

Congressional Elections I
Fall 2000
Midterm examination

Answers to the midterm exam questions are given in Arial font. The original examination is in Times New Roman.

This examination has three parts. Follow the instructions in each.

I. *Formal models of legislature.* (20%) Answer the following question.

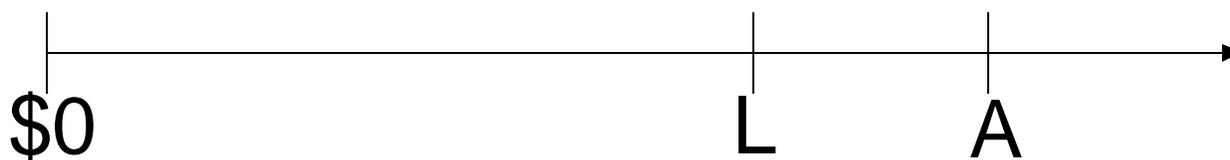
You are hired as a consultant to advise the new State of Puerto Rico (the 51st state of the Union) on writing a Constitution. Everyone in the Constitutional Convention agrees that the state legislature should only be allowed to meet for 30 days each year, with no provision for calling the legislature into special session. ***The Constitutional Convention is also composed only of fiscal conservatives who want to keep overall government spending as low as possible (but presumably still significantly greater than zero).***

Because the legislature must adjourn after sitting for 30 days, a question naturally arises about what to do with appropriations if the unicameral legislature is unable to agree on an appropriations bill. One faction of the legislature believes that spending should default back to the amount spent in the previous year. A second faction believes that spending should default back to 90% of the amount spent the previous year. A third faction believes that spending should default back to \$0.

Assume the following: (1) the amount passed by the unicameral legislature becomes law (i.e., there is no governor who must approve appropriations bills), (2) the median spending preference of the legislature will be greater than that of the Constitutional Convention, (3) there is an appropriations committee with gatekeeping power whose median member prefers more spending than the median member of the state legislature, (4) the chamber will adopt appropriations bills under a closed rule (i.e., the bill can't be amended), and (5) in the first year of statehood the default level of spending will be set to zero.

Using the unidimensional spatial model to illustrate, advise the Constitutional Convention about which default (reversion) spending level to choose. Which would be the best choice, among the options favored by the three factions? Which would be the worst choice?

The best way to answer this question is to sketch out a single, general setup, and then to lay out the dynamics under the scenarios that are implied by the preferences of the three factions.

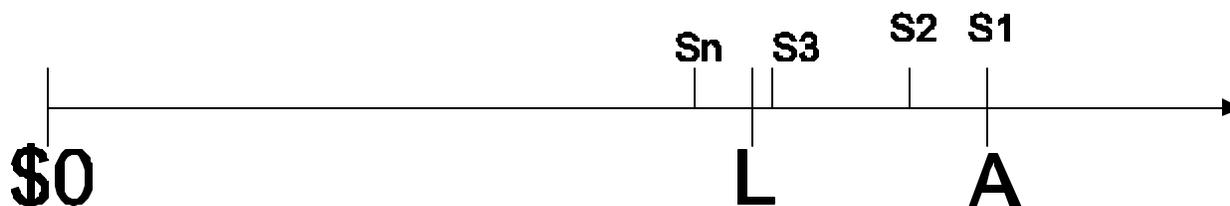


The set-up can be sketched as follows:

L = the ideal point of the median legislator; A = the ideal point of the median member of the Appropriations Committee. I am assuming that $|L-A| > |L-0|$, that is, that the distance from L to A is less, in dollar terms, than the distance from 0 to A . I am finally assuming that L and A are fixed.

Scenario 1: Spending reverts to last year's level.

In the first year under the constitution, spending is already at $\$0$. The Appropriations Committee can present a bill to the legislature that is equal to the ideal point of the median member of the Committee. L prefers this amount to $\$0$, so spending is set to A . In year two, the Appropriations Committee has no reason to bring a bill to the floor, because the



reversion level equals the ideal point of its median member. Therefore, spending is stuck at A forever. [Note: If you argued that A might fluctuate from year to year, you got a few style points, but without a plausible story for why A would systematically trend upward or downward, you only got style points.]

Scenario 2: Spending reverts to 90% of last year's level.

As with Scenario 1, in the first year the Appropriations Committee can present a bill to the legislature that is equal to the ideal point of the median member of the Committee, which passes and becomes the spending amount in year 1. In year two, the reversion point is now 90% of the year 1 amount. This is illustrated in the preceding figure, where $S1$ = spending in year 1; $S2$ = the reversion point in year 2. In year 2 the Appropriations Committee has no incentive to present a bill to the legislature, since it cannot force higher spending than $S2$. Therefore spending falls. Over a series of years, spending continues to

fall like this, until year n , when the reversion level falls below the ideal point of the median legislator. This amount is S_n . In this year, the appropriations committee can propose a bill, labeled S_3 , that the median legislator prefers compared to the reversion level. Spending continues to cycle around the median legislator's ideal point indefinitely.

Scenario 3: Spending defaults to \$0

If spending defaults to \$0 if no appropriations bill is passed, then the dynamic is identical to that of the first year: The Appropriations Committee presents a bill at the ideal point of the median committee member, which the legislature passes.

Therefore, the best alternative for the Constitutional Convention is scenario 2; scenarios 1 and 3 are equally bad.

II. *Short answers.* (40%) Answer *two* of the following questions.

1. What is sophisticated voting?

Sophisticated voting occurs when a decisionmaker votes against an alternative that constitutes his/her top choice, in order to keep a lower-ranked choice from ending up the ultimate winner in the voting. It contrasts with *sincere voting*, in which a decisionmaker always votes in favor of the higher-ranked alternative, even if it guarantees that a lower-ranked alternative will eventually prevail.

For example, consider the simple alternative in which three voters, A, B, and C, order three alternatives, X, Y, and Z, as follows: ($>_A$ means "is preferred to" by A)

$$\begin{aligned} X >_A Y >_A Z \\ Y >_B Z >_B X \\ Z >_C X >_C Y \end{aligned}$$

The rules pit X versus Y, and the winner against Z. Under *sincere voting*, X prevails on the first round (A+C against B); Z prevails on the second round (B + C against A). Under sophisticated voting A mis-states his/her preferences on the first round and votes for Y. This leads to a first round match-up of Y vs. Z, which Y wins. Therefore, under sophisticated voting, Y prevails on the first round (A+B against C), and then Y prevails on the second round (A+B against C). By mis-stating his/her preferences in the pairing of X & Y, A alters the final outcome from Z (his/her worst policy) to Y (his/her # 2 policy).

2. Which were the two major political parties that dominated Congress from 1828 to (roughly) 1860, and what did they stand for?

Whigs and Democrats. The Whigs stood for an activist federal government in the economic realm and commercial interests, while the Democrats stood for a weak federal government and agrarian interests.

3. How do opportunity costs affect the career decisions of candidates (or potential) candidates for Congress?

An opportunity cost is the advantage foregone as a result of pursuing an alternative. In the case of career decisions of candidate for Congress, major opportunity costs include the salary foregone in the private sector when a businessperson decides to enter the electoral fray and the relatively safe elected position a veteran politician gives up when s/he runs for a higher office. In addition, veteran members of Congress incur opportunity costs when they decide to run for office again, to the degree that their skills as a potential lobbyist are probably valuable to lobbying firms. Opportunity costs are a conservative force in career decisions. [Note: a number of people listed actual costs, such as money, time away from the family, etc. Actual monetary costs are not opportunity costs.]

4. What distinguishes the "personal constituency" from the "primary constituency"?

The personal constituency consists of a candidate's closest, intimate supporters, including friends, family, and old cronies. The primary constituency consists of a politician's most stable set of mass supporters. It is the primary constituency that forms the basis for winning the party nomination.

III. *Essay (40%) Answer one of the following essay questions.*

Both of these essays required you to adduce evidence and then to knit it together into a coherent argument. I will list here the evidence I expected you to come up with.

1. Candidates for Congress—incumbents, challengers, and open seat candidates—have many reasons to feel ambivalent about the political parties. Discuss the benefits and costs that members of Congress face because they must affiliate with one of the political parties. (In this answer focus on electoral factors, not internal factors.)

Benefits: Parties provide tangible campaign and political assistance [make mention of what it costs to run for office and what the parties can do to help out]. Party membership bestows a label that allows voters to make a reasonably informed issue choices.

Costs: the party label varies in how valuable it is in different districts, and in some districts it may stand for policies that most constituents find distasteful; party leaders sometime demand party loyalty in DC, causing problems with the people back home; party leaders usually rally behind their incumbents, creating a glass ceiling for lower-ranking party officials who want to move on to Congress from a particular geographic area.

2. One possible outcome of the 2000 election is unified control of Congress, plus the presidency, by the Republicans. However, even if this unified control does occur, it will be associated with the closest of margins separating the parties. What would be the implications of this razor-thin Republican majority, with George W. Bush in the White House? In writing this essay, make sure you touch on the following two subsidiary questions:
 - a. Relying on past history, what are internal congressional dynamics likely to be like if both chambers of Congress are controlled by a razor-thin Republican majority, with George W. Bush in the White House?
 - b. How would this razor-thin major affect the electoral environment in the 2002 congressional election?

[Note: This question is inspired by an interview I will do with CBS News on Monday about this scenario.]

Past history should first conger up the stories about Speakers Reed and Cannon. In particular, during the 1880s, majorities were often razor-thin; the parties responded by strengthening their leaders, to put down minority obstructionism. In addition, you might mention examples of compromise and/or gridlock that came up in more recent unified control of the federal government, during the 1993–94 period.

In talking about 2002, you should at least mention the following dynamics: (a) Republican losses because of the midterm slump that the incumbent president's party has to endure and (b) changes due to the reapportionment. In addition, many people also proposed various scenarios that seemed plausible, though ad hoc, such as the Republicans taking a bath because they will be tarred with the "do nothing" label, following two years of gridlock. I indulged such scenarios so long as the first two ideas made it into the essay.

About grading

I always grade with the Institute's definitions of the letter grades in mind. Here they are:

- A Exceptionally good performance demonstrating a superior understanding of the subject matter, a foundation of extensive knowledge, and a skillful use of concepts and/or materials.
- B Good performance demonstrating capacity to use the appropriate concepts, a good understanding of the subject matter, and an ability to handle the problems and materials encountered in the subject.
- C Adequate performance demonstrating an adequate understanding of the subject matter, an ability to handle relatively simple problems, and adequate preparation for moving on to more advanced work in the field.
- D Minimally acceptable performance demonstrating at least partial familiarity with the subject matter and some capacity to deal with relatively simple problems, but also demonstrating deficiencies serious enough to make it inadvisable to proceed further in the field without additional work.
- F Failed. This grade also signifies that the student must repeat the subject to receive credit.

In assessing the answers, I begin by asking myself which set of modifiers best describes a student's performance on a particular answer. I then assign a number of points, indicating the relative success of an answer. This is how I assessed answers to this midterm:

	Section I		Section II		Section III	
	Verbal description of mastery	Points assigned	Verbal description of mastery	Points assigned	Verbal description of mastery	Points assigned
A	Clear facility with the unidimensional spatial model and a strong ability to explain your reasoning	18–20	Clear grasp of the concept's definition and able to state a clear example	18–20	Clear grasp of the evidence necessary to form an argument, and then a clear expression of an argument	36–40
B	Proficient facility with the spatial model and description of its use; perhaps a small error in the model or lack of clarity in explaining what you did	14–17	Grasp of the concept's definition with a possible lack of clarity or minor error	14–17	Grasp of the necessary evidence and a good knitting together of evidence and argument; may contain one small error	28–35

C	Incomplete understanding of the spatial model, usually resulting in an unclear rendering of the example	10–13	Impartial grasp of the concept's definition along with a significant error, in definition or usage	10–13	Adduced less-than-complete evidence or major lack of clarity in posing the answer	20–27
D	Minimal facility with the spatial model—no more than setting up the problem unclearly or using it with significant errors	6–9	Minimal grasp of the concept's definition, suggesting a lack of sophisticated understanding of the concept	6–9	Significant errors of fact and unclear argument	12–19
F	Lack of understanding of how to use the spatial model. You need to start over in learning how to use it.	0–5	Failure to understand the concept	0–5	Lack of knowledge of subject material to the point where I suspect you have not been paying attention	0–11

You will notice that I have written points next to each answer, and then I have tallied up those points on the first page of your blue book. The sum of those points is the starting point for my assignment of a letter grade to your exam. I record your letter grade in my grade book, not the points. The letter grade corresponds with an overall assessment of my performance, and a statement about what you need to do to master the material in this class. You may generally interpret my letter grades to mean the following:

- A Exceptionally good performance, demonstrating mastery of the facts covered thus far in the class, plus a strong ability to knit those facts together clearly. Whatever strategy you used to study for the midterm should serve you well on the final.
- B Good performance, demonstrating good mastery of the facts covered thus far in the class, plus a good ability to knit those facts together clearly. Depending on the particulars, you need to work on either getting your facts or examples internalized a little more completely or on clearly expressing yourself on the exam. (A common problem of clarify—especially in essays—is simply due to not organizing answers ahead of time, and simply writing the first thing to come into your head.)
- C Adequate performance, suggesting some weaknesses that should be addressed in the second half of the class. Usually this means taking a little extra effort not only to read and understand the assignments, but to apply the assignments to contemporary developments in Congress.