

Introduction to the American Political Process

Class 8: Congress I

Asya Magazinnik (Professor)

1. Readings

Mayhew, "Congress: The Electoral Connection"

Fenno, "Home Style"

Cox and McCubbins, "Setting the Agenda"

Readings

Building a Model of Congress

- **Actors:** Members of Congress (MCs)
- **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:**
 - Elections (constituency support) (Fenno)
 - Congressional rules and procedures (Cox & McCubbins)
 - Parties (Cox & McCubbins)

Mayhew, “Congress: The Electoral Connection”

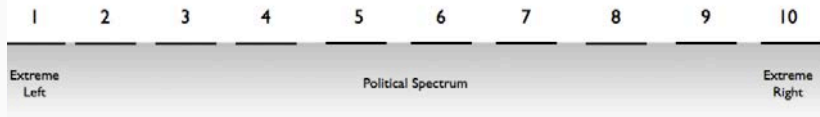
Written as thought exercise: *suppose* MCs are single-minded seekers of reelection. How would they behave?

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

Implication: policy convergence to median voter's preference

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 holds in reality? Why might we see deviations from it?

Note: Policy-motivated candidates is not a reason!

The four key 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 problems are parties trying to solve?

1. Commitment
2. Collective action

Cox and McCubbins, “Setting the Agenda”

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

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

- **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

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: Changes interpretation of observed unified partisan voting patterns (not necessarily a united party)

MIT OpenCourseWare
<https://ocw.mit.edu>

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>.