

17.251/252
 Midterm answers
 Fall 2008

Ia. Start with a sketch:



The easiest way to proceed is to ask, first, what would happen if the Treasury Secretary (T) just proposed his own ideal point. Both houses of Congress would want to pass a law increasing the allocation. However, the president would veto even the most “conservative” of bills — one that set the amount at the Senate’s ideal point (S). That is because any crease from T makes the president worse off. Therefore, The Treasury Secretary can set the amount to his own ideal point, at T.

Another way of proceeding is to notice that T lies in the contract curve between P and S (the more conservative chamber). Therefore, if the Treasury Secretary sets the amount within this interval (and T is the best in the interval from the perspective of the Treasury Secretary) the two parties that would have to agree to a change in that amount can’t bargain together about changing the status quo.

Ib. Start with a sketch:



As before, start with the Treasury Secretary making the allocation to suit his ideal point, T. The House and Senate will want to pass a law increasing the allocation to at least \$550b, and perhaps \$650b, depending on the bargain. P would approve an increase in that region. (To confirm this, note that P is closer to S than to T.) Therefore, T sets the amount to H’s ideal point, \$550. By doing this, T at least guards against anything higher than this.

II-1. A *supermajority* is a winning margin that requires agreement than more than $(n/2)+1$. An example in the constitution is the $2/3$ supermajority required in both chambers to override a presidential veto.

II-2. Article I, section 8 of the Constitution contains the enumerated powers of Congress. It also contains provisions like the “Commerce Clause.” It is significant because the powers given Congress expressly were so much more than was given to Congress under the articles of Confederation.

II-3. The *Australian ballot* is a ballot printed by the state and cast in secret.

II-4. The *incumbency advantage* is the number of votes that a member of Congress gets by virtue of him/her being the incumbent. This number is on top of the partisan “normal vote,” which is taken as the baseline.

II-5. *Baker v. Carr* was the 1962 Supreme Court decision that established the principle of “one person, one vote.” It led to a flurry of redistricting in the South (especially) to get the legislative districts have the same populations.

III. Short answer. There are two parts to the question. The first assesses what was going to happen on Election Day in the congressional elections. The second asks you to predict what will happen in the midterm election of 2010.

The most important set of factors in congressional races we studied and read about were the economy and the role of “quality challengers.” The poor showing of the economy would have made it difficult for Republicans to pick up seats in this year’s congressional election. In addition, things were looking very bad last winter and spring, when potential candidates make up their mind about running for Congress against an incumbent, or to run in an open seat. Republicans did poorly in this season, having to endure a lot of retirements; Democrats, on the other hand did well, getting the best of the crop to challenge vulnerable incumbents.

[Note: I recognize now that there was an ambiguity in the question, by asking about the most important outcome of the election. While most of you interpreted it in the way I intended, some of you interpreted it as meaning to write about the policy consequences of the election — such as a shift to the left, especially with the President changing parties and Congress being less constrained. Because we didn’t touch on factors much in the first half of the class that would help to make this a strong answer, this generally ended up not being a good strategy. Predicting a Republican loss of seats and explaining why that was going to be was in all cases the stronger strategy in this part of the answer.]

Looking ahead, there’s almost always a slump for the president’s party in the midterm, and it’s likely to happen in 2010. A few explanations for this. The first is a “surge and decline” effect. In the presidential year, almost by definition, an extra chunk of electorate shows up to vote for president that doesn’t normally vote in other elections. While they are in the voting booth, these marginal voters will vote in down-ballot races, and generally favor the part of the president they are supporting. Almost by definition, the winner of the presidential race wins among the marginal voters — usually by larger margins than the rest of the voting population. Then, in the midterm, these marginal voters don’t turn out. People who vote all the time — “core” voters — vote in midterms. So, the special increment that resulted in the president’s party gaining seats in the presidential election year will be gone in the midterm. The second thing to mention is strategic moderation. In midterms, moderates will now *know* the party of the president. So, some moderate Democrats (who voted for Democratic House member in 2008) will vote for Republican congressional candidates in 2010, in order to balance out the president and Congress.