required for overturning a presidential veto. The case of (16) is less clear cut. The wording of the rule in question, on p. 119, belongs to class C. But on the preceding page there is a confusing and mistaken account of the rule for passing a bill by simple majority, which, by implication, disambiguates the statement on p. 119 in the wrong direction. The case of (15) is most curious: the wording of the rule in question is definitely erroneous: 'Congress may still have the last word, but it can do so only if two thirds of the members of both houses are determined to do so' (p. 344). But this is immediately followed by a correct statement of the rule for passing *ordinary* legislation: 'When the president says he wants something, he must garner a majority of those voting in both houses.'

The remaining 26 textbooks and two encyclopedias are in classes B and C. Of these, 10 textbooks—(2), (5), (6), (12), (14), (19), (20), (23), (25) and (26)—as well as the account in *Encyclopedia Americana*, are clearly in class B. Ten textbooks—(1), (4), (7), (21), (24), (27), (28), (29), (31) and (32)—as well as the account in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, are in class C. Six cases are doubtful, and we classified them as B/C: (13), (18), (30) and (33) contain both the 'in' phrasing (which would put them in class B) and the 'of' phrasing (class C); and the wording in (8) and (22) is too condensed ('. . . repass by a two-thirds vote') to be classifiable with precision.

Clearly, the great majority of textbooks in our sample do not provide a satisfactory—that is, unambiguous and correct—account of the rule in question. On the other hand, only a small minority contain accounts that are blatantly incorrect. In this respect the textbooks seem to compare favorably with the voting-power literature, in which almost all accounts of the rule are erroneous.

But beyond this it is impossible to draw firm clear-cut conclusions. Authors of papers on voting power are compelled, by the nature of their subject, to state precisely any decision rule they wish to examine. If the authors of

textbooks in classes B and C were likewise compelled to make their accounts more precise, would they do so correctly? Textbooks (9) and (10) in class A show that this is possible: an author who states the rule ambiguously on one occasion may well be aware of the correct interpretation and so provide an unambiguous accurate statement when he or she wishes to do so. On the other hand, there is no clear evidence in the texts of the 26 books in classes B and C that their authors are aware of the correct rule; and if they are, one wonders why they keep it from their readers.

The sub-sample of ten textbooks listed in Hershey (1991)—those marked with an asterisk in the list—may be expected to do better than average: they were especially selected by the American Political Science Association. This is indeed the case: three of them—(3), (17) and (34)—are in class A. Nevertheless, one of the ten, (15), is in class D. Four—(6), (14), (19) and (26)—are in class B and the remaining two—(7) and (31)—in class C. So, if we confine ourselves to this sub-sample, the implications for the tested hypothesis are somewhat more favorable; but they are still not clear-cut.

5 Accounts of the UNSC Decision Rule

Let us now consider accounts of the UNSC rule of decision on substantive issues. Here the situation differs in one important respect from that of the USC rule discussed in Section 4. Although the wording of Article 1, Section 7(2) of the US Constitution may *suggest* the wrong interpretation—that is, an interpretation contrary to the subsequent authorized one—the Article is really vague and genuinely open to both interpretations. In contrast, Article 27(3) of the UN Charter is not at all vague or ambiguous; its subsequent authorized interpretation was highly 'creative' in going against the plain meaning of the words.[19]

Therefore any account of this rule that merely quotes or paraphrases fully the wording of the Charter, without an explicit caveat against taking this wording literally, must be counted as definitely wrong, because it is certain to mislead the unwary reader. An account can only be regarded as vague if the rule is too briefly stated or is partly implied by a discussion of specific instances.

Accordingly, we used the following four-way classification of the accounts of this rule. As before, an account is in class A if it is unambiguously correct.

[19]It is indeed puzzling why Article 27(3) has not been amended to date so as to reflect the *actual* decision rule used by the UN Security Council.

Class D contains accounts that are definitely incorrect, *including those that fully quote or paraphrase the wording of the Charter, without an explicit caveat*. Classes B and C contain incomplete accounts. From those in class B the reader can infer at least that absence of a permanent member from a vote in the UNSC does not count as a veto. Accounts in class C are too vague even for such an inference.

Among the nine textbooks we examined,[20] we found one, (1), in class A. The accounts in *Encyclopædia Britannica* and *Encyclopedia Americana* are also in class A; and the same obviously applies to Simma (1982).

Four of the textbooks—(2), (3), (5) and (6)—are in class D. Two of these books, (2) and (6), mention the UNSC resolution of 25 June 1950, which laid the initial basis for the US-led intervention of the UN in the Korean war, and say that the Soviet delegate was absent from that crucial vote. From this a perceptive reader might deduce correctly that absence of a permanent member does not amount to a veto. But in both cases such a conclusion is contradicted and undermined by a separate misreporting of the decision rule, which puts these books in class D.

Class B contains two textbooks, (4) and (9) which do not contain any statement of the decision rule in general, but do give a fairly detailed account of the Korean episode, which clearly implies the correct conclusion regarding abstention by absence.

The remaining two textbooks, (7) and (8), are in class C; their accounts of the decision rule are simply vague, though not actually incorrect.

So, as in the case of the rule considered in Section 4, most accounts of the UNSC decision rules in the books we examined are unsatisfactory. Thus they do not provide corroboration to the hypothesis proposed in Felsenthal and Machover (2000) that the misreporting in the voting-power literature is due to a specific cause, that of theory-laden observation. But here again we feel that the result of the test is not sufficiently clear-cut to refute this hypothesis decisively.

6 The Rarity Hypothesis

As we have seen, the decision rules of both the USC and the UNSC are widely misreported not only in the voting-power literature but also in textbooks on American Government and International Relations. Specifically, the rules

[20] In what follows, numerals in parentheses refer to the second list of textbooks in Section 3.

are mistakenly stated as though abstention amounts to a 'no' vote rather than being a distinct *tertium quid*.

It occurred to us that this misreporting could be explained—and to some extent excused—if abstentions in the USC and UNSC were relatively so rare that they made little difference in practice. Perhaps the erroneous reports are merely instances of inaccuracy that may be of purely theoretical significance but of little practical importance. In the present section we examine this alternative hypothesis.

First let us consider the USC. Here the rarity hypothesis has particular prima-facie credibility. Because of the unusually high quorum requirement imposed by Article 1, Section 5(1) of the Constitution, participation in roll-calls is much higher in the USC than in legislatures of most other countries.

For the purpose of assessing the importance of abstention, cases in which the decision rule requires a two-thirds majority of those voting are of particular significance. When a simple majority is required, members who for some reason find it inconvenient to attend the meeting often resort to 'pairing': an arrangement whereby two members who are on opposite sides of the bill in question agree that neither of them shall attend. Although technically both members must be regarded as abstaining, it might be argued that the pairing arrangement is not genuine abstention but amounts in practice to 'virtual voting': the two opposite 'virtual votes' simply cancel out, with no possible effect on the outcome. However, when a two-thirds majority is required, an analogous arrangement demands a binding pact among *three* members: two supporters and one opponent of the bill. Clearly, such a tripartite pact is considerably harder to arrange and must therefore be much less common than pairing. So abstention on issues that require two-thirds majority is far more likely to be genuine in the sense just explained.

Accordingly, we examined all cases in the history of the USC until the end of 1998 in which a bill passed by both Houses was vetoed by the President using a 'regular' veto—that is, one that could potentially be overridden.[21] The results are summarized in Table 1. The fourth column in this table shows the number of regular vetoes cast by each President. The total number of

[21]We excluded 'pocket vetoes': occasions when the President left unsigned a bill that was sent to him less than 10 days before adjournment of Congress, and that was thereby killed according to Article 1, Section 7(2) of the Constitution. (There were altogether 1,067 pocket vetoes during the entire period.) We also excluded line-item vetoes used, for the first time, during the 105th Congress by President Clinton. (There were altogether 11 line-item vetoes in this Congress.) Pocket vetoes as well as line-item vetoes are irrelevant for our purpose, as they cannot be overridden.

such vetoes is 1,472. Of these, 1,174 were unchallenged by Congress. The following columns show what happened to the 298 that were challenged.

The fifth column shows the number of vetoes that were overridden by the USC. The total number of these is 106.[22]

The next column shows (in parentheses) the number of cases in which a veto was overridden, but the 'ayes' for overriding the veto constituted less than two-thirds of the entire membership in at least one House. These 66 cases—that is, 62.3% of all overridden vetoes!—are central to the theme of this paper: they contradict the erroneous version of the decision rule for overriding a presidential veto, which is widespread in the literature. If abstention were always tantamount to 'nay', as implied or suggested by the mistaken or vague statements of the rule, these 66 vetoes should have been sustained rather than overridden.

In the seventh column are shown the number of cases in which a presidential veto was challenged by Congress but sustained, either because more than one-third of those voting in the House where the vetoed bill had originated voted against the motion to override the veto, or because the House where the vetoed bill had originated overrode the veto but the other House did not challenge the veto or voted to sustain it. There were 192 such cases.

The last column shows (in parentheses) the number of cases in which a veto was overridden in the House where the vetoed bill had originated, and challenged but sustained by the other House; and the 'nays' in the sustaining House constituted no more than one-third of its entire membership. There were 14 such cases—that is, 7.3% of all vetoes that were challenged but sustained.[23] These 14 cases do not contradict the erroneous version of the decision rule, because if the abstentions had counted as 'nays' (that is, as opposing the motion to override), the 14 vetoes should still have been sustained. Nevertheless, they show that abstention can have a real effect, because if all the abstainers had voted *for* overriding, these 14 vetoes would have been overridden rather than sustained.

Next, we examined the effect of abstentions in cases where the decision rule of the USC requires a simple majority. We looked at the records of all such roll-calls conducted in both Houses of Congress during the second session of the 104th Congress (1996) and the first and second sessions of the 105th Congress (1997–98). The results are summarized in Tables 2 and 3.

[22]We have compiled a fully detailed list of the 106 overridden vetoes. It is too bulky to be reproduced here, but is available by e-mail on request.

[23]We have compiled a fully detailed list of these 14 cases, which is available by e-mail on request.

Table 2 shows that during the period under consideration 1,368 ordinary motions—that is, motions that need a simple majority—were put to the vote (by roll call) in the House of Representatives. Of these, 828 were passed and the remaining 540 were blocked.

Of the 828 that were passed, 70 (8.5%) received less than 218 'ayes'. So, had the rule required a majority of *all* 435 members, abstentions should have counted as 'nays' and these 70 motions should have been blocked.

Of the 540 motions that were blocked, 47 (8.7%) received less than 218 'nays'. These 47 motions would have passed had all abstaining members voted 'aye'.

Similarly, Table 3 shows that during the same period 781 ordinary motions were put to the vote (by roll call) in Senate. Of these, 577 were passed and the remaining 204 were blocked.

Of the 577 motions that were passed, 17 (2.9%) received less than 51 'ayes' and so would have been blocked had abstentions counted as 'nays'.

Of the 204 motions that were blocked, 17 (8.3%) received less than 51 'nays' and would therefore have passed had all abstainers voted 'aye'.

Finally, let us turn briefly to the UNSC. Anyone following press or TV reports on UNSC proceedings is in a position to notice that resolutions (on non-procedural matters) are often adopted without the assent of at least one permanent member. In particular, the US has long made it a firm rule never to vote for any resolution condemning Israel; but occasionally such resolutions are adopted, with the US abstaining. Of special historical importance is the resolution mentioned in Section 5, which was adopted by the UNSC on 25 June 1950 and laid the basis for the US-led UN intervention in the Korean war. This resolution was adopted in the absence of the Soviet delegate.

We looked at the records of all 1,068 substantive resolutions adopted (with vote) by the UNSC in the period 1946–97. We found that in the case of 300 of these 1,068 resolutions—about 28% of the total—at least one permanent member abstained. (In one case, that of Resolution 344 adopted on 15 December 1973, *all five* permanent members abstained, and the resolution was carried by the votes of the 10 other members.) These 300 resolutions would have been blocked if abstention by a permanent member had amounted to a veto, as erroneously stated or implied by many accounts in the literature.

From the data presented in this Section it is evident that in the USC abstention was a very common occurrence, and played a highly visible role, in roll-calls on overriding a presidential veto. Thus, in over 60% of all successful overrides of presidential vetoes in the USC to date, the 'ayes' in at least one of the two Houses constituted less than two-thirds of its entire membership;

so that if all those abstaining had counted as voting against the override, those vetoes should have been sustained.

In USC roll-calls on motions requiring simple majority, abstention was not so highly visible, at least in recent times; but it was by no means negligible.

In the UNSC abstentions by permanent members were quite common, and played a highly visible—and on at least one occasion momentous—role.

In view of these findings, the rarity hypothesis stated at the beginning of this Section is untenable.

Table 1: Regular Presidential Vetoes 1789–1998: Total Cast; Overridden; Challenged but Sustained

			Number of Vetoes				
Congress	*Years*	*President*	*Cast*	*Overridden*		*Sustained*	
1–4	1789–1797	G Washington	2	0	(0)	2	(0)
5–6	1797–1801	J Adams	0	0	(0)	0	(0)
7–10	1801–1809	T Jefferson	0	0	(0)	0	(0)
11–14	1809–1817	J Madison	5	0	(0)	5	(0)
15–18	1817–1825	J Monroe	1	0	(0)	1	(0)
19–20	1825–1829	J Q Adams	0	0	(0)	0	(0)
21–24	1829–1837	A Jackson	5	0	(0)	4	(0)
25–26	1837–1841	M Van Buren	0	0	(0)	0	(0)
27	1841	W H Harrison	0	0	(0)	0	(0)
27–28	1841–1845	J Tyler	6	1	(1)	5	(0)
29-30	1845–1849	J K Polk	2	0	(0)	2	(0)
31	1849–1850	Z Taylor	0	0	(0)	0	(0)
31–32	1850–1853	M Fillmore	0	0	(0)	0	(0)
33–34	1853–1857	F Pierce	9	5	(5)	4	(0)
35–36	1857–1861	J Buchanan	4	0	(0)	3	(0)
37–39	1861–1865	A Lincoln	2	0	(0)	1	(0)
39–40	1865–1869	A Johnson	21	15	(13)	2	(0)
41–44	1869–1877	U S Grant	45	4	(4)	5	(1)
45–46	1877–1881	R B Hayes	12	1	(1)	6	(0)
47	1881	J A Garfield	0	0	(0)	0	(0)
47–48	1881–1885	C A Arthur	4	1	(1)	2	(0)
49–50	1885–1889	G Cleveland	304	2	(2)	18	(3)
51–52	1889–1893	B Harrison	19	1	(1)	2	(0)
53–54	1893–1897	G Cleveland	42	5	(5)	7	(1)
55–57	1897–1901	W McKinley	6	0	(0)	1	(0)
57–60	1901–1909	T Roosevelt	42	1	(1)	1	(0)
61–62	1909–1913	W H Taft	30	1	(1)	9	(5)
63–66	1913–1921	W Wilson	33	6	(5)	10	(0)
67	1921–1923	W G Harding	5	0	(0)	1	(1)
68–70	1923–1929	C Coolidge	20	4	(3)	4	(0)
71–72	1929–1933	H Hoover	21	3	(1)	6	(0)
73–79	1933–1945	F D Roosevelt	372	9	(5)	7	(1)

Table 1. Regular Presidential Vetoes 1789–1998: Total Cast; Overridden; Challenged but Sustained (cont.)

			Number of Vetoes				
Congress	*Years*	*President*	*Cast*	*Overridden*		*Sustained*	
79–82	1945–1953	H S Truman	180	12	(7)	10	(1)
83–86	1953–1961	D D Eisenhower	73	2	(1)	7	(0)
87–88	1961–1963	J F Kennedy	12	0	(0)	0	(0)
88–90	1963–1969	L B Johnson	16	0	(0)	0	(0)
91–93	1969–1974	R M Nixon	26	7	(4)	15	(1)
93–94	1974–1977	G R Ford	48	12	(2)	15	(0)
95–96	1977–1981	J Carter	13	2	(0)	2	(0)
97–100	1981–1989	R Reagan	39	9	(2)	7	(0)
101–102	1989–1993	G Bush	29	1	(0)	21	(0)
103–105	1993–1998	W J Clinton	24	2	(1)	7	(0)
Total			1472	106	(66)	192	(14)

Sources

Presidential Vetoes, 1789–1988, compiled by the Senate Library under the direction of Walter J Stewart, Secretary of the Senate, by Gregory Harness, Head Reference Librarian. (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, February 1992).

Presidential Vetoes, 1989–1994, compiled by the Senate Library under the direction of Martha S. Pope, Secretary of the Senate, by Gregory Harness, Head Reference Librarian. (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, December 1994).

Congressional Index 104th Congress; Congressional Index 105th Congress. Washington DC: Congress Clearing House.

Notes

1. Table 1 does not include 'pocket vetoes'. It also does not include line-item vetoes used, for the first time, during the 105th Congress by President Clinton. These vetoes cannot be overridden.

2. Numbers in parentheses in the sixth column indicate instances in which the 'ayes' for overriding a veto constitute less than two-thirds of the entire membership in at least one House.

3. Numbers in parentheses in the last column indicate instances in which a veto was overridden in the House where the vetoed bill had originated, and challenged but sustained by the other House; and where the 'nays' in the sustaining House constituted no more than one-third of its entire membership.

Table 2: Simple Majority Roll-Calls
US House of Representatives, 1996–98

Congress: *session*	*Year*	*Number of Roll-Calls* *Passed*		*Blocked*	
104:2	1996	235	(14)	149	(16)
105:1	1997	329	(34)	216	(16)
105:2	1998	264	(22)	175	(15)
Total		828	(70)	540	(47)

Source: Thomas Legislative Information on the Internet
(`http://thomas.loc.gov/home/thomas2.html`)

Note: Numbers in parentheses in the fourth column indicate simple-majority motions that passed but where the number of 'ayes' was less than 218. Similarly, numbers in parentheses in the last column indicate simple-majority motions that failed to pass but where the number of 'nays' was less than 218.

Table 3: Simple Majority Roll-Calls
US Senate, 1996–98

Congress: *session*	*Year*	*Number of Roll-Calls* *Passed*		*Blocked*	
104:2	1996	191	(7)	69	(5)
105:1	1997	187	(0)	51	(2)
105:2	1998	199	(10)	84	(10)
Total		577	(17)	204	(17)

Source: Thomas Legislative Information on the Internet
(`http://thomas.loc.gov/home/thomas2.html`)

Note: Numbers in parentheses in the fourth column indicate simple-majority motions that passed but where the number of 'ayes' was less than 51. Similarly, numbers in parentheses in the last column indicate simple-majority motions that failed to pass but where the number of 'nays' was less than 51.

7 Discussion

The starting point of this paper was the fact that in the literature on voting power the decision rules of the USC and UNSC are systematically misreported: almost all accounts of these rules overlook the role of abstention and erroneously imply that any voter who does not vote 'yes' counts as voting 'no'.

We set out to test the hypothesis that this systematic misreporting in the voting-power literature is due to a specific cause: theory-laden (or theory-biased) observation. This hypothesis would be strongly corroborated if the rules in question tended to be reported much more accurately in introductory textbooks on American Government and International Relations, where that specific factor, theory-laden observation, does not operate.

In Section 4 we considered the USC rule for overruling a presidential veto and examined how it is reported in a sample of 34 English-language textbooks on American Government. We found that the general level of accuracy of these accounts is somewhat higher than in the voting-power literature, so that the tested hypothesis is not conclusively refuted; but the difference is not sufficiently marked to provide a convincing corroboration of that hypothesis. While only a small minority of the textbook accounts are blatantly incorrect, there are not many which are unambiguously correct; the great majority are vague and potentially misleading. Moreover, there is no evidence that the authors of these vague accounts have in mind the correct version of the rule in question.

In Section 5 we considered the decision rule operated by the UNSC on substantive issues. (Here only abstention by a permanent member is relevant, because abstention by a non-permanent member is indeed tantamount to a 'no'.) Our examination of accounts of this rule in the relevant textbooks led to results that are broadly similar to those of Section 4.

In our opinion, the widespread misreporting of these decision rules in textbooks on American Government and International Relations is itself puzzling and calls for explanation. In Section 6 we explored the hypothesis that abstentions by members of the USC and permanent members of the UNSC are ignored because they are in practice too rare to have much of an effect. But our examination of the records of these two bodies showed that this hypothesis is untenable. On the contrary: abstentions by members of the USC (especially in roll-calls on motions to override a presidential veto) and by permanent members of the UNSC were very common, and had extremely significant real effects.

The uncomfortable implications of these findings are self-evident.

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