17.251
Fall 2012
Midterm Exam answers

Part I: Univariate Spatial Model (20%)

Directions: Do the following problem.

The nation is faced with a situation in which, if legislation isn't passed, the level of income and payroll taxation in the United States will rise from $2.0T to $2.4T. If legislation is to pass, it must follow the constitutional provisions for the passage of legislation, including the presentation clause and the veto clause. (Ignore the filibuster, because we haven't learned about that.)

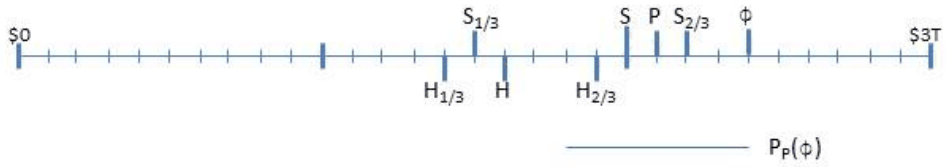
The following table gives statistics about the distribution of ideal points in the House and Senate, along with the president's ideal point.

	House	Senate	President
Median	1.6T	2.0T	2.1T
Minimum	0.6T	0.6T	—
First quartile (1/4)	1.2T	1.3T	—
First tertile (1/3)	1.4T	1.5T	—
Third quartile (3/4)	1.8T	2.1T	—
Second tertile (2/3)	1.9T	2.2T	—
Maximum	2.4T	2.6T	—

Ia. If Congress were to pass a bill to change tax revenue levels, what would the highest and lowest possible revenue levels be in a bill that could possibly become law?

The first thing to do is to sketch out the relevant ideal points. Note that I introduced a lot of extraneous information in this table about ideal points. We know we will need the president's ideal point and the medians of the House and Senate, because satisfying the median voters in the chambers, plus the president, is the minimal condition to pass legislation. Because there is the possibility of a veto, we also want to keep in mind the location of the tertiles. The minimums, maximums, and quartiles are irrelevant and can be ignored. The reversion point is $2.4T — the taxation amount if no law is passed.

Here is the graph:



Note that the president and the medians of the House and Senate all want to move revenues downward. Therefore, the maximum amount is the reversion point, $2.4T. Note also that the pivotal actor whose ideal point is closest to the reversion point is the president. Therefore, if we just pay attention to the medians (for the moment), the president, being the closest to the reversion point, is the one whose preferred-to set sets the limits to where the final bill can be. The minimum of the president's preferred-to set is $1.8T.

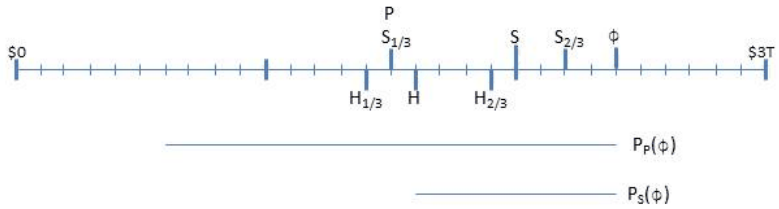
We are following the Constitution, so the Congress will propose a bill to the president, who must decide whether to veto it. Again, focusing just on the medians in the two chambers, there is no reason to suppose that the bill passed by Congress would exceed the Senate median's ideal point. (If a bill exceeded the Senate median's ideal point, both the House and Senate median would agree to reduce revenues.) With the Congress bounded on the low end by the president's preferred-to set and on the upper end by the Senate median, the region defining the credible bill is between $1.8T and 2.0T.

Because the veto is a possibility, one should ask whether it would be possible to expand this interval by passing a bill that might face a presidential veto, but which might also be overridden. Note that a bill just a small bit less than $1.8T would be vetoed by the president. This bill would be supported by the veto pivot in the House, but not the Senate. Therefore, the strategy of playing with the veto is not an option here.

Answer: ($1.8T, 2.0T)

Ib. Suppose the ideal point of the president is moved to 1.5T. What would the highest and lowest possible revenue levels be in a bill that could possibly become law?

Here is the graph:



I have redrawn the new preferred-set for the president. However, now that the Senate median is the closest ideal point to the reversion point, it is necessary to draw that preferred-to set, also. Note that the Senate's preferred-to set includes the contract curve between the Senate and House median. Therefore, any bill presented to the president must be somewhere in this interval.

The question again arises whether it could be possible for a bill to pass that was outside this interval, by appealing to one of the veto pivots. Note that any bill to the left of the House median's ideal point would not be supported by the veto pivot closest to the reversion point, nor would it be supported by the Senate median so that's out. Any bill to the right of the Senate median would be supported by all the veto pivots. However, by majority rule, you could always move the bill to lie within the interval between the House and Senate medians.

Answer: ($1.6T, 2.0T)

For both of these, draw a diagram to illustrate your answer, and write a brief paragraph explaining the diagram.

Grading:

Each subquestion is worth 10 points.

10 points: correct interval and legible diagram
8 points: correct (or nearly correct) interval and imperfect diagram
6 points: nearly correct interval and imperfect diagram
4 points: entirely wrong interval with partially correct diagram
0 points: entirely wrong interval with diagram suggesting lack of understanding of the question

Part II: Short Answers (24%)

Directions: Answer *three* of the following short answer questions.

1. What/who is a *veto pivot*?

The veto pivot is a member of a legislature who would determine whether a bill passes if vetoed by the president. In a unidimensional policy setting, if we array all legislators according to their preferences, the veto pivot is the member one-third of the way from the end of the dimension, on the same end of the dimension as the president.

2. What is the *incumbency advantage*, and what are two factors that are said to account for it?

The incumbent advantage is the extra increment of electoral support an incumbent receives purely by virtue of being an incumbent. Factors that are said to account for it include (1) better name recognition, (2) campaign spending advantage, (3) greater political skill, (3) gerrymandering, (4) constituency service, (5) use of the franking privilege.

3. What is the *swing ratio*? Why is the value of the swing ratio rarely 1.0?

The swing ratio is the predicted change in the percentage of legislative seats held by a political party when that party receives 1 percentage point more of the popular vote. The most basic reason it is rarely 1.0 is that the bulk of election outcomes are decides around the 50% point. Therefore, a small shift in popular vote can switch a large number of seats from one party to the other. Gerrymandering can further depress the swing ratio.

4. In his chapter in the Dodd and Oppenheimer volume, Joseph Cooper describes the presidency as being "plebicitary." What is a "plebicitary presidency," and what does Cooper say that academics and journalists should do to help provide a balance to this situation?

The idea of the plebicitary president is that the president has been able to appeal more directly to the public in the popular imagination than Congress, making the desires of the president in lawmaking more prominent than the desires of legislators. However, our constitutional system makes Congress just as important as the president, which causes the public to mis-attribute success and failure to the president. Cooper believes

academics and journalists should do more to educate the public about the workings of our republican Constitution.

5. Before the passage of the 17th Amendment, what was the process that state legislatures were required to follow in electing U.S. senators?

Prior to the passage of the 17th Amendment, state legislature elected U.S. senators. The first balloted separately for candidates. If the same person received a majority in each chamber, he was elected. If not, then the two chambers would vote together in joint session, continuing to vote until someone received a majority of all votes cast.

Grading: Each question is worth 8 points.

8 points: correct identification with no errors
6 points: basically correct identification that doesn't quite hit the mark.
4 points: answer that is more right than wrong, but which betrays a significant error
2 points: answer is mostly wrong, betraying lack of understanding of the item

Part III: Essay (56%)

Directions: Write an essay on the following topic. Please write on only one side of your blue book.

In addition to the presidential election, tomorrow there will be a congressional election. Write an essay in which you discuss what the likely outcome will be, and why that outcome will be as it is. In writing this essay, include information from what you've learned about the particular circumstances of this election (from the roundtables and your own independent reading) and the larger body of knowledge that informs what we know about congressional elections in general. Avoid writing an essay that is motivated by your own partisan hopes. Finally, discuss how the results of this current election will set up the dynamics for the midterm congressional election in 2014.

The essay must contain elements of each aspect of the question:
(1) What will the likely outcome be?
(2) Why the outcome will be as it is.
(3) How will the election set up the dynamics for 2014?

At the time of the exam, the most likely outcome in the press was the status quo, with a possible slight pick-up for the Democrats

in each chamber. Factors to talk about in discussing the likely outcome include incumbency advantage and redistricting. The blunders of some of the Senate candidates could be mentioned. In discussing 2014, it is necessary to discuss the trend by which the president's party almost always loses seats in the House.

Grading: The whole essay is worth 56 points.

56 points: Good discussion of each of the three points. Bring in examples of the points based on reading the news or participating in the roundtables. Displays comprehensive integration of the course material with outside reading.

45 points: Overall good discussion of the three points, but with one of the points being done more weakly than the others. Perhaps the evidence brought to bear wasn't as comprehensive as it could be.

34 points: Shaky discussion on one or more points, with a limited integration of materials based on outside reading.

22 points: Marginal engagement with the question.