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For my dissertation, I plan to explore a few factors that affect the level of legislative responsiveness to public opinion (responsiveness meaning the degree to which legislators base their actions on the preferences of their constituents). I plan to focus on three such factors, each of which will comprise one chapter, as follows:

1. Political parties provide organization for electoral and legislative politics. John Aldrich and others hypothesize, and preliminary evidence supports the hypothesis, that increased party competition in a jurisdiction increases the responsiveness of elected officials individually and governments collectively to public opinion. Party competition may also increase political participation. In chapter 1, I will test these hypotheses. I have talked to John Aldrich a bit about this project, and will continue to work with him to develop the framework for the study.
2. Issue publics, or groups of citizens with more intensely-held opinions about an issue than the rest of the population, may send amplified signals to politicians, causing them to respond more to the issue public than to median public opinion. In previous work, Sunshine Hillygus and I have examined how the number of hunters in a congressional district affects House members' votes on gun bills. In this chapter of my dissertation, I plan to use a similar approach to examine the effects of various issue publics on congressional support for health bills. The issue publics analyzed may include doctors, hospitals, the elderly, and the uninsured. The hypothesis here is that members of Congress will, in some circumstances, pay attention to issue publics related to an issue more than to their constituents as a whole. The circumstances for issue public effects involve the homogeneity of opinion within the issue public, their potency as an electoral force, and the intensity with which they hold their views on the issue relative to other voters.
3. My idea for the third chapter is more in flux, but essentially I want to analyze the way characteristics of public opinion itself affects legislative behavior. If we view public opinion itself as a signal received by legislators and translated into policy, then there may be characteristics of the signal itself that affect its reception. My specific hypotheses at this point are as follows (but may change as I do more literature review). Public opinion is expected to exert more consistent influence on representatives' behavior under the following conditions when:
   * Public opinion clearly favors a specific change from the status quo (signal is easier to discern as distinct from status quo)
   * Public opinion has a low variance (signal is less noisy)
   * There is more publicly available information about an issue (again, signal is less noisy)
   * An issue is more salient to the public overall (signal strength is higher)

Testing all of these hypotheses will require compiling a wide variety of existing data, including public opinion, congressional data, election returns, etc. I have been compiling a list of all the data I will need, and I already have some of it.