Title

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Abstract

Leading theories of legislative party influence argue that legislators gain appreciable benefits from winning their preferred committee assignments. Control over the committee assignment process is therefore thought to be among the most powerful tool party leaders have to incentivize party loyalty. However, evaluating the degree to which legislators actually benefit from winning their preferred assignments – and therefore to what degree control over assignments represents an important disciplinary tool for party leaders – has been challenging with observational data. This paper sheds unique light on the benefits legislators accrue from winning their preferred committee assignments by exploiting unique rules in Arkansas' state legislature, where legislators select their own committee assignments in a randomized order. The natural experiment indicates that legislators reap at most limited rewards from winning their preferred assignments. This suggests that committee seats have at best limited use as inducements.

A great deal of literature argues that legislators who win their preferred committee assignments gain significant advantages (e.g., Fenno 1973; Mayhew 1974; Grimmer and Powell 2013).[1] Smith (2000, p. 62) summarizes this scholarly consensus as follows: “Tangible incentives come in many other forms, although few are as important as committee assignments to most legislators.”

The existence and magnitude of these advantages is important to understand because leading theories of legislative politics posit that party leaders induce party loyalty among the rank and file in large part by rewarding loyal legislators with their preferred committee assignments (e.g., Rohde and Shepsle 1973; Crook and Hibbing 1985; Coker and Crain 1994; Sinclair 1995; Stratmann 2000; Snyder and Groseclose 2000; Roberts and Smith 2003; Kanthak 2004). For example, Cox and McCubbins (1993, p. 175) use their finding that “loyalty to the party leadership is a statistically and substantively important determinant of who gets what [committee] assignment” to conclude that the committee assignment process makes legislators “more responsive to both the party’s leadership and goals” (p. 182).

We present novel evidence on the benefits that legislators accrue from winning their preferred committee assignments. Our evidence comes from Arkansas’ state legislature, where parties play no role in making standing committee assignments; instead, legislators choose their own assignments in

[1] We know of only one study in the large literature on committee assignments that has suggested the benefits to legislators are limited (Bullock 1972).

the order of their seniority. Crucially, for legislators who have served the same length of time, this seniority order is determined by a random lottery. Some members are thus randomly assigned to have a better opportunity to select their preferred assignments, a situation equivalent to randomly assigning party leaders' intention to reward some members with access to their most preferred committee assignments.

We exploit this randomized lottery to test whether legislators who have a more complete and higher quality slate of committee assignments to choose from gain appreciable benefits over those who are forced to accept the assignments no other legislators want. In contrast to a great deal of previous observational work, the results from the randomized lottery suggest that legislators are not significantly more likely to attain any of their principal goals as a result of attaining their preferred assignments. This evidence suggests that the benefits individual legislators derive from having better committee assignments are too meager to form a plausible basis for party power.

Experimental Design: The Randomized Committee Lottery in Arkansas

The random assignment of Arkansas legislators to their order in the committee assignment process occurs as follows. Each legislator in Arkansas' two state legislative chambers has a seniority number, and legislators choose their own standing committee assignments in the order of

this seniority number.[2] This seniority number is first determined by how long a member has served in the chamber, with the lowest numbers (and thus the first choice of committee assignments) going to those who have served longest. Crucially, however, the seniority number of legislators who have served the same length of time is randomly determined: before their first term, legislators draw numbers written on slips of paper out of a hat to determine their seniority within their freshman class. Their relative seniority within their cohort stays with them for the remainder of their time in the legislature.

The Independent Variable: Relative Rank

Although legislators' seniority is randomized across their entire cohort, committee assignments in the House are allotted within four separate 'caucus districts' corresponding to the four congressional districts in Arkansas. Because only a certain pre-set number of legislators from each caucus district can sit on each committee, House members only compete with legislators in their caucus district for committee seats.

Table 1 presents a fictional 25-member Arkansas House populated with legislators in their first or second term to illustrate how we operationalize the randomization within these chamber-cohort-caucus district groupings. Legislators in their first term have lower seniority numbers than the legislators in their second term. However, because seniority within each

[2] Legislators serve on two standing committees. Legislators choose their first committee in the order of seniority and then choose their second committee in the same order. As Figure 1 shows and we discuss, this arrangement leads to significant heterogeneity in the quality of legislators' committee assignments, with legislators choosing first systematically serving on different committees who choose later in the process.

cohort is randomly determined, what matters for the natural experiment is one's seniority rank *within* one's chamber-cohort-caucus district group.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

The resulting *Relative Rank* metric is shown for our fictional legislature in part (b) of Table 1. Legislators are arranged in groups by their cohort and caucus district and then sorted by their randomized seniority number within these groups because legislators pick their own assignments in direct succession within these groups. Thus, for example, within caucus district A, legislator 4 would pick first, followed by legislator 6 and 11. Once the senior members finish picking, legislators 14, 15, 18, and 23 would then pick the remainder of the assignments allocated to district A.

The *relative rank* metric gives the percentile ranking of each legislator's lottery number relative to the legislators in their year-chamber-cohort-caucus district on a 0 to 1 scale. Legislators assigned to 1 are the most senior in their year-chamber-cohort-caucus district group (and thus can select the best committee assignment available to those in their caucus district elected at the same time) and legislators with a 0 are the least senior. Likewise, a *relative rank* value of 0.5 would mean that the legislator is at the 50^{th} percentile and chooses in the middle of her group.

We use *relative rank* as our main independent variable for the analysis because it has a comparable meaning across the different year-chamber-cohort-caucus district groups. It is important to use a measure that is comparable across these groups because we are not looking at one

experiment in the analysis; instead, we are pooling and analyzing the results from a series of many smaller experiments, one in each year-chamber-cohort-caucus district group (see Table 1). This is also the reason we drop legislators who have no peers in their cohort and caucus district (such as legislator 13 in Table 1) from the analysis; these legislators have no counterfactual observations for comparison. We account for this pooling across the year-chamber-cohort-caucus district groups by including fixed effects for these groups in the analysis.

Contrasting Relative Rank And Typical Measures of Legislative Committee Assignments

Box 1 compares the committee assignment process in Arkansas to the process elsewhere in order to illustrate the benefits of studying this question in the Arkansas context.

Box 1. Comparing Relative Rank and Typical Measures of Legislative Committee Quality

Typical Assignment Process				
Party Leader Regard	→	Desirability of Committee for Each Legislator	→	Outcomes
Endogenous, Measured with Proxy		*Endogenous, Measured with Proxy*		*Measured*
Arkansas Assignment Process				
Randomized Lottery Number	→	Desirability of Committee for Each Legislator	→	Outcomes
Exogenous, Measurable		*Unmeasured*		*Measured*

The top half of Box 1 depicts the committee assignment process in

most legislatures and how scholars typically measure it. First, party leaders are thought to hold some legislators in higher regard than others as a result of their service and loyalty to the party. This regard cannot be measured directly and is sometimes proxied with party unity scores (e.g., Cox and McCubbins 2005). This party leader regard is also endogenous to other aspects of the legislators' career that might influence their assignments and their legislative behavior, such as the safeness of their seat. Next, this regard is thought to influence the quality of legislators' committee assignments. Assignment quality cannot be measured directly because some assignments may have greater value for some legislators than others – for example, an assignment to the Agriculture committee may have significantly more value to a legislator from a rural area than one from a city center. Further assignment quality is potentially endogenous to other factors party leaders use to make choices unrelated to their regard for the legislator (e.g., marginality of the district). To study the committee assignment process, existing studies typically examine the associations between various outcomes (e.g., re-election margins) and these proxies for party leader regard and committee quality.

By contrast, consider the committee assignment process in Arkansas and the measures available there. Instead of party leaders choosing which legislators to reward with their preferred assignments, the randomized lottery determines which legislators will select their preferred assignments. Unlike the regard party leaders have for legislators, this first stage of the

assignment process (*relative rank*) is exogenous and can be measured in Arkansas.

We cannot directly measure the desirability of each committee to each legislator. However, as with other studies, we are not ultimately interested in the effects of legislators winning particular committee assignments; we are interested in the effect of an in increase in legislators' ability to select their preferred assignment. Because *relative rank* is randomly determined in Arkansas, we can measure the impact of legislators having a better chance of getting their preferred assignments (the first stage of the process) directly on their outcomes; similar to the exogenous dose of party leader regard we would ideally deliver in other legislatures. Although there are undoubtedly other factors that influence whether legislators achieve their goals, these factors will be uncorrelated with the assignment mechanism in our data – the randomized lottery – whereas in traditional data they may be highly correlated with the assignment mechanism – the strategic decisions party leaders make.

Data and Dependent Variables

Our analysis uses 2,173 legislator-term observations from the period 1977-2011.[3] We analyze sixteen dependent variables related to four aspects of legislators' careers and goals on which the literature has consistently argued that winning preferred assignments has large effects: legislators'

[3] There are 2,431 legislator-term observations during this period. However, only 2,173 of these observations are used because some legislators were the only ones elected in their caucus district in their cohort, and thus were not subject to any randomization, and because some committee assignment data was missing from 1977.

electoral success, chamber leadership, policy productivity, and roll call voting.

For electoral goals, we used data from Carsey et al. (2007) and the Arkansas Secretary of State's website on whether each legislator won re-election, lost their primary re-election, lost their general re-election, ran for or won higher office, retired, was opposed in the general election, and was opposed in the primary election, as well as their general and primary election vote shares. We collected the amount of campaign money that each incumbent raised from www.followthemoney.org.

For chamber leadership, we collected data from the *Arkansas Legislative Digest* on whether legislators served in party or official chamber leadership.

Policy productivity variables were only available for the years 2005-2008. For those years we collected data from the *Arkansas Legislative Digest* on the number of bills legislators filed and the number of bills they passed, a metric many other scholars have used to measure policy productivity and effectiveness.

Last, we used members' roll call votes from 1997-2010 to construct three final dependent variables about their voting and party loyalty: members' extremity (based on their W-NOMINATE score); the percentage of the time they vote with their party on roll calls where the majority of Democrats opposed the majority of Republicans (*Party Unity*); and the percentage of the time they vote with their party on roll calls where the

majority of Democrats opposed the majority of Republicans *and* their party *lost the vote*, i.e., when the majority of their party is rolled (*Party Unity (Losing Votes)*).

Results: Are Committee Assignments Valuable To Legislators?

The Supplementary Materials show that the legislative randomization produces comparisons groups of legislators balanced on pre-treatment covariates and that the randomization has clear effects on legislators' committee seats. Specifically, Table A1 in the Supplementary Materials presents a randomization check that shows the expected covariate balance across the legislators and districts. Table A2 presents a manipulation check showing that legislators who select committees first do tend to end up on the 'top committees' in the legislature much more often than those who do not.

Table 2 presents our estimates of the benefits legislators gain by obtaining their preferred committee assignments. In all the regressions the independent variable is *Relative Rank*, the scaled randomized seniority of legislators within their year-chamber-cohort-caucus district that allows them to pick from a much larger and more desirable set of committees. Because *Relative Rank* varies from 0 to 1, the coefficient on this variable indicates the estimated difference between the most and least senior member within each cohort – that is, between the cohort members who have the most and least choice in their assignments. These limiting cases are roughly analogous to the situations in which a hypothetical party leader wished to reward a loyal legislator with the best available committee assignment that more senior

members had not already taken or, alternatively, consign a disloyal one to the last remaining assignment after all others legislators' wishes were granted.[4]

The dependent variables, each described in the previous section, are listed under each of the headings in Table 2. For each outcome we present the results from a regression without any fixed effects and the results from a regression with fixed effects for year-chamber-cohort-caucus district (i.e., the groups within which the randomizations occur). Table 2 shows that legislators' relative rank does not have a statistically significant effect on any measures of their election outcomes. Legislators who have their pick of desirable committee assignments are not meaningfully more likely to win their primary or general election bids, raise campaign money, run for or win for higher office, deter opponents, or increase their vote share. We also find that legislators are no more likely to write nor pass bills as a result of their seniority. Further seniority does not affect legislators' probability of becoming a party leader, nor how they vote.[5]

In their totality, the results of the analysis are clear and highly

[4] Legislators can be expected to choose their most preferred available choice since they choose for themselves (i.e., in a "serial dictatorship" arrangement; see Satterthwaite and Sonnenschein 1981).

[5] This finding also rules out an alternative explanation for the null findings, namely that legislators do receive electoral benefits from more attractive committee assignments but use this additional 'political capital' to vote more extremely. In this way, committee membership might grant members additional leeway to vote against their constituents' preferences (Cain, Ferejohn, Fiorina 1987, p. 87). However, the results show that legislators with more attractive committee assignments are neither more likely to be extreme nor more likely to vote with their party. Likewise, the consistent null results across the large number of variables we tested suggests that legislators do not use 'political capital' from their committee assignments in order to help them achieve other goals. The reliable pattern in other legislatures that party leaders place more loyal legislators on more prestigious committees may be a result of party leader attempts to stack committees with reliable loyalists.

surprising in light of decades of scholars' conventional wisdom about the benefits legislators accrue from winning their preferred committee assignments. We find no statistically significant effects for a legislators' seniority on the outcomes of interest we identified (with a generous threshold of $p < 0.10$). Further, our estimates are based on a large number of observations and have substantively small standard errors. For example, the 95% confidence interval for the estimate of the decreased probability that a legislator loses a general election because of their seniority extends only to 1.2 percentage points. The benefits legislators may reap from having an upper hand in the committee assignment process are meager at best.[6]

Discussion

The results of the naturally occurring randomized experiment in Arkansas' state legislative committee assignment process suggest that legislators reap at most relatively minor benefits from winning their preferred committee assignments. These results speak to longstanding debates about whether party leaders can use the committee assignment process to meaningfully incentivize party loyalty. Because the benefits of winning one's preferred assignments appear to be quite small while the electoral costs for voting out of step with their constituents are quite high (e.g., Fiorina 1974; Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002; Masket and Greene 2011), our evidence suggests that the committee assignment process is unlikely to plausibly form an important basis for the formidable power over legislators' roll call votes parties appear to exercise (e.g, Fowler

[6]

and Hall 2013).

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Table 1. Hypothetical Example of how *Relative Rank* is computed

(a) *Grouped by Cohort and Seniority*

Term Number (Cohort)	**Random Seniority**	Caucus District
2	**1**	D
2	**2**	B
2	**3**	B
2	**4**	A
2	**5**	B
2	**6**	A
2	**7**	C
2	**8**	D
2	**9**	B
2	**10**	C
2	**11**	A
1	**12**	D
1	**13**	B
1	**14**	A
1	**15**	A
1	**16**	C
1	**17**	C
1	**18**	A
1	**19**	D
1	**20**	C
1	**21**	D
1	**22**	D
1	**23**	A
1	**24**	D
1	**25**	C

(b) *Grouped by Cohort Caucus District, and Seniority*

Term Number (Cohort)	**Random Seniority**	**Caucus District**	***Relative Rank***
2	**4**	**A**	**1**
2	**6**	**A**	**.5**
2	**11**	**A**	**0**
2	**2**	**B**	**1**
2	**3**	**B**	**.67**
2	**5**	**B**	**.33**
2	**9**	**B**	**0**
2	**7**	**C**	**1**
2	**10**	**C**	**0**
2	**1**	**D**	**1**
2	**8**	**D**	**0**
1	**14**	**A**	**1**
1	**15**	**A**	**.67**
1	**18**	**A**	**.33**
1	**23**	**A**	**0**
1	**13**	**B**	**-**
1	**16**	**C**	**1**
1	**17**	**C**	**.67**
1	**20**	**C**	**.33**
1	**25**	**C**	**0**
1	**12**	**D**	**1**
1	**19**	**D**	**.75**
1	**21**	**D**	**.5**
1	**22**	**D**	**.25**
1	**24**	**D**	**0**

Notes: This table illustrates how relative rank *is calculated using a hypothetical 25-member Arkansas House populated with legislators who were either just elected or are serving their second term.*

Table 2. Effect of Seniority within Cohort (*Relative Rank*) on Outcomes of Interest (OLS)

	Electoral Goals											
	Win Reelection		*Lose Primary*		*Lose General*		*Run for Higher Office*		*Win Higher Office*		*Retire*	
	F.E.	No F.E.	F.E.	No F.E.	F.E.	No F.E.	F.E.	No F.E.	F.E.	No F.E.	F.E.	No F.E.
Coeff.	0.012	0.026	-0.001	-0.004	0.001	0.001	-0.002	-0.002	0.008	0.008	-0.009	-0.018
Std. Error	(0.021)	(0.029)	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.018)	(0.023)
# Obs.	1,875	1,875	1,875	1,875	1,875	1,875	2,084	2,084	2,084	2,084	1,875	1,875
# F.E.	433	-	433	-	433	-	441	-	441	-	433	-

	Opposed in General		*Opposed in Primary*		*Vote Share in General*		*Vote Share in Primary*		*Money Raised*	
	F.E.	No F.E.	F.E.	No F.E.	F.E.	No F.E.	F.E.	No F.E.	F.E.	No F.E.
Coeff.	0.014	0.010	0.005	0.000	-0.012	-0.016	-0.026	-0.006	-9164	-2895
Std. Error	(0.019)	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.021)	(0.031)	(0.020)	(0.038)	(0.022)	(6512)	(6327)
# Obs.	1,875	1,875	1,875	1,875	207	207	223	223	453	453
# F.E.	433	-	433	-	133	-	163	-	61	-

	Chamber Goal		**Policy Productivity Goals**				**Roll Call Voting**					
	Serve as Chamber Leader		*Number of Bills Filed*		*Number of Bills Passed*		*Party Unity*		*Party Unity (Losing Votes)*		*Extremity (W-Nominate)*	
	F.E.	No F.E.	F.E.	No F.E.	F.E.	No F.E.	F.E.	No F.E.	F.E.	No F.E.	F.E.	No F.E.
Coeff.	-0.002	-0.002	-2.83	-2.54	-0.74	-0.56	0.002	0.001	-0.005	-0.003	-0.005	-0.005
Std. Error	(0.013)	(0.013)	(1.85)	(2.19)	(1.25)	(1.51)	(0.013)	(0.014)	(0.022)	(0.024)	(0.032)	(0.032)
# Obs.	2,084	2,084	264	264	264	264	1,043	1,043	1,001	1,001	1,040	1,040
# F.E.	441	-	30	-	30	-	133	-	133		133	-

F.E.

Notes: Fixed effects refer to the groups in which the randomization takes place (i.e. for each year-chamber-cohort-caucus district group). The independent variable for all regressions, relative rank, is the scaled random seniority rank of each legislator within their randomization group. The variable ranges from 0 to 1, with legislators assigned to 1 as the most senior. Coefficients represent the estimated effects of being the most senior member instead of the least senior member. No outcomes are significant at the 0.10 level. Ns differ in regressions with dependent variables for which data is not available for all years.