

Linking Whip Counts to Roll Call Votes

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Party leaders conduct whip counts to gauge the views of their party rank and file about some matter important to the party agenda. The matter might be an expected amendment on the House floor, a bill as reported by one of the chamber's standing committees, a procedural matter such as a special rule, a general policy question about a major issue, or perhaps a matter of party strategy. Obviously, the whips can poll their members about a wide range of questions and concerns.

One value of the whip count data in this archive is that scholars and citizens can compare the initial positions of House members (from the member-level data sets) with the votes these members actually cast. Since the whips tend to be strategic and very practical in their work, the questions that they poll usually relate directly to matters on the legislative agenda in the coming days or weeks. And not surprisingly, their questions are usually the direct subject of recorded votes on the House floor. The whips may ask their rank-and-file members whether they will vote for the special rule for a bill, the rule is considered the next day without change, and a roll call occurs. In such instances, the whip count and the vote mesh perfectly and there is no ambiguity at all about the count-vote linkage.

Alternatively, the whip may ask the relevant membership for their views about a bill that recently has been reported by committee, or perhaps about a possible amendment to that bill that was circulated ahead of time. If the bill or amendment is not actually considered on the floor, then no decision or vote takes place and the counts obviously cannot be associated with roll calls. This also is the case if a floor decision did occur but the matter was settled without a recorded vote. Before adoption of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970, for example, roll call votes were rare in the Committee of the Whole, which is the parliamentary device through which amendments are considered in the U.S. House of Representatives. As a result, it was not unusual in the 1950s and 1960s for even important amendments to be settled without a roll call vote. In such instances, the whip count clearly does not link to a roll call. Once again, the appropriate count-vote linkage (or lack thereof) is unambiguous.

However, there are many intermediate cases where the count-vote linkages are complex and require judgment calls of some sort. For example, most major bills are amended to some extent on the floor. If the polled question dealt with the bill as reported from committee and there were major amendments prior to the final passage vote, is it meaningful to link the count to the roll call on final passage? The answer depends on the nature of the research question you are asking. If the goal is to gauge the persuasive powers of the leadership or to identify cases of member "waffling," for instance, then the count probably should not be linked to the vote. Any position changes may have been caused by the substantive modifications that occurred between the time of the count and the relevant roll call and thus reveal little about persuasion or waffling. On the other hand, if the goal is to gauge the ability of the leadership to increase the size of its supporting coalition, irrespective of the tactics employed, or to identify the subset of

votes or issues on which the whips were active, then the whip count probably should be linked to the roll call.

I have used several rules of thumb for linking whip counts and roll calls in the preliminary analyses and working papers prepared as part of this project and as the project progresses I hope to refine and integrate them into the database. But for now, in the whip count index I only associate counts with votes when, based on my analysis of the archival record and relevant legislative history (mostly derived from *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, *Congress Quarterly Weekly Report*, *The Washington Post*, and floor debate from the *Congressional Record*), it appears that any substantive modifications that occurred between the count and the vote were sufficiently minor that they did not alter the underlying coalition-building dynamics. In other words, any changes in member positions cannot be attributed entirely to the aforementioned substantive modification. This coding rule may appear to create significant ambiguities, but in practice it was not that difficult to decide whether or not to link a count with a vote for the purposes of analysis.

Still, the coding rule is fairly restrictive and many roll calls are excluded where the whips clearly were active but the substance of the questions subjected to roll calls was sufficiently different from the question that was polled. For illustrative purposes, here is an example. On January 4, 1956, the House Democratic leadership polled rank-and-file Democrats about a major educational bill. The precise question put to members was: “Do you favor H.R. 7535, a bill to authorize Federal assistance to the States and local communities in financing an expanded program of school construction so as to eliminate the national shortage of classrooms, as reported by the House Committee on Education and Labor?”¹ The bill as reported did not include controversial language advocated by Rep. Adam Clayton Powell, D-NY, which would have barred the use of federal school construction funds by systems that practice racial segregation. When the bill was finally considered on the House floor in July 1956, the Powell amendment passed and the legislation as amended lost on final passage. Democratic leaders actively lobbied their colleagues to vote against the Powell amendment because they viewed the language as a killer amendment, that is, if adopted the proposal would result in the defeat of the school construction measure. But at no point during floor action on the bill was there a vote precisely on the measure as reported by the Education and Labor Committee and in the whip count index this whip poll is not linked to either the roll call on the Powell amendment or the failed vote on passage.

The reasons are straightforward. The archival record and relevant legislative history indicate that positions on the whip poll derived from a pair-wise comparison between the bill as reported and the status quo of existing law at the time. The roll calls on Powell’s amendment and final passage, in contrast, were shaped in significant ways by member attitudes about race. For researchers interested in killer amendments, voting cycles, and various forms of strategic behavior, it makes perfect sense to integrate the whip count

¹ Carl Albert Congressional Collection, The Carl Albert Center, University of Oklahoma, Norman Oklahoma. Legislative Series, Box 26, Folder 39.

responses and one or both roll calls. But employing the restrictive coding rule adopted here in the whip count index, I do not make that association.

More generally, in linking polled questions with roll call votes, the whip counts about legislation as reported were especially likely to produce judgment calls because of the passage of floor amendments. In these cases, if the successful amendments did not significantly alter coalition building dynamics based on my interpretation of the archival record and legislative history, the whip count was linked to the roll call on final passage, assuming of course that one occurred. If the amendment was major, there is no linkage to the final passage vote. In a few cases, the key test vote turned out to be on one of the amendments. In these cases, the linkage is to the relevant amendment roll call.

Users may notice in the whip count index that in a small subset of cases the personal papers of former party leaders did not include the text of the question that was asked during a whip count. There may have been systematic poll response data and sufficient information to associate the count with a bill and even a date, but the question wording has been lost. In these instances, I used other materials in the personal papers, the relevant legislative history, and other forms of evidence to make a judgment call about the likely focus of the question. The vast majority of these cases is from the 1960s and almost certainly dealt with questions about bills as reported or final passage of entire pieces of legislation. In a few instances, though, the evidence indicates that the likely target of the question was an amendment. These counts were linked to roll calls based on my best judgment about the likely content of the polled question.

The bottom line is that users of this database should consider the appropriate standards for linking whip counts to votes based on their own research questions and make the appropriate adjustments.² And if users have further questions about how whip counts were linked to roll calls, or if you suspect any errors, please let me know.

² The selection of votes is important and can affect the results of analysis. For example, Burden and Frisby (*Legislative Studies Quarterly* 29, 2004, 569-90) reports on an analysis of 16 whip counts conducted by the House Democratic whip during 1971-72. The raw evidence is from files included in the congressional papers of Thomas P. O'Neill at Boston College, and data sets coded from these archives are also included in this database. The results reported in the Burden and Frisby article can not be fully replicated with the data here, however, because they used different criteria in linking whip counts to roll calls.