

# Committees

17.251/252

Fall 2008

# Wilson's Famous Quote

- Congress in session is Congress on public exhibition, whilst Congress in its committee-rooms is Congress at work.



# Organization

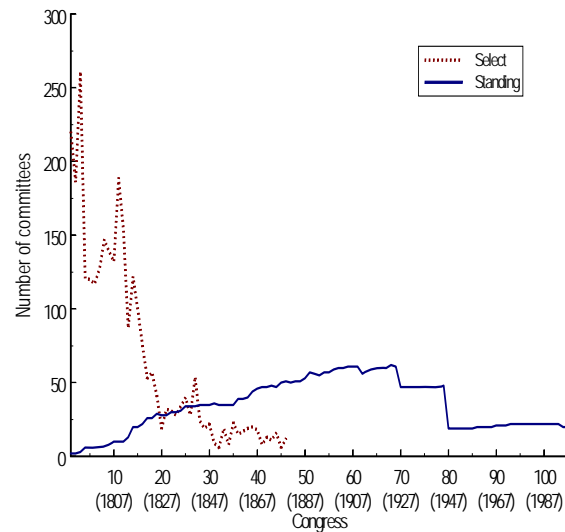
- Mechanics
- Theoretical perspectives on committees

# What do Committees Do?

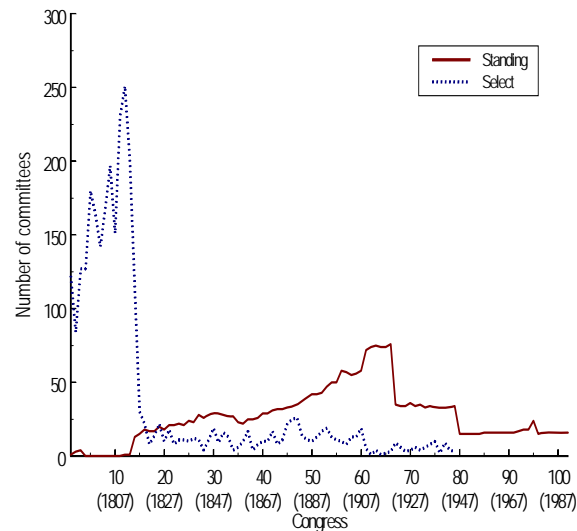
- Study issues and provide expertise
- Channel ambition
- Provide for representation of groups

# Development of Committees

a. House



b. Senate



- House
  - Slow to develop (Hamilton)
  - Short leash
  - Gradual increase under Clay
- Senate
  - Even slower
  - 1819 boom

# House/Senate comparisons

- House more reliant on committees than the Senate
  - House more specialized
  - First-mover advantage may give Ways and Means even great power

# Types of committees

Type	Can originate legislation
Standing	✓ ✓
Select/special	✓
Joint	
Conference	

# Committees in the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress

## House

### *Standing*

- Agriculture
- Appropriations
- Armed Services
- Budget
- Education and Labor
- Energy and Commerce
- Financial Services
- Foreign Affairs
- Homeland Security
- House Administration
- Judiciary
- Natural Resources
- Oversight and Government Reform
- Rules
- Science and Technology
- Small Business
- Standards of Official Conduct
- Transportation and Infrastructure
- Veterans Affairs
- Ways and Means

### *Select*

- Energy Independence & Global Warming
- Permanent Intelligence
- Investigate Voting Irregularities

## Senate

### *Standing*

- Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
- Appropriations
- Armed Services
- Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs
- Budget
- Commerce, Science, and Transportation
- Energy and Natural Resources
- Environment and Public Works
- Finance
- Foreign Relations
- Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
- Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
- Judiciary
- Rules and Administration
- Small Business and Entrepreneurship
- Veterans Affairs

### *Select*

- Indian Affairs
- Ethics
- Intelligence
- Aging

## Joint

Economic  
Library  
Printing  
Taxation

# Membership

- Party ratios
  - Renegotiated every Congress
    - Sometimes a bone of contention with minority party
  - There is usually a bonus given to the majority party
  - Special bonus for certain committees
    - House right now:  $\geq 1.3:1$  for “important” committees, closer to 1.2:1 for others
      - House Ag: 25/21, Fin. Svc., 36/33; Ed: 27/22,
      - HAC: 37/29, Rules: 9/4, WAM: 24/17
    - Senate: Dems have a majority of 1, likely to grow to 2
    - Expect this to change in 111th Congress

# How Committee members are chosen

- Party committees make choices
  - House tends to rely on party committees
  - Senate tends to go by seniority
    - Republicans pure seniority
    - Democrats weight seniority highest
- Formal and informal constraints
  - Property rights in committee assignments arose around the turn of the last century
  - Allocation restrictions
    - Senate
      - “Johnson rule” most famous
      - All junior senators get one “good” assignment before a senior senator gets a second
    - Rules, create “A” and “B” committees
      - **A:** Agriculture, **Appropriations**, **Armed Services**, Banking, Commerce, Energy, Environment, **Finance**, **Foreign Relations**, Governmental Affairs, Judiciary, and Health, Education, Labor and Pensions [limit of 2]
      - **B:** Budget, Ethics, Indian Affairs, Rules and Administration, Select Aging, Select Intelligence, Small Business and Veterans’ Affairs [may serve on 1]
    - Senate Republicans create “super A” committees [bold, limit 1]
    - House
      - Dems & Reps have created “exclusive committees” for 111th: Appropriations, Ways and Means, Rules, Energy & Commerce, Financial Services.

# Chairs

- Seniority system: the practice of reserving the chairs of committees for the most senior member (on that committee)
  - Result of revolt against Cannon
  - Senate: pretty inviolate, with bidding
    - (note saga of Jesse Helms, p. 296, Table 8-6)
    - Senate Byrd/Biden shuffle (next slide)
  - House
    - Democrats in 1970s put chairs up to confirmatory vote
    - Republicans
      - 1970s put ranking members up to confirmatory vote
      - 1994: term limits (6 years) plus vote of caucus
        - » 2000: Affected virtually every chair (ideology + \$\$ mattered)
      - 2008 deposition of Dingle similar to Les Aspin's deposition of Melvin Price in 1985

# Senate chair shuffle in 111th Cong.

- Byrd cascade
  - Appropriations: Byrd (WV) → Inouye (HI) [Commerce]
  - Commerce: Inouye (HI) → Rockefeller (WV) [Select Intelligence]
  - Select Intelligence: Rockefeller (WV) → Feinstein (CA) [Rules and Administration]
  - Rules and Administration: Feinstein (CA) → Schumer (NY) [Jumping over Byrd, Inouye, Dodd]
- Biden cascade
  - Foreign Relations: Biden (DE) → Dodd (CT) [Banking]
  - Banking: Dodd (CT) → Tim Johnson (SD) [Ethics] (?) / Reed (RI)
  - Ethics: Possible shuffle, depending on what Johnson does;

# Subcommittees and Their Role

- Subcommittees sometimes just smaller versions of committees
- The congressional receptor for the “Iron Triangle”
- Increasing importance of subcommittees
- “Subcommittee bill of rights” in 1973 (House Dems)
  - Written jurisdictions
  - Members given rights to pick memberships and bid for chairmanships

# Staff and Resources

- Varies by committees
  - Number
  - Who controls



# Moving To and Fro

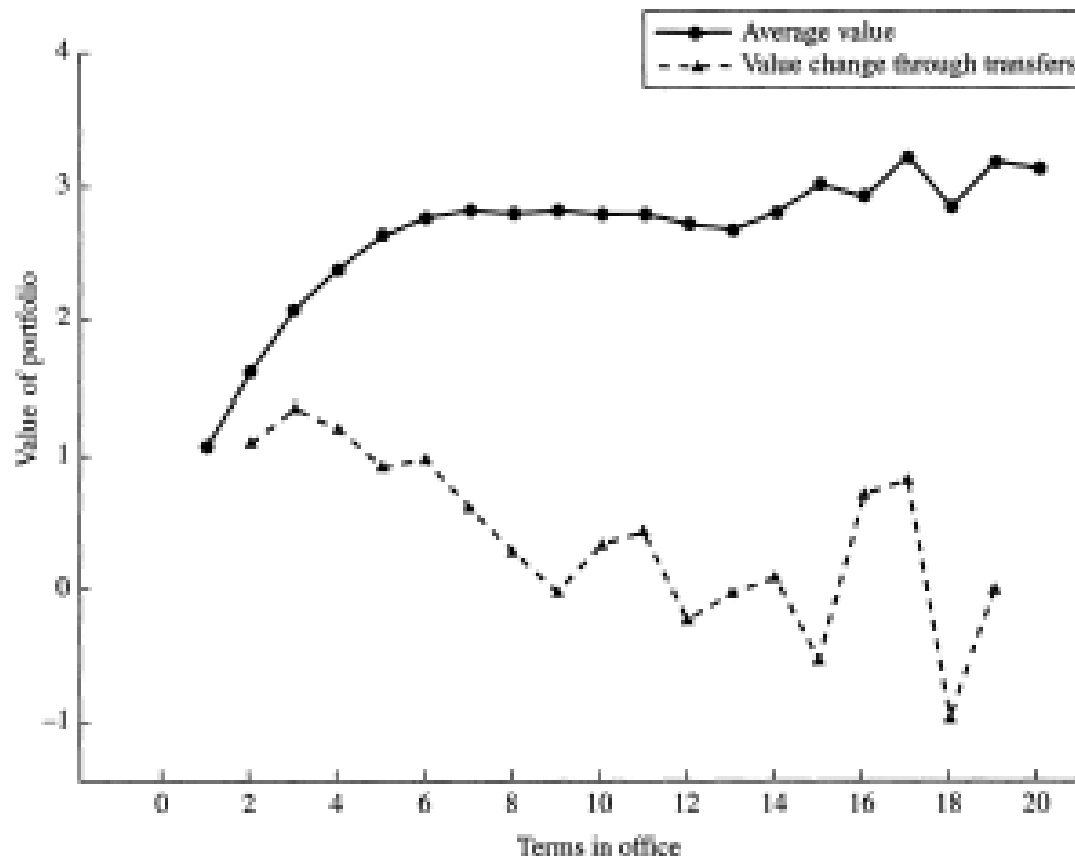
- If there are property rights in committee seats, then a transfer reveals a preference for Committee<sub>new</sub> over Committee<sub>old</sub>
- This gives rise to independent measures of committee value (see table 8-7)

# Groswart Scores for the House

Ways and Means	∞
Appropriations	5.08
Rules	4.47
Energy & Commerce	2.00
Armed Services	1.96
Foreign Affairs	1.72
Budget	1.56
House Administration	1.08
Internal Security	0.97
Natural Resources	0.93
Agriculture	0.84
Judiciary	0.81

DC	0.59
Banking	0.56
Merchant Marine	0.56
Public Works	0.55
Science	0.35
Post Office	0.31
Education & Labor	0.28
Standards of Official Conduct	0.28
Government Operations	0.26
Veterans Affairs	0.15
Small Business	-0.25

**Figure 1. Average Value of Committee Assignments Held by House Members, 1947-91, as a Function of Terms in Office**



Source: Groseclose and Stewart (1998)

# Hearings

- Civics book perspective on hearings is incomplete
  - Information-gathering (substantive and political)
  - Build the public record
  - Symbolism
  - Establish jurisdiction
- Put together by staff
- Rarely change minds

# The Markup

Summary: The Chairman's Mark Creating a Homeland Security Department - Netscape

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Location: <http://hsc.house.gov/legislation/mark.asp>

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select committee on **HOMELAND SECURITY**  
*hsc.house.gov* U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Home > News > Homeland Security > Documents > Chairman's Mark

**Related Links**

- Summary: What's New in H.R. 5710
- Bill Text: HR 5710 (822k, PDF Format)
- House Leaders Urge Senate Return to Homeland Security After Iraq Vote
- HR 5005 as Passed by the House (568k, PDF format)
- Summary: H.R. 5005 As Reported

**Transforming Government for the 21st Century**  
*Summary of the Chairman's Mark for a Bill Establishing a Department of Homeland Security*  
July 18, 2002

The standing committees of the House of Representatives have recommended improvements to the President's proposal. The Chairman's mark incorporates many of these improvements while preserving the essential functions outlined in the President's plan. It will serve as a basis for Friday's mark up.

**Protecting Our Borders**

*The first step in defending America from the enemies of freedom is to ensure that our borders are secure. That is why this draft ensures the border function remains strong within the new Department.*

- **Coast Guard Moves to DHS**  
Because the longest borders in our country are our coasts, the Coast Guard will play an essential role within the new Department. *This draft essentially accepts the Government Reform Committee's recommendation.*
- **Customs Service Moves to DHS**  
The U.S. Customs Service describes itself as the primary enforcement agency protecting the Nation's borders and will move to the new Department. Some revenue collection agents, however, will be subject to guidance from the Treasury Department. *This draft essentially accepts the recommendation of the Ways and Means Committee.*
- **Border Functions at APHIS Move to DHS**  
Those inspectors at the Animal Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) who currently protect our borders will move into the new Department. All other functions of this agency will remain with the Agriculture Department. *This draft closely reflects the recommendations of the Agriculture Committee.*
- **INS Enforcement Functions Move to DHS**  
Enforcement and border protection functions at the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) will move to the new Department. Immigrant service functions will remain at the Department of Justice. *This draft essentially accepts the recommendation of the Judiciary Committee.*
- **DHS Provides Rules for Entry into the Country** The State Department and consular officials will continue to issue visas, but they will do so under rules established by the Department. *This draft essentially accepts the recommendation of the Judiciary and International Relations Committees.*

Community Involvement

Document: Done

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# Committees to Know About

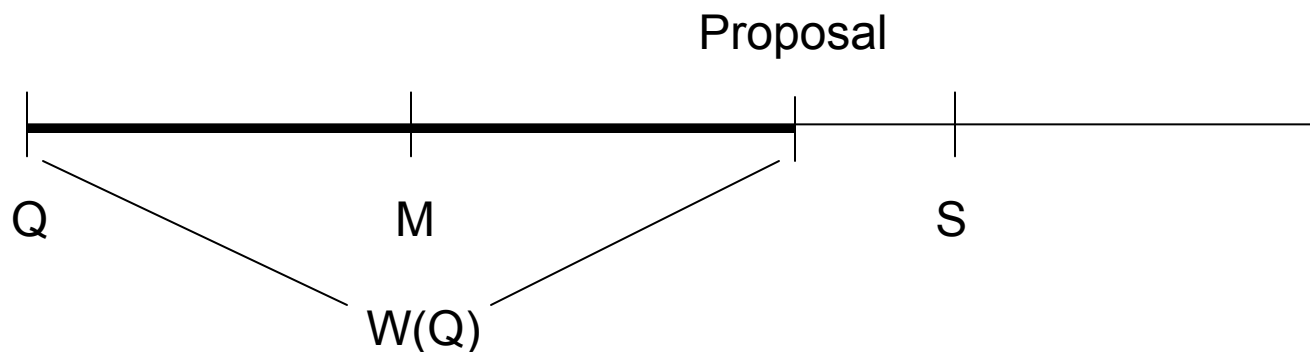
- House
  - Rules
  - Appropriations
  - Ways and Means
  - Budget
- Senate
  - Finance
  - Appropriations
  - Budget
  - Judiciary
  - Foreign Relations

# Theoretical perspectives on committees

- “Distributive” theories
  - Agenda setting (the setter model)
  - Gate-keeping
  - Structure-induced equilibrium view
  - “Stacking”
- Information theories

# The “Setter Model” Reprised

- Romer and Rosenthal
  - An agenda-setter has power to offer a “take it or leave it” motion.
  - If the agenda-setter is “high demand” and the reversion point is well below the median’s ideal point, the agenda-setter makes out like a bandit

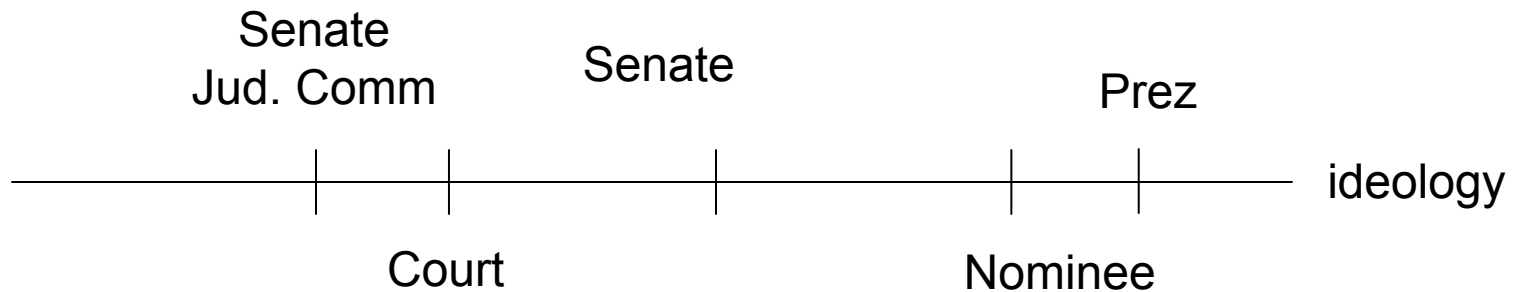


# Application of Setter Model to Committees

- Easy to think of committees as providing “take it or leave it” propositions and being composed of “high demanders”
  - “deference” to committees
  - Supposed “self-selection” on committees
- Problems with this view
  - “high demand committees” hard to sustain in a majoritarian institution
    - Empirical evidence mixed
    - Amendment opportunities galore
  - Status quo rarely so Draconian

# Gatekeeping

- Gatekeeping is the right of a committee to decide to keep an item off the floor if it doesn't want action.
- Usually thought of in a majoritarian setting



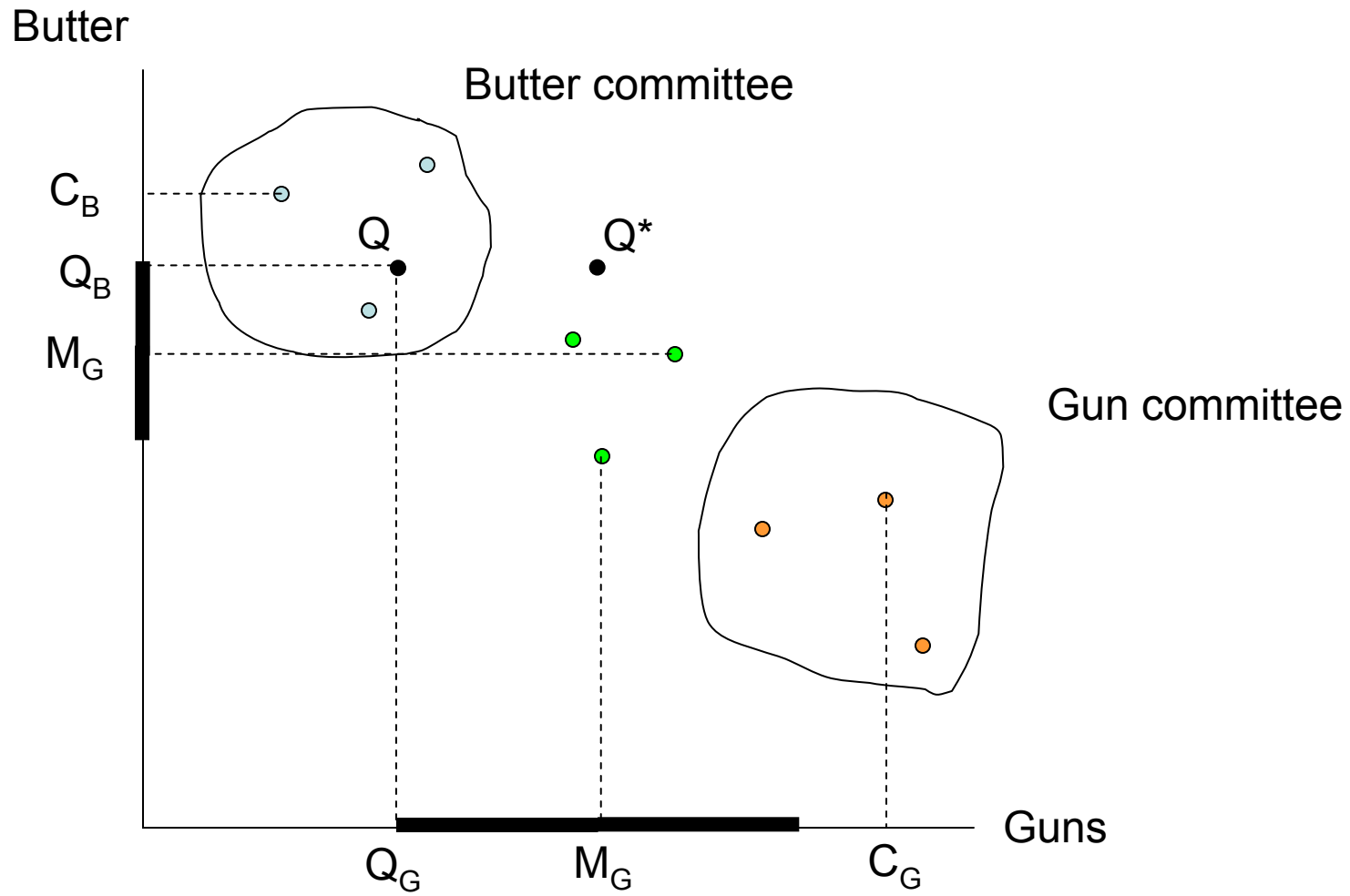
# Applicability of the View

- Corresponds to practical application of rules (esp. in House)
- Problems with view
  - Majoritarian objection (again)
    - The Senate, especially, has ways around committees
    - Other ways around gatekeeping
      - Discharge
      - “speaker discharge”
  - Note that this is definitely a negative power

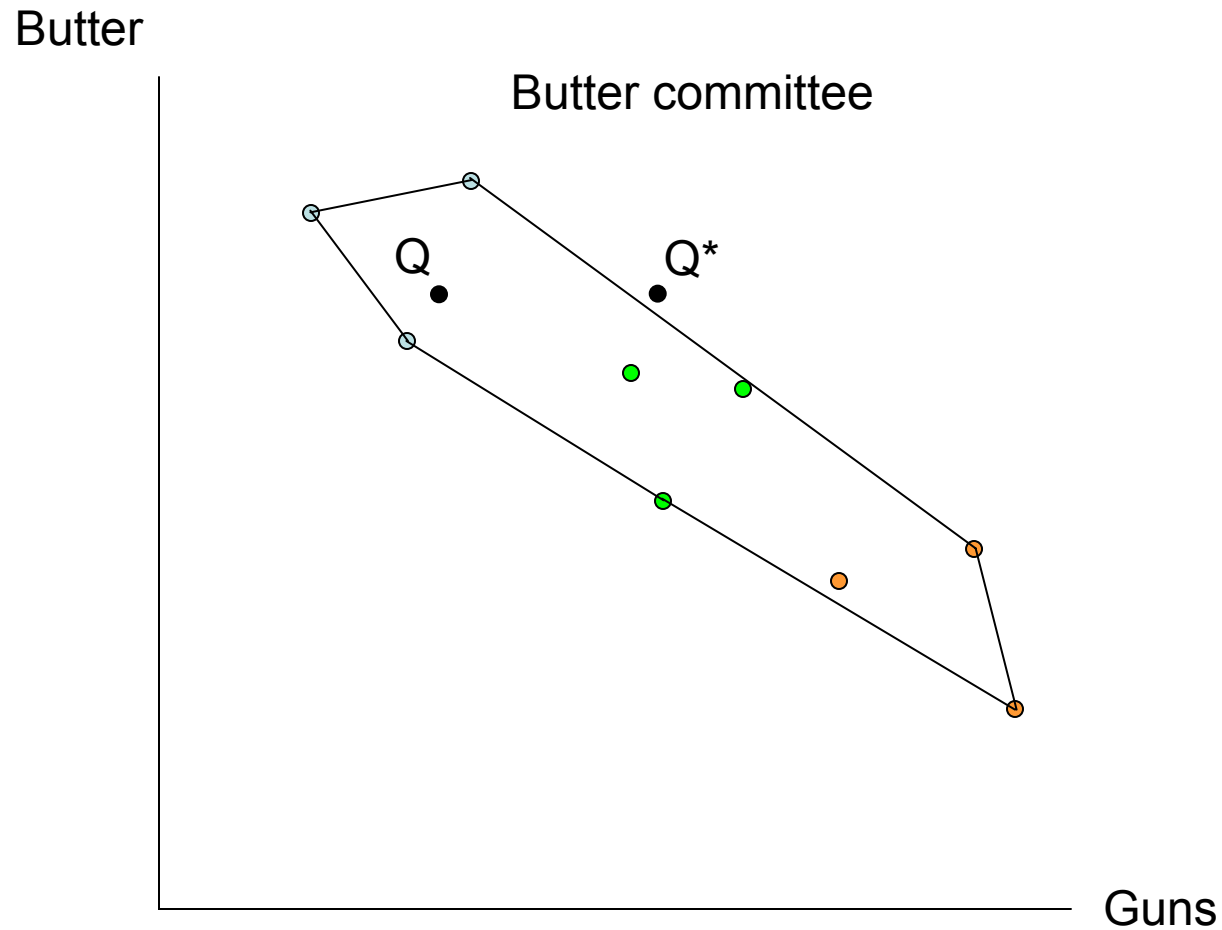
# Structure-Induced Equilibrium View

- Combines gate-keeping with a certain view of jurisdictions
  - “Explains” (or at least illustrates) two stylized facts
    - Stability
    - “capture”

# SIE: The Picture



# Compare with the Pareto Set



# Some Comments About This View

- Why it's called the "gains from trade" view
- Majoritarian objection very clear from the "out of the Pareto set" result in the example
- Nonetheless, if the majoritarian objection doesn't hold, this is an attractive descriptive view of much of policymaking + an explanation for why "everyone" can be dissatisfied with the current state of policy

# Informational View

- Fundamentally different from other modern views
- While “rational choice,” more in consonance with more traditional views

# Sum-up points