

Constituents' Policy Perceptions and Approval of their Members of Congress*

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Abstract

Theories of representation typically begin with the assumption that constituents support politicians who vote as they would in the legislature, and punish representatives who do not. Survey research, dating back to Miller and Stokes (1963) classic study, doubts whether constituents have sufficient knowledge or vote on the basis of actual legislative decisions. No study has examined whether citizens' perceived agreement with their Representatives' roll call votes translate into support for the Member of Congress. Using a new survey designed with this question in mind, we show that voters (1) have preferences over the questions before the legislature, (2) have beliefs about how their representatives voted, and (3) evaluate their elected officials on the basis of their perceived agreement with their representatives' roll call votes and party affiliation. Party, we find, matters enormously for substantive representation because the content-rich brand labels of the parties are highly informative about Representatives' policy positions.

Modern democratic theory assumes a strong and direct relationship between representative and represented. Legislators serve as the principals for their constituents, and the constituents choose politicians who will best stand for their interests and ideals. Representation, by this account, works through the crudest of means: Politicians who are out of step with their district will be voted out of office. This view is widely embraced by scholars of Congress, especially those who characterize politics in spatial terms (e.g., Poole and Rosenthal 1997; Krehbiel 1998; Brady and Volden 2006), and by theorists of representation and democracy. At a broad level, this electoral connection seems to function reasonably well. Studies of roll call voting and election results show that the more Democratic a Congressional District is the more liberal its representatives' roll call voting behavior, and incumbents whose overall roll call voting behavior is out of line with their constituencies overall ideological leaning are most likely to lose office.¹ Over time, the public policies that Congress enacts follow swings in the preferences of the electorate as a whole.²

Do voters in fact hold Representatives accountable for their roll call votes? This paper shows that they do. The classical theory rests on the assumptions that voters learn about legislative behavior and use that information in assessing their Representatives. Survey research has long found these assumptions wanting. Perhaps the most damning evidence questioning the validity of substantive representation comes from Warren Miller and Donald Stokes' (1963) "Constituency Influence in Congress," which remains one of the central empirical studies of representation more than four decades after its publication. Respondents to the 1958 American National Election Survey, the Michigan

researchers found, knew relatively little about the preferences of their members of Congress on civil rights, foreign policy, and welfare, and there were low levels of agreement (or congruence) between members of Congress and their constituents on these issues. Miller and Stokes concluded that party symbols, rather than policy substance, must dictate constituents' views on Congress.³

A massive literature has built on and at times departed from these findings. Perhaps the most substantial strain of research has examined the effect of a voters' perceived agreement with the legislators' "ideology" affects vote choice (e.g., McAdams and Johannes 1988; Born 1991); typically, strong correlations are found but it is not clear if perceived ideology relates to roll call voting inside the legislature or is itself symbolic. Other researchers have asked constituents to evaluate the role of their legislator and have found symbolic and trustee schemas to be more prominent than policy representation (e.g., Eulau and Wahlke 1978; Box-Steffensmeier et al 2003), though these studies do not measure the assessments of actual legislative decisions taken in the legislature. A third sort of study measures the direct effects of legislators' actual roll call votes on voters' decisions in congressional elections (e.g., Jacobson 1993), but such studies fail to determine whether it was the citizen's perception of the legislator's roll calls or something else, such as strategic electoral behavior by politicians. Still others use surveys to gauge legislators' own policy preferences and, then, compare legislators preferences to the ideological tendencies of the constituencies (e.g., Sullivan and Minns 1976; Wright 1978; Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001). Few studies put the politicians' behavior and the citizens' preferences on the same scale, leading to non-comparable measurements and measurement errors (Stone 1979). The survey used in

Miller and Stokes (1963) itself exhibits many of these weaknesses and has been roundly criticized for not measuring constituents' perceptions of legislative behavior (Weissberg 1979) and for having massive measurement error (Achen 1978; Erikson 1978).

Missing in this literature, though, is a direct assessment of whether voters in fact harbor beliefs about how their Representatives' voted in Congress and whether constituents use these beliefs to evaluate their Representatives. This paper tests this connection directly using a national survey from 2005 designed to capture constituents' perceptions of their members of Congress. We find, first, that most people indeed have conjectures about how their Representatives voted on key legislative decisions and that most people can state how they would have voted on those issues. Second, we show that perceived agreement with a legislator's roll call vote translates directly into evaluations of the job performance of the own legislators. OLS regressions show a strong direct effect of policy positions on approval of the legislators' job performance. Third, we show that this relationship is not just a correlation but is causal. Perceived policy agreement and job approval might be simultaneously determined: voters who like their representatives, for whatever reason, may project agreement with the legislator on policy matters, even when that is not the reality. Some researchers have tried to sidestep this problem by using the actual roll call voting behavior, but this approach does not address what, if anything, people perceive. We solve this problem by using the actual roll call vote as an instrument for the perceived roll call vote and find that perceived agreement, indeed, has large and substantial causal effect on approval of the representative. As such we offer direct support for the classical theory of representation, at least from the perspective of the voters.

Our findings reveal further that party is not an alternative to substantive representation, but it integral to it. Consistent with contemporary theorizing about parties (Aldrich 1995; Rohde 1991; Cox and McCubbins 1993), we show that party labels carry substantial *policy* information. In addition to measuring the effects of policy agreement on evaluations of legislators, we ascertain what accounts for citizens' perceptions of their representatives' legislative behavior. Constituents' perceptions indeed depend on the members' actual roll call votes -- some signal penetrates the noise. An even stronger predictor, though, is political party affiliation. Most people infer how their legislator voted simply from the fact that the Representative is a Republican or a Democrat. Constituency influence on Congress, then, operates strongly through the Congressional parties' policy reputations and also through the legislators' own decisions on key roll call votes.

Finally, we address the normative concerns raised by the observed low levels of voter information. Following Bartels (1996), Gilens (2001), and others, we consider the hypothetical electorate that would emerge if all people were completely knowledgeable or informed. An electorate fully informed of the roll call votes examined here and of the names and party affiliations of their Representatives would hold only slightly different opinions of their members of Congress. This result that suggests that the marginal value to candidates of conveying policy information to the electorate, say through aggressive public relations activities, is modest.

2. Methodology

Central to our study is a straightforward model of representation from the constituent's perspective. The Representative makes decisions in the legislature, especially casting votes on critical issues. The constituent develops impressions about the Representative's actual legislative behavior. The constituent, then, assesses the quality of representation on the basis of perceived agreement with legislative votes.

We examine how voters perceive salient roll call votes cast by their Representatives using a survey designed and implemented by the MIT Public Opinion Research Training Lab (PORTL) in 2005. Polimetrix was commissioned to conduct the on-line survey of a nationally representative sample of 1200 respondents. The survey was fielded between October 31, 2005, and November 10, 2005, and the sample reflected the national population well on the main demographic characteristics – gender, age, education, race, and income. Very low Income minorities and non-voters were underrepresented. We reweight the sample to offer some correction for this.

The primary innovation of the survey is the focus on specific roll call votes. Traditional survey questions about legislative issues ask respondents to place themselves on a scale designed to tap their general dispositions towards a certain policy area (Page and Shapiro 1992). Such questions do not readily allow us to assess the congruence between legislators' behavior and their constituencies' preferences since congressional behavior is expressed in terms of discrete, specific votes and not broad evaluative scales of attitudes (Stone 1979). Even if we were able to match individual survey questions

with congressional behavior, surveys do not ask respondents where they believe their Representative stands on the same issue. As a result, with exception of the 1958 ANES, previous surveys do not allow us to assess constituents' perceived agreement with their Representatives' legislative votes. Replicating the 1958 ANES has proved prohibitively expensive (Stoker and Bowers, 2002).

The PORTL survey asked respondents about three key votes from the 108th Congress: Importation of Prescription Drugs, Partial Birth Abortion, and Gay Marriage. These three issues were chosen out of two dozen key roll call votes identified by Congressional Quarterly because they were extensively debated in public and in Congress, they were decided on closely divided votes that were not straight party votes, and they remained salient throughout 2005, when the survey was conducted. With straight party votes, it would not be possible to untangle simultaneity, as discussed below. It should be noted that Miller and Stokes also focused on three divisive and salient issues of the day – racial discrimination and civil rights, welfare, and foreign policy.

On each issue, the survey asked respondents how they would have voted and how they believe their U. S. House Representative voted. Each question was framed in terms of the actual key vote and the debate in Congress over that vote. Because we measure the constituent's preference and perception of the legislator's vote using the exact same survey question we can measure the perceived agreement between the constituent and the legislator directly. In addition, we can match constituents' beliefs about their Representatives' roll call votes to the actual key votes in Congress, and use the actual votes to construct instruments for the perceived votes.

The survey also asked a series of questions designed to tap respondents' understanding of and attitudes towards their Member of Congress. Respondents' approval of their Representatives' job and recall of their Representatives name were measured using standard questions from the American National Election Study. Parallel to the name recall question, the survey ascertained *perceived* party affiliation: "Do you happen to remember the party affiliation of your Representative in the U. S. House of Representatives? Choose One: Democrat, Republican, Independent, Don't Know."

The issue questions summarized the arguments that proponents and opponents made concerning three bills voted on by the House of Representatives. Question wordings did not assign party or ideological labels to either side. Respondents indicated how they thought their member of the U.S. House of Representatives had voted on the issue and how they would have voted on the same issue if they were faced with the decision and. The details for each issue are as follows.

(i) Importation of prescription drugs

HR 2427, which passed by the House on July 25th 2003, required the FDA to allow the importation of approved prescription drugs from foreign countries. In exchange for sponsor Rep. Jo Ann Emerson's (R-MO) support for the Medicare prescription drug benefit, GOP leaders agreed to an up-or-down vote on the bill. The GOP leadership mobilized against the bill, with arguments largely echoing previous debates on the issue.

Proponents of the bill stressed the benefits importing prescription drugs from other countries would bring to consumers. As *CQ Weekly* noted, "Many Republicans and Democrats say it is only fair that American taxpayers — who pay for government-funded drug research — should not pay more for medicines that sometimes sell for half as much

in other countries” (Carey 2003). Opponents of the bill claimed that the FDA would be unable to verify that the imported drugs met the standards set for American-made drugs. Rep. Billy Tauzin (R-LA) argued that “It’s still a question of whether we can validate the safety and efficacy of the drug” while Rep. John D. Dingell (D-MI) worried that unsafe drugs might be dangerous if consumers continue to “believe that these drugs are supposed to be safe and effective as labeled because their local pharmacist and the FDA say so”. Our question wording reflected the different frames used in this debate:

First we’d like to ask about allowing prescription drugs made in other countries to be sold in the United States. Some argue that importing these drugs would lower the high cost of prescription drugs for consumers. Others argue that we can’t guarantee they would meet the same standards as American-made drugs.

How about you? If you were faced with this decision, would you vote for or against allowing prescription drugs from other countries to be sold here?

How about your member of the US House of Representatives? Do you think he or she voted for, or against allowing the drugs to be sold here?

HR 2427 did not represent a straightforward party split, and the debate over its passage did not reflect traditional liberal-conservative arguments: 155 Democrats and 86 Republicans voted for the bill while 45 Democrats and 139 Republicans voted against it.

(ii) Partial-birth abortion ban

Efforts to ban “partial-birth” or “late term” abortion failed to overcome President Clinton’s vetoes in the 104th and 105th Congresses. With unified Republican government, Congress took up the measure again in 2003. The key vote in the House concerned the conference report on the Partial Birth Abortion Ban Act (H. Res. 760).

Proponents of the ban phrased their arguments in emotive terms that graphically detailed the procedure. Rep. Steve Chabot (R-OH), who introduced the original House bill argued that "It has been almost a decade since the gruesome practice of partial-birth

abortion escaped the shadowy corners of abortion clinics and was disclosed to the public...we move one step closer to finally banning this horrific procedure" (Dloughy 2003). Opponents of the ban instead argued that partial-birth abortion was rarely carried out and should be based on considered medical opinion. (The bill did not include a provision for the health of the mother). "Who are we to be making these decisions?" argued Rep. Nita M. Lowey (D-NY). Opponents also argued that the bill represented the first step towards outlawing abortion altogether: Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-NY) argued the bill was "deceptive, extreme and unconstitutional. . . . Do not be fooled. This is nothing less than an attempt to outlaw all abortions" (Carey 2000). Our question wording reflected these debates:

Now we'd like to ask about proposals to ban a type of late-term abortion sometimes called partial-birth abortion. Some argue that late-term abortion is a barbaric procedure and should be banned. Others argue that late-term abortions are extremely uncommon and used only in exceptional circumstances best determined by a doctor, not the Congress. The proposed legislation could also be the opening to a broader ban on abortion.

How about you? If you were faced with this decision, would you vote for or against banning late-term abortion?

How about your member of the US House of Representatives? Do you think he or she voted for, or against banning late-term abortion?

The conference report was easily accepted 281-142 (218 Republicans and 63 Democrats voted for the bill, while 4 Republicans and 137 Democrats voted against), and was accepted by the Senate and signed into law by President Bush.

(iii) Proposed constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage

Congress considered a constitutional amendment to define marriage as a union between a man and a woman (H.J. Res. 160). The House voted on the resolution on September 30th, 2004; it won a majority but failed to receive support from the 2/3

required of constitutional amendments. Supporters of the amendment, written by Rep. Marilyn Musgrave (R-CO), argued that gay marriage threatened the sanctity of marriage and the family. Opponents of the amendment saw it as grandstanding: Rep. Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) said it “distracts the American people from urgent issues and immediate policy decisions that are at the heart of this election” (Perine 2004). Opponents also tried to frame the issue as being one of civil rights and the freedoms guaranteed by the constitution. Our question wording reflects these conflicting arguments:

Now we'd like to ask about amending the US constitution to ban gay marriage. Some argue that the constitution should be amended to protect the institutions of marriage and family. Others argue that a constitutional amendment is unnecessary and restricts the freedom of Americans.

How about you? If you were faced with this decision, would you vote for or against amending the constitution to ban gay marriage?

How about your member of the US House of Representatives? Do you think he or she voted for, or against amending the constitution to ban gay marriage?

One-hundred-ninety-one Republicans and 36 Democrats supported the amendment, while 27 Republicans joined with 158 Democrats to opposed it.

3. Constituents' Knowledge of their Representatives

For constituents to have influence in Congress, classical models of representation assume that they need to know about their Representative's actions, and respond to them accordingly. One of the fundamental critiques of this model has been that it overestimates the capacity of the American electorate. Voters know little about politics and often care less (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, Converse 2000).

Many respondents in our survey indeed know next to nothing about their Representatives, but large segments of the electorate have views on how they would have voted on issues before the Congress and how their Representatives voted. Table 1 shows constituent perceptions of the party affiliations and roll call votes of their Members of Congress, as well as their actual affiliation and positions. We first consider whether respondents are capable of placing their Representatives on each of the issues under consideration, before turning to the question of whether those placements were correct.

[Table 1]

Overall, most respondents were able to offer answers regarding their Representative's party affiliation and policy positions. A minority gave "don't know" responses, while 81% of constituents gave an answer regarding the party affiliation of their Member of Congress, 57% placed their Representative on the Prescription Drug Importation bill, 64% on the Partial-birth Abortion Ban, and 62% on the Gay Marriage Amendment. Seventy percent offered an answer when asked if they remembered the name of their Member of Congress.

Most constituents, then, are able to attribute party affiliations, names, and policy positions to their Representative. These answers were not always right. Table 1 allows us to calculate the percentages of respondents who correctly identified the party affiliation (47%) and policy positions of their Member of Congress (38% for the gay marriage ban, 47% for the partial birth abortion ban and 30% for the prescription drug importation bill). In none of these cases did more than half of respondents correctly identify where their Representative stands. However, slightly more were able to say *who* their Representative is: 52% of constituents correctly identified their Member of

Congress' name.⁴ Much of this is driven by uncertainty. If we look only at those who were able to place their Representative, the percentage of correct responses increases dramatically. Of those placing their Member of Congress, 85% correctly identified their party affiliation, while the percent of correct policy positions increased to 54% for the drug importation bill, 74% for the partial birth abortion ban, and 62% for the gay marriage amendment. Knowledge of the Representative's name likewise increases to 76% when we consider only those who were able to give a response. In Section 6 below, we will consider the implications of these deviations from complete information for Representation.

The immediate consideration for our investigation is whether voters perceive their Representatives to take positions that are congruent with their own. Table 2 summarizes the data from this perspective. Notably, the large majority of respondents offer their opinions on the roll call questions, allowing us to place them with less difficulty on the same scale as their Representative.

[Table 2]

Perceived congruence varies across issues, and constituents do not necessarily always see their Representatives as in agreement with their own preferences. Clear pluralities believe their Representatives share their party affiliations and views on gay marriage and partial-birth abortion. On the drug importation bill, constituents who believe their Member of Congress disagrees with them outnumber those who perceive agreement.

Notions of representation require that constituents have ideas about where their Representatives stand, and act on those ideas accordingly. Most respondents are able to offer their own opinions regarding the roll call votes we asked about, and most at least

attempt to place their Member of Congress on the same issues. These perceptions diverge to some extent from reality – an issue we return to later in the paper – but the foundations for substantive representation are clearly present.

4. Constituents' Evaluations of their Representatives

The central question of this study is whether constituents indeed take policy into consideration in assessing their representatives. When constituents disagree with their member of Congress on an important issue do they punish the member, and do they reward politicians with whom they agree? Or, do other factors, such as party and simple familiarity with the members' name, swamp policy considerations? The classical view of representation holds that the electoral connection between constituents and legislators operates strongly, though not exclusively, through public policy decisions. Voters reward politicians who represent them well, and punish those that do not.

In assessing the validity of this assertion, two issues arise. First, we must estimate the effect of perceived policy agreement on assessments of the member of Congress. It is the perceptions in voters' minds that are immediately relevant, and these perceptions extend not only to policy agreement but also to party, ideology, and simple name recognition. We find the literature up to this point to have confused these. Throughout we study the perceived policy agreement, perceived roll call vote, and perceived name, rather than the actual agreement. Ultimately, we also care about the connection between the legislators' actual behavior and identity and constituents' evaluations of their representatives, but that operates through perceptions. Second, we must untangle the

direction of causality. Approval of a member might affect perceptions of roll call votes as much as perceptions affect approval. We take each of these matters on in turn.

Regression Estimates

Our first step in answering these questions is to estimate a regression of the survey respondents' approval of their member of Congress on perceived policy agreement, perceived party agreement, and name familiarity. The dependent variable in this analysis is approval of the job the representative is doing as a Member of Congress, ranging from strongly approve (+2) to strongly disapprove (-2). As independent variables, we include measures of perceived agreement with each of the three roll calls and perceived agreement with the members' party affiliation. Perceived Party Agreement equals +1 if the respondent believed the Representative to be a Democrat and the respondent identified as a Democrat or the respondent believed the Representative to be a Republican and also identified him or herself as a Republican. Perceived Party Agreement equals -1 if a self-identified Democrat stated that his or her Representative was a Republican or a self-identified Republican stated that his or her Representative was a Democrat. Perceived Party Agreement equals 0 if the respondent either identifies as a non-partisan or is unsure of the Representative's party affiliation. Perceived Agreement on each roll call is coded similarly. Respondents who say they would vote yes and that they believe their legislator voted yes or who say they would vote no and that their legislator voted no are coded as +1. Respondents who say they would vote yes and that they believe their legislator voted no or who say they would vote no and that their legislator voted yes are coded as -1. Respondents who have no preference or who say they are unsure how their legislator voted are coded as 0. We control for whether the

respondent correctly identified the party and name of their Representative, as well as whether they claimed to identify with neither political party (independents) or placed themselves as moderates on the ideological scale. We also include a measure of perceived ideological agreement, coded similarly to Party Agreement. This follows the method used in some papers in which generic ideology questions are used to capture substantive representation. The simple lesson is they do not.

Table 3 presents the results from two models. The first set of estimates treats perceived roll call vote and party agreement as symmetric effects. That is, we use a single trichotomous measure, as described above, for perceived agreement for each roll call vote and for party. The second set of estimates allows for possible asymmetries. A single dummy variable is used to indicate perceived agreement (in the positive direction), and a separate dummy variable is used to indicate perceived disagreement (in the negative direction). This coding captures the possible asymmetry in the principal-agent relation in which voters only punish, and never reward (Fiorina and Shepsle 1989).

The main lesson of these analyses is that the electoral connection indeed works through public policy. Respondents' perceived agreement with the legislators' roll call voting record strongly predicts the respondents' level of approval of the MC's performance in office. If you perceive a member as voting as you would, you give the legislator higher marks as a representative, and if you perceive the member as in disagreement with how you would have voted, you downgrade him or her. In all three cases, the effects of perceived agreement with specific roll call votes are statistically significantly different from 0, and these estimated effects are substantively significant: moving from perceived disagreement to agreement increases approval ratings by around

0.5 points for each of the roll call votes. The difference between someone who agrees with their representative on all three issues and someone who agrees on all three issues, then, is approximately 1.5 points on a 5-point approval scale. Perceived agreement in party affiliation is of a slightly smaller magnitude. The coefficient on Party Agreement in the first regression is approximately .6. The difference in MC approval ratings between someone who thinks they are of the same party as their representative and someone who thinks they are of the opposite party is 1.2 points on the 5-point scale.

[Table 3]

The asymmetric effects we report largely mirror these findings: in each case, perceived disagreement with the Representative hurts their approval ratings while perceived agreement helps. By and large, these effects are of roughly the same magnitude in each direction. The only evidence of an asymmetry – negative voting – arises with the proposed Ban on the Importation of Prescription Drugs; members seen to disagree with their constituents were strongly punished relative to those who were seen to either disagree or for whom no disagreement could be discerned (because the respondent didn't express an opinion or didn't state a belief about who the representative voted).

The estimates regarding ideology also deserve comment. Perceived agreement in ideology proved insignificant throughout these analyses. Even when we exclude the roll call votes from the specification, agreement in ideology fails to register a statistically significant effect. There are many reasons why this might have occurred, including substantial measurement error in the ideology question, the correlation between ideology and party in these data, or the fact that representatives' behavior on prominent roll call votes sometimes cuts against ideology. Whatever the ultimate explanation, these results

suggest that traditional single-question ideology measures may be poor indicators of legislators' behavior and relate only weakly to questions concerning substantive representation.

Causality and Instrumental Variables.

We interpret these regressions as the effect of issue positions on approval. It is possible, however, that approval affects issue positions. Specifically, respondents may have in mind whether they approve of the member when answering questions about how they think the member voted on the particular issue. This problem has long been thought to affect estimates of the effects of issue positions on reported approval ratings and voting behavior. Indeed, it is just as applicable to Miller and Stokes' seminal work as to this study. This objection also applies to partisanship. If a member of Congress is well known and well liked, then the constituents might guess that their representative is of the same party as they are.

The particular design of our study opens one avenue for untangling the simultaneous relationship between perceived votes and approval ratings. Specifically, we can use the actual roll call votes cast to construct an instrumental variable for the perceived roll call vote. Because the actual roll call vote is not a function of whether the particular respondent approves of the member, the instrumental variables estimator will break the simultaneity. Predicting the perceived roll call vote using the actual roll call vote and other variables will eliminate the simultaneity between approval of the member of Congress and perception of the member's roll call votes.⁵

Instrumental variables estimation did not alter the regression results appreciably, suggesting that perceived positions are not endogenous, or at least this endogeneity does

not bias our estimates. The second stage instrumental variable estimations are reproduced in the appendix. Each of the coefficients on the possibly endogenous variables went up slightly with the instrumental variables correction, and the other coefficients in the model were virtually unchanged. Results of this analysis are presented in the appendix. The difference between the instrumental variables and ordinary least squares specifications proved insignificant. The Hausman test for the difference between the coefficient vectors is 5.94, and the probability of observing a deviation at least this large for a Chi-squared statistic with 12 degrees of freedom is .94. Hence, there are no statistically significant differences between the two sets of estimates. Because OLS is more efficient than two-stage least squares, the OLS estimates are preferred. This comparison suggests that there is no appreciable simultaneity bias in the OLS estimates.

Perceptions of party labels and of specific roll call votes directly and strongly affect approval ratings of Members of Congress. Consistent with the literature on congressional politics, voters of the opposite party are much less likely to approve of the job their Member is doing. We have found an additional and very strong effect of individual roll call votes. Citizens' perceptions of the roll call votes that their representatives cast strongly influence approval ratings of Members of Congress. A member of Congress who is seen to disagree with a constituent on an important roll call vote will receive much lower marks from the constituent than a member who is seen to be in agreement on particular policy issues. The strong connection between perceived roll call votes and approval runs thoroughly counter to survey research on Congress, but it supports an important assumption commonly made in empirical and theoretical research

on representation: voters evaluate their legislators, at least in part, in terms of their perceived agreement and disagreement on important policy questions.

5. Explaining perceptions of Representatives' positions

Perhaps the greatest concern from democratic theory is whether the public perceives their members' policy decisions correctly, and where those perceptions come from. Classical theory emphasizes the connection between the individual representative to his or her constituents; the voters back home must learn how their legislators' voted (Mayhew 1974; Fenno 1978). Contemporary political science emphasizes the importance of intermediaries, especially parties, which may make it difficult for politicians to distinguish themselves from their colleagues and may introduce biases (Aldrich 1995, Rohde 1991, Cox and McCubbins 1993). Social psychologists tell us that voters project what they want to hear, introducing all manner of perceptual errors (Campbell et al 1960).

We explore three potential mechanisms that might explain how respondents arrive at their perceptions of Representatives' issue positions. First, respondents may be following the "true signal" of how their Representative actually voted, perhaps because these votes are high-profile, or because their Representative's position is already well known. Second, respondents may be projecting their own preferences on to their Representative, assuming that the two are congruent: to tap this, we simply include a measure of the respondent's own position on each roll call question. Third, respondents may be inferring Representatives' positions from the party affiliation that they perceive

them to hold: if parties in Congress have become more polarized and distinct, then respondents may simply use party labels as a cue to their Member's likely position.

Finally, respondents may also be inferring their Representative's position in a more sophisticated way, combining the second and third mechanism: respondents may be projecting their own preferences on to their Representative, but only do so when they perceive themselves to share a party affiliation. We include a measure of the respondents own position, conditional on whether they perceive themselves to share a party affiliation with their Representative.

Table 4 models respondents' perceptions of their Representative's positions on each of the roll calls. We include a measure of the actual roll call vote cast by each respondent's Representative to test the notion that the voters learn the actual roll call vote. We include party to capture party labels. We also control for the respondent's party ID, their ideology and whether they knew the party of their Representative.

For each of the roll calls, constituents' perceptions of their Representative's party have the largest effects on perceptions of their Representative's issue position. Moving from perceiving the Representative as a Democrat to a Republican is associated with an estimated .7 point shift towards perceiving them as in favor of banning gay marriage, a .66 shift against importing prescription drugs and a .6 shift in favor of banning partial-birth abortion. Even controlling for the true roll call vote cast by their Member of Congress, the perceived party affiliation has a large effect. Republicans are perceived to be in favor of the constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage, the partial-birth abortion ban and opposed to importing prescription drugs, regardless of how the Representative actually voted on each of these issues.

In contrast, the other hypothesized mechanisms appear to have little effect on perceptions of Representatives' positions. The actual roll call position of the Member of Congress *is* statistically significant (with a p-value of less than 0.001) for the gay marriage and partial-birth abortion questions, but has only weak substantive impact. A shift from the Representative voting against the bill to voting for it is associated with 0.16 and 0.28 shifts in perceptions in the same direction respectively.

[Table 4]

Projections of the respondent's own position also fail to explain perceptions of the Representative's position. Only for the partial-birth abortion question is the coefficient statistically significant, with a shift from being opposed to the ban to being in favor of it associated with a .28 point shift in the same direction in perceptions of the Representative's position. Further, the estimated effects of our conditional projection measure are small and fail to reach conventional levels of statistical significance (although they at least have the hypothesized sign in each case).

These findings suggest that the major parties have identifiable positions on major issues: respondents appear to react to party labels as "brands" that stand for particular policy issues. Stokes and Miller (1962) originally despaired that party appeared to be a mere "symbol" that voters used to structure their evaluations of their Representatives. This symbol was held to be just a psychological attachment that held no real policy content – casting doubt on the how well constituents' policy preferences could be represented in government. Our results suggest a different story: party affiliations act as "brand labels" that stand for substantive policy positions in constituent's minds. Respondents in the survey analyzed here clearly used Representatives' party affiliations

to infer how the representative likely voted, and because of the strong influence of party in roll call voting in Congress, those inferences were on the whole right.

6. What if the electorate were fully informed?

Perceptions of policy representation have a substantial impact on Representatives' approval ratings – but these perceptions are not directly derived from the real-world positions Members of Congress take. These findings leave two questions unanswered: to what extent do constituents' perceptions diverge from reality? And would constituents' responses to their Representative change if they were fully informed?

Table 5 presents the accuracy and congruence in respondents' preferences. We classified people according to whether their Perception of the MC's position agreed with their own position. We also classified people according to whether their MC's Actual position agreed with their own. When a person perceives agreement and in fact agrees, their perception is correct. It is also correct when they perceive disagreement and the MC's actual roll call vote disagrees with their preferences.

[Table 5]

Table 5 bears out the common result that many voters do not have clear perceptions of their representatives. For each of the roll call votes, less than half of respondents have correct perceptions of how well represented they are. A third of the people did not state how they thought their member voted on each vote. Another 15 to 25 percent got it wrong. Only when we look at congruence between Representative and constituent in terms of party affiliation do we see that almost 60% of respondents are

correct in their assessment of congruence. Focusing just on those who had an opinion and a belief about their representative reveals a higher degree of congruence. Eighty-six percent hold correct perceptions of party affiliation, and perceptions for each of the three roll calls are also largely correct: 67% on the gay marriage amendment, 77% on the partial birth abortion ban, and 57% on the importation of prescription drugs. This is hardly the idealized world of classical representation. Individual survey respondents made a lot of errors in assessing how their own Representatives voted and their Representative's party affiliations.

Does the lack of knowledge and misperception matter in the aggregate? We assess the consequences of these errors by considering a counter-factual. What level of approval of their legislators would we expect to observe if voters had complete knowledge of their Representatives' roll call votes? First, we calculate the mean agreement with party and issue positions as perceived by respondents, and then as it exists in reality. To estimate the effect that perfect knowledge would have on evaluations of Representatives, we then calculate the difference between these two means, and multiply this by the coefficient estimated in Table 3. Table 6 presents the results.

[Table 6]

Interestingly, representatives observed approval ratings do not differ appreciably from what we expect if all respondents know the actual roll call votes and actual party affiliation of their representatives. Full information about the Representative's position on gay marriage slightly decreases its effect on approval ratings, but complete information on the other roll call votes and on party affiliation has no effect on expected

approval ratings. The reason that there is little net effect of complete information is simple: respondents' errors appear to balance out.

The main action occurs with name recall. If all respondents knew their Member's name, the expected approval rating would increase .12 points (on a 5 point scale). Perceptions of roll call votes already exert strong influence over approval ratings – ensuring that these perceptions are correct adds little to their estimated impact. Ensuring that constituents know the name of their Representative, however, substantially increases approval ratings.

Politicians' actions are consistent with this finding. Election campaigns in the United States have long been criticized for their lack of policy content and the squandering of a chance to educate the electorate about important matters. Instead, politicians focus on boosting their name recognition and name recognition strongly predicts the vote. (See Jacobson, 1997, Chs. 4 and 5) Our simulation of a fully-informed electorate suggests that these strategies are rational ones. Given their finite resources, the choice to emphasize name recognition over votes cast appears to be the winning strategy for campaigns.

7. Conclusions

The classical account of representation is quite simple. Voters elect politicians to represent their interests, and voters will punish politicians who act against their wishes. Despite the centrality of this view to modern Political Science, there is surprisingly little direct evidence supporting its main assumptions—namely, that voters have preferences

over the issues before the legislature, have some understanding or belief about their representatives decisions on those questions, and use that information in deciding whether to support the legislator. We find that most voters are indeed able to articulate their own preferences on issues decided in the legislature. They perceive agreement with their legislator based on what they know of how the legislator voted and their inferences derived from party labels. And, their perceived policy agreement affects their approval or disapproval of their member of Congress. Indeed, the effect of agreement or disagreement on three prominent issues in 2005 on approval of the legislator was about equal to the effect of perceived agreement or disagreement with the party affiliation of the representative. In the end, we find strong evidence of substantive representation.

This conclusion differs starkly from Miller and Stokes landmark study. The differences may affect the eras in which the studies were conducted. Individual legislators in the 1950s may have had much less of a distinctive identity than those today. That is surely borne out in the rise of the personal vote and the incumbency advantage. In addition, the racial politics of the late 1950s may have made it difficult for many voters to figure out their Representatives' stances on the questions in the 1958 ANES. We think more important are the improvements in study design. We have asked about specific roll call votes, which are the key behavior at stake in theories of representation, and measured directly constituents' perceived agreement with their representatives.

Finally, our findings recast the role of party in representation. Like the Michigan researchers, we conclude that party is centrally important in voters' assessments of their representatives, but we disagree about the role party plays. As we have shown, a legislators' party affiliation has concrete policy meaning, and voters infer the roll call

voting behavior from the legislators' party affiliation. This finding reinforces the argument of contemporary scholars, such as Aldrich and Rohde, that parties and their Members in Congress maintain clear and distinct policy labels and, in this way, solve the information problems facing voters. Constituents' use of party in evaluating their elected officials, then, does not preclude substantive representation; rather, it reinforces it.

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Table 1: Constituent Perceptions of Members of Congress and Members' Actual Positions and Affiliations

Party affiliation

| | | Member of Congress (actual) | | | |
|---------------------------------|------------|-----------------------------|------------------|--|------------------|
| | | Democrat | Republican | | <i>Total</i> |
| Constituents' Perceptions Of MC | Democrat | 322 (28%) | 84 (7%) | | 406 (35%) |
| | Republican | 54 (5%) | 488 (42%) | | 542 (46%) |
| | Don't Know | 93 (8%) | 125 (11%) | | 218 (19%) |
| <i>Total</i> | | 473 (40%) | 699 (60%) | | |

Note: Not shown are two Independents. 1 Person from Vermont correctly identified Sanders as Independent and 1 Person who incorrectly said they have an "Independent" MC.

Importation of Prescription Drugs

| | | Member of Congress (actual) | | | |
|---------------------------------|---------|-----------------------------|-----------------|------------------|------------------|
| | | Against | No position | For | <i>Total</i> |
| Constituents' Perceptions Of MC | Against | 188 (16%) | 14 (1%) | 171 (15%) | 373 (32%) |
| | DK | 200 (17%) | 85 (7%) | 223 (19%) | 508 (43%) |
| | For | 114 (10%) | 10 (1%) | 168 (14%) | 292 (25%) |
| <i>Total</i> | | 502 (43%) | 109 (9%) | 562 (48%) | |

Partial birth abortion ban

| | | Member of Congress (actual) | | | |
|---------------------------------|---------|-----------------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| | | Against | No position | For | <i>Total</i> |
| Constituents' Perceptions Of MC | Against | 182 (16%) | 8 (1%) | 72 (6%) | 262 (22%) |
| | DK | 125 (11%) | 103 (9%) | 199 (17%) | 427 (36%) |
| | For | 104 (9%) | 8 (1%) | 372 (32%) | 484 (41%) |
| <i>Total</i> | | 411 (35%) | 119 (10%) | 643 (54%) | |

Gay marriage amendment

| | | Member of Congress (actual) | | | |
|---------------------------------|---------|-----------------------------|----------------|------------------|------------------|
| | | Against | No position | For | <i>Total</i> |
| Constituents' Perceptions Of MC | Against | 178 (15%) | 14 (1%) | 84 (7%) | 276 (24%) |
| | DK | 205 (17%) | 45 (4%) | 201 (17%) | 451 (38%) |
| | For | 155 (13%) | 20 (2%) | 271 (23%) | 446 (38%) |
| <i>Total</i> | | 538 (46%) | 79 (7%) | 556 (47%) | |

Note: Cells sum to 100 percent.

Table 2: Constituent perceptions of agreement with MC on Each Issue

Constituents' Perceived Agreement with Member of Congress

| Issue | Agree | Disagree | No Position or Independent | Don't Know MC's Position |
|-------------------------------|--------------|-----------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Prescription Imports | 292 (25%) | 373 (32%) | 72 (6%) | 430 (37%) |
| Partial-birth Abortion | 484 (42%) | 262 (22%) | 90 (8%) | 330 (28%) |
| Gay marriage Ban | 446 (38%) | 276 (24%) | 20 (2%) | 427 (37%) |
| Party | 489 (27%) | 317 (42%) | 144 (12%) | 218 (19%) |

Note: Rows sum to 100%.

Table 3: Regression Estimates of the Effects of Roll Call Votes, Party, Ideology, and Name Recognition on MC's Job Approval

| | Approval of Representative's Job (2=Strongly Approve, 1=Approve, 0 = DK, Neither, -1=Disapprove, -2=Strongly Disapprove) | |
|-------------------------------------|---|---------------------------|
| | Symmetric Effects | Asymmetric Effects |
| Party affiliation | | |
| Party agreement* | .587 (.056) | |
| Same party** | | .635 (.133) |
| Opposite party** | | -.455 (.143) |
| Gay marriage amendment | | |
| Agreement* | .247 (.051) | |
| Agree** | | .210 (.084) |
| Disagree** | | -.315 (.104) |
| Importing prescription drugs | | |
| Agreement* | .245 (.047) | |
| Agree** | | .115 (.082) |
| Disagree** | | -.354 (.089) |
| Partial-birth abortion ban | | |
| Agreement* | .266 (.046) | |
| Agree** | | .303 (.085) |
| Disagree** | | -.233 (.102) |
| Ideology | | |
| Agreement* | .099 (.049) | |
| Agree** | | .254 (.135) |
| Disagree** | | -.092 (.154) |
| Respondent's ideology | .012 (.030) | -.004 (.031) |
| Moderate** | .065 (.066) | .135 (.103) |
| Independent** | -.157 (.101) | -.089 (.127) |
| Rep.'s party correct** | -.066 (.082) | -.118 (.104) |
| Rep.'s name correct** | .247 (.079) | .245 (.080) |
| Constant | -.050 (.056) | -.075 (.074) |
| <i>N</i> | 1115 | 1117 |
| R-squared | .427 | .432 |
| Root MSE | 1.014 | 1.012 |
| *Coded 1, 0, -1 **Coded 1, 0 | | |

Table 4: Explaining Perception of Representative's Roll Call Position

| | Perception of Representative's Vote (For = +1, Don't Know = 0, Against = -1) | | |
|---|--|---|---|
| | Gay Marriage Amendment | Importing Prescription Drugs | Partial-birth abortion ban |
| Perceived party | .355 (.026) | -.329 (.025) | .302 (.029) |
| Don't know party | .006 (.047) | -.171 (.056) | .016 (.049) |
| Actual roll call vote | .080 (.023) | .032 (.021) | .142 (.027) |
| Respondent's position | .080 (.038) | -.013 (.045) | .110 (.040) |
| Respondent's position if party agreement | .105 (.047) | .097 (.053) | .048 (.049) |
| Ideology | -.003 (.013) | .001 (.017) | -.014 (.017) |
| Party ID | -.032 (.013) | .031 (.011) | -.022 (.012) |
| Independent | -.063 (.062) | -.114 (.066) | -.007 (.063) |
| Constant | .151 (.070) | -.227 (.067) | .239 (.064) |
| N | 1149 | 1147 | 1146 |
| R square | .234 | .171 | .231 |
| Root MSE | .692 | .692 | .697 |

Table 5: Accuracy of perceptions of congruence with Representative

Party

| | | Perceived agreement | | |
|------------------|----------|---------------------|------------------|-----------|
| | | Agree | Disagree | DK/ind |
| Actual Agreement | Agree | 426 (36%) | 52 (4%) | 97 (8%) |
| | Disagree | 63 (5%) | 265 (23%) | 86 (7%) |
| | DK/Ind | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 184 (16%) |

Gay Marriage Amendment

| | | Perceived agreement | | |
|------------------|------------|---------------------|------------------|------------|
| | | Agree | Disagree | DK/No Pref |
| Actual Agreement | Agree | 258 (22%) | 76 (6%) | 192 (16%) |
| | Disagree | 136 (12%) | 164 (14%) | 193 (16%) |
| | DK/No Pref | 52 (4%) | 36 (3%) | 66 (6%) |

Partial Birth Abortion Ban

| | | Perceived agreement | | |
|------------------|------------|---------------------|------------------|------------|
| | | Agree | Disagree | DK/No Pref |
| Actual Agreement | Agree | 347 (30%) | 66 (6%) | 184 (16%) |
| | Disagree | 88 (8%) | 167 (14%) | 116 (10%) |
| | DK/No Pref | 49 (4%) | 29 (2%) | 127 (11%) |

Importation of Prescription Drugs

| | | Perceived agreement | | |
|------------------|------------|---------------------|------------------|------------|
| | | Agree | Disagree | DK/No Pref |
| Actual Agreement | Agree | 166 (14%) | 151 (13%) | 208 (18%) |
| | Disagree | 108 (9%) | 171 (15%) | 179 (15%) |
| | DK/No Pref | 18 (2%) | 51 (4%) | 121 (10%) |

Table 6: Simulation of effect of perfect knowledge of party, roll call and name on MC approval

| | Agreement | | Effect (Diff x b) |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|
| | Perceived Average | Actual Average | |
| Party | .147 | .137 | -.006 |
| Gay Marriage | .145 | .028 | -.029 |
| Partial BirthAbortion | .189 | .193 | .000 |
| Prescription Drugs | -.069 | .057 | .003 |
| MC name (correct) | .512 | 1.000 | .121 |

APPENDIX

This analysis compares two-stage least squares and OLS estimates of the effects of perceived party affiliation and perceived roll call votes on gay marriage and partial birth abortion. For each of these three variables we have strong instruments. For the roll call vote on importation of prescription drugs the actual roll call vote is only a weak instrument, as the coefficient on the first stage is only .032 with a standard error of .021. See Table 4. To avoid well-known problems associated with weak instruments we test for potential endogeneity using only the set of variables for which we have strong instruments.

Table A1: Instrumental Variables and OLS Estimates of the Effects of Perceived Party and Perceived Roll Call Votes on Approval of Members of Congress

| | Approval of Representative's Job (2=Strongly Approve, 1=Approve, 0 = DK, Neither, -1=Disapprove, -2=Strongly Disapprove) | |
|---------------------------------------|--|----------------------|
| | IV Estimates | OLS Estimates |
| Party affiliation (e) | .74 (.14) | .62 (.05) |
| Gay marriage amendment (e) | .37 (.17) | .29 (.04) |
| Partial-birth abortion ban (e) | .38 (.31) | .31 (.05) |
| Ideology | -.01 (.04) | .00 (.03) |
| Ideology agreement | -.02 (.07) | .10 (.05) |
| Independent | -.15 (.09) | -.15 (.09) |
| Rep. party correct | -.08 (.09) | -.07 (.08) |
| Rep. name correct | .25 (.08) | .25 (.08) |
| Constant | -.10 (.14) | -.06 (.06) |
| <i>N</i> | 1115 | 1115 |
| R-squared | -- | .41 |
| Root MSE | 1.035 | 1.027 |
| Hausman-test | 5.54 (12 df, p=.94) | |

Notes: (e) means endogenous variable.

¹ The literature on this point is enormous. A series of recent prominent articles estimate the responsiveness of election outcomes to deviations of legislators from their districts. See Erikson and Wright 1989; Erikson and Wright, 2000; Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart, 2001; Canes-Wrone, Brady and Cogan, 2002.

² Again, there is a sizable literature on this question. On the specific issue of race see Carmines and Stimson (1990) and Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002) offers a comprehensive synthesis.

³ Miller and Stokes also sought to gauge how closely aligned the politician was with his or her district; a significant literature has since examined how legislators understand and respond to their constituents. Research links roll call votes to constituencies' demographic characteristics (Campbell 2003), predicts roll call votes as a function of proxies for constituencies preferences (Ansolabehere, Snyder and Stewart 2001, Erikson and Wright 1980), and to legislators' personal policy preferences (Miller and Stokes 1963, Wright 1989, Griffin and Newman 2005). An important avenue of research has also established association between public preferences and public policy at the macro-level (Page and Shapiro 1983, Monroe 1998, Wlezien 1996, Stimson, MacKuen and Erikson 1995; for a general review see Burstein 2003 or Manza and Cook 2002).

⁴ We coded each respondent's answer regarding the name of their Representative as correct if their answer included the surname of their Representative in a form which – if read out loud – would be recognizable as the correct name. This allows for spelling errors and respondents phonetically spelling the pronunciation of their Member of Congress' name.

⁵ This method is not guaranteed to fix the problem. The instruments may be weak if perceived roll call votes are not strongly correlated with the actual roll call votes or if actual roll call votes are nearly perfectly divided along party lines, and thus not distinguishable from party. Two of the three actual roll call votes in this study, Gay Marriage Ban and Partial Birth Abortion were very strong instruments, with t-statistics in the first stage regressions of 4 and 7, respectively. Roll call votes on Importation of Prescription Drugs served as a weak instrument in that case, with a t-statistic of only 2. The actual party of the member of Congress has a t-statistic of 19 in the regression predicting perceived party. Actual party is a strong instrument as well.