

The Logic to Senate Committee Assignments: Committees and Electoral Vulnerability
with Cross Pressured Senators

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Abstract

Is there an electoral calculus to committee assignments in the Senate? Commenting on the importance of committees, Woodrow Wilson said, “Congress in session is Congress on public exhibition, whilst Congress in its Committee Rooms is Congress at work.” Indeed, as important as committees are to the legislative process, committee assignments hold just as much importance for senators. Mayhew (1978) argues that legislators can use committee assignments to bolster their chances at completing their goals of reelection, power, and good public policy. In this paper, we examine committee assignments and the logic behind the appointments to them. Indeed, while there is a logic for party leaders to follow, we find that there is an electoral logic that is also in play with committee assignments.

Introduction

In his book addressing the United States Senate, Robert Byrd wrote, “As all new senators realize, their careers in this institution will largely be determined by the committee assignments they receive” (Byrd 1988, 651). Indeed, as Byrd writes of his own experiences in the Senate, scholars have too found that much of the legislative activities that senators partake in are driven by their work in their committees (Smith 1989). As a result, senators have to be keenly aware of the logic behind what committees they should serve on. In his seminal book tying electoral politics to the legislative process, Mayhew (1974) argues that legislators have three goals: good public policy, power, and reelection. Smith and Deering (1990) find that these goals are often translated into committee work, in which senators seek opportunities to change policy, enhance their influence within the chamber, and respond to constituent interests.

Indeed, a great deal of political science scholarship has examined this relationship finding that junior senators often lost out to senior senators with regards to prime committee assignments, especially before the 1980s (see: Foley 1980; Sinclair 1988; 1989 who argue that the change took place in the 1950s and 1960s and Arnold 2001 who argues that the change took place in 1977). Indeed, as Sinclair (1988) finds, members of the inner club, or the more senior members of the Democratic caucus, monopolized the most valuable committee assignments. Yet in the modern era, the inner club and seniority system has deteriorated in lieu of a more democratic system in which junior senators have a more significant influence over their own committee assignments. In this article, we seek to examine the logic behind committee assignments. Do senators seek electoral gains in their committee assignments? Examining data on committee assignments from

2010 to 2014, we find that senators, especially those in vulnerable positions, are strategic in their choice of committee assignments. Specifically, we find that senators representing swing states choose to sit on committees that affect broad policy rather than regional or local interests. We also find that moderate senators sit on fewer powerful committees than their more ideological counterparts. We argue that this is in large part due to the electoral circumstances surrounding cross-pressured senators.

The Logic of Committee Assignments

To date, there has been a great deal of research on committee assignments and committee selection on the US House of Representatives (See for example, Cox and McCubbins 1993; Shepsle and Weingast 1994; Weingast and Marshall 1988). Perhaps one of the reasons why committee selection research has focused on the House of Representatives is because of the relative difference in workload between the two chambers. Senators, for example, are expected to serve on more committees than their House counterparts, and are often have to choose and prioritize between committee obligations (Evans 1991). Indeed, Sinclair (1988) finds that the number of committees an average senator sits on has grown substantially since the 1950s despite the number of standing committees growing only by two in the same time span.

Still, much of the logic in choosing committee assignments in the House still applies to the Senate: Senators should choose their committee assignments based on power and prestige, constituency representation, electoral security, and policy preference (Hess 1986). In his seminal study on congressional committees, Richard Fenno (1973) finds that legislators base their assignment requests primarily on a handful of factors,

mostly related to their reelection prospects, their previous political or occupational background, and their concerns for policy issues. Bullock (1985) echoes this sentiment arguing that power and prestige also plays a large role in the decision-making.

Still, much of the scholarship on committee selection and requests is based in assessing the value of committee assignments as well as the value that senators place on them. For example, Endersby and McCurdy (1996) measure the value of committee assignments by examining which committees senators switch to as their seniority and clout increases. Stewart and Groseclose (1999) examine the value of committee assignments for Senators and find that the most prestigious committees are those that are associated with power while the least prestigious are committees that are associated with committees that have a reputation of constituency orientation. While prestige and power are certainly goals that senators seek and pursue, we argue that senators, particularly those that are cross-pressured, are less concerned with power and more concerned with ensuring their reelection prospects. As a result, we seek to find the logic behind committee selection in the US Senate. In the following section, we discuss the difference in electoral circumstances between moderate, cross-pressured senators, and safe and ideologically polarized senators.

Cross-Pressured Senators

A central tenant of modern studies of the United States Senate revolves around the growing trend of polarization and the disappearance of the ideological moderate senators that once dominated the chamber. Indeed, many scholars have demonstrated that few centrists remain in today's Senate (Bond, Fleisher, and Stonecash 2009; Mayhew 2005; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2008; Sinclair 2006, Theriault 2008). Even the moderates

that do exist have to deal with new types of constituencies that are more polarized than cohorts before, ever complicating their electoral calculus.

Indeed, today's moderates are less ideologically moderate by choice than by necessity. Assumed away in much of the scholarship on the Senate is that all Senators have single-peaked preferences. However, voters today are voting more in line with their ideology and partisanship and as such, fewer moderates from both parties are elected (Fiorina 2010). As a result, the moderates of today's Senate overwhelmingly come from traditional swing states with dual peaked preferences (e.g. Florida, Ohio, Virginia), or from states in which the Senator holds the opposite ideology of the state (e.g. Democrat Mark Pryor from Republican Arkansas) (Chaturvedi 2013). Having heterogeneous constituencies creates incredibly unstable electoral conditions (Grofman et al. 1999). Moderates then face a distinctively precarious political position: they are elected from states that force them to build volatile coalitions. This makes for decisions that often pit party against constituency, raising doubts about the moderate senator's viability in future elections.

So what should we expect to see from moderate senators? First, Chaturvedi (2017a) finds that moderate senators often shy away from the legislative process on highly salient bills so as to avoid being traced to unpopular decisions that could impact their reelection negatively (Arnold 1990). As a result, we should expect to see moderates shy away from the most powerful committees. Chaturvedi (2017b) finds that swing state senators are also unique, regardless of their ideology. Indeed, senators from states in which the opposing party is the party of strength have less incentive to take a visible role than senators from "safe states" where their party is the party of strength. Senators from

swing states can mirror this strategy, but given the relatively even makeup of their state, it also makes sense to push policy actively in an effort to galvanize their base and win reelection based on turnout rather than building a volatile coalition. In the following sections I test these hypotheses.

Data

To examine the logic behind committee assignments, we compiled a list of each committee senators served on from 2010 to 2014. The corresponding Congresses are the 111th, 112th, and 113th Congresses, in which the Democrats were in the majority for all three. Since we are concerned with how committee assignments affect reelection, we limit our analysis to senators who sought reelection and were in the election cycle. That is, for each respective Congress, the dataset only includes senators who were running for reelection in the immediate year following the close of the Congressional session. As such, the dataset includes sixty-nine observations.

Of course, not all committees are equal in their power or ability to assist in reelection. As mentioned, Mayhew (1974) argues that each member of Congress has three goals: impact and create good public policy, power, and of course, gain reelection. In our analysis, we split each committee into one of these three categories: committees that are essential to reelection, the creation of good public policy, and power. While we will return to these categories shortly, we paid special attention to one committee that does not fit squarely into any one of these categories: the Senate Rules Committee. Unlike the House Rules Committee, which is considered one of the most powerful committees due to its ability to control the rules of debate and protect legislation on the

floor of the chamber (See for example, Cox and McCubbins 1993; 2005), the Senate Rules Committee is relatively powerless in terms of controlling the legislative debate. According to the Senate Rules and Administration Committee's website, the purpose and jurisdiction of the committee addresses: the administration of Senate office buildings, floor and gallery rules, corrupt practices, credentials and qualifications of Members of Congress, federal elections, printing of the congressional record, meetings of the Congress and attendance, presidential succession, purchase of books and manuscripts, Senate library, services to the Senate (i.e. the Senate restaurant), and the Smithsonian¹. While certainly essential, the jurisdiction of the committee does not necessarily assist in the senator's goals. As such, we treat the Rules Committee as a safe assignment that could provide cover in the form of a costless committee assignment for vulnerable senators. With this reasoning, we consider placement on the Rules Committee as our first dependent variable.

Concerning the other dependent variables, we separate committee assignments into one of three categories: Reelection committees, Power committees, and Public Policy committees. Table 1 summarizes our coding scheme.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

We defined reelection committees as those committees whose jurisdiction fell over areas of policy that affected only a portion of the population, were isolated to a certain part of the region, or affected specific industry. We used Paletz's et al. (2017) definition for Senate power committees, which are of course, different from the more recognized and accepted power committees in the House. Finally, all other committees, select or

¹ See: <http://www.rules.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?p=PurposeJurisdiction>

otherwise, that addressed some form of policy creation were categorized as public policy committees. To examine the question at hand, we run three negative binomial regressions predicting the number of committees a senator sits on in each category.

Here, again, our question is how moderate senators used the committee assignment process to help their reelection bids. As a result, we use Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal's DW-Nominate scores to measure ideology in the chamber. However, since we are primarily concerned with moderates, we take the absolute value of the 1st Dimension DW-Nominate measure, and create a new variable, measuring the senator's ideological distance from the center. The expectation here should be that senators further from the middle sit on more powerful committees since moderates are more vulnerable electorally and provide weak support to the party. Indeed, party leaders should appoint their most loyal members to highly valued committees in order to protect their legislative agenda.

Still, certain moderates are required to be more strategic than others. Indeed, moderate senators typically come from either swing states, in which there are an equal number of partisan voters from which the senator must make a volatile coalition (i.e. Ohio or Virginia) or from states in which the opposite party is considerably stronger than the senator's party (i.e. Mark Pryor, a Democrat, in Arkansas). In each model, we include dummy variables for senators from swing states ("1" corresponds to swing state, "0" corresponds to any other type of state) and from opposite party states ("1" corresponds to opposite states, "0" corresponds to any other type of state). States in which the incumbent is a member of the party of strength are the excluded category.

We also include control variables for the number of years a senator is in the chamber. The presumption here is that senators that have been reelected to the chamber and have gained experience may act differently than senators who need to be more strategic to gain reelection. Finally, we also include a dummy variable for whether the senator is from the leadership or not (coded as a “1” for in the leadership and “0” for not in the leadership). In the following section we discuss the results of our study.

Results

A first descriptive cut of the data shows an interesting pattern in terms of the committee assignments organized by the type of state. Figure 1 illustrates this pattern.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

As a result of our coding scheme, senators sit on public policy committees the most, but then the pattern differs in terms of power committees and reelection committees. Senators from safe states and opposite party states sit on reelection committees at higher rates than those senators from swing states. The tradeoff, at least descriptively, seems to be that swing state senators prefer to sit on public policy committees rather than reelection committees.

To a certain extent, this seems to be strategic. Indeed, safe states and opposite party states are largely homogenous and reflect one ideology over another. As a result, it makes more sense for a senator to focus their time on a narrow, regional issue, as it would impact a larger number of voters. Swing state senators however, are working with larger, more heterogeneous populations, in which working on narrow issues may not appeal to a wide constituency. Instead, they may be more successful in appealing to their

base by working on committees dealing with larger policy issues. Still, this is a descriptive cut of the data and requires a more rigorous look.

First, we examine the strategic use of the Rules and Administration Committee, a committee in the Senate that is void of much public policy influence or power. Table 2 summarizes the results of a logistic regression model, predicting placement on the Rules and Administration Committee.

[Insert Table 2 here]

Here, it seems that experienced senators sit on the Rules committee more often in that the senators who have been in the chamber the longest have the highest probability of sitting on the committee. Similarly, the negative coefficient for the distance from the middle variable suggests that moderates are more likely to sit on the Rules committee rather than their more ideological counterparts.

Turning our attention to the models predicting the number of committees a senator sits on, Table 3 presents the results of a negative binomial regression predicting the number of power committees a senator sits on.

[Insert Table 3 here]

In the first model, the only significant variable that helps predict the number of committees a senator sits on is whether the senator is in the leadership or not. This should not be surprising as members of the leadership rarely sit on these committees themselves—Harry Reid for example, only sat on the select committee on intelligence. Still, this does not reveal the full picture. Indeed, experienced senators may exercise a different strategy than less experienced senators and party leaders may use experienced senators differently as well given that they have a more concrete record for leaders to rely

upon. As a result, we rerun the models including an interaction term where we interact the number of years a senator has spent in the chamber with the distance from the middle variable. This changes our results considerably. In the second model, the interaction term is significant and negative, suggesting that experienced senators who are more ideological are less likely to sit on power committees. This runs counter to our expectations since we would expect senators with the most experience and the most loyalty to sit on the most powerful committees, though the effect is comparatively smaller than the distance from the middle variable which is positive and significant. This suggests that overall, senators that are more ideological are more likely to sit on power committees.

The results of the negative binomial regression predicting the number of reelection committees are presented in Table 3.

[Insert Table 3 here]

In this model, the only variable of interest that is significant is the swing state variable, confirming that even when we control for other factors, swing state senators sit on fewer reelection committees than their counterparts. As with the previous model, we again interacted the experience variable with the distance from the middle variable, though in this model, there were no remarkable changes.

Finally, Table 4 presents the results of the negative binomial regression predicting the number of public policy committees a senator sits on.

[Insert Table 4 here]

Again, the swing state variable is significant and positive, suggesting that swing state senators sit on more committees than their counterparts. In this model, we also see that

the distance from the middle variable is positive and significant, meaning that the more ideological senators sit on more public policy committees than their more moderate counterparts. When we include the interacted variable, the models do not result in new findings.

Discussion

In this paper, we have sought to gain a better understanding of the committee selection process with regards to electoral politics in an age of polarization. We find a number of substantive conclusions. First, the Rules Committee in the Senate, a committee with almost no power or prestige, is a valuable resource for vulnerable senators who are trying to shy away from the legislative process. As such, moderate senators are more likely to be on the Rules Committee in the Senate.

Similarly, the logic of moderate senators avoiding the legislative limelight rings true for committee work as well. Moderates sat on fewer power committees that had broad power over policy and legislation. Meanwhile, swing state senators were unique in their committee selections. Unlike their safe state and “opposite state” counterparts, swing state senators sat on fewer reelection committees but more public policy committees. Again, we argue that the logic behind this is about electoral politics. Swing state senators have little incentive to push regional issues in large, swing states with equal numbers of partisans. Instead, they seek to rally their partisan and ideological allies by seeking to push their agenda on public policy committees.

Still, this study is an incremental step in understanding the electoral logic behind committee assignments. Indeed, further research needs to be done about the

electoral outcomes associated with these assignments. Specifically, committee assignments can lead to financial contributions but can also open candidates up to attacks as well. Future studies should examine these connections to gain a stronger understanding of the impact of electoral politics on the committee selection process.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1:

Committee Typology		
Reelection Committees	Power Committees	Public Policy Committees
1) Indian Affairs 2) Energy and Natural Resources 3) Environment and Public Works 4) Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry	1) Commerce, Science, and Transportation 2) Finance 3) Foreign Relations 4) Appropriations 5) Armed Services	1) Select Committees 2) Budget 3) Judiciary 4) Health, Education, Labor and Pension 5) Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs 6) Ethics 7) Veteran's Affairs

Table 2:

**Logistic Regression Predicting Appointment onto the Rules
Committee in the Senate**

	Coefficient	Standard Error
Number of Years in Senate	.10***	.032
Leadership	1.91	1.29
Distance from Middle	-6.67*	3.95
Republican	-1.35	.94
Swing	-2.82*	1.63
Opposite	-2.48	1.54
111 th Senate	-3.13***	.95
112 th Senate	-3.92***	1.19
Constant	2.01	1.87
N=69		

*P<.1, **P<.05, ***P<.01

Table 3:

Negative Binomial Regression Predicting the Number of Power Committees				
	Coefficient	Standard Error	Coefficient	Standard Error
Number of Years	-.002	.007	.04**	.02
Leadership Distance from Middle Republican	-.47*	.28	-.41	.30
Swing Opposite 111th Senate	.02	.44	1.43**	.67
112 th Senate	-.09	.15	-.08	.15
Number of Years X Distance from Middle	-.11	.17	-.1	.17
Constant	.008	.19	.1	.19
N=	-.07	.16	-.11	.16
	-.18	.16	-.17	.16
			-.11**	.05
	.32	.24	-.28	.32
	69		69	

*P<.1, **P<.05, ***P<.01

Table 4:

Negative Binomial Regression Predicting the Number of Reelection Committees				
	Coefficient	Standard Error	Coefficient	Standard Error
Number of Years	-.01	.01	-.02	.03
Leadership Distance from Middle	-1.22	.86	-1.24	.84
Republican	.45	.79	-.51	1.37
Swing	-.12	.27	-.12	.25
Opposite	-.65**	.31	-.67**	.31
111th Senate	.08	.38	.005	.42
112 th Senate	.19	.27	.23	.27
Number of Years X Distance from Middle	.09	.30	.07	.31
Constant	.07		.07	.06
N=	-.41	.49	.02	.71
	69		69	

*P<.1, **P<.05, ***P<.01

Table 5:

Negative Binomial Regression Predicting the Number of Public Policy Committees				
	Coefficient	Standard Error	Coefficient	Standard Error
Number of Years	-.01	.009	.00	.02
Leadership Distance from Middle	-.16	.54	-.16	.54
Republican	.71*	.47	.93	.8
Swing	-.25	.18	-.25	.18
Opposite	.31**	.16	.32**	.16
111th Senate	.07	.22	.09	.21
112 th Senate	.33	.21	.32	.21
Number of Years X Distance from Middle	.06	.2	.06	.2
Constant			-.02	.04
N=	.38	.22	.28	.41
	69		69	

*P<.1, **P<.05, ***P<.01

Figure 1:

