



NORTH CAROLINA CENTER FOR
PUBLIC POLICY RESEARCH INC.

NEWS RELEASE

For Release 11 p.m. Thursday, June 9, 1988

CENTER SAYS LEGISLATURE'S NEW COMPUTER CAPABILITY SHOULD ENABLE PUBLICATION
OF LEGISLATIVE VOTES

The General Assembly now has the computer capability to publish the votes of state lawmakers, the North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research reports in the latest issue of its quarterly magazine, North Carolina Insight. With this new computer system, the legislature could make the voting records of all 170 legislators more accessible to the public, the Center adds.

"With the 1988 elections underway, the timing seems appropriate for a push for greater accountability among legislators," says Ran Coble, the Center's executive director. "Publishing legislative votes would help the public keep track of how their elected representatives are voting on important policy issues and would help citizens make more informed decisions at the ballot box."

While it is usually possible to determine how a lawmaker votes on a bill by tracing its steps to passage or defeat in a series of notebooks in the legislative library, the process is extremely cumbersome. Even if the citizen knows the bill number, the legislative library notebooks only contain legislators' names and Y or N for a "yes" or "no" vote on the bill. There is no bill name nor is there a description of what the vote was about. Voice votes and many important procedural votes are never recorded.

In addition, records of legislative votes are kept only in the legislative library and in the principal clerk's office of both the House or the Senate. Those who want to research legislative voting in North Carolina either must come to Raleigh, or call the library on the telephone and ask the librarians to do some of the research. The library has a small but extremely helpful staff that tries to help all callers with research questions, but during legislative sessions, other business comes first.

"The legislature's tacit policy is to make the task of tracing a vote difficult," says Coble. "Publishing votes would enhance the state's climate of openness, which has become an issue in many legislative and statewide races this year."

The Center recorded and published more than 4000 votes of all 170 lawmakers in the special fall session in 1981, and during regular sessions in 1982, 1983 and 1984, but the project was halted because of its expense and an insufficient number of paying subscribers. Coble says the cost of staffing legislative sessions for recording votes totaled \$45,932 in 1983 alone. The voting records, however, were published frequently in North Carolina newspapers and the demise of the Center's service was lamented by Tar Heel editors in a number of editorials on the subject.

"The N.C. Center venture in publishing voting records proved to the state that such a record is feasible to compile and to issue in understandable form," said The Raleigh Times. "The records were usable enough that news media, lobbyists, corporations, associations, parties, candidates, and individual citizens all made substantial use of them."

The Fayetteville Observer said, "If the [legislative] leadership is interested in the free flow of information that permits North Carolina citizens to make informed judgments at the voting booth, it should seriously consider providing this information [on voting records] from now on."

The Center has since encouraged the legislature to pick up the program as a legislative service. Lt. Gov. Robert B. Jordan III said in 1985 that the decision on publishing legislative votes should be "deferred until computer capabilities in the General Assembly are fully operational." Jordan says that now that the computer system is in place, the legislature should begin publishing the votes. "I would support every vote being recorded," Jordan says. "I think it would be worth the \$45,000." Sen. Henson Barnes (D-Wayne), the leading candidate for President Pro Tempore of the Senate in 1989, says he would not object to the legislature's upgrading its computer system to record and publish all votes. "[I] don't mind a bit in the world," says Barnes.

More than one lawmaker, however, said there is resistance among the rank and file to recording every legislative vote. "I guess a lot of people don't want their votes recorded," says Sen. Laurence Cobb (R-Mecklenburg), Senate minority leader, who has for years been an aggressive advocate of more recorded votes. Rep. Dennis Wicker (D-Lee) says, "I'm sure there are a lot of members who don't want the public to know how they voted."

Cost is the factor House Speaker Liston B. Ramsey (D-Madison) mentions when the subject of legislative vote records comes up. "What's it going to cost?" he asks when questioned whether he'd support such a system. "I'm told it would cost a considerable amount of money." Besides, says the Speaker, it's not the legislature's job to report votes. "That responsibility belongs to the press. It would be worth it for you people in the press to get in there [the library] and do your jobs," says Ramsey. "All they have to do is go into the library and publish."

But Coble says it is much more involved than that. A mere listing of votes, such as Ramsey suggests, is virtually meaningless, says Coble. "Those votes must be accompanied by an explanation of what the votes on motions and amendments mean."

Some other states already have begun making legislative votes available via computers. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, Alabama provides legislative votes in a data base that is open to the public. And Iowa has the journals of its House and Senate on line. The public in Iowa thus can gain computer access to many of the state's legislative votes. In 1984, the Kansas legislature opened up public access to its computerized information system to keep tabs on bills. Anyone with a personal computer and a \$100 access fee can hook up with the information system, which offers data mostly on the status of pending legislation.

The Center says that North Carolina, through its open meetings and open records laws, has established a tradition of accessibility that is a model to other states. Now that the N.C. General Assembly has the computer capability, it has the opportunity to expand that tradition by recording and publishing its legislative votes, the Center says.

The N.C. Center for Public Policy Research is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization created to examine state government programs and important issues of public policy in North Carolina. The Center is supported in part by grants from the Z. Smith Reynolds and Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundations, both in Winston-Salem. Other funding comes from 109 corporate contributors and 700 individual members. In addition to its quarterly magazine, North Carolina Insight, the Center also publishes rankings of the effectiveness of all state legislators and book-length research reports. Recent studies have been issued on state environmental policies, all boards and commissions in state government, and the rise of the two-party system in North Carolina.

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Copies of the issue of North Carolina Insight containing the research on legislative voting are available for \$6.30 (plus \$1.00 postage and handling) from the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research, P.O. Box 430, Raleigh, NC 27602, or call (919) 832-2839.

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