Understanding Individual Preferences in a Committee

The preferences of members of a single committee might seem fairly easy to comprehend. There is a literature, however, that attests to the superficiality of this view. The theoretical intricacies of game theory and social choice theory, the implications of the need for multidimensional scaling of attitudes, and the inability to account for a high level of variance in most statistical models of human choice, all serve to point out complexity of human preference rather than simplicity. Nevertheless, the purpose of this chapter is to offer a way of comprehending individual behavior in the legislative context of a single committee in order to better understand behavior in the context of a committee "system." To do so, we can first take up those restrictions or constraints most common to legislative committees and then we can explore the flexibilities within those constraints.

Jurisdictional and Time Constraints

Entire legislatures can have broad jurisdictions, but they are still limited by national boundaries, higher levels of government, or constitutional sanctions. The standing committees and subcommittees of legislatures, of course, have more limited jurisdictions. For each standing committee, only certain kinds of issues are eligible for action, and these issues
appear in the form of proposals, mainly bills or amendments to bills. For most legislative committees, the input of issues either in the form of bills or amendments to bills is open rather than fixed, subject mainly to the time available to consider them. *Jurisdictional limits and available time act as two major constraints upon the introduction of issues and their consideration.*

**Voting Procedures**

For the study of legislatures, a number of procedural assumptions are appropriate to most if not all situations. Among the most common rules of procedure are *majority rule* and *binary voting.* In tallying the vote, stated preferences of members are counted equally within the committee, and the alternative receiving the highest count is declared the winning alternative. The preferences are almost always registered in the form of "preference to pass" some measure or "preference to defeat" it. Those whose preferences are counted consist of all members of the committee, or of all of those actually present to be counted.

Within the above framework, there are two distinct voting procedures, the *amendment* procedure, and the *successive* voting procedure (as made explicit in Farquharson, 1969; Brams, 1975). In the amendment procedure, the practice is to put forward a primary proposal that will be voted on after one or more possible modifications through amendment. In the successive voting procedure, proposals are introduced independently and disposed of one at a time. In most legislative situations, however, more than one proposal will be in the hopper at any given time, and members will have knowledge of what proposals are ready for consideration. In many cases amendments also are filed in advance of meetings, a tendency that increases perhaps with institutionalization and formality.

**Saliency, Separability, and Preference Maps**

To each member of a committee, the issues that come before it will have varying degrees of *saliency.* In other words, the member will want to win on some issues more than on others. For example, suppose that two bills were up for consideration, bills 35 and 36. A legislator may prefer to win on bill 35 more than on 36, in which case we can state:

\[ W(35) > W(36) \]
where ">" substitutes for the phrase "is preferred to." To the legislator in question, bill 35 is more salient than bill 36.

Since legislative committees utilize binary voting, in the sense that all members vote for pass or fail, our representation of member preferences need not be any more complex. Thus, if a member prefers that a bill pass rather than be defeated, we can state his preference:

\[ \text{P} > \text{D} \]

If the member prefers that both bills 35 and 36 pass, his preferences may be represented as follows:

\[ W(35) > W(36) \]

\[ \text{P} \quad \text{P} \]

where \( \text{P} > \text{D} \) is implied in each case.

Still we have an incomplete map of the individual's preferences. Further elaboration requires that we ask which of the remaining possible outcomes (PD, DP, DD) the member prefers and in what order. A full display of possible outcomes might produce:

\[ W(35) > W(36) \]

\[ \begin{array}{ll}
\text{P} & \text{P} \quad \text{Most preferred outcome} \\
\text{P} & \text{D} \quad \text{Second preferred outcome} \\
\text{D} & \text{P} \quad \text{Third preferred outcome} \\
\text{D} & \text{D} \quad \text{Least preferred outcome}
\end{array} \]

In this example, the member prefers both bills to pass, but short of that he would prefer that bill 35 pass. If bill 35 does not pass he would still prefer that bill 36 pass. The least desirable outcome occurs when both bills are defeated.

The example as it is constructed above represents preferences on two issues for a single individual. In this instance, the preferences on the two issues are separable; that is, preferences on one issue are not contingent upon the fate of the second issue. In contrast, the preferences in the following example are inseparable:

\[ W(35) > W(36) \]

\[ \begin{array}{ll}
\text{W(35)} & \text{W(36)} \\
\text{P} & \text{P} \quad \text{Most Preferred Outcome} \\
\text{D} & \text{D} \quad \text{Second Preferred Outcome} \\
\text{P} & \text{D} \quad \text{Third Preferred Outcome} \\
\text{D} & \text{P} \quad \text{Least Preferred Outcome}
\end{array} \]

If bill 35 promotes banks and bill 36 promotes savings and loans firms, the above preferences suggest that the member most prefers to aid both
types of financial institutions (PP). However, if either bill does not pass, he would prefer the other not to pass also (DD) in order to preserve fair competition between banks and their savings and loans rivals. If neither of these outcomes is possible (both pass or both are defeated), he would still favor banks (PD) over savings and loans (DP).

Situations that illustrate separable and inseparable preferences are common in legislatures. Unrelated bills normally will yield separable preferences unless such preferences become inseparable because of logrolling or bargaining. Inseparable preferences are expressed often in relation to appropriations and pork barrel legislation. At the state level, for example, it is common for a legislator to oppose an increase in funding for the state university system unless the state four-year college system is given a similar increase. In Congress, the omnibus bill is a classic example of inseparable preferences run amuck (Ferejohn, 1974).

The preference maps illustrated in the above examples cover positions on two issues only. Such maps may be extended to any number of issues or proposals, with the number of possible outcomes increasing exponentially, or $2^M$ where $M$ is the number of proposals. Thus three proposals yield eight possible outcomes, and four proposals offer sixteen possibilities. The preference maps become very complex very quickly as new proposals are added to the matrix. For three proposals only, a legislator might rank the outcomes in order of preference as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Preference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PPD</td>
<td>Most Preferred Outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PPP</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDP</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DPD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DPP</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DDD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DDP</td>
<td>Least Preferred Outcome</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is only one of $8!$ (the factorial) different rankings of these eight preference alternatives.

**Changing Preferences and Votes**

Legislators do change their preferences and votes. A most common cause is the introduction of new information. Legislators are exposed to
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a great deal of information about the content and consequences of specific proposals, and they also learn about who does and does not support each proposal. Such information frequently will change the preferences of members, and often their votes as well. It is estimated, for example, that state legislators spend an average of two hours a day obtaining information about proposals in their committees and another hour finding out how other members feel about the issues (Francis and Riddlesperger, 1982).

Members may change their votes without changing their preferences. Events of this kind occur when legislators become involved in vote trading. A member votes for a colleague's proposal only because a reciprocal vote-favor is expected on another measure. Votes are at best "revealed" preferences, which may or may not correspond to "true" preferences. Along these lines it is customary to distinguish between "sincere" voting and "sophisticated" voting, where it is implied that sincere voting expresses true preferences in disregard of strategic considerations. Sophisticated voting, in contrast, represents the calculation of a winning vote strategy in relation to some larger goal (Farquharson, 1969; Riker & Ordeshook, 1973).

Sophisticated voting occurs when members estimate that preferences of others on the issues are inseparable. For example, if an attempt is made to include funding for a new optometry school in the higher education bill, the sponsor of the higher education bill might vote against his own wishes in support of optometry funding in order to preserve majority support for the remainder of the general bill. If he thought that other members would vote their original intentions, uninfluenced by the optometry amendment, then there would be no need to cast a sophisticated vote. It might be noted that the sophisticated vote is very much like a vote-trade, except that there is no concrete transaction.

Setting the Agenda

There are two major reasons why setting the agenda is so important in legislative committees. First, the order in which issues are taken up makes a difference in the way members vote. Second, due to the crowded agenda, many issues at the tail end will never be considered. While these observations may seem obvious, it will be helpful here to clarify their theoretical and practical underpinnings.

When we examine the true preferences of individuals with respect
to a set of proposals, it will be found that if the preferences are separable, the individuals will choose to vote the same way on each proposal regardless of the order in which the proposals are decided. As each new issue comes up, the members need not regret their previous votes. The issues can be separable in both the amendment procedure and the successive voting procedure. A member who offers a bill enforcing the use of automobile seatbelts, for example, may prefer that it pass with or without proposed amendments that would alter the severity of the penalty. The outcome of that entire issue may have no effect upon the member's position on a toxic waste law.

The neatness of separable preferences can be thwarted, however, by members who logroll or vote trade on the issues. Opponents of the seatbelt law might change their vote to support it in exchange for other members' support on the toxic waste bill. In such a case, the opponents might decide to vote for the toxic waste bill if and only if the seatbelt bill is passed. In the same manner, the amendment process can be altered by trades in which, for example, a member agrees to support the amendment of a colleague in exchange for support of his own amendment. It is evident that such trades require an element of "trust," and that the order of the agenda is relevant to the interested parties. A member would prefer to have the bill most salient to him appear first.

Vote trading can have the affect of making separable preferences inseparable, but it is very likely that many of the preferences over proposed legislation are inseparable in the first place. The most preferred outcome on one issue will depend on the fate of another issue. When preferences are inseparable, the order of the agenda is a crucial matter. The beauty of the amendment process is that members are able to insert their most preferred alternative (the bill with an amendment) at the top of the agenda prior to voting on a much less preferred alternative (the bill without the amendment). As one would expect, legislators frequently are opposed to legislation unless their own amendments are accepted. Such amendments at the same time may turn others against the legislation.

The ramifications of agenda setting in this context can be seen vividly in Congress. Ferejohn's 1974 evaluation of public works projects in the Omnibus Rivers and Harbors and Flood Control Bill of 1968 paints a convincing picture of how bills win acceptance in standing committees—by allocating projects to the states of committee members. Although the projects are not necessarily inserted by formal amendment, it is in fact the formal power of amendment and vote that encourages a
distribution of benefits among committee or subcommittee members. In contrast, we might note how the Committee of the Whole conducts its business on the floor of the House. Normally, the leadership adopts a highly restrictive amendment policy because it thinks that majority support has been achieved. Further amendment might well destabilize the coalition. As Riker and Ordeshook (1973; p. 100) have pointed out, the amendment process does allow manipulation through the introduction of paradoxes (i.e., cyclical majorities).

The order in which legislation is considered is important not only in the amendment process but also in the processing of separate bills. The vote of a legislator on one bill may depend upon the outcome of another bill. A state legislator may feel the need to increase state revenue, and if that feeling is broadly shared, there will probably be several bills proposing tax increases. The legislator may prefer most an increase in the sales tax only but, failing that, he or she may prefer an increase supported by one of the other measures. For strategic reasons, the legislator may prefer to vote on the sales tax increase first, calculating that if it passes, the other measures will not be successful.

In sum, it can be seen from the above that preferences may be inseparable either because of vote trading or the actual nature of original preferences, and that such conditions may exist in both the amendment process and the successive voting procedure. Whenever preferences are inseparable, the order of the agenda is important. It is difficult to know just how often inseparable preferences characterize members' positions, but it seems clear that the phenomenon is common if not dominant.

Finally, it is apparent that under the busy conditions of many legislatures, much legislation is never given serious consideration. Moving legislation to a formal hearing may be more difficult for a legislator than getting it approved once a hearing is granted. In this context, the formal organization of the legislature becomes very important. The efficiency with which legislative proposals are processed will have a bearing on the extent to which rank-and-file members are able to act effectively in the pursuit of their own favored legislation. In practical terms, in most American legislatures, this type of efficiency is affected by the standing committee and subcommittee structure and associated chamber rules.