

U.S. National Elections

17.263/264

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Week 8: Consequences of Elections

Themes of the Day

- What are the effects of electoral outcomes?
 - Voters
 - Candidates
 - **Policy**
- Selection (turnover) vs. incentives (anticipation)
- Policy effects are moderated by institutions.
- Elections aren't the only drivers of policy change (organized interests, shocks to status quo).

Effects on Voters

- Elections as dominance contests (it feels bad to lose)
→ social identity (again)
- Comparing 17- and 18-year-olds, we find:
 - Voting is habit-forming: voting in election t increases the probability of voting in election $t + 2$.
 - Voting for a candidate increases a voter's evaluation of that candidate (cognitive dissonance).

Effects on Candidates

Comparing bare winners and bare losers, we find:

- Winning in election t massively increases the probability of winning election $t + 2$, for both candidates and parties.
- Election (to Parliament) dramatically increases wealth at death.

Effects on Policy

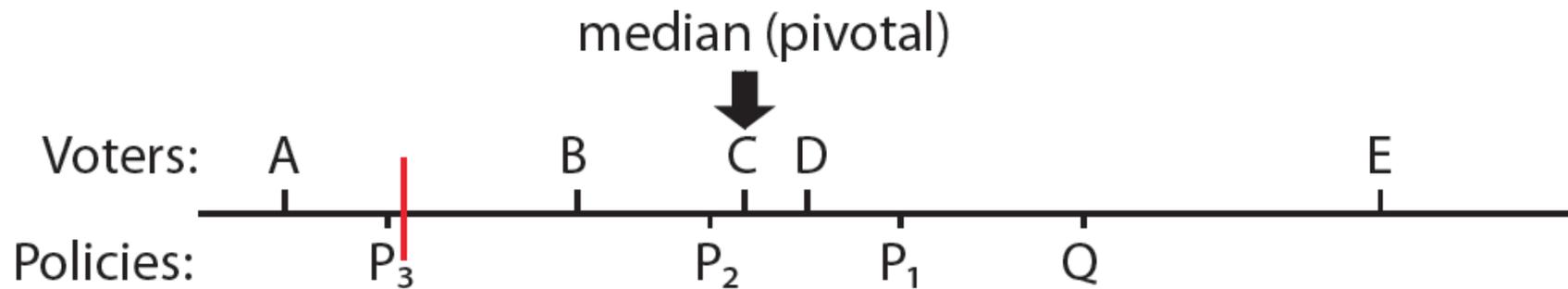
- Representation as “principal–agent” relationship
- Key problem: how to get officeholders to act in accordance with the interests/preferences of citizens.
- Elections provide a solution, via two mechanisms:
 - 1 **Selection**: choose candidates with same prefs. as citizens
 - 2 **Incentives**: threaten to vote out of office if act contrary to citizens’ preferences (rational anticipation)
- Selection tends to dominate in contemporary U.S. politics (legislators “die with their ideological boots on”).
 - Implication: policy change through **replacement**

Moderating Effects of Institutions

- **Congress:** Candidates represent national parties rather than converging on median voter \implies large differences between electing a Democrat and electing a Republican
 - Institutional constraint: party discipline in Congress
- **Mayors:** Democratic and Republican mayors differ little on many policy areas
 - Institutional constraint: limited, overlapping authority
- **Systemic:** Election outcomes can have large effects (New Deal, Great Society, Reagan Revolution), but they depend on the institutional configuration of preferences.

Spatial Voting

A Hypothetical 5-Member Legislature:



- Given majoritarian spatial voting, the **median** voter (C) is **pivotal** (necessary and sufficient for passage).
- Proposals P_1 and P_2 would pass because they are closer to C than is the status quo (Q).
- P_3 would not pass because it is farther from C than is Q (beyond the **reflection point** indicated by the red line).

The Median Voter Model

A Simple Median Voter Model:



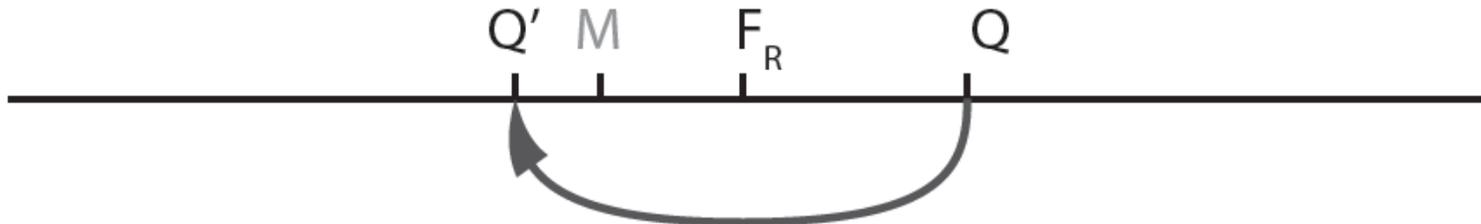
- The **only information** we need is the location of the **median** voter (M) and of the **status quo** policy (Q).
- The legislature will pass any proposal between Q and Q' .

Supermajority Institution 1: The Senate Filibuster

Majoritarian ($50\% + 1$)

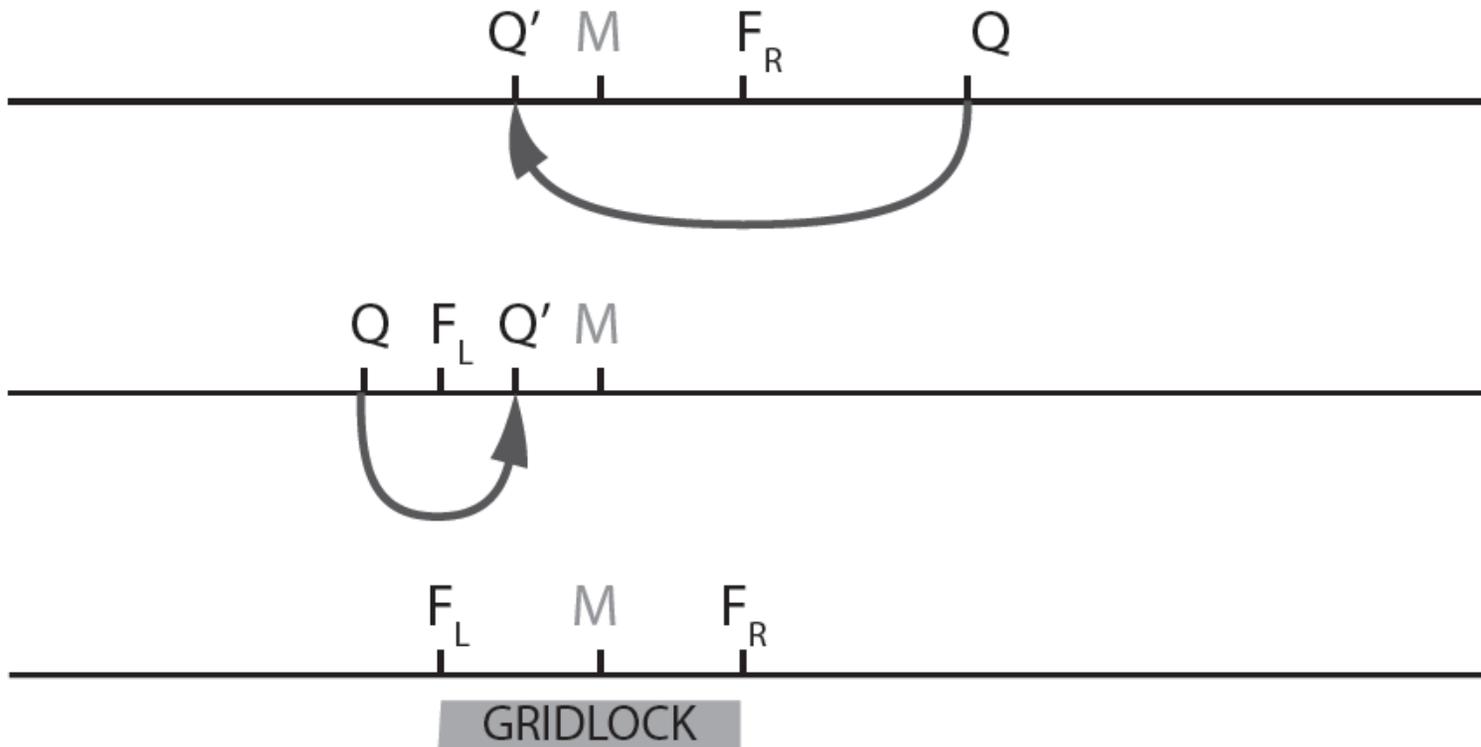


Supermajoritarian (60%)



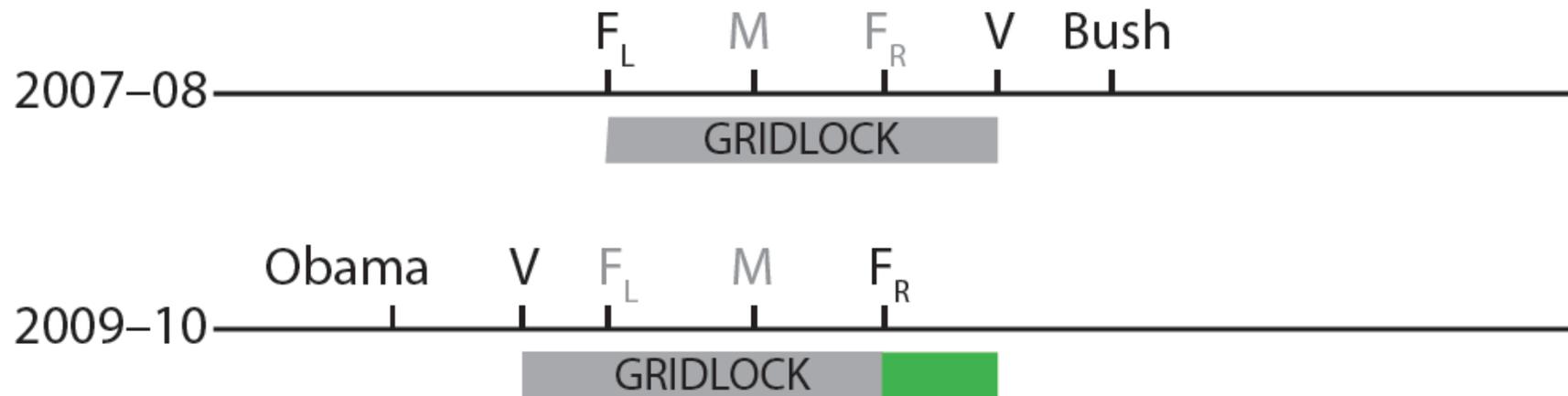
- The right/conservative **filibuster pivot** (F_R), the 60th most liberal member of the 100-member Senate, is pivotal to the passage of proposals that move policy to the left.

The Gridlock Interval



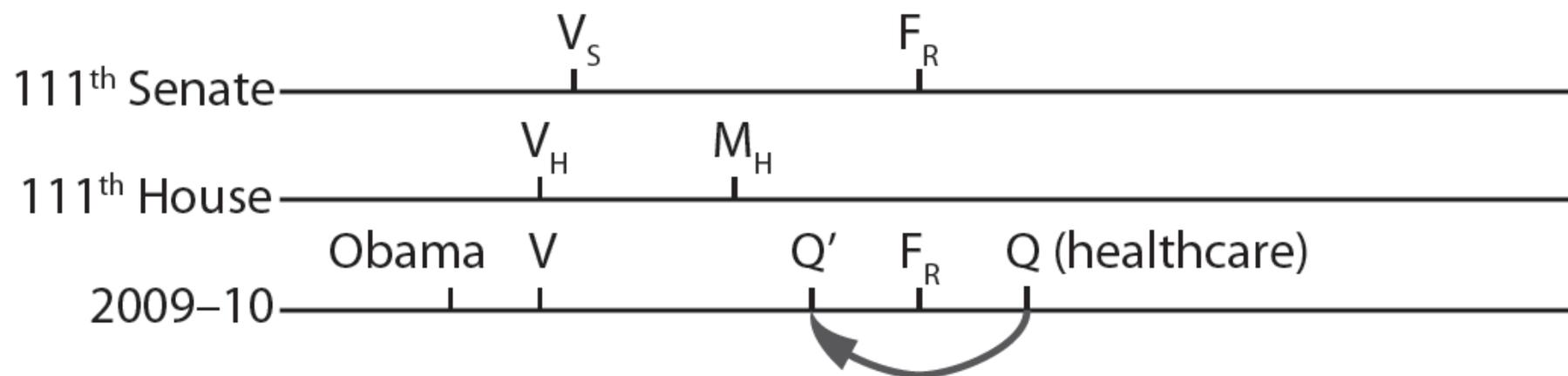
- Status quos between F_L and F_R cannot be beaten by any proposed policy shift \implies **gridlock** (policy stasis)

Supermajority Institution 2: The Presidential Veto



- A $2/3$ supermajority is needed to override a presidential veto, so the gridlock interval extends to the **veto pivot** (V) on the president's side of the median.
- Partisan change in the presidency (e.g., Bush to Obama) “releases” policies btwn veto and filibuster pivots (green) → presidential “honeymoon”

The Case of Health Care, 2009–10 (111th Congress)



- Healthcare reform (Q') barely passed Senate (60 votes).
- More conservative than liberal Democrats (e.g., V) wanted.
- “Cornhusker kickback” to buy off conservative Democrat Ben Nelson of Nebraska, the filibuster pivot (F_R).
- (Democrats lost supermajority before final passage and had to use special majoritarian procedure, “reconciliation”)

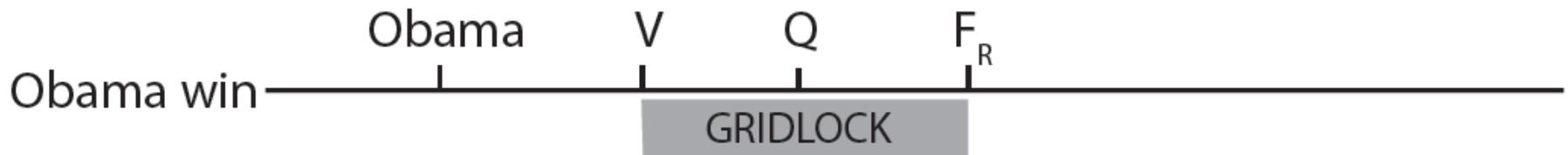
Policy Effects of a Romney Victory

- Assume little change in House (currently Republican) or Senate (Democratic)



- Healthcare reform (Q) is in the gridlock interval, unless Senate Republicans use reconciliation (unlikely).
- So are conservative status quos (e.g., climate policy), so little chance of action.

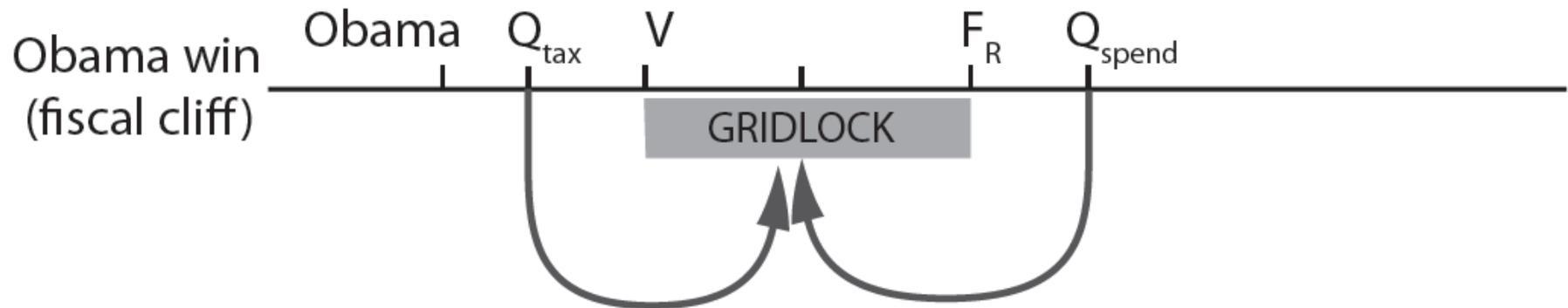
Policy Effects of an Obama Victory



- Wide gridlock interval (like now) due to divided gov't.
- Policy stasis itself is consequential.
- Marginally higher chance of action on climate policy, but unlikely (already tried under more favorable circumstances).

Effects of an Extreme Status Quo

- Policy change is most likely on issues where both sides are dissatisfied with status quo, such as immigration and especially the “fiscal cliff” (tax hikes, spending cuts).



- Exact outcome is outside of the model—depends on bargaining, agenda control—but I am hopeful that a “grand bargain” is feasible.

Elections Aren't Everything

Alternative drivers of policy change, besides election outcomes:

- Changes in status quo: slow (policy drift) or dramatic (war)
- Anticipation of public opinion by sitting officeholders
- Shifts in power of organized interests (1970s)
- Ideational or ideological change

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