

Introduction to American Politics

Week 11: Congress

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4 April 2023

Attendance



Outline

- Group Project information
- Kernell et al. (Ch. 6)
- Smith, Binder, and Aldrich & Rohde
- Additional readings (if time)

Section 1

Group Project

Overview: Exposing Biased Ads

- Political scientists often use experiments to measure the political impact of “treatments” → here, that’s whether telling a survey respondent that a political advertisement is biased affects the impact of the ad
- In groups of 4, you will:
 - Find a biased political ad
 - Write 2 scripts that the surveyors (*you!*) will employ
 - Design other questions to include in the survey
 - Distribute the survey (~40 respondents per group)
 - Give a brief (3-5 minute) presentation to the section elaborating on your hypotheses, survey design, and findings
- 5% of the final grade
- **Due: Tuesday, April 25th**

Section 2

Discussion

Overview: Congress & the Constitution

- Congress is the product of the Great Compromise between large and small states
- Extraordinarily powerful under Article I §8
 - Commerce clauses (e.g., coin money, levy taxes, regulate commerce)
 - Necessary and proper clause (“elastic” clause)
 - Declare war and raise an army
 - Senate’s powers over treaty ratification and approving presidential appointments
- $\frac{2}{3}$ veto overrides
- Unique electoral provisions
 - Separate presidential and congressional elections
 - Plurality districts
 - Federalism and apportionment decisions

Congress & Elections

- The proximate goal is **reelection**
- Ebb and flow from *party*-centered to *candidate*-centered electoral politics, and (in the last ~2 decades) a return to party-centered elections
- As partisan voting has increased, incumbency advantage has declined
- Nationalization of congressional electoral politics
- Members have a stake in their party's image because they can't disassociate themselves easily
- Representation vs. responsibility → collective action problems as a result of constituency-oriented activities (but, "solved" by logrolling?)

Legislative Organization (and Problems)

- Information and time deficits → division of labor and specialization (i.e., committees and MC “experts”)
- Coordination issues → party leaders and chamber procedures
- Conflict resolution → rules, customs, and party control
- MCs working for personal vs. common goals (collective action)
- **Parties and committees help solve (or at least mitigate) these problems** → agenda control is a critical component
- **Conditional party government** → the degree of authority delegated and exercised by party leaders is conditional on the extent of ideological consensus within the party *and* the degree of ideological polarization between the parties

Congressional Work & The Reactions

- Kernell et al. does a pretty good job walking through the legislative process, so be sure to take a close look at that
- On the whole, people have conflicting attitudes about Congress:
 - In general terms, they approve of how the Constitution laid out the legislature as an institution
 - Most Americans also (usually) like their own representatives/senators. . .
 - . . . *but*, most of the same Americans have a general disdain for Congress itself and “politicians”
- Approval of Congress tends to be very low, and this is a reflection of American **pluralism**

Smith: “Congress, the Troubled Institution”

- Congress has significant **collective action problems**
- Generally pretty low public approval from the post-New Deal/WWII era until ~9/11 → now even lower than pre-9/11
- Many MCs *themselves* complain about Congress, too
- Hyper-polarized environment, increased partisan sorting, and high political stakes cause nasty campaigns and gridlock
- Congressional inaction (or incapacity) encourages aggressive presidents/agencies and increasingly active courts, but also hampers these institutions by battling over appointments
- ***What to do?***

Binder: “Legislating in Polarized Times”

- A revisitation of Binder’s dialogue with Mayhew, who found that divided government did *not* impact the amount of “significant legislation” that gets through Congress
- Binder creates an alternative measure that she argues captures the *degree* of legislative deadlock itself by assessing the set of salient agenda items that fail for each Congress
- 2 key findings that go beyond just examining year-to-year changes:
 - Regardless of *what* polarization is a function of, intense partisan behavior results in struggles between MCs and the president to find solutions that are palatable to everyone
 - Interestingly, when accounting for polarization between the parties, unified governments aren’t that much more productive than divided governments

Aldrich & Rohde: “Congressional Committees...”

- Overview of the **conditional party government** theory → as parties become more internally homogeneous and more ideologically divergent from each other, rank-and-file members will be more willing to delegate to strong party leaders
- The committee system was created, first and foremost, to serve the interest of MCs
 - Standing committees with (relatively) non-partisan leadership assignments were prevalent from the Civil War era until the mid-20th century
 - Shifts away from seniority and towards the “partisan era” began in the 1950s and 1960s → centralization of authority in partisan positions that then restructured committees to serve partisan ends

Additional materials

- Sherman & Palmer → McConnell as a ruthless politician, but still limited (sometimes) by the structures of Congress
- Tumulty → Pelosi as savvy and equally ruthless; biopic describing her rise to power
- McConnell → arguing for keeping the filibuster (plus some blaming of Democrats)
- Toobin → the perils of gerrymandering and redistricting (and SCOTUS's role)
- VandeHei → use of the Rules Committee by Republicans to hamper Democrats

Section 3

Outro

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- Adjusted office hours today: 12:30-1pm & 2-2:30pm
- Coordinate with your groups for the project
 - **Groups** listed on *section* BB page
 - **Instructions** on *course* BB page
- Next paper assignment coming soon (exact date TBA)

Attendance

