Association Between Political Interest and Feelings of Political Representation

1. Background

A large proportion of Americans do not believe Congress represents them well, however the reasons for this are unclear. It is actually contested whether political interest can effectively predict voter turnout (Glenn et al., 1968), so research needs to be cautious when associating voting behavior to faith or lack of faith in Congress. This study proposes that it would be more effective to investigate whether there is a direct link between political interest and the people’s sense of congressional functioning.

Americans with greater political interest may have more faith in Congress, however limited research has been done to corroborate or refute this claim. While the relationship between demography, voting behaviors, and political beliefs has been widely studied (see Unnever et al., 2011; Roscoe, 2003; Glenn et al., 1968), political interest of the general public has typically not been used in research as an explanatory variable. Some associations regarding political interest have been established, such as the fact that political interest increases as people get older (Glenn et al., 1968), but many other essential factors have been left out.

One such factor is religious affiliation, and specifically, whether people believe church and politics should be separate (Levesque et al., 2005).[[1]](#footnote-1) Christians make up a significant portion of the United States population, and it is worth testing whether more ‘politically minded’ Christians may have fewer hostile feelings towards Congress. Thus, the goal of this study is to determine why political interest, coupled with religious sentiments (or lack thereof), may or may not be a strong predictor of American feelings of political representation in Congress.

2. Method

2.1 Sample

The sample comes from the 2012 Outlook on Life Surveys, which has been organized into two waves: Wave 1 had 2,294 participants, and Wave 2 had 1,604 participants. This study will focus predominately on the first wave. “The target population was comprised of four groups: African American males aged 18+, African American females aged 18+, White/other race males aged 18+, and White/other race females aged 18+ (OOL Surveys).” The surveys were conducted through Knowledge Networks, an organization which uses “address-based sampling” and “random digit dialing” methodology to recruit participants. Participants may not volunteer: after being selected, they receive an email with a questionnaire.

2.2 Measures

Political interest and feelings toward Congress were measured separately on a scale from 1-5, which this study recodes to have 1 represent the lowest level of political interest and the most negative feelings toward Congress (measured based on the question of Congress’s ability to represent its constituents) and 5 represent the highest level for each variable. Political interest is explanatory and faith in Congress is the response variable. To see how religious factors may influence the association between these two variable, this study also analyzes the data on variable w1\_m7, which measures participants feelings toward the notion that church or religion should be separate from politics on a scale of 1-5 (which has similarly been recoded to have 1 represent the strongest belief in the separation of church and politics, and vice versa). Religion adhered to makes up a secondary variable for this association. Political interest, again, is the explanatory variable, and its relationship to the religious variables will be evaluated with an analysis of variance test. The relationship between political interest and ‘faith’ in congress, will also be analyzed using an analysis of variance test. When more than two variables are being analyzed, a post-hoc test will be applied if necessary.

3. Implications

Larson’s research has found that hostility towards government has been on the rise since the 1990s, and he notes that the prospects of establishing term-limits on Congress are highly unlikely for two reasons. First, in the 90s a term-limits movement failed when the Supreme Court ruled that it must be amended to the Constitution, making the bar for implementation much higher; second, the relatively split distribution of Republicans and Democrats in Congress since 2010 means constituents generally won’t feel as politically underrepresented as would be necessary for a strong term-limits movement to sufficiently pressure Congress (Larson, 2012). But as more and more people are becoming dissatisfied with the parties themselves, this model needs to be re-evaluated in terms which do not assume that public generally supports either the Democrats or Republicans. By isolating political interest – and adding variables which have been understudied yet may still be important predictors of feelings toward Congress – this study seeks to shed more light on why a significant proportion of United States residents are skeptical of Congress’s efficacy.

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1. The study indicated is representative of how most research politico-religious is focused: on authority rather than the general population. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)