We Need More Politicians*

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1 Introduction

Survey data across the U.S. show general dissatisfaction with American legislatures. For example, in a recent national survey of likely voters' opinions about Congress, 70% of respondents thought most members of Congress were "just interested in their own careers" rather than "sincerely interested in helping people." Further, 45% of respondents thought used car salesmen were more ethical than members of Congress.[1] Another recent survey has found 57% of respondents "strongly disapprove" or "somewhat" disapprove of their state's legislature.[2] What explains this dissatifaction with the one branch of government uniquely charged with carrying out the wishing and desires of the population? The argument presented here is that static legislative chamber size, particularly in the U.S. House, combined with population growth across the U.S. has weakend the relationship between citizens and representatives. More legislators are needed to represent a growing population. Smaller district constituency sizes, the number of citizens represented by each legislator, would result from such a reform. This is particularly important for the U.S. House, whose 435 members currently represent almost 650,000 citizens each.

2 A Tale of Political Expediency

Why are there 435 seats in the U.S. House? Some observers may assume this number is constitutionally mandated, but the Constitution does not specify the size of the House. Throughout U.S. history, the House has varied in size until the chamber was frozen at the 435 number in 1929. This was, however, a political

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[1]Rasmussen Reports. Survey of 1,000 likely voters conducted April 27-28, 2009 with a reported margin of error of ±3 percentage points. Results available online at http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/mood_of_america/congressional_performance/congressional_performance.

[2]Cooperative Congressional Election Study. The survey was conducted online in October of 2008, and has over 32,000 respondents.

answer to a contentious political issue. The size of the House could be changed by mere statute, if Congress could be persuaded to do so.

2.1 Intentions of the Founders

After refraining from entering the numerous debates during the Constitutional Convention, George Washington, on the very last day of the convention, broke his silence to give support to one proposed amendment. This amendment would reduce the minimum ratio of representatives to citizens in the House from 1:40,000 to 1:30,000. [3] The appropriate size of House districts was not simply a minor issue of concern only to Washington; rather, it was a central topic in the convention debates and in the following ratification debate.

A central point of debate between the Federalists and Anti-Federalists was the proposed size of House districts. The Anti-Federalist authors were concerned with the ability of a small House of Representatives, with a proposed starting size of 65 members, to adequately represent the diverse interests of the nation. Looking forward to a growing population, Anti-Federalists feared large House constituencies would limit the democratic character of the House. According to one author, the House members would "be elevated and important, and they will be considered as ambitious and designing. They will not be viewed by the people as a part of themselves, but as a body distinct from them, and having separate interests to pursue" (Brutus, *The Anti-Federalist Papers*, IV).

The Federalists responded clearly to the Anti-Federalist attacks. Madison explicitly states that he expects the size of the House of Representatives to rise in accordance with growing population:

> Within three years a census is to be taken, when the number may be augmented to one for every thirty thousand inhabitants; and within every successive period of ten years the census is to be renewed, and augmentations may continue to be made under the above limitation... At the expiration of twenty-five years, according to the computed rate of increase, the number of representatives will amount to two hundred, and of fifty years, to four hundred. This is a number which, I presume, will put an end to all fears arising from the smallness of the body. I take for granted here... that the number of representatives will be augmented from time to time in the manner provided by the Constitution.
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> James Madison, *The Federalist Papers*, No. 55

The proper size of the U.S. House, and the corresponding constituency size resulting from the number of seats and the size of the population, was considered

[3] Madison recorded the following event in his *Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787*: "The smallness of the proportion of Representatives had been considered by many members of the Convention an insufficient security for the rights & interests of the people. He [Washington] acknowledged that it had always appeared to himself among the exceptionable parts of the plan, and late as the present moment was for admitting amendments, he thought this of so much consequence that it would give much satisfaction to see it adopted."

to be an important issue worthy of debate at the time of the nation's founding. It was considered important because the democratic character of the House, and therefore of the entire federal government was thought to be related to the size of the body. As such, key leaders of the Constitutional Convention and the ratification debate clearly expected the House to grow according to population.

2.2 Apportionments

After ratification, apportionment did initially correspond to Madison's predictions. The House grew to 105 seats after the 1790 Census and over 210 seats after 1820. Decennial increases in the size of the House occurred after every decennial census until 1920, except for the 1840 Census, where the House contracted in size (Yates 1992).

The 1920 Census, however, showed large demographic shifts at work, as residents flocked to large cities in the largest states.[4] Members of Congress from rural states, in order to maintain power in the House, blocked attempts at apportionment throughout the decade (the original plan being to increase the House to 483 seats). In order to break the deadlock, Sen. Vandenberg, whose growing state of Michigan was currently underrepresented due to the delayed apportionment, introduced legislation requiring the executive branch to submit a plan to reapportion the existing House seats across the states according to a mathematical formula (Kromkowski and Kromkowski 1991; Balinski and Young 1982).[5]

Vandenberg's plan, in a sense, worked very well. Reapportionment of House seats occurs, in accordance with U.S. Code, after every decennial census, and the important process is no longer captive to the political battles in Washington. Automatic reapportionment, however, has allowed Congress to abdicate its responsibility to set the size of the House, effectively freezing it to the 435 members established in 1912.

[Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1 presents the size of the U.S. House after each decennial apportionment, the population of the United States, and the corresponding constituency size of House districts. The figure clearly shows the growth of the U.S. population through its history. From the nation's founding until 1910, the population of the U.S. grew by just under 90 million residents. The House, in accordance with that growth, was enlarged from a body of 65 members to one of 435. The post-1910 period has seen a tripling of the U.S. population (280 million residents in 2000, and well over 300 million residents today). This dramatic population growth coupled with a static House size has resulted in a tripling of House constituency sizes over the same time period.

[4] More complete accounts of the apportionment battles following the 1920 Census can be found in Balinski and Young 1982, Kromkowski and Kromkowski 1991, and Yates 1992.

[5] At the time, this formula was known as Webster's method. The formula was later changed to the Hill method, or the method of equal proportions (Balinski and Young 1982).

Also displayed in Figure 2 is a counter-factual: what might have happened if the size of the House was not frozen at 435. If the number of seats in the House after 1910 increased at the average rate that it did during the 1790-1810 period, the House would currently seat 683 members. Each member would represent just over 400,000 residents. To put it differently, large population growth does not *necessarily* lead to large constituency sizes. Changes in chamber size could alleviate some of the pressure from growing populations; in this hypothetical situation, incremental increases in the number of representatives would have cut constituency sizes by a over a third.

3 The State Legislatures

The House of Representatives is not the only American legislature to deal with constituency size and legislature size debates. The debate concerning the size of the U.S. House arose, in part, from the varying answers to the same question in the thirteen state legislatures. The states offer great variation on population, ranging from under half a million residents in Wyoming to over 36 million residents in California. Likewise, legislative chamber size also varies greatly across the states. In 2000, lower chamber sizes ranged from 40 in Alaska to 400 in New Hampshire.

Change in state legislative chamber size has varied widely across the states and over time. The general story, however, is similar to the U.S. House: most states have not adjusted the size of their legislatures in accordance with population growth during the last half of the 20th century. If anything, the trend among the states was to decrease the number of representatives seated in the chambers. The results, of course, are ballooning constituency sizes in the most populous U.S. states. The extreme case is California, which had a constituency size in 2000 of over 450,000 persons per district in the Assembly and over 900,000 residents per district in the Senate. Shockingly, California's *state senators* represent more constituents than do their fellow Californians in the U.S House!

4 Research on Constituency Size

What difference does a large (and growing) constituency size make for representation in the House of Representatives and state legislatures? This, of course, is the key question. Equal constituency sizes of House districts *within* states and relatively[6] equal constituency sizes *between* states have frustrated efforts to isolate the effect of constituency size of representation. The literature on constituency size is thus scattered among House, Senate, state legislatures, and cross-national studies.

[6]But see Fredrick 2008 and Ladewig and Jasinski 2008.

4.1 Communication

The strongest strongest empirical work evaluating potential impacts of constituency size concern citizen-representative communication. Such communication is obviously important in a democratic system grounded in the selection of legislators to represent specific constituencies in the state or national legislature.

Theoretically, larger constituency sizes should lead to less direct communication in the representational relationship. Dahl and Tufte (1973) suggest that in larger polities, only rarely can citizens communicate directly with political leaders. Smaller polities, on the other hand, offer more opportunities for direct interaction with political leaders for the average citizen. The resulting effect on the legislature is also intuitable: smaller districts allow legislators to learn directly about citizen opinions, rather than rely on staffers to relay information. Taagepera's (1972; Taagepera and Shugart 1989) work has sought to determine an ideal legislature size based on communication demands both within the legislature and between legislators and constituents. His research has settled on the cubed root law: lower chambers of national assemblies should be approximately on cubed root of the nation's population. Comparatively, the theory holds up well, with the U.S. House of Representatives being an obvious outliers. What follows is a brief summary of the literature regarding the effect of constituency size on constituent-legislator communication.

Overall Communication: Hibbing and Alford (1990), in a study using the 1988 National Election Study, find general support for the hypothesis that smaller state constituency sizes lead to more direct communication between U.S. senators and citizens. Respondents from less populous states are more likely to report meeting senators personally, attending a meeting with a senator, talking to a senator's staff member, and contacting a senator for help. Another study on the U.S. Senate reinforces these findings (Lee and Oppenheimer 1999). Squire (1993) in a study of 7 Midwest states, also finds evidence that lower constituency sizes at the state legislative level increases the likelihood of respondents' contacting their state legislators. In one of the only empirical studies to examine constituency size in the House, Fredrick (2008) also uncovers evidence that respondents report having less contact with incumbent House members as constituency size increases.

Communication Effects on Constituents and Legislators: The same research highlights some important potential impacts on constituent behavior and opinions. First, the research suggests constituents are more likely to initiate the contact with their Senator or representative (Hibbing and Alford 1990; Lee and Oppenheimer 1999; Fredrick 2008). Second, Fredrick's work finds evidence that respondents from districts with larger constituencies have lower perceptions of how well House members stay in touch with constituents and the helpfulness of House members than respondents from smaller districts. Third, constituency size impacts senators' perceptions of citizen expectations: senators from less populous states believe citizens expect greater and more personal communication (Lee and Oppenheimer 1999).

4.2 Evaluations of Institutions

Evaluations of public officials and institutions display information about the effects of constituency size. Large district populations, by reducing communication between representatives and citizens and creating districts made up of heterogeneous preferences and interests, may make the legislator's job more difficult. The legislator may have a difficult time pleasing his or her constituents in such a situation. Here existing research is more mixed, with Fredrick (2008) finding a significant negative relationship between constituency size and approval of House incumbents, but Hibbing and Alford (1990) find no such significant effect of state population on senator approval ratings.

The states offer great variation in constituency size that can be leveraged in answering this question. In Table 1, data on evaluations of state government and the state legislature are presented. The source of the data are two national Internet surveys conducted in 2008. According to these surveys, moving from the first to the fourth quartile of constituency size is associated with a five and a half point decrease in average trust in state government and an eleven percentage point decrease in approval of the state legislature.

Large constituency sizes produce citizens who are unsatisfied with representative democracy. Such citizens have lower trust in their state governments and lower approval ratings of their state legislature. The research also suggests high constituency size reduces approval ratings of House members. Combined, the evidence is powerful: large constituency sizes lead to less-favorable evaluations of representatives and democratic institutions.

4.3 Constituency Size and the Electoral College

A final consequence of ever-growing constituency sizes in the U.S. House relates to presidential elections. A peculiarity of the presidential election process is the Electoral College. The number of electors awarded to each state equals the size of the state's congressional delegation. In other words, the weight each state has in electing the president lies, in part, in the number of House seats awarded to that state. This system produces results that approximate the actual popular vote for president, with some important distortions. Most of the time the distortions do not matter; in close races (like the 2000 election) such distortions can decide the difference between winning and losing. Neubauer and Zeitland (2004) establish a relationship between the size of the U.S. House and the closeness of the Electoral College to the popular vote total. The authors concluded that if the House had at least 597 seats, Gore would have won the election. If the House had less than 491 seats, Bush would have won. If the size of the House fell in between those two numbers, the outcome would vary by exact seat number. In a way, say the authors, Gore's fate was set when the House was frozen at 435 members.

5 Possibility of Reform

Based on the above research, ample evidence exists for considering reforms to reduce the constituency size of American legislative districts, particularly in the U.S. House of Representatives. The only way to reduce constituency size, short of limiting immigration and population growth, is to increase the size of American legislatures. In assessing the feasibility of such a reform, legal and political barriers to passage need to be considered.

5.1 Legal Considerations

As mentioned above, the U.S. Constitution *does not* mandate 435 seats in the House of Representatives. The Constitution only assures that Congress use the decennial census to apportion House seats to the states. The exact method used and the number of seats to be apportioned have been set by statue. Congress could, at any time, send a bill to the president apportioning some number of seats other than 435.

Changing the size of state legislatures is another issue, since the state constitutions typically codify either the exact or the maximum number of legislators to serve in the legislative chambers. It is important to note, however, that states have frequently changed the size of the state legislatures in the past.

5.2 Political Considerations

In order to understand the political feasibility of increasing the size of legislative chambers, particularly in the U.S. House, it is essential to examine how such a change might impact politicians. First, such a reform reduces the visibility of the average legislator. Reelection-minded career politicians might refuse such a proposal, choosing instead to keep up contact with constituents by increasing staffing and legislative resources. Second, increasing the size of legislatures entails creating new districts - likely many new districts. Reelection-minded politicians will likely shy away from such an action since it introduces uncertainty into the electoral process. Why would a politician who succeeded under the current system voluntarily choose to remove a portion of his or her constituency to some other district?

The point is clear: convincing legislators to increase the size of the U.S. House and/or state legislatures will be a tough sell. Incumbents have distinct incentives not to support such a proposal.

That being said, one opportunity will likely present itself as a useful avenue for reform. In only a few years, the 2010 Census will be complete, and apportionment numbers will be passed from the Commerce Department to the Congress. Some states will be losers under the current system by losing a congressional district (or two) despite having a constant or growing population. The high-profile coverage of the losing states may create a window of opportunity for pasage of the reform.

6 Conclusion

The House of Representatives plays an incredibly important role in the political system of the United States. The House is the only federal institution distinctly charged with representing the interests of American citizens in government. The argument in this essay is that an ever-growing constituency size, caused by Congress's decision to reapportion existing seats rather than apportion new ones, coupled with large population growth, has diminished the ability of the House to fulfill its proper role. The consequence of growing constituency size is evident in the social science literature: reduced communication between constituents and representatives, lower evaluations of governmental institutions, and inoptimal transmission of the popular vote for president and Electoral College votes. These are problems that will not go away; as population continues to grow in the U.S. (and grows unequally across the states) Americans may find their elected representatives even harder to contact and even more out of touch.

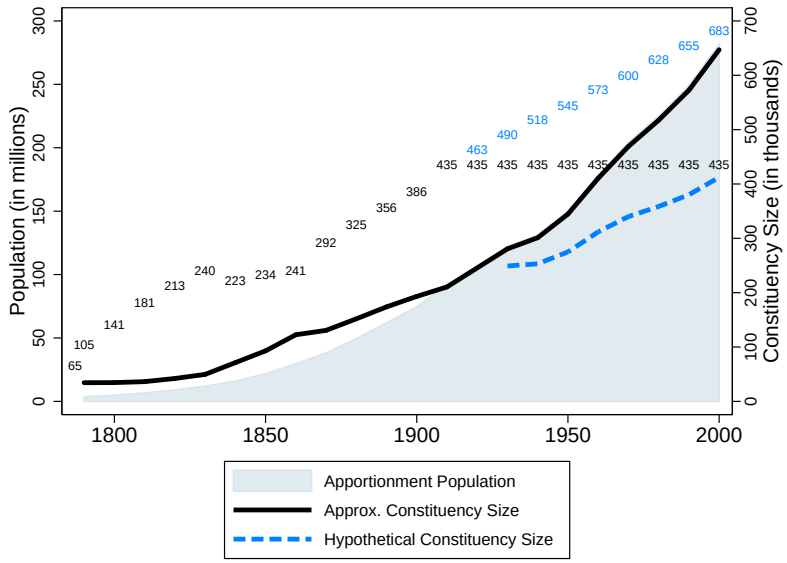

Figure 1: Size of the U.S. House, Population, and Constituency Size

Table 1: Mean Comparison of Evaluations by Constituency Size Quartile[a]

Quartile	Trust in State Government[b]	Approval of Legislature[c]
1	49.255	.501
2	45.429	.496
3	45.514	.467
4	43.879	.391
N	(931)	(25818)

[a] Lower chamber constituency size is used in this analysis.

[b] Source: 2008 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project, 100 pt. thermometer rating of trust in state government.

[c] Source: 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, Common Content. Item is proportion of respondents saying they "strongly approve" or "somewhat approve" of their state legislature.