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Constituent diversity and congress: the case of NAFTA

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Abstract

An important finding of legislative research is that constituency variables are more important predictors of a legislator's vote when constituent preferences are homogeneous, as opposed to when the various elements of the legislator's constituency are pulling the legislator in opposing directions (Goff & Grier, *Public Choice*, 76, 5–20; Bailey & Brady, *American Journal of Political Science*, 42, 524–544). We examine these expectations on a highly salient vote, the 1993 senate vote on the North American Free Trade Agreement. While we find support for the view that constituency variables are more important in homogeneous than heterogeneous constituencies, we also find that by confining constituency variables to economic factors scholars overlook the importance of constituent ideology on legislator behavior in homogeneous constituencies. © 2000 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Does constituent diversity matter?

One of the most researched topics in recent years is Congressional roll call voting (see Krehbiel, 1993; Poole & Rosenthal, 1997, for a review of the literature). Generally, this work focuses on identifying the various factors *ex post* that influence roll call votes. The results of this vast literature may best be described as contradictory. Some of the literature finds that, on at least some types of issues, constituents are stentorian in their ability to influence legislators (e.g., Miller & Stokes, 1963, Cnudde & McCrone, 1966; Kingdon, 1973; Fenno, 1978; Erikson, 1978; Markus, 1974; Page et al., 1984; Jackson & King, 1989; Wright, 1989; Arnold, 1990; Bartels, 1991). However, an only slightly less voluminous literature finds that

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legislators' personal preferences as reflected through their ideology are the most important influence on roll call decisions (e.g., Achen, 1978; Bernstein, 1989; Kau & Rubin, 1979, 1993; Poole & Rosenthal, 1997; Peltzman, 1984, 1985; but for a different view of ideology see Richardson & Munger, 1990; Dougan & Munger, 1989). Indeed these results lead Arnold (1990) to hold that "Unfortunately, the effects of these electoral calculations will never show up in a study of representation that searches for correlations between measures of constituency opinion and legislators' actual decisions."

We believe that these contradictory results stem from the fact that researchers have not fully examined the various ways in which legislators interpret the views of their constituents (for a similar view see Achen, 1978). Due to difficulty obtaining data, most studies use whatever proxy for constituency effect is available. However, since legislators may use different constituency cues for different constituencies on various issues, studies using measures based only on the best available data may understate the effect of constituency.

In order to more fully explore the impact of constituency preferences on legislator behavior, we need a vote that has attained sufficient salience so that constituency opinion is reasonably well-formed and for which there are good measures of the various nonconstituency opinion factors that previous research suggests may also influence the legislator (e.g., the economic self-interest of the constituency). One recent senate vote that meets these criteria is the vote on the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

2. Previous research

Research shows that legislators are most likely to be constrained by public opinion on highly salient issues (Miller & Stokes, 1963; Key, 1961; Kingdon, 1973; Erikson, 1978; Kuklinski, 1978; Page et al., 1984; Arnold, 1990; Bartels, 1991). For example, Miller & Stokes, (1963) find that on highly visible civil rights issues, legislators use the opinion of their constituents as a guide to roll call voting (however, see Achen, 1978). Similarly, Kingdon (1973) finds that legislators are concerned with the opinion of constituents on highly visible issues about which constituents express intense preferences. Bartels (1991) finds that constituent opinion not only influences legislators votes but effects the distribution of policy benefits stemming from the legislation. Thus it seems likely that constituent preferences influence legislator behavior on highly salient issues.¹

Research asserting a strong constituency role frequently relies on constituent opinion as the measure of preference and examines salient issues.² However, this research does not fully examine the different methods by which constituents influence their legislators. For example, while legislators could respond to constituent opinion, they could also respond to either the ideology (especially if constituent opinion is either not well-formulated or communicated) or the economic self-interest of the constituency.

In addition to constituent opinion, studies suggest that legislators use two other mechanisms to interpret constituent preference. The 'ideology hypothesis' suggests that legislators' actions reflect the general ideological preferences of their constituents (Wright, 1989; Medoff et al., 1995).³ Conceptually, ideology is the general philosophical belief system voters have about politics. Research suggests that "a congressman develops a certain 'feel'

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