

Elections and the Responsiveness of Incumbents: A Response to Bernstein

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Robert A. Bernstein's comment on my paper asks some intriguing questions and raises some important concerns that should be addressed. First, I will discuss the selection procedure for the roll-call votes. Second, I will discuss the interpretation of the findings regarding the marginality hypothesis. Third, I will offer an additional explanation for the findings in my paper.

Bernstein states that my selection of votes across time is open to question, especially since I am looking at roll-call behavior across time. When I selected the votes to examine, I specifically selected those that in the brief description mentioned something about social welfare spending. Of course, on some of these, the dominant concern of those voting was something else. This is why I subjected these votes to factor analysis. Why did I select the first factor out of the 95th Congress and the second factor out of the 96th Congress? Very simply, these were the most highly correlated factors across time ($r = .77$). Knowing that the voting behavior of members does not change at a torrential rate (Clausen 1973; Asher and Weisberg 1978; Poole and Rosenthal 1985; Ladha 1991), this seems to be a reasonable strategy.

Why do I obtain the results I do concerning the dynamic marginality hypothesis? Bernstein (p. 353) asserts that I say the "'fear of losing' is really about equal for all members." Bernstein is correct in arguing that this is unlikely. A member who wins with 90 percent is likely to feel safer than a member who wins with 51 percent. However, I never argued that all members, regardless of their margin of victory or the change in their margin of victory, have an equal sense of electoral fear. What I argue is that it is possible for all members to have some fear, regardless of how safe objective indicators would lead us to believe.

Bernstein also argues that it is unlikely that members are unaware of how their districts stand on social welfare spending. Miller and Stokes (1963) show that correspondence between constituency opinion on social welfare and the members' perceptions of constituency opinion is very low. Similarly, Erikson (1978) shows that when district opinion on social welfare issues is simulated, members' perceptions of constituency opinion on social welfare issues are not terribly accurate. Bernstein argues that since I am examining members who have been in the legislature for a long time, they should have an even better sense of district opinion than junior members. Erikson, Luttbeg, and Holloway (1975), however,

argue that junior members of the Florida legislature are better predictors of district opinion than are the more senior members. While somewhat counter-intuitive, this suggests that serving in the legislature for a moderately long period of time does not make one better at ascertaining constituency opinion.

Bernstein points to many other plausible interpretations of my finding that the marginality hypothesis is not supported by the data. An additional explanation that should be considered is the heterogeneity/homogeneity hypothesis I offer in my paper. Perhaps when opinion is more homogeneous, members are better able to discern constituency opinion and then follow it when casting roll-call votes. Alternatively, if Bernstein is correct, and members do have an accurate sense of the district, perhaps members see homogeneous districts as constraining them. One must vote with district opinion or increase the likelihood one will be defeated. However, when district opinion is fragmented, a member may be in the unenviable position of alienating some substantial group regardless of how s/he votes. Perhaps, then, a fragmented or polarized district allows the member to vote without regard to district opinion, because there is no consensus within the district.

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