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## The Saliency of Religion as a Social Background Variable in Congressional Voting

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With the pioneering legislative studies of Lowell<sup>1</sup> in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, studies of voting behavior in Congress have become increasingly numerous and sophisticated. The major research undertaken by Rice, Truman, Turner, MacRae, and Froman<sup>2</sup> indicated that political party affiliation is the strongest single determinant of legislative voting while constituency acts as a secondary variable. Typically it reinforces party voting, but it also can undermine party loyalty when counter-pressures in the constituency operate. More recent research by Kingdon, Matthews and Stimson, Clausen, and Cherryholmes and Shapiro<sup>3</sup> reveal other important variables impinging upon the Congressman's decision-making, for examples ideology, party and committee leadership cues, issues, state delegations, and representational roles.

The body of empirical data on legislative voting is impressive, but there remains a missing component in the existing literature. The major studies do not include explicit reference to social background variables in their inventory, and few scholarly articles have focused on this dimension.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>A. L. Lowell, "The Influence of Party Upon Legislation in England and America," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association* (1901), 321-343.

<sup>2</sup>Julius Turner, *Party and Constituency: Pressures on Congress* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1951); Duncan MacRae, Jr., *Dimensions of Congressional Voting* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958); David Truman, *The Congressional Party* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1959); Lewis A. Froman, Jr., *Congressmen and Their Constituencies* (Skokie, Illinois: Rand McNally, 1963).

<sup>3</sup>John W. Kingdon, *Congressmen's Voting Decisions* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973); Donald R. Matthews and James A. Stimson, *Yeas and Nays: Normal Decision-Making in the U.S. House of Representatives* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1975); Aage R. Clausen, *How Congressmen Decide* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973); Cleo H. Cherryholmes and Michael J. Shapiro, *Representatives and Roll Calls* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merill Company, 1969).

<sup>4</sup>Donald R. Matthews, *The Social Background of Political Decision-Makers* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1954); Leroy N. Rieselbach, "Congressmen as 'Small-Town Boys': A Research Note," *Midwest Journal of Political Science* (May, 1970), 321-330 and "The Demography of the Congressional Vote on Foreign Aid, 1938-1958," *American Political Science Review* (1964), 577-588; Donald R. Matthews, *United States Senators and Their World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960); David W. Brady, John Schnidhauser, and Larry L. Berg, "'House Lawyers and Support for the Supreme Court,'" *The Journal of Politics* (August, 1973), 724-729.

While these studies point that Congressional membership appears sociologically atypical of a cross-section of American society, little effort is made to point out the obvious implications of this on the representative process. Our review of textbooks on American government,<sup>5</sup> for example, indicates that none mentioned the impact of social background characteristics on voting although all noted that social biases affected legislative recruitment. Legislative voting studies seem to give major attention to constituency influence at the expense of background variables even though rather large Congressional samples would permit rigorous statistical analysis. By contrast, students of judicial behavior put their major emphasis on the social background of judges<sup>6</sup> while ignoring judicial constituency variables.

This paper will assess the literature and develop hypotheses concerning the probable impact of social background attributes on Congressional voting. Toward this end, eight variables were studied: (1) size of residence, (2) geographic "mobility," (3) previous elective experience, (4) seniority within the House of Representatives, (5) occupation, (6) religion, (7) age, (8) region. For purposes of comparison, the analysis will include party affiliation as well as four constituency variables (percent urban, percent Negro, percent owner-occupied housing, and density) and electoral marginality (percent margin of victory).

All but four variables studied are readily available<sup>7</sup> as numerical

<sup>5</sup>Martin Diamond, Winston Mills Fisk, and Herbert Garfinkel, *The Democratic Republic* (Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1971); Kenneth Prewitt and Sidney Verba, *An Introduction to American Government* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); Marian D. Irish, James W. Prothro, and Richard J. Richardson, *The Politics of American Democracy* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1977); James MacGregor Burns and J.W. Peltason, *Government by the People* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972); Milton C. Cummings, Jr. and David Wise, *Democracy Under Pressure* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977); Theodore J. Lowi, *American Government: Incomplete Conquest* (Hinsdale, Illinois: The Dryden Press, 1976).

<sup>6</sup>Among the numerous studies of judicial behavior, see the following: Joel B. Grossman, "Social Backgrounds and Judicial Decision-Making," *Harvard Law Review* (1966) 1551-1564; S. Sidney Ulmer, "Dissent Behavior and the Social Background of Supreme Court Justices," *Journal of Politics* (1970), 580-598; S. Sidney Ulmer, "Social Background as an Indicator to the Votes of Supreme Court Justices in Criminal Cases: 1947-1956 Terms" *American Journal of Political Science* (1973), 622-630.

<sup>7</sup>Information on party, age, occupation, religion, and seniority is found in the *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, 89th Congress, 1st Session, Vol. XXI (Washington: Congressional Quarterly Service, 1966), 34-37. The four constituency variables are listed in: United States Bureau of the Census, *Congressional District Data Book*, 88th Congress (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1963). Birthplace, experience, and size of residence were determined from: 89th Congress, 1st Session, *Official Congressional Directory* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1965) and *Biographical Directory of the American Congress* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971); U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of the Population*, 1970, Vol. 1, "Characteristics of the Population" (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1973). The margin of victory was calculated on the basis of statistics in: Richard M. Scammon, *America Votes 6: A Handbook of Contemporary American Election Statistics* (Washington: Governmental Affairs Institute, 1966) and *Congressional Quarterly, Guide to U.S. Elections* (Washington: Congressional Quarterly, Inc. 1975).

values. The exceptions are party affiliation, religion, occupation, and region, and they were all assigned values for purposes of analysis. For political party, Democrats were coded 1 and Republicans 0. Congressmen were divided into two regional categories; Southerners<sup>8</sup> were coded 0 and non-Southerners as 1. For religion, Catholics and Jews were coded 1 and all other denominations as 0. And since the literature suggests that, compared to other occupations, lawyers hold a special relationship to the political system, three classifications of occupations were constructed. Congressmen with law as their only occupation were coded 2; those who designated law in conjunction with other occupations were coded 1; and those Congressmen engaged in non-legal occupations were coded 0.

As the dependent variable, the index used by Rieselbach, Cherryholmes and Shapiro and others—the “federal support score”—is used. This index coded any yea or nay vote by a Congressman in favor of greater involvement by the federal government<sup>9</sup>. The 89th Congress (1965-66) was chosen for study because of the many important Great Society proposals—civil rights, medicare, aid to education. Issues of this magnitude, we felt, would bring added meaning to one’s vote in favor or against increased federal involvement. Based on selected roll calls from both sessions of the 89th Congress, a range from 0 to 23 is created. Only the House of Representatives is included in this analysis since its larger membership is more heterogeneous than the Senate on the many social background variables chosen for study. Excluded from the study were ten Representatives without a federal support score (FSS). This gave us a workable universe of 425.

While our major purpose is to determine which social background variables affect voting behavior and to measure their relative impact, the direction of each coefficient will indicate which Congressmen are more supportive of an expanded federal role. By applying correlation and regression techniques to all variables, moreover, the importance of background variables relative to party, constituency, and electoral marginality can be

<sup>8</sup>The South includes the eleven states of the former Confederacy: Alabama, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana, Virginia, Florida, Tennessee, and Georgia.

<sup>9</sup>See *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, 89th Congress, 2nd Session, Vol. XXII (Washington: Congressional Quarterly Service, 1966), 1008-1009. The legislation and issues included in these roll calls are: daylight savings time, rent supplements (2), minimum wage, consumer credit control, open housing, civil rights, traffic safety, War on Poverty (2), truth in packaging, Demonstration Cities, Appalachian Regional Development Act, Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Medicare, housing department, voting rights, right-to-work, Higher Education Act, National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities, Clean Air and Water Disposal Act, highway beautification, Teacher Corps.

delineated. To guide this study, eight hypotheses based on the theoretical arguments and empirical evidence in the literature are provided:

1. Congressmen who reside in larger communities are more supportive of FSS than those who live in smaller communities.
2. Congressmen who exhibit greater geographic "mobility" are more supportive of FSS than those with less mobility.
3. Congressmen with more "experience" in previous elective office are more supportive of FSS than those with less experience.
4. Congressmen with less "seniority" in the House are more supportive of FSS than those with more seniority.
5. Congressmen who are lawyers are more supportive of FSS than those who are not lawyers.
6. Congressmen who are Catholic or Jewish are more supportive of the FSS than those who are not.
7. Congressmen who are younger are more supportive of FSS than those who are older.
8. Congressmen from regions outside the South are more supportive of FSS than those from the South.

Table 1 presents a Pearson correlation coefficient matrix showing the inter-relationships among all fifteen variables studied. Most relevant are the correlations between each social background variable and the federal support score. The correlation between FSS voting and occupation, however, is insignificant. The other seven are significant, and five are significant at very high levels ( $p = .0001$ ). Moreover, our hypotheses are sustained by the correlations between FSS voting and age, religion, mobility, region, and size of residence. The data indicates, however that our assumptions about the impact of seniority and experience require re-examination.

TABLE 1

*Pearson Inter-Correlation Matrix of Fifteen Variables Studied*

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Party</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Religion</i>	<i>Size of Residence</i>	<i>Urban</i>	<i>Negro</i>	<i>Density</i>	<i>Owner-Occup. Housing</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>"Experience"</i>	<i>Margin of Victory</i>	<i>"Seniority"</i>	<i>"Mobility"</i>	<i>Federal Sup. Score</i>	<i>Region</i>
Party	xxx	.035	.188	.165	.083	.272	.169	-.300	.023	.089	.381	.553	.093	.586	-.181
Age	.035	xxx	-.061	.128	-.006	.159	.062	-.124	-.054	.698	.244	-.501	-.053	-.098	-.069
Religion	.188	-.061	xxx	.218	.352	-.121	.254	-.199	-.028	-.059	-.007	.202	-.019	.456	.290
Size of Residence	.165	.128	.218	xxx	.432	.244	.790	-.609	-.011	.097	.176	.031	.066	.269	.149
Urban	.083	-.006	.352	.432	xxx	.057	.428	-.371	-.041	-.081	.066	.069	.131	.398	.305
Negro	.272	.159	-.121	.244	.057	xxx	.258	-.442	.054	.196	.509	-.020	-.047	-.125	-.338
Density	.169	.062	.254	.790	.428	.258	xxx	-.741	.008	.033	.244	.042	-.019	.289	.188
Owner-Occupied Housing	-.300	-.124	-.199	-.609	-.371	-.442	-.741	xxx	-.036	-.093	-.403	-.087	.027	-.256	-.037
Occupation	.023	-.054	-.028	-.011	-.041	.054	.008	-.036	xxx	.104	.043	-.031	.055	-.064	-.120
"Experience"	.089	.698	-.059	.097	-.081	.196	.033	-.093	.104	xxx	.359	-.577	-.038	-.140	-.169
Margin of Victory	.381	.244	-.007	.176	.066	.509	.244	-.403	.043	.359	xxx	-.135	-.048	.015	-.281
"Seniority"	.553	-.501	.202	.031	.069	-.020	.042	-.087	-.031	-.577	-.135	xxx	.094	.488	.024
"Mobility"	.093	-.053	-.019	.066	.131	-.047	-.020	.027	.055	-.038	-.048	.094	xxx	.100	.042
Federal Support Score	.586	-.098	.456	.269	.398	-.125	.289	-.256	-.064	-.140	.015	.488	.100	xxx	.319
Region	-.181	-.069	.290	.149	.305	-.338	.188	-.037	-.120	-.169	-.281	.024	.042	.319	xxx

Within this table, any correlation with a value of .081 is significant at the .05 level. A value of .104 is significant at the .01 level; a value of .149 is significant at the .001 level; and a value of .176 is significant at the .0001 level.

Size of residence and geographic "mobility" both address the question of parochialism in the recruitment of legislative elites. In his well-known study, Andrew Hacker<sup>10</sup> indicated that Senators were more parochial than corporate executives in their backgrounds, and he hinted that such limited experiences may hinder legislators in being able to understand the complexities of our economy. Rieselbach tried to determine whether Congressmen as "small town boys" voted differently than their more urban counterparts.<sup>11</sup> To gauge parochialism, he used three indices: size of birthplace, size of residence, and geographic mobility. He found that Representatives born in smaller towns and from smaller residences were less supportive of FSS voting, but there seemed to be no relationship to mobility. Our data affirms this line of reasoning, vis., FSS voting is correlated to larger residences and to greater geographic mobility.

The variables of age, occupation, and religion were given some attention by Donald Matthews.<sup>12</sup> His study of the 81st Congress indicated that liberal Senators tend proportionately to be younger rather than older, to be Catholic rather than Protestant, and to be professionals rather than businessmen.

With regard to age, it can be argued that younger legislators are less committed to traditional ideology and, over time, more amenable to the changing agenda of issues. Presumably, these Congressmen would not generally represent "safe" districts controlled by conservative interests. Research by Duncan MacRae, Jr.<sup>13</sup> shows that age can displace the impact of social status. He found that Massachusetts legislators who were younger were under more cross-pressures than older ones and were less loyal to their social status as a cue to voting on issues. Our data also shows that younger Representatives are more supportive of FSS voting, but the correlation is weak and barely significant.

That lawyers dominate American politics at all levels is readily apparent, and arguments are advanced in the literature which indicate that this occupation is functional to the operation of the political system.<sup>14</sup> Unlike

<sup>10</sup>Andrew Hacker, "The Elected and the Anointed: Two American Elites," *American Political Science Review* (September, 1961), 539-549.

<sup>11</sup>Leroy N. Rieselbach, "Congressmen as 'Small-Town Boys': A Research note,; *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup>Donald R. Matthews, *The Social Background of Political Decision-Makers*, *op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup>Duncan MacRae, Jr., and Edith K. MacRae, "Legislators' Social Status and Their Votes," *American Journal of Sociology* (May, 1969), 599-603.

<sup>14</sup>For examples see: Heinz Eulau and John D. Sprague, *Lawyers in Politics: A Study of Professional Convergence* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1964); Joseph A. Schlesinger, "Lawyers and American Politics: A Clarified View," *Midwest Journal of Political Science* (1957), 26-39; P. L. Hain, "Lawyers and Politics Revisited—Structural Advantages," *American Journal of Political Science* (February, 1975), 41-51.

businessmen, lawyers are trained and socialized—the argument goes—in the process of negotiation and compromise. To this extent, they may be more flexible on the issues and less likely to react to policy from a fixed ideological position. The relationship between occupation and FSS voting, as formulated in this analysis, is not significant; however, its direction indicated greater FSS voting by non-lawyer Congressmen.

The voting tendencies of Jewish and Catholic Representatives are similarly liberal, indicative of their ethnic origins. One public opinion study, for example, showed Jews and Catholics to be more “liberal” than Protestants with regard to government’s role in the society.<sup>15</sup> Our data confirms this expectation. A strong correlation exists between religion and FSS voting and it seems to exist independently of other variables. While most Catholics and Jews are Democrats,<sup>16</sup> there are fewer Democrats in Congress who are Catholic or Jewish (thus the weak correlation between party and religion, .188). Not surprisingly, most Catholics and Jews are from outside the South, but the vast majority of non-Southern Congressmen are not Catholic or Jewish. The correlation between religion and region, as a consequence, is only a modest .290. Furthermore, by calculating partial coefficients, it is determined that the impact of religion on FSS voting is sustained after controlling for party (.436), for seniority (.386), and for urban variables (.363). Among all social background variables, only religion acts independently of other factors.

The distinctive impact of region on American politics has long been recognized. This has been particularly true of the South. Most Congressional voting studies impose controls for region. One of the well-known Congressional voting blocs—the “conservative coalition”—takes account of the importance of region. Southern conservatism is rooted in the Civil War era, in the rural plantation economy and its “peculiar” institution of slavery. It is sustained today by a new-found affluence caused by late industrialization and economic development. Among social background attributes, our study showed region to be fourth strongest, but highly inter-related to constituency variables (urban and Negro).

As measures of “professionalism” one’s experience in previous elective office and seniority within the House are used. The literature suggests that

<sup>15</sup>Wesley and Beverly Allinsmith, “Religious Affiliation and Politico-Economic Attitudes,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* (Fall, 1948), 377-389.

<sup>16</sup>Among the Congressmen in the 89th Congress, religious denominations are represented in the following proportions in the Democratic Party: Jewish—93.3; Catholic—88.0; Baptist—78.0; Methodist—67.1; Lutheran—62.5; Presbyterian—54.5; and Episcopalian—51.0.



these variables might have differential impact. The assertion is made that elites with greater experience in elective office—unlike amateurs—are less ideological, more willing to compromise, and are more loyal to party leadership.<sup>17</sup> Following this line of reasoning, greater elective experience should aid FSS voting. The same could be said of seniority within Congress, yet evidence to the contrary would suggest that very senior Representatives—committee chairmen—tend to come from safe, homogeneous and conservatively oriented districts.<sup>18</sup> However, it should be mentioned that even should all twenty-one standing committee chairmen be very conservative, their roll call voting record would be minor in our universe of 425 Representatives. As indicated by the correlations, experience is negatively related to FSS voting. But how is this disparity explained? The intercorrelation matrix shows experience, seniority, and age to be strongly interrelated. Age correlates to experience (.698) but to less seniority (–.501). The reverse situation affects FSS voting; that is, voting for FSS correlates to *younger* age, to *less* prior experience, and to *more* seniority. What these linkages suggest is that FSS voting is aided by Congressmen who typically enter the House at a younger age, without having had much previous elective experience, and who, subsequently, are able to accumulate greater seniority within the Congress. It would appear, therefore, that arguments against the seniority system affecting committee assignments have less validity when applied to the operation of the legislative system as a whole. To the extent that seniority introduces ““professionalism”” into the law-making process, it aids voting for an expanded federal role. And there are suggestions in the data that previous experience may be less relevant to the legislative process than ongoing experience in the Congress.

Seniority is the strongest social background variable (.488), but it appears to be a function of party affiliation. That is, when a partial correlation is calculated with controls for party, the correlation between seniority and FSS voting is reduced to .243.

Overall, the four strongest correlates of FSS voting are: party affiliation, seniority, religion, and percent urban. The literature confirms that party is most important; however, social background attributes appear

<sup>17</sup>See James Q. Wilson, *The Amateur Democrat* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966). C. Richard Hofstetter gives some empirical support to Wilson's argument in “The Amateur Politician: A Problem in Construct Validation,” *Midwest Journal of Political Science* (February, 1971), 31-57.

<sup>18</sup>George Goodwin, Jr., “The Seniority System in Congress,” *American Political Science Review* (June, 1959), 412-436. For an argument suggesting that committee chairmen tend to mirror party strength and ideology, see Barbara Hinckley, *The Seniority System Congress* (Bloomington Indiana University Press, 1971), especially chapter 8.

stronger than constituency variables. Table 2 gives the multiple regression model based on these strongest predictors. Taken together, party, seniority, religion, and urbanism explain 54.9 percent of the variance in FSS voting. Independently, party explains 33.9 percent, religion adds 12.4 percent, urban accounts for 6.3 percent, and—as expected—seniority adds only 2.3 percent to the total variance predicted.

The salience of religion as a social background variable is confirmed, even though it is based on an uncomplicated dichotomy between Jewish/Catholic Representatives and all others. The “liberalism” of Jewish and Catholic Congressmen cannot be explained in terms of the economic condition or the social class of all Jews and Catholics since the position of Jews generally exceeds that of Catholics. One answer may lie in the history of discrimination suffered by both groups in America.<sup>19</sup> The threat of anti-Semitism and the tenets of the Jewish faith may foster liberalism in Jewish Congressmen. The struggle of immigrant groups—like the Catholics—in their quest for social mobility led many of them to enter the trade union movement and to capitalize on the paternalism of big city political machines. From this perspective, Jewish and Catholic Representatives may be more supportive of governmental intervention to aid minorities and to limit the privileges of established elites. To this extent, it would appear that the nature of the belief systems of organized religion as well as the differential attraction of ethnic groups to certain religious denominations has an affect on voting behavior. In this light, moreover, arguments which underestimate the “symbolic” or sociological importance of group representation in Congress and stress only geographical representation may need restructuring. Members of specific religious denominations may transmit independent perceptions of issues, individual approaches to problem-solving, and create new demands on Congress in behalf of their clientele groups.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup>See the chapter which analyze the political inclinations of Jews, Irish, Slavs, and Italians in Mark R. Levy and Michael S. Kramer, *The Ethnic Factor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973).

<sup>20</sup>For example, see Leroy N. Rieselbach, “The Demography of the Congressional Vote on Foreign Aid, 1939-1958,” *op. cit.* Among the personal attributes he studied, only religion strongly related to voting on foreign aid. Catholics were more supportive of foreign aid, and Rieselbach suggests that “such programs may have appeared to Catholics as a means to assist their homelands in time of economic crisis.” Other discussions of this issue are found in: Bernard Fensterwald, Jr., “The Anatomy of American ‘Isolationism’ and Expansionism,” *Journal Conflict Resolution* June and December, 1958), 111-138 and 280-309; John H. Fenton, *The Catholic Vote* (New Orleans: Hauser Press, 1960), 87-108.

TABLE 2

*Multiple Regression Model Showing Impact of Party, Religion, Urbanism, and Seniority on Voting the Federal Support Score*

<i>Independent Variables</i>	<i>Multiple R</i>	<i>R Square</i>	<i>RSq Change</i>	<i>Simple R</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>F Value</i>
Party	.58259	.33942	.33942	.58259	6.467109	.41531	108.623
Religion	.68063	.46325	.12384	.45465	3.688582	.24657	46.486
Urban	.72544	.52626	.06300	.40195	.7926693	.26826	57.384
Seniority	.74093	.54897	.02272	.47964	.5687984	.18157	20.650
(constant)					.6933314		

This research suggests that social background variables can affect voting behavior and that religion deserves to be studied as an independent variable of importance. Its operation does not depend upon issue-specific voting but rather affects voting behavior on numerous domestic, social welfare issues associated with increased role of the federal government in our economy and society.