Legislative Voting and Accountability

Legislatures are the core representative institutions in modern democracies. Citizens want legislatures to be decisive, and they want accountability, but they are frequently disillusioned with the representation legislators deliver. Political parties can provide decisiveness in legislatures, and they may provide collective accountability, but citizens and political reformers frequently demand another type of accountability from legislators – at the individual level. Can legislatures provide collective and individual accountability? This book considers what both kinds of accountability require and offers the most extensive cross-national analysis of legislative voting undertaken to date. It illustrates the balance between individualistic and collective representation in democracies and how party unity in legislative voting shapes that balance. In addition to quantitative analysis of voting patterns, the book draws on field and archival research to provide an extensive assessment of legislative transparency throughout the Americas.

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Shortly after the 2006 election, in which the Democrats recaptured control of the U.S. Congress, the spoof newspaper *The Onion* ran a story in which Nancy Pelosi, the new Speaker of the House, reprimanded her partisan colleagues for supporting her legislative agenda without necessarily meaning it. Referring to a fictitious bill, *The Onion* had Pelosi admonishing Democrats not to “just pass it because I want it, but because you want it, too,” and went on to describe Pelosi’s “concern that her relationship to the House was based completely on voting” (*The Onion*, 42 [49], December 4, 2006).

Legislative decisions are about votes, and voting behavior is organized by parties. If we want to understand legislatures and the representation they provide, it makes sense to look at partisan voting. To *The Onion*, the joke was that Pelosi might care about anything beyond that bottom line.

It never got big laughs, but I had a similar idea in mind around a decade ago, when I started the project that became this book. At the time, the study of voting in the U.S. Congress was a bustling cottage industry, but there was almost no information about legislative voting outside the United States. The reason, it seemed to me, had to be the lack of available data on votes. So, to begin, I set out to collect data on votes in a number of legislatures, mostly in Latin America where I had some experience, but also in other assemblies where I could establish research connections. My first surprise was that, in most countries, it was exceedingly unusual to record how each legislator voted on a given proposal. What *The Onion* took to be the bedrock of legislative representation could not be taken for granted in many democracies.

As I explored the issue across more and more assemblies, it became clear that a prior question – before *how* legislators vote – is whether assemblies make it possible to *know* how legislators vote. So the research agenda...
evolved and expanded, and I spent as much time talking with politicians, journalists, and activists about whether they favored voting transparency, and why, as I did collecting and analyzing voting data.

As it turns out, I spent a lot of time on each, which accounts for the ten years that passed between starting the project and publishing this book. Those years have seen progress in the study of legislative voting beyond the halls of the U.S. Congress. This book takes a step toward mapping, and explaining, the world of partisan voting in legislatures. Data availability remains an obstacle in most assemblies. Many still record few or no votes, and those that do record often do not make vote records easy for outsiders like scholars, or citizens, to examine. The problem is more than academic. Lack of voting transparency is also an obstacle to accountability.

There is much more on this topic in the book itself. Here, I want to recognize and thank the organizations and the people who made my research possible. The book offers the broadest cross-national analysis of recorded voting to date, and all the data collected for the project are available online for other researchers to use. Doing field research in ten countries, and collecting the data from fifteen others, required resources, expertise, and effort beyond what I could muster on my own. Early financial support was provided by National Science Foundation Grant SES-9986219 and also by the Weidenbaum Center on the Economy, Government, and Public Policy at Washington University in St. Louis.

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In the course of conducting field research and in collecting data from assemblies far and wide, I drew on the expertise, and often on the hospitality, of dozens of generous souls. Eduardo Alemán, Mark Jones, Valeria Palanza, Roberto Sabá, and Mariano Tommasi shared data and provided insights into Argentine politics. In Bolivia, thanks go to Diego Ayó, Carlos Cordero, William Culver, René Mayorga, José Rivera Eterovic, and Eduardo Rodríguez. On Brazil, I am grateful to Barry Ames, Octavio Amorim Neto, Scott
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After acknowledging intellectual debts far and wide, it is customary to close a preface by paying homage closer to home. I turn to this task with some apprehension, recognizing that the stakes are high. My office, after all, is filled with books, and I have read all their prefaces, but I confess to having studied the full contents of a much smaller number. So it stands to reason that, for many readers, any lasting impression from Legislative Voting and Accountability could depend on my eloquence regarding my family. I admit straightaway I cannot do justice to that subject. My wife, Lisa, is the greatest, and my sons, Joe and Sam, are too, for a million reasons that have nothing to do with voting or accountability, although it is worth noting that they indulge my habit of visiting legislatures in any state or country where we travel, whether on vacation or for more important purposes, like soccer tournaments. I really could not ask for anything more.