

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02647-6 - Representational Style in Congress: What Legislators Say and Why it Matters

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Excerpt

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Representation Inside and Outside Congress

This is a book about the practice of political representation in Congress – the activities representatives undertake on behalf of their constituents. Part of this representation occurs in Washington. There, legislators craft legislation, cast roll-call votes, secure money for their district, and advocate for constituents.

But representation also occurs outside Congress. There, representatives actively engage their constituents. To do this, legislators present and explain their work, informing constituents about *what* actions their representative undertook and *why* the representative undertook them. Representatives hold press conferences, issue statements to reporters, and argue with pundits on cable news. Legislators' staff spend hours crafting speeches, writing press releases, circulating newsletters, and responding to constituent letters. At home and among constituents, members of Congress conduct town hall meetings, give stump speeches, and participate in live interviews with local reporters.

I will show that the representation that occurs outside Congress fundamentally affects how constituents evaluate the representation that occurs inside Congress. To affect this evaluation, legislators strategically adopt *presentational styles* – how representatives present and explain their work to constituents. The goal of legislators when they articulate presentational styles is to affect constituents' impressions of their representatives' *representational style*: the work legislators perform across a wide array of politically relevant activities in Congress. To affect this impression, legislators emphasize activities that are likely to cultivate support among constituents, subtly shifting what constituents expect of their member of Congress.

Legislators cultivate this support by adopting styles that are responsive to the composition of their constituency: who legislators represent affects how they present their work. Aligned legislators, those who represent states composed of ideologically sympathetic copartisans, adopt *Issue Oriented* styles, regularly engaging in national policy debates. Marginal legislators, those who represent constituents who identify with the opposing party, articulate

an *Appropriator* style, regularly claiming credit for particularistic spending. Legislators who represent mixed constituencies adopt strategies that blend the two styles, engaging in both national debates and claiming credit for expenditures in their district.

The distinctive styles alter the representative-constituent relationship: how legislators present their work affects how they are evaluated by constituents. Constituents whose legislator adopts an Appropriator presentational style are less knowledgeable about her partisan affiliation and roll-call voting history than constituents whose representative adopts an Issue Oriented style. And different styles induce different terms of evaluation: Issue Oriented senators polarize their constituents more than appropriators.

Representatives articulate presentational styles to affect their relationship with constituents, but the systematic selection of styles has unintended consequences for who participates in policy debates. When representatives adopt a credit-claiming style, they avoid broad policy debates. And moderates are much more likely than other senators to adopt a credit-claiming style. The result is that ideological extremists dominate policy debates – contributing to the vitriolic and partisan discourse that is now a feature of American politics.

Together the evidence I present depicts the numerous consequences of legislators who actively engage constituents to shape the representative-constituent relationship. This expands on the normal activities scholars consider when studying representation. Studies of representation tend to ignore how legislators present their work to constituents outside Washington (Bianco 1994). This is surprising because one of the most widely cited books in political science, *Home Style*, examines how representatives engage their constituents outside Congress (Fenno 1978). Fenno's (1978) core insight is that how legislators present their work to constituents – their *home styles* – comprise one of the most important components of the representation process. Yet, in the three decades since *Home Style* was published, few studies have engaged this insight. *Home Style* is one of the most regularly cited books in all political science, but home style remains a largely unstudied concept.

This neglect, I believe, has its origins in a methodological challenge: there are simply too many statements from legislators to analyze. The result is that scholars have been unable to investigate *Home Style*'s core insight about representation. The original research design in Fenno (1978), intensive participant observation, is difficult to replicate on a large scale. Other attempts to measure how legislators engage constituents provide extremely useful insights but are unable to provide systematic measurement across all members of a legislature (Schiller 2000; Lipinski 2004; Sulkin 2011), or focus on a subset of policy debates (Sellers 2010). There are simply too many statements to provide comprehensive measures of how legislators engage constituents. This methodological obstacle ensures that the representation that occurs outside Congress remains inaccessible despite Fenno's (1978) demonstration of the importance of home style for representation.

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To overcome these challenges, I introduce new data and statistical tools to provide comprehensive, systematic, and verifiable measures of how legislators present their work to constituents. To create the measures, I use a surprisingly useful source: Senate press releases. I use a new collection of every press release from each Senate office from 2005, 2006, and 2007, constituting over 64,000 press releases in total. This collection is useful because each Senate office regularly issues press releases, they capture substantively interesting content missing from other types of statements, and their content is likely to reach constituents. To measure what senators say in their press releases, I introduce a new statistical model for political texts. My model automatically measures how senators divide their attention in press releases: senators' *expressed priorities*. The measures facilitate analyses of what issues senators emphasize, why they emphasize those issues, and the broad consequences for representation.

This book contributes to both a political science literature on the study of representation and a *computational social science* literature on using large text collections to better understand political interactions. When focused on representation, this book demonstrates how legislators present their work and how this shapes the representative-constituent relationship. This expands on the predominant model of representation in political science, which tends to focus on a particular aspect of the representation process – roll-call votes – and the ideological alignment of legislators and constituents (Miller and Stokes 1963; Bafumi and Herron 2010). The models of ideological representation provide essential insights into how constituent preferences are translated in Washington but often leave unexplained how constituents go about learning about their legislators' work in Washington and, crucially, how representatives engage constituents to shape their impressions of their elected officials' work. I show why the representation that occurs outside Congress is essential for understanding how the process of representation occurs.

When focused on analyzing large text collections, this book contributes new methods to measure the content of large collections of texts, contributing to the burgeoning literature on *text as data* and *computational social science* (see Grimmer and Stewart 2013 for an overview). The methods that I introduce are broadly applicable – useful in any situation where scholars want to examine authors' expressed priorities in large collections of texts. While the two contributions of this book may appear distinct, they are actually intimately intertwined. Without the new statistical tools, the insights into the process of representation that I document would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to make.

1.1 POSITION TAKERS AND APPROPRIATORS

That legislators' messages matter at all for representation may seem surprising. After all, a large literature on representation almost completely ignores how

legislators present and explain their work. To illustrate how legislators engage constituents and how this engagement matters for representation, I begin with a comparison of Massachusetts' and Arkansas' Senate delegations – Ted Kennedy (D-MA), John Kerry (D-MA), Mark Pryor (D-AR), and Blanche Lincoln (D-AR) – in 2005, the first year of the press releases in my collection.

Even though both states had Democratic Senate delegations, Massachusetts and Arkansas were (and are) two very different states politically. Massachusetts was well known as a state with a large share of liberal Democrats, where the Bush administration was extremely unpopular. Bush was immediately unpopular in Massachusetts, receiving only 32 percent of the vote in the 2000 election. Throughout Bush's second term, his approval ratings were even lower. Arkansas, however, had a larger share of conservative Republicans who maintained higher levels of support for the president. Bush carried the state in both the 2000 and 2004, and his approval ratings and popularity remained relatively high.

The differences in constituencies help to explain the distinctive styles the two delegations adopted – differences that are indicative of the broader variation underlying senators' presentational styles. Kennedy and Kerry adopt an Issue Oriented style. When presenting their work to their liberal copartisan constituents, they focus on articulating positions and contributing to national policy debates. Pryor and Lincoln instead are Appropriators. They emphasize their work securing money for Arkansas and avoid reminding their conservative Republican constituents about their Senate delegation's discordant ideology and partisanship.

1.1.1 The Position Takers

By 2005, both John Kerry and Ted Kennedy had established national reputations as advocates for liberal causes. John Kerry solidified his national reputation in a failed bid to defeat President George W. Bush in 2004. But Kerry's reputation had its origins in his earliest political aspirations, when he ran for Congress in 1972 to influence foreign policy. Ted Kennedy also failed in his run for the presidency – failing in his primary challenge of Jimmy Carter in 1980. In the years since the defeat, Kennedy had developed a reputation as one of the most effective legislators in Senate history.

Both Kerry and Kennedy reinforced and cultivated their policy-focused reputations when presenting their work to constituents. The focus on national policy began with the statements and press releases from their offices, where both senators regularly expressed their positions on policy debates. Kerry issued press releases where he “insisted that the United States do more to become energy efficient and encourage new incentives for renewable energy” (Kerry 2007c) or criticized the Bush administration's foreign-policy decisions that, Kerry said, “called into question the judgment and competence of the administration officials” (Kerry 2006a). Kennedy used his press releases to

argue that “the needs of the poor in America have been constantly ignored by the Bush Administration” (Kennedy 2005c) or that “the Bush Administration must stop putting the financial interest of the pharmaceutical industry ahead of the needs of the poor and sick in developing countries” (Kennedy 2007a). Across their press releases, Kerry and Kennedy were much more likely to criticize the Bush administration’s handling of the Iraq war, advocate for liberalized immigration policies, or champion an increase in the minimum wage than claim credit for federal money spent in Massachusetts.

The focus on national issues continued when the senators were at home with constituents. This was evident when Kerry appeared before a firefighter’s union in 2006, an ideal place for him to claim credit for grant money spent to help firefighters – money used to bolster training and purchase new equipment across Massachusetts. Instead, Kerry used the speech to condemn Bush’s nominee for CIA director, Air Force General Michael Hayden. Kerry explained to the firefighters that he was “very troubled by the nomination because he [Hayden] is one of the main supporters representing Donald Rumsfeld,” and this was troubling because Rumsfeld “helped to put in place the programs of spying on Americans” (Webster 2006).

This basic interaction – Kerry focusing on broad policy instead of claiming credit for particularistic spending – occurred throughout his career. One *New York Times* profile of Kerry argued that during his first congressional campaign in 1972

Kerry, seared by his combat experience in the Mekong Delta and embittered by the death of close friends in the war, had made Vietnam the centerpiece of his campaign. He found it hard to display similarly persuasive passion for the bread-and-butter economic issues that were of greater concern to many of the district’s voters [Purdum 2004].

And Kerry’s emphasis on broad national policy continues today. For example, during a speech to local Democrats in Massachusetts, Kerry focused on foreign policy, telling the group that “[w]e’ve got to restore America’s position in the world” (Bishop 2007). Local papers reiterate Kerry’s policy statements. Massachusetts’ papers tended to run stories describing how Kerry was “encourag[ing] public dissent over [the] Iraq war” (Staff 2006b) or profiling Kerry’s failed efforts to redeploy troops out of Iraq (Staff 2006a).

Ted Kennedy, like Kerry, crafted a reputation for providing policy-focused representation to his constituents. And with support for the waning of the Bush administration’s policies during Bush’s second term, Kennedy’s statements were increasingly critical of the administration. For example, after President Bush nominated Samuel Alito for the Supreme Court, Kennedy assessed that “this is a nomination based on weakness not on strength.” Kennedy went on to argue that the right wing of the Republican party “forced the President to choose a nominee that they think has views as extreme as their own” (Kennedy 2005b). Kennedy’s attacks on the president spanned the most salient policy debates. Kennedy regularly issued warnings of a “quagmire in Iraq”

(Monahan 2005), his intention to “block Bush’s Iraq plan” (Lehmann 2007), and how he “led the chamber in repelling” Bush’s immigration proposal (Lehmann 2006). Kennedy was so emphatic in his attacks that he elicited a response from the Bush administration that alleged that Kennedy was making “false attacks against the administration” (Lehmann 2005). Kennedy’s office was quick to respond, accusing the White House of resorting “to the only thing they know how to do: the politics of fear” (Lehmann 2005).

Examining how the Massachusetts’ Senate delegation presents its work reveals that the senators are Issue Oriented. Both Kerry and Kennedy engage in national debates – attacking the Republican president and presenting their work to advance liberal policy reforms. I turn next to Arkansas’ Senate delegation – Blanche Lincoln and Mark Pryor – who present a very different summary of their work to constituents.

1.1.2 The Appropriators

Blanche Lincoln and Mark Pryor offer a sharp contrast to Kerry and Kennedy’s focus on broad national policy. Lincoln and Pryor focused almost exclusively on claiming credit for money spent in Arkansas. This was evident in the senators’ press releases – they regularly issued joint press releases to claim credit for money allocated to Arkansas. For example, both Senate offices issued a press release to declare that “Senators Blanche Lincoln and Mark Pryor ... announced today that they secured \$1 million ... for the Wolverine World Wide factory in Jonesboro to develop an advanced mountain climbing boot for the U.S. special operations forces” (Pryor 2005b). Another press release claimed credit for a smaller allocation, stating that, “Senators Blanche Lincoln and Mark Pryor ... announced today that the Grover Township Fire Protection District in Lakeview will receive \$24,025 for firefighter operations and safety” (Pryor 2005a). And the joint credit claiming included other members of Arkansas’ congressional delegation. One press release included Arkansas’ entire delegation, touting their “united effort ... to secure millions of dollars to support the state’s growing defense industry” (Pryor 2005c).

Stories in local papers also documented the senators’ collaborations. One article quoted Lincoln’s chief of staff Steve Patterson as explaining that both “Pryor and Lincoln ... added the \$15 million during negotiation over the bill” (Blomeley 2005). Another newspaper story reported that both “Blanche Lincoln and Mark Pryor” announced a “\$600,000 Economic Development Administration grant to construct an industrial railroad spur” (Rayburn 2010). And an article on funding for a disaster center reported that “Sens. Mark Pryor and Blanche Lincoln announced ... that the Southwest Arkansas Planning and Development District will receive the Commerce department grant to fund the center” (Press 2009). Not surprisingly, this article borrows heavily from a press release issued by Mark Pryor’s office (Pryor 2009).

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The senators not only focused on spending in statements from their Senate offices, but they also linked their reelection campaigns to the delivery of particularistic benefits to the state. This is particularly true for Blanche Lincoln, who faced a strong, and ultimately successful, challenge in the 2010 Senate election from John Boozman – a conservative House member. A centerpiece of Lincoln’s campaign was that as chairman of the Agriculture Committee, she could deliver funding to the state and protect Arkansas’ interests. Lincoln touted her prowess in her stump speeches and in televised campaign advertisements. In one advertisement, L. D. Brantley – a farmer from Arkansas – explained that as chair of the Agriculture Committee, Lincoln “forced the Department of Agriculture to put 700 Arkansans back to work” and secured “special disaster aid for Arkansas farmers” (Lincoln 2010). Even when Lincoln strayed from claiming credit for money delivered to the state, she maintained her focus on local farming affairs. This was never more evident than the morning she called into a local television station to explain why Russia had opened its markets to poultry raised on Arkansas farms.

Mark Pryor, like Lincoln, regularly referenced his ability to deliver money to the state – even defending often-maligned congressional institutions used to secure that money. While on one local Arkansas talk show he explained how he was able to effectively deliver money to support highways funds – with earmarks. He went on to defend earmarked funds as a tool to protect funding for small southern cities that compete with large coastal metropolitan areas, stating that “I [Pryor] want to help as much as I can. Some of that [help] is earmarks.”

1.2 PRESENTATIONAL STYLES, REPRESENTATIONAL STYLES,
AND REPRESENTATION: AN OVERVIEW OF THE ARGUMENT

The cases of the Massachusetts and Arkansas Senate delegations demonstrate how proactive representatives use communication to shape how they are evaluated by constituents. Both delegations use their presentational styles to define the type of representation they provide to constituents – attempting to affect constituents’ impressions of their legislator’s representational style. But how legislators define their styles depends on the characteristics of their constituents. Kennedy and Kerry bolster their reputation among their like-minded constituents with an emphasis on articulating positions and engaging in policy debates. Pryor and Lincoln present themselves as appropriations ombudsmen, attempting to cultivate non-partisan support among otherwise unsympathetic constituents. The comparison also reveals the very different information the delegations provide their constituents in an attempt to shift the terms of evaluation. Kennedy and Kerry emphasize their partisan policy work in Washington, encouraging evaluations based on the positions taken in Washington. Pryor and Lincoln avoid explaining their votes or positions.

Instead, they inform constituents about spending – encouraging evaluations based on particularistic, and not policy, terms.

The cases of the Massachusetts and Arkansas delegations, then, foreshadow my argument that how legislators present their work systematically affects the representative-constituent relationship – *dyadic* representation – and distorts the participants in political debate – harming *collective* representation. To make this argument, I characterize legislators' presentational styles, explain why legislators adopt those styles, and then show their far-reaching consequences for how representation occurs in American politics. To preview my argument and evidence, I now provide an overview of the book.

In Chapter 2, I argue that the structure of representation creates the opportunity, motive, and resources for legislators to use communication to influence the representative-constituent relationship. This occurs because tracking what legislators do in Congress is challenging for constituents, who are both unable and unwilling to invest the time to monitor their representatives in Congress. Legislators fill the void that their constituents' inattention creates, providing them with an account of what their elected official does and an explanation for why it is valuable. Legislators provide this information strategically, in an effort to shape their dyadic relationship with constituents – subtly shifting how constituents evaluate their members of Congress.

To demonstrate how legislators use communication to shape political representation, I introduce a new collection of political texts and new methods for measuring the content of those texts. In Chapter 3, I introduce the comprehensive collection of Senate press releases: every press release from every Senate office from 2005, 2006, and 2007. Press releases are a nearly ideal source for measuring how legislators engage constituents: They are regularly used by each Senate office, they are issued throughout the year, they are used in newspaper stories about the representative, and press releases are distinct from other forms of communication.

To measure how legislators communicate with constituents in press releases, in Chapter 4, I introduce a new statistical model for political texts. The model simultaneously estimates what legislators discuss in their press releases – the *topics* – and the attention legislators allocate to those – their *expressed priorities*. Across a variety of validations I demonstrate that the model applied to the press releases provides credible estimates of legislators' *presentational styles*.

The new measures of presentational styles provide insights into the strategic choices legislators make when presenting their work to constituents to cultivate support. In Chapter 5, I show that legislators' expressed priorities lie on a pork-policy spectrum. At the policy end of the spectrum are senators such as Ted Kennedy and John Kerry – focused on articulating positions and engaging in partisan debates. At the other end of the spectrum are senators such as Mark Pryor and Blanche Lincoln – emphasizing their work procuring particularistic spending for their state. Other senators strike a balance, more evenly engaging

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in credit claiming for spending and articulating positions on major policy disputes.

Legislators strategically locate themselves on this spectrum, adopting styles to cultivate support with their constituents. But how legislators cultivate support depends on the partisan composition of a state. In Chapter 6, I show that legislators who are *marginal* – representing states composed of the other party’s partisans – allocate a larger share of their press releases to claiming credit for spending and articulate fewer positions. Legislators who are *aligned* – representing states with a large share of copartisans – are more likely to engage in policy debates and engage in fewer credit-claiming activities.

Senators strategically adopt distinct presentational styles in order to shape the dyadic relationship with constituents. This creates the opportunity for deception. In Chapter 7, I show that one form of deception – fabrication – is rare. Across three distinct policy areas, I show a correspondence between actions senators take in Washington and what legislators say to constituents. Legislators are providing a faithful reporting of their actions to constituents.

In Chapter 8, I show that a second form of deception – omission – is more prevalent in senators’ presentational styles and has far-reaching consequences for both dyadic and collective representation. Omission occurs as senators draw attention to actions that cultivate support with constituents, implicitly drawing attention away from controversial actions that would undermine support. This affects how legislators are covered in newspapers and, as a result, what constituents know about their senators. Constituents whose legislators emphasize credit claiming are less knowledgeable about their senators’ partisan affiliations and roll-call votes than constituents whose legislators adopt a policy-focused presentational style. The differences in knowledge affect how constituents evaluate their representatives. Legislators who focus on non-partisan credit claiming are less polarizing than policy-focused legislators – cultivating greater support among opposing partisans than the policy-focused senators.

Legislators’ presentational styles affect the dyadic relationship between legislator and constituent, shaping how constituents perform evaluations. In Chapter 9, I show that when aggregated together, legislators’ strategic adoption of presentational styles also affects collective representation, causing an ideological distortion in who participates in policy debates. This occurs because aligned senators are not only engaged in policy debates more than marginal senators, but they are also the most conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats. The result is that the most extreme members of each party dominate policy debates. Using the Iraq war as a quantitative case study, I show how the selective engagement of legislators causes the most extreme members to dominate the debate. Across issues, I show that the most extreme legislators are the most likely to articulate positions, while the more moderate legislators are more likely to claim credit for particularistic spending. This

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distortion has wide-ranging normative implications for both representation and the health of democracy.

Chapter 10 concludes the book. There I argue that the study of representation must be more than the study of ideological agreement between elected officials and constituents. In addition to understanding how legislators aggregate constituent preferences, the study of representation also must consider how legislators manage constituents' impressions of how their members of Congress *represent* them in Washington. Understanding how legislators shape this impression will provide a better understanding of a wide range of puzzles in political representation and the study of Congress and American democracy.

1.3 CONCLUSION

Throughout this book I show how senators actively engage constituents to shape the representative-constituent relationship. This expands on the predominant model of representation used in quantitative studies. Recognizing this engagement also complicates the evaluation of the quality of representation. If legislators are able to cultivate support through their presentational styles, then comparisons of how legislators and constituents align ideologically are insufficient for examining the quality of representation (Rehfeld 2009). Rather, new normative standards are necessary to assess the more active relationship between legislators and their constituents (Mansbridge 2003). This book, then, also introduces new normative questions about what constitutes legitimate representation and shows that commonly applied standards are useful but incomplete.

In Chapter 2, I begin making the case that what legislators say matters for representation in American politics. There I explain why the structure and incentives of American politics create the motive and opportunity for legislators to influence how they are evaluated by constituents.