

# Introduction to the American Political Process

## Class 7: Congress I

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## 1. The Rational Choice Approach to American Political Institutions

## 2. Readings

Mayhew, “Congress: The Electoral Connection”

Fenno, “Home Style”

Cox and McCubbins, “Setting the Agenda”

Lee, “Insecure Majorities”

# The Rational Choice Approach to American Political Institutions

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# Rational Choice Theory

Dominant framework for studying American political institutions:

- Congress
- The Presidency
- The Courts
- The Bureaucracy
- Federalism

These are all examples of a **strategic setting**:

1. The fate of each actor depends on the actions of other actors
2. Actors are aware of their interdependence.

# Building a Model

From these basic principles, we build **models** with these features:

## 1. Individual preferences

- Politicians want to get reelected (conflict: beholden to different constituencies)
- Voters want better jobs, lower taxes, health insurance, education...

## 2. Actions available to individuals/“rules of the game”

- Legislator: vote yea, nay, abstain
- President: veto, public appeals
- Voter: vote for one of the candidates/stay home

## 3. Mapping from actions to outcomes

- A voting rule, e.g. popular vote, electoral college
- How different tax policies affect the economy

# When Is Rational Choice Theory Useful?

1. Players understand the “game” they’re playing
2. Shared understanding of the rules of the game (shared history, culture)
3. Significant incentives to act like a decision theorist

**High applicability:** Congress deciding how to vote on important legislation

**Low applicability:** Voter deciding how to vote on low-level office or referendum

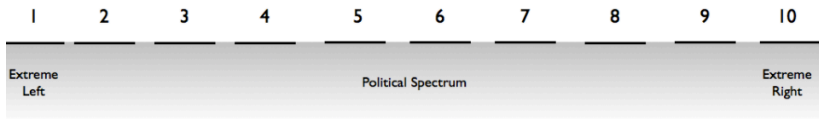
- Voters more broadly? We will revisit this when we get to Political Behavior.

# Building a Model of Congress

- **Actors:** Members of Congress (MCs)
  - Also voters and interest groups
- **Preferences/motivations:**
  - Single-minded seekers of reelection (Mayhew)
  - + Professional advancement, good policy, and party majority status (Cox & McCubbins)
- **Actions:**
  - Advertising, credit-claiming, position-taking (Mayhew)
- **Constraints/Rules of the game:**
  - Elections (constituency support) (Fenno)
  - Congressional rules and procedures (Cox & McCubbins)
  - Parties (Cox & McCubbins)

# Median Voter Theorem (Downs 1957)

## The Election Game



Candidate A



Candidates must choose to position themselves at one of the ten ideological locations. Voters are evenly distributed along the ideological spectrum, i.e. 10% at each location.



Candidate B



Do you think the median voter theorem is a useful model? Why might we see deviations from it?

**Note:** Policy-motivated candidates is not a reason!

## Readings

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Mayhew, “Congress: The Electoral Connection”

# Mayhew, “Congress: The Electoral Connection”

Written as thought exercise: *suppose* MCs are single-minded seekers of reelection. What would they have to worry about?

- Under the median voter theorem, the **expected incumbent differential**

What activities would they engage in?

1. Advertising
2. Credit-claiming
3. Position taking

# Readings

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Fenno, “Home Style”

The four concentric constituencies of an MC:

1. The **geographical constituency**: the district
2. The **reelection constituency**: the supporters
3. The **primary constituency**: the strongest supporters
4. The **personal constituency**: the intimates

What is the utility of distinguishing between these constituencies for thinking about representation?

## Readings

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Cox and McCubbins, “Setting the Agenda”

# What problems are parties trying to solve?

## 1. Commitment

- Making sure that policies enacted today aren't overturned tomorrow

## 2. Collective action

- Building and maintaining the party brand to appeal to voters



# How are parties organized?

We can think of parties as similar to “partnerships,” where senior partners steer the tactical and strategic direction of the firm.

The senior partners include:

- Committee and subcommittee chairs
- Majority and minority leaders
- Senior members

# What do parties do?

Parties as **voting coalitions**.

Parties as **procedural coalitions**.

- **Positive agenda power:** Putting items that unite the party on the legislative agenda
- **Negative agenda power:** Keeping items that divide the party off the legislative agenda

**Procedural cartel theory:** The majority party operates as a cartel to secure party unity.

# Procedural Cartel Theory: Assumptions

1. MCs seek reelection, internal advancement, good public policy, and majority status
2. The reputation, or **brand**, of an MC's party affects both personal probability of winning reelection and party's probability of securing a majority
3. The party brand depends on its record of legislative achievement
4. Legislating entails overcoming cooperation and coordination problems
5. Overcoming these problems entails centralizing authority within the party
6. The key resource majority parties centralize control over is the legislative agenda

# How does the majority party cartelize the agenda?

Tools at the majority party's disposal:

- Senior members get professional rewards in return for party loyalty
- Committee assignments: Rules Committee, Ways and Means Committee, other committees

**Key insight:** Unified party voting  $\nRightarrow$  unified party.

## Readings

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Lee, “Insecure Majorities”

# Congress and the Perpetual Campaign

Describe the trade-off between campaigning and legislating. Are voters' interests well-served by differentiated parties?