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Who Cares About the Kids? Examining Roll Call Voting in the Senate on Children's Programs

Abstract

This research attempts to explore the reasons why children's issues are addressed, how they are addressed, and who is addressing them in the Senate and on the state level

Jamie Kolb

Who Cares About the Kids?

Examining Roll Call Voting in the Senate on Children's Programs

The familiar image of a politician kissing babies, while proud mothers look on, has identified itself with American politics of past and present. Children are the pure, unbiased subjects that are totally dependent on the adults around them for their well being. A politician is hard-pressed to criticize those programs that help children. However, children are not the first priority of most politicians and their constituents.

Out of the 26 industrialized countries, the United States of America ranks first in gross domestic product, health technology, military technology, military exports, defense spending, and in the number of millionaires and billionaires. In contrast, this country ranks 101 in eighth-grade scores, 161, in living standards among the poorest one-fifth of children, 17th in rates of low-birthweight births, 21st in eighth grade math scores, and last in protecting children against gun violence (CDF). This research attempts to explore the reasons why children's issues are addressed, how they are addressed, and who is addressing them in the Senate and on the state level

Literature Review

"A sick, hungry, or abused child doesn't know the difference between a Democrat, a Republican, or an Independent and doesn't care who comes to the rescue" (Edelman 1). The situation facing America's children today is dependent upon public support of social programs. Today's child advocates are concerned with childcare, health insurance, and improving education programs. All of these programs hinge on financial backing by Congress. Important programs in today's political arena for children have changed in the last few decades. In the beginning, interest was drawn to poor children, because the industrial age forced many children into hard labor in addition to living in extreme poverty. The first child advocates campaigned to outlaw child labor and further protect them at home. Later institutions included nurseries for the children of migrant workers in the thirties and day care for working women during World War II. Not until the 1970s did we see a resurgence of advocacy (Chafel 205). In 1971 Senator Mondale tried to pass a bill that was to implement a graduated income scale day care system for working parents. Nixon vetoed this bill however. Stating that it would "Sovietize childcare by taking children out of their mother's care" (Chafel 207), he failed to realize the need to modernize the child care system in order to keep up with the changing times, including working mothers.

Obviously attitudes have changed, and now issues such as health and childcare are necessities. "The placement of child health and development on the legislative agenda can be attributed to both a set of demographic changes, including increased migration, and increased proportion of children raised in single-parent families, and the reduced well-being of children and their families" (Chafel 205). The American family has changed in the last three decades and our programs for children have had to change to reflect that. Other programs that have risen to the forefront are drug-abuse education, and

experimental or alternative education such as Head Start, the highly popular, yet controversial, preschool programs for underprivileged children.

It is important to point out who is receiving these benefits. Single parent families traditionally receive 25% of all universal benefits, which includes 66% of all child care subsidies, but only 10% of health care benefits (Garfinkel 41). This leaves thousands of poor children without health insurance and brings about the dilemma of the working poor:

The unfairness to working class, two-parent families and the resulting marriage penalty in the public transfer system arise from excessive targeting on the poorest families—those headed by single parents. Limiting benefits to single-parent families discourages marriage. Limiting benefits to poor single parent families discourages work among mothers with low earnings capacity. Yet marriage and work convert poor families to near poor and lower-middle income families (Garfinkel 54).

According to the Children's Defense Fund (CDF), 11.3 million children, 90% coming from working families, have no health insurance. Child advocates of today such as CDF, are working to help middle and lower middle class children as well as poor. The controversy over many of the programs is that whether or not money allotted to programs for them will actually help them. Irwin Garfinkel, author of *Social Policies for Children*, found the United States to "be in the midst of a great national debate about the appropriate amount and form of public investment in children" (Garfinkel 33). Basically, the conservative argument is that as a capitalist society the United States cannot afford to have too many social programs, specifically children's programs, because it teaches people to rely on their government instead of making their own way. Ronald Reagan argued that the taxes required to fund existing governmental programs were seriously undermining incentives and thereby despoiling the wellsprings of capitalism. He proposed dramatic reductions in federal expenditures for children, which were not adopted by Congress (Garfinkel 33).

Garfinkel argued that, as our country advances it should give our nation more incentive to provide security to the disadvantaged.

As standards of living increase, we and other nations spend more to reduce insecurity. Between 1950 and 1970, American productivity grew by 42 percent and per capita social welfare expenditures grew by 74 percent. Between 1975 and 1990, productivity grew by only 13 percent and per capita income "security expenditures" grew by only 33 percent" (Garfinkel 39).

Garfinkel points out the disturbing trend that the American government is spending much less on children's programs as well as these "security expenditures", such as welfare programs.

In the book *Support for the the American Welfare State: The The Views of Congress and the Public*, Cook and Barrett attempt to explain why congressmen may be devoting less

time to this issue. They point to a "Scale of Recipient Deservingness" (37) created by analyzing the responses of Representatives to a survey administered in 1990. This scale is supposed to be used when deciding an important social welfare issue. It is:

- 1) Level and extent of need (more intense-more help)
- 2) No alternative source exists (no parents, etc)
- 3) Not "at fault" beyond their control
- 4) Must be perceived to possess the will to be independent
- 5) Must be perceived to use their benefits wisely

According to this scale, programs supporting senior citizens are much more likely to be backed than children's issues. The understanding is that children have the support of parents and they will naturally become dependent, at least for a short time, on that aid. The significance of the scale in this research is learning why Senators make the choices they do. Not every cause or program is going to get the funding it is asking for, so there has to be some sort of criteria for deciding "what is worthy." Of course not every issue is decided by this scale, or even viewed on a case by case situation.

When examining why members of congress vote for certain issues, it is always important to look at the ideology and party of that member. Generally liberals, and thus Democrats, are looked at as the supporters of social programs relating to welfare. The survey conducted by Cook and Barrett found that liberals and Democrats were more willing than conservatives and Republicans to take action to support AFDC and other social programs. In a model only examining the votes of representatives concerning children's issues, they found that party of the member explained 83 percent of the variance (182). We also know that party and ideology are not the only factors that affect a Senator's vote; the opinion of his or her constituency is also very important.

In general, Cook and Barrett also found that members of congress are more likely to want to maintain programs at current benefit levels keeping up with inflation, while members of the public are more likely to increase benefit levels. How much does public opinion really matter? In a democratic society, the theory is that electorates choose reflective candidates, and when the candidate stops being reflective then another one is elected. Andersson and Wood found that in the senate, "the most important determinants of senator voting behavior are those flowing from the constituents" (Andersson and Wood 728). As Erikson, Wright, and McIver point out in their article "Public Opinion and Public Policy: A View from the States", state electorates tend to elect politicians who share their ideological views. In turn, politicians respond to state ideological opinion out of a desire to get or stay elected (255).

So how dramatic are the implications of a state's constituency characteristics on how a senator votes? If it is true that a senator will act more liberal or conservative to match the mood in his or her state, what characteristics create this mood in the state? McIver, Erikson, and Wright describe a liberal state as one that has disproportionate big city residents, Jews, Catholics, blacks, and highly educated people. Conversely, a conservative state is more rural, has a less educated populace, more whites, and has a

higher influence of fundamentalist Protestants. In Support for the American Welfare State, the author suggests that those states with higher proportions of Democrats and liberals would support children's programs because they have the most vested interest in these programs as possible recipients. Measure of need in the district does predict support. "Those congress members from poorer districts and districts with higher levels of unemployment are nonetheless more supportive than others" (Cook and Barrett 186).

From this information, several hypotheses were reached:

H1: Democratic senators are more likely to vote in support of children's programs than Republicans.

H2: Senators with higher liberal ratings on social and economic issues will be more likely to vote for children's issues.

H3: Senators that represent states with a higher percentage of liberals and Democrats will be more likely to vote in favor of children's programs.

H4: Senators that represent a constituency with a higher median income, have higher percentage of people with college education, have a more urban population, and have a higher percentage of married couples with children, will be more likely to support children's issues.

Data and Methods

The data for the dependent variable was obtained from Congressional Quarterly's roll call voting records of the senate for the 105th Congress. From this an index of five key votes was created. Vote One involved the Fiscal 1998 Budget Resolution/Children's Programs. In this measure Domenici motioned to kill Dodd's amendment to "raise discretionary spending caps by \$15.8 billion over five years and express the sense of the senate that there should be increased funding for children's programs, with off sets coming from ending corporate tax breaks" (CQ S-15). A "yes" vote was perceived as unsupportive of children's issues.

Vote 2 entitled, Fiscal 1998 Budget Resolution/Children's Health Insurance was another motion by Domenici to kill a Hatch amendment to raise "\$30 billion in revenue by increasing the tobacco tax... \$20 billion of which would be used to provide health insurance for low and moderate income children" (CQ S-15). A "yes" vote was against the Children's Defense Fund's position and therefore unsupportive of children's issues.

Vote 3, Fiscal 1998 Budget Reconciliation-Spending/ Disabled Children, was a Dodd amendment to provide Medicaid eligibility for disabled children who have lost Supplemental Security Income benefits (CQ S-23). A "yes" vote would provide more money for an important children's issue.

Vote 4, Fiscal 1998 Agriculture Appropriations/ FDA Children's Tobacco Initiative, which the Children's Welfare League was very opposed to, was an attempt by Cochran to kill the Harkin amendment to "fund fully the Food and Drug Administration's initiative to curb teenage smoking at \$34 million by limiting funding to the Commodity Credit Corporation" (CQ S-37). Therefore a "yes" vote was considered detrimental to the children's cause.

The last vote in the index, Fiscal 1998 Labor-HHS Appropriations/ Head Start, was championed by children's advocates, especially the Children's Defense Fund. It was a motion by Wellstone to protect his amendment to "increase funding for Head Start educational programs by \$525 million and offset the increase with a reduction in the Defense Department" (CQ S-39). Once again, a "yes" vote was considered to reflect support of the children's campaign.

The votes were coded so that a senator who voted against the Children's Defense Fund/ Child Welfare League vote received a 1 and a positive vote received a 0. The index therefore, was a tabulation of all these votes 0-5. Various independent variables were used to gauge both the effects of the characteristics of the Senator and the constituents in the State. The most important variable for the Senator will be party, followed by his/her liberal ratings based on social and economic issues as determined by the Almanac of American Politics. Party identification was taken directly from the recorded votes in the Congressional Quarterly.

To test the effect a constituency has on its elected representative's vote, we will test certain characteristics of the state. The variables will be: percent rural, percent college educated, percent married couples with children, the party of the state (Democrats minus Republicans in 1996 exit polls), the ideology of the state (liberals minus conservatives in 1996 exit polls), and the median income of the state. These measures were once again derived from the Almanac of American Politics.

Using a linear regression model we can hope to gauge the effects of each variable on the index. To check for the multicollinearity we will also determine whether any of the independent variables are correlated with each other. Frequencies on the votes will also be run to see how many senators voted for each of the issues.

Data Analysis

The multiple regression results are displayed in Table 1. In examining the regression, an R square of .724 means we can explain about 72% of the variance in the index given the nine independent variables: senator's party, senator's liberal rating, % rural of state, % of state married with children, % of state with college education, average income of state, and the liberal ratings of the senator in liberal and economic scales. The overall research model is statistically significant with a F value of 29.009 and Significance tested at .000.

Table I						
Model Summary						
R	R square	Adjusted R square	Std. Error			
	0.866	0.75	0.724	1.049		
				6		
ANOVA						
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	
Regression	287.604	9	31.956	29	0	
Residual	95.84	87	1.102			
Predictors: (Constant), Liberal, LIBSOC, COLLEGEE, Party, RURAL, MARRIEDW, Democrat~ income, L113ECONO						
Dependent Variable: INDEX						
Coefficients						
Model	Beta	t		Sig		
Party	0.762	12.84		0		
RURAL	0.089	1.04		0.301		
MARRIEDW	0.006	0.075		0.941		
COLLEGEE	0.022	0.227		0.821		
LIBSOCIA	-0.933	-1.007		0.317		
1 ECONO	0.966	1.042		0.3		
income	0.061	0.634		0.528		
Democrat	0.065	0.77		0.443		
Liberal	-0.28	-2.593		0.011		

Party of the Senator seems to have the strongest independent effect on support for children's programs. It is significant at the .000 level and has a Beta score of .762. This supports the hypothesis that Democratic senators are much more likely to vote in support of children's programs. This logically follows as one expects the traditional support of welfare issues to be the same support base for children's issues.

Surprisingly, the liberal ratings of the senator in both social and economic issues did not prove significant in this model (.537) as shown in Table 2. Ignoring the significance, only the social variable moved in the expected direction. As the senator voted more for children's programs, he was more likely to be liberal in that respect (Beta -.933). However, as a senator voted more for children's programs, he was less likely to be liberal economically, which is surprising considering all the votes were asking for funding in some way.

The effect of the liberal rating of the state was also consistent with conventional wisdom. This variable was also significant at the .01 level with a Beta of -.280, showing that as the liberal rating of the state grows stronger, the state's senator is more likely to vote for children's programs. This was hypothesized following the logic that constituents vote for people that reflect their general values. If it can be assumed that liberals will be more likely to vote for children's programs then it can be assumed that as a state's liberal ratings increase, the chance that their senator will vote for these issues increases.

All of the other constituency characteristics were inconsistent with the hypotheses. They all proved to be statistically insignificant and moved in the opposite direction then what was assumed. However, upon further analysis, it is logical that the income and married with children factors would not be synonymous with support for children's issues. Median income and married with children variables would be factors more relevant to the middle class. Citizens in these brackets would be more concerned with fiscal and social conservatism. They would not perceive themselves as ever needing that kind of aide for their children, and they would be more concerned with saving money on taxes etc. In addition these people are the traditional backbone of the Republican party and the research already suggests that Republican senators are less likely to support these programs.

The percentage of Democrats in the state variable and percentage of constituents with a college education were also not significant, but they logically did not follow with theory. Their Beta values indicated that as the percentage of Democrats and those with college educations increased, the likelihood that their senator would vote for children's programs actually decreased. It seems especially odd that party for the state would have the opposite effect as the party of the senator. Previous research had also stated that liberal states had higher percentages of college-educated citizens (Erikson, Wright, and McIver), but it did not follow in this model.

Table 2 examines the relationship without the variables Rural, Married with Children, College Education, and Liberal/Economic rating. The thought process behind it was that it would boost the significance of the other independent variables. However, this really did not show anything except to change the direction of the Liberal/Social rating for the senator, which was not what we expected.

Table 2

**Model
Summary**

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std Error
.861	.741	.727	1.0440

Predictors: (Constant), Liberal, LIBSOCIA, Party, Democrat, Income

ANOVA

Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square		F	Sig.
Regression	284.252	5	56.85	52.156	.000
Residual	99.19	91	1.09		

Predictors: (Constant), Liberal, LIBSOCIA, Party, Democrat, Income

Dependent Variable: INDEX

	Beta	t	Sig.
Constant		-.015	.988
Party	.768	13.071	.000
L113SOCIA	.033	.619	.537
income	.004	.050	.960
Democrat	.052	.776	.440
Liberal	-.263	-3.132	.002

Model Summary						Table 2
R		R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std Error		
	0.861	0.741	0.727	1.044		
Predictors: (Constant), Liberal, LIBSOCIA, Party, Democrat, Income						
ANOVA						
Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.		
Regression	2	284.25	5	56.85	52.156	0
Residual	99	19.19	91	1.09		
Predictors: (Constant), Liberal, LIBSOCIA, Party, Democrat, Income						
Dependent Variable: INDEX						
	Beta	t		Sig.		
Constant			-0.015	0.988		
Party	0.768		13.071	0.000		
L113SOCIA	0.033		0.619	0.537		
income	0.004		0.05	0.96		
Democrat	0.052		0.776	0.440		
Liberal	-0.263		-3.132	0.002		

Crosstabulation between the index and party shows clearly that votes on children's programs were on the basis of party. However, it is interesting to note that two Republicans did have a score of zero, and no Democrats had a score of 5. But it is clear which way the Republicans favor with 27 senators having a score of 5.

Conclusion

The findings in this article seem to shed some light on the question at hand. Why do senators vote the way they do on children's issues? The main determinant is simply the party of the senator, followed by the percentage of liberals in the state. These findings are consistent with the findings of Cook and Barrett in their study of the House of Representatives.

Why is party such an important factor? I believe the democrats have simply found a rallying point to gather behind in this issue. Just as Republicans support the Christian Coalition, Democrats support issues such as Head Start, child health insurance, and education programs. Also, children's programs have associated themselves with traditional welfare programs, which the Democrats historically supported.

It is also interesting, yet not surprising, that the liberalness of the state plays an important role in a Senator's decision according to this research. This shows that the people will elect senators that will stand for the same issues that they do. This theory seems to be

somewhat complicated in the sense that the party indicator for the state did not show the same results. This could have been due simply to error in the data or the fact that so many more people are undecided on the issue of party. While my data considered the percentage of democrats over republicans, it did not take into account the number of undecided or independent voters. This is especially important today with the high incidence of split-ticket voting and issue voting.

Contrary to our expectations were the low and insignificant findings with the other state characteristic variables. This could simply be due to the fact that these variables are already explaining who they voted for and party is making up so much of the variance that it would be difficult to find the other important variables. It is also possible that other interactions exist that were not captured in the paper. In sum, only hypothesis number one was supported, and part of number three. State characteristics and the liberal rating measure of the senator could not be found to be reliable indicators of a senator's vote.

Future research on this topic might examine a more longitudinal study of the issues. What affects a senator's vote over time? Does this vote change the longer he or she is in office? It would also be interesting to examine which children's issues have more success, and see how the bills they are attached to effect their success. For example, I think one of the problems with the issues I chose is that they were asking for the end to all corporate tax breaks, or increases in the tobacco tax, things they know Republicans will not support. The real problem for child advocates today is finding a way to fund these programs that will be supported by both sides of the Senate and House because in the end everyone cares for the kids, it is just an issue of what they care more for.

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