

## *Can Inattentive Citizens Control Their Elected Representatives?*

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How much are ordinary citizens—people who pay only occasional attention to politics and public affairs—able to control the behavior of their elected representatives? In principle, it might seem relatively straightforward for citizens to control legislators. If legislators wish to be reelected and if citizens reward and punish them for their actions in office, one should expect legislators to do whatever citizens desire. In practice, the issue of control is more problematic. How can citizens control legislators when most citizens pay scant attention to public affairs? Why should legislators worry about citizens' preferences when they know most citizens are not really watching them? How, in fact, can even the most conscientious legislators follow their constituents' preferences when so many of those preferences are unformed, unclear, and unstable?

Popular beliefs about citizens' control appear to follow the more pessimistic line. Many believe that legislators give greater weight to special interests and to their personal interests than to constituents' interests. In a national survey in 1990, only 20 percent of those interviewed agreed that "most members of Congress are more interested in serving the people they represent than in serving special interest groups," whereas 71 percent believed that members are more concerned with special interest groups. Similarly, only 31 percent agreed that "most members of Congress are more interested in serving the people they represent than in serving themselves," whereas 58 percent believed that members are more concerned with serving themselves.<sup>1</sup> This is hardly a ringing endorsement of democratic control.

Scholars' beliefs about the extent of citizens' control are more complicated, but the general theme is still pessimistic. In their classic article "Constituency Influence in Congress," Warren Miller and Donald Stokes found some evidence that local constituencies controlled the actions of their representatives, but their influence seemed restricted to the domain of civil rights and did not embrace the equally important domains of social welfare and foreign policy.<sup>2</sup> A more recent book by Robert Bernstein, subtitled "The Myth of Constituency Control," finds even less supportive evidence and declares that "elections do not serve as a mechanism through which citizens control their government."<sup>3</sup> Although some scholars have found greater evidence of democratic control than these findings suggest, it is fair to say that the scholarly literature supports more than it refutes the notion that ordinary citizens have little control over their elected representatives.

This essay explores the mechanisms by which citizens can control elected representatives. My quarrel with previous research on the subject is that most scholars have focused on a single mechanism for control. Failing to find evidence that citizens use that method, they conclude that citizens lack any meaningful control. The mistake is to assume that a single mechanism is necessary for effective control. Although I am prepared to believe that a single mechanism is a sufficient condition for citizens to control their representatives, I am not convinced that such a mechanism must also be a necessary condition for control. As long as there are other ways in which citizens could control legislators, scholars are in no position to conclude that examination of a single method says anything definitive about either the existence or the extent of democratic control of government.

The first section of this essay explores the assumptions that other scholars have made when they study constituency influence and reviews briefly the evidence that either supports or refutes their hypotheses about citizens' control. The second section questions why these assumptions are thought to be necessary for effective control. I discuss what we mean by control, how social scientists have studied control relationships in other settings, and how those lessons apply to questions about constituency control of Congress. The third section sets forth an alternative mechanism by which citizens can control legislators and discusses its plausibility in the American setting. The final section returns to the original question and assesses what is known about the extent of citizens' control.

### Legislators as Instructed Delegates: The Standard Control Model

The standard control model presumes that citizens are active controllers. Citizens are conceived to be much like automobile drivers. They know where they want to go, they can select the best routes (policies) to get there, and they are capable of steering their vehicles (legislators) to reach their chosen destinations. The proper test for how well motorists control their vehicles is their success in navigating unfamiliar routes, bypassing various obstacles, and arriving at their destinations in time for their appointments. The proper test for how well citizens control legislators is their success in getting legislators to support and enact their most preferred policies.

The most basic assumption of the standard model is that citizens have both outcome preferences and policy preferences. Outcome preferences are attitudes about the desirability of specific ends, such as safe communities, clean air, protection from foreign attack, and the maintenance of a sound economy. Policy preferences are attitudes about the proper means toward those ends. Examples are preferences about instituting a seven-day waiting period before handguns can be purchased, requiring mechanical scrubbers on coal-powered plants, increasing the number of aircraft carriers in the Navy, or cutting federal expenditures across the board to bring the budget into balance.

The second assumption is that on the important issues of the day citizens

evaluate legislative candidates by focusing on both their positions and their actions. For challengers, the focus is on the policies they promise to support and those they promise to oppose. For incumbents, the focus is on both their promises and their past actions. Citizens are presumed to be especially attentive to legislators' roll call votes. The logic of the model is that citizens reward and punish legislators based on how compatible legislators' roll call positions are with citizens' own policy preferences.

The third assumption is that legislators are strongly interested in being reelected to Congress. Most legislators are career-minded politicians who seek to retain their current positions—at least until a more promising political position becomes available. With citizens choosing among candidates by focusing on their positions and their actions in office, it follows that legislators will work diligently to reflect their constituents' current policy preferences. It also follows that challengers will work to position themselves even more closely to citizens' current policy preferences.

These three assumptions are all that is required for citizens to control legislators in office. Legislators act as instructed delegates, working to discern their constituents' policy preferences and doing their best to follow the majority's preferences. When individual legislators fail to act as good delegates, either by intentionally following the preferences of a minority or by failing to discern the majority's preferences, citizens replace them with those who promise to be better delegates.

The standard control model is far from perfect in allowing citizens to control governmental decisions. First, it works only for items that are placed on the governmental agenda and for which roll call votes are required. Citizens can hardly punish their individual legislators for failing to support a given policy when their legislators were never given the opportunity to vote. Second, it fails to consider the strategic aspects of voting and the ability of clever leaders to structure the order in which legislators vote on amendments so that majorities win on each successive vote but nevertheless attain a less-preferred policy. Third, it works only for citizens who vote. Given that voter turnout in congressional elections has been less than 50 percent for each national election since 1972, citizens' control under the standard model is, at best, control by a majority of the minority.

Despite these and other defects, the standard control model allows for an impressive amount of influence. If the assumptions were all true, legislators would feel tightly controlled by their constituents' policy preferences, and legislators' actions would be largely congruent with citizens' preferences. The questions that remain are empirical ones. Do citizens have both policy preferences and outcome preferences? Do citizens evaluate legislative candidates by focusing on both their positions and their actions? Do legislators actually respond to constituents' policy preferences?

There can be little doubt that citizens have preferences about a wide range of outcomes. On some issues they have practically identical outcome preferences. Most citizens prefer a strong defense, a sound national economy,

safe communities, and a cure for cancer to the alternatives of invasion, depression, crime, and early death. On other issues citizens have conflicting outcome preferences. Some people prefer quiet lakes; others enjoy fast boats. Some enjoy pornography in the privacy of their homes; others are offended by its very existence. Citizens may also have conflicting preferences about the necessary trade-offs among competing ends. Some people seek a clean environment but are unwilling to pay much to achieve it; others favor redesigning everything from the automobile to beverage containers in the pursuit of the cleanest environment possible.

Citizens are far less likely to have preferences about the scores of policy alternatives that are designed to achieve a particular end. The existence of policy preferences depends in part on citizens' awareness of the alternatives and in part on the simplicity of the various remedies. If one asks most citizens their attitudes toward coal scrubbers, tradable emissions rights, or effluent taxes, the answers will contain more noise than information. Few people have genuine preferences about the principal alternatives for reducing emissions from utility plants because they are only dimly aware of the alternatives. If one asks citizens their attitudes toward more general policies, such as increasing (or decreasing) spending on defense, education, or the environment, one is far more likely to elicit genuine information about their preferences. Visible problems that seem to have simple remedies also generate policy preferences easily. Most citizens have strong, though conflicting, policy preferences about proposals such as a constitutional amendment to outlaw flag burning, a bill to ban the possession of handguns, or a proposal to require the use of seat belts.

The assumption in the standard control model that citizens have both outcome preferences and policy preferences is only partially met. Although citizens easily pass the test for outcome preferences, most citizens do not have policy preferences for the hundreds of policy alternatives that Congress considers each year. This limitation necessarily restricts the range of issues for which citizens can control elected legislators, given that preexisting policy preferences are essential to the instructed-delegate model. Control is still possible, however, for the many alternatives for which citizens do have genuine policy preferences.

The assumption that citizens evaluate legislative candidates by focusing on candidates' positions on the important issues of the day is more difficult to assess. Although it is relatively easy to identify citizens' preferences about the various candidates, it is far from easy to determine the causes of those preferences. Citizens themselves may not know why they prefer candidate A to candidate B any more than they know why they prefer corn flakes to bran flakes, Harrison Ford to Kevin Costner, or country music to jazz.

At least some of the findings from past studies raise doubts about the notion that citizens rely heavily on candidates' policy positions when they decide how to vote in legislative elections. First, citizens do not appear to have extensive information about candidates' policy positions. Although 46 percent of a 1988 sample of voters were able to express general agreement or disagreement with their representative's votes in Congress, only 16 percent were able to express

agreement or disagreement with their member's vote on a specific bill.<sup>4</sup> Second, policy and ideology are not the most frequently mentioned reasons for liking or disliking legislative candidates. In the same 1988 survey, voters were far more likely to mention candidates' personal qualities, experience in office, and attention to constituency matters as justifications for their preferences than they were to mention candidates' specific policy positions or general ideological stances.<sup>5</sup>

When citizens do have information about candidates' general voting records or specific policy positions, however, that information does affect their evaluations of the candidates. Citizens who agree with their representative's vote on a specific bill tend to support the incumbent, whereas those who disagree are more likely to support the challenger. The same is true for citizens who express general agreement with the incumbent's votes or who believe the incumbent would handle the most important issue of the day better than the challenger.<sup>6</sup> The extent of agreement or disagreement also affects the probability of their voting for the challenger. Voters who see themselves in fundamental disagreement with their representative tend to support the challenger, whereas those who see more modest ideological differences are more likely to stick with the incumbent.<sup>7</sup>

The problem with the second assumption, then, is one of information more than of behavior. When citizens have good information about the candidates' policy positions, it appears that the information affects their voting decisions. The problem is that too few citizens know where the candidates stand on the issues or what their representatives have done in office for the standard control model to operate effectively.

The third assumption—that legislators actually respond to constituents' policy preferences when they make decisions in office—is the most difficult to assess. The difficulty is not in identifying legislators' policy decisions, for members of both House and Senate vote publicly on several hundred policy alternatives each year, but rather in estimating citizens' policy preferences within each legislative district. Although there is nothing inherently difficult about conducting opinion surveys in all districts (or in a sample of districts), surveys are enormously expensive. Administering a survey in a single state or congressional district is not noticeably cheaper than doing so throughout the entire nation.

The expense of district-level surveys has encouraged scholars to try other approaches. Warren Miller and Donald Stokes first attempted to use a single national sample to estimate constituency opinion in House districts, but their district samples were too small and too biased to allow reliable estimates.<sup>8</sup> The more common approach is to use indicators of each district's economic interests as surrogates for constituents' opinions about a proposed policy. For example, Robert Bernstein and William Anthony used each state's share of contracts for the antiballistic missile system as a measure of statewide opinion toward the proposed system.<sup>9</sup> Other scholars have been less explicit in equating economic interests with constituents' preferences, but they imply that economic indicators are adequate surrogates for constituency opinion.<sup>10</sup> In fact, this approach tells one very little about constituents' true opinions. Given that most citizens do not

have preferences about most policies, it is very odd to assume that they have preferences about each proposal and that their policy preferences are a simple function of their supposed economic interests.<sup>11</sup> The only reliable way to estimate constituents' policy preferences is with survey research in which legislative districts are the primary sampling units.

The best research employing survey evidence from congressional districts demonstrates that legislators do respond to constituency opinion when voters have strong policy preferences. Larry Bartels, who used the 1980 National Election Study survey of 108 congressional districts to estimate citizens' preferences about defense spending, showed that constituency opinion had powerful effects on representatives when they were voting on the level of defense appropriations.<sup>12</sup> In 1981 constituency opinion accounted for most of the legislative support for a 9 percent increase in real defense spending. Bartels also estimated the effect that each district's stake in the Pentagon budget had on legislators' decisions. Although he discovered that representatives responded to their districts' economic interests, these responses were quite distinguishable from their responses to constituency opinion. At least in this case, economic indicators were not acceptable surrogates for evidence about constituents' actual policy preferences.

The various empirical studies, then, provide each of the three assumptions in the standard control model with some support. These findings make it difficult to accept the most pessimistic conclusion that legislators' actions are completely beyond the control of their constituents. It is equally difficult, however, to accept the view that legislators act as well-instructed delegates, working to carry out their constituents' detailed instructions about policy. The main problem with this view is that most citizens do not have preferences about most policy alternatives. A secondary problem is that most voters do not have much information about legislators' policy positions or about their performance in office.

My reading of the evidence suggests that citizens can and do control some of the actions of their representatives in office. They do so when they have strong preferences about policy and good information about legislators' actions in office. The extent of citizens' control, however, falls far short of the normative ideal embodied in the standard control model.

### The Nature of Political Control

The standard control model is not the only way in which citizens can control their elected representatives. Although this statement may seem obvious to many readers, it has not been obvious to most scholars working on the subject. For example, after reviewing the evidence for and against the standard control model, Bernstein concludes: "Constituencies do not control the policies adopted by their representatives; they have some influence over what those policies are, but members are by and large free to adopt what they think best."<sup>13</sup> This statement would be true only if there were no alternative mechanisms for controlling legislators' actions.

Establishing the existence of control relationships is no easy task. Social scientists have long debated how to observe and measure power, influence, control, and all the other variations on the same theme.<sup>14</sup> A control relationship is easiest to observe when one person issues a direct order and another obeys. No one can doubt that a kindergarten teacher is in control when a single word quiets an entire class. What makes this case so easy to evaluate is that the controller's preferences are crystal clear and the students' responses are directly opposite to their habitual behavior. Most control relationships are far more subtle than this, however, and require careful detective work to unravel.

One of the most common mistakes is to confuse the frequency with which one person monitors another person's behavior with the extent of control. Careful monitoring and tight control are very different things, and frequent monitoring may not be necessary for tight control. Scholars once concluded that Congress had little influence over the bureaucracy because legislators devoted so little time to monitoring what the agencies were doing. It was the signal contribution of Mathew McCubbins and Thomas Schwartz to show that Congress had other mechanisms for learning about bureaucratic compliance—ones that were more efficient and more effective than legislators themselves gathering information.<sup>15</sup> McCubbins and Schwartz argued that Congress relied on individual citizens and organized interest groups to monitor bureaucratic decision making. When legislators heard complaints, they assumed there was a problem; when they heard nothing, they assumed all was well. Millions of citizens can monitor bureaucratic compliance far more effectively than can a few hundred legislators holding hearings and conducting field investigations.

A second mistake is to assume that in order to influence another person's choices the person in control must have well-established preferences about all the alternatives under consideration. Well-established preferences make the scholar's job easier, but they are not necessary for control itself. Consider the relationships between generals and fighter pilots in two air forces. In country A, the generals specify what a pilot should do in every imaginable situation, threatening serious punishment for pilots who deviate from detailed flight plans. In country B, the generals give pilots latitude to react to new and changing circumstances, reserving punishment only for those who cannot defend the reasonableness of their actions in a subsequent review. In which air force do the generals have the greater control? If the question is control over every flight maneuver, clearly country A's generals are the more powerful. If the question is control over the outcomes that generals actually prefer—high kill ratios in combat—country B's generals may well be the more influential. Detailed policy preferences are not necessary for effective control so long as the controllers have clear outcome preferences.

A third mistake is to confuse the frequency of punishment with the extent of control. Many proponents of term limits for legislators have fallen into this trap, arguing that legislators operate beyond the control of constituents—the evidence being that so few legislators are ever defeated at the polls. The problem with this argument is that the contrary hypothesis is observationally equiva-

lent. A setting in which legislators responded perfectly to constituency opinion would produce no defeats at the polls just as certainly as one in which legislators operated independently of constituency opinion. Punishment is evidence of imperfect control; no punishment is consistent with both perfect control and perfect independence.

A fourth mistake is to fail to appreciate the changed nature of control relationships when two actors play (or expect to play) a repeated series of games together. When a rental company loans a car for even a single day, it demands that a customer sign a legal document specifying what the customer can and cannot do with the car. The company details its expectations about every possible eventuality because it presumes a customer has no interest in a continuing relationship and therefore no interest in pleasing the company. When a mother loans her son the car for an evening, no elaborate agreements are necessary. Most children treat their parents' cars with greater care than any rental car because they hope to borrow the car on subsequent occasions and because they know that getting caught doing something stupid (no matter whether it had been directly prohibited) might eliminate future borrowing rights.

Those who believe that the standard control model is the only way for citizens to control their elected legislators have committed each of these errors. They assume that citizens need to have preferences about all the alternatives under consideration in order to influence legislators' choices among those alternatives. They assume that citizens need to monitor carefully legislators' actions in office in order for legislators to have an incentive to serve citizens' interests. They accept as evidence of citizens' inability to control legislators the fact that voters rarely remove legislators from office. They fail to appreciate how legislators' aspirations for long political careers give them incentives to avoid actions that might displease voters. These errors do not diminish the empirical research that shows the inadequacy of the standard control model for explaining legislative activity. They do, however, undermine the argument that the standard control model is a necessary condition for citizens to control elected legislators.

Before we can develop an alternative model about how citizens can control their elected legislators, it is important to define carefully the concept of control. In common usage, control means "to exercise restraining or directing influence" over something or somebody "in order to keep within bounds or on a course."<sup>16</sup> Drivers who control their automobiles and parents who control their children keep their cars' and their children's actions within accepted bounds. By extension, citizens who control their legislators keep legislators' behavior within the bounds of what citizens want legislators to do.

The concept of control is closely related to the concept of influence—a term for which social scientists have a precise definition. Jack Nagel defines influence as "a causal relation between the preferences of an actor regarding an outcome and the outcome itself."<sup>17</sup> In this essay, I consider citizens influential (or in control) to the extent that legislators' decisions reflect in some way citizens' preferences about policy issues. Establishing what citizens prefer is, thus, essential to measuring citizens' influence over legislators' behavior. In



fact, the principal difference between the standard control model and the alternative control model offered in this essay is the way in which citizens' preferences are conceived.

### Legislators as Controlled Agents: The Alternative Model

The alternative control model presumes that citizens are somewhat more passive than the citizens of the standard control model. Citizens are regarded more like tax auditors, who notice when things are seriously out of line, than like drill sergeants, who direct troops to march left and right in precise formations. Passivity, however, should not be confused with a lack of influence. Auditing can be an efficient and effective means of controlling legislators' behavior.

The alternative control model rests on four basic assumptions, one of them identical to an assumption in the standard control model, two of them modifications of the original assumptions, and one completely new. The identical assumption is that legislators are strongly interested in reelection. This simple motivational assumption is basic to any model of representation in which legislators respond to citizens' preferences. In settings where legislators are not strongly interested in reelection, legislators lack the basic incentive to discover and follow citizens' wishes.<sup>18</sup>

The second assumption in the alternative control model is that citizens have outcome preferences and can easily acquire policy preferences after the legislature acts, even though they may not have had policy preferences in advance of legislative action. This is a modification of the assumption in the standard control model in which citizens are presumed to have both outcome and policy preferences in advance of legislative action. The modified assumption is considerably more realistic than its predecessor. It allows citizens to develop policy preferences as a response to debates among policy experts and politicians rather than in advance of such debates. Citizens may acquire policy preferences as a direct consequence of legislative debate or when they first notice a change in governmental policy or in the middle of a subsequent electoral campaign, when a challenger questions the wisdom of an incumbent's actions in office.

The third assumption is that citizens are capable of evaluating incumbent legislators by focusing on their policy positions and their actions in office. This is a modification of the assumption in the standard control model in which citizens actually evaluate legislative candidates according to their positions and actions. The revised assumption simply states that citizens are capable of such evaluations once they become aware of what their representatives have done in office.

The new assumption is that the system contains activists who have incentives to monitor what legislators are doing in office and to inform citizens when legislators fail in their duties. Challengers to incumbent legislators have perhaps the strongest incentives for monitoring legislators' behavior and mobilizing voters. Few challengers fail to sift through incumbents' voting records in search of issues that can be used against incumbent legislators. In addition, groups that bear major costs

under a particular governmental policy may help publicize what incumbent legislators have done to contribute to their plight. Whereas challengers seek to replace incumbents, these groups may seek to persuade incumbents to avoid electoral repercussions by altering their positions and working for the groups' benefit.

These four assumptions recognize a division of labor between citizens and professional politicians. Legislators, challengers, and activists do most of the real work. Citizens act more like spectators who register their approval or disapproval at the end of a performance. This division of labor reflects the incentives that drive each type of actor.

In the political world described by these four assumptions, legislators have strong incentives to anticipate citizens' future preferences. Even when citizens seem unaware of an issue or indifferent toward it, legislators do not assume that they are free to vote as they please. Instead, legislators consider the possibility that someone might work to inform their constituents about their policy positions before the next election and that their constituents might not be pleased by their positions and might be inspired to oppose their reelection. To forestall such a reaction, legislators choose their policy positions very carefully. Although it is true that most issues do not present legislators with life or death choices in which a single wrong decision can lead to electoral defeat, legislators create acceptable voting records one issue at a time. They vote carefully on every issue because that is the safest way to guarantee that their voting records cannot be used against them in future elections.

Challengers have equally strong incentives to uncover potentially unpopular positions that incumbents have taken on past roll call votes. Most challengers begin their campaigns with serious disadvantages. Ordinarily, incumbents are better known than challengers, and most incumbents have spent their years in office showering their districts with newsletters, baby books, press releases, services, and an unending stream of favorable publicity. Challengers need to find ways to generate negative publicity about incumbents and favorable publicity about themselves. Scandal aside, challengers have discovered that unpopular roll call votes provide them with the best way to jump-start their campaigns, attract media attention, generate campaign funds, and get voters to notice them.

The leaders of interest groups also have incentives to inform their members (and perhaps citizens more generally) about legislators' actions in office. Interest group leaders are themselves politicians who need to maintain the support of their members and attract the support of new members. By focusing citizens' attention on the errors of government and the actions of specific legislators, interest group leaders attempt to mobilize their members to support continued group action. Single-issue groups may publicize legislators' votes on specific issues, whereas broader based groups often compile and publish ratings of all legislators to show how friendly or unfriendly individual legislators have been to their group's interests.

Individual citizens have fewer incentives to become actively involved in monitoring legislators' performance in office. A single citizen can do so little to reward or punish an individual legislator that it hardly makes sense for that

citizen to invest a lot of time and energy in acquiring information about legislators' actions in office. Even passive citizens, however, can acquire a great deal of politically relevant information when interest group leaders and challengers slip messages about legislators' performances in office into the daily diet of news stories, advertisements, and direct mail. Citizens are capable of learning a great deal when they are presented with information indirectly; they simply have little incentive to acquire it directly.

The alternative control model conceives of legislators as controlled agents rather than as instructed delegates. Legislators do not simply follow the preferences of those few citizens who already have policy preferences. Instead, legislators anticipate what policy preferences might exist at the time of the next election—including preferences that citizens already hold and preferences that might be generated by challengers and interest groups working to tarnish their reputations. According to this model of representation, legislators must pay attention to both the preferences of attentive publics and the potential preferences of inattentive citizens.

Uncertainty abounds in a system like this. Legislators cannot possibly know for sure what policy effects will follow from specific governmental actions, how challengers or interest group leaders might use governmental actions or inactions to stir up citizens, or whether citizens might blame or absolve legislators for their connections with specific actions. What is certain is that legislators will do their best to anticipate citizens' preferences, to avoid the most dangerous mine fields, and to chart as safe a course as possible through the treacherous territory before them.

Legislators are most fearful of electoral retribution when they consider proposals that would impose large and direct costs on their constituents. Few legislators are willing to consider doubling the gasoline tax, cutting Social Security benefits, eliminating the tax deduction for mortgage interest, closing military bases in their districts, or eliminating food stamps because they know that their roll call votes on these issues can be used against them in future elections. The costs are so great and the connections to their own actions are so obvious that legislators feel certain that journalists, challengers, and interest group leaders will inform citizens of their votes and that some citizens will come to believe that their representatives are not serving their interests.

Legislators have much less fear of electoral retribution when they consider proposals that would impose only small costs on individual citizens or when the issues are sufficiently narrow or technical that it would be difficult for citizens to understand exactly what was at stake. Issues relating to the depreciation of capital assets in the defense industry, the formula for calculating dairy price supports, or the sale of licenses for radio stations are examples. Although these three issues are readily understandable to defense contractors, dairy farmers, and broadcasters—and as a consequence legislators need to weigh carefully the preferences of these three groups—the issues are so obscure to most citizens that it is difficult to imagine challengers making them into big campaign issues.

The vast majority of policy questions lie between these two extremes,

where electoral retribution is neither certain nor highly unlikely. A vote on a technical issue relating to air pollution might appear harmless, but it could become politically dangerous if a powerful environmental group used it as a litmus test for whether legislators were friendly or hostile to the environment. A vote on the details of a formula for distributing grants for urban redevelopment might appear benign, but it could become politically dangerous if a challenger showed that an incumbent voted for a formula that cost her district millions of dollars. To guarantee that a seemingly easy issue today does not come back to haunt them in a subsequent campaign, legislators need to think about every issue that comes their way.

Exactly how legislators estimate the electoral consequences of their decisions in office is a complicated matter—one that goes well beyond the scope of this essay.<sup>19</sup> It helps that legislators handle many of the same issues year after year. It also helps that legislators are not alone. They learn from interest groups, committee hearings, staff members, and other legislators about the policy consequences and the political consequences of specific decisions.

When legislators adjust their voting decisions to avoid generating preferences among inattentive citizens, is it fair to suggest that legislators are controlled by those inattentive citizens? It is indeed. I have already argued that citizens are considered influential (or in control) to the extent that legislators' decisions reflect citizens' preferences about policy issues. It makes little difference whether legislators are responding to citizens' existing policy preferences or to the preferences they believe would arise if they voted carelessly. The essence of citizens' control is for legislators to satisfy citizens' wants and interests. If legislators can manage to satisfy citizens' wants before they become transformed into detailed policy preferences, more power to them.

Notice how similar this kind of political control is to the economic control exercised by consumers in the marketplace. Movie producers do not survey movie audiences to discover their exact preferences about scripts, locales, and special effects; nevertheless, producers attempt to anticipate and satisfy the public's preferences so that their films will make money. When we say "the consumer is king," we do not mean that the consumer directs the design and production of movies, automobiles, or town houses. We mean that movie makers, auto makers, and real estate developers attempt to anticipate and satisfy consumers' preferences. Those who fail to satisfy consumers' tastes are eventually driven out of business, just as legislators who fail to anticipate citizens' policy preferences are eventually driven out of office.

This conception of legislators as controlled agents is very similar to the way agents in other areas are controlled. Corporate stockholders are largely unaware of what corporate managers are doing day by day, but managers still attempt to serve stockholders' interests in order to forestall negative evaluations by stock analysts and declines in stock prices, both of which stockholders would notice. Legislators are equally unaware of what bureaucratic officials are doing day by day, but bureaucrats still attempt to serve legislators' political interests in order to keep interest groups and citizens from complaining to legislators.

The comparison of citizens' oversight of legislators' decisions with that of stockholders over managers (or legislators over bureaucrats) is a useful reminder that these control relationships are imperfect. Although corporate managers may be controlled agents, they also have ample freedom to serve their own interests. The current uproar over executive salaries, in which compensation seems to increase as corporate profits decline, is a good example. Similarly, legislators have ample discretion in some policy areas; they know that their constituents will never notice the decisions they have made since the decisions will have only tiny effects on individual citizens.

The power of occasional audits to induce people to keep their behavior within the bounds of what those in control find acceptable is most compelling if we consider how the Internal Revenue Service monitors and controls 110 million taxpayers. Essentially, the IRS allows taxpayers to write their own tax bills and pay what they believe they owe the government. The IRS then audits about 1 percent of the tax returns, looking for income that taxpayers failed to report or deductions that they invented or exaggerated. Despite the infrequency of audits, the American system has an enviable record of collecting taxes. The best available research suggests that 96 percent of all households with tax liability file tax returns. Individual taxpayers report between 91 and 95 percent of their true taxable incomes, and the overreporting of itemized deductions, personal exemptions, and business expenses is only about 2 percent of total personal income.<sup>20</sup>

Most taxpayers report most of their income most of the time because the IRS has other sources of information and because it can impose heavy fines and criminal sanctions on those who cheat the government of its lawful share of income. The other sources of information include reports of wages and salaries from employers, reports of interest and dividends from financial institutions and corporations, reports of real estate transactions from closing agents, and reports of stock transactions from stockbrokers. The results of extensive compliance audits by the IRS demonstrate that taxpayers are most accurate in reporting items for which the IRS has alternative sources of information (for example, wages, salaries, interest, and dividends) and least accurate in reporting items for which the IRS has no good alternative sources (for example, capital gains or income from small businesses).<sup>21</sup> The government also encourages taxpayers to be relatively honest by imposing heavy fines on those it finds cheating and by prosecuting for criminal fraud those who seriously flout the law. A single visible prosecution, such as the conviction of Leona Helmsley for tax fraud, can help to deter many others from practicing similar deceptions.

This account of how the Internal Revenue Service monitors and controls American taxpayers helps to reveal how citizens can monitor and control elected legislators without knowing much about what legislators are doing day by day. First, it shows the importance of auditable records. Although legislators may feel free to vote as they please on voice votes, they must be far more cautious when they face roll call votes because these actions are permanently and publicly recorded. Second, it shows the efficiency of having others collect and process raw

information. Challengers and interest group leaders monitor what legislators have been doing and then inform citizens of legislators' misdeeds, much as employers, banks, and brokers monitor taxpayers' behavior and send summary accounts to the IRS. Third, it shows the deterrent power of heavy sanctions. Legislators anticipate and respond to citizens' preferences and potential preferences because they fear electoral defeat, much as taxpayers anticipate and respond to the rulings of the IRS because they do not wish to risk fines, public humiliation, or imprisonment.

One virtue of the alternative control model is that it avoids the four basic mistakes in identifying control relationships that were outlined in the previous section. It does not confuse the frequency with which citizens monitor legislators' behavior with the extent of their control over legislators' actions, for it allows other people to do most of the day-to-day monitoring. It does not assume that if citizens are to be influential they must have well-established policy preferences in advance of legislative action, for such preferences are required only before the next election (and only then if legislators have failed to anticipate what preferences citizens would form at that time). It does not confuse the frequency of electoral defeat with the extent of control, for such defeats are evidence of the breakdown of control. Finally, it does not assume that legislators play the electoral game only once and therefore are willing to take small risks on any given issue; instead, it assumes that legislators' aspirations for long political careers give them incentives to anticipate citizens' future preferences on every issue put before them for fear that small risks will cumulate over time and threaten their continuance in office.

### The Extent of Citizens' Control

The logic of the alternative control model is simple. Legislators adjust their behavior in office to avoid electoral problems, and they do this by paying careful attention to the known preferences of attentive publics and the potential preferences of inattentive citizens. Although the logic is simple, testing the empirical validity of the model is extraordinarily difficult. How can one know that legislators are anticipating and responding to the potential preferences of inattentive citizens when by doing so they remove the stimulus (a careless vote) that would have transformed those potential preferences into real and measurable preferences?

John Kingdon offers the most persuasive evidence that legislators anticipate the preferences of citizens who are not attentive to legislative action. Kingdon interviewed House members in 1969, just after they had made decisions on fifteen important roll call votes. His extensive questioning was designed to uncover the kinds of factors legislators considered and the way they balanced conflicting forces. One of his principal findings was that legislators attempt to consider how roll call votes could be used against them, and they anticipate the reaction of inattentive citizens.<sup>22</sup>

In a recent book, I offer a different kind of evidence. One of the questions I

examined was why would Congress first deliver narrowly concentrated benefits to some group in society and then suddenly switch sides, imposing costs on the previously favored group and delivering benefits to those whom it had long neglected? Why, in other words, would legislators enact policies that were opposed by organized, attentive publics and about which inattentive citizens had no obvious preferences? The only satisfying answer was that legislators were behaving as the alternative control model would predict—anticipating and responding to citizens' potential preferences.<sup>23</sup>

We know far less about the empirical validity of the alternative control model than we do about the standard control model because few scholars have taken seriously the notion of legislators as controlled agents rather than legislators as instructed delegates. What is known suggests that the alternative control model is empirically plausible. What is known also suggests that those who find little support for the standard control model and then speak of “the myth of constituency control” are confusing necessary conditions with sufficient conditions. The standard control model is not the only way in which citizens can control elected officials. The notion of legislators as controlled agents is a powerful alternative to the notion of legislators as instructed delegates.

## Notes

I am indebted to Richard F. Fenno, Jr., and Fred Greenstein for their helpful comments and suggestions.

1. CBS News/*New York Times* poll “Does America Really Want to Throw the Rascals Out?” (Press release from CBS News dated Oct. 11, 1990, based on telephone survey conducted Oct. 8-10, 1990). Excerpts from the poll were published in Robin Toner, “In a Survey, Americans Wish a Pox on Both Congress and the President,” *New York Times*, Oct. 12, 1990, A21.
2. Warren E. Miller and Donald E. Stokes, “Constituency Influence in Congress,” *American Political Science Review* 57 (March 1963): 45-56.
3. Robert A. Bernstein, *Elections, Representation, and Congressional Voting Behavior: The Myth of Constituency Control* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1989), 98.
4. Gary C. Jacobson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections*, 3d ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 137.
5. *Ibid.*, 140.
6. *Ibid.*, 137.
7. Bernstein, *Elections, Representation, and Congressional Voting Behavior*, 21-22.
8. Miller and Stokes, “Constituency Influence in Congress.” For a discussion of the measurement problems, see Robert S. Erikson, “Constituency Opinion and Congressional Behavior: A Reexamination of the Miller-Stokes Representation Data,” *American Journal of Political Science* 22 (August 1978): 513-517.
9. Robert A. Bernstein and William W. Anthony, “The ABM Issue in the Senate, 1968-1970: The Importance of Ideology,” *American Political Science Review* 68 (September 1974): 1198-1206.
10. See the citations in Bernstein, *Elections, Representation, and Congressional Voting Behavior*, 69-93.
11. It is equally odd to assume that citizens' preferences have exclusively economic roots, whereas legislators' preferences have ideological roots.

12. Larry M. Bartels, "Constituency Opinion and Congressional Policy Making: The Reagan Defense Buildup," *American Political Science Review* 85 (June 1991): 457-474.
13. Bernstein, *Elections, Representation, and Congressional Voting Behavior*, 104.
14. Although some authors find shades of difference between the three concepts of power, influence, and control, these subtleties are not crucial for my analysis of the relationship between citizens and their elected representatives. The three concepts are close enough to being synonyms that I use them interchangeably throughout this essay.
15. Mathew D. McCubbins and Thomas Schwartz, "Congressional Oversight Overlooked: Police Patrols Versus Fire Alarms," *American Journal of Political Science* 28 (February 1984): 165-179.
16. *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 1983), 285, 274.
17. Alternatively, influence is "the causation of outcomes by preferences." See Jack H. Nagel, *The Descriptive Analysis of Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 24, 29.
18. Kenneth Prewitt, "Political Ambitions, Volunteerism, and Electoral Accountability," *American Political Science Review* 64 (March 1970): 5-17.
19. On this matter, see R. Douglas Arnold, *The Logic of Congressional Action* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).
20. These estimates are from Jeffrey A. Roth, John T. Scholz, and Ann Dryden Witte, eds., *Taxpayer Compliance: An Agenda for Research* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 25, 30, 42, 43.
21. Robert A. Kagan, "On the Visibility of Income Tax Law Violations," in *Taxpayer Compliance: Social Science Perspectives*, ed. Jeffrey A. Roth and John T. Scholz (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 83-84.
22. John W. Kingdon, *Congressmen's Voting Decisions*, 3d ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 60-67.
23. Arnold, *Logic of Congressional Action*.



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