Epigenetics steps in where mapping the human genome left off. Nature says we inherit our genetic make-up or DNA code from our parents. Many believe this code and the genes it represents set the ‘program’ for who we are and what health risks we might possess. Nurture (or epigenetics) says that this program can be ‘hacked’ by life experience, either increasing or decreasing health risks already in our DNA code. Join our experts in a discussion about whether we can control our health destinies by controlling what we eat, drink, breathe, and where we live.

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A first in research: linking politicians’ behaviour to increased votes
Groundbreaking study to be published in top political science journal

BY KATIE CHALMERS-BROOKS
For The Bulletin

Researcher Royce Koop has some good news for Canadian democracy. Votes do in fact care about what members of Parliament do on the job, and will reward—or punish—their actions at the polls.

Koop is part of an international research group that discovered that MPs who introduced a private member bill had a seven per cent greater chance of winning their seat again.

“We were pretty shocked by this, shocked in a good way,” says Koop, noting that study after study reveals Canadians are disenchanted by how they’re represented in Ottawa. “It does seem that people are paying attention, maybe more than we give them credit for. Politicians should be aware of that.”

Proving whether or not representative democracy works as it’s designed to in tough. A key component of this political model requires citizens notice and respond to the behaviour of their elected officials. “But establishing that this relationship exists is actually tricky because many other variables intervene at some point,” says the political studies assistant professor.

He and his research colleagues (from Toronto, San Diego, Calif., and Williamsburg, Va.) figured out a way to eliminate these variables. They were first to recognize that the way private member bills are awarded to Canadian MPs provides the element of randomness required for a natural experiment. The Speaker of the House of Commons draws from a hat the names of those chosen to present a bill dealing with an issue of the MP’s choosing—from the repercussions of selling a local hospital to the creation of harsher penalties for offenders who wear masks during riots. The 308 MPs have an equal chance of being chosen. Since they aren’t picked based on other factors—like how good a communicator they are—it creates a level playing field to measure research outcomes.

“This random element provided us with a natural experiment where we could observe whether acquiring the right to introduce a private member bill had any effect on subsequent vote shares for MPs,” says Koop. “When we looked at the numbers, we were shocked to find that there was a clear relationship. MPs received a 2.5 per cent boost (in votes) solely as a result of winning the lottery and introducing one bill.”

This is the first study to show experimentally that citizens respond to and reward the activities of their elected MP. The findings were recently accepted for publication in the American Journal of Political Science, widely considered the discipline’s top journal.

The study stretched five years and covered the 2006 and 2008 federal elections. The researchers also compared other findings with Election Canada survey results which showed MPs who introduced bills experienced additional benefits: more campaign donations and greater likability among constituents.

Koop is now delving deeper into the relationship between how they communicate with their constituents. “It’s not just trained seals in Parliament, yelling at each other,” Koop says.

Researchers south of the border have done a lot of this type of observational research but that hasn’t been the case so far in Canada. “We’re trying to be trailblazers in this area,” Koop says.