

The Effect of Citizen Input on State Legislator Decision-Making: Does Gender Matter?

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ABSTRACT This study is an attempt to determine the degree to which state legislators consider citizen input and opinion when making day-to-day policy decisions, based on numerous variables, including political party affiliation, tenure in office, full-time vs. part-time status, and especially gender. Ultimately, we found that none of these variables were significant predictors of consideration of citizen input—including gender—a conclusion that contradicts much of the prevailing literature on the subject.

INTRODUCTION

There have been a multitude of studies addressing citizen participation in state and local government over the past thirty years (Cole 1975; Goodin and Dryzek 1980; Verba et al. 1993; King and Stivers 1998; Timney 1998), and the topic is currently being addressed with renewed vigor (Reingold 2000; Ellickson and Whistler 2001; Irvin and Stansbury 2004). These studies acknowledge that while citizen participation can be advantageous under certain circumstances, it is not always realistic or viable and may perhaps be detrimental to the policy process in some cases. This then begs the question, “What factors play a role in determining the degree to which state and local elected officials consider citizen input and opinion when making day-to-day policy decisions?” In particular, previous studies in the women and politics literature have explored gender as a potentially significant variable in determining elected officials’ consideration of citizen input (Mansbridge 1999). More specifically, do elected female officials pay more attention to constituents than their male counterparts?

The responses to this question have been somewhat mixed. Initial studies in the 1970s indicated that female state legislators viewed themselves as more responsive to constituents than their male colleagues (Diamond 1977; Johnson and Carroll 1978). However, while more recent studies have suggested that female

legislators perform more constituency work than their male counterparts (Richardson and Freeman 1995), others have indicated that female legislators are equal to male legislators in the amount of attention paid, and level of responsiveness to constituents (Thomas and Welch 1991; Reingold 1992; Reingold 2000; Ellickson and Whistler 2001).

While the issue of gender differences among elected officials in the decision-making process has often been examined in the women and politics literature, it has been somewhat neglected by scholars involved in the field of citizen participation, with the exception of a few (Thomas and Welch 1991; Richardson and Freeman 1995). This study attempts to bridge that gap by evaluating gender along with other variables including party affiliation, length of service, and full-time vs. part-time legislative status. To what degree do these variables correlate with the degree to which state legislators consider citizen input when making political decisions?

To examine this question, we sent a nationwide email survey to all state legislators with an email address (approximately 2200 subjects in over 35 states). For this type of survey, results were positive with a response rate of roughly 10% (n=227). Due to the magnitude in the size of the survey, there was tremendous diversity among the respondents with regard to background, geography, years of service, and full-time vs. part-time status. The primary research question addressed in this study was, “Is there a significant correlation between the variables of gender, party

affiliation, length of service, and full-time vs. part-time legislative status, upon the degree to which state legislators consider citizen input when making day-to-day policy decisions?" As we are attempting to bridge the gap between the women and politics and citizen participation literatures, we were most interested in the gender variable. Ultimately, we found that gender was not significantly correlated to our dependent variable, neither were any of the other utilized variables, a finding significant unto itself taking into account the studies mentioned previously. It would seem that gender does not seem to be a significant factor with regard to consideration of citizen input among elected state legislators.

This study also offers a few secondary research questions. First, do full-time office holders consider citizen input more so than their part-time counterparts? Second, is there a significant relationship between gender and political party? That is, are women more likely to serve as Democrats? Ultimately, we found that yes, full-time state legislators tend to consider citizen input more so than their part-time counterparts and there is a significant relationship between gender and political party; women are more likely to serve as Democrats than men.

METHODOLOGY

We sent an 11-question e-mail survey to 2200 state legislators in 35 states. The simple, two-page survey elicited responses first on myriad of background and biographical information including: full-time vs. part-time status, gender, years of service, and political party. Secondly, we asked the subjects to address several questions regarding their consideration of citizen input on a daily basis and the extent to which it influenced their decision making on policy issues. We also asked the respondents to estimate, on average, how many hours per week they spent on constituency service. Finally, we asked the officials to rank which methods of constituency relations they most often utilized from a list of six options including: personal contact at the capitol; personal contact in the district; answering phone calls, e-mails, letters, faxes; surveys/mailings; social functions; and elections events. Our response rate was 10% (N=227).

The dependent variable for this study was *the degree to which state legislators consider citizen input/views when making day-to-day*

policy decisions and was measured by a four-item Likert-type attitudinal scale. Responses for each item in the scale were scored on a three-point scale (not at all, somewhat, to a great extent, e.g.). The higher the scale score, the more favorable one's attitude toward consideration of citizen input. The Cronbach's Alpha score for this scale was .82 (a high score indicating a reliable scale) with a mean of 9.21 and a standard deviation of 1.87. Four independent variables were used in this study to aid in the prediction of the dependent variable including: position (part time vs. full-time); gender; political party (Republican or non-Republican); and years served as a state legislator. Sixty-seven percent of the respondents were male and 33% were female. With regard to political party affiliation, 57.7% were Republican while 42.7% were non-Republican (Democrat or other). With regard to full-time vs. part-time distinction, 32.2% of respondents worked full-time and 67.8% served in a part-time capacity. Finally, the mean years of service was 6.53 with a standard deviation of 6.15.

RESULTS

The zero-order correlation results for the variables used in this study are presented in table 1. Type of position (full-time v. part-time) is the strongest predictor of the dependent variable—the degree to which state legislators consider citizen input/views when making day-to-day policy decisions. Those legislators that worked full-time were more likely to take citizen input into account when making policy decisions on a daily basis ($r=.11$). This relationship was not significant at the .05 level. There is no relationship between the dependent variable and the years of service ($r=-.07$) or political party ($r=.05$). There was also no relationship between gender and the dependent variable ($r=.03$).

There are several correlations between the independent variables that may be worth noting. First, there was a significant relationship between the type of position (full-time v. part-time) and political party. Full-time legislators were more likely to be non-Republicans ($r=.31$). There was also a significant relationship between gender and political party—females were more likely to serve as non-Republicans ($r=.29$).

In order to fully examine the influence of the independent variables on the degree to which state legislators consider citizen input/views when

Table 1: Zero-order correlations among variables (N=227)

	(5)	(4)	(3)	(2)	(1)
(1) Gender	.03	.29*	-.03	.04	1
(2) Position	.11	.31*	.11	1	
(3) Years served	-.07	.09	1		
(4) Party	.05	1			
(5) Dependent variable	1				

*Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

making day-to-day policy decisions, a multivariate regression was performed. For the regression analysis, dichotomized variables were treated as dummy variables. Only standardized regression coefficients were used in order to assess the relative importance of each independent variable. The regression model is presented in table 2. The total amount of variance explained by the regression model is only 2% (r square=.02). Type of position (full-time vs. part-time) was the

Table 2: Regression Coefficients for the degree to which state legislators consider citizen input/views when making day-to-day policy decisions (Standardized)

<i>Independent Variables</i>	<i>Dependent Variable</i>
Position (1=part-time, 2=full-time)	.101
Gender (1=male, 2=female)	.010
Political party (1=Republican)	.057
Years served	-.085
RSquared=	.021

*p<.01

strongest predictor of the dependent variable (beta=.10). This relationship, however, was not significant at the .05 level. Gender (beta=.01), years of service (beta=-.08), and political party (beta=.05) were not significant predictors of the dependent variable.

DISCUSSION

Many results merit discussion in further detail. First, it is worth noting that none of the independent variables in this study seem to be significant statistical predictors of the dependent variable, the degree to which state legislators consider citizen input when making day-to-day policy decisions.

Gender

Perhaps most significantly for this study, gender was not a predictor of consideration of citizen input, a finding that seems to contradict

some of the prevailing literature on the subject. According to our findings, women do not consider citizen input to a greater degree (or lesser degree) than their male counterparts when making day-to-day policy decisions. Our findings indicate that male and female state legislators consider citizen input equally and some heed it tremendously while other consider it almost not at all. There may be a myriad of factors determining consideration or non-consideration of citizen input when making policy decision on a day-to-day basis, but at least according to the data generated and analyzed in this study, gender is not one of those factors.

Earlier studies from the 1970s indicated that there were important differences between male and female legislators in many aspects of legislative behavior. According to these studies, women viewed themselves as harder working and more responsive to constituents than their male colleagues but less likely to speak in committee meetings and floor sessions, and less likely to meet with lobbyists other representatives from interest groups (Kirkpatrick 1974; Diamond 1977; Johnson et al. 1978). However, Thomas (1994) concluded that by the 1980s, female representatives were just as active as their male counterparts in terms of floor and committee speaking and meeting with lobbyists.

The prevailing literature also indicates that women perform more constituency work and therefore may consider citizen input more so than men (Freeman 1995) and are also more likely to use a facilitative and open leadership style—that is, one that is considered “feminine” (Flamang 1985; Dodson and Carroll 1991; Jewell and Whicker 1993; Kathlene 1994; Thomas 1994; Rosenthal 1998), although some recent studies have contradicted this notion (Reingold 1992; Reingold 2000; Ellickson and Whistler 2001). These recent studies contend that both male and female elected officials use “feminine” leadership styles that emphasize compromise, consensus building, honesty, and equality while de-emphasi-

zing traditionally male traits such as manipulation, coercion, and reliance on hierarchy. Or, more simply, as Mansbridge (1999) argued, women may better represent women and their interests. In addition, Reingold (2000) concluded that male and female legislators were equal in the amount of attention paid to constituents and in their level of responsiveness to their needs. Our findings support this second set of findings that suggests there is no discernible difference between male and female consideration of citizen input when making day-to-day policy decisions or even in leadership style for that matter.

It would seem that while distinguishable differences existed between male and female legislative roles a generation or so ago, these roles and behaviors have become somewhat standardized today, including the amount of time spent dealing with constituency concerns and the degree to which legislators consider citizen input. The “feminine” vs. “masculine” distinction with regard to style, outlook, and policy priorities has become seemingly blurred with regard to gender according to many studies including this one.

Political Party and Tenure in Office

Furthermore, Republicans do not consider citizen input either more or less than their non-Republican counterparts and those serving longer in office do not consider citizen input more or less than those that those relatively new to elective state legislative office, according to this study. Anecdotally, one might have assumed that those with a shorter tenure in office would be more sensitive to or directed by citizen opinion and direction. In the Burkean sense, one may have thought that newly elected officials would behave more like delegates while those serving for a longer period of time would behave more like trustees.

A delegate is an office holder who is more responsive to public opinion, whose actions in the legislature are mandated by or sensitive to his constituents, and who makes fewer independent decisions on policy issues, especially when at odds with public opinion in the home district. On the other hand, a trustee is an official who is not always responsive to public opinion but assumes that he or she knows what is best for the voters in the district and should, therefore be trusted to do what is best for the constituents

even if some of those decisions contradict short-term public opinion. We did not find the delegate/trustee distinction to hold true in terms of tenure in office in this study.

Full-time vs. Part-time

The strongest relationship with regard to the independent variables and consideration of citizen input was the full-time vs. part-time distinction. It seems as though those serving in a full-time capacity are more likely to consider citizen input compared to their part-time counterparts. This finding is not surprising given the reality that full-time, relatively well-paid, and well-staffed officials have the organizational infrastructure in place to handle constituent concerns on a day-to-day basis while this structure may be absent in the case of part-time officials who lack the support, resources, and time necessary to meet constituent demands or consider citizen views in a timely or organized manner. Full-time legislative officials spend more time in the state capitol crafting public policy and more time in their respective home districts dealing with constituency concerns and gauging citizen input in comparison to part-time officials who often meet in the state house for a legislative session lasting only a few weeks.

Furthermore, part-time officials, because their pay is so low in comparison to full-time officials (often only a few thousand dollars per year in most cases) usually have full-time occupations beyond their legislative duties. As a result, their legislative responsibilities, including constituency outreach, are limited or subjugated to the duties of earning a living. This finding does not suggest that part-time state legislators do not consider citizen input when making day-to-day policy decisions whatsoever, but rather suggests that because of the aforementioned pressures faced by part-time officials, consideration of citizen input is oftentimes sacrificed or marginalized.

CONCLUSION

So, do female state legislators consider citizen input more than their male colleagues when making day-to-day policy decisions? According to our findings-no. Furthermore, Republican officials do not take citizen input into account more than their non-Republican counterparts and

those relatively new to elective office do not consider citizen input more than those who have been serving in office for a longer period of time. With regard to consideration of citizen input, the only significant (albeit tenuous) variable studied here was the full-time vs. part-time distinction. Those officials serving in the state legislature in a full-time capacity are more likely to consider citizen input when making policy decisions than those officials serving in a part-time capacity due to the reasons mentioned previously—they simply have more time, resources, money, and energy to attend to constituency concerns and gauge public opinion.

In terms of gender, this study falls in line more with those recent studies that contend that fewer differences exist between male and female elected officials at all levels of government, especially with regard to constituency relations, leadership style, and consideration of citizen input. Whereas studies from the 1970s suggested that significant gender differences existed in these areas, we found, like more recent studies, that these differences are waning, blurring, or even disappearing.

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