Issue Politics in Congress

Do representatives and senators respond to the critiques raised by their challengers? This study, one of the first to explore how legislators’ experiences as candidates shape their subsequent behavior as policy makers, demonstrates that they do. Winning legislators regularly take up their challengers’ priority issues from the last campaign and act on them in office, a phenomenon called “issue uptake.” This attentiveness to their challengers’ issues reflects a widespread and systematic yet largely unrecognized mode of responsiveness in the U.S. Congress, but it is one with important benefits for the legislators who undertake it and for the health and legitimacy of the representative process. Because challengers focus their campaigns on their opponents’ weaknesses, legislators’ subsequent uptake of these issues helps to inoculate them against future attacks and brings new and salient issues to the congressional agenda. This book provides fresh insight into questions regarding the electoral connection in legislative behavior, the role of campaigns and elections, and the nature and quality of congressional representation.

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Contents

List of Figures vi
List of Tables viii
Acknowledgments xi

1 Electoral Challenges and Legislative Responsiveness 1
2 A Theory of Issue Uptake 19
3 The Nature of Campaign and Legislative Agendas 43
4 Assessing Uptake 71
5 Who Responds? Explaining Individual Variation in Uptake 89
6 Patterns of Responsiveness in Congress 114
7 The Electoral Impacts of Uptake 128
8 Uptake and Public Policy 150
9 Elections, Governance, and Representation 167

Appendix House and Senate Samples 179
References 193
Index 203
Figures

3.1 Campaign and Congressional Attention to Tax Policy, 1988–1998

5.1 Predicted Uptake Counts by Vulnerability

5.2 Vulnerability and Uptake in the U.S. House

5.3 Vulnerability and Uptake in the U.S. Senate

5.4a Relationship between Vulnerability and Uptake for Vulnerable Representatives

5.4b Relationship between Vulnerability and Uptake for Vulnerable Senators

5.5 Relationship between Vulnerability and Uptake – Hypothesis 1

5.6 Relationship between Vulnerability and Uptake – Hypothesis 2

5.7a Vulnerability and Uptake for Relatively Safe Senators

5.7b Vulnerability and Uptake for Vulnerable Senators

5.8a Vulnerability and Uptake for Very Safe Representatives

5.8b Vulnerability and Uptake for Relatively Safe Representatives

5.8c Vulnerability and Uptake for Vulnerable Representatives

6.1 Uptake Patterns across Activities by Vulnerability Group

6.2 Uptake Levels across the First and Second Years of House Terms

6.3 Uptake Levels across Congresses in Senate Terms
List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>Within-Term Uptake Patterns for Safe and Vulnerable Legislators</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>Comparing the Uptake Levels of House Candidates and Retirees</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>Legislative Fates of Uptake Introductions</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>Uptake Laws by Issue Category</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Tables

1. Characteristics of the House and Senate Samples \hspace*{1cm} page 47
2. Issue Priorities in Campaigns and Activity in Congress \hspace*{1cm} 49
3. Summary of Legislative Activity for the House and Senate Samples \hspace*{1cm} 54
4. Sampled Candidates’ and Legislators’ Attention to Issues \hspace*{1cm} 57
5. Relative Attention to Issues across Election Years \hspace*{1cm} 62
6. Impact of Campaign Attention on Legislative Attention to Issues \hspace*{1cm} 70
7. Volume of Uptake in Legislative Activity \hspace*{1cm} 73
8. Factors to Consider in Comparing Uptake Levels \hspace*{1cm} 81
9. Activity on Health Policy by the House and Senate Samples \hspace*{1cm} 85
10. Uptake on Health Policy in the 101st–105th Congresses \hspace*{1cm} 86
11. Correlations between Electoral Vulnerability and Uptake \hspace*{1cm} 92
12. Summary of Structural Control Variables \hspace*{1cm} 94
13. Impact of Electoral Vulnerability on Uptake \hspace*{1cm} 95
14. Impact of Individual and Constituency Characteristics on Uptake \hspace*{1cm} 99
15. Uptake Patterns by Seniority and Vulnerability \hspace*{1cm} 106
16. Uptake Patterns across Chambers and across Activities \hspace*{1cm} 115
17. Impact of Vulnerability on Representatives’ Uptake on Introductions, Cosponsorships, and Floor Statements \hspace*{1cm} 119
18. Impact of Vulnerability on Senators’ Uptake on Introductions, Cosponsorships, and Floor Statements \hspace*{1cm} 120
List of Tables

7.1 Status of Sample in the Next Election 131
7.2 Does Uptake Influence Representatives’ Probability of Reelection? 135
7.3 Impact of Uptake Levels on Changes in Electoral Security 137
7.4 Varying Electoral Impact of Different Uptake Decisions 140
7.5 Effect of Uptake on General and Primary Election Opposition 144
7.6 Uptake and the Quality of Competition 146
8.1 Do Challenger-Themed Bills Receive Less Attention from Their Sponsors? 155
8.2 Comparing the Fates of Challenger- and Non-Challenger-Themed Bills 159
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