

Voting Behavior in the Wisconsin State Legislature: 2003-2010

J. Stampen, December 2011



An illustration of the Battle of Stiklestad, by Halvdan Egedius (1877-1899)

Suggestions for database users

The above image evokes how many see the current political situation in Wisconsin, as well as the rest of the nation. The sayings and doings of elected officials pursuing ideologically extreme political agendas are a mainstay of daily news reporting. Moreover, reporting is often designed to be entertaining rather than informative, with a focus on what one or another leader/spokesperson says about something and how the other side reacts.¹ We learn little about the actual workings of our political systems and what can be done to improve them. Thus, we as citizens are ill equipped to discover for ourselves how adequately the people we elect are representing us.

Making the accompanying databases widely accessible will hopefully help to elevate the discourse over Wisconsin politics by making legislative actions easier for policy analysts, students, journalists and interested citizens to analyze and make sense of. This is accomplished by organizing publicly-available information about legislators and their voting behavior in ways that facilitate cross-sectional and longitudinal perspective on the behavior of individual legislators, coalitions of legislators and political parties.

The enclosed data encompasses the Assemblies and Senates of four legislative sessions between January 2003 and December 2010. The data base is mainly composed of records collected and

¹For substantive discussion of this problem see Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson, Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class New York: Simon and Shuster 2010.

maintained by the Wisconsin Legislative Reference Bureau. Added data on lobby ratings and private funding for individual legislators is drawn from other sources.

The data is organized into Excel-spreadsheet matrixes with legislators listed alphabetically in the far left column, with background characteristics and votes on individual bills arrayed horizontally. Code books for each house and session explain the placement of information in the matrixes. Past and future sessions will be added to the archive as they become available or can be placed in consistent formats. Work in progress includes the 1895, 1901, 1903, 1905, 1915, 1965, 1967 and 2011 Wisconsin Senates and the 1965, 1967, 1969 and 2011 Wisconsin Assemblies.

Following are some examples of different ways to analyze the data:

- 1) Cluster analysis (ward linkage with Euclidian distance) of final floor votes on all bills contested by at least 5% of voting legislators can identify underlying structures\ legislative agents (e.g., parties, sub-parties, factions, coalitions or voting clusters) of a legislative system. Principal component factor analysis and other statistical techniques can shed further light on inter and intra party relationships.
- 2) Legislators' background characteristics and their connections with one or another coalition can be analyzed to yield important insights into patterns of individual and group interactions, activities, and shared beliefs. Depending on the nature of the legislative system, groups may be composed of people of the same political party. Or, membership might reflect shared cultural, occupational, or regional characteristics that cross party lines. Still another possibility is voting behavior based on similar ratings by special interest groups.
- 3) Simply reordering Assembly and Senate data elements according to the results of statistical analysis (e.g., horizontally: members according to similarity of voting behavior and vertically: bills by similar treatment) will provide a great deal of information about legislators' policy agendas and public policy preferences.
- 4) Ratings of individual legislators by lobby groups can be analyzed to provide important information about the content of public policies and government actions. Such information can also be used to evaluate the quality of news coverage.
- 5) Employing what researchers have learned from legislative studies on related topics can further illuminate understanding. Well developed conceptual frameworks can greatly enhance perspective as the following illustrates:

A framework developed by Scott Morgenstern in his book, [Patterns in Legislative Politics: Roll-Call Voting in the United States and Latin America](#) is particularly useful.² Morgenstern's work focuses on the behavior of legislative *agents*, the core units of analysis in legislative studies. Sometimes these are political parties, other times they can be referred to as sub-parties, factions, coalitions or voting clusters. More specifically, Morgenstern focuses on "the internal unity of legislative agents and the interactions among these agents." Morgenstern argues that legislatures generally fall into one of three categories

² Scott Morgenstern. (2004). *Patterns in legislative politics: Roll-call voting in Latin America and the United States*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

based on whether they display high or low *flexibility* and *identifiability*.³ The three common types of legislatures emerge from this classification are: *Coalition Partner Systems*; *Legislators for Sale to the Highest Bidder Systems*, and *Exclusivist Ruler Systems* .

Coalition Partner Systems are often associated with multiparty parliamentary systems, in which political parties negotiate with one another, and when mutually agreeable, unite with other parties to form larger voting coalitions. America's two party political systems would seem to preclude functioning as a Coalition Partner system, but throughout the nation's history legislative politics have often been driven by sub party coalitions that behave much like political parties in parliamentary systems. Coalition Partner systems are easy to identify because their party preferences are widely known and they predict voting behavior. These systems are also flexible as is reflected by the willingness of legislative agents to join with others to form larger voting coalitions.

The second type of system is the *Legislators for Sale to the Highest Bidder System*. Here, members trade votes in order to benefit themselves and/or their constituents, but mostly behind closed doors. Members of this kind of legislature are highly flexible in their voting, but for reasons that are difficult to identify, so that constituents find it difficult to know who or what is influencing voting.

Morgenstern's third kind of legislature is high in identifiability and low in flexibility. He refers to this type of organization as an *Exclusive Ruler System*, hereafter referred to as *Exclusivist*. Members are typically highly disciplined and cohesive in their voting behavior (i.e., easy to identify) but unwilling to compromise (i.e., inflexible). When in the majority, members see themselves as exclusive rulers, and when in the minority, persistent oppositionists.⁴ Morgenstern observes that in recent years the U.S. Congress has displayed highly partisan Identifiability and few Coalition Partner characteristics.

According to Morgenstern's definition, the U.S. Congress has increasingly functioned as an Exclusivist body. Similar "periods of polarization (e.g., divisions leading to the U.S. Civil War, the Progressive Movement, the New Deal, and the Great Society) have signaled important partisan realignments, if not social upheaval"⁵.

Do any of the above descriptions apply to Wisconsin politics? The attached paper, [Hard Times in America's Laboratory for Democracy](#), argues that legislative behavior in Wisconsin has been Exclusivist and quite similar to reported behavior in many other states and within the U.S. Congress. It further argues that between 1965 and recently, the Wisconsin Legislature transitioned from a Coalition Partner system to an Exclusivist system. Others may analyze the data and draw similar or different conclusions. What is most important is that people have easy access to information that can help them discover for

³ Morgenstern, 2004, pp.18-19

⁴ Morgenstern's concept of Exclusivism is similar to what Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson call "winner take all" politics in their recent book, [Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class](#) New York: Simon and Shuster 2010.

⁵ Morgenstern, p.20

themselves well their laws are being made. Here is a new source of information about voting behavior in the Wisconsin Legislature.⁶ Any and all are invited to make use of it.

Postscript

Recent analyses by the author using the 2003-2010 data base:

Jacob Stampen. Hard Times in America's Laboratory for Democracy: Wisconsin Legislative Politics 1966 and 2006. Madison, WI: Wisconsin Center for the Advancement of Postsecondary Education. 2007 <http://wiscap.wisc.edu/uploads/media/79c49d2a-cbe4-4c5b-a592-b304615e3896.pdf>

Jacob Stampen. WisOpinion. "Rise of block voting in the Wisconsin State Legislature." Madison, WI: WisPolitics.com, August 7, 2007. <http://wisopinion.com/index.iml?mdl=article.mdl&article=9333>

Jacob Stampen. WisOpinion. "Democrats continue legislative gridlock." Madison, WI: WisPolitics.com, April 30, 2010. <http://wisopinion.com/index.iml?mdl=article.mdl&article=27639>

Jay Stampen. WisOpinion. "Reject legislative ideologues this fall." Madison, WI: WisPolitics.com, September 9, 2010. <http://www.wisopinion.com/index.iml?mdl=article.mdl&article=29986>

Jay Stampen. WisOpinion. "ALEC's role in setting legislative agenda deserves scrutiny." Madison, WI: WisPolitics.com. May 27, 2011. <http://www.wisopinion.com/index.iml?mdl=article.mdl&article=35276>

Earlier studies using different but similarly organized data and research methods include the following:

Jacob Stampen. Voting Behavior in the Wisconsin Legislature: 1945 - 1967. PhD thesis., University of Wisconsin -Madison, 1969.

Jacob Stampen and John Davis. "Multi-issue coalitions in the Congress." In J.L. Martin & S. Lundstrom (eds.), Supercomputing Science and Applications. Washington, DC: The Computer Society Press. 1989.

John Davis and Jacob Stampen. Sub-Party Coalitions in the Congress: the Evidence against Realignment Sept. 1. 1989. Available at Social Science Research Network (SSRN): <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1916004>

Jacob Stampen and John Davis, "Multi-issue coalitions in six U.S. Senates: The appropriate units in roll-call studies." Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association (1988).

Jacob Stampen and Roxanne Reeves, "Coalitions in the Senates of the 96th and 97th Congresses," Congress and the Presidency (1986) 13 2, 47-65.

⁶ Recording errors are possible, but hopefully very rare. The author assumes responsibility for any that might occur.