Grassroots Lobbying and Issue Salience: The Flattened Cost of Signals

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Abstract

Previously, political scientists have found that grassroots lobbying messages from constituents to legislators are a costly signal to legislators about the salience of an issue among constituents. These studies argue that legislators respond to the volume of grassroots lobbying messages that they receive. However, in the twenty-first century, the costs of information have flattened, and obtaining trustworthy information has become the goal of political actors above obtaining simple information. I challenge existing research by developing a theory of information marketplaces where trust replaces price. Instead of supply and demand, this market is governed by latent forces like issue salience, resources, and goals in the legislature. I test this theory using a survey of state legislators and interviews with legislators and interest group leaders. In a survey experiment, I find (contrary to previous work) that lobbying message volume has no effect on legislator responses to high-salience issues, and a negative effect on low salience issues.

Introduction

Journalistic accounts argue that in high-profile legislative battles, constituent communications changed the course of legislation. On their own and motivated by groups, Americans send hundreds of thousands of messages to legislators across all levels of government on policy matters (Butler, Karpowitz and Pope 2012). These grassroots lobbying efforts have been enabled by advances in technology and restructuring of membership groups, along with the emergence of new broad-spectrum ideological groups (Karpf 2012). In surveys and interviews, legislators at every level say they want to hear from constituents about policy issues.

Leading theories of information in legislatures and explanations of grassroots lobbying rely on assumptions that are no longer empirically true.[1] The core of these theories is that political information is a resource governed by the economic forces of scarcity, production costs, and value that produces a set price (Krehbiel 1991). Further, they argue that grassroots lobbying is a costly signal from interest groups to legislators of issue salience in the public (Kollman 1998). Developments

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[1]While Krehbiel (1991) argues that expertise is scarce and costly, legislators no longer seek out interest groups for information (Powell 2012).

in the tactics of grassroots lobbying and the dynamics of interest organizations have reduced the costs of grassroots lobbying to near zero for interest groups and incentivized more groups to use the tactic more often as a means of maintaining the organization. To explain information processing by institutional actors in the digital age, we need theories that explain how political actors in institutions respond to inundations of cheap information.

To resolve this tension and update existing theories, I develop an economic theory of political information where trust replaces price. Political actors treat information like a commodity, where buyers seek information to accomplish their goals, and sellers provide information to accomplish their goals. Buyers and sellers each have their own set of constraints and incentives, and act rationally based on the constraints and incentives generated in the marketplace environment and the institutions that surround it. These constraints and incentives create trade-offs for political actors. However, when costs are flattened, legislators seek trustworthy information rather than ideally-priced information. Trust is governed by the value of information by legislators, and also by the constraints placed on legislators, the resources available to them,and the learning they experience in the marketplace of information. In grassroots lobbying, legislators act as buyers of information, and interest groups that engage in grassroots lobbying act as sellers.

Previous research finds that legislators respond to the number of messages they receive to constituents (Kollman 1998). However, if trust replaces price, the volume of messages should have no effect on legislator responses. I expect that when overwhelmed with information, legislators are responding to information they deem to be trustworthy, not the signal provided by grassroots lobbying efforts. I test this theory using a survey experiment that alters the tone, volume, and issue salience of hypothetical grassroots lobbying messages sent to legislators, and I measure their responses to these messages in the survey. I find that while the volume of email messages has no effect on high-salience issues, legislators who see high volume messages on low-salience issues are less likely to respond to them. The effect is both statistically and substantively significant: the predicted probability of a legislator voting for legislation supported by a low-salience/high-volume treatment is half that of the probability of a legislator voting for a hypothetical bill supported low-salience/low-volume treatment.

Grassroots Lobbying Defined

Grassroots lobbying is distinct from other forms of citizen/legislator communication and other forms of lobbying. Grassroots lobbying falls within the broader category of outside lobbying, mobilization of those outside the institution. It is a direct communication between a citizen who is not a registered lobbyist and a legislator or legislator's office. This citizen may or may not be a constituent.[2] Grassroots lobbying is not constituent service; grassroots lobbying messages contain both an *issue position* and a *recommended legislative action*. A variety of organized interests can use grassroots lobbying as a tactic, though not all do.[3] A message requesting assistance with the Social Security Administration is constituent service; a message requesting the legislator support changes in Social Security policy is grassroots lobbying. Grassroots lobbyists are wholly amateurs; they do not register as lobbyists, are not in the paid employ of an advocacy organization. They tend to however, be "high-information" citizens, and are likely members of one or more organized interests.

The End of Costly Information

Assumptions

All else equal, legislators want to be re-elected. They are not "single-minded seekers of re-election" (Mayhew 1974), but legislators generally need to be re-elected to accomplish their other goals in government[4]. All else equal, legislators view responsiveness to citizen needs as helpful to their chances of re-election (Bianco, Spence and Wilkerson. 1996). In this vein, I assume that legislators desire information about the policy preferences of their constituents.[5] Among constituencies, legislators seek the most information about their re-election and primary[6] constituencies (Fenno

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[2]In interviews, state legislators vary greatly on their desire to hear from non-constituents. There is no clear pattern in the data about this desire across either personal or institutional factors. Members of the United States Congress, on the other hand, report almost unanimously that they only want to hear from their constituents.

[3]In interviews, I spoke to leaders of trade groups, labor unions, citizen groups, and business groups. All reported using grassroots lobbying in some form. All different *types* of organized interests use grassroots lobbying, but not all groups do.

[4]Beyond re-election, these goals include advancement in the chamber, good public policy, and majority status for their party (Fenno 1978; Cox and McCubbins 2004)

[5]This desire for information is not exclusive to the policy preferences of constituents. Legislators seek a variety of information to do their jobs.

[6]There some evidence that legislators fear primary challenges more now than they did previously. Recent research attributes this phenomenon to the development of ideological fundraising and new types of partisan organizations that operate outside of traditional party structures (Boatright 2013).

1977; Butler and Nickerson 2011). Legislators may see themselves as representative of their district, seek information from trusted individuals in their district (Fenno 1978), from parties (Aldrich 1995; Cox, Kousser and McCubbins 2010), or from interest groups (Hall and Deardorff 2006).

These assumptions suggest that legislators must evaluate the value of information that is offered to them. With a variety of sources of information, legislators must decide how valuable sources of information are, and how those sources help them do their jobs. It also suggests that interest groups want to offer the most valuable information possible to legislators, and that they create this information through interaction with members and potential members.

Legislative Information Overload and Grassroots Lobbying

Obtaining, processing, and evaluation information is important to legislators. Legislators develop institutional structures and rules to assist information processing. For example, the Massachusetts colonial legislature formed its committee structure to deal with information overload from citizen petitions (Jameson 1894; Higginson 1986). Studies of institutional systems show that these informational arrangements also shape the power of legislators within the body. Krehbiel (1991) argued that the committee structure of the U.S. Congress was designed to create unbiased and representative committees by encouraging individual legislators to become policy experts. While Krehbiel's findings are disputed by scholars who argue for a more party-centered organizational structure (Rohde 1991; Cox and McCubbins 2004; Cox, Kousser and McCubbins 2010), the finding that legislators must bear costs to gain policy information and that committee structures help allay these costs for some legislators remains robust.

Lobbying is an important source of information. The provision of information to legislators and bureaucrats is considered an important tactic of "insider" or "direct" lobbying (Walker 1983; Schlozman and Tierney 1986; Hojnacki and Kimball 1999). Gathering expert information and disseminating it to policymakers is a costly activity, but the results are mixed as to whether resource-rich interests win more policy conflicts (Baumgartner, Berry, Hojnacki, Kimball and Leech 2009; Godwin, Ainsworth and Godwin 2013). Much of what we understand about "outside" lobbying, policy activism through the mobilization of citizens, comes from Kollman's (1998) model of outside lobbying as the production of costly information signals to legislators. Kollman's model relies on the assumption that issue salience and the costs of outside lobbying are inversely related; in other

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words, the less a group's members care about an issue, the more it costs to mobilize them, because the group must bear the high costs of educating and mobilizing its members on a particular issue.

Information overload[7] shapes the problems of the twenty-first century. The production of information by human beings is orders of magnitude greater in the digital age. Eric Schmidt, the CEO of Google, claimed at a 2010 conference that the world now produces the same amount of data in two days as it did from the beginning of civilization through 2003 Trelles, Prins, Snir and Jansen (2011). This information explosion is due to the compressed cost of producing information. Political scientists have treated information overload like an information deficit; legislators are "barraged with information from a wide variety of sources, and lack the time and resources to effectively process the information they receive" (Ringe and Victor 2013). While institutions have helped legislators deal with information overload and the demands of parties, citizens, and interest groups, the digital age has rapidly scaled up the communications directed at legislators. The rates of citizen contact to politicians has increased as much as tenfold in the last decade (Miler 2010). As citizen contact rates have increased, legislators are more likely to say that they believe grassroots lobbying messages are fake (Foundation 2011). The costs of generating information have flattened, but the costs of evaluating information have not.

American legislative institutions, more than those in parliamentary systems, reward information gains with greater power in the institution (Lupia and McCubbins 1994), but legislators cannot infinitely process information. Information overload is thus more disruptive in the United States, as there are high payoffs for identifying and using good information, but also significant problems in processing it. While previous work found that legislators were likely to value professional lobbyists for their information and expertise (Austen-Smith and Riker 1987), a recent survey of state legislators found that they solely seek campaign contributions from professional lobbyists rather than information (Powell 2012), regardless of the legislator's goals in the institution. Expertise is readily available, the issue becomes *which* expertise is most valuable. Legislators are faced with large amounts of information, and thus must develop a system to assign value to such information. Through this valuation, they determine which sources are trustworthy and which are not.

Information scientists deal with an information environment much like contemporary grassroots

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[7]Information overload is a form of cognitive overload where an individual or institution has too much information to process.

lobbying. Marketplace models of information allocate resources to end users based on the desire for information, the value assigned to that information, and the cost of that information. In these models, buyers make information products from raw materials of source information, and then sell this information to those who seek it (Atkins, Birmingham, Durfee, Glover, Mullen, Rundensteiner, Soloway, Vidal, Wallace and Wellman 1996). Trust replaces price: buyers want trustworthy information, and sellers want their information to be trusted. I apply this model to politics; political actors create and sell information in a marketplace environment to other political actors who want to buy information in order to accomplish their goals. While individuals and groups may be both buyers and sellers of information, the roles of individuals and groups are conditioned by sets of constraints and incentives that are both internal and external. In the case of grassroots lobbying, grassroots lobbying messages are the raw material, interest groups are sellers, and legislators are buyers.

I add a number of refinements to the marketplace of information model that make it more applicable to political processes. Political actors are more risk-averse than other actors; they tend to more heavily discount future gains (Rohde 1979), and tend to be more responsive to uncertainty, even when they are average citizens (Jacobs and Matthews 2013). This is a necessary condition, as this refinement means that legislators will seek more information than they need to make a decision. The marketplace of political information model uses the acceptance and incorporation of information as its transactions, rather than a monetary purchase. Political scientists have used versions of this model before, treating expertise as a valuable commodity that legislators expend resources to obtain (Guston, Jones and Branscomb 1997). In information marketplaces with flattened production costs, the supply element no longer matters, instead trust is shaped by information resources.

Political actors pay a high cost for taking risks and failing; such failures tend to result in losses of position or power. This is not normally true of information marketplace environments. In typical information marketplaces, there are risk-neutral preferences, as information buyers are incentivized to innovate in purchasing information, and may agree to less assured responses in order to reap benefits in the long term.[8]

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[8]In general, information seeking actors do not discount future benefits as much as do political actors. While this condition does affect the marketplace of political information, it is relevant to the theory only in that it reflects the risk-averse nature of political actors.

In the marketplace of political information, buyers tend to have more direct political power than sellers. Buyers are usually agents of government or potential agents of government, who have a specific set of goals that they accomplish by gaining information. Buyers are usually able to create information products on their own, and they must thus have a specific need for the information provided by sellers. As an example, legislators can campaign quite successfully on their own, but they may seek guidance from both interest groups and their party to fill gaps in the information they need to accomplish their goals. Sellers accomplish their goals by developing information products to offer buyers and leveraging incentives and punishments to entice buyers to use their information. The market is infinitely repeated; buyers are constantly seeking political information, and sellers are constantly offering different products.

When buyers in the marketplace of political information choose to use information, they are conducting a transaction in the marketplace. Sellers provide information that they want buyers to use. The choice to trust the seller may offer incentives to reward buyers for using the seller's information, as well as punishments for buyers who ignore the information they offer. The resources expended acquiring and processing information by the buyer constitute the direct costs of the information good. These costs tend to be set by latent forces in the market, but can be reduced by the seller, who may attempt to offer trustworthy information goods that reduce the resources expended by the buyer to acquire them.

Buyers and sellers make choices based on the resources available to them and their attention[9] to a set of goals they want to accomplish. Buyers need resources to make good information purchases, and institutional rules and cartels constrain these resources. Sellers need raw information to sell and resources to process information and incentivize buyers. Institutional rules and collaboration with similar actors alters buyer and seller resources and goal attention. Competition with other sellers reduces the resources available to sellers and forces innovation.

Empirical work has borne out the effectiveness of grassroots lobbying in less constrained legislatures (Bergan 2009) and its ineffectiveness in more constrained legislatures (Hojnacki and Kimball 1999). Bergan's field experiment in particular showed that on an issue without particular partisan constraints in a legislature with weak constraints, grassroots lobbying messages had a substantial

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[9]Actors may also *prioritize* some goals over others, but attention is more observable. While all actors prioritize survival as most important, some actors must pay more attention to survival than others.

effect on legislative action. While legislators are motivated to gain more and more information about their constituents, institutions condition both the resources and incentives legislators have to seek additional information.

Because information costs have flattened, legislators will respond to other things in messages. Legislators., through election, understand what issues are important to their constituents, and will respond in general to more salient issues. I identify three hypotheses related to this understanding.

Hypothesis 1 *The volume of emails sent by constituents to legislators has no effect on a legislator's willingness to take action on a particular piece of legislation.*

Hypothesis 2 *Legislators are more likely to they will take legislative action on high-salience issues.*

Hypothesis 3 *Legislators are more likely to respond positively to higher-volume email messages on low-salience issues.*

Data and Methods

My data were obtained through an email survey of 7,248 active state legislators. The survey excludes approximately 134 legislative districts.[10] The lists of state legislators and public email lists were obtained from OpenStates, an online, open-source resource of information on government. Additional emails were purchased from the National Conference of State Legislators, which maintains a private email list for 99% of state legislators. The surveys were delivered by email using the Qualtrics portal. Legislators received three email solicitations over a period of six weeks.[11] I gave respondents the option to have a staff member complete the survey, and included a question asking whether the respondent was a staff member or a legislator. 510 respondents completed at least one question.

While the survey addresses other questions as well, the core of the survey is an experiment using one of each of two possible variations on three treatment conditions (2x2x2) for a total of

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[10]Excluded legislators are distributed among all states, chambers, and parties. At least 90% of the legislators in individual states, chambers, and parties within chambers were included. Some legislators among the 134 do not have email addresses that are listed in any source. At the time of the survey, there were at least 32 state legislative seats that were vacant due to retirements, deaths in office, ethics investigations, and federal indictments.

[11]Full copies of the survey are available upon request of the author. The survey and its data were authorized by the University of North Carolina Office of Human Research Ethics Non-Biomedical IRB, study number 14-0420.

eight possible treatments. No control group was used. The Qualtrics survey software randomly assigned respondents to a treatment as they took the survey. Legislators are told that they receive the email from a constituent and either 6 (low volume treatment) or 60 (high volume treatment) similar emails about a hypothetical bill. The email displayed also varies in tone, using a formal, technical style (formal tone treatment), or an informal tone (informal tone treatment). The content of the message also varies on issue. I use two issues to separate the role of issue salience, a bill that creates a 45-day waiting period to purchase a handgun (high salience treatment), and a bill that requires that all GMO foods be labeled (low salience treatment).[12]

The dependent variable in the model is a binary outcome question asking legislators if they would take a particular action in response to the hypothetical email. A list of possible responses with check-boxes was provided on the survey. Respondents may choose any, all, or check a box labeled "none of the above." For this analysis,[13]I chose the following legislator responses: introduce the bill "by request" on behalf of a constituent, co-sponsor the bill, vote for the bill on the floor, and urge fellow legislators to support the bill.

To analyze the data, I used a logistic regression model with binary variables for three of four possible categories: low salience and high volume, high salience and low volume, and high salience and high volume. The low-salience/low-volume variable was excluded to avoid the dummy variable trap. Logistic regression models are well-specified in the literature and can be interpreted easily in the case of binary variables. I converted the regression results to predicted probabilites, and report these predicted probabilities with 95% confidence intervals in Figures 1 and 2.

I also supplanted the survey with qualitative interviews I conducted 27 interviews by phone or in person with state legislators, legislative staff, and interest group leaders in seven states: Alaska, Utah, Maine, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Virginia, and New Hampshire. I emailed every legislator to request interview in these states. To ensure more truthful answers, I told all interviewees at the beginning of each interview that their information would be de-identified; in all cases, I refer to interviewees using information that is institutionally relevant, and do not use the name of the interview subject or their state.

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[12]These issues were chosen in consultation with a number of legislators I interviewed. In the interviews, legislators repeatedly said that gun control issues were the most relevant regulatory issues in their legislature, and that while they knew about GMO labeling, their constituents did not.

[13]Other possible responses are included in the survey, but were not used for this analysis. These results are available at the request of the author.

The survey also contained a free-response section at the end, asking respondents for additional thoughts, comments, or statements to help me better understand what they hear from constituents and how they respond. 265 of 512 respondents completed this section of the survey. All 265 respondents who completed the free-response question wrote at least one complete sentence of text. These responses were coded for how legislators respond to emails, and what they said would motivate them to change behavior.

Results

[Insert Figure 1 here]

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Figures 1 and 2 show the predicted probability plots[14] for the high-salience treatments and low-salience treatments respectively. These predicted probabilities are calculated by regressing the binary variables low salience/high volume treatment, high salience/low volume treatment, and high salience/high volume treatment. Predicted probabilities are generated from the inverse logit of each of the regression coefficients. As the excluded variable, the coefficient of the intercept shows the predicted probability of the low salience/low volume treatment. The error bars in each graph indicate the 95% confidence interval.

For the high-salience treatments, the predicted probabilities are similar across high-volume and low-volume treatments. All the predicted probabilities are statistically significant, and none of the responses are measurably different from another.

For the low-salience treatments, the predicted probabilities of all treatments are measurably different from zero. In these cases, two of the responses are measurably larger in the low-volume treatments than the high-volume treatments. The co-sponsor bill response is nearly twice that fo the low-volume treatment than the high-volume treatment. The predicted probability of the "vote for the bill on the floor" response is also more than twice for the low-volume treatment than for the high-volume treatment. While low-volume predicted probabilities are also higher for the other low-volume responses, but these are not measurably different from each other.

These results find credibility for Hypothesis 1, but only in the case of high-salience issues. For

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[14]full regression tables are available in the Appendix to this article.

high-salience issues, the difference in the volume treatment is not statistically significant. The difference between volume treatments *is* statistically significant for low-salience treatments, but the effect is negative, contrary to previous research. For Hypothesis 2, the issue salience treatment does stastically significantly affect responses when controlling for the effects of the volume treatments. When the treatments are aggregated on salience, there is no statistically significant difference between the mean predicted probabilities for each response. This is also true within volume treatments, neither the high or low volume treatments show statistically significant varation in the response predicted probabilities across issue salience. When testing hypothesis 3, I find that I should not reject the null hypothesis. In fact, the opposite hypothesis is true; higher volume emails *reduce* the likelihood that a legislator will take any of the measured actions in response to the email.

Conclusion

The survey experiment in this paper provides a clear challenge to the idea that legislators count email responses and treat them as a latent measure of issue salience. The high-volume treatments, even when aggregated, show less legislator response than the low-volume treatments. Legislators are responding in different ways to emails from constituents than previously thought. The results also show a negative effect for higher volume treatments on low-salience issues. My original theory, based on the assumption of flattened information, suggests that there would be no effect, rather than a negative effect.

However, trust forms the core of the marketplace of political information, and in interviews and the free-response sections of the survey, legislators repeatedly say that large-volume email efforts, especially on low-salience issues, are untrustworthy. In person, one legislator told me that, "if I get less than five or more than fifty emails about any topic, I ignore it," later explaining that the former indicated no real interest among constituents, while the latter indicated an effort by an outside interest group that was not worthy of his time. In the form responses, 73% of legislators who mentioned emails from constituents said that they did not trust "form" or "cut-and-paste" emails, and instead preferred personal stories and idiosyncratic formatting from constituents. Legislators seem to be able to easily determine which emails are "form" emails, and for the most part, ignore them.

Citizens who send form emails, however, are constituents, too. Some states have added webforms to make contacting legislators the exclusive right of constituents. These forms increase the cost for citizens to communicate with their legislators, and may incentivize resource-rich groups who can develop methods to pass form communications through these webforms. While legislators say over and over again that personal messages are informative and helpful to their work, they are increasing the costs for individual citizens with stories to contact them.

This finding has greater implications for understanding how legislators, citizens, and interest groups interact and communicate with one another. If legislators are less responsive to high-volume efforts, it may behoove concerned citizens and interest groups to dial back mass communication efforts, and focus instead on individual stories and personal interactions. It also suggests that interest groups may be aware of that mass email efforts do not have an effect on policy outcomes, and instead use these actions to maintain and measure their membership.

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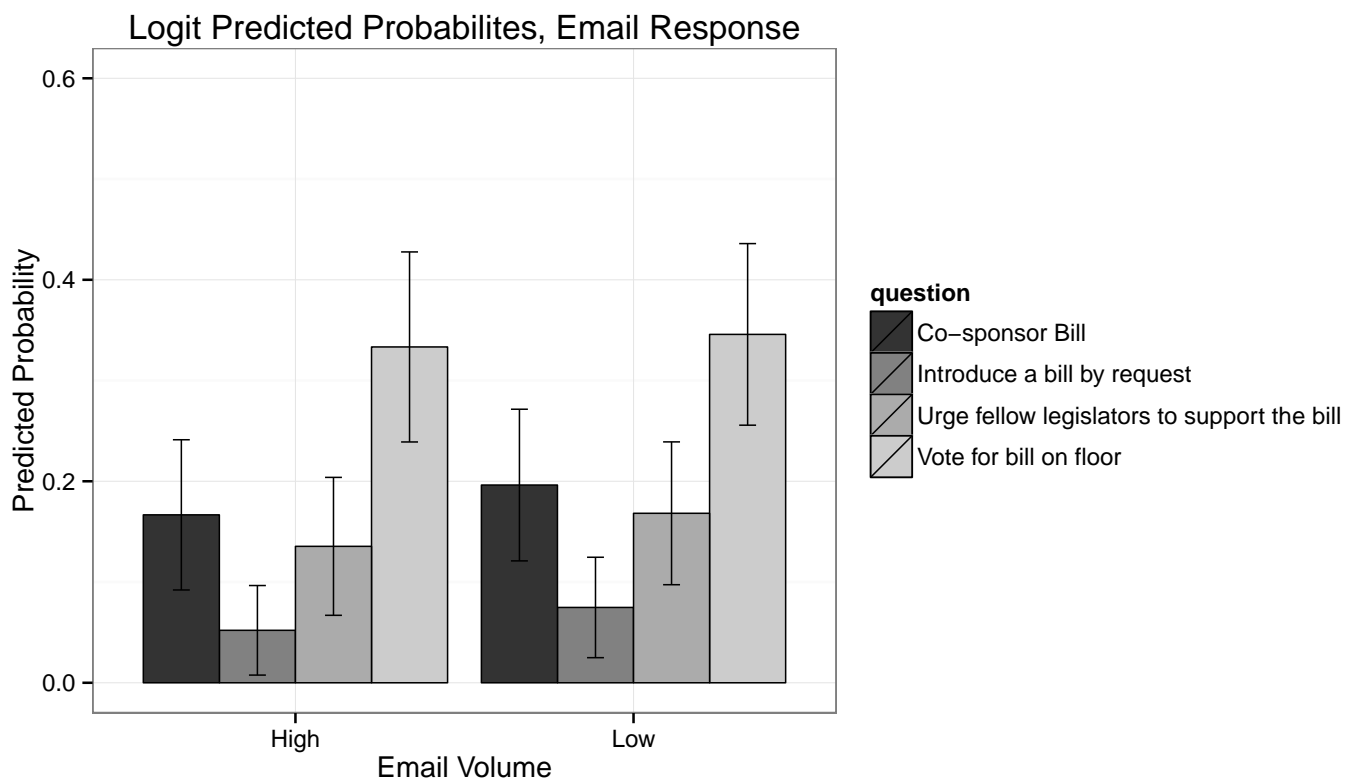
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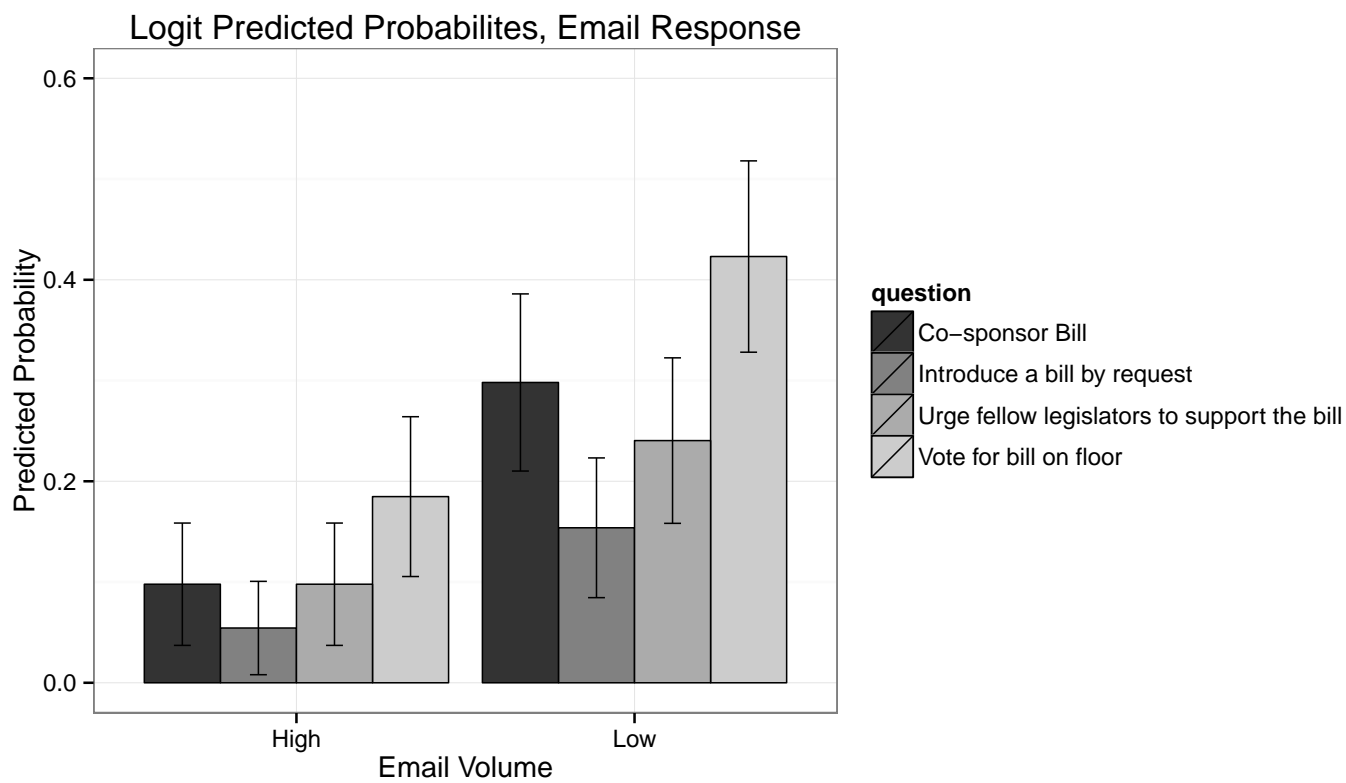
Figure 2: Predicted Probabilities of Legislator Responses to High Salience Treatment