

Stiff party competition, modest salaries good for state government, study shows

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Vigorous two-party competition provides the best guarantee for meaningful, broad-based governance and modest salaries for lawmakers add a second protection against narrow-interest legislation, finds a national study spanning 120 years of state lawmaking published online this week.

Although government critics often call for transparency, executive vetoes, and professional pay to curb pork barrel legislation and other bills that benefit only one lawmaker's constituents, the study finds that sharp competition and lower salaries, in fact, are better remedies.

"For healthy policy, an ounce of competition is worth a pound of cure," says coauthor Gerald Gamm, associate professor of political science and history at the University of Rochester. "Stiff competition gives political parties a greater incentive to build their collective reputation with statewide legislation and less incentive to focus on localized, non-programmatic politics," Gamm explains.

In highly contested states, politicians "may be uncivil to each other, but they are getting things done," adds coauthor Thad Kousser, visiting associate professor at Stanford University. "In states where you don't have a filibuster, partisanship does not lead to gridlock; it leads to broad legislation."

The research found that the larger the majority party's control, the more parochial legislation a state produced. When the majority edge was less

than 20 percent of seats, legislators typically devoted only 5 to 15 percent of bills to district legislation. When the majority edge was 75 to 25 percent, fully one-third to one-half of bills were local. With a century-long perspective, this relationship between party control and lawmaking holds true "both in the one-party Democratic states that once characterized the South and in the once-Republican (and, more recently, Democratic-dominated) states of the North," the authors write. And it holds true for historical as well as contemporary sessions, they add.

Along with one-party dominance, higher lawmaker salaries are linked to policies targeted to a particular local interest, the study of 13 states reveals. The effect of more lucrative pay is surprising, Gamm points out, because good government advocates have long argued that professionalizing state legislatures -- increasing the length of legislative sessions and providing hefty salaries -- would give lawmakers the time and financial freedom needed to focus on broad legislation, bills that often require study and expertise to understand and coalition building to pass.

Why then do larger salaries lead to more narrowly-focused laws instead? "By paying people more and making them really want to keep their job, you are motivating them to respond to voters in the most direct and transparent way possible. That often means district legislation," explains Kousser.

The authors note that New York and Massachusetts, historically the home of two of the nation's most professional legislatures, "have long waded through swamps of district legislation," with parochial bills constituting 29 percent of legislation in New York and 23 percent in Massachusetts. By contrast, district bills made up less than 10 percent of legislation in Nebraska, Montana, Illinois and Washington, where representatives' salaries are low.

Published in the February issue of the *American Political Science Review*, the foremost scholarly journal in its field, the paper provides a comprehensive picture of the prevalence of district legislation, bills focusing on a specific locality as opposed to statewide legislation, bills affecting the entire population or broad sectors of the economy or government of a state. Examples of district legislation include everything from bills relating to local construction projects and the number of judges in a county to a 1941 proposal to outlaw the killing of raccoons and mink in Red River County, Texas. So called pork barrel legislation, bills that transfer money from state coffers to single communities, represent 9 percent of all district bills in the study.

The findings support the political insights of V. O. Key, which were first advanced in his seminal 1949 book *Southern Politics in State and Nation*. From his study of the then solidly Democratic South, Key argued that one-party states descend into regionalism, factionalism, and favoritism. States with evenly matched parties, he reasoned, have the incentive and ability to develop competing visions of [government](#).

Although Key's analysis has been highly influential, this is the first study to test and confirm the theory in a comprehensive manner, the authors write. Funded by the National Science Foundation, the study examined every piece of legislation, a total of 165,284 bills, introduced during seven legislative sessions between 1880 and 1997 in the lower house of 13 state legislatures: Alabama, California, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, New York, Texas, Vermont, Virginia, and Washington. The chosen states reflect variations in region, urbanization, legislative professionalism, state incomes, racial and ethnic composition, and other factors. The research examined other possible influences on the prevalence of narrowly-focused district legislation, but found that such factors as state population, legislator turnover, and per capita income had no effect.

Provided by University of Rochester

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