

Elections and the Responsiveness of Incumbents: A Reaction to Lockerbie

Robert A. Bernstein, *Auburn University*

Brad Lockerbie's test of the "marginality hypothesis" provides additional evidence for a thesis I have propounded for many years: we cannot rely on elections to force incumbents to be more responsive to the policy preferences of their constituencies (Bernstein 1989, 1991a, 1991b, 1992).

The marginality hypothesis assumes that fear of losing a reelection bid (or at least pre-emptive protection against such a loss) will force representatives to adopt issue positions similar to those preferred by the median voters in their constituencies. According to that hypothesis, the greater the fear of losing a reelection bid, the more the incumbent's policy positions are likely to reflect (or shift toward) the preferences of the constituency. As Lockerbie points out, when this hypothesis was tested in the late 1970s, "fear of losing" typically was measured by closeness of the previous election, while "reflection of the preferences of the constituency" was measured by various static comparisons of the policy positions of the incumbents with the policy preferences of their constituencies. Those tests found relatively little support for the hypothesis. Using different measures, Kingdon (1981) also failed to find support for the hypothesis. McCormick and Black (1983) tested a variant of the marginality hypothesis, but they, too, found that those who feared reelection defeat were no more likely to adopt issue positions favored by their constituencies than were those who had no fear of defeat. Lockerbie's dynamic model, measuring "fear of losing" by change in previous election margin and using "shift toward the constituency preference" rather than "reflection of that preference," reflects a valiant effort to save the hypothesis. But even that effort cannot find support where none exists. "Incumbents with a decreasing margin of victory" simply do not "scramble toward the median voter"(p.) If anything, as equation 2 demonstrates, incumbents display a slight tendency to crawl away from the median voter.

Certainly, Lockerbie's measures are open to question. I see little reason to believe that the first factor out of the analysis of the 95th Congress, the second factor out of the analysis of the 96th Congress, and the only factor out of the analysis of the voters all are measuring the same dimension and all using the same scale. If the dimensions and scales are not the same, his measure of policy shift toward or away from the constituency is questionable. However, if one accepts his measures, the results are clear: the marginality hypothesis is not supported.

Why is it that so many tests have failed to find support for the marginality hypothesis? Lockerbie discusses two possibilities: (1) that “fear of losing” is really about equal for all members (hence, all are equally likely to shift toward their constituencies’ preferences); and (2) that incumbents from heterogeneous districts don’t know what their constituencies’ preferences are, and thus cannot shift toward them (although he presents no evidence that his dynamic test of the marginality hypothesis holds for even the homogeneous districts). I find neither of those explanations very convincing.

The first explanation asks us to assume that an incumbent who got 90 percent of the vote last time (perhaps up from 80 percent the time before) will fear electoral defeat about as much as does an incumbent who got 50 percent of the vote last time (perhaps down from 53 percent the time before). Both incumbents may have some fear of defeat; but to assume that they fear defeat equally is to assume that one of them is irrational. I see no compelling reason for accepting an explanation based on the assumption of widespread irrationality among highly educated professionals.

The second explanation asks us to assume that incumbents cannot tell where their constituencies stand on even very general dimensions, such as support for social welfare. On any given issue, incumbents may have trouble telling where their constituencies stand. However, these members have served at least four years, they have seen voting by their constituencies on presidential candidates, and generally have lived in their districts for some time prior to their election. To assume they cannot tell roughly how supportive their district is on social welfare is to assume that the incumbents deliberately have closed their minds to all outside input. As above, I see no compelling reason for accepting an explanation based on the assumption of such irrational behavior by members, especially deliberately self-destructive irrational behavior.

It is soothing to supporters of democracy to think that observed policy gaps between constituencies and their representatives are a consequence of faulty communications between them. However, Overby (1991) has shown that when members have the clearest possible signals of constituency preference -- a referendum on the issue -- they show no inclination to shift positions to match the referendum results (in his study of voting on the nuclear freeze issue, they actually tended to shift slightly away from the expressed views of their constituencies).

There is a much more satisfactory set of explanations for the failure of the marginality hypothesis. Fear of reelection defeat doesn’t force incumbents to “scramble toward the median voter” because incumbents (1) know that their issue positions will have little effect on the outcome of their race, (2) know that shifting toward the median voter often is a counterproductive strategy, (3) are pressured to adopt issue positions by actors who may not have the same preferences as the constituency, and (4) often prefer to vote for what they see as the best policies, even when they expect those policies are not the ones preferred by their constituencies.

First, incumbents don’t scramble toward the median voter because scram-

bling generally is unnecessary for reelection. Constituencies very rarely defeat members for deviating from their policy preferences (Bernstein 1989, 1991b, 1992). Members are aware of that. They see the extraordinarily high reelection rates. They can trace, as did Weissberg (1981), the causes of the electoral defeats that do occur, and note as he did that virtually none of them are attributable to deviation from constituencies' policy preferences (but rather to check bouncing, Abscam, old age, etc.)

Second, incumbents don't scramble toward the median voter because such scrambling often is counterproductive. Where issue voting has an electoral impact, it often is more rewarding for incumbents to move away from their constituencies' preferences rather than toward them (Thomas 1985; Bernstein 1989, 1991a, 1992). For example, in senate races, support for conservative Democrats increases slightly for every step they position themselves further to the right of their constituencies' preferences (Bernstein 1992). Members of congress are aware that shifts deeper onto the opponent's turf pay off; that is why senators up for reelection tend to shift toward the positions of their likely opponents, even if that means shifting away from the preferences of their constituencies (Bernstein 1991a).

Third, incumbents don't scramble toward the median voter because there is resistance to such scrambling from other politically important actors. Incumbents are subjected to pressures from many actors, and may have to choose between them and their constituencies. For example, Payne (1991a, 1991b) shows that members of both the House and Senate are under terrific pressure to vote for more federal spending regardless of whether they are running for reelection or whether their constituencies favor more spending. Incumbents' support for increased spending tends to increase with each additional year they serve, including the year in which they retire and will not face another electorate. Incumbents also are pressured by their party leadership; that is evident in the shifts by senators toward their party's median position, which are independent of any strategic shifts toward the opposition (Bernstein 1991). Additionally, incumbents are subject to pressures from the administration, newspapers, contributors, and so on. All these other pressures on members can be substantially greater than the pressures to shift toward the median voter: if those pressures all are arrayed in opposition to the constituency, members tend to vote with the constituency only 5 percent of the time (Kingdon 1981).

Finally, incumbents generally don't scramble toward the preferences of the median voter if they think those preferences are wrong. Rather, they view scrambling in such cases as a dereliction of duty. For example, McCormick and Black (1983) showed that in the face of public opposition, support for the Panama Canal Treaties was about equally strong among senators who were and were not up for reelection. In a recent discussion of his vote for those treaties, Senator Henry

Bellmon (1992, 6) said

it is the duty of a legislator to . . . follow the course that he or she is persuaded to be in the public interest. It is a perversion of the public trust for an elected official to act against the public interest in order to avoid criticism or to try to retain elected office.

Kingdon (1981) found that in 43 decisions in which members saw a conflict between their own preferences and those of their constituencies, members voted with their constituencies only five times. Substantial additional research (much of it summarized in Bernstein 1989) confirms his finding that in those instances where there is a conflict between members' ideologies and constituencies' preferences, members tend to vote their ideologies.

In sum, we cannot rely on elections to maintain the responsiveness of even those incumbents who expect close reelection races. Incumbents do tend to reflect the views of their constituencies on most issues, but that primarily is because they originally were selected by those constituencies, rather than because the constituencies are holding a club over their heads (Kingdon 1981; Bernstein 1989). Equations 3a and 3b in Lockerbie's article suggest that the more homogeneous the views of the constituency are, the more likely they are to select representatives who closely reflect those views. However, the longer representatives stay in office, the more likely the preferences of the constituencies and the representatives are to diverge (Stone 1980; Payne 1991a). Continued threats of electoral defeat do not force incumbents to toe the constituency line.

REFERENCES

- Bellmon, Senator Henry. 1992. Why I Voted for the Panama Treaties. *Extensions: A Journal of the Carl Albert Center* (Summer): 3-6.
- Bernstein, Robert A. 1989. *Elections, Representation, and Congressional Voting Behavior: The Myth of Constituency Control*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- _____. 1991a. Strategic Shifts: Safeguarding the Public Interest? U.S. Senators, 1971-86. *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 16: 263-281.
- _____. 1991b. Ideological Deviation and Support for Reelection: Party Differences in Senate Races. *Western Political Quarterly* 44: 987-1003.
- _____. 1992. Limited Ideological Accountability in House Races: The Conditioning Effect of Party. *American Politics Quarterly* 20: 192-204.
- Kingdon, John W. 1981. *Congressmen's Voting Decisions*, 2nd edition. NY: Harper & Row.
- McCormick, James M. and Michael Black. 1983. Ideology and Voting on the Panama Canal Treaties. *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 8: 45-63.
- Overby, L. Marvin. 1991. Assessing Constituency Influence: Congressional Voting on the Nuclear Freeze, 1982-83. *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 16: 297-312.

- Payne, James L. 1991a. *The Culture of Spending: Why Congress Lives Beyond our Means*. San Francisco: ICS Press.
- _____. 1991b. Why Government Grows. *Western Political Quarterly* 44: 487-508.
- Stone, Walter J. 1980. The Dynamics of Constituency: Electoral Control in the House. *American Politics Quarterly* 8: 399-424.
- Thomas, Martin. 1985. Election Proximity and Senatorial Roll Call Voting. *American Journal of Political Science* 29: 96-111.
- Weissberg, Robert. 1981. Have House Elections Become a Meaningless Ritual? In Norman Luttbeg, ed., *Public Opinion and Public Policy: Models of Political Linkage*, 3rd ed. Itasca, IL: Peacock.