

SCORE CARDS

With the election season approaching, you can expect to read more about “Score Cards” for lawmakers. Before you pay too much --- or too little --- attention to them, it might be helpful to know exactly how they work.

Numerous interest groups “rate” legislators based upon their voting record on topics that are of interest to that interest group. Business and industry groups have their rating systems, as does the environmental lobby. Numerous groups issue ratings related to education alone – each from its own perspective.

The systems all pretty much work the same: the group picks a couple of vetoes on issues critical to it --- most use about a dozen or so votes --- and then they rate a lawmaker based upon his or her vote on those issues. If the group advocated for, say, extra money for Program X, then a “yes” vote by the lawmaker on that appropriation would be a positive mark on the scorecard. Obviously, the reverse would be true for a “no” vote. A “not voting” is usually graded unfavorably, unless the lawmaker’s absence that day was on the record as being excused. Importantly, the votes are often weighted: issues central to the group’s mission typically carry more weight on a scorecard than an issue that was low on the group’s priority list.

So, it’s fairly simple. And a well-conceived scorecard can in fact be a valuable tool in articulating to a wider audience how a lawmaker voted on various issues.

The problem, of course, is that how the scorecards are structured will inevitably affect their outcome. A couple of real-world examples can show you exactly why giving scorecards *carte blanche* is dangerous.

This past year, a large business and industry group gave tremendous weight on its scorecard to a vote on a judgeship. While grading the vote at all is probably understandable, as the judiciary plays a growing role in whether South Carolina has a favorable business climate, the weighting system was flawed. The vote took three ballots before a candidate emerged victorious, the group counted every single vote, in essence giving triple weight to this single issue.

Just this year, one environmental group gave notice that a vote “for” identifying nuclear energy as a “clean” energy source would be considered an anti-environment vote. This was interesting, in that another environmental group labeled the exact same vote as being pro-environment.

My favorite, though, is the scorecard that is advertised on the internet as being endorsed by the South Carolina Education Association (SCEA). As you would expect, votes on topics such as Open Enrollment and property tax breaks for schools are rated. But, amazingly, so are votes on immigration, the Jasper County port, and even

abortion. One is left to wonder how those are related to education. (Note: I brought this to the attention of the SCEA, and they denied any affiliation with the scorecard. However, it is still available today, several months later, on the internet.)

The bottom line – as is so often the case – is that there is no substitute for doing your own research and, importantly, your own thinking. Just as is the case with polls and public opinion surveys, the devil in scorecard ratings is often in the details. Before you put too much confidence in a scorecard, or conversely, before you dismiss it, take the time to dig into the details, especially if the issues are of importance to you.

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