Introduction to the American Political Process

Class 9: Congress 2

Asya Magazinnik (Professor)
1. Readings

Krehbiel, “Pivotal Politics”
Readings
Gridlock: The persistent inability to enact major legislation when majorities on Capitol Hill and/or the President seem to prefer such enactments to the status quo.

Three clarifications:

1. Not inherently partisan
2. Not new in American politics
3. Not necessarily a bad thing
A theory of gridlock should address three empirical realities:

1. We get gridlock often, but not always

2. When gridlock is broken, it is by large winning coalitions as opposed to bare majorities

3. When gridlock is broken, it is by bipartisan coalitions
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reality</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Coalition size</th>
<th>Partisanship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Responsible party government</td>
<td>Nonexistent</td>
<td>Size of majority party</td>
<td>Majority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conditional party government</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Size of majority party</td>
<td>Majority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unified vs. divided government</td>
<td>As common as divided gvt</td>
<td>Size of majority party</td>
<td>Majority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median voter theorem</td>
<td>Nonexistent</td>
<td>Just over half</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majoritarian chaos stability-inducing</td>
<td>Nonexistent</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

...
Elements of the Theory: Players and Preferences

The players are $n$ legislators (for simplicity, $n$ is odd) with the following preference structure:

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 2.1** Single-peaked utility function for legislator $i$
The game proceeds as follows:

1. Median legislator proposes a bill or accepts the status quo
2. Filibuster pivot (3/5) decides whether to invoke cloture
3. President can sign bill into law or veto
4. Congress can override presidential veto (2/3)
Case 1: The Economic Stimulus Package
Case 1: The Economic Stimulus Package
Case 1: The Economic Stimulus Package
Case 1: The Economic Stimulus Package
Case 1: The Economic Stimulus Package
Case 1: The Economic Stimulus Package
Case 1: The Economic Stimulus Package
Case 1: The Economic Stimulus Package
Case 1: The Economic Stimulus Package
Case 1: The Economic Stimulus Package

Note: A more extreme (right) status quo allows for a more extreme leftward policy shift. (And vice-versa.)
Case 2: Family Leave (GRIDLOCK)
Case 2: Family Leave (GRIDLOCK)
Case 2: Family Leave (GRIDLOCK)
Case 2: Family Leave (GRIDLOCK)
Case 2: Family Leave (GRIDLOCK)
Case 2: Family Leave (GRIDLOCK)
Case 2: Family Leave (GRIDLOCK)

President will veto

b?
Equilibrium

Krehbiel, Keith. “A Theory.” Chapter 2 in *Pivotal Politics: A Theory of U.S. Lawmaking*. University of Chicago Press, 1998. © University of Chicago Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see [https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/](https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/).
1. Legislative productivity depends on the width of the gridlock interval
2. When policy swings, it often swings dramatically
   • When status quo is moderate, it is hard to move
3. Gridlock is broken by large, possibly bipartisan coalitions (bigger than simple majority)
4. Gridlock can occur in unified or divided government
Assumptions

What important assumptions went into the Pivotal Politics model, and what might break it?

1. Open rule (vs. majority party agenda control (Cox & McCubbins))
2. No parties!
3. Single dimension of ideology
4. No interest groups or pork
17.20 Introduction to the American Political Process
Fall 2020

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: https://ocw.mit.edu/terms.