Political Science 10: Introduction to American Politics

Week 4

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Plan for the Day

- Reading Quiz
- Go over learning outcomes
- Announcements
- Answer questions from lecture this week
- Review the Median Voter Theorem
  - Discuss election forecasting
  - Discuss Obama as the frontrunner or the underdog?
Reading Quiz

- Clearly write your name at the top of the quiz
- Turn your quiz over when you are finished
- Good luck!
Learning Outcomes

By the end of section today, you should be able to:

- Explain the Median Voter Theorem
- Summarize Sides’ and Vavreck’s argument about whether (and why) Obama was the front-runner or the underdog going into the 2012 election
- Describe the factors that are commonly used in election forecasting and why they are useful
Announcements

- Reminder: Office Hours are Wednesdays 8am-9:30am and 11am-11:55am in SSB 341, or by appointment (tnCarlson@ucsd.edu). Extra office hours for midterm prep:
  - Monday, 10/30 3pm-4:30pm in SSB 341
  - Wednesday, 11/1 2:30pm-4:00pm in SSB 341
  - Thursday, 11/2 4pm-5:30pm outside WLH
- Participation grade update soon
- Midterm review next week — please come prepared with questions
What questions do you have from lecture this week?
Driving Question: How do people vote?

Answer: People vote for the candidate who takes the policy position they most prefer (see lecture slides).

Definition: A majority rule voting system selects the outcome most preferred by the median (middle) voter.

In class, Professor Hill showed an example of defense spending preferences. Let's look at another policy area: gun control.
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The Median Voter Theorem

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Median Voter Theorem

Example: Gun Control Policy
Full Restrictions
Firearms only for the military and police

Strong Restrictions
Age requirement, firearm safety, no criminal record, waiting period

Moderate Restrictions
Age requirement, firearm safety, no criminal record

Loose Restrictions
Anyone over a certain age, who has passed firearm safety

No Restrictions
Anyone in America can purchase a firearm
Happiness

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Voter 1

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Voter 1

Voter 2

Happiness
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Happiness
Voter 1
Voter 2
Voter 3
Voter 4
Voter 5
Voter 6
Voter 7
Voter 8
Voter 9
Voter 10
Voter 11
Happiness

Full Restrictions
Voter 4

Strong Restrictions
Voter 1
Voter 5
Voter 6

Moderate Restrictions
Voter 2
Voter 7
Voter 11

Loose Restrictions
Voter 8
Voter 9

No Restrictions
Voter 3
Voter 10
Full Restrictions
Voter 4

Strong Restrictions
Voter 1
Voter 5
Voter 6

Moderate Restrictions
Voter 2
Voter 7
Voter 11

Loose Restrictions
Voter 8
Voter 9

No Restrictions
Voter 3
Voter 10

Candidate A
Full Restrictions
Voter 4

Strong Restrictions
Voter 1
Voter 5
Voter 6

Moderate Restrictions
Voter 2
Voter 7
Voter 11

Loose Restrictions
Voter 8
Voter 9

No Restrictions
Voter 3
Voter 10

Candidate B
Candidate A

- Full Restrictions
  - Voter 4
- Strong Restrictions
  - Voter 1
  - Voter 5
  - Voter 6
- Moderate Restrictions
  - Voter 2
  - Voter 7
  - Voter 11

Candidate B

- Loose Restrictions
  - Voter 8
  - Voter 9
- No Restrictions
  - Voter 3
  - Voter 10
Candidate A

- Full Restrictions
  - Voter 4

- Strong Restrictions
  - Voter 1
  - Voter 5
  - Voter 6

Candidate B

- Moderate Restrictions
  - Voter 2
  - Voter 7
  - Voter 11

- Loose Restrictions
  - Voter 8
  - Voter 9

- No Restrictions
  - Voter 3
  - Voter 10
Candidate A

Full Restrictions
Voter 4

Strong Restrictions
Voter 1
Voter 5
Voter 6

Moderate Restrictions
Voter 2
Voter 7
Voter 11

Candidate B

Loose Restrictions
Voter 8
Voter 9

No Restrictions
Voter 3
Voter 10
Full Restrictions
Voter 4

Strong Restrictions
Voter 1
Voter 5
Voter 6

Moderate Restrictions
Voter 2
Voter 7
Voter 11

Loose Restrictions
Voter 8
Voter 9

No Restrictions
Voter 3
Voter 10

Candidate A  Candidate B
Candidate B
Candidate A

- Full Restrictions
  - Voter 4

- Strong Restrictions
  - Voter 1
  - Voter 5
  - Voter 6

- Moderate Restrictions
  - Voter 2
  - Voter 7
  - Voter 11

- Loose Restrictions
  - Voter 8
  - Voter 9

- No Restrictions
  - Voter 3
  - Voter 10
The Median Voter Theorem—Key Points

- Voters have single peaked preferences
- Voters choose the candidate closest to their preferred outcome
- Candidates respond to voters’ preferences and alter their positions to make them most likely to win the elections
  - Candidates strategically moderate, trying to capture the median voter
- The median voter is NOT necessarily in the middle of the policy space
How do we predict election outcomes? What might we want to measure? Presidential approval ratings. Rate of economic growth. Thinking back to the theories of voter decision making discussed in lecture, what should we measure to predict election outcomes? Recall these voting rules:

- Heuristics: incumbent performance, single issues, opinion leaders, candidate traits, party label
- Retrospective voting rule
- Prospective voting rule
- Single issue voting
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Sides and Vavreck (2013)

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According to Sides and Vavreck, was Obama the front-runner or the underdog going into the 2012 election?

Slight front-runner

Why? What evidence did they use to support this argument?

- Economic conditions? — because people blamed Bush instead of Obama
- Likability factor? — perceived as warm, empathetic, "Obama the person"
- Partisan polarization?
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Questions to Ponder

- Where might latent opinion fit in? Is latent opinion part of election forecasting? How so?

- Last week we discussed the conditions under which public opinion is meaningful, finding many cases where it might not be as informative as we’d like to think. How does this complicate our understanding of the strategic moderation employed by candidates in the median voter theorem? How do candidates know what the median voter prefers?

- Thinking back to our discussion about party cohesion and polarization from Week 2, how do these concepts help or hinder the median voter theorem? Would the median voter theorem be most effective (or realistic) under high or low party cohesion? What about polarization?

- Voting is hard and it’s hard for candidates to get a good sense of what the public wants. How does this impact our ability to constrain the government?