

Ideological Caucus Membership and Committee Assignments in the U.S. House of  
Representatives

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## Abstract

The most important step in passing legislation in Congress lies in the committees where legislation is marked up and sent to the floor of the chamber for a vote. Understanding the composition of these committees is an important step in understanding why legislation is passed and why legislation is shaped the way it is. Ideological caucuses have been described as formal organizations that seek to use their votes to achieve policy outcomes counter to the desires of party leadership. The relationship between the two is what this project covers. This project analyzes why ideological caucuses get the seats in committees in the House of Representatives that they do.

Using the partisan theory of committee assignments and the assumption that caucuses wish to achieve goals counter to those of party leadership, with data from the House from 2005-2010, three hypotheses regarding the relationship between caucus membership and committee assignments were tested. The results show that ideological caucus members do not tend to be assigned to desirable committees more often than non-caucus members in most cases. However, the Democratic party does assign moderate members to constituency committees significantly more often than extreme members, whereas the reverse is true for the Republican party, pointing to a difference in the two parties not accounted for in the models.

This research shows that while ideological caucuses may be a factor in committee assignments, there is not enough evidence to prove that caucus membership significantly predicts committee assignments. Rational choice models of members of Congress only go so far in explaining the variance in committee assignments.

## Introduction

The United States Congress is oft compared to a circus. Its approval ratings are hovering around 23% as of January 2020 and the number of bills passed by Congress are dwindling in number. For all this talk of legislative dysfunction, it begs the question, why does Congress pass the laws that it does? A key component in answering this question is the committee system. As former President Woodrow Wilson put it, “Congress in its committee-rooms is Congress at work” (1885, p.69). Congressional committees are where legislation is reviewed, marked up, and sent to the floor of the chamber for a final vote. These committees specialize in a specific topic, such as Education or Agriculture, and allow their members to build expertise in these areas of policy and improve the efficiency of the legislative process. While every bill is sent to a committee, only about 10-20% of bills manage to make it out of committee and get a vote by at least one full chamber of Congress. Committees are where the vast majority of decisions regarding which laws get passed or not happen and understanding why members are appointed to the committees that they are is a key part of understanding why Congress passes the laws that it does.

Another institution in the United States Congress, or more specifically category of institutions, that has shaped policy making is the ideological caucus. These are groups of members of Congress, usually members of the House of Representatives but also sometimes Senators, that share ideological and policy goals, particularly ones that are against the desires of party leadership (Rubin 2017). These caucuses have changed over time and have included both informal and formal groupings and use tactics such as secrecy, meticulous meeting minutes, and naming and shaming through friendly newspapers and media outlets to keep the caucus in line (Rubin 2017).

Today there are several ideological caucuses in both the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. On the Democratic side, the Congressional Progressive Caucus includes the most liberal Democratic party members that seek to produce equally liberal policy outcomes, the New Democrat Coalition, a grouping of pro-business and pro-growth moderate Democrats aligned with the ‘Third Way’ practices of the Clinton and Obama administrations, and the Blue Dog Coalition, a moderate to conservative and traditionally southern grouping of Democrats that differ with their party on issues like gun control, abortion and the environment. In the Republican Conference, there are the Tuesday Group and the Republican Main Street Partnership, both moderate factions of the Republican Party that claim to represent the ‘governing’ wing of the party and focus more on economic bread-and-butter issues than social issues, the Republican Study Committee, a very large and conservative caucus that nowadays includes a majority of the Republican Conference and seeks both economically and socially conservative policy on a broad range of issues, and the most recently formed caucus, the House Freedom Caucus, a small but very ideologically committed group of conservative Republicans born out of the Tea Party movement in 2015 that seeks to push Republican leadership and policy outcomes to the right.

The size of these ideological caucuses varies from Congress to Congress but they typically have more members in their caucus than the margin of members of the majority party in the House of Representatives. It should be noted that while these ideological caucuses can and do exist in both the House of Representatives and the Senate, they tend not to have many members in the Senate for a number of reasons, such as the cultural differences and the difference in rules between the two chambers. Hence, most of the power that ideological caucuses have come through their influence in the House of Representatives.

Committee assignments matter a lot for legislators seeking to pass laws as it can make or break a legislator's influence in Congress. These assignments are in the hands of party leadership. The parties in Congress are also composed of these intra-party factions that have formally organized into caucuses that specifically seek to achieve legislative goals against the wishes of party leadership (Rubin 2017). It is not known how party leadership approaches these ideological caucuses when making committee assignments, but the answer is very important as the composition of committees can very directly influence the legislation that is passed in Congress.

### **Literature Review**

The study of congressional committees dates as far back as Woodrow Wilson's seminal book on Congress, *Congressional Government*. Many scholars have since sought to answer the question of why members of Congress get the committee assignments that they do. There are three main theories that explain this question and the difference between the three lies in who or what benefits from committee assignments: "individual legislators, the full chamber, or political parties" (Martin and Mickler, 2019, p. 78). These theories were developed specifically to study the United States Congress but are not limited to Congress in applicability.

#### **Distributive Theory**

Distributive theory, in short, posits that legislators receive their committee assignments according to the specific policy interests that will help the legislator get re-elected. Members of Congress will specifically trade influence in one area of legislation that is unimportant to their re-election interests for another area that is in a process known as 'logrolling'. Committees would thus be comprised of legislators who have an electoral incentive to pass legislation that

focuses on specific segments of the population and thus resemble ‘preference outliers’ and are unrepresentative of the larger chamber as a whole (Weingast and Marshall 1988). There are a number of assumptions in this theory: one is that members of Congress want to be re-elected, an assumption outlined in Mayhew’s book *Congress: The Electoral Connection*, and that members of Congress can self-select into the committees that they want (1974) (Shepsle 1978). In an application of this theory, a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from a district with a high percentage of agriculture workers in their district would seek a seat on the Agriculture committee. This theory was widely viewed as the ‘correct’ interpretation of committee assignments in Congress from the 70’s to the 90’s (Martin and Mickler, 2019, p. 81).

#### Informational Theory

This theory posits that legislators receive their committee assignments in a way that will benefit the whole legislative chamber and promote informed decision-making. In contrast to distributive theory, the focus in informational theory is ensuring that committees are not unrepresentative of the parent chamber and will not represent ‘preference outliers’ (Krehbiel 1990). Committees, instead, will be ‘microcosms’ of the parent chamber and will consist of members who will accumulate expertise over time and be able to make more informed decisions (Krehbiel 1990). There are a number of assumptions behind this theory, the first of which is that legislators are, even with proper knowledge and expertise, unable to fully dispel uncertainty regarding the effects of legislation (Gilligan and Krehbiel, 1990, p. 535). The second assumption is that the committee system exists to solve information asymmetries among legislators by allowing legislators to specialize in certain areas of legislation (Martin and Mickler, 2019, p. 82). An important fact to consider in this theory is that “policies cannot be enacted without the consent of the majority of the legislature’s members” (Martin and Mickler, 2019, p. 81). Under



the informational theory, a committee would, over time, be a body of legislators with significant knowledge in the specific area of legislation that the committee handles that is representative of the parent chamber as a whole. The committee assignment process is the mechanism by which this committee composition is achieved.

### Partisan Theory

The partisan theory of committee assignments posits that committee assignments are made to benefit the interests of the parties in the chamber (Martin and Mickler, 2019, p. 83). This theory takes a departure from the previous two and states that party leadership use committee assignments as a ‘good’, a way to influence the behavior of their legislators and promote the passage of legislation that benefits their party (Cox and McCubbins 2007). Committees are more of a tool than the focal point of power in Congress as had been accepted as common knowledge among Congress scholars until fairly recently. A distinction between the relative ‘power’ of committees must be made distinct here, as with very few exceptions, all members of Congress receive committee assignments. According to this theory, the more ‘powerful’ committees will generally be packed with party loyalists and the less ‘powerful’ committees will have relatively more legislators that are less loyal to party leadership.

These three theories provide three different generalized answers for why members of Congress receive the committee assignments that they do. These answers, while developed to study the United States Congress, can be applied to other legislative institutions as well.

In Ruth Bloch Rubin’s book *Building the Bloc: Intraparty Organization in the U.S. Congress*, she outlines the theory that ideological caucuses are organizations created in order to overcome organizational problems between co-partisan and turn their pivotal votes (i.e. a collection of votes that can swing a vote in the chamber) into desirable policy outcomes,

especially “when those outcomes are at odds with the interests of party leaders” (2017, p. 13). These ideological caucuses are formal organizations that rival their parent political parties. Since the parties in the House of Representatives are the actors that make committee assignments and committee assignments can determine if a legislator is able to achieve their legislative goals, it is important to understand how they treat these caucus members in making committee assignments.

### **Theory**

The implication of the partisan theory of committee assignments is that powerful committees will be stacked with party loyalists thanks to the influence of party leaders and the need to keep key committees accountable to the legislative party. I believe that partisan theory provides the best foundation because Congress, and particularly the House of Representatives, has met the conditions for ‘conditional party government’ since the 1980’s, with the two parties being ideologically cohesive within themselves and ideologically distinct from one another (Rohde 1991). Within conditional party government, party leaders are strong and use the tools at their disposal (including committee assignments) to achieve both the party’s legislative and electoral goals. On the other hand, the purpose of ideological caucuses is to use their pivotal votes to achieve policy goals, often at the expense of the preferences of party leaders and the rest of the party. There are two categories of ideological caucuses: moderate and extreme caucuses. It is also assumed that party loyalists, as defined in the partisan theory of committee assignments, are those without ideological caucus membership as they have chosen to not join an organization with the capacity to challenge party leadership. On a two-dimensional ideological plane, moderate caucuses are ideologically closer to the political center than their parent party at large, whereas extreme caucuses are ideologically further away from the political center than their

parent party. Since majorities in the United States House of Representatives tend to be relatively small, the numerical size of these ideological caucuses is, for the most part, larger than the majority of seats of the majority party. This implies that both kinds of caucuses can tank votes that they do not agree with due to their numerical size, notwithstanding potential organizational issues.

These so-called ‘destructive’ votes are a tool that both types of caucuses share, but there also exists the potential for moderate caucuses, as a result of being closer to the ideological center as well as the other party, to take their votes and support a bill proposed by the opposing party. This type of vote, a ‘constructive’ vote, gives the moderate caucuses more tools to achieve policy goals counter to party leadership than extreme caucuses. Since legislation that receives a vote on the floor of the House of Representatives primarily comes from the majority party, ideological caucuses will be able to use the tools available to them more often when their party is in the majority than in the minority. Party leaders are well aware of this dynamic and the ability for caucuses to break majority votes, so they will tailor their committee assignments around the expectation that caucuses will have the numbers to break their majorities even if they currently lie in the minority party. On one hand, party leaders may seek to placate these ideological caucus members by giving them good committee assignments and thus discouraging these members from breaking party line. On the other hand, party leaders may punish ideological caucus members and give them worse committee assignments, thus reducing their influence in committees and discouraging legislators from joining these caucuses. Party leaders may also reward moderate caucus members with better committee assignments than extreme caucus members due to moderate caucuses having the ability to side with the other party, something that

extreme caucuses don't have, thus giving moderate caucuses more leverage against party leadership.

Hypothesis 1:

- a. Among members of the House, those with ideological caucus membership will be more likely to have seats on "Constituency" and "Prestige" committees than will those without ideological caucus membership.
- b. Among members of the House, those without ideological caucus membership will be more likely to have seats on "Constituency" and "Prestige" committees than will those without ideological caucus membership.

Hypothesis 2: Among members of the House, those with "moderate" ideological caucus membership will be more likely to have seats on "Constituency" and "Prestige" committees than those with "extreme" ideological caucus membership.

Hypothesis 3: Among parties in the House, the party in control of the majority will have a larger gap between "moderate" and "extreme" ideological caucus membership in the aforementioned committees than the party in the minority.

## **Methods**

To test the hypotheses laid out in the Theory section, I used Jennifer Victor's caucus membership data alongside Stewart III and Woon's committee assignment data. Victor's dataset contains all congressional caucus membership rosters from the 109th to 111th Congresses for members of the U.S. House of Representatives. I used the membership data for the following six caucuses: the Congressional Progressive Caucus (CPC), New Democrat Coalition (NDC), Blue Dog Coalition (BDC), Tuesday Group (TG), Republican Main Street Partnership (RMSP), and

the Republican Study Committee (RSC). The CPC and RSC are self-identified as belonging to the ‘extreme’ end of their political party and the NDC, BDC, TG and RMSP self-identifying as ‘moderate’ caucuses. The RMSP was omitted from the 111th Congress dataset, however, so to rectify that I used the Wayback Machine webpage to visit the archived version of the caucus’ website from February 2nd, 2009, corresponding to the beginning of the 111th Congress, and drew membership data from the ‘Elected Members’ page on the website. For committee assignments, I drew data from Charles Stewart III and Jonathan Woon’s committee assignment dataset containing all committee assignments in the U.S. House of Representatives from the 103rd to the 115th Congresses. The combined dataset consists of every lawmaker's caucus memberships and committee assignments from the 109th to 111th Congress, corresponding to one Congress of Republican control in the House and two Congresses of Democratic control.

For example, Representative Dingell of Michigan, at the time the Dean of the House of Representatives, had three entries in the dataset, one for the 109th Congress, one for the 110th Congress, and one for the 111th Congress. Each committee that existed in the timespan covered in the data was also assigned to one of four categories: “Prestige”, “Policy”, “Constituency”, or “Unrequested.” These categories come from Deering and Smith’s book *Committees in Congress*, which defines these categories on the basis of the member’s “personal aspirations and goals” (1990, p.86). Prestige committees are the most prestigious committees that have wide ranging influence over the chamber and public policy, policy committees cover specific, but very important, areas of legislation, constituency committees are committees that cover areas of legislation that, depending on the member, may appeal to their constituents and help the member get re-elected, and unrequested committees are committees that are rarely sought out by members of Congress because of their relative unimportance (Deering and Smith 1990). The

categorizations of these committees only go up to the 101st Congress, so to keep to the literature the categorization of the committees was followed as closely as possible. There were a number of minor name changes and the formation of a few select committees, with only one new standing committee being formed- Homeland Security. Since these new select committees don't have the authority to draft legislation, they were put in unrequested alongside all the other select committees and joint House/Senate committees. Homeland Security, considering that much of the jurisdiction of the committee is in policy areas that already have other committees, was also put in unrequested.

In the dataset, each member of the House of Representatives from 2005-2010 is assigned a random five-digit ID number. To measure ideological caucus membership, I created dummy variables for each of the 6 ideological caucuses in the House of Representatives with 1 meaning the legislator is a member of the caucus and 0 meaning the legislator is not. Each caucus is then divided into two categories, extreme or moderate, with their own corresponding binary dummy variables that indicate membership. I then created dummy variables for each of the committees in the House, with 1 representing membership in that committee and 0 representing non-membership. I also created dummy variables for the four types of committees, with a 1 representing membership in any single committee in a particular category and 0 representing non-membership. I then created a dummy variable for majority status, with 1 meaning the legislator is in the party that controls the majority of seats in the House of Representatives for that term of Congress and 0 meaning the legislator is not. Party membership is also measured, with 1 representing a Republican legislator and 0 representing a Democratic legislator. The one independent legislator in the dataset, Representative Bernard Sanders, was coded as a Democrat as he caucused with the Democrats and thus received committee assignments from Democratic

party leadership. For Hypothesis 3, I created an extremism dummy variable, with 0 representing a legislator solely in a moderate caucus, 1 representing a legislator in either no ideological caucuses or in both a moderate and extreme caucus, and 2 representing a legislator solely in an extreme caucus.

To test the hypotheses presented above, I estimate logit models of assignments to each type of committee at a 95% confidence level. Each model controls for chamber seniority which is a measure of how many sessions of Congress that a member has served. More senior members tend to receive better committee assignments, particularly for the prestige committees (citation needed). Standard errors are clustered by member of Congress to address autocorrelation produced by each lawmaker appearing multiple times the data. In testing hypothesis 3, I added an interaction term between the extremism variable and the majority status variable to control for the effect that majority status has on the models.

## Results

Statistical significance in the following tables is indicated by \*\*. b stands for the coefficient and se stands for standard error. The threshold for statistical significance is  $p < 0.05$  or greater than 95% confidence.

### Hypothesis 1

The member variable in Table 1.1 is a dummy variable that measures whether a legislator is a member of an ideological caucus or not.

	Prestige	Constituency
	b/se	b/se
Caucus Membership	0.108 (0.156)	-0.000 (0.149)
Chamber Seniority	0.057** (0.021)	-0.133** (0.025)
Intercept	-1.099** (0.175)	0.749** (0.168)
N	1293	1293
X <sup>2</sup>	7.775**	29.292**

\*\* denotes  $p < 0.05$ . Values are logistic regression coefficients with standard errors (clustered by lawmaker) in parentheses.

Table 1.1 Logistic Regression Model of Assignment to Prestige and Constituency Committees

As shown in Table 1.1, there is no statistically significant relationship between both Prestige and Constituency committee membership and ideological caucus membership. There is not enough evidence to suggest that either hypothesis 1a or 1b are true.



## Hypothesis 2

	Prestige	Constituenc y
	b/se	b/se
Moderate	0.164 (0.192)	0.213 (0.184)
Extreme	0.053 (0.179)	-0.216 (0.167)
Chamber Seniority	0.058** (0.021)	-0.130** (0.025)
Intercept	-1.103** (0.176)	0.745** (0.168)
N	1293	1293
X <sup>2</sup>	7.915**	33.733**

Table 2.1 Logistic Regression Model of Assignment to Prestige and Constituency Committees by Moderate and Extreme Ideological Caucus Membership

As shown in Table 2.1, there is no statistically significant relationship between Prestige and Constituency committee membership and both moderate and extreme ideological caucus membership. There is not enough evidence to suggest that Hypothesis 2 is true.

## Hypothesis 3

Both models shown below include the three-point extremism variable as described in Methods. The interaction term between extremism and majority status is also shown below.

	Prestig e	Constituenc y
	b/se	b/se
1.Extremism	-0.54	0.565
	-0.361	-0.373
2.Extremism	-0.346	0.719
	-0.381	-0.386
Majority	0.095	-0.335
	-0.349	-0.389
1.Extremism~ Chamber Seniority	0.2	0.651
	-0.393	-0.438
2.Extremism~ Chamber Seniority	0.204	0.057
	-0.482	-0.526
Intercept	-0.405	-0.663
	-0.326	-0.34
N	611	611
X <sup>2</sup>	6.23	10.021

Extremism is a 3-point variable where 0=moderate caucus member, 1=non-caucus member or moderate and extreme caucus member, 2=extreme caucus member, and Extremism-Chamber Seniority is an interaction term.

Table 3.1 Logistic Regression Model of Assignment to Prestige and Constituency Committees by Ideological Caucus Membership for Republicans

	Prestige	Constituenc
	b/se	y
	b/se	b/se
1.Extremism	-0.092	-0.647
	-0.357	-0.336
2.Extremism	-0.013	-1.000**
	-0.393	-0.379
Majority	0.019	0.351
	-0.25	-0.224
1.Extremism ~ Chamber		
Seniority	0.268	-0.424
	-0.383	-0.349
2.Extremism ~ Chamber		
Seniority	0.114	-0.261
	-0.317	-0.342
Intercept	-0.738**	0.418
	-0.26	-0.248
N	691	691
X <sup>2</sup>	2.104	22.8**

Table 3.2 Logistic Regression Model of Assignment to Prestige and Constituency Committees by Ideological Caucus Membership for Democrats

As shown in Tables 3.1 and 3.2, when controlling for majority status, there are still no statistically significant relationships between caucus membership and committee assignments, with one exception.

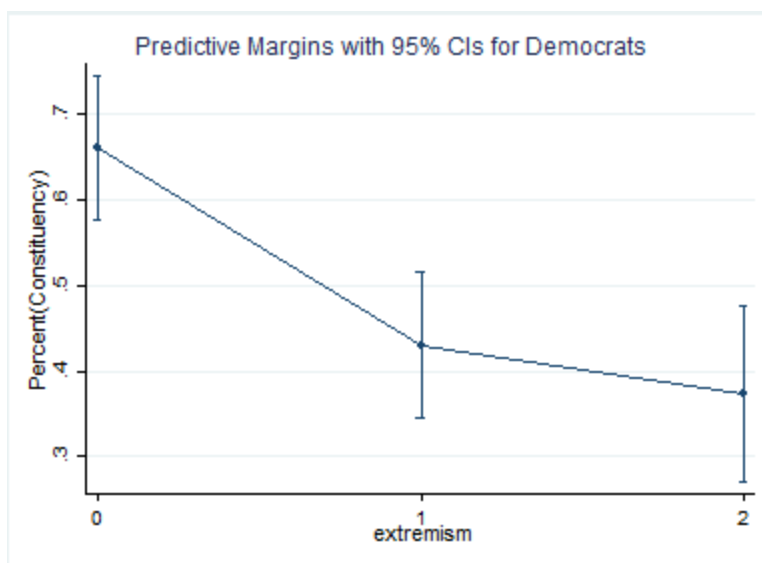


Figure 3.1 Constituency committee membership among Democrats in the House of Representatives

As shown in Figure 3.1, in the Democratic Party only, legislators with only moderate caucus membership receive a significantly greater proportion of committee assignments on constituency committees than do Democrats with only extreme caucus membership. There is not enough evidence to suggest that the gap between moderate and extreme caucus member committee assignments is bigger when in the majority than in the minority and not enough evidence to suggest that Hypothesis 3 is true.

### Implications and Discussion

All three of the hypotheses turned out to be null. The only statistically significant relationship is that moderate caucus Democrats tend to receive more Constituency committee assignments than do extreme caucus Democrats when controlling for majority status. From what can be gathered, the committee assignment process is very opaque. There are many potential factors that go into what committees a legislator may be put on and a rational choice model can only go so far in explaining a murky and political process. While it could not be proven true in

this test, the possibility remains that ideological caucus membership is a factor that party leadership considers when making committee assignments.

In conducting a future study in this field, I would expand the dataset to include all Congresses from at least 1974, the last year where major reforms to the Congressional leadership and committee structure were made. I would also add other variables that might influence committee assignments, such as legislative productivity, career experience prior to entering Congress, as well as the demographic and economic characteristics of the districts of each legislator.

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