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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

An Institutional Capture Theory of Interest Group Influence

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Political Science

Nicholas Jenkins

December 2022

Dissertation Committee:

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Acknowledgements

Completing this dissertation was an immense task and there are several people that I would like to thank for their help and guidance along the way. First, I would like to thank my advisor, Kevin Esterling, for all of his feedback, encouragement, and support. Kevin consistently encouraged me and pushed me to produce my best work. He was always available to help me work through obstacles in my research and was quick in getting back to me with constructive feedback. Kevin sought out employment opportunities for me on campus that would benefit my career and provided unwavering support for me on the job market. I really couldn't have asked for a better mentor and advisor.

I would also like to thank Molly Ritchie for her help and feedback on all of my research projects throughout my time at UCR. Molly helped me significantly improve my writing and presentation skills for which I will always be indebted to her! I also have Molly to thank for developing my interest in American politics and ultimately switching over to from international relations. I am also very thankful for Nick Weller providing excellent feedback on many drafts of my prospectus and dissertation and for helping me on the job market. I am very fortunate to have had such an excellent dissertation committee. This dissertation would also not have been possible without financial support from the The Congressional Research Grant provided by the Dirksen

Congressional Research Center nor the generosity of Sean Kelly and Scott Frisch sharing their committee request data with me.

Outside of my dissertation support, I would like to thank Steven Liao for his early advice on the skills that I would need to become a quantitative researcher. His patience in teaching me R and good research procedures were invaluable experiences that I continue to benefit from today.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Brooke Jenkins, for her constant encouragement, unconditional support, and many constructive brainstorming sessions. From day one, Brooke has encouraged me to accomplish everything I aim for and has never doubted my ability to succeed. She has helped me think through research problems, organize my schedule, and plan out my future more times than I can count. Brooke is a better partner than I deserve and I am beyond blessed to have her in my life.

As proud as I am of this dissertation, my sole motivation in doing good work is to bring honor to my savior, Jesus Christ, so that I might help accomplish the work of his kingdom. In the words of the Apostle Paul, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord." To those who doubt the intellectual credibility of Christianity, I implore to earnestly consider the material at reasonablefaith.org. To those ready to commit their lives to Christ, I encourage to sincerely reflect on Romans 10:9, "if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

This Dissertation is dedicated to my parents and my wife for all of their support and encouragement without which I would not have been able to finish.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

An Institutional Capture Theory of Interest Group Influence

by

Nicholas Jenkins

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Political Science
University of California, Riverside, December 2022
Dr. Kevin Esterling, Chairperson

Concerns that democratic institutions are biased towards “special interests” and lobbyists are longstanding and span multiple countries. Since the opportunity cost of not getting involved in democratic policy-making is high, interest groups have a strong incentive to participate. Surprisingly, however, political economists have struggled to identify exactly how interest groups and lobbyists affect political outcomes. In this dissertation, I contribute to the literature on interest group influence by arguing for an alternative point of access to democratic institutions. Specifically, using the committee system in the U.S. Congress as a test case, I argue that interest groups work to “capture” institutional arrangements, like the committee system in Congress, to exert their influence. They accomplish this by lobbying members to serve on committees that oversee the group’s interests, and by lobbying steering committees to assign allied members to these committees.

To support this claim, I develop a method to classify interest groups according to how concentrated their issue interests are within committees in Congress. Using this measure, I predict that groups with concentrated committee interests will be more likely than groups with diffuse interests to get involved in the committee assignment process. Interviews with lobbyists and former members of Congress yield evidence

that interest groups influence committee requests, lobby steering committee members, and that concentrated groups are more likely to employ these strategies than groups with diffuse interests. Finally, I use data on committee requests from the 102nd to 110th Congress to provide a quantitative test of my theory. With these data, I find that campaign contributions from groups under each committee's jurisdiction do predict freshman committee requests. That is, contributions from groups under the authority of a given committee are significant predictors of requests to serve on that committee. In sum, this institutional capture theory of interest group influence explains why members request to serve on the committees that they do, and how interest groups are able to influence legislation without pressuring members on roll call votes or otherwise persuading them on particular legislation.

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Chapter 1

Congress, Committees, and Interest Group Influence

Committee jurisdictions are complex and committee politics are often unfamiliar to the new member. Interactions with "interested others" are sources of information on each of these matters.

Kenneth Shepsle, *The Giant Jigsaw Puzzle*

Citizens of democratic nations have long been concerned with the possibility that "special interests" and lobbyists exert a disproportionate level of influence, or even control, over public policy. As professional groups, these organized interests often have more resources than the average citizen at their disposal to make their policy preferences heard. By resources, I primarily mean time, money, and information, although the public is disproportionately focused on money.

Concern about the influence of money in U.S. politics is not misplaced nor is it new. In the 1755, George Washington ran for a seat in the Virginia House of Burgesses but only received 40 of 581 votes.¹ He ran again in 1757, but this time he spent nearly

¹<https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/house-of-burgesses/>

£40 (which is the equivalent of £7,639, or about \$5,587 in 2021) on alcohol to give to everyone who voted for him.² He won the election. In the 1828 presidential campaign, Andrew Jackson employed a radical new strategy of running campaign offices (he had two) and raising money for his election (OpenSecrets.org, n.d.). Following Jackson's election, candidates increasingly began soliciting contributions from voters which led to the first federal campaign finance law in 1867 prohibiting federal officials from asking naval yard workers for campaign contributions.

The concerns that money buys undue influence in U.S. elections has only increased in the 21st century and has prompted new campaign finance laws and regulations. But political actors interested in influencing politics have other ways to sway public policy than just money, indeed ways that may be more important than money. Over the last several decades, it has come as a fairly large surprise that the evidence that money influences politics is remarkably sparse, despite its increasing presence in U.S. elections. While money certainly plays an influential role in policymaking, and researchers are beginning to identify how it influences politics (e.g. Powell and Grimmer, 2016; Fournaies and Hall, 2018), political scientists responded to this drought of evidence by looking to other factors like information and expertise as means of political influence. These are plausible avenues of influence given that the sole reason these groups exist is to advocate for particular issues. This means that they spend a significant amount of time researching the issues that they care about, developing persuasion strategies, and networking with the members of Congress who can help them get their way. Interest groups help members of Congress with policy research, public opinion polling, and other essential activities to lighten their legislative load in order to free-up their time for other things (Hall and Grofman, 1990). Similarly, interest groups provide

²A letter written to George Washington from Charles Smith says that Washington bought 46 and 3/4 gallons of beer; 40 gallons, 1 hogshead, 1 barrel, and 10 bowls of rum punch; 35 gallons of wine; 2 gallons of cider; and 3.5 pints of brandy (Smith, 1758).

important information about the likely effects of policies (Smith, 1984; Esterling, 2004) and how a member's constituents feel about specific policy proposals (Hansen, 1991).

Focusing on the issues they care about on a full time basis helps interest groups develop expertise not only on their issues, but also on the process and procedure of policy making. Interest groups and lobbyists build personal relationships with the legislators that have the power to affect policy related to the group's interests. Interest groups and lobbyists learn the intricate details of how policy is made and what makes policy proposals successful. In short, interest groups and lobbyists are experts on how Congress works and how to get bills signed into law (and how to prevent bills from becoming law). In fact, interest groups and lobbyist are frequently more experienced and knowledgeable about this process than many members of Congress!

Expertise in "how the game is played," so to speak, means that interest groups and lobbyists know how to affect policy change. But their expertise in the workings of Congress extends beyond mastering the rules of procedure. Interest groups can leverage their expertise to control established institutional arrangements. Political scientists and economists often talk about the importance of institutions because institutions put constrains social interactions. In essence, institutions are the "rules" that govern social interactions. This interest group control over institutions could be accomplished in at least two ways.

First, interest groups could lobby for the implementation of specific institutions, or rules. Institutions are created by people, and in the case of congressional rules, they are created by members of Congress who face external influences. That means the rules Congress follows are determined by members of Congress, political parties, and, potentially, interest groups (Krehbiel, 1992; Diermeier and Krehbiel, 2003). Because members can choose social constraints and organizational structures that will

achieve their desired outcomes, the institutions that are selected are subject to competition between interested and influential actors, like interest groups. Second, interest groups can “capture” existing institutional arrangements to better serve their interests (Kroszner and Stratmann, 1998). Similar to how members of Congress “stack the deck” by strategically creating administrative procedures to maintain control over the bureaucracy (McCubbins, Noll, and Weingast, 1987; McCubbins, Noll, and Weingast, 1989), interest groups may “stack the deck” of legislative institutions to maintain control over policy that will affect their interests. In doing this, interest groups are able to establish their position of influence over the policymaking process before any policy considerations begin. While both are possible, in this book I argue that this second strategy is the case in at least one institutional context: the U.S. Congress.

There are several institutions employed in Congress, but the committee system stands out as one of the most important. Committees in Congress are specialized subunits that claim jurisdiction over specific policy areas. Thus, committee members have a disproportionate level of influence over the issues their committee oversees, and have the first opportunity to review and debate bills that have been submitted for consideration. Moreover, the process of assigning bills to committee for consideration is overseen by a neutral authority known as the House Parliamentarian which ensures some level independence from political parties and other influential actors in the process. As a result, committee members are important and are uniquely positioned to affect public policy on particular issues. The authority that committee members enjoy over particular issues has led them to become the target of intense interest group lobbying and campaign contributions from affected industries. It would seem, then, that who sits on which committee is something of tremendous importance to interest groups and the process of assigning committee seats is not without opportunities for outside influence.

This system of specialized subunits that are responsible for specific policy issues has created a significant opportunity for interest groups across industries to accomplish their policy goals (Denzau and Munger, 1986; Grier and Munger, 1986; Munger, 1989; Kroszner and Stratmann, 1998; Loucks and Bennett, 2011; Fourinaies and Hall, 2018). As a result of the potential benefits to be had, interest groups are unlikely to stand-by idly watching who gets put on which committee all the while hoping that members friendly to their policy preferences will be assigned to the committees they want. Instead, an economically rational interest group should be active in the committee assignment process, working to influence who serves on the committees they care about. Interest groups regularly work to develop relationships with members of Congress, particularly committees that oversee their interests, and are therefore knowledgeable about what types of issues committees oversee, what kind of members party leaders and committee chairs would like to have on particular committees, as well as who has influence in assigning committee seats. With this information, interest groups get involved with the demand-side of the process by helping incoming members strategically formulate their list of committee assignment preferences. Similarly, interest groups also have the relationships with lawmakers who make committee assignment decisions they need to get involved with the supply-side of the process by influencing the ultimate assignment decisions. Simply put, interest groups know the importance of committees and know the best ways to get the people they want on to those committees. Finally, because they know the value of this information, they use it to help the members they like get the assignments they want.

In this chapter, I develop my argument that interest groups get involved with the committee assignment process to influence policy by reviewing some of the literature on interest group influence and strategy, exploring the extant evidence for committee

capture, and finally by identifying how interest groups can influence the assignment process.

1.1 Interest Groups and Lobbyists are Experts

There is arguably no better informed, experienced, or strategic actor than a professional lobbyist. Regularly recruited from the pool of legislators and government staff (Shepherd and You, 2020), lobbyists have a solid understanding of how policy is made and often have well-developed relationships with key policymakers. The majority of lobbyists specialize in specific policy areas and are hired by organizations of all types to advance their interests via public policy. Given this intimate connection with, and understanding of, the political process, political scientists have been working to understand how these important actors affect public policy.

Early theories of lobbyist and interest group influence postulated that these actors use their resources to build voting coalitions to support their favored positions on specific bills. These theories became known as “exchange theories” and argued that by making campaign contributions to legislators, interest groups could ensure that sympathetic and unsympathetic legislators alike would vote in line with their interests (Stigler, 1971; Austen-Smith, 1996). This theory led to two related predictions on interest group influence; that campaign contributions should predict roll-call voting behavior and that lobbyists should spend more time and resources on members who disagree with their preferences. However, the evidence that contributions affect voting behavior is, at best, mixed (Chappell, 1981; Chappell, 1982; Peltzman, 1984; Wright, 1990; Smith, 1995; Baumgartner and Leech, 1996). More often than not, these studies find no relationship between contributions and voting behavior, and the studies that find positive effects typically estimate a very small relationship. Even

more problematic for these theories is that lobbyists tend to direct their resources to members who already agree with their group's position (Grier and Munger, 1986; Grier and Munger, 1991; Grenzke, 1989). If money was a persuasive tool, one would expect lobbyists to use it to win over legislators that oppose their interests.

In response to these findings, scholars began investigating legislator behavior in areas other than voting. For example, Hall and Wayman (1990) argue that influence of interest groups is more likely to surface in committee deliberations than on the House floor, and that groups use campaign contributions to incentivize participation in critical legislative activities like committee hearings and markup sessions. Similarly, Hall and Deardorff (2006) argue that by conducting policy research, opinion polling, and general legislative activities, lobbyists can help free up time for their legislative allies. In essence, lobbyists can function like contractors to allied legislators to help them accomplish mutual legislative objectives. These models of interest group influence tend to highlight the fact that legislators are not always aware of the range of possible outcomes that are likely under a particular policy proposal. However, because they are so vested in specific issues, interest groups have a good sense of likely consequences of proposed policies and they willingly share it with legislators who oversee the policy area (Austen-Smith, 1996). For example, Hansen (1991) argues that interest groups are capable of gathering information about district opinions, which is expensive to collect, and that they use this information strategically to influence a legislator's behavior (also see Wright, 1996). In general, this theoretical shift is marked by a move towards the information that interest groups can provide to members (whether that information is used to influence participation decisions or subsidize time) and away from the possibility of exchanging money for votes.

Interest groups not only have information on policy issues, but they are also experts on legislative procedure and operations. Numerous studies document the

fact that lobbying firms pay premiums for former congressional staffers and members of Congress (Blanes I Vidal, Draca, and Fons-Rosen, 2012; Bertrand, Bombardini, and Trebbi, 2014; Ban, Palmer, and Schneer, 2019), and a large number of these individuals do in-fact become lobbyists. For example, as of March 2022 there are 452 former members of Congress who are currently working as lobbyists (known as revolving door lobbyists) according to Opensecrets.org³, and that includes some of the most powerful former members of Congress, members like Dick Arney (former House Majority Leader), Tom Daschle (former Senate Majority Leader), Tom Foley (former Speaker of the House), and Trent Lott (former Senate Majority Leader). Moreover, Shepherd and You (2020) were able to identify 4,520 former congressional staffers that became lobbyists between 2001 and 2014. Further still, it is the most important committees that produce the highest number of revolving door lobbyists. For the House, Opensecrets.org was able to profile 216 members who became lobbyists after serving on the House Ways and Means committee. The runner-up was Energy and Commerce with 171 members followed by 163 from the Appropriations committee. All of this means that interest groups and lobbying firms not only have the subject matter expertise they need, but they also have access to inside information on how the legislative process works, and it is this inside information that gives them the ability to gain control of legislative institutions in Congress like committees. By influencing who serves on committees of importance, these groups are able to make committees to better serve their interests.

³<https://www.opensecrets.org/revolving/top.php?display=Z>

1.2 “Capturing” Committees

The committee assignment process in the House of Representatives involves two stages. Between election day and the beginning of the new Congress, members carefully form a list of committee assignment preferences. Members seek out information and advice on which committees would fit their interests from party leaders, representatives on the steering committees (responsible for making committee assignments), and veteran members of Congress. Once completed, they submit their committee requests to their party’s steering committee for consideration. From there, the members of the steering committee consider each member’s preferences, debate their merits, and ultimately vote on who will serve in each committee seat. This is a complex, and political, process with several actors who are interested in who gets what assignment. Members obviously hope to secure seats on their most preferred committees, party leaders want to put their best members on the best committees, and leaders of state parties are hoping for favorable assignments for their state’s representatives.⁴

Political scientists have made several attempts to understand the incentives of actors involved in the assignment process. For example, party-cartel theories argue that committee assignments are made to benefit the majority party. By strategically selecting committee members, the majority party can better control the legislative agenda and help their members get re-elected (Cox and McCubbins, 1993). In contrast to the distributive view, which posits that members self-select onto the committees that they prefer, the party-cartel model describes the committee system and assignment process as providing a strategic opportunity for key actors to accomplish their desired outcomes. This theory entails that information given to members about

⁴Although it is rational that party leaders would want their most competent members on the most important committees, recent work suggests that they might put their best fundraisers on the most important committees instead to maximize their party’s campaign contributions (Adler and Cayton, 2020; Jenkins, 2022).

the assignment process from party leaders would be used strategically to persuade members to request committees that are consistent with their party's goals. The impact of party leadership on committee assignments, however, has diminished in recent years (Smith and Ray, 1983; Frisch and Kelly, 2006a). This means that the value of persuading members to make particular requests has increased because leaders have less influence over committee assignment decisions. At the very least, convincing a member that serving on a particular committee is in their best interest could reduce negative feelings towards party leaders that might be introduced if each member was assigned to a committee independent of their wishes.

In a chapter on relationship networks, Padgett (1990) argues that state party delegation deans, like party leaders, lobby both members and steering committees to influence the assignment process. Members consult with their state party delegations about which committee assignments would be beneficial to their state, and that state parties monitor their geographic representation on important committees. With data on committee assignments and geographic representation, he shows that the majority of vacant committee seats are given to members who would help achieve better geographic representation for states.

All of these actors have a vested interest who serves on what committee. Thus, it is in their best interest to work with members when forming the request preferences to increase their chances of a favorable assignment, and that is exactly what they do. Party leaders make recommendations for committee seats and campaign for particular outcomes. Similarly, the leaders of state delegations want their members on specific committees, so they lobby on their behalf for the outcomes that they want.

But what about interest groups? Committees are the first stop in the legislative process and they are specifically designed to oversee particular policy issues, which makes them the ideal target for lobbying activity. Instead of having to track down

bills of interest spread across the chamber, lobbyists only need to interact with the committee that deals with the issues they care about.⁵ As a result, committees are an incredibly important point of access when working to influence legislation, and the implications of this have played out as expected. For example, there are numerous studies documenting the fact that Political Action Committee (PAC) contributions from specific industries are disproportionately directed towards committees with jurisdiction over that industry (Grier and Munger, 1986; Grier and Munger, 1991; Munger, 1989; Romer and Snyder, 1994; Kroszner and Stratmann, 1998; Loucks and Bennett, 2011; Fourirnaies and Hall, 2018) More recently, Powell and Grimmer (2016) examined what happens to the distribution of campaign contributions a member receives after they are suddenly removed from a committee. They find that after removal from a committee, members receive significantly less money from industries affected by their former committee. In short, interest groups care about committees because they have a good deal of control over certain policy issues.

Because of their interest in committees, party leaders and state delegation leaders get involved in the committee assignment process, but do interest groups do the same? Existing work that discusses the activity of interest groups in this area focuses almost exclusively on their lobbying efforts directed towards steering committees and is often cursory, reserved only for footnotes. Focusing on interest groups in the assignment process, Kenneth Shepsle writes in the concluding chapter of *The Giant Jigsaw Puzzle*,

Outside interest groups occasionally seek to obtain assignments for “friendly” congressmen on committees with jurisdiction in their areas of concern.

Their activity usually takes the form of “campaigning” in the House on

⁵It should be mentioned that committees often have overlapping, and evolving, jurisdictions which dilutes the degree of control that any one committee has over a single issue.

behalf of such members through letters, telephone calls, and personal visits to [steering committee] members.

Shepsle even makes note of a steering committee member who recounted, “I always consult my good friend Andrew Biemiller,” an AFL-CIO lobbyist, “on Labor committee appointments.” Similar accounts have been recorded by Fenno (1973) as well. Indeed, such relationships with lobbyists have been dated back to Speaker Reed, who was known to visit “with the ‘gentlemen of the lobby’, especially on Boston textile interests, to consult on committee assignments” (Shepsle, 1978).

In Richard Fenno’s classic work, *Congressmen in Committees*, he quotes a National Association of Letter Carriers leader on page 41 explaining their strategy to “persuade someone to seek membership on the Committee.” Similarly, in an examination of request letters (in which members make their case for why they should receive the requested committee assignment) submitted by Democrats between 1958 and 1974, Achen and Stolarek (1974) find that endorsements from colleagues and interest groups rank among the most important reasons for a successful request. Although they find limited support for letters mentioning outside interest endorsement, Frisch and Kelly (2006a) discuss instances in which a member’s committee requests were accompanied by letters of support from interest groups.

A recent study by Fournaies and Hall (2018) investigates committee systems at the state-level to see whether or not interest groups care about committees for accomplishing their legislative goals. They find that interest groups are exceptionally aware of which legislators are friendly to their interests and that interest groups increase campaign contributions for friendly members when they gain the power to make committee assignments.

Given the importance of congressional committees to interest group objectives, it seems extraordinarily unlikely, and evidence suggests that it is, that interest groups simply *hope* that legislators friendly to their policy interests get assigned to relevant committees. A more likely scenario is that interest groups encourage allied legislators to request seats on the committees that oversee the group's interests. At the same time, an economically rational interest group will lobby party leaders and members of the steering committees to increase the chances of "their" member receiving a requested committee. By identify friendly candidates early on, interest groups can start building trust with future legislative allies as soon as possible and likely gain or maintain access to relevant committees. After developing a relationship, members are much more likely to be open to the information interest groups have to offer about the committee assignment process and their recommendations for committee requests.

Indeed, researchers have argued that the primary way interest groups exert influence on legislators is by developing long-term relationships. For example, Snyder (1992) argues that interest groups work to make long term investments in legislators. Only after relationships of mutual respect and trust are developed can interest groups receive policy benefits for campaign contributions (Hall and Wayman, 1990; Snyder, 1992). Moreover, recent evidence suggests that interest groups are keenly aware of which legislators are friendly to their causes (Fournaies and Hall, 2018) and are able to identify legislators who have high levels of policy competence (Esterling, 2007).

If interest groups have the capacity, and desire, to seek out members friendly to their policy interests, and provide monetary resources members need for re-election, it seems likely that members would request committees that are consistent with the interests of their campaign contributors. By using a variety of strategies to persuade members, interest groups can incentivize legislative allies to request committees important to the group's interests and steering committees to make favorable assign-

ments. Since understanding and monitoring the committee system in Congress is in a group's best interest, they have valuable information to share with members to help them make better committee requests.

1.3 How Do Interest Groups Get Involved?

There are many facets to successfully getting assigned to a requested committee and members make every effort to get the seats they want. The difficulty is that incoming members do not always know which committees would best serve their constituent's interests or even which committees would best serve their own policy goals. Moreover, not all committees have open seats every session and members certainly do not want to list committees on their preference list that will not have any openings.

Committee seats are also subject to intense competition. This competition not only exists between members vying for seats, but between steering committee members that want to accomplish their own objectives. Steering committees want to accommodate their member's preferences, but they also care about using committee assignments to maximize their party's legislative goals, the geographic representation of members on committees, and their party's ability to raise money for elections.

Together, these factors make the assignment process rather complicated and uncertain, which creates a prime opportunity for interest groups to get involved in two ways. First, interest groups are in a unique position because they have the information that incoming members need to make committee requests that have a high probability of getting fulfilled. By working with members in forming their requests, interest groups are involved with what I call the demand side of the committee assignment process. Second, interest groups have relationships with the key members in Congress that make assignment decisions. By working with these members, interest

groups are also involved with the supply side of the process since they are trying to change who gets assigned where.

1.3.1 Demand-Side Activity

Member Goals and Constituent Preferences

The number of information obstacles to overcome when selecting a committee are numerous, making it necessary to consult with knowledgeable actors, like interest groups, to develop an informed request. When they begin their campaigns, candidates presumably have at least some idea about what they would like to achieve as members of Congress and what policy areas they would like to work on. Perhaps a member's professional background has led them to be particularly interested in an area of policy. Maybe their personal experience with government has motivated them to make specific changes. A candidate's policy preferences, or priorities, may also be the result of their constituent's preferences.

Interest groups can work to support the campaigns of candidates they like and identify as being potentially valuable members of committees that oversee their industry's interests. It is even possible that interest groups could persuade members to care about other policy issues or issues related to the candidates other interests. The principle challenge to this claim would be that members use their committee assignments to represent their constituent's policy interests (e.g. (Jones, 1961; Mayhew, 1974; Shepsle, 1978; Weingast and Marshall, 1988; Adler and Lapinski, 1997; Adler, 2000). The difficulty, however, is that political scientists have struggled to find evidence to support this claim. Not only do committee assignments tend not to match with a member's district demographics (Bullock, 1972; Frisch and Kelly, 2004; Frisch and Kelly, 2006a), but they also do not seem to yield much electoral benefit (Bullock,

1976; Fowler, Douglass, and Clark, 1980; Grimmer and Powell, 2013; Broockman and Butler, 2015). If voters do not have any preferences regarding the committees that their representatives sit on, and committee assignments have no effect on the electability of members, members might be more willing to serve on the committees that their interest group supporters want them to.

Mapping Preferences to Committee Jurisdictions

The degree to which candidates have specific policy preferences or know their constituent's interests likely varies between candidates and presumably improves throughout the campaign cycle as candidates have more opportunities to interact with their constituents and opponents. However, even with well-formulated political goals and policy interests, it is another task entirely to map these preferences to the jurisdictions of various congressional committees.

It is surprising that the existing body of literature on committee requests and assignments often overlooks the complexity of committee jurisdictions. Considering that the 117th Congress has 20 standing committees with over 100 subcommittees that have continually evolving, and often some degree of overlapping, policy jurisdictions, mapping policy preferences to committee jurisdictions is no small task (Shepsle, 1978; King, 1994; Deering and Smith, 1997). In 1947, the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946 went into effect and reduced the number of House committees from 48 down to 19 in an attempt to reduce jurisdictional complexity by creating more distinct committee jurisdictions. Since then, however, more committees have been added, and new issues have arisen. Moreover, committees are known to actively expand their jurisdictions to cement their influence in the chamber (Jones, Baumgartner, and Talbert, 1993; King, 1994; Hardin, 1998).

Leaving subcommittees aside, according to House Rule 10, which defines all committee jurisdictions, immigration, for example, could reasonably fall under the jurisdiction of the Committee on Homeland Security which is responsible for border security, the Committee on the Judiciary which is responsible for immigration policy, the Committee on Foreign Affairs which is responsible for relations with foreign nations generally, or the Committee on Education and Labor which is responsible for the regulation of foreign workers and exchange students.

During routine hearings held by the Committee on House Administration at the beginning of each Congress, members routinely ask for increases in their committee budgets, citing their broad jurisdictions as justification for more funding. In a statement on behalf of the Committee of Oversight and Reform, Congressman Elijah Cummings (D-MD) explained, “As the primary investigative committee of the House of Representatives, the Oversight Committee has one of the broadest jurisdictions of any committee in Congress. We are charged with conducting robust and responsible oversight of the entire federal government - and beyond” (Cummings, 2019). Similarly, executive agencies regularly complain about having to report to too many committees (Lewis and Selin, 2015).

With the consideration of subcommittees, this decision process becomes even more complicated. Consider the case of an incoming member of Congress from a large agricultural district. This member would likely be interested in making agricultural policy, satisfying the farmers in their district, or merely trying to ensure their reelection. Which committee would be best suited for one or all of these purposes? The obvious suggestion would be the House Committee on Agriculture, but maybe the Appropriations subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies would be a better fit. What about the Small Business subcommittee on Rural Development, Agriculture, Trade and Entrepreneur-

ship? Without the right information, deciding which of these options would offer the highest likelihood of meeting a member's needs would be difficult, if not impossible. To make an informed committee request, members need to have at least some information on each committee's jurisdiction and what kind of bills each committee has historically been assigned.

Since interest groups want members friendly to their policy goals to get assignments on relevant committees, they can help members overcome the challenge of committee jurisdictions. Interest groups know what types of legislation committees have dealt with in the past, and they can use that knowledge to help members request the committees that would best accomplish their legislative goals. If a member expresses interest in some detailed aspect of immigration policy, an immigration interest groups could, and would, quickly identify which committee and subcommittee would best serve those specific policy interests. Moreover, these interest groups have likely developed relationships with the committee's leadership and could lobby to get "their" member a seat. This information would not only help members make better requests, but it would also help interest groups to "capture" committees that oversee their industries by stacking them with allied legislators.

Unfortunately, this information will not be enough to make an informed decision since not all committees are the same. Some committees, like Appropriations, are much more competitive, meaning that freshmen have little to no chance of being assigned. Moreover, even if one is assigned to the Appropriations Committee, subcommittee assignments require an additional selection process within the committee, so a seat on the desired subcommittee is not guaranteed.

1.3.2 Supply-Side Activity

Seat Availability

The probability of an assignment does depend on the committee's prestige, but it also depends on whether or not there are any open seats. The number of seats on each committee is generally determined by party leadership before the committee assignment process begins, and while the number of seats and party ratios usually remain constant over time, small changes are not uncommon (Skinner, 2014). Changes to the number of available seats can occur in a few different ways.

First, party leaders can decide to expand the size of a committee, opening up new seats. Some argue that committee expansions are used to accommodate incoming members (e.g. Shepsle, 1978), but this option is challenging to exercise (Frisch and Kelly, 2006a) and can decrease the value of a given seat (Shepsle, 1978; Munger, 1988). A second option is to transfer current committee members to another committee. This option can be exercised with or without the member's consent.

Party leaders could have many reasons for wanting any one member on a particular committee, and one of these factors is lobbying from interest groups. As Shepsle (1978) notes, "On occasion lobbyist and informal House groups seek the majority party leadership's attention on committee expansion. In the 1961 expansion of the Rules Committee, for example, prominent roles were played by the Democratic Study Group . . . and various labor lobbyists in support of Speaker Rayburn's move to expand the committee." Interest groups make their committee preferences known to party leadership and steering committee members (Shepsle, 1978). This is analogous to Padgett's (1990) observation that state delegations lobby steering committee members to "shape the structuring of seats," since interest groups are essentially working to "shape the structure of seats" by influencing who serves on what committee. Moreover,

interest groups are aware of which committees related to their jurisdictions have, or will have, open seats and can use this information to start looking for a replacement member.

One can imagine a scenario in which an interest group working to get an incoming member a seat on a particular committee engages in talks with party leaders and steering committee members to get a seat opening. If these efforts begin to look like they will be unsuccessful, the group may return to the member and suggest an alternative committee request. Even if interest groups do not attempt to persuade members in this way, simply providing members with information on seat availability may change which committees they request.

Geographic Representation

Another consideration for an informed committee request is the geographic representation of the committee in question. Steering committees, congressional party leaders, and state party leaders all want appropriate representation in committees across geographic zones (Rohde and Shepsle, 1973; Shepsle, 1978; Padgett, 1990; Frisch and Kelly, 2006a). As a result, even if there is an open seat on a committee of interest, a member from a state already sufficiently represented on the committee will have a low chance of assignment. Instead, leaders would prefer to assign a member from a state with few or no, members on the committee. A member's chances of assignment become smaller when there is competition for a committee seat between members within the same geographic zone. Although there is no reason to suspect that interest groups have a special insight into this information, they could still provide it nonetheless.

Armed with this information, a hypothetical member seeking an agricultural-related assignment might choose not to pursue an open seat on the Agricultural committee if they learn that several other freshmen from the same geographic zone are interested in the same seat. Similarly, the member might request a different committee if they learn that the Agricultural Committee already has several members from their state or region since party leaders are likely looking to increase the “geographic spread” with the open seat (Padgett, 1990).

Partisan Goals

In recent years, researchers have found evidence that political parties use the assignment process as a tool for party unity and securing party majorities (Frisch and Kelly, 2006a). Indeed, the use of “leadership support scores,” which essentially amount to loyalty scores, have been used by members of the committee on committees to make assignments (Smith and Ray, 1983; Deering and Smith, 1997; Asmussen and Ramey, 2018). Party leadership likely uses the assignment process to advance their party’s goals, but reforms in the committee assignment process have lessened their ability to do so.

More influential interests groups have relationships with party leaders friendly their interests and can use these relationships to help “their” members get better committee assignments. First, because of their relationships, interest groups have at least some idea of what party leaders are looking for in new committee members. Thus, interest groups can use this information when deciding which incoming members would be a good fit for certain committees. If a member that an interest group likes meets all the wishes of party leaders for a particular committee, the interest

group would likely pass this information along to the requester and encourage them to request that committee.

Moreover, in this situation the interest group could act as a trusted middleman to encourage the steering committee to give “their” member the requested committee. Steering committees do not always know much about incoming members, so having the endorsement of a trusted interest group could help to reduce the risk associated with giving a new member a more important assignment. S. S. Smith and Ray (1983) record a member of the 97th Congress saying, “A smart freshman will talk to all Steering committee members.” Perhaps an equally important strategy might suggest, “A smart interest group will talk to all Steering committee members.”

Committee Dues

With the demise of the Speaker’s ability to control committee assignments and the demand for a more democratic assignment process, party leaders have adopted alternative strategies to maintain their control in the House. One of the most critical strategies is the implementation of party “dues” for various committee assignments. Several news articles have been published over the years on members of Congress talking about the practice of both parties requiring a certain amount of campaign contributions made to their parties’ congressional campaign committees to secure desired committee seats (NPR, 2012; Shanky, 2012; Lewis and Arkedis, 2014; Bellamy, 2016; Black, 2017; Ackley, 2017).

These so-called “dues,” or assessments, have been uncovered by reporters and show the specific fundraising targets each member must achieve to maintain their seat (Shanky, 2012; Schweizer, 2013). In his book, Representative Ken Buck (R-CO) explains, “Lesser committee spots such as the Judiciary panel, will set a freshman

lawmaker back \$220,000 ... while ‘A’ committees, such as Ways and Means, require dues of \$450,000” (Buck, 2017). In addition to fundraising targets, each party publishes each member’s fundraising total and how much they have to raise in order to meet their target. Parties have even developed point-systems to rank members according to their contributions to the party.

Researchers have argued that committee dues have emerged as a result of the increasing costs of campaigns and each party’s desire to maintain majority control (Heberlig and Larson, 2005; Herrnson, 2016; Jenkins, 2022). It is thought that party leaders can shift the burden of raising money for party funds on to members by requiring dues for committee assignments. Evidence suggests that members’ contributions to party campaign funds are associated with more successful committee transfers (Heberlig, 2003) and an increased likelihood of getting a position as committee chair (Cann, 2008). Cann (2008) argues that these fundraising goals have “replaced seniority as the central criteria for selecting committee chairs.”

These dues are also explicitly known among members. In addition to the published lists of members and their fundraising status mentioned above, members seek potential donors to help them reach their fundraising targets. An ABC News article written in 2010 reported on a recording of Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-DC) calling a lobbyist to ask for a contribution because members, “have obligations to raise funds” (Siegel and Parkinson, 2010). She also highlighted the fact that this lobbyist’s organization had contributed to several other members of her committee and that she is a veteran Congresswoman also deserving money. When contacted about the recording, her office claimed that this was a “standard request.” A similar story published in Roll Call by Kate Ackley documented Thomas Massie (R-KY) being approached by a lobbyist who offered to “help him raise money to secure a seat on the Ways and Means Committee” (Ackley, 2018).

The presence of these “committee dues” and the fact that even freshmen are expected to comply with these dues entails that adequate financial support is an essential aspect of securing a good committee assignment. Interest groups have the financial resources that members need to meet any fundraising goals necessary to increase the probability of a member receiving a requested committee assignment. This opens the door for campaign contributions to play an essential role in the committee assignment process and allows for an excellent opportunity for an interest group to provide material support.

1.4 Conclusion

Committees are an important aspect of the policymaking process. They hold jurisdiction over specific policy issues and have a good deal of control over legislation on those issues. This makes them the perfect targets for lobbying activity, but interest groups can do more than just lobby the members of committees. Interest groups have the knowledge, networks, and resources to affect the make-up of committees and they can do this in two main ways. First, they can influence the demand-side of the assignment process by strategically helping members request particular committees. Second, because they also have relationships with lawmakers in charge of making committee assignments they can influence who gets assigned to what committee. By influencing who serves on what committee, interest groups are able to shape the organization of the chamber to make it more responsive to their interests. Instead of waiting to see who is on what committee to start their lobbying efforts, these groups work to stack the committees they care about with allied legislators so they can secure their influence before the next session of Congress even begins.

This chapter lays out the case for why interest groups care about committee assignments and how they get involved in the assignment process, but which groups get involved and when? There are thousands of interest groups in the U.S. and a great deal of diversity among those groups with respect to the size of their membership, the amount of financial resources they have, and both the type and number of issues that they care about. Not all interest groups have an incentive to get involved with the assignment process, so in the next chapter I explain which groups do and why.

Chapter 2

A Data Driven Approach to Interest Group Classification

Many members eager for specific assignments write lengthy memos to convince party leaders of their personal qualifications or political needs. They also seek support from their state delegations, key interest group figures, and committee chairs.

Deering and Smith, *Committees in Congress*

There are tens of thousands of interests groups engaged in U.S. politics but not all groups pursue the same influence strategies. Groups with a large amount of money for campaign contributions and professional lobbyists may pursue strategies that are very different from groups that rely of grassroots efforts. In Chapter 1, I argued that interest groups influence public policy through the committee assignment process in two primary ways. First, interest groups attempt to influence the committees that incoming members ask to serve on, thereby changing member's stated preferences.

Second, they try to secure spots for allied legislators on committees by lobbying the steering committee which has ultimate control over committee assignments.

In this chapter, I argue that interest groups that are focused on only a small number of committees are most likely to get involved with the committee assignment process as a strategy of influence. Bills concerning similar policy issues are typically assigned to the same committees for consideration, which means that interest groups with a stake in those issues will end up lobbying the same committees over and over. As a result, the lobbying activities of groups that are only interested in one or two issues will only lobby one or two different committees. For these groups, influencing the composition of those specific committees will prove extremely beneficial. In contrast, groups with a wide range of issue interests end up lobbying so many different committees that it becomes less advantageous to alter the composition of any one committee, since so many committees are important for their policy goals.

Before reviewing the evidence for these claims, I first develop a framework for making predictions about which interest groups engage in these activities. To do so, I use data from lobbying disclosure reports and congressional bill referrals to classify interest groups according to how concentrated their lobbying activities are within committees. Ultimately this measure serves as a the basis for selecting interest groups to test my theory in Chapters 3 and 4.

2.1 The Challenge of Classifying Interest Groups

Interest groups are particularly challenging to study for at least two primary reasons. First, interest groups often rely on their social networks and informal conversations. While there is a rather stringent set of regulations that govern lobbying activity, interest groups hold closed-door meetings with members that are not documented in

detail. We simply cannot know everything that interest group representatives discuss with members of Congress which inherently restricts our ability to identify *how* groups influence policies. Second, researchers have disagreed on what constitutes an “interest group.” Developing a clear understanding of what an interest group is and how they influence policy is complicated by the presence of competing conceptions (e.g. interest groups, interest organizations, pressure groups, cause groups, citizen interest groups, social movement organizations, civil society organizations) and the fact that there are no comprehensive lists or agreed upon classification schemes for interest groups (Jordan, Halpin, and Maloney, 2004; Baroni et al., 2014).

The first set of research on interest group influence naturally focused on exploring the available data on their activity, which was roll-call votes and campaign contributions. These studies assumed that interest groups are primarily interested in convincing legislators to support their side of a policy issue. In other words, they assumed that interest groups primarily aim to determine policy outcomes rather than move policies closer to their preferences. As such, the early expectation was that lobbyists spend their time trying to convince undecided and oppositional legislators to vote in the way that an interest group wants on relevant legislation.

Using the roll-call vote of each member as their outcome variable and campaign contributions from Political Action Committees (PACs) as the primary predictor, early researchers set out to explain how lobbying activity influences members of Congress. Much to their surprise, many of these studies found that PAC contributions are not predictive of roll-call voting (Chappell, 1981; Chappell, 1982; Kau and Rubin, 1981; Kau and Rubin, 1984; Welch, 1982; Peltzman, 1984; Wayman, 1985; Grenzke, 1989; Vesenka, 1989; Wright, 1990; Nollen and Quinn, 1994; Bronars and Lo, 1997; Langbein, 1993).

Making the puzzle worse, not all of the early studies conclude that campaign contributions have no effect on roll-call votes. Indeed, several studies indicate that contributions have significant effects (Silberman and Durden, 1976; Coughlin, 1985; Frensdreis and Waterman, 1985; Wilhite and Theilmann, 1987; Jones and Keiser, 1987; Saltzman, 1987; Stratmann, 2002). In his review of 37 different studies of campaign contributions and roll-call voting, Smith (1995) documents that 8 studies do not support the relationship between contributions and roll-call votes, 12 have mixed support, and 17 support the relationship between contributions and roll-call votes. In their discussion of 48 studies on lobbying and interest group influence, Baumgartner and Leech (2001a) show that roughly half of the studies report null findings while the other half report significant findings. Almost as a crowning achievement, Burstein and Linton (2002) review the results of all studies on interest group influence from 1990 to 2000 published in sociology and political science journals and find that just under half report interest group efforts as having a significant influence. In short, there is clearly a lot more to the story than interest groups using campaign contributions to buy votes.

As a result of this "dead-end," researchers began shifting their attention towards other types of interest group activities. Instead of explaining how interest groups influence policy, these studies sought to understand the strategies that interest groups use to engage with policy. This new focus involved investigating why interest groups form coalitions (Hojnacki, 1997; Hula, 1999; Holyoke, 2009), why groups use grass-roots efforts over inside lobbying (Kollman, 1998), and who interest groups focus their lobbying efforts on (Kollman, 1997; Hojnacki and Kimball, 1998; Hojnacki and Kimball, 2001; Carpenter, Esterling, and Lazer, 2004). What these studies have in common is their classification of interest groups by either issue area or organization type.

The issue area approach typically involves classifying interest groups according to the policy activities they engage in (Jordan, Halpin, and Maloney, 2004). With this strategy, researchers learn about interest group strategy by generalizing across organizations that are active within the same policy domain. For example, in his book, *Private interests, public policy, and American agriculture*, William Browne (1988) studies a range of organizations active on agricultural policy to understand "... who does what and why." To increase the generalizability of interest group strategy beyond a single policy domain, Kevin Hula (1999) studied a range of organizations active on several different issue areas to learn how and why interest groups form coalitions for their lobbying efforts. Studying groups across issue domains is a powerful approach because it provides an improvement in external validity over single organization case-studies (Salisbury et al., 1987; Heinz et al., 1990; Browne, 1999).

In contrast to the issue area classification approach, the organizational approach classifies interest groups according to certain organizational features. For example, studies have divided groups into for-profit firms, nonprofits, citizen groups, businesses, trade associations, professional associations, unions, or governmental organizations (Walker, 1983; Baumgartner and Leech, 2001b; Furlong and Kerwin, 2004). Other studies using this approach focus on characteristics such as the group's membership structure, level of geographical mobilization, staff size, and/or lobbying budget arguing that these resources play a key role in determining which strategies groups use (Baroni et al., 2014). The problem with each of these approaches is that they ignore the connection between issues and committee jurisdictions.

To overcome the issues of limited data on interest group activity and classifying interest groups, I offer two solutions. First, rather than focusing on how interest groups might influence a member's behavior *after* they are in the chamber, I focus instead on how interest groups might influence a member's behavior *before* they are

in the chamber. The committee assignment process happens before each session of Congress starts and could, as I argue, offer an opportunity to establish influence in Congress before the session begins.

Second, instead of trying to classify interest groups based on qualitative descriptions their organizational features, I use lobbying report data on all groups that lobbied Congress to estimate a new classification measure. Namely, issue concentration. Some researchers have focused on the value of developing narrow issue concentrations for interest group efficacy (Gray and Lowery, 1996; Hojnacki, 1997; Baumgartner and Leech, 2001a; Heaney, 2004), but none have used a measure of committee concentration to classify interest groups and develop an understanding of the strategic differences between groups with narrow and disparate interests. The scope of an organization's issue interests is, however, theoretically important for making predictions about lobbying strategy and influence. Such a measure can vary across different types of organizations, membership structures, budgets, and issues. Indeed, this argument follows from Olsen's (1965) bifurcation of "privileged" and "latent" interest groups where privileged groups have an incentive to take it upon themselves to realize the collective benefits of lobbying and latent groups can free ride because they are unable to make meaningful contributions. Thus, committee concentration does not neatly map into either the issue area or organizational classification approaches. For example, an interest group whose sole purpose is to advocate for health insurance reform may have different strategies, opportunities, and/or levels of success when working to influence health insurance policy than a group that exists to advance their membership's broad interests of which health insurance is only one of many important issues. Focusing on whether the group being studied is a business, professional association, union, etc. fails to capture this aspect because the political activities of these groups may be more or less concentrated on a single policy issue. Similarly, sampling

groups active on a single policy does not guarantee that all of the groups selected have concentrated interests in the issue that they were selected for.

2.2 A Committee Concentration Classification Scheme

Considering how important committees are in the legislative process, it seems natural that they are the target of lobbying activity. Committees have a powerful influence on the formation of legislation that could have a significant impact on an organization's policy interests or even profitability. As a result, committees are one of the most important targets for interest group and lobbying activities. Numerous studies show that Political Action Committee (PAC) contributions from specific industries are disproportionately directed towards committees with jurisdiction over that industry (Grier and Munger, 1986; Munger, 1989; Grier and Munger, 1991; Romer and Snyder, 1994; Kroszner and Stratmann, 1998; Loucks and Bennett, 2011; Fourinaies and Hall, 2018). Moreover, interest groups are tremendously vested in the committee system because of the significant opportunity costs they create for nearly all economic industries and policy interests (Denzau and Mackay, 1983; Grier and Munger, 1986; Munger, 1989; Kroszner and Stratmann, 1998; Loucks and Bennett, 2011; Fourinaies and Hall, 2018), but these opportunity costs are not constant across groups. As one lobbyist explained to me during an interview,

... the [issues of the] mortgage bankers, the Realtors, the American Bankers Association, the pharmaceutical industry generally tend to be located in a couple of committees. If they were able to - well, I was going to use the word "control" - if they had enough friends on those committees they could have a significant say in how the issues that were

most important to them were handled by those committees. That was their game. [The organization that I represented], frankly, had important issues that could appear before any number of important committees in Congress, most of the major committees. In the House, they were Commerce, Ways and Means, Education and Labor, very few issues before finance. . . Bankers basically had two committees, one on each side [of Congress]. They have Financial Services [in the House] and the Banking Committee [in the Senate]. I mean, there are issues that would come up, probably in the Labor Committee, but the pharmaceutical industry, the oil industry, the banking and finance industries, realtors - none of those got involved in labor management issues.

This suggests that the scope of issue interests is an important consideration for understanding interest group strategy. Organizations with narrow, or concentrated, policy interests, like the American Bankers Association (ABA), have a strong and vested interest in who serves on the primary committees that oversee their interests, namely the Financial Services Committee. In contrast, groups with more disparate interests are likely to be more concerned with developing relationships with members across the chamber than they are in concentrating their efforts on one or a couple committees. Broadly interested groups have little to gain by investing time and money to “control” a single committee because the issues they care about are spread across so many different committees.

This idea is very similar to that enunciated by Hall and Wayman (1990). In their article, Hall and Wayman argue that interest groups consider the relevance of committees and subcommittees when deciding how to allocate lobbying resources because they recognize that some committees will yield a higher return than others.

This theory would seem to imply that groups with a high expected return of investing in a committee will do so. However, because groups differ in the scope of issues they care about, not all groups will benefit from "committee investments." As a concrete example of this, consider the National Association for Gun Rights and the Friends Committee on National Legislation.

The National Association for Gun Rights (NAGR) is a group that has a very narrow issue interest, namely, gun rights. According to their website, the NAGR "... works tirelessly to hold politicians accountable for their anti-gun views, and has made great strides in protecting and preserving the Second Amendment."¹ If gun rights are the group's sole interest, we could make several predictions about their lobbying strategies. First, given the relatively small number of bills submitted for consideration on gun issues, we would expect the NAGR to lobby nearly all of these bills.² Second, because Congress uses a committee system to process legislation, and committees have defined jurisdictions over issues, we might also expect the NAGR to spend the majority of their time lobbying a small number of committees. The concentration on gun rights by NAGR is shown on the right-hand side of Figure 2.1. While their lobbying activity is spread across multiple committees (which is to be expected given the nature of overlapping committee jurisdictions and the practice of referring a single bill to multiple committees), of the 215 bills they lobbied, the overwhelming majority of them were assigned to the House Judiciary Committee. With such a narrow scope of focus, it seems almost obvious that any efforts NAGR might take to influence gun rights legislation would be primarily focused on the Judiciary Committee given its disproportionate control over gun right issues.

¹See their "Key Issues" page here: <https://nationalgunrights.org/about-us/key-issues/>.

²Out of 33,097 bills in my data submitted to the House between the 106th and 114th Congress, only 1.87 percent were classified by OpenSecrets as having an issue of "Firearms, Guns & Ammunition".

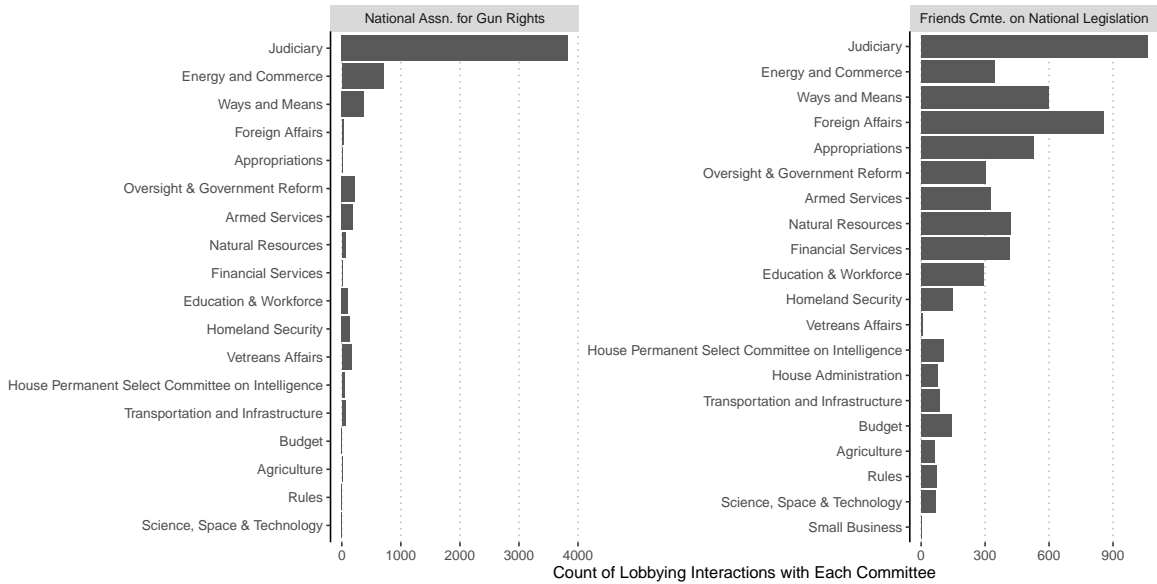


Figure 2.1: Number of Bills Lobbied by Committee of Referral.

The Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL), however, has a much more disparate lobbying activity, with respect to committees. Their website states that they exist to lobby on the broad range of issues related to “. . . advancing peace, justice, and environmental stewardship.”³ As shown in the left-hand side of Figure 2.1, the 500 bills that the FCNL lobbied are much more evenly distributed across committees, indicating a more disparate issue focus. Given this spread, it is much less likely that the FCNL would substantially benefit from concentrating their lobbying activity on a single or small number of committees. Their best chance to influence policy would be to develop relationships with members across the chamber, and across committees, that will advocate for their issue positions.

Although a committee concentration classification scheme of interest groups has not been used before, there is some support for such a scheme in previous literature. In their article *A Niche Theory of Interest Representation*, Gray and Lowery (1996) surveyed several organizations (classified as either institutions, associations,

³See their “About” page here: <https://www.fcnl.org/about>.

or membership groups) on a series of questions about the importance of particular legislators, committees, and issues. Nearly 60 percent of all institutions, associations, and membership groups said that it is sometimes true that a policy area is dominated by few key legislators, and 28 percent of institutions, 21 percent of associations, and almost 17 percent of membership groups said that it was always true. When asked if the legislative jurisdiction over the organization's issue interests are restricted to only one or a few committees, 53 percent of institutions, 61 percent of associations, and 46 percent of membership groups said that this is always true. Of course, the missing dimension, with respect to my argument, is the concentration of the surveyed organization's committee activity. If we map my argument to these survey results, we would expect to see firms with concentrated interests responding that the legislative jurisdiction over the organization's issue interests are always restricted to only one or a few committee.

While this alternative approach to classifying interest groups yields many important predictions about lobbying strategy and influence, the focus of this chapter is on the construction of such a classification.

2.3 Measuring Committee Concentration

Instead of defining a specific policy issue and selecting groups active on it, or selecting interest groups that are representative of various organization features, I use observable data on lobbying activity to create a measure of committee concentration for interest groups. Specifically, I use lobby reports and bill referral data to measure the frequency with which each organization lobbies each committee in the House to measure their committee concentration.

The idea of committee concentration is not entirely foreign to researchers of interest group politics. Beyers (2004), for example, classifies interest groups according to whether they represented the narrow interests of a constituency or the broad interests of society. Similarly, Schneider and Baltz (2003) classify groups based on the activities they engage in and whether those activities are concentrated in a limited number of issues or not. Within the committee jurisdiction literature, Hardin (1998) uses a Herfindahl index to measure the degree of concentration within each committee in Congress.

To develop a measure of interest group committee concentration, I follow Gray and Lowery (1996) and use a population ecology approach. Diversity indices are commonly used in the biological sciences to calculate the diversity of organisms within an ecosystem (e.g. Odum and Barrett, 2005). However, these metrics are becoming increasingly important in the social sciences as well. Unfortunately, there is no single agreed upon measure of diversity and it is often difficult to capture the true diversity of a system with just a single measure (Grabchak et al., 2017). Some measures emphasize richness (the number of species present) while others emphasize evenness (how organisms are split among different categories).

Since my goal is to measure the scope of issue interest across organizations with respect to committees, my focus is on the breadth of committees that an organization lobbies. As such, I need to measure both the richness and evenness of committees lobbied by an organization. For example, an organization that lobbies several bills that were all referred to the same committee will be classified as having a narrow scope of issue interests. In this scenario, such an organization would have a low variety of lobbying activity. Similarly, an organization that lobbies dozens of committees but 90 percent of the bills they lobby are referred to the same committee should also be classified as having a narrow issue interest. To overcome the limitations of using a

single measure, and to capture both the variety and balance of committees lobbied by any one organization, I use three of the most common measures of diversity: the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI), the Berger-Parker Dominance Index, and Shannon's Entropy and combine them in a measurement model.

The Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI) is most commonly used by economists to measure market, or wealth, concentration (Ceriani and Verme, 2012). The HHI primarily measures the degree of concentration in an ecosystem by calculating the probability that two randomly sampled items belong to the same group (Guevara, Hartmann, and Mendoza, 2016). The higher the HHI, the greater the diversity. As a result, this measure will help capture how concentrated a group's lobbying activities are.

The Berger-Parker Dominance Index is less common in the social sciences and focuses on measuring the dominant category in an ecosystem by calculating the proportional abundance to the most common category. In contrast to the HHI, which focuses on measuring "balance" within an ecosystem, the Berger-Parker Dominance Index aims at capturing the variety, or "richness," of an ecosystem. In the context of this project, the Berge-Parker Dominance Index will be good a measuring the variety of committees that an interest group lobbies.

Finally, Shannon's Entropy (also known as Shannon's Index) captures both the variety and balance of a system and reduces it to a single dimension. As such, Shannon's Entropy can process the variety of committees lobbied in addition to the rates at which each committee is lobbied. Shannon's Entropy is one of the most popular measures of diversity in ecology (Gauthier and Derome, 2021).

To calculate each of these diversity measures, I use data on all lobbying activity on bills between the 106th and the 114th Congress from [Opensecrets.org](https://www.opensecrets.org) along with committee referral data for all bills between this same period from the Con-

gressional Bills Project (<http://www.congressionalbills.org>).⁴ With these data, I aggregate them to calculate how often each group lobbies bills assigned to each House committee.⁵ Finally, I restrict the data to only include organizations whose lobbying activity ranked in the top quantile of activity. I do this, because the raw data contain thousands of organizations that only lobbied a single-digit number of bills between 2000 and 2018. With such sparse data on lobbying activity for these organizations, one would be unable to draw any reliable inferences and accurately measure the concentration of their lobbying activity. Moreover, the ultimate goal of this project is to improve our understanding of interest group strategy and influence, so groups that are hardly involved in these activities are not the primary focus. Of course, it is possible that some of these groups are much more active in their lobbying efforts but they did not disclose information for, or lobby, specific bills, but I am unable to account for this possibility. In total, there are 1,094 organizations in the final dataset.

After computing an organization's lobbying diversity according to each of these measures, I estimate a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) model with each diversity measure serving as an indicator for the latent measure of committee concentration. The goal of using a CFA model is to pool all three diversity measures into a single, more representative, estimate of each interest group's committee concentration that captures both evenness and richness. In other words, instead of relying on a single value to estimate concentration, the CFA approach uses several measures to produce a more accurate value that accounts for multiple aspects of diversity.

⁴I am limited to this time period because of the availability of the bill referral data.

⁵I use the parent company of the lobbying activity as the unit of each organization. So, in the case that a company hires a lobbying firm to lobby on their behalf, that company will be credited with the lobbying activity rather than the lobbying firm.

2.3.1 Measurement Validity

In addition to estimating committee concentration, we also need to assess its validity. Specifically, we need to assess construct validity. There are a number of ways to assess construct validity, but the general approach is to test whether the measure is correlated with variables that the measure should be correlated with (Cronbach and Meehl, 1955; Reichardt, 2011). So, with what should an interest group's level of committee concentration correlate?

Diversity measures of richness and evenness are useful for capturing interest group committee concentration, but committee concentration is not the only variable that governs interest group activity. Resources also matter a great deal for predicting who gets involved and when (Baroni et al., 2014). There could exist a group with extremely narrow issue interests, but because they lack the staff or money to spend on lobbying they do not get involved with lobbying activities. Thus, organizational resources should be strongly correlated with interest group concentration. As the amount of available resources for a group increase, they have a greater ability to lobby on multiple issues because they can hire more staff or more lobbyists.

Organizational type also matters for interest group activity (Walker, 1983). Some types of organizations will be more or less broadly interested as a result of what they do. Business organizations, for example, encompasses a wide diversity of activities and thus a broad range of issue interests. In contrast, ideological and educational organizations have much more focused interests across organizations. These groups revolve around issues related to their specific policy areas and so should be more concentrated than the business category. The general point, however, is that if my measure of interest group committee concentration is valid, there should be a correlation between it and the organizational type.

To evaluate these relationships, and thus the construct validity, I include a structural component in the model to capture the interest group’s lobbying expenditures and the type of organization that it is classified as. All of these data come from `Opensecrets.org`.

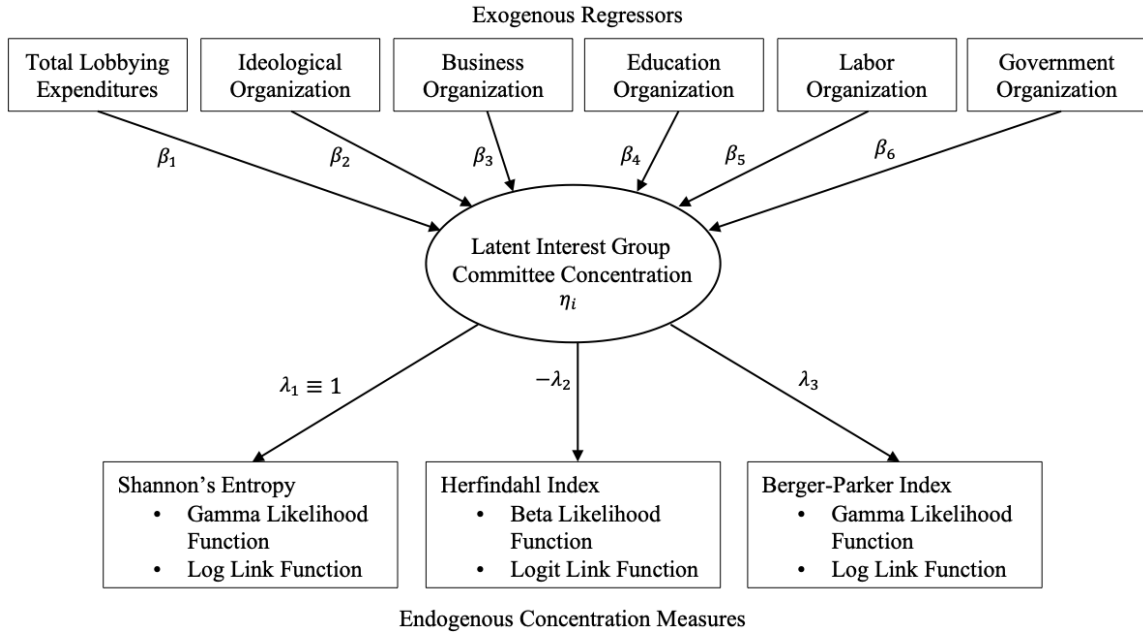


Figure 2.2: Committee Concentration Structural Equation Model

With these data, I estimate a structural equation model to construct a latent measure of interest group committee concentration and see how lobbying expenditures and organizational type affect committee concentration. The full model is shown in Figure 2.2. The committee concentration indicators (Shannon’s Entropy, Herfindahl Index, and Berger-Parker Dominance Index) all have value constraints by design, so I use non-normal likelihood functions in each equation. Both Shannon’s Entropy and the Berker-Parker Dominance Index are restricted to positive continuous values, where higher values mean greater diversity and thus less concentration. As such, I model these measures with a Gamma likelihood function and a log link function. The Herfindahl Index is a positive and continuous measure but is restricted to fall between

0 and 1. For this measure, I use a beta likelihood function with a Logit link function. Finally, I estimate this model in JAGS (Just Another Gibbs Sampler) with 4 chains and 60,000 iterations each. All parameter estimates indicate convergence with their R-hat values falling below 1.05 and good mixing of each chain.

2.4 Concentration Scores

The results of the structural equation model are displayed in Figure 2.3. The structural component of the model, shown on the right side of Figure 2.3 provides evidence of construct validity. First, lobbying expenditures are positively correlated with committee concentration meaning that organizations with more resources are typically less concentrated in their issue interests, as expected. Of course this result only holds on average, and it is important to recall that this model was estimated on a sample of organizations who's lobbying activity ranked in the top 25 percent. Thus, it may be more uncommon for such active organizations to have extremely narrowly focused issued interests, relatively speaking. Second, the estimates for different organization types follow expectations as well. Organizations in the business category have broader issue interests, on average, and organizations in the education category have narrower interests. Ideological organizations are also more likely to have narrower interests, but the estimate has a wide uncertainty interval. This makes sense considering that there are thousands of different ideological groups, of which some have rather broad policy interests like the Friends Committee on National Legislation. The median concentration score in the full sample of organizations is 0.05, the mean is 0.02, and the standard deviation is 0.19.

To gauge the reasonableness of the results, we now examine how various interest groups rank according to the measure. Figure 2.4 shows the 10 most concentrated

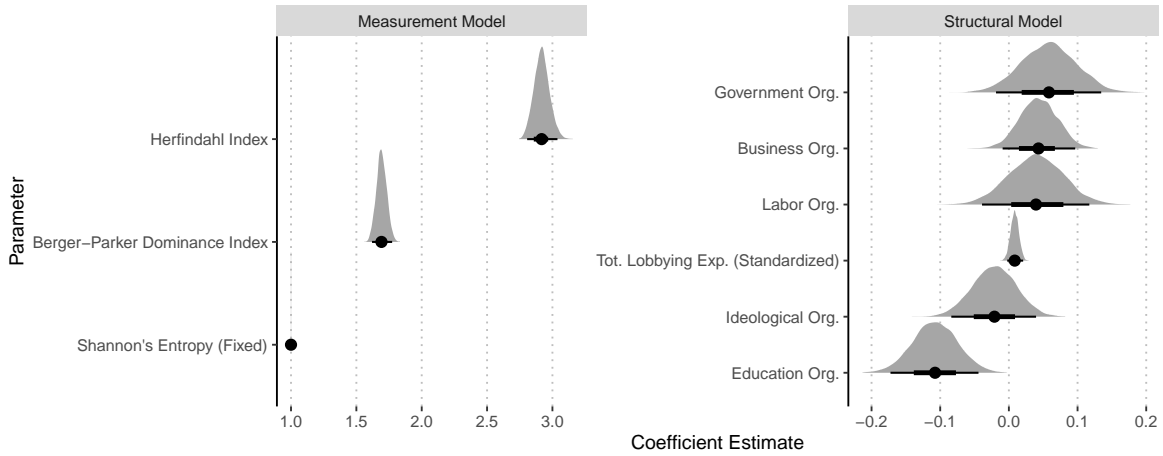


Figure 2.3: Structural Equation Model Estimates

and the 10 least concentrated interest groups.⁶ Although not all of these groups may be particularly well-known, some quick research reveals that these rankings are reasonable. The least concentrated organization, for example, is GenCorp, Inc which is now known as Aerojet Rocketdyne Holdings, Inc. GenCorp, Inc. is a technology company involved with aerospace, defense, and real estate.⁷ On the other end of the scale is DyStar which is chemical manufacturer. The differences in these two groups' committee concentration becomes apparent when we look at their lobbying activity across committees.

Figure 2.5 shows the lobbying activity of GenCorp, Inc. along with the other top 10 least concentrated organizations. These groups share a common pattern in that they all have rather disbursed lobbying activity. All of these organizations spent a substantial amount of time lobbying multiple different committees.

In stark contrast to these organizations, Figure 2.6 shows DyStar and the other top 10 most concentrated organizations. All of these groups have a significantly more

⁶Larger values indicate less committee concentration. Model fit in JAGS with 4 chains running for 60,000 iterations each. Each distribution represents the posterior median estimate along with a 95 highest density interval shown with the thin line and the 50 highest density interval shown with the thick line.

⁷See their "About" page here <https://www.aerocketrocketdyne.com/about-us>.

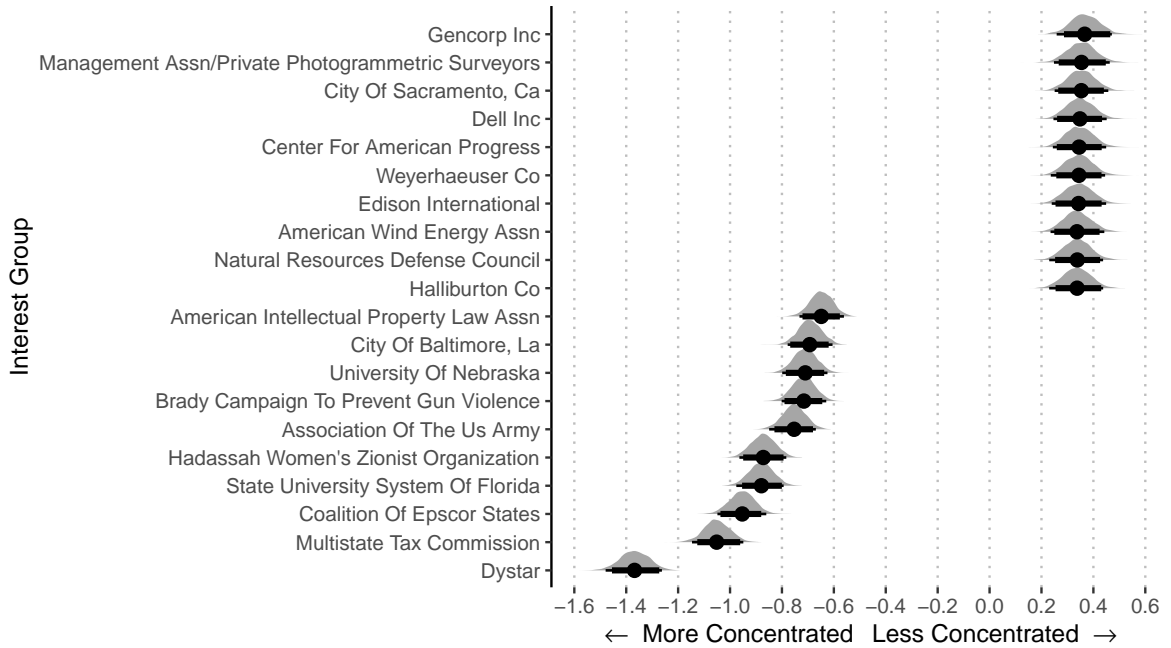


Figure 2.4: 10 Most Concentrated and 10 Least Concentrated Interest Groups

concentrated distribution of lobbying activity. The most concentrated organization, DyStar, only lobbied one committee and they lobbied them over 250 times.

2.5 Conclusion

Categorizing and classifying interest groups is a difficult task because groups differ across a range of different organizational characteristics, have a range of issue interests, and there is no comprehensive list of active groups. Classifying groups is extremely important, however, in order to generate theories of their strategies and activities.

The goal of this chapter was to develop a data-driven approach to measure committee concentration among interest groups to use as a starting point to test my theory that interest groups influence policy via the committee assignment process. Using lobbying and bill referral data along with ecosystem diversity measures, I de-

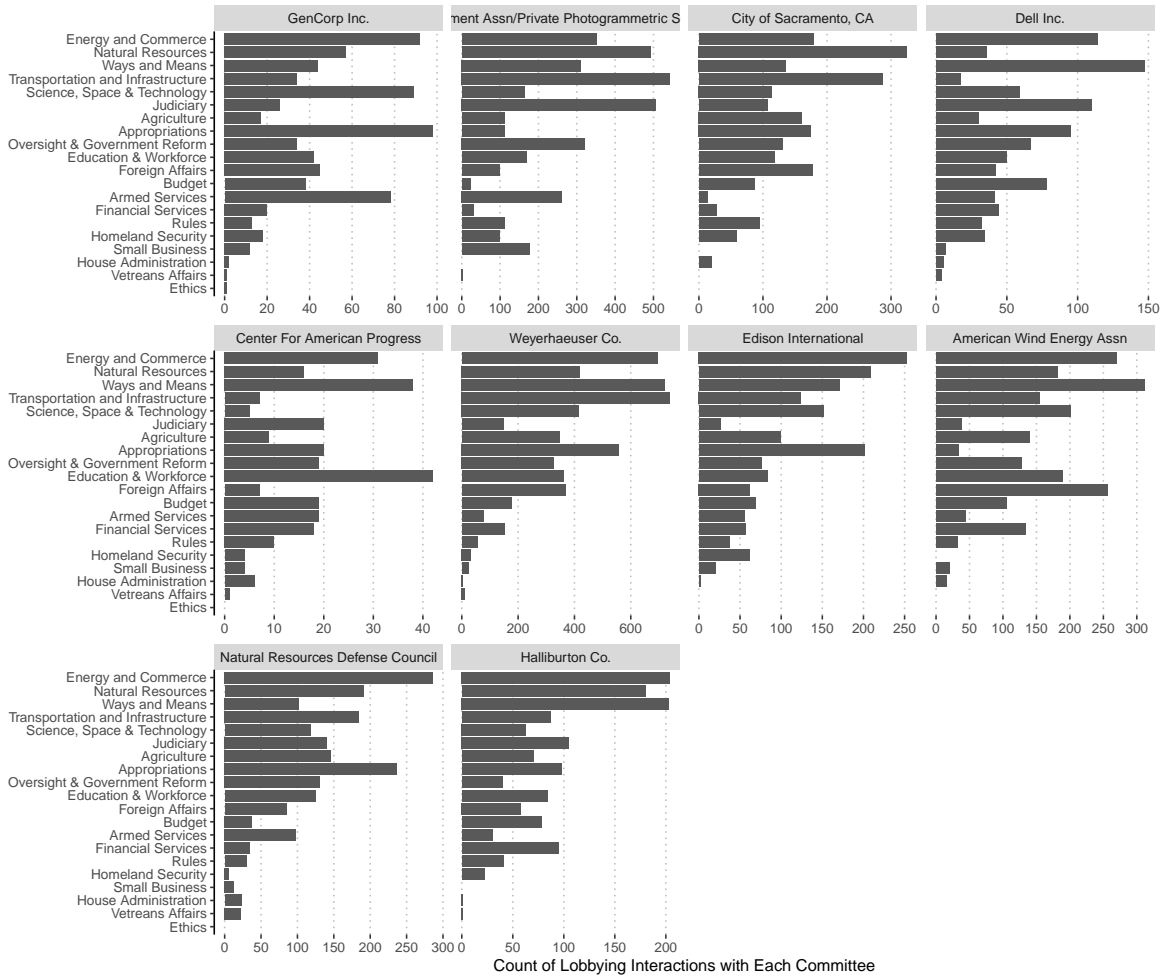


Figure 2.5: The Distribution of Lobbying Activity Among the 10 Least Concentrated Organizations.

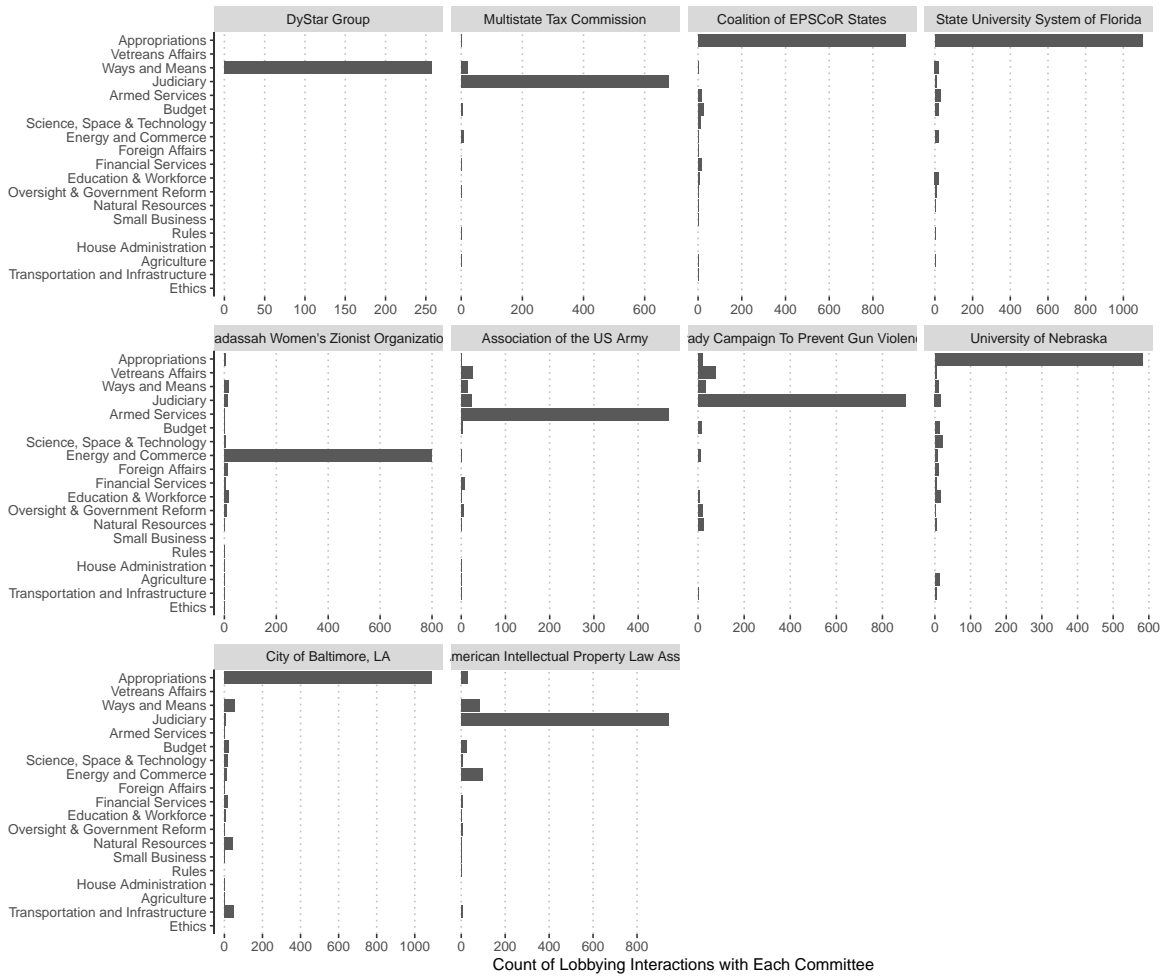


Figure 2.6: The Distribution of Lobbying Activity Among the 10 Most Concentrated Organizations.

velop a measure of the diversity of lobbying activity across committees in Congress. The result is a rank-ordered list of the level of committee concentration for all interest groups in the top 25th percentile of lobbying activity since 1999.

With a quantified measure of committee concentration, I can now test my theory of interest group influence which I developed in Chapter 1. The first step in evaluating my theory is to interview lobbyists and interest group representatives about their involvement with the committee assignment process, and these committee concentration scores will guide my selection of groups to interview. As explained in Chapter 1, I expect that groups with less concentrated interests will be unlikely to get involved in the committee assignment process because their interests are distributed across a range of House committees. Conversely, I expect groups with concentrated interests to be the ones that influence the committee assignment process because placing members on the select few committees that oversee the group's interests could yield significant benefits. In the next chapter, I examine the qualitative evidence for these expectations.

Chapter 3

Interest Group Influence in the Committee Assignment Process: Qualitative Evidence

The membership of the committee ... that's something most lobbyists don't get into - at least not the ones I talk to. But it's very important. This year we got this fellow X to go on. He's against unions, but with us he's been just fine.

National Federation of Post Office Clerks Office, from Richard Fenno's
Congressmen in Committees

In Chapter 2, I developed a method to quantitatively measure the degree to which interest groups concentrate their lobbying efforts within congressional committees. I argued that interest groups with concentrated committee interests are most likely to use committee assignments as a strategy of influence. Committees are an important stage of the policy-making process, so interest groups have a natural incentive to care about committee activity. It would be an enormous advantage if interest groups

could choose members to serve on particular committees because they could fill the committees that oversee their interests with members who are friendly to their policy preferences. Obviously, interest groups do not possess the ability to choose committee members, but they can try to play a role in the selection process. For the groups that are narrowly focused on only a few issues, this strategy could prove beneficial. For groups with broad policy interests, weighing in on the committee assignments for only a couple of committees could still be helpful, but it will not yield the same level of benefit that it would for a group with narrow interests. This is because groups with broad interests need to work with several different committees to accomplish their policy objectives, not just one or two.

In this chapter, I explore the evidence for this theory of interest group influence. Evaluating my theory involves two components. First, I use the committee concentration measure developed in Chapter 2 to interview individuals who represent a range of organizations in order to test whether organizations with more committee concentration use the committee assignment process as a point of influence. Second, I interview a number of former members of Congress who served on their party's steering committee to understand the frequency of these interest group efforts, if they do occur, to lobby for particular committee assignments. Gathering data from both sides of the process will help determine which groups do, and do not, engage in efforts to influence the committee request and assignment process, and also the frequency with which they occur. Current theories of interest group activity argue that groups try to influence policy by freeing up member's time, subsidize them with information, or incentivize them to become policy experts (Hall and Wayman, 1990; Hall and Deardorff, 2006; Esterling, 2007), but I argue that interest groups exert their influence even before Congress begins by changing the distribution of committee seats.

Interest groups, in effect, work to organize Congress in a way that will serve their interests without continuous intervention.

These interviews uncover three main findings. First, interest groups get involved in the committee assignment process by giving advice to incoming members on which committees to request. Second, interest groups also attempt to influence committee assignments by lobbying members of both parties' steering committees to assign the members they like to the committees they want. Third, interest groups with more concentrated committee interests are more likely than groups with diffuse committee interest to pursue these strategies. These findings are supported by both lobbyists and former members of Congress.

3.1 Selected Groups

My theory of interest group influence via the committee system in Congress asserts that whether or not a group engages in this strategic approach depends on whether the group has concentrated or disparate issue interests. With a working conception of concentration of interest group concentration and a way to measure it, I am now ready to sample groups based on their calculated concentration as case studies. From the list of 1,094 organizations analyzed in Chapter 2, I interview representatives from 11 organizations that have a range of diversity scores, which are visualized in Figure 3.1. As a reference point, recall that the least concentrated organization in the data, GenCorp Inc., has a score of 0.366 and the most concentrated organization, DyStar Group, has a score of -1.368 (and the nearest concentrated organization has a score of just over -1.0). The vertical dashed line indicates the median concentration score of 0.052 in the full sample. Considering these values, the organizations that I was able

to interview represent a fairly reasonable range of the concentration scores in the full sample.

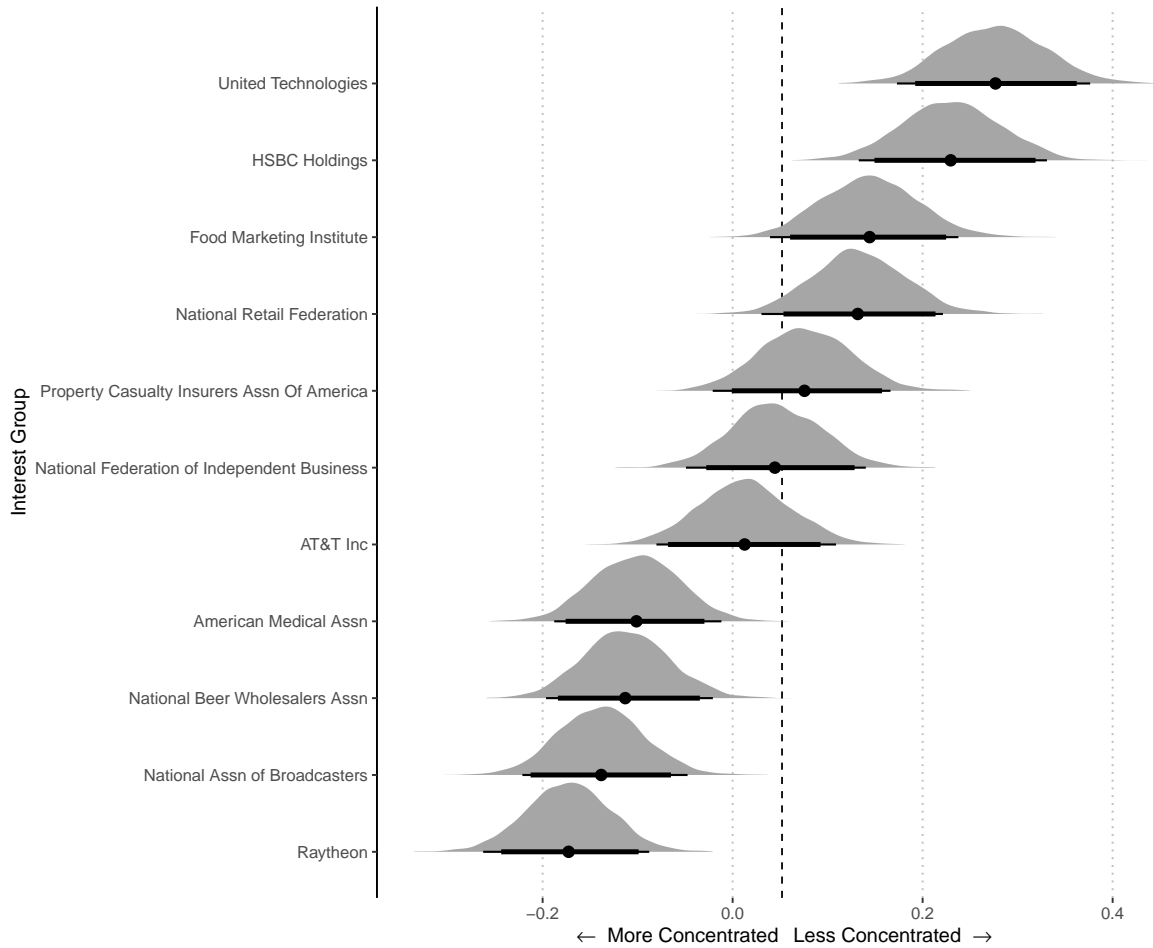


Figure 3.1: Issue Concentration Scores for Interviewed Organizations. 90 and 95 percent highest density intervals shown by the thick and thin lines respectively.

Looking at the lobbying activity of the organizations presented in Figure 3.1 helps illustrate just how much their lobbying activity differs. Figure 3.2 shows the number of lobbying interactions each organization had with each congressional committee. As we move left to right and top to bottom, we see organizations that are increasingly diverse in their lobbying activity. For example, Raytheon overwhelmingly lobbied the Appropriations and Armed Services committees where United Technologies lobbied

a range of committees with roughly equal frequencies. Overall, we see a reasonably representative sample of concentrated and disparate organizations.

One might argue that the distribution of lobbying activity across committees in Figure 3.2 is not due to strategy, but is a function of the resources available to these organizations. Indeed, resources have traditionally been understood to greatly impact the effectiveness and ability to engage in lobbying activities (Walker, 1983; Hansen, 1985; Hall and Wayman, 1990; Hojnacki and Kimball, 1998; Hall and Deardorff, 2006). The organizations studied in this chapter, however, all have lobbying expenditures within one standard deviation of one another. AT&T spent the most money, spending \$1,161,442,639 over the span of the dataset, HSBC Holdings spent least with \$27,689,002 and the standard deviation of spending across all organizations is \$1,240,074,817. Of course, there could still be disparities in the size of the lobbying staff in these organizations, but given their total expenditures this seems unlikely. As a result, these patterns are not plausibly explained by the lack of resources among some organizations.

Given these organizations and their estimated concentration scores, which groups are considered concentrated and what are their corresponding hypotheses? All organizations that fall below the median concentration score of the full sample of data will be considered concentrated, or “narrowly focused”, organizations and all organizations above the median will be considered diffuse, or “broadly focused”, organizations. Of course, this bifurcation is somewhat arbitrary and one could reasonably question the substantive difference between organizations on the margin like the National Federation of Independent Businesses (NFIB) and the National Retail Federation (NRF). This, however, is one advantage of conducting interviews as a means of theory testing. Rather than debate the substantive difference of point estimates, we will let the interviewees determine what conclusions can be drawn.

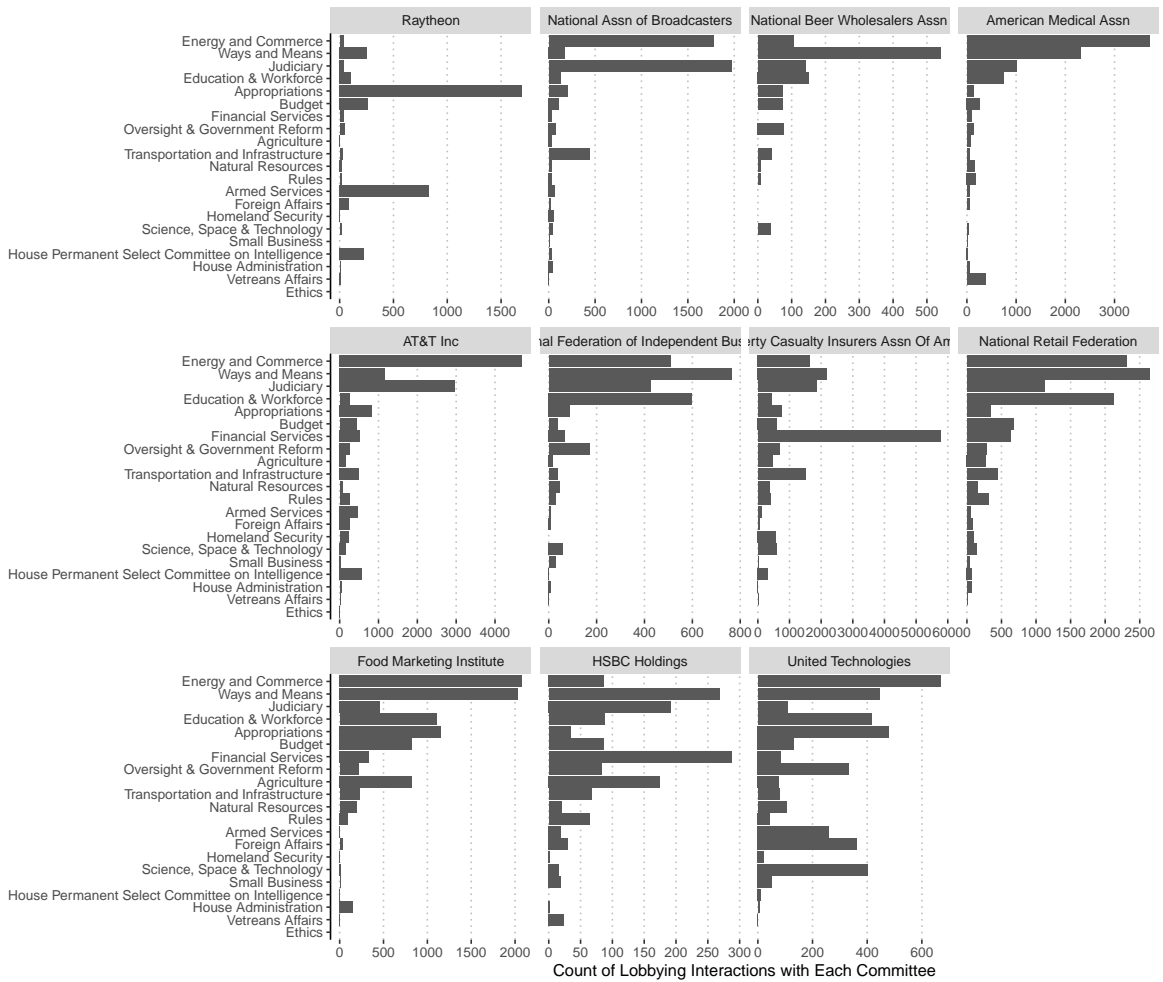


Figure 3.2: The Distribution of Lobbying Activity Across Interviewed Organizations

Table 3.1 shows which organizations fall into each category along with the hypotheses for each group. Based on the theory developed in Chapter 1, I predict that narrowly focused organizations will be those that are most likely to persuade members to make specific committee requests and lobbying steering committee members for particular committee assignments for the candidates they like.

Table 3.1: Organization Classifications and Hypotheses

Category	Organizations	Hypotheses
Narrowly Focused	Raytheon, National Association of Broadcasters, National Beer Wholesalers Association, American Medical Association, AT&T, National Federation of Independent Businesses	These organizations push members to pursue specific committee assignments and lobby steering committee members about committee assignments.
Broadly Focused	Property Casualty Insurers Association of America, National Retail Federation, Food Marketing Institute, HSBC Holdings, United Technologies	These organizations are not be as active in pushing members to specific committees and do not lobby steering committee members about committee assignments.

Interest groups interact with hundreds of members, so their perspective is valuable for identifying patterns among members. They can help us understand how much members think about issues and committee assignments in addition to helping us learn about the strategies they use to influence committee assignments. Members of Congress, on the other hand, interact with dozens, if not hundreds of lobbyists so they can help identify patterns across interest groups. Thus, in addition to interviewing interest groups, I also interviewed 11 former members of Congress, 8 Republicans and 3 Democrats.

3.2 Are Members Focused on Committees or Issues?

Why think that the committee assignment process offers an avenue of influence for interest groups? In Chapter 1, I argued that the task of mapping issue preferences to committees is difficult because of the broad and changing nature of committee jurisdictions and that this is one way that interest groups have a point of leverage. Because of their familiarity with committees and legislation in Congress, interest groups have an accurate picture of which committees are most likely to handle the legislation they care about. As a result, they have the information needed to help members request committees that are aligned with their issue preferences. Members of Congress are smart and strategic people, though, so do they really need help requesting committee assignments? Surely incoming members are laser focused on getting a particular committee assignment, right? Not so much, as it turns out. Members usually have a good idea about the issues they want to work on, but not such a good idea of which committees would give them the best chance to work on those issues. When asked if members are firm on what committees they want to serve on, a former lobbyist from the National Broadcasters Association between 2006 and 2010 told me,

I think a lot members rely on their delegations for advice. However, I think that most don't know when they come in. Most have an issue area that they're particularly interested in, but if they can get on those committees is uncertain. They're not sure if they can get on those committees. So, I think for the most part members are flexible when they come to the hill.

Similarly, a former lobbyist for the American Medical Association (AMA) between 1998 and 2006 answered,

[Members] would tell us what committees they would be interested in because they had subject matters that they may have dealt with in a state legislature, or sitting on the county council or something like that.

This focus on issues over committees was also emphasized by a former Republican member of Congress with a 20 year service record when I asked if members get advice on which committees to serve on,

Yeah, you do [get advice from interest groups]. You come into it with some issues you care about outright, so it might be agriculture, it might be forestry, it might be high tech, it might be transportation, communications or healthcare. So you kind of naturally have some things you care about when you run for office. So I think first and foremost, it's what you want to be involved in. Then there's the layer of what your district cares about. So you have to pay attention to those issues as well as your district. How does that fit in with what you're interested in, or how do you make it fit? And so I think both of those play into it. And then there's a lot more we can get into in terms of how you go about getting on a committee.

Notice the emphasis here is on identifying the issues you want to work on first, then thinking about the committees to get you there. He continues:

Certainly your staff, if they've been around awhile, will talk to you about what the committees do, because most new members have no idea one committee to the next. One may have a good sounding title but actually have very little jurisdiction in the area you want to work in. . . . You know, you think you're on a committee that really is going to have jurisdiction over your small business issues, only to discover they don't do any tax

policy, they don't do any trade policy, they don't do any healthcare, they don't do, you know, all the things you may have been concerned about. So, maybe you want to be over on Education and Labor if labor is your issue or Ways and Means if tax policy are your issues, or Energy and Commerce which is just about everything else that might be your issues.

So, members have a firm grasp on the issues that they want to work on, but are less certain of the committees that correspond to those issues. Making this connection is further complicated by the fact that freshman are much less likely to serve on exclusive, or A, committees (Ways and Means, Appropriations, Financial Services, and Energy and Commerce). So, do interest groups help members navigate this complexity? If so, how? One way is to help them map their issue interests to committees with jurisdiction over those issues, and they can do that by recommending committees to serve on.

3.3 Influencing Committee Requests

3.3.1 Evidence From Former Members of Congress

In Chapter 1, I argued that interest groups have two ways of influencing the committee assignment process. They can influence the committees that members request to serve on and they can lobby members of the steering committees to assign the members they want to the committees they want them on. Before narrowing in the specifics of which groups try to influence committee requests and which do not, we will examine first whether interest groups engage in this kind of strategy at all. To answer this, we explore what former members of Congress have to say about it. I asked former

members if interest groups would talk them about committee assignments before they got to Congress and whether they would make recommendations. The answer was overwhelmingly “yes.” One member told me,

Yes, [you would hear from interest groups], and not only advocacy groups, but business groups within your district. So, for instance, if you represent a district that has a huge number of defense contracting businesses, or say you represent a district with a huge number of tech businesses, sometimes those types of groups will say, “Boy, we sure hope you get on X committee.” ... There were groups that certainly would meet with me and would say, “Oh, you’re so interested in healthcare issues, we hope that someday you pursue Energy and Commerce because that’s really where so many healthcare decisions are made.” ... [They would also say], “with your background and what you care about, we wish you were on this committee.” Groups like that say that all the time.

Another member said,

I think that happens a lot. Because, again, when you’re trying to sort out what committees of jurisdiction, what committee you want to be on, what issues you want to work on, you have to evaluate all of that. So you have a lot of outside input and it happens pretty quickly between Election Day and not too long after when the steering committee meets and they begin making committee assignments.

Or again from another member,

My wife and I were in the radio business for 20 years, so obviously anybody related to telecommunications, especially the broadcast side of the

cable side, wanted to talk to me and see if I'd be interested in being on the commerce committee. . . . So in my case, having that broadcast experience, the National Association of Broadcasters and others were very interested in what path I might take, and were very excited when I got on the commerce committee.

In total, ten of the eleven former members I interviewed said that interest groups had these conversations with them and would weight in on what committees they thought the member should pursue. While these responses make it clear that interest groups get involved in the way hypothesized, they provide very little insight as to which kinds of interest groups contact them, whether all groups or just narrowly focused ones. To answer that question, I turn to the interviews with interest groups.

3.3.2 Evidence from Interest Groups

Concentrated Interest Groups

Of the eight interviewees from narrowly focused organizations who collectively represent Raytheon, the AMA, the National Beer Wholesalers Association (NBWA), the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), AT&T, and the NFIB, when reflecting on their time at these organizations, all but one said that they would discuss committee assignments with members and make recommendations. When asked if he would suggest committees to serve on to incoming members, a lobbyist from the NFIB from 1986-1991 recalled,

As we became more sophisticated in our political operation, we would have those kinds of conversations. A lot of times you'd get a candidate who would say, "Well, I really haven't given it a lot of thought yet." And

if that was the case, you would say, “Well, maybe in your consideration you should think about such and such and what your background lends to. It might be useful to work on the commerce committee.” One of the things we used to do a lot is, especially for the members that we would support heavily and who won, is we would try to get with them early on as they were coming in to learn where the restrooms were. At orientation we would try to get with them, sit down and have dinner with them. We might have dinner with five or six of them and that always came up. “What committee should I serve on?” “I’d really like to do this.” But we were never heavy handed in that conversation.

In answering the same question, a former AMA lobbyist between 1998-2006 said,

When I was at the AMA, the answer to that is “yes.” We actually had a program for that where between Election Day and swearing in, we would go see them in their state. As many of them as we could. The rest we would try to catch when they came in because the leadership in both houses and both parties have to have their leadership elections for the next Congress, so the freshman would show up anyway. . . . And you know, we might have a discussion about different committees of jurisdiction that might deal with issues. A lot of people say, “I deal with healthcare, I want to be on Energy and Commerce and Ways or Means in the House.” Well, that’s damn hard. Usually freshman don’t get on those committees. But, we would talk to people about what different committees do, but one of things we would say to doctors is, “yeah, Energy and Commerce and Ways and Means deal with healthcare, but so does Education and Labor. It has pieces of healthcare, so does Government Oversight. . . . Also, Veterans

Affairs, especially since the law has changed so that if you are beyond a certain distance and you're a veteran, you can go to a non-V.A. facility." So we talk to people in that fashion. Some people have specific kinds of interests that they want to be on. You know, if you're from a rural area, odds are, you want to be on Agriculture. That's easier to pull off than one of these other big time committees.

When I asked a lobbyist who represented the NFIB (1986-1991), NBWA (1992-2005), and the NAB (2005-2009), if he would suggest committees to incoming members, he said, "... out of the thousands of candidates I met, I probably had that conversation several hundred times." He continued, "The people running for office, you know, they watch TV and who do they see on TV? The Ways and Means committee member, or they read about them in newspaper. They don't think necessarily about [a committee like] the science and technology committee. It doesn't sound super sexy."

Of all the interviews I conducted with individuals from the six concentrated organizations in my sample, all except one recounted similar stories. Seven of the eight individuals were active in helping members form their committee assignment preferences. They were not, however, forceful in doing so. A common pattern across the interviews was that this kind of advice was only well received if it was given genuinely, out of concern for the member's success in Congress. Nonetheless, the advice was still given and it very likely affected the committees that at least some members listed on their request list.

Diffuse Interest Groups

Thus far, we have seen evidence that narrowly focused organizations are active in steering committee assignments, but how active are the groups with broad interests?

These groups seem to recognize the value of having allied members on particular committees, but they do not prioritize it. One lobbyist who represented the Property Casualty Insurers (2009-2019) of America and HSBC Holdings (1999-2009) told me,

I mean, we wouldn't really talk about committee assignments per say, because that's purely a leadership decision and there's such a strategy behind that from a leadership perspective. But usually if there is an open seat, and we've identified one of the candidates that we want to support because they're a farmer or a banker, we would probably be hedging our bets a little bit thinking they may get a committee of jurisdiction that aligns with where our issues land. So we may say, "okay, this candidate comes from a part of the country where we have a major facility, his background is in banking, he's probably a likely candidate for the banking committee." But there's no guarantee. We potentially still support them, in the hopes that even if he doesn't get on the banking committee this year, that maybe there is a good potential for him down the road. But, at [PAC events] you would talk about the issues, the number of employees you have, I mean, you would still try to talk about the issues that you care about. At the end of the day, if it gets to the floor they're all going to have to vote on it, but they just may not be apart of the work in committee. . . . So again, you sort of hedge your bets early on for a number of reasons, thinking this person may be in a position of power some day, you know? And those are the ones where we're like, "Oh we got that right."

This suggests that the organizations that this lobbyist represented placed a higher value on supporting a member who aligned with them on the issues and has a reasonable chance of holding a position of power within the chamber one day. Committee

assignments still seem important, but this individual was fairly clear in saying that they were not the number one priority. When I asked a former Director of Government Affairs for United Technologies, if they would provide advice for committee assignments to members, he said, “That kind of council would be valuable, but I just never sat at, or am aware of, a conversation like that between an industry and an incoming member where you would try to steer that person. That’s just not something I’ve been aware of.”

These testimonies from both sets of interest groups provide clear evidence for at least two facts. Incoming members know much more about the issues they care about than which committees would provide the best opportunity for them to work on those issues, and that interest groups are active in influencing the committees that members ask to serve on. In addition, there is some evidence that the groups that are more narrowly focused in their issue interests are more likely than groups with broad interests to engage in this sort of strategy.

After reviewing the evidence for interest group influence in committee requests, I now explore the evidence for the second way interest groups can exert their influence through the committee assignment process. Namely, that interest group lobbying steering committees members to make specific assignments. This will help determine how active groups are at this stage and provide additional insight on whether narrowly focused groups are more likely to get involved than more broadly focused groups.

3.4 Influencing Committee Assignments

3.4.1 Evidence from Interest Groups

In addition to affecting committee requests, interest groups could also influence the committee assignment process by lobbying members of the steering committee to assign the members they like to the committees they want. While some of the members I talked to were much more reluctant to admit that this kind of activity took place, they all admitted that it does, in fact, take place. Before we look at their interviews, we will first look at what the interest groups had to say about this strategy.

In general, interest groups seem willing to lobby steering committee members as long as they were confident with the candidate they planned to lobby for and if they had good relationships with the people on the steering committee. For example, one of the lobbyists from the NFIB (1983-1995) told me,

If we had a member who had a background at NFIB and particularly if they were an accountant or interested in the tax code and they won their seat, and they wanted to be on the Ways and Means committee, we would weigh in. And if they wanted to be on the small business committee, which wasn't really a big lift ... you go to the leadership and put in a good word for them and that might help.

Similarly, a lobbyist from the NAB (2006-2010) explained,

... let's say you're Congressman Nick, and pharma has a good relationship with you, you're a doctor or you're a pharmacist, I think pharma could talk to the Ways and Means chair, or to the ranking member, and say, "I think this person would be a good choice because of their expertise and we've worked with him for a long time."

Finally, the lobbyist I interviewed who primarily represented the NBWA (1992-2005) outlined a similar strategy, but explained the nuance of needing to have a preexisting relationship with someone on the steering committee:

I think it really depends on the special interest relationship with the steering committee member. I tend to be more aggressive as an individual, so I would proactively try to help [a hypothetical member] as much as possible, because at some point that steering committee member is going to say, “hey [hypothetical member], you have a good friend in [the interviewee].” And that’s what I want [the hypothetical member] to hear when he gets elected. That’s kind of my payoff. So when I see [the hypothetical member], he is more inclined to listen to me and allow me to make my pitch. They may not vote with me, but it gives me more ability to try to influence him or her. . . . If I walked up to [a steering committee member] and said, “I’m [Tim], I’m with the Beer Wholesalers. I know [the hypothetical member].” They’re just going to look at me and go, “who is this guy? Why do I care? I have no credibility with you.”

The AMA (1998-2006) lobbyist said that lobbying steering committee members for committee assignments was a risky move, one that he did not think was worth pursuing despite admitting that it does happen. However, he also brought to light a new aspect of the story - that members themselves ask for help getting onto a committee:

Now, a lot of freshman ask you to help them out. My rule is don’t go there. You don’t know who is competing with whom to get on whatever committees. I mean, there’s some associations and organizations that try to weigh in, you know, “we want so-and-so on such-and-such committee.” If they get on and it gets out, then it means you helped somebody get

on it also means you pissed somebody off. It usually means you pissed somebodies off.”

The claim that members themselves seek the help of interest groups for securing committee seats was also corroborated by one of the former members of Congress I interviewed:

Sometimes a newly elected candidate will reach out to people in the business community in their district and say, “Look, I’d really like to be on committee X, can you help me?” And sometimes those folks will go up through the chain of command through their organizations. So let’s say they’re a doctor, they would go up through the medical associations, they’re a realtor, they go up through the realtors... They would reach out to the people in the business community who are lobbyists to help them get on the committee they’re interested in. ... In some cases organized labor has supported a winning candidate and they may weigh in, either at the candidate’s request or just go ahead and start checking things out themselves, to help the candidate get on a committee that would be important to the things they’re interested in. So that does go on, but sometimes it’s originated by the candidate himself or herself. ... In other cases, [candidates] would be reached out to by the initiative of business interests. I’ll give you another example. A former staff member of mine worked on my staff for six years was elected to Congress in 2012. ... he was from [city X] and the defense industry is very important in [city X]. Lockheed Martian is there, Bell helicopters is there, there are a lot of defense jobs there. And so, [the candidate] wanted to go on Armed Services. He understood that, at least initially in his congressional career,

going on Armed Services would be very important in his ability to get re-elected. So he contacted some of the major defense contractors and said, “would you put in a good word for me? I’d really like to be on the defense committee.” And of course, the people from Lockheed Martin were very interested in helping him get on the defense committee. And, ultimately, he got on the defense committee.

The evidence thus far indicates that at least some interest groups lobby steering committee members for committee assignments and that sometimes this occurs at the request of the member. Of the eight representatives from narrowly focused industries that I interviewed, five said that contacting steering committee members about committee assignments would be part of their strategy. None of the representatives from broadly interested organizations discussed using such a strategy and two were not very confident that such a tactic takes place at all. Talking to interest groups about this strategy is important, but talking to steering committee members would help to gauge how common this tactic is. That is where I turn next.

3.4.2 Evidence from Steering Committee Members

I interviewed eleven former members of Congress who, except for two, had experience serving on their party’s steering committee for at least one term. The member I interviewed with the least amount of time on the steering committee had served on it for two terms, and the member with the most amount of service had served on it for nine terms. The average length of steering committee service in my interview sample is 3.9 terms. Seniority and position are important in steering committees because not all members carry equal weight in the process. Although each party has its own rules and procedures, it remains true that party leaders and chairmen of

the exclusive committees are the most influential members of the steering committee. This is important to note, because less important members may be less likely to be lobbied due to their relative lack influence on the steering committee. Thus, the testimony of members with more seniority on the committee may provide a more accurate insight on the strategy of interest groups to lobby for particular committee assignments.

Republican Members

To start, we will consider what the Republican interviewees had to say. I asked all interviewees if interest groups would try to weigh in on the committee assignment decisions, and the answer was generally a reluctant “yes,” though some were more confident than others. “Yes,” one member told me, “It’s a secret vote on the steering committee, but the answer is yes, [interest groups] do weigh in, particularly with the Speaker.” An eight year veteran of the Republican steering committee answered,

Absolutely. Of course. You have these very disparate interest groups and they would find someone [on the steering committee] they think would be friendly towards their interests and they would push that member. They would talk to members of the steering committee. Say somebody has been in a particular industry in their work, that industry would get behind them sitting on a particular committee. . . . And you know, most industries have existing relationships with [members of the steering committee].

Another member told me,

Yes. And the way interest groups work . . . is depending on the size, they try to develop close relationships with us. So, take Verizon, a big company

throughout all fifty states, big shop, a lot of lobbyists, but each lobbyist will have their own members that they deal with. Their own little group. And so when there's events or things when they have to bring someone in, it's that person. So you develop a personal relationship. That's true with leadership too. So they have their Verizon lobbyist who now is very excited because the person they've been lobbying for ten years is now the Speaker of the House. The Verizon group might get together and say, "[Frank] wants to be on [Energy and Commerce] and he'd be great because his dad was a telephone guy." Or if someone came up through the legislature that they had worked with and they really know their industry, they would get to, say Kevin McCarthy is Speaker, they would get to Kevin or his political person and say, "it would be great if [Frank] got on Energy and Commerce because he has carried the water for us in Springfield Illinois, or the state capitol and we think he would be very helpful."

This member continued to tell me that interest groups also ask other members of Congress to talk to steering committee members about committee assignments on their behalf,

... And [interest groups] ask members to do that too. I was the head of the Republican delegation and I would get asked . . . , "will you talk to Joe for me?" So the answer is interest groups will, but other members will be asked too. I mean, you're running a campaign. If you really want it, you're going to put everything on the table.

According to this, not only do interest groups get involved, but they also leverage the relationships they have with other members to lobby steering members.

Democratic Members

Democratic members gave similar answers. After one Democratic member explained that interest groups would weigh in on committee assignments to get the people they like on the committees they want, I asked how they would do it. He told me,

They would talk to people in the leadership. The Speaker, or the Majority or Minority Leader, depending on whether your party's in the majority or minority - your party leadership has a lot of say about who ultimately gets on committees. And so, people in the defense industry might go to the Speaker if the Democrats are in the majority, or if the Democrats are in the minority, they go to the Minority leader and they would say, "national defense is really important to this particular district and we like this particular fellow who has just been elected and we would really like him to be on the committee." Depending upon the leader's relationship with those in that industry, the leader would say, "well, we'll see what we can do."

The reluctant "yes" was expressed by members who acknowledged that interest groups do weigh in, but said that their input was ineffective. For example, one member who I asked if interest groups weigh in on the assignment process explained,

Yeah, but different members on steering have different attitudes. I always figured it was our internal business. It's like, "thanks for sharing, but you don't have a vote in here and you really shouldn't be playing in this." That was my attitude. It didn't hurt, though, to know that so-and-so, and such-and-such groups support so-and-so and hope they get on such-and-such committee. I guess what I'm trying to say is there are limits to

how far you can push and [interest groups] really don't have a vote in that room. So I think you have to be smart about how you convey to steering committee members, "look, we think Nick can do a great job on Ways and Means. I know that's your decision, but just know we've worked with him on the following eight issues and he's been terrific."

Similarly, another member told me,

Yeah, I think [interest groups] would [try to help you get assigned to a committee], but there really isn't that much they can do. I mean, they could say something to a steering committee member. . . . I tend not to like to have groups weigh in. That was just me. I thought that might not be seen as too cool. Some members will take that well, others won't so you have to be really smart about it.

One member was much more forceful and reluctant to admit any interest group influence at all,

The most over used sentence for any new Democratic member of Congress is, "I should on X committee. I'm a friend Nancy Pelosi's and I'll get her to do it." Any one who says that is no friend of Nancy Pelosi's, and the last person on earth who could get her to do it because that's not how she operates at all. And that goes into how committee decisions are actually made, which is a different story. A ton of people would tell me they had relationships with Nancy Pelosi or the chairperson of the Steering and Policy Committee, and they put in a good word and I would say, "sure, feel free to." Not at all effective. Not at all influential. Not at all relevant to the ultimate decision.

In total, only one of the nine members I asked denied that interest groups try to lobby for committee assignments. Some were more skeptical that such efforts were helpful in getting members on committees, but of course, whether or not it is effective depends on the individual members lobbied, the lobbyists, the circumstances, etc. The key take away is that interest groups do try to weigh in on committee decisions and sometimes it is even at the request of members themselves.

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter we have evaluated the qualitative evidence in support of my theory that interest groups exercise their influence in Congress by affecting which committees members ask to serve on and by working to get members assigned to those committees. The evidence considered comes from individuals who represent a range of organizations as well as former members of Congress who have served on their party's steering committee. I will conclude by summarizing the evidence gathered from these individuals.

Table 3.2 summarizes the evidence from interest groups on whether they try to influence the committees that members request or lobby steering committee members to put the members they like on the committees they want. The fourth column in this table shows how each interviewee answered the former question. The number in parenthesis next to each answer indicates the number of interviewees who gave that answer, since I interviewed some individuals who have represented multiple organizations. The third column of Table 3.2 lists each interviewee's years of experience with the organization to help access how credible their answers are.

Recall that I hypothesized that narrowly focused interest groups would be more likely to try to influence the committee assignment process than broadly focused

Table 3.2: Summary of Evidence from Interest Groups

Category	Organization	Years of Experience	Shape Committee Requests	Lobby Steering Members
Narrowly Focused	National Association of Broadcasters	4 years, 4 years	Yes (2)	Yes (1)
	National Beer Wholesalers Association	13 years	Yes (1)	Yes (1)
	American Medical Association	13 years	Yes (1)	Yes (1)
	AT&T	13 years	Yes (1)	Yes (1)
	National Federation of Independent Businesses	5 years, 12 years	Yes (2)	Yes (1)
	Raytheon	4 years	No (1)	No (1)
Broadly Focused	Property Casualty Insurers Association of America	9 years	No (1)	No (1)
	National Retail Federation	3 years	-	-
	Food Marketing Institute	11 years	Yes (1)	-
	HSBC Holdings	9 years	No (1)	No (1)
	United Technologies	5 years	No (1)	No (1)

interest groups. With respect to the first component of the strategy, influencing which committees members request, seven of the eight respondents in the narrowly focused group said that this type of activity does take place. Conversely, three of the five broadly focused organizations said that this activity does not take place (I was unable to draw a conclusion for the National Retail Federation because the representative from this group that I spoke to did not clearly explain what their strategies at the organization were.) What about the evidence for lobbying steering committee members? The last column of Table 3.2 indicates that interest groups do lobby steering committees, and as hypothesized, and it seems to be the interest groups who are narrowly focused who are more likely to use such a strategy. Overall, this represents fairly strong evidence in favor of my theory.

If my theory is correct, then why would the lobbyist from the Food Marketing Institute have told me that he guides members on committee assignments when the Food Marketing Institute is classified as a broadly focused group? Of course, this individual may be unrepresentative of the organization, or even broadly focused groups as a whole, but what if we consider his account to be generalizable? It is possible that broadly focused groups help members form their committee requests when they have a particular need. For example, say the Food Marketing Institute already has members on eight committees of the nine committees that they care about. In this case, getting a member on that ninth committee would give them “full coverage” and so they may try to find members that could serve on that committee. So, it is possible that the broadly focused groups do not help steer members onto certain committees unless they already have adequate spread in the chamber.

Table 3.3 summarizes the evidence of interest group influence in the committee assignment process from members of Congress. All but one member said that interest groups would talk to members about the committees they were planning to request

Table 3.3: Summary of Evidence from Former Members of Congress

Party	Terms in Congress	Steering Committee Terms	Shape Committee Requests	Lobby Steering Members
Republicans	12	9	Yes	Yes
	4	2	Yes	Yes
	11	3	Yes	Yes
	7	-	Yes	-
	12	5	Yes	Yes
	16	8	Yes	Yes
	7	2	Yes	Yes
	7	-	Yes	-
Democrats	18	4	Yes	Yes
	13	7	Yes	Yes
	8	3	No	No

and offer advice on those decisions. Unfortunately, the conversations with members were not helpful in determining whether narrowly focused groups were more likely to use this strategy than broadly focused groups, but taken together with the interest group evidence this bolsters the conclusion that interest groups are active in helping members decide which committees to request.

The final column of Table 3.3 shows how former members of Congress who have served on their party’s steering committee responded to the question of whether interest groups lobby steering committee members about assigning particular members to particular committees. Like before, every member who had served on a steering committee except one said that interest groups would lobby them on committee assignment decisions. Admittedly, some of the members I interviewed questioned the effectiveness of these lobbying efforts, and members seemed to think that such activity would be more targeted towards high-ranking party leaders than just any member of

the steering committee. Regardless, the fact that this type of interest group activity does occur is confirmed by former members of the steering committees themselves.

In this chapter, we have seen a reasonable amount of evidence from both interest groups and former members of Congress supporting the claim that interest groups actively work to influence the committees that incoming members request to serve on and that they also lobby steering committee members to assign the members they like to the committees they want. Additionally, the evidence from interviews with interest groups suggests that groups with narrow issue interests are more likely to use these strategies than groups with broader interests. The caveat to make on this point, however, is that it is based on a small sample size, just eleven different organizations. In the next chapter, I address this small sample size issue with a large-N quantitative analysis of how narrowly focused groups behave in contrast to broadly focused ones with respect to the institutional capture theory of interest group influence.

Chapter 4

Committee Requests: Self-Selection or Interest Group-Selection?

Some members believe that an endorsement from relevant individuals or groups, either inside or outside Congress, may influence the [committee assignment] process.

Frisch and Kelly, *Committee Assignment Politics in the U.S. House of Representatives*

How do incoming members of Congress decide which committees to serve on? For the last several decades, the most commonly proposed answer to this question is that members select committees that will offer the greatest service to their constituents (Rohde and Shepsle, 1973; Shepsle, 1978). This proposal, however, dramatically simplifies request decisions (Padgett, 1990) and has little explanatory power for the majority of committee requests (Frisch and Kelly, 2004; Frisch and Kelly, 2006a). Of course, members themselves do not have the final say on their committee assignments,

but they do participate in the process by submitting a rank-ordered preference list of assignments and by campaigning for what they want.

Requesting a committee to serve on, however, presents a unique challenge for new incoming members. First, incoming members must be able to identify which committee assignment would be most valuable for accomplishing their political goals. Considering that the 116th Congress has 20 standing committees with a total of 102 subcommittees that have continually evolving, and often some degree of overlapping, policy jurisdictions, this is no small task (Shepsle, 1978; King, 1994; Deering and Smith, 1997).

Second, new members have little understanding of the politics of committee assignments. The Appropriations Committee may be the best option for a member to achieve their goal of influence in the legislature, but freshmen rarely get assigned to such prestige committees. Because the likelihood of receiving a particular committee depends on a variety of factors beyond the requestor's control, the optimal committee to request will be one that satisfies the dual constraints of value for political goals and the likelihood of assignment. Existing theories of committee requests often fail to account for these strategic considerations.

In Chapter 1, I argued for a theory of committee request behavior that accounts for these information asymmetries. Specifically, I argued that because interest groups have a strong incentive to familiarize themselves with the committee structure of Congress, they identify candidates for office that could become legislative allies via committee service and then support their election efforts. Committees are the first step in the legislative process and thus can significantly influence many industries. As a result, interest groups have a strong incentive to get involved in the committee assignment process by directing the members they like onto the committees that they want. This incentive, however, is not constant across interest groups. Instead, groups

with issue interests that only appear before a small number of committees are more likely to influence the allocation of committee seats because doing so yields a much higher marginal benefit than it would for a group with issue interests spread across several committees.

In the previous chapter, I explored the qualitative evidence for this theory gathered from interviewing lobbyists and former members of the Democratic and Republican steering committees to identify whether or not interest groups get involved in the committee assignment process, which groups get involved, and how they get involved. Overall, I found that interest groups get involved in the assignment process by influencing which committees incoming members request to serve on, and by lobbying members of the steering committee to assign the members they like to the committees that they want. Additionally, I found that interest groups with issue interests concentrated within a small number of committees are much more likely to engage in this activity than interest groups with interests dispersed among several committees.

In this chapter, I explore the quantitative evidence for this theory using data on committee requests and campaign contributions for the 102nd to the 110th Congress. These data provide support for one primary finding. Namely, that campaign contributions made in the cycle leading up to a congressional election predict the committee requests made by freshman for six of the seven committees studied. Conversely, these data fail to provide strong evidence that groups with more concentrated interests are more engaged in this process than groups with less concentrated interests. This null result could be because of the relatively small number of observations I have for each committee request and/or because campaign contributions may not be the best measure of interest group strategy.

4.1 The Committee Request Process

At the beginning of each Congress, members seeking initial committee assignments and incumbents seeking different assignments are asked for a ranked list of committee assignment preferences. These lists are reviewed by each party's steering committee who are responsible for making ultimate committee assignments. For Democratic members, this is the Democratic Steering and Policy Committee (DSPC), and for Republican members, this is the Republican Committee on Committees (RCC). Although the processes for selecting members to serve on the DSPC and RCC differ, both committees have geographic zone representatives as well as a significant presence of party leaders.

Incoming members of both parties are assigned representatives on their respective steering committees who are responsible for advocating for their member's committee preferences (Skinner, 2014). These steering committee representatives are also available to consult with members about their request decisions. Members, however, can also consult with party leaders, colleagues in their state delegations and other members of Congress (Shepsle, 1978; Padgett, 1990; Deering and Smith, 1997). Each of these individuals serves as important sources of information about committees and the assignment process that can reduce a member's information uncertainty about which committees would be best suited for their goals and how likely they are to secure an assignment to a particular committee.

One other important source of information on this process is Interest groups. Kenneth Shepsle (1978) writes in the conclusion of *The Giant Jigsaw Puzzle* that,

Outside interest groups occasionally seek to obtain assignments for 'friendly' congressmen on committees with jurisdiction in their areas of concern. Their activity usually takes the form of 'campaigning' in the House on be-

half of such members through letters, telephone calls, and personal visits to [steering committee] members.

Shepsle even notes a comment made by a steering committee member who said, “I always consult my good friend Andrew Biemiller,” an AFL-CIO lobbyist, “on Labor committee appointments.” Indeed, such relationships with lobbyists date back to Speaker Reed, who was known to visit “with the ‘gentlemen of the lobby,’ especially on Boston textile interests, to consult on committee assignments” (Shepsle, 1978).

Evidence of lobbyist and interest group influence in the committee request process also exists in records other than first-hand accounts. In an examination of request letters (in which members make their case for why they should receive the requested committee assignment) submitted by Democrats between 1958 and 1974, Achen and Stolarek (1974) find that endorsements from colleagues and interest groups rank among the most important reasons for a successful request. Although they find limited support for letters mentioning outside interest endorsement, Frisch and Kelly (2006a) discuss instances in which a member’s committee requests were accompanied by letters of support from interest groups.

In Chapter 3, I reviewed the evidence from a much more detailed investigation of interest group involvement in the committee assignment process. Through a series of interviews with lobbyists from a range of organizations and former members of the Democratic and Republican steering committees, I found that interest groups, and particularly interest groups with interests concentrated in only a few committees, get involved in the process in two primary ways. First, they meet with members either during the campaign season, right after they win their election, or both, to discuss committee assignments and weigh in on which committees members should request. For example, interest groups advise freshman members who want to sit on exclusive

committees to pursue committees with a better chance of assignment. In addition, I learned that freshman members regularly have specific issue interests but are unsure which committees might best suit those interests. In these situations, interest groups are eager to guide members in requesting committees that will best match with the member's policy goals.

The second way that interest groups get involved is by lobbying members of the steering committees responsible for making committee assignments. Lobbyists meet with the members they know on steering committees to try to get the members they like on the committees they want. This fact was attested by former Democratic and Republican steering committee members. Though some of these members questioned the effectiveness of these efforts, ten out of the eleven members I interviewed said that interest groups do engage in this activity.

The evidence in this section indicates that communication channels between members of Congress and interest groups exist on matters of committee assignments. Similar to how lobbyists may subsidize legislative allies with policy information (Hall and Deardorff, 2006), this section provides a basis for thinking that interest groups subsidize new members of Congress with information about committee jurisdictions and assignment probabilities to help their future legislative allies successfully obtain an assignment to a committee related to their issue interests.

4.2 Committee Attractiveness, Requester Motivations, and Information

4.2.1 Request Motivations

Whether or not a particular committee assignment is attractive to a member will depend on what the member's goals are. Freshmen, who are primarily concerned with reelection, are thought to be much more motivated to request "constituency" committees (Bullock, 1976; Smith, 1984; Deering and Smith, 1997; Frisch and Kelly, 2006a). Surprisingly though, reelection concerns are not the most commonly cited reason for committee requests. Instead, Bullock (1976) finds that 83 percent of freshmen expressed a desire to engage in policy handled by a committee as their primary motivation for a request. Shepsle (1978) argues that the desire to engage in specific policy discussions is simply another strategy of a freshman to secure reelection. He assumes these "policy" motivations have a direct connection with the member's electoral coalition back home:

Thus, it is the rare freshman who explains a particular committee request on the basis of policy concerns independent of (much less contrary) to the interests of his electoral coalition back home. When a policy rationale is offered to explain a request, the member undoubtedly believes that these same policy concerns matter to the constituents that elected him.

Members requesting committees based on constituency characteristics, as expressed in the quote above, has become known as the "self-selection thesis." Unfortunately for its defenders, however, the self-selection thesis has not been supported with very much evidence when examined across congressional committees (Padgett, 1990; Frisch and Kelly, 2004; Frisch and Kelly, 2006a). For example, in the most extensive

examination of committee requests to-date, Scott Frisch and Sean Kelly (2004) only find support for the self-selection thesis in eight out of fourteen committees.

Where Shepsle and supporters of self-selection error is with the assumption that policy motivations can only be targeted at satisfying the “constituents that elected him.” Members could decide to act as trustees and satisfy their own self-interested policy goals. Rather than seeking to satisfy constituents, they could seek to satisfy their campaign contributors. Indeed, if there is little to no connection between committee assignments and electoral support (Fowler, Douglass, and Clark, 1980; Grimmer and Powell, 2013; Broockman and Butler, 2015), then what incentive do members have to request committees strictly related to their reelection constituencies? Whether voters are even aware of what committees their representatives serve on is doubtful.

The claim that interest groups have a vested interest in committee assignments and that members desire campaign contributions is far from controversial and is supported by a wealth scholarship. For example, Denzau and Munger (1986) argue that members of Congress desire both campaign contributions and votes and must balance this trade-off when contributions from interest groups conflict with the desires of constituents. As a result, interest groups target members who have constituents that are indifferent to the policies the interest group seeks. Additionally, numerous studies show that Political Action Committee (PAC) contributions from specific industries are disproportionately directed towards committees with jurisdiction over that industry (Grier and Munger, 1986; Munger, 1989; Grier and Munger, 1991; Romer and Snyder, 1994; Loucks and Bennett, 2011; Fourinaies and Hall, 2018).

Kroszner and Stratmann (1998) even go so far as to offer an alternative explanation for the purpose of congressional committees. They point out that the traditional theories of congressional organization omit any consideration of how competition

among interest groups for access to the legislative process might affect legislative organization. Assuming that members rely on campaign contributions from interest groups to increase their reelection chances, Kroszner and Stratmann (1998) argue that because legislators cannot out-right sell their votes in Congress to the highest bidder, the next best solution is to create specialized standing committees which allow for repeated interactions between members of Congress and interest groups. If these repeated interactions are permitted for multiple periods, they explain, then the process will reach an equilibrium where committee members receive a high amount of contributions from interest groups affected by the member's committee.

In testing their interest group theory of congressional committees, Kroszner and Stratmann (1998) examine of the Financial Services Committee for five election cycles and show that contributions from commercial banks, investment banks, and insurance companies are significantly higher for members on the committee than they are for members not on the committee. More recently, Powell and Grimmer (2016) take advantage of the sudden removal of members from various committees to show that after a member is removed, they receive fewer contributions from industries affected by their former committee. Fourniaies and Hall (2018) investigate committee systems at the state-level and use a series of difference-in-difference models find that interest groups are exceptionally aware of which legislators are friendly to their interests and that once friendly members gain control over making committee assignments, they receive an increase in contributions from these groups. These studies all indicate that committees and committee assignments are extremely valuable to interest groups.

4.2.2 Campaign Contributions as Information Subsidies

Given the importance of congressional committees, it seems extraordinarily unlikely, and the evidence suggests that it is, that interest groups simply *hope* that legislators friendly to their policy interests get assigned to relevant committees. A much more plausible scenario is that interest groups support candidates friendly to the group's policy interests to help them get elected. By identifying friendly candidates early on, interest groups can start building trust with future legislative allies as soon as possible. After developing these relationships, members will be much more open to the information interest groups have to offer about the committee assignment process as well as their recommendations for committee requests.

Indeed, researchers have argued that the primary way in which interest groups exert their influence on legislators is by developing long-term relationships. For example, Snyder (1992) argues that interest groups work to make long term investments in legislators. Only after relationships of mutual respect and trust are developed can interest groups receive policy benefits for campaign contributions (Hall and Wayman, 1990; Snyder, 1992).

In line with the relational approach, other theories have been offered, which argue that interest groups provide valuable information to members of Congress. Studies show that interest groups provide friendly legislators with all the policy information that they need (Hall and Deardorff, 2006) and that providing information allows interest groups to gain more significant influence over policy formation (Hansen, 1991; Esterling, 2004). Finally, not only does research show that interest groups are keenly aware of which legislators are friendly to their causes (Fournaies and Hall, 2018), but it also shows that interest groups are capable of identifying legislators who have high levels of policy competence (Esterling, 2007). If interest groups have the capacity,

and desire, to seek out members who are friendly to their policy interests and provide them the monetary resources members need, then it seems likely that members would request committees that are consistent with the interests of their campaign contributors.

4.3 Data

An immediate obstacle to testing this theory is that it is difficult to know whether a member of Congress receives money from a donor because they are on a specific committee, or if they serve on a specific committee because they received money from a donor. To address this, I use data on incoming freshman members of Congress and the committees that they request to serve on. This helps to alleviate the reverse-causality problem in two ways. First, by focusing on freshmen, I observe their campaign donor activity before their arrival in Congress, thus eliminating the possibility that their donors contribute only after observing their behavior in Congress. Second, by using each member's requested committees, I observe their committee selections based solely on electoral factors. That is, I will be getting at the question of why they select certain committees over others without consideration of the actual committees to which they are assigned. If members of Congress are genuinely attentive to campaign donors, then there should be a relationship between their donors and the committees they ask to serve on.

Despite this precaution, however, there is still a reasonable chance of causal confounding. As was indicated to me during the interviews in Chapter 3, incoming members frequently have conversations with interest groups about committee assignments and their plans upon entering Congress. This makes it challenging to truly achieve causal identification. Ultimately, in the absence of a carefully thought out re-

search design (which may very well be impossible give the subject of inquiry), causal statements simply cannot be made on the basis of these data. Nevertheless, a descriptive analysis is still useful. The causal claims identified in Chapter 3 entail, at the very least, a descriptive relationship between campaign contributions and member committee requests.

Data for these committee requests was provided to me by Sean Kelly and Scott Frisch who undertook a massive effort in reading through historical congressional files to record the committee requests for as many members as possible from the 80th to the 110th Congress (Frisch and Kelly, 2006b). Given limitations on the availability of campaign finance data, however, I am only able to use requests after the 101st Congress.

The data for my independent variables of interest comes from OpenSecrets.org. Specifically, all campaign contributions made to candidates from PACs. With these data, I match each contribution to the congressional committee with jurisdiction over the group's industry of operation. This crosswalk of industry codes to congressional committees was also provided to me by OpenSecrets.org. Finally, all campaign contributions are adjusted for inflated using 2006 dollars.

These variables form the primary test of my theory, but I also use several demographic variables as a way to test my theory against the self-selection thesis. These variables follow the approach taken by so many congressional scholars before me (Shepsle, 1978; Adler and Lapinski, 1997; Adler, 2000; Frisch and Kelly, 2004; Frisch and Kelly, 2006a; Frisch and Kelly, 2006b), and are based on the rich dataset of historical congressional district demographics for the 102nd Congress to the 105th Congress compiled by Scott Adler (n.d.). I extended this dataset to the 110th Congress using data from a variety of sources. Finally, I also include variables related to each individual member's occupation before coming to Congress and whether they are a veteran

to identify the influence of personal characteristics on committee request decisions. These data come from the Congressional Quarterly database.

4.4 Methods

One complication with analyzing these data is that members request to serve on more than one committee. Indeed, Frisch and Kelly collected as many as thirteen requests from members although the vast majority of members only request two or three committees at most. Still, how should these data be used when each member requests three committees on average?

I chose to focus only on each member's 1st committee request for two reasons. First, as was explained to me in the interviews I conducted with lobbyists, members have different strategies for requesting committees. Some members list their "dream" committee as their first choice to signal the steering committee of what they would want in an ideal case, and then list their "realistic" choice second. The members who do this however, do so against the advice of interest groups. Interest groups encourage members to select committees that they have a good chance of getting assigned to. The second reason is that using each member's first choice is consistent with previous research. This is the practice of Shepsle (1978), Cox and McCubbins (1993), and Frisch and Kelly (2006a; 2004) which are the primary studies on the subject.

To estimate the effect of campaign contributions on committee requests, a theoretically justified model would use a multinomial likelihood to model each committee request as an unordered choice of multiple options. The multinomial likelihood better matches the process of members making a decision about which committee to request. Knowing the full range of committees, members select one as their top choice, rather than considering each committee independently. Fitting multinomial models, how-

Table 4.1: Distribution of First Committee Preferences for Freshman Members (102nd to 110th Congress)

First Committee Preference	Freshman Members	
	Democrat	Republican
Agriculture	9	13
Appropriations	19	33
Armed	13	26
Bankg, Fin. & Urban Affairs	8	28
Budget	5	1
Education and Labor	6	3
Energy and Commerce	40	20
Foreign Affairs	1	3
Intelligence	0	1
Judiciary	0	6
Natural Resources (Interior)	1	17
Pub Wks and Transportation	32	20
Rules	1	4
Sci, Space, and Technology	1	2
Small Business	1	0
Veterans Affairs	1	1
Ways and Means	18	25
Total	156	203

ever, is computationally difficult especially with a long list of controls (discussed below). Multinomial models also introduce the assumption of the independence of irrelevant alternatives which, in context, means that the probability of a member requesting a given committee is unaffected by the option to select other committees. That is, a member will request committee X with the same probability whether or not they could have selected committee Y instead. Such an assumption could be plausible, but it can only be avoided by using a mixed logit or multinomial probit, which both add computational complexity. Despite these theoretical advantages, I resort to using standard multilevel logistic model to model each requested committee separately. This solution is much more computationally efficient and yields very similar results even though it may not be as theoretically appropriate.

Table 4.1 shows the distribution of committee requests for Democratic and Republican freshman. Some committees are clearly more popular than others, and the least popular committees pose challenges for estimation because so few members selected some committees. As a result, I am forced to exclude committees that were not selected by enough members. Specifically, I exclude Budget; Foreign Affairs; Intelligence; Judiciary; Rules; Science, Space, and Technology, Small Business; and Veterans Affairs. In addition, because of the unique challenge of getting placed on exclusive committees, I also exclude Appropriations and Ways and Means.

In addition to these controls, I also include intercepts (random effects) for states and Congress. However, instead of estimating the state and Congress effects as independent of one another, I nest them to allow for correlation between them. This is theoretically justified because the steering committees responsible for making committee assignments consider the geographical representation of members when making assignments, which varies from Congress to Congress. Said differently, the effect of which state you represent with your committee assignment is not constant over time.

Thus, treating time effects as constant across states yields an unrealistic model. Nesting these intercepts allows them to vary across states and across time within states.

Each model is estimated in a Bayesian framework to quantify the uncertainty of each estimate in a probabilistic fashion and to avoid relying on null hypothesis significance testing to make inferences. Additionally, all models use weakly informative, normally distributed, priors. Models are implemented in Stan with four chains each, run for 6,000 iterations and a warm-up period of 3,000 iterations. The convergence of each parameter estimate is verified with a visual inspection of the trace-plots and a verification that each parameter's \hat{R} values are less than 1.01.

4.5 Results

Before testing the more detailed hypothesis that groups with concentrated interests are more likely to influence the committees that members request, I first examine how the institutional capture theory of interest group influence compares to the self-selection thesis. Recall that under the self-selection thesis, members request to serve on the committees that most closely match with their constituent's demographics and their own backgrounds. In contrast to this, my theory holds that the advice from interest groups is the most important determinant of committee requests. Table 4.2 shows the results of the models comparing these two theories. This table shows the median coefficient estimates from all seven models along with each estimate's 89 percent highest density interval and the probability of each coefficient having the direction of the estimated effect.¹

¹I use 89 percent highest density intervals for stable interval estimates. Kruschke (2014) only recommends using 95 percent intervals when the sample size exceeds 10,000.

Table 4.2: The Effect of Campaign Contributions on Member’s First Committee Assignment Preference

Committee	Model Coefficients	Median Est. with 89% HDI	Prob. of Direction
		Est.	p
Energy and Commerce	Intercept	-1.468 [-2.533, -0.336]	0.989
	Energy & Commerce Contribs. (Proportion)	0.689 [-0.174, 1.578]	0.938
	Republican Member	-1.663 [-2.662, -0.678]	0.998
	Wholesale/Retail Trade Emp.	0.375 [-0.463, 1.231]	0.771
	Trans./Utilities Emp.	-0.742 [-1.644, 0.119]	0.929
	No Nuclear Powerplant	0.358 [-0.600, 1.325]	0.725
	Member Prev. Occupation Business	-0.184 [-0.973, 0.668]	0.645
	Member Prev. Occupation Medicine	0.604 [-1.037, 2.220]	0.730
Trans. & Infrastructure	Intercept	-1.314 [-1.939, -0.758]	1.000
	Trans. & Infrastructure Contribs. (Proportion)	1.067 [-0.093, 2.226]	0.940
	Republican Member	-1.385 [-2.270, -0.541]	0.999
	Trans./Utilities Emp.	1.182 [0.481, 1.834]	0.999
	Dist. Flood Potential	0.000 [0.000, 0.000]	0.786
	Construction Emp.	0.987 [0.193, 1.802]	0.986
	Dist. Unemployment	-0.200 [-1.033, 0.551]	0.657
Armed Services	Intercept	-4.365 [-6.105, -2.954]	1.000
	Armed Services Contribs. (Proportion)	68.251 [31.722, 109.661]	0.999
	Republican Member	0.304 [-0.641, 1.225]	0.703
	Dist. Military Pop.	0.164 [-0.743, 1.048]	0.620
	Military Installation in Dist.	-0.167 [-0.514, 0.193]	0.788
	Major Military Installation in Dist.	1.092 [0.244, 2.021]	0.992
	Member is a Veteran	0.546 [-0.412, 1.443]	0.839
	% Veterans in Dist.	0.188 [-0.863, 1.170]	0.618
Financial Services	Intercept	-6.788 [-9.837, -4.061]	1.000
	Financial Services Contribs. (Proportion)	1.627 [-0.021, 3.390]	0.956
	Republican Member	0.027 [-1.652, 1.614]	0.510
	Member Prev. Occupation Business	0.966 [-0.123, 2.099]	0.929
	Dist. Unemployment	-2.703 [-5.067, -0.701]	0.991
	Dist. Does not Contain 50 Largest City	1.174 [-0.416, 2.917]	0.896
Agriculture	Intercept	-3.966 [-6.111, -2.514]	1.000
	Agriculture Contribs. (Proportion)	2.006 [0.539, 3.725]	0.994
	Republican Member	-1.594 [-3.384, 0.014]	0.965
	Pop. in Rural Farm Areas	0.665 [-0.765, 2.154]	0.780
	Farmer Emp.	2.042 [0.740, 3.537]	0.999
	Member Prev. Occupation Agriculture	-1.529 [-3.865, 0.757]	0.877
Natural Resources	Intercept	-6.358 [-8.706, -4.334]	1.000
	Natural Resources Contribs. (Proportion)	1.795 [0.860, 2.717]	1.000
	Republican Member	2.984 [1.061, 5.022]	1.000
	Member Prev. Occupation Engineering	-197.269 [-741.308, 4.997]	0.992
	Land Owned by NPS & BLM	-1.118 [-2.714, 0.261]	0.918
	Pop. per Square Mile	-0.483 [-3.157, 1.304]	0.646
Education & Labor	Intercept	-8.184 [-13.367, -4.443]	1.000
	Education and Labor Contribs. (Proportion)	1.338 [-1.196, 3.769]	0.815
	Republican Member	0.036 [-3.064, 2.920]	0.509
	% Unionized in State	0.099 [-0.014, 0.236]	0.930
	State Govt. Employees	1.090 [-0.071, 2.359]	0.938
	Member Prev. Occupation Education	1.997 [0.381, 3.785]	0.987

Note:

Models are estimated using multilevel logistic regression and weakly informative priors. All models are estimated with Stan via BRMS with four Markov chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) chains. All chains indicate convergence with every R-hat value being less than 1.01. All continuous predictors are centered and divided by two standard deviations.

Using the traditional battery of controls established by Frisch and Kelly (2004) and Adler (2000) to measure each member's district preferences, with the addition of each member's previous occupation, the evidence supports the interest group thesis with reasonably high probability for all but one committee. For example, holding constant the proportion of wholesale and retail trade employees, transportation and utility employees, whether the district has a nuclear power plant, and a member's previous occupation in business or medicine, we see that contributions made from PACs that fall under the Energy and Commerce committee have a 94 percent probability of having a positive effect on freshman requesting to serve on the Energy and Commerce committee. Indeed, campaign contributions from their respective committees have at least a 94 percent probability of having a positive effect for every requested committee except for Education and Labor. Overall, these results strongly support the interest group thesis over the self-selection thesis.

My theory, however, not only predicts that interest groups get involved in the committee assignment process by influencing the committees that members request, but also that groups with a more narrow committee focus will be more likely to guide requests than groups with broader committee interests. To test this prediction, I divide the contributions that each member receives under each committee's jurisdiction into quantiles based on the group's concentration score calculated in Chapter 2. Doing so produces a dataset that shows how much money each member received from groups by committee jurisdiction and the level of concentration for each group within a committee jurisdiction. For example, for one member we can see how much money they received from agriculture groups in the top, 75th, 50th, and 25th percentiles. This allows me to test whether contributions from more concentrated groups have a larger effect on committee requests.

Table 4.3: The Effect of Campaign Contributions by Concentration Quantile on Member's First Committee Assignment Preference

Committee	Model Coefficients	Median Est. with 89% HDI	Prob. of Direction
		Est.	p
Energy and Commerce	Intercept	-1.848 [-3.081, -0.713]	0.998
	Energy & Commerce Bottom Quantile Contribs.	0.492 [-0.216, 1.253]	0.880
	Energy & Commerce Top Quantile Contribs.	-0.688 [-2.406, 1.026]	0.751
	Republican Member	-0.977 [-2.240, 0.270]	0.901
	Wholesale/Retail Trade Emp.	0.417 [-0.448, 1.303]	0.789
	Trans./Utilities Emp.	-0.905 [-1.816, -0.041]	0.962
	No Nuclear Powerplant	0.357 [-0.645, 1.309]	0.723
	Member Prev. Occupation Business	-0.184 [-1.004, 0.639]	0.641
Trans. & Infrastructure	Member Prev. Occupation Medicine	0.463 [-1.258, 2.124]	0.669
	Intercept	-1.314 [-2.041, -0.740]	1.000
	Trans. & Infrastructure Bottom Quantile Contribs.	0.248 [-0.385, 0.859]	0.744
	Trans. & Infrastructure Top Quantile Contribs.	0.705 [-3.884, 6.047]	0.597
	Republican Member	-1.371 [-2.302, -0.548]	0.999
	Trans./Utilities Emp.	1.314 [0.624, 2.014]	1.000
	Dist. Flood Potential	0.000 [0.000, 0.000]	0.773
	Construction Emp.	1.020 [0.220, 1.906]	0.987
Armed Services	Dist. Unemployment	-0.120 [-0.923, 0.673]	0.598
	Intercept	-4.664 [-7.087, -2.632]	1.000
	Armed Services Bottom Quantile Contribs.	1.681 [0.698, 2.854]	1.000
	Armed Services Top Quantile Contribs.	-0.791 [-2.621, 0.750]	0.805
	Republican Member	0.905 [-0.227, 2.152]	0.932
	Dist. Military Pop.	0.297 [-0.718, 1.301]	0.696
	Military Installation in Dist.	-0.349 [-0.807, 0.086]	0.932
	Major Military Installation in Dist.	1.512 [0.478, 2.764]	0.997
Financial Services	Member is a Veteran	0.801 [-0.285, 1.874]	0.900
	% Veterans in Dist.	0.406 [-0.814, 1.754]	0.717
	Intercept	-7.852 [-11.944, -4.075]	1.000
	Financial Services Bottom Quantile Contribs.	1.121 [-0.451, 2.858]	0.902
	Financial Services Top Quantile Contribs.	2.812 [0.419, 5.629]	0.985
	Republican Member	-0.779 [-3.154, 1.408]	0.734
	Member Prev. Occupation Business	1.250 [0.048, 2.675]	0.958
	Dist. Unemployment	-3.111 [-5.934, -0.720]	0.993
Agriculture	Dist. Does not Contain 50 Largest City	1.607 [-0.326, 3.874]	0.928
	Intercept	-4.387 [-6.622, -2.669]	1.000
	Agriculture Bottom Quantile Contribs.	0.014 [-0.936, 0.902]	0.511
	Agriculture Top Quantile Contribs.	0.996 [-0.524, 2.491]	0.876
	Republican Member	-0.443 [-1.792, 0.882]	0.727
	Pop. in Rural Farm Areas	0.280 [-1.166, 1.744]	0.630
	Farmer Emp.	2.359 [1.008, 4.060]	1.000
	Member Prev. Occupation Agriculture	-0.578 [-2.718, 1.367]	0.687
Natural Resources	Intercept	-6.108 [-8.516, -3.887]	1.000
	Natural Resources Bottom Quantile Contribs.	0.266 [-0.239, 0.790]	0.812
	Natural Resources Top Quantile Contribs.	3.338 [1.555, 5.193]	1.000
	Republican Member	2.315 [0.422, 4.499]	0.990
	Member Prev. Occupation Engineering	-200.949 [-761.671, 5.146]	0.992
	Land Owned by NPS & BLM	-1.685 [-3.647, -0.030]	0.962
	Pop. per Square Mile	-0.584 [-3.233, 1.294]	0.672
	Intercept	-8.671 [-15.022, -3.980]	1.000
Education & Labor	Education and Labor Bottom Quantile Contribs.	0.769 [-0.572, 2.321]	0.852
	Education and Labor Top Quantile Contribs.	-1.906 [-5.252, 1.502]	0.846
	Republican Member	-2.757 [-6.767, 0.682]	0.924
	% Unionized in State	0.129 [-0.005, 0.319]	0.954
	State Govt. Employees	1.271 [-0.148, 2.768]	0.945
	Member Prev. Occupation Education	2.703 [0.800, 5.178]	0.995

Note:

Models are estimated using multilevel logistic regression and weakly informative priors. All models are estimated with Stan via BRMS with four Markov chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) chains. All chains indicate convergence with every R-hat value being less than 1.01. All continuous predictors are centered and divided by two standard deviations.

Table 4.3 shows the results of these concentration tests. Unfortunately, the results here are far less clear. Under the hypothesis, we should see that contributions from groups in the top quantile of concentration have more predictive power over committee requests than contributions from groups in the bottom quantile of concentration. Unfortunately, this is only the case with Financial Services and Natural Resources requests. For most other requested committees, contributions from either the top or bottom quantiles of concentration are very likely to have an effect on the committee requested. While we at least see some evidence for the concentration hypothesis, it is preliminary at best.

4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter we evaluated the quantitative evidence for the institutional capture theory of interest group influence which posits that interest groups exert their influence in Congress by getting involved in the committee assignment process. This theory not only postulates a new avenue of interest group influence in Congress, but it also entails a theory of committee request behavior that is at odds with previous speculation. Although scholars have offered competing theories for committee assignments (information, distributive, and partisan theories), the only theory of committee requests is the self-selection (also known as the “distributive theory”) thesis which states that members request to serve on committee that most align with their constituent’s, and their own personal, preferences.

In contrast to this view, the institutional capture theory posits that members request to serve on committees that are consistent with their interest group supporters. Members listen to interest groups because they have expert and inside information on the availability of committee seats, the bills that fall under each committee’s ju-

risdiction, and the preferences of steering committee members that make committee assignment decisions.

Using committee request and campaign contribution data from the 102nd to the 110th Congress, I find that the interest group capture theory provides better explanatory power than the self-selection thesis. Whereas the self-selection thesis was only able to correctly predict freshman committee requests for roughly 57 percent of committees, the interest group capture thesis correctly predicts freshman requests for 86 percent of committees.

The interest group capture theory also postulates that interest groups with interests concentrated in a small number of committees will be more likely to get involved in the committee assignment process than groups with interests distributed across multiple committees. To test this, I used the committee concentration scores developed in Chapter 2 to group contributions by each committee's jurisdiction and by the concentration level of the organization that made them. The evidence for this aspect of my theory, however, is much more limited. Contributions from organizations in the top quantile of concentration only predicted requests for two out of the seven committees.

This lack of evidence could potentially arise from a measurement issue. Measuring campaign contributions of concentrated and dispersed interest groups is very difficult. While I am able to identify which organizations have concentrated committee interests and which do not, there is no ideal way to categorize their contributions since we only know the industries that the parent organization represents, and not the committees they have in mind when they make contributions. For example, the Food Marketing Institute has rather broad committee interests, yet because their industry is aligned with the Agriculture committee, all of their contributions are considered as falling under the jurisdiction of Agriculture. This is not necessarily justified, however,

because they care about several committees. As a result, matching contributions to committee jurisdictions is not the ideal measurement since we really want to know the organization's motives for making a contribution to a candidate. Is the Food Marketing Institute giving money to a particular candidate because they want them to serve on Agriculture, a different committee, or do they even have a committee preference at all? Since contributions in this chapter are being used as a proxy for the information that interest groups give, the Food Marketing Institute contributions should presumably not be accompanied by any committee request guidance, but this remains difficult to measure. In the absence of more detailed data, this issue will be challenging to resolve.

Despite this limitation, this chapter still shows relatively strong evidence that interest groups weigh in on the committee request process. Taken as a proxy for information, campaign contributions made to freshman candidates leading up to an election are strongly associated with that member requesting to serve on the committee with jurisdiction over the industry that gave the money. This fact is especially surprising since, as was discovered in the interviews discussed in Chapter 3, incoming members are frequently unsure of which committees they want to serve on. This provides even more reason to think that interest groups are the deciding factor for member choosing their committee preferences. Thus, it seems that interest groups, not simple self-selection, provide a better theory of committee request behavior. Moreover, if interest groups are active in guiding members onto committees, one can easily see how this would increase their influence over public policy.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Outside interest groups occasionally seek to obtain assignments for “friendly” congressmen on committees with jurisdiction in their areas of concern. Their activity usually takes the form of “campaigning” in the House on behalf of such members through letters, telephone calls, and personal visits to [steering committee] members.

Kenneth Shepsle, *The Giant Jigsaw Puzzle*

5.1 Review

The committee assignment process in the U.S. House of Representatives is a complex. Members work to identify which committees match their legislative goals while balancing numerous considerations for increasing the probability of a relevant assignment. Steering committee members seek to maximize their legislative accomplishments by assigning the right members to the right committees. In addition, we have seen throughout this book that interest groups also seek to get allied members onto

committees that will advance their legislative agenda. The combination of all these actors, competing motivations, and strategic calculations make for an exceedingly complex network of decisions. While scholars have recognized the complexity of the committee assignment process, the vast majority of its investigation has centered on role of assigners and assignees. That is, steering committee members and members themselves.

These actors obviously play essential roles, but in this book I have attempted to show that outside interests also have a significant presence in the process. In Chapter 1, I argued that the committee assignment process is complex and that members need help navigating it. This complexity stems from several factors. Committee jurisdictions often overlap and change over time making it difficult for members match their interests with the correct committee (and even subcommittee). Committee seats are also not guaranteed. Rather, they depend on the party in power, the geographic representation on the committee, demographic representation on the committee, and transfers of more senior members. Moreover, it is becoming increasingly common for members to be required to pay "dues" to their party's congressional campaign arm to secure committee seats.

The key to understanding how actors can effectively navigate this process is interest groups. Interest groups exist to advocate for a particular issue position in Congress and doing so requires an intimate knowledge of which committees are most relevant for one's issues. Groups must know the priorities of the party in power as well as the individual members of their key committees so they can effectively target their lobbying efforts. Moreover, interest groups are ready and willing to spend money in order to support members that support their interests. These facts indicate that interest groups have exactly the right information to help members navigate their committee assignment process more effectively.

If interest groups exist to achieve specific legislative priorities, why would they refrain from getting involved with committee assignments? Committees are the first stage in the legislative process and thus hold a reasonable amount of control over legislation. The Congress literature documents the fact that interest groups are more favorable to members of the committees that govern their issues than members outside key committees, so it seems natural that they would try to influence who serves on those key committees. Members want to get on committees that best align with their issue priorities and interest groups know exactly which committees those are. Members need to know how likely they are to get an assignment on a given committee and interest groups know the geographic and demographic representation on the committee, as well as what party leaders are looking for in committee members and which members are transferring to other committees. Finally, members need money to meet their fundraising obligations ("dues") for committee seats and interest groups are eager to financially support friendly members. In short, interest groups are perfectly positioned to help the members they like get on the committees they want.

There are, however, plausible limits to which groups get involved in the committee assignment process. In Chapter 2, I developed a way to classify interest groups according to how concentrated their lobbying activities within a committee. This is a useful distinction because not all groups have the same scope of issue interests. Some groups advocate for broad policy issues that span the jurisdiction of multiple committees while others exist only for the sake of a very narrow range of issues which fall within the jurisdiction of a single committee. Given this continuum of concentration, I argued that interest groups with concentrated committee interests are more likely to influence committee assignments because the marginal benefit of doing so is much larger for these groups. Getting an allied member onto a key committee

could prove enormously beneficial for a concentrated group; a benefit that would not exist, at least certainly not to the same degree, for a broadly interested group. In developing a measure to classify interest groups according to their concentration within committees, I am able to compare the tactics of concentrated groups with the tactics of diffuse groups. This analysis involved a qualitative and quantitative component.

In Chapter 3, I explored the qualitative evidence for the claim that interest groups seek to influence the committee assignment process. Specifically, I hypothesized that interest groups influence the process in two ways. First, they work with incoming members to guide their committee request preferences. By providing members identified as potential allies with information about committee jurisdictions, probabilities of assignment, and other factors, they are able to influence the committees that incoming members ask to serve on. Second, I hypothesized that interest groups also lobby members of each party's steering committee to get the members they like assigned to the committees that they want.

To test these hypotheses, I conducted a series of interviews with lobbyists from concentrated and diffuse organizations and former members of Congress, the majority of who had experience serving on their party's steering committees. Lobbyists interact with many different members and members interact with many different lobbyists so interviewing individuals from each perspective provided a wide insight into interest group activity in the committee assignment process.

The central finding of Chapter 3 was that interest groups do get involved in the committee assignment process by influencing committee requests and by lobbying members of the steering committee for assignments. Moreover, the evidence also indicated that interest groups with more concentrated interests were those more likely to do so. Of the lobbyists representing concentrated organizations all but one said

that they guide incoming members on their committee requests. Similarly, all but one lobbyist said that they lobby steering committee members about committee assignments on behalf of specific members. By contrast, only one lobbyist from the group of broadly focused groups said that they would guide members on committee requests.

The evidence from former members of Congress was equally supportive. All six Republican members and two of the three Democratic members with steering committee experience said that interest groups would meet with members to discuss committee requests and that they would meet with steering committee members to discuss committee assignments. Thus, the qualitative evidence provides strong support for the claim that interest groups are active in influencing the committee assignment process.

The primary limitation of the qualitative investigation is the small sample of interviewees. To mitigate this, I turned to a quantitative analysis of committee requests and campaign contributions in Chapter 4. If interest groups do provide guidance to members on committee assignments, then there must be some correlation between the groups that support an incoming member and the committees that the member requests to serve on. Using a data set of committee requests between the 102nd and 110th Congress I examined exactly that.

Across seven different committees, campaign contributions from each committee's respective interest groups predicted committee requests for six of them. These results hold after controlling for district and member demographics which indicates that the interest group theory of committee requests outperforms the traditional "self-selection" thesis. Unfortunately, the quantitative evidence for concentrated groups being more engaged than diffuse groups did not yield persuasive results. Of the seven committees campaign contributions from highly concentrated groups only predicted committee requests for two committees.

5.2 Contributions and Reflection

In developing an institutional capture theory of interest group influence, my aim is to advance two important areas in the American politics literature. First, this theory is unique in providing a framework for understanding why members request to serve on the committees that they do. Apart from the “self-selection” thesis, the other dominant theories of congressional organization overlook this important aspect of Congress. The Partisan and Informational theories (e.g. Krehbiel, 1992; Cox and McCubbins, 1993) attempt to explain why the particular allocation of committee *assignments* obtains, but they do not offer any explanation for why members *request* the committees that they do. Does this distinction matter? In so far as committee requests represent a member’s revealed, or perhaps more accurately “strategic,” preferences, it would seem that it does. If party leaders were to pay no attention to the preferences of their members, they could jeopardize their ability maintain control of the chamber, efficiently organize it with experts, or both. Moreover, if steering committees do base their assignment decisions, at least partly, on their member’s preferences, and interest groups shape member preferences, then interest group influence flows through the entire system ultimately leading to an organization of Congress that differs from what it would be in the absence of interest group activity.

The second aim of this theory is to provide a novel insight into how interest groups influence congressional politics. Political scientists and economists have struggled for decades to uncover evidence of interest group influence in Congress and have only made limited progress in theorizing about interest group strategies. My institutional capture theory of interest group influence fills this gap. In positing that interest groups influence legislation through the committee assignment process, I am able to concord an explanation of *how* they affect legislative politics with the absence of evidence

of their influence in roll call votes and campaign contributions. This concordance is achieved, in short, by saying that groups do not need to try to persuade members to vote this or that way on a bill because they helped place the members they like on the committees they want. If you can organize the chamber to work towards your ends without continual intervention, then why would you need to intervene to persuade members on roll call votes?

The fundamental purpose of a legislative body is to provide the means to reflect and express the preferences of the people that the body governs. Accomplishing this task requires faithful representatives and an efficiently organized system to propose, debate, and approve various policy proposals. The participation of interest groups in this process has the potential to help with the efficient organization, but it could also lead to a failure of the legislatures' fundamental objective. In as much as interest groups help faithful representatives navigate the complexity of a carefully designed legislative system, they can serve to put the right representatives in the right places. However, if voters fail to uphold their responsibility of electing faithful representatives, interest group participation in legislative organization could lead to a government that is more effective in providing concentrated benefits to those with privileged access than the voters that the legislature is designed to serve.

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