BRIDGING THE GAP: WHAT DRIVES LEGISLATORS ENGAGEMENT WITH
CONSTITUENTS

A Culminating Project Presented to the Department of Public Policy and Administration at
California State University, Sacramento in Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF PUBLIC POLICY AND ADMINISTRATION

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May 2025

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Executive Summary

This paper examines the varying dynamics that affect whether state legislators are more likely to consider their constituency when it comes to voting on legislation. How well or how often representatives engage with their constituents can have several determining factors. Getting elected is one part of the process, but how they represent their voters is another. In certain cases, legislators vote according to their district. Still, in other instances, aggressive lobbying tactics by well-funded interest groups or political gamesmanship can take over the process entirely, derailing policies or initiatives. That is why it is important to evaluate what factors influence a representative's decision-making, because a more adequate understanding can lead to a more representative democracy. This paper analyzes data from *Survey of State Legislators Relationship with their Districts*, by Rebekah Herrick (2008), and runs five ordered logistical regression models to test how factors such as gender, chamber of Congress, age, racial composition of the district, educational attainment in district, and the dominant voter ideology of their district influence legislators consideration of 1) their constituents 2) colleagues (other legislators) 3) interests groups 4) own staff, and 5) their own personal views when deciding how to vote. Findings suggest that legislators who are male and members of the Senate are significantly less likely to consider constituents when voting, when compared to their counterparts. Findings also suggest that these factors vary in effect depending on where the legislator is taking into consideration. The results of this study can inform future voters, constituencies, and advocates. A generalized approach to connecting with your representative may not be the most effective method, so it is important to tailor outreach and advocacy strategies to the specific characteristics of individual legislators.

Acknowledgements

Reaching this point came with much hard work and dedication that I could not have done alone. First, I would like to thank my mother and father for their love and support throughout my entire educational journey, whether assisting with my tuition or ensuring I was not starving; they are my rock. I would also like to thank my professors in the program, particularly Robert Wassmer for inducting me into the program, Dr. Ahrum Chang for keeping me encouraged in PPA 207 and 500, Christian Griffith for supporting me in my career, and David Deluz for making class enjoyable. I would also like to acknowledge my entire cohort for being the coolest cohort ever. It was worth struggling with you all. Finally, thank you to my friends and family, who kept me motivated to finish.

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Introduction

According to representative democracy, legislators are supposed to act on behalf of the people they represent (constituents). However, that reality is more than just black and white. Government consists of a dense system of influences and procedures that make things complicated. This complex system includes constituents, other politicians, organized interest groups, and legislative staffers - who often carry their own biases and opinions and bring them to the decision-making process when directing their boss. Though a critical component, elections are only a small mechanism for public accountability as they do not reflect the full picture of how representation functions in a day-to-day process. Because of this, the purpose of this research is to investigate the other factors that drive legislators to consider the opinions of their constituents and under what conditions they may rely on alternative sources. Suppose we can better understand these underlying influences. In that case, we can better inform ourselves to tackle specific issues by establishing more effective strategies to make our government more representative of its population.

According to Cal Matters, California's legislature is now the most diverse it has ever been in state history, with increased representation across race, gender, and sexual orientation (Kamal, 2023). However, diversity alone does not guarantee more responsive representation. Scholars like Oppenheimer (1996) and Thomas and Welch (1991) emphasize that contextual factors such as chamber size, district demographics, and legislator identity can all influence legislative behavior. Therefore, this paper asks: What makes legislators engage with their constituents?

In representative democracies, legislators are expected to act in accordance with the preferences of their constituents. However, recent observations suggest that this ideal is not always realized. A notable example is the voting behavior of California's Democratic legislators.

According to a 2024 CalMatters investigation, these legislators vote "no" on bills less than 1% of the time, with some, like Assemblymember Mike Fong, having never cast a "no" vote in thousands of decisions (Sabalow & Watts 2024). This trend raises concerns about the extent to which legislators are genuinely considering constituent input versus adhering to party lines or avoiding political risk.

This phenomenon is particularly significant in California, a state known for its diverse population and progressive policies. The reluctance to vote against party lines or take definitive stances on controversial issues may indicate a disconnect between elected officials and the constituents they represent. Such behavior undermines the principles of accountability and transparency that are fundamental to a healthy democracy.

To answer this question, I use data from a 2008 survey of state legislators. I run five ordered logistic regression models that test the effect of legislator demographics (gender, age), institutional position (chamber), and district-level characteristics (race, education, ideology) on the likelihood that legislators report considering: 1) constituents, 2) colleagues, 3) interest groups, 4) staff, and 5) their own views when it comes to voting on legislation.

Conceptual Framework

Representation theory is the baseline of this research, with a particular focus on the distinction between descriptive and substantive representation (Pitkin, 1967). Descriptive representation refers to the idea that elected officials who share demographic characteristics with their constituents (e.g., gender, race, socioeconomic background) are more likely to act in ways that reflect those constituents' interests. Substantive representation, by contrast, emphasizes the actions and decisions of legislators, regardless of their identity. While much of the political discourse celebrates increases in demographic diversity, scholars such as Thomas and Welch

(1991) and Oppenheimer (1996) have shown that institutional and contextual constraints can limit the degree to which descriptive traits translate into substantive action.

This study also draws on Rebekah Herrick's (2013) concept of listening as representation, which frames responsiveness as a two-stage process: monitoring public preferences and integrating them into decisions. This framework is especially useful in assessing legislators' decision-making beyond electoral outcomes, focusing instead on daily legislative behavior and communication patterns.

Additionally, the theory of bounded rationality (Simon, 1991) helps explain why legislators might rely on proxies such as colleagues, interest groups, or staff. Given cognitive limitations and time constraints, decision-makers often rely on heuristics, relationships, or trusted networks to guide their votes. This makes proximity, institutional familiarity, and partisan alignment strong influences in legislative decisions—especially when constituent signals are weak or ambiguous.

By integrating these frameworks, this study investigates not only whether legislators engage with constituents but why, and under what conditions they may substitute other inputs for direct voter feedback.

Literature Review

Miller and Stokes (1963) laid the foundation for understanding legislators' behaviors by introducing the concept of constituency influence in Congress. Miller and Stokes found that, in general, legislators do tend to respond to their constituents. However, they do note that the level of that responsiveness depends on the type of issue and context. Scholars, later on, build upon this framework to explore how the legislator's own identity and institutional environment directly affect responsiveness.

Rebekah Herrick's work expands on this topic by examining how gender specifically influences constituent engagement. From her work, Herrick (2010) finds that while male and female legislators often do spend similar amounts of time contacting their constituents, it is women who are more likely to attend meetings and incorporate constituent input into their decision-making. Earlier findings from Thomas (1992) and Flammang (1985) make Herrick's evidence even stronger, arguing that women tend to adopt a more constituent-oriented style of politics. Similarly, Sue Thomas and Susan Welch (1991) found that women were more likely to prioritize health, education, and welfare issues, which often necessitate close contact with constituents.

It is no surprise that race and district demographics play a part in a legislator's behavior. Work from Thomas (1992) and Oppenheimer (1996) iterate this notion, finding that legislators who represent a racially diverse population and even include smaller districts (rural communities) tend to have a stronger connection with them. The makeup of their districts often forces these legislators to adopt different strategies and approaches that gear them to establish stronger connections because they are more likely to be called out for lack of representation and held accountable since these communities are more than likely marginalized communities who rely on policies to help them. Legislators who share demographic characteristics with their constituents, i.e., same race, similar background, often present their districts more beneficially, known as descriptive representation.

When we look at the institution itself, Mooney (1991) argues that legislators often rely on the most conveniently available information due to proximity or familiarity. In other words, they tend to rely on their colleagues, staff, or organized groups for their information because that is what is most readily available. However, Herrick (2013) reframes representation in a different

light, defining representation as a process of "listening" rather than just having one's votes unify to the opinions of their constituents. To Herrick, listening translates to monitoring. She finds that legislators who monitor the preferences of their districts are more likely to use that information when voting, especially on salient or identity-based issues.

This research also intersects with broader conversations about California's evolving legislature. While the chamber has become more diverse, this has not always translated into equitable policy outcomes or consistent constituent engagement. The state's demographic complexity requires a more meticulous understanding of how institutional and personal characteristics play into the pressures legislators face.

It is important to take into consideration that many of the empirical studies referenced—such as those by Thomas (1991, 1992), Oppenheimer (1996), and Herrick (2010)—are based on legislative contexts from the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Times have since changed, and new dynamics have emerged, including, but not limited to, institutional reform, demographic diversity, and technological advancements that have reshaped how representatives interact with their districts.

Considering all the literature, constituent engagement is quite complex. A single factor does not determine it but consists of many different influences that can stem from institutional forces, demographic makeup, and a broad array of contextual influences. This study contributes to that body of knowledge by testing these dynamics empirically through survey data and regression analysis.

Data

This research draws upon data from the Survey of State Legislators' Relationship with Their Districts, 2008. Conducted by a team of political scientists, this survey was distributed nationally via mail in Fall 2008. The intention behind the survey is to gain a better understanding of how state legislators remain in tune with various elements within their districts and beyond. Across all 50 states, a total of 267 state legislators responded from their respective chambers. The dataset contains a good variety of different variables, like how they approach their policy decisions, how they interact with their constituents and if they do at all, and demographic information about their districts as well.

Because the dataset is a survey, the information I'm observing directly measures the legislator's self-reported reflection of how they consider constituent input, among other factors. More so, how the data is structured allows for demographic, institutional, and other contextual narratives to be considered in my analysis. Something else to consider is the fact that the dataset captures a population at a single point in time, which makes it appropriate for examining associations rather than causations.

Research design & approach

Individual state legislators are my unit of analysis. I cleaned the data only to include legislator input because the dataset initially consisted of staff responses. To make the data more robust, observations where key variables were missing were omitted. This resulted in observations for each model ranging from 239 to 287.

This research aims to understand the underlying influences behind legislators voting decisions and whether they value the input of their constituents. The research also expands on

these underlying influences and their assigned weight to other sources such as 1) fellow legislators, 2) interest groups, 3) legislative staff, and 4) personal views.

I do this by utilizing an ordered logistical regression, which is an appropriate method for analysis because my dependent variable is categorical with more than two categories. Because I am running an ordered logistic regression, I interpret the size of the coefficients by providing the odds ratio table. The odds ratio tells us the chance of the events occurring.

Each model includes the same set of explanatory variables, allowing for cross-comparison of predictors across all five realms of influence. The five separate models are as follows:

- Model 1: Dependent variable (DV) = consideration of constituent views

- Model 2: DV = consideration of their colleague's input

- Model 3: DV = consideration of interest groups influence

- Model 4: DV = consideration of legislative staff advice

- Model 5: DV = consideration of personal views

These dependent variables are coded on a four-point ordinal scale:

1. Rarely

2. Roughly half the time

3. Often

4. Almost always

Note that higher values indicate greater influence.

Variables

Each of the models uses a different DV from the survey, where legislators were asked to rate "how often" they considered different avenues when it came to voting on legislation. Note that each category is treated as a separate outcome in its own regression model. These include:

- Constituent input

- Colleague input

- Interest group influence

- Staff recommendations

- Personal views

Based on previous literature and theoretical frameworks, the following control variables are included in each model. Sex (Male & Female) is coded as dummy variables, 1 for male, 0 for female. Past research suggests gender may shape representative style, with female legislators often being more constituent-oriented (Herrick, 2013). The Chamber (House/Senate) is also coded as a dummy variable, where 1 if the legislator served in the state Senate and 0 if they served in the Assembly or House. Institutional norms and constituency sizes differ between chambers, which may influence their ability to engage with their constituency and how they do so. Age is calculated by subtracting the reported year of birth from 2008. Older legislators may have more experience and different motivations or networks than younger ones. The percentage of Black and Latino Residents in the district is a continuous variable that represents the percentage of the legislator's district population that is Black or Latino. This measures potential representational pressures in more racially diverse districts, especially under the framework of descriptive and symbolic representation. The percentage of College Graduates in the district is also a continuous variable that captures the educational profile of the district. Higher-education

populations may be more politically engaged or demand more responsiveness. Party Affiliation breaks into Democrat and Republican affiliation, with both being categorical variables with a Likert scale range. This variable controls for the encompassing environment that each representative represents that might systematically shape their decision-making.

Descriptive statistics

The descriptive statistics for the key independent and explanatory variables are provided in Table 1 below. Examining the data further, I configure the average legislator to be 57 years old within the data set. Most of the sample is male, with 81% identification, and the lower chamber (House) is the dominant chamber, representing 76% of the dataset. The variance of racial demographics varies at a high level, where we see the percentage of Black and Latino residents ranging from 0% to 90%. The same goes for educational attainment, where we see that between 5% and 90% of residents hold college degrees.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

MODEL 1 Variable	Observations	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
Dependent Variable					
Constituent Engagement	259	3.254	0.713	1	4
Explanatory Variables					
Gender					
Male	259	0.814	0.389	0	1
Female	259	0.185	0.389	0	1
Chamber					
House	259	0.760	0.427	0	1
Senate	259	0.239	0.427	0	1
Year born					
Age	258	57.02	10.96	28	89
Demographic					
Blacks & Latinos in District	251	13.65	17.45	0	90
College Graduates in District	244	37.21	17.59	5	90
Voter's Ideology					
Democrat	259	4.694	1.199	1	7
Republican	259	5.814	0.887	1	7

Ordered logistical regression

I ran five ordered logistical regression models to assess the relationships between legislators and their likelihood to consider various inputs when voting. Each model uses identical predictors, which allows for a direct comparison of which characteristics significantly predict responsiveness to different sources of influence.

Table 2. Ordered logistic Regression

MODEL 1

Variable	Coefficient	Odds Ratio
Explanatory Variables		
Gender		
Male	-.97** (.32)	.38
Chamber		
Senate	-.51* (.27)	.60
Year Born		
Age	.01 (.01)	1.01
Demographic		
Black & Latinos in District	.01 (.01)	1.01
College Graduates in District	-.01 (.01)	.99
Voter's Ideology		
Democrat	-.02 (.10)	.98
Republican	.16 (.13)	1.17
N = 287		

Note: †ρ<.1; *ρ<.05; **ρ<.01; ***ρ<.001

Statistical significance was interpreted at the following levels: † p < 0.10 (marginally significant), * p < 0.05 (*), ** p < 0.01 (**), *** p < 0.001 (***).

Model 1, Table 2 (constituent engagement) revealed that male legislators and Senators are significantly less likely to prioritize constituent input in their voting decisions. According to the odds ratio, male legislators are 62% less likely to engage with their constituents. Furthermore, Senators are 40% less likely to engage with their constituents.

Table 3. Ordered logistic Regression

MODEL 2

Variable	Coefficient	Odds Ratio
Explanatory Variables		
Gender		
Male	-.53† (.30)	.59
Chamber		
Senate	-.20 (.27)	.82
Year Born		
Age	-.00 (.01)	.96
Demographic		
Black & Latinos in District	-.01 (.01)	.99
College Graduates in District	.01 (.01)	1.00
Voter's Ideology		
Democrat	.05 (.10)	1.04
Republican	.04 (.13)	1.04
N = 278		

Note: †ρ<.1; *ρ<.05; **ρ<.01; ***ρ<.001

Table 4. Ordered logistic Regression

MODEL 3

Variable	Coefficient	Odds Ratio
Explanatory Variables		
Gender		
Male	-.62* (.31)	.54
Chamber		
Senate	-.06 (.27)	.94
Year Born		
Age	-.00 (.01)	1.00
Demographic		
Black & Latinos in District	-.01 (.01)	.99
College Graduates in District	-.00 (.01)	1.00
Voter's Ideology		
Democrat	.13 (.10)	1.14
Republican	.09 (.14)	1.10
N = 270		

Note: †ρ<.1; *ρ<.05; **ρ<.01; ***ρ<.001

Model 2, Table 3 (colleagues) and Model 3, Table 4 (interest groups) suggest similar patterns for male legislators, though weaker patterns. According to the odds ratio, from model 2, male representatives are 41% less likely to consider the opinions of their colleagues when it comes to voting. From model 4, we see that male representatives are 46% less likely to consider the ideas of interest's groups when it comes to voting.

Table 5. Ordered logistic Regression

MODEL 4

Variable	Coefficient	Odds Ratio
Explanatory Variables		
Gender		
Male	.06 (.32)	1.06
Chamber		
Senate	-.17 (.28)	.85
Year Born		
Age	.01 (.01)	1.01
Demographic		
Black & Latinos in District	0.11† (.01)	1.01
College Graduates in District	.01 (.01)	1.01
Voter's Ideology		
Democrat	-.24* (.11)	.79
Republican	-.10 (.14)	.90
N = 242		

Note: †ρ<.1; *ρ<.05; **ρ<.01; ***ρ<.001

Table 6. Ordered logistic Regression

MODEL 5

Variable	Coefficient	Odds Ratio
Explanatory Variables		
Gender		
Male	.03 (.34)	1.03
Chamber		
Senate	.20 (.30)	1.22
Year Born		
Age	-.00 (.01)	1.00
Demographic		
Black & Latinos in District	.01 (.01)	1.01
College Graduates in District	.00 (.01)	1.00
Voter's Ideology		
Democrat	-.02 (.11)	.98
Republican	.08 (.16)	1.08
N = 239		

Note: $†p<.1; *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001$

Interestingly, Model 4 (staff input) showed that racial diversity in a district (percentage of Black and Latino residents) is positively and marginally associated with staff reliance. At the same time, Democratic legislators were less likely to weigh staff opinions. Model 5 (own views) showed no significant predictors, suggesting legislators across types may consistently value their personal judgment regardless of background. The odds ratio from model 4 tells us that staff are 1% less likely to consider Blacks and Latinos when it comes to voting on legislation, which is marginally significant. Staff are also 21% less likely to consider democratic ideologies as well.

Discussion

This section will dissect the broader patterns and implications that resulted from my five regression models. In hindsight, the models show both consistency and variation throughout.

The most consistently significant factor across all the models was gender. Male legislators were significantly less likely than female legislators to prioritize constituent views, input from colleagues, and interest group perspectives. These results align with the previous literature, where Herrick (2010) noted that women legislators are more likely to engage with the public directly. The resulting pattern from this study suggests that gender does and continues to play a meaningful role in shaping representative behavior. The results reinforce the continuous findings of women adopting more inclusive behavior when facing their constituents. From this, we can assume that male legislator attitudes are more exclusive than anything, and that may have to do with broader societal factors than anything else.

From this study, we can also conclude that the chamber the representative is in also matters. Senators who represent larger, more diverse districts were less likely to consider constituents when making voting decisions. The Senate is also considered the upper chamber, which may play a role as to why Senators engage less - maybe they see themselves as more prestigious and make themselves harder to reach. Oppenheimer's (1996) findings support this result, where he found that institutional structure plays a role in the engagement style of representatives. However, in the other models, the chamber played a less significant role, which can indicate that institutional behavior may interact with other variables like gender or demographics in complicated ways. This variation suggests the importance of examining chamber-based behaviors in tandem with other legislator characteristics.

Surprisingly, district demographics, particularly the percentage of Black and Latino residents, only played a significant role in shaping staff reliance (Model 4). This suggests that legislators representing a more racially diverse district might depend more on internal advice to interpret their constituent's needs. Demographics did not play a significant role in other models, which could indicate that staff play crucial roles in being mediators in translating diversity into legislative priorities. The finding hints at the behind-the-scenes role of staff in ensuring their bosses remain engaged even though they may not be doing it directly themselves.

Surprisingly, partisanship did not play a strong role as expected. Both Democratic and Republican districts were largely insignificant predictors across models. Given the current political context, especially the increase in polarization, one might have anticipated stronger partisan effects. The lack of significance could reflect either the limitations of the 2008 dataset or a broader insight: that institutional and demographic variables may outweigh partisanship in shaping constituent engagement behavior, at least when self-reported by legislators.

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the nuanced and often overlooked factors that influence how state legislators consider different sources of input when making policy decisions. Most notably, the data show that male legislators and those in the Senate are significantly less likely to consider constituent input than their female or Assembly counterparts. This supports a long-standing thread in the literature suggesting that women often adopt a more constituent-centered approach to representation, while institutional dynamics—such as larger Senate district sizes—can create distance between elected officials and their communities.

Additionally, the study finds that demographic factors such as the percentage of Black and Latino residents in a district are associated with increased reliance on staff input, suggesting

that racial diversity may heighten the complexity of constituent demands and drive legislators to seek additional support in navigating them.

Interestingly, when it comes to legislators' own views, none of the variables were statistically significant. This suggests that legislators' reliance on their personal judgment may be more consistent across demographic and institutional lines, reaffirming a longstanding belief that representatives ultimately act on a blend of public input and personal ideology.

These findings have practical implications. Advocacy organizations, lobbyists, and constituents themselves must recognize that a one-size-fits-all approach to influencing legislators may be ineffective. Engagement strategies should instead be tailored to the characteristics of each legislator—such as their gender, chamber, and district composition. More broadly, this research reinforces the importance of both descriptive and substantive representation in a democratic system. Greater diversity alone is not a guarantee of equitable policymaking; institutional reforms and active constituent engagement are equally necessary.

Future research should build on this foundation by examining more recent data, as the political landscape has changed significantly since 2008. Also, variables with more specific demographic information and other factors should also be considered. Digital communication, polarization, and evolving public expectations all deserve further exploration to understand how representation continues to evolve in modern legislatures.

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