Introduction to the American Political Process

Class 26: Reflections

Asya Magazinnik (Professor)
Zeyu Chris Peng (Teaching Assistant)

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MIT

Building Blocks of American Politics

1. Institutions

   - Rules of the game that constrain the choices of political actors

   - How rational actors (often with competing agendas) navigate these rules and interact with one another

2. Behavior

   - Psychological processes that determine how ordinary citizens navigate the political world

Institutional Analysis

Institutional analysis is applied to:

- sophisticated political actors
- having a shared understanding of the rules of the game
- who have powerful incentives to behave strategically
- including (maybe!) members of Congress, the President, the bureaucracy, the courts...

Fundamentally, it revolves around:

- actors with well-defined preferences
- maximizing their expected utility
- given rules of the game and expectations about other rational actors

Insights from Institutional Analysis

Institutional design shapes political outcomes

- Supermajoritarian rules → legislative gridlock
- Electoral geography → urban disadvantage

Power in institutions may be obvious or less visible

- The Electoral College
- The presidential veto

Yet some institution must be (is always) in place

- There is no politically neutral default

Game Theory

If you like this style of analysis and want to learn it more formally, take 17.810/811 (offered Fall 2023). The course covers:

- Mathematical (and philosophical) foundations of rational preferences and choices
    - Set theory, social choice theory
- Equilibrium concepts
    - Nash equilibrium
- Utility maximization
    - Convex optimization
- Information
    - Bayesian updating

Recognizing that ordinary citizens are *not* usually utility-maximizers with well-formed policy preferences, the subfield of *political behavior* seeks to explain:

- How politically relevant identities form and are sustained

- How identities translate to political choices (turnout, other forms of participation, vote choice)

- How citizens evaluate candidates — and the consequences for democratic accountability

- People seem naturally inclined to form and identify with groups; politics is often a game of teamsmanship, not issues

    - But which identities become relevant for political behavior, and how?

- On most issues, politicians seem to lead voters — not the other way around

    - But how do people choose which politicians to support in the first place?

- At least there is some evidence of retrospective voting, which gives us partial hope of democratic accountability

    - But how do people decide the standards by which to judge success?

    - (Always a risk of blind retrospection)

Theory and Empirics in Institutions and Behavior

Institutional analysis practices a **deductive** approach to theory:

- Specify some behavioral postulates and rules of the game

- Derive how a rational individual would behave under those assumptions → social equilibrium

- [Test the predictions of that theory with data]

While behavior is fundamentally **inductive**:

- Make observations about human behavior (e.g. people tend to identify with groups)

- Generalize from those observations to form broad theories

- Test and refine those theories in new contexts & iterate

Special Features of the American Case

1. History of racial apartheid intersects with various features of American politics, including:

   - Political identities (white and minority)
   - Partisanship
   - The carceral state
   - Preferences for redistribution
   - Federalism

2. Income inequality

3. Federalism

4. Polarization

The Science of Politics?

Academic political science provides scientific frameworks and tools that I hope you will find helpful for deconstructing politics:

- Definitions (e.g., representation)
- Theories (inductive and deductive)
- Statistical methods for data analysis

These tools can *describe* the facts on the ground and, at times, *explain* them.

But they cannot tell us what *should be* — what is fair, who deserves what — which is the substance of most political disagreements.

Beyond American Politics

At the core of most questions in American politics is **representation**:

- How are resources and power being distributed across groups?

- Is government responding to the will of the people? Which people?

That is because the American politics tradition is deeply concerned with **democratic performance**. But there are also other areas of study in political science:

- Relations between states (IR)

- Politics of nondemocratic (e.g. authoritarian) states (CP)

- Most useful (and not useful) things you've learned?

- Unresolved questions? Points of confusion?

- Anything you came to learn that you did not learn?

Please fill out course evaluations by 9 am on Friday, May 13:
`http://registrar.mit.edu/subjectevaluation`

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Feel free to contact: asyam@mit.edu