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978-1-107-40713-8 - Mandate Politics

Lawrence J. Grossback, David A. M. Peterson and James A. Stimson

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Whether or not voters consciously use their votes to send messages about their preferences for public policy, the Washington community sometimes comes to believe that it has heard such a message. In this book, the authors ask, “What then happens?” This book focuses on these perceived mandates – where they come from and how they alter the behaviors of members of Congress, the media, and voters.

These events are rare. Only three elections in postwar America (1964, 1980, and 1994) were declared mandates by media consensus. These declarations, however, had a profound if ephemeral impact on members of Congress. They altered the fundamental gridlock that prevents Congress from adopting major policy changes. The responses by members of Congress to these three elections are responsible for many of the defining policies of this era. Despite their infrequency, then, mandates are important to the face of public policy and our understanding of Congress, the president, and the responsiveness of our government more generally.

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Mandate Politics

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Preface

We confess. We are sinners. According to the gospel of political methodology, one should never let method determine choice of topics to investigate. The prohibition is so sensible that it needs no explanation. And yet this is exactly what we did. In the spring of 1997, four of us sat around a table in a seminar room in Minneapolis and asked the question, “What would be a good application of the duration modeling techniques that we had been studying together?”

In a few minutes of conversation, we spun a story about observing members of Congress faced with a Washington consensus that the election just passed had carried a voter mandate. We asked what the reaction should look like and, because this was a methods course and we are social scientists, how we could model it. Although we may not have known it then, the question of the impact of perceived mandates had been investigated before. Importantly, however, the tools used and assumptions made were blunt. Scholars asked if the year following a mandate was different from the year that preceded it, concluding that it was not. The duration model, in contrast, focused on a temporary response that had run its course, as we now know, by midyear – and lost most of its force well before that. In this case, the tool matters.

The question originated from both the 1994 election and its aftermath, on the one hand, and the opportunity to test a piece of the theory Stimson had developed elsewhere (“Dynamic Representation,” with coauthors Michael B. MacKuen and Robert S. Erikson), on the other.

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The four of us were quite amazed at the dynamics of the aftermath of the Republican revolution. The Republicans took control of Congress for the first time in a generation and were poised to make tremendous changes in public policy. In the space of two years, this opportunity had collapsed. We could not agree if there really was something in public opinion that propelled the Republicans to power in 1994. We could not agree if that election had been a mandate or if *any* election could be a mandate. Despite years of trying, we never could develop a test of whether or not a mandate had occurred. Instead, we decided that the beliefs of the members of Congress comprised a more testable, and ultimately more theoretically interesting, question.

The second motivation is the one we were more interested in and the one that maintained this project for eight years. Stimson's work in "Dynamic Representation" proposed a theory that members of Congress were forward-looking observers of public opinion who constantly monitored all the signs of what the public wanted and how that might be changing so that they could be ahead of the curve, reacting to what could be known today so that they would never be caught out of line with public sentiment in a future election. This required members to be ambitious – and they are – and to be assiduous processors of all the little scraps of information that might forecast where the public was heading. If these were true, then the currents that move elections should be fully anticipated and the elections themselves should have no influence on the future behavior of members. Future elections in this world of rational expectations might move current behavior, but past elections were just history.

But we found one detail in this story troublesome. In a world of uncertainty, it should be the case that even the most assiduous information processors make forecast errors. Trying very hard to get it right, as if one's whole career depends on it – which it does – still does not guarantee that all will be foreseen. The loose end is the answer to the question, "What if some elections surprise, their outcome different from what informed observers expected?" Then, contrary to the main line of the dynamic representation theory, these elections should matter. Surprises do lead rational actors to change behavior.

And so our interest in statistical theory, tied to our observations about politics and grafted onto a nugget of theoretical anomaly, led to an animated discussion of thirty minutes or so in which much of the

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research that would eventually lead to this book was anticipated. It played out in our minds without a scrap of data at hand.

We were a class, not a research group. We were not looking for a project and had no plan to do something together. In most circumstances it would have been a fun discussion and then . . . nothing, on to the next week's topic. The work we anticipated was massive and none of it had been started. There was no assurance that it would work, that we actually could demonstrate that mandate elections changed behavior. It was crucial in this regard that the computer routines that produced the data for the dynamic representation research were available off the shelf. With them in hand, we generated the aggregate voting patterns that will be seen in Chapter 4, a matter of a few hours' work. This evidence was unmistakable. For the three elections that we considered reasonable candidates to have been perceived by Washington insiders as mandates, there was noticeable movement toward the mandate at the beginning of a new Congress, which then decayed back to normal voting patterns as the session progressed – exactly what we had anticipated with our prior theory.

From that first discussion in which we had real results, tentative though they were, we were hooked. We knew then that the difficult and sensitive duration analysis was likely to uncover the same patterns already seen in the easy aggregate analyses. It was worth the effort, which was considerable. We ceased to be a class and became a research team of four. Our fourth member, Amy Gangl, was present at the creation and made valuable contributions to our early research program, including the first published article from it. To our regret, she decided that this project was too far removed from the political psychology that is her specialty and professional identity.

And what of the duration modeling that sparked the discussion that was the origin of this research? Well, we did it. As we thought it would be in advance, it became the key evidence for the micro theory of member response to mandates. But to put the matter in context, it is just one section in one chapter of the seven-chapter book that follows. How members of Congress respond to news of a mandate is a pretty important part of our story, but it led us to ask several other questions. How do the media create the story of an election being a mandate? Why do some elections create these messages, whereas others don't? What are the policy changes induced by these responses? How do voters react

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to these responses in subsequent elections? Each of these questions was completely beyond our original plan and each caused us to immerse ourselves in history and in textual analysis that were well beyond our normal research styles. In combination, we have a more or less complete story of mandate elections that begins with those elections and ends when members of Congress face the voters two years later.

For eight years, we immersed ourselves in the idea of electoral mandates. This book is the result.

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As with any other book, the authors leaned heavily on many other people. The project began while all three of us were at the University of Minnesota. Minnesota provided a rich academic environment and strong research support to launch this effort. We all have since moved on and have received institutional support from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (Stimson), Texas A&M University (Peterson), and West Virginia University (Grossback). WVU, in particular, awarded a Faculty Senate Research Grant to assist in this project.

Several of our friends and colleagues have provided valuable comments on portions of the manuscript. These include Patricia Hurley, Kim Hill, B. Dan Wood, Eric Lawrence, Paul Kellstedt, Walter Mebane, Adam Berinsky, Mike MacKuen, Jan Leighley, Stephen Ansolabehere, Neal Beck, Scott Chrichlow, Stephen Borelli, Byron Schaeffer, participants of the 1997 and 1998 Annual Meetings of the Society for the Study of Political Methodology, and the WVU Department of Political Science Research Seminar. Janet Box-Steffensmeier and Brad Jones, in particular, helped with the duration analysis and encouraged the project along the way. Chaun Stores, Teresa Hutchins, and Brian Fogarty provided invaluable research assistance. Brian deserves special mention for his work on the content analysis in Chapter 2.

Some of our data come from archival sources. The Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research provided much of the roll call and election data we rely on. We are indebted to Keith Poole for his meticulous work archiving and making public roll call data for

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recent congresses. Data on key laws were taken from David Mayhew, and we appreciate his continued efforts at identifying these laws and making the data public.

We also thank Lori Biederman, Dianne Stimson, and Teresa Warkel. Each of us in our own way knows why.

Finally, this project began with four authors. When we started exploring mandates, Amy Gangl was an equal partner. At some point, Amy decided that this project did not fit into her research agenda and chose to work on other things. She helped develop the theory and analysis that form the basis of Chapter 3 of this book (and the *American Journal of Political Science* article that was an earlier version of that chapter). Several of the ideas that we would explore after she was no longer part of the project, particularly those about the media in Chapter 2, were heavily influenced by our early discussions with her on the topic. We know that this book is better off because of her involvement at the beginning – and worse off for her absence at the end.