Needs, norms, and food policy in the U.S. House of Representatives

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the influence of partisanship, religion, and district need on legislative behavior pertaining to food policy. Historically, policymaking is this area has been decidedly bipartisan, because it provided opportunities for logrolling among legislators. As the parties became more ideologically polarized and as budget pressures mounted, some suggested the food coalition would break down. To test this argument, this article analyzes legislative behavior on food and agriculture measures in the U.S. House of Representatives in 106th Congress. The findings indicate that while party, ideology, religion, and district need all affect legislative behavior, there is still a bipartisan majority coalition of legislators that supports food assistance.

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1. Introduction

At the end of the 111th Congress (2009–2010), the United States found itself in dire economic circumstances. The unemployment rate was over 9%; the national debt exceeded $9 trillion, or 62% of GDP; and in the first quarter of fiscal year 2011 the country ran a deficit of $371 billion. In light of these circumstances, one could be forgiven for looking back on an earlier era, the 106th Congress (1999–2000), as the halcyon days of budget politics. The government was running a surplus; the unemployment rate hovered around 4%; and the national debt was about $5.6 trillion. Even then, however, legislators faced difficult choices with respect to allocating resources. The federal budget had only moved into the black in 1998, and that happened in part because of imposed statutory spending caps (Schick, 2000). Then and now the decisions made by legislators are much more than a dry calculation about the bottom line. The budget reflects the values of the nation; it “is a vital means of establishing and pursuing national priorities” (Schick & LoStracco, 2000, 2).

In that context, Congress makes social welfare policy. Focusing on the U.S. House of Representatives in the 106th Congress (1999–2000), this article investigates legislative behavior in one area of that domain—food policy. Food policy refers to the creation, funding, and administration of government programs designed to provide food and nutrition assistance. It makes for an interesting case because it is at the fulcrum of various political cleavages. Food policy provides a practical response to an economic need. Because legislators are electorally motivated, we expect legislators to be highly responsive to constituency needs and preferences (Arnold, 1992; Mayhew, 1974). However, food policy is redistributive and typifies larger debates about the size and role of government. As such, we expect legislative behavior to be partisan and ideological (Rohde, 1991; Poole & Rosenthal, 1991). Finally, legislators’ personal characteristics affect their behavior (Burden, 2007; Fetzer, 2006; Swers, 1998). Because food policy is religiously salient, in particular we expect religious affiliation to influence behavior.

We find that a mix of needs and norms structures legislative behavior. Republicans were slightly less
supportive than their Democratic colleagues of expanding individual food programs, but slightly more supportive of the larger appropriations bill that funded the programs. On the whole, however, roll call voting was bipartisan, as is consistent with the historical pattern on this issue. The partisan differences were incremental. Legislators were also highly responsive to district needs. Finally, when religious values were most at stake, religious affiliation also influenced legislative behavior.

2. The politics of food

As of 2009, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reports that over 20% of U.S. households (or 57,000,000 people) are food insecure or have low food security, meaning they are either hungry or at risk of hunger. This figure is up from 13% in 1999. In response to this national problem, the federal government provides an array of food programs. These include the SNAP/Food Stamps and WIC (women, infants, and children) programs, which help the poor buy food; the National School Lunch and the School Breakfast Programs, which provide meals to school children; and the Child & Adult Care Food Program, which provides meals to children and adults in non-residential day care facilities and to homeless children and youths. About a dozen programs specifically target child nutrition, with total funding levels of about $15 billion in FY2002 (Richardson, 2001). The SNAP/Food Stamps Program constitutes the most significant federal expenditure in the area of hunger and nutrition. The program was created in 1964 with passage of the Food Stamp Act, and it appropriates funds to the 50 states, the District of Columbia, Guam, and the Virgin Islands. According the USDA, in FY2010 the SNAP/Food Stamps Program cost $68,218,220,000, as compared to $6,765,200,000 for WIC.

Federal nutrition programs are administered by the USDA (often in cooperation with the states) and funded annually via the agriculture appropriations bill. As a component of agricultural policy, food policy created a terrific logrolling opportunity. Legislators representing needy districts and legislators representing agricultural interests were at the center of the logroll (King, 2000, 49). The former were legislators whose districts received food assistance, while the latter represented districts that received agricultural subsidies. Each supported the other's appropriation, and everyone got something (Hansen, 1991). However, bipartisan pro-food coalitions were increasingly "put on the back burner" in the 1970s (Maney, 1989, 56). In the 1980s, partisan considerations began to eclipse this mutually beneficial relationship, as President Reagan and congressional Democrats battled over funding for an array of domestic social programs (King, 2000). The old logroll was still in place, but in an era of skyrocketing deficits and increased defense spending, something had to be sacrificed. Social programs were a logical choice for President Reagan, since he opposed "big government" generally and redistributive programs specifically. Ohls and Beebout (1993, 158–160) agree "the process was... less bipartisan in the early 1980s," but contend most legislation during the mid–1980s "had relatively little opposition" and was enacted on a bipartisan basis. Even so, the early George H.W. Bush years are described as a period of "partisan stalemate," even though the early 1990s saw some bipartisan support concerning food stamp costs (King, 2000, 191).

The salience of this partisan cleavage continued when the Republicans took control of the House in 1995. Their Contract with America called for food stamp funding to be grouped with other nutrition programs in a block grant to the states. However, this initiative was blocked in 1995 by farm state Republicans on the Agriculture Committee who considered it an economic detriment to their constituents (Weaver, 1996). When Congress reformed welfare with creation of the TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) program in 1996, the Food Stamps Program "escaped assignment to the states" and remained under the federal umbrella as an entitlement program (King, 2000, 197). The effort to transform the Food Stamps Program into a block grant was defeated in the House by a vote of 114–316, "with Republicans divided almost evenly and Democrats opposed almost unanimously." The Senate voted 36–64, with one-third of the Republicans joining the Democrats to vote against it (King, 2000, 206). Republican Senator Richard Lugar stated, "there must be a safety net, basically, for eating, for nutrition – a safety net against starvation in this country" (King, 2000, 207). It was understood that states could experiment with the new TANF program, but food policy would stay in Washington.

3. Theory

The literature suggests that a mix of considerations affects the food policy dynamic. Depending on the actual vote being analyzed, it is possible to see the machinations of Congress as being generally in support of nutrition policy, but being occasionally tinged with partisan rhetoric and division. First, there are partisan and ideological considerations. Partisanship affects roll call voting because the party caucuses in Congress have become more internally cohesive and externally polarized over the course of the 20th century, and because party leaders act to enforce discipline and limit defection (Cox & McCubbins, 2007; Rohde, 1991). As such, party monikers represent meaningful differences. As an indicator of individual political values, ideology also affects voting (Kalt & Zupan, 1984; Poole & Rosenthal, 1991). In the 1980s, nutrition assistance came to represent larger partisan and ideological cleavages over the size of government and the welfare state. To the extent that legislative behavior is influenced by political norms, party and ideology will exert a strong influence on legislative behavior. We expect that because Democratic and liberal legislators are more likely to embrace a redistributive social welfare agenda, they will be more likely to support food assistance programs.

Second, there are constituency considerations. Irrespective of political norms, constituency factors are often

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2 See also Ripley (1969) and Ferejohn (1986).
associated with defection from partisan and ideological orthodoxy. This is because the electoral system in the United States encourages attentiveness to constituency interests at the expense of party discipline (Arnold, 1992; Fenno, 1973; Mayhew, 1974; McClone & Kuklinski, 1979; Miller & Stokes, 1963). Two kinds of congressional districts benefited from the food logroll: districts experiencing high levels of poverty and agriculture districts. The former benefited by receiving nutrition assistance, and the latter benefited by receiving agricultural subsidies. Thus, we expect legislators representing agricultural districts and districts with high levels of poverty will be more likely to support food programs than their colleagues.

Finally, we argue that religion influences legislative voting. Personal characteristics such as religion are often associated with distinct socialization experiences and group interests. As a result, personal characteristics influence legislative behavior and the larger legislative agenda (Canon, 1999; Swers, 1998; Welch, 1985; but see also Swain, 1993). Unlike ascriptive characteristics such as race and sex, religion often entails a set of values or creedal admonitions for how one is supposed to live. As such, it provides an “internal cue” that may guide decision-making among legislators (Burden, 2007; 39). It influences our politics because among believers, religious creeds and participation in religious and ethno-religious communities inform their values and therefore their political preferences (Swirenga, 2007; Wald, Owen, & Hill, 1988; Wuthnow, 1988). Legislators then bring these personal preferences to bear on their decision-making. At the same time, legislators also respond to religious communities within their districts (Calfano, 2006). This kind of representation is advanced by electoral politics, as religion shapes vote choice and partisanship at the mass level (Green, Smidt, Guth, & Kellstedt, 2005; Layman, 2001; Oldmixon, 2009).

Studies of religion and legislative behavior usually focus on cultural issues, such as abortion and gay rights (Green & Guth, 1991; Oldmixon, 2005), because these issues are commonly understood in religious terms. The focus on cultural issues is overly narrow. Religion can serve as an “internal cue” on any policy issues that implicate religious creeds and community interests. The polarity may not understand food policy in explicitly religious terms, but religious values are clearly associated with issues of poverty and social justice. As Wilson (2009) (191) notes, “there is perhaps no command more universally normative in the world’s great religious traditions than the imperative of charity for the poor.” Religion affects mass level attitudes on government assistance for the poor (Jelen, Corwin, & Wilcox, 1993; Wald & Calhoun-Brown, 2007 chapter 7). Moreover, religious institutions have a long history of social justice advocacy (Hertzke, 1988), and a number of religious institutions, such as the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, routinely lobby on food issues specifically. The provision of nutrition assistance can and should be understood as having a religious dimension, because it is part of the larger social gospel that has traditionally animated religious activism and political attitudes in American. We expect these patterns to be reflected in legislator decision-making on food issues.

4. Methodology

4.1. Dependent variables

Focusing on the 106th Congress, we explore this topic by analyzing three dependent variables comprised of roll call votes and sponsorships/cosponsorships. First, we analyze H.Amdt. 971, which is an amendment to HR 4461, the 2000 agriculture appropriations bill (yes = 0, anti-food; no = 1, pro-food). This is the only straightforward food vote. Second, we analyze HR 4461 as a point of comparison. This is the agriculture appropriations bill. It contains funding for food programs, among many other expenditures. Finally, we analyze an index of support for food programs. The index is comprised of sponsorship/cosponsorship decisions on three food related bills, HR 1324, HR 2738, and HR 3192.

HR 1324, the Food Bank Relief Act of 1999, authorized appropriations for organizations providing emergency food assistance. It was sponsored by Rep. Tony Hall (D-OH) and garnered 52 co-sponsors. HR 2738, the Food Stamp Outreach and Research for Kids Act of 1999, authorized appropriations for caseworker training, program impact studies, and program grants for partnership organizations. It was sponsored by Rep. William Coyne (R-PA) and co-sponsored by 54 representatives. HR 3192, the Hunger Relief Acts of 2000, would have amended the welfare reform act of 1996 to expand food stamp eligibility to “qualified aliens.” It was sponsored by Rep. James T. Walsh (R-NY) and garnered 185 co-sponsors. Legislators were given one point for each sponsorship/cosponsorship. Scores range from 0 to 3, with high scores reflecting high levels of support for food programs.

We would have liked to analyze roll call voting on major nutrition programs, such as the National School Lunch program. However, nutrition measures are either so consensual as to undermine analysis or they are components of larger authorization and appropriations bills. This makes analysis of decision-making difficult, because there are few “clean” votes. Even so, using three separate models allows us to draw important inferences about the nature of decision-making on this issue.

4.2. Independent variables

4.2.1. Party and ideology

The 106th Congress was part of a continuing era of considerable partisanship. This level of partisanship is reflected in roll call voting. In 2000, the level of party unity voting was well over 80% for Republicans and Democrats alike (Richert, 2008). Of course, strong partisanship of this variety is predicated on intra-party ideological cohesion and interparty ideological polarization (Aldrich & Rohde, 2009). In the 106th Congress, the ideological centers of gravity in the two parties moved farther apart, with Democrats ever more liberal, and Republicans ever more conservative. There were few moderates (Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2006, pp. 12–15).

As a facet of social welfare policy, debates over food policy are probably less ideological and less discordant than debates over, for example, the TANF program. Food policy is smaller in scale. It targets a specific need (rather
than general income assistance), and, as said, it creates opportunities for logrolling. Even so, we expect that given the partisan and ideological tenor of the time, Republican representatives will be more likely than Democratic representatives to oppose food policies. Because conservatives tend to oppose redistributive programs, we expect conservatives to express lower levels of support for food programs than liberals (Poole & Rosenthal, 2009, chapter 6).

Party is operationalized with a categorical variable (Republican = 1), while ideology is operationalized using American Conservative Union Scores. Scores reflect the percentage of conservative roll votes taken by each legislator.

4.2.2. Religion

We expect that white evangelical Protestants, Catholics, and black Protestants will be more supportive of food programs than their mainline colleagues. The expectation for white evangelicals may be surprising. American evangelicalism has its roots in Calvinist theology. It is associated with economic conservatism and opposition to the welfare state, because “poverty and damnation were individual matters, and only individuals could overcome them” (Trattner, 1999, 55, quoted in Wilson, 2009, 195). This is reflected in evangelical opinion at the mass level and in legislative behavior (Fastnow, Grant, & Rudolf, 1999; Green & Guth, 1991; Wald & Calhoun-Brown, 2007, chapter 7). However, an alternative perspective suggests that evangelicals are more liberal on the welfare state than their mainline counterparts (Clydesdale, 1999; Pyle, 1993; see also Wilson, 2009). Wuthnow (1994) attributes greater concern for the poor among evangelicals to their higher levels of church attendance, rather than a theological difference. Because evangelicals attend at higher rates, they are more likely to encounter and internalize teachings on the importance of caring for the poor. We expect, then, that controlling for party and ideology, evangelicals will be more supportive of nutrition assistance than their mainline colleagues.

The expectation for Catholics and black Protestants is fairly straightforward. Catholic Social Teaching on economic issues has a decidedly progressive tenor, which emphasizes structural injustices, the common good, and solidarity with the poor (Oldmixon & Hudson, 2008). Protestantism among African Americans has a history of combining evangelicalism with a liberal outlook on noncultural issues. Rather than theology, economic liberalism is rooted in the status of black churches in America. They were formed in the face of white oppression and became centers of prophetic social activism (Wald & Calhoun-Brown, 2007, chap. 10). Moreover, various studies have found that among legislators, black Protestant and Catholic affiliation is associated with liberalism (Fastnow et al., 1999; Oldmixon & Hudson, 2008; but see also Green & Guth, 1991). Our expectations are consistent with that. Religion is measured with a series of dummy variables (Catholic = 1; black Protestant = 1; white evangelical = 1).2

4.2.3. Constituency interests

The traditional Foods Stamps logroll was between legislators from rural agricultural districts and poor urban districts (Ferejohn, 1986). The logroll prevailed because it served the interests of both kinds of constituencies. To account for this, we include in our models% of the constituency living in poverty and % of the constituency classified as rural. Both are expected to be positively related to support for nutrition programs. We control for constituency partisanship by including the % of the vote for the Democratic candidate in the most recent presidential election (President Clinton in 1996). We expect that high levels of Democratic partisanship will be associated with support for food programs.

5. Analysis

House Amendment 971, also known as the Sanford Amendment, would have cut money from a school breakfast program. In 1999, the Clinton Administration requested a $13 million appropriation for a “school breakfast pilot project under which all children in participating elementary schools would receive free breakfasts” (Richardson, 2001, 18). The program was designed to explore the relationship between having a healthy school breakfast and performance in school. The House appropriation came in well below the Administration’s request ($13 million requested, $7 million appropriated). In 2000, the Administration requested the additional $6 million to complete the school breakfast study. The appropriation was approved. However, when the House considered the agricultural appropriations bill containing funding for the school breakfast program, Rep. Mark Sanford (R-SC) offered an amendment to strike the appropriation. During floor debate, Rep. Sanford expressed concern that the pilot program would grow into a permanent national entitlement. He stated, “It does not take $13 million to tell us that young folks will do better in school after breakfast. I think that what this is about is do we want this pilot program to grow into a school breakfast program for everybody in the country? For me, the answer would be no.”8

The Sanford Amendment was soundly defeated by bipartisan supermajority vote. Republicans cast 57 of the 59 votes in favor of the Sanford Amendment, but 98.9% of Democrats and 70.6% of Republicans voted against it. Table 1 provides the results of a probit analysis of voting of the amendment. While the vote was bipartisan, the analysis nevertheless finds a negative relationship between

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5 There were high levels of collinearity between partisanship (elite and district) and ideology. This was reduced by regressing ideology on legislator partisanship and district partisanship, and using the residuals from that equation in place of the ACU scores. This new indicator reflects the portion of ideology not explained by partisanship. This allows for a more confident interpretation of the direction and strength of the ideology coefficient, but it limits our ability to make substantive interpretations (Haider-Markel, 1999).

6 The following denominations were coded as evangelical: all Baptists, Assemblies of God, Brethren in Christ, Christian Missionary Alliance, Christian Reformed Church, Church of God, Church of Christ, Missouri Synod Lutherans, and self-identified evangelicals.

7 We originally included a dummy variable for Jewish representatives, but it was a perfect predictor of behavior and was dropped from the model.

8 Congressional record, July 10, 2000, page H5712.
Republican partisanship and pro-food voting. The analysis also demonstrates that, as expected, ideological conservatism produces lower levels of support for food programs. Dissent from the dominant (pro-food program) position comes from those legislators who are the most conservative. The religion coefficients indicate that while Catholics were more likely to cast pro-food votes than their mainline colleagues, white evangelicals and black Protestants were indistinguishable from their mainline colleagues. Finally, district level Democratic partisanship, poverty, and ruralism were all positively associated with support for the school breakfast pilot program. All three relationships achieve statistical significance.

In the second model we analyze HR 4461, the appropriations bill that the Sanford Amendment sought to change. Passage of HR 4461 was highly bipartisan, with 95.6% of Republicans and 67.5% of Democrats supporting the bill. However, Democrats and legislators from strongly Democratic districts were less likely to support the bill than their colleagues. Republicans may have been more likely to oppose an individual food program, as we saw in the previous model, but they were more supportive of the larger appropriations bill. This makes sense, since Republicans controlled the House and therefore held a majority of seats on the Appropriations Committee—it was their bill. It is especially interesting to note that in this model Catholics are indistinguishable from mainline Protestants. This also makes sense. HR 4461 included appropriations for food programs, but on the whole it was a wide-ranging bill not focused on any particular issue of religious significance. District ruralism and poverty were positively associated with support for the bill.

Finally, we analyze a sponsorship/co-sponsorship index of food related bills comprised of HR 1324, 2738, and 3192. All three bills sought to expand government nutrition programs, and none made it to the floor. However, each of these bills provided legislators with an opportunity to take positions on the issue of food and nutrition assistance. As with the vote on the Sanford Amendment, partisanship and ideology are strong predictors of legislative behavior. Republicans and conservatives are less likely than their liberal and Democratic colleagues to sponsor/co-sponsor food bills. District level Democratic partisanship is positively associated with sponsorships/co-sponsorships. None of the religious variables emerge as significant. The influence of district level preferences is mixed; ruralism is insignificant, while there is a negative association between poverty levels and index scores.

6. Conclusion

Was legislator behavior on food assistance and agriculture appropriations in the 106th Congress consistent with the overall partisan and ideological tenor of the times? The answer is complex. First, nutrition assistance may be politicized, but there is a strong consensus in support of food programs at the federal level. In an era of heightened partisanship, neither of the roll calls was a party line vote. Majorities of Republicans and Democrats opposed the Sanford Amendment and supported HR 4461. While we find a statistically significant relationship between party and voting, the differences are at the ideological margins. Second, to the extent that partisanship and support for food assistance are related, the direction of the relationship varies. While Republicans were more likely than Democrats to oppose singular food programs as reflected in the Sanford Amendment and the index, they were more likely to support the larger appropriations bill—with all its food expenditures and implicit bargains.

The influence of religious affiliation is mixed. We tested the argument that because food assistance policymaking implicates religious teaching, religious patterns would emerge with respect to legislative behavior. Catholics were more likely than their colleagues to oppose the Sanford Amendment, but otherwise Catholics, white evangelicals, and black Protestants were indistinguishable from their mainline Protestant colleagues. It is worth noting that the Sanford Amendment vote was the only opportunity legislators had to act with efficacy on a singular food program. If legislators felt a religious imperative, they would have been more likely to feel it on that vote than on the vote for HR 4461, where food assistance was only one part of the bill, or the index, which lacked policy consequences. This suggests that while district preferences, partisanship, and
ideology have strong explanatory power, religious norms may be operative when narrow questions related to food assistance emerge.

The impact of party, ideology, and to a lesser extent religion suggests that legislative behavior on food policy has a strongly normative element. Food policy probably lends itself to this kind of behavior, because it is made well below the radar. As said, policies are structured in committee and subsumed into larger appropriations bills. However, legislators do respond to district needs and preferences. Poor and rural districts traditionally have had much to gain in this, and we find that legislators from these districts were more likely to oppose the Sanford Amendment and support the HR 4461.

Finally, it is worth noting that in the era of devolution, national and state governments share responsibility for food policy. While the federal government authorizes and funds food programs, the states distribute and manage many of them. As a result, what we find in the U.S. House may not hold in state legislatures, where legislators are making different kinds of decisions. Rather than general authorizations and appropriations, states deal with program mechanics, such as food stamp eligibility. It is in these details that partisan cleavages may emerge (Scherter & Oldmixon, 2002). This suggests that additional work investigating legislative behavior at the state level is warranted, in addition to continued review of how Congress deals with this important policy issue.

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