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The Giant Jigsaw Puzzle at 25: A View from the Backbenches

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After viewing a classic film I sometimes go back and read the original reviews, just to see what the critics originally thought about the movie. While thinking about what I wanted to say regarding the *Giant Jigsaw Puzzle* (Shepsle 1978), I thought I would do something similar and soon found four reviews. Here are a couple of choice quotes from one of them:

Subtitled "Democratic Committee Assignments in the Modern House," Shepsle's book tells you more than you probably want to or will ever need to know about how the Democrats make committee assignments in the United States House of Representatives (Ogden 1979: 356).

It goes on to say:

As an assignment for students, even in an advanced graduate class in the legislative process, however, it is too specialized. It's greatest use will be for reference and research (Ogden 1979: 356)

All the reviews, including the one cited above, say quite laudatory things about *Jigsaw*, but overall I would characterize them as a tepid set of endorsements. My point is not in any way deride these critics – top scholars all. Lacking the twenty-five years of hindsight we now enjoy, these writers could not predict that *Jigsaw* would in several different ways prove a seminal piece of political science.

My role on this roundtable is to discuss *Jigsaw* from the perspective of someone who came to the book well after it was published. I

first came across *Jigsaw* in 1988 while I was getting a Masters at Texas A&M. I took a class on Congress from Jon Bond and much of the material in that class focused at what today we would call distributive theory, but then were calling sub-government theory. I soon developed an interest in the topic and this interest led me to *Jigsaw*. Unfortunately the library copy had been stolen, but through mysterious pre-Napster means I eventually managed to secure what had to be a fifth-generation photocopy. This led to my first graduate student paper, which used some of the logic of *Jigsaw* to examine sub-committee composition.

With the certainty typical of a graduate student, I saw formal theory without hypothesis testing as akin to Robert Frost's complaint about free verse: It "is like playing tennis with the net down."

This initial interest in *Jigsaw* was purely topical. But a year or so later I developed a different interest in the book. By now I was at Rice University working on a Ph.D. For me this was a fortuitous time to be in graduate school since the study of political institutions was

coming very much back into vogue. Closely (though not completely) coupled with this “new institutionalism” was rational choice theory, especially formal modeling.

What became obvious to a lot of us back then was a divide between the empirical and the theoretical. The congressional studies field was and remains empirically oriented. Formal models offered interesting theoretical insights, but usually presented little more than anecdotal evidence about the way a “real-world” legislature, such as Congress, actually behaved. With a certainty typical of a graduate student, I saw formal theory without hypothesis testing as akin to Robert Frost’s (1935) complaint about free verse: It “is like playing tennis with the net down.” Thus while casting about for a dissertation I knew I wanted to do something that tested insights from formal modeling. Yet, at the time I could not think of a template for such an approach, until, that is, I recalled *Jigsaw*. Shepsle’s melding of theory with data is now common in congressional studies.

I believe *Jigsaw* remains an important book to teach our students so I will conclude with a few comments about teaching. When using *Jigsaw* I like to stress four points. First, *Jigsaw* addresses an important topic. When looking at the literature *Jigsaw* helped spawn, it is easy for us to get lost in the arcane minutiae of NOMINATE scores, request data, and Monte Carlo simulations. But this literature remains lively precisely because it asks fundamental questions about the distribution of power within the linchpin of America’s representative democracy. This question has obsessed practitioners and theorists for centuries, notably including the Jeffersonians (Cooper 1970).

A second point I like to make is that *Jigsaw* demonstrates that rational choice theory does not have to be purely abstract. It can be rooted in “real” world issues that matter. Third, *Jigsaw* was ahead of its time. It could not be predicted at its publication – thus the

lukewarm reviews – but *Jigsaw* eventually formed part of the basis of distributive theory, one of the “competitors” in the triumvirate of theories of congressional organization. Indeed, I think it is notable that the real spike in *Jigsaw* citations came in the 1990s, more than twenty years after it was published.

Finally, I like to point out that *Jigsaw* is about a time, but it is not time bound. To be sure, the committee membership process that existed in the mid-1970s only resembles what came before and what came after. Likewise the nature of politics – such as the role and strength of party – was very different in the 1970s than what came before and what came after that period. Shepsle is quite self-conscious about this in the book, and while it is not fully elaborated, he does lay out a framework – “principles of composition” (Shepsle 1978: 9-10) – that places the details of *Jigsaw* within a broader historical context.

The lack of data made many of these ideas untestable. Fortunately, recent years have seen tremendous advances in the quality of historical data. Scott Frisch and Sean Kelly gathered information on committee requests from numerous paper collections. They now have a dataset that dramatically extends Shepsle’s, both across time and party (Frisch and Kelly, Forthcoming). Garrison Nelson’s massive archival work on post-World War II committee membership (Nelson 1993) has aided research on the temporal dynamics of committee membership in that period (e.g., Adler and Lapinski 1997; Young and Heitshusen 2003). Now, through the efforts of Nelson, David Canon, and Charles Stewart, this data extends back to the beginning of time, i.e., 1789 (Stewart, Canon, and Nelson 2002). All of this promises that ideas the Shepsle articulated in *Jigsaw* will continue to motivate research for some time to come.

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