

Paying-to-Play: How Members of Congress Purchase Their Seat At the Table

Nicholas R. Jenkins
Department of Political Science
University of California, Riverside
nicholas.jenkins@email.ucr.edu

March 23, 2021

Abstract

Scholars of money in politics have traditionally focused their attention on how outside groups use money to influence elected officials' behavior. As a result, less attention is given to investigate how elected officials themselves use money to advance their careers. In this article, I offer evidence that elected officials, like interest groups, also use money to gain political advantages. Specifically, using data on members' committee requests and their ultimate committee assignments, I show that members of Congress make larger contributions to parties and their parties' candidates when requesting prestige committees. Second, I show that steering committees reward these fundraising efforts by granting members their first choice committee assignments and that making contributions can help one receive their first choice assignment in fewer tries. If seats on Congressional committees can be bought with contributions to party committees, then a new equilibrium may develop in which members not only need money to win elections but also to receive positions in the legislature that will allow them to meaningfully represent their constituent's interests.

Key Words: Campaign Contributions; Committee Assignments; Committee Requests

Members of Congress have to pay the Republican or Democrat parties hundreds of thousands of dollars for official committee assignments. It's literally pay campaign money to play in Congress. The more financially lucrative the committee, the higher the fee.

Representative Justin Amash, *Twitter*

1 Introduction

At the beginning of the 117th Congress, Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) and Kathleen Rice (D-NY) faced-off for a seat on the House Energy and Commerce Committee (Ferris and Caygle 2020). This showdown was all but arranged by Speaker Pelosi (D-CA) and her leadership team when they submitted a list of their preferred candidates to the steering committee for just four of the five available seats - leaving New York to be decided by the committee. As the steering committee members debated each candidate's merits, several Democrats argued against Ocasio-Cortez, citing her efforts to help progressive candidates unseat Democratic incumbents and her refusal to pay her party dues.

At the same time Democrats were settling this standoff, a similar battle was playing out among Republicans. Michael Burgess (R-TX), Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-WA), and Greg Walden (R-OR) were all pursuing the top GOP seat on Energy and Commerce, and all had repeated meetings with the Republican Steering Committee (Brufke and Beavers 2020). In these meetings, each member touted their substantial contributions to the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC) and other Republican candidates, which the steering committee indicated was an essential consideration in the decision.

Although each party has its own steering committee to determine committee assignments, these two events demonstrate at least one commonality. Namely, the importance of a member's willingness and ability to support their party with campaign contributions. Typically, discussions on whether money buys political influence focus on spending by organized in-

terests and political action committees - not spending by members themselves. As a result, most research ignores how elected officials use campaign contributions to influence politics and investigates interest groups and lobbyists instead.

In this article, I examine members of Congress' campaign contribution behavior and the relationship between these contributions and committee request success. Using data on campaign contributions and committee requests between the 102nd and 110th Congress, I am able to find evidence in support of three claims. First, I present evidence to suggest that members have responded to fundraising pressure from party leaders by increasing the amount of money they contribute when requesting to serve on the valuable prestige committees. Second, I find evidence that steering committees reward these fundraising efforts by granting members their first choice committee assignments more often. Third, I show that members who make more contributions to parties and parties' candidates receive their requested committee assignments sooner than members who contribute less.

This is the first study to explore the relationship between committee requests and campaign contributions. Party leaders in Congress have begun to pursue aggressive fundraising strategies in the last couple of decades, and previous research has investigated how this shift has factored into leadership appointments (Heberlig, Hetherington, and Larson 2006; Heberlig and Larson 2007; Cann 2008a; Kistner, [Forthcoming](#)) and committee transfers (Heberlig 2003), but none have examined how it affects committee request success. This study provides insight into how members respond to pressure to fundraise for their party and the value that party leaders have assigned to different types of committee assignments. If contributions are important for a member's initial assignment to the most important committees in Congress, then the representational value of committee assignments becomes unclear.

Committees provide members with a meaningful venue to advocate for their district's interests and oversee the activities of vital industries. Thus they are a vital component of creating an effective representative democracy. If assignments are allocated to the highest

bidder, rather than those with the greatest representational need, then a member's ability to represent their constituents will become contingent on their ability to contribute to the collective party good. Moreover, this makes it unclear whether members can meaningfully regulate corporate activities. This would mean that to secure better committee assignments, members need more money, which requires spending more time fundraising instead of tending to their constituents and increases our representatives' dependence on those with the most campaign contributions to contribute. Ultimately, this set of incentives could create a legislative body where the only members who last are those that are committed to spending a significant amount of time fundraising for their party. Members with more idealistic goals, making good policy, for example, will be prevented from being placed into an environment (committee) that would provide an opportunity for them to have an impact on public policy.

2 “Buying In” to the Committee System

Party leaders have long used institutional arrangements to maintain their majority status in Congress and incentivize rank and file members to contribute to the collective party good (Cox and McCubbins 1993; Rohde 1994; Aldrich 1995). Over the last several decades, however, competition for majority control in Congress has intensified, and party leaders have had to devise new strategies to secure their majority status (Heberlig 2003). One of the most significant strategic developments is the pressure leaders have placed on members to contribute to their party's fundraising efforts.

Traditionally, party leadership has incentivized qualities like loyalty and seniority, to increase party voting on important role calls (Cox and McCubbins 2005), and policy expertise (Krehbiel 1992) by rewarding members with leadership positions, favorable treatment of legislation, information, and district visits from popular members. Although leaders still desire these characteristics, a growing body of literature suggests that demands for fundraising are slowly taking over.

As competition for majority status in Congress increased, party leaders started shifting their focus towards raising more money to support their members' campaigns. Fundraising has become so crucial to party leaders that members are expected to spend 30 hours a week on the phone at Republican and Democratic call centers to raise money for their party (O'Donnell 2016). Congressman David Jolly (R-FL) was so frustrated with this pressure that he introduced the Stop Act, an amendment to the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971 to "prohibit an individual holding federal office from soliciting funds directly from any person: (1) for or on behalf of any political committee, or (2) for or on the behalf of any person for use for federal election activity", in the 114th Congress (Stop Act 2016). Unfortunately, the bill only attracted nine co-sponsors and ultimately expired at the end of the session without a vote.

The demand for fundraising extends to members of both parties and has increased over time. Figure 1 shows the amount of money per candidate contributed by candidates to their party's Congressional campaign committee (CCC) and their party's candidates. For both parties, contributions to the CCCs and party candidates show a distinct upward trend, reaching a high of nearly \$300,000 per candidate.

Party leaders, however, do more than just demand that members fundraise for their party. Instead, they offer valuable rewards to members in exchange for their fundraising prowess. For example, fundraising ability has become an important consideration for leadership positions (Heberlig, Hetherington, and Larson 2006; Heberlig and Larson 2007; Cann 2008b), committee chairmanships (Kistner, [Forthcoming](#)), and committee transfers (Heberlig 2003). Indeed, party leaders have begun placing such an emphasis on fundraising ability as a primary concern that they have assigned freshmen to seats on prestigious committees in an attempt to help them raise money for the next election cycle (Adler and Cayton 2020).

The push for increased fundraising has even developed into more formal arrangements. The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC), for example, created a points program where members receive points for activities such as hosting fundraising events for

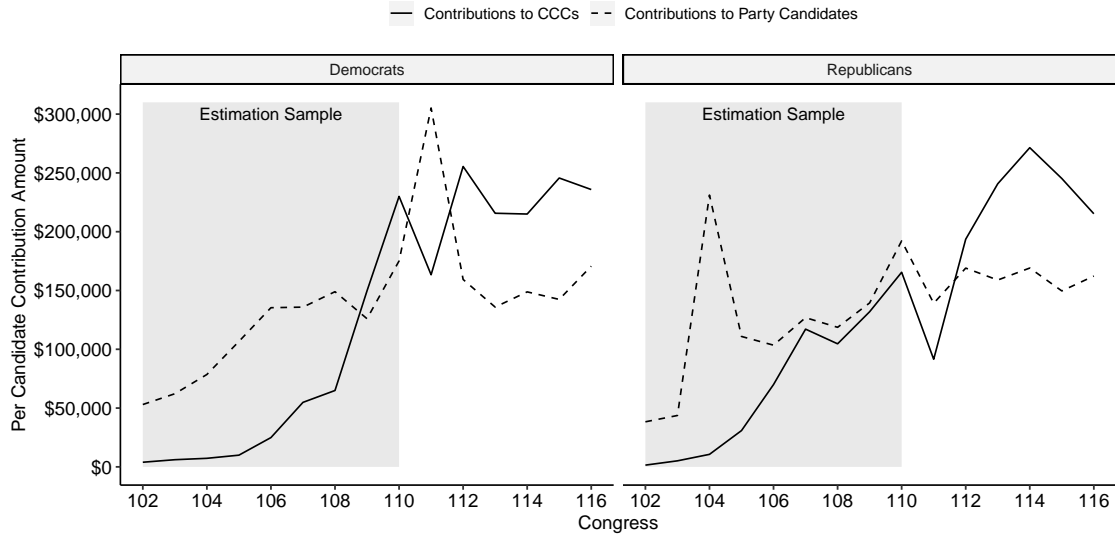


Figure 1: **Per Candidate Contribution Patterns Over Time.** This figure shows the contribution patterns of Democratic and Republican members of Congress over time. The shaded region indicates the portion of data used in this study.

Democratic challengers, making contributions to a colleague’s campaign or leadership PAC, and supporting the DCCC’s fundraising efforts.¹ Democratic members’ points are then posted for all members of the party to see and are used in deciding leadership appointments and can even grant members more favorable treatment of their legislation (Grim and Aida Chávez 2019).

Similarly, both the Republican and Democratic parties have instituted the practice of attaching fundraising targets to leadership positions and committee seats. For the 2020 cycle, DCCC dues range from \$150,000 for more junior members up to \$1,000,000 for the Speaker of the House, and seats on the prestigious Ways and Means, Appropriations, Energy and Commerce, and Financial Services committees all have a higher price than other non-exclusive committees.²

In response to these fundraising pressures and incentives, members should adjust their committee request strategies to reflect the value of fundraising ability. When formulating

1. Leaked documents outlining the DCCC points program are found here: <https://beta.documentcloud.org/documents/6361076-2020-Member-Points-One-Pager>.

2. These documents are found online from various sources: 2020 Cycle DCCC Dues, 2012 Cycle DCCC Dues, 2012 Cycle NRCC Dues, <https://www.issueone.org/price-of-power/>.

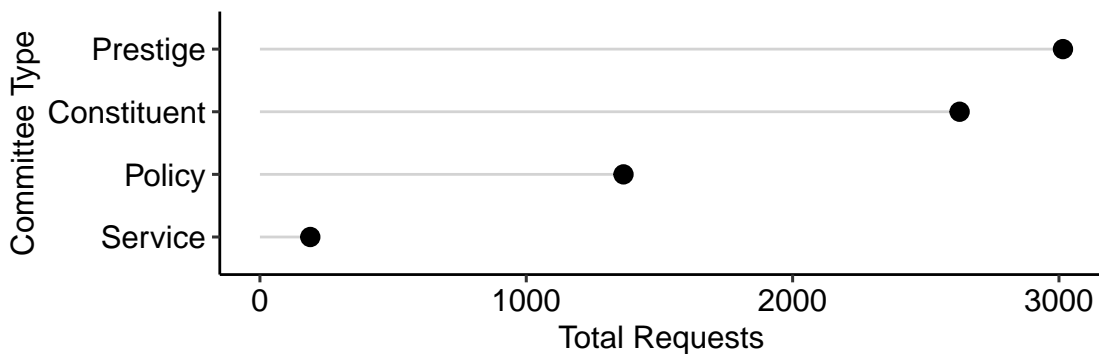


Figure 2: **Total Requests by Committee Type From the 80th to the 110th Congress.** This figure shows the total number of requests submitted by members of both parties and committee type between the 80th and 110th Congresses.

these request lists, members consult with party leaders, steering committee members, colleagues, state delegation members, and interest groups (Shepsle 1978; Padgett 1990). As a result, members know that leaders and steering committees want committee members with a demonstrated commitment to fundraising. With this information, members can adjust their behavior to maximize their chances of receiving an assignment to a top choice committee.

However, not all committees are equally valuable for party leaders and members. The “prestige committees” are much more valuable to members and party leaders because of high-profile issues they have jurisdiction over (Jewell and Chi-Hung 1974; Shepsle 1978; Deering and Smith 1997; Frisch and Kelly 2006a). Although absent from any formal rule, both the Democratic and Republican parties restrict the ability of members to serve on other committees in addition to the prestige committees because of their importance to party agendas (Skinner 2014). Prestige committees also attract the highest levels of lobbying and campaign contributions (Adler and Cayton 2020). Both the caliber of policy issues that these committees deal with and the level of money flowing to their members, provide strong incentives for members wishing to make good public policy and achieve influence in the chamber and party leaders working to accomplish their party’s most important policy goals to demand and control seats on these committees.

Figure 2 shows the total number of committee requests by committee type from the 80th

to the 110th Congress. Although constituent requests are a close second, prestige requests clearly have the highest demand. Not only is the demand higher for prestige committees, but steering committees are a lot more selective when making assignments to them (Shepsle 1978; Frisch and Kelly 2006a). For example, previous work finds that party loyalty is an important consideration for assignments to prestige committees (Cox and McCubbins 1993; Maltzman 2001). Additionally, both the DCCC and NRCC have higher fundraising targets for the prestige committees, indicating their elevated importance.

As a result of the growing importance of fundraising to parties in Congress, I argue that members will respond to these pressures by using contributions to their party and party's candidates to increase the chances of receiving a top choice committee assignment. Because of the high value of prestige committees to both members and party leaders, members should make more contributions when requesting these committees than policy or constituent committees. This leads to my first two hypotheses (H1 and H2):

Hypothesis 1 *Members requesting prestige committees will make larger contributions to their party and party's candidates than members who request constituent committees.*

Hypothesis 2 *Members requesting prestige committees will make larger contributions to their party and party's candidates than members who request policy committees.*

Members are not adopting this contribution strategy *ad hoc*, however. Rather, they respond to the incentives that their party leaders have established. Contributions that advance the party's fundraising goals will be rewarded with seats on desired committees. This leads to my third hypothesis (H3):

Hypothesis 3 *Compared to members who contribute less, members who make more contributions to their parties and parties' candidates are more likely to receive a top requested committee assignment.*

A preliminary look at the data finds some evidence to support H3. Figure 3 shows the distribution of successful and unsuccessful committee requests by the type of committee

requested. It shows that contributions are associated with successful committee requests for prestige committees but not policy or constituent committees.

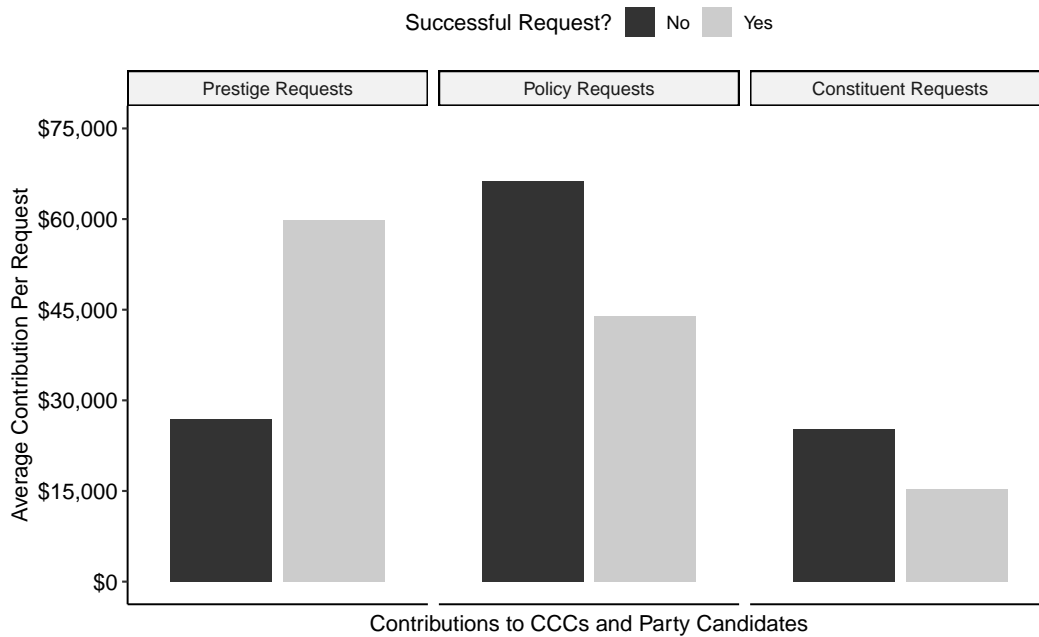


Figure 3: **Contributions per Committee Request.** This figure shows per request contributions made to the CCCs and party candidates by request success. It shows that requests to prestige committees that are accompanied by more contributions are also more successful. This pattern does not hold for requests made to policy or constituent committees.

Finally, if fundraising ability is an important consideration for steering committees when making committee assignments, then members who made more contributions should receive their initial assignment to a first choice prestige committee sooner than members make fewer contributions. This motivates my last hypothesis (H4):

Hypothesis 4 *Member who contribute more money will receive their initial prestige request sooner than members who contribute less.*

3 Data

The primary data to test these hypotheses is the committee request data for members from the 102nd to the 110th Congress (Frisch and Kelly 2006b). These data allow for several

important advancements on the prior literature. First, committee requests are the official medium by which member express their preferences. Although there is some debate, a surprising number of requests are not accommodated, and a large percentage of members get assigned to committees that did not appear anywhere on their request list (Padgett 1990). As a result, data on the ultimate assignment of members is a poor measure of members' intentions since it potentially mixes their preferences with the politics of the assignment process, which is mostly out of the member's control. Using committee transfers suffers from these same issues as well.

Second, using committee request data enables an investigation of members' contribution strategies. Request lists are solicited before the beginning of each Congressional session and thus reflect all of the information each member has about which committees they want to serve on and their probability of assignment (Shepsle 1975, 1978). Therefore, when each request is made, it reflects the member's belief about whether or not contributions to their party's fundraising efforts matter. As a result, the request data can reveal how members use contributions when requesting committees.

For member contributions, I focus on those made to the Congressional campaign committees and party candidates from a member's campaign committee or leadership PAC in the election cycle before a given session of Congress. Committee types are classified into prestige, policy, and constituent committees.³

3. Prestige committees consist of Appropriations, Rules, Ways and Means, Energy and Commerce (Energy and Commerce became a prestige committee for Democrats in the 104th Congress), and Financial Services (Financial Services became a prestige committee for Democrats in the 109th Congress) (Skinner 2014). Policy committees consist of Education and Labor, Foreign Affairs, Government Operations, Judiciary, and Intelligence. Constituent committees consist of Agriculture; Armed Services; Natural Resources; Merchant Marine and Fisheries; Public Works and Transportation; Science, Space, and Technology; Small Business; and Veterans Affairs. The typologies for policy and constituent committees comes from Deering and Smith (1997).

4 Empirical Strategy

4.1 Modeling Member Contributions

To describe the data generating process of Congressional campaign contributions, I use a gamma likelihood function since the gamma distribution describes a data generating process for a random variable with only positive real number outcomes $y \in \mathbb{R}^+$. However, not all members make contributions to their party or party’s candidates (45 percent of candidates in the sample did not contribute to their party or party’s candidates). This creates a problem for the gamma likelihood since the gamma distribution is not defined for values of zero. To account for this, I use a hurdle-gamma likelihood to model contributions. The hurdle-gamma likelihood is a mixture of a Bernoulli and gamma process and is easily summarized as $Z\text{Gamma}(\pi, \mu, \theta)$ where π indicates the probability of a zero, and non-zero outcomes are described by a mean μ and rate θ .⁴ Importantly, posterior predictive checks reveal that the hurdle-gamma likelihood substantially outperforms a model with a Gaussian likelihood. Formally, the model is defined as:

$$y_i \sim Z\text{Gamma}(\pi_{it}, \mu_{it}, \theta_{it}) \tag{1}$$

$$\log\left(\frac{\pi_{it}}{1 - \pi_{it}}\right) = \alpha_\pi + \alpha_{congress[t]} + \alpha_{state[i]} + \mathbf{X}\boldsymbol{\beta}_\pi \tag{2}$$

$$\log(\mu_{it}) = \alpha_\mu + \alpha_{congress[t]} + \alpha_{state[i]} + \mathbf{X}\boldsymbol{\beta}_\mu \tag{3}$$

where i indexes individuals, t indexes time, \mathbf{X} is a matrix of variables, and $\boldsymbol{\beta}_\mu$ and $\boldsymbol{\beta}_\pi$ are the corresponding coefficient vectors. To estimate how much a member contributes to their party’s campaign committee, I use the type of committee requested (prestige, policy, or constituency) with constituent committee request as the reference group. To account for other “pre-treatment” differences between members who made different levels of contributions and the type of committee they request to serve on, I include the member’s seniority, whether or

4. For more information on the mathematical details, see McCullagh and Nelder (1989)

not they are a member of the majority party in a given Congress, the member’s party ID, and their party unity voting score lagged by one Congressional session. To estimate whether or not a member contributes to their party’s campaign committee, I use these same covariates. Finally, I adjust for differences over time and across states by including varying-intercepts for both Congressional session and the member’s state.⁵

4.2 Modeling Request Success

To estimate the relationship between contributions to parties and parties’ candidates and committee request success, I use two distinct empirical strategies. First, I use the full sample to model the probability of an individual receiving a requested committee assignment as a function of how much money a member gave to their party and party’s candidates. This strategy allows for an estimate of the impact of contributions on request success across all observed members. Second, I use a discrete-time hazard model to estimate the occurrence of receiving a requested committee assignment over time as a function of how much money a member gave to their party and party’s candidates. This procedure allows me to learn how contributions affect request success over time from members who we observe making repeated attempts to secure the same committee assignment.

4.2.1 Logistic Regression

To model the probability of receiving a requested committee assignment, I use a Bernoulli likelihood function with a Logit link function:

$$y_{it} \sim \text{Bernoulli}(p_{it}) \tag{4}$$

$$\log\left(\frac{p_{ij}}{1 - p_{ij}}\right) = \alpha + \alpha_{congress[t]} + \alpha_{state[i]} + \beta_{request[i]} \text{Contributions}_{it} + \mathbf{X}\boldsymbol{\beta}_{\mu} \tag{5}$$

5. I use the term “adjustment variable” rather than “control variable” to avoid causal language that should only be used with causal inference research designs.

where i indexes individuals and t indexes time.⁶ $\beta_{request_i}$ estimates the effect of member contributions for each committee request type (prestige, policy, constituent) and $X_{it}\beta$ is a matrix of predictor variables include the predictor of interest, contributions to party committees, along with other “pre-treatment” variables to adjust for a member’s seniority, whether or not the member is a member of the Republican party (0-1 indicator), whether or not a member is a member of the majority party in Congress, the members party ID, their party unity voting score lagged by one Congressional session, and indicator variables for the type of committee they requested (policy, prestige, or constituent committee) with constituent committee as the reference category. Finally, to aid with coefficient interpretation by placing the continuous predictors on the same scale as the binary outcome, I standardize all continuous variables by subtracting the mean and dividing by two standard deviations (Gelman, Hill, and Vehtari 2020). This changes the interpretation of each continuous variable to be a 1-unit change corresponding to a change from 1 standard deviation below the mean, to 1 standard deviation above the mean.

Next, the nested data structure provides an opportunity to adjust for variables related to either the Congressional session in which the request and assignment was made, or the state that the requestor is from. For example, members are unlikely to receive an assignment to, and possibly make a request for, a committee that has no vacant seats and these vacancies vary from one Congressional session to the next (Shepsle 1978). Similarly, when making committee assignments steering committees work to balance the geographic representation of committees by assigning representatives from a range of states to ensure that all relevant states are represented on a given committee (Padgett 1990). Ultimately, this means that the probability that a member receives a requested assignment depends on how well that member’s state is currently represented on the requested committee. To account for these factors, I include varying intercepts for both states and Congressional sessions.

6. Although members can request multiple committees, in ranked order, I only consider whether a member received their first choice committee. I assume that members list their most preferred committee first (Frisch and Kelly 2006a).

4.2.2 Discrete-Time Hazard Model

In addition to estimating the probability of receiving a requested committee assignment, these data allow for an analysis of the point in time that individuals receive requested assignments as a function of covariates. Of the 935 members of Congress in the full sample, 897 members are observed making requests for the same committee seat over time. 718 of these members receive their requested assignment on their first try, 145 receive it on their second try, 31 receive it on their third try, and 3 receive it on their fourth try.⁷ Using these data, I model the event occurrence of receiving a requested assignment to learn how the trajectory of contributions to parties and parties' candidates over time affect the occurrence of receiving a requested assignment. In other words, this analysis allows for an investigation of how changes in the level of contributions made by a member of Congress over time, as they make repeated attempts to secure a committee assignment, affect when their request is granted. Formally, this model is defined as:

$$y_{it} \sim \text{Bernoulli}(p_{it}) \tag{6}$$

$$\log\left(\frac{p_{it}}{1-p_{it}}\right) = [\alpha_1 \text{Time}_{1it} + \dots + \alpha_4 \text{Time}_{4it}] + [\beta_{\text{request}_i} \text{Contributions}_{it} + \mathbf{X}\boldsymbol{\beta}_\mu] \tag{7}$$

where i indexes individuals and t indexes time. β_{request_i} is the estimate of contributions for each type of committee request (prestige, policy, constituent) and $X_{it}\boldsymbol{\beta}$ is a matrix of predictor variables include the predictor of interest, contributions to party committees, along with other “pre-treatment” variables to adjust for a member’s seniority, whether or not the member is a member of the Republican party (0-1 indicator), whether or not a member is a member of the majority party in Congress, the members party ID, and their party unity voting score lagged by one Congressional session.

7. After a member receives their requested assignment, they exit the sample.

5 Model Results and Evaluation of Evidence

Before discussing results, it is important to clarify the goal of these analyses. Most cautiously, the results should be interpreted descriptively. These models are useful in identifying contribution patterns of members and the probability of their associations with committee request behavior and ultimate assignment. While the contribution data used is that during the member’s campaign cycle and thus temporally prior to their committee requests and assignments, there is no consideration of the qualitative factors involved with making requests and receiving assignments. Members may, for example, make informal arrangements with other members or party leaders to secure assignments (Cox and McCubbins 1993) and consult with these individuals on which committees to request (Shepsle 1978; Padgett 1990). As a result, these strategic actions are confounding factors that make causal identification difficult, if not impossible.

These analyses still yield important advancements to our understanding of Congress and how members use campaign contributions despite these confounders. Numerous antidotal accounts from investigative journalists (Grim and Siddiqui 2013; Black 2017; Grim and Aída Chávez 2019; Olsen-Phillips 2019; Currinder 2019; Brufke and Beavers 2020; Ferris and Caygle 2020; Teachout 2020) and members themselves (*C-Span 2 Book TV After Words* 2017) discuss the importance of fundraising as a consideration for committee assignments. These antidotal accounts entail a causal mechanism that claims that contributions made to Congressional campaign committees and other candidates increase the probability that a member gets assigned to a desired committee. While my empirical strategy cannot directly test this causal mechanism, it can provide descriptive evidence consistent with it.

To summarize, my analyses should be interpreted purely on a descriptive basis. As such, I will be cautious to interpret the results as comparisons between candidates rather than counterfactual within-candidate changes, as would be warranted if the assumptions of causal identification are met. Additionally, I use the term “adjustment variable” rather than “control variable” to further distance myself from the causal language of experimental

designs.

5.1 Member Contributions and Committee Requests

Figure 4 shows the results of hurdle-gamma models predicting the total amount of contributions that a member will make as a function of the type of committee that they request. Overall, I find strong support for H1. Compared to members who request constituent committees, contributions from members who request prestige committees are expected to be about 26 percent higher (estimate = 0.255, 90% HDI [0.021, 0.480]).⁸ This coefficient has a 96 percent probability of being positive, and a Bayes factor of 28 which means that the hypothesis that the coefficient is positive is 28 times more likely than it being negative. Thus, this constitutes strong evidence in favor of H1 (Raftery 1995).

The support for H2, that members should make more contributions for prestige requests than policy requests, is also strong. Members making prestige requests are expected to give a little over 20 percent more contributions than those making policy requests (estimate = 0.226, 90% HDI [0.017, 0.422]). The posterior for this contrast has a 96 percent probability of being positive, and it is 28 times more likely to be positive than negative.

These findings are also consistent with the journalist reports that both the Democratic and Republican parties have a scheduled committee fee structure that requires higher payments for more highly demanded committees (Olsen-Phillips 2019; Grim and Aida Chávez 2019; *C-Span 2 Book TV After Words* 2017; Buck and Blankschaen 2017) as well as comments made by members of Congress like Justin Amash and Ken Buck, which furthers bolsters their credibility.

If fundraising is an important factor in making committee assignment, or if members at least believe that it is, then we should expect to see that members make contributions to their party and party's candidates before requesting committees. Moreover, the amount that

8. I use 90% intervals rather than 95% because of the relatively low effective sample sizes for each coefficient. Kruschke (2014) suggests only using 95% credible intervals when the effective sample size is at least 10,000 to ensure a reasonably accurate estimate of the highest density region.

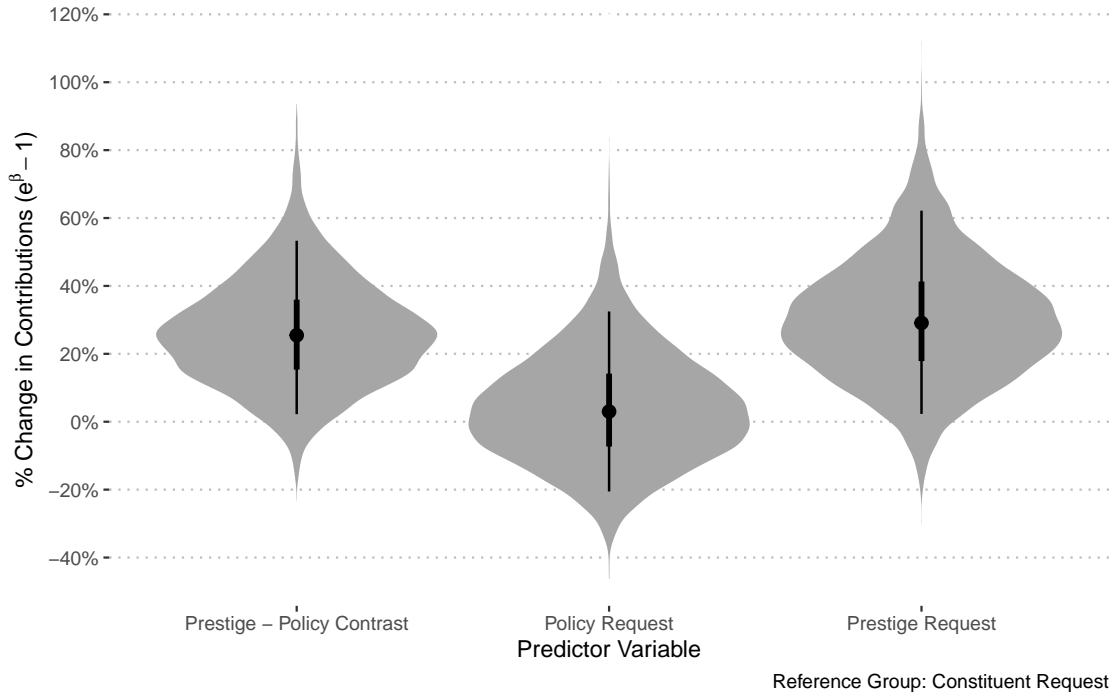


Figure 4: **Estimation Results of Committee Request Types and Member Contributions.** This figure visualizes the results of the models predicting total contributions made by members. It displays the median point estimate with 50% and 90% credible intervals. Analyses use four Markov chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) chains at 4,000 iterations each with a warmup period of 1,000 samples using the Hamiltonian Monte Carlo algorithm. All chains indicate convergence with every \hat{R} value being less than 1.01.

members give should be scaled to the prices that party leaders assign to different committee seats. Seats on prestige committees are more expensive than those on policy or constituent committees. The results of this first analysis are consistent with these expectations, indicating some degree of strategy in members' request behavior.

5.2 Contributions and the Probability of Assignment

Figure 5 displays the results of the models testing H3. The evidence for H3, that members who make more contributions to their parties and parties' candidates are more likely to receive a top requested committee, is strong, however it only exists for prestige committee requests. Comparing two members who differ in how much they contribute to their party, the model predicts a positive difference in the relative probability of receiving a first choice

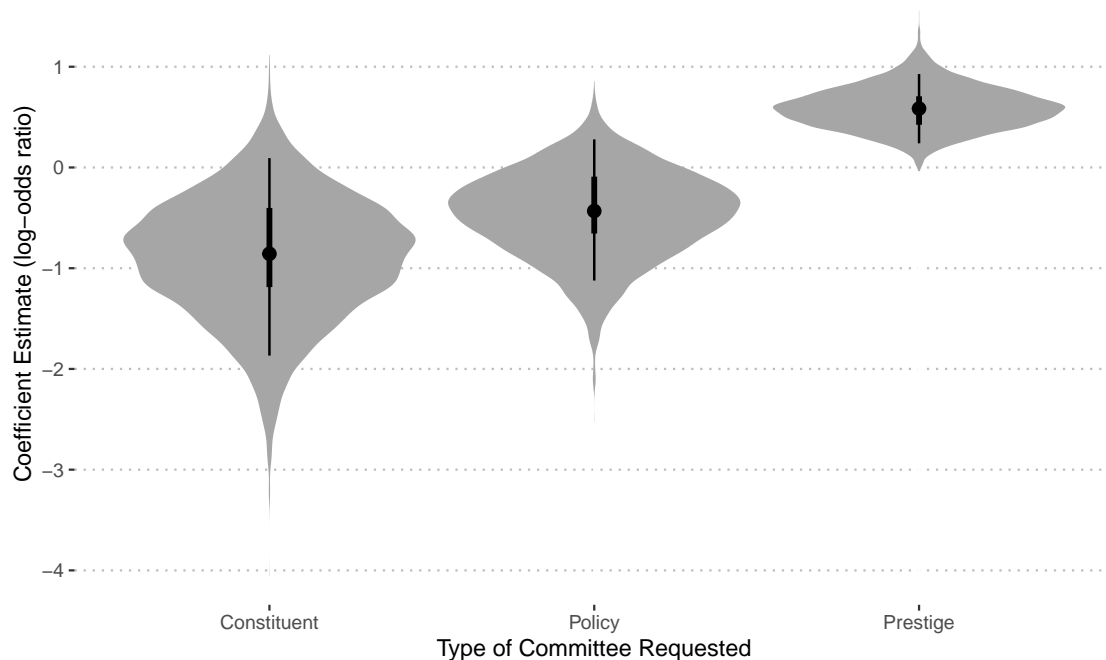


Figure 5: **Estimation Results of Member Contributions and Request Success.** This figure visualizes the results of the models predicting committee request success as a function of member contributions. It displays the median point estimate with 50% and 90% credible intervals. Analyses use four Markov chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) chains at 4,000 iterations each with a warmup period of 1,000 samples using the Hamiltonian Monte Carlo algorithm. All chains indicate convergence with every \hat{R} value being less than 1.01

committee of 64 percent for prestige requests (estimate = 0.585, 90% HDI [0.240, 0.927]).⁹ By contrast, members who make more contributions to their parties and parties' candidates are 30 percent (estimate = -0.857, 90% HDI [-1.868, 0.093]) and 39 percent (estimate = -0.432, 90% HDI [-1.123, 0.279]) more likely to receive top requests for constituent and policy committees, respectively. Importantly, these results are consistent with related research (that total contributions to Congressional campaign committees and other candidates are associated with a greater likelihood of transferring to a prestige committee (Heberlig 2003)) and numerous journalist reports.

9. $\text{logit}^{-1}(0.585) \approx 0.64$.

5.3 Contributions and the Timing of Request Success

To understand how contributions affect when members first receive their top committee request, Figure 6 displays the fitted hazard and survival functions. The hazard functions, in the top panel, show the probability (also known as risk) of receiving a requested committee assignment in each time period. These figures show that the rate at which members receive constituent committee requests is higher in every period than the rate at which members receive policy or prestige requests. Interesting, the probability of receiving a requested assignment conditional on the level of contributions is opposite of what is expected for constituent and policy committee requests. For these committees, members who give one standard deviation below the mean level of contributions have lower probabilities of receiving their request. Conversely, for prestige requests members who give one standard deviation above the mean have a higher probability of receiving their request in each period.

The bottom panel of Figure 6 shows the survival functions by the type of committee requested. These functions show the probability that a member will not receive an initial first choice committee request over time conditional on the level of contributions that a member makes. So, the left side plot of the bottom panel shows that by period 3, virtually everyone who has been requesting a constituent committee receive their first choice constituent committee assignment. It makes sense that the survival function would decrease more rapidly for individuals requesting constituent committees since these assignments are less competitive and party leaders do not exercise the same level of control over them as they do with prestige committees. There is a higher survival rate among individuals who request policy committees, but it is not as high as the survival rate for prestige requestors.

For individuals who request prestige committees and make contributions to their party and party's candidates at a level of one standard deviation below the mean, the probability that they will not receive their request and will need to request it a second time in the next Congress is about 75 percent. For individual who contribute one standard deviation above the mean, this probability drops to about 60 percent. Thus, member contributions increase

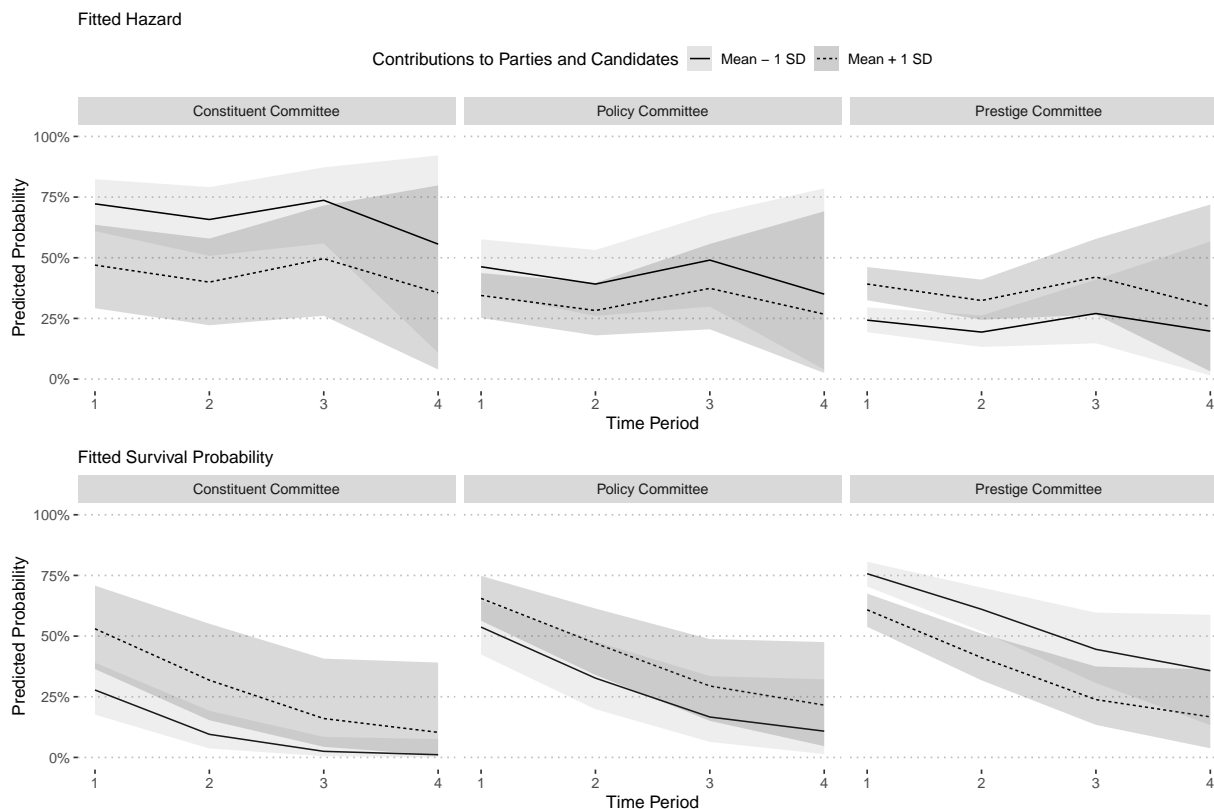


Figure 6: **When Members Receive a Requested Assignment.** This figure visualizes how contributions to parties and their parties’ candidates affect when they initially receive a first choice committee assignment.

the probability of a member receiving a prestige request on their first try. By a member’s second attempt, these rates are about 60 and 35 percent for those making contributions one standard deviation below and above the mean, respectively. This evidence indicates that members who make more contributions to their parties and parties’ candidates are more likely to receive a requested prestige committee sooner than their colleagues who make fewer contributions.

In summary, the evidence presented is consistent with the general argument that members strategically use campaign contributions to advance their political careers. Specifically, members use campaign contributions to help secure committee assignments that will provide opportunities to make good public policy, secure power in Congress, and help with re-election (Fenno 1977). Members have responded to their parties’ demands for campaign funds by

increasing the amount of money they give when making requests to prestige committees. Further, steering committees reward these contributions by assigning members to their first choice committees. Finally, I find evidence to suggest that making contributions increases the timing of when members first receive a requested prestige committee.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

In summary, I find strong statistical evidence that members contribute non-trivial amounts of money to their parties and parties' candidates when requesting prestige committees. Moreover, they make larger contributions to their parties and parties' candidates for prestige requests than they do for policy or constituent requests. These findings are further bolstered by journalist reports and comments from Members of Congress that Republican and Democrat party leaders push their members to contribute to their campaign committees for official committee assignments. Second, I find that member contributions to their parties and parties' candidates increase the probability that a member receives their first choice committee. When competition for committee seats is high, the effect of contributions is intensified, suggesting that steering committee members use contributions to determine which requestors will receive seats when considering a high volume of requests.

While these results may not seem all that surprising, their normative implications are striking. The committee system in Congress was intended to provide members with an opportunity to represent their constituents on policies specific to their interests. Committees provide a venue in which members can exercise their expertise to formulate efficient and effective legislation to the benefit of all Americans. If committee seats are allocated on the basis of money, rather than merit or fit, can committee still fulfill these important roles?

Partisan pressures to maintain majority status has resulted in tight control over the legislative agenda and has arguable elevated the importance of the prestige committees. This increased importance makes it all the more vital for good public policy that prestige com-

mittees are composed of the most expert and focused members. If instead, they are filled with each parties' best fundraisers, then it becomes unclear how effectively these committees can formulate public policy that has the best interests of the American people in mind.

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