

## Comments on congressional readings

This week's readings bring into focus three major themes in the congressional literature, the role of parties in Congress, the use of the spatial model in theory-building and prediction-making, and the problem of measurement in congressional scholarship.

### *Role of parties*

We will spend plenty of time worrying about parties later in the semester, but Congress is an obvious place to begin worrying about the role of parties in American politics. Americans --- both normal Americans and American political scientists --- are of two minds about parties. We remember something the Founders said denigrating parties (or "factions") and (in popular culture) tend to view parties as something corrupt, stifling individual agency. At the same time, party affiliation is the most powerful predictor of a lot of political behavior, including mass behavior, and political scientists have spilled a lot of ink bemoaning America's weak parties and salivating over Europe's strong parties. (Perhaps realizing we are living in an era of strong American parties will diminish our appetite a bit.)

The history of how parties have been treated in congressional scholarship follows the popular and scholarly ambivalence. Focusing on scholarship, early political science was founded out of a conviction that parties were corrupting devices and that professional social scientists had a duty to destroy them, or at least regulate them heavily. As a consequence, much of the early political science treating parties and Congress was reformist in nature and short on dispassionate analysis. A major exception was A. Lawrence Lowell's 1902 essay on "The Influence of Party Legislation in England and America," published in the American Historical Association proceedings. This essay is also notable (see the points below) for being the first quantitative study of roll call voting that I know about --- all from a historian. (The next time you walk through the doorway leading from Lobby 7 to the Infinite Corridor, notice that the bronze doorway is dedicated to him. Bow.)

Parties and Congress became noticed again in the middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as the behavioral revolution came about. David Truman's *Congressional Party* (1959), is the classic here. The take-away there was that party leaders were middle-men, negotiating the difficult factional politics of the parties, particularly the Democrats. Here, the analysis is more scientific. The one problem, though, was that it was done in a period that we now know to be atypical in America --- a time when the parties were especially divided, in the electorate and in the government. So, the view of Truman, and those who followed (Mayhew's essay from last week is infected with this view) may have tended to generalize something that was atypical in American politics.

Another feature of the mid-century literature on party and Congress is that there was an undercurrent of worry that the Democratic party is insufficiently liberal, or rather, that the liberal majority body seemed to be wagged by the conservative southern tail. We didn't read any of this literature, but addressing this argument became the work of David Brady and some of his collaborators. (For instance, see his article with Joseph Cooper, "Institutional Context and Leadership Style: The House from Cannon to Rayburn.") The long and short of this literature is that if, by "strong parties" we mean parties that strong-arm followers into loyalty, the historical electoral and government environment has been hostile to strong parties. So, leaders like Rayburn are weak not because they lacked backbone, but because the electoral environments of the parties was so diffuse. Strong leaders like political scientists and activists wanted at the time wouldn't last a day (or at least an election cycle.)

When the rational choicers came along, they had two opportunities. For those who believed that American parties are always “weak” (whatever that means), the technology of spatial voting theory provided a mechanism to explain the service that party leaders provide. If parties are really atomistic to their core, then it would be natural that centrists would be chosen as leaders, and it would also be natural that they would be given the task of coordination, rather than strong-arming. Krehbiel’s book (and his other work) is very much influenced by the “weak parties” view. Parties are so weak, in fact, that the D’s and R’s we observe are simply convenient labeling devices.

The interesting thing about Cox and McCubbins (and their other works, including the newer *Setting the Agenda* [2005]) is that they take seriously the need to create a theory that produces positive levels of effort by party leaders [think about one implication of Krehbiel’s work --- all the effort of party leaders must be based on their being delusional]. As I mentioned in class, the book we read was written at a time when the theory of the firm was a hot topic among institutionalists. It’s not so hot these days, but coordination continues to be something we all worry about.

Another work we didn’t read, but which is huge, is David Rohde’s *Conditional Party Government* book. Krehbiel discusses it, so you probably have a sense of his argument, at least in its straw person version. I would encourage you to read the book yourself one way, so that you can judge for yourself. It’s hugely influential (and relatively short).

To conclude this part, the role and power of parties continues to be one of the hottest topics in the study of Congress today. For someone preparing for a general exam, for instance, it is important for you to understand what it means for parties to be “strong,” why it’s difficult to achieve, what the marks of a strong legislative party might be, what the historical trends are, etc. In other words, this should be a major focus of your study.

### *Spatial model*

The spatial model is behind all of the three readings for this week. Krehbiel’s book relies on it explicitly in its core argument, and much of the Cox/McCubbins book can easily be put in the context of the spatial model, too. My *Analyzing Congress* has an accessible (I hope) introduction; Enelow and Hinich’s *The Spatial Theory of Voting* is also accessible, if more technical.

Most people encounter the spatial model via Downs’s *Economic Theory of Democracy*. Downs’s account of the theory is actually filled with a couple of important errors, so I do encourage you to move on from there. The founding use of the spatial theory in the study of Congress is actually Duncan Black’s *The Theory of Elections and Committees* (1956).

In my mind, the instability and chaos results of the multidimensional spatial model provide a way of thinking about some of the most profound questions of democratic life and the rule of political institutions in complex societies. They are very disturbing. However, after about 30 years of noodling on the spatial model in great depth, we have mostly settled on building and interrogating one-dimensional models. They’re complicated and interesting enough that if you’re willing just to suppress the thought that there really are no equilibria in politics, you’ll go far.

As a student of American politics, it is very important that you feel comfortable manipulating the unidimensional spatial model, including understanding how common institutional features interact with

it. These institutional features include various voting rules (like the filibuster and veto rule Krehbiel highlights) and practices like endowing certain sub-institutions (like committees) with agenda-setting and veto powers. In fact, understanding these things will allow you to gain a fuller, and more precise, appreciation of what Cox and McCubbins are talking about.

### *Measurement*

To the degree that Congress legislates (as opposed to offering a cushy job that people was to hold just for the sake of holding), understanding how inputs (preferences) translate into outputs (policy) is very important. From the moment scholars tried to approach Congress scientifically, the issue of measuring inputs and outputs precisely rose to the fore. (Think about A. Lawrence Lowell again.)

Efforts like Miller and Stokes's article we read a couple of weeks ago, and even the work I've done with Jim and Steve A., are all attempts to try and gauge the rawest of legislative inputs, the preferences of the members themselves. Keep in mind that this is a terribly difficult thing to do, and I would caution against assuming you can ever successfully do this. (One cautionary story, for instance, is that after we wrote our paper using the Project VoteSmart data, the party campaign committees cautioned their candidates against responding to the survey. Nowadays, only fringe candidates tend to fill out the survey.)

Because of the difficulties in measuring "pure" legislative preferences, political scientists and activists have attempted to measure the preferences of members, or at least their behaviors, in a systematic fashion. As I mentioned, in the 1940s, the *New Republic* started calculating the percentage of times members of Congress voted in a liberal manner, which eventually morphed into the ADA (Americans for Democratic Action) score. Many other interest groups followed suit. You can't swing a dead cat in DC now without hitting an interest group with a support score.

Some cautions about these scores. One of these, attributable to Jim Snyder's "Artificial Extremism..." article is that the purpose of these scores is to separate friends from enemies, not provide a clean psychological measure. There's also a literature showing convincingly that while you might think that the different interest groups are measuring different things, the components of their scores are often thin on votes that pertain to the interest group's interests --- most of these scores are actually based on the same roll call votes, they aren't independent. So, because they're basically all versions of a left-right ideological scale, they have another glaring problem: they're usually based on a small number of votes which are atypical.

Efforts by Keith Poole, Jim Snyder, and others have tried to overcome the glaring problems of interest group ratings --- to the point that I'm surprised when anyone uses them rather than Poole-Rosenthal or Heckman-Snyder score. These comprehensive scales are simply better measures.

I made mention of a great lecture Keith Poole once gave about the history of dimensional analysis. I'm still searching for the video, and when I find it, I'll give you the link.

The Poole-Rosenthal corpus convinces me that there is a great, powerful regularity to the behavior of legislators that most casual observers don't appreciate, and many experts overlook, too. Where the regularity comes from remains an important question. P&R normally take the position that the regularity and low dimensionality comes from the type of issue constraint first described in the *American Voter* research of the 1950s. What are the other factors, though, and can we partition among

psychological recruitment, electoral, party activity, and institutional factors. On top of all of this, to what extent is the regularity and low dimensionality just an artifact of the statistical technique --- if you crunch a bunch of numbers through an algorithm that is based on a maintained hypothesis of low dimensionality, that's what you're going to get.

I do not expect you to be able to reproduce the WNOMINATE procedure. However, at some point in your training, learning some data-reduction technique, such as principal component factor analysis (which is the basis of the Heckman-Snyder procedure) would be very useful --- at least to convince you that the output of such procedures isn't magic.

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Spring 2010

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