

# A Field Experiment on Legislators' Home Styles: Service versus Policy

**Daniel M. Butler** Yale University  
**Christopher F. Karpowitz** Brigham Young University  
**Jeremy C. Pope** Brigham Young University

*We conducted a field experiment involving roughly 1,000 letters sent by actual individuals to nearly 500 different legislative offices in order to test whether legislative offices prioritize service over policy in their home style. We find strong evidence that both state and federal legislative offices are more responsive to service requests than they are to policy requests. This pattern is consistent with the desire of legislators to gain leeway with their constituents in order to pursue their own policy goals. We also find that at the federal level Democrats prioritize service over policy more than Republicans and at the state level legislators who won by larger margins are more likely to prioritize service over policy. Finally, our results suggest that the decision to prioritize service occurs in how the office is structured. Among other things this suggests that legislators may be microtargeting less than is often supposed.*

What messages do legislators prioritize in their home styles? Who prefers constituency service, and who prefers policy? Fenno (1978) argued that a member's home style (how he or she interacts with constituents) is a part of representation that is both important and distinct from their Washington behavior. Yet, as Bianco (1994) points out, researchers have not systematically investigated member's home style. In contrast, numerous researchers have studied members' Washington behavior, especially their roll-call behavior. Studies of roll-call behavior are extremely important, but they cannot tell us much about members' priorities over representational style and are insufficient for describing how elected officials represent their constituents (e.g., Eulau and Karps 1977; Hall 1996). Even studies that examine how legislators invest their time tend to focus on Washington behavior (Hall 1996; Sulkin 2005).<sup>1</sup>

While these studies have made important contributions, they do not show how members allocate their resources when faced with a choice between valence issues like constituency service and policy issues. And legislators do face these choices. The volume of constituent communications is growing

dramatically; in Congress, the number of emails and letters received quadrupled between 1994 and 2005 (Fitch and Goldschmidt 2005). Because staff resources are limited, each legislative office must decide which of the rising tide of messages will take priority.

What systematic evidence that does exist on members' home styles focuses on the period prior to the 1980s, looks only at members of Congress, and does not investigate beyond the basic trade-off between service and policy overall (e.g., Fiorina 1977; Herrera and Yawn 1999). Adler, Gent, and Overmeyer (1998) is a notable exception that tests whether legislators' characteristics moderate how much members of Congress mention constituency service on their web pages. While their study provides important insights (we use it to help develop our empirical models), there are several reasons to revisit whether legislators prioritize service over policy in their responses to constituent mail.

First, our field experiment ensures that legislators have an equal opportunity to deal with both policy and service. A concern with existing work based on observational data is that any finding may be driven by differences in opportunities that legislators have to deal with service. Some legislators may mention

<sup>1</sup>An online appendix with supplementary material for this article is available at [www.journals.cambridge.org/jop](http://www.journals.cambridge.org/jop). Data and supporting materials for the study will be made available at <http://isps.research.yale.edu/>.

service more simply because their committee assignments are more conducive to doing so (Fenno 1973). Our particular study involved over 1,000 letters sent by actual individuals to nearly 500 different legislative offices (we describe the experiment more fully below). Because we randomized the type of letter that was sent each time, legislators' opportunities are not driving the results. This research design also avoids the problems that can arise from using surveys, such as social desirability bias.

Second, the interests of the letter sender are clear and straightforward: they want a quality response. Because this is true across the different treatment conditions, we can compare how legislators prioritize service and policy when presenting themselves to their constituents.

Third, communication with constituents through emails and letters is an important activity that deserves attention in its own right. In a large-scale survey, the Congressional Management Foundation found that nearly half of those surveyed reported contacting one of their members of Congress in the past five years (Goldschmidt and Ochreiter 2008). Consistent with this high level of participation, members of Congress received over 200,000,000 emails and letters in 2004 alone (Fitch and Goldschmidt 2005). The responses to such letters and emails are one of the most frequent ways that members have to communicate directly and individually to their constituents. Not surprisingly, members of Congress take these communications seriously and expend a large amount of money and staff resources to responding to these letters (Fitch and Goldschmidt 2005). Because resources are limited, legislators' choices in such communications are a vital expression of their home style; it is worth testing how members use these opportunities.

Our results show that when given an equal opportunity to communicate about service and policy, both state and federal legislative offices are much more responsive to service requests than they are to policy requests. We also find that at the federal level Democrats prioritize service over policy more than Republicans and at the state level legislators who won by larger margins are more likely to prioritize service over policy.

## Which Legislators Prioritize Service over Policy in their Home Style?

Representatives must choose what sort of relationship they will construct with the constituents in their

district. That is, representatives must choose a particular style of communication—what Fenno (1978) calls their home style. Fenno describes a variety of different approaches, from those based on personal relationships in the district to those focused on Washington's power game. Two specific approaches he highlights are "Servicing the District" (chapter four) and "Articulating the Issues" (chapter three). Fenno defines an issue-oriented home style as one that places "special emphasis on articulating, explaining, discussing, and debating issues" (1978, 94). Alternatively, constituency service is the activity of "providing help to individuals, groups, and localities in coping with the federal government" (1978, 101). Legislators make choices about how to get reelected, and the choice of service versus policy is a choice between two different avenues for pursuing that goal. The service-policy divide is thus an important theoretical lens through which legislative behavior can be viewed, and it suggests several potential hypotheses.

In general, legislators might be more responsive to service requests because service activity is not likely to offend constituents, especially those who might have very different partisan leanings or issue positions. Lawmakers can thus win over many different types of constituents, including those opposed for either partisan or policy reasons, by assisting them with service-related problems or questions (see, e.g., Cover and Brumberg 1982; Serra and Cover 1992).<sup>2</sup>

Consistent with this perspective, Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina show that a large percentage of Americans care about service-related concerns more than policy responsiveness and that "denizens of Capitol Hill unequivocally believe that their district service activities have salutary electoral consequences" (1987, 80). For this reason, in particular, service-related communication may be the best strategy for legislators who live in a highly polarized legislative environment to communicate with their less polarized constituents (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2005) back home. In addition to being a means of gaining policy leeway with constituents, cultivating the personal vote by focusing on service can give elected officials the space to resist "efforts by national leaders to coordinate and control their behavior" (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987, 3).

<sup>2</sup>Policy letters entail higher risk (communicating with those who might disagree with or be otherwise frustrated by the legislator's policy positions) and an uncertain or small reward (the chances of persuading those who disagree is small and the added benefit of spending resources to communicate with those who already agree is uncertain).

But the choice to concentrate on service is not simply a means of avoiding difficult policy questions or making electorally “safe” choices; it is a substantively *different* form of representation that has its own independent benefits. Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina (1987) describe several such benefits. First, service allows legislators the opportunity to cultivate an image or reputation for helpfulness, sympathy, courtesy, and hard work. Second, legislators may sincerely feel that an important part of their duty or responsibility is to assist constituents when they have questions or difficulties, especially as government becomes larger and more complex. Finally, service may also be a method for defending local interests or pleasing local activists by solving a problem of special interest to those back home. In this study we cannot conclusively test which of these various factors would lead legislators to prioritize service over policy. They may prioritize service because of its electoral benefits or for other reasons. However, we can test what legislators prioritize. This discussion of the unique advantages of a service-oriented home style leads to the following prediction: *all else equal, legislators are more likely to respond to service requests than policy requests.*

In contrast to the older literature on home style, there is a newer literature suggesting that Congress and its members are no longer as interested in casework, that policy polarization is the order of the day (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006 is an accessible introduction to this voluminous literature on polarization). If the polarization of the political class in Washington or the state capital bleeds over into legislators’ interactions with constituents, then policy may matter most. Evidence from Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina (1987) shows that just as some constituents care most about service, others believe that the representative’s issue stands are most important. Legislators may agree that representation is primarily about position taking and working to achieve policy goals (see also Mayhew 1974). Fenno (2000) himself argues that the political context—especially in the South—has changed in ways such that candidates for Congress now choose to emphasize policy over service. Contemporary home style communication patterns may, therefore, be more likely to focus on the issues than service requests. This view suggests an alternative prediction: *all else equal, legislators are more likely to respond to policy requests than service requests.*

We test these two possibilities against the null hypothesis that there will be no differences across letters. This alternative hypothesis derives from the

view of legislative offices as bureaucratic machines; a letter comes in, a letter goes out, with the routine nature of the office process overriding any potential differences across letters. This null hypothesis can be characterized as follows: *there is no difference in responsiveness between service requests and policy requests.*

In addition to testing average priorities across all legislators, we test four predictions from the existing literature about which types of legislators should put more emphasis on service relative to policy requests. First, numerous studies have suggested that legislators who are electorally unsafe may be more responsive to service opportunities (e.g., Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita 2006; Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987; Epstein and Frankovic 1982; Freeman and Richardson 1996). Legislators who are unsafe may focus on service because it is a less-risky strategy. Second, others have argued that legislators who have served for less time may put more effort into service than their more experienced counterparts in order to build up their base (e.g., Adler, Gent, and Overmeyer 1998; Cover 1980). Third, Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina (1987) suggest that legislators from “parties of the left” put more effort into constituency service because their base is more supportive of the government programs that are at the heart of many service requests. Finally, many argue that legislators from multimember districts should be more likely to focus on service (Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita 2006; Freeman and Richardson 1996; Jewell 1982).

We test these expectations by randomly assigning the content of the letter that is sent to each legislator. We hold the issue constant across letter types: all letters in this experiment dealt with the issue of immigration, which has figured prominently on the national agenda for the last several years, sparking a great deal of debate both within and across parties. Immigration debates have occurred at both the state and the national level. Thus we are able to get insights into legislative priorities and style of representation on an issue that has been and continues to be politically important.

## Defining the Treatment

We sent several letter type treatments that can be categorized as either “service” or “policy.” Our “constituency service” treatment asked about what steps are necessary to become a citizen and whether the legislator provides any resources for helping a

noncitizen complete the process. Because policy letters could plausibly come in several different forms, we sent several different varieties of policy queries. In the "position inquiry" treatment, the letter writer did not reveal anything about her own position and simply asked about the legislator's position regarding some specific aspect of immigration policy. This treatment directly paralleled the "constituency service" treatment in length and in the presence of a simple, straightforward question. Because policy letters received by legislators are also likely to include appeals to support a constituent's position, we also included two additional treatments. In the "basic advocacy" treatment, the writer gave her own position on the issue and then asked the legislator to advocate that position in the upcoming session. We also employed a "sophisticated advocacy" treatment that included the exact same wording as the "basic advocacy" letter, but added a short paragraph in which the writer identified a bill on this issue, including giving the bill number, that was discussed in one of the U.S. legislatures in the past year. In this way, the writer signaled increased knowledge and concern about the issue.

The policy letter treatments thus varied along several dimensions. Some did not reveal the position of the letter writer, while others did. Some gave evidence of detailed knowledge of the issue, while others did not. However, when using the interaction terms to test the predictions about which legislators prioritize service over policy more than others, we combine all of the different policy letters together to make it easier for readers to interpret. We feel justified in doing so because we found that all of the policy letters were treated similarly, regardless of the specific form (see the first and second columns of Tables 1–3). The differences between these different letter treatment types never reach statistical significance and are never substantively large.

### **Experimental Setup, Execution, and Analysis**

Our experiment builds on Robert Putnam's approach in his seminal book *Making Democracy Work* (1993, 73). Like Putnam we contact public officials to measure the level of responsiveness. One difference is that we randomize the content of those contacts in order to learn about how letter content affects responsiveness.

We recruited confederates (largely from the student body at Brigham Young University) to write

letters to their legislators and also open post office boxes in their hometown. For each letter sent to a legislator we randomized both the ethnicity of the name signed on the letter (Latino or Anglo) and the type of letter sent (varying across four types of letter). In this article we will only focus on the randomization dealing with letter content.

### **Our Confederates**

For this project we felt it best to try to employ actual constituents. Toward that end, we recruited roughly 200 BYU students to send letters to the legislators representing their hometown. Typically when students are used in experimental studies there is a concern about external validity. However, because the legislative offices, and not the students, are the primary subjects of study, we are not worried about external validity in this regard.<sup>3</sup> We believe that one of the noteworthy features of this study is that it employs actual citizens, writing actual letters to their legislators (all students were given the opportunity to review their responses). Because BYU recruits students nationally, our sample contained considerable geographic variation.

When recruiting possible confederates, we surveyed them and matched them into pairs that agreed on issues regarding immigration and were from the same general area (typically the same zip code). Confederates were paid a total of \$50 for participating in the experiment: \$20 for writing letters to the legislators and \$30 for opening up a post-office box in their home area.

In addition to the student confederates, one of the researchers and an additional volunteer used a commercial post-office box service to open up boxes in an additional 20 large cities located across the United States in order to provide more geographic coverage across the United States. While this allowed us to get greater regional coverage, the students' letters still represented the bulk of the letters sent (about 85% of the total).

### **Preparing the Letters**

When the matched pairs came in, we had them write letters about the two immigration-related issues on which they had been matched and for which they shared the same views. In order to help facilitate that process, students were given templates of five

<sup>3</sup>Because students used post-office boxes in the legislators' district and because their letters did not mention their student status, the legislative offices did not know they were students.

different letters. They were given one template for the “Service Request” treatment and templates for the “Position Inquiry” and “Basic Advocacy” treatments associated with both immigration-related issues that they had been matched on. The templates had been previously written by other college students and were designed to fit on one page. The “Sophisticated Advocacy” letters were created by adding a short paragraph at the end of the “Basic Advocacy” letters the matched pair ultimately agreed upon. We received the confederates’ consent to have the option of including this paragraph in a letter if we chose.

When the matched pairs were given the templates, they were told that they could alter them in any way as long as the letter still had the basic characteristics of the treatment condition (e.g., shared and then advocated a position on the issue).<sup>4</sup> All letters sent were formatted in exactly the same way, with the same salutations and conclusions. No letter sent exceeded one page of text, and all included an email address in case the legislator preferred to respond by email.<sup>5</sup> Once the confederates agreed to the different letter contents, they were paid \$20 for participating in this part of the experiment.

### Post-Office Boxes

From the BYU site we also had students reserve post-office boxes through the USPS online system. They were then paid \$30 for visiting these post-office locations during either their Thanksgiving or winter break in order to open these boxes. When the letters were sent, these post-office box addresses were used as the return address. Using post-office boxes allowed the responses to be forwarded directly to the researchers, thus minimizing any bias that might arise from relying on students or their parents to forward the responses they received.<sup>6</sup> Also, using post-office boxes instead of students’ campus addresses increased the probability that the letters would be opened and responded to. In Congress, for example, legislative courtesy dictates that letters from a zip code outside the legislators’ district be forwarded to

the office in charge of that zip code (even if the writer is from the district and away at school).<sup>7</sup>

We sent test letters both at the beginning and end of the project to ensure that the mail sent to the post-office boxes was being properly forwarded. In the few cases where forwarding problems occurred, we were able to work with the post office to correct the problem and ensure that any mail in the box was forwarded correctly.<sup>8</sup>

### Sending the Letters and Descriptive Statistics of the Sample

Once the post-office boxes were open, we used the website developed by Project Vote Smart ([votesmart.org](http://votesmart.org)) to identify all of the state and federal legislative representatives who represented at least part of the zip code associated with the post-office box. In many cases, several legislative districts from the same legislative chamber all shared at least part of the same zip code. Unless it conflicted with our measures to avoid detection, we sent letters to all of these legislators.

Because we are looking at constituent mail, the sample for our study is the legislator’s office and not necessarily the legislator themselves. The response (or lack thereof) to any of the letters that were sent may have come from someone other than the legislator, such as a staff member. However, because we used the legislators’ official address, whoever is responding to the letters is doing so in an official capacity on behalf of the legislators. More importantly, home style refers to the behavior of the legislator’s whole enterprise, which includes their staff (Salisbury and Shepsle 1981a, 1981b), and not just their own behavior (Fenno 1978). Even if the legislator never personally sees the individual letters received by the office, the pattern of responses reveal something meaningful about that legislator’s home style.

In all, a total of 1,036 letters were sent to 489 different legislative offices across 23 different states.

<sup>7</sup>The following example comes from Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro’s House website:

“This service is for current 3rd Congressional District constituents of Connecticut only and will not accept messages from zip codes located outside of the 3rd District. Congressional courtesy dictates that Representatives be given the opportunity to assist their own constituents.”

<sup>8</sup>Obviously this does not correct for problems that occurred when letters were forwarded. One letter, for example, was initially forwarded to Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam before being correctly redirected to us. We suspect that the number of letters that were misdirected represent a small percentage of our sample. Further, we have no reason to believe that postal service errors were correlated with the treatments.

<sup>4</sup>When the matched pairs made changes to the templates, they tended to be very minor alterations to sentence structure or word choice, and many made no changes at all.

<sup>5</sup>With the confederates’ permission, we opened special email accounts for each letter writer that were used for the sole purpose of collecting legislators’ email responses.

<sup>6</sup>Legislators may favor street addresses over post-office boxes. Such bias would decrease the overall response rates but should be uncorrelated with the treatment conditions.

Just over half of those letters (555 letters; 54%) were sent to the Democratic legislators and the rest to Republican legislators. The letters were also split fairly evenly between those sent to federal and state legislators. The specific breakdown by legislative office is as follows: US Senate Offices – 250 letters (24%), U.S. House Offices – 222 letters (21%), State Senate Offices – 223 letters (22%), and State House Offices – 341 letters (33%).

In sending these letters, we took several steps to help avoid detection of our experiment. First, we used the following limits on the number of letters that any given legislator was sent: U.S. Senator – 12-letter limit; U.S. House Member – 8-letter limit; State Legislator – 2-letter limit. Figure 1 gives the distribution of the number of letters received by each office in the sample. The vast majority of the legislators in the study (88%) received either one or two letters.

Second, when we randomized the content of the letters we block randomized within the letters being sent to the same legislator. These steps ensured that no legislator received the exact same letter. In fact, when a legislator received four or less letters, they did not receive more than one of the same type of letter.

Finally, we sent the letters from various noncollege locations in several different states. The letters were sent during the first two weeks of February 2009. We collected responses from legislators until December 2009—a period of approximately 10 months.

For the analyses we use the variable *response received*, which is a binary indicator equal to 1 if the legislative office responded to the letter either by email or postal mail and 0 otherwise. *Response*

*received* is an objective measure that matters—people sending a letter want a response. We use random effects for each legislative office in the empirical model because some legislative offices received multiple letters (see Figure 1 for the distribution of letters each office received). Further, we present the results both without any control variables and when controlling for the legislator's partisanship, the legislator's margin of victory in his or her most recent election, the number of years the legislator has been in office, and a dummy variable indicating whether the legislator represents a multimember district. Because *service request* is the omitted category, the coefficients on the treatment variables indicate the difference between those policy requests and service requests.

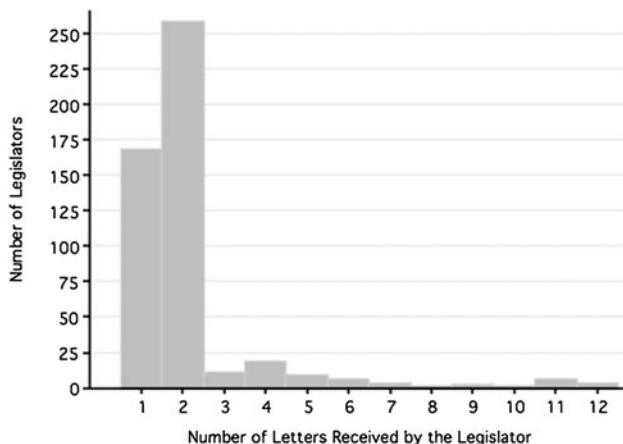
## Results

Table 1 presents the results of the initial analysis for all legislators in the sample. We find strong evidence that legislators distinguish between policy and service letters. For each outcome, there are large differences between the service letters and the policy letters. This is true when each of our three types of policy letters (position inquiry, basic advocacy, and sophisticated advocacy) are considered separately and when we combine the position inquiries together. The results are not, therefore, driven by some subset of the policy letters, with legislators responding to some types of policy inquiries but not others.

Moreover, the magnitude of the difference between service and policy responsiveness is substantial. Using Model 3 of Table 1, for example, legislative offices responded to 51% of the constituency-service letters that were submitted (see the constant term) but only to 28% of policy letters sent. That 23 percentage points is statistically significant and remains robust when all of the controls are included in the model. Legislative offices respond more to service requests than policy requests.

Model 5 of Table 1 shows some evidence of a heterogenous treatment effect for margin of victory. Legislators who are electorally safe are even *less* likely to respond to policy letters than service letters. Legislators who ran unopposed were 17 percentage points less likely to respond to policy letters than legislators who eked out an extremely narrow victory (a difference that is marginally significant at the .07 level).<sup>9</sup> When both

FIGURE 1 Distribution of the Number of Letters Legislators in the Study Received



Note: This figure gives the distribution of the number of letters received by each office in the sample.

<sup>9</sup>The margin of victory variable runs between 0.002 and 1 (for unopposed candidates). The mean margin of victory is 0.42, and the median is 0.32.

TABLE 1 Results for All Legislators

Dependent Variable: Response Received	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Position Inquiry	-0.22* (0.04)	-0.23* (0.04)			
Basic Advocacy	-0.24* (0.04)	-0.25* (0.04)			
Sophisticated Advocacy	-0.24* (0.04)	-0.24* (0.04)			
Policy Letter			-0.23* (0.03)	-0.24* (0.03)	-0.25* (0.07)
<i>Interaction Terms</i>					
Republican*Policy Letter					0.06 (0.06)
Margin of Victory*Policy Letter					-0.16 (0.10)
Years in Office*Policy Letter					0.006 (0.004)
Multimember*Policy Letter					0.02 (0.07)
<i>Control Variables</i>					
Republican		0.02 (0.04)		0.02 (0.04)	-0.03 (0.06)
Margin of Victory		-0.12* (0.05)		-0.12* (0.05)	0.003 (0.09)
Years in Office		-0.000 (0.002)		0.000 (0.002)	-0.004 (0.004)
Multimember District		-0.03 (0.04)		-0.03 (0.04)	-0.04 (0.07)
Constant	0.51* (0.03)		0.51* (0.03)		
State Fixed Effects?	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Number of groups	487	487	487	487	487
N	1029	1029	1029	1029	1029

Note: All of the models were estimated using a random-effects model with random effects included for the legislator receiving the letter. The *service request* condition is the omitted category so that the coefficients on the other three treatment conditions give the difference between that condition and the service request condition. \*Sig. at 0.05 level.

federal and state legislators are included in the analysis, we find no evidence of differences in responsiveness to policy inquires by party, tenure in office, or whether it was a single or multimember district.

Tables 2 and 3 reveal important differences between members of Congress and state legislators, however. While legislators at both levels are more responsive to service requests than to policy requests, the difference is especially pronounced among state legislators. At the federal level, legislators are approximately 14 percentage points less responsive to policy letters: members of Congress respond to 52% of service letters, but only 38% of the policy letters they receive. At the state level, the difference in responsiveness rises to 32 percentage points, with state legislators responding to 51% of service requests but only 19% of policy requests.<sup>10</sup> The difference in differences between state and federal legislators is statistically significant. Thus state legislators seem particularly likely to avoid responding to policy issue letters.

We also find differences in the characteristics of legislators who respond to the various types of letters. The results show, for example, that state legislators are driving the effect on the interaction between

margin of victory and policy letters. At the federal level the interaction is positive, though not statistically significant. State legislators, on the other hand, become much less responsive to policy as their margin of victory grows (and the result is statistically significant at the 0.10 level). This result can be seen in Figure 2, which shows both the distribution of margin of victory among state legislators and the lowess curves indicating how the probability of receiving a response to either a service or policy letter changes as the legislator’s margin of victory increases. This result is surprising given that researchers have predicted that legislators who are electorally unsafe may be more responsive to service opportunities (e.g., Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita 2006; Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987; Epstein and Frankovic 1982; Freeman and Richardson 1996). We think that these unexpected findings might be an indication that the causal arrows go in the other direction too. Legislators who fail to prioritize service over policy do not do as well during elections. The fact that this finding only applies to state legislators and not federal legislators may be an indication that only candidates who take actions to be successful in elections make it into Congress.

At the state level, we find no party differences in the preference for service over policy. Among

<sup>10</sup>These estimates are computed from Model 3 of Tables 2 and 3.

TABLE 2 Results for Federal Legislators

Dependent Variable: Response Received	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Position Inquiry	-0.17* (0.06)	-0.17* (0.06)			
Basic Advocacy	-0.12* (0.06)	-0.14* (0.06)			
Sophisticated Advocacy	-0.13* (0.06)	-0.13* (0.06)			
Policy Letter			-0.14* (0.05)	-0.15* (0.05)	-0.35* (0.12)
<i>Interaction Terms</i>					
Republican*Policy Letter					0.21* (0.10)
Margin of Victory*Policy Letter					0.13 (0.22)
Years in Office*Policy Letter					0.01 (0.01)
Multimember*Policy Letter					-0.07 (0.11)
<i>Control Variables</i>					
Republican		0.08 (0.08)		0.08 (0.08)	-0.07 (0.10)
Margin of Victory		0.01 (0.13)		0.01 (0.13)	-0.09 (0.21)
Years in Office		-0.006 (0.004)		-0.006 (0.004)	-0.012 (0.006)
Multimember District		-0.01 (0.07)		-0.01 (0.07)	0.03 (0.10)
Constant	0.52* (0.05)		0.52* (0.05)		
State Fixed Effects?	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Number of groups	138	138	138	138	138
N	465	465	465	465	465

Note: All of the models were estimated using a random-effects model with random effects included for the legislator receiving the letter. The *service request* condition is the omitted category so that the coefficients on the other three treatment conditions give the difference between that condition and the service request condition. \*Sig. at 0.05 level.

members of Congress, by contrast, we find a statistically significant interaction between political party and policy letters. All else equal, Republicans in Congress are approximately 21 percentage points more responsive to policy letters than are Democrats. Republicans are still less responsive to policy than to service (the difference between service and policy among Republicans is significant at the .10 level), but they are much more responsive to policy than are Democrats. This result fits with previous studies of national legislatures (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987), which suggested that compared to conservative legislators, members of more liberal parties would be especially likely to prefer constituent service. Neither district type (single v. multimember) nor tenure moderates the treatment of policy versus service letters.

In sum, we find that legislators have a strong preference for service over policy in their communications with constituents. This increased responsiveness-to-service request is especially pronounced among state legislators (especially those who enjoyed large margins of victory). Lower levels of responsiveness were found among members of Congress, especially Republican MCs. But even among those most likely to respond to policy, legislators are at least as responsive, and typically more responsive, to service than to policy letters.

We also tested the predictive impact of variables that may be relevant to immigration—whether or not the legislator is Hispanic, the percentage of Hispanics in the legislator’s district, and whether the legislator is on a subcommittee that deals with immigration. The legislator’s own ethnicity or the presence of larger numbers of Hispanics in the district might indicate a special interest in immigration policy. Members of the immigration subcommittee have access to greater resources and information about immigration issues that might lead them to treat these letters differently. However we found no evidence that legislators with either increased personal interest or the relevant policy experience and staff support were any more responsive to policy letters about immigration than were their colleagues without such interests or resources. (Details are available in the online supplementary appendix, Table A1.) The possession of expertise and resources to better answer the letters makes little difference, at least on this issue.

We also find evidence that legislative offices respond more quickly to service requests than they do to policy requests. These results can be found in the appendix, Tables A2 and A3, and show that federal legislators are more likely to respond to service letters than to policy letters within 60 days, and state legislators are more responsive to service letters within 30 days. Legislators are more likely to



TABLE 3 Results for State Legislators

Dependent Variable: Response Received	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Position Inquiry	-0.27* (0.05)	-0.28* (0.05)			
Basic Advocacy	-0.35* (0.05)	-0.34* (0.05)			
Sophisticated Advocacy	-0.34* (0.05)	-0.33* (0.05)			
Policy Letter			-0.32* (0.04)	-0.32* (0.04)	-0.17* (0.09)
<i>Interaction Terms</i>					
Republican*Policy Letter					-0.05 (0.08)
Margin of Victory*Policy Letter					-0.19 (0.11)
Years in Office*Policy Letter					-0.006 (0.007)
Multimember*Policy Letter					0.09 (0.11)
<i>Control Variables</i>					
Republican		0.02 (0.04)		0.03 (0.04)	0.06 (0.08)
Margin of Victory		-0.11 (0.06)		-0.12 (0.06)	0.02 (0.10)
Years in Office		-0.003 (0.004)		-0.002 (0.004)	0.002 (0.006)
Multimember District		-0.12 (0.09)		-0.12 (0.09)	-0.19 (0.12)
Constant	0.51* (0.04)		0.51* (0.04)		
State Fixed Effects?	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Number of groups	349	349	349	349	349
N	564	564	564	564	564

Note: All of the models were estimated using a random-effects model with random effects included for the legislator receiving the letter. The *service request* condition is the omitted category so that the coefficients on the other three treatment conditions give the difference between that condition and the service request condition. \*Sig. at 0.05 level.

respond to service than policy requests and are also more likely to respond promptly to service inquiries.

### Considering an Alternative Explanation for the Service Priority: Level of Effort

The experimental results are consistent with the argument that legislators prioritize service over policy, at least when communicating with constituents, for political reasons. Alternatively, it might be that more effort was required to respond to the policy requests than was needed for the service requests. In other words, it might simply be that the results were driven by a resource calculation and not a political calculation.

In terms of the effort level required to read the letters, the *constituency-service letter* was short, just a few sentences. While the advocacy letters were slightly longer (because they included the letter writer’s position), the *position inquiry* treatment was also just a few sentences long (and both the *service request* and *position inquiry* letters specifically asked for a response). There is no reason to expect that it took more effort to read the position-inquiry letter than the service-request letter and yet the results hold

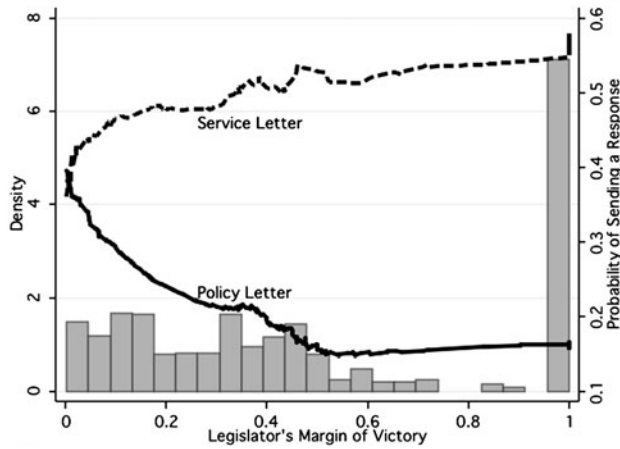
when we just compare the *position inquiry* and *service request* treatments.

How about effort in responding to these different letters? For both the service and policy letters, a quality response required only a written message—no meeting, telephone calls, or other time-intensive forms of communication. Further, the vast majority of responses received for both types of letter were about the same length (one page).

While the responses to the two different letter types were about the same length, perhaps it took more effort to create the text for policy letters. We performed several analyses to evaluate this possibility. First, we surveyed a convenience sample of recent legislative interns who served in either a state legislature or Congress over the past three years, screening for respondents with direct experience answering constituent mail as part of their duties.<sup>11</sup> We

<sup>11</sup>We sent invitations to 175 former legislative interns, using email addresses provided by those who supervise the state and congressional internship programs at an institution with which the authors are affiliated. This list included all students or former students at the institution who had served as interns at the state or congressional level in the past three years. Of the 175 recent interns invited to participate, 102 responded, for a response rate of 58%. Among respondents, 44% worked in a Congressional office, 56% in a state legislature.

**FIGURE 2 Margin of Victory and Legislative Responsiveness – State Legislators**



*Note:* The sample is limited to state legislators in the sample. We used locally weighted regression (lowess) to estimate the probabilities of sending a response, with the dashed (solid) line representing the lowess line for the service (policy) letter treatment. The histogram shows the distribution of the legislator's margin of victory in the previous election. Those who were not challenged are coded as earning a margin of victory equal to 1 in the previous election.

randomly assigned respondents to read either the service letter or the position-inquiry-letter templates from our experiment, and then we asked them several questions. The analysis shows there are no significant differences between the two letter types in judgments about the level of difficulty, in the availability of preapproved text or other resources, or in the ease of finding the information necessary to answer the letter (see Table A4 in the supplementary appendix). Compared to other letters they worked on, interns judged both the service request and the policy inquiry as relatively average. If anything, they suggested the service letter might require more effort. Specifically, the former interns were much more likely to say that it would take them longer to write an initial response to the service letter, as compared to the policy letters. The increased time to write service letters works directly against the contention that policy letters were dramatically more difficult for the office staff.

However, interns assigned to read the policy letter were also more likely to say that a response to the letter would require some sort of approval from their supervisor. This suggests that the observed priority for service may be built into the way that these offices operate. We explore this possibility more in the next section.

Second, we had four independent student coders read each letter received and rate what percentage of the letter they thought was a form letter.<sup>12</sup> The results, given in Table A5 of the supplementary appendix, show no statistically significant or substantively large difference between the policy- and service-request letters in any of the models. This confirms what the former legislative interns told us—there was preapproved text for both types of requests. Similarly, enclosures, which take some effort to assemble, were much more likely to accompany responses to the service letters than the policy letters (in a difference of proportions test,  $z=6.17$ ,  $p < .000$ ). In sum, we do not believe that the service letters were treated better simply because they required less effort.

## How Do Legislative Offices Prioritize Service over Policy?

Our experiment has shown that legislative offices prioritize service over policy when they respond to constituent mail. This observed result could occur because legislative offices evaluate each individual letter and respond to those that are most electorally advantageous, or it could be that they simply structure the office as a whole to be more responsive to service letters. In other words, the decision to prioritize service could occur at the individual-letter level or at the office level. While we did not design our study to explicitly test these competing possibilities, our data allow us to gain some insight on this question.

There are theoretical arguments in support of both possibilities. The literature on campaigning suggests that legislators want to microtarget constituents with messages that will appeal most to them. Recent developments in the accessibility of information about voters and the technology used to contact them have only increased the ability of politicians to identify likely supporters and treat them differently (Hillygus and Shields 2008). When legislators receive policy letters from constituents, the writer may directly provide information that the office can use to decide whether or not to respond (i.e., by expressing agreement or disagreement). Given this set of incentives we might expect legislative offices to

<sup>12</sup>Cronbach's alpha for the aggregate measure formed from individual coder judgments is 0.78. Pair-wise correlations between coders range between 0.42 and 0.61. Krippendorff's alpha for this measure is 0.41.

evaluate whether to respond to each level (as a way to microtarget constituents). On the other hand, the increasing size of legislative offices requires that they operate as small enterprises (Salisbury and Shepsle 1981a, 1981b). Legislators working under these conditions may find it easier to exercise control by creating policies or structures that favor service letters over policy letters avoiding the costs of evaluating each individual letter. There are various ways that this type of exercise might be exercised. For example, the former legislative interns we surveyed were more likely to say that the policy letter would require some sort of approval from a supervisor than a service letter. This might be evidence of legislators setting rules to control their particular legislative enterprise.

We evaluate whether the decision to prioritize service occurs at the individual letter level or at the office level by looking at how legislative offices respond to the advocacy letters. Because the writers reveal their own position in the advocacy letters, legislative offices learn whether the writer agrees or disagrees with the legislator. If the legislative office prioritizes service at the letter level, then we would expect that letters advocating a position similar to the legislators' position should be more likely to receive responses. These are the supporters that legislative offices would like to microtarget. If, on the other hand, the decision to prioritize service occurs at the office level, then we would not expect the letter writer's position to affect responsiveness.

For each advocacy letter sent to a member of Congress, we identified whether it promoted policies more favorable to immigrants or less favorable. We then used the interest group ratings created by the National Latino Congreso as reported at [votesmart.org](http://votesmart.org) to identify those legislators whose voting positions were pro-/anti-immigration.<sup>13</sup> Using this information we created the following dummy variables to capture the different types of letters that were sent: advocacy letter that shares the MC's position, advocacy letter that opposes the MC's position, and position-inquiry letter (service-request letters continue to be the omitted category). Table 4 shows that policy letters that signal agreement with the legislator are no different from policy letters that signal

**TABLE 4 Results for Federal Legislators when Comparing the Match between the MC's Position on Immigration and the Position Expressed in the Letter**

Dependent Variable: Response Received		
Advocacy Letter: Shares MC's Position	-0.12* (0.06)	-0.12* (0.06)
Advocacy Letter: Opposes MC's Position	-0.12 (0.06)	-0.14* (0.06)
Position Inquiry	-0.16* (0.06)	-0.16* (0.06)
Republican		0.09 (0.08)
Margin of Victory		0.01 (0.12)
Years in Office		-0.006 (0.004)
Constant	0.52* (0.05)	
State Fixed Effects?	No	Yes
Number of groups	137	137
N	463	463

*Note:* All of the models were estimated using a random-effects model with random effects included for the legislator receiving the letter. The *service request* condition is the omitted category so that the coefficients on the other three variables give the difference between that condition and the service request condition. \*Sig. at 0.05 level.

disagreement. Members of Congress respond to both types of letters at lower rates than service letters.

Advocacy mail that is in line with the member's position is less likely to get a response suggesting that the decision to prioritize service occurs in the office organization, not by scrutinizing individual letters. Service-oriented home styles appear to take precedence over policy home styles in legislators' one-on-one communication with constituents, even when policy position taking is relatively easy. This also suggests that legislators may engage in microtargeting less than previous research implies (at least in this context). More work needs to be done to more directly test how legislators structure their office, but these initial results suggest that the focus on service occurs at the office level, not with respect to individual communications.

## Discussion

We have shown that legislators are more responsive to service requests than to policy queries. This increased responsiveness-to-service requests is more pronounced among state legislators, but even Members of Congress prioritize service over policy. Further, the evidence suggests that this priority stems

<sup>13</sup>[http://www.votesmart.org/issue\\_rating\\_detail.php?r\\_id=4890&rtype=](http://www.votesmart.org/issue_rating_detail.php?r_id=4890&rtype=). The distribution of these ratings are bimodal with most legislators having scores either greater than 70 or lower than 30. For the analysis here we coded all individuals with scores above 50 as being pro-immigration and all legislators with scores less than 50 as being anti-immigration. Other possible cut points (such as 40 or 60) did not affect the results.

from how the legislative office is structured and not how they microtarget individual letters. What does preferential treatment of service requests imply for the broader representational relationship between legislators and their constituents?

In Federalist 35, Hamilton described the “strong chords of sympathy between representative and constituent.” In 1978, Fenno suggested that these chords were cultivated by a legislator’s home style and argued that legislators chose whether to emphasize service or policy. By 2000 Fenno (among others) was arguing that the chords had changed their tune and that a grassroots desire for policy instead of service was driving members to become more policy oriented—a desire that came from “*outside*” the institution where the relationship between each “member and his or her constituents are pursued, shaped and maintained” (2000, 151, emphasis in original).

Researchers have had difficulty testing claims about prioritizing service or policy because previous research designs have failed to evaluate legislators with an equal opportunity to choose service or policy. Despite the recent polarization and increased emphasis on a policy style, we find that, when presented with a choice, legislators prioritize service over policy. Why?

Fenno suggests that a member of Congress may gain a leeway<sup>14</sup> on her policy positions through service by choosing a service-oriented style: “[t]ime spent at home can be spent in developing leeway for activity undertaken in Washington. And that leeway in Washington should be more valued than the sheer number of contact hours spent there . . . we might then ask House members not to justify their time spent at home, but rather to justify their use of the leeway they have gained there from” (1978, 244). Leeway is not necessarily good or bad. It is a morally neutral concept that can be judged only by how it is employed. This insight extends to the clear pattern we find of prioritizing service over policy in response to constituent mail. If legislators gain additional leeway by downplaying policy requests and responding more often and more quickly to service requests, how do they use that leeway?

With respect to policy, democratic theory suggests that elections are a mechanism to keep legislators in line with their constituents. But as Fenno (1978) suggests, gaining “leeway” through service

could muddy that relationship. Legislators’ focus on service might allow members who are otherwise out of step with their constituents to retain their seats. The concern is not that legislators are providing service, but that the image they portray to voters—their home style—might intentionally be devoid of policy because they care much more about their own policy views than about the policy views of constituents (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000).

The choice to privilege service over policy in individual-level communications with constituents is therefore consequential. A willingness to assist letter writers in navigating government bureaucracy or answering other nonpolicy concerns is an important type of attention to constituents, one that is especially satisfying for those who contact their legislators demanding that style of representation. But our evidence suggests that such a choice to prioritize service over policy may come at the cost of informing constituents about legislators’ issue positions or helping constituents understand similarities and differences between their own opinions and the actions legislators are taking with respect to important issues of the day.

Though we cannot be sure that representatives prioritize a service-oriented style *purely* for purposes of gaining leeway, it seems very likely that it would have that effect. Answering constituents’ policy questions may come with an increased set of risks (and potentially lower rewards) for legislators, but the absence of issue-based communication is a potential problem for a representative democracy that depends on the “chords of sympathy” between representative and constituent. If legislators privilege service over policy, they may also make it more difficult for constituents to hold them accountable on issues. The evidence here strongly suggests that they do prioritize in exactly that way.

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<sup>14</sup>Leeway is defined, either explicitly (e.g., Bianco 1994) or implicitly (e.g., Arnold 1990), in several different ways in the literature. Here we follow Fenno’s (1978) definition.

as all three authors are principal investigators on the study.

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Daniel M. Butler is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Yale University, New Haven, CT 06520.

Christopher F. Karpowitz is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602.

Jeremy C. Pope is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602.