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The Salience of Religion as a Social Background Variable in Congressional Voting

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Loyola University of Chicago
and
BYRON W. DAYNES
DePauw University

With the pioneering legislative studies of Lowell1 in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, studies of voting behavior in Congress have become increasingly numerous and sophisticated. The major research undertaken by Rice, Truman, Turner, MacRae, and Froman2 indicated that political party affiliation is the strongest single determinant of legislative voting while constituency acts as a secondary variable. Typically it reinforces party voting, but is also can undermine party loyalty when counter-pressures in the constituency operate. More recent research by Kingdon, Matthews and Stimson, Clausen, and Cherryholmes and Shapiro3 reveal other important variables impinging upon the Congressman’s decision-making, for examples ideology, party and committee leadership cues, issues, state delegations, and representational roles.

The body of empirical data on legislative voting is impressive, but there remains a missing component in the existing literature. The major studies do not include explicit reference to social background variables in their inventory, and few scholarly articles have focused on this dimension.4


While these studies point that Congressional membership appears sociologically atypical of a cross-section of American society, little effort is made to point out the obvious implications of this on the representative process. Our review of textbooks on American government, for example, indicates that none mentioned the impact of social background characteristics on voting although all noted that social biases affected legislative recruitment. Legislative voting studies seem to give major attention to constituency influence at the expense of background variables even though rather large Congressional samples would permit rigorous statistical analysis. By contrast, students of judicial behavior put their major emphasis on the social background of judges while ignoring judicial constituency variables.

This paper will assess the literature and develop hypotheses concerning the probable impact of social background attributes on Congressional voting. Toward this end, eight variables were studied: (1) size of residence, (2) geographic “mobility,” (3) previous elective experience, (4) seniority within the House of Representatives, (5) occupation, (6) religion, (7) age, (8) region. For purposes of comparison, the analysis will include party affiliation as well as four constituency variables (percent urban, percent Negro, percent owner-occupied housing, and density) and electoral marginality (percent margin of victory).

All but four variables studied are readily available as numerical

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All but four variables studied are readily available as numerical


values. The exceptions are party affiliation, religion, occupation, and region, and they were all assigned values for purposes of analysis. For political party, Democrats were coded 1 and Republicans 0. Congressmen were divided into two regional categories; Southerners were coded 0 and non-Southerners as 1. For religion, Catholics and Jews were coded 1 and all other denominations as 0. And since the literature suggests that, compared to other occupations, lawyers hold a special relationship to the political system, three classifications of occupations were constructed. Congressmen with law as their only occupation were coded 2; those who designated law in conjunction with other occupations were coded 1; and those Congressmen engaged in non-legal occupations were coded 0.

As the dependent variable, the index used by Rieselbach, Cherryholmes and Shapiro and others—the "federal support score"—is used. This index coded any yea or nay vote by a Congressman in favor of greater involvement by the federal government. The 89th Congress (1965-66) was chosen for study because of the many important Great Society proposals—civil rights, medicare, aid to education. Issues of this magnitude, we felt, would bring added meaning to one's vote in favor or against increased federal involvement. Based on selected roll calls from both sessions of the 89th Congress, a range from 0 to 23 is created. Only the House of Representatives is included in this analysis since its larger membership is more heterogeneous than the Senate on the many social background variables chosen for study. Excluded from the study were ten Representatives without a federal support score (FSS). This gave us a workable universe of 425.

While our major purpose is to determine which social background variables affect voting behavior and to measure their relative impact, the direction of each coefficient will indicate which Congressmen are more supportive of an expanded federal role. By applying correlation and regression techniques to all variables, moreover, the importance of background variables relative to party, constituency, and electoral marginality can be

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*The South includes the eleven states of the former Confederacy: Alabama, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana, Virginia, Florida, Tennessee, and Georgia.

*See Congressional Quarterly Almanac, 89th Congress, 2nd Session, Vol. XXII (Washington: Congressional Quarterly Service, 1966), 1008-1009. The legislation and issues included in these roll calls are: daylight savings time, rent supplements (2), minimum wage, consumer credit control, open housing, civil rights, traffic safety, War on Poverty (2), truth in packaging, Demonstration Cities, Appalachian Regional Development Act, Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Medicare, housing department, voting rights, right-to-work, Higher Education Act, National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities, Clean Air and Water Disposal Act, highway beautification, Teacher Corps.
delineated. To guide this study, eight hypotheses based on the theoretical arguments and empirical evidence in the literature are provided:

1. Congressmen who reside in larger communities are more supportive of FSS than those who live in smaller communities.

2. Congressmen who exhibit greater geographic "mobility" are more supportive of FSS than those with less mobility.

3. Congressmen with more "experience" in previous elective office are more supportive of FSS than those with less experience.

4. Congressmen with less "seniority" in the House are more supportive of FSS than those with more seniority.

5. Congressmen who are lawyers are more supportive of FSS than those who are not lawyers.

6. Congressmen who are Catholic or Jewish are more supportive of the FSS than those who are not.

7. Congressmen who are younger are more supportive of FSS than those who are older.

8. Congressmen from regions outside the South are more supportive of FSS than those from the South.

Table 1 presents a Pearson correlation coefficient matrix showing the inter-relationships among all fifteen variables studied. Most relevant are the correlations between each social background variable and the federal support score. The correlation between FSS voting and occupation, however, is insignificant. The other seven are significant, and five are significant at very high levels (p = .0001). Moreover, our hypotheses are sustained by the correlations between FSS voting and age, religion, mobility, region, and size of residence. The data indicates, however that our assumptions about the impact of seniority and experience require re-examination.
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<th>Negro</th>
<th>Density</th>
<th>Owner-Occup. Housing</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>“Experience”</th>
<th>Margin of Victory</th>
<th>“Seniority”</th>
<th>“Mobility”</th>
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<td>.319</td>
<td>xxx</td>
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Within this table, any correlation with a value of .081 is significant at the .05 level. A value of .104 is significant at the .01 level; a value of .149 is significant at the .001 level; and a value of .176 is significant at the .0001 level.
Size of residence and geographic "mobility" both address the question of parochialism in the recruitment of legislative elites. In his well-known study, Andrew Hacker\textsuperscript{10} indicated that Senators were more parochial than corporate executives in their backgrounds, and he hinted that such limited experiences may hinder legislators in being able to understand the complexities of our economy. Rieselbach tried to determine whether Congressmen as "small town boys" voted differently than their more urban counterparts.\textsuperscript{11} To gauge parochialism, he used three indices: size of birthplace, size of residence, and geographic mobility. He found that Representatives born in smaller towns and from smaller residences were less supportive of FSS voting, but there seemed to be no relationship to mobility. Our data affirms this line of reasoning, vis., FSS voting is correlated to larger residences and to greater geographic mobility.

The variables of age, occupation, and religion were given some attention by Donald Matthews.\textsuperscript{12} His study of the 81st Congress indicated that liberal Senators tend proportionately to be younger rather than older, to be Catholic rather than Protestant, and to be professionals rather than businessmen.

With regard to age, it can be argued that younger legislators are less committed to traditional ideology and, over time, more amenable to the changing agenda of issues. Presumably, these Congressmen would not generally represent "safe" districts controlled by conservative interests. Research by Duncan MacRae, Jr.\textsuperscript{13} shows that age can displace the impact of social status. He found that Massachusetts legislators who were younger were under more cross-pressures than older ones and were less loyal to their social status as a cue to voting on issues. Our data also shows that younger Representatives are more supportive of FSS voting, but the correlation is weak and barely significant.

That lawyers dominate American politics at all levels is readily apparent, and arguments are advanced in the literature which indicate that this occupation is functional to the operation of the political system.\textsuperscript{14} Unlike

\textsuperscript{10}Andrew Hacker, "The Elected and the Anointed: Two American Elites," \textit{American Political Science Review} (September, 1961), 539-549.
\textsuperscript{11}Leroy N. Rieselbach, "Congressmen as 'Small-Town Boys': A Research note," \textit{op. cit.}
\textsuperscript{12}Donald R. Matthews, \textit{The Social Background of Political Decision-Makers, op. cit.}
\textsuperscript{13}Duncan MacRae, Jr., and Edith K. MacRae, "Legislators' Social Status and Their Votes," \textit{American Journal of Sociology} (May, 1969), 599-603.
businessmen, lawyers are trained and socialized—the argument goes—in the process of negotiation and compromise. To this extent, they may be more flexible on the issues and less likely to react to policy from a fixed ideological position. The relationship between occupation and FSS voting, as formulated in this analysis, is not significant; however, its direction indicated greater FSS voting by non-lawyer Congressmen.

The voting tendencies of Jewish and Catholic Representatives are similarly liberal, indicative of their ethnic origins. One public opinion study, for example, showed Jews and Catholics to be more "liberal" than Protestants with regard to government's role in the society. Our data confirms this expectation. A strong correlation exists between religion and FSS voting and it seems to exist independently of other variables. While most Catholics and Jews are Democrats, there are fewer Democrats in Congress who are Catholic or Jewish (thus the weak correlation between party and religion, .188). Not surprisingly, most Catholics and Jews are from outside the South, but the vast majority of non-Southern Congressmen are not Catholic or Jewish. The correlation between religion and region, as a consequence, is only a modest .290. Furthermore, by calculating partial coefficients, it is determined that the impact of religion on FSS voting is sustained after controlling for party (.436), for seniority (.386), and for urban variables (.363). Among all social background variables, only religion acts independently of other factors.

The distinctive impact of region on American politics has long been recognized. This has been particularly true of the South. Most Congressional voting studies impose controls for region. One of the well-known Congressional voting blocs—the "conservative coalition"—takes account of the importance of region. Southern conservatism is rooted in the Civil War era, in the rural plantation economy and its "peculiar" institution of slavery. It is sustained today by a new-found affluence caused by late industrialization and economic development. Among social background attributes, our study showed region to be fourth strongest, but highly interrelated to constituency variables (urban and Negro).

As measures of "professionalism" one's experience in previous elective office and seniority within the House are used. The literature suggests that

16Among the Congressmen in the 89th Congress, religious denominations are represented in the following proportions in the Democratic Party: Jewish—93.3; Catholic—88.0; Baptist—78.0; Methodist—67.1; Lutheran—62.5; Presbyterian—54.5; and Episcopalian—51.0.
these variables might have differential impact. The assertion is made that elites with greater experience in elective office—unlike amateurs—are less ideological, more willing to compromise, and are more loyal to party leadership. Following this line of reasoning, greater elective experience should aid FSS voting. The same could be said of seniority within Congress, yet evidence to the contrary would suggest that very senior Representatives—committee chairmen—tend to come from safe, homogeneous and conservatively oriented districts. However, it should be mentioned that even should all twenty-one standing committee chairmen be very conservative, their roll call voting record would be minor in our universe of 425 Representatives. As indicated by the correlations, experience is negatively related to FSS voting. But how is this disparity explained? The intercorrelation matrix shows experience, seniority, and age to be strongly interrelated. Age correlates to experience (.698) but to less seniority (−.501). The reverse situation affects FSS voting; that is, voting for FSS correlates to younger age, to less prior experience, and to more seniority. What these linkages suggest is that FSS voting is aided by Congressmen who typically enter the House at a younger age, without having had much previous elective experience, and who, subsequently, are able to accumulate greater seniority within the Congress. It would appear, therefore, that arguments against the seniority system affecting committee assignments have less validity when applied to the operation of the legislative system as a whole. To the extent that seniority introduces ""professionalism"" into the law-making process, it aids voting for an expanded federal role. And there are suggestions in the data that previous experience may be less relevant to the legislative process than ongoing experience in the Congress.

Seniority is the strongest social background variable (.488), but it appears to be a function of party affiliation. That is, when a partial correlation is calculated with controls for party, the correlation between seniority and FSS voting is reduced to .243.

Overall, the four strongest correlates of FSS voting are: party affiliation, seniority, religion, and percent urban. The literature confirms that party is most important; however, social background attributes appear


stronger than constituency variables. Table 2 gives the multiple regression model based on these strongest predictors. Taken together, party, seniority, religion, and urbanism explain 54.9 percent of the variance in FSS voting. Independently, party explains 33.9 percent, religion adds 12.4 percent, urban accounts for 6.3 percent, and—as expected—seniority adds only 2.3 percent to the total variance predicted.

The salience of religion as a social background variable is confirmed, even though it is based on an uncomplicated dichotomy between Jewish/Catholic Representatives and all others. The “liberalism” of Jewish and Catholic Congressmen cannot be explained in terms of the economic condition or the social class of all Jews and Catholics since the position of Jews generally exceeds that of Catholics. One answer may lie in the history of discrimination suffered by both groups in America. The threat of anti-Semitism and the tenents of the Jewish faith may foster liberalism in Jewish Congressmen. The struggle of immigrant groups—like the Catholics—in their quest for social mobility led many of them to enter the trade union movement and to capitalize on the paternalism of big city political machines. From this perspective, Jewish and Catholic Representatives may be more supportive of governmental intervention to aid minorities and to limit the privileges of established elites. To this extent, it would appear that the nature of the belief systems of organized religion as well as the differential attraction of ethnic groups to certain religious denominations has an affect on voting behavior. In this light, moreover, arguments which underestimate the “symbolic” or sociological importance of group representation in Congress and stress only geographical representation may need restructuring. Members of specific religious denominations may transmit independent perceptions of issues, individual approaches to problem-solving, and create new demands on Congress in behalf of their clientele groups.


20For example, see Leroy N. Rieselbach, “The Demography of the Congressional Vote on Foreign Aid, 1939-1958,” op. cit. Among the personal attributes he studied, only religion strongly related to voting on foreign aid. Catholics were more supportive of foreign aid, and Rieselbach suggests that “such programs may have appeared to Catholics as a means to assist their homelands in time of economic crisis.” Other discussions of this issue are found in: Bernard Fensterwald, Jr., “The Anatomy of American ‘Isolationism’ and Expansionism,” Journal Conflict Resolution June and December, 1958), 111-138 and 280-309; John H. Fenton, The Catholic Vote (New Orleans: Hauser Press, 1960), 87-108.
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This research suggests that social background variables can affect voting behavior and that religion deserves to be studied as an independent variable of importance. Its operation does not depend upon issue-specific voting but rather affects voting behavior on numerous domestic, social welfare issues associated with increased role of the federal government in our economy and society.