

TOEING THE LINE: Balancing Party Discipline and Autonomy as an Elected Representative

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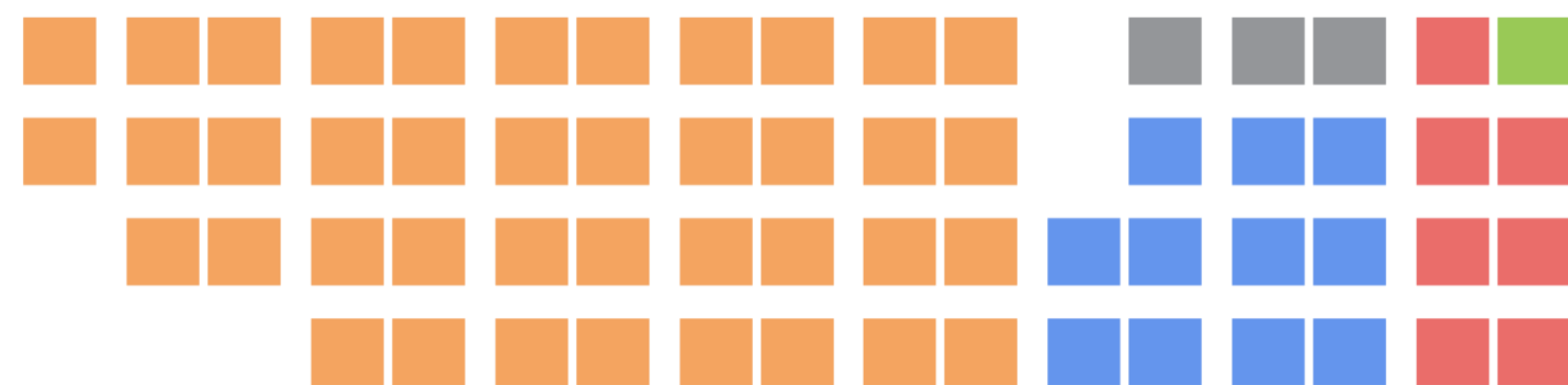
Abstract

Among the many arenas for political discourse, the Legislative Assembly is the main venue for policy change in Ontario. Within this arena are key political actors that are responsible for representing the people of this province. In modern legislatures, the role of elected representatives is thought to be clear. That is, to serve members of the electorate by bringing forward policy that effectively responds to issues in the riding. However, there are limitations to this line of thought. All politicians are subjected to their party's discipline which, in turn, put various constraints on their autonomy as an elected representative. This research aims to examine the extent to which party discipline impacts the autonomy of a politician to represent their constituents without overstepping party lines.

Research Question

Does party discipline limit the autonomy of an elected representative and negatively impact political decision making in Ontario?

Context



Her Majesty's Government - **PC (73)** Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition - **NDP (40)**
Other Parties - **Liberal (7)** Independent (3) **Green (1)**

Methods

- Non-random, stratified sample of 10 MPPs from Ontario's 42nd Parliament.
- Includes the government, official opposition, and independent seats in the House.
- All participants have a diverse range of experiences in being a backbencher, parliamentary assistant, house leader, and party whip.

Theoretical Background

Formation of Political Parties & Responsible Government

The emergence of distinct party lines has in turn produced party discipline and have become an inherent part of the central principles of responsible government. This relationship exists because the executive can control the legislature by virtue of majority (Ward, 1958). Responsible government gives immense power to the electorate because if the electorate does not like the government, policy, leader, or local member, it knows how to vote effectively to bring about change (McMurray, 1958; Reid, 1993). The structure of political parties help alleviate pressures arising from party discipline through the alignment of interests between members and party policies, and reconciling differences through cabinet and caucus meetings (Franks, 1997).

Party Discipline

Party discipline refers to both the existence of a high degree of cohesion among members and the methods of maintaining this cohesion in a political party (Lemco, 1988). Members have to uphold the viewpoints of their respective party, give voice to the wishes of their constituents, while remaining faithful to their own political and moral principles (Howard et al., 2006). Of primary concern to scholars is the relative freedom legislators' have to respond to local pressures (Lemco, 1988) and more specifically, the consequences members might face if they fail to toe the party line. However, individuals give up the right to independently determine their own policy position once joining a party because members become policy takers.

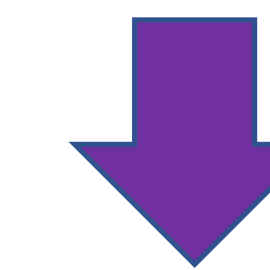
Intra-Party Factors

Party discipline is manifested among party members due to several intra-party factors. Legislative voting is an important avenue for implementing strict party discipline within caucus. Party discipline implies that all members are required to vote in accordance with the party and in compliance with the leader's direction. Support of backbench members to the executive is needed so that the party can remain in power (Flavelle and Kaye, 1986) and disciplined voting is often enforced to promote party cohesion for the advancement and success of the party. Garner and Letki (2005) maintain the view that both the socializing effect of the party on members and the institution of the party whip has significant effects on how a member will vote. Party cohesion is designed to reflect a unified government majority that is facing a cohesive opposition.

Findings

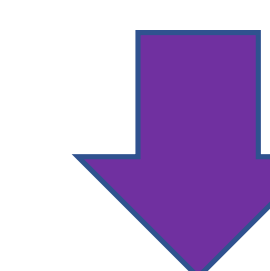
Duty as MPP

- Members are elected with the responsibility of representing the interests of constituents at the Legislature by acting as their voice on matters of public policy.



Fulfillment of Duty

- Factors that impede the fulfillment of duty as MPP includes geographical location of the member's riding, party discipline, party expectations, and top down leadership.



Developing Public Policy

- Two prominent viewpoints:
 - (1) Constituency work is the primary guide to developing effective policy;
 - (2) Case work ultimately has no impact on government decision making.

Conclusion

This study provided an opportunity to reflect on the varying impacts a party-system has on members upholding their autonomy to represent constituents without overstepping party lines. Overall, the data presents a strong connection between party discipline, autonomy, and political decision making and does an effective job in showing how party discipline has a negative impact on effective policy making in Ontario.

Select Bibliography

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