

Casework in U.S. State Legislatures

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* We would like to thank the University of Missouri Research Board for its generous support of the project. Of course, the Research Board is not responsible for the contents of the article. We would like to thank Tony Bertelli for his useful comments on the manuscript. We would also like to thank Derek Fishel, Uriah Mach, and Shannon Stokes for their help with survey administration and David Valentine for his comments on the questionnaire.

Abstract

Casework has long been considered an extremely important component of legislative representation as it provides the most direct and visible link between legislators and constituents. The existing literature suggests the importance of the electoral connection in motivating legislators to provide service, but less is known about the impact of legislative institutions, legislator attitudes, and district characteristics. Using survey data from legislators in eight states, we employ generalized negative binomial regression to predict the number of casework requests legislators receive. We find that legislator visibility is the most important factor affecting casework requests. Institutional features that reduce legislator visibility, such as term limits and multimember districts, tend to reduce the number of casework requests a legislator receives.

Legislators must balance a diverse set of demands in their representation of the governed, and an extremely important one is constituency service. Whereas the distribution of government spending or votes in the “best interest of the district” can be controversial and set a legislator at odds with a portion of her constituency, casework provides a legislator with a generally positive opportunity to serve the people. Despite the low cost and potentially high benefit of casework, legislators differ greatly in the number of casework requests they receive. While some are inundated with requests, others receive relatively few.

In this study we examine three propositions we expect to shape the number of casework requests. First, legislators who are more visible to the constituency will receive more casework requests, and factors such as term limits and multimember districts that reduce visibility will decrease the number of casework requests. Second, legislators can signal their willingness to help the constituency, and such signals are expected to increase requests. Finally, legislators who represent constituents with less perceived access to state government will receive lower demand for casework.

WHAT IS CASEWORK AND WHY DO LEGISLATORS PERFORM IT?

Casework comprises one of the four components of representation: “communication with constituents, policy responsiveness, the allocation of resources for the district, and service to constituents” (Jewell 1982, 18). Legislators provide casework when they help individuals, businesses, or groups of constituents navigate bureaucracy. This may include cutting through red tape, easing regulations, helping with jobs, or intervening in local disputes (Freeman and Richardson 1996). Because of increased staffing and resources, most evidence suggests the volume and importance of casework is increasing at the state level (Rosenthal 1998, 15-17; 2004, 29).

Legislators perform casework for various reasons, but securing re-election (Mayhew 1974) and building trust with constituents (Fenno 1978) rank among the most important motivations. A

legislator hopes that if she performs casework for a constituent, the constituent's evaluation of the legislator will improve and the constituent will be more likely to vote for her in ensuing elections. Despite a general feeling that casework must improve electoral prospects (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987), scholars throughout the 1980s had difficulty demonstrating the electoral effects of casework (Johannes and McAdams 1987; McAdams and Johannes 1981, 1988; Yiannakis 1981). Recently, however, studies employing better measures of incumbency advantage (rather than raw votes), as well as of actual casework (rather than reported casework), demonstrate that casework improves evaluations of incumbent politicians and in turn increases the likelihood of re-election (King 1991; Serra and Cover 1992; Serra and Pinney 2004).

WHAT CAUSES CASEWORK VOLUME TO VARY?

The distribution of casework requests varies tremendously among members of Congress (Johannes 1980; Johannes and McAdams 1987) and state legislators (Jewell 1982; Freeman and Richardson 1994, 1996). For instance, Jewell discusses a legislator who claimed to receive up to 75 requests per week but another who received only 10 requests over a four month period (1982, 141). The question remains, what factors explain these dramatic differences? To explore this question, we begin with three propositions that follow from the literature on casework in legislatures, and develop hypotheses related to each proposition.

Proposition 1

Casework requests are generated from constituents. When a constituent has a problem the casework request is a considerably less costly action if she knows her legislator. If her legislator is more unknown, however, the constituent must take more time to investigate who the legislator is

before she can file the request. If it is more costly, one is less likely to make a request. This simple assumption leads us to Proposition 1.

P₁: Legislators who are more known to their constituents receive more casework requests than legislators who are less visible.

We hypothesize that multimember districts, tenure and term limits affect legislator visibility and therefore influence the number of casework requests. Although the majority of legislators are elected in single-member district systems, a number of states still elect legislators under multiple member district (MMD) arrangements. Because there are $n > 1$ legislators in a MMD, any given legislator is likely to receive less media coverage and less attention from her constituents. As a result, Jewell (1982) argues that MMDs diffuse accountability and reduce name recognition. Studies support this assertion, finding that legislators from MMDs receive about four fewer casework requests per week than legislators who represent SMDs (Richardson and Freeman 1995; see also Jewell 1982, 146-147). This suggests hypothesis 1, which follows directly from Proposition 1.

H₁: Legislators elected under an MMD system will receive fewer casework requests than legislators elected under an SMD system.

All else being equal, legislators become better known as they are in office longer. They have had more time to meet constituents, receive media coverage, and engage in campaign activities such as advertising and sending out mass mailings. Therefore, hypothesis 2 suggests a positive relationship between tenure and casework requests.

H₂: Legislators who have been in office longer will receive more casework requests.

A number of states have implemented term limits in the past decade. Although the effects of term limits are still being debated (Carey, Niemi and Powell 2000; Carey et al. 2003; Wright 2004), most observers agree that legislators in term-limited states are less visible to their constituents than

legislators in non-term-limited states, and the turnover caused by term limits reduces legislator name recognition. Further, research at the Congressional level has established that legislators in their last term display signs of shirking—abstaining from legislative activities (Rothenthberg and Sanders 2000), working less to help gain bill passage (Herrick, Moore, and Hibbing 1994), and generally not responding to constituents (Tien 2001) or their casework requests (Prewitt 1970). Following from proposition 1, we posit hypothesis 3.

H₃: Legislators from term-limited states will receive fewer casework requests than those not facing term limits.

We do not expect this hypothesis to be absolute, however. Instead, we expect this effect to be attenuated somewhat by length of tenure. The reelection motive diminishes over time for term-limited legislators, and they have little reason to believe the long-term goodwill created through constituency service will pay off in time before the term limit occurs. Further, whereas legislators in non-term limited states gain power as their tenure increases, legislators in term-limited states quickly approach their lame-duck term, and thus may be less visible to constituents. In addition, Kousser (2005) suggests that term limited legislators approaching their last term concentrate on achieving key policy goals rather than spending time on casework and other constituency-related activities. Consequently, we cast hypothesis 4, which we operationalize using an interaction term between term limits and the years in a legislative chamber.

H₄: Legislators in term-limited legislatures will receive fewer requests as tenure increases.

Proposition 2

The number of casework requests that a legislator receives is not only a function of being known to constituents. Legislator attitudes about constituency service vary, and the signals a legislator sends to her constituents may also increase (or decrease) casework requests (Ellickson and Whistler 2001). Clearly, some legislators are more likely than others to send signals to their constituents that they are

accessible and willing to help with casework. Such legislators may use mass mailings, web pages, and public appearances to advertise information about a district office, the legislator's office hours, and their interest in helping constituents. We expect that constituents can be understood as rational actors; they pick up on these signals and are more likely to address their requests to legislators who will be amenable to them. This leads us to Proposition 2.

P₂: Legislators who send signals that they are interested in helping constituents are more likely to receive casework request than legislators who do not send such signals.

The literature suggests female legislators, minority party members, legislators who hold frequent office hours, and those who believe constituency service is important are more likely to send such signals. Each of these hypotheses is discussed in more detail below.

Differences in sex-roles lead women to place a higher priority on personal relationships and helping others than males (Kathlene 1989). Consequently, women are significantly more likely to pay close attention to their constituents than men (Carey, Niemi and Powell 1998; Thomas 1992). Female legislators may communicate this willingness to help to their constituents and as a result appear more helpful than their male counterparts. Because of these signals, Richardson and Freeman (1995) found female legislators receive about two more casework requests per week than their male counterparts.

H₃: Female legislators receive more casework requests than their male colleagues.

Minority party members are also more likely to receive more requests. Legislators in the majority party are more likely to play an active role in the adoption of policy due to formal leadership roles such as committee chairs, influence within the caucus or simply because of floor agenda control. Minority party members, however, may find it difficult to affect the internal policy process and will spend more of their time and resources on external activities related to their

constituency. Further, minority party members have less potential for claiming credit on specific policy achievements, and thus may focus on their service role to maintain office. Therefore, it is likely minority party legislators will receive more casework requests than their partisan opponents.

H₆: Legislators from the minority party receive more requests than legislators from the majority party.

Another signal that a legislator may send to her constituents is the frequency of office hours in the district. When legislators hold frequent office hours in their district, they are sending a visible signal to their constituents that they are interested in helping them.

H₇: Legislators who hold frequent office hours receive more casework requests than legislators who hold less frequent office hours.

In addition to office hours, legislator attitudes about constituency service likely affect the signals that legislators send to constituents—and therefore the number of casework requests that a legislator receives. This argument is consistent with findings by Ellickson and Whistler (2001) and Freeman and Richardson (1996), and it leads us to our next hypothesis.

H₈: Legislators who place more importance on constituency service will receive more casework requests than legislators who place less value on constituency service.

Proposition 3

The previous two propositions focused on legislators rather than on constituents. Certainly, variables related to the constituency are also likely to influence casework requests. One could expect people who need more help from government, such as the poor, to be more likely to request casework than constituents who do not need as much help navigating state bureaucracy and government. On the other hand, studies suggest minorities, the poor, and less educated have less trust in government and are less likely to participate in politics (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995). As a result, we would expect legislators from districts with less access to government to receive

fewer casework requests. We therefore suggest the following proposition related to the constituency.

P₃: Legislators who represent constituents with less access to government will receive fewer casework requests than legislators who represent constituencies with more access.

We believe three types of legislators are likely to represent constituents with less access to state government: ethnic minority legislators, those who represent ethnically diverse districts, and legislators whose districts are far from the state capital.

Jewell (1982, 146-147) finds that ethnic minority legislators represent lower income districts, which are often in need of greater governmental assistance. When constituents need assistance, it requires interaction with government agencies, and more interaction is likely to lead to more conflicts, questions, and needs for intervention. This set of needs lead minority legislators to value constituency service more and spend more time on service (Thomas 1992). On the other hand, studies suggest minorities experience more alienation from the political system and are therefore less likely to participate in politics (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995). Because most minority state legislators represent districts with large minority populations, we expect such legislators to receive fewer casework requests.

H₇: Ethnic minority legislators receive fewer casework requests than white legislators.

Legislators also represent districts that vary from those with homogenous populations to those that are quite diverse. Heterogeneous districts are likely to have a broader array of interests, and this could produce more needs resulting in casework requests. For example, wealthier constituents may have more interaction with agencies such as economic development, but poorer constituents may have more contact with social service agencies. A diverse district is more likely to have some of both needs. On the other hand, it is likely that a large portion of the constituency in a

diverse district may not feel represented by a legislator from a different social group. For example, blue collar workers or ethnic minorities may feel less comfortable making requests of a white conservative legislator known for business interests. Therefore, even though a broader set of needs exist in a diverse district, fewer requests make it to the legislator.

Measuring diversity across interests is difficult, and data are limited for state legislative districts. Ethnic diversity data are available, however, and at the aggregate level ethnic diversity in a legislative district can serve as a proxy for other factors such as income and education. Using a measure of ethnic diversity we shall describe more fully later, we posit that heterogeneous districts will produce fewer casework requests.

H₁₀: Legislators who represent more diverse districts receive fewer casework requests than legislators who represent less diverse districts.

One factor often ignored in state legislative research is the effect of geographic proximity. It is likely that constituents in districts further from the capital will experience considerable frustration in communicating with distant bureaucrats. In addition, the legislator may not be able to spend as much time in the district during session because of the distance. Further, constituents who live closer to the state capital know more about state government than those who live further away (Delli Carpini, Keeter, and Kenamer 1994). Therefore, constituents from more distant districts may not believe they have the same access so fewer requests are made.

H₁₁: Legislators who represent districts farther from the state capital receive fewer casework requests than legislators who represent districts closer to the capital.

The Role of Resources

In addition to the factors described above, there is considerable evidence suggesting that resources influence the provision of casework in state legislatures (Rosenthal 2004, 28). We do not

expect that professionalism affects the mean, however, but rather the variance. In other words, we expect that in highly professional states, where resources are greater, there will be less variance in the number of requests a legislator receives—the number of requests will be more uniform. In less professional states, however, we expect legislators to vary greatly in the number of requests they receive because much of the workload falls on the legislator so personal preferences contribute to the variation in requests.

H₁₂: There will be less variance in casework requests in professional legislatures than in less professional legislatures.

As we discuss later, we model this not by including professionalism as an independent variable in the model (which would account for movement in the mean), but rather as a predictor of the variance (or, more accurately, the overdispersion) in our model.

LIMITATIONS OF PREVIOUS WORK

As the review above suggests, a few scholars have examined casework in the state legislature, but several issues suggest further investigation is necessary. First, most of what we know about casework focuses on Congress (e.g. Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987; Johannes 1984; Serra and Cover 1992; Serra and Moon 1994). What little work has been done on state legislatures is dated and thus unable to consider recent changes in legislative institutions and culture, such as the implementation of term limits in many legislatures (Carey et al. 2003; Wright 2004), a rise in direct democracy (Bowler and Donovan 2003) and an increasingly powerful media (Rosenthal 1998). These changes may have forever altered patterns of representation and the provision of casework in the state legislature.

Existing work predicting casework requests also includes important methodological limitations. For example, extant work does not consider district size as an independent variable. It

is likely that a legislator representing 250,000 constituents will receive more requests than one representing 10,000. Consequently, it is crucial for models predicting the number of casework requests to control for district population size. Further, studies that predict the number of casework requests generally use OLS regression to model the number of requests (e.g. Richardson and Freeman 1995), but these dependent variables are count data, which do not fit the assumptions of OLS regression, and thus may produce biased results (King 1988).

Finally, previous research testing for the influence of legislator minority status has considered only African-Americans, ignoring Native American and Latino/Latina legislators. This is particularly problematic given the rapid rise in the number of Latino/Latina legislators across the country. By examining legislators from three ethnic minority groups rather than one, we can broaden our knowledge of the effects of ethnicity on the provision of casework in the states.

DATA AND METHODS

To examine casework requests, we distributed a mail survey to 1176 state legislators in both chambers of eight states during summer 2003. The survey asked questions about casework requests, as well as a number of other questions about representation. We received 494 questionnaires back for a 42% response rate.¹

Our sample of states varies in important ways for testing the research questions. First, these states were evenly divided between states that employ a single member district system (Colorado, Missouri, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina) and those who have multimember district systems in their lower house (Arizona, New Jersey, North Dakota, and South Dakota)². All of the sampled states have single member districts in their upper chamber. The influence of MMDs on service has received some attention (Jewell 1982; Richardson and Freeman 1995), but the number of MMD states has generally been limited and the number of MMD seats in the chambers has been inconsistent.

To test for the effects of term limits, we chose four states with term limits (Arizona, Colorado, Missouri, and South Dakota) and four without (New Jersey, North Dakota, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina). This design includes two MMD and two SMD states for both term-limited and non-term-limited states.³ The four term-limited states have experienced nearly complete membership turnover from the passage of term limits to the survey implementation, and all of the legislators know they will lose their job in no more than 8 years from the year of their first election in the current legislative chamber. Consequently, we expect term limits to influence the attitudes of all legislators in these states. Because term limits had not yet taken effect in the early 1990s when the most recent state legislative casework studies were conducted (Freeman and Richardson 1994, 1996), little is known about the influence of term limits on casework.

Most of the variables used in the paper are self-explanatory (the questions and response sets are described in the appendix), but two require a bit of explanation. First, the ethnic diversity measure is not drawn from the survey, but is computed from a variety of sources. We collected data directly from each state's Secretary of State (when available), and when not available, we used geographic information systems software to estimate the percent of each Census block group (2000 summary tape 3 iteration or STF3) that fell within each legislative district and computed the demographic data accordingly. We then summed the demographic data for each legislative district based on the block group fragments contained within the district. The result is an estimate of the demographic profile for the legislative district.

Once the district ethnicity data were collected, we relied on the Hero and Tolbert (1996, 855) formula of ethnic diversity to estimate a diversity measure for each state legislative district.⁴ This measure could vary from 0 to 1—a one indicating an extremely heterogeneous district and a 0 indicating a completely homogeneous district. For example, our lowest score (.007) comes from a

South Dakota district that is 99.7% white non-Hispanic, and the highest score (.714) is one from New Jersey with 22% Latinos, 37% white non-Hispanic, 29% black, and 12% Asian American.

Our measure of a legislator's attitude towards constituency service is derived by adding 6 variables together—each of which taps into a different aspect of constituency service. The questions (listed in the appendix) refer to the importance of constituency service, its impact on elections, constituent trust, voting leeway, whether the legislator would do more with more staff, and how a legislator compares to chamber colleagues. For each indicator, respondents were asked to indicate how strongly they agreed with the statement at hand. Each individual indicator is scored 1 to 5, meaning that the entire scale ranges from 6 to 30. To assess whether these variables are scaleable, we computed a Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha=.75$), which indicates that the measures are appropriate to express as a scale.

CASEWORK REQUESTS

We first consider the distribution of casework requests displayed in Figure 1. The median number of casework requests is about nine, and the mean is about 30 per week. On the two extremes, legislators reported as few as zero and as many as 450 requests. Clearly, there is a great deal of variation in the number of requests that a state legislator receives. Figure 1 also reveals that the data are skewed to the left with 29% of legislators reporting less than 5 requests, and about 50% reporting less than 10 requests. Only 39% report 15 or more requests, and less than 20% indicate they receive 40 or more requests.

(Figure 1 about here)

How do these figures compare to previous studies? Freeman and Richardson (1994) find that 32% of legislators report less than 5 requests per week, 29% report 15 or more requests, and the median is ten requests per week. The sample of states in each study differs, but the lower and middle portions of the distribution are similar. The major distinction is in the upper portion of the

distribution, where a difference of ten percentage points is observed. More legislators are now in the high service category.

The Overall Model

Our model explaining the number of casework requests tests several hypotheses related to our three general propositions. Essentially, we expect legislators who are better known to the constituency, those who send signals expressing an interest in helping, and those who represent districts with more perceived access to government to receive more casework requests.

To test a model explaining the variation in casework requests, we employ a generalized negative binomial regression model. Given that the dependent variable is a count (requests per week during the legislative session), OLS is clearly not appropriate (King 1988). A traditional Poisson model, however, is not appropriate either as it assumes that the mean and the variance of the dependent variable are equal. A Chi Square test on our data indicates that this assumption is not met and overdispersion is present. Using traditional Poisson methods in the face of overdispersion produces artificially small standard errors and thus biases results towards Type I errors.⁵ Given that the variance in this distribution is significantly greater than the mean and the dispersion parameter is itself theoretically interesting, we opt for a generalized negative binomial model (Gardner, Mulvey, and Shaw 1995). This model produces more accurate estimates than previous work on casework requests, which has assumed that the OLS assumptions are met. The negative binomial model also allows us to model the overdispersion, represented by the alpha term. In this case, we use the professionalism of the state legislature to account for the overdispersion (from King 2000).

One other aspect of the model estimation requires explanation. Although we achieved a high response rate, we observed small response biases in our sample. To maximize the representativeness of our sample, we estimated the model with a sample weight based on the inverse of the overall probability of selection of a legislator from that state. This weighting procedure is

similar to that used by Carey, Niemi and Powell in their 50-state survey of state legislators (2000: 688). These results for our model are presented in Table 1.

(Table 1 about here)

Table 1 reports four columns of data: the coefficient for the variable, the robust standard error, the probability from the z-test, and the marginal effect of each statistically significant variable—interpreted as the influence of a discrete change for a dummy variable or a one-unit change in an interval level variable, holding all other variables at their sample mean or mode. The coefficients are important for interpretation of the direction of the relationship, the probability shows significance, and the marginal effects provide the substantive effect of each variable.

Recall that our first proposition suggests legislators who are known to their constituents are more likely to receive a large number of casework requests. The results in Table 1 strongly support the hypotheses derived from this proposition. Legislators from MMDs (all members of the lower chambers in AZ, ND, NJ, and SD) receive significantly fewer casework requests than legislators from SMD chambers (both in other states as well as in the SMD senate within the same state). The marginal effects measure indicates legislators from MMDs receive about 14 fewer requests than their counterparts who represent SMDs, holding all other variables constant. When multiple legislators represent a district it diffuses accountability, reduces name recognition, and creates more turnover, all of which result in substantially fewer casework requests.

Legislators from states with term limits (AZ, CO, MO, and SD) also receive significantly fewer casework requests than legislators from non-term limited states (over 12 fewer per week). This result can be viewed in two contrary ways. To the degree that casework is a staple of a career politician, term limit proponents appear to have achieved one desired effect. Term limits reduce the reelection motive so legislators may not seek out constituency service opportunities, and the turnover created by term limits reduce name recognition that makes constituents more comfortable

making such requests. Alternatively, if casework is a sign of legislators staying close to the constituency, then term limits, intended to punish legislators for “losing touch,” may have had an unintended negative effect for constituents needing help with government.

Although the term limits variable by itself is interesting, we are most interested in the interaction between term limits and tenure. The tenure/term limits interaction is negative and significant ($p=.005$), suggesting tenure works differently for term-limited and non term-limited legislators. We explore the specifics of this interaction in Figure 2.

(Figure 2 about here)

Figure two presents the predicted number of casework requests given different combinations of MMD and term limits at different levels of tenure, while holding all other independent variables at their mean or mode. The top two lines (extending furthest to the right) represent non-term limited states and suggest that as tenure rises in non-term limited states, the predicted number of casework requests rises. In term limited states, however, the predicted number of casework requests decreases with tenure. This is consistent with our expectation and suggests that as legislators enter their lame-duck terms in term-limited states, constituents are less likely to approach them with casework requests. Figure 2 also presents graphically the effect of MMDs we described previously. In all, the results in Table 1 and Figure 2 provide strong support for proposition 1.

Our second proposition suggests legislators who send signals of helpfulness are likely to receive more casework requests than other legislators. We include four variables to test this proposition: legislator gender, whether the legislator is from the minority or majority party in the chamber, a scale of legislator attitudes about constituency service, and the frequency of legislator office hours.

Consistent with earlier studies, we expect female legislators to receive more requests than male legislators (Richardson and Freeman 1995). Our findings suggest, however, that sex has no influence on casework requests—women receive no more or less casework requests than men. These differences between studies could be because gender differences have decreased as more women have gained office, or because the OLS methods used in previous work produced artificially small standard errors, and thus biased the results towards statistically significant findings, when such a relationship might not exist.

The office hours variable is significant and positive, as hypothesized. Legislators who regularly hold office hours signal the district they are willing to work to solve constituent problems, are more accessible on a regular basis in the district, and devote more resources to constituency demands. The marginal effect measure indicates each unit change on the ordinal scale toward more regular office hours adds almost 6 casework requests per week.

The majority party variable is also significant and negative, as expected. A legislator in the majority party can expect to receive about 8 fewer casework requests per week than a legislator in the minority party, all else being equal. Our results suggest that legislators in the majority party are more focused on policy, leadership and other insider roles, and less likely to adopt an external, constituency focused orientation. On the other side, minority party legislators may feel largely shut out of the policy process so they focus on the constituency service role.

As Table 1 demonstrates, the constituency service scale is not a significant factor explaining the number of casework requests. Legislators who attribute little importance to constituency service are no different than those who see it as very important on all dimensions. Further, we tested (but did not report) models that included the service variables separately, but none of these attained significance either.⁶ Finally, because of the potential for collinearity with the office hours variable, we tested the service scale without the office hours variable present, and the service scale was still

insignificant. This suggests the supply and demand sides of casework are in fact different processes. It appears legislators who feel more positively about casework are no more likely to receive a high number of casework requests than legislators who feel less positively. Overall, the second proposition receives support via the signal sent by holding office hours and the majority/minority party status of the legislator, but the other two variables do not offer support.

Our third proposition suggests legislators who represent people with less perceived access to government receive fewer casework requests. We include three variables in support of this proposition: legislator ethnicity, district ethnic diversity, and the distance from home district to the state capital.

The results for the ethnic minority variable support the proposition. Ethnic minority legislators receive about 9 fewer requests on average per week than their colleagues. Because this variable is strongly correlated with the district minority proportion, we see this as more related to the constituents than the legislators. Because ethnic minorities are less likely to participate in politics, they may perceive that they have less access to government and do not make requests to state legislators.

Though consistent with our proposition and hypotheses, the finding is contrary to Jewell's 1982 study. These differences may be due to unobserved changes over time, differences in the states covered by the studies, or that several of the sample states in this study include sizable populations of Hispanic and Native American legislators who may act differently than African American legislators.⁷

Also consistent with the third proposition, we find district diversity is negative and significant, indicating that legislators who represent ethnically diverse districts tend to receive fewer casework requests than legislators who represent more homogeneous districts. The marginal effect suggests a legislator from a completely homogeneous district receives about 25 more casework

requests per week than a legislator who represents a completely heterogeneous district. Diverse districts may produce a greater variety of service needs, but it is not reflected in requests to the legislator. A different dynamic appears to be at work. A more diverse district results in a significant portion of the district that is of a different ethnicity than the legislator, and they may not feel as comfortable making casework requests to such a legislator. In effect, such citizens may not feel as represented by the legislator so they perceive less access. More evidence is clearly needed, but such a finding suggests an important substantive effect of descriptive representation.

The distance between home district and the state capital is positive and significant, indicating the further a legislative district is from the capital, the more casework requests a legislator receives. The marginal effect suggests that a legislator living 100 miles away from the capital receives about six more casework requests on average per week than one who resides in the capital city. This means a legislator who represents a district in Pittsburgh, PA receives over 12 more requests than a legislator who lives in Harrisburg, PA, all else being equal. This finding is contrary to our hypothesis. We expected more distant constituents to perceive less access so they would make fewer casework requests. In this case, constituents may be relying on the relationship to the local legislator to overcome this lack of access to state government.

In all, we find some support for proposition 3. Diverse districts and those represented by ethnic minorities receive fewer casework requests, but legislators from more distant districts receive more requests. This finding has serious implications for American democracy. If legislators who represent the neediest constituents receive fewer casework requests than legislators who represent more well-off legislators, it suggests that the representational process may be tilted in favor of those with resources—further exacerbating problems of inequality in American society. To paraphrase Schattschneider (1960), our findings lend some credence to the idea that the chorus of representation sings with an upper-class accent.

Finally, the district population size does not achieve significance, but this is of little substantive interest. District population size does, however, serve as an important control variable and its inclusion makes our findings more robust.

Explaining the Overdispersion

Overdispersion in a count data model occurs when the variance of the dependent variable exceeds its mean. By modeling this overdispersion with a generalized negative binomial model, we can provide a more nuanced understanding of casework requests. In this case, we include the professionalism variable to explain the overdispersion. Professionalism is significant and has a negative coefficient, indicating that a higher value of professionalism produces a smaller variance in the number of casework requests relative to the mean than for a lower value of the service scale. In less professional legislatures, there appears to be more variance in the number of requests that a legislator receives, but requests are much more uniform in professional legislatures. The minimal resources available in a citizen legislature appear to create a more idiosyncratic set of responses by legislators (so there is more variation), but the staff and other resources available in professional legislatures make it easier for all legislators to provide similar levels of service.

DISCUSSION

Casework lies at the heart of legislative representation in the states. Many citizens form impressions of legislators through their responsiveness to casework requests. These impressions not only affect the way statehouse democracy works, but also influence electoral outcomes (Serra and Cover 1992). As citizens have increased their expectations for a responsive legislature, it is increasingly important to understand the distribution of casework requests and the factors affecting this distribution.

Using an original survey of state legislators in eight states, we find considerable variation in the number of casework requests legislators receive. Further, it appears the most important factor

affecting casework requests is how well known a legislator is to her constituents. Institutional factors that decrease visibility, such as term limits and multimember districts appear to depress the number of casework requests. Tenure is also generally associated with more casework requests, but tenure has the opposite effect in term-limited states where requests decline the longer a legislator is in office.

It also appears that the most effective signal legislators send to constituents that influences casework requests is the number of office hours a legislator holds in her home district. Minority party legislators also appear to have more of a constituency orientation that affects the number of casework requests. Contrary to previous studies, female legislators are not significantly different than male legislators on the number of requests. It is likely that as more women have entered state legislatures gender differences have dissipated somewhat. Finally, a legislator's service attitudes do not influence the number of casework requests.

The evidence on the third proposition on the effect of constituent access is mixed. Specifically, we find that distance from the home district increases casework requests, but ethnic minority legislators and diverse districts receive fewer requests, which is consistent with an argument that districts with more people lacking access to government will make fewer casework requests. This suggests that those who need the most help from government are the least likely to request help from their legislators. This finding has important implications for our understanding of how representation is distributed in American society.

In sum, this paper suggests that casework requests are observable and predictable. Whereas other representational linkages can be difficult to measure and explain, research on casework has much to teach us about the conditions under which representational linkages vary. The findings about legislative institutions are particularly important because institutions are not necessarily permanent. Indeed, although states cannot control many of the other predictors of casework, they

can shape institutions to produce more visible legislatures. Recent movements to eliminate MMDs and to create term limits pull in opposite directions. While the former strengthens direct linkages between legislators and constituents, the latter decreases casework requests.

Future research should continue to investigate these questions—with a focus on how removing the re-election motive through term-limits changes casework. How does casework vary across chambers that allow legislators to serve unlimited non-consecutive terms? Do legislators change their positions on casework as term limits force them from one chamber to another? These questions lie at the heart of theoretical and practical questions about representation and deserve further study.

APPENDIX

Dependent Variable

How many requests for casework does your office receive in an average week?

Independent Variables

For each of the following items about legislator attitudes, please circle the response that best reflects your attitudes toward legislative constituency service

1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=not sure; 4=agree; 5=strongly agree

- a) Constituency service is the most important thing I do.
- b) Constituency service is an important method of maintaining electoral support.
- c) Constituency service is an important method of building trust with the public.
- d) I would increase constituency service if I had more staff
- e) Effective constituency service allows a legislator to take stands that may alienate some voters
- f) I put more emphasis on constituency service than the typical legislator in my state

- The service scale variable is an additive scale of responses to the previous six statements.

How would you classify your ethnicity (check all that apply)

Caucasian
Latino/Latina
African American
Native American
Asian American
Other

- This variable was recoded so that Caucasian =0, minority=1

How many miles is it from your home in the district to the capital?

How often do you personally hold office hours for the public in your district?

Daily
Weekly
Every Two Weeks
Monthly
Infrequently

All other variables were coded by the authors from available data.

ENDNOTES

¹ The response rate is calculated as the # of surveys returned with at least half of the survey completed (494) over the number of surveys sent (1176). Some respondents skipped questions, therefore the N varies for each question. We report specific sample sizes for each model. The response rate for each state was at least 32% (AZ=53%, CO=48%, MO=48%, NJ=32%, ND=47%, PA=34%, SC=35%, SD=52%). We have two reasons to feel confident in our sample. First, our response rate surpasses recent studies in the state legislature (Maestas 2003) and other elite samples (Abbe and Herrnson 2004). Second, recent research suggests that non-response bias is not as much of a problem as previously believed (Krosnick 1999). Third, we compared the respondents' demographic characteristics to those of the population as a whole to look for any evidence of response bias. The comparison does not reveal any major problems. The average age of respondents is 54, 19% of the legislators are female (compared to 22.4% in the population of eight state legislatures), approximately 36% are first time legislators (as opposed to 26% in the population), and 54% of the sample are Republicans (the same as the population). The survey included some questions addressing other topics about representation and was designed to conform to Dillman's Tailored Design Method (2000). Results from other questions are reported in other papers. The survey went through the proper IRB approval process and was approved by the University of XXXX in April, 2003 (approval #1027364).

² We examine the only four states that have a lower chamber composed entirely of two-person, free-for-all MMD districts.

³ The states also varied along a number of other dimensions. The sampled states vary as to legislative professionalism (King 2000). Two states, ND and SD, are categorized as citizen legislatures, while PA and NJ are characterized as professional. The remainder reside somewhere in the middle. Second, the states vary considerably in terms of political culture (Elazar 1966). Third, the states vary as to policy liberalism (Erikson, Wright and McIver 1993). Overall, this sample provides a representative cross-section of American state legislatures.

⁴ Diversity = $1 - ((\%Latino)^2 + (\%Black)^2 + (\%White)^2 + (\%Asian)^2 + (\%American\ Indian)^2 + (\%Other)^2)$. The actual groups used for this calculation varied by state depending on data availability, and the numbers for all groups other than Latino were for non-Hispanics.

⁵ This is not only true in theory, but also in practice. We estimated our model using traditional OLS methods and a number of variables that were not statistically significant in the GNB model, appeared to be significant in the OLS model. Likewise, a few variables changed significance in the other direction.

⁶ The models and data to re-create the analysis will be placed on the author's web site.

⁷ To test for this last hypothesis, we used separate dummy variables for black legislators and other minority legislators, and the results were very similar, suggesting that Hispanic and Native American legislators do not act differently than their African-American counterparts. Both variables are significant, and the marginal effects suggest that a black legislator receives almost 11 fewer requests per week and non-black minority legislators receive about 9 fewer requests a week. The coefficients, standard errors, z-scores, and probabilities are as follows:

Non-black Minority Legislator	-8.903827	3.2237	-2.76	0.006
Black Legislator	-10.66507	3.0341	-3.52	0.000

The results of the overall model are strikingly similar for all other coefficients and standard errors.

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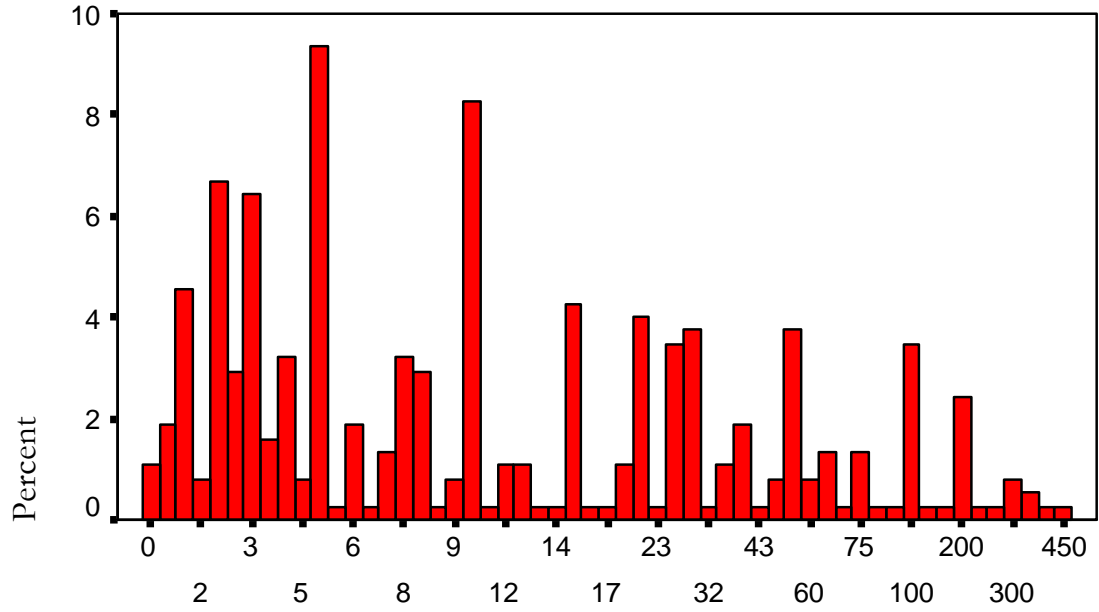
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Table 1 – Model Explaining the Number of Casework Requests - Generalized Negative Binomial Regression

	Coefficient	Robust Standard Error	Probability	Marginal Effect
<i>P₁: Visibility</i>				
Multiple Member District	-0.743	0.221	0.001	-14.239
Term Limits	-0.564	0.188	0.000	-12.417
Legislator Tenure	0.022	0.002	0.000	0.506
Tenure/Term Limits Interaction	-0.071	0.025	0.005	-1.607
<i>P₂: Signals</i>				
Female Legislator	0.255	0.397	0.586	-
Majority Party Legislator	-0.364	0.072	0.000	-8.488
Office Hours	0.248	0.045	0.000	5.647
Service Scale	0.009	0.020	0.664	-
<i>P₃: Access</i>				
Ethnic Minority Legislator	-0.502	0.085	0.000	-9.515
District Diversity	-1.098	0.485	0.020	-24.986
Miles (100s)	0.267	0.023	0.000	6.080
<i>Control Variable</i>				
District Population (1000s)	0.050	0.039	0.147	-
Constant	2.282	0.590	0.000	-
<i>Overdispersion Model</i>				
Professionalism	-1.759	0.942	0.062	-
Constant	0.481	0.260	0.065	-
Predicted Y				21.866
Sample Size				362
Wald Chi Square				207.2
Probability of Chi Square				0.000

Note: Probability is computed using a two-tailed test. The marginal effect is the change in the number of casework requests given a one-unit change in the independent variable at the mean level of the independent variable. For a dichotomous independent variable, the marginal effect is the change in the number of casework requests for a change from zero to one in the independent variable.

Figure 1: Distribution of Casework Requests

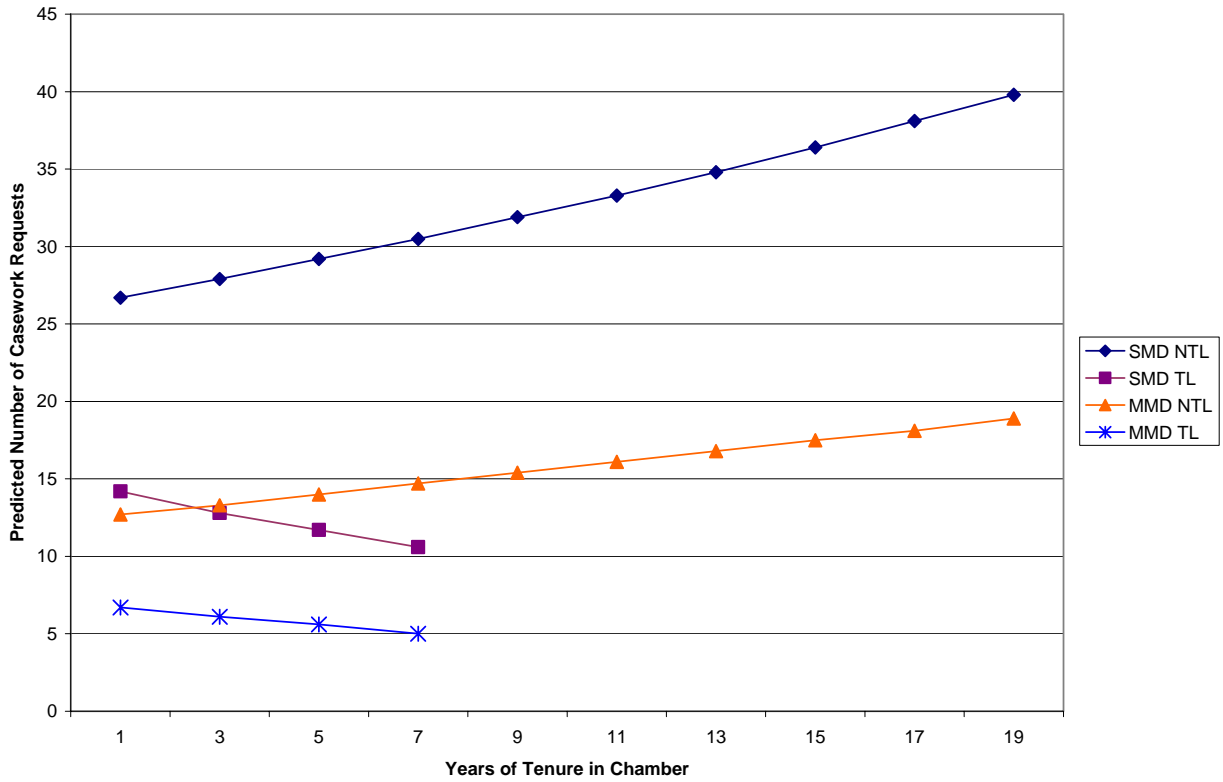


of Requests

N=374; mean=30.4; SD=60.72

Source: authors' mail survey of state legislators

Figure 2: Predicted Number of Casework Requests Based on Model in Table 2



Note: Predicted values were estimated holding all other independent variables to the modal category for dichotomous variables or the mean value for other independent variables. SMD NTL indicates a legislator from a non-term-limited legislature with a single member district system, and MMD TL represents a legislator from a multimember district system with term limits.