Political Science 17.20
Introduction to American Politics

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Congress: Internal Organization
Lecture 7 (February 28, 2013)
Outline

1 Institutional Solutions to Collective Action Problems
   - The Committee System
   - Majority Party Control

2 Pivotal Politics
1. Institutional Solutions to Collective Action Problems
   - The Committee System
   - Majority Party Control

2. Pivotal Politics
Basic Problems Faced by Legislatures

Last lecture: Individual rationality $\implies$ collective irrationality

- Collective goods (balanced budget, party reputation, etc.)
- Lack of information and expertise
- Time limitations
- Transaction costs (instability)
Institutional Solutions

- Institutions that (partially) solve these problems:
  1. Committee system
  2. Majority-party control

- Each set of institutions solves problems in different ways and encourages different kinds of politics/policymaking.

- Relative importance has evolved over time due to formal and informal changes in Congress.

- Need for rules, organization greater in House than in (smaller) Senate
Committees: Origins and Purpose

- Congressional committees predate Constitution
- **Idea:** Let small group, possibly with special expertise, work on problem or issue (e.g., Declaration of Independence)
- Information, expertise, specialization
- Committees as **agents** of the chamber as a whole
- Problems:
  1. Incentivize acquisition of expertise
  2. Preference outliers
Evolution of the Committee System

- Early 1800s: *Ad hoc* to **standing**
- Early 1900s: **Seniority** rule
- 1920s–1970s: Strong, autonomous committee system
- 1970s–present: Increasing party control over committees
Politics of the Committee System

- Norm of deference → logroll
- Non-ideological, universalistic, distributive politics
- Preference outliers dominate their area of interest
- Special role of House Rules Committee (now partisan)
Mechanisms of Party Control

- Leaders (Speaker, majority leader, etc.) are agents of the majority party caucus, not the chamber as a whole.
- Hastert Rule: “majority of the majority”
- Speaker of the House is empowered by majority caucus to influence committee membership, control agenda (what is voted on when → Rules), etc.
- Senate majority leader has much less power.
Conditional Party Government

- **Aldrich & Rohde**: Amount of power the majority party is willing to cede its leadership depends on its internal homogeneity and its polarization relative to the minority.
Ideological Polarization Over Time

House 1879-2012
Party means on liberal-conservative dimension

Liberal-Conservative


Republicans Southern Democrats Democrats Northern Democrats

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Krehbiel: Given the distribution of preferences in Congress, does it matter what the majority party is?

All we need to know is who are the pivotal voters.
Supermajority Institution 1: The Senate Filibuster

Majoritarian (50% + 1)

Supermajoritarian (60%)

- The right/conservative filibuster pivot \((F_R)\), the 60th most liberal member of the 100-member Senate, is pivotal to the passage of proposals that move policy to the left.
Status quos between $F_L$ and $F_R$ cannot be beaten by any proposed policy shift $\implies$ gridlock (policy stasis)
A 2/3 supermajority is needed to override a presidential veto, so the gridlock interval extends to the veto pivot (V) on the president’s side of the median.

Partisan change in the presidency (e.g., Bush to Obama) “releases” policies between veto and filibuster pivots (green) → presidential “honeymoon”
Healthcare reform (Q’) barely passed Senate (60 votes).

More conservative than liberal Democrats (e.g., V) wanted.

“Cornhusker kickback” to buy off conservative Democrat Ben Nelson of Nebraska, the filibuster pivot (F_R).

(Democrats lost supermajority before final passage and had to use special majoritarian procedure, “reconciliation”)
The Role of Parties in Congress

Even if parties have little influence over roll-call votes, they still have two very important roles:

1. **Structure politics along a single ideological dimension**
   → Example: Abortion + gun control + healthcare mandate

2. **Influence/control the alternatives**
   → Example: Clinton impeachment
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