

Approaches: Rational choice

Joe Greenwood-Hau

L2929 Political behaviour
School of Government & Public Policy
University of Strathclyde
Thursday 29 September 2022



Agenda

- Practical decisions
- Basic tenets of rational choice
- An example: Veto players
 - Number of actors
 - Agenda setting
- Discussion of readings



Practical decisions

- Class representative
 - Attends the Staff-Student Liaison Committee (week 5 or 6) to represent the views of students in the class
- Publishing your blogs
 - The best (e.g., those with distinction grades) will have the opportunity to be posted on the School of Government & Public Policy website
 - There is an opportunity to host the other blog posts on the Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences website; do you want this opportunity?



Basic tenets of rational choice

- Humans as (expected) utility maximisers
 - Ordered preferences
- Availability of information
 - Capacity to process information
- (Voting) Behaviour: $R = (BP) - C$
- Amendments:
 - Behaviour: $R = (BP) + D - C$
 - Heuristics (information shortcuts)



An example: Veto players

- George Tsebelis (2002), ‘Veto Players Theory’ chapter in George Tsebelis, *Veto Players: How Political Institutions Work* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press), pp. 17-37.
 - Amongst elites, ‘policy outcomes are the results of two factors: the preferences of the actors involved and the prevailing institutions.’ p. 17.
 - ‘Veto players are individual or collective actors whose agreement is necessary for a change of the status quo.’ p. 19.
 - May be ‘institutional’ (e.g. houses of a legislature) or ‘partisan’ (e.g. parties controlling one house of the legislature). p. 19.
 - The ‘winset of the status quo’ is the ‘set of outcomes that can defeat the status quo’. The ‘core’ is ‘the points that cannot be defeated by any other point if we apply the decision making rule.’ p. 21.



Veto players: Three actors

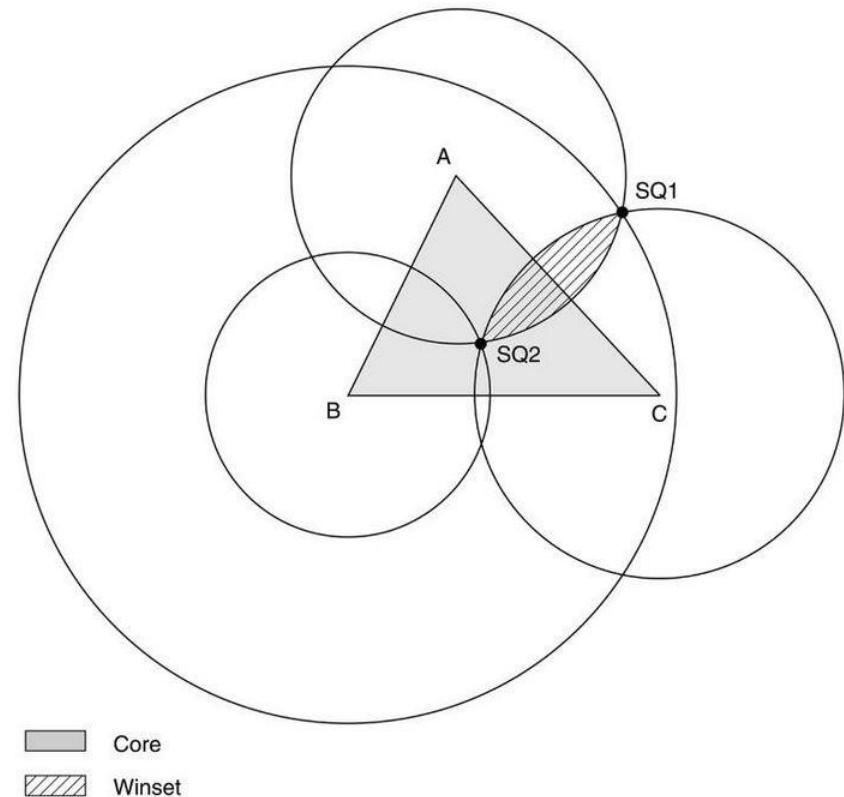


Figure 1.2. Winset and core of a system with three veto players.



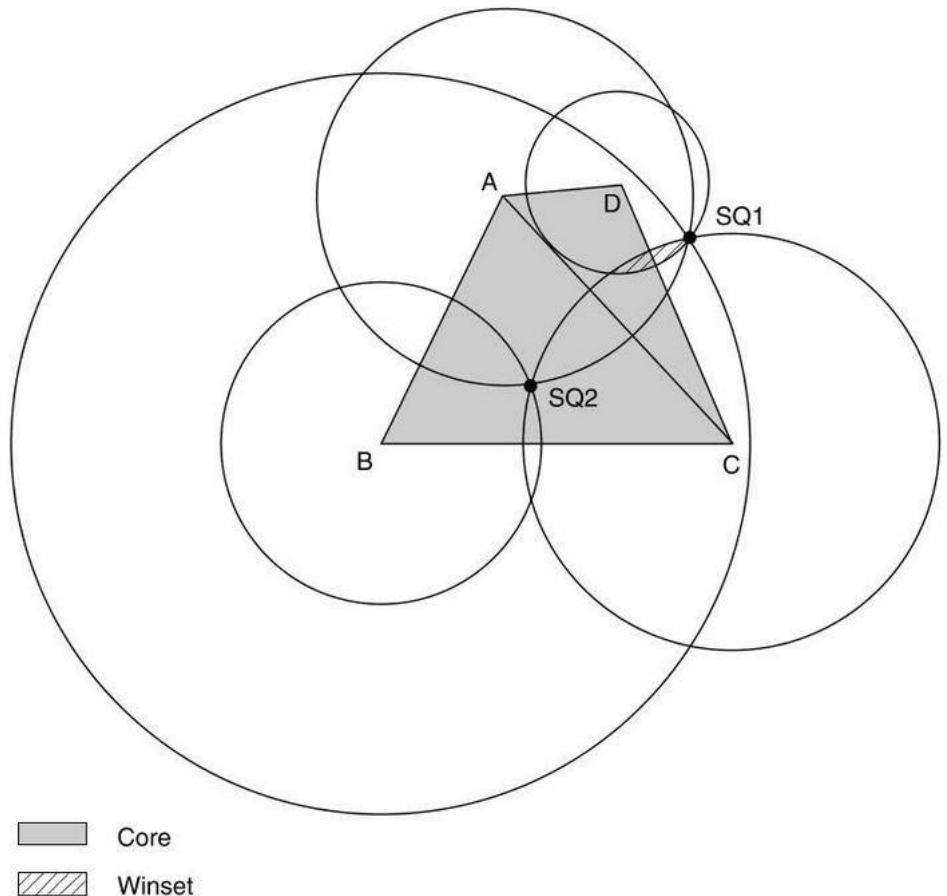


Figure 1.3. Winset and core of a system with four veto players.

Veto players: Four actors



Veto players: Agenda setting

- ‘The veto player who sets the agenda has a considerable advantage: he can consider the winset of the others as his constraint, and select from it the outcome he prefers.’ p. 34.
 - ‘A single veto player is also the agenda setter and has no constraints in the selection of outcomes.’ p. 35.
 - ‘The significance of agenda setting declines as policy stability increases.’ p. 35.
 - ‘The significance of agenda setting increases as the agenda setter is located centrally among existing veto players.’ p. 35.
- Consider also Steven Lukes.



Veto players: Agenda setting

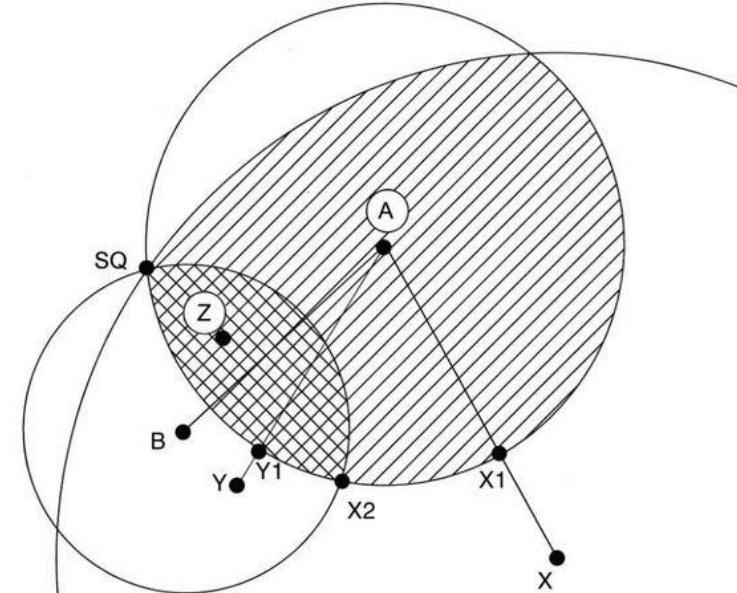


Figure 1.9. Importance of agenda setting decreases with more veto players and increases with the central location of agenda setter.



Essential reading overview

Aldrich outlines amendments to the basic rational choice model of voting but argues that voting is a poor example because it is low-cost and low-benefit. Suggests that strategic (challenger) politicians shape many relationships between voting and electoral conditions (economic, closeness, and tactical).

Riker and Ordeshook argue for the introduction of the conditional *A* and the unconditional *D* terms into the calculus of voting but go on to show that *P* and *B* matter within levels of *D*.

Stokes outlines and challenges Downs' spatial model based on the non-existence of the left-right dimension in some systems, the existence of multiple other dimensions in other systems, the existence of 'valence-issues' (linking a party to a positively or negatively valued condition (e.g. corruption)), and the multiple possible spatial perceptions of actors.



Group discussion

- In a random order, each group chooses two questions from the handout, which is available via [Myplace](#) (L2929 > Week 2 – Approaches: Rational choice)
- Each group discusses their questions and summarises the discussion on padlet, including any uncertainties or questions about the ideas, concepts or arguments:
 - <https://padlet.com/joegreenwoodhau/L2929>
- At least one group member should be prepared to feed back

