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EFFECTS OF CONTEXTUAL FACTORS ON BARGAINING DECISIONS OF EXPERIENTIAL GROUP REPRESENTATIVES

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ABSTRACT

This study used an OB exercise to test the effects of organizational level on the accuracy of political representation. It also compared three models of representation under two conditions of visibility to constituents. Participants were 486 undergraduate and graduate students in 96 primary groups represented by 14 congressional groups. Primary groups represented their members more accurately than congressional groups represented their constituents. Congressional groups represented the primary groups (responsible parties model) more accurately than they represented either their own delegates (trustee model) or their constituents (delegate model). Congressional groups did not represent their own delegates any more or less accurately than their constituents. Congressional groups represented the primary groups, the delegates, and the constituents more accurately when constituents did not observe the congressional decision making process than when constituent did observe that process.

INTRODUCTION

The decisions of groups are often represented by boundary-spanning people, who are members of higher-level groups. Stewards represent their union members, managers, their subordinates; corporate attorneys, their clients; and congressmen, their districts. An important question about representatives concerns whether they represent the interests of their constituents as individuals, the collective interests of their groups, or their own interests as individuals. How trustworthy are representatives?

In 1774, Burke [3] introduced the concept of representatives as independent individuals who would act on their own judgment rather than the will of their constituents. This notion opposed the tradition that representatives should follow the mandates of their constituents.

Eulau et al. [6] empirically identified three role types: (a) trustees follow the Burkean tradition operating as free agents following their own judgments, (b) delegates generally subordinate their own judgments to the mandates of their constituents, and (c) politicos make decisions according to circumstances in the bargaining arena, taking on the trustee and delegate roles either simultaneously or serially, vacillating between the poles of the independence-mandate dimension.

Miller and Stokes [8] specified a model that departs from the independence-mandate dimension. This model of responsible parties is justified (and perhaps required) by poor communication between representatives and their constituents. Frequently, constituents are uninformed about legislative issues, and legislators have poor information about the preferences of their constituents. Therefore, legislators should represent their party platforms, with the political parties taking the responsibility of reflecting the interests of their members.

My study extended the previous ones by testing the fit of decision-making behaviors of congressional groups to the trustee, delegate, and responsible parties models of representation. I tested causal relationships among

contextual factors, quality of constituent- to-representative communication, and accuracy of representation. Much of the theoretical foundation followed studies on boundary roles and constituent effects by Adams [1;2] and his colleagues/former students. I also relied on empirically-established relationships between power and trust [7;11].

My study tested: (a) the effect of organizational level on the accuracy with which group decisions present the interests of constituents, (b) the effect of the type of model of representation on the accuracy of representation, (c) the effect of a publicity-privacy contextual factor on the accuracy of representation, and (d) the interaction between the type of model and the publicity-privacy factor on the accuracy of representation.

The operational hypotheses are:

H₁: Primary groups represent their members' decisions more accurately than higher-level congressional groups represent their constituents' decisions.

H₂: The congresses will represent the primary groups, the interests of their own members, and the interests of their constituents with differing degrees of accuracy.

H₃: The congresses will represent the primary groups' decisions and their constituents' decisions more accurately in a public context than in a private context. However, the public-private factor will not affect the accuracy of congressional representation of the representatives' own decisions.

H₄: In the private context, congressional decisions will be more similar to representatives' individual decisions (trustee model) than to primary group decisions (responsible parties' model) and least similar to nonrepresentatives' individual decisions (delegate model). In the public context the order of similarity to congressional decisions will be, from greatest to least, primary groups decisions then representatives' individual decisions then nonrepresentatives' decisions (responsible parties then trustee then delegate). Thus, interaction is hypothesized between the model-type and contextual factors.

METHOD

The participants were 486 graduate and undergraduate OB students. They were 45% female and ranged in age from 18 to 52 with a mean age of 21.4. The data were decisions of the 486 individuals, who composed 95 primary groups. Representatives from the primary groups compared 14 congressional groups. The decisions were percentages assigned to grading criteria [4].

I tested the four hypotheses by computing indices of profile dissimilarity specified above in the hypotheses. The relevant dissimilarities were between the following pairs of decision profiles: (a) primary groups vs. non-representatives, (b) congress vs. nonrepresentatives, (c) congress vs. primary groups, and (d) congress vs. representatives.

I computed the indices of profile dissimilarity according to the vector model described by Butler [5], which generalizes the index of Osgood and Suci [10] to a set

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 12, 1985

of non-orthogonal profile elements.

The following inequalities summarize the hypotheses, where D = mean profile dissimilarity C - congressional groups, G = primary groups, R = representatives, and N = nonrepresentatives.

$$H_1: \bar{D}_{CN} > \bar{D}_{GN}$$

$$H_2: \bar{D}_{CG} \neq \bar{D}_{CR} \neq \bar{D}_{CN}$$

$$H_3: (\bar{D}_{CG})_{\text{Private}} > (\bar{D}_{CG})_{\text{Public}}$$

$$(\bar{D}_{CN})_{\text{Private}} > (\bar{D}_{CN})_{\text{Public}}$$

$$(\bar{D}_{CR})_{\text{Private}} = (\bar{D}_{CR})_{\text{Public}}$$

$$H_4: (\bar{D}_{CR} < \bar{D}_{CG} < \bar{D}_{CN})_{\text{Private}}$$

$$(\bar{D}_{CG} < \bar{D}_{CR} < \bar{D}_{CN})_{\text{Public}}$$

H1 was tested with a t test for paired samples. H2, H3, and H4 were tested with a two-way, 3 x 2 ANOVA design that accommodates unequal sample sizes. Also, one-way multiple range tests (Duncan at .05) were conducted for means within given columns and given rows.

RESULTS

was confirmed at the .0001 level of significance. The mean of (DCN - OGN) was 6.35 with a standard error of .55 giving t = 11.53. Primary group decisions were more congruent with those of their nonrepresentatives than were congressional decisions with those of their constituents (the nonrepresentatives).

The data supported H2 at < .01, but supported neither H3 nor H4. The congresses represented the primary groups, the representatives, and the nonrepresentatives with different degrees of accuracy (H2). However, the effect of visibility of congressional groups to constituents (H3) was opposite to the hypothesized effect and opposite to that found in previous studies [9]. The interaction between the type of model of representation (responsible parties vs. trustee vs. delegate) and the congressional context (public vs. private) was not significant.

DISCUSSION

The study found some strong effects; not all in the hypothesized directions. The confirmation of H1 affirms a proposition of organization theory that the fewer the organizational levels between an information source and a decision, the more likely it is that the decision will implement the information accurately. The confirmation of H2, along with the multiple-range tests, shows that the representatives behaved much more loyally to their primary groups than to either themselves or their constituents. That is, the responsible parties model received stronger support than either the trustee or delegate model, each of which received similar support. However, the disconfirmation of H3 and H4, particularly the reverse effects revealed by the test of H3 indicates that visibility of the congressional groups to constituents has an adverse effect on the accuracy of representation. That is, when constituents could not observe their congresses in action, the congresses make decisions that conformed more closely to the constituents' preferences than they did when constituents could observe

their congresses. Were the representatives in the private context really as altruistic as that? Some important contextual factors that differentiate this study from earlier ones suggest answers to these questions.

First, the primary groups had four to seven members. Second, the members believed they would continue in their primary groups, working together on tasks for the course during a number of weeks. Third, the primary groups had the authority to hold caucuses and replace their representatives. Fourth, the primary groups democratically choose their own representatives. Fifth, the issues under consideration seemed important to participants, judging, for example, from their expressed distaste for term papers. (All congresses and nearly all primary groups and individuals assigned zero percent to "term paper.") These five conditions (moderate-sized, perpetual, powerful, democratic primary groups deciding on important issues) could have caused stronger pressures on the private representatives than on the public representatives to conform to group preferences. Both public and private representatives knew they would have to meet with their primary groups for the following several weeks. Both would have to justify the outcomes of their negotiations. However, public representatives could share the accountability with other members of their primary groups for any deviations from groups' preferences. They could ask, "If you didn't like what I was saying, why didn't you send me a note, or call a caucus, or replace me?" Private representatives could not use this excuse because they were on their own to represent their groups.

Many previous studies on boundary roles were characterized by tight control. My study sacrificed some control for realism. A number of contextual factors differentiate my study from the previous ones. These factors include congressional group size, primary group size, primary group perpetuity, democracy of representative selection by primary groups, and issue importance. These contextual factors were at moderate levels in my study, although I did not test their separate effects. They were at low levels, or zero, in previous studies and, therefore, did not confound the observed effects of visibility on conformity to constituents' preferences. Effects of the contextual factors would be worth testing in future research. Their dynamics seem to be important in describing the situation in which a representative really operates.

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Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 12, 1985

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