

Publication

Special Interest Groups versus Voters and the Political Economics of Attention

Discussion paper / Internet publication

ID 4491667

Author(s) Balles, Patrick; Matter, Ulrich; Stutzer, Alois

Author(s) at UniBasel [Stutzer, Alois](#) ; [Balles, Patrick](#) ; [Matter, Ulrich](#) ;

Year 2018

Month and day 1101

Title Special Interest Groups versus Voters and the Political Economics of Attention

Series title IZA Discussion Paper Series

Number 11945

Pages 57

Publisher / Institution IZA Institute of Labor Economics

URL <http://ftp.iza.org/dp11945.pdf>

Keywords attention, campaign finance, interest groups, legislative voting, mass media, media attention, roll call voting, US House of Representatives

Asymmetric information between voters and legislative representatives poses a major challenge to the functioning of representative democracy. We examine whether representatives are more likely to serve long-term campaign donors instead of constituents during times of low media attention to politics. Combining data on campaign finance donations made by individuals and special interest groups with information on their preferences for particular bills, we construct novel measures of electoral and organized interests pressure that representatives face with regard to specific legislative votes. In our analysis based on 490 roll calls between 2005 and 2014 in the US House of Representatives, we find strong evidence that representatives are more likely to vote with special interests and against constituency interests when the two are in conflict. Importantly, the latter effect is significantly larger when there is less attention on politics. Thereby, we draw on exogenous newsworthy shock events that crowd out news on the legislative process, but are themselves not related to it. The opportunistic behavior seems not to be mediated by short-term scheduling of sensitive votes right after distracting events.

edoc-URL <https://edoc.unibas.ch/67335/>

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