

PUBLICIZING VOTING RECORDS

by Lester Milbrath, 1963

Roll-call votes in both houses of Congress are part of the public record available to anyone who is interested. A few lobby organizations give roll-call votes wide publicity, so that many more voters know the voting records of officials than would otherwise be the case. Curiously, the wide publicizing of a public record is rejected and resented by most lobbyists and officials. Half of the lobbyists rate it 0, and the mean rating is only 2.05. Michigan lobbyists even more unanimously reject the tactic. Congressional respondents rate it somewhat higher than do lobbyists, but they also are not enthusiastic. The major reason for the difference in ratings and for the low rating given by most lobbyists is that publicizing voting records is a powerful and dangerous political tactic open only to groups with considerable power at the polls. The rating of this tactic was very significantly correlated ($r = .37$) with the power at the poll of respondent's organization and with his rating of such other political tactics as contributing money to parties or working in political campaigns. Lobbyists for groups without power at the polls naturally rate the tactic 0; whereas congressional respondents perceive that the tactic generally has an effect on them.

The tactic is dangerous because most members of Congress perceive it as punitive and sometimes unjust; they may

retaliate against the organization or lobbyist who uses it. Members quite accurately feel that pressure is being applied to force their vote in a certain direction. Many also object because they think that the particular combinations of votes published by some organizations present unfair pictures of their voting records. Quotations from congressional and lobbyist respondents make this point. One senator said, "It makes you feel adverse – a sort of kickback."

As a staff assistant to a senator expressed it:

They are very deceptive since the organization that publishes them picks the issues, and they usually pick and interpret them from their own viewpoint. They can be very misleading because sometimes the key vote on an issue is on a procedural matter. There are very few objective voting record jobs. Of course, they do help to maintain support for an organization.

A lobbyist and former congressional staffer said:

Publication of voting records is a sneaky kind of thing. People can get the records if they want them. It is best to evaluate a man on the basis of his over-all record. It is just not honest to pick out a certain group of votes and evaluate a man on the basis of that selection.

In an effort to set the record straight, some members have publicized a voting record compiled by themselves which they feel is more fair than that circulated by the lobby group. Publishing voting records has been pursued most diligently by

labor and other large membership groups. Most labor lobbyists are convinced of the wisdom of the tactic:

I think it's important. Of course we make people mad at us at times. Bill —— is sore as hell at me now because we published his records. But I think we are going to make up – I kind of like Bill and I think he kind of likes me. I really don't get particularly bothered if they do explode. We find this especially valuable in the case of a congressman who comes from a very close district. He's got to have labor votes in order to win, so he will certainly come around. The reason I am so convinced that they are helpful is that I get many calls from members saying, "Couldn't you keep that vote off the record?" and "Do you have to have this vote on the record." I reply that the record is purely objective and we've got to report whatever they do.

Although most labor lobbyists agree with the above point of view, a few do not totally concur.

I have quite mixed feelings about this. You incense as many people as you please when you publicize these records. Some members of Congress have come to me and said, "You didn't tell me you were going to put that particular vote in the record." Usually they are pretty angry about it. I am not so convinced it is useful. This is all confidential, isn't it? No one in the organization is going to see this are they?

The vulnerability of a member to pressure arising from publicizing his voting record depends on his strength in his constituency. A man who is fairly certain of re-election is not very concerned if his record is published. If his re-election is doubtful, he is not in a position strong enough to protest vigorously to a politically powerful organization which has published his record. He can, however, end all the future access for which a group with little power at the polls publishes his record; that is why such organizations do not use the tactic.

In summary, we can say that the tactic has some power to influence a vote if the publicizing organization has a large and faithful membership. Most congressional respondents rate the tactic above 0. A staff assistant to one of the labor committees in Congress reports that he has seen committee members switch their vote according to whether it was a voice or a roll-call vote. He rates the tactic 6. He also reports that he uses the AFL-CIO record in his own work in the committee. If a member of the committee calls up and wants to know his voting record on certain bills, the staff assistant finds it easier to consult the AFL-CIO record than to dig back through the official records.