The idea for this special issue dates back to the summer of 2009. In July of that year, Craig Volden and I found ourselves feverishly trying to complete a chapter for the *Oxford Handbook of the American Congress* (Schickler and Lee, 2010) titled ‘Formal Approaches to the Study of Congress’ (Volden and Wiseman, 2010). My daughter had been born just that spring, and (as is often the case for many of us in the academy) Craig and I had committed to writing something (i.e., the chapter) without thinking about the practicalities of various timelines. So as the conclusion of summer approached, we found ourselves being contacted by the editors of the volume, who were hoping for our submission as soon as possible, and we realized that we had yet to complete a manuscript that we were entirely content with.

In writing the chapter, our goal was to review the ways in which formal models had been incorporated into the analysis of legislative politics (and the US Congress in particular), and to provide some guidance on how formal models might be used to engage a wide range of additional topics in congressional studies. To ensure that we were accurately characterizing the literature, we circulated an early draft of the chapter to every author that we cited, as well as a collection of scholars who were likely to teach formal theory and/or congressional politics to advanced graduate students. The response that we received was notable in several ways. Firstly, the sheer volume of comments was truly impressive, as more than half of the scholars whom we contacted wrote back with extremely constructive comments. Secondly, the comments were also notable in that they consistently pointed to a particular omission in the current draft: our failure to incorporate a discussion of formal theories of congressional committees into the manuscript. In the words of one colleague:

... you may be well out of space, but I think it is worth trying to incorporate—something—on committee power. This is a great case of formal theory leading the way to characterize the
issue and inform the empirical debate. It is also, obviously, some of the most important formal work in the field.

By referring to the ‘committee power’ literature, our colleague was implicitly speaking to the influential collection of papers that investigated the ways in which committees might serve as an agenda setter in the House (e.g., Denzau and MacKay, 1983), as well as how they might effectively induce structure over multidimensional policy debates in order to facilitate stable and resolute policy choices (e.g., Shepsle, 1979; Shepsle and Weingast, 1981). Even more important, some colleagues argued, was the need to include a discussion on the role and incorporation of signaling models into the study of legislative politics, focusing on Gilligan and Krehbiel (1987) as a starting point.

While readers of this journal are likely quite familiar with Gilligan and Krehbiel (1987), it is still worth noting that nearly 25 years ago these two assistant professors at Caltech advanced a new approach to studying the potential influence of committees in legislative bodies by building on Crawford and Sobel’s (1982) path-breaking work in signaling theory. More specifically, rather than assuming that committees had been endowed with agenda-setting authority and/or monopoly control over particular policy jurisdictions, Gilligan and Krehbiel sought to understand the conditions under which the House (and the median legislator in the House, in particular) might choose to endow committees with particular parliamentary privileges, given that such privileges might lead the median member to incur distributive policy losses (such as those identified in earlier works on committee politics). The key insight from this model, as scholars of legislative politics are well aware, pertains to information.

If one assumes that there is a disconnect between the bills that are passed by the Congress and the final outcomes that are implemented, and that a subset of the parent chamber (i.e., the committee) can exert costly effort to learn about the mappings from bills to outcomes, then the chamber will, under certain circumstances, be willing to provide the committee with incentives to specialize. By incorporating its expertise into the bills that it proposes, committee specialization ensures that there will be a reduction in the uncertainty associated with passed bills, which is beneficial to all actors (even if they have divergent policy preferences). The specific tool for providing the committee with such incentives, then, is the choice of a restrictive (i.e., closed) rule, whereby the committee’s policy proposal will not be altered upon being reported out of committee. Hence, Gilligan and Krehbiel (1987) provide an informational rationale for procedural choices by the House, which has numerous theoretical and empirical implications for understanding the relationships between the committee and the floor, the nature of committee composition, the incentives that can be (and need to be) provided to informed agents to induce information transmission, and broader lessons about the determinants of institutional choice in political settings.

If one reads the earliest reactions to Gilligan and Krehbiel’s paper, one sees hints of the ways in which the theoretical and empirical debates about information and political institutions would evolve in the coming years. As noted by Fiorina (1987) in his response essay to Gilligan and Krehbiel’s work:

It is an ambitious and impressive effort to apply recently developed ideas and tools to the study of important political questions . . . Gilligan and Krehbiel provide another compelling...
demonstrates that conflict of interest in an uncertain world may indeed lead rational actors to ‘tie their hands’ in order to achieve a better outcome.

While appreciating the broad theoretical point that Gilligan and Krehbiel were making, however, Fiorina was somewhat less convinced of the likely empirical implications of the theory and its utility for understanding the politics of the US House. Or, as he put it:

... I am less convinced that they provide an important part of the explanation for the actual historical development of restrictive amendment procedures in the House of Representatives.

This sentiment that the theory underlying Gilligan and Krehbiel’s arguments was novel, yet the empirical implications of that theory were open to debate, is representative of the broader legacy of ‘Collective Decision-Making and Standing Committees: An Informational Rationale for Restrictive Amendment Procedures.’ Over the 25 years following the publication of Gilligan and Krehbiel’s manuscript, a rich empirical debate emerged regarding the extent to which committee politics seemed more reflective of distributive theories, informational theories, or alternative (sometimes presenting themselves as combinations of informational and distributive) theories of legislative organization. On the theoretical side, as well, the technological advancement that Gilligan and Krehbiel introduced with their legislative signaling game has been incorporated into a variety of substantive applications in political science. Moreover, the broader substantive and theoretical legacy of Gilligan and Krehbiel (1987) is arguably the attention that a wide range of scholars have given to important questions regarding information acquisition and use in different political environments, and the institutional choices that might facilitate the endogenous creation of information. A recent essay by Stephenson (2011) parsimoniously identifies the tension underlying the questions at the heart of much of the scholarship on information and institutional design:

Public decisionmakers’ expertise about policy decisions is often endogenous ... rather than exogenous ... the endogeneity of government agents’ expertise may have profound consequences for a range of institutional design questions. As a general matter, agents’ private incentives to invest in research may not align with the social interest in their doing so.

While Craig and I ultimately opted to not incorporate a treatment of committees (and the legacy of signaling models) into our chapter (largely because of binding space constraints), the collective feedback of our colleagues resonated with us, and we began to think more broadly about the legacy of these works on the current state of research in political science, and positive political economy. More generally speaking, given the cumulative body of scholarship that has been created over the past 25 years, one might find him/herself asking the following questions. Firstly, what do we know, as a discipline, about the role of information acquisition and use in political institutions? More specifically, how do political actors cultivate and use expertise? Are there institutional arrangements that clearly encourage (or inhibit) information acquisition and use? What is the nature of the empirical evidence that supports, or clearly refutes, the body of theoretical work that has emerged over the past 25 years following the publication of ‘Collective Decision-Making and Standing Committees’?
These are the questions that were the focus of a conference titled ‘Government Expertise: Information and Political Institutions’ that was co-sponsored by the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, the Vanderbilt Law School and the Vanderbilt Department of Political Science at Vanderbilt University on September 30–October 1, 2011. The conference brought together more than 60 scholars from the United States and Europe, who were drawn from a wide range of disciplines including political science, economics, law, and business, to present and discuss a collection of papers that spoke to the heart of the questions that are raised above. Among those in attendance were several scholars who had contributed to the foundational works in this literature (including Thomas Gilligan, Keith Krehbiel, and Kenneth Shepsle), as well as members of the ‘next generation,’ including a number of advanced graduate students and assistant professors from various institutions. It was interesting to note that of the eight papers that were presented, almost none of them dealt primarily with legislative politics, which is a testament to how the study of information and political institutions has transcended issues of legislative design. Of the papers that were presented at that conference, five of the authors (and/or author–coauthor teams) submitted manuscripts to be included in this special issue of the Journal of Theoretical Politics. Taken together, they represent the cutting edge of contemporary research that seeks to understand the way political actors cultivate, retain, and/or use information to achieve their goals in different institutional settings.

Minozzi and Woon (2013), for example, analyze how decisionmakers weigh the relative impacts of different messages from competing (informed) senders. Building on Minozzi’s (2011) recent theory of ‘jamming,’ which deviates from the canonical Crawford–Sobel model in several ways, Minozzi and Woon demonstrate that the presence of competing senders will not necessarily induce greater levels of information transmission. The authors build on these insights and test the implications of this theory in a laboratory setting. Chief among their experimental findings is that they are able to demonstrate how the specific context of the interaction (in their case, whether a sender is identified as a ‘lobbyist’) influences the behaviors of those transmitting information, and its ultimate reception by decisionmakers. Taken together, Minozzi and Woon’s findings represent a novel contribution to the evolving literature on the roles of context and ‘pro-social’ preferences (that might facilitate lying aversion) in information transmission, and they are relevant to understanding a wide range of interactions that occur among competing interests across different political institutions.

In thinking about the legislative arena, Chen and Eraslan (2013) investigate how the ability (or inability) of actors to convey credibly their respective policy preferences influences legislative bargaining. In their model, legislators bargain over a policy with an ideological dimension and a separate distributive dimension, where legislators’ policy preferences are private information. Prior to the commencement of bargaining, legislators are able to send cheap talk messages about their policy preferences that are received by a legislator who will then devise a policy proposal. A fundamental result of their model is that the inability to send credible information may lead to situations in which bargaining over the issues separately is more appealing to the legislature than bundling the issues together, due to the informational and distributive losses that can be incurred from bundled bargaining. This result stands in contrast to results that are obtained in a perfect information setting, and the authors’ findings motivate additional questions about how communication might influence collective decisionmaking processes in strategic settings.
Turning to questions of bureaucratic design, a fundamental issue in contemporary policymaking is how one might structure the bureaucracy to ensure that agents are sufficiently competent to undertake the tasks that are delegated to them. Ting et al. (2013) engage this question by investigating how partisan competition in the electoral arena might induce politicians to implement civil service reforms, rather than employing a patronage-based ‘spoils system.’ Their paper develops a new model of electoral politics where overlapping generations of political parties compete for an office while deciding whether to insulate a personnel system, or maintain a patronage system that allows for the targeted distribution of electorally valuable benefits. A fundamental finding of the model is that when the electoral prospects of the incumbent party are sufficiently unfavorable, it will decide to institute a civil service system that effectively ties the hands of future incumbents (even members of their own party) to prevent them from delivering targeted electorally valuable goods to specific constituencies. They explore the empirical implications of their theory by considering the patterns of adoption of civil service systems by individual state governments and municipalities in the 20th-century United States.

Another important question in bureaucratic design is how one might ensure that an executive can obtain the information necessary from his or her subordinates to make sufficiently well-informed decisions. This question is the focus of Gailmard and Patty (2013), who develop a new model of executive politics in which a policymaker can choose to receive information from different subordinate sources. One of the subordinates (e.g., a bureaucratic agency) is effectively able to censor, or filter, the information, whereas the other (e.g., an independent information source) passes along completely unfiltered (but perhaps lower-quality) information that is then incorporated into policymaking decisions. The authors identify how the possibility of political principals accessing an information ‘stovepipe’ (the channel through which unfiltered information flows) might influence the decisions of the more conventional information providers, as well as the relative levels, and quality, of information that are passed along to the policymaker.

Finally, there are few institutional arenas for which questions of information asymmetry are more salient than the accountability relationships that exist between elected officials and their constituents. Morelli and Van Weelden (2013) engage these topics with a new model that explores how preference heterogeneity among the electorate, and the nature of policy uncertainty, influences the types of policies that elected officials chose—particularly given that officials want to retain office, and that their preferences (and other attributes) are not publicly known to their constituents. The results of their analysis identify how changes in the composition of the electorate map into politicians’ incentives to ‘pander’ (meaning, to choose a policy that the electorate thinks it desires, regardless of the actual consequences of said policy). One main implication that emerges from the model is that politicians are more likely to pander on social issues that are characterized by moral debates than on more technical issues for which the politician might be better-informed about the policy instrument that should yield the best consequences. The authors also provide a new lens with which to evaluate the impact of electoral competition and electoral institutions on voter welfare, and they suggest that increasing the information available to voters might actually lead to decreases in social welfare.

These five papers cover a wide range of substantive topics: elections, legislatures, bureaucratic politics, and various connections between these institutions. Yet these substantive differences aside, they all share a common thread in that they all engage, to
varying degrees, the ways that information is acquired, cultivated, and used by actors in political settings. As stated above, the initial motivation for this special issue was to publish the works that were presented at a conference, which, to a great degree, sought to engage the status of a research program that has been cultivated over the past 25 years. With that as some context, it is worth noting that Gilligan and Krehbiel (1987) also appeared in a special issue that emerged out of a conference—in that case, a special issue of the Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization that published a collection of papers that was presented at a conference on ‘Law and Economics of Procedure’ in early 1987. In considering the collection of papers in this special issue, one can only wonder where we will be, as a discipline, 25 years from now, and how the contributions within the current issue of the Journal of Theoretical Politics issue will be instrumental in advancing our understanding of the role of information in political institutions.

Notes

1. Another of our colleagues was quite explicit on this point, stating: ‘I think you either need to have a special section on committees or emphasize them more in the delegation chapter. I would recommend a special section (from Gilligan/Krehbiel to Battaglini et al.).’

2. The body of work that speaks to these questions is voluminous, but a few prominent examples of literature that engaged the empirical implications of informational theories against other theories of legislative organization include Adler and Lapinski (1997), Dion and Huber (1996, 1997), Groseclose (1994), Hall and Grofman (1990), Krehbiel (1990, 1991, 1997a, 1997b), Londregan and Snyder (1994), and Maltzman (1995, 1997).

3. In addition to being applied in a variety of legislative contexts (e.g., Baron, 2000; Battaglini, 2002; Chiou, 2011; Diermeier, 1995; Diermeier and Feddersen, 2000; Gilligan and Krehbiel, 1989, 1990; Krishna and Morgan, 2001) variants of models that are similar in spirit to Gilligan and Krehbiel’s initial contribution have been incorporated into a wide range of substantive applications, most notable being studies of bureaucratic politics (e.g., Bendor and Meirowitz, 2004; Epstein and O’Halloran, 1999; Gailmard, 2002; Volden, 2002).

4. Indeed, a collection of scholars has engaged these questions regarding information transmission in institutions by incorporating modeling technologies that move well beyond those that are commonly used in these earlier works. Callander (2008, 2011) and McCarty (2012), for example, develop models of information transmission in complex policy environments, where information that is transmitted from an agent to a principal is context-specific, thereby limiting the extent to which a principal can expropriate the expertise that has been cultivated by his/her subordinates.

5. It is worth noting that at least one other incredibly influential paper in positive political economy, McCubbins et al.’s (1987) paper developing their theory of administrative procedures, was also presented at the same conference and included in this special issue of the Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization.

References


