The Impression of Influence: Legislator Communication, Representation, and Democratic Accountability

The Impression of Influence: Legislator Communication, Representation, and Democratic Accountability by Justin Grimmer; Sean J. Westwood; Solomon Messing

Review by: Jeffrey J. Harden

The Journal of Politics, Vol. 77, No. 3 (July 2015), pp. e1-e2

Published by: The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the Southern Political Science Association

Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/681889

Accessed: 11/06/2015 12:54

Book Review

Jeffrey J. Harden, University of Colorado Boulder

The Impression of Influence: Legislator Communication, Representation, and Democratic Accountability. By Justin Grimmer, Sean J. Westwood, and Solomon Messing. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014.

In *The Impression of Influence*, Grimmer, Westwood, and Messing take a major theoretical and empirical step forward in the study of credit claiming as an important means by which representatives generate support from their constituents. Using a wide variety of evidence on the allocation of funding and projects in the US Congress—including 170,000 press releases from House members and several original survey experiments—they make the case that credit claiming is not always as straightforward as a legislator doing something beneficial for her district. Instead, it is a complex relationship that is influenced by legislators, constituents, and mass attitudes toward particularistic spending. The result is a book that greatly improves our understanding of representation, legislative behavior, and American political economy.

The book makes two key points. First, legislators use voters' inattention to government expenditures to their own electoral advantage. In communicating with their districts, these legislators carefully craft language to create the impression that they are influential in delivering particularistic benefits. They do this in cases where they had actual, direct influence on spending for the district as well as cases in which they had virtually no real power. Importantly, while their involvement in those two scenarios is drastically different, the language legislators use to communicate them shows only subtle variation—perhaps as minor as replacing the phrase "secures funding" with "announces funding." Drawing on literature from psychology and linguistics, the authors make the case that people tend to make causal inferences from either type of phrase, which allows legislators to claim credit for real projects, requested projects, and even those that are not under the control of Congress.

A second critical point that the book makes is that constituents respond to legislators' efforts to claim credit for expenditures, but not always in the way we might think. In general, constituents' views about legislators improve if the latter bring home funding. But this positive effect does not simply increase in the amount of spending. A legislator does not need to secure a large earmark to gain support from her district; instead, she can generate support by bringing home several smaller projects and reminding her constituents about them frequently. Additionally, constituents' positive feelings from credit claiming for projects can erode quickly if the projects are framed against the larger government budget and the charge of wastefulness.

The opening chapter introduces the central arguments and previews the research. In chapter 2, the authors detail their theoretical framework, which centers on the two points mentioned above. They begin presenting empirical evidence in chapter 3 with an analysis of one of the main data sources: a large collection of press releases from members of Congress from 2005 to 2010. Their primary goal with these texts is to generate a measure of Congresspersons' propensity to credit claim for district projects. Using cutting-edge statistical tools for text analysis, they produce and validate such a measure. Then they proceed to assess its variation. For example, they find that credit claimers tend to represent districts with economic need (e.g., low income, low education). They also find that legislators in safe districts tend to fall on the low end of the credit claiming spectrum, while those in competitive electoral circumstances credit claim more often.

Chapters 4–6 present an array of survey experiments designed to assess constituents' views toward credit claiming. The authors are clear about the decisions they made in constructing the experiments and even replicate their own findings multiple times over the course of successive experiments. They also make considerable efforts to maximize external validity, including one experiment in which they presented subjects with information on Facebook. The experiments break new ground in our understanding of how citizens process information about government expenditures. For example, we learn that (1) credit claiming benefits legislators more than does simple name recognition, (2) constituents give credit simply based on the attempt to bring home funding and are not sensitive to the amount of money or the certainty that the benefit will be realized, (3) affect toward the target of funding matters a lot for constituents' evaluations of the funding, and (4) legislators can still receive credit for bringing funding home even if they had indirect (at best) influence over the money.

Also in chapter 6, the authors use a case study of the Assistance to Firefighter Grant Program (AFGP) to draw linkages between the legislator and constituent perspectives. In brief, they demonstrate that in allowing legislators to claim credit by announcing agency grants, bureaucrats give political value to their agencies, thereby improving their chances of receiving Congressional budgetary support. However, this support can easily erode, as the authors discuss in chapter 7. They show that the positive benefits of credit claiming disappear if expenditures are presented with more context on the overall budget or if they are framed as wasteful. This led to a sharp decline in the credit claiming behavior of Republicans after the rise of the Tea Party in 2009. Additionally, the authors point out that by weakening the benefit of credit claiming, the backlash against expenditures removed a key means of bringing coalitions together to pass legislation, perhaps leading to more gridlock.

One minor shortcoming of this book is that it seems to underutilize the press release data to some extent. For example, the authors generate a measure of the amount of money claimed by legislators in the press releases but do not do much with it beyond simple description. This measure would prove useful for testing additional hypotheses about how legislators claim credit. For example, are there party differences? Do legislators claim more or less depending on electoral security?

Overall, this is an excellent book that should make a lasting contribution to the study of American legislative politics. It combines a strong theoretical foundation with novel and interesting data. Moreover, it employs sophisticated methods not for their own sake, but because those methods greatly improve our understanding of key concepts. Finally, it takes seriously the idea that representation is a two-way relationship between representatives and the represented.