**Lawmaker Age, Issue Salience, and Descriptive Representation in Congress**

James M. Curry

Department of Political Science

University of Utah

[james.curry@utah.edu](mailto:james.curry@utah.edu)

Matthew Haydon

Department of Political Science

University of Utah

[matt.haydon@utah.edu](mailto:matt.haydon@utah.edu)

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**Abstract**

Political scientists have demonstrated the importance lawmakers’ identifies, showing that a legislators’ races, genders, socioeconomic statuses, and sexual orientations affect their behavior. Is the same true for age? We argue it does, but the effect is conditional on the salience of different “senior issues.” Analyzing the bill sponsorship behavior of members of Congress during the 109th and 110th congresses, we show that older lawmakers are more likely to introduce legislation addressing *low-salience* senior issues than their younger colleagues, while sizeable senior constituencies in a district influence lawmaker attention on *high-salience* senior issues, regardless of a lawmaker’s age. These findings have implications for our understanding of senior power and descriptive representation in the United States.

In 2009, 24% of elected members of the House of Representatives were 65 years or older, as were 48% of senators. By comparison, just 13% of the country’s total population, and 18% of adults, were in that age group. Similarly, the typical House member was 57 years of age and the typical senator was 63 in 2009, while the median age among all Americans was just 37. In short, there is an age bias among elected members of Congress. While this bias is well known, surprisingly its consequences have been little studied. Typically, it is believed that issues important to American seniors receive disproportionate governmental attention because older Americans have strong group interests and vote, donate, and generally participate in politics and elections at higher rates than younger Americans. However, as demonstrated in this paper, the prevalence of seniors in the halls of Congress also contributes to the attention paid to “senior” issues.

Political scientists have clearly identified the importance of identity for the behavior of lawmakers. Descriptive representation has been studied as it relates to race (e.g., Haynie 2001; Bratton and Haynie 1999; Gamble 2007; Minta 2009), gender (e.g., Swers 2002; Frederick 2010; Gerrity, et al 2007), socio-economic class (e.g., Carnes 2013), and more. We know that minority lawmakers are more likely to focus on issues important to minority Americans, female lawmakers are more likely to focus on issues important to women, and working class lawmakers are more likely to focus on issues important to the working class. We ask, is the same true for age? Are older lawmakers more likely to focus on issues of importance to American seniors?

We argue that a lawmaker’s age influences their attention to “senior issues,” but that this dynamic is conditioned by the salience of each issue. While the actions taken by lawmakers to introduce bills on *high-salience* senior issues, such as Medicare and other health care issues, is driven by the size of the senior population in their districts, it is a lawmaker’s age that influences the likelihood they will devote time and effort to crafting and introducing legislation on other, *low-salience* senior issues, such as elderly abuse, housing, and continuing education. On these issues a lawmaker’s age is highly predictive of such action, irrespective of the size of the senior population in their district. Data on bills introduced by members of Congress during the 109th and 110th congresses (2005-2008) are leveraged to provide support for our theory. This paper proceeds as follows. First, the roles age and descriptive representation play in American politics are discussed including why issue salience should influence a lawmaker’s age-descriptive representation. Second, the data on bill introductions used to test our expectations are discussed. Third, the results of our analyses are presented. Fourth, the implications of the findings for how we understand representation and lawmaker behavior in the U.S. Congress are discussed.

**Age, Descriptive Representation, and Issue Salience**

It is widely acknowledged that American seniors can significantly influence American public policy making, particularly on issues and governmental programs important to them such as Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security. For decades, scholarship has attributed this senior power or “gray power” to the numerical size, political cohesion, and high level of political activity found among seniors in the public. This “senior power model” argues that because seniors compose a large proportion of the public, have significant group policy self-interests, and have developed active and influential interest groups (such as the AARP), they have outsized influence over the public policy decisions of their representatives (Binstock 1997; Schulz and Binstock 2008; Pratt 1993; Rix 1999; Street 1999).

Interest in senior power emerged in the 1970s as scholars predicted that the growing elderly population would become established as a powerful voting bloc, particularly in the Sunbelt and other states with large retiree populations, and that these seniors would alter the dynamics of both local and national politics and policymaking (e.g., Trela 1971; Weaver 1976). Indeed, today the senior population in the United States has grown and is large. Thirteen percent of Americans today are over the age of 65, compared to less than 10% in 1970 (U.S. Census Bureau 2014), and this is a population that continues to grow. Between 2000 and 2010 the over 65 population grew at a faster rate (15%) than any other age group, and more Americans were over 65 in 2010 than in any previous census (Census 2011). Importantly, this large senior population has group interests to fight for, including preserving and expanding Medicare and other social welfare programs. American seniors get nearly half of their income from Social Security benefits (Moon and Mulvey 1996, 29), and the vast majority of seniors use Medicare or Medicaid for all or some of their health care costs. Further, seniors benefit from a positive image among the broader public, which aids their causes. Compared to other groups, retirees and senior Americans are both easily identifiable and enjoy high levels of public sympathy and political visibility (Pratt 1976).

That senior citizens participate in politics at higher rates than most Americans only strengthens the senior power model. The likelihood of participating in elections increases with age (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Persons aged 65 and older constitute a substantial proportion of voting age Americans. In 2012, 70% of Americans 65 years or older voted, by far the highest rate of participation among any age group (File 2013). In some states, seniors constitute a particularly substantial voting bloc. In the 2004 elections in Florida, for instance, voters age 60 and older made up more than one-quarter of the state’s electorate. While there is some debate over the actual amount of political power seniors can wield (see, e.g., Sherman, Ward, and LaGory 1984), Bramlett (2015) shows that large communities of seniors often reinforce participation among their age group, amplifying their political power within these constituencies.

It is for these reasons that we typically view seniors as a powerful political group; it is why former House Speaker Tip O’Neill coined the term “third rail of politics” in reference to Social Security; and it is the reason attributed to the successes of senior citizen interest groups at blocking policy change on many entitlement programs (Pratt 1983, Day 1990). Further, it is why the AARP is often disparaged as the most powerful lobby in America (Hornblower 1988).

However, these constituency-based explanations for senior power ignore the potential importance of the age-bias among elected members of Congress. As noted in the introduction, lawmakers tend to be much older than the broader American public, on average, with senior citizens composing roughly one-quarter of the House and half of the Senate in recent congresses. This matters because research has long established that lawmakers’ identities matter. Pitkin (1967) was the first to draw the distinction between descriptive representation—in which lawmakers support particular groups because they share a characteristic with the group—and substantive representation—in which a lawmaker acts on behalf of a group. Many lawmakers have described seeing themselves as this kind of surrogate, and understand it as their role to represent their descriptive groups’ interests. Interview research, in particular, has found this to be true among women and minority lawmakers (Reingold 1992; Carroll 2002; Hawkesworth 2003; Dodson 2006; Swain 1993; Tate 2003; Fenno 2003).

There is a substantial amount of empirical evidence that a lawmaker’s behavior is influenced by his or her identities on several dimensions, including race (Bratton 2006; Bratton and Haynie 1999; Cameron, Epstein, and O'Halloran 1996, 807; Ellis and Wilson 2013; Gamble 2007; Haynie 2001; Kerr and Miller 1997; Minta 2009; Preuhs 2005; Rocca, Sanchez, and Uscinski 2008; Rouse 2013; Whitby 1996; Whitby and Gilliam 1998; Whitby and Krause 2001; Wilson 2010), gender (Dodson 2006; Frederick 2010; Gerrity et al 2007; MacDonald and O’Brien 2010; Norton 1999; Swers 1998, 2002; Tatalovich and Schier 1993), socio-economic class (Carnes 2013), and sexual orientation (Haider-Markel 2007; Herrick 2009; Mansbridge 2003). Black, Hispanic, female, rich, poor, and LGBT lawmakers have been shown to pay more attention to and work harder on issues of importance to these aspects of their identities, cultivate distinct voting records, and act differently in positions of leadership.

We expect the same to be true for a lawmaker’s age as there are several reasons to believe that older lawmakers may act differently, have different political priorities, and most importantly, be acutely attentive toward senior issues when compared to younger lawmakers. For one, older Americans, including lawmakers, have a different relationship with governmental policies and problems than most other Americans. Most of the government’s social welfare spending is on policies and programs important to older Americans, including Social Security, Medicare, pensions, survivors and disability support, and other long-term medical care policies. Not only may attachment to these programs grow with age, but according to Street (1997) the existence of these programs aids the very formation of political cleavages between the old and the young. Furthermore, senior Americans face a variety of relatively distinct problems, including elderly abuse, late-life housing, and assisted living and medical care. Their vulnerability in facing these problems helps give seniors the kind of group consciousness typically associated with minorities and the poor (Campbell 2002; Miller, Gurin, and Gurin 1980). Ultimately, the distinct group-based relationship seniors have with various governmental programs is likely to influence how older lawmakers approach them.

Second, age has been shown to be a stable predictor of political attitudes. Older Americans are generally expected to be slightly more conservative and Republican than younger Americans. Reinforcing these age differences are generational differences in political attitudes. Different generations often hold different feelings and attachments towards the political parties (Abramson 1979) and generally hold different attitudes on a variety of political issues (Alwin 1998; Alwin and Krosnick 1991; Jennings and Niemi 1981). Generally, because of the differences in the socialization and life experiences of different generations, people within each often hold different attitudes. This is likely to be as true for lawmakers as any other citizens.

The above suggests we should find that not only does traditional senior power, driven by seniors in the public, contribute to the attention paid towards “senior issues” in American politics, but so may the age bias in Congress. In other words, both the attention paid to many senior issues may be the consequence of both the composition of the participating electorate and the composition of the national legislature. However, these two forces may be influential in different ways and on different issues. Namely, the senior power model may explain the attention paid to highly salient senior issues, such as Medicare and other programs providing benefits directly to seniors, while the ages of lawmakers may explain the attention paid to other, lower salience senior issues.

Several studies have found that the influence of seniors in the public, and senior interest groups, is at its greatest, and the senior power model is most true, when an issue is particularly salient to seniors. When programs like Medicare are being threatened with change, or have otherwise become salient on the political agenda, older Americans are more likely to mobilize and try to leverage their collective power to influence policy (Andel and Liebig 2002; Anderson and Anderson 1978; Streib, Folts, and LeGreca 1985; Campbell 2002, 2003, 2005; Jennings and Markus 1988).

Similarly, there is substantial evidence that lawmakers are most responsive and attentive to their constituencies, and groups within it, when an issue is particularly salient. Lawmakers are always responsive to their constituents (e.g., Mayhew 1974; Fenno 1978; Kingdon 1989; Grimmer 2013). But there is evidence that lawmakers become even more attentive to groups within their district when an issue important to that group becomes political salient (Hayes and Bishin 2012) and are more likely to introduce legislation that is particularly salient to their districts (Lazarus 2013). Generally, on issues that mobilize seniors in the public it is likely that lawmakers with large senior constituencies will feel pressure to take action to support and promote the issues their seniors are talking about, regardless of the lawmaker’s age.

However, this leaves room for age-descriptive representation to play a role on low-salient senior issues. While seniors in the public may not be as effectively mobilized on less salient senior issues, and consequently while lawmakers may not be as influenced by seniors in their districts on these issues, older lawmakers, by virtual of their identities, should still be attentive and sensitive to these other senior issues, and their behaviors should still be affected. Generally, older lawmakers will be attentive toward and work to promote and support less salient senior issues regardless of the size of the senior constituency in their districts.

Ultimately, we have several hypotheses to test regarding the relationship between a lawmaker’s age and their legislative behavior. As discussed and justified below, we focus on the bills lawmakers introduce as evidence of the attention and importance they place on senior issues. Our first two hypotheses can be understood as straightforward, unqualified tests of age-descriptive representation and the senior power model that do not take into account the salience of different senior issues.

H1: Older lawmakers are more likely to introduce legislation addressing a senior issue than younger lawmakers.

H2: Lawmakers with larger senior constituencies are more likely to introduce legislation addressing a senior issue than lawmakers with smaller senior constituencies.

The second two hypotheses recognize that the salience of a senior issue may influence when constituency matters and when a lawmaker’s identity matters.

H3: Older lawmakers are more likely to introduce legislation addressing *low-salience* senior issues than younger lawmakers.

H4: Lawmakers with larger senior constituencies are more likely to introduce legislation addressing *high-salience* senior issues than lawmakers with smaller senior constituencies.

The next section describes how these hypotheses are tested.

**Data and Methods**

To test these hypotheses we employ a dataset of all bills introduced in the House of Representatives during the 109th and 110th congresses as compiled by the Congressional Bills Project (CBP).[[1]](#endnote-2) Members are not required to draft or introduce legislation. When they do, they have the freedom to introduce legislation on whatever topics they please. The bills a lawmaker introduces indicate which issues they care about (Schiller 1995; Wawro 2001), what positions they hold on those issues (Rocca and Gordon 2010), and what signals they would like to send to constituent groups (Mayhew 1974). Generally, if a lawmaker introduces a bill on an issue it is a good indicator that the issue is an important part of their legislative portfolio and their legislative identity. For these reasons, bill sponsorship is a common way of assessing how descriptive representation influences lawmakers’ legislative priorities (e.g., Haynie 2001; Bratton and Haynie 1999; Bratton 2006; Wilson 2010; Swers 2002).

The 109th and 110th congresses are advantageous for testing our hypotheses. These years include variation in party control of the House (the 109th was Republican controlled and the 110th was Democratic controlled) and divided and unified government (the 109th was unified and the 110th was divided). There was also substantial turnover between the 109th and 110th congresses, allowing us to test our hypotheses on a larger population of lawmakers than would be the case for many other pairs of congresses.

The dependent variable for our analyses is whether or not any bill in the dataset is a “senior bill.” Determining what is and is not a senior bill is challenging. Our operational definition of a senior bill is any bill that is primarily focused on addressing policies or programs that overwhelming affect or are salient for American seniors. The data from the Congressional Bills Project (CPB) codes every bill for issue content using the Policy Agendas Project’s (PAP) codebook.[[2]](#endnote-3) The PAP codes policy issues into 220 issue topics nested within 20 broader issue areas. To determine which issues and bills were “senior” we first looked through the descriptions of the 220 topics to determine which were clearly and overwhelmingly focused on issues important to seniors. Three topics stood out: topic 204 (“Age Discrimination”), topic 1303 (“Elderly Issues and Elderly Assistance Programs”), and topic 1408 (“Elderly and Handicapped Housing”). All bills addressing any of these three topics were counted as senior bills. In addition, we identified 20 more topics that we determined might include issues and bills important to seniors. To determine which bills within these topics should count, we worked as separate coders to read the title and a summary of each bill and coded each as a senior bill or not. With the coding done separately we could be confident in the bills we both identified as senior bills, and then discuss the discrepancies. In total, 463 of the 13,600 bills[[3]](#endnote-4) introduced in the House during the 109th and 110th congresses were determined to be senior bills.[[4]](#endnote-5) Table 1 summarizes these bills by issue topic.

[TABLE 1 about here]

The primary independent variable used to test both hypotheses is simply the age of each bill’s sponsor at the time it was introduced. This measure ranges from 30 to 85 and it is normally distributed. To test the second and third hypotheses, the salience of each bill’s issue topic needed to be measured. We use data on the issue content of articles published in the *New York Times* during the 109th and 110th congresses, collected by the PAP, to create such a measure. The PAP codes a random sample of every article published in the *New York Times* each year by its 20 issue areas. Our measure is the count of articles each bill’s issue area received. Using this measure we are able to split the dataset of bills into those of relatively high salience (above the median of the variable) and low salience (below the median). This allows us to determine if the relationship between a lawmaker’s age and their senior bill sponsorship behavior is conditioned by the salience of different senior issues. Table 2 summarizes the issue topics coded as high-salience and low-salience for each Congress. As shown, in both congresses, senior bills that address health care and family issues are coded as high-salience, while senior bills addressing a variety of other topics including Social Security, education, and housing are coded as low-salience.

[TABLE 2 about here]

To test the third hypothesis, we also need measures of size, and thus potential influence, of seniors in each lawmaker’s district. We use three measures for this purpose. First is the percent of each sponsor’s district population that is over 65 years of age. Second is the total amount spent on Social Security benefits in each district. For the analyses the natural log of this variable is calculated as it has an extreme right skew. Third is the number of Medicare beneficiaries in each lawmaker’s state. Lawmakers from states with more Medicare beneficiaries should be attuned to issues related to Medicare and similar programs.[[5]](#endnote-6) If the third hypothesis is correct lawmakers with more significant senior constituencies should be more likely to introduce bills addressing high-salience issues, regardless of their age.

We also measured several other factors about each lawmaker that may have influenced their sponsorship behavior. First is a measure of whether or not a lawmaker was in the majority during each Congress. Lawmakers in the majority are often more active in introducing legislation because their bills have a better chance of becoming law (Anderson, Box-Steffensmeier, and Sinclair 2003; Cox and Terry 2008). Second is each lawmaker’s first dimension DW-NOMINATE score. DW-NOMINATE is often used as a measure of lawmaker ideologies, but at the very least indicates whether a lawmaker is within the more moderate or extreme wing of their party. This variable is included in case a lawmaker’s “ideology” has an impact on their orientation towards senior issues. Third, dummy variables are included that indicate if a member held a seat on the Judiciary, Ways and Means, or Energy and Commerce committees. Committee membership is a strong predictor of which issues lawmakers are likely to put effort towards (Fenno 1973; Deering and Smith 1997). Most bills addressing senior issues would be routed through one of these committees. As such, lawmakers sponsoring senior bills should be more likely to be on one of these committees.

**Results**

To test our hypotheses, three logistic regression analyses were conducted using the data described above.[[6]](#endnote-7) The first includes all 13,600 bills and assesses whether a lawmaker’s age influences the likelihood that they sponsored a senior bill. This is a straightforward test of the first hypothesis. The second two analyses split the dataset of bills into those above the median of the salience measure (high-salience) and those below it (low-salience). Bills coded as having the median value of the measure were included in the high-salience group. The analyses were replicated including that set of bills among the low-salience group as well, and the results were neither substantively nor statistically different.

Table 3 shows the results of all three analyses. The analysis in the first column includes all bills. As clearly shown, when looking at all bills the age of a lawmaker does not have a significant impact on their likelihood of introducing a senior bill. The sponsor age variable is insignificant and its impact is small. However, also notable in the results is that constituency characteristics also do not matter. None of the three measures—the percent of a lawmaker’s district over 65 years of age, the amount of spending on Social Security benefits in the district, or the number of Medicare enrollees in the state—have a significant impact on the likelihood that a lawmaker sponsors a senior bill. These null findings hint that there is more nuance to the relationship among lawmaker age, constituency pressures, and bill sponsorship.

[TABLE 3 about here]

The second and third columns of Table 3 split the analysis into bills coded as high-salience and those coded as low-salience in order to evaluate hypotheses 2 and 3. The results demonstrate that the influence of a lawmaker’s age and constituency on their attention to senior issues varies by issue salience. The results of the analysis in column 2, specifically, are for bills with saliences above the median. The results show that while a lawmaker’s age does not have a significant influence, the percentage of a lawmaker’s constituency over the age of 65 has a strong impact. As shown in Figure 1, the likelihood that a lawmaker introduces a high-salience senior bill increases substantially as this portion of their constituency increases in size. Lawmakers with a senior constituency size one standard-deviation above the mean (about 21%) are almost twice as likely to introduce such bills than lawmakers with a senior constituency size one standard deviation below the mean (about 11%). These results support the general findings of the senior power thesis: American seniors, when motivated and mobilized, can influence the behavior of their lawmakers and focus their attention on senior issues. They also support hypothesis 3.

[FIGURE 1 about here]

In contrast, the results in column 3 show that when it comes to low-salience bills, it is the age of the lawmaker that is important rather than the constituency. In this analysis, the age of the lawmaker is positive and statistically significant. The older a lawmaker, the more likely he or she is to introduce a bill addressing a low-salience senior bill. As shown in Figure 2, the likelihood that a lawmaker takes such an action increases meaningfully with age, as the oldest lawmakers, on average, are almost four times more likely to introduce a senior bill than the youngest lawmakers. More conventionally, a 62 year old lawmaker (one standard-deviation above the mean of age) is 67% more likely than a 48 year old lawmaker (one standard-deviation below the mean) to introduce such a bill. Notably, constituency characteristics have less explanatory value for low-salience bills. The percent of a lawmaker’s district over 65 does not impact their behavior, nor does the amount spent on Social Security benefits in their district. Only the number of Medicare enrollees in a lawmaker’s state has any effect, but it is a small effect.

[FIGURE 2 about here]

These findings compellingly demonstrate the importance of issue contexts for the relationship among a lawmaker’s age, their senior constituency, and their behavior regarding the introduction of senior bills. It appears the senior power thesis holds weight where highly-salient senior issues are concerned. On these issues, senior citizens are likely motivated and mobilized to put pressure on their representatives. In these instances the campaigns organized by interest groups such as the AARP likely result in impressive mobilization, putting clear pressure on lawmakers to act, regardless of their age. However, on less-salient issues the identities of lawmakers play a bigger role. On these issues, older lawmakers are attentive, even without significant constituency pressure. Their identities drive their behavior. This is the very essence of descriptive representation.

One other aspect of our analyses is worth noting. In figures 1 and 2, it is clear from the size of the standard errors that there is a great deal of variation in the effects of very senior constituencies and in the behavior of the oldest lawmakers. For instance, in Figure 2, the standard errors indicate that while some of the most elderly lawmakers focus a great deal of attention on senior issues, some pay very little attention. This variation is clearly driven by factors not analyzed in this study, and should be explored in more depth.

**Conclusions**

A host of previous research shows lawmakers’ identities matter for their representational behavior, especially regarding their race, gender, socioeconomic class, and sexual orientation. In this paper, we begin to demonstrate that a lawmaker’s age is also important in this regard. Older lawmakers are more likely to focus their bill sponsorship behavior on certain senior issues, primarily those that are less salient with the public. On highly salient senior bills it is lawmakers’ constituencies, rather than their identities, that drive their attention to senior issues.

These findings regarding saliency add a new wrinkle to our understanding of descriptive representation, broadly conceived. Beyond seniors, issues of importance to women, minorities, the working class, and other descriptive groups vary in their general public salience. Studies of descriptive representation among these facets of identity should also take issue salience into consideration. It is possible that black legislators, for instance, are more attentive to low-salience black issues than white lawmakers representing heavily black districts. Generally, looking at such issue contexts may help scholars better untangle the influence of identity and constituency on a lawmaker’s actions.

Returning to age, these findings also say something about the broader representativeness of the U.S. Congress. As noted in the introduction, the membership in both chambers is heavily skewed. For several reasons, including age requirements to run for congressional office, the life experiences generally needed to be recruited to run and win elections, and the disposable income needed to leave a career to pursue elected office, it is much easier for older Americans to run for and win a congressional seat. Furthermore, the benefits of incumbency that help keep lawmakers in office promote an aging Congress, as members who may have been elected young remain in office as they age. But regardless, the results here suggest that the age bias among elected representatives is likely to focus the legislative agenda on low-salience senior issues more so than might be the case if the population of elected officials were more representative.

This is not necessarily a good or bad consequence. The senior population is in many ways vulnerable, and it is a good thing that the government is attentive to their needs. However, the needs of other vulnerable populations deserve governmental attention as well. Ultimately, having substantial variation in the ages and generations represented on Capitol Hill is probably ideal. As Mayhew (2000) discusses, each age group and generation brings unique perspectives and ideas to the table. The synergy of these perspectives is probably best for public policy making.

Further research on age and descriptive representation is needed to fully understand how lawmakers’ ages affect their behavior in office. Future research should analyze the roll-call voting patterns of senior lawmakers, and their participation in committee proceedings and in floor debate. Additionally, the seniority norm in Congress should be reexamined in light of these findings. Most institutional leadership positions are held by older lawmakers as time in office is usually a necessary condition for obtaining such a position. The sway these powerful lawmakers have over the congressional agenda may further benefit the interests of seniors. Altogether, out findings here suggest this is an area of research in need of more scrutiny.

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|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **TABLE 1 "Senior Bills" by Policy Agendas Project Issue Topic, 109th and 110th Congresses** | | |
| PAP issue topic | N | Pct. |
|  |  |  |
| 204: "Age discrimination" | 1 | 0.2% |
| 300: "Health: General" | 8 | 1.7% |
| 301: "Comprehensive health care reform" | 14 | 3.0% |
| 302: "Insurance reform, availability, and cost" | 80 | 17.3% |
| 322: "Facilities construction, regulation, and payments" | 43 | 9.3% |
| 324: "Medical liability, fraud and abuse" | 3 | 0.7% |
| 334: "Long-term care, home health, terminally ill, and rehabilitation services" | 65 | 14.0% |
| 335: "Prescription drug coverage and costs" | 73 | 15.8% |
| 336: "Health: Other or multiple benefits and procedures" | 36 | 7.8% |
| 398: "Health: Research and development" | 6 | 1.3% |
| 699: "Education: Other" | 1 | 0.2% |
| 1208: "Family Issues" | 4 | 0.9% |
| 1300: "Social Welfare: General" | 2 | 0.4% |
| 1301: "Food Stamps, Food Assistance, and Nutrition Monitoring Programs" | 1 | 0.2% |
| 1303: "Elderly Issues and Elderly Assistance Programs (Including Social Security  Administration)" | 119 | 25.7% |
| 1304: "Assistance to the Disabled and Handicapped" | 1 | 0.2% |
| 1305: "Social Services and Volunteer Associations" | 2 | 0.4% |
| 1408: "Elderly and Handicapped Housing" | 4 | 0.9% |
|  |  |  |
| *Notes:* Issue topics are taken from the Policy Agendas Project and Congressional Bills Project. | | |

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **TABLE 2 "Senior Issues" by Salience and Congress** | | | | |
| 109th Congress | |  | 110th Congress | |
| PAP issue topic | N |  | PAP issue topic | N |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| *High-salience:* |  |  | *High-salience:* |  |
| 300: Health: General | 4 |  | 300: Health: General | 4 |
| 301: "Comprehensive health care reform" | 9 |  | 301: "Comprehensive health care reform" | 5 |
| 302: "Insurance reform, availability, and cost" | 40 |  | 302: "Insurance reform, availability, and cost" | 40 |
| 322: "Facilities construction, regulation, and payments" | 20 |  | 322: "Facilities construction, regulation, and payments" | 23 |
| 324: "Medical liability, fraud and abuse" | 2 |  | 324: "Medical liability, fraud and abuse" | 1 |
| 334: "Long-term care, home health, terminally ill, and rehabilitation services" | 30 |  | 334: "Long-term care, home health, terminally ill, and rehabilitation services" | 35 |
| 335: "Prescription drug coverage and costs" | 52 |  | 335: "Prescription drug coverage and costs" | 21 |
| 336: "Health: Other or multiple benefits and procedures" | 17 |  | 336: "Health: Other or multiple benefits and procedures" | 19 |
| 398: "Health: Research and development" | 3 |  | 398: "Health: Research and development" | 3 |
| 1208: "Family Issues" | 1 |  | 1208: "Family Issues" | 3 |
| Total | 178 |  | Total | 154 |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| *Low-salience:* |  |  | *Low-salience:* |  |
| 204: "Age discrimination" | 1 |  | 1300: "Social Welfare: General" | 1 |
| 699: "Education: Other" | 1 |  | 1303: "Elderly Issues and Elderly Assistance Programs (Including Social Security Administration)" | 54 |
| 1300: "Social Welfare: General" | 1 |  | 1305: "Social Services and Volunteer Associations" | 1 |
| 1301: "Food Stamps, Food Assistance, and Nutrition Monitoring Programs" | 1 |  | 1408: "Elderly and Handicapped Housing" | 3 |
| 1303: "Elderly Issues and Elderly Assistance Programs (Including Social Security Administration)" | 65 |  | Total | 59 |
| 1304: "Assistance to the Disabled and Handicapped" | 1 |  |  |  |
| 1305: "Social Services and Volunteer Associations" | 1 |  |  |  |
| 1408: "Elderly and Handicapped Housing" | 1 |  |  |  |
| Total | 72 |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **TABLE 3 Predicting the Likelihood of Sponsoring a "Senior Bill", 109th and 110th Congresses** | | | |
|  | All bills | High salience  bills only | Low salience  bills only |
|  |  |  |  |
| Sponsor's age | 0.001 (0.008) | -0.010 (0.009) | 0.029\*\* (0.014) |
|  |  |  |  |
| ***Constituency characteristics*** |  |  |  |
| Percent of district population over 65 | 0.041 (0.025) | 0.052\*\* (0.026) | -0.026 (0.046) |
| Spending on Social Security   (by district) | 0.065 (0.384) | -0.089 (0.424) | 0.935 (0.671) |
| Number of Medicare enrollees   (by state, in hundreds) | 0.042 (0.054) | -0.025 (0.065) | 0.153\* (0.080) |
|  |  |  |  |
| ***Member characteristics*** |  |  |  |
| Majority party | -0.047 (0.098) | -0.159 (0.129) | 0.001 (0.162) |
| DW-NOMINATE (first-dimension) | -0.070 (0.139) | -0.072 (0.153) | 0.065 (0.295) |
| Judiciary Committee | -0.564\*\*\* (0.270) | -0.483 (0.324) | -1.053\*\* (0.522) |
| Ways & Means Committee | 0.893\*\*\* (0.179) | 1.282\*\*\* (0.197) | 0.055 (0.348) |
| Energy & Commerce Committee | 0.510\*\*\* (0.181) | 0.668\*\*\* (0.214) | 0.077 (0.318) |
|  |  |  |  |
| 110th Congress | -0.624\*\*\* (0.204) | -0.290 (0.224) | -0.674\*\* (0.326) |
|  |  |  |  |
| constant | -4.792 (4.597) | -2.203 (5.020) | -16.568\*\*\* (8.189) |
|  |  |  |  |
| N | 13,600 | 7,025 | 6,575 |
| ePCP | 0.935 | 0.912 | 0.961 |
|  |  |  |  |
| *Notes:* \* p<.10, \*\* p<.05, \*\*\* p<.01. Coefficients are derived using logistic regression analysis. Standard errors are corrected for clustering by member of Congress. | | | |

**FIGURE 1**

**The Impact of Senior Constituency on the Likelihood of Sponsoring a High-Salience Senior Bill**

**C:\Users\Jim\Dropbox\Research Projects\Age Descriptive Representation\fig1.tif**

*Note:* Derived from logistic regression analysis presented in Table 3, column 2.

**FIGURE 2**

**The Impact of Lawmaker Age on the Likelihood of Sponsoring a Low-Salience Senior Bill**

**C:\Users\Jim\Dropbox\Research Projects\Age Descriptive Representation\fig2.tif**

*Note:* Derived from logistic regression analysis presented in Table 3, column 2.

1. E. Scott Adler and John Wilkerson, Congressional Bills Project: 2005-2008, NSF 00880066 and 00880061: <http://congressionalbills.org/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. The Policy Agendas Project data were originally collected by Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones, with the support of National Science Foundation grant numbers SBR 9320922 and 0111611, and were distributed through the Department of Government at the University of Texas at Austin. Neither the NSF nor the original collectors of the data bear any responsibility for the analysis reported here: <http://www.policyagendas.org/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. This total does not include the 127 bills introduced by delegates and other non-voting members of the House. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. A few notable coding decisions arose during this process. First, some very large omnibus bills addressed senior issues within, but within just a small part. These bills were not counted as senior bills as we directed our coding at identifying bills that were primarily focused on senior issues. Second, some bills addressed clear senior issues, but only for a small geographic area, such as Puerto Rico. We did not count these bills either as we considered these bills as more about Puerto Rico than the elderly. Third, we did not count bills that used the Medicare or Social Security programs for policy means not directed at the elderly. For example, one bill indicated that hospitals would be barred from receiving Medicare funds if they did not make their pricing data public. Bills like these were not about Medicare, but used Medicare as a carrot or stick for some other purpose and as such were not considered elderly bills. A full list of senior bills is too long to include in an appendix to this paper, but is hosted online: <http://goo.gl/NjQ3do>. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. We sought data on Medicare beneficiaries broken down by congressional district, but the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services does not keep track of such data. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. In each analysis we calculate robust standard errors correcting for clustering around each lawmaker in the dataset (see, Primo, Jacobsmeier, and Milyo 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)