



Bribery or just desserts? Evidence on the influence of Congressional reproductive policy voting patterns on PAC contributions from exogenous variation in the sex mix of legislator offspring

Dalton Conley^{a,*}, Brian J. McCabe^b

^a New York University & NBER, 6 Washington Square North, Room 20, New York, NY 10003, United States

^b Department of Sociology, Georgetown University, 3520 Prospect St., NW, Suite 209, Washington, DC 20057, United States

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ABSTRACT

Evidence on the relationship between political contributions and legislators' voting behavior is marred by concerns about endogeneity in the estimation process. Using a legislator's offspring sex mix as a truly exogenous variable, we employ an instrumental variable estimation procedure to predict the effect of voting behavior on political contributions. Following previous research, we find that a legislator's proportion daughters has a significant effect on voting behavior for women's issues, as measured by score in the "Congressional Record on Choice" issued by NARAL Pro-Choice America. In the second stage, we make a unique contribution by demonstrating a significant impact of exogenous voting behavior on PAC contributions, lending further credibility to the hypothesis that Political Action Committees respond to legislators' voting patterns by "rewarding" political candidates that vote in line with the positions of the PAC, rather than affecting those same votes – at least in this high-profile policy domain.

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1. Introduction

The relationship between Congressional voting behavior and political contributions remains a continuing puzzle for social scientists interested in the American political process. We know that there is a high correlation between how legislators vote and how they are rated by interested Political Action Committees (PACs) on the one hand, and the amount of donations that legislators receive from these lobbyist groups, on the other. The data from NARAL Pro-Choice America used in this paper, for instance, underscore the high correlation between PAC contributions in a given election cycle and voting scores assigned by the organization for the previous Congressional session.

However, though of critical importance to understanding the role of money in the lawmaking process, sorting out causal directionality here is extremely difficult methodologically. To what extent do contributions from PACs actually influence the voting patterns of elected officials – a particularly worrisome dynamic from the point of view of those concerned with influence peddling? Or, conversely, to what extent do the voting record and ideological commitments of an elected official influence his or her PAC contributions – a "rewards" based system of political patronage that may still be troubling to those concerned with the influence of money on democracy, but which is less blatantly a bribery system?

The scale of contributions made by Political Action Committees to Congressional candidates raises the salience of the issue for social scientists concerned about the influence of money in our political process. According to the non-partisan, non-profit Center for Responsive Politics, which compiles, tracks and publicizes political donations, approximately 40% of

* Corresponding author. Fax: +1 212 995 4010.

E-mail addresses: dalton.conley@nyu.edu (D. Conley), mccabeb@georgetown.edu (B.J. McCabe).

monies received by candidates for the US House of Representatives comes from PACs. In absolute terms, the amount of money donated by PACs to successful House candidates nearly doubled from \$300,000 to \$550,000 between 1998 and 2006. The largest PAC receipt for a single successful House candidate doubled from \$1.2 million to \$2.4 million during this period.¹

Recognizing the magnitude of PAC contributions, this paper examines the extent to which these contributions are used as “rewards” for legislators that support PAC position. We focus on PAC donations since such campaign contributions are explicitly linked to a legislative agenda; in the conclusion, we discuss the generalizability of this sector to political donations more generally (i.e. from private individuals, corporations, unions and other donor groups). While previous research provides evidence for this rewards-based system, we focus on quantifying the impact of political donations in a highly-visible, ideological domain – reproductive rights. Our central contribution is the employment of an instrumental variable approach to measure the “rewards”-based system. This unique estimation strategy uses a truly exogenous variable – the proportion of a legislator’s children that are female – as an instrument to predict voting behavior, offering an improvement over instruments used in previous IV regression models.

2. Background

An extensive body of literature in political science and political sociology explores strategies used by Political Action Committees to distribute contributions to political candidates (e.g. Clawson and Neustadt, 1989; Gopoian, 1984). The majority of research on this subject examines the hypothesis that financial contributions from Political Action Committees influence the voting decisions of members of Congress (see Grenzke, 1989a,b; Ansolabehere et al., 2003). Yet, determining the direction of causality between political contributions and voting behavior remains elusive. The search for causality is hindered by methodological concerns, as well as the recognition that strategies for distributing political contributions are likely to differ by issue, with ideological, politically-charged issues (like reproductive rights) more susceptible to a rewards-based system.

One theory of political donations suggests that over and above other important factors such as party affiliation (Stratmann, 1996; Rudolph, 1999), seniority (Grenzke, 1989a), committee assignments (Grier and Munger, 1993, 1991; Evans, 1988) and other legislator characteristics, ideological ‘fence-sitters’ should elicit the greatest financial support in a ‘bidding war’ of sorts for their swing votes on important issues. In terms of individual legislator characteristics, this theory predicts that moderates, rather than committed liberals or conservatives, are most susceptible to influence peddling from PACs. From his work on defense PACs, Fleisher (1993) concludes that his results “indicate that contributions from defense PACs can under certain circumstances marginally influence the votes of members, especially those members with weaker ideological predispositions.” (Fleisher, 1993: 406) Those without clear, consistent policy positions are viewed as most swayable, and political contributions are aimed at influencing these legislators’ voting behavior.

Yet, other recent empirical evidence suggests the opposite – that a consistent ideological position is associated with high campaign contributions. In a recent NBER working paper, Kroszner and Stratmann (2000) find that a clear, well-known ideological position increases campaign contributions. Using the percent of repeat givers as a proxy for a legislator’s reputational development, Kroszner and Stratmann (2000) report that “high reputational development is rewarded with high total contributions.” (Kroszner and Stratmann, 2000: 25) In this analysis, legislators profit as they build their reputational clarity, as political contributors invest in legislators who will provide ‘sure’ returns based on prior patterns.²

Net of individual legislator characteristics, the literature suggests that PACs should be *most* influential in swaying voting behavior for low profile, non-ideological issues. Fleisher (1993) tests the effect of political contributions from organizations involved in the national defense industry. Using a two-stage least squares estimation procedure to overcome the simultaneity of defense PAC donations and voting behavior, Fleisher predicts PAC contributions using characteristics of individual legislators and their districts in his model, including a legislator’s campaign receipts from other PACs. In the second stage, this instrumented variable for defense PAC contributions is used to predict support for defense legislation in the 100th Congress. While finding a significant impact of ideology on voting behavior, Fleisher also finds a significant effect of defense PAC contributions, although the magnitude of this effect is small. Unfortunately, the variables Fleisher claims to be exogenous in the first-stage (e.g. ideology, contracts received from the Defense Department, party, etc.) in predicting defense PAC contributions do not meet the exclusion restriction; in other words, we should expect all those factors to affect voting on defense issues independent of donations.

Likewise, Grenzke (1989b) finds that political contributions are unlikely to change voting behavior, even for low profile, niche issues. In the first stage, Grenzke predicts PAC contributions from a host of variables, including electoral vulnerability and member’s power (Grenzke, 1989b: 8). Grenzke then lags the effect of political contributions by using contributions in both the simultaneous year and the preceding year to when the behavior was measured. In other words, for voting during the 95th Congress (1977–1978), Grenzke uses both contributions during the 1977–1978 election cycle, as well as during the 1975–1976 election cycle. Of 29 models, Grenzke finds only four significant associations in the simultaneous relationship and one significant association in the lagged relationship. As a result, Grenzke concludes that “contributions from 120 PACs

¹ This and other information on political donations is available from the Center for Responsive Politics through their website www.opensecrets.org.

² These conclusions build on earlier attempts to understand the effect of ideological positioning on campaign contributions. Some research leaves out the ideology variable because of its multicollinearity with political party affiliation. Other research includes an aggregate measure of ideology, such as the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) score for each legislator, and finds significant effects of ideology on PAC contributions (Evans, 1988; Borck, 1996).

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