State Policy Priorities and Their Effect on House Voting Behavior

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Introduction

A key question in the congressional literature addresses the motivations of members of Congress. What is the key determinant of their behavior while in office? Early work focused on members’ desire for reelection (Mayhew 1974; Downs 1957). Downs (1957) assumed that members (and their parties) were motivated solely by their desire to win elections; therefore if voters chose based upon the candidate or party closest to them on policy, the candidates would converge to the median in order to maximize their chances of winning. Mayhew (1974) built upon this assumption arguing that election/reelection was not the only motivation shaping member behavior, but that it fit reality well despite its simplicity, and placed an emphasis on individual members rather than political parties, which he considered to play a minimal role in legislative behavior.

Fenno (1973) argued that some members were also driven by their desire for power and for good public policy. According to Fenno, members were constrained by a more elaborate constituency than was implied by Downs. He theorized that in addition to geographic and reelection constituencies, members also had primary constituencies and personal constituencies. The primary constituency is composed of a member’s strongest supporters, implying that a member’s primary constituency will have an independent effect on the member’s behavior from the effect of their reelection constituency. This argument supports the idea that members will converge to the median of their primary constituency (rather than general election constituency) in order to overcome the first hurdle of an election cycle, the primary.

Regardless of which factor motivates legislative behavior the most, members must continue to be reelected if they want to achieve any other policy goals they may have. In order to be reelected members must do something to bring them in favor with their voting constituency,
whether this is their primary constituency or their geographic constituency. At times their personal policy goals may be independent of constituency preferences, but members must not stray too far if they want to keep office.

An impressive amount of literature has examined the relationship between congressional voting behavior and constituencies (Shannon 1968; Turner 1951; Clausen 1973; Froman 1963; Flinn 1964; Markus 1974; Mayhew 1960; Fiorina 1974, Fenno 1972, 1977, Bullock and Brady 1983; Huntington 1950). Here we focus on an new route for constituency preferences to influence voting behavior, specifically in the House. Jacoby and Schneider (2001) find that public opinion (as measured through state partisanship) plays a strong role in determining state policy priorities. This finding leads them to conclude that the preferences of state constituencies are transmitted to legislators through party attachments, or more specifically through political parties.

Members of the House, as elite members of state political parties, would seemingly be attached to state party goals as mitigated through state public opinion. Their desire to follow state public opinion is rooted in their desire for reelection, which ultimately determines their ability to reach their personal and constituency policy goals. A significant amount of literature has been devoted to constituency/state influence specifically (Shapiro, Brady, Brody and Ferejohn 1990; Segal, Cameron, and Cover 1992; Bartels 1991; Clausen and Cheney 1970; Wright 1989; Kuklinski 1978; Elling 1982), however, to this point, no one has looked at how state policy priorities influence the voting behavior of House members.

This paper is an attempt to take Jacoby and Schneider’s (2001) research on state policy priorities in a new direction. Primarily their focus has been on using priorities as a dependent variable, seeking to explain what factors influence state policy priorities. Here, we use state policy priorities as an independent variable, attempting to shed light on another factor that influences congressional voting behavior while hopefully extending the importance and scope of the study of
state policy priorities. We develop a theory that members of the House pay attention to state policy priorities based upon the role that policy priorities play in representing constituent preferences on specific policy areas. Therefore, the voting behavior of House members on similar issues in Congress should represent their states’ priorities toward these same policy areas.

**State Policy Priorities**

States allocate resources to meet societal needs in different ways. These allocations are variable across states (Gray 1999; Nathan 1996; Rivlin 1992), and when measured can give us a good idea about what types of programs specific states like to spend their money on. States that prefer certain groups of programs to others usually do so because there is a constituency base that prefers these groups of programs as well. Jacoby and Schneider (2001) find that policy priorities are strongly influenced by public opinion and interest group activity within the respective states.

They define state policy priorities as, “the component of governmental decision making in which public officials allocate scarce resources, in the form of expenditures, to different program areas” (545). They argue that this process is formally carried out by state legislatures, but is the culmination of much broader interests including public demands, interest group pressures, bureaucratic procedures, and executive proposals. “Policy priorities are the clear manifestation of the institutional commitments of state governments” (546). In sum, a measure of state policy priorities operationalizes the relative salience that government officials give to specific social and political issues. This relationship encourages the involvement of the public and interest groups in relating their preferences to law-makers, making constituency demands an important, if not the most important, determinant of state policy priorities.

The raw data for Jacoby and Schneider’s State Policy Priorities measure consists of state general expenditures in 15 policy areas: corrections; education; employment security; government administration; health; highways; hospitals; housing and community development; inspections;
natural resources; parks and recreation; police and law enforcement; transportation; veterans benefits; and welfare. Jacoby and Schneider construct a spatial proximity model in which the 50 states and the 15 policy areas are shown as two sets of points located along a common continuum. The positions of the points relative to each other are conditional upon the expenditure values. State points tend to be located close to the points representing the policies for which their relative spending levels are high and far from those in which their spending levels are low. Their overall spatial proximity model for the state spending data shows that states with similar spending profiles have points that are located close to each other along the dimension, while states with dissimilar spending profiles will be located greater distances apart. The same is characteristic of the model for the policy data.

The authors find that most of the 15 policy areas fall into two contrasting groups. One group combines policies that provide *particularized benefits* while the other appears to group policies aimed at providing *collective goods*. They find that policy areas dealing with the social, economic, and health care needs of state constituencies, especially those dealing with the poor are found in the former category. These include policies addressing such areas as employment security, transportation, health care, and hospitals. “All of these policy areas involve specific benefits to particular groups within the respective state populations” (554). The opposite end of the scale groups policies addressing issues such as police protection, housing/community development, inspections, and parks/recreation. These policies tend to be looked at as generic regulatory policies or policies aimed at benefiting all of society rather than individual groups of the population.

When looking at how the states group spatially based on their polity priority scores, Jacoby and Schneider find a regional pattern. Northeastern states tend to be grouped together at one end, while western states appear at the other. This result is consistent with earlier research that stresses region-based characteristics in American state politics (Elazar 1984; Garreau 1981; Gray 1999).
However, the authors do find a few considerable anomalies, suggesting that the scale should be interpreted strictly from a policy priority viewpoint, rather than relying on regional patterns.

They argue that states that fall towards particularized benefits tend to be proactive states, “progressive and highly active in orientation, aggressively taking positive steps to deal with social problems as they arise” (555). This categorization includes states such as Massachusetts, New York, California, and Michigan. In contrast, states that aim spending towards collective goods tend to be “more cautious in their orientations toward governmental involvement in social and economic issues” (555). States such as Wyoming, Montana, and North Dakota are represented here.

Jacoby and Schneider (2001) argue that their spatial proximity model contains a great deal of content validity and allows researchers to gain a great deal of leverage on state policy priorities. The scale score for each state is based upon spending across all program areas, while each policy point is based upon its spending in all 50 states. This enables the researcher to analyze differences among policies without referring to particular states, and vice versa. The final question to answer is: what influences state policy priorities?

Jacoby and Schneider (2001) find that public opinion (Hill and Anderson 1995; Hill and Leighley 1993; Wright, Erikson, and McIver 1987) and interest groups (Olson 1965; Gray and Lowery 1988, 1996; Walker 1983, 1994) play key roles in determining state policy priorities. Both divisions have direct incentives to influence the allocation of scarce state resources. Here we want to focus on the role of public opinion in determining state policy priorities because it is this public opinion that has also been found to play a role in the voting behavior of Congressional members. Jacoby and Schneider (2001) measure public opinion through state partisanship and state ideology. They find that state partisanship plays a strong role in influencing policy priorities. States with larger numbers of individuals who identify with the Democratic Party tend to focus their spending on programs aimed at particularized benefits to needy groups. However, they find that ideology is
lacking as a predictor of policy priorities. This falls in line with past research (Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes 1960; Converse 1964; Jacoby 1995), which argues that most citizens do not connect ideological abstractions to specific policy alternatives. These findings suggest that the preferences of the state masses are transmitted through partisanship, or specifically through political parties (Aldrich 1995; Schattschneider 1960).

**House Members and Constituencies**

As key leaders of political parties in the states, members of the House play an important role in representing the state party interests that can be considered reflective of constituent interests, at the national level. It should be noted that a constituency, in this instance, is defined as a House member’s voting constituency; those individuals who participate in elections and are engaged in the political process. It is not rational for members of the House to pay attention to the preferences of those individuals who do not vote, even if those preferences are known.

Fiorina (1974) argues that constituencies should be defined as the subset of a member’s geographic constituency who identify with the same party as the member. He argues that a Republican member will vote in line with the Republican base in his/her state, while a Democratic member will vote in line with the Democratic base in his/her state. This argument also applies to members of opposite parties from the same state.

Bailey and Brady (1998) argue that there is another aspect to this thesis. They theorize that voter heterogeneity plays a key role in how members respond to their constituents. The relationship between constituency preferences and voting behavior may be relatively direct for members from homogenous states. However, when the voting population is heterogenous, there are more possibilities for electoral coalitions, which lead the authors to argue that including homogenous and heterogenous states in the same quantitative analysis may lead to a clouded relationship between constituency preferences and voting behavior. Bailey and Brady (1998) find that the relationship
between constituency characteristics and voting is much clearer for members from homogenous states.

On the other hand, constituency characteristics are less important in heterogenous states. Jacoby and Schneider’s (2001) measure of state policy priorities (SPP) provides for this type of distinction. States located in the middle of the measure are considered to have heterogenous policy priorities. These states tend to spend equally on collective goods and particularized benefits and tend to have heterogenous constituencies as well.

These findings suggest (at least) three separate hypotheses about the voting behavior of state delegations in the House of Representatives, of which we go on to examine one in this paper:

*Hypothesis I: House members from states which focus spending on particularized benefits will be more likely to support these types of policies with their voting behavior.*

*Hypothesis II: House members from states which focus spending on collective goods will be more likely to support these types of policies with their voting behavior.*

*Hypothesis III: States that are more heterogenous in their spending will be more likely to have heterogenous House delegations.*

**Data and Methods**

In this paper, we focus only on the first hypothesis, using two different measures of the roll call behavior of state delegations. The first is a simple measure of the proportion of the delegation voting in favor, while the second is the Rice Cohesion Score of a delegation (Rice 1927), on a vote coded in the Rohde/PIPC House Roll Call dataset as one of the issues that Jacoby and Schneider suggest are “particularistic goods” issues.¹ We look at House votes that address any one of three policy areas suggested by Jacoby and Schneider’s (2008) examination of state policy priorities: welfare, health care, and employment security. To measure state policy priorities we draw on the

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¹ We look at a sample of roll calls in the following issue categories in the Rohde/PIPC data: 150s, 170s, 610s, 800s (all), and 940s.
data directly employed by Jacoby and Schneider (2008) for 1991 and 1992, taking the average of their measure\(^2\) for the two years, and we use this measure to model House roll call voting in the 102\(^{nd}\) Congress.\(^3\)

There are multiple challenges with our approach. The most important is that while we can identify roll calls by issue, we cannot assess the yea and nay positions with respect to the dimension captured by the SPP measure. We also cannot safely assume non-independence across observations. To deal with these two initial challenges, we do the following: we first run our model on two dependent variables, the proportion of the state delegation voting yea and the state delegation cohesion score on each roll call. We also adjust the standard errors associated with our coefficients in two ways, first adjusting for clustering on the vote and next adjusting for clustering on the state. In addition, we run the models for our cohesion dependent variable with the absolute value of the SPP measure (and the absolute value of our partisanship control variable after re-centering it on zero), as our measure ‘cohesion’ lacks a clear directional prediction, given that two state delegations could be equally cohesive while taking different positions on a roll call vote.

[FIGURE 1 about here]

We present FIGURE 1 to facilitate interpretation of our coefficients. The specifications of our models are straightforward: the SPP measure (or its absolute value) and a control for the partisan makeup of the state delegation.

[TABLES 1 & 2 here]

Looking at our models using the proportion of state delegation voting in the affirmative, there is suggestive evidence of a relationship between policy choice in state government and the roll call

\(^2\) In their codebook, they describe the measure as follows: “[The score shows] the degree to which state policy spending is devoted to collective goods policies, rather than particularized benefits policies. Values are set to a mean of zero; units are proportions; the difference between any two values shows the difference in spending allocated to collective goods.” [http://polisci.msu.edu/jacoby/research/polprior/data8205/Documentation%20of%20Jacoby-Schneider%20Data,%201-18-09.pdf](http://polisci.msu.edu/jacoby/research/polprior/data8205/Documentation%20of%20Jacoby-Schneider%20Data,%201-18-09.pdf)

\(^3\) We start with individual-level roll call votes as provided by Keith Poole: [ftp://voteview.com/dtaord/hou102kh.ord](ftp://voteview.com/dtaord/hou102kh.ord)
behavior of state delegations in the House, albeit in an admittedly simple model with the caveat that there is much ambiguity in attributing all yea votes on these issues to the particularistic position. In Table 1, the coefficient of interest is just shy of conventional levels of significance, while in Table 2 the coefficient is further from significance, with the difference attributable to the different adjustments for clustering between the models. Substantively, the result suggests that a one unit positive change in the SPP measure (i.e. a state emphasizing collective goods more in its spending) should be associated with a change from a unanimous state delegation in favor of a measure to a delegation unanimous in opposition. In sample, moving from the minimum value of our independent variable to the maximum suggests a drop in the proportion of a delegation voting yes of 0.4.

[TABLES 3 & 4]

Tables 3 and 4 show results that are closer to what we would call definitive, at least in the context of a first cut analysis. Regardless of the cluster adjustment of our standard errors, the coefficients of interest are statistically significant, and the substantive inference suggests that as a state’s policy priorities become clearer, either in the collective or particularistic goods direction, that state’s House delegation becomes more cohesive. In sample, as we move from zero to the most extreme observation on the absolute value of the SPP measure, a state delegation’s cohesion score is predicted to increase by roughly 0.17.

Conclusion

The mechanism by which state policy choices and voting behavior in the House of Representatives are linked is unclear (and admittedly under-theorized in this paper). But our results are intriguing. Spending choices made by states are driven by both long- and short-term factors, and the notion that they may have political effects beyond state government and state politics deserves further exploration. We admit the potential of a spurious relationship (that some third,
unobserved factor is shaping both our dependent variable AND our explanatory variable of interest), and the results herein are a very tentative first cut, but we think that scholars of the U.S. Congress could advance our understanding by exploring what their theories predict about the behavior of members who are clearly ‘clustered’ in political units with needs, preferences, demands, etc. that may affect, if only at the margins, the decisions of their delegations.
References


FIGURE 1. Distribution of the SPP Variable Across 50 States, 1991-1992 Average
TABLE 1. Proportion of State Delegation Voting Yea “Particularistic Goods” Roll Calls  
102\textsuperscript{nd} Congress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Exp.</th>
<th>Coef.</th>
<th>(Robust Standard Error)(\dagger)</th>
<th>p-value (two-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State Policy Priority, 1991 &amp; 1992 Average</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–1.000</td>
<td>(0.052)</td>
<td>0.056</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Proportion of State Delegation</td>
<td>+/-</td>
<td>0.138</td>
<td>(0.038)</td>
<td>&lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>+/-</td>
<td>0.511</td>
<td>(0.027)</td>
<td>&lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(N = 7750\)  
\(F_{(1, 49)} = 6.75\)  
\(R^2 = 0.01\)  
RMSE = 0.34

\(\dagger\) Standard errors adjusted for clustering on the vote (151 clusters)
TABLE 2. Proportion of State Delegation Voting Yea “Particularistic Goods” Roll Calls 102\textsuperscript{nd} Congress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Exp.</th>
<th>Coef.</th>
<th>(Robust Standard Error)\textdagger</th>
<th>p-value (two-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State Policy Priority, 1991 &amp; 1992 Average</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–1.000</td>
<td>(0.069)</td>
<td>0.152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Proportion of State Delegation</td>
<td>+/-</td>
<td>0.138</td>
<td>(0.030)</td>
<td>&lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>+/-</td>
<td>0.511</td>
<td>(0.018)</td>
<td>&lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\begin{align*}
N &= 7750 \\
F_{(1, 49)} &= 6.75 \\
R^2 &= 0.01 \\
RMSE &= 0.34
\end{align*}

\textdagger Standard errors adjusted for clustering on the state (50 clusters)
TABLE 3. Rice Cohesion Scores by State Delegation
“Particularistic Goods” Roll Calls
102\(^{\text{nd}}\) Congress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exp.</th>
<th>Coef.</th>
<th>(Robust Standard Error)(^{\dagger})</th>
<th>p-value (two-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Absolute Value State Policy Priority, 1991 &amp; 1992 Average</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>0.852 (0.071)</td>
<td>&lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisanship of State Delegation</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>0.862 (0.043)</td>
<td>&lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>+/-</td>
<td>0.384 (0.024)</td>
<td>&lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( N = 7750 \)
\( F_{(2,150)} = 228.5 \)
\( R^2 = 0.18 \)
\( \text{RMSE} = 0.34 \)

\(^{\dagger}\) Standard errors adjusted for clustering on the vote (151 clusters)
TABLE 4. Rice Cohesion Scores by State Delegation
“Particularistic Goods” Roll Calls
102nd Congress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Absolute Value</th>
<th>Coef.</th>
<th>Exp.</th>
<th>Standard Error)†</th>
<th>p-value (two-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State Policy Priority, 1991 &amp; 1992 Average</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>0.852</td>
<td>(0.316)</td>
<td>0.010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisanship of State Delegation</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>0.862</td>
<td>(0.092)</td>
<td>&lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>+/-</td>
<td>0.384</td>
<td>(0.026)</td>
<td>&lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[
N = 7750 \\
F_{(2,49)} = 49.51 \\
R^2 = 0.18 \\
RMSE = 0.34
\]

† Standard errors adjusted for clustering on the state (50 clusters)