

Political Science 17.20

Introduction to American Politics

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Congress: Internal Organization
Lecture 7 (February 28, 2013)

- 1 Institutional Solutions to Collective Action Problems
 - The Committee System
 - Majority Party Control

- 2 Pivotal Politics

1 Institutional Solutions to Collective Action Problems

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Basic Problems Faced by Legislatures

Last lecture: Individual rationality \implies collective irrationality

- Collective goods (balanced budget, party reputation, etc.)
- Lack of information and expertise
- Time limitations
- Transaction costs (instability)

Institutional Solutions

- Institutions that (partially) solve these problems:
 - 1 Committee system
 - 2 Majority-party control
- Each set of institutions solves problems in different ways and encourages different kinds of politics/policymaking.
- Relative importance has evolved over time due to formal and informal changes in Congress.
- Need for rules, organization greater in House than in (smaller) Senate

Committees: Origins and Purpose

- Congressional committees predate Constitution
- **Idea:** Let small group, possibly with special expertise, work on problem or issue (e.g., Declaration of Independence)
- Information, expertise, specialization
- Committees as **agents** of the chamber as a whole
- Problems:
 - 1 Incentivize acquisition of expertise
 - 2 Preference outliers

Evolution of the Committee System

- Early 1800s: *Ad hoc* to **standing**
- Early 1900s: **Seniority** rule
- 1920s–1970s: Strong, autonomous committee system
- 1970s–present: Increasing party control over committees

Politics of the Committee System

- Norm of deference → logroll
- Non-ideological, universalistic, distributive politics
- Preference outliers dominate their area of interest
- Special role of House Rules Committee (now partisan)

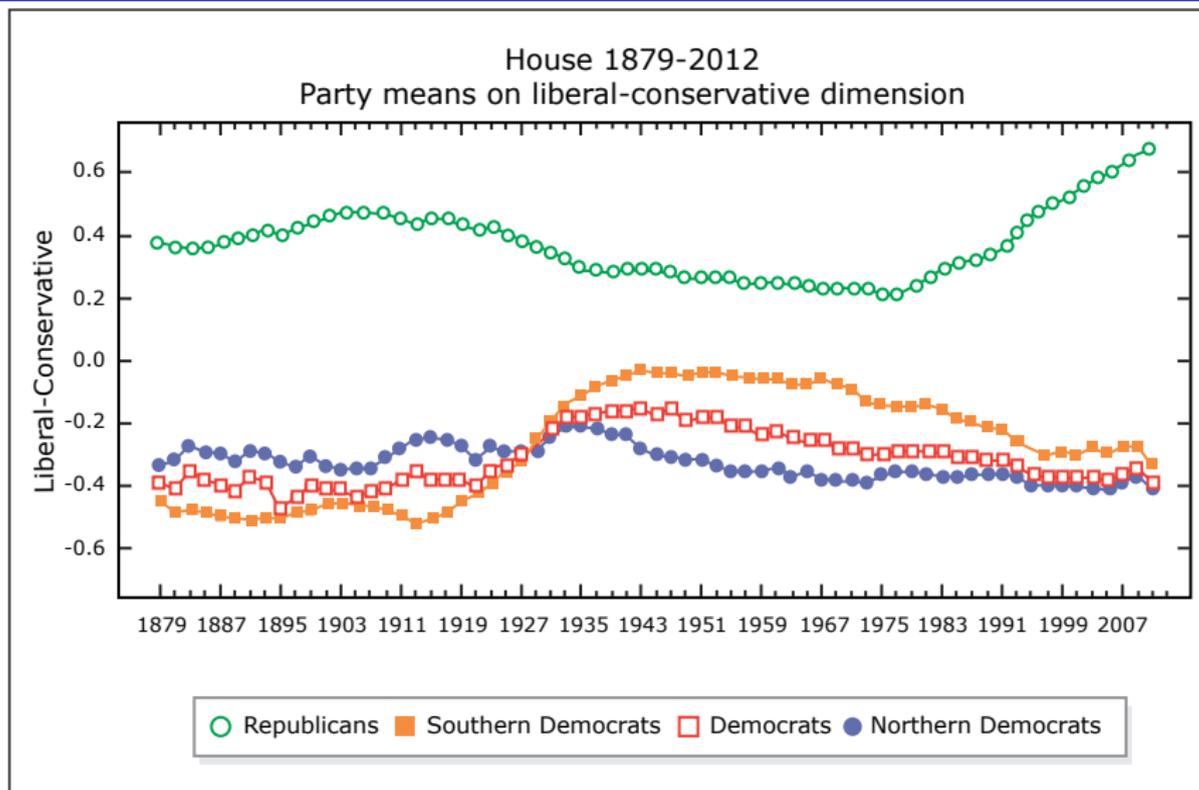
Mechanisms of Party Control

- Leaders (Speaker, majority leader, etc.) are agents of the majority party caucus, not the chamber as a whole.
- Hastert Rule: “majority of the majority”
- Speaker of the House is empowered by majority caucus to influence committee membership, control agenda (what is voted on when → Rules), etc.
- Senate majority leader has much less power.

Conditional Party Government

- **Aldrich & Rohde:** Amount of power the majority party is willing to cede its leadership depends on its internal **homogeneity** and its **polarization** relative to the minority.

Ideological Polarization Over Time



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(How) Do Parties Matter?

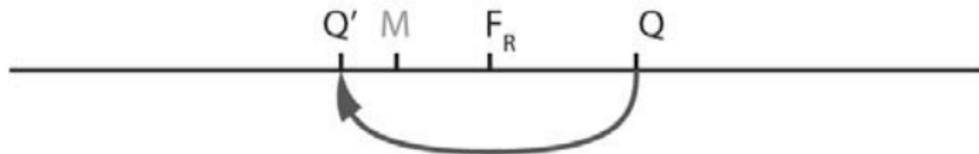
- **Krehbiel:** Given the distribution of preferences in Congress, does it matter what the majority party is?
- All we need to know is who are the **pivotal voters**.

Supermajority Institution 1: The Senate Filibuster

Majoritarian (50% + 1)

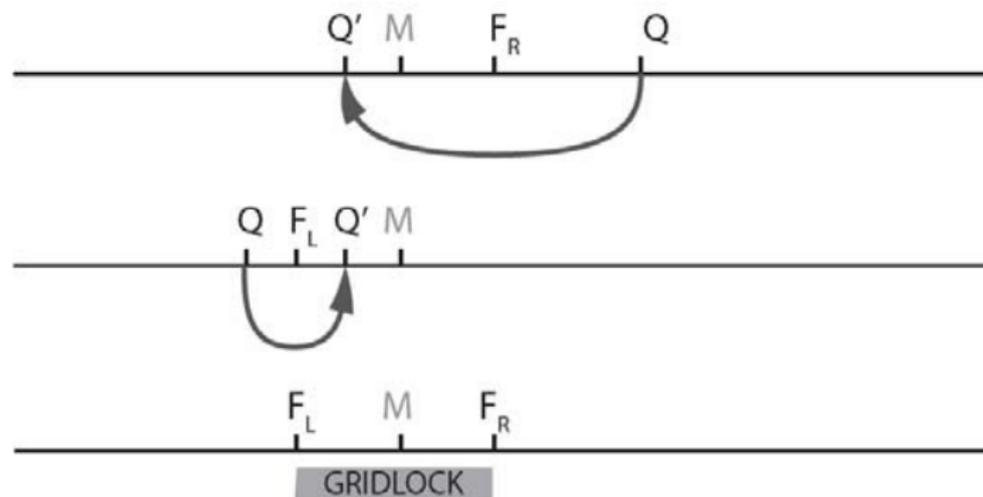


Supermajoritarian (60%)



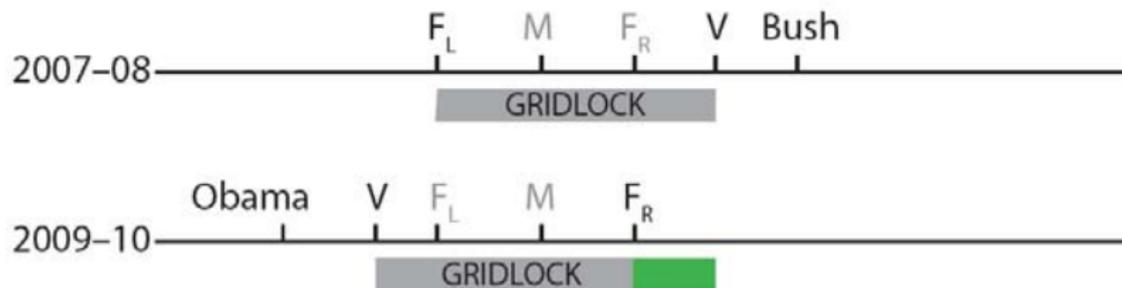
- The right/conservative **filibuster pivot** (F_R), the 60th most liberal member of the 100-member Senate, is pivotal to the passage of proposals that move policy to the left.

The Gridlock Interval



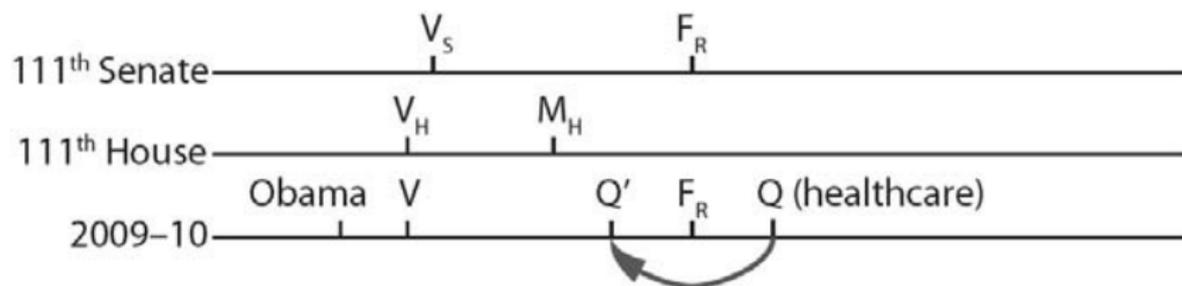
- Status quos between F_L and F_R cannot be beaten by any proposed policy shift \implies **gridlock** (policy stasis)

Supermajority Institution 2: The Presidential Veto



- A 2/3 supermajority is needed to override a presidential veto, so the gridlock interval extends to the **veto pivot (V)** on the president's side of the median.
- Partisan change in the presidency (e.g., Bush to Obama) “releases” policies btwn veto and filibuster pivots (green) → presidential “honeymoon”

The Case of Health Care, 2009–10 (111th Congress)



- Healthcare reform (Q') barely passed Senate (60 votes).
- More conservative than liberal Democrats (e.g., V) wanted.
- “Cornhusker kickback” to buy off conservative Democrat Ben Nelson of Nebraska, the filibuster pivot (F_R).
- (Democrats lost supermajority before final passage and had to use special majoritarian procedure, “reconciliation”)

The Role of Parties in Congress

Even if parties have little influence over roll-call votes, they still have two very important roles:

- 1 Structure politics along a single ideological **dimension**
 - Example: Abortion + gun control + healthcare mandate
- 2 Influence/control the **alternatives**
 - Example: Clinton impeachment

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Spring 2013

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