

**General and Specific Opinion and Senator Roll Call Voting:  
The Case of Immigration Policy, 2006**

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## **Abstract**

An emerging consensus argues that that policy makers pay attention to citizen preferences when building public policies. But what type of opinions do legislators respond to? Do they respond to their constituent's general public orientations, such as ideology, their constituents' opinion on the specific issue at hand or some combination of the two? Whether legislators respond to general or specific constituency opinion or both, have implications for democracy and the ability of the public to hold its policy makers accountable. Lack of data has kept researchers from assessing which type of opinion more strongly figures into legislator decision making. Using newly available surveys across the 50 states, which ask respondents about specific attitudes towards immigration as well as general political orientations, we test for the comparative impact of specific versus general attitudes on Senate roll call voting on immigration. We find that both types of opinion affect senator roll call behavior about equally. Our conclusion discusses the conditions under which specific attitudes about policies might affect legislative policy making decisions and implications for democracy.

## Introduction

Most scholars now agree that policy makers are responsive to constituent preferences when building public policies. Jacobson's (2004) review of the literature on congressional representation is typical: "[C]ongressional roll-call votes are indeed related to estimated district opinion, although the strength of the connection varies across issue dimensions and is never overwhelmingly large" (p. 220).<sup>1</sup>

Despite this emerging consensus, several important questions remain. For instance, what type of constituent preferences do policy makers take into account when representing their constituencies? Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson (1995) contend that policy makers respond primarily to general political attitudes, such as partisanship and ideological orientations, rather than attitudes on specific issues. They do so because specific opinions tend to be diffuse, ill-informed, and unstable; the environment provides better quality information on general as opposed to specific opinion; and current general opinion more accurately predicts future public opinion and voting behavior than current specific opinion.

This general opinions model argues that specific opinions play little role in the linkage between constituents and policy makers. In contrast, a body of work makes the case for legislator responsiveness to specific opinions (Bartels 1991, Jackson and King 1989). Whether policy makers respond to the general or specific attitudes, or both, of their constituents has implications for our understanding of the linkage between

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<sup>1</sup> The literature on responsiveness to constituency representation is much too large to cite here. Extensive reviews can be found in Manza and Cook, 2002 and Burstein, 2006, 2003, 1998, as well as several books (e. g., Arnold 1990; Bernstein 1989; Clausen 1973; Kingdon 1989, Manza, Cook, and Page, 2002; Matthews and Stimson 1975). Some scholars raise the possibility that rather than responding to constituent opinions government policy makers seek to influence public beliefs, to bring them in line with the policy maker's preferred policy outcome (cf., Ginsberg 1986; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Page and Shapiro 1992).

constituents and policy makers. If policy makers respond only to general attitudes, then the linkage between constituency preferences and policy making behavior is relatively straight forward. All that policymakers need to know in responding to constituent's general attitudes is whether their constituents have distinct partisan and ideological attitudes or orientations. If, in contrast, specific issue opinions affect policy makers' decisions, then the connection between citizen and policy maker is more complex with the linkage taking a different form from one policy area to the next.

Testing for the impact of specific issue preferences is made difficult when attitudes on specific issues are strongly correlated with general preferences. Responding to one implies responding to the other, and we are unable to disentangle their separable effects on legislator behavior.<sup>2</sup> Only when specific issue attitudes are uncorrelated with general sentiments can we test for the impact of each type of attitude. But the correlation between measures of many attitudes on specific issues and general political orientations is high, especially in an age of polarization, such as the current one.

In this paper, we take advantage of state-wide polls across all 50 states that provide us with reliable indicators of mass ideology and mass attitudes on one issue, immigration, which meets the requirement of a sufficiently low correlation between specific and general measures of constituency preference. These data allow us to test for the relative impact of general and specific on legislative voting, specifically Senator roll call votes on immigration in 2006. Foreshadowing our results, we find that both types of opinions have a large and statistically significant impact on the roll call behaviors of Senators for this case. Our conclusion discusses the implications and generalizeability of our findings.

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<sup>2</sup> Statistically, this implies multicollinearity between the two types of opinion.

## **Constituency Influence and Legislative Roll Calls**

Strong theoretical linkages exist that expect legislator responsiveness to constituent opinion. Legislators will respond to or anticipate public opinion when casting roll calls because they think their roll call behavior affects their electoral security and likelihood of being re-elected (Mayhew 1974).<sup>3</sup> Roll calls are visible and challengers can use the incumbent's roll call votes to frame their election campaign. When incumbent roll call behavior deviates from public preferences, challengers possess strong incentives to publicize these unpopular votes, which in turn may persuade constituents to vote against the incumbent. This linkage assumes that legislators want to be re-elected and stay in office (Fenno 1978; Mayhew 1974), which we take as reasonable and is quite common in research on legislator behavior. A second mechanism, representative role orientation, may also lead legislators to learn of constituent opinion on issues and cast their roll call votes accordingly (McCrone and Kuklinski, 1979). Representatives may view themselves as instructed delegates whose proper legislative task is to carry out their constituents' policy preferences. For either of these representational mechanisms, policy makers may look to their constituents' general and/or specific opinions.

### **General Political Attitudes and Legislative Behavior**

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<sup>3</sup> Although in this paper we examine the impact of public opinion on congressional roll call voting we recognize that it is doubtful that members of Congress survey their constituents prior to every vote. It should be noted that with the increase use of polling by party organizations, the media and growing number of polling organizations, members of Congress as professional politicians with a constant eye on the next election have a pretty good feel for the opinions of constituents on important, controversial issues. One reader of a prior draft of this paper noted that the lack of polling by members of Congress suggests that members utilize demographic characteristics to predict constituency opinion. Given the uneven track record of linking demographics to roll call voting we are not convinced that utilizing surrogates to estimate public opinion makes sense when we have direct measures of public preferences.

Miller and Stokes (1963) were among the first to make the case for studying representation by seeking to link “broad evaluative dimensions” to roll call votes. They note:

The average citizen may be said to have some general ideas about how the country should be run, which he is able to use in responding to particular questions about what the government ought to do..... What makes it possible to compare the policy preferences of constituents and Representatives despite the public’s low awareness of legislative affairs is the fact that Congressmen themselves respond to many issues in terms of fairly broad evaluative dimensions (p. 47).

Jacobson’s (2004) recent review also suggests representation is strongest when measured in terms of general issue dimensions rather than specific issues. Similarly, Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson (1995; also Clinton, 2006 and Grossback, Peterson, Stimson 2006) argue the general responsiveness case. They contend that “public sentiment is generally more vague, diffuse, than the more concrete government action,” (pp. 543-544) and thus it is proper to focus on general political orientations, which picks up this trait of public opinion toward government, rather than specific opinion on discrete issues. Furthermore, politicians have a difficult time in discerning information about specific opinion because “public preferences only rarely crystallize on specifics,” and even if relevant, this type of information “is exceedingly difficult to know.” (p. 545). The argument that voter opinions on specific policies may be “non-attitudes” also makes it less likely that policy specific opinions will be of value to a legislator seeking to represent the constituent’s responsible for deciding the politician’s political fate. Thus, to

Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson (1995), general political orientations are easier for politicians to get a fix on, as politicians and others interact and scan the environment for information about where, what they call the public mood, and which is most clearly realized in general opinions such as ideological and partisan identification.

General opinion thus serves as a guide for policy makers across a range of issues, even when specific opinion on an issue has not formed, but potentially could, for instance by opposition candidates for office raising it in campaigns (Arnold 1990). The assumption here is that if specific opinion formed on an issue, general political orientations would strongly shape the distribution of opinion on the specific issue. General opinion is thus a good predictor of the future course of public opinion on specific issues. From this perspective, specific opinions play no direct role in affecting legislative roll call behavior and general opinion is a good surrogate for specific opinion, because of the tight relationship between the two at the mass level when specific opinion crystallizes.

### **Specific Attitudes and Legislative Behavior**

In contrast, some studies make the case for legislator responsiveness to specific opinions. For instance, Bartels (1991) analyzes votes on defense because “the 1980 NES survey included an item directly tapping constituents’ opinions on that issue . . .” (p. 463). Bartels does not provide a theoretical rationale for the superiority of specific versus general measures of constituency opinion, but his comment and findings indicate that specific opinion can influence legislator roll calls. Similarly, Jackson and King (1989) attempt to derive estimates of constituency opinion on their issue of interest, taxes, and like Bartels, find that specific policy preferences affect roll call voting. In addition, Page

and Shapiro (1983), although not explicitly looking at representative's roll call voting behavior, report evidence indicating that specific measures of government policy change is congruent with changes in public opinion on specific policy questions.

Uncorrelated Specific and General Opinion: How can we test for the separate effect of specific issue preferences? If attitudes on a specific issue correlate highly with general attitudes, testing for the effect of specific attitudes is highly problematic. Statistically we will be unable to disentangle the effects of specific and general opinions when both types of opinions are highly correlated. Thus, a test of the impact of specific attitudes requires a lower correlation between specific and general measures of constituency preference.

How common is it for specific and general measures of constituency opinion not to be strongly correlated? Although we might expect some degree of consistency between signals based on general preferences and those focused on specific issues, the two can just as easily diverge. Jacoby (1991) finds that the link between ideological self-placement and issue attitudes varies, sometimes being strong, while at other times "the link between ideology and policy is less clear-cut (p. 201). Several factors contribute to the divergence between general and specific attitudes. First, some citizens adopt general positions based on factors other than specific issue positions (Conover and Feldman 1981; Jacoby 1991; Stimson 2004). Partisanship, for instance, often develops in the family, as a part of political socialization process, not issue based considerations (Campbell, et. al., 1960; Green, et. al., 2004; Jennings and Niemi 1968, 1981; Niemi and Jennings 1991). Second, an individual's position on a specific issue may depend on how the issue is framed. In one context, an individual may support a specific policy but if



couched in a different context that same individual may oppose the same government effort. Thus, there may be many instances in which specific opinions do not correlate with general political orientations.

Salient Specific Opinion: Legislators are not likely to be equally responsive to all specific opinions that diverge from general opinion. Characteristics of the issue and public opinion on the issue will affect the degree of their roll call responsiveness. In particular, issues that have strong implications for re-election should elicit the greatest roll call response. Such issues are likely to be those that are salient with the public as well as issues that can be elevated into campaign issues by the opposition candidate and/or the mass media. Being transformed into a campaign issue should increase an issue's salience to the public.

Legislators may not be able to predict with much certainty whether any vote that they take will become a campaign issue if it is not salient at the time of the roll call. At best, only a small number of issues become important campaign issues. Issues already salient have the highest likelihood of being salient during the re-election campaign, and this likelihood will grow the nearer the timing of roll call is to the election campaign. General attitudes, then, may give legislators the best guess as to public sentiment on specific issues that are not salient at the time of the roll call but may become salient during the campaign period.

But for those issues that are salient at the time of the roll call and that are likely to remain so during the campaign, specific opinion may provide legislators with more precise information about public attitudes than general opinion on the issue in question. Thus, they may be a superior or preferable guide to roll call voting than general attitudes,

especially when the specific opinion does not highly correlate with general opinion. In fact, if the legislator relied upon general opinion under these conditions, the legislator may increase his or her electoral vulnerability by casting “incorrect” votes on the specific roll call.

### **Immigration as a Relevant Issue**

Our argument contends that when opinion on a specific issue is not highly correlated with general political orientations and when that specific opinion is salient, legislators may take it into consideration in casting roll call votes. The above argue further that such issues occur often enough to make them relevant to understanding legislative roll call behavior. Our study is the first to include measures of both general and specific opinion on a salient issue at the constituency level, in this case immigration, to assess the relative impact of both types of constituent opinion on legislator roll call voting. Immigration is a good issue to test our theoretical expectations. The issue was salient in 2006 and immigration attitudes were not overly correlated with general orientations, like partisan or ideological identification.

Figure 1 presents two measures of public salience, the average monthly percentage of the public citing immigration as the nation’s most important problem and a monthly count of articles in the *New York Times* on immigration from mid-2004 through May 2006. Public salience grew in late winter and early spring 2006, leading up to the Senate voting on immigration. That about 10% of the public in April and May rated immigration the most important problem is especially noteworthy. Rarely do issues other than war or the economy reach that level of public salience.

**Figure 1 about Here**

Second, neither was immigration opinion overly correlated to general opinion. In the analysis below we use two items to measure state level opinion on immigration, one from SurveyUSA in December 2005 on whether immigrants take jobs and another from the 2004 National Annenberg Election Study (NAES) on whether respondents desire more restrictive immigration enforcement. (We discuss these items in more detail below.) The SurveyUSA item correlates with the state percentage of Republicans at  $r = .11$  ( $p = .46$ ,  $n = 50$ ) and conservatives at  $r = .53$  ( $p = .000$ ,  $n = 50$ ). The 2004 NAES item correlates with the percentage of Republicans and conservatives at  $r = .19$  ( $p = .19$ ,  $n = 48$ ) and  $r = .60$  ( $p = .000$ ,  $n = 48$ ), respectively. Although these correlations are significant in both cases for conservatives, they are not overly strong, with only 28% and 36% of the variance of these items overlapping with the state percentage of conservatives. If immigration attitudes of constituents fail to influence legislative roll calls on this issue, it is unlikely that specific opinion in general will have the kind of impact that we are theorizing. Ours is, thus, a best case design.

## **Data**

### **Dependent Variable**

We use Senate voting on immigration reform in 2006 to test the ideas put forth above. For the Senate we have state-level measures of immigration and general attitudes, which matches these opinion measures to the legislator's constituency.<sup>4</sup> The Senate held 37 roll calls from May 16 through May 25 (roll calls 121-157). From these roll calls, we develop two dependent variables, an additive index and a W-nominate support score.

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<sup>4</sup> We could have simulated opinion for the House as well, but doing so would require making some assumptions about district level public opinion, which might affect the relative impact immigration and general opinion on representative's roll calls. In contrast, for the Senate we have direct measures of constituency opinions, and thus a clean test of the relative impact of specific and general opinions on Senate roll calls.

The additive index, which corrects for absences, counts the number of times that the senator supported the more liberal position, divided by the number of time in which the senator cast a roll call. We use Poole and Rosenthal's W-nominate program to calculate senators' w-nominate scores.<sup>5</sup> One vote (125) was dropped from both indexes because of Senate unanimity. Also Jay Rockefeller (D-WV) was absent from all votes. Cronbach's alpha of .97 for the 36 roll calls suggests their scalability for the additive index and the W-nominate analysis indicates the unidimensionality of Senate voting on immigration. Not surprisingly, the two indexes correlate quite highly.

The additive index can range from 0 to 100 percent. Average support among all Senators is 48%, ranging from 0 to 94%. The parties diverge on the issue, with Democrats providing stronger support for immigration than Republicans (78% to 25%). Still there is some overlap in the support of the two parties: Republican support scores range from 0 to 83%, while Democrats range from 19 to 94%. Eleven Republicans had immigrations support scores above 50% and three Democrats had support scores below 50% (Byrd, WV; Dorgan, ND; Nelson, NE).<sup>6</sup>

### **Independent Variables: Constituency Opinion**

Specific Opinion on Immigration: Our basic model includes variables tapping senators' personal preferences and constituency opinions at the state level. We employ two measures of state level specific opinion on immigration. First, we rely on 50 state-wide polls conducted by SurveyUSA in December 2005 and a question from the 2004 NAES. (Since readers may not be very familiar with SurveyUSA, we present details on it in the appendix.) Our second measure of state level immigration attitudes comes from

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<sup>5</sup> The W-nominate routine is available at <http://pooleandrosenthal.com/dwnl.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Details on the immigration support scores of each senator can be obtained from the authors.

the 2004 NAES. Critically both of these polls come before the Senate roll call votes, which allow us to unambiguously assess causal direction from constituent opinion to roll call voting.

The SurveyUSA immigration question reads: “Which of these 2 statements do you agree with more: One: Immigrants take jobs away from Americans. Two: Immigrants do jobs that Americans don't want.” The first option taps into anti-immigrant sentiment, while the second option pro-immigrant public sentiment.<sup>7</sup> The NAES question reads: “Should the federal government do more about it, do the same as now, do less about it, or do nothing at all? More, Same, Less, or Nothing.”<sup>8</sup> We created a “more restrictive” variable by dividing the number of respondents who gave that response by the total number with an opinion.<sup>9</sup> The two variables correlate at the state level at .56,  $p < .001$ .

The immigration debates of spring 2006 were complex and contained a number of issues beyond the economic one of whether immigrants were taking jobs from Americans or whether the federal government should step up enforcement of the existing immigration laws. Amnesty to those who had been in residence in the nation for several or more years was among the most heated of issues, as were the costs that illegal immigrants

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<sup>7</sup> Across the 50 states, 44.4% of respondents take the anti-immigrant position, with 50.6% taking the pro-immigrant stance, and 5.0% not expressing an opinion. Considerable state-level variance exists in these data, which range from 30% to 60% for the anti-immigrant position, and 34% to 66% for the pro-immigrant position, both with standard deviations of 7%. Weighted by state population, 42% and 53% hold anti- and pro-immigrant attitudes. To correct for “don't know” and “no opinion” responses, our immigration opinion variable is the percentage pro-immigration in the state, divided by the summation of the pro- and anti-immigrant state percentages. This corrected immigration opinion variable ranges from 36.2 to 68.8, with a standard deviation of 7.8.

<sup>8</sup> This question was posed in NAES surveys from 10/7/03 through 6/24/04. Across this time period, 19,946 respondents had opinions to the question, an average of 415 respondents per state, ranging from 39 in Wyoming to 1939 for California (NAES does not poll in Alaska or Hawaii).

<sup>9</sup> At the state level, this variable ranges from 45.2 (Vermont) to 75.9 (Mississippi), with a mean of 62.5.

imposed on local governments. One may critique the two questions that we use as not tapping into the full range of immigrant sub-issues and perhaps not representing the most important aspects of the immigration debate to voters. Closely related is the notion that the immigration debate is multidimensional, and that these two items do not capture this multidimensionality.

These are the only two items that we could locate for which we could create state level opinion indicators, which is necessary for our analysis. Although most surveys and polls only include one or a few items on immigration, a March 2006 Pew survey includes a large battery of immigration questions. Using this survey we can address the issue of multidimensionality at the individual level.

Several of the Pew questions are similar to the SurveyUSA one used here. For instance Q 37 ask respondents, “Do you think the immigrants coming to this country today mostly take jobs away from American citizens, or do they mostly take jobs Americans don't want?” Other than allowing respondents to answer both, this question is quite similar to the SurveyUSA one. Another (Q8e) also raises this issue: “I'm going to read you some pairs of statements that will help us understand how you feel about a number of things. As I read each pair, tell me whether the FIRST statement or the SECOND statement comes closer to your own views — even if neither is exactly right. The first pair is... Immigrants today strengthen our country because of their hard work and talents OR...Immigrants today are a burden on our country because they take our jobs, housing and health care.”

Along with these two questions, we identified 13 others in the Pew survey that tap immigration attitudes across a wide range of issues or aspects of the immigration

debate.<sup>10</sup> First, after recoding each variable so that high values indicate anti-immigrant sentiment, we correlated all 15 variables. All correlations, which ranged from about .2 to .6, were positive and statistically significant at  $p < .001$ . Second, we factor analyzed the 15 variables using a principle components, orthogonal rotation. Only one factor had an eigenvalue greater than 1, the minimum for a significant factor. In this case, that factor had an eigenvalue of 3.82. Moreover all 15 variables strongly loaded on that factor, with factor loadings that ranged from 0.30 to 0.67. The take jobs question loaded at .51, while the take job, housing and healthcare loaded at .67.<sup>11</sup> At the individual level, mass attitudes toward immigration are unidimensional.

General Political Orientations: To measure general political orientations, we use the SurveyUSA question, which asks respondent's to identify whether they think of themselves as liberal, moderate, or conservative, the same type of question that Erikson, Wright, and McIver (1993, 2006) use. We construct a corrected state liberalism variable by dividing the percentage of self-identified liberals by the summation of the percent liberal and percent conservative.<sup>12</sup>

### **Control Variables**

Several factors beside constituency opinion may affect senator roll calls on immigration. Thus, we control for the senators' party. The party variable is measured 1

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<sup>10</sup> Rather than list the question wording for each, to preserve space we list the question numbers and refer the reader to the Pew poll for exact question wording: Q8d, Q16, Q31, Q32, Q36, Q39, Q40, Q42, Q44, Q47, Q48, Q52, and Q54.

<sup>11</sup> Two questions, Q47 and Q48, also loaded on a second factor at .42 and .46, compared to their loadings of .30 and .35 on the first factor. These two questions seemed somewhat tangential to the key debates over immigration, with one asking whether the respondent favored or opposed "creating a new government database . . . and requiring employers to check that database before hiring someone for ANY kind of work?" and the second asked respondents whether they favored or opposed "requiring everyone seeking a new job to have a new kind of driver's license or Social Security card that proves they are U.S. citizens or are in the country legally?"

<sup>12</sup> This variable ranges from 18.2 to 66.0, with a mean and standard deviation of 32.2 and 10.2.

for Democrats and -1 for Republicans, with 0 for the independent Jeffords (VT).

Furthermore, senators may look to objective conditions, such as economic conditions in the state, feeling that the public is either misinformed and/or because objective conditions provide senators (and other decision makers) with “hard” evidence about the possible implications of a decision. For instance, in states experiencing high unemployment, senators may reckon that an open immigration policy might exacerbate state unemployment, and thus the senator might fear the political fallout for supporting such an immigration policy. In contrast, senators representing states with low unemployment may believe that a more liberal immigration policy might help the state’s economic growth by attracting relatively cheap labor. Thus, we expect high unemployment to be associated with more restrictive immigration voting by senators. We use state unemployment in April 2006, the latest unemployment figure prior to the voting.

We also add a measure of whether the senator is running for re-election to test for whether Senators up for re-election in 2006 were more/less supportive of immigration than were the group of Senators not facing the electorate in November.<sup>13</sup> May 2006, the month of the Senate debate and votes on immigration, was less than six months prior to the November election, a short enough time frame for immigration to be a major issue in the campaign. Although no direct evidence exists, it appears that supporters of a restrictive immigration policy hold their positions more intensely than supporters of a more open immigration policy. If this is the case, senators running for re-election in 2006, feeling that anti-immigration supporters might be more likely to vote and to base

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<sup>13</sup> We also experimented with several other variables, including whether the senator was retiring in 2006, the state’s mass partisan distribution, Bush’s approval, the state’s percentage Hispanic and percentage estimated immigrant population. None of these variables were found to be statistically significant and thus were dropped from the analysis. Detailed results can be obtained from the authors.



their vote in the senator's immigration roll call record, will oppose open immigration reforms and support restrictive ones more than senators not running for re-election in 2006. We measure this with a dummy variable. Twenty-nine senators were up for re-election in 2006, while four decided to retire. These included majority leader Frist (R-TN), as well as Sarbanes (D-MD), Dayton (D-MN), and Jeffords (I-VT). In addition, we interacted the up-for-reelection variable with our measures of immigration opinion to see if those Senators facing reelection in November 2006 were more sensitive to the immigration issue than those with 2008 and 2010 re-election dates.<sup>14</sup> Finally we included a variable for whether the state shared a border with Mexico, with the expectation that sharing a border will reduce support for immigration.

### **Analysis and Results**

We begin the discussion of the results by presenting a simple plot of Senators votes on immigration issues against constituency opinion on the issue. Figure 2 plots the Nominate measure of Senator voting behavior and the SurveyUSA "takes jobs" measure of constituency opinion. As can be seen by examining the plot, there is a relationship between attitudes toward immigration in the state and the Senators voting score on the immigration issue. The more a state's constituency believed that immigrants cost jobs the less likely was the Senator to support immigration reform in 2006.<sup>15</sup>

### **Figure 2 about Here**

We now turn our attention to a multivariate test of the hypothesis that attitudes on the specific issue of immigration influenced Senator's voting behavior. Tables 1 and 2

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<sup>14</sup> In addition we created an interaction term between the up for re-election dummy and state mass ideology. As that variable failed to reach statistical significance in any estimation we drop it from the discussion, but details can be obtained from the authors.

<sup>15</sup> For the sake of space we only provide one plot. Any reader who wants to see the plots for the other measure of roll call voting should contact the authors.

present the results of a regression analysis estimating the effect of specific immigration attitudes and more general predispositions on Senators support for immigration reform. Results for the SurveyUSA “take jobs” question on Senate roll call voting are presented in Table 1, while Table 2 presents results of the NAES “more restrictive” enforcement question. The tables also display the impacts of the several control variables.

### **Tables 1 and 2 About Here**

For ease of interpretation and presentation, we have rescaled the additive index to range from 0 to 100% and the W-Nominate scale to range from -100 to 100. In all cases, we present the results of a regression analysis with Huber-White robust standard errors. In both tables 1 and 2, model 1 uses the Nominate measure of roll call voting while model 2 reports the results analyzing the additive scale. With only minor exceptions discussed below, results for comparable equations across the two dependent variables are consistent and substantively identical. Thus most of the discussion focuses on the percentage index dependent variable because of its more intuitive interpretation.

### **Impact of the SurveyUSA Take Jobs Specific Opinion Variable**

Our main interest lies in the impact of specific opinion on Senate roll call voting. The results on Table 1 are unequivocal—specific opinion, here measured as the percentage of state residents who think that immigrants take jobs, affects senator roll call behavior, controlling for the other factors we hypothesized should affect roll calls, including general opinion, in this case state ideology. As the percentage of such opinion increases, senator support for the “liberal” immigration alternative declines.

To illustrate the impact that state attitudes toward immigration has on Senator’s voting, we use the estimates from Model 2 in Table 1. This estimation indicates that

Senator support for immigration declines by .81% for each 1% increase in the percentage who think that immigrants take jobs from Americans, a statistically significant effect ( $p = .017$ ). Not only is this result statistically significant, but it is also substantively significant. A one standard deviation difference in state immigration attitudes (7.7%) produces a 6.2 percentage shift in senatorial roll call voting. Senators from states with the lowest percentage of such residents (31.3) will be 26.3 percent more supportive of immigration than senators from states with highest percentage of such constituents (63.8). These results indicate a high degree of senator responsiveness to constituent specific opinions on immigration.

The results in table 1 are even more dramatic given that the effect of the public's attitude on immigration exists after controlling for state conservatism. To be sure, Senators from states with more conservative populations were significantly less supportive of immigration reform. Each 1 point shift in the state's percentage of conservative corresponds to a .80% shift in senator roll call support. A one standard deviation shift in state conservatism (10.2%) leads to about an 8.2% point shift in senator roll call behavior. Given the near equality in magnitude of the general and specific attitudes, we can say that for immigration, specific opinion affected Senator roll call voting with about the same impact as more general political predispositions.

Results of the other control variables are also instructive. Again, focusing on Model 2 in Table 1, we find not surprisingly given the highly polarized environment in the contemporary Senate, that Democrats and Republicans voted differently from one another with Republicans on average 44 percent less supportive of immigration reform (recall Senator Jeffords, an independent is scored a 0 on this variable). Those Senators

from states sharing a border with Mexico voted more liberally on immigration than Senators from other states, contrary to expectations, but in the analysis using the 2004 NAES question this variable failed to reach statistical significance. Also contrary to our expectation, greater unemployment in their state did not induce Senators to be less supportive of immigration. In fact, the results indicate that higher levels of state unemployment were associated with greater levels of support for immigration reform. Finally, there is absolutely no support for the expectation that the group of Senators who were up for reelection in 2006 behaved any differently than their colleagues not facing immediate reelection.

#### **Impact of the 2004 NAES More Restrictive Enforcement Specific Opinion Variable**

Table 2 presents parallel analyses using the 2004 NAES “more restrictive” specific opinion variable. We do not expect this variable to perform as strongly as the SurveyUSA item because we lose 4 cases for analysis (NAES did not poll in Alaska or Hawaii) and the NAES study was held in 2004, over a year before the Senate roll call votes. Our main rationale for employing this variable is to show that our basic findings are not an artifact of the specific immigration question used. Despite these limitations, the results using the NAES question comport closely to those using the SurveyUSA measure. Senators from states more supportive of restricting immigration were significantly less supportive of immigration reform. Again this result reflects the effect of immigration attitudes after controlling for the state’s general political conservatism. If anything, the estimates in table 2 suggest that the specific immigration attitude exerted a somewhat stronger effect than the more general political predisposition.

In general, the control variables perform as they did when using the SurveyUSA item. The only substantive difference in the results of the various control variables is found in the estimated effect of sharing a border with Mexico. In this set of equations, the impact of a common border does not meet the standard levels of statistical significance.

## **Conclusions**

Existing research has found legislative responsiveness to constituent opinion, but it is not clear from that research what type of opinion legislators respond to, specific opinion on issues or general political orientations, like ideology. In this paper we sought to test relative legislator responsiveness to specific policy cues and general political orientations. A test of the impact of specific issue opinions requires a case in which specific opinions are not highly correlated with general political orientations. If specific opinions and general political orientations are strongly related disentangling the effects of either is problematic. Furthermore, we believe that the specific issue must be salient enough to constituents to believe that they may take it into account when making electoral decisions. Only on salient issues that are not highly correlated with general political orientations are we likely to find evidence of the effect of specific issue opinions.

We use immigration policy in 2006 to test our ideas, a salient policy that was not strongly correlated with general orientations. Surveys conducted by SurveyUSA and

NAES allowed us to obtain both general ideological preferences and specific attitudes on immigration reform in each of the states. Our results demonstrated Senator roll call responsiveness to both specific opinion on immigration and state conservatism at about the same magnitude, even when controlling for other factors, like Senator's party.

Admittedly, we have only one case here, immigration, which raises the question of whether the same processes hold for other issue areas. To answer that question definitively requires analyses, such as that conducted here, on a variety of issue areas, as well as extending the analysis to other decision making venues, like the House of Representatives and state legislatures. Such studies will depend upon survey organizations asking questions tapping specific opinions across a representative sample of constituencies. Thus, we must await the availability of they type of data used here for a other issue areas and other policy making venues.

Still, we believe that we can generalize our findings to other policy areas and decision making venues because, like immigration policy, other policy areas exist that are both salient and uncorrelated with general political orientations and because other legislators will employ essentially the same decision calculus that we have hypothesized here for U. S. senators.

A related question asks whether salient issues that are uncorrelated with general political orientations occur often enough for us to care about. Again, we think that such issues exist frequently enough for them to be important political phenomena. Such issues are likely to occur less frequently when partisan polarization is high, like it now is, than when the political system exhibits lower degrees of party polarization. Notably, we were able to locate a salient and uncorrelated issue during a period of extremely high partisan

polarization. When such issues emerges during periods of intense polarization even if they do not arise too often, they are likely to be very important to eventual election outcomes, as they undercut the normal patterns of political alignments. During periods of low party polarization, legislators are likely to encounter salient and uncorrelated issues with enough frequency to view them as normal, rather than exceptional occurrences.

## **Appendix: SurveyUSA**

SurveyUSA is a commercial polling firm, with primarily local news media clients, such as newspapers and television stations. Since May 2005, SurveyUSA has been posting the results of its state-based polls on its internet site, <http://www.surveyusa.com>, where we accessed the state public opinion data.

Compared to other state-based polls, the SurveyUSA polls offer several advantages. SurveyUSA uses the same sampling procedure for all 50 states, collects data on the same number of respondents per state (600), and asks respondents the same questions, using the same survey instrument. This produces a comparable set of opinion readings across the states, with a manageable sampling error of +/- 4.1%.

Like many survey organizations, SurveyUSA samples by using a random digit telephone dialing process, but also employs a “robot interviewing process.” The robot poll technique, however, is somewhat controversial. The “robot interview” begins with an actor who reads the questionnaire, which is recorded and used to interview all respondents. Respondent voice activation technology advances the survey from question to question. Although each respondent is in effect interviewed by the same interviewer, which mitigates interviewer variance, the effects of the recorded or “robot” interviewer on the survey response is not well understood. SurveyUSA indirectly addresses this issue on their webpage, where they demonstrate that their state level results closely match the results of other survey firms and that they have a better than average track record in forecasting election outcomes from their data.

SurveyUSA reports tests comparing its own election predictions with other polling agencies, finding as good as if not better results than its competitors. In a recent



paper, Gary Jacobson (2006) extensively tests the SurveyUSA data for reliability and validity and finds them quite comparable to other state level polls. Thus despite this reservation, SurveyUSA provides us with unique data to test the impact of state level presidential approval on state level election contests in 2006.

Another advantage of the SurveyUSA data employed here is their timing. Unlike many polls on public opinion issues, which occur during or after congressional debate or roll call voting, or during election periods,<sup>18</sup> which also occur after congressional voting, these SurveyUSA data date five months before these Senate votes on immigration. This temporal ordering allows us to specify causality more clearly than with polls conducted during or after congressional activity, which raises the possibility that congressional action might influence public opinion.

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<sup>18</sup> However note that some studies are careful about the temporal order between constituent opinion and roll call voting. For example in his study of defense roll calls in the 1980s, Bartels (1981) used the 1980 NES data based on an average of 19 respondents in 108 districts. Jackson and King's (1989) measure of constituency opinion was based on a May 1978 Roper survey in which they estimated constituency opinion using the demographic correlates of tax attitudes the roll call votes they analyzed were taken in August 1978.

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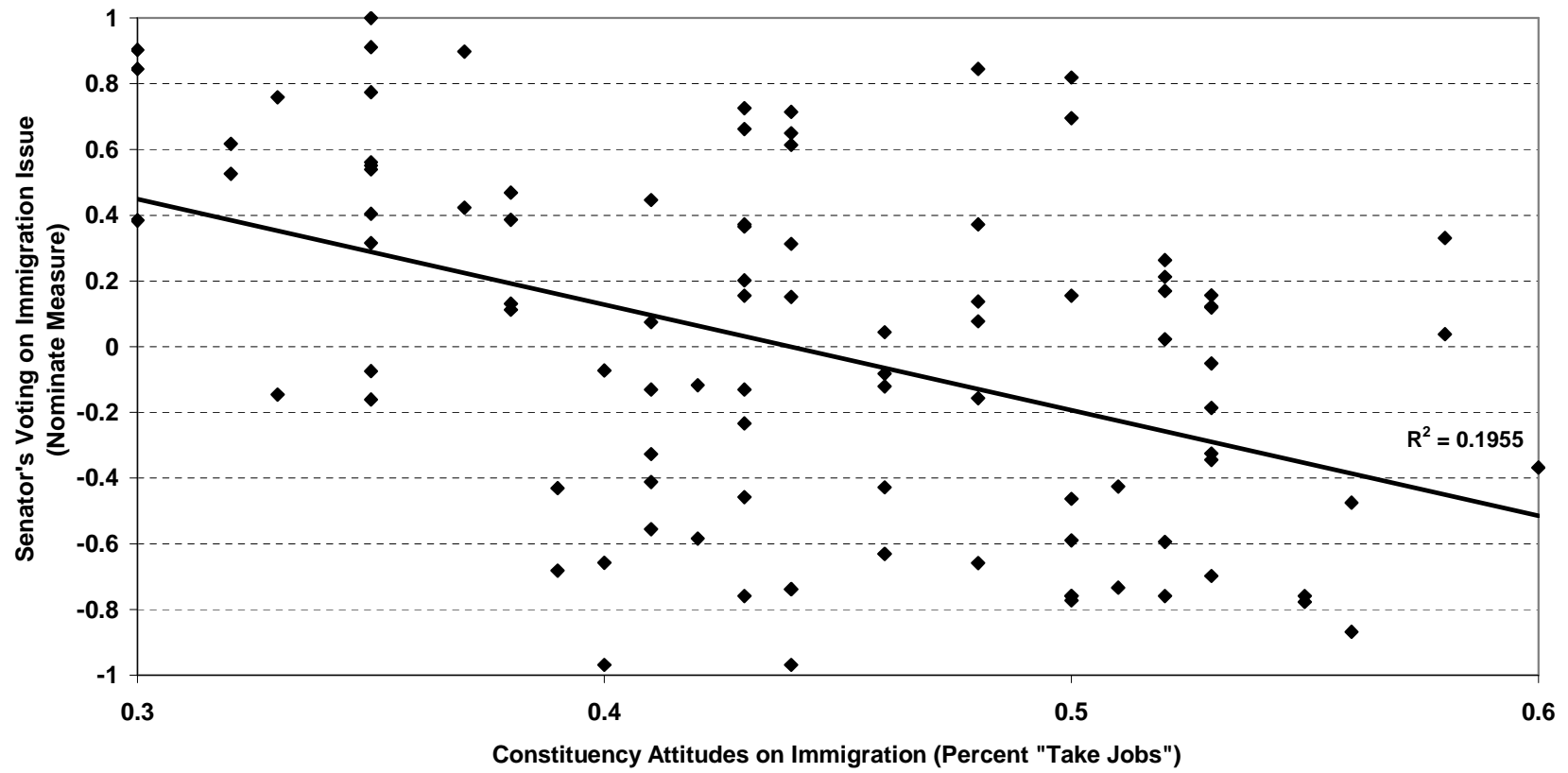
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Figure 1: Senators Voting on Immigration and State Constituency Attitudes on Immigration



**Table 1: Regression Results of Specific Immigration Attitudes on Senate Roll Call Voting Using the SurveyUSA “Take Job” Item**

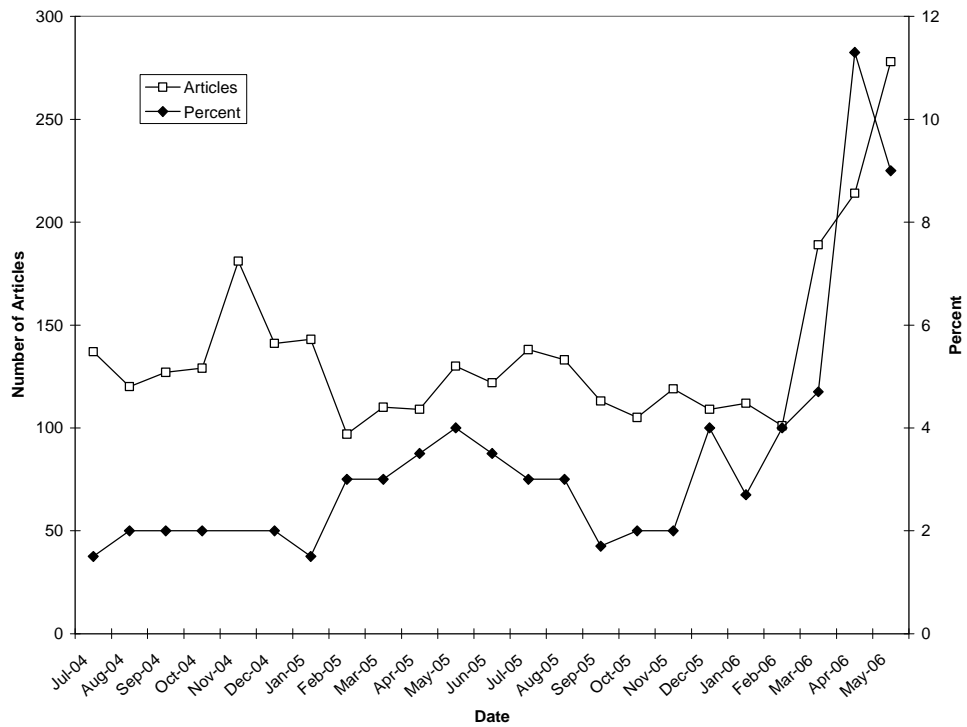
	<b>Model 1 Nominate Scale</b>		<b>Model 2 Percentage Support Scale</b>	
	<b>b</b>	<b>p*</b>	<b>b</b>	<b>p*</b>
<b>Unemployment % - April 2006</b>	7.336	0.004	4.409	0.005
<b>Take Jobs%</b>	-1.461	0.008	-0.810	0.019
<b>Conservative %</b>	-1.193	0.001	-0.800	0.003
<b>Up in 2006</b>	-28.793	0.258	-17.162	0.276
<b>Up in 2006 * Take Jobs%</b>	0.365	0.356	0.202	0.382
<b>Senator Party (D=1; R=-1)</b>	-34.683	0.000	-22.442	0.000
<b>Mexican Border State</b>	-23.443	0.030	-13.403	0.050
<b>Constant</b>	124.321	0.000	126.547	0.000
<b>n</b>	98		99	
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	0.69		0.69	

\* 1-tailed test based on robust standard errors

**Table 2: Regression Results of Specific Immigration Attitudes on Senate Roll Call Voting Using the 2004 NAES “More Restrictive” Item**

	<b>Model 1 Nominate Scale</b>		<b>Model 2 Percentage Support Scale</b>	
	<b>b</b>	<b>p*</b>	<b>b</b>	<b>p*</b>
<b>Unemployment % - April 2006</b>	8.842	0.004	4.211	0.017
<b>More Restrictive %</b>	-2.074	0.004	-0.942	0.019
<b>Conservative %</b>	-0.871	0.013	-0.625	0.016
<b>Up in 2006</b>	-77.813	0.168	20.817	0.339
<b>Up in 2006 * More Restrictive %</b>	1.048	0.214	-0.469	0.285
<b>Senator Party (D=1; R=-1)</b>	-34.090	0.000	-22.430	0.000
<b>Mexican Border State</b>	-9.186	0.233	-5.604	0.228
<b>Constant</b>	154.992	0.000	135.435	0.000
<b>n</b>	94		95	
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	0.69		0.69	

\* 1-tailed test based on robust standard errors



**Figure 1. Two Measures of the Salience of the Immigration Issue, July 2004-May 2006**

**Notes:**

Percent--Average Monthly Percentage of Respondents Citing Immigration or Illegal Aliens as the Most Important Problem Facing the Nation Today  
 Articles--Monthly Count of the Number of Articles in the New York *Times* Using the Terms “Immigration” or “Immigrant” in the Headline, First Paragraphs, or Terms.

The correlation between the two series is  $r = .76$ ,  $p = .09$ .

*Source:* Various polls compiled from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, and a search of the New York *Times*, both from Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe.