How elections matter: 
A study of U.S. senators*

A. GLAZER
M. ROBBINS
School of Social Sciences, University of California, Irvine, CA 92717

Abstract

Policy representation implies not only congruence between constituent and representative preferences, but also the ability of representatives to perceive and adjust to changing constituent preferences. This paper examines the extent of such representation among U.S. senators. It shows that a senator's voting behavior strongly affects his chances of election, but that senators demonstrate only a limited ability to adapt to changing constituent preferences.

1. Introduction

The idea of the representative as delegate, faultlessly responding to the wishes of his electorate, has dominated formal models of democratic politics. These models view representatives as supplying legislative votes in exchange for constituent support, thereby shaping their policy positions to conform to the attitudes of their electorate. The classic formulation, of course, is Downs (1957), who spawned a daunting literature on the subject. (See, for example, Fiorina, 1974.)

The immense influence of this model demands that its assumptions be carefully tested. First, and most crucially, we would wish to know whether voters behave as if candidates’ positions matter. Second, we ask whether candidates attempt to discover and reflect the preferences of the electorate. A Downsian model requires positive answers to both these questions.

Note, however, that policy responsiveness can hold even if candidates make no attempt to discover voters’ preferences: voters can choose that candidate whose ideology most closely matches theirs. Nevertheless, it does make some difference if politicians read and respond to the public’s prefer-

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ences once in office. Elections, as in the Senate, may come infrequently; even in the House of Representatives, several years may pass before the voters can turn out an ill-fitting representative. Non-ideological factors such as constituency services and presidential coattails may also influence elections, so that ideological representation can suffer by a non-adapting representative managing to hold onto office.

One approach to these issues is to determine the correlation between the opinions of voters and officials. It is difficult, however, to judge whether any observed correlation is high or low, or whether indeed elections play any role in creating such similarities. We take a different approach here and look at the consequences of changes in voter preferences. More specifically, we find that voters are likely to replace an incumbent whose ideology no longer reflects theirs, and that to a limited extent senators change their ideology as the voters change theirs.

2. Previous research

For reasons of chauvinism or of data availability, most of the empirical work concerning political responsiveness has centered on the U.S. Congress. Researchers have found that a congressman's votes on bills can be well explained by his constituents' ideology, as measured by their preferences for presidential candidates (see Kau, Keenan and Rubin, 1979; Erikson and Wright, 1980; Johannes and McAdams, 1981; Glazer and Robbins, 1983, 1985). They also find that a politician who ignores his electorate's preferences will suffer at the polls. The degree of representation appears to be tighter the closer the date at which the incumbent will have to face re-election (Amacher and Boyes, 1978; Greene and Salaitabar, 1982). Survey research suggests that voters consciously select those candidates whose positions they prefer (Powell, 1982; Erikson, 1978).

Whether politicians respond to changing preferences remains, however, something of an unsolved puzzle. Research has tended to rely on static measures which reflect levels of agreement between voters and representatives, but which do not show how representatives change when their voters do. The study by Page and Shapiro (1983) does capture the effects of changes in voter preferences, but does not link it to adaptation by individual representatives.

3. Research design

The central idea here is that nothing succeeds like success and that a representative who is (re)elected must be satisfying the voters in some fashion.