Institutions
Government 6301: Fall 2009

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Course description:

This course will explore the ways in which institutions influence collective deliberation and decision-making and thereby shape the conduct and outcome of politics. The opening section of the course will briefly review the general literature on theories of institutional formation and influence over politics. After that, we will focus on the United States Congress where the literature on institutional design and structure is both comprehensive and deep.

Congress will be examined, for the most part, as a closed system in which internal organizational arrangements decisively apportion political power. Emphasis will be placed on parliamentary rules as both arrangements within which the rational choices of legislators are played out and as deliberate constructions and allocations of political influence. This approach is intended to illustrate the many ways in which legislative behavior can be used as evidence in the analysis of fundamental principles of politics. Because the literature on the lower chamber is generally richer, the House of Representatives will receive greater attention than the Senate.

The broadest purpose of the syllabus and the course is to survey how research in this field can be organized and taught.

Course Requirements:

Students can choose between two options. Both options commit you to lead and organize the opening discussion for at least two of the sessions (usually a 30-45 minute responsibility). Option one also requires a 72 hour take-home examination. In place of the exam, option two commits you to lead discussion in two additional sessions as well as prepare a research paper of (to be negotiated) length. You should choose this second option only if you believe you might want to publish in this area.

General Reading List:

A basic reference library in congressional research would include at least the following works. Because most of these are expensive, you might note their availability and location in the library.


Useful Websites

http://www.house.gov/house/Tying_it_all.shtml


http://www3.capwiz.com/c-span/issues/basics/?style=legis

http://thomas.loc.gov/home/lawsmade.toc.html

At the Cornell Bookstore:

Douglas Arnold, Logic of Congressional Action.


Sarah A. Binder, Minority Rights, Majority Rule: Partisanship and the Development of Congress.

Barry C. Burden, Personal Roots of Representation.

Charles M. Cameron, Veto Bargaining: Presidents and the Politics of Negative Power.


Andrew Gelman, Red State, Blue State, Rich State, Poor State: Why Americans Vote the Way They Do.
Richard L. Hall, Participation in Congress.
Keith Krehbiel, Information and Legislative Organization.
Frances Lee, Beyond Ideology: Politics, Principles, and Partisanship in the U.S. Senate.
David R. Mayhew, America’s Congress: Actions in the Public Sphere.
Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, Ideology in Congress.
Eric Schickler, Disjointed Pluralism: Institutional Innovation and the Development of the U.S. Congress.
Wendy J. Schiller, Partners and Rivals: Representation in U.S. Senate Delegations.
Charles Stewart, III, Analyzing Congress.
Gregory J. Wawro and Eric Schickler, Filibuster: Obstruction and Lawmaking in the U.S. Senate.

Course Outline: Each of the weekly assignments below is accompanied by questions that are intended to guide your reading. If you are leading the discussion that week, you may either use these questions as a starting point in organizing your presentation or abandon them for another frame. The lists of recommended readings contain background materials to particular historical periods and theoretical problems. They are provided as additional references; you are not expected to read them for class.

First Week (September 2): Overview and Introduction.

In addition to the overview, we will attempt to assign responsibility for the weekly presentations.

Second Week (September 9): Approaches to the Study of Institutions.

Discussion questions:

Although there are many approaches to the study of institutions, the two primary frames involve either path dependence or rational preferences. Path dependence arguably rests on the power of “expectations” to channel and shape individual and group behavior. Simply put, what has happened in the past is expected, everything being equal, to happen again in the future. Radical alternatives to the past are just not considered feasible because other people do not expect other people to view them as realistic possibilities. They are thus off the public agenda. Path dependence can thus be seen as an explanation for the creation of preferences. Rational choice approaches, on the other hand, assume the existence of preferences without attempting to explain their creation. The structure of institutions, including the decision rules within them, influence the ways in which these preferences are turned into public policies by “processing” preferences into collective decisions. One of the questions we will address this week is whether and how these two approaches might be compatible with one another.
Assigned readings:


Recommended readings:


Third Week (September 16): Rational Choice Theory and Legislative Behavior.

Discussion questions:

At the very foundation of rational choice theory is the concept of a "preference" and a "preference ordering." Ask yourself, as you go over this week's readings, "What is a 'preference'?

As rational choice models become more complex, there appears to be a convergence with something we might call (from an inductive perspective) "thick description." Is this the case? If so, is it possible to arrive at a satisfactory theory before this convergence with a very complex reality has become complete (i.e., the model is just as complicated and contingent as the reality in which we live)? Needless to say, these questions will not be answered or even fully addressed in the second week but we will first broach them here.

Assigned readings:


Discussion questions:

We all know, as Weber once told us in another era, that institutions are constructed out of rules. But are institutions nothing but systems of rules? The offices established within institutions have names (e.g., the "Speaker") that do not change very often, sometimes remaining the same for centuries on end. But the powers/authority assigned under an institution's rules often change radically. Which should we focus on when we study institutional change, the formal names associated with individual offices or the procedural powers which often are assigned to different offices over time? We will also review some of the most important rules, norms, and institutional arrangements in the House and Senate. Be prepared to reconstruct these in class.

Assigned reading:


Recommended readings:

Secondary works on congressional procedure:

1) DeAlva Alexander, History and Procedure of the House of
Fifth Week (September 30): Legislative Institutions, Information, and the Stability of Preferences.

Discussion questions:

This week we explore two institutional models that relate congressional chambers to each other and to the presidency. As you study these models, think about the foundational assumptions that each of the authors explicitly or implicitly adopt in order to get their model up and running. Are these two sets of foundational assumptions compatible with each other? If so, does that imply that the two models can be combined? If not, where do they differ and what are the consequences of their differences?

Assigned readings:


Recommended readings:


Sixth Week (October 7): Parties, Rules, and Policy Outcomes.

Discussion questions:
Congressional scholars usually contend that control of legislative procedure confers great power on the majority party. While the analytical arguments accompanying this contention are often theoretically persuasive, in practice the majority party sometimes appears indecisive and, when it loses, relatively powerless. What are the major factors in the legislative environment that have empowered partisan efforts to manipulate the choices presented to the rank and file members?

Among other things, each of the books we read this week presents an alternative interpretation of the way in which the legislative success of the majority party is affected by the procedural rules under which the House of Representatives deliberates. For example, they present varying perspectives on the origins and consequences of the 1890 adoption of Reed’s Rules. Can their differences be reconciled?

Assigned readings:


Recommended readings:


Seventh Week (October 14): The Golden Age of the Congressional Committee
Discussion questions:

The "Golden Age" of the committee system in Congress is usually said to have begun in 1946 and ended in 1965. A little stretching at both ends would extend the period back to 1933 and forward, perhaps, to 1975. Try to construct explanations for the onset and demise of committee dominance in terms: (a) of the evolution of political parties as organizations; (b) of the internal dynamics of changing systems of power distribution among institutional offices; and (c) the external topography of the national political economy (e.g., state-society relations). Which of these is most persuasive or complete? Can any be dispensed with?

From what you have read this week and earlier in the course, you would probably conclude that "exclusive jurisdictions" and "strong seniority norms" in assignments within committees are necessary elements for a strong committee system. Are they the only conditions under which the committee system might be dominant?

Several of the readings this week attempt in one way or another to explain the institutionalization of the United States Congress as a product of a larger modernization of the national political system. Seen from this perspective, is it possible that the national political system has "de-modernized"? Recent developments aside, is it possible to reconcile the historical flow charts in the first Polsby article with a "rational choice" explanation of institutional change? What might that reconciliation look like?

Required readings:


Recommended readings:


Eighth Week (October 21): Information, Participation, and Institutional Change.

Discussion questions:

Almost all explanations of a contemporary institution focus on how the institution actually works, thereby emphasizing the stability-inducing aspects of institutions as systems of rules, norms, and sociological interactions. For that reason, political scientists often fail to anticipate or predict massive change in the institutions they study. How true is that generalization for each of the readings this week?

In the Krehbiel book, what is "information"? Consider the role that information plays in his theory--is Hall’s account of congressional participation compatible with that role?

Assigned readings:


Recommended readings:


Discussion questions:

Ideology has become the most common "independent variable" for explaining roll call voting and many other forms of legislative behavior. Of the many empirical referents for the ideological beliefs of members of Congress, NOMINATE scores generated by Poole and Rosenthal's statistical
algorithm are now favored by many, if not most, analysts. Their definition of ideology, in turn, is taken from Converse's article on "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics." Does the latter, in fact, support the conception of ideology proposed by the former? Frances Lee's book will help you answer that question. She also raises other problems concerning the status of ideology as an independent variable.

The Almanac of American Politics is probably the most widely read reference book for the members of Congress. However, as you read the various entries for the individual members, you may find it difficult to discern a dominant theory of either electoral or legislative behavior. Try to do so...

Required readings:


Recommended readings:

1) For Politics in America, see http://library.cqpress.com/pia/search.php.


Tenth Week (November 4): Elections and Representation.
Discussion questions:

Financial contributions, particularly those given by special interest groups, dominate many explanations of the relationship between elections and representation (i.e., policy-making by the elected member). Lots and lots of data exist, along with lots and lots of analysis. Jacobson, for example, presents an interpretation in which campaign finance seems the major factor in determining the success of candidates running for Congress.

Now read Gelman's interpretation of recent voting patterns in the United States. Campaign finance seems to drop completely out of sight. How would you combine these two studies into a single analytic model of congressional elections?

Assigned readings:


Recommended readings:

9) http://moneyline.cq.com/pml/home.do
10) http://www.opensecrets.org/

Eleventh Week (November 11): Congress and Law-making.

Discussion questions:

The readings this week present several very different approaches to understanding the relation between law as policy-making, congressional decision-making, and the impact of both upon the larger political system. Do these approaches have anything in common? Can any of them be combined? What is a "law"? What is its relation to a "bill" that has been
enacted? In order to see that the second of these is not a trivial question, think about the relations between a command written into statutory language, a grant of discretionary authority, and the strategic possibilities that accompany statutory ambiguity (see, for example, Arnold’s book).

Assigned readings:


Recommended readings:


Twelfth Week (November 18): The Member of Congress as Political Personality.

Discussion questions:

Almost all the readings so far have emphasized a kind of equality among all members of Congress. Their votes in Congress are weighted equally. They constitute equally weighted cases in terms of analysis between campaign contributions and election outcomes. Each of them, for example, contributes an equal quantum of information in Krehbiel’s models. And so on. Mayhew stresses the inequality among members in terms of their influence on the course of American political development. Is there a disjunction between his interpretations and those that stress the equality of members as analytical units?

Putting the Wawro and Schickler book alongside Mayhew’s analysis might suggest that the formal organization of Congress plays an important role in discouraging or encouraging exceptional performance by the individual members. Might this be true for the Senate filibuster? Whether or not that is the case, can you think of other kinds of congressional reform which might encourage exceptional performance by individual members?

Assigned readings:

2) Gregory J. Wawro and Eric Schickler, Filibuster: Obstruction and

Recommended readings:


Thirteenth Week (November 25): Personal Image versus Personality.

Discussion questions:

Schiller gives us a very thorough study of representation by pairs of senators representing the same state. In her interpretation, these senators make strategic choices that are largely determined by a need to attract media attention and otherwise position themselves against the other senator from their state. Burden, on the other hand, gives us a very different interpretation of the choices made by members. In his view, it is the personal characteristics of the members, not the strategic context in which they find themselves, that accounts for much of legislative behavior. Are these interpretations compatible with one another? If so, how would you apportion responsibility for explaining legislative behavior between them? If not, how would you choose between them? What might be a third alternative?

Assigned readings:


Recommended readings:

1) Frances E. Lee and Bruce I. Oppenheimer, Sizing Up the Senate: The Unequal Consequences of Equal Representation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
6) Daniel Wirls and Stephen Wirls, The Invention of the United States
Fourteenth Week (December 2): Overview.