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Volume 39, Issue 2

1 April 2014

RESEARCH ARTICLE | APRIL 01 2014

Participation without Representation? Senior Opinion, Legislative Behavior, and Federal Health Reform

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J Health Polit Policy Law (2014) 39 (2): 263-293.

**Journal of
Health Politics,
Policy
and Law**

Volume 39
Number 2
April 2014

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Abstract

Why do legislators sometimes engage in behavior that deviates from the expressed policy preferences of constituents who participate in politics at high rates? We examine this puzzle in the context of Democratic legislators' representation of their senior citizen constituents on the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 (ACA). We find that legislators' roll-call votes on the ACA did not reflect the stated preferences of their respective senior constituents; by contrast, these roll-call votes did reflect the preferences of nonsenior adults. We draw upon a theoretical framework developed by Mansbridge to explain this apparent nonresponsiveness to seniors on the ACA. This framework distinguishes between promissory representation, whereby legislators merely respond to constituents' preferences, and anticipatory representation, whereby legislators respond to constituents' underlying policy interests, even when such interests conflict with expressed preferences. By considering the Medicare provisions in the ACA and analyzing Democratic legislators' floor speeches on health reform, we provide preliminary evidence that members of Congress engaged in anticipatory representation of their senior constituents by attempting to educate seniors about how the ACA serves their policy interests.

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