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Professionalization and Public Opinion of State Legislatures

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Using a seven-state survey I examine how closely people follow the activities of the state legislature, how much contact they have with its members, and how they evaluate its performance. In particular, I investigate whether legislative professionalization level or district size influences how people see their legislature. Professionalization has a positive relationship with contact but has a negative relationship with attention level and performance rating. Constituency size exhibits little influence except on contacts.

In recent years American politics has been rife with antilegislature sentiment. At the Congressional level there is a growing term limitation movement. Even more pronounced are emotions at the state level. In 1990, for example, Colorado and Oklahoma voters passed propositions limiting the number of years individuals can serve in the state legislature. Coloradans also imposed an annual 120-day limit on legislative sessions. California voters went even further. Not only did they impose term limitations, but for the third time in six years they voted to curtail the resources available to their state legislators, this time by cutting the legislature's budget and staff by 40%, and restricting pension benefits.¹ Underlying these actions is a notion that professional legislators do not provide adequate representation. While state legislatures have long been the subject of public scorn, the professionalization movement begun in the 1960s was intended, in part, to improve the institutions' standing by enhancing the representational capacity of those who served within them. The available bits and pieces of public opinion on state legislatures suggest they are little appreciated (Newkirk 1979; Jewell 1982; Cotter 1986). By appearances, the dramatic legislative reforms of the last 20 years (Rosenthal 1989) have failed to impress the public.

But appearances can deceive. Little systematic work has been undertaken in this area. We are not sure if constituents prefer amateur to professional legislatures or smaller to larger districts. It might even be the case that people do not

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¹Previously voters passed propositions which, among other things, limited legislators' use of constituent mailings (Proposition 73, 1988) and altered the powers exercised by the speaker (Proposition 24, 1984).

discriminate on these characteristics and that they simply do not like their state legislature, or that the events described here are altogether misleading about public sentiment. In this paper I use a seven-state survey to examine public opinion on state legislatures. I investigate how closely people follow the actions of their state legislature, how much contact they have with local state legislators, and how they evaluate their legislature's performance. My goal is to determine whether professionalization or size of constituency affects the way people see their state legislature.

DATA

From October 1989 to December 1989 the University of Iowa Social Science Institute conducted its Heartland Poll, which included a series of questions about state legislatures. The Heartland Poll is a random sample telephone survey of approximately 300 people in Iowa and in each of its six neighboring states (Illinois, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, South Dakota, and Wisconsin). The total number of interviews for the survey was 2,112.² This survey is an advance over previous studies of legislative support because they were focused on a single state (Patterson, Ripley, and Quinlan 1990), compilations of disparate state polls (Jewell 1982; Cotter 1986), or a mix of both approaches (Patterson, Hedlund, and Boynton 1975). The Heartland Poll provides a large random sample in each of seven states and asks respondents the same questions over the same time period.

Moreover, the states in this survey constitute a good sample for my purposes because they vary on a number of important dimensions. As will be shown, they include professional and amateur legislatures with large and small districts. They vary on total population and most socioeconomic measures. Politically, the sample includes four states with legislatures controlled by the Democrats but with a Republican governor (Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, and Wisconsin), a Democratic (Minnesota) and a Republican (South Dakota) controlled state, and Nebraska with a GOP governor and a nonpartisan, unicameral state legislature.

Professionalization and Constituency Size

Although some scholars use the term legislative professionalization to mean a change in the personal characteristics and attitudes of individuals who serve in office (e.g., King 1981; Eliassen and Pedersen 1978), I employ it here to refer to attributes of the institution. Measures of professionalization (e.g., Grumm 1971; Citizens Conference on State Legislatures 1971), can be broken into three components (Squire 1988, 69–70): level of member remuneration, staff support and facilities, and time demands. Legislatures deemed professional are like the U.S. Congress. They meet in unlimited sessions, pay their members well and provide

²These data have been made available by the University of Iowa Social Science Institute, which bears no responsibility for the following analysis. I used the unweighted sample. The weighted sample produces virtually identical substantive results.

TABLE 1
CHARACTERISTICS OF STATE LEGISLATURES

State	Professionalization ^a		Total Number of Legislators	Mean Constituency Size
	Score	National Rank		
Illinois	.302	8	177	65,000
Iowa	.225	19	150	19,400
Minnesota	.199	23	201	20,700
Missouri	.287	10	197	25,400
Nebraska	.186	25	49	32,800
South Dakota	.083	46	105	6,700
Wisconsin	.270	12	132	36,100

^aTaken from Squire (1992)

superior staff resources and facilities. Using data from 1986 to 1988 I developed a measure of professionalization using an index of Congress' member pay, average days in session, and mean staff per member as a baseline against which to compare an index composed of those same attributes of other legislative bodies. The measure is designed to show how closely a state legislature approximates the professional characteristics of the Congress, with one representing perfect resemblance, and zero no resemblance (Squire 1992).³

Professionalization scores for the legislatures in the seven states surveyed are given in table 1. The heartland states include several close to the top in national rank, a couple in the mid-ranks, and one near the bottom. I anticipate that the probability people follow what is going on in the legislature increases with professionalization because sessions are longer and presumably generate more news. Moreover, members of professionalized legislatures have more resources such as staff and constituent newsletters to exploit to generate publicity for themselves and the institution. The availability of these resources should also increase the number of contacts between legislators and those they represent.

But familiarity may breed contempt. Following the legislature and interacting with its members may not make the institution better liked. Jewell (1982, 179–81) finds that professional legislatures are evaluated less favorably because, he suggests, the public becomes more aware of controversies and conflicts within the organization. Similarly Patterson, Ripley, and Quinlan (1990) find a negative, but statistically insignificant relationship between legislator contact and support for the Ohio state legislature. So having more information may result in a lower opinion.

³Data on the Congress were collected from Ornstein, Mann, and Malbin (1987). Data for the state legislatures were collected from Weberg and Bazar (1988, 9) and *The Book of the States 1988–89*. In each of the three categories a state legislature's score was turned into a percentage of the congressional figure. The three percentages were then added and divided by three to give a score ranging from zero to one.

Constituency size also may influence attitudes. The size of legislative districts has long been an issue in American politics. Madison devoted three *Federalist Papers* to the subject (numbers 55, 56, and 58), arguing that at a district size of 30,000 per representative would “possess a due knowledge of the interest of [his or her] constituents.” The range in district sizes among the seven Heartland states is substantial: from 6,700 people per legislator in South Dakota to 65,000 per legislator in Illinois.⁴ Certainly contact between legislator and constituent should increase as the number of people in a district declines (Rosenthal 1981, 14), as is the case with U.S. senators and the people they represent (Hibbing and Alford 1990). Increased contacts produced by smaller districts also might promote greater attention to the activities of the legislature and, a higher opinion of it, perhaps because of the intimacy of the legislator-constituent relationship.

Following the Legislature

According to Patterson (1983, 159), “Many [state] legislators find a large proportion of their constituents to be ill informed [and] not very interested.” Heartland Poll results confirm this impression. Only 17% of the respondents claim to follow their state legislature most of the time. Another 40% say they pay attention some of the time, and 31% admit watching only now and then. The final 12% almost never give the activities of the state legislature any consideration. These numbers correspond roughly to those for similar national survey questions on general interest in politics (cf. Miller, Miller, and Schneider 1980, 307).

In addition to professionalization and constituency size, several other variables might affect the probability of following the state legislature and must be entered as controls.⁵ (Question wordings for the dependent variables and the coding of the independent variables are given in the appendix.) In general, the most powerful variable influencing interest in politics is education. Additionally, older people, those with higher incomes, men, whites, and urban residents are more apt to participate in and know more about politics than are others (Smith 1989; Conway 1991). People who strongly identify with one of the major parties also evidence more interest in politics than those with weaker attachments (Smith 1989). Nebraskans may find it easier to follow the Unicameral’s activities because they only have to keep track of one house, not two (Rodgers, Sittig, and Welch 1984, 85).

⁴This measure averages across the two houses in each state (except unicameral Nebraska, of course). The ratio of upper house to lower house seats in Missouri is 4.8:1, and in Wisconsin it is 3:1. Excluding Nebraska, the other states are all 2:1. The ratios are only weakly related to any important differences among the state legislatures, particularly staff resources. In almost every state upper and lower house members enjoy similar staffing levels. Moreover, as noted in the text, average staff per legislator is one of the components in the professionalization measure.

⁵Professionalization and constituency size correlate at about .7 in this sample. To assess potential collinearity problems I used the technique recommended by Lewis-Beck (1980, 60). Each of the independent variables was regressed on all of the other independent variables and none of the resulting R²s—all around .55—suggested trouble.

The effect of these variables on how closely people follow the state legislature is given in table 2. Most of the results are as expected. Attention increases with age, education, income, and strength of partisan identification. Men are more likely to say they follow legislative activities than are women. The regression coefficients for minorities, rural dwellers, and Nebraska residents are negative but statistically insignificant.

More interesting are the results for constituency size and professionalization. The former is small and statistically insignificant. People are just as likely to follow what is going on in the capital if they are in a district with many people than if they share their representative with far fewer people. In contrast, professionalization clearly matters. Its coefficient is large and statistically significant. The more professionalized the legislature, the less likely people are to pay it much attention, contrary to my expectations. This may result for two related reasons. First, professionalization tends to increase with state population and urbanization. Thus,

TABLE 2
ATTENTION TO STATE LEGISLATURES

Variables	Unstandardized Coefficient	T-Ratio
Professionalization Level	-1.463 (.469)	3.12
Constituency Size ^a	.002 (.0017)	.84
Strength of Party Identification	.099 (.021)	4.72
Age	.015 (.001)	11.60
Education	.038 (.009)	4.36
Income	.050 (.013)	3.77
Sex	-.131 (.040)	3.25
Race	-.122 (.098)	1.25
Rural	-.011 (.041)	.26
Nebraska	-.108 (.062)	1.76
Constant	1.549 (.178)	8.70
Number of Cases	1,808	
R ²	.11	
Adjusted R ²	.11	

^aMeasured in thousands

the legislature suffers from a cacophony effect: information about it is lost in the clutter of competing news. Second, people can focus better on more amateur legislatures because they have shorter sessions, and consequently receive more in depth news coverage. When the South Dakota legislature is in session it is a major source of news in the state. The Illinois General Assembly probably commands less media attention on average because it is more of a continuing story and must compete with a greater number of other events for space.

Contact with the Legislature

An unbelievable 45% of Heartland Poll respondents report that either they or someone in their family had some contact with a local state legislator or his or her staff. While this number seems inflated, it is still usable for my purposes here because it does not seem to be biased by state. That is, if the percentage who say they have had contact with their state legislator is exaggerated, the error is consistent across the sample. The percentages do not vary much by state. Thus, I can still test whether professionalization increases contacts and whether district size matters.

A probit equation with contact as the dependent variable and professionalization, district size, and appropriate control variables is presented in table 3. The probability of contacting a local legislator increases with income, education, and interest in the legislature. These relationships are expected because they are consistent with the notion that individuals for whom the cost of contacting legislators is low are more likely to undertake that action. The results in table 3 also show that there is no relationship between party or opinion of the legislature and contacting legislators. An individual whose party is in the legislative minority, or who does not hold a high opinion of the legislature is just as likely to communicate with a legislator as a majority party adherent with positive feelings. Nebraska's unicameral legislature, where each constituent has just one legislator, does not affect contacts.

The probability of contacts increases with professionalization level and decreases with district size, although the statistical significance of the latter coefficient is marginal. With all else being equal, the professionalization coefficient reveals that, on average, an Illinois resident is 11% more likely to communicate with his or her local legislator than is someone living in South Dakota.⁶ But the constituency size coefficient cuts the other way. On average, South Dakota residents are 19% more likely to get in touch with their legislators than are people in

⁶These probabilities were calculated using the probit estimates given in table 3. For example, the mean probability of an Illinois resident contacting his or her legislator as opposed to a resident of South Dakota doing likewise was determined by running the equation in table 3 for each case twice; first setting the variable of interest at the appropriate figure (e.g., professionalization at .302) and then again setting that same variable at the other value for comparison (e.g., professionalization at .083). The predicted value from each equation was evaluated against the cumulative standard normal distribution to turn it into a probability, and then the first number was subtracted from the second. A mean score for all cases was then calculated.

TABLE 3
CONTACT WITH STATE LEGISLATORS^a

Variables	Unstandardized Coefficient	Coefficient Standard Error
Professionalization Level	1.521 (.752)	2.02
Constituency Size ^b	-.005 (.003)	1.83
Party	-.013 (.036)	.35
Age	-.0008 (.0021)	.37
Education	.069 (.014)	4.81
Income	.103 (.022)	4.81
Sex	.072 (.065)	1.11
Race	-.229 (.169)	1.37
Rural	.113 (.065)	1.73
Follow State Legislature	.475 (.040)	11.76
Opinion of State Legislature	-.018 (.045)	.39
Nebraska	.015 (.099)	.15
Constant	-2.863 (.319)	8.99
Number of Cases	1,732	
McKelvey Pseudo R^2	.21	
% Correctly Predicted	65	

^aProbit equation

^bMeasured in thousands

Illinois. When the contrasting professionalization and constituency size coefficients are considered together, the latter proves more powerful: South Dakota residents, on average, are 9% more apt to contact their legislator than are individuals in Illinois (43% to 34%). Contacts, then, are enhanced more by the intimacy of small districts than by the staff and resources afforded by professionalization.

EVALUATING THE LEGISLATURE

In general the public holds state legislatures in low esteem (Jewell 1982; Cotter 1986), although some surveys find that people express an even harsher opinion of Congress (Newkirk 1979). Heartland respondents tend to give their state legislatures

a passable rating. As shown in figure 1, in each state most people evaluate the performance of their state legislature as fair. A smaller percentage give it a good or excellent rating, while only a few consider it to be poor or very poor.

Previous studies have found a number of variables which affect these evaluations (Patterson, Hedlund, and Boynton 1975; Jewell 1982; Cotter 1986; Patterson, Ripley, and Quinlan 1990), although they do not always agree on which ones are important, or even the direction of the effect. In general, people like legislatures controlled by their party and also are favorable if they approve of the governor (see also Rosenthal 1990). Similarly, the legislature is given credit by those who think the state economy has performed well and support rises with income. Better educated people and those with greater knowledge of the institution are more critical of the legislature than are others. Ethnic minorities tend to be negative in their assessments, while women are more positive than men.

Other variables can be hypothesized to influence opinion of the legislature. Professionalized legislatures have more resources to exploit for public relations purposes at their disposal and should benefit. Smaller districts increase contacts with legislators and should provide legislators with a better sense of their constituents and their interests. The aggregate effect should be a reward for the institution. Along these same lines, increased contact with legislators ought to result in greater support for the legislature as its members are given credit for responding to constituent problems. In theory, at least, the lack of overt partisanship may increase

FIGURE 1

OPINION ON PERFORMANCE OF
STATE LEGISLATURES

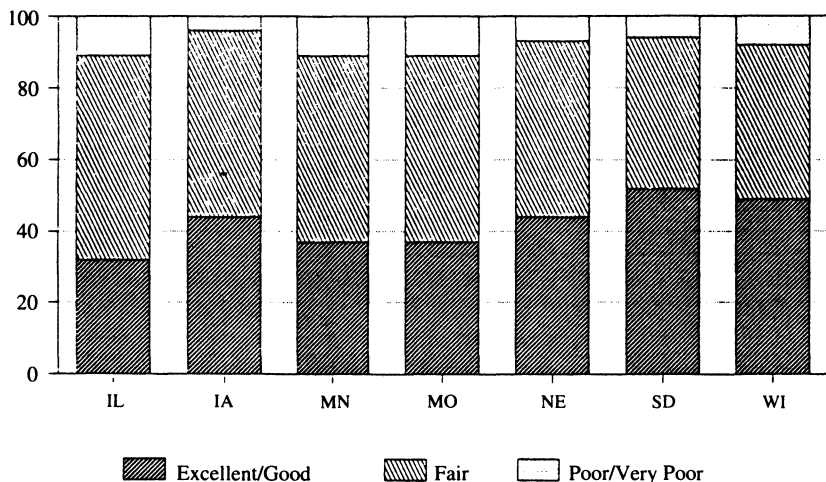


TABLE 4
OPINION OF STATE LEGISLATURE

Variables	Unstandardized Coefficient	T-Ratio
Professionalization Level	-.806 (.411)	1.96
Constituency Size ^a	.001 (.002)	.70
Party	.056 (.020)	2.81
Age	-.001 (.001)	1.11
Education	-.013 (.008)	1.72
Income	-.004 (.012)	.34
Sex	.184 (.035)	5.25
Race	-.183 (.089)	2.04
Rural	.072 (.035)	2.04
Rating of Governor	.007 (.0007)	8.85
Opinion of Past State Economic Performance	.150 (.025)	6.04
Follow State Legislature	.128 (.022)	5.88
Contacted State Legislator	-.015 (.037)	.41
Nebraska	.049 (.053)	.92
Constant	1.672 (.159)	19.16
Number of Cases	1,610	
R ²	.12	
Adjusted R ²	.11	

^aMeasured in thousands

the Nebraska legislature's popularity (Rodgers, Sittig, and Welch 1984). Finally, older people and rural residents have been found to be more supportive of government institutions (Lipset and Schneider 1983, 122-24; Lewis-Beck 1977), and variables for age and residency have been added as controls.

A regression to sort out these competing claims is presented in table 4. Most of the coefficients are large and statistically significant and almost all take the expected sign. Some variables do not prove important. Constituency size, contact

with legislators and Nebraska residency do not influence opinion. Support for the legislature is independent of age, income, and education, although the coefficient for the last of these is in the expected negative direction and is close to traditional statistical significance levels.

Minorities express a lower opinion of the legislature than do nonminorities. People living in rural areas are more supportive than those from larger cities. Taken together these findings suggest that the public thinks state legislatures favor rural interests over urban concerns. But the legislature's image as a protector of traditional interests is, perhaps, contradicted by the finding that women express an 18% higher opinion of it than do men.⁷

Political orientations are important. Individuals whose party is in the legislative majority are 6% more favorable than are political independents, and 11% more favorable than are people who identify with the legislative minority party. Support for the governor translates into a higher opinion of the legislature. A 10-point increase in support for the governor produces a 6% gain for the legislature. The perception of a good state economy also redounds to the legislature's benefit.

Level of professionalization is negatively related to evaluation of the legislature. Jewell (1982, 179–80), who came to the same finding, speculated that "the more a legislature is in session, the more the public is aware of conflicts and controversies and the less respect it has for the institution. Although this is plausible, it seems at least partially inconsistent with the findings reported here. First, as shown in table 2, people are less likely to follow the legislature the more professionalized it is. Second, in table 4, increased attention to the legislature is associated with a higher opinion of it, consistent with Patterson, Hedlund, and Boynton's findings (1975, 47–48).

What may be driving the finding that professionalized legislatures are rated lower is that such bodies tend to be found in larger and more economically and socially diverse states. This means they are likely to be asked to handle more complex issues and take more initiatives, which can make people less favorable toward them, even without having to pay much attention. Because professionalized legislatures are likely to have more expected of them, they are apt to disappoint people. Those who follow the legislature's activities more closely may appreciate the difficulty it faces in weighing competing demands.

CONCLUSION

Obviously, a number of variables help explain attention to, contact with, and opinion of the state legislature. In general, constituency size does not matter much. Smaller districts appear to increase contacts between representative and constituent, but this does not spill over into a more favorable attitude toward the institution. Moreover, greater professionalization can partially mitigate the cost of

⁷This finding holds even when liberalism is entered into the equation.

larger districts on legislator–constituent contact. This is of some comfort given the inevitability of larger constituencies throughout the country. In the public’s eyes, smaller is not necessarily better.

While professionalization increases contacts, it lowers attention levels and opinions. In general, people seem less satisfied with professional legislatures than with amateur bodies. But this does not mean that members are disliked. Almost all state legislators are reelected, and by large margins (Jewell and Breaux 1988). Thus, for more professionalized legislatures there is the same paradox as at the congressional level (Parker and Davidson 1979; Patterson and Caldeira 1990): people like their representatives but not the institutions in which they serve.

This does not, of course, say anything about the legislative output of more professionalized bodies. They may very well be preferred to amateur legislatures because of their greater analytic capacities. Indeed, Opheim (1990) has found that legislators in professionalized legislatures are more satisfied in their work than are their counterparts in amateur bodies because of the superior resources at their disposal. But, regardless of their advantages, professional legislatures are less liked by those they represent. This dissatisfaction is not the result of districts which have grown too large but probably because of too many unmet demands and unsolved problems.

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APPENDIX

SURVEY QUESTION WORDINGS AND VARIABLE CODING

Question Wordings. Attention to the state legislature was established by asking, “Now I’d like to ask you a few questions about your state legislature. Would you say you follow what is going on in the state legislature most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all?” Contact was established by asking, “Have you or anyone in your family living there ever contacted a local state legislator or his or her staff?” Evaluation of the legislature was established by asking, “What kind of job do you think your state legislature is doing overall in representing the people of your state? Do you think it is doing an excellent, good, fair, poor or very poor job?” Using the coding which follows, attention had a sample mean of 2.6 (standard deviation of .9); contact, a mean of .4 (standard deviation of .5); and evaluation, a mean of 3.3 (standard deviation of .7).

Variable Coding. Age: in years. Constituency size: see table 1, the number given is the ratio of total legislators to total state population. Contact with legislator: 0 = no; 1 = yes. Education: by grade completed, 1–16. Follow the legislature:

1 = hardly at all; 2 = now and then; 3 = some of the time; 4 = most of the time. Governor rating: thermometer scale, 1–100. Income: 1 = 0–\$9,999; 2 = \$10,000–\$19,999; 3 = \$20,000–\$29,999; 4 = \$30,000–\$39,999; 5 = \$40,000–\$49,999; 6 = \$50,000 and over. Legislative professionalization: see table 1. Nebraska: 0 = non-Nebraska resident, 1 = Nebraska resident. Party: –1 = identifies with legislative minority; 0 = independent or Nebraska resident; 1 = identifies with legislative majority. Race: 0 = white, 1 = black, Hispanic, American Indian, Asian. Rural: 0 = big city, small city, suburb; 1 = small town, rural. Sex: 0 = male; 1 = female. State economic performance (retrospective): 1 = worse; 2 = same; 3 = better. State legislature rating: 1 = very poor; 2 = poor; 3 = fair; 4 = good; 5 = excellent. Strength of party identification: 1 = pure independent; 2 = Democrat leaner or Republican leaner; 3 = weak Democrat or weak Republican; 4 = strong Democrat or strong Republican.

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