Science & Technology

How Congress Misreads Public Opinion

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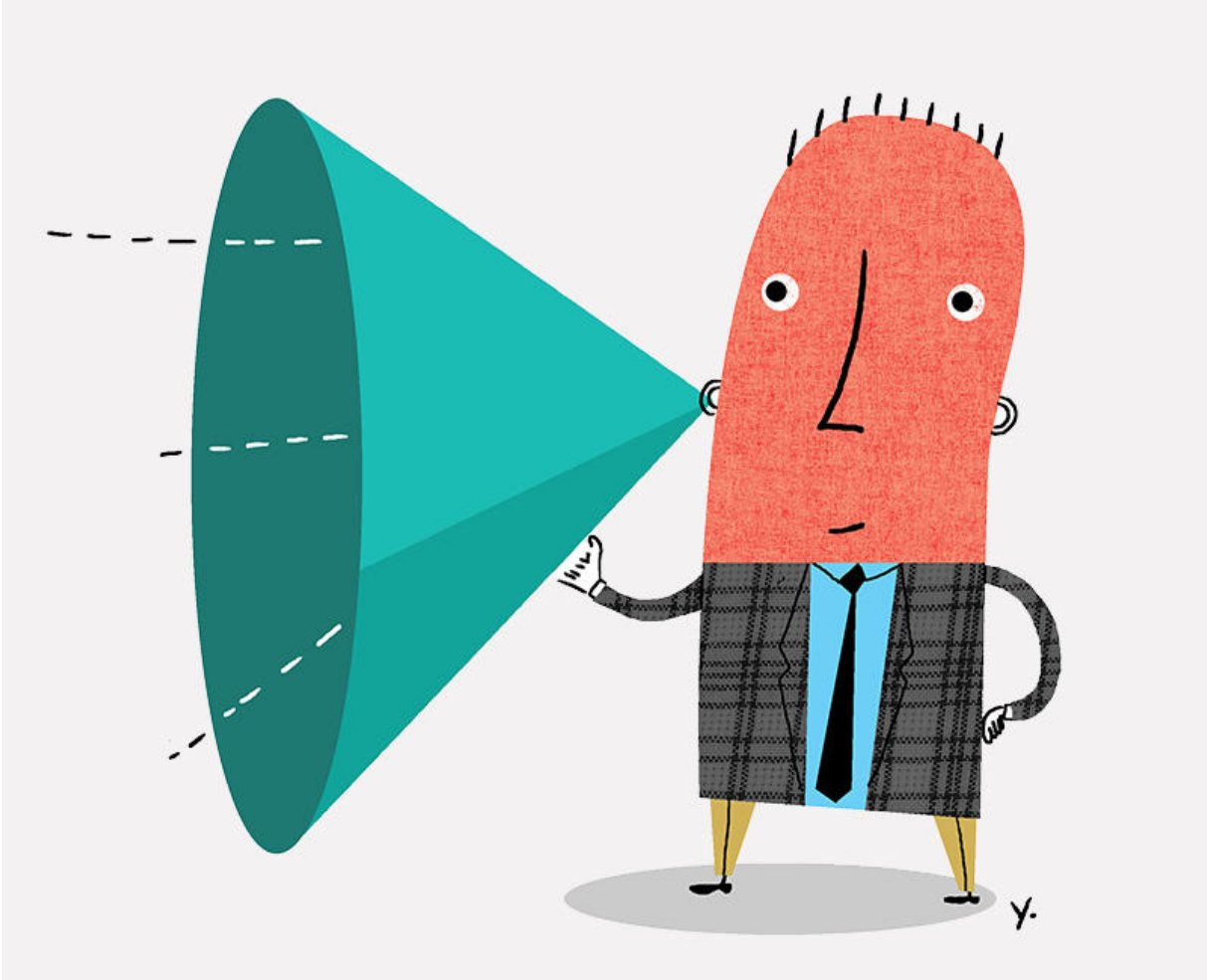

James Yang

It has often been said that Congress is out of touch with the American public, but a new paper by Columbia political scientist Alexander Hertel-Fernandez provides evidence that the criticism is warranted. It shows that senior congressional aides

who help set their offices' legislative agendas have wildly inaccurate perceptions of their constituents' views.

Hertel-Fernandez, along with political scientists Matto Mildenberger and Leah C. Stokes '09SIPA of the University of California, Santa Barbara, surveyed the chiefs of staff and legislative directors of ninety-one congressional offices. They asked the staffers to estimate the amount of public support in their districts for five policy proposals: repealing Obamacare, raising the federal minimum wage to twelve dollars, requiring background checks for gun sales, regulating carbon dioxide as a pollutant, and investing $300 billion in infrastructure improvements. They then compared the aides' responses to actual polling data.

The researchers found that aides to both Republican and Democratic members of Congress overestimate voters' conservatism. On the whole, the Republican staffers performed worse, estimating that public support for the conservative position on each of the five policy proposals was anywhere from 20 to 49 percent higher than it really was; the Democrats overshot by 5 to 11 percent. (Democrats underestimated the public's conservatism on only one issue, assuming, on average, that support for Obamacare was 24 percent higher that it was.)

The study also provides an explanation for the staffers' misperceptions, revealing that those who report meeting more frequently with corporate interest groups have the most skewed views of citizens' opinions and priorities. In fact, the researchers learned that congressional aides routinely rely on information received from special-interest groups to help them gauge public opinion, since there is a dearth of district-level data on voters' attitudes toward specific legislative proposals. (Republicans favor pro-business groups; Democrats favor labor unions and social-advocacy organizations.)

"To get good district-level numbers, we had to conduct pretty sophisticated statistical analyses of national polling data, and that's something that's too time-consuming and expensive for congressional offices to do regularly," says Hertel-Fernandez, an assistant professor at the School of International and Public Affairs. "Lobbyists, knowing that congressional staffers are looking for shortcuts to understanding their constituents' views, step in to provide them with information that purports to help."

Hertel-Fernandez hopes that his team's findings, which were published in a recent issue of the *American Political Science Review*, will motivate members of the public to do more to ensure that their voices are heard. He notes that congressional staffers do tally the telephone calls, e-mails, and letters they receive from constituents and present them to their bosses when making policy recommendations.

"When ordinary citizens don't communicate directly to members of Congress," Hertel-Fernandez says, "special-interest groups hold sway."

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