Adding Up Pennsylvania's Ideological Divide
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Politically speaking, are you a moderate, a conservative or a liberal? Or maybe you’re not sure. What about Pennsylvanians in general: how do they stack up along these standard ideological categories? Is Pennsylvania a moderate, conservative or liberal state?

Political philosophies aside, this is important information to understand when analyzing public policy and to understand public opinion on a host of issues. Knowing someone’s self identified ideology along with their political party preference goes a considerable distance to explaining how people vote and what public policy preferences they are likely to support. Knowing an entire state’s ideological preferences can illuminate political trends and policy decisions and even help predict the course of future events.

The exact proportion of Pennsylvanians who say they are moderate, conservative or liberal varies somewhat, but the proportions can be estimated by looking at the ideological preference of voters measured in Keystone Polls since 1996. Slightly more than four of every ten indicate they are moderates; another roughly three in ten label themselves conservative; and slightly less than two in ten say they are liberals.

It’s important to note that these three categories--moderate, conservative and liberal--overlap the major political parties considerably. For example, many conservatives also identify themselves as Democrats, while a few liberals say they are Republicans, and moderates align themselves to both parties.

So, Pennsylvania can be classified as a state that leans moderate with a substantial concentration of conservatives followed by a smaller number of liberals. Among political parties in the state, there are slightly more Democrats than Republicans, with self proclaimed Independents providing the critical difference.

How does this all fit in terms of the representative democracy to which we aspire? Given the ideological contours of the Pennsylvania electorate: how representative are Pennsylvania’s members of Congress and how well do they represent ordinary Pennsylvanians?

One way to answer this question is to examine how moderate, liberal or conservative members of Congress are when voting; this has been done by the independent and highly respected National Journal. The Journal has developed a solid rating methodology that allows for a snap shot analysis of individual member ideological profiles.

The analysis for 2005 included 111 key votes on major economic, social, and foreign policy matters. The votes were weighted on a scale to give each member a composite ideological rating on a spectrum from strong conservative to strong liberal. The resultant scores provide a reasonable basis for making comparisons among individual members and districts.

The Pennsylvania results are fascinating. The state’s congressional delegation has 19 members, including 12 Republicans and seven Democrats. Conventional wisdom might expect that Democrats have more liberal tendencies and Republicans more conservative ones. And to some extent that is borne out by the ratings. In
fact, House members with the most liberal scores in the state’s delegation are all Democrats who represent Philadelphia or parts of the city--Chaka Fattah, Bob Brady, and Allyson Schwartz. And these liberal members represent largely liberal constituents.

But what happens when Democrats represent conservative districts? The answer seems to be that they vote their constituents’ preferences regardless of party. The least liberal Democrat was Tim Holden, who represents a 60-percent Republican district in the south central part of the state, a district carried by George Bush in 2004. Similarly John Murtha, whose 12th district is overwhelmingly rural and filled with conservative Democrats--had the second least liberal Democratic scores in the delegation. Both Holden and Murtha ideologically represent their mostly conservative constituents.

Similar patterns are observed on the Republican side. The most conservative members of the delegation were Republicans Bill Shuster, Melissa Hart, and Joe Pitts. All three represent conservative or moderate leaning voters. And all three are good ideological fits for their districts.

But when Republicans represent moderate districts, they become less conservative just as Democrats representing conservative districts become less liberal. The least conservative Republican members--Mike Fitzpatrick, Jim Gerlach, and Curt Weldon---all represent suburban Philadelphia districts--where the voters tend to be more moderate. Intriguingly, these moderate districts have become more competitive in recent years; each of these incumbents faces serious opposition from Democrats this year.

Not only are individual districts represented well ideologically, but the state appears to be as well. Nationally, the Journal lists 116 of the 435 House members it ranks at the ideological center, that’s just over 20-percent of Congress. Yet, in Pennsylvania fully nine of the state’s nineteen-member delegation (about 45%) falls into the center, three Democrats and six Republicans. This proportion of the delegation works out to approximate the ratio of Pennsylvanians who are moderates.

Another four congressional members are ranked toward the liberal end of the spectrum, also approximating liberal strength statewide. And the six remaining members can be classified as mostly conservative, roughly the proportion of Pennsylvanians statewide who call themselves conservative.

In sum and substance, Pennsylvania’s members of Congress largely reflect ideologically both their districts and the statewide electorate as well. In the parlance of traditional political science, Pennsylvania’s members of congress in sum are “delegates” who adhere to the preferences of their constituents, rather than “trustees” who exercise their own judgments about how to vote.

These findings may be surprising in the present milieu of cynicism infecting state politics. Certainly no one will argue that Pennsylvania’s congressional delegation is perfect or even distinguished. But on balance, and despite what critics might argue, Pennsylvanians generally get representatives whose values and aspirations are similar to their own, and who vote in Congress as their constituents themselves might vote.

If we still don’t like what they do, we at least must acknowledge they are mostly doing what we tell them to do.