Understanding the Confidence Vote in Vietnamese National Assembly

An Update on "Adverse Effects of Sunshine"

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For analysts of Vietnam's politics, the country's representative politics have always been an object of curiosity and controversy. Although the present chapter is the only one that deals specifically with representative politics in virtually all the chapters in the volume, the Vietnamese National Assembly (VNA) appears as specter in the background, quietly shaping and interacting with the actors profiled by the other scholars. To offer but a few examples: The Wells-Dang discussion of Civil Society speculates on a critical question of how advocacy can be converted into legislation. Many of the dissidents analyzed in the extraordinary Kerkvliet chapter interacted with the VNA or were responding explicitly to its activities and, more importantly, to its lack of activity. Vu's study of party membership is critical for understanding how regime leaders exert control despite reforms that have granted the VNA increased prestige and policy-making authority. In these and other chapters, the authors' arguments are explicitly shaped by the unique role the VNA plays in Vietnamese policy making. Despite abundant representation of reforms of political institutions in the extant literature on authoritarian politics, there have been relatively few in-depth studies of representative politics. In this context, this chapter attempts to embed the study of the Vietnamese parliament into the broader literature on authoritarian politics, and provide a road map for future research on Vietnamese politics.

It has now been a year and a half since *Adverse Effects of Sunshine* (Malesky, Schuler, and Tran 2012) was published and nearly three years since we first initiated the online experiment that generated the results. Since we posted

information about delegate participation in query sessions and legislative debates on *VietnamNet*, a great deal has happened in Vietnamese politics, with the Vietnamese National Assembly (VNA) often at the center of the action. In this reflection to the article, I reflect on the most high profile of these developments – the confidence vote on high-ranking VNA officials and ministers that took place in June 2013. The results suggest a consistent theme faced by the Vietnamese leadership that we attempted to highlight in *Sunshine* – the difficult balancing act of acquiring valuable information on citizen preferences and views of the regime, while at the same time maintaining order and stability in an authoritarian parliament.

I begin by discussing the intellectual history of *Sunshine*, highlighting the key puzzles about the "assertiveness" of the VNA that piqued our curiosity. Along the way, I attempt to place *Sunshine* in the context of the reforms that have garnered so much attention among Vietnamese analysts and media. I show how recent debates over the Vietnamese Constitutional reforms and the defense by the regime of one of their most outspoken critics can be understood within the theoretical framework of the article. Finally, I discuss the motivation, organization, and the results of the confidence vote, demonstrating how this unique new mechanism, unprecedented in the annals of authoritarian regimes, further elucidates the tension between transparency, access to information, and stability faced by Vietnam's leadership. It is noteworthy that while the results of the transparency were made public, the actual confidence voting itself was done with a secret ballot. Neither citizens nor elites knew which delegates actually voted for or against a particular minister. As in *Sunshine*, the protection of voting delegates' identity allowed for a more honest assessment of their perceptions about top leaders. In fact, more delegates gave low confidence votes to the State Bank governor and prime minister than they would have actually spoken out in query sessions!

The intellectual history of the article

When we first sat down to design the online experiment described in the article, we had both broad and narrow intellectual goals. For general political science audiences, we intended to test the effects of transparency interventions on performance in authoritarian legislatures (McGee and Gaventa 2010). For the subfield of authoritarian regimes, we wanted to explore a critical mechanism of the co-optation theory, the notion that authoritarian regimes use parliaments to co-opt potential opposition (Wright 2008; Gandhi 2009; Svolik 2012). We were worried that the

literature had emphasized the benefits of co-optation without paying enough attention to the threat of punishment, which was necessary to ensure regime stability.

In addition to these broader claims, we also had a narrow goal of pinpointing the role of the VNA in elite Vietnamese politics. Unfortunately, this motivation is somewhat buried in the disciplinary jargon, experimental design, and complex statistics. Yet, this agenda is critical for how we, as Vietnam specialists, view the implications of the experimental results.

It has become conventional in analyses of Vietnamese politics to refer to the VNA as increasingly "assertive." The phrase is so ubiquitous in descriptions of the body, that the words "National Assembly" alone appear almost naked.[1] Moreover, the reference is always meant to connote a recent development, even though some of the usage goes back over a decade. What is unclear is what assertive actually means, and especially what assertive implies when used to describe a political institution in its entirety rather than to refer to individual delegates or leaders. The usage gives the impression that a once tame institution, suddenly and on its own, decided to challenge higher authorities. We are guilty of the turn of phrase ourselves, but our own culpability does not diminish the fact that "assertive" is shorthand that obfuscates more than it explains.

There is no doubt that the role of the body and quality of delegates has changed over time. In our work, we have chronicled the increasing professionalism of the VNA. With each new session, the share of full-time delegates has risen, and our work has charted a steady increase in educational attainment and professional expertise in the body over time (Thayer 2003; Malesky and Schuler 2010). As a result, the level of legislative debate and query sessions has improved. Furthermore, elections, while still far from truly free and fair, have become uniquely competitive for single-party regimes. Candidate-to-seat ratios now range between 1.7 and 2 (depending on electoral district characteristics). This means that voters have some choice among the candidates nominated and vetted by central institutions or local election commissions (Gainsborough 2005). In the past two elections, 2007 and 2012, a large number of centrally nominated candidates (those designated for leadership positions) have lost and an even larger number barely eked out a victory (Malesky and Schuler 2008, 2011). Increasing professionalism and functional expertise has in turn allowed the VNA to take on new responsibilities, including the query sessions, where delegates are able to grill ministers on their performance and policy choices, legislative debates, where delegates

debate draft laws, and public hearings, where committees (the Economic Committee being the most active) have solicited testimony from experts on policy debates of national import.

These are important developments to be sure, and they have certainly raised the profile of the parliament as well as that of individual delegates, but do they constitute "assertiveness"? Champions of the assertiveness thesis cite a few well-worn anecdotes: the active query sessions and fierce criticism of ministers (including the sacking of an education minister after a poor showing), rejection of the prime minister's sponsored resolution for a high-speed railway, and the occasional low vote total for a ministerial appointment (i.e. Deputy Prime Minister Hoang Trung Hai received a VNA approval vote of 73% in 2007). For each of these anecdotes, however, there is an equally compelling counternarrative. Query session participation is actually quite low with only 30 percent of delegates asking any questions at all, and only 5 percent asking questions that could be perceived as critical of a minister, ministry, or government action (Malesky and Schuler 2010). The rejection of the high-speed rail was truly remarkable, but as we have argued in another work, it occurred during a unique set of circumstances – when Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) leaders were not unified in support for the initiative. The 2008 Hanoi merger with Ha Tay province was equally controversial initially, but passed with over a 90 percent of the vote after a Central Committee Resolution signaled unified elite support (Malesky et al. 2011). Finally, the cherry-picking of low votes totals for particular ministers ignores the obscenely high vote total for most other appointments. In 2007, for instance, 21 out of 31 ministers were approved by the VNA with votes over 90 percent.

Moreover, the Hanoi merger reminds us that the VNA is not an autonomous institution. It is embedded within a web of institutions controlled by a single-party regime (Thayer 1995; Gainsborough 2005). Over 90 percent of delegates are VCP members and beholden to the party line, established through elite resolutions. The greatest predictor of leadership in the VNA is not a large vote total in the popular election, but party membership and nomination by a central institution (Malesky and Schuler 2013). The institutional changes that have professionalized the body, and provided it with a prominent, televised forum, were allowed by the VCP, and in many cases were conceived of at the highest levels of the VCP leadership. An "assertive" VNA did not simply burst on the political landscape. Its reforms have been carefully designed and cultivated to achieve regime goals, and its powers have been parameterized to avoid destabilizing single-party control of the country.

In our research agenda, we have highlighted four benefits that the reforms of the VNA accomplish for the regime: information, professionalism, co-optation, and power sharing. *Information*: elections, query sessions, and legislative debates provide valuable information on popular support for the regime, the strength of potential opposition, public perceptions of national policy, and the geographic distribution of policy preferences. *Professionalism*: better educated and professional, full-time delegates means that laws can be designed with more complexity and specialization. *Co-optation*: query sessions and debates provide an outlet for potential critics, who otherwise might seek external outlets for their dissent. These potential critics can be co-opted by the limited ability to influence policy and direct access to high-ranking politicos. *Power-sharing*: the institutionalized rules and evaluations provide a powerful ability for elites to check the power of other political elites. In *Sunshine*, we focused our attention on elucidating the co-optation mechanism.

A fascinating illustration of the value elite regime leaders place on the information and policy ideas revealed during VNA debate and the lengths they will go to protect it occurred in early 2012, when Hoang Huu Phuoc, a VNA delegate from Ho Chi Minh City, criticized fellow delegate Duong Trung Quoc as one of the four "great idiots" in the VNA for his criticism of the government. Duong had been an outspoken in his dismay at the Vinashin bailouts, opposition to a Chinese bauxite investment in the Central Highlands, and had famously called for the resignation of the prime minister. In Phuoc's blog post, which he admitted to writing, he suggested that Quoc "shut his mouth" so that other delegates could speak (Truong Son 2013). However, Phuoc's ploy quickly backfired. The government chose to take no action against its most famous gadfly (*GiaoDuc Vietnam* 2013). Instead, it was Phuoc who was publically chastised by the VCP leadership and was ultimately forced to apologize publicly for his actions (Schuler 2013: ch. 6).

The benefits that VCP elite receive from its parliament, however, are not risk free. By expanding membership beyond a narrow, loyal circle, opening the scope of debates, and allowing a wider audience to view them, the regime places itself at serious risk. An outspoken critic could use the powerful forum to mobilize an opposition movement. Fierce debate in the VNA might spill over into the public, igniting popular discontent and protests. Limited evidence for both of these threats can be found in the debate over a Chinese bauxite firm's investment in the Central Highlands and in the collapse of *Vinashin*, the state-owned shipping conglomerate.

For a current example of this, witness the 2013 debates about the draft Constitution. Seeking to generate public support and solicit helpful advice, the National Assembly circulated a draft version of the Constitution for public comment. Intellectuals, bloggers, and advocates took advantage of the opening to post their own draft constitution online, which removed Article 4's stipulation of the VCP as the sole political force in the country. The intensity of emotion and the number of participants in the debate surprised the leadership, forcing leaders like Party Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong to take to the media in an attempt to tame the critics by calling their positions "political, ideological and ethical deterioration" (Brummit 2013a). Nguyen Sing Hung, chairman of the National Assembly, put it most directly, "Abusing the garnering of ideas on the revised constitution to propagandize and lobby for the people to oppose the party and the government…must be resolutely prevented" (Brummit 2013b).

The tension between the benefits of an active VNA and the risk to regime stability are felt directly by delegates, who must do their jobs professionally (speaking, researching laws, and caucusing with other delegates) while avoiding actions that might endanger regime stability. In *Sunshine*, we sought to probe this tension directly. By providing citizens information on what their delegates were doing in an easy to use and follow format, we hoped to see how delegates might toe this fine line.

At the same time, we hoped to learn something about the representativeness of delegates to their underlying constituencies. In previous work, we identified a strongly robust pattern between vote shares and delegate activity in the query session. Holding characteristics of the delegate constant, representatives who performed worse in the most recent query session tended to be more active than then delegates who had won by large margins. As Figure 5.1 shows, delegates with safe seats simply did not feel as obligated to challenge ministers. While confident of the correlation, we were always unsure of the specific mechanism driving the results. On the one hand, the relationship could be viewed as evidence for delegates competing for the votes of citizens; on the other, delegates might care more about the provincial leaders who nominate local candidates and structure the electoral districts. Thus, their query performance might be a signal to provincial elites rather than citizens. A third possibility was reverse causality – active delegates were less popular among citizens and/or provincial elites.

By randomizing whether or not citizens learned about the activity of particular delegates, we hoped to determine which of these three
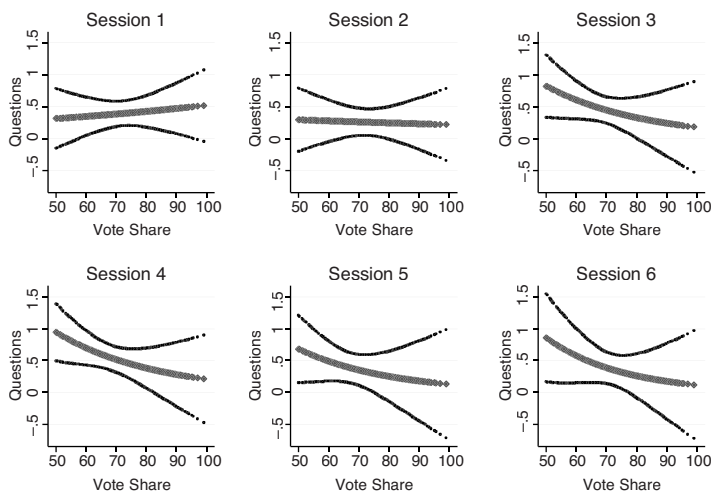
Figure 5.1   Relationship between vote share and participation

Note: This figure provides a bivariate correlation between vote share and participation in query sessions in all six sessions. The statistically significant negative relationship in the final four sessions indicates that delegates are responding either to voters or local leaders who arrange provincial electoral districts. Note that Session 6 (the time of the *Sunshine* intervention) demonstrates the same pattern as previous sessions and the relationship is not altered by proximity to the 11th Party Congress.

mechanisms was most likely doing the work. If it was the popular representation mechanism, then transparency should have led to greater delegate participation in query sessions, as delegates tried to impress voters. We did not observe such behavior.

An agenda for future work

As we discuss in the *Sunshine* article, the experiment sheds light on how transparency affects political processes in a single-party state. Legislative transparency initiatives have often been promoted by international donors as a shortcut to generate accountability of an authoritarian regime without institutional reform. While laudatory, we sought a direct test of these claims. We suspected that while transparency certainly has benefits, there are our occasions when it might not work as expected. Indeed, our research found that legislative transparency did not have the salutary effects on performance that it has in a democratic setting. While the experiment had no direct effect on participation and criticism in the VNA, it actually curtailed activity for those in provinces

where there was a high degree of internet penetration. Delegates, who knew their actions in the VNA would be visible, were reluctant to make statements that they deemed might be destabilizing. In other words, delegates internalized the trade-off between information and stability that the regime faces and responded accordingly to the incentives. A few delegates miscalculated, speaking even though their statements were posted online. In these cases, the increased exposure also had an effect on re-election prospects, with delegates undergoing the treatment facing a lower probability of being re-nominated and elected to the VNA.

These findings are sobering for two groups. For advocates of an assertive "VNA," the results expose clearly the constraints that even the most active and critical VNA delegates operate within. They also present important cautionary evidence to those who would promote transparency interventions in authoritarian settings.

That said, it is important to bound our findings as well. Our conclusions do not rule out the possibility that certain types of transparency can also have benefits. We studied only one effect of transparency – the influence on delegate behavior during VNA sessions. There are other areas where transparency might be extremely beneficial. Of particular importance in the case of Vietnam has been the expansion of the number of sessions that appear on television. Televised query sessions were first introduced in 1994, and have since expanded to other debates within the VNA such as the debates over the government's implementation of the socioeconomic plans and debates on constitutional revisions. The effect of television is difficult to ascertain, given that the sessions to be televised are not randomly assigned as in *Sunshine*. Therefore, it is not easy to assess whether or not the tenor of the debates or the types of delegates that speak in these sessions differ from those sessions that are not televised. However, one possible benefit touched upon by Schuler (2013: ch. 2) is the effect of debates on public opinion. Schuler shows that speeches made on the floor of the VNA can have a direct impact on public interest in an issue. For instance, the mention of the bauxite issue on the floor of the VNA increased the number of *Google* searches for information on bauxite in Viet Nam. If the proceedings of the VNA were not made public similar to the debates within the VCP Central Committee, such discussion could not generate public debate.

What this suggests is that when assessing the impact of transparency on performance in an authoritarian legislature, it is important to consider the metric used to measure performance. As *Sunshine* shows, transparency may not improve the performance of individual delegates. In fact, in some cases it may depress their activity. On the other hand,

the presence of transparency also enables activity within the VNA to reach the public. Therefore, if a delegate makes an incendiary speech, the presence of television cameras ensures that they will have an audience for their critiques.

Once again, we return to the inherent tension between the benefits and risks of policy changes that enable the VNA. In the next few pages, I look at how events that followed the publication of *Sunshine* shed additional light on this tightrope walk.

The Confidence Vote

The origins of the no confidence vote

The discussion of a "No Confidence" vote first arose during the VNA's debates over the Vinashin bankruptcy in the fall of 2010. Although Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung admitted partially responsibility (*VietnamNet* 2010), critics argued that ultimately the buck stopped with him, because state conglomerates officials reported to the PM's office and the PM appoints their leaders according to a 2006 decree (Decree 86/2006/ND-CP). The issue was first raised by Nguyen Minh Thuyet in a bold speech on the VNA floor, but he received support from a handful of other delegates, including Duong Truong Quoc, who would continue the calls for the PM's resignation in subsequent sessions (Hookway 2010). Importantly, although interviews suggest that the prime minister was clearly upset with Nguyen Minh Thuyet's proposal, neither he nor any of the delegates who supported him were removed. Furthermore, not only were the delegates who supported Thuyet not punished, but some of them were actually re-nominated, including Truong Quoc (Schuler 2013: ch. 5).

New momentum for a no confidence vote picked up after the 11th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam, which was rife with internal debates and divisions (Clark 2011). The Congress opened with an apology for corruption and inefficiency, which spurred critics to ask for leadership changes. At the 6th Plenum of the 11th Central Committee (October 2012), internal division re-emerged during a debate about whether to discipline certain members of the Politburo for the underperformance of state corporations and elite-level corruption. Members of the Politburo engaged in self-criticism for their actions, but the Central Committee did not think leadership change was warranted at that time (An Dien 2012). Immediately after the session, critics in and outside the top echelons of the party hierarchy hoped that there would be greater opportunities to hold particular officials accountable in the VNA, which had a more diverse

membership than the VCP Central Committee (Thayer 2013a). In the aftermath of the 6th Plenum, General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong noted his support for continued self-criticism of top officials along with the resolution permitting no confidence voting in the VNA (An Dien 2012).

Critical to the main thesis of our argument is the fact that internal divisions within the elite ranks of the VCP facilitated the move to empower the VNA with this unique new authority, unprecedented in other authoritarian and single-party regimes. The VNA did not seek this power on its own accord; it was invested with it by the VCP to provide a check on elite actors in government.

The structure of the Confidence Vote

On November 21, 2012, the internal critics succeeded in passing Resolution No. *35/2012/*QH13 in the VNA, which called for a no confidence vote, but was thin on details. Resolution *561/2013/UBTVQH13* (February 2012) provided the framework for how the VNA would be administered. According to the two resolutions, the VNA laid out a two-tier process: a preferential ranking of confidence ranking, followed by a no confidence vote.

During the preferential ranking stage, delegates of the VNA would be asked to fill out a form with names of the individuals, who had been elected to position subject to the approval of the VNA. This list included all members of the National Assembly Standing Committee (NASC), and VNA committee chairs, the president, prime minister, chief justice, and head of the procuracy, an official charged with the observance of the law by all government officials. On each form, delegates were asked to tick the cell for "highly confident about," "confident about," and "low confident about," depending on their evaluation of the official's performance. The slight semantic gamesmanship did not go unnoticed by observers of Vietnamese politics – the ballot expressly did not present an option to demonstrate "no confidence."

According to Article 6.4, officials receiving over two-thirds of the VNA expressing low confidence votes, or receiving over 50 percent low confidence votes for two successive years would be provided with the opportunity to resign. In case they did not, the VNA could begin procedures for an actual "No Confidence" vote, where the official simply received an up or down vote. The second stage would take place in the next VNA session following the disappointing preferential ranking. The mechanism for discharge of an official receiving low confidence votes is not direct (Article 8), but can be requested by the Standing Committee of the

VNA in accordance with the Law on Oversight of the National Assembly (2003: Article 13). Ultimately, the Standing Committee will ask the institution that nominated the official who failed the confidence vote to dismiss him or her.

Following the vote, Article 6.1 mandated that the vote totals be publically posted. While this was a tentative move to transparency, delegates were provided with a secret ballot (using paper instead of the usual electronic voting) to ensure their anonymity from citizens and elites. This partial transparency, in line with our argument in *Sunshine*, protected delegates, so that they could vote more honestly without fear of retribution or endangering regime stability. Thus, VCP leaders could receive far more accurate information on the perceptions of delegates, which we document below.

Results of the preferential confidence ranking

The preferential confidence ranking was held on June 11, 2013. On the face of it, the vote in the VNA was a failure for critics hoping that particular officials would be held accountable. Focusing on the "low confidence" vote that triggers further proceedings, not a single official received a share over the 50 percent threshold to be monitored over two years or the two-thirds criteria necessary for immediate action. All top officials kept their jobs and stability was preserved among the elite VCP leadership.

On the other hand, the vote provided an incredible amount of information to the Vietnamese leadership and outside observers about perceptions of the performance of individual officials and satisfaction with governance. For instance, it was notable that the officials most associated publically (fairly or not) with the economic importance of the country received the highest share of "low confidence" votes (State Bank Governor Nguyen Van Binh [42%], Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung [32%], Minister of Industry and Trade Vu Huy Hoang [25%]). As the Vietnamese economy has struggled to regain its dynamism, a share of delegates appear to be willing to identify the leaders they deem to be most responsible.

The health (29% low confidence) and education ministers (36%) rounded out the top five lowest performers. These scores also provide valuable information, because these ministries are of critical importance to Vietnamese citizens. In the annual Provincial Administration Performance Index (PAPI) survey conducted by UNDP every year, the strongest correlates of citizens' satisfaction with government (measured on a 100-point feeling thermometer) are perceptions of health and

education services. This is the reason that PAPI weighs the public services index so highly (about 44% of the total index), above measures of participation, transparency, and corruption control. Further disaggregating the different public services that are measured, it is clear that education and health stand alone. Their relationship with citizens' satisfaction is twice the level of assessments of "infrastructure" and "law & order" (UNDP 2012).

Scrutiny and performance

Digging further into the vote totals, it becomes clear that level of scrutiny applied to particular officials had a large impact on their confidence ranking. On average, National Assembly Standing Committee (NASC) and committee heads performed much better than ministers. The average share of "low confidence" votes for members of the NASC was 3.4 percent, ranging from 1 percent to 12.6 percent. For members of government, the mean share of "low confidence" was 15.1 percent, ranging from 2.6 percent to 42 percent. This is a statistically significant difference. There are three possible reasons for the differences in scores. First, this may be professional, as delegates may be reluctant to vote against their bosses and colleagues. Second, it may be that delegates truly value the government NASC leadership over government for meritocratic or political reasons. But a third aspect may have to do with process and opportunity. Heads of the NASC did not have to participate in query sessions, and therefore were less subject to intense scrutiny.

To see how the level of scrutiny affects the confidence votes, I next analyze the data on ministers and whether they were subject to the query session. Ministers who never appeared before query sessions (i.e. defense, foreign affairs, justice) had the best scores. They received a "low confidence" average of 5.4 percent, compared to 19.5 percent for ministers who were queried. This difference is also statistically significant. Another way to see this is to rank order the scores with the individual receiving the lowest number of "low confidence" votes as number one. Not a single minister, who was subject to a query session, ranks in the top 25 delegates who received a confidence vote.

Moreover, there is a strong correlation between the number of times a particularly ministry (not necessarily the individual) was queried and the share of low confidence votes (bivariate correlation = .71). More precisely, Figure 5.2 shows that every time a ministry was subject to a query session between 2007 and today, they received 3.5 percent more "low confidence" votes.
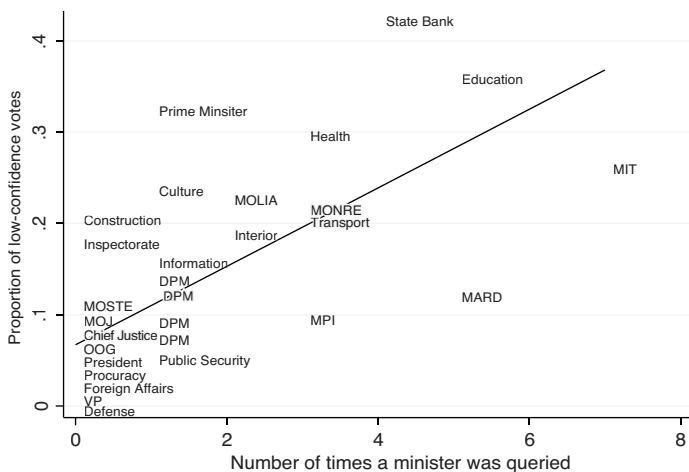
Figure 5.2 Relationship between query appearances and confidence voting

Note: This figure provides a bivariate correlation between number of total query appearances by a government official and the share of low confidence votes. The line represents the fitted values, with observed values labeled by the official's position. DPM is Deputy Prime Minister.

It is hard to prove statistically, but if you compare the no confidence vote to general impressions about how a minister performed in the query sessions (Did they give respectable answers? Were they well informed? Did they appear to understand how problems in their Ministry would be addressed? A number of follow-up questions?), ministers who performed adequately (judging by the analysis on blogs and media), received reasonable votes of confidence (Ministry of Planning and Investment = 9.2% low confidence; Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development = 11.6% low confidence). Ministers who were thought to perform poorly received very low scores as you note. The best examples of this are health and education, where the query sessions were quite vigorous and the delegates were panned in the media for having underperformed.

Information on elite-level politics

The VNA vote also provided a great deal of information on internal rifts. Figure 5.3 creates a measure of polarization for all government offices, which is essentially a standardized difference between high and low vote totals. A high polarization means that delegates were strongly divided in their position of candidates. One figure stands out as extremely polarized, PM Nguyen Tan Dung. This was expected, given that it was the
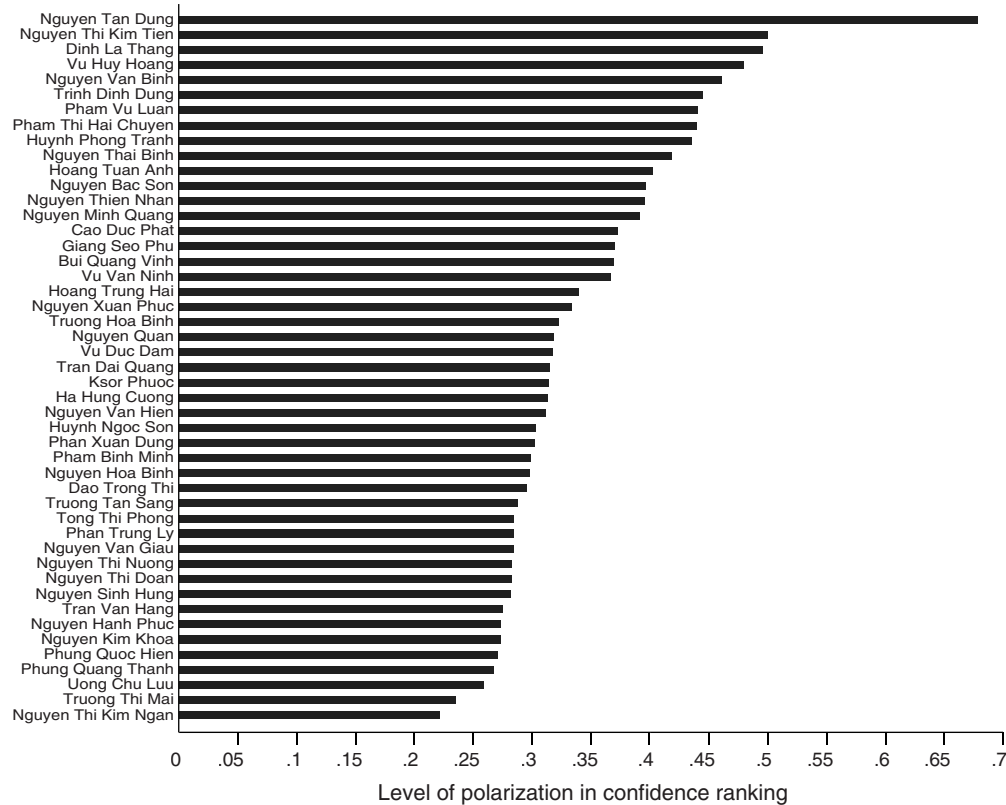
Figure 5.3   Polarization of confidence ranking of government officials

Note: Polarization is the scaled difference between the number of "high confidence" and "low confidence" votes received by a delegate. It is calculated using the formula: $polarized = \left(1 - \sqrt{(high\% - low\%)^2}\right) * (1 - medium\%)$

debate over his performance in the 6th Plenum, which stimulated the confidence proceeding in the first place (Thayer 2013). Two other officials, the ministers of transport (D. L. Thang) and health (N. T. K Tien) also stand out with close to 0.5 scores on polarization. Notably, the state bank governor (N. V. Binh), while unpopular, was not extremely polarized, as delegates converged in their negative views about his performance. Also notable were the extremely low polarization scores of other Politburo members, which congregate at the bottom of the chart.

Conclusion

Overall, the results of the confidence vote point in the same direction as conclusions in *Sunshine*. Both the query sessions and the confidence votes provide critical benefits to regime leaders. Valuable information is being revealed and delegates have an opportunity to probe issues that are of importance to Vietnamese citizens, as measured by independent public opinion surveys. And when ministers do not perform adequately, a portion of delegates are willing to use the no confidence vote to let them know. It would be even more useful if all officials were subject to the intense scrutiny of the query session. The strong variation in which ministries are subject to query sessions is very hard to explain.

How much the confidence vote really matters for promoting change in Vietnamese politics is hard to predict. I noted above that only 30 percent of delegates can be characterized as *active participants* in the query sessions. This again appears to be true in the no confidence vote. The very worst performance had only 42 percent low confidence votes. Because of this large number of fairly inactive delegates, there is very little danger that a top official will ever be removed by the institution. Schuler (2013) refers to this as the "Yes, Man" insurance plan. The Vietnamese government is best served when it gains information from a few active delegates, but stacks the body with enough "Yes, Men" that there is no risk of a surprise vote, sudden change in policy, or mobilization against the regime.

Thus, rather than playing a transformative role, the confidence vote appears to be a mechanism for information gathering in a semi-transparent setting. Top officials in Vietnam can learn about which issues are of important to Vietnamese citizens and can adjust policy and personnel to make improvements, if they choose. Similarly, individuals who received relatively low confidence votes can adjust their own performance, if they choose. The system is designed to be highly stable, providing opportunities for policy voice and information

acquisition without putting top leaders or delegates at risk through full transparency.

For outsiders attempting to derive normative lessons from VNA reforms in Vietnam, the results of the confidence votes and *Sunshine* pose a conundrum. It is impossible to understand the institutional reforms in the country as simply black or white. On the one hand, it is clear that nominally democratic reforms, such as opening electoral completion and increasing the power and professionalism of VNA delegates, strengthen Vietnam's current leadership as Vasavakul explains in her chapter. Far from being a vehicle for democratic reform as hoped by the dissidents profiled by Kerkvliet in his chapter, they actually postpone it. On the other hand, these reforms have increased the responsiveness of VNA delegates to civil society (as Wells-Dang explains) and local economy (as Jandl demonstrates), enhanced the quality of policy and public services, and ultimately improved the lives and welfare of Vietnam's citizens today.

Note

1. A *Google* search of the words "assertive" and "Vietnamese National Assembly" together yields 15,100 citations including country reports, journalistic accounts, academic articles, and even the *Transparency International* webpage. Early examples include Abuza 2001: 99; Thayer 2003: 28; Dalpino and Steinberg 2005: 84; Vo X. Han 2008: 34.