

Election Marginality, District Homogeneity, and Policy Responsiveness

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This research addresses the question of what factors influence policy responsiveness by members of Congress. Data from the 95th and 96th sessions of Congress and the 1978 American National Election Study are employed to test two possible influences on policy responsiveness. First, a revised test of the marginality hypothesis is offered. Instead of looking at marginality statically, the change in both policy responsiveness and marginality is examined. This dynamic model receives no support from the data. Second, the hypothesis that a homogenous opinion structure within the district encourages greater policy responsiveness finds modest support.

Since the Miller-Stokes study of 1963, political scientists have been debating the topic of representation of constituency opinion in Congress. Specifically, how well do members of Congress represent constituency opinion when casting votes, and what conditions lead to greater or lesser responsiveness? Miller and Stokes (1963), finding that members are most responsive on civil rights, moderately responsive on social welfare spending, and not at all responsive on foreign policy, argue that knowing the type of issue is important for determining how responsive a member is going to be to constituency opinion. Glazer and Robbins (1985) find that when districts are altered by reapportionment, representatives alter their roll-call behavior to reflect the changed composition of their new constituencies.

Eulau and Karps (1978) point out that policy responsiveness is but one of four types of responsiveness (the others are service, allocative, and symbolic responsiveness). While each of the four types certainly is important, most research -- with some notable exceptions (Fiorina 1974, 1977; Fenno 1978) -- has concentrated on policy responsiveness. Despite the voluminous amount of research on policy responsiveness, there remain many unanswered questions.

This paper addresses the continuing debate over the factors leading to greater or lesser policy responsiveness. Specifically, are members of Congress from marginal districts more likely than their colleagues from safe congressional districts to be responsive to constituency opinion? At this time, the debate is unsettled with researchers arguing both sides of the question. Shannon (1966), Kuklinski (1977a), and others argue that marginality matters, while Froman (1963), Deckard (1976), and others contend that marginality does not incline a member of Congress to be more responsive to constituency opinion. The task in this paper is to examine the marginality hypothesis more closely. First, according to the marginality hypothesis, members of Congress who are in marginal districts are more likely to be responsive to constituency opinion than their safe colleagues

because they fear defeat in the next election. This fear of defeat leads the members from marginal districts to court constituency opinion more closely than those from safe districts. One important point that has been left out so far is that a member from a so-called marginal district may not have an especially acute fear of defeat. A member might feel one's self to be relatively certain of retaining one's seat in the next election, though with a relatively narrow margin of victory.¹ The member may feel that every election is going to fall within what we would call the marginal range, but unless the member commits a rather serious error, the member is going to win reelection. Members' fears of defeat may be depicted more accurately if we look at the margins of victory dynamically, rather than statically. Members who experience a decline in their margins of victory may fear that the next contest will draw a quality challenger (Jacobson 1987a; Fenno 1978), and for that reason do everything they can, including moving toward the constituency's policy preferences, to gain reelection. For this reason, a comparison will be made of those members who experience a decline in their margin of victory with those who experience an increase in their margin of victory.

Previous works have presented us with the hypothesis that the more marginal members of Congress will be closer to constituency opinion than are their safer colleagues. This hypothesis assumes that all members are equally capable of being in tune with their constituencies. If, however, we look at changing margins of victory, we also should look at changing levels of responsiveness. Perhaps a member experiencing a decline in the margin of victory moves closer to the constituency, but still remains relatively far away. If the marginality hypothesis, as described here, is true, those members experiencing a decline in their margin of victory should be inclined to move toward constituency opinion. Note that this does not mean that members who experience a decline in their margins of victory will be closer to their constituency than their colleagues who experience an increase. Instead, what we are examining is the hypothesis that members who experience a decline in their margin of victory will be more likely than their safer colleagues to move toward constituency opinion. If, however, we find there are no differences between the two groups of congressmen, or that members increasing their margin of victory are more likely than members experiencing a decline to move closer to constituency opinion, doubt will be cast on the marginality hypothesis.

Before proceeding any further, one key assumption should be made clear. In conducting the research at hand, I assume that members of Congress believe that their roll-call behavior has some effect on the outcomes of future elections.² Since Miller and Stokes (1963) report that members overestimate the visibility of their issue stands, and Fenno (1978) states that members of Congress fear that if they are not close to constituency opinion, problems are likely to arise in the next campaign, this assumption seems reasonable.

Votes on budgetary matters during the 95th and 96th sessions of the House of Representatives will be the focus of the examination. Since the priorities of the

government are set through the budgetary process, it is difficult to overstate the importance of the budget. As Aaron Wildavsky (1984, 4) states, "Taken as a whole the federal budget is a representation in monetary terms of governmental activity. If politics is regarded in part as conflict over whose preferences shall prevail in the determination of national policy, then the budget records the outcome of that struggle." One additional benefit of choosing this arena of policy is that wrangling over the budget is going to continue into the future, thus facilitating the making of comparisons over time.

Roll-Call Votes

The roll-call votes used in this analysis are those concerning social welfare spending. More specifically, those votes in which the word budget appears in the brief description alongside the vote in the *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* are the votes of interest.³ As the government's redistributive functions provoke the most dissensus, these votes should make the best test cases for studies of representation. While many votes are cast in a legislative session, some clearly are more important than others. Votes of a highly conflictual nature and those in which most members participate are more likely to become known in the members' districts. For this reason, I have chosen to limit the votes examined according to these criteria. By limiting the votes considered, I will increase the likelihood that members will have reason to pay attention to constituency opinion when voting.

Riker's coefficient of significance is an excellent tool for pairing the votes to be analyzed.⁴ On a zero to one scale, the more significant votes have higher scores, and the votes in this analysis have a score of .70 or higher. At this point, the roll-call votes are coded in the following manner: pro-social welfare spending -1, non-votes 0, and anti-social welfare spending +1. This coding scheme allows for non-voting to be considered. If a member misses a vote, intentionally or unintentionally, the member is voting neither for nor against social welfare spending, and should be scored accordingly. Furthermore, past works find that non-voting can have important consequences. Lawrence O'Brien (1974) reports that during the mid-sixties several Southern Senators were persuaded to miss a vote concerning cloture, thereby allowing a filibuster to be stopped. Edwards (1980) reports that Lyndon Johnson, when unable to persuade a member to vote his way, would attempt to persuade the member to miss the vote.⁵

I subjected the roll-call votes to factor analysis with a varimax rotation. For the 95th session, there are 19 votes, and for the 96th session, there are 30 votes. Given Weissberg's (1979) caveat about inferences concerning a member's behavior from just one or a few votes, the number of votes here is likely to produce an accurate depiction of the representatives' voting behavior. Similarly, Kingdon (1981, 41) points out that one vote out of the ordinary is not likely to entail extensive damage to one's reelection chances, but a "string of votes" contrary to constituency opinion could present electoral difficulties. The analysis extracted

two factors for the 95th session and three factors for the 96th session. Since we know there is a great deal of similarity in members' voting behavior over time (Clausen 1973; Asher and Weisberg 1978; Poole and Rosenthal 1985; Ladha 1991), I have chosen the two factors that are most closely related over time: Factor 1 for the 95th session and Factor 2 for the 96th session ($r = .77$) [see Appendices 1 and 2 for the factor loadings]. The factor scores from this analysis are the members' stances on social welfare spending. Using the factor scores, rather than simply using the variables with substantial loadings, allows the variables to have variable weights. Also, by using the factor scores, we can control for the low loading factors without giving them undue weight.

An additional means of validating the roll-calls under examination is to examine the factor loadings of the votes. Since the roll-calls were coded prior to the factor analysis, the factor loadings of the votes should be of the same sign on their respective factors. As can be seen in Appendices 1 and 2, this expectation is upheld for the relevant factors.

District Opinion

The easiest method of estimating district opinion is to collect demographic data and use that as a surrogate for district opinion. This method, however, is laden with many problems (Weissberg 1979). Another method of estimating district opinion is to use national opinion surveys and demographic characteristics to simulate opinion at the district level (Weber, Hopkins, Mezey, and Unger 1972; Uslaner and Weber 1977, 1979). Although this is an improvement on the use of only demographic data, this method assumes local, non-demographic factors do not influence opinions at the district level (Kuklinski 1977b; Jewell and Loewenberg 1979).

Miller and Stokes (1963) inaugurated a means of assessing district opinion that has great potential: actually asking respondents their views on issues and taking the aggregation of these opinions at the district level to represent district opinion. Despite the theoretical virtue of asking constituents for their opinions on issues, this technique is not without problems. Erikson (1978) points out that a national sample is not meant to be divided into samples of congressional districts, and the sample sizes are too small for us to consider them representative. This, however, does not appear to be as much of a problem with the 1978 American National Election Study (hereafter ANES) as it was in the past. Erikson (1981) reports that the district vote in the 1978 congressional elections correlates highly with the vote reported in the 1978 ANES. Additionally, the percent black in each district correlates highly (.86) with the percent black reported in the survey, so we can see that the 1978 ANES is representative on demographic characteristics, as well as on the political dimension that Erikson reports.¹ Because of (1) the problems associated with attempting to simulate district opinion, either by using demographic data alone or with national poll data, and (2) the benefits of district

surveys, both theoretical and practical, it is preferable to use the district samples of the 1978 ANES to ascertain district opinion.

The 1978 ANES contains three questions that appear to measure respondents' attitudes on social welfare spending: guaranteed job and standard of living, government aid to minorities, and government medical insurance. To make certain that these items constitute a single dimension in the electorate's eyes, I subjected them to factor analysis with a varimax rotation. Knowing that if only three items are factor analyzed, there is likely to be only one factor found, regardless of the actual dimensionality, I included two other variables: equal rights for women and abortion. The results of the factor analysis strongly confirm the earlier expectation; each of the variables loads highly on the expected factor, and each item loads on only one factor (see Appendix 3 for the factor loadings).

To construct a measure of district opinion, the individuals' factor scores are aggregated to the district level, and the median position within each district is district opinion. Choosing median district opinion over mean opinion involves a subtle yet important distinction. Most of the rational choice literature states that candidates move to the middle of the opinion distribution when seeking election or reelection to office (see especially Downs 1957 on this point). Candidates position themselves so that half the electorate is on each side of them. If we employ the mean district opinion, instead of the median, it is not necessarily the case that the district will be so neatly divided. A few outliers easily can pull the mean far away from the median. With the small sample sizes by district, the median also is much less sensitive to the influence of outliers.

The Traditional Test

So this work can be compared more easily with earlier works, I will provide the more traditional test of the marginality hypothesis before proceeding with the main focus of the research. The representatives' roll-call behavior in the 96th session (Factor 2) is regressed on median district opinion regarding social welfare spending.⁷

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Eq. 1a} \quad \text{Spending Votes } 96^{\text{th}} &= .0038 + .70(\text{District opinion}) + e \\ & \quad [.13] \quad [.24] \\ R^2 &= .11 \quad N = 70 \end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Eq. 1b} \quad \text{Spending Votes } 96^{\text{th}} &= -.01 + 1.15(\text{District opinion}) + e \\ & \quad [.24] \quad [.64] \\ R^2 &= .14 \quad N = 22 \end{aligned}$$

where equation 1a is for the safe congressional districts (winning percentage > 60%), and equation 1b is for the marginal congressional districts (winning

Congress who increase their margin of victory and those who experience a decline? One reason might be that all members of Congress, regardless of their electoral position, fear defeat in the next election, and therefore all members strive to follow district opinion. In a member's decision calculus, the probability of losing may be quite low, but the cost of losing is high enough that members do all they can to minimize the likelihood of defeat. Mann (1977) and Jacobson (1987b) argue that members tend to fear defeat, regardless of objective indicators of electoral security. If all members believe they are electorally insecure, an examination of marginality will not turn up any positive findings, for all members will be courting district opinion.

HOMOGENEITY VERSUS HETEROGENEITY

Why is there no meaningful difference in movement toward district opinion between those members who experienced increases in margin of victory and those who experienced decreases? Miller (1964) explains the apparent anomaly of marginal members being less responsive by pointing out that members from marginal districts have difficulty ascertaining constituency opinion, and, for that reason, are less likely to be responsive to constituency opinion than are their brethren from safe House districts. Fiorina (1974) suggests that researchers have been misconstruing the distinction between safe and marginal districts. Instead of considering districts as safe or marginal, we should consider districts as homogeneous or heterogeneous. According to Fiorina, members from safe districts also are from homogeneous districts, and members from marginal districts also are from heterogeneous districts. Members from safe (homogeneous) districts have an easier time following district opinion because they can ascertain district opinion more easily. Fiorina tests this hypothesis in a somewhat limited manner; he correlates his measures of homogeneity with electoral margin, and finds that high electoral margins are associated positively with his measures of homogeneity. From this, Fiorina concludes that the margin of victory can be taken as a measure of district homogeneity.

While Fiorina's (1974) findings are suggestive, the examination of district homogeneity should not stop.⁹ What we need now is a more direct test of the homogeneity-heterogeneity hypothesis. The variance of opinion on social welfare spending is a reasonably good measure of opinion diversity within the district. To determine whether a district is homogeneous or heterogeneous, I split the measure at the median. The regression equations for each type of district appear below, with the results for the heterogeneous (Eq. 3a) and homogeneous districts (Eq. 3b).

Eq. 3a

$$\text{Spending Votes } 96^{\text{th}} = .15 + .53(\text{District opinion}) + e$$

[.16] [.29]

$R^2 = .07$ $N = 46$

Eq. 3b

$$\text{Spending Votes } 96^{\text{th}} = -.14 + 1.17(\text{District opinion}) + e$$

[.19] [.37]

$R^2 = .19$ $N = 46$

From an examination of the above equations, we can see that the members from homogeneous districts appear to be more responsive to median district opinion than are their colleagues from heterogeneous districts. Examination of the confidence intervals reveals that the differences are not statistically significant at the .05 level. We should, however, note that the median district opinion is statistically significant for the homogeneous districts and it is not statistically significant for the heterogeneous districts. While suggestive, the findings from this analysis are by no means definitive.¹⁰

Conclusion

From the start, the purpose of this paper has been to identify factors leading to greater or lesser policy responsiveness by members of Congress. More specifically, I examined both the marginality and homogeneity hypotheses. With regard to the reformulated marginality hypothesis, the evidence points in a direction contrary to the hypothesis. Instead of finding that members who experience a decline move closer to the median district opinion, we can see no statistically significant difference between the members experiencing a decline and those experiencing an increase in their margins of victory.

Aside from examining the marginality hypothesis, the hypothesis that district homogeneity leads to greater responsiveness receives somewhat more support, but once again the differences are not statistically significant. Nevertheless, the differences here are worthy of further investigation. While the differences are not statistically significant, the coefficient for median district opinion in the homogeneous districts is more than twice as large as it is in the heterogeneous districts. Also, we should note that the coefficient for median district opinion is statistically significant for the homogeneous districts and not for the heterogeneous districts. That the difference between the two types of districts is not statistically significant may be purely a function of sample size. Perhaps with a larger sample we will find the homogeneous districts to have more responsive members.

Appendix 1

Factor loadings of budget votes for the 95th session of the House

ICPSR Number	Factor 1	Factor 2
v970	.80471	.32389
v962	.79056	.27820
v839	.74504	.45928
v1342	.73121	.01128
v1338	.70875	.49512
v45	.69471	.48288
v969	.69387	.34480
v30	.69178	.46481
v946	.67196	.52131
v495	.66703	.38882
v964	.65517	.40586
v1340	.65038	.51815
v971	.61659	.62156
v1344	.52851	.70437
v516	.44301	.76896
v499	.41578	.75666
v194	.36525	.76008
v996	.28345	.77299
v241	.08809	.81247

Appendix 2

Factor loadings of budget votes for the 96th session of the House

ICPSR Number	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
v106	.32805	.82941	-.00471
v104	.29907	.82429	.04264
v452	.30063	.79340	.06247
v868	.14164	.72651	.20864
v142	.00278	.65750	.16315
v110	.39175	.63301	-.33857
v872	.51859	.59110	.18879
v115	.59342	.57922	.14772
v454	.62847	.53602	.17736
v880	.63167	.53351	-.04103
v860	.67442	.46066	-.00789
v618	.75206	.42694	.12249
v450	.79680	.41802	.19479
v876	.75730	.41690	.16701
v875	.78474	.40664	.17944
v477	.76694	.38592	.06876
v132	.76054	.38399	.21675
v133	.77369	.35591	.13389
v619	.77640	.33938	-.09287
v455	.77714	.32271	-.11119
v579	.78801	.31500	.04364
v136	.80591	.27499	.16841
v123	.10870	.26753	.60717
v1247	.80554	.22069	-.11346
v863	.71634	.17854	.04375
v453	.64018	.16441	.30217
v1139	.77721	.11740	-.06357
v864	.72222	.10282	.19593
v973	.76068	.08900	-.35638
v879	.69142	.04095	-.34790

Appendix 3

Factor loadings of respondents' attitudes from the 1978 ANES

ICPSR number	Description	Factor 1	Factor 2
v357	Guaranteed job	.79731	-.14344
v373	Aid to minorities	.76998	.06962
v381	Government medical	.66196	.15014
v389	Women's equality	.16701	.78441
v450	Abortion	-.09151	.81328

NOTES

¹Weber's (1989) discussion of Congressman Richard Nolan who felt relatively certain of holding his seat although his margin of victory was only five percentage points. As Collie (1981) asks, is a member who continually wins what we would call a marginal seat any less secure than a member who continually wins what we would call a safe seat?

²See Bernstein (1988) for an argument that members are not especially concerned with constituency opinion.

³The data employed in this project were made available by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research. Neither the consortium or the original collectors bears any responsibility for the interpretations herein.

⁴See Anderson, Watts, and Wilcox (1966) for a discussion of Riker's coefficient of significance.

⁵For further work on non-voting and its importance, see Covington (1988).

⁶The percent black in each district is taken from the 1982 *Almanac of American Politics*.

⁷The traditional means of examining the relationship between district opinion and roll-call behavior has been to make use of correlation coefficients. Achen (1977), however, has shown this technique to be flawed.

⁸The N drops because members who were uncontested in 1976 are dropped from the analysis.

⁹Especially since in this case district homogeneity and marginality are only correlated at .07.

¹⁰I also looked at the very homogeneous and heterogeneous districts (the third most homogeneous and the third most heterogeneous). The findings from this analysis are similar to those reported in the text.

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