

Congress – Party, Polarization and Ideology

Krehbiel focused on answering the question: why is Congress continually mired in gridlock? He developed a theory emphasizing the constraints of dealing with Congressional rules requiring supermajority support for many types of legislation. Without surpassing these “pivotal points,” Congress is unable to effectively pass laws. This is true regardless of whether Congress and the president represent the same party. I thought Krehbiel’s illustration on page 41 showing how it was theoretically possible that the unified government under Clinton would be unable to surpass the supermajority requirements was particularly illuminating.

Cox and McCubbins, though telling a very different story about how Congress functions, also provided evidence for why legislating may be difficult. Their theory rested on the power of the Speaker (and, though not explicit, the related power of committee leaders). The Speaker exercises significant control over which bills come before the floor of the House—and under what rules they are considered. These rules mean that committees, in proposing legislation, must consider the (potentially very different) ideal points of (1) the committee, (2) the Speaker, and (3) the House floor. If these ideal points are too dissimilar, no legislation will be proposed. Finally, Poole and Rosenthal’s data show that the ideologies of Congressmen in the two parties began moving away from each other about 30 years ago, when Republicans replaced Democratic congressmen in the south. At this point, there is no overlap in the parties’ coalitions, which should make legislating more difficult.

It also seems to me that there are other potential constraints on Congress’ ability to enact legislation. For example, I would think that anticipation of priorities in the other chamber or in the White House could play a part in how some Congressmen act. However, Poole and Rosenthal show a regression that this is uncommon at best. They also claim that many votes on legislation coming out of the conference committee is passed overwhelmingly. That could mean the conference committee is really good at what they do, or it could mean that the conference committee is another place where bills go to die. Many of the authors also hinted at the power of the committee chairs (most explicitly, Cox and McCubbins), and clearly they can and have played a big role in stopping legislation of which they don’t approve.

In light of all these constraints, my biggest question is: how does Congress pass any legislation at all? Every year, a budget eventually gets passed. Major legislation—including emergency bills like the stimulus package and non-emergency laws like No Child Left Behind—also gets through this gauntlet. What are the situations that provide Congress with sufficient fortitude (or votes) to get a bill signed?

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