

Does Legislative Shirking Exist? A Perspective from Public Opinion

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Paper delivered at the 1995 Annual Meeting of the Southern Political Science Association in Tampa

Research on the effect of constituent influence on legislator behavior has produced seemingly contradictory results. On the one hand, there is a vast body of literature which suggests that members frequently “shirk” constituent preferences and vote their own preferences (c.f. Kalt and Zupan 1984, 1990; Kalt 1981; Higgs 1989; Lott and Davis 1992; Kau and Rubin 1979; Dougan and Munger 1989; Davis and Porter 1989; Nelson and Silberberg 1987; Weissberg 1976). Other research concludes that constituent opinion both guides and constrains legislator activity (Stimson 1991; Wood and Hinton-Andersson 1994; Uslander 1995; Monroe 1979; Page and Shapiro 1983; Shapiro, Brady, Brody, and Ferejohn 1990).

One of the primary sources of the shirking literature comes from economics, where the term “shirk” first evolved. In many economic models, legislator-agents are viewed as actors with private ideological agendas. If there exists sufficient slack in electoral institutions, the legislator-agents may shirk the interests of their constituent-principles and engage in private rather than public consumption. Broad national agendas such as party platforms are often assumed to be at odds with the preferences of local districts.

Constituent preferences are generally measured by demographic characteristics of the district such as percentage urban, percentage union. These demographic variables are regressed on vote histories such as ADA scores, with the residual variance attributed to the “personal” ideology of the legislator (Carson and Oppenheimer 1984; Kalt and Zupan 1990). In each case, variance in voting behavior that is not explained by the demographic characteristics of the constituency is labeled “shirking” on the part of the agent. This research trend has permeated the field political science as well in recent years, as political scientists have become more exposed to economic models, better trained in econometric techniques, and more willing to emulate approaches used in a field that has garnered a greater amount of academic prestige.

There are several problems inherent in the borrowing of such models to explain the political behavior of legislators. At a theoretical level, these models have little to offer political scientists. This is because such models often start with assumptions about the nature of representation and the attentiveness of the citizenry that do not fit well with the research trends in political science.

There are empirical problems with many of these economic models of constituent responsiveness as well. These problems occur on two levels: modeling and measurement. With regards to modeling, most shirking models are simple linear models containing a single equation. Thus, they restrict the influence of the explanatory variables to a direct effect on the dependent variable, which is usually a measure of voting behavior. Independent variables such as constituent opinion and legislator ideology are assumed to be unrelated to each other. If ideology, party affiliation, or constituent preferences exert any indirect effect on behavior, or if there is any overlapping variance, the model will be misspecified.¹ Most of the models of legislative behavior in the field of political science *do* contain assumptions about shared variance and multiple, indirect effects, making it inappropriate a priori to posit these economic models as explanations of voting behavior.

¹Uslander (1994) has made a similar argument. However, the model he estimates does not take overlapping variance into account.

Moreover, economists have spent little time formulating measures for concepts such as constituent opinion and personal ideology of legislators. Demographic characteristics of the district are used because they are a convenience, and not because they have desirable measurement qualities. The use of physical characteristics of a district are a poor substitute for a measure of political sentiment across a broad range of political issues. Recent studies suggest that such variables are poor measures of constituent preferences (Krehbiel 1993; Goff and Grier 1993). The use of “purged” interest group ratings as measures of a legislator’s personal ideology are equally problematic. The assumption underlying this measure is that constituent opinion and legislator ideology are statistically independent.

A casual glance at the array of ideology measures produced by such a process should suggest that something has gone terribly awry. For instance, Carson and Oppenheimer (1984) regress party affiliation on ADA scores and use the residuals from the equation as a measure of ideology. Their results place very liberal senators such as Leahy on the conservative end of the ideological spectrum while conservatives such as Helms and McClure are grouped on the liberal end. The problem is, when ideology and party are highly correlated, removing the effects of party also removes the substantial chunk of variance that these two variables *share*. The resulting residuals may contain nothing more than measurement error, leading to meaningless placements on the ideological continuum. The same problems should occur when constituent opinion and legislator opinion covary.

The tendency to treat legislator ideology as nothing more than residual variance is suggestive of a lack of theoretical development of basic political concepts in the field of economics. In this project, shirking will be analyzed from a political behavior perspective. Specifically, we will examine the theoretical expectations that representation and responsiveness generate for legislators. We will then examine the nature of constituent preferences, and to what extent, given what we know about public opinion, legislators can be expected to respond to those preferences.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR AN ANALYSIS OF “SHIRKING”

Before undertaking a discussion of the theoretical issues involved in the notion of shirking, it is first necessary to determine what precisely is meant by the term “to shirk.” Certainly, it means something beyond low levels of constituent influence on legislative behavior. If it did not, political scientists and economists would purport to be studying “constituent influence” rather than shirking. The choice of the term “shirk” suggests an underlying political agenda because the word itself has pejorative connotations. According to the Merriam Webster Collegiate Dictionary (10th edition), “shirk” is defined as:

1) to go stealthily; sneak 2) to evade the performance of an obligation (p.1082)

From this definition, it is apparent that there are multiple meanings suggested by the use of the term “to shirk.” First, an obligation (moral or legal) is being evaded. Second, the avoidance of the obligation is deliberate. Third, the evasion of responsibility is being concealed; this is perhaps the most serious charge. In effect, to claim that legislators “shirk” constituents’ preferences is to claim that legislators deliberately and secretly avoid representing constituent preferences in order to advance their own hidden agendas. Such a charge, if it is true, is a troublesome one for democracy. It suggests that there is a complete lack of electoral accountability at work.

What Is Meant by “Representation”?

Many of the economic models of legislative shirking define representation as the degree of correspondence between local interests and legislator voting behavior. Support for a political party agenda is viewed as personal, rather than public consumption. Legislators are assumed to function as instructed delegates, acting as proxies for the local district on all political issues.

From the perspective of political science, this assumption is problematic. If we examine the design of our national institutions, they have a variety of characteristics that suggest that the framers of the Constitution did not intend for representation to be a purely local matter (indirect election of senators, widely-spaced elections for most offices, state-level districts for senators). Moreover, the notion of an overarching national interest is at the heart of

what we view as the citizen-public policy linkage process. In order for citizens to be effective in their efforts to influence public policy, parties must present differing national platforms, voters must perceive these differences and cast a rational vote based on their preferences, and party officials must attempt to implement the platform upon entering office. As Miller and Stokes (1963) suggest, the very notion of “responsible” political parties requires that representatives put the national interest ahead of parochial interests. In this sense, toeing the party line in Congress cannot be at odds with representation; rather, it must be a crucial component of it.

From the perspective of public opinion, the assumption that representation can be purely local is equally problematic. First, it suggests there is no such entity as “the national interest.” Instead, all politics is assumed to be local and voters are assumed to have preferences rooted strictly in parochial concerns. Yet, there is much evidence to suggest that voters do respond to politics from a national, rather than a parochial perspective. Research on the effect of issues on voting behavior indicates that Americans are more likely to respond to politics at a symbolic level, rather than on the basis of self-interest (Sears, Hensler, and Speer 1979; Sears and Citrin 1985; Lau, Brown, and Sears 1978). For example, voters tend to evaluate candidates and parties in terms of how the national economy is performing, rather than by how they personally are affected by current conditions.

Other research suggests that citizens use political parties as reference groups in formulating their own preferences on issues (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960; Jacoby 1988). If this is the case, then the legislator casting a party-line vote cannot be acting contrary to the interests of the home district. Rather, voters observe such behavior *in order* to construct opinions. Representation occurs when voters cast a ballot for the party they prefer, rather than when the legislator casts a ballot. Because party identification is a national identity, representation occurs on a national level, as well.

Expectations Regarding Legislator-Constituent Relations

Miller and Stokes (1963) suggest that representation, or constituent influence, can occur in two ways. Voters can select a like-minded individual as their representative, and thus expect that the legislator to act in accordance with the districts’ preferences on most issues. Responsiveness is a product of the selection process, rather than a deliberate attempt by the legislator to follow the constituents’ will. This is somewhat along the lines of the notion of the legislator as a trustee endorsed by Burke. If this mode of representation was present, we would expect to see a strong relationship between district ideology and legislator ideology. There is some evidence to suggest that this is, indeed, the case (Kingdon 1989; Bernstein 1989).

Alternatively, the legislator may attempt to follow the wishes of the constituents in order to ensure re-election. Here, representation would be a function of the legislator’s behavior; successful representation would depend upon an accurate perception of constituent preferences (Miller and Stokes 1963). If this mode of representation was present, we would expect to see a strong correspondence between a legislator’s behavior and district opinion regardless of the legislator’s ideological orientation or political party affiliation. From this perspective, the legislator is a delegate following instructions from the district, rather than acting on his or her perceptions of what is in the best interest of the district or the nation. This is the perspective we find in most of the economic models of legislative shirking. “Shirking” is viewed as that component of a legislator’s behavior not in accordance with district preferences.

One of the earliest studies on legislator responsiveness suggested that legislators do attempt to follow constituent’s wishes on major policy votes (Miller and Stokes 1963). When slippage occurred in the representation process, it appeared to derive from member misperceptions of constituent preferences and constituent misperceptions about the member’s orientations. In other words, misrepresentation was due to a lack of information rather than a lack of willingness on the part of the legislator to be responsive.

A legislator’s perceptions of the preferences of the constituents may also be affected by the degree of homogeneity present in the district. Specifically, the more heterogeneous the district, the more likely there are to be differences in opinion among the constituents. The more diversity in opinion in the district, the more difficult it will be for the legislator to gauge preferences. As a result, regardless of the willingness of the legislator to be responsive, a heterogeneous district may result in the appearance of shirking. This could happen for two reasons. First, it may simply be too costly for the legislator to follow constituent opinion. This would entail determining the dimensions

of public sentiment across a wide range of issues, and attempting to determine the “correct” faction to side with in each case. This kind of endeavor is far too time consuming for the average legislator. Moreover, regardless of the amount of time invested in determining the dimensions of public opinion on a bill, in a divided district, any position taken by the legislator will necessarily cause a substantial segment of the constituency to appear to be unrepresented (see Goff and Grier 1993; Shapiro, Brady, Brody, and Ferejohn 1990).

Differences in Issue Importance

In their study of constituent influence, Miller and Stokes (1963) found that legislator responsiveness tended to vary across issue areas. Responsiveness was highest in the area of civil rights, and lowest in the area of foreign affairs. This was due, in part, to a greater degree of awareness on the part of the legislator of district opinion on civil rights. Awareness was lower in foreign policy, due in part, most likely, to the lack of stable attitudes on international affairs in the mass public (c.f. Almond, 1960; Caspary, 1970; Wittkopf, 1990; Holmes, 1985; Hurwitz and Peffley, 1987; Holsti, 1992; Bennett, 1994).

There is a tendency within the econometric approach to legislator responsiveness to treat all political issues as equal in both content and importance. Thus, votes on strip mining legislation are expected to result in the same degree of responsiveness to constituents as votes on tax bills or Medicare cuts. There are several reasons to question this assumption.

First, such an assumption ignores a large body of literature on citizen conceptualization. Research in the area of public opinion suggests that as issues become more complex and more technical in nature, citizens become less likely to have stable, well-formed preferences (Carmines and Stimson 1980; Zaller 1992). It may not be reasonable to assume, then, that constituents have meaningful, informed opinions on all issues.

If citizens do not have stable preferences on an issue, it is not clear how an instructed delegate should vote. Those studies that conclude that shirking exists tend to focus on issues that are, in part, low-profile and lacking in personal importance to most voters. While strip mining may affect all voters at a symbolic or moral level, it is not a daily concern for most voters. Rather, it is an activity restricted to a few legislative districts. Therefore, it should be no surprise that legislators exhibit a low degree of responsiveness on such issues. Indeed, the whole notion of “responsiveness” itself should be questioned in such cases. If constituents have not expressed a preference, to what should the legislator be expected to respond? Or, should they simply refrain from voting at all?

Interestingly, the studies that find higher amounts of legislator responsiveness to constituent opinion tend to focus on items that are highly salient, where the legislator is likely to be informed about constituent opinion. If information matters to legislators when they form an evaluation, then it makes sense that when more information is available, it would tend to be utilized.

The problem with both approaches is that neither addresses the role of information itself as a variable. Rather than select issues according to their importance (or lack thereof), we need to treat salience as a variable in a more comprehensive analysis of voting across all types of issues. Without such a systematic treatment, the question of shirking may never be satisfactorily resolved.

The Role of Personal Ideology in Legislator Decisions

Research in the area of mass belief systems has suggested that when individuals are asked to form an evaluation, they rely on judgmental shortcuts, or heuristic devices (c.f. Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky, 1982; and Fiske and Taylor, 1984; for specific examples, see Brady and Sniderman, 1985; Conover and Feldman, 1986; Hamill and Lodge, 1986; Hastie, 1986; Lau, 1986; Lau, 1989; Lodge, McGraw and Stroh, 1989; McGraw, Pinney, and Neumann, 1991; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). Specifically, researchers have found that for many members of the mass public, liberal-conservative ideology can be a helpful heuristic device for evaluating political issues and candidates (Downs, 1957; Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes, 1960; Converse, 1964; Wildavsky, 1987; Zaller, 1992; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock, 1991; Jacoby 1987; Knight 1985). Because they often operate under time and information restrictions when casting votes on the floor, ideology should serve as a cognitive shortcut in much the same fashion as it does for voters at the ballot box (see Converse 1964). Rather than viewing

ideological judgments as a hindrance to decision-making, public opinion researchers view ideology as an integral organizing component of an individual's political belief system. Legislators don't rely on ideology as a substitute for constituent input; rather, it is a worldview that helps to shape the way they evaluate all information, including citizen preferences.

Conceptualizing personal ideology as an information shortcut is a more constructive approach because it clarifies the relationship between ideology, constituent opinion, and vote choice. As an information processing shortcut and an heuristic device, personal ideology should be most important when information costs are high. In particular, ideology should play the greatest role in the legislator's vote decision when no other cue is available (see Kingdon 1989). Viewed in this way, evidence of ideological decisions on the part of a legislator is not necessarily indicative of shirking, or deliberately ignoring constituent preferences. Rather, it may be evidence that other potential considerations were not present in the decision making environment.

The problem with the principle-agent models is that they fail to incorporate in their notion of representation a scenario in which constituent preferences are unknown. Simply put, these models cannot predict how a legislator will or should behave when no external cues are available. As political scientists, we need to question the utility of such atheoretical models of legislative behavior. Is the assumption that there are readily available constituent cues for every bill or issue a reasonable one? Certainly not, according to the preponderance of evidence from the field of public opinion. Moreover, we also need to question the implicit assumption that ideological voting on the part of legislators somehow compromises our democratic system of government.

DEVELOPING A GENERAL MODEL OF CONSTITUENT INFLUENCE

In order to properly assess the nature of constituent influence on legislator voting behavior, we need to develop models that better represent the multitude of ways district opinion can influence legislators. The problem with the principle-agent models is that they only look at direct effects. In the process, they are required to treat legislator ideology and constituent ideology as two separate entities. In most cases, the two are modeled as diametrically opposed to each other. This does not fit well with what we know about the relationship between legislators and their districts. If being a part of a district shapes one's opinion, and if voters elect like-minded individuals, then there will necessarily be a great deal of overlap between legislator ideology and constituent ideology.

Therefore, we need to construct a measure of legislator ideology that does not exclude the possibility of a correlation with constituent ideology, as many of the principle-agent models do. Additionally, if we have reason to believe that constituent and member ideology are related, we should construct a model that permits us to measure shared variance.

Dynamics of the Model

In the model evaluated here, personal ideology, political party affiliation, and constituent ideology all have an independent, direct influence on voting behavior. This will permit us to measure the extent to which members act as instructed delegates for their constituents. In addition to direct effects, constituent ideology will be permitted to have indirect effects on a legislator's vote choice through its influence on the legislator's ideology and political party affiliation. This enables us to evaluate the trustee mode of representation by assessing the degree to which citizens vote for individuals who share their ideological orientation. A schematic representation of this model is shown in Figure 1.

Variables and Measures

For the purpose of this analysis, the model will be applied to a series of foreign and domestic policy votes occurring in 1989. In this year, candidates were not running for reelection. This makes it an ideal choice for analyzing the effects of personal ideology. If shirking does exist, we would expect it to be most prevalent when legislators felt least compelled to be responsive to their districts (Mayhew 1974; Kuklinski 1978; Elling 1982; Wright 1989). This is most likely to be the case in the middle of a legislative session, rather than at the end.

Vote choice. The universe of non-unanimous, non-procedural votes was categorized according to the specific issue addressed in the bill. So, for instance, votes that impacted on subsidies or tax breaks for child care were all grouped together in a common category. In each case, the dependent variable consists of the legislator's mean score on all votes within the category. Individual votes are coded such that zero indicates the liberal position and one indicates the conservative position. For mean category scores, values close to zero should indicate an overall liberal tendency in the issue area, while mean scores near one should indicate a strong conservative predisposition. Appendix A details the formal criteria used to classify votes, while a listing of all votes used is provided in Appendix B. Votes were taken from the *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*. A separate regression analysis will be performed for votes in each issue area.

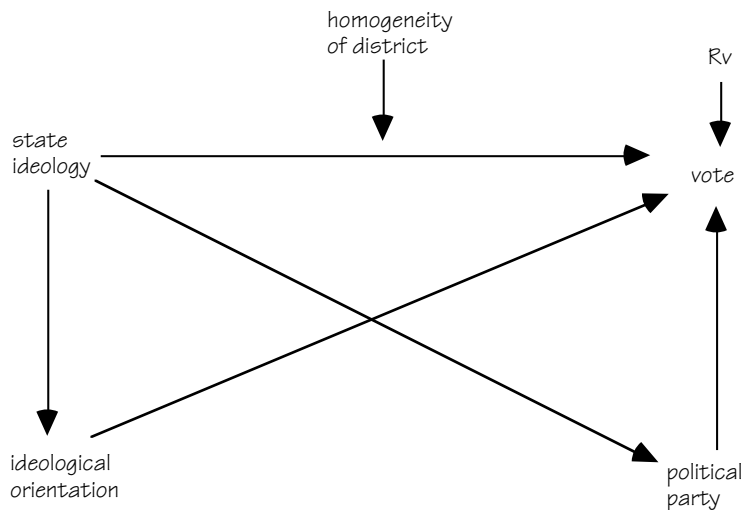


Figure 1. Model of Voting Behavior in the Senate

Party. This is a the member's formal political party affiliation, coded as zero for Democrats and one for Republicans. When a legislator formally changed party affiliation during the session, the new party identification was used.

Constituent ideology. Here we will use the measure of state ideology provided by Wright, Erikson, and McIver (1985). This measure is derived from public opinion polls conducted within each state. Higher values indicate greater conservatism, while numbers closer to zero indicate greater liberalism. For members of the Senate, this will represent the ideology of the re-election district. This is a more precise operationalization of constituent preference than we find in the economic-style principle-agent models. These models rely on demographic characteristics of the member's state or district as a surrogate for opinion; here, we measure opinion directly, and thus have a more valid indicator of mass preferences.

Ideological orientation. This is a measure of the ideological orientation, or personal ideology, of the legislator. For senators, the measure is derived from an unfolding analysis of 10 interest group ratings reported in the 1988 *Almanac of American Politics* (see Coombs 1964; Davison 1983; Jacoby 1991; Poole 1981; Rabinowitz 1984; Sulfaro 1994). All groups are weighted equally. Positive scores should indicate conservatism while negative scores should indicate liberalism. Scores near zero should indicate that the member is a moderate.

Homogeneity of district. The homogeneity of the member's district will be represented by the proportion of the vote won in the most recent election (see Fiorina 1989). Members from marginal districts are assumed to be from

heterogeneous districts, while members from safe districts are assumed to be from homogeneous districts. This is a multiplicative term in the model, and thus will affect the strength of the relationship between constituent ideology and vote decision. Margins of victory of 65% or greater will be coded as safe; margins of victory less than 65% will be coded as marginal (Mayhew 1985; Fiorina 1989).

INCORPORATING ISSUE SALIENCE INTO THE GENERAL MODEL

The importance, or visibility of the issue should have an effect on the legislator's vote choice. If the legislator views him or herself as an "instructed delegate," the regardless of the issue, decisions should reflect constituent preferences. For low visibility issues, information on voter preferences may be lacking, or it may be too costly for the legislator to obtain. The more visible the issue, the lower the information costs for the legislator, and thus the more likely it is that vote decisions should correspond to constituent ideology.

If legislators view themselves as Burkean trustees, the incentive to vote in a manner consistent with constituent preferences still exists. This is because regardless of the legislator's personal convictions, there remains the necessary task of persuading the voters that their best interests are being served in Washington when election time comes. The extant research suggests that for the vast majority of politicians, being re-elected is their most important priority (Mayhew 1974). Trustees are still accountable to the constituents at the ballot box, and highly visible issues are those areas in which they are most likely to be judged by voters. Thus, there should be some desire on the part of the legislator to be perceived as responsive to constituent concerns on salient issues.

The most appropriate way to conceptualize the role of issue salience is as a variable that affects the relationship between constituent preferences and the legislator's vote choice. Specifically, the more visible the issue, the stronger the linkage between citizen and vote decision should be. In the context of the model being analyzed here, salience should serve to magnify the effect of constituent ideology on the legislator's vote decision. The more salient the issue, the stronger the influence of constituent opinion on legislator behavior should be.

If salience is appropriately conceptualized as a multiplicative influence on constituent ideology, then it should vary across legislators *and* across issues. This will necessitate estimating a separate system of regression equations for each legislator for each vote. The sheer magnitude of such an endeavor, even for a single legislative year, is daunting indeed. Therefore, an additional emphasis will be placed on finding a measure of issue salience that is simple and straightforward.

Developing a Workable Measure of Issue Salience

Salience can be conceptualized in two ways. One way is as the degree of personal importance of an issue to an individual. Research in this vein has suggested that when an individual views an issue as "important," their feelings about that issue affect the manner in which they evaluate political candidates (see RePass 1971; Rabinowitz, Prothro, and Jacoby 1982). Brady and Ansolabehere (1989) find that the existence of preferences is, in part, a function of knowledge and information. Thus, the more information an individual possesses, the more likely they are to perceive differences between political candidates (and political party agendas) and to feel a greater amount of affect toward one of them. In low information settings, an individual is more likely to be indifferent. While the use of individual priorities can tell us something about the influences underlying an individual's vote decision, they are not appropriate for measuring the responsiveness of legislators on individual bills. Legislators don't respond to individuals, they respond to mass constituencies. And, they respond to their perceptions of voters preferences, rather than the actual preferences themselves.

While it would be possible to develop a measure of salience by looking at preferences on a national level, perhaps by examining the marginals for the various issue categories on "most important national issue" question in the National Election Studies, this approach is not desirable for several reasons. First, there is no necessary correspondence between issues cited as important by respondents in surveys and the legislative agenda. Not all political issues are resolved by statute. Some are within the scope of the executive, and may be administrative matters to be dealt with by bureaucratic agencies. Others are matters of state and local politics. More importantly, however, voters do not frame the political agenda. Rather, they react to images painted by the media and to

solutions offered by parties and candidates (Carmines and Stimson 1980; Zaller 1992; see also Jacoby, 1990, 1993). Recent studies in political psychology suggest that responses to questions such as what the respondent perceives to be the “most important national issue” are strongly shaped by media coverage of political events (Taylor and Fiske 1978; Zaller and Feldman 1992). It appears, then, that personal importance of an issue may be, in part, caused by factors in the political environment.

The alternative is to view issue salience as something that is external, rather than internal, to the individual. Here, salience would be conceptualized as a product of the political environment. A salient issue would be one that is highly visible relative to other issues, and one where the appropriate party and ideological cues are accessible to the public because it represents an on-going controversy in government. The visibility of an issue on the political agenda is, in part, a function of media coverage (see McCombs and Shaw 1972; Behr and Iyengar 1985).

The data used create a measure of environmental-induced salience for the purpose of this analysis will come from the Vanderbilt Television News Archives. Specifically, I will use the amount of coverage that the issue received in 1989 by the three major national televised news reports. The amount of coverage will be measured by minutes of airtime on the ABC, CBS, and NBC nightly news programs for the three months prior to the legislative vote.² The measure of “coverage” will include stories that explicitly address the bill under consideration as well as stories that address the themes present in the bill. So, for instance, stories on the atrocities committed by the government of the People’s Republic of China will be included in counts for bills to impose sanctions on that country. The total number of minutes of coverage by these networks during this period will be used to classify issue areas as “high salience,” “medium salience,” and “low salience.”

DISCUSSION

Findings

Categorizing issue areas according to the number of minutes of televised coverage they received led to four distinct clusters: an extremely high salience group (receiving in excess of 120 minutes of coverage by the three major networks over the three month period preceding each component vote), a high salience group (receiving between 60 and 120 minutes of airtime), a medium salience group (receiving greater than 25 but less than 60 minutes of airtime), and a low salience group. More than half of the issues in the latter category contained bills that received no television coverage at all. For the purposes of this analysis, the extremely high salience group and the high salience group were treated as a single category. The issue areas included in each category are reported in Table 1 below.

²Since a series of votes on the same issue will be grouped together as a single dependent variable, airtime will be recorded until the time of the last vote.

Table 1. Issue Areas Broken Down by Minutes of Television Coverage

High Salience (60 or more minutes)	Medium Salience (25 to 59 minutes)	Low Salience (less than 25 minutes)
China sanctions	Oil spill liability	Nicaraguan election aid
Anti-drug policy	Flag desecration	Minimum wage
Panama	Contra aid	Eastern Air strike
Cuba trade	PLO negotiations	Government pay & ethics
S & L bailout	Child care subsidies	FSX project
Budget	Capital gains tax	Catastrophic health
Defense spending		South African investment
Foreign aid		Major
		fraud/whistleblowers
Congress'1 pay raise		Isotope separation plant
Domestic spending		Hastings impeachment
		Congress'1 franking
		Nixon impeachment
		Discrimination against disabled
		Committee funding
		Martin Luther King holiday
		Gas price deregulation
		North pension restoration
		Census count of illegal aliens
		DC funding
		Gay education/HIV disclosure
		Drug testing for welfare recipients
		Death penalty for terrorists
		UN policy (anti-Zionism)
		Oil tanker limits

Note: Estimates are approximate.

Source: Vanderbilt University Television News Archives

As Table 1 suggests, most bills voted on by the Senate receive very little coverage. On its face, this may suggest that the media are failing in their task of keeping the public adequately informed about the activities of government. However, it may also be a function of the structure of the law-making institution itself. By the time a highly controversial or widely-publicized issue grinds its way through the legislative process and makes it to the floor for a vote, it is no longer "news" and receives correspondingly less coverage. Additionally, media analyses of Senate votes after they take place were not included in measures of coverage because they did not contribute to an atmosphere of visibility at the time the vote took place.

Does Salience Affect the Influence of Constituent Opinion?

As was hypothesized earlier, constituent influence was expected to be greater for those issues that were more visible, or salient in the political environment. If senators act as instructed delegates for their districts, we would expect voting behavior to conform to constituent ideology when issues are visible and information costs for the legislator are low. The more obscure, or less salient, the issue, the more difficulty legislators should have in gauging their districts' preferences accurately. In the absence of district cues, it is hypothesized that legislators will rely on other cues such as personal ideological orientation and political party affiliation.

In order to test these hypotheses, a causal model for each major issue area was estimated using the paths shown in Figure. A full reporting of these results can be found in Appendix C. In order to assess the effect of issue salience on the structure of senators' voting behavior, the averages of the standardized coefficients were taken. These are shown in Table 2. Because state ideology was conceptualized as affecting the ideological orientation and political party affiliation of senators, it should have a direct and an indirect effect on voting behavior.

Table 2. Effects of Orientations on Legislators' Votes

Variable		low salience	medium salience	high salience
Party	Direct effect	.15	.07	-.02
	Indirect effect	---	---	---
	Total effect	.15	.07	-.02
Personal ideology	Direct effect	.39	.56	.44
	Indirect effect	---	---	---
	Total effect	.39	.56	.44
State ideology	Direct effect	.09	-.07	.11
	Indirect effect	.18	.23	.18
	Total effect	.27	.16	.29
Homogeneity of district	Direct effect	---	---	---
	Indirect effect	-.03	-.07	-.04
	Total effect	-.03	-.07	-.04

Cell entries are average values of standardized coefficients summed across issue areas
N = 238 votes

As Table 2 suggests, issue salience does appear to make some difference in what cues are used by legislators to formulate vote decisions. As issue salience decreases, political party affiliation becomes a more important determinant of the vote. This is what we would expect to find information costs are related to the visibility of the issue. Absent other cues, Republicans and Democrats exhibit a tendency to cast votes along party lines. This tendency, however, is not strong, as evidenced by the size of the party coefficient.

While the marginal influence of political party may seem counterintuitive at first glance, upon further reflection it makes sense. Research on congressional decision making has suggested that when push comes to shove, party leaders are reluctant to press legislators to vote against their consciences or the concerns of their constituents (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987; Smith 1989). Legislators from safe seats are more likely to vote with their party than those who perceive a narrow margin of victory in their most recent election (Kingdon 1989). These findings nicely parallel recent research by Wright (1994), who finds that most of the partisan influence on policy positions disappears when the activist constituency in a state is added to the model. That is, the party activists in a legislator's home state are the primary source of partisan influence on policy. And, since activists tend to be more ideologically extreme than most members of the mass public, they tend to vote for ideologues rather than moderates in the primaries. As a result, ideology should be a better explanation for legislator behavior than should

party; in a large part, the influence of party may be captured by the relationship between constituent ideology and personal ideology rather than the party label itself.

The role of personal ideology in voting decisions is not as clear-cut. These results suggest that the effect of ideology is lowest on low-salience issues, which runs contrary to what had been hypothesized. Instead, the effects of ideology seem to be strongest for medium-salience issues. A glance at Appendix C may provide an explanation for why this pattern exists. If we look at the size of the standardized coefficients for the individual issue areas, for most of the low salience issues, the ideology variable was quite large. However, there were a few cases where the coefficients were not in the direction expected, and this served to lower the average value for the coefficient. An inspection of these votes might suggest an explanation for this finding. Votes on the North pension and the Hastings impeachment, for instance, showed strong evidence of party-line voting and produced negative ideology coefficients. If party affiliation and ideological orientation are related, then some of the variance attributable to ideology may be masked by the existence of the party variable.

Constituent opinion does not appear to play much of a *direct* role in legislative decisions on most of these issue areas, regardless of salience. This is what many of the shirking models in the economic literature have found. While the instructed delegate mode of representation requires a strong direct link between district opinion and voting behavior, such a link is clearly absent here. Indeed, for medium-salience issues, it appears that legislators have a slight tendency to vote in the opposite direction of constituent opinion. If our model assessed only direct effects of these orientations on voting decisions, we would have to conclude that legislators are shirking their representative functions and voting strictly on the basis of their own self-interest. Indeed, many studies have reached this same conclusion.

However, if representation can occur through the selection of individuals with a shared set of preferences, as a delegate-oriented view of representation would suggest, then the picture is more hopeful. An examination of the indirect effects of constituent opinion on legislative voting indicates that there is a tendency for districts to elect individuals with shared ideological dispositions. The cumulative effect is to boost the influence of constituent opinion on overall voting behavior, as shown by the cell entries for total effects for the constituent ideology variable.

The last independent variable in this analysis is the homogeneity of the district, measured by a multiplicative term that was assigned a value of zero for contested seats and a value of one for safe seats. The variable was almost never statistically significant. When it was, it served to depress the relationship between constituent opinion and vote choice. If the composition of the district played a stronger role in results reported here, it may have suggested that legislators who feel optimistic about their potential for re-election are less inclined to look to their constituents for guidance in formulating decisions. However, this does not appear to be the case.

Do Legislators Shirk?

Overall, the evidence presented here does not demonstrate convincingly that shirking exists for most issues. The legislator's personal ideological orientation does appear to be the strongest predictor of vote choice, but constituent opinion plays a strong secondary role. This is what we would expect given that legislators have more accurate information on their own preferences. An "instructed delegate" notion of representation is not borne out by the results of this study. Constituent opinion has little direct effect on legislative vote choice.

This not imply that representation is not occurring. Instead, the legislative selection process itself seems to be responsible for much of the relationship between district opinion and policy voting. Rather than expressing their preferences during the legislative session, citizens are expressing preferences at the ballot box. This suggests that elections do function as instruments of accountability because citizens are effective in choosing representatives who share their preferences. This fits well with other research that has demonstrated that members of Congress are responsive to changes in the composition of their districts (Glazer and Robbins 1985; Kuklinski 1978; Elling 1982). Members with a high level of ideological agreement with the constituency are more likely to be re-elected than those with lower levels of agreement (Glazer and Robbins 1985). If this is the case, then the notion of shirking itself seems somewhat misplaced. The process of representation begins before any floor votes are actually cast. The problem with the principal-agent models is that this process is overlooked due to an emphasis on direct effects. As a

consequence, many economic models of representation may underestimate the amount the influence of constituent opinion on legislative behavior.

When we examine the findings presented here, we also need to keep in mind the research in public opinion that has found that citizens simply do not have stable preferences on many political issues. The more issues are technical and complex, and the more removed they are from the daily concerns of voters, the more likely it is that political attitudes, if they exist at all, will be unstable and inconsistent (see Carmines and Stimson 1980). Public opinion researchers have found that when citizens are asked to form evaluations of such issues, they often look to a reference group such as a political party or a trusted political leader to provide cues (Downs 1957; Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960; Jacoby 1988; Carmines and Kuklinski 1990). Specifically, Carmines and Kuklinski (1990) find that prominent legislators are a source of cues for voters.

Yet, the shirking literature would suggest that when citizens take cues from legislators rather than being cue-providers, democratic representation is thwarted. Such an interpretation of representation begs the question: “what happens when citizens don’t have preferences in the first place?” The expectation that citizens be the primary source of cues for legislators is based on an unrealistic assessment of public opinion. To argue that legislators must act in accord with citizen preferences on all issues in order to represent them is to build a straw man. If we broaden our perspective of representation to encompass the notion of responsiveness to citizen interests, then we can conclude that there is a substantial correspondence between legislator behavior and citizen beliefs.

Appendix A. Criteria for Classification of Congressional Votes

I. Classification rules for foreign policy votes

- A. All votes relating to appropriations for U.S. government agencies in the areas of defense and/or foreign affairs.
- B. All votes relating to policy positions toward other countries.
- C. All votes related to the sizing or downsizing of the U.S. military.
- D. Excludes votes which pertain to the constitutional rights of U.S. military personnel or employees of government agencies which are involved in defense or foreign affairs. These are classified as domestic policy votes.
- E. Excludes votes to confirm ambassadors, cabinet heads, and agency heads in the areas of defense and foreign affairs. These have been classified as procedural, and will not be used in the analysis.

II. Classification rules for domestic policy votes

- A. All non-foreign policy votes, except for the exclusions already mentioned.
- B. Excludes all other votes to confirm agency heads and cabinet secretaries.
- C. Excludes votes to accept the minutes of the proceedings. These have been classified as procedural, and will not be used in this analysis.

III. Classification rules for identifying votes as “liberal” or “conservative”

- A. All other things being equal, votes with the president (in this case George Bush) were classified as conservative
- B. When opposition to the president consisted primarily of conservatives, the president’s position was coded as liberal
- C. Unanimous votes were excluded.³
- D. Legislators who paired or announced positions for (or against) a bill are counted as voting for (or against) the bill.

³While such votes will not bias results, they create unnecessary noise in the data (they do not contribute to our ability to discriminate between subjects, but they make the denominator of the summated rating scale larger).

Appendix B. Votes Used in the Analysis

The numbers reported are those assigned by the Congressional Quarterly Almanac (CQA). The CQA records all votes in the order in which they are taken. Quorum calls are not included in the CQA report of votes.

A. Foreign Policy

Contra aid 40-42
FSX 66-67
Panama 73
South Africa 79
Anti-drug efforts 65, 119, 121, 125, 125, 210, 228-230
China sanctions 118, 280
Cuba trade 129
PLO negotiations 131-132
UN (anti-Zionism) 139
Foreign Aid 135-136, 186-190, 192-194, 296, 311
Tanker limits 144
Defense spending 141, 143, 148, 152-155, 158-161, 175, 180, 201-204, 206, 213-215, 217, 289, 299, 300, 310
Nicaragua 244-250

B. Domestic policy

Pay raise 11, 12
Committee funding 14-15
Fraud/ whistleblowers 27-28
Hastings impeachment 22, 254-262, 264
Minimum wage 29-31, 33-39, 68, 290-292
Savings and loan bailout 46-51, 166-167
King holiday 52-55, 57
Budget 58-61, 63-64, 69, 72, 74, 76-77, 82-83, 243, 252, 271-272, 294
Gas prices 84-91
Child care 93-95, 98-103, 151
Visa quotas 106-117
Flag desecration 224-22, 251
Catastrophic health 233-239
Franking 169, 281, 293
Capital gains tax 295, 298
Eastern airlines strike 222, 273, 276
Nixon impeachment 284-288
North pension 282
Aliens/census count 221, 301
Ethics/pay raise 303-308
Oil spill liability 163-165
DC funding 178-179
Isotope separation 153
Discrimination/disabled 170, 172-173
Gay education/HIV disclosure 197-198,
Domestic spending 122-123, 128, 145-147, 156-157, 162, 176-177, 181-185, 199-200, 205, 207, 212-216, 218-220, 241-242, 252, 277-278
Drug testing 231
Death penalty (terrorists) 274-275

Appendix C. Standardized OLS Coefficients for Direct Effects on Issue Area Votes

Issue Area	Party	Ideology	State	Homogeneous	Adj. R ²
Oil spill	.25	.41*	-.41*	.00	.38
DC	.43*	.20	.09	.01	.39
Isotope	.37*	.51*	-.01	-.05	.67
Disab. discrim.	-.22	.81*	.18*	-.12	.46
Gay ed/HIV	.14	.26	.29*	-.04	.25
Dom. spend	.02	.69*	.20*	-.07	.60
Drug test	.04	.39*	.05	.00	.15
Death penalty	.14	.35	.01	-.01	.19
Contra	-.09	.74*	.15	-.11	.49
FSX	.72*	.35	.29*	-.05	.25
Panama	-.12	.63*	.10	-.05	.30
S. Africa	.13	.76*	-.04	-.03	.70
China	.37*	.11	.21	-.12	.22
Anti-drug pol.	.16	.07	.07	.16	.07
Cuba	-.49*	.40*	.19	.02	.12
PLO	.13	.38	-.04	-.11	.17
UN	.01	.22	.20	-.12	.06
Foreign aid	-.13	.80*	.13	-.12	.51
Tankers	-.12	.50*	.17	.16	.33
Def. spend	-.61*	1.07*	-.15	-.16	.33
Nicaragua	.32*	.36*	.02	.00	.38
Pay raise	.05	.10	.21	-.09	.02
Comm. fund	.40*	.43*	-.16	-.22*	.52
Hastings	.41*	.52*	-.07	.15	.05
Whistleblower	.55*	.24	-.09	.04	.12
Min. wage	.17*	.80*	-.04	-.04	.84
S & L	.74*	.13	-.04	.01	.70
King	.00	.50*	.09	-.08	.24
Budget	-.14	.42*	.21	-.02	.15
Gas dereg.	-.27	.60*	.34*	-.06	.35
Child care	.63*	.35*	.04	-.09	.85
Visas	-.13	.66*	.12	.06	.38
Flag	-.20	.74*	.03	.04	.34
Cat. health	-.26*	.97*	.11	-.09	.61
Franking	.58*	.15	.25*	.07	.30
Cap. gains	-.30	.72*	-.15	-.13	.14
Eastern	-.19	.61*	.17	-.11	.24
Nixon	.10	.71*	.03	-.14	.56
North	.62*	.40	.19	.08	.13
Aliens census	.27	.54*	.03	-.16	.52
Ethics/pay	-.38	.51*	-.02	-.02	.02

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