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# LEGISLATIVE COMMITMENT IN CONGRESS

BY

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DISSERTATION

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates why some members of Congress (MCs) commit themselves to lawmaking in the pursuit of changing public policy – in other words, why some MCs behave as policy wonks. While the Framers envisioned that Congress would be the policymaking engine of the federal government and that some MCs would become master legislators, today Congress is routinely criticized for dysfunction and gridlock. In this context, the behavior of policy wonks is of normative and practical interest, but there remains relatively little research that focuses squarely on these members. I conceptualize policy wonks as MCs who commit to legislating by adopting intense, specialized, and consistent legislative agendas, and I identify policy wonks with a novel measure of legislative commitment based on these three components and using MCs' slates of bill sponsorships from 1989 through 2008. Building on previous work on legislative entrepreneurship, I argue that MCs commit to legislating and act as policy wonks based on a strategic calculation that weighs the benefits that flow from this behavior against its costs. I find that legislative commitment is associated with MCs' institutional positions, the characteristics of their districts, and future career advancement and legislative success. The implications of the research are mixed. While some MCs conform with the Framers' expectations that they be committed legislators, not all the incentives in Congress are aligned to support MCs acting as policy wonks.

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## CHAPTER 1: "Masters of the Public Business" and Today's Congress

Studying Congress in the first quarter of the 21st century is not for the faint of heart. In recent years, the institution has come under severe criticism for policymaking gridlock and partisan combativeness, while public trust in government lingers at historic lows (Binder 2015; Hetherington and Rudolph 2015; Howell and Moe 2016; Mann and Ornstein 2016). Following shifts in national demographics, the advent of heightened political polarization, consistently close and high-stakes national elections, and changes in its internal norms of operation (Carson et al. 2007; Levendusky 2008; Lee 2016; Theriault 2008), perceptions of Congress among the public and the scholarly community have turned decidedly negative.

This dim view of Congress and its members is concerning not only to the extent that it underscores the political system's lack of capacity to resolve problems, but also because it suggests that the legislative branch is operating in a way that is substantially different from what the Framers intended. In Federalist No. 51, the Framers wrote, "In a republican form of government, the legislative authority necessarily predominates." The Constitution begins in Article I with the design of the legislative branch, an indication that the Framers meant for Congress to be the policymaking engine of the United States government. Between the growth of executive power and the incapacity of Congress, it is questionable whether this principle holds today.

Along with envisioning Congress as the lawmaking branch, the Federalists also expected that the legislature would be home to at least some members that focused on this task. The Framers were aware of the challenge of governance. As they wrote in Federalist No. 53, in

"the great theater of the United States," Congress would be tasked with solving complex problems, and representatives would require "extensive information" about many subjects (Fowler 1993). To satisfy Congress's institutional purpose, some members would have to be "thoroughly masters of the public business" (Federalist No. 53; see also Fowler 1993). Today, we might say that Hamilton and Madison recognized the need for "policy wonks" in the chamber – members who commit themselves to lawmaking in order to change public policy.

Madison and Hamilton were not just constitutional theorists, however. They were also keen observers of legislative behavior. Along with anticipating that some members of Congress (MCs) would have to become masters of the public business, the Framers also articulated a theory about why representatives would adopt this strategy. They argued that "as it happens in all such assemblies," MCs would be tempted by the opportunities for personal advancement and achievement that come with serving in a powerful political institution (Federalist No. 53). Hamilton and Madison expected that members would "avail themselves to those advantages," developing "superior talents" as legislators as a means to pursue other goals (Federalist No. 53). Thus, while members of Congress might face substantial challenges while governing, the Framers believed that this incentive structure would drive members towards this desirable form of behavior (Fowler 1993). In expectation of rewards they desire, MCs would find committing to lawmaking to be a good investment of their time and effort.

How have the Framers' expectations about the lawmaking habits of MCs played out? Experience and observation suggest that Madison and Hamilton's theory of legislative behavior was correct, at least to a degree. Reviewing journalistic and biographical profiles of MCs, it is easy to find examples of representatives who stand out for the way they take on the

lawmaking aspect of their jobs. Lane Evans (D-IL), for example, rose to prominence for his work on veterans issues, spearheading efforts to get compensation for veterans exposed to Agent Orange and securing funding for veterans assistance programs (Barone, Cohen, and Ujifusa 2001). His colleague Ray LaHood (R-IL) hailed Evans as "voice for veterans" (Geiger and Sobol 2014). Jim McCrery (R-LA) built his reputation as an ally of Bill Thomas (R-CA), who was his chair on the Ways and Means Committee (Barone and Cohen 2007). McCrery "worked hard on mastering the intricacies of tax, trade, and health care finance legislation," and he tried to make Ways and Means a productive policymaking committee (Barone and Cohen 2007, 726-727). For these efforts, McCrery was known in Washington, D.C. as "the rare combination of studied policy wonk and keen political operator" (McGrane 2008). Other members are similarly notable for how they embark on crusades, zero-in, or become active and enthusiastic advocates on select issues. Such members are not always successful in their efforts. Pete Stark (D-CA), for instance, chaired a health subcommittee for ten years but never fully achieved his goal of increasing government's role in health care (Barone, Cohen, and Ujifusa 2001). Nonetheless, Stark pressed forward, pursuing his legislative agenda so that the idea would live to be implemented another day.

What distinguishes MCs like Evans, McCrery, and Stark is the way that they were committed to the legislative process. Having found issues that spoke to them personally, that aligned with demands from their constituencies, or were instrumentally useful in their quests for power and influence, these members focused on those topics and spent resources and energy to work on them across time. Hamilton and Madison would have called such MCs masters of the public business. Today, we would identify them as policy wonks.

Yet even while these descriptions point out that some members of Congress are outstanding as legislators, others are less distinguished. There are many members who come to Congress and get little done or are only there for a short time. Other members may have long tenures but leave no lasting policy achievements. Along these lines, consider Michael Doyle (D-PA). Doyle was elected in 1994 and, as of 2018, is the dean of the Pennsylvania congressional delegation. During his career, he has generally tended to district interests and has been an avid earmarker. It is said of Doyle that he "rarely seeks attention or causes much of a ruckus" (Barone et al. 2013). Jack Kingston (R-GA) presents a contrast with Doyle in style, but he is similar in that his focus was not on policymaking. Elected in 1992, Kingston was defeated in the 2014 primary for the Senate seat previously held by Saxby Chambliss. During his career in the House, Kingston was best known for being a partisan messenger in the media; he was the first lawmaker to appear on Stephen Colbert's popular "Better Know a District" segment (Barone et al. 2013). In more than 20 years in Congress, Kingston introduced only four substantive and significant bills (Volden and Wiseman 2014).[1] Finally, take as an example Todd Platts (R-PA). A moderate Republican, Platts hardly campaigned, and he was not an active fundraiser (Allen 2011). He was known for the unusual practice of driving 100 miles almost every day from Washington to his district in Pennsylvania (Barone and Cohen 2007). Once named the "chairman" of the "Obscure

[1] Volden and Wiseman (2014) characterize a piece of legislation as substantive and significant if it was the subject of an end of year summary in the *Congressional Quarterly Almanac.* A substantive bill is any piece of legislation that is not a commemorative bill, such as those renaming post offices or offering private relief to individuals.

Caucus" by the publication *Roll Call*, Platts defended his record, saying he'd "rather be a workhorse than a showhorse" (Allen 2011). In fairness, Platts did make contributions to Congress's oversight work (Barone and Cohen 2007). However, his defense rings hollow with respect to his legislative accomplishments. Platts only saw two of his substantive bills signed into law during 12 years in his seat (Volden and Wiseman 2014).

The contrast between MCs like Evans, McCrery, and Stark on one hand and Doyle, Kingston, and Platts on the other is the kind of puzzle that piques the curiosity of scholars of the American Congress. Because of its relevance to Hamilton and Madison's constitutional design, it would be interesting to know the factors that are associated with MCs being active, specialized, and consistent legislators, operating as masters of the public business and policy wonks. Yet in today's political climate the question takes on even greater urgency. When public faith in government is at a historical nadir and the list of public problems awaiting resolution is large, understanding the factors that are associated with MCs dedicating themselves to lawmaking speaks to fundamental questions about the American political system. If the origins and behavior of policy wonks can be explained, then citizens might have more faith that the American political system will either respond to the challenges it currently faces or that institutional reforms can help revitalize Congress's problem-solving capacity. If this variation remains a mystery, then citizens will continue to operate in confusion and institutional reformers will continue to lack an important data point as they consider options for reinvigorating congressional capacity. This dissertation is designed to help avoid that outcome by providing an account of policy wonks in Congress.

**Connecting Policy Wonks with Previous Research on Legislative Behavior**

Given their normative importance, particularly in light of the politics of recent years, it might come as a surprise that legislative scholars have not made policy wonks the subject of much theorizing or empirical study. Indeed, a review of literature on legislative behavior returns little work that engages directly with this concept. There are at least two reasons for this oversight. First, from the 1960s to early 1980s, when the field of congressional studies was taking shape, legislative capacity was arguably not as much of a normative concern as it is today. As the federal government expanded in scope and power in the post-World War II era, Congress demonstrated an ability to pass landmark legislation like that implementing Johnson's Great Society initiatives, Nixon's regulatory programs, and Reagan's tax reforms (Mayhew 2005). In short, the issue of whether Congress was supporting the activities of policy wonks was not as pressing an issue as it became in later decades, when there have been greater doubts about federal policymaking capacity.

The other reason for the relative neglect of Hamilton and Madison's masters of the public business has to do with the course of development of the field of American legislative behavior. Two streams of scholarship were critical in this process. The first was the advent of the rational choice revolution in the 1970s. David Mayhew's (1974) work on the electoral connection – which posited that MCs are primarily motivated by their interest in reelection – had a profound impact on how scholars thought about legislative behavior. With a simple model in which representatives make decisions by optimizing their behavior around a single goal, scholars were able to make rapid advances. Scholars realized that Mayhew's concepts of position-taking, credit-claiming, and advertising could characterize a huge array of representational activities,

and they leveraged this insight to explain many kinds of legislative behavior, from voting in roll calls to providing constituency service to engaging in distributive politics (Arnold 1990; Bafumi and Herron 2010; Butler, Karpowitz, and Pope 2012; Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987; Grimmer 2013; Harden 2016; Kuklinski 1978; Lazarus and Reilly 2010).

The second line of scholarship that has shaped much of the research on legislative behavior is that on the congruence between MCs' actions and the ideological and policy preferences of citizens. Building off the classic research design of Miller and Stokes (1963), many studies have assessed whether MCs are responsive to the preferences of their constituents, often with an emphasis on whether constituents reward or punish lawmakers for voting in line with citizens' preferences at the roll call stage (see, e.g., Miller and Stokes 1963; Canes-Wrone 2002; Nyhan et al. 2012). While perhaps an oversimplification of the notion of legislative responsiveness (see, e.g., Mansbridge 2003), examining MC-district congruence in roll calls makes for a straightforward way to assess the nature of the principal-agent relationship between citizens and representatives.[2]

The behavior of policy wonks does not fit squarely within a Mayhew-ian and Miller and Stokes-ian framework. Whether a MC is committed to lawmaking – in order words, acting as a master of the public business or a policy wonk – is not easily assessed by looking at a record of roll call votes, which cannot capture the intensity of MCs' interests (Hall 1996). Additionally, to

[2] Voting behavior in legislatures also has major implications for legislative productivity and the content of the policy agenda (see, e.g., Krehbiel 1998; Cox and McCubbins 2005).

the extent that policy wonks are intrinsically interested in making good public policy or work on making policy to advance their careers, this legislative strategy does not directly map on to the electoral connection (see Fenno 1973). As such, the behavior of policy wonks falls into an empirical and conceptual gap in the dominant theoretical approaches that Congress scholars have been using since the 1970s. It thus comes as little surprise that this pattern of legislative behavior has not been the subject of much research.

*Policy Wonks as a Type of Legislative Entrepreneur*

Although it is accurate to say that the majority of work on MCs' legislative behavior has been focused on the electoral connection and MC-district congruence, there is a line of research that serves as the foundation for studying policy wonks. This comes from the work on legislative entrepreneurship, which springs largely from John Kingdon's (1984) influential examination of the policymaking process. Kingdon imagined the policymaking process in Congress as being tied to the role of "policy entrepreneurs" who would assemble legislative packages and wait for "policy windows" during which they could pair their proposals with problems that arose in the course of public life. Kingdon characterized these entrepreneurs as policy "investors" – actors who were willing to spend current time, energy, and resources in expectation of future benefits.

In general, the field of legislative studies has spent less time focused on entrepreneurship than it has testing the electoral connection and assessing roll call responsiveness. However, the last 25 years have begun to see a shift towards this way of thinking about MCs, with scholars paying increasing attention to how MCs act as legislators prior to the roll call stage. Scholars working in this area have completed a variety of useful studies examining how MCs introduce legislation, build coalitions, work with interest groups, participate in committee markup, and

even strategically select the issues on which they campaign. (Hall 1996; Kingston 1984; Schiller 1995; Sulkin 2005; Sulkin 2011; Wawro 2001).

How members participate at these stages of the lawmaking process is very important. Collectively, MCs' activities set Congress's legislative agenda and determine the choices that are presented to MCs (Hall 1996). Focusing on MCs' entrepreneurial behaviors, and specifically the composition of their individual agendas, can be a powerful tool for studying legislative behavior and representation (see Sulkin 2005). By assessing activities that occur prior to the roll call stage but are more public than the backroom deliberations of MCs, an agenda-based approach provides scholars with a useful way of capturing the legislative priorities of MCs, how they respond to their constituents, and the way they address policy problems in the normal process of legislating.

My contribution to this literature is to borrow concepts from entrepreneurship scholarship and apply them in a study that places its conceptual and empirical focus squarely on masters of the public business – a term that I use synonymously with policy wonk. I characterize these members of Congress as investors who take actions now in anticipation of benefits in the future. In my framework, MCs approach the Madisonian ideal when they commit to the legislative process by becoming increasingly (1) intense, (2) specialized, and (3) consistent in their legislative activities. This means that members work on *more* legislation, they focus these efforts across a *limited* number of substantive areas, and they *persist* in working in those same areas from Congress to Congress.

I describe the reasons for these indicators in more detail in the next chapter, but in short, focusing on MCs' intensity, specialization, and consistency makes logical sense given how Congress makes policy, and this pattern of behavior also reflects the practices of actual members

who have reputations as policy wonks. When members advance agendas with these attributes, it is a sign that they are focused on an issue, are willing to expend their resources to see their ideas become law, and are a potential source of information and solutions in a policy domain. Thus, using the components of intensity, specialization, and consistency to measure legislative commitment can identify which MCs are doing the kind of legislative work that the Framers intended.

**Motivations for Policy Wonks**

Along with presenting a conceptualization and measurement strategy for assessing policy wonks in Congress, my work also helps us to understand why members make the choice to commit to legislating. Drawing from and synthesizing the large body of previous research on legislative behavior, my explanation has two complementary components. First, the degree to which members commit to lawmaking is in part a function of how members pursue common objectives. Second, however, the contours of that pursuit are contingent on individual characteristics and political context.

In theorizing about legislative commitment, I start from the goal-oriented framework introduced in the 1970s with work by scholars like Mayhew (1974), Fenno (1973), and Fiorina (1974) and later advanced by a vast amount of research on legislative politics. This work posits that members are informal utility optimizers, meaning that MCs pursue a set of commonly held goals by making strategic, rational choices about how to utilize their time, energy, relationships, and other forms of political capital. Most typically, it is assumed in this research that members work to achieve electoral, career, and policy objectives, although each member may place different weights on these objectives.

In this formulation, how members invest in lawmaking is a function of members pursuing these common goals, "availing" themselves of the advantages of this behavior to work towards their other objectives. The decision for an MC to be one of Hamilton and Madison's masters of the public business is thus reducible to a cost-benefit calculation. Members will commit to legislating when they perceive that the benefits that flow from that activity outweigh the costs.

While it is probable that members are motivated to pursue lawmaking as a function of their perception of the expected tradeoffs, this statement is perhaps too simple to capture how MCs make their decisions. As Hall wrote in his study of patterns of participation in Congress, while rational choice theory is a powerful tool for generating predictions about legislative behavior, "the concept of utility must be imbued with some substantive meaning" (Hall 1996, 66). Indeed, each MC arrives in Congress with different prior experiences and personal orientations. Furthermore, each MC operates in at least two political contexts simultaneously, one in Washington and one in his or her home district. The features of these contexts can change over time. Thus, while members may share a set of common goals and all engage in a sort of economic optimization, the shape of the utility function and the weighting of the factors in it will be different from member to member. This is a way of saying that variation in MCs' political contexts and personal characteristics is likely to be associated with variation in how they behave. In the parlance of research design, we might say loosely that members' pursuit of common objectives has a heterogeneous effect on the extent to which they devote their energy towards policymaking. Intervening in their decisions is a set of individual and contextual factors that shape tradeoffs.

In the chapters to come, I describe a series of expectations for how political context and individual characteristics might shape MCs' calculations about the utility of committing to the lawmaking process, and I provide empirical evidence of such relationships. However, to give a sense for this, it is useful to provide an illustration. First, consider the career of Henry Waxman, who is in many ways the paradigmatic model of a master of the public business. A product of the 1974 post-Watergate Democratic wave, Waxman would go on to be one of the most distinguished policymakers of his era. A former member of the California Assembly, Waxman decided to focus on issues related to public health when he entered Congress, which he felt was a good match for the needs of his constituents and his previous legislative work (Waxman and Green 2009, 27). Skillful intra-party maneuvering earned Waxman the chair of the House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Health and Environment just five years into his tenure (Waxman and Green 2009, 32-35). From that position, Waxman went on to become one of the most accomplished legislators in Congress. His achievements included major policy successes in public health, ranging from funding pharmaceutical research for rare diseases to providing care for AIDS patients (Rogers 2014). When Waxman retired in 2015, he was remembered as one of the most influential and respected members of Congress (Ornstein 2014).

Next, consider the career of Howard Coble (R-NC). At first glance, Coble shared little in common with Waxman. Coble was, quite literally, a colorful representative, known for his trademark brightly-colored, patterned suit jackets. Speaking with a slight southern drawl, he liked to eat brains and eggs, smoke cheap cigars, and flaunt his knowledge of the high school mascots in his district (Barone, Cohen, and Ujifusa 2001, 1151; Times-News Editorial Board 2015). Like Henry Waxman, Coble earned quite a reputation as a policymaker, although his

legislative focus was perhaps unexpected given his personal history. A former garbage man with the Coast Guard, insurance salesman, and lawyer, Coble was self-admittedly computer illiterate (Barone, Cohen, and Ujifusa 2001, 1151). However, this did not stop him from enacting more than a dozen bills on copyright law and putting himself at the center of the digital revolution in intellectual property (Barone, Cohen, and Ujifusa 2001, 1151; Times-News Editorial Board 2015). While this topic might have been outside his own sphere of interest and experience, it does make sense given that Coble's district included areas in North Carolina's Research Triangle. Coble faced one razor-thin margin in his reelection to a second term, but beyond that he enjoyed essentially complete electoral security from 1985 to 2015, when he was forced to retire because of health concerns.

Examining the backgrounds of Waxman and Coble suggests some factors that likely enabled their investment in lawmaking. For example, both had long tenures in the House, college educations, and electoral security. However, the members are not identical. Coble was a southern, conservative Republican, while Waxman was a liberal Democrat from California. Accordingly, Waxman began his career during the long period of Democratic dominance in the House, while Coble was not in the majority until much later in his career. In addition, Waxman was a prolific fundraiser, far more than Coble (Heberlig and Larson 2012). While Waxman and Coble were both former state legislators, the connection between Waxman's agenda in the state legislature and his congressional agenda is clear but Coble's is not. Additionally, by his own account, Waxman's work in Congress was directly related to his personal belief in the power of government to address the problems of everyday people, imparted to him by his family (Waxman and Green 2009, 2). Coble's perspective was quite different. Despite his notable work,

Coble was less sanguine about lawmaking, once describing his role in Congress as "one of keeping bad legislation off the books" (Barone, Cohen, and Ujifusa 2001, 1151).

Offering an account of legislative commitment that reconciles Coble and Waxman's patterns of behavior is the ultimate objective of this dissertation. Perhaps it was their electoral security, or their personal backgrounds, or the course of their careers in Congress that led Coble and Waxman to invest as they did. However, making such a claim requires much more than a review of a few biographies. Instead, along with telling stories of individual members, I will present a theoretical framework that helps to explain why these members invested in lawmaking and a research design strategy that captures members' legislative commitment systematically.

**Plan of the Dissertation**

In this project, I explain why some MCs are policy wonks and others are not. Chapter 2 provides additional conceptual background, illustrating in more detail what I mean by this term and how understanding this behavior can help scholars to understand how Congress operates as a legislative, policymaking institution. I then outline my theory that explains patterns in legislative commitment. In short, I argue that each member of Congress shares, to varying degrees, a common motivation to work on policy issues. Members might expect that committing to legislating can help them to satisfy their electoral, professional, and policy-related goals. However, the effect of that motivation is contingent on a set of personal and contextual factors that can modify the benefits and costs of legislative commitment as a behavioral strategy. As a result, I expect to see substantial variation in legislative commitment across members and across time.

In Chapter 3, I set out the basic research design that I use to study policy wonks. I draw on data on MCs' bill introductions from the 101st to the 110th Congresses (1989-2008) (Bernhard and Sulkin 2018). This is a time period of unique interest in congressional studies, as it includes the Republican takeover of Congress and the rise of persistent partisan polarization. To the extent that pathologies of American political institutions are undermining faith in government today, the 1990s and early 2000s set the stage. Building on previous scholarship on legislative behavior as well as taking some inspiration from mathematical ecology, I introduce measures that capture MCs' legislative intensity, specialization, and consistency. Then, I illustrate how a composite of these measures – which I call a "legislative commitment score" – can serve as a useful way to capture how MCs devote their political resources to lawmaking.

Chapter 4 begins my investigation of the reasons for variation in legislative commitment. With my measure in hand, I test for a series of relationships between MCs acting as policy wonks, features of the political contexts in which MCs operate, and individual members' personal characteristics. The results help provide an inventory of the factors that shape patterns of legislative commitment in Congress.

Chapter 5 explores whether members see a return on investing in lawmaking. I test to determine whether a member's commitment to legislating results in a subsequent dividend in terms of electoral, professional, or policy outcomes. Comparing the results here with those from Chapter 4 provides a sense of whether MCs commit to legislating strategically or whether the impulse to do so is orthogonal to the traditional story of how members pursue their objectives.

I close in Chapter 6 by summarizing my results and considering the implications of my findings. I discuss the opportunities for research that builds on my work, and I offer some comments on studying Congress and policy wonks in the current political environment in the United States.

## CHAPTER 2: What do Policy Wonks Do, and Why Do They Do It?

In his book *Congress at the Grassroots*, Richard Fenno described the careers of two members of Congress from Georgia, Jack Flynt and Mac Collins. Flynt was a conservative Democratic representative from the central part of the state, southwest of Atlanta. First elected in 1954, Flynt retired in 1978 after several close races with Newt Gingrich, who eventually took over his seat. Collins was a Republican representative elected in 1993 and serving until 2005, and he represented much of the same geography as Flynt had several decades earlier. Fenno's book was a close-up, qualitative comparison of these two members and their approaches to representation. The key conceptual distinction that Fenno drew in his analysis was between the "person-intensive" style adopted by Flynt and "the policy-intensive" style of Collins. Flynt's mode of representation was "grounded in his knowledge about and interest in individual constituents" (Fenno 2000, 148). Collins, on the other hand, "sought political involvement that centered on matters of public policy, especially…the strong conservative preferences he shared with a solid majority of his constituents" (Fenno 2000, 148). As Fenno described it, Collins was a "policy wonk" (Fenno 2000, 105).

The contrast between Flynt and Collins relates directly to the puzzle I presented in the first chapter. Flynt did not do a "bad" job of representing his district. He shared the policy preferences of many of his constituents, voted accordingly in Congress, and engendered a sense

of connection between his constituents and their government in Washington, D.C.[3] Collins, however, seems closer to the Framers' idea of a master of the public business. Whereas Flynt "never spoke of a bill, an amendment, or an initiative he was especially proud of" (31), Collins wanted to be a policy player and the "governing part" was the "part of the job he like[d]" (Fenno 2000, 105). Madison and Hamilton would have recognized this distinction. Collins took advantage of the opportunity to legislate in a way that Flynt did not.

Given the concerns today about congressional policymaking capacity, it is curious that the contrast that Fenno pointed out between these two members has not received more attention in congressional research. If part of the problem with Congress is that it cannot make policy, understanding the behaviors of policy-centric members seems an important avenue for research, for both its practical consequences and its implications for the balance of power in the constitutional system. As I speculated in the last chapter, the reason for this gap in the literature might be explained with a review of the course of the development of the literature on legislative behavior. One possibility is that a focus on the reelection incentive and roll call voting may have crowded out studying the kinds of legislative behaviors that distinguish between MCs like Flynt and Collins (but see Bernhard and Sulkin 2018). It is also possible that Fenno's book did not clearly set the table for follow-up scholarship. Although his observational study is fascinating in its detail and theoretically rich, in *Congress at the Grassroots*, Fenno did not include an extensive discussion that tied his research into the broader scholarship on legislative behavior.

[3] It should be noted that this included Flynt sharing many of his constituents' preferences for racist, segregationist policies.

Additionally, Fenno acknowledged that he was only telling two stories of district-level representation, and so the book was not intended to be a comprehensive take on the origins and consequences of the policy- and person-centric strategies in Congress.

*Congress at the Grassroots*, then, presents opportunities for scholarship that speaks to current concerns about Congress. However, pursuing this line of inquiry requires conceptual, theoretical, and empirical advances. In this chapter, I aim at the first two of these. Revisiting previous research on legislative behavior, I place the under-explored behavior of the policy wonk in the framework that previous scholarship has constructed for understanding how MCs behave as representatives. Further, I draw on work on MCs' strategic behavior to explain why an MC would choose to become a master of the public business, or not.

**MCs Behavioral Options in Congress and The Place for Wonks**

Perhaps the most underappreciated point about the organization of Congress and the behavior of members is that there is no job description or any minimum performance criteria for MCs. No matter how serious the concerns of citizens or scholars about congressional policymaking capacity, there is no constitutional requirement than any individual MC do anything about it. As members of a "free profession" operating in an institution without the kinds of rigid hierarchical structures that typically characterize private firms or executive bureaucracies, members of Congress have substantial latitude about how to approach their jobs (Hall 1996). Members can leverage their and their staff's time, energy, and attention as they see fit, so long as they build a record that passes muster among their constituents.

With such flexibility, the ways that MCs choose to behave with respect to the legislative process are highly varied, and policymaking is not always at the center of MCs' representational

profile. As Fenno (2000) described, some members are clearly person-centric, focusing on responding to the needs of constituents and developing personal relationships with them. Members have a variety of tools they can leverage towards this end. These include constituency service, such as helping constituents get services from the federal bureaucracy, and distributive politics, like directing federal spending to the district (Bishin 2009; Box-Steffensmeier et al 2003; Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987; Grimmer 2013). Indeed, allocational and service responsiveness are both important theoretical aspects of the representational relationship, so it is little surprise that many members engage in such activities (Eulau and Karps 1977; Harden 2016).

In addition to taking actions targeting their constituents and their districts, MCs also expend energy advancing partisan objectives and their own career goals. Members spend a great deal of time on such activities, perhaps most prominently fundraising and campaigning on behalf of copartisans (Ansolabehere and Snyder 2000; Currinder 2009; Sinclair 2006). Members contribute campaign funds to other members to garner support in their efforts to gain leadership positions (Cann 2008; Heberlig and Larson 2012). Members also spend substantial energy supporting their parties beyond fundraising, for example by joining and working in intra-party organizations (Rubin 2017). Finally, members commonly pursue activities related to seeking higher office beyond Congress (Herrick and Moore 1993; Hibbing 1986; Schlesinger 1966; Victor 2010).

Highlighting the constituency service, partisan work, and career ambitions of MCs proves the underlying point: many MCs can have meaningful congressional careers that focus on objectives other than lawmaking. Indeed, looking at a large set of behavioral indicators,

Bernhard and Sulkin (2018) showed this empirically, using cluster analysis to group MCs into five distinct legislative styles: party soldiers, policy specialists, ambitious entrepreneurs, district advocates, and party builders. Grimmer (2013) made a similar point with his research analyzing communications of MCs, separating members into groups based on whether they emphasized pork or policy in their messages to constituents. In short, members have electoral goals and professional objectives outside of crafting public policy, and they could realistically satisfy these without substantial expenditure of resources in the legislative process.

*Policy Related Behaviors*

Even though they do not have to focus on legislating, it is important not to oversell the case about MCs' ability to avoid policymaking as part of their jobs. All MCs work on policy in at least a limited sense while they hold a seat in the chamber. At the most basic level, a member's decision about how to vote in roll calls is a way that MCs pursue their goal of making good public policy, and it is one that has been intensely studied. The most frequently asked question about MCs' roll call votes is how strong the relationship is between them and the preferences of an MC's constituency – essentially a variation of the classic research design of Miller and Stokes (1963). On this point, the results are not entirely consistent, with some work finding a stronger relationship between the preferences of constituents than others (Ansolabehere et al. 2001; Bafumi and Herron 2010; Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002; Clinton 2006; Fiorina 1974). However, there is no question that MCs use roll call votes to satisfy many of their objectives. MCs can use roll call votes to take positions, credit claim, and signal to constituents that they are being their voice in the policymaking process in Washington (Mayhew 1974). Roll

call votes are also a way that MCs can communicate with interest groups, the Executive Branch, and their own party (Kingdon 1989).

As powerful and analytically useful as they are, though, roll call votes are only one way that MCs engage in the legislative process. Members do not limit their advocacy to voting when the leadership arranges it. Instead, MCs engage in a wide array of other policy-related behaviors in the day-to-day life of Congress. Very broadly, these pre-roll call legislative behaviors have been grouped by congressional scholars under the umbrella of "entrepreneurial behavior." The use of the term entrepreneur with respect to legislative policymaking has roots going back to the 1960s and 1970s, but the scholar most closely associated with popularizing the term in congressional studies is likely John Kingdon (1984). Entrepreneurship, as Kingdon meant it, is advocating for policy proposals and the prominence of policy ideas. A "policy entrepreneur" is an actor in the policymaking process, to include MCs, that is willing "to invest their resources…in the hope of a future return [which] might come in the form of policies of which they approve, satisfaction from participation, or even personal aggrandizement" (Kingdon 1984, 129).

The concept of the policy entrepreneur is a natural fit for legislative studies. Since at least Fenno's observational studies (1973), researchers have recognized that some members stand out with respect to how they "work harder" and are "more interested" in legislative policymaking than they are in other aspects of their jobs. Further, it is well established than MCs are goal-oriented in the same way as Kingdon described policy entrepreneurs (Fenno 1973; Mayhew 1974). Thus, characterizing such MCs as entrepreneurs is a straightforward conceptual step, and scholars have latched on to the idea. A major contribution that borrowed from this paradigm was

Hall's (1996) study of participation in Congress. His careful unpacking of the concept of participation in Congress and MCs' motivations for it was a significant advance. Hall's key insight was that the intensity of an MC's legislative activity was just as important as its ideological content. Entrepreneurship, to Hall, was simply MCs being high on the scales of formal and informal participation in the policy process. Further, Hall echoed Kingdon's logic, pointing out that variation in the intensity of legislative participation was associated with MCs pursuing goals like electoral security, following up on their personal interests, and supporting the president's agenda.

Entrepreneurial behavior by MCs can take a variety of forms. One way that members participate in the process is to make legislative speeches that explain their votes and state their positions on matters of public policy (Pearson and Dancey 2011; Rocca 2007). Another relatively low-cost approach for members to express themselves through the legislative process is through cosponsorships, which can serve as a mechanism for position-taking or credit-claiming, as well as operate intra-institutionally as a form of coalition building (Bernhard and Sulkin 2013; Fowler 2006; Kessler and Krehbiel 1996; Koger 2003; Rocca and Sanchez 2008; Wilson and Young 1997). Members also act in the committee markup and amendment processes, as MCs hash out the details of proposed legislation as it moves towards becoming law (Hall 1996).

Perhaps the most "textbook" way that MCs act as entrepreneurs is to author bills and work to pass their agendas into law. Wawro provided a useful definition of this variety of entrepreneurship, defining "legislative entrepreneurship" as "a set of activities that a legislator engages in, which involves work to form coalitions of other members for the purpose of passing

legislation by combining various legislative inputs and issues in order to affect legislative outcomes" (Wawro 2001, 4). Wawro measured this kind of coalition building using an index of several indicators of legislative activity, including the number of cosponsors a MC's bills attract, the number of issues included in their legislation, and the expertise of the member as measured by the number of appearances as a witness as committee hearings.

Ultimately, the goal of coalition building is legislative productivity, and there is a substantial body of research that has aimed to quantify legislative success and find the personal and contextual factors that are associated with it (Frantzich 1979; Hibbing 1991; Cox and Terry 2008; Anderson, Box-Steffensmeier, and Sinclair-Chapman 2003; Volden and Wiseman 2014). Scholars have worked to develop an operationalization of the concept of legislative success, generally based on either the total amount or fraction of a MC's bills that progress to various stages of the legislative process. This work underscores the importance of institutional positions for MCs' legislative success, though there are still unanswered questions related to this research program, such as whether specialization enhances MCs effectiveness or whether focusing on issues that are closely related to the needs to the district supports legislative productivity (see Volden and Wiseman 2015, 196).

Coalition building and enacting legislation are closely related to the process of MCs generating their individual legislative agendas. At about the time that Hall drew on Kingdon's ideas for his own work on participation in Congress, Schiller (1995) took a slightly different approach for studying entrepreneurship. Rather than focusing on activity in committee, Schiller proposed to assess patterns of legislative entrepreneurship in the Senate by focusing on the slate of individual senators' bill sponsorships. Schiller argued that studying sponsorship agendas could

provide unique analytical leverage for understanding representation, pointing out that a senator's agenda is a "strong indicator of which issues he or she wants to be associated with and the reputation he or she wants to acquire among colleagues" (Schiller 1995, 187). Sulkin (2005; 2011) built on this idea, outlining a framework for studying legislative behavior through the lens of "agenda-based responsiveness."

*Policy Wonks and the Legislative Process*

Being a "policy wonk" is a kind of entrepreneurial behavior, a form of participation in the legislative process that precedes roll calls. It is the behavior of MCs who are policy-intense, act as masters of the public business, and are committed to the legislative process. It is likely that some of these members are "born" to be wonks, pursuing their interests because that is what they want to do. Other times, adopting this pattern of behavior might be driven by an MC's strategic instincts. Of course, these two motivations could also operate jointly. However, such descriptions are all about the intentions and aspirations of MCs. It does not tell us what the behavioral markers of being a "policy wonk" are. If we wanted to identify "policy wonks," how could we do it? What is the content of the concept?

As a first step, consider the lawmaking environment that MCs face. Congress maintains a basic level of responsiveness to the demands and needs of the public (Adler and Wilkerson 2012; Harbridge 2015; Jones and McDermott 2009; Stimson, Mackuen, and Erikson 1995), but even in the best of times, policymaking in Congress is difficult. As Kingdon described in the same study where he advanced the concept of policy entrepreneurship, the optimal conditions for policymaking in a legislature are created when there is a convergence of three factors - the occurrence of a problem of public importance, the availability of a policy solution to that

problem, and a political environment where addressing the problem with the policy is within the scope of the political agenda (Kingdon 1984). A similar approach to understanding how Congress resolves public problems was articulated in Baumgartner and Jones's theory of punctuated equilibrium (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Jones and Baumgartner 2005). The contribution of Baumgartner and Jones was to articulate how policy processes are characterized by periods of stability interrupted by an intense a pattern of policy activity, such that policy issues are only intermittently available for action on the public agenda (see also Baumgartner and Jones 2015). In addition to the punctuated equilibrium hypothesis, Baumgartner and Jones presented a model of organizational decisionmaking that was like Kingdon's model of the policymaking process, including stages of agenda setting, problem definition, proposal and debate, and collective choice (Baumgartner and Jones 2005, 38-42). In general, then, the literature on the collective policymaking process in Congress describes the chamber as a complex information-processing institution, responding to changes in the political environment and generating policy intermittently when institutional conditions align.

The "flow" of congressional policymaking is not the only obstacle that potential policy wonks face. MCs put a premium on attending to the specific policy demands of their districts, and this creates obstacles to formulating nationally uniform policies (Arnold 1990; Bishin 2009; Harden 2016). Indeed, simply because it is a collective, heterogeneous legislative body, Congress is naturally prone to being slow and inefficient as a policymaking engine, certainly by comparison with the more unified executive branch (Howell and Moe 2016; Shepsle and Weingast 1995). Finally, the marked increased in partisan polarization and the overriding focus

of the parties on tight races for the control of the chamber are also likely culprits for congressional gridlock and combativeness (Binder 2015; Lee 2016).

Based on this snapshot of Congress as a lawmaking institution, it is no surprise that many MCs do not engage heavily with legislating. Put simply, it is a potentially low-yield strategy. Most matters related to policymaking are outside of an MCs control. Leadership controls the agenda and has a tight hold on information about potential legislation (Cox and McCubbins 2005; Curry 2015). MCs cannot readily anticipate when a policy window will open. Faced with such uncertainty, it might be the smartest choice for MCs to avoid spending time and energy trying to legislate. Instead, a wiser course of action might be to adopt a more reactive strategy (Burden 2007). Members can vote on roll calls when they are scheduled. They can respond to requests from their constituents for help with the bureaucracy. The reactive MC can be a shapeshifter, adjusting his or her representational profile to suit the situation at hand (Saward 2014).

However, this is not enough for some members. Motivated by their own interests and/or because they perceive it to be strategically prudent, some members take a proactive stance and act on their own accord to introduce their policy ideas and priorities into Congress. For an example, refer again to Henry Waxman (D-CA), who might be the prototypical policy wonk. Waxman was known for his intense interest in the health and environmental issues in which he made his name (Waxman and Green 2009). While the possibilities for legislative success varied over the course of his career, Waxman continued to sustain this interest, pushing legislation that outlined his objectives and waiting for the right opportunity to emerge. For his tenacity, Waxman was ultimately rewarded – after championing health reform throughout the 1980s, Waxman was

at the center of the enacting of the Affordable Care Act in 2009 (Rubin 2017, 218-219). For another example, take Chris Smith (R-NJ). Based on his intense religious beliefs, Smith came to Congress in 1981 with a strong interest in human rights (Barone and Cohen 2009). As he rose in seniority and with the Republican takeover of the House, Smith was eventually able to use his positions as a senior member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and chair of the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights to become a prominent champion on this issue. Smith eventually saw dozens of his bills related to human rights pass into law (Barone and Cohen 2009).

The essence of Waxman and Smith's strategy was to construct individual legislative agendas around their core policymaking priorities. They both sought partnerships and wanted to build coalitions, but even when they could not, these policy wonks kept working on their ideas using the tools they had. They were committed participants in the legislative process, distinguishing themselves from the reactive approach that many of their colleagues took. In fact, this contrast accords with one of Mac Collins's observations about MCs' legislative strategies. Collins reported to Fenno that "some politicians' agendas are set *by* the constituents; other politicians' agendas are set *for* the constituents" (Fenno 2000, p. 105, emphasis in original).

All of this is to say that legislative agendas are a useful mechanism for identifying policy wonks in Congress. Crafting an agenda offers MCs a way to signal the intensity of their policymaking interests, but doing so requires time and resources from MCs (Schiller 1995; Sulkin 2011, 27). Thus, the size and breadth of an MC's legislative agenda is the result of a strategic calculation by MCs, signaling their "conscious desire to participate (Sulkin 2011; see also Burden 2007). What is on the agenda in Congress determines what MCs represent on behalf

of their constituents – issues that never reach the agenda can never be voted on all. This echoes the classic argument about political power from Bachrach and Baratz (1962): that true political power is the ability to limit or expand the scope of public decision making (see also Schattschneider 1962). In short, it is extremely unlikely that an MC that is interested in policymaking would forgo the opportunities that developing an individual legislative agenda presents.

*The Legislative Agenda of Policy Wonks*

The agendas of MCs are at the core of what it means to be a master of the public business. However, what does the agenda of a policy wonk look like? What are its characteristics? I argue that the key to assessing the degree to which an MC is a policy wonk is to measure their *legislative commitment*. Legislative commitment, in turn, has three components: intensity, specialization, and consistency.

First, and most simply, the legislative agenda of a policy wonk should reflect that the member is an active legislator. In Congress, where there is so much opportunity for free-riding off the work of others and so little time, higher levels of participation indicate that a member is engaging in legislative entrepreneurship (Hall 1996). As Sulkin (2011) describes, proactivity is also an indicator of other less directly observable legislative behaviors. Thus, the foundation of a policy investment strategy of a member of Congress would be the level of intensity of a member's legislative activities. Though perhaps a somewhat noisy measure, other things being equal, more activity by an MC equates with greater dedication to using the legislative process to achieve his or her goals.

However, the level of an MC's legislative intensity cannot be the only criterion for evaluating whether an MC is a policy wonk. Sometimes, two MCs' agendas indicate a similar level of legislative activity, but the content of the agendas suggests an important difference in legislative strategy. In fact, this is the case with Jack Flynt and Mac Collins. In his last three terms in Congress (the 93rd-95th Congresses), Flynt sponsored a total of 76 bills (Congress.gov).[4] Collins, in his last three terms (the 106th-108th Congresses), introduced 77 (Congress.gov). Both these numbers are above the average number of introductions for members (about 10 per congress). However, while both members were similar in terms of being more active than average, there is a key difference in the agendas of the two MCs. Flynt's 76 bills were distributed across 19 substantive areas, with the largest category consisting of 12 bills related to Armed Forces and National Security. Collins's efforts were more concentrated. He introduced his 77 bills across only ten substantive areas, with 59 of those bills being about either taxation issues or foreign trade and finance (Congress.gov). In short, while Collins and Flynt introduced a similar number of bills, the difference in how they constructed their legislative agendas echoes Fenno's observations. Flynt, a member who was interested in addressing the needs of a wide array of his constituents, spread his legislative efforts out relatively evenly across many issues. By contrast, with his keen focus on representing the intense policy preferences of a majority of his constituents, Collins designed his agenda to be more closely focused on a core set of topics.

[4] This count of bill sponsorships is the sum of the number of bills that are categorized into substantive policy areas on Congress.gov. A few bills for each member are uncategorized, and thus are not included this this total.

The importance of distinguishing between Flynt and Collins on the basis of the range of topics they cover reflects other theoretical work that has explored the value of specialization for MCs. If for no other reason than the demands of time, it is not feasible for MCs to be active in every area, and thus their decisions about how to distribute their efforts across issues provide important information about their policy interests and their legislative strategies (Burden 2007; Hall 1996). Because lawmaking is complex, members must work to gather information about issues that come before the chamber (Curry 2015; Kingdon 1984; Schiller 1995). Specialization, therefore, is a sign that a member's legislative activities are more than merely symbolic and are intended as a genuine spending of resources in pursuit of a legislative objective.

In addition to intensity and specialization, there is a third characteristic of MC behavior that is, logically, a component of legislative commitment – consistency across time. Legislating is not a linear process that results in consistent returns on investment or instant gratification. The policymaking process often involves a substantial amount of "softening up," with issues percolating in Congress's issue environment for years or even decades before an alignment of institutional factors or a catalyzing event paves the way the progress (Kingdon 1984; Baumgartner and Jones 2005). Policy windows or punctuations in policy equilibria are transient, and members who want to take advantage of them must be ready to "strike while the iron is hot" (Baumgartner and Jones 2015; Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Kingdon 1984). Thus, for a member of Congress to usefully engage with the legislative process, it is probable that he or she would need to be consistent *across time* to achieve policy objectives or gain value from investing resources in a policymaking project. While a member who jumps from issue to issue might hit

the proverbial jackpot in a given term, it is likely that the savvy policy investor adopts a longer-term strategy.

As a matter of theory building, these three components – intensity, specialization, and consistency – are the building blocks of a strategy of legislative commitment. In turn, legislative commitment is what distinguishes policy wonks in Congress. This approach for capturing masters of the public business also notably accords with the legislative philosophy of Henry Waxman, who I have now twice used as an example of a policy wonk. Looking back at his career, Waxman summarized his lawmaking strategy this way: "[S]ustained focus and interest, and an ability to seize on openings as they present themselves, will eventually yield success" (Waxman and Green 2009, 223).

**Why Become a Wonk, or Not?**

With a model for the agenda of a policy wonk in hand, I have outlined a conceptual approach for studying masters of the public business in a way that has not been done before. In the next chapter, I provide an operationalization strategy that uses indicators of intensity, specialization, and consistency to generate a legislative commitment score, thereby allowing me to identify policy wonks in Congress and the degree to which every MC conforms with this model of legislative behavior. However, to this point, there is only half a theory here. While the concept of the policy wonk might be clearer now, and there is a claim about how to capture MCs who match this concept, to this point I have not addressed the obvious follow-up question: why would a MC choose this behavior?

The basic expectation for why an MC would adopt the profile of a policy wonk follows the same logic as MCs' motivations for other forms of entrepreneurial behavior. As Kingdon

described, MCs commit to a legislative agenda now to reap the benefits in the future. Put into the classic purposive actor framework for legislative behavior, this means that members will choose to commit to legislating with an eye to their electoral security, influence in Congress, post-Congressional professional ambitions, and their preferences about public policy. While reelection is the proximate goal to satisfying all these objectives, members balance the objectives against each other and make tradeoffs depending on their priorities (Arnold 1990; Frisch and Kelly 2006).

There are good reasons to think that being a policy wonk can support MCs' electoral, career, and policy goals. One way that investing with this strategy could subsequently pay off electorally for a member is by increasing his or her electoral performance with constituents. Although the political psychology of voters' evaluations of MCs is complex, citizens have the ability to reward or sanction political candidates based on the ideological content of their legislative activities and their reputations for competence and integrity (Bishin, Stevens, and Wilson 2006; Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002; Hirano and Snyder 2014; McCurley and Mondak 1995; Nyhan et al. 2012). Politicians clearly see the value of communicating information about their effectiveness to constituents, in expectation of electoral reward (Grimmer, Westwood, and Messing 2014). Members could improve or cement their standing among constituents by using legislative commitment as a means to build up their credentials as a serious-minded representative who is working to represent constituents' policy interests. Additionally, committing to lawmaking might also support MCs' electoral goals by dissuading prospective challengers. Because challenger entry in races is strategic (see, e.g., Lawless 2012), a

well-defined and developed legislative agenda might drive away challengers who perceive this as an electoral strength.

It is also reasonable to think that being a policy wonk can help a member achieve his or her goal of amassing influence in Congress. Power in Congress is partially based on seniority, but information is also extremely valuable (Kingdon 1984; Baumgartner and Jones 2015). Rank-and-file members simply cannot learn all the specific details of the legislation that comes before them (Curry 2015), and they must rely on other members who specialize to help them make decisions. One of the likely purposes of the committee system is to serve this information processing role for Congress as a whole (Krehbiel 1992), but the same kind of logic can be extended to individual members. When problems arise that need legislative attention, which members are likely to hold the cards? Most likely it is the MCs who have a track record of being knowledgeable about the issues. If this assumption holds true, then previous legislative commitment would be a signal to other members that the investor would serve as a good delegate in that information process. Thus, we might expect for members who are interested in gaining influence in Congress to invest in the legislative process, in expectation that this activity will be subsequently rewarded by their information-seeking colleagues.

The second broad class of professional ambitions that could be related to acting as a master of the public business is the goal of many members to pursue political offices beyond the House. As is known to both scholars and the general public alike, many members of Congress hope that they will be able to parlay their seat in Congress into Senate seats, governorships, or even the presidency (Schlesinger 1966). Progressive ambition is an area of congressional studies that has received less focus than others, but it is known that higher office seekers in Congress

modify their behavior in several ways vis-à-vis their colleagues. Ambitious MCs modify their roll call behavior and other forms of legislative behavior like bill introductions and floor speaking (Herrick and Moore 1993; Hibbing 1986; Rothenberg and Sanders 2000). They also tend to be more specialized over the course of their careers, except they do change their behavior to become less specialized as they prepare to campaign (Victor 2010). These changes in behavior serve ambitious members by demonstrating their competence and their ability to respond to the needs of their constituents, which can consequently support their appeals to a new prospective constituency. A history of being committed to legislating could also help a candidate for higher office draw support from interest groups or partisan organizations, which may perceive the policy-related behavior as a sign that the MC is a quality candidate. In this fashion, being a policy wonk can instrumentally serve members who seek to advance in their careers, and this suggests that it should have a positive relationship with professional advancement.

The final motivation that could drive MCs to develop an active, specialized, and consistent legislative agenda is that doing so satisfies their own policy interests and their orientations towards representation. Even if the relationship between electoral or professional interests and policy investment are uncertain, these interests could still provide a systematic explanation for variation in MCs' policy related activities. It is important to remember what while MCs are interested in reelection and career advancement, many representatives are there because they are genuinely interested in shaping public policy. Some members have individual interests in policy issues that stem from their personal backgrounds and are not readily attributable to a reelection or professional objectives (Burden 2007). For example, a member with a family member who has had chronic illnesses might be interested in health issues for

reasons unrelated to any especially strong demand from his or her constituents. Other MCs may not have a specific issue that animates them so much as they have a general personal orientation towards specializing and attending to the type of detail-oriented work that characterizes the policymaking process.

If MCs are intrinsically motivated to make good public policy, then it makes sense that they would commit to legislating by adopting an intense, specialized, and consistent agenda. Lawmaking is a long, difficult process. MCs are unlikely to achieve their policy objectives without gathering expertise, persisting in their efforts, and taking opportunities to pass their agenda into law (Sinclair 2011; Volden and Wiseman 2014). Thus, the way for a member who wants to make an impact as a lawmaker is to commit to it.

*Contextual and Individual Factors that Shape Commitment Decisions*

As in other aspects of their job, MCs are likely to invest in lawmaking based on electoral, professional, and policy-related interests. Further, there are reasons to believe that legislative commitment can contribute to each of these goals. However, this creates an analytical problem. If acting like a policy wonk is useful for members as a strategy for achieving their goals, why wouldn't every member devote a substantial degree of their time and resources to legislating? Why don't we see generally high levels of legislative commitment?

The reason that Congress is not full of masters of the public business is that even though all MCs pursue a common set of objectives, the tradeoff of benefits and costs that flow from being one is going to change as a function of political contexts in which MCs operate, along with their personal characteristics. To make this more concrete, a senior Republican sitting in the at-large seat in Alaska (for many years, Don Young) has a much different job in front of him or her

than a junior Democrat from a district in suburban Chicago (for example, as of 2018, Raja Krishnamoorthi). While these two members similarly want to be reelected, have influence in the chamber, and have some impact on public policy, these members are likely to place different weights on these objectives and adopt different strategies for how to work towards their goals. Extending this kind of analysis to the unique positions and backgrounds of 435 members, it is evident that while members are broadly similar, their individual characteristics and the contexts in which they operate are going to affect how they act on their common motivations. Again, to draw on Hall's theoretical insight, the content of each MC's utility function should be infused with an acknowledgement of the differences between them (Hall 1996).

Perhaps the biggest set of factors that should affect MCs' investment decisions comes from the institutional position that MCs occupy in Congress. Where a member sits in Congress has a substantial effect on the costs and benefits of their actions, including those associated with being a policy wonk. In short, members in advantageous institutional positions are likely to get more out of behaving like a policy wonk than members in less preferable circumstances. Members in the majority, who are more senior, and who hold positions of leadership in the chamber have a higher likelihood of seeing their legislative ideas advance in the chamber than junior, rank-and-file members in the minority (Volden and Wiseman 2014). Thus, we would expect members who are in these more preferred positions to adopt the legislative strategy of the policy wonk more readily; there is simply more to gain when an MC is in a preferable position.

Aside from where members sit in Washington, D.C., acting on the motivation to invest in lawmaking is also likely contingent on how the member perceives his or her position in the district. One potentially important attribute here is the electoral security of the member. There

are two competing expectations here. First, it is possible that an electorally secure member would have a measure of flexibility to commit to legislating that a threatened member would not. Because lawmaking can be taxing, it may be that only a member who thinks he or she is electorally secure can bear the risk of diverting resources from maintaining a relationship with the district towards acquiring information or drafting bills. However, other expectations are also plausible. MCs who are electorally insecure might believe that acting more like a policy wonk could have an electoral benefit, if they think that their constituents would respond favorably to the member working hard representing their substantive interests. It is also possible that some members who do not fear electoral threat might use that flexibility not to enter the lawmaking market, but rather withdraw from it, freeing themselves up to focus on activities like supporting their party's organizational efforts or laying the groundwork to run for higher office. Without reference to the data, it is not clear which of these mechanisms is operating.

Electoral security is not the only district-level factor that is likely to affect the costs and benefits of investment. Another is the characteristics of a members' constituency. Some members of Congress may sit in a political context where committing to a policy area is an electoral good, and thus constituents will be selecting representatives that have either made an explicit promise to pursue an issue of local importance or have a natural connection and interest in a locally important issue as a function of being of the district (Fenno 1973; Fenno 1978; Fenno 2000; Sulkin 2011). Aggressively pursuing a policy portfolio may make sense in districts with an intense focus on a particular industry or in which a particular social group is predominant, but MCs in districts that are heterogeneous with respect to economic interests or in other ways might be less apt to become policy-invested because they would need to spread their efforts across a

variety of substantive areas. Additionally, while it might be true that citizens generally want their representatives to be competent and hardworking, it is not necessarily the case they expect their member to be so as a policymaker. Constituencies vary in the demands they place on their representatives, and policymaking is not always the most important evaluative criterion that citizens use (Harden 2016).

Finally, beyond institutional and district-level political context, it should not be forgotten that members' perceptions about the costs and benefits of committing to legislating also implicate the personal backgrounds and characteristics of MCs themselves. While members all share some degree of interest in affecting public policy, the strength of this interest varies from member to member (Burden 2007). Some members likely have close personal connections to policy issues that drive them to work in the area or may have orientations that predispose them to interests in policy work. Additionally, some members will have a personal skillset and background that makes it easier for them to engage in lawmaking, or perhaps do so with greater skill. Variation in any of these areas is likely to increase or decrease the cost and benefits that members perceive in acting as policy wonks.

**Conclusion**

I have covered substantial ground in this chapter about the theoretical underpinnings of legislative commitment. I reviewed both the legislative and non-legislative behavioral options that MCs have for how to use their scare time and resources. I then presented a three-pronged test for analyzing whether a MC is committed to the legislative process. I argued that maintaining an intense, specialized, and consistent agenda is an indication that an MC is dedicated to using the tools of lawmaking for achieving his or her goals; in short, these are the

three criteria I advocate for identifying what Madison described as "masters of the public business."

Following this conceptual discussion, I provided a framework for explaining why members adopt this strategy. I described the decision to commit to legislating as having two parts. First, all members share a set of common electoral, professional, and policy-related motivations. However, the individual calculations of MCs about whether to adopt the intense, specialized, and consistent agenda that characterizes policy wonks are conditional on a set of variables including features of political context and the personal characteristics of members.

What emerges from this chapter is a series of empirical questions. To identify just a few: are members in the majority more likely to commit than those in the minority? Are members who act like policy wonks rewarded with promotions in the committee leadership system? Do they perform better electorally? Does differential demand for substantive versus descriptive representation explain variation in legislative commitment? How do the personal and professional backgrounds of members shape their tendencies to invest in this way? I answer these questions later, in Chapters 4 and 5. But first, I present a measure of legislative commitment that can be used to identify policy wonks. That is the subject of Chapter 3.

## CHAPTER 3: Measuring Legislative Commitment

In the previous chapters, I presented my motivation and a conceptual framework for studying policy wonks in Congress. As I described it, studying members of Congress that adopt intense, specialized, and consistent legislative agendas can provide fresh insight into how Congress operates. The Framers expected some representatives to be committed to legislating, and the agendas of MCs provide an indication of whether they are adopting this strategy. Analyzing MCs through this lens thus addresses theoretically and normatively interesting questions about how Congress and its members make law – an especially relevant topic at a time when the institution is subject to intense scrutiny.

The objective of this chapter is to describe my operationalization strategy for capturing legislative commitment and present some initial findings about the distribution of this pattern of behavior across MCs and across Congresses. My approach uses MCs' bill introductions to capture the three components of legislative commitment that I described in Chapter 2. Using different indicators of intensity, specialization, and consistency, I describe how these aspects of MCs' legislative agendas vary across members. Then, I examine how these three components relate to one another. Finally, I show how I combine scores for each of these into a composite "legislative commitment score" that provides a continuous measure of how much the behavior of an MC conforms with the theoretical model of a master of the public business. By describing the contours of policy wonks' behavioral strategy in this chapter, I set the stage for the analysis of its antecedents and consequences in the chapters to come.

## Capturing Legislative Commitment with Bill Introductions

My analysis draws on data from the 101st through the 110th Congresses. This period allows me to examine legislative behavior in many different institutional configurations, as it encompasses shifts in party control of the House, redistricting cycles, and turnover of presidential administrations. It is also an important time period to study because it covers pivotal changes in Congress. The 1994 Republican takeover and the continued ideological sorting of the parties led to the stronger, more centralized party leadership and the partisan polarization that characterize Congress today.

To capture MCs' legislative agendas, I study their slates of bill introductions. My choice here follows a long line of research that relies on bill introductions as a mechanism for studying legislative behavior. Hibbing (1991) used a set of statistical measures of bill introductions proposed by Matthews (1960) to evaluate the "legislative activity career" of members, describing MCs' legislative intensity, specialization, and effectiveness. Schiller (1995) used bill introductions to study how contextual and political forces shaped senators' legislative agendas, and Wawro (2001) expanded on this work, using the content of MCs' sponsored bills as a component of his "legislative entrepreneurship score" tracking the coalition building efforts of MCs. Sulkin (2005; 2011) used bill introductions in studies of issue uptake and promise keeping in congressional campaigns, and Bernhard and Sulkin (2018) also relied on them as part of their study of MCs' legislative styles. In short, scholars examining several different facets of MCs' behavior have found bill introductions to be a suitable mechanism for assessing legislative activity.

Bill introductions are a good match for the theoretical framework I presented for studying policy wonks. Being a master of the public business is fundamentally about MCs actively and consistently inserting their preferred policies into the legislative process in Congress, and the essence of a bill introduced into Congress is the underlying policy ideas it contains. The ideas embedded in a sponsored bill go into the "primeval soup" of Congress's policy environment, beginning or supporting the "softening up" of policy communities and setting the stage for broader debate on the issue (Kingdon 1984, 134). MCs can use bill introductions to send a strong, clear, persistent signal of their policy preferences (Sulkin 2005; 2011). With that, members can begin to accrue the benefits of investing in lawmaking – for instance, strengthening their professional reputation with their colleagues, communicating to constituents that they are aggressively pursuing the issues that matter to them, and increasing the likelihood that they will get preferred policies enacted into law. Thus, bill introductions are the primary currency of policy wonks and should be at the core of identifying them.

Bill introductions can serve as a measure of a MCs' legislative commitment because introducing legislation implies that MCs are spending their time and energy in anticipation of future payoffs. Even though outside actors may assist in bill drafting, introducing legislation is costly for MCs. As Wawro (2001) observes, "Primary sponsorship typically involves more than just signing one's name to a piece of legislation and dropping it in the 'hopper'" (27) (see also Schiller 1995). Members of Congress must coordinate with their own staffs during the process of developing legislation, and members who want to communicate with their colleagues and constituents about their legislative work must develop familiarity with the substance of it; to do otherwise makes it harder to advocate for and advertise their work. Introducing legislation also

requires that representatives engage in an "intelligence gathering process" in which they work with other legislators and interest groups to get feedback and build support (Schiller 1995). Introducing legislation is not simply a matter of jotting down ideas or cribbing from an interest group, but rather implies a more extensive process of collecting, evaluating, and distributing information, all of which consumes a MC's extraordinarily limited time.

The fact that bills differ in length and complexity does not invalidate introductions as a measure of activity. While it is possible that a long, complex piece of legislation passing out of the House is a signal of greater policy investment than a short, simple bill, there are reasons to question whether this is systematically true. Additionally, aside from identifying purely commemorative legislation, there are few options for making an exogenously-determined judgment about a bill's substantiveness beyond this distinction (but see Volden and Wiseman 2014). Further, if a bill is "simple," a MC could still need to do research on the implications of a relatively basic policy provision and spend political capital persuading his or her colleagues and constituents to lend their support, even though the drafting process is not time-consuming.

It would also be misleading to identify a bill as unimportant based on its progress towards becoming law. This is due to the round-about nature of the legislative process. With the rise of unorthodox lawmaking and leadership-driven legislative strategies, a member's policy ideas may ultimately make it into law through bills which are not attached to the individual member, even though the member introduced the original legislative language (Sinclair 2011). For example, in their study of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act ("Obamacare"), Wilkerson, Smith, and Stramp (2015) showed through a computational text analysis that the final legislation was composed of portions of hundreds of bills introduced by members of Congress. Less than 15% of

introduced bills ever receive action in the committee stage (Volden and Wiseman 2014), and it is impossible at present to know how many ideas embodied in introduced legislation ultimately make it into law. Legislative effectiveness is an important attribute of members, but it risks being seriously misleading as a means for assessing the importance of a bill.

The difficulty of creating objective measures of bill substantiveness and accounting for the legislative process point away from attempting to discriminate amongst bill introductions on these grounds. A "small" idea that does not itself become law can still have major implications, and a "big" bill may not reflect the effort of an individual member of Congress. This response is related to the critique that some bill introductions are entirely symbolic, an exercise in position-taking by MCs with no intention of following up (Mayhew 1974). It is of course possible that some members of Congress introduce bills insincerely. However, as with judging complexity or importance, there is no way to evaluate this systematically (see Sulkin 2011, 32; Hall 1996). Simply because a bill does not advance towards becoming law does not suggest that the bill itself is symbolic, especially given the low rate of legislative efficiency.

There is also an important practical consideration that supports using bill introductions. As Wawro (2001) notes, a desirable way to study legislative participation might be that taken by Hall (1996), who conducted an intense study of MCs' participation in legislative mark-up, reviewing thousands of pages of transcripts of committee meetings. Qualitative research like Fenno's classic studies are similarly desirable, giving a rich sense of the motivations, opportunities, and obstacles of members over the course of their careers (Fenno 1973; Fenno 1978; Fenno 2000). However, despite their appeal, gathering data in this way is enormously expensive in terms of the researcher's time and resources. Hall and Fenno needed months in the

archive and the field to get their results. If we want to learn about legislative behavior, complementing such qualitative work with quantitative studies is the best way to ensure that legislative research is both theoretically rich and broad in scope.

**Indicators of the Components of Legislative Commitment**

Establishing bill introductions as the "raw material" provides a starting point for measuring legislative commitment. To take the next step towards an operationalization, in the sections that follow I specify how I use introductions to capture each component of legislative commitment: intensity, specialization, and consistency.

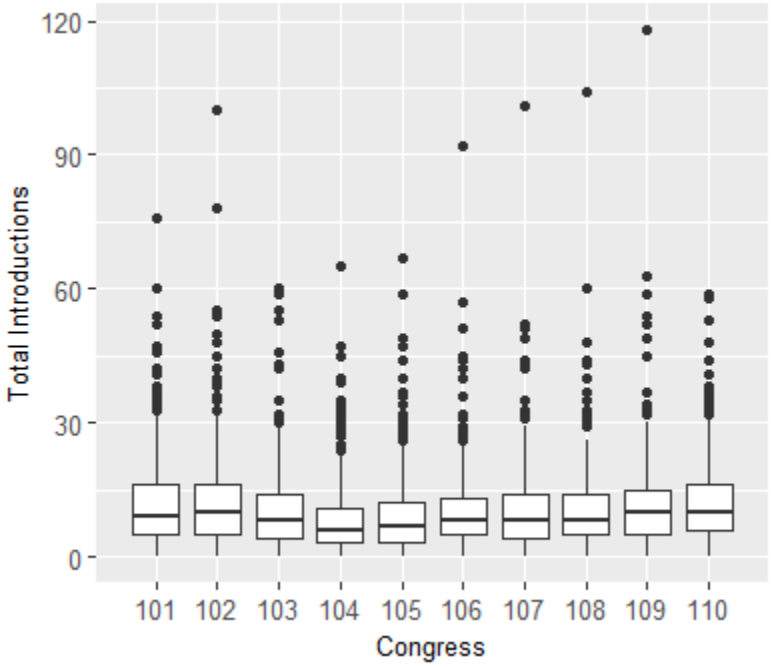
*Intensity*

To be a policy wonk, a member must be engaged with introducing ideas into policy debates in Congress. As I described above, the institutional mechanism for this is proposing legislation. Anecdotally, it comes as no surprise that some members are more active or prolific in this regard than others. Representatives introduce an average of about 10 bills per Congress, but there is wide variation around this central tendency. For example, from the 101st to the 110$^{th}$ Congresses, Don Young (R-AK) introduced at least 20 and as many as 55 bills per year. Similarly active was Bob Filner (D-CA), who from the 103$^{rd}$ to the 110$^{th}$ Congresses introduced no fewer than 11 bills (in his first term) and as many as 48 (by the 110$^{th}$). On the low end, however, other members are much less active. Ed Pastor (D-AZ) from the 102$^{nd}$ to the 110$^{th}$ Congresses introduced an average of only four bills per term. From the 101$^{st}$ to the 107$^{th}$ Congresses, Norman Sisisky (D-VA) averaged less than two bills per term.

To tabulate the number of bills that MCs introduce in each term, I draw on Sulkin's data on bill sponsorships (Bernhard and Sulkin 2018). I measure legislative intensity per term by

taking the sum of all bills MCs introduce during that Congress, except for bills that are related to government operations.[5] Again, the approach of using the number of bill introductions as a proxy for legislative intensity leads to some tradeoffs. However, as a measure of the quantity of ideas that a member inserts into the broader policy debate in Congress, the measure captures a key element of the concept of commitment.

**Figure 3.1: Boxplots of MCs' Bill Introductions Per Term**




*Note: Figure displays boxplots of the total number of introductions per term (excluding government operations bills, see footnote 5) for members in the 101st to the 110th Congress.*

[5] Government operations bills include those that cover "subjects like congressional structure and organization, use of the Capitol for ceremonial events, nominations and appointments, and the like" (Sulkin 2011, 49).

The number of bills introduced is an observation at the member-term level. I have 4,410 term observations of 1,038 unique members across these ten congresses. Figure 3.1 displays boxplots for the number of bills introduced per members, grouped by congress. As I mentioned above, while the median number of bills introduced in a term is eight and the mean is 11, there is wide variation in legislative intensity, from a minimum of zero bills in a term to a maximum of 118 bills introduced, a feat accomplished by Rob Andrews (D-NJ) in the 109$^{th}$ Congress. This generates a strongly right-skewed distribution.

*Specialization*

A member who introduces very few bills is likely less committed to the legislative process than a member who introduces legislation at the average rate among MCs. However, aside from ruling out very inactive members, drawing inferences about whether a member is a master of the public business and a policy wonk from a simple count of introduced bills is risky. A member who introduces ten bills may be investing more resources than a member who introduces five, but what if the member with the higher absolute number of bills spreads his or her attention across ten different substantive areas? The member with the more focused agenda is sending a clearer signal about his or her policy preferences. The more focused member also likely has more at stake in working on his or her bills than the member that spreads his or her efforts out across many different substantive areas. In short, a given magnitude of legislative intensity is made more meaningful when paired with a measure of specialization.

As with a count of bill introductions, simply browsing through the records of members of Congress makes clear that there is variation in how specialized MCs are as lawmakers. Some representatives are very active legislatively but spread their activities out over a wide range of

issues. Patsy Mink (D-HI) introduced 227 bills from 1990 to 2002 but did so across 16 different substantive areas. Her most common legislative agenda topic, defense and foreign policy issues, comprised only 20% of her total legislative activity. Similarly, Nita Lowey (D-NY), introduced 319 pieces of legislation from 1990 to 2000. Her biggest issue was health, but it only constituted 20% of her legislative agenda. Other MCs are much more focused than Mink or Lowey. Lane Evans (D-IL) was an active legislator with 151 bills introduced from 1990 through 2006, but 80% of his legislation focused on military and veterans' issues. Similarly, Bud Shuster (R-PA) introduced 92 bills from 1989 to 2009, and he dedicated about two-thirds of his legislative work to issues related to jobs and infrastructure. Shuster's second most common area was environmental issues, but this constituted only 13% of his total legislative agenda. Thus, while Mink and Lowey were more active, they were much less focused than Evans or Shuster.

While this kind of snapshot of a few members' legislative habits confirms that there is variation in specialization, capturing this systematically requires making research design choices. There is no dominant measure of legislative specialization in the literature on congressional behavior, although scholars have suggested several different approaches. Matthews (1960) measured specialization by calculating the proportion of legislation introduced by senators that was referred to the two committees receiving the largest amount of sponsored legislation from the senator. Researchers adopted this basic approach, with minor modifications, in several subsequent studies (Adler and Wilkerson 2005; Anderson, Box-Steffensmeier, and Sinclair-Chapman 2003; Hibbing 1991). Other scholars have suggested different techniques for measuring specialization, such as Gilligan and Krehbiel's (1997) proposed measure based on

cosponsorship, or Victor's (2010) idea to measure specialization using the substantive content of floor speeches.

For my study of legislative commitment, I measure specialization by using Shannon's Entropy (Shannon's H). Initially developed in thermodynamics as a measure of the diffusion of heat (Shannon 1948; Shannon and Weaver 1949), legislative scholars have more recently adopted Shannon's H as a measure of "attention diversity" (Boydstun, Bevan, and Thomas 2014; Baumgartner and Jones 2015).[6] Shannon's H is a scaled probability of the likelihood that any two units pulled from a collection of units drawn from different categories will be of the same category. In the context of political attention – or in my application, legislative specialization – it is calculated by "multiplying the proportion of the agenda that each issue…receives by the natural log of that proportion, then [taking] the negative sum of those products" (Boydstun, Bevan, and Thomas 2014).[7] In equation form, this is:

$$\text{Shannon's H} = -\sum_{i=1}^{n} p(x_i) * \ln p(x_i)$$

[6] Shannon's H also has a long history of use in ecology to measure biological diversity (Magurran 2004). It is closely related to another value, the Herfindahl-Hirschmann Index, which has been used in several political science contexts. Boydstun, Bevan, and Thomas argue persuasively that Shannon's H has several properties that make it more desirable as a measure of attention diversity, or in my application, individual MCs' legislative specialization.

[7] Because the natural log of 0 is undefined, for those issue areas where a member introduces no bill, when $p(x_i)$ is 0, I use ln(0.0000001).

Shannon's H captures entropy, measuring the concentration and diffusion of categorical information (Boydstun, Bevan, and Smith 2014). For my study, I calculate Shannon's H by drawing on Sulkin's data on bill introductions (Bernhard and Sulkin 2018). Sulkin uses a coding scheme to assign every bill introduced by a member of Congress into one of 17 substantive categories.[8] Thus, to calculate Shannon's H, I use the proportion of bills introduced by the member in each term in these 17 substantive categories.[9] This provides me with a measure of the entropy of a members' introduction activities. A member of Congress is a specialist if his or her introduction activities have a low level of entropy, and a generalist if he or she has a high level of entropy. Shannon's H increases as entropy increases, so higher values of Shannon's H indicate that a MCs' agenda is increasingly dispersed across issues, i.e., less specialized.

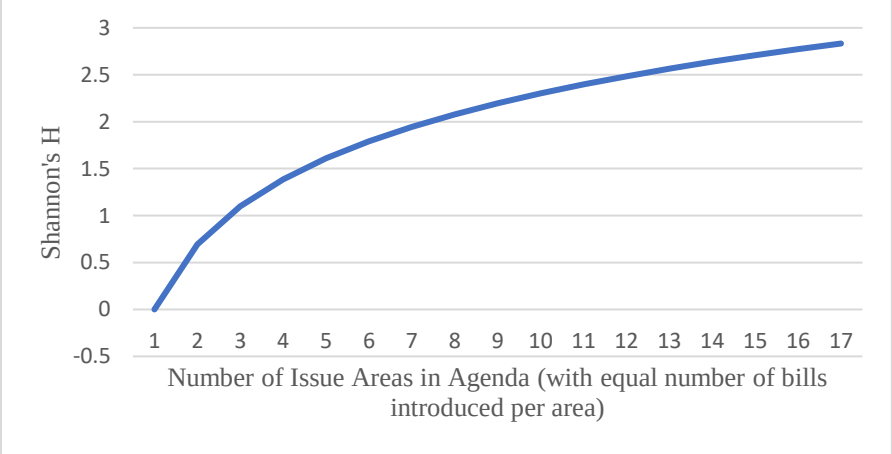
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[8] These categories are: "agriculture, budget, campaign finance and government reform, children's issues (child care, family law, family leave, etc.), civil rights, consumer issues (consumer safety, fraud, credit cards, etc.), corporate regulation, crime, defense and foreign policy, education, environment, health, jobs and infrastructure, Medicare, moral issues, Social Security, taxes, and welfare" (Sulkin 2011, 48). An eighteenth category, governmental operations, refers to bills on "subjects like congressional structure and organization, use of the Capitol for ceremonial events, nominations and appointments, and the like" (Sulkin 2011, 49). I do not include government operations bills in my count of total introductions, my calculation of Shannon's H, or in the consistency calculations presented below.

[9] For members who introduce no bills, there is no value for Shannon's H, so I code the value as missing.

Although Shannon's H is easy to calculate in this way, it can be difficult to interpret at first glance, so it is useful to provide an illustration. Consider a hypothetical set of members with agendas spanning from one to all 17 issue areas, introducing an equal number of bills in each issue are. With this number of issues, the maximum possible value of Shannon's H is 2.83. This would occur when a member introduces the same number of bills across every issue area. The minimum value is zero, which would occur when the member introduces exclusively in one issue area. Figure 3.2 shows this range of values graphically. A member who introduces evenly across three areas would have an entropy score of about one, a member who introduces evenly in five areas would have an entropy score of about 1.6, and so on up to the maximum spread across 17 issues.

**Figure 3.2: Sample Shannon's H Values**

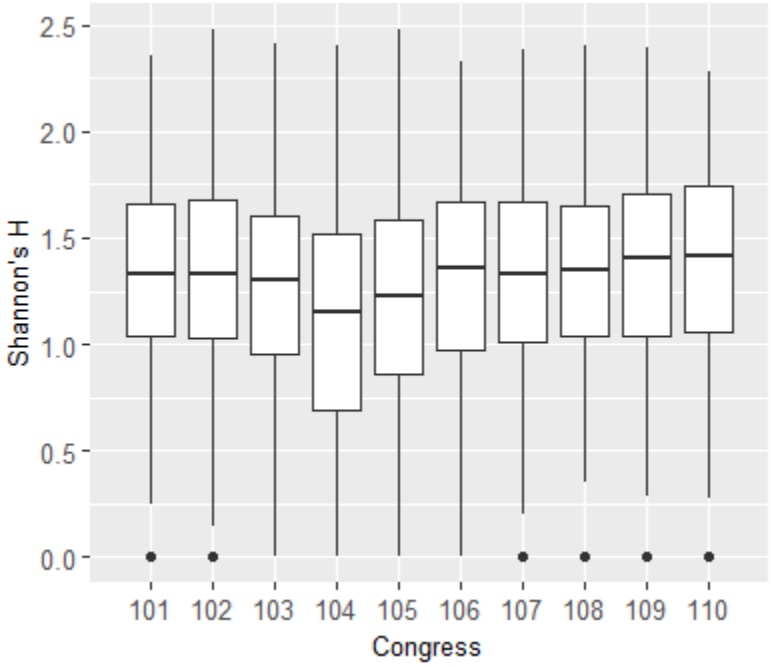



*Note: Figure displays the hypothetical value of Shannon's H for a member-term when the member introduces bills evenly across increasing issue areas.*

With this sample distribution as a reference point, Figure 3.3 displays boxplots for the Shannon's H values for MCs' agendas, grouped by Congress. The maximum value for the

dataset is 2.48, which is short of the theoretical maximum (because there is no member who introduces equally across all 17 substantive areas). The mean of Shannon's H is 1.26 and the median is 1.33, with small fluctuations in these values across Congress. Substantively, values in the 1.3 to 1.5 range would correspond with the entropy level for a member who introduces evenly across four or five different issue areas. This makes sense, as the median number of areas a member of Congress introduces per term is five.

**Figure 3.3: Boxplots of MCs' Shannon's H Scores Per Term**




*Note: Figure displays boxplots of Shannon's H values for members in the 101st to 110th Congresses, calculating the value using MCs' slate of bill introductions.*

*Consistency*

With measures of intensity and specialization, I have two components of legislative commitment in place. However, there is another piece still missing. To be a policy wonk,

lawmakers must be not only active and focused, but they should give sustained attention to issues over time. For members to stake out a reputation for investing in lawmaking, they must work in an area consistently. While measuring specialization helps to clarify whether active members are focused legislators, measuring consistency helps to ensure that members are not "jumping around" and focusing on different issues across terms. Thus, consistency is the third leg of policy investment.

As with intensity and specialization, an examination of legislators' histories of introducing bills shows members vary in how consistent they are. From the 104th to the 110th Congresses, John Shadegg (R-AZ) intermittently legislated across a variety of issues, introducing a bill focused on Social Security in the 107th Congress, then skipping that area in the 108th, then introducing another piece of Social Security legislation in the 109th. He displayed a similar pattern in the areas of crime and consumer protection. Nydia Velazquez (D-NY) did the same in the area of welfare law, introducing three bills on the subject in the 104th, 107th, and 109th Congresses but not in others. Although all members do this to an extent, a review of members' substantive agendas suggests that some members are more prone to adopt this type of spotty, inconsistent introduction pattern than others.

I am not aware of previous work in legislative behavior that attempts to capture this concept of legislative consistency. To assess it systematically, I use the Bray-Curtis index. This index is a measure of similarity adopted by biologists to compare species distribution across geographic areas (Magurran 2004). In the context of comparing two sets of organisms belonging to multiple different species, it is calculated by dividing the sum of the lower of the two

abundances for species found in both sets, multiplied by two, by the sum of the individuals in both sets. In equation form, this is:

$$\text{Bray-Curtis Index} = \frac{2_j N}{N_a + N_b}$$

To put this in terms of bill introductions, imagine that a representative introduced six bills in term *t*, with three bills in Area A, two in Area B, and one in Area C. Then, in term *t* + 1, the member introduces three bills in Area A, one in Area B, and zero in Area C. The value of the numerator for the Bray-Curtis formula would be 8 and the denominator would be 10, resulting in a Bray-Curtis index of 0.8. This is illustrated in Table 3.1. The Bray-Curtis index can be thought of as a measure of how much of a member's substantive agenda "carries over" from term to term. The value is zero when a member does not carry over any substantive category from term to term, and one when the member's slate of bill introductions is distributed identically across issue areas from one congress to another.

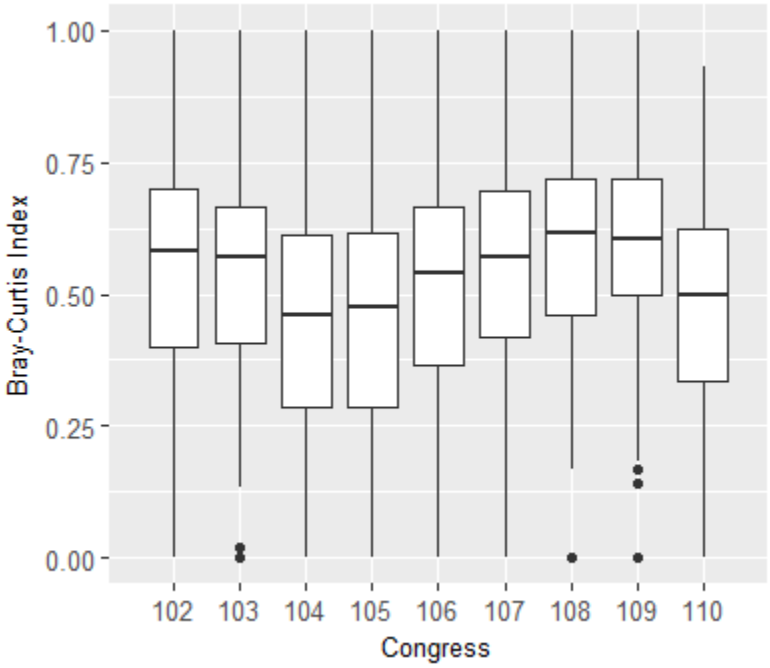
**Table 3.1: Example Bray-Curtis Calculation**

| | Area 1 | Area 2 | Area 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Term *t* | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Term *t* + 1 | 3 | 1 | 0 |
| Does the MC legislate in the area at *t* and *t* + 1? | Yes | Yes | No |
| Lesser of the number of bills introduced at *t* and *t* +1 | 3 | 1 | -- |
| | | | |
| Sum of the lesser of the number of bills introduced at *t* and *t* + 1 | | 4 | |
| Sum of all bills in both years | | 10 | |
| Bray-Curtis Index | | 0.8 | |

*Note: Table displays the steps for calculating the Bray-Curtis index for each member of Congress based on the areas in which they legislate.*

I calculate the Bray-Curtis index for each member-term observation in my dataset, using Sulkin's categorization of bill introductions across the 17 topics.[10] Figure 3.4 displays boxplots for the value for all member-term observations grouped by Congress. The median Bray-Curtis value is 0.55 and the mean is 0.51.

**Figure 3.4: Boxplots of MCs' Bray-Curtis Index Per Term**




*Note: Figure displays boxplots of the Bray-Curtis index for members in the 101st to 110th Congresses.*

[10] It is impossible to calculate a value for the Bray-Curtis index for members in the 101st Congress in my dataset or for any first term MC, because I do not have the data for the 100th Congress or the data do not exist. Thus, there are no Bray-Curtis index values for observations from the 101st Congress or for first-term members.

## Identifying Masters of the Public Business

Thus far, I have presented approaches for capturing the intensity, specialization, and consistency of MCs legislative agendas using bill introductions. Scores on these dimensions are the building blocks for an approach to identify masters of the public business in Congress. The next step is to explain how to use the measures to do so. This requires both theoretical and empirical elaboration.

The simplest way to identify which MCs are policy wonks using these three measures would be to take members that are high on all three of these scores and characterize them as such. These Madisonian masters of the public business would introduce a higher than average number of bills, and their agendas would be more specialized and consistent than average. This simple approach works to the extent that it creates a small subset of members that can be categorized as policy wonks. There are 3,303 member-terms for which I can generate commitment scores. Out of those, 253 member-terms have scores for intensity, specialization, and consistency that are all above the median for each of these components (pooled across congresses), consisting of 158 unique members. However, while a simple cutoff for making a dichotomous classification is satisfying in its simplicity, it is problematic in other ways. Looking at the data, there is no obvious point at which to divide wonks from non-wonks. This suggests the need for generating a continuous measure of legislative commitment that could be assigned to every MC in every term. The measure would identify MCs that are high on all three components at the top of the scale and give MCs lower scores as they became less intense, specialized, or consistent.

This is an appealing goal, but in practice there are some challenges to achieving it. Some MCs are intense, specialized, and consistent, but these are not mutually reinforcing characteristics in Congress. As members become more legislatively active, they tend to spread their attention out across topics. This increases entropy, thereby reducing an MC's level of specialization. Similarly, as members become more specialized, they reduce the number of areas over which they legislate. This in turn decreases how persistent they are in legislating in the same areas across congresses, because reducing the number of areas they legislate in will lead to members dropping some issues from their agendas entirely.

Because of this pattern, intensity, specialization, and consistency are not positively associated with each other. In fact, they work at cross purposes. In Table 3.2, I provide a correlation matrix for MCs' scores on each of these components. To generate this table, I transformed the measures in several ways. First, to account for the skewed distribution of bill introduction activity, I took the natural log of this measure. Second, I normalized the logged count of bill introductions, the Shannon's H value, and the Bray-Curtis index for each member-term observation across all Congresses. Then, I multiplied the scaled Shannon's H score by -1, so that higher values indicated greater specialization (as opposed to greater entropy).

As Table 3.2 indicates, there are moderately strong to strong correlations between intensity, specialization, and consistency. Lawmaking intensity is negatively correlated with specialization and positively correlated with consistency, while specialization and consistency are negatively correlated. While the relationships between specialization and consistency and intensity and consistency are only weak or moderate, there is a strong negative correlation between intensity and specialization.

**Table 3.2: Correlation Matrix of the Components of Legislative Commitment**

| | Intensity | Specialization | Consistency |
|---|---|---|---|
| Intensity | 1 | | |
| Specialization | -0.75 | 1 | |
| Consistency | 0.45 | -0.34 | 1 |

*Note: Cell entries are Pearson correlation coefficients for the components of legislative commitment.*

This pattern of correlations creates some complications for constructing a measure of legislative commitment. The most interesting MCs are those who defy the general tendency and have agendas that score highly on all three components. As policy wonks, these members engage in a behavior of normative interest that does not follow typical patterns of legislative behavior. However, simple approaches for creating a scale, like adding or multiplying the scores together, would lead to unusual results. MCs with very high scores on intensity but lower scores for specialization might end up with a higher score than MCs who are specialized and consistent but had a smaller agenda. This would lead to problematic misidentifications, because members with very large agendas that are not specialized or consistent could potentially have a higher score than members who sponsor a more moderate amount of legislation but whose agenda is focused on a core set of policy priorities. In other words, legislative position-takers would score higher than members whose behavior more closely resembles that of a policy wonk.

My solution to this problem is both theoretical and empirical, and it involves several measurement choices. My first step is to reduce the dimensionality of the problem. Thinking about the components of being a policy wonk, specialization and consistency are different concepts and both need to be measured separately. However, in another sense, specialization and consistency are both attributes of a larger theoretical construct: diversity. A member with a more

varied agenda that is unstable across time is addressing a wider "diversity" of policy interests than a MC that hammers away at the same issue term after term. Specialization can be re-interpreted as "instantaneous diversity" (diversity of the agenda in a single term) while consistency can be thought of as "temporal diversity" (diversity across time). Reimagined in this way, a straightforward way to combine specialization and consistency into a single dimension of agenda "diversity" is to add a constant to both measures so that the minimum value equals one, then multiplying the two values together.[11] This creates a composite value that reflects the joint

[11] I borrow this approach from literature on mathematical ecology. There is a substantial literature in this field about how to measure diversity (Jost 2006; Lande 1996; Magurran 2004). I take the approach of Whittaker (1972). Whittaker conceptualized the overall biological diversity of an environment, called "gamma" diversity, into two components, "alpha" diversity and "beta" diversity. In Whittaker's language, alpha diversity meant the diversity among species in spatial sub-units of the environment, and beta diversity meant the change in species composition and abundance across the environmental gradient. Whittaker calculated gamma diversity as the product of multiplying alpha diversity and beta diversity. I do the same here.

Setting the bottom value for specialization and consistency at one avoids an unintuitive outcome. If the member had a specialization score or consistency score or 0, the resultant concentration score for the term would be zero as well. This would cause a member who is highly specialized in a term but legislated on different issues than the last term to receive a concentration score of zero. Setting the bottom value for specialization and consistency at one prevents this.

quality of how specialized and consistent a MC's agenda is. I call this composite score "agenda concentration."[12]

My final step for identifying policy wonks is to the calculate a legislative commitment score as follows. First, for each member-term observation, I calculate the Pythagorean distance from the origin of an intensity-by-concentration plot to the point of that observation in the two-dimensional plot space. Then, I subtract from that value the absolute value of the difference between the scores for intensity and concentration. Subtracting this absolute value operates as a penalty term, reducing the score for members that dilute (or, in some cases, over concentrate) their agendas as they increase their legislative activity.

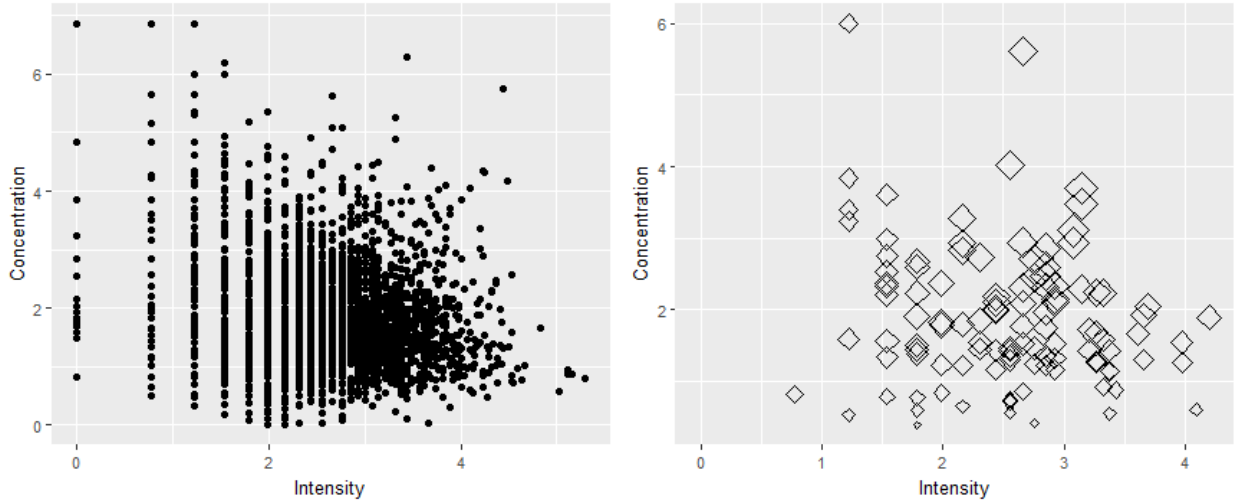
This approach yields intuitively reasonable results. In Figure 3.5, I display two scatterplots with intensity and agenda concentration plotted against each for observations in my dataset. The left panel includes all observations. As the plot suggests, these values are slightly negatively correlated with each other ($r = -0.18$). The right panel is a sample of only 150 observations, to make the figure more readable. In the right panel, the size of the diamonds corresponds with increasing legislative commitment scores.

As the different sizes of the diamonds in the right panel indicates, this approach for calculating legislative commitment does not over-reward MCs for being very concentrated and having a small agenda or very intense with a very unconcentrated agenda. This approach is not

[12] The term "agenda concentration" was used by Boydstun, Bevan, and Smith (2014) in their application of Shannon's H to studying attention diversity. There, it referred only to a Shannon's H value; here it is the combination of instantaneous and temporal diversity.

perfect, as members in the lower right and upper left of the plot would have similar commitment scores but with differently designed agendas. However, it succeeds in making the critical distinction between MCs that are wonks and not, and it does not misidentify members that are very high on only one component.

**Figure 3.5: Scatterplots of Intensity and Concentration**



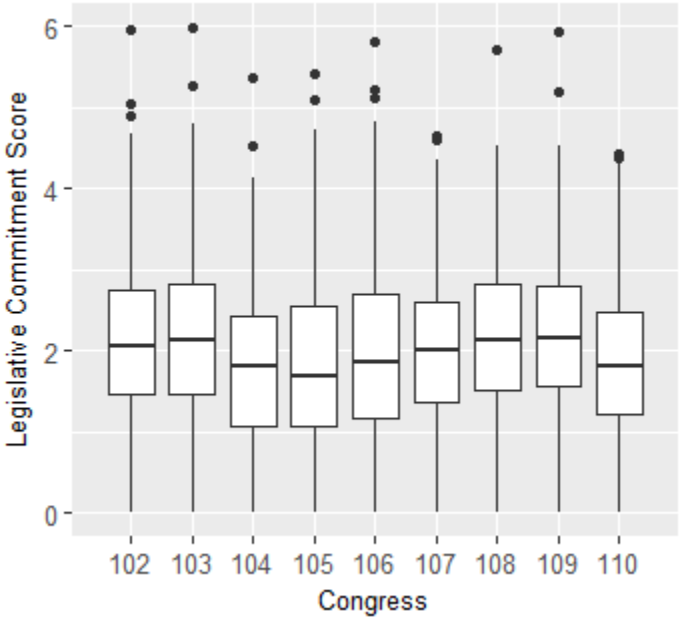

*Note: Figures display scatterplots of intensity and concentration for member-term observations from the 102nd to the 110th Congresses. The left panel includes all observations. The right panel is a random sample of 150 observations. In the right panel, increasing diamond size corresponds with an increasing legislative commitment score.*

These plots are helpful in thinking about how to conceptualize policy wonks in Congress. In the lower right of the plots, the members are active lawmakers, but they have unspecialized agendas. These types of members might be characterized as position-takers who use legislation to stake out their policy preferences but do not organize their agenda around a set of core issues, as a policy wonk would. The left side of the figure is populated by members who are not active

lawmakers, likely choosing to direct their energies towards other representational activities.[13] Hamilton and Madison's masters of the public business would be in the upper right quadrant; these members are active lawmakers that have concentrated legislative agendas. Notably, every member-term observation in my dataset that has scores above the median for intensity, specialization, and consistency has a legislative commitment score above the third quartile.

Figure 3.6 displays a set of boxplots of MCs' legislative commitment scores per term, grouped by Congress. The median score is 1.96 and the mean is 2.00, and the standard deviation is 1.00. Legislative commitment is somewhat "sticky," with commitment in a term being correlated with commitment in the previous term at r = 0.42.

**Figure 3.6: Boxplots of MCs' Legislative Commitment Score Per Term**




*Note: Figure displays boxplots of the Bray-Curtis index for members in the 101st to 110th Congresses.*

[13] These inactive members might be characterized as policy amateurs or policy dilettantes, but the label is not critical to my analysis.

*Who are these Members?*

The methodology I have outlined provides a way to systematically identify when members of Congress are committed to legislating. The measure works by assessing the intensity, specialization, and consistency of MCs' legislative agendas. Indeed, reviewing the careers of a few members with repeatedly high scores on the measure provides further examples of MCs with notable policymaking reputations. Along with Henry Waxman and the other examples I have used so far, there are members like Jim Oberstar (D-MN). Oberstar was the long time representative of the Iron Range of northern Minnesota. Described as "part scholar and part Iron Range street fighter, part pothole-filling ward healer and part workaholic," Oberstar was, like Waxman, elected in 1974 (Barone and Cohen 2007, 909). During his career, Oberstar was known for his work on transportation issues, and he was an important figure on the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. From that position, Oberstar worked on major national spending bills, but he also attended to local needs, directing millions of dollars to Minnesota (Barone and Cohen 2007).

Most media coverage in recent years of Lamar Smith (R-TX) would not make paint him as a policy wonk. Lately, he has been best known to casual observers for his skepticism about climate change. But outside of that issue, Smith has been an active and focused legislator. Since he was elected to a safe Republican seat in 1986, Smith has not been a major presence in his district, but he has taken up several critical legislative projects (Mervis and Cornwall 2017). Smith earned praise from the intellectual property community (including Democratic lobbyists) for his work with Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT) on a revamping of the patent system (Mervis

and Cornwall 2017), and he also took on a central role in the ongoing efforts to reform the immigration system (Barone et al. 2013).

Michael Bilirakis (R-FL) made his name in Congress by working on health issues. Along with passing bills in his own name, Bilirakis also saw his ideas spread through the Republican Party. In the mid-1990s, Bilirakis introduced legislation to make health insurance portable, but then withdrew the bill during the 1994 healthcare debate (Barone and Cohen 2001). In 1996, a nearly identical idea was passed as part of the Kennedy-Kassebaum Act, which implemented HIPAA (Barone and Cohen 2001). Similarly, Bilirakis sponsored legislation that would implement expanded prescription drug benefits for poor Medicare recipients. Bilirakis's proposal became the plan of the Republican Party and the Bush Administration (Barone and Cohen 2001).

Finally, take as an example Diana DeGette (D-CO). In 1996, DeGette took over the seat long held by Pat Schroeder, a prominent feminist in Congress. DeGette was described as "organizationally adept" and "legislatively creative," and she used these gifts to good effect (Barone and Cohen 2013). Like Bilirakis, DeGette made her mark in health policy. She showed a willingness to work with Republicans on issues, and she was persistent over time. She first led the charge to expand federal funds for stem cell research in the mid-2000s, but vetoes from President Bush blocked her bipartisan legislation (Barone and Cohen 2013). Ultimately, DeGette did not even get legislative credit when this policy was enacted, as President Obama ended up using his executive authority to expand federal stem cell research (Barone and Cohen 2013). It is also notable that DeGette, while she pursued issues tenaciously, also balanced this with political ambition, as she for many years angled for positions of party leadership in the Democratic Caucus (Barone and Cohen 2013).

In conjunction with the other examples I have presented so far, these short profiles give a sense of what the career of a highly committed legislator looks like. Members of both parties, from all regions of the country and with a wide variety of substantive interests, make the decision to commit to their legislative agendas. Sometimes, the public personas of MCs do not fit with their behavior on the Hill, or their work may be little known to those outside a small policy community. Other times, members' work is not immediately rewarded. Further, members commit to legislating even while they balance other objectives, like directing resources to their districts or working to advance within the House. However, despite these differences, the key similarity of these members is that they are acting as representatives in the way Madison and Hamilton imagined: as committed legislators.

**Conclusion and Look Ahead**

The process I have outlined in this chapter succeeds in identifying members who are distinctive in their policy-related legislative behavior. For at least some period of their service in Congress, these members were active, specialized, and consistent lawmakers, selecting a pattern of legislating which goes against the general tendencies of members. Choosing this behavioral profile is a sign that members are committed to the legislative process.

Simply knowing that these policy wonks exist and reviewing some of their stories, however, is only a small piece of the puzzle. The results of this chapter suggest many more questions than they answer. First, aside from their legislative behavior, what are the characteristics of masters of the public business? Are they systematically different from other members of Congress? If there are systematic differences, can this help researchers and citizens to understand the factors that drive members to become policy wonks? What changes in political

context or events during members' careers affect members' decisions to invest in lawmaking? Finally, what are the consequences of members' decisions? I begin to address these in the following chapters.

## CHAPTER 4: The Who, When, and Where of Legislative Commitment

In the last chapter, I argued that adopting an intense, specialized, and consistent legislative agenda is a sign that a member of Congress is a policy wonk, and I developed an approach for generating a legislative commitment score based on indicators of each of these components. The legislative commitment score identifies members who are dedicated to the lawmaking process and have earned reputations for legislating in a variety of substantive areas.

As I described in Chapter 1, studying such members can provide insight about how MCs operate as masters of the public business. Madison and Hamilton believed that members behaving in this way was critical to Congress's purpose, and the legislative commitment score is a tool for investigating the characteristics of MCs who serve in this role and the contexts in which it is most common. Generally, based on the framework in Chapter 2, I anticipate that MCs' decisions to behave as policy wonks will be driven by the same kind of informal cost-benefit analysis that drives much of their legislative behavior. Members of Congress are likely to commit to lawmaking when they believe that doing so will help them achieve one or more of their electoral, career, or policymaking goals while not risking unacceptable losses in the pursuit of others. However, although this calculation might be straightforward in theory, there is much to learn about how it works in practice.

In Chapter 5, I will assess the payoffs and costs and that flow subsequently from committing to legislating. However, before getting to that question, in this chapter I take a closer look at how contextual and individual factors are associated with members making the decision to commit. To that end, this chapter proceeds in three parts. First, I examine the relationship

between legislative commitment and MCs' institutional positions in Congress. Second, I look for associations between commitment and contextual factors related to MCs' districts. Finally, I consider how the personal characteristics and pre-congressional experiences of MCs are related to whether they act as a policy wonk.[14]

## Lawmaking and MCs' Institutional Positions in Congress

When a MC arrives for the start of a term, the representative must take stock of his or her position in the chamber. In crafting a legislative strategy, a variety of considerations would come to mind about the environment in Washington, D.C. Perhaps chief among these is the institutional position of the member in the House. Three positions are especially likely to be influential as the member decides to what extent he or she should commit to legislating. First, members will be either in the majority or minority party. Next, every member will enter the session with a degree of seniority in the chamber. Finally, some members will occupy leadership positions either in the committee system or in the partisan leadership structure. Each of these factors – majority status, seniority, and chamber leadership – is likely to alter the costs and benefits associated with adopting an intense, specialized, and consistent agenda.

### *Majority Status and Commitment*

In the House, the majority party holds strong procedural advantages over the minority, and leadership is strategic about how to wield its control of the legislative and oversight agenda. The leadership of the majority party prioritizes legislative matters that support the party's

[14] Except as otherwise noted, data for the variables in this chapter come from the dataset used for Bernhard and Sulkin (2018).

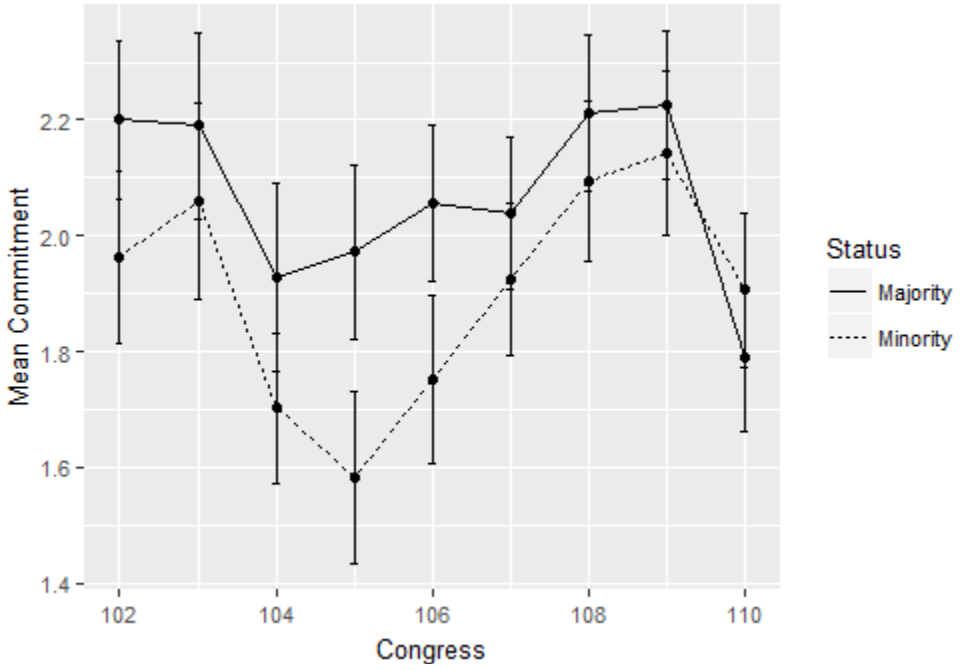
electoral efforts, and it avoids allowing items on the agenda that divide the party in substantive policy debates (Aldrich 1995; Cox and McCubbins 2005). The experience of a minority member reflects these realities, as members in the minority have poor prospects for getting their legislation advanced (Volden and Wiseman 2014). The value of majority control is part of the reason for the ferocity of partisan competition in the House (Lee 2016).

This sharp imbalance of power is likely to impact MCs' decisions about whether to commit to legislating. MCs in the majority should see more opportunities to get legislation enacted, thus increasing the potential payoffs of devoting energies to lawmaking and focusing on it. A member with a consistent and well-defined agenda can take advantage of being in the majority and work to get his or her legislation advanced towards becoming law. MCs in the minority would face the opposite situation. A MC in the minority has little opportunity to advance legislation, and thus the effort of constructing an intense agenda may provide limited prospective benefits. Further, even if MCs in the minority see fit to introduce more legislation, the strategically appropriate move might be to increase the diversity of their agendas. This would force majority MCs to respond to a wider array of ideas, as well as offer position-taking opportunities. In turn, this would drive members away from the specialization that characterizes policy wonks. Accordingly, I expect that MCs in the majority will be more committed to lawmaking than minority members.

A first look at descriptive statistics supports this expectation. Figure 4.1 displays the average legislative commitment score for members of the majority and minority from the 102$^{nd}$ to the 110$^{th}$ Congress, along with 95% confidence intervals. With the exception of the 110$^{th}$ Congress, the point estimate for the mean score for MCs in the majority is above that of the

minority. While the confidence intervals overlap in most Congresses, a t-test of all the scores pooled across Congresses indicates that members in the majority have a higher average level of commitment (2.08) than members in the minority (1.90) (t=5.05, p <0.001).

**Figure 4.1: Mean Commitment and Majority Status**

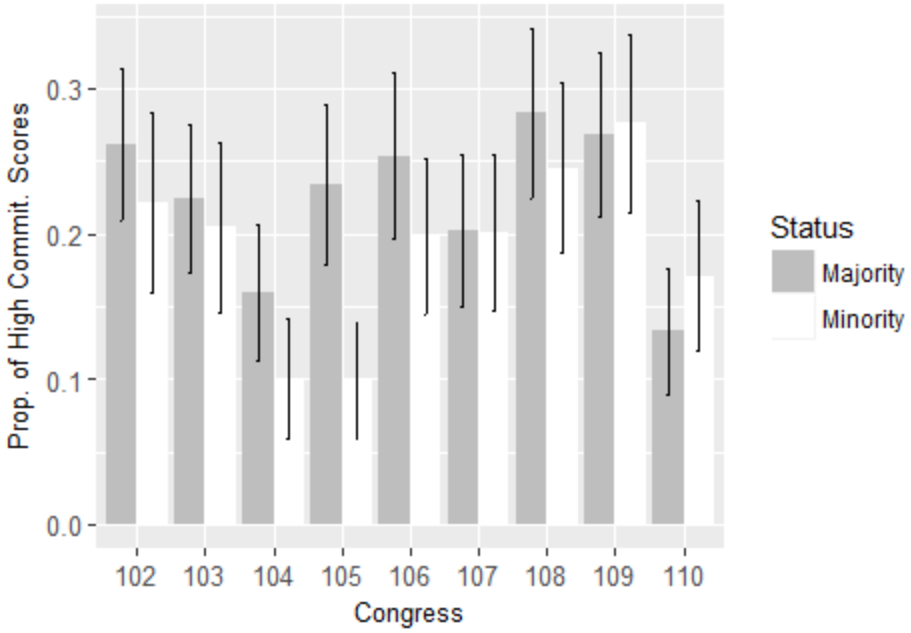



*Note: Figure displays mean commitment scores for member-term observations in the majority and minority parties for the 102nd to 110th Congresses. Error bars cover the 95% confidence interval for the mean.*

In addition to comparing the average levels of commitment in the majority and minority, it is also useful to consider how many members of the majority and minority are highly committed. As I have explained, when a member advances an agenda that is intense, specialized, and consistent, he or she comes closest to behaving in accord with the concept of a policy wonk. Comparing the proportions of MCs in the majority and minority that have high commitment scores leads to similar conclusions as when comparing the means. MCs in the majority are slightly more likely to have high commitment scores than MCs in the minority. Across the 102nd

to 110th Congresses, 20% of the member-term observations in the majority have a legislative commitment score above the third quartile for the score (pooled across all Congresses) while 17% in the minority score at least that high. This difference in proportions is statistically significant (chi-squared=5.11, $p<0.05$), and Figure 4.2 displays the proportion of member-term observations with such high commitment scores in the majority and minority from the 102nd to the 110th Congresses. In most Congresses, the difference in proportions is not statistically significant, but the point estimates for the majority are higher in six of the nine Congresses.

**Figure 4.2: Proportion of Member-Terms with High Commitment Scores by Majority Status**




*Note: Figure displays the proportion of member-term observations with scores above the third quartile for the commitment score for members of the majority and minority parties for the 102nd to the 110th Congress. Error bars cover the 95% confidence interval for the proportion.*

Another approach for assessing how majority status relates to legislative commitment is to compare members' levels of commitment when their party switches from majority to minority status and vice versa. One opportunity for this is examining Democrats who served in the 103rd and the 104th Congresses, the transition that saw Republicans win control under Newt Gingrich. In the 103rd Congress, the mean commitment score among Democrats who went on to serve in the 104th Congress was 2.16; in the 104th Congress, these same members' average commitment score drops to 1.70, a difference in means that is statistically significant in a paired t-test ($t=4.57$, $p<0.001$). Along with this shift in average among returning members, there was also a drop in the number of Democratic members who were highly invested from the 103rd to the 104th Congress. In the 103rd Congress, 58 Democratic members (22% of the caucus) had a commitment score above the third quartile of all scores pooled across the 102nd to the 110th Congress. In the 104th Congress, that number dropped to only 21 (10%). This difference in proportions is statistically significant (chi-square=11.70, $p<0.001$).

The complement of this relationship is whether there is an uptick in commitment in the caucus that is newly in the majority. Among Republicans who returned for the 104th Congress, their average commitment in the 103rd Congress was 2.07. These same returning members' average commitment drops to 1.83 in the 104th Congress, though the difference is not statistically significant ($t=0.26$, $p>0.05$). Additionally, there was little change in the number of Republicans with high commitment scores in the 103rd and the 104th Congresses. In the 103rd Congress, 37 Republicans (20% of the caucus) had an investment score above the third quartile of pooled observations from the 102nd to the 110th Congresses. This is the same number of highly committed Republicans as in the 104th Congress, even though there were more Republicans in

the 104th Congress and the party was in the majority (the difference in proportions, 20% and 16%, is not significant (chi-squared=0.29, $p>0.05$).

A second opportunity to observe how patterns of legislative commitment change after a switch in control of the chamber comes after the 2006 elections, when the Democrats took control of the chamber in the 110th Congress. Looking first at the Democrats, there is a downtick in the mean commitment scores among the Democrats in the 110th Congress who returned from the 109th, shifting from 2.15 to 1.79 (with a paired t-test, $t=3.36$, $p<0.001$). There is also a decrease in the proportion of highly committed in the Democratic caucus. While there were 56 Democrats with commitment scores above the third quartile in the 109th Congress (28% of the caucus), there are just 32 in the 110th Congress (13%), a difference in proportions that is statistically significant (chi square=27.6, $p<0.001$). To complete the comparison, the average commitment among Republicans who returned to Congress in the 110th Congress was 1.91, lower than the 2.26 average among those members' in the 109th Congress (in a paired t-test, $t=3.72$, $p<0.001$). There was also a significant drop in the number of Republicans who scored above the third quartile from 27% (63 members) in the 109th Congress to 17% (35 members) in the 110th (chi square=5.44, $p<0.05$).

In total, this review of the relationship between legislative commitment and majority status supports the hypothesis that being in the majority leads to members behaving like policy wonks. However, this factor is not determinative. There are also many minority MCs that continue to behave as policy wonks, and the switches in majority control in 1994 and 2006 had disruptive effects on legislative commitment. Members that were newly in the majority were not, on average, more likely to commit to legislating than in their prior terms in the minority. This

suggests that while being in the majority supports legislative commitment, members are slow to adjust to this new institutional position.

*Seniority and Commitment*

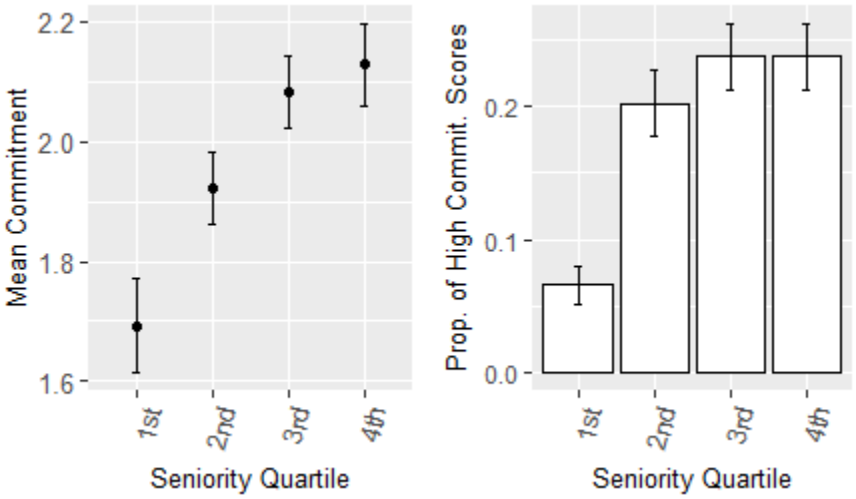
Along with majority status, a second feature of MCs' institutional context that shapes their experiences in Congress is seniority. Seniority provides members with a variety of privileges and advantages. Senior members have had more time to develop policy interests, build expertise working in government, and recruit allies within the chamber (Hall 1996; Ritchie 2018; Schiller 1995). Accordingly, senior members have a greater likelihood of getting their legislation to advance in the chamber (Anderson, Box-Steffensmeier, and Sinclair-Chapman 2003; Volden and Wiseman 2014).

The net effect of this should be that senior members are more likely to commit to legislating than junior members. Senior MCs should find it easier to pick issues to emphasize, will have amassed more information about those topics, will have experience crafting legislation, and are more likely to see their bills advance in the chamber. This combination of factors is likely to decrease the costs associated with committing to lawmaking and increase the potential benefits. I expect, then, that seniority is associated with higher levels of legislative commitment.

Initial results support this expectation. I measure seniority by the number of years that a MC has served in Congress. In Figure 4.3, I divide member-term observations into four groups

based on the quartile into which the MC's seniority falls.[15] In the left panel, I display the average legislative commitment score of members in each quartile of seniority. On the right, I display the proportion of observations in which the MC had a high commitment score (again, above the third quartile). As the figures indicate, higher seniority is associated with greater legislative commitment, both when looking at mean levels and proportion of MCs with high scores. The differences among members flatten out at higher levels of seniority, but the contrast between very junior members and those with longer tenure is apparent.

**Figure 4.3: Commitment and Seniority**




*Note: Figures display mean commitment scores and proportion of member-term observations with scores above the third quartile, grouped by seniority quartile, from the 102nd to 110th Congress. Error bars cover the 95% confidence interval for the mean and proportion.*

[15] In the first quartile are MCs who have served two years or less; the second quartile between 3 and 7 years; the third quartile between eight and 13 years, and the fourth quartile 14 or more years.

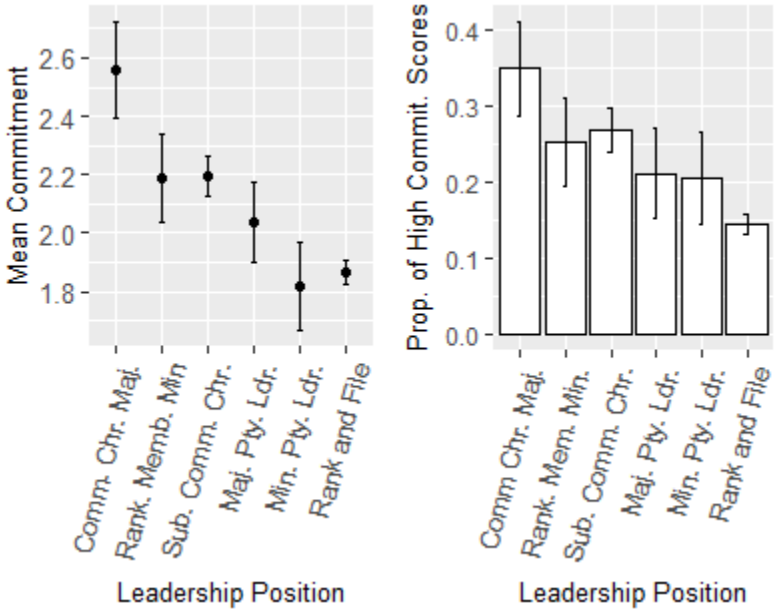
*Leadership Positions*

The final institutional positions of interest that I examine are leadership positions in the chamber. Several leadership roles could be associated with greater commitment to lawmaking, including committee chairmanships and ranking member positions, subcommittee chairs, and party leadership positions (such as majority and minority leaders and whips). As with majority status and greater seniority, both committee and party leadership positions provide MCs with substantially improved prospects for seeing their legislation passed into law (Anderson et al. 2003; Volden and Wiseman 2014). Committee and party leaders also have significant resource advantages over rank-and-file members, with larger staffs and greater ability to induce rank-and-file members to support them (Curry 2015).

With these advantages, I expect that holding a leadership position should have a similar impact on MCs' commitment to lawmaking as do majority status and seniority. Being a leader decreases costs and increases potential benefits of legislating, so holding such positions should make a MC more likely to commit to it. However, this expectation is not equally strong across leadership positions. Committee chairs from the majority party are traditionally legislative leaders in Congress, and they have especially strong procedural prerogatives that increase the likelihood of them getting their own bills to receive attention in the committee (Curry 2015; Oleszek 2007). Accordingly, holding a committee chair should be most closely associated with behaving as a policy wonk. For the other leadership positions – ranking members, subcommittee chairs, and party leadership – the expectation is more uncertain. Ranking members, as members of the minority party, have less power than the chair. Subcommittee chairs, even as members of the majority, are similarly weaker than committee chairs, in part because their staffing is

dependent on the decisions of the committee chair (Curry 2015). Outside the committee structure, party leaders also have additional staff resources and greater power in the chamber. However, these MCs are selected for intra-caucus coalition building more than policymaking, making it unclear whether the resource advantage would translate into greater legislative commitment.

**Figure 4.4: Commitment and Congressional Leadership**




*Note: Figures display mean commitment scores and proportion of member-term observations with commitment scores above the third quartile for members in different leadership positions for the 102nd to the 110th Congress. Error bars cover the 95% confidence interval for the mean and proportion.*

Comparisons of levels of commitment among MCs with different leadership positions in the House generally support these expectations. The left panel of Figure 4.4 displays the average level of legislative commitment among committee chairs, ranking members in the minority, subcommittee chairs, party leaders in the majority and minority, and finally among rank and file members who hold no leadership positions. The right panel shows the proportion of MCs in

those same leadership positions with a commitment score above the third quartile. The evidence in the figures reflects how differences in power that come with leadership relate to whether MCs commit to legislating. Looking first at the left panel, committee chairs do have the highest average scores of legislative commitment, and the proportion of high scoring members is greatest within this group. Beyond this contrast, the differences between groups are less distinct, but ranking members, subcommittee chairs, and majority party leaders are all more committed to legislating than members of the rank and file.

**Individual Political Context and Investment**

As the last section indicated, initial findings show that the institutional positions of MCs in Congress are related to whether they commit to lawmaking. However, the context in Washington is not the only factor that goes into MCs' cost-benefit analyses. MCs also come to Congress mindful of the conditions they face back home. MCs know that they must win reelection, and their choice of legislative strategy is likely shaped by the characteristics of their constituencies. I examine the relationship between lawmaking commitment and three characteristics of MC's individual political contexts: electoral security, constituency demographics, and the size of a MC's congressional delegation.

*Electoral Security*

Electoral considerations are never far from MCs' minds when they make choices about their activities. Members who perceive that they are electorally secure may feel that they have flexibility to pursue a broad range of activities, while MCs who are under the electoral gun may feel compelled to shift towards behaviors that will shore up their standing with constituents. There are a variety of ways that vulnerable MCs might do this, such as by increasing the amount

of time they spend on constituency service, trying to provide more distributive benefits to the district, and by recalibrating their legislative work to align more closely with the interests of the district or respond to the content of the previous campaign (Fenno 1978; Lazarus 2009; Sulkin 2005).

There are conflicting expectations about how legislative commitment would figure into this. One possibility is that MCs who are electorally secure will be the most likely to adopt intense, specialized, and consistent agendas. Insulated from electoral threat, secure members might feel that they have more time to spend working on legislation and intensify their legislative efforts. They may sense that they have flexibility to focus on a smaller set of issues that fit their policy interests rather than attempt to diversify their legislative portfolios, leading to greater specialization. Finally, they might believe that they have found the right mix of issues that fit their district and press on with their established legislative agendas. On the other hand, though, a counter hypothesis is also plausible. MCs who are secure might feel that they can shirk lawmaking work and focus on other activities that are a better fit for their goals. Alternatively, MCs that are insecure may think they can improve their position by doubling down on lawmaking, demonstrating to their constituents that they are working hard to represent their interests. *A priori*, it is difficult to predict the net effect of these conflicting mechanisms.

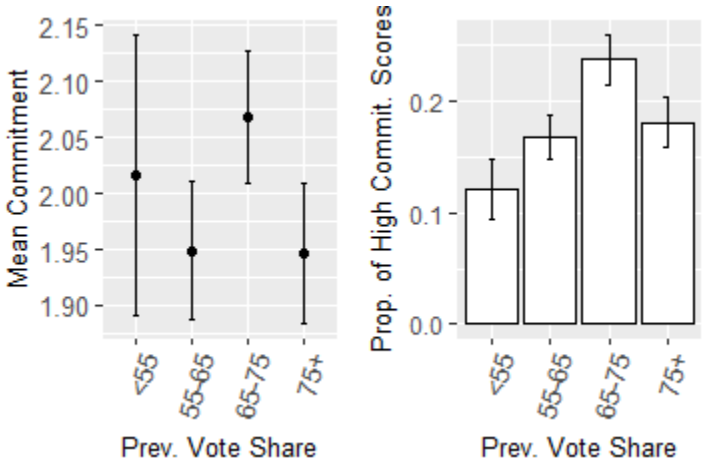
A first cut at assessing the relationship between electoral security and legislative commitment does not point to a strong relationship either way. I measure electoral security by using MCs' vote share in the previous election (the election in November before the congressional term begins in January). Commitment scores and vote share in the previous election are uncorrelated with each other ($r = -0.01$). In the left panel of Figure 4.5, I display the

average commitment scores of MCs whose previous vote share falls into four tranches of electoral security, from the members that received less than 55% of the previous vote to MCs that received more than 75% of the vote.[16] The right panel displays the proportions of member-term observations in each group with commitment scores above the third quartile. As the figures indicate, there is no obvious pattern here. MCs that are quite insecure (winning less than 55% of the vote) are the least likely to be highly committed to legislating, but the mean levels of commitment do not vary much across the four levels of electoral security. It is intriguing that MCs who are secure but not extremely so, winning 65-75% of the vote, are the most likely to have a commitment score above the third quartile, as it suggests that there is an electoral "sweet spot" for MCs behaving as policy wonks. However, given that the overall relationship between electoral vulnerability and commitment is diffuse, the spike in highly committed members at that level of security should be interpreted cautiously.[17]

[16] The mean vote share of a MC is 70% and the median is 67%.

[17] Another possibility is that members do not adjust their levels of investment as a function of their absolute level of electoral security, but instead might only respond to a relative *change* in their security. A member who has performed much worse or much better in the last election may feel they either need to or are able to recalibrate his or her legislative strategy. However, there is little evidence to support this claim. Among members who performed at least five percentage points worse in their last election than the previous election, a paired t-test shows that these threatened members on average made a small increase their level of investment as compared to their previous term, but the differences are not statistically significant.

**Figure 4.5: Commitment and Electoral Security**




*Note: Figures display mean commitment scores and proportion of member-term observations with commitment scores above the third quartile for members at different levels of electoral security for the 102nd to the 110th Congress. Error bars cover the 95% confidence interval for the mean and proportion.*

*Constituency Demographics*

In addition to electoral vulnerability, there is another way that the electoral connection might influence MCs in their decisions about how much to commit to legislating. Rather than being driven by electoral pressure, whether a MC behaves as a policy wonk could be related to the characteristics of a MC's constituency. Put simply, citizens and constituencies vary in what kinds of behaviors they want from their representatives, including their desire for policy-based representation. (Adler and Lapinski 1997; Eulau and Karps 1977; Harden 2016). Based on a reading of their constituents' demands, MCs may choose to prioritize service, allocative, descriptive, substantive, or other "flavors" of representation to suit the expectations of their constituents. If citizens do not perceive that their constituents are asking for an active, specialized, and consistent pattern of legislating, then MCs may well adopt other strategies.

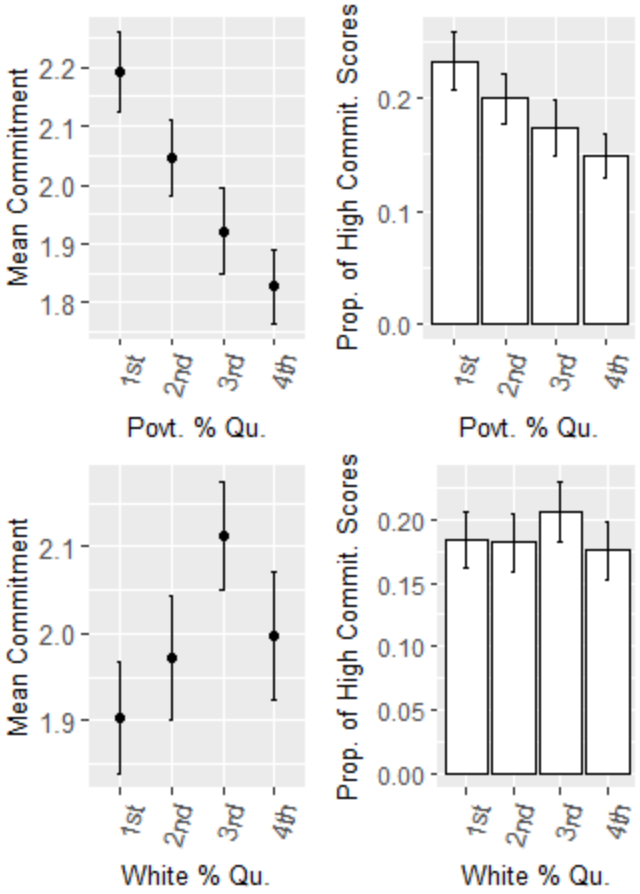
Care should be taken when generalizing about the demands of different identity-based or socio-economic groups. However, scholars have found some important patterns in what citizens seem to want from their legislators. The evidence suggests that low income and minority constituents have less of a demand for policy representation than affluent and white citizens (Griffin and Flavin 2007; Griffin and Flavin 2011; Harden 2016). There are complementary explanations for this tendency. Historically or economically marginalized groups may be more focused on how MCs provide descriptive representation. Additionally, marginalized citizens may place greater value on direct assistance from MCs, in the form of constituency service or bringing federal dollars back to the district. Regardless of whether these motivations are correctly ascribed to constituents, representatives respond as such. Studies show consistently that the policy preferences of majority and more affluent citizens get more attention from lawmakers (Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012; Griffin and Newman 2008).

Based these findings, I expect that MCs who represent lower income districts and those with larger minority populations would be less likely to behave as masters of the public business. If minority constituents do not value policy representation as much as white constituents, then MCs are likely to shift their strategies accordingly. Likewise, the bias towards MCs representing the policy preferences of affluent constituencies is likely to translate to a higher level of legislative commitment among MCs whose districts are wealthier than MCs from poorer districts.

To provide a preliminary test of these expectations, I measure district economic affluence by using the percentage of constituents with an income below the poverty line, and I measure the racial and ethnic composition of a congressional district by using the percentage of constituents

that are white. In Figure 4.6, in the upper left panel, I display the mean commitment scores for MCs from districts with different levels of economic affluence divided into quartiles based on the percentage of the constituents that are below the poverty line. The upper right panel of Figure 4.6 displays the proportion of MCs that have a legislative commitment score above the third quartile, again grouped by poverty quartile. The lower left and lower right panels display the mean commitment scores and proportions of MCs with high commitment scores for districts that fall into each quartile of the percentage of constituents that are white.

**Figure 4.6: Commitment and Constituency Demographics**




*Note: Figures display mean commitment scores and proportion of MCs with commitment scores above the third quartile for MCs representing districts at different levels of economic affluence and white percentage, for the 102nd to the 110th Congress. Error bars cover the 95% confidence interval for the mean and proportion.*

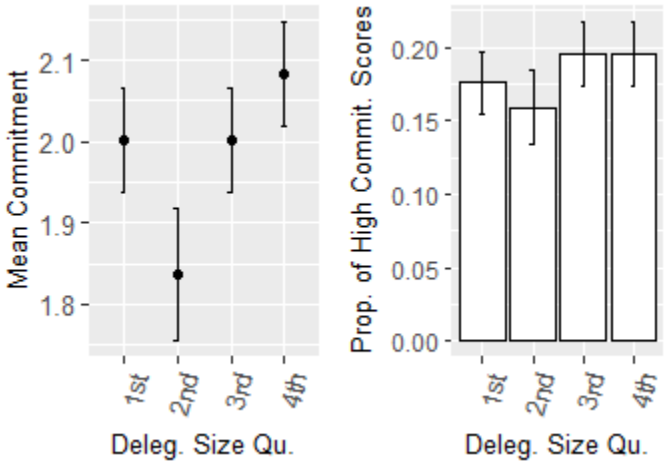
These figures show that there is a relationship between district demographics and the tendency for an MC to commit to legislating, though the pattern is clearer when looking at economic affluence than at the racial makeup of a district. The top two figures, comparing levels of commitment of MCs representing districts in increasingly poorer districts, point to a pattern of MCs from less affluent districts being less likely to be policy wonks. The mean level of commitment decreases across the four quartiles of poverty rate in the district. The same pattern occurs with the proportion of MCs that have a high legislative commitment score, as there is a progressively smaller proportion of observations with a high commitment score across the quartiles for poverty rate in the district. There are more mixed results in the bottom two figures, showing the comparison of commitment levels among MCs from increasingly whiter districts. MCs representing the districts with the lowest proportion of white constituents (i.e., districts with the largest minority populations), have the lowest mean level of commitment. Mean commitment increases up to the third quartile of proportion white, but then dips again at the high end. Additionally, there is no clear pattern between the proportion of a district's citizens that are white and the proportions of representatives from those districts with high legislative commitment scores.

*Congressional Delegation Size*

Along with electoral security and district demographics, the final feature of MCs' individual political context that I examine is delegation size. Previous studies of non-roll call legislative behavior have shown that the size of a congressional delegation can have a variety of effects on how MCs act. Larger delegations provide opportunities for coalition building because of the alignment of interests within a state (Levitt and Snyder 1995; Shepsle and Weingast 1981;

Bickers and Stein 2000; Koger 2003). With this support, MCs from larger delegations might believe that their legislation is more likely to advance with the help of their delegation. Further, this network could be a mechanism for information sharing information among a delegation, thus lowering the costs of generating legislation. Further, having many MCs from a state might also feasibly open "policy lanes" for MCs, with MCs across the state picking different substantive areas of emphasis. In total, these factors lead to the expectation that larger delegation sizes will be associated with higher levels of legislative commitment.

**Figure 4.7: Commitment and Delegation Size**




*Note: Figures display mean commitment scores and proportion of member-term observations with commitment scores above the third quartile for members with different delegation sizes for the 102nd to the 110th Congress. Error bars cover the 95% confidence interval for the mean and proportion.*

Figure 4.7 provides only limited evidence for this expectation. The left panel of the figure displays the average commitment score of members from increasingly large delegations, grouped by quartile. The right panel displays the proportion of member-term observations with high commitment scores across the quartiles for delegation size. It is difficult to discern a pattern in these figures. While MCs from the largest delegations have the highest average levels of

commitment among MCs, the confidence interval for the mean overlaps with that from members from the smallest delegations. Additionally, the confidence intervals for the estimates of the proportion of highly committed MCs overlap across all the delegation size groups.

**Personal Characteristics and Backgrounds of MCs**

The analyses so far present mixed evidence about how contextual factors shape MCs' commitment decisions. Members are more likely to commit to legislating when they are in an institutionally privileged position. There is also a tendency for MCs to commit to legislating when they represent more affluent citizens. However, MCs are not entirely creatures of the context in which they operate. While it is less common, some members behave as policy wonks even when it might not be expected, as when they are in the minority or are electorally vulnerable.

The fact that members commit to legislating even when they are not in ideal institutional or contextual settings underscores that the individual experiences of MCs figure into their decisions about their behavior. While it may be easy to forget, members of Congress are people too, and they vary in their interests and skillsets just as do people in other professions. Thus, while context matters as MCs weigh the costs and benefits of acting like a policy wonk, there should also be associations between this choice and MCs' individual-level characteristics. In this section, I set out expectations and provide an initial look at three such possible factors: (1) previous political, professional, and educational experiences, (2) social identity, and (3) ideological extremity.

*Prior Educational, Political, and Professional Experience*

Like anyone starting a new job, MCs arrive at the Capitol with a set of prior educational and professional experiences. Some have specialized educations, have worked in politics before, or have traditional pre-political careers such as in law or business. Other MCs have less typical backgrounds or are political neophytes. This variation has the potential to affect how MCs perform once they are in office, modifying the costs and benefits associated with their behaviors, including their legislative work.

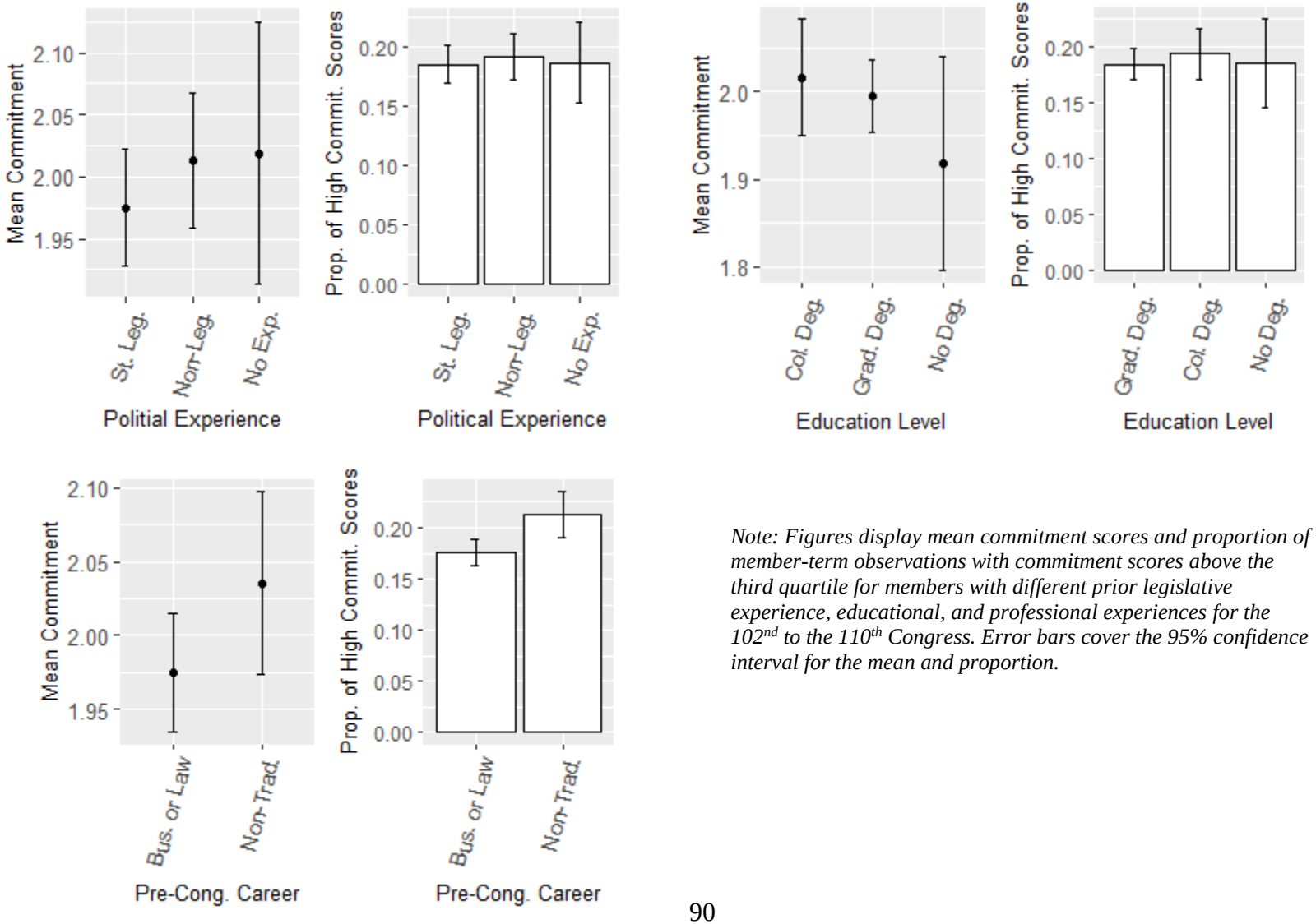
Former state legislators, for example, start their service in Congress having already worked in a similar institutional context. These members know what it means to legislate, understand something about how to work in coalitions, may already have a well-defined set of policy interests, and, finally, may have experience in non-legislative tasks like fundraising. Research has shown that this prior experience helps these members perform better in the institution, obtaining committee leadership positions more readily and getting more legislation farther towards becoming law (Berkman 1993; Francis and Bramlett 2017; Volden and Wiseman 2014). A similar logic suggests that other forms of prior political experience, such as in the executive branch or working for a political party, would also yield benefits for MCs (Francis 2014).

Along with prior political experience, different non-political professional and educational experiences might also impact the skills that MCs bring to the chamber. Educational experiences prepare MCs to deal with complex information and balance multiple priorities, skills that are potentially valuable for members that want to engage with lawmaking in Congress. Knowledge and capabilities cultivated in a pre-congressional career can also be useful. There are many

potential relationships between pre-congressional careers and legislative behavior, but I focus on just one: whether having a "traditional" pre-congressional career experience in law or business makes it more likely to that an MC will commit to legislating. Candidates often trumpet their business acumen in their campaign appeals, arguing that it positions them to run government like an all-American mom-and-pop shop or a Fortune 500 company, depending on their own background (Francis 2014). Lawyers can also make a credible claim that they are ready to legislate, having already been acquainted with how to interpret statutes and understanding legal and bureaucratic processes (Francis 2014; Eulau and Sprague 1964). Whether this is campaign puffery or not, the transferability of skills acquired in these traditional pre-congressional careers to legislating is quite important, as about three quarters of MCs have worked in at least one of these fields prior to coming to Congress.

As with institutional positions and individual contextual factors, I begin investigating how pre-congressional experiences are related to legislative commitment by looking at average levels of legislative commitment and the rate at which MCs have high commitment scores. To capture educational differences, I divide member-term observations into three groups based on whether the MC has no college degree, a college degree, or a graduate degree. Next, I divide member-term observations into groups based on whether the member is a former state legislator, has political experience other than service as a state legislator, or has no political experience.

**Figure 4.8: Commitment and Prior Political, Educational, and Professional Experiences**




*Note: Figures display mean commitment scores and proportion of member-term observations with commitment scores above the third quartile for members with different prior legislative experience, educational, and professional experiences for the 102nd to the 110th Congress. Error bars cover the 95% confidence interval for the mean and proportion.*

Finally, I split member-term observations into two groups based on whether the MC had pre-congressional experience working in either law or business.[18]

In Figure 4.8, I present the mean commitment scores for MCs with different prior political experiences, educational backgrounds, and career experiences. The differences in legislative commitment across members with these different personal backgrounds are slight. There is no difference in mean commitment or the proportion of member-terms with high commitment scores when comparing MCs with different levels of education or varieties of prior political experience, with all of the confidence intervals overlapping across groups. Turning to the bottom panel of the figure, there is also no difference in mean commitment for MCs with or without pre-congressional careers in law or business. The only indication of a relationship between pre-congressional experiences and legislative commitment comes from the comparison of the proportion of member-terms with high commitment scores between members with and without traditional pre-congressional careers in law or business. There is a slight difference in

[18] For information about MCs' pre-congressional careers, I used data collected by Francis (Francis 2014; Francis and Bramlett 2017) and incorporated into the dataset compiled by Sulkin (Bernhard and Sulkin 2018). To fill in missing data, I collected additional information with the help of two research assistants. I used the coding system outlined in Francis and Bramlett (2017). In this scheme, MCs are coded to have legal experience if they worked as a judge or as a lawyer in either government, nonprofit, or private practice. Business experience includes work experience in fields such as accounting, insurance, real estate, engineering, banking, insurance, and the like (Francis and Bramlett 2017).

proportions between MCs with and without a traditional career path, though it small in magnitude.[19]

*Social Identity*

Aside from prior life experience, an individual-level factor that relates to how MCs behave in Congress is their personal social identities. As it does in other behavioral domains outside of Congress, gender and race affect the life experiences of MCs, and this extends to how they approach their jobs as representatives. First, with respect to gender, studies have shown that men and women legislate differently (for an overview, see Lawless 2015). Several of these findings stand out when thinking about whether women are likely to be policy wonks. Women and men behave similarly at the roll call stage, but the set of issues that they legislate over is different (Lawless 2015). Women are more likely to devote attention to women's issues, like women's health, child care, and gender equity (Burrel 1996; Swers 2002; Gerrity et al. 2007). Women sponsor more legislation than men (Anzia and Berry 2011), and they are more effective at getting legislation to advance towards becoming law (Volden and Wiseman 2014; Volden, Wiseman, and Wittmer 2013). It is possible that women's higher degree of legislative effectiveness is partially attributable to their approach to legislating, which may be more

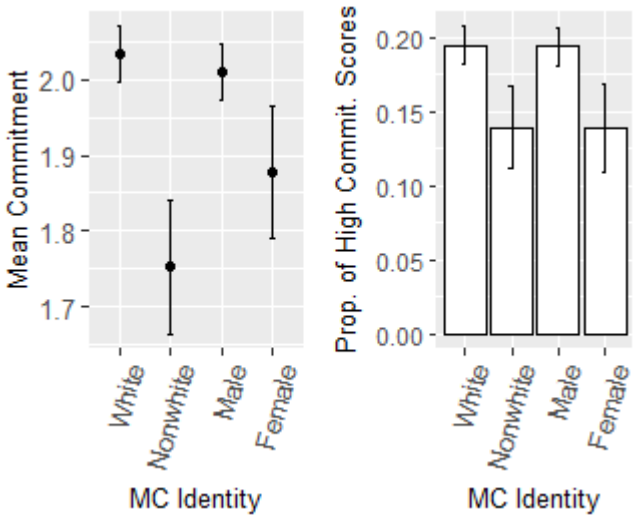
[19] One possibility is that contrasts between MCs on the basis of pre-congressional experiences would be sharpest when members are early in their careers. To account for this possibility, I also compared levels of commitment on the basis of pre-congressional professional and career experiences among only those MC-term observations in which the MC had served less than four years in Congress. The differences are no sharper there, with no differences across groups.

collaborative and less individualistic (see Thomas 1994). Yet while they may be more effective, women do face obstacles building credibility on some issues, especially stereotypically gendered issues like those related to national security (Swers 2007).

Along with gender, MCs' racial and ethnic identities are also associated with differences in legislative strategy vis-à-vis white MCs. In the same way that women are more likely to represent women's issues, research also shows that politicians are likely to represent the interests of constituents that share their own background (Broockman 2013; Burden 2007; Harden 2016; Tate 2003). This connection extends beyond roll call votes. For example, black and Latino/a legislators tend to propose bills that reflect the policy interests of constituents that share their race or ethnicity (Bratton and Haynie 1999; Griffin 2014; Rouse 2013). Yet while minority lawmakers may emphasize minority interests in their legislative work, they do not appear to enjoy the higher levels of legislative success that women do (Bratton and Haynie 1999; Volden and Wiseman 2014).

Given this review, there are mixed expectations about whether minority and female MCs will be more likely or less likely to be identified as policy wonks than white and male MCs. On one hand, minority and female representatives face cross-pressures that white and male representatives do not. MCs from traditionally marginalized groups could feel pressure to address a wider range of issues than other MCs, which would reduce their ability to specialize around a smaller range of topics. In the case of women, the possibility of greater legislative effectiveness might suggest that committing to policymaking would lead to benefits, but this expectation would not hold among minority MCs.

**Figure 4.9: Commitment and MC Identity**




*Note: Figures display mean commitment scores and proportion of member-term with commitment scores above the third quartile for members with different racial and gender identities for the 102nd to the 110th Congress. Error bars cover the 95% confidence interval for the mean and proportion.*

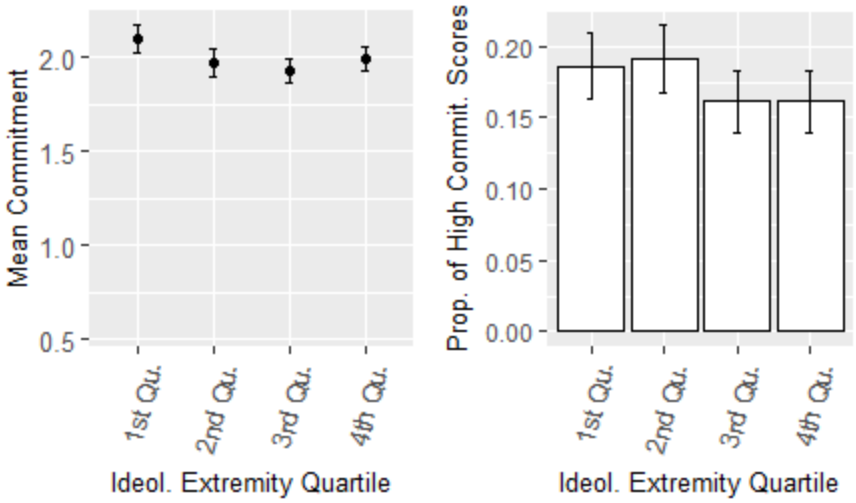
Yet while there are conflicting expectations about how social identity relates with legislative commitment, the descriptive results are less equivocal. Figure 4.9 displays the average legislative commitment scores and proportion of terms with high commitment scores for white, nonwhite, male, and female MCs. As the left panel indicates, white MCs have a higher average legislative commitment score than their non-white colleagues. Additionally, a higher proportion of white MCs have higher legislative commitment scores than women.

*Ideology*

Along with their previous life experiences and social identity, a final individual characteristic of MCs that I explore that could drive levels of commitment to lawmaking is MCs' ideological extremity. Of course, MCs vary in their ideological stances, ranging from very conservative to very liberal. A plausible case could be made that more extreme ideologies would

be associated with higher legislative commitment. Some scholars have advanced a liberalism hypothesis, suggesting that more liberal MCs are more likely to introduce more legislation (Woon 2009; Schiller 1995). Additionally, an intense ideological viewpoint could drive an MC to push hard on substantive issues that are important to them, giving them unwavering attention across time. The intrinsic benefit associated with "fighting for the cause" could thus drive legislative specialization and consistency. This, in turn, would lead to greater legislative commitment. Yet there is a potential downside to being an ideological firebrand that could discourage such MCs from being policy wonks. To the extent that ideologues are outliers in Congress, they may have fewer willing coalition partners, or their ideas may be so far outside the norm that they are unlikely to be selected by leadership for consideration in the legislative process (see Volden and Wiseman 2014).

**Figure 4.10: Commitment and MC Ideology**




*Note: Figures display mean commitment scores and proportion of member-term observations with scores above the third quartile, group by quartile of ideological extremity, for the 102nd to the 110th Congress. Error bars cover the 95% confidence interval for the mean and proportion.*

I assess ideological extremity by measuring the absolute value of the difference between a MC's DW-NOMINATE score in a term and the median score for the Congress in that term (Volden and Wiseman 2014). There is no obvious relationship between ideological extremity and legislative commitment. Figure 4.10 shows the mean levels of legislative commitment and the proportion of MC-term observations with high commitment scores, dividing the observations by quartile of ideological extremity. There are no indications of an association.

**Culmination of Results and Conclusion**

In the previous sections, I described the relationship between legislative commitment and a series of variables capturing elements of MCs' individual characteristics and aspects of the political contexts in which they operate. At each stage, I provided bivariate comparisons that, in some cases, were suggestive of associations with legislative commitment. These descriptive findings are important for the picture they paint of legislative representation in the United States. While some of these associations might be spurious in an inferential sense, they are very real to observers who do not consider every possible variable when assessing the political landscape. If policy wonks are mostly male, white, in the majority party, or typically share other characteristics, this is the profile that citizens and other political figures see. Because policy wonks are a critical part of American constitutional design, their profile matters for how citizens perceive legislators.

This observation aside, the case for systematic associations between MCs' legislative commitment and these variables is strengthened by conducting a multivariate analysis. Thus, as a final step, I estimate regression models that include covariates for the institutional positions, contextual factors, and personal characteristics that I have reviewed in this chapter. I estimate

**Table 4.1: Legislative Commitment and Individual Factors, 102nd to 110th Congresses**

| | DV=Leg. Commit | | DV=High Commitment Score 0/1 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Model 1 | | Model 2 | |
| *Institutional Position* | | | | |
| Majority | 0.24 ** | (0.08) | 0.39 * | (0.17) |
| Seniority | 0.02 * | (0.01) | 0.03 * | (0.02) |
| Comm. Chair or Ranking Mem. | 0.33 *** | (0.09) | 0.35 * | (0.17) |
| Party Leader | -0.06 | (0.07) | -0.03 | (0.16) |
| Subcommittee Chair | 0.20 ** | (0.06) | 0.38 ** | (0.13) |
| *District Context* | | | | |
| Previous Vote Share | 0.00 | (0.00) | 0.00 | (0.00) |
| White Percentage in District | 0.04 | (0.18) | 0.21 | (0.42) |
| Poverty Percentage in District | -1.46 * | (0.58) | -2.89 * | (1.35) |
| Delegation Size | 0.01 ** | (0.00) | 0.01 * | (0.00) |
| *Personal Characteristics* | | | | |
| Former State Legislator | -0.04 | (0.05) | -0.05 | (0.12) |
| Prior Political Experience | 0.01 | (0.10) | -0.06 | (0.21) |
| Graduate Degree | -0.02 | (0.06) | -0.07 | (0.13) |
| College Degree | 0.07 | (0.10) | -0.02 | (0.22) |
| Business or Law | -0.10 # | (0.06) | -0.30 * | (0.13) |
| Woman | -0.08 | (0.08) | -0.40 * | (0.20) |
| Nonwhite | -0.17 # | (0.10) | -0.21 | (0.24) |
| Ideology Dist. | 0.50 ** | (0.16) | 0.91 ** | (0.34) |
| Constant | 1.59 *** | (0.28) | -1.69 ** | (0.64) |
| N | 3263 | | 3263 | |
| $R^2$/Pseudo $R^2$ | 0.07 | | 0.06 | |

*Note: Cell entries are OLS and logistic regression coefficients with robust standard errors, clustering on the individual MC. The dependent variables are the legislative commitment score and a dichotomous indicator for legislative commitment scores above the third quartile. *** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05; # p < 0.1.*

two models: first, an OLS regression model with legislative commitment as the dependent variable, and. second, a logistic regression model in which the dependent variable is a dichotomous indicator variable for whether the member has a high legislative commitment score in a term. A member-term observation receives a score a one on this variable if the legislative commitment score for the member in that term is above the third quartile for the score, pooled across all Congresses. The results for these two models are displayed in Table 1.

The results replicate many of the conclusions drawn from the previous sections. As the pattern of coefficients and their statistical significance indicate, a MC's institutional position in Congress is associated with greater legislative commitment. MCs appear to have higher legislative commitment scores when they are in the majority, have been in the chamber for longer, and hold committee leadership positions as either a chair, ranking member, or subcommittee chair. With respect to district contextual factors, there is no evidence of a relationship between electoral security and commitment, but there is some evidence that district demographics matter. The regression results show that district affluence is related to commitment, as an increasing poverty rate in a district is associated with a lower legislative commitment score. In the multivariate analysis, there is also evidence that MCs from larger delegations tend to have higher legislative commitment scores. Finally, the model coefficients for variables capturing MCs' individual characteristics also echo the bivariate comparisons, with several coefficients reaching or approaching the $p<0.05$ level of statistical significance. The results indicate that women are less likely to have a high commitment score during a term than men, that nonwhite legislators tend to have lower average commitment scores, and that careers in business and law are associated with lower levels of legislative commitment. Additionally, the

positive and statistically significant coefficient in the regression results suggests that greater ideological extremity is associated with greater legislative commitment, a result that was not indicated with the bivariate comparison.

*Conclusion*

In this chapter, I started from the assumption that MCs make decisions about how much they commit to legislating based on the results of an informal cost-benefit analysis. From there, I considered how MCs' institutional positions, features of their individual political contexts, and their personal characteristics would be associated with legislative commitment. To be sure, these results are in accord with the idea that MCs' act as utility maximizers who commit to legislating strategically. MCs are more likely to commit to legislating when they are in preferred institutional positions that bring resource advantages and present a greater likelihood that their legislation will progress towards becoming law. Similarly, MCs that represent less affluent districts are less likely to commit to legislating, arguably because their constituents have weaker demands for policy-based representation than do wealthier citizens. I also find evidence in the multivariate analysis that larger delegation size is associated with greater legislative commitment, which would conform with the previous findings that larger delegations offer the advantage of having more natural coalition partners.

Other findings in this chapter, however, will require future work to interpret definitively. In some cases, it was difficult to predict how individual and contextual factors would figure into MCs' behavioral calculations. For example, there is evidence in these results that women are less likely than to be highly committed than men, that MCs with traditional pre-congressional careers are less likely to be highly committed than MCs without such backgrounds, and that MCs who

are more ideologically extreme tend to be more committed. I also did not find evidence that electoral vulnerability was associated with legislative commitment. All of these findings are consistent with a cost-benefit framework, but the expectations prior to completing the analysis were less clear. As such, future work could look at these relationships more closely, aiming to get a stronger sense of the tradeoffs associated with legislative commitment.

The other major unanswered question that stands out from this chapter is whether legislative commitment leads to subsequent costs or benefits. In this chapter, I have assumed that members make a calculation about the opportunities and risks that flow from legislative commitment, but I did not explore the consequences that MCs see when their colleagues adopt the behaviors of policy wonks. This is the topic I address in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 5: The Risks and Rewards of Legislative Commitment

In Chapter 4, I showed that legislative commitment varies across MCs as a function of the institutional position of MCs, contextual features related to MCs' districts, and the personal characteristics of representatives. This supports the claim that I presented in Chapter 2 about the cost-benefit calculations that lead MCs to commit to lawmaking. The results underscored that MCs make decisions about how to commit to legislating by weighing the likelihood that they will receive intrinsic or extrinsic benefits from investment against the tradeoffs associated with expending time and resources. As such, with institutional positions, individual political contexts, and personal characteristics all leading to variation in these calculations, legislative commitment in Congress tends to be higher among members in certain positions and with certain characteristics.

In this chapter, I shift away from the characteristics of MCs that influence their investment decisions at the beginning of and during the term, and I instead focus on another part of the utility maximizing process that I have posited: whether members see acting like a policy wonk as associated with subsequent benefits or costs. My theoretical framework indicates that members will be more likely to operate as masters of the public business when they believe that it will help them to achieve their goals - specifically, electoral security, intra-Congressional advancement, advancement beyond the House, and policy achievement. Conversely, members would shy away from committing to lawmaking if they observe that high levels of commitment undermine their pursuit of these objectives. However, I have yet to provide any evidence of

whether this mechanism operates in practice. Thus, in the sections that follow, I examine the associations between legislative commitment and electoral, career, and policymaking outcomes.

**Electoral Consequences of Commitment**

One potential reason why MCs would commit to a legislative agenda would be that it redounds to their electoral benefit. In a classic model of democratic accountability, citizens would use the legislative record of their representative as a factor in their decisions about whether to support him or her in the upcoming election. Voters would perceive a commitment to legislating as a positive factor in their evaluations, at least if the MC's proposals aligned with the citizens' preferences. Of course, the truth is likely more complicated. Whether citizens have the ability to evaluate MCs' performance in such a way is contestable, given what political psychology research has shown about the impact of motivated reasoning, affective partisanship, and information processing shortcomings (see, for an overview, Kuklinski and Peyton 2007). Yet even so, citizens appear to reward or punish politicians based on how much their behavior conforms to their own preferences, and they also respond to reputations for competence and honesty (Basinger 2012; Hall 2015; Bishin, Stevens and Wilson 2006; Hall 2018; Hirano and Snyder 2014; McCurley and Mondak 1995). This accords with the behaviors of MCs, who make obvious efforts to communicate their achievements and substantive priorities to constituents (Grimmer, Westwood, and Messing 2014). Such findings would suggest that increased legislative commitment would be associated with improved electoral performance in subsequent elections.

Yet while a positive association between commitment and electoral performance is possible, there are reasons to question this expectation. First, it is possible that some of the

potential benefits of legislative commitment would be counteracted by lost opportunities for the MC to engage in electorally beneficial activities. If a member is focused on legislating, he or she may be taking time away from the district or may have missed opportunities for position-taking that would come from having a less specialized agenda. If this is correct, it might weaken or entirely counteract whatever credit constituents give MCs for their hard work.

A second factor that would weaken a positive relationship – or for that matter, a negative one – between commitment and electoral benefits could be the strategic behavior of MCs. It might be that only members who consider themselves to be electorally secure already would act as a policy wonk. In Chapter 4, my results did not show evidence of such a pattern in the aggregate, and legislative commitment was not associated with previous electoral performance. However, to the extent that this kind of strategic calculation operates in individual cases, it would suppress a relationship between legislative commitment in a term and electoral performance following it. Additionally, MCs could use legislative commitment to appease key constituencies that are electorally critical to the member, even if it does not result in a net increase in electoral performance. Finally, MCs might simply understand that their constituents are unlikely to modify their vote choice on the basis of their legislative activity. If this is true, then MCs would have flexibility to select whichever level of commitment is appropriate in light of their other objectives, and there would be no positive or negative association with electoral performance.

Acknowledging these conflicting expectations, I begin my examination of the relationship between legislative commitment and electoral considerations by focusing on a straightforward indicator of an MC's electoral strength: his or her share of the votes in the next

election. As background here, it is important to note that most members of Congress benefit from a strong incumbency advantage, and the average vote share for incumbents is about 70%. Out of the more than 4,000 observations in my dataset, only 115 MCs received less than 50% of the vote in the election following the member-term observation.

Even so, there is evidence of a slight negative relationship between commitment and electoral performance. To test for this, I modeled the change in members' vote share from the previous election as a function of legislative commitment during the term, using OLS regression with robust standard errors clustered on member. I used four different variables to capture commitment: the member's legislative commitment score in the term prior to the election, an indicator for whether the member was a "wonk" in the previous term (scoring about the third quartile of the commitment score), the average commitment score of the member for all terms prior to the election (a running average), and a dichotomous indicator for whether the member had an average prior commitment score above the third quartile (which I call "running average wonk"). Along with the commitment variable in each model, I include control variables that are standard in analyses of electoral performance in Congress, including whether the member holds any leadership position in Congress (committee, party, or chamber), majority status, seniority, the MC's previous vote share, and the national vote share of the MC's party in the previous election. In addition, I include in the model an indicator variable that equals one if the MC is a good ideological match with his or her constituents and a zero if not.[20]

[20] The "fit" variable was constructed by Bernhard and Sulkin (2018, 134) and is based on the match between MCs' NOMINATE scores and Kernell's (2009) ideology scores for districts.

The estimates for these models are displayed in Table 5.1. The results demonstrate that commitment has a weak negative relationship with subsequent electoral performance. Because the outcome variable in these models is a change score, a negatively signed coefficient indicates that an increase in that variable leads to a reduced vote share for the member in the next election, as compared to their previous performance. As the table indicates, the coefficient for the commitment variables are significant for the models using running averages for the commitment score. In other words, controlling for key differences relevant to electoral performance, members that have a history of greater legislative commitment tend to see their vote share decline in the subsequent election, as compared to their colleagues without a history of prior commitment.

While these results suggest that commitment is associated with a slight electoral penalty, does this mean that MCs risk their tenures in the Congress for the sake of devoting themselves to public policy? Or is this a case where members might suffer a slight electoral penalty, but one that does not substantially jeopardize their chances at reelection? To address these questions, I use a similar modeling strategy to test for an association between commitment and whether MCs lose their next elections. In these models, I use the same variables for legislative commitment and control variables as I did when using vote share change as the dependent variable, but I swap the vote share variable for an indicator variable that equals one if the member loses his or her next election. Accordingly, I use logistic regression instead of OLS. As the model estimates in Table 5.1 suggest, there is little indication that MCs risk their offices for the sake of legislative commitment. None of the regression coefficients for the different variables capturing current and past commitment reach statistical significance in models 5-8.

**Table 5.1: Legislative Commitment and Electoral Outcomes**

| | DV = Vote Share Change | | | | DV = Lost Next 0/1 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 | Model 6 | Model 7 | Model 8 |
| Commitment Score | -0.39 | | | | 0.04 | | | |
| | (0.24) | | | | (0.11) | | | |
| High Comm. 0/1 | | -0.51 | | | | -0.50 | | |
| | | (0.54) | | | | (0.36) | | |
| Avg. Comm. Score | | | -0.89 ** | | | | 0.09 | |
| | | | (0.33) | | | | (0.14) | |
| High Avg. Comm. 0/1 | | | | -1.93 *** | | | | 0.20 |
| | | | | (0.55) | | | | (0.30) |
| Comm. Leader | 0.06 | -0.03 | 0.06 | 0.06 | -0.00 | 0.08 | -0.01 | -0.00 |
| | (0.98) | (0.98) | (0.97) | (0.96) | (0.53) | (0.52) | (0.53) | (0.53) |
| Party Leader | 0.90 | 0.92 | 0.86 | 0.88 | -0.19 | -0.23 | -0.19 | -0.20 |
| | (0.96) | (0.96) | (0.96) | (0.95) | (0.50) | (0.50) | (0.50) | (0.51) |
| Subcomm. Chr | 0.52 | 0.48 | 0.56 | 0.54 | -0.32 | -0.28 | -0.32 | -0.31 |
| | (0.65) | (0.65) | (0.65) | (0.65) | (0.34) | (0.35) | (0.35) | (0.34) |
| Majority | -3.91 *** | -3.97 *** | -3.84 *** | -3.84 *** | -0.46 | -0.45 | -0.46 | -0.47 |
| | (0.86) | (0.86) | (0.85) | (0.85) | (0.36) | (0.36) | (0.36) | (0.36) |
| Seniority | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.02 | 0.0 | 0.01 | 0.02 | 0.01 | 0.01 |
| | (0.08) | (0.08) | (0.08) | (0.08) | (0.05) | (0.05) | (0.05) | (0.05) |
| Prev. Vote Share | -0.57 *** | -0.57 *** | -0.57 *** | -0.57 *** | -0.10 *** | -0.10 *** | -0.10 *** | -0.10 *** |
| | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) |
| Party Natl. Pct | 0.06 | 0.07 | 0.06 | 0.06 | 0.33 *** | 0.33 *** | 0.33 *** | 0.33 *** |
| | (0.16) | (0.16) | (0.16) | (0.16) | (0.08) | (0.08) | (0.08) | (0.08) |
| Fit | 4.00 *** | 3.99 *** | 4.07 *** | 4.10 *** | -1.24 *** | -1.24 *** | -1.24 *** | -1.25 *** |
| | (0.79) | (0.79) | (0.79) | (0.79) | (0.28) | (0.28) | (0.28) | (0.28) |
| Constant | 36.17 *** | 35.19 *** | 37.41 *** | 36.19 *** | -12.39 ** | -12.25 ** | -12.40 ** | -12.28 ** |
| | (7.22) | (7.20) | (7.22) | (7.1) | (4.11) | (4.09) | (4.12) | (4.13) |
| N | 2829 | 2829 | 2829 | 2829 | 2829 | 2829 | 2829 | 2829 |
| $R^2$ | 0.31 | 0.31 | 0.31 | 0.31 | 0.19 | 0.20 | 0.19 | 0.19 |

*Note: Cell entries are OLS and logistic regression coefficients with robust standard errors, clustering on the individual MC. The dependent variables are next vote share (models 1-4) and a dichotomous indicator for losing the next election (1= lose) (models 4-8). *** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05; # p < 0.1. Analyses are limited to MCs that ran in the next election.*

Voters at large in the constituency are not the only actors that MCs have to keep in mind when deciding whether to commit to lawmaking or not. MCs must also be mindful about how their legislative agendas could influence the type of opposing campaigns they face in the upcoming election. Even if voters in general are not sensitive to MCs' patterns of legislative commitment, more attention could be paid to this aspect of their behavior among potential primary or general election challengers. Potential candidates decide whether to enter a race for Congress strategically, based on their assessment of their own strengths as a candidate as well as an assessment of the weaknesses of an incumbent (Lawless 2012; Maisel and Stone 2014). Extending this logic to the sphere of legislative strategy, ambitious challengers might perceive a low level of commitment as an indication of an MC is failing to satisfy the representational responsibility to engage in the lawmaking process. Alternatively, a challenger might perceive that a heavily committed member is a tempting target if the member is engaged in *too much* legislating, perhaps being attached to unpopular or controversial legislation or not paying enough attention to local matters. In this way, MCs' legislative commitment could spur primary challengers or stronger, more experienced general election challengers. Thus, in either the primary or general election cases, it is likely that MCs' levels of commitment are calibrated to avoid this outcome.

I model the relationship between commitment and challenger entry to test whether MCs receive such benefits or face such risks when they shift their behavior towards that of a policy wonk. I use three different indicators related to challenger entry as dependent variables: (1) whether the member faces a primary challenger in the upcoming election, (2) whether the member is unopposed in the next election, and (3) whether the next general election challenger is

a quality candidate on the basis of having previous political experience. The independent variables are the different versions of the legislative commitment score, and the control variables are identical to those in the models for change in vote share.

As with examining the relationship between vote share and legislative commitment, it is useful to note the baseline for these outcome variables capturing challenger entry. MCs face a primary challenger in 31% of the observations in my dataset, are unopposed in 13%, and face a quality challenger in 15%. In short, there is still a strong incumbency advantage at work. The results reflect this. In Table 5.2, I display the results of three sets of models: one set modeling whether the member is unopposed in the upcoming election, one set modeling whether a member faces a primary challenger, and one set for whether a MC faces a quality challenger in the general election. The results in the table provide no indication that legislative commitment provides an electoral benefit in terms of deterring challenger entry. As the regression coefficients show, there are no statistically significant relationships between commitment and the likelihood of facing a primary challenger or a quality general election challenger in the upcoming election. The only evidence of an electoral consequence in these results comes from the models for whether a member is unopposed in the upcoming election. There, the negative and significant coefficients for the commitment score, running average commitment score, and the indicator variable for whether the member has a high score for running average commitment suggest that, if anything, a reputation for being more committed makes it more likely that the MC will face a general election challenger.

Taken together, these results testing for electoral consequences of legislative commitment support the conclusion that MCs are savvy, strategic operators when crafting their agendas. As I

**Table 5.2: Legislative Commitment and Challenger Entry**

| | DV = Unopposed in Next Election 0/1 | | | | DV= Next Challenger Experienced 0/1 | | | | DV= Primary Chal. in Next Election | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 | Model 6 | Model 7 | Model 8 | Model 9 | Model 10 | Model 11 | Model 12 |
| Commitment Score | -0.14* | | | | -0.03 | | | | -0.16 | | | |
| | (0.06) | | | | (0.07) | | | | (0.13) | | | |
| High Comm. 0/1 | | -0.15 | | | | -0.03 | | | | -0.08 | | |
| | | (0.15) | | | | (0.14) | | | | (0.11) | | |
| Avg. Comm. Score | | | -0.28** | | | | -0.04 | | | | -0.07 | |
| | | | (0.09) | | | | (0.09) | | | | (0.07) | |
| High Avg. Comm. 0/1 | | | | -0.44*** | | | | -0.10 | | | | -0.16 |
| | | | | (0.16) | | | | (0.18) | | | | (0.13) |
| Comm. Leader | 0.06 | 0.04 | 0.05 | 0.05 | 0.14 | 0.14 | 0.14 | 0.14 | -0.03 | -0.04 | -0.03 | -0.03 |
| | (0.25) | (0.25) | (0.25) | (0.24) | (0.27) | (0.27) | (0.27) | (0.27) | (0.20) | (0.20) | (0.20) | (0.20) |
| Party Leader | 0.00 | 0.00 | -0.01 | -0.01 | -0.16 | -0.15 | -0.16 | -0.15 | -0.18 | -0.18 | -0.18 | -0.18 |
| | (0.22) | (0.22) | (0.23) | (0.22) | (0.24) | (0.24) | (0.24) | (0.24) | (0.22) | (0.22) | (0.22) | (0.22) |
| Subcomm. Chr | 0.17 | 0.16 | 0.18 | 0.17 | -0.09 | -0.09 | -0.09 | -0.09 | 0.33* | 0.33* | 0.33* | 0.33* |
| | (0.17) | (0.17) | (0.17) | (0.16) | (0.21) | (0.21) | (0.21) | (0.21) | (0.14) | (0.14) | (0.14) | (0.14) |
| Majority | -0.06 | -0.09 | -0.03 | -0.05 | -0.29 | -0.30 | -0.29 | -0.29 | -0.38* | -0.39* | -0.39* | -0.38* |
| | (0.24) | (0.24) | (0.23) | (0.23) | (0.22) | (0.22) | (0.22) | (0.22) | (0.18) | (0.18) | (0.18) | (0.18) |
| Seniority | -0.02 | -0.02 | 0.01 | -0.02 | -0.01 | -0.01 | -0.01 | -0.01 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.02) |
| Prev. Vote Share | 0.04*** | 0.04*** | 0.04*** | 0.04*** | -0.05*** | -0.05*** | -0.05*** | -0.05*** | -0.01* | -0.01* | -0.01* | -0.01* |
| | (0.00) | (0.00) | (0.00) | (0.00) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.00) | (0.00) | (0.00) | (0.00) |
| Party Natl. Pct | -0.04 | -0.04 | -0.05 | -0.05 | 0.10* | 0.10* | 0.10* | 0.10* | 0.08* | 0.08* | 0.08* | 0.08* |
| | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.05) | (0.05) | (0.05) | (0.05) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) |
| Fit | 0.28 | 0.28 | 0.30 | 0.29 | -0.59*** | -0.59*** | -0.59*** | -0.59*** | 0.42* | 0.41* | 0.42* | 0.42* |
| | (0.06) | (0.26) | (0.26) | (0.26) | (0.17) | (0.17) | (0.17) | (0.17) | (0.17) | (0.17) | (0.17) | (0.17) |
| Constant | -2.63 | -3.04 | -2.24 | -2.77 | -2.32 | -2.39 | -2.31 | -2.37 | -4.41** | -4.45** | -4.32** | -4.41** |
| | (1.77 | (1.78) | (1.78) | (1.78) | (2.18) | (2.18) | (2.19) | (2.18) | (1.44) | (1.44) | (1.45) | (1.44) |
| Pseudo $R^2$ | 0.09 | 0.08 | 0.09 | 0.09 | 0.11 | 0.11 | 0.11 | 0.11 | 0.02 | 0.02 | 0.02 | 0.02 |
| N | 2831 | 2831 | 2831 | 2831 | 2198 | 2198 | 2198 | 2198 | 2913 | 2913 | 2913 | 2913 |

*Note: Cell entries are logistic regression coefficients with robust standard errors, clustering on the individual MC. The dependent variables are indicators for whether the MCs is unopposed in the next election (1=unopposed, models 1-4), whether the MCs' challenger in the next election is experienced (1= experienced, models 4-8), and whether the MC faces a primary challenger in the next election (1=challenged, model 9-12). *** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05; # p < 0.1. Analyses for all models are limited to MCs who ran for office in the next term. Ns vary due to missing data.*

suggested, if MCs are talented and cautious politicians, they are not likely to allow their policy work to interfere with their electoral security. While diverting time and resources towards legislating might detract from a MC cultivating his or her constituents, we would not expect to see many members acting as policy wonks if it put them under electoral threat. This is essentially what we see in these results. There is some indication that acting like a policy wonk is associated with lower electoral performance, in the sense that doing so is associated with lower vote share and a slightly lower chance of running unopposed. However, greater legislative commitment is not associated with deterring challengers or losing the next election. While legislative commitment does not yield subsequent electoral benefits, nor does it seem related to consequent substantial electoral harm. The conclusion to draw is that being an intense, specialized, and consistent legislator is likely motivated or suppressed by other factors in congressional life.

**Commitment and Influence in Congress**

The findings in the previous section provide evidence that MCs are not perfect when it comes to calibrating their levels of legislative commitment to match their electoral environment, but they appear to be quite good at it. The results indicate that members take a slight electoral penalty for committing, but MCs who do rarely lose subsequent elections or face serious electoral jeopardy. This could be either because citizens and challengers do not factor legislative commitment heavily in their decisions about who to turn out and vote for, or that MCs understand the political landscape and balance their levels of legislative commitment accordingly. On the other hand, the results are somewhat concerning from a normative perspective. Because investing in lawmaking or not strongly associated with an electoral

dividend for members, it seems that electoral incentives are unlikely to drive members towards this behavior.

There is, though, another avenue by which members might be drawn towards acting as a master of the public business. MCs may always be subject to the electoral connection, but they also have other objectives, among them gathering influence in Congress. If it is a way for members to advance in the chamber, then members might have an incentive to commit to legislating even if it is unlikely to lead to electoral dividends. In fact, as I described in Chapter 2, there are reasons to expect Congress to be organized to promote members who commit to lawmaking. Members of Congress have an interest in cultivating expertise among their colleagues and distributing their vast legislative and oversight workload (Cox and McCubbins 2005; Krehbiel 1992; Shepsle and Weingast 1981). To this end, MCs pledge their support and cede authority to caucus leaders as a mechanism for getting preferred policies through the chamber (Kanthak 2007; Rohde 1991). Thus, it would be sensible for the members to organize themselves in such fashion as to reward members that commit to the legislative process. A practical way to do this would be for members to "promote from within" when selecting which members to advance to positions of leadership in the chamber. By choosing to support legislatively committed members for leadership positions, MCs would be telegraphing to other members that if they want similar positions, they should make sure they attend to their legislative work. Further, even if such a strategic long-game is beyond the planning horizon for MCs, in any given leadership selection process, members may want to support members with reputations for hard work and expertise. Previous performance as a policy wonk could be an indication that a member can provide competent legislative leadership – and outcome that is good for rank-and-

file members in the short term, regardless of broader notions about the health of congressional institutions.

All of this is to say that one of the reasons that MCs choose to commit to legislating is the prospect of amassing influence in the chamber. However, as with electoral outcomes associated with higher investment, I have yet to provide any evidence that legislative commitment is associated with such gains. To look for such an association, in the analyses that follow, I focus on whether MCs rise in the leadership hierarchy in Congress through committee leadership positions or through positions in party leadership. These positions are a prized commodity in Congress. Of the 1,038 members in my dataset, only 16% ever serve as a full committee chair or minority ranking member from the 101st to 110th Congresses.[21] Similarly, only 13% ever hold a position of party leadership.

To test whether legislative commitment aids MCs in their pursuit of these positions, I estimate two sets of regression models. First, I specify four models where the dependent variable is a dichotomous indicator for whether an MC obtains a committee leadership position in the next term by becoming either a committee chair or ranking member. The independent variables of interest are the different measures of legislative commitment – again, the legislative commitment score, an indicator variable for whether a MC has a score above the third quartile

[21] By contrast, there are many more subcommittee chair positions. 41% of MCs in the dataset are a subcommittee chair for at least one term from the 101st to the 110th Congress. When I conduct a similar analysis for whether legislative commitment leads to gaining a subcommittee chair position, I do not find any evidence of a relationship.

for all observations, the running average commitment score, and an indicator for whether the member has a running average above the third quartile. Along with these variables of interest, I include a set of control variables, including whether the MC is in the majority, his or her seniority, and a score capturing the MC's ideological extremity (the distance between the MC's NOMINATE score and the median score for the chamber in that Congress). Then, I specify a second set of models using the same approach, except I use as the dependent variable an indicator variable for whether the member holds a party leadership position in the next term. Party leadership includes positions like majority or minority leader or a whip position. For all these models, I use subsets of the data including only members who do not hold a committee or party leadership position for the current term. Thus, a score of one on the outcome variable indicates that the member obtains a leadership position that he or she did not hold in the previous term. For both models, I use logistic regression with robust standard errors clustered on member.

The model estimates are displayed in Table 5.3. The results paint a mixed picture. Turning first to the models for obtaining a committee leadership position in the next Congress, there is evidence that legislative commitment does position members to climb up the congressional hierarchy. The coefficients on the variables for high commitment in the previous term, running average commitment, and high running average commitment all either reach the $p<0.05$ level of statistical significance or approach it. This suggests that MCs are rewarded for their past legislative commitment by having an increased chance of obtaining a committee leadership position in the next Congress. The effect size is small, with even high investors having not much more than a 5% chance of receiving a committee leadership position. However, given the scarcity of committee leadership and ranking member positions in Congress, even

**Table 5.3: Commitment and Obtaining Leadership Positions**

| | Obtained Comm. Leader Position in Next Term | | | | Obtained Party Leader Position in Next Term | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 | Model 6 | Model 7 | Model 8 |
| Commitment Score | 0.16 | | | | -0.20 # | | | |
| | (0.12) | | | | (0.11) | | | |
| High Comm. 0/1 | | 0.51 * | | | | -0.31 | | |
| | | (0.24) | | | | (0.27) | | |
| Avg. Comm. Score | | | 0.23 # | | | | -0.15 | |
| | | | (0.14) | | | | (0.13) | |
| High Avg. Comm. 0/1 | | | | 0.45 # | | | | -0.31 |
| | | | | (0.24) | | | | (0.28) |
| Seniority | 0.23 *** | 0.23 *** | 0.22 *** | 0.23 *** | -0.13 ** | -0.14 ** | -0.13 ** | -0.14 ** |
| | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.04) |
| Majority | -0.15 | -0.16 | -0.14 | -0.13 | 0.06 | 0.03 | 0.04 | 0.03 |
| | (0.38) | (0.38) | (0.39) | (0.38) | (0.28) | (0.28) | (0.28) | (0.28) |
| Dist. from Chamber | -0.36 | -0.37 | -0.32 | -0.31 | 0.99 | 0.95 | 0.95 | 0.92 |
| Median Ideology | (0.70) | (0.70) | (0.69) | (0.70) | (0.61) | (0.61) | (0.61) | (0.61) |
| Constant | -4.59 *** | -4.39 *** | -4.72 *** | -4.40 *** | -2.56 *** | -2.80 *** | -2.62 *** | -2.79 *** |
| | (0.55) | (0.52) | (0.56) | (0.52) | (0.46) | (0.46) | (0.49) | (0.46) |
| Pseudo $R^2$ | 0.10 | 0.11 | 0.10 | 0.11 | 0.04 | 0.03 | 0.03 | 0.03 |
| N | 2171 | 2172 | 2172 | 2172 | 2200 | 2200 | 2200 | 2200 |

*Note: Cell entries are logistic regression coefficients with robust standard errors, clustering on the individual MC. The dependent variables are indicator variables for whether the MC is a committee leader (chair or ranking member) in the next term (1=leader, models 1-4) and whether the member obtains a party leadership position in the next term (1=leader, models 4-8). *** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05; # p < 0.1. Analyses are limited to MCs that do not hold a committee leadership position (models 1-4) or a party leadership position (models 5-8) and return in the next Congress.*

marginal increases in the probability of obtaining a position might be an incentive for members to pursue a "wonky" strategy. By contrast, there is no indication from these model results that commitment is associated with a greater chance of obtaining a party leadership position. In fact, the negative coefficient for the legislative commitment score suggests that committing to legislating may marginally undermine MCs who want to advance in the party structure, though the evidence here is weak given that this is the only coefficient that reaches even marginal statistical significance in these models.

The takeaway from these results regarding legislative commitment and intra-chamber mobility is like that from looking at commitment and electoral security. While there is some evidence here that commitment is related to a member's ability to achieve his or her objective of building influence in Congress, the results are mixed. This approach may pay off in the pursuit of committee leadership positions, but it does not for partisan leadership positions in the chamber. This is understandable because a MC's colleagues may value different aspects of the resume when supporting candidates for committee versus partisan leadership positions. Yet overall, these results provide limited evidence of a dividend of legislative commitment. MCs might have slightly enhanced opportunities to advance through the committee leadership system through greater investment in lawmaking, but the benefits seem quite diffuse given the small number of these positions and low likelihood of getting them.

**Commitment and Career Ambitions Beyond Congress**

Members of Congress attend to electoral concerns, and they also are interested in building influence in the chamber. Their record of legislative commitment factors into both these pursuits, but of course these are not the only goals that MCs pursue. Some MCs also carry with

them ambitions to move out of the House and into higher elective office, primarily seats in the Senate and governorships (Herrick and Moore 1993; Schlesinger 1966). In my dataset, only 13% of the MCs ever run for higher office, and higher office seekers from the House only win about one-third of the time. However, ambitious MCs do modify their legislative behavior in anticipation of a run for higher office, such as by becoming more specialized, more legislatively active, and altering their roll call behavior (Francis et al. 1994; LaForge 2013; Rothenberg and Sanders 2000; Victor 2010).

As I described in my theoretical framework in Chapter 2, legislative commitment could arguably serve to either support or undermine such ambitions. When MCs contemplate running for higher office, they may want to enter this competition with a strong record of policy-related work, even if such efforts did not yield legislative success. This résumé can serve as the basis for campaign appeals or serve as a foundation for building alliances with relevant interest groups and other political actors. Yet as with many of the other relationships I examine, an alternative outcome is possible. Members who are highly committed may be so preoccupied with their legislative work that they do not spend time on preparing the groundwork for a run for higher office, gathering donors and building relationships that would aid such ambitions. For the purposes of this analysis, either outcome is substantively important. If members find that high levels of legislative commitment are not compatible with their colleagues' professional ambitions, it would serve as another brake on the tendency for members to invest in lawmaking. If the opposite holds, then progressive ambition would support MCs' active, persistent, and focused engagement with the lawmaking process.

**Table 5.4: Commitment and Progressive Ambition**

| | DV= Ran for Higher Office 0/1 | | | | DV= Won Race for Higher Office | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 | Model 6 | Model 7 | Model 8 |
| Commitment Score | 0.08 | | | | 0.09 | | | |
| | (0.09) | | | | (0.33) | | | |
| High Comm. 0/1 | | 0.03 | | | | -0.30 | | |
| | | (0.24) | | | | (0.61) | | |
| Avg. Comm. Score | | | 0.15 | | | | 0.46 | |
| | | | (0.12) | | | | (0.38) | |
| High Avg. Comm. 0/1 | | | | 0.05 | | | | 0.15 |
| | | | | (0.24) | | | | (0.64) |
| Seniority | -0.03 | -0.02 | -0.03 | -0.02 | 0.22 | 0.20 | 0.23 | 0.22 |
| | (0.05) | (0.05) | (0.05) | (0.05) | (0.14) | (0.14) | (0.15) | (0.14) |
| Majority | 0.20 | 0.21 | 0.19 | 0.21 | -0.40 | -0.37 | -0.39 | -0.40 |
| | (0.31) | (0.31) | (0.31) | (0.31) | (0.88) | (0.89) | (0.88) | (0.87) |
| Committee Leader | -0.97 | -0.96 | -0.96 | -0.96 | -0.49 | -0.50 | -0.38 | -0.43 |
| | (0.67) | (0.67) | (0.68) | (0.67) | (1.69) | (1.70) | (1.71) | (1.69) |
| Party Leader | 0.28 | 0.28 | 0.29 | 0.28 | 1.68 * | 1.63 # | 1.79 * | 1.65 # |
| | (0.31) | (0.31) | (0.32) | (0.31) | (0.85) | (0.87) | (0.87) | (0.85) |
| Excl. Committee | 0.08 | 0.08 | 0.09 | 0.08 | -0.65 | -0.61 | -0.71 | -0.65 |
| | (0.22) | (0.22) | (0.22) | (0.21) | (0.56) | (0.55) | (0.57) | (0.56) |
| Subcomm. Chr. | -0.22 | -0.21 | -0.22 | -0.21 | -0.17 | -0.10 | -0.17 | -0.19 |
| | (0.33) | (0.33) | (0.33) | (0.33) | (0.72) | (0.73) | (0.72) | (0.74) |
| Age | 0.14 | 0.15 | 0.13 | 0.14 | 0.02 | 0.04 | 0.01 | 0.01 |
| | (0.12) | (0.12) | (0.12) | (0.12) | (0.44) | (0.44) | (0.45) | (0.44) |
| Age $^2$ | -0.00 | -0.00 | -0.00 | -0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| | (0.00) | (0.00) | (0.00) | (0.00) | (0.00) | (0.00) | (0.00) | (0.00) |
| Female | -0.21 | -0.21 | -0.22 | -0.21 | -0.26 | -0.22 | -0.33 | -0.29 |
| | (0.38) | (0.38) | (0.39) | (0.38) | (1.57) | (1.57) | (1.58) | (1.56) |
| Next redistricting | 0.05 | 0.05 | 0.05 | 0.05 | 0.26 | 0.27 | 0.30 | 0.27 |
| | (0.24) | (0.24) | (0.24) | (0.24) | (0.60) | (0.59) | (0.61) | (0.61) |
| Delegation Size | -0.05 *** | -0.05 *** | -0.05 *** | -0.05 *** | -0.04 | -0.04 | -0.04 | -0.04 |
| | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) |
| Natl. Party Pct. | -0.04 | -0.04 | -0.04 | -0.04 | -0.01 | -0.02 | -0.02 | -0.01 |
| | (0.07) | (0.07) | (0.07) | (0.07) | (0.17) | (0.17) | (0.17) | (0.17) |
| Constant | -2.76 | -2.69 | -2.70 | -2.67 | -1.60 | -1.75 | -1.63 | -1.48 |
| | (4.65) | (4.65) | (4.63) | (4.64) | (11.85) | (11.90) | (12.03) | (11.87) |
| $R^2$ | 0.10 | 0.10 | 0.10 | 0.10 | 0.20 | 0.20 | 0.20 | 0.20 |
| N | 2676 | 2676 | 2676 | 2676 | 112 | 112 | 112 | 112 |

*Note: Cell entries are logistic regression coefficients with robust standard errors, clustering on the individual MC. In models 1-4, the dependent variable is an indicator for whether the MC runs for higher office (1=runs higher). Models 1-4 are estimated using only observations for which there is a gubernatorial or senate race in the MC's state. In models 5-8, the dependent variable is an indicator for whether the MC wins a race for governor or Senate. Models 5-8 are estimated using only observations in which the MC ran for higher office. *** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05; # p < 0.1.*

I examine the relationship between legislative commitment and progressive ambition by testing for associations between commitment and the tendency for MCs to run for and win higher office. I examine the relationship between commitment and two dependent variables: (1) whether a member of Congress runs for higher office at the end of a term, and (2) whether a member succeeds at winning higher office. Using logistic regression and including a set of control variables, I find no relationships between any of the different formulations of commitment as an independent variable and either of these outcome variables. The results are displayed in Table 5.4. In short, it appears whether a MC is a policy wonk has no bearing on his or her decision to run for higher office or the likelihood of the member winning.

**Commitment and Policy Productivity**

So far in this chapter, I have provided an overview of the relationships that MCs see between commitment and three of their major goals: electoral security, gathering influence in Congress, and advancing their careers beyond the House. The evidence for a relationship between legislative commitment and these outcomes has been uneven. There are indications that acting like a policy wonk is associated with a slight electoral penalty and a slight benefit in rising in the House committee leadership structure, but there is no evidence that commitment helps members prepare for a run for higher office or helps MCs rise to party leadership. However, the fact that the costs or benefits of legislative commitment vis-à-vis these goals are diffuse should not be a surprise. First, if being a master of the public business was really the "secret sauce" of a successful congressional career, then we would not see the overall pattern of commitment to lawmaking that we do. It is uncommon for members to adopt active, specialized, and consistent legislative agendas, and this suggests that benefits for high commitment are not consistent across

members. Second, we would not expect to find a strong negative correspondence between commitment and MCs' non-policy-related objectives. If such a penalty did exist, MCs who are sensitive to these consequences would learn to avoid them.

While one might anticipate such subtlety in the relationships between commitment and non-policy related objectives, there remains another important goal of MCs that could be serviced by committing to legislating: legislative productivity and efficiency. As I have emphasized throughout this project, one of the reasons that MCs invest in lawmaking is likely that at least some members are genuinely interested in achieving policy outcomes. There are certainly MCs that feel that they can satisfy these objectives by supporting their party and voting on the issues that come before them in committees and on the floor. Such members delegate the majority of the work of formulating policy to others in Congress, and they would be happy to spend their time on other representational activities. That said, there are members that care passionately about policy issues, and their intention is to make their presence in Congress felt through legislative achievement. These members are likely to commit to legislating in expectation that it will result in their proposals making progress towards becoming law.

In Congress, the odds are stacked against members as they try to move their bills towards becoming law. Out of the thousands of bills that are introduced in Congress in each term, only about 15% ever advance even to the committee stage, and the median number of bills a MC advances to the committee stage is one. Further, Congress deals with many policy issues episodically, when "policy windows" open. Members who want to deal with legislative issues must, to use Kingdon's language, "strike when the iron is hot." Legislative commitment, however, places MCs in the best position to do so. By having previously devoted time and

resources to cultivating expertise and preparing legislative packages, policy wonks would theoretically be ideally placed to see their bills advanced when opportunities arise. This argument suggests that legislative commitment should be connected with legislative success.

In the analysis that follows, I test for such an association. I capture the notion of legislative success in two ways, drawing on Volden and Wiseman's legislative effectiveness data (Volden and Wiseman 2014). First, I examine the relationship between legislative commitment and the quantity of legislation that MCs advances to different stages of the legislative process. Specifically, these different stages are (1) receiving action in the committee to which the legislation is referred, (2) action beyond the committee stage, (3) passing out of the chamber, (4) becoming law. Second, I consider the relationships between legislative commitment and the proportion of the member's legislation that advances to these different stages. This captures legislative efficiency, measuring the likelihood that a member will see a piece of his or her legislation moving forward in the legislative process.

The modeling strategy that I use to capture the relationship between commitment and these legislative outcomes is slightly different than what I have used in my prior analyses. In Table 5.5, I display the results of a series of negative binomial models, where the dependent variable is the number of pieces of a MC's introduced legislation that advance to each stage of the legislative process. I include a set of control variables related to legislative productivity. The key difference between the analysis here and in the prior sections is that, rather than model my outcome variable as a function of the legislative commitment score, I break apart the commitment score and use its two components, intensity and concentration, as separate independent variables (recall that concentration is the product of multiplying specialization and

consistency). I also include a term that interacts intensity and concentration. By decomposing commitment into its two components, I am able to show how the volume of legislative activity by a member in conjunction with a specialized and consistent strategy is related to legislative outcomes.

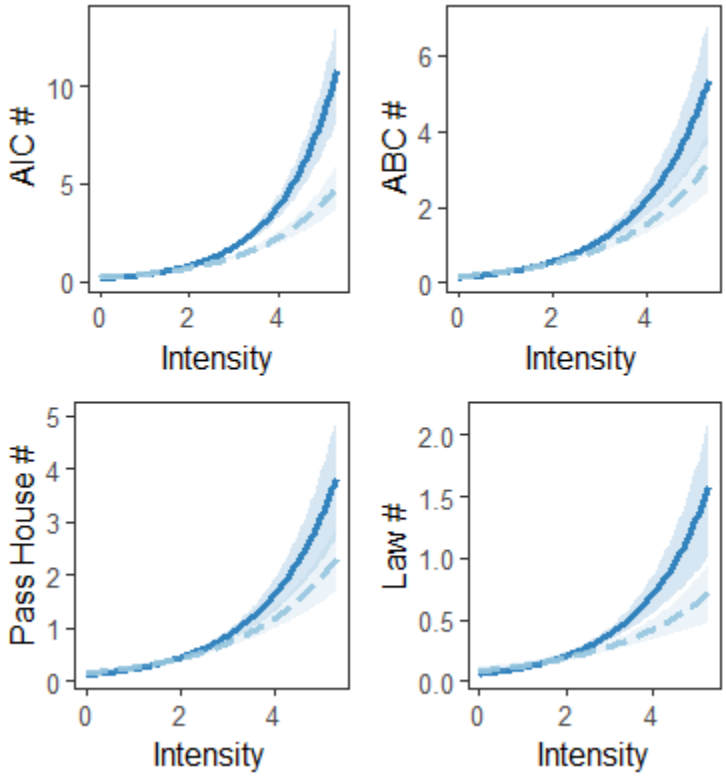
The results of this first set of models are displayed in Table 5.5. As expected, the interaction term for intensity and concentration is statistically significant in all four models, suggesting that adopting a specialized and sustained pattern of legislating can affect the marginal returns of a MC's slate of bill sponsorships. However, interaction terms are difficult to interpret without a visual aid, so I also include in Figure 5.1 a series of four plots that show the interactive relationships between intensity, concentration, and legislative productivity. On the y-axis of these four plots are the counts of the number of a MC's bills that reach each stage of the legislative process (action in committee, action beyond committee, pass the chamber, and becoming law). On the x-axis is the MC's intensity score (which, as a reminder, is a scaled count of how many bills the member sponsors in a term). The two lines of these graphs track the predicted values for the outcome variable using the model formula from Table 5.5 at the corresponding values of intensity. The darker shading and solid line shows the predicted values for the dependent variable when the MC has a concentration score that is one standard deviation above the mean, while the dotted line and lighter shading shows concentration at one standard deviation below the mean. The curve of the lines is due to this being a negative binomial model.

**Table 5.5: Legislative Commitment and Lawmaking Productivity**

| | DV=Action in Committee | DV=Action Beyond Committee | DV=Pass in the House | DV=Became Law |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 |
| Intensity | 0.50 *** | 0.48 *** | 0.45 *** | 0.30 *** |
| | (0.06) | (0.06) | (0.07) | (0.09) |
| Concentration | -0.13 * | -0.09 | -0.12 # | -0.17 # |
| | (0.06) | (0.07) | (0.07) | (0.10) |
| Intensity X Concentration | 0.10 *** | 0.07 * | 0.07 * | 0.11 ** |
| | (0.02) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.04) |
| Democrat | -0.09 | -0.32 *** | -0.34 *** | -0.36 *** |
| | (0.06) | (0.07) | (0.08) | (0.09) |
| Majority | 0.70 *** | 1.05 *** | 1.04 *** | 0.99 *** |
| | (0.08) | (0.10) | (0.11) | (0.13) |
| Seniority | 0.01 | 0.02 | 0.01 | 0.02 # |
| | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) |
| Party Leader | 0.02 | -0.03 | -0.06 | 0.18 |
| | (0.09) | (0.11) | (0.12) | (0.13) |
| Committee Leader | 0.36 *** | 0.53 *** | 0.51 *** | 0.54 *** |
| | (0.09) | (0.10) | (0.11) | (0.14) |
| Exclusive Committee | -0.34 *** | -0.35 *** | -0.34 *** | -0.44 *** |
| | (0.06) | (0.07) | (0.07) | (0.09) |
| Ideol. Dist. to Median | -0.57 *** | -0.16 | -0.10 | -0.26 |
| | (0.17) | (0.20) | (0.22) | (0.26) |
| Female | -0.10 | 0.04 | 0.03 | -0.06 |
| | (0.09) | (0.10) | (0.11) | (0.13) |
| Nonwhite | 0.04 | 0.15 | 0.20 | 0.21 |
| | (0.10) | (0.11) | (0.12) | (0.15) |
| Delegation Size | -0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | -0.00 |
| | (0.00) | (0.00) | (0.00) | (0.00) |
| Previous Vote Shae | -0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| | (0.00) | (0.00) | (0.00) | (0.00) |
| Constant | -1.36 *** | -2.08 *** | -2.16 *** | -2.56 *** |
| | (0.23) | (0.26) | (0.28) | (0.33) |
| Pseudo $R^2$ | 0.36 | 0.33 | 0.29 | 0.21 |
| N | 3292 | 3292 | 3292 | 3292 |

*Note: Cell entries are negative binomial regression coefficients with robust standard errors, clustering on the individual MC. The dependent variables are counts of how many bills introduced by the MC in a term get to that stage in that term. *** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05; # p < 0.1.*

**Figure 5.1: Commitment and Legislative Productivity**




*Note: Figures display predicted values for measures of legislative productivity at different levels of intensity. The darker shading and solid line shows the predicted values and confidence interval for the dependent variable when the MC has a concentration score that is one standard deviation above the mean, and the dotted line and lighter shading shows concentration at one standard deviation below the mean.*

The different panels in Figure 5.1 are indicative of the legislative benefits of MCs being committed to legislating. At lower levels of intensity, there is no difference in the legislative productivity of members whose agendas are concentrated (i.e. specialized and consistent) and those that are not. However, as intensity approaches the third quartile (an intensity score of about three, corresponding to about 14 introduced bills), the predicted values for the dependent variables begin to diverge based on MCs' levels of concentration. MCs who are more concentrated than average begin to see greater returns in terms of legislative productivity than

their colleagues who are equally active legislators but are not as concentrated. The differences in the predicted values are clearest at the earliest stages of the legislative process, when counting the number of a MC's bills that receive attention in the committee to which they are referred. However, the effects are still present at all stages, all the way up to the number of a MC's bills that become law. In short, the results in these plots are evidence of a legislative benefit to legislative commitment: given similarly high levels of legislative activity, members that are more committed by pursuing a concentrated agenda are relatively more productive. One might say that these MCs who invest in lawmaking get "more bang for their buck."

Another way of assessing how commitment is related to legislative outcomes is to look for a relationship between commitment and the fraction of a MC's bills that reach different stages. In other words, this is studying commitment's relationship to legislative efficiency instead of legislative productivity. Along with seeing more bills make progress towards becoming law, commitment might also be associated with members seeing a larger proportion of their bills making such progress. To test this, I use a similar modeling strategy as I did in testing legislative productivity, but I use as my dependent variable the fraction of a member's legislation that proceeds from one stage of the legislative process to another. This means dividing the number of an MC's bills that progress to one stage of the legislative process by the total number of bills that made it to the previous stage. Additionally, because this is not a count variable, I use OLS regression models instead of negative binomial matters; I continue to use robust standard errors clustered on member.

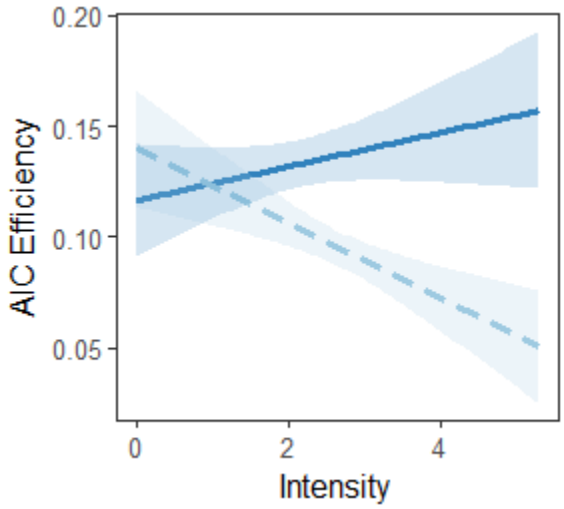
The results for four models of legislative efficiency are displayed in Table 5.6. The four models correspond with efficiency at each the stage of the legislative process: the proportion of

**Table 5.6: Legislative Commitment and Lawmaking Efficiency**

| | DV= Action in Committee/Bills | DV= Action Beyond Committee/AIC | DV= Pass/AIC | DV= Law/Pass |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 |
| Intensity | -0.03 *** | 0.02 | -0.04 | -0.10 * |
| | (0.01) | (0.03) | (0.02) | (0.04) |
| Concentration | -0.01 # | 0.02 | -0.04 | -0.06 |
| | (0.01) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.04) |
| Intensity X Concentration | 0.01 *** | -0.02 | 0.01 | 0.03 |
| | (0.00) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.02) |
| Democrat | -0.01 | -0.17 *** | -0.04 # | 0.01 |
| | (0.01) | (0.04) | (0.02) | (0.03) |
| Majority | 0.06 *** | 0.18 *** | -0.04 | -0.06 |
| | (0.01) | (0.05) | (0.04) | (0.05) |
| Seniority | 0.00 | 0.01 | -0.00 | 0.00 |
| | (0.00) | (0.00) | (0.00) | (0.00) |
| Party Leader | 0.01 | -0.05 | -0.02 | 0.14 ** |
| | (0.01) | (0.05) | (0.04) | (0.04) |
| Committee Leader | 0.04 *** | 0.16 ** | -0.01 | 0.05 |
| | (0.01) | (0.06) | (0.03) | (0.04) |
| Exclusive Committee | -0.03 *** | -0.00 | 0.00 | -0.03 |
| | (0.01) | (0.03) | (0.02) | (0.03) |
| Dist. to Chamber Median | -0.07 *** | 0.05 | -0.03 | -0.11 |
| | (0.02) | (0.11) | (0.07) | (0.08) |
| Woman | -0.01 | 0.06 | -0.02 | 0.01 |
| | (0.01) | (0.05) | (0.03) | (0.04) |
| Nonwhite | 0.01 | 0.11 * | 0.06 | -0.04 |
| | (0.01) | (0.05) | (0.04) | (0.04) |
| Delegation Size | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | -0.00 |
| | (0.00) | (0.00) | (0.00) | (0.00) |
| Previous Vote Share | 0.00 | 0.00 | -0.00 | 0.00 |
| | (0.00) | (0.00) | (0.00) | (0.00) |
| Constant | 0.14 *** | 0.42 ** | 1.01 *** | 0.71 *** |
| | (0.02) | (0.14) | (0.09) | (0.12) |
| R | 0.12 | 0.06 | 0.01 | 0.03 |
| N | 3283 | 1796 | 1488 | 1292 |

*Note: Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients with robust standard errors, clustering on the individual MC. The dependent variables are ratios of how many bills introduced by the MC get to each lawmaking stage, divided by how many bills made it to the prior stage. *** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05; # p < 0.1. Ns decrease because some MCs do not get any bills to that stage.*

**Figure 5.2: Commitment and Lawmaking Efficiency**




*Note: Figure displays predicted values for ratio of introduced bills that advance to receive action at the committee stage at different levels of intensity. The darker shading and solid line shows the predicted values and confidence interval for the dependent variable when the MC has a concentration score that is one standard deviation above the mean, and the dotted line and lighter shading shows concentration at one standard deviation below the mean.*

sponsored bills that receive action in committee, the proportion of bills that receive attention in committee that advance out of committee, the proportion of bills that advance out of committee that pass the chamber, and the proportion of bills that pass that chamber that eventually become law. As with the models for legislative productivity, the coefficient of interest is the interaction term for intensity and concentration. As the table indicates, this coefficient is only statistically significant in the first model, which tests for a relationship between the components of investment and the proportion of sponsored bills that are taken up by a committee. Yet while this is the only stage of the legislative process where intensity and concentration have an interactive relationship, this finding is substantively interesting. To aid in interpreting the interaction term, I provide a plot of predicted values in Figure 5.2. On this plot, the y-axis is the fraction the bills that a member introduces that receive attention in a committee, and the x-axis is legislative

intensity. Again, the two lines display the predicted values for the dependent variable at two different levels of concentration, one standard deviation above and below the mean. As the figure displays, for members who are more concentrated that average, the proportion of their bills that receive action in committee increases slightly as members increase their legislative intensity. However, for members that are less concentrated than average, additional legislative intensity does not pay off. Members with diluted (unconcentrated) agendas see lower levels of legislative efficiency associated with increased intensity. What this suggests substantively is that members who are not focused in their legislative activities do not get the same kind of return on their investment as a member with a more focused agenda. Another way to think about this is that the plot shows that using bill sponsorship as a means to take positions across many issues, while it might have some advantage as a campaign tactic, does not result in greater legislative productivity.

These models of the relationship between legislative outcomes and the components of legislative commitment provide evidence that one of the benefits associated with having an intense, specialized, and consistent agenda is enhanced legislative productivity and efficiency. This finding hearkens back to one of my motivations for investigating legislative commitment. In Chapter 2, I noted that noted policy wonk Henry Waxman once stated that sustained activity and focus was a recipe for legislative success in Congress. Additionally, in their study of legislative effectiveness, Volden and Wiseman (2014) noted the need for studies that could test whether specialization was indeed a "habit of successful lawmakers" as they suggested. The findings in this section help to answer these questions. When they commit to lawmaking by adopting a legislative strategy characterized by intensity, specialization, and consistency, members of

Congress are more productive legislators and, at least at the critical early stages of the legislative process, more efficient.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I tested for relationships between commitment and the satisfaction of MCs' electoral goals, their desire for influence in Congress, their career ambitions beyond Congress, and their legislative and policymaking objectives. As would be expected in observing the actions of strategic politicians, the results suggest that some of the costs and benefits that flow from legislative commitment are diffuse. I found evidence that members face a slight electoral penalty for legislative commitment and might receive a slight career benefit in terms of advancing to positions of committee leadership. However, the most notable finding of the chapter comes from the results of tests for associations between commitment and legislative productivity and efficiency. Being a master of the public business may have only weak connections to members' non-policy-related objectives, but members that are policy wonks display better legislative outcomes as compared to their colleagues who do not invest in lawmaking.

In a sense, the results in this chapter make a simple point: if members want to be successful lawmakers, they are more likely to be if they generate a focused, coherent legislative agenda and keep working on it across time. More broadly, this chapter serves as additional evidence that MCs are competent strategic actors who allocate time and resources appropriately to meet their goals. Committing to lawmaking appears to be related to MCs being successful legislators without bearing crippling electoral or career costs. In conjunction with the results I presented in Chapter 4 regarding how political context and personal characteristics modify the

prospective costs and benefits of investing in policy, this analysis underscores that MCs are skilled at managing the tradeoffs associated with a congressional career. Yet even as my work has underscored this point, it has also pointed to a variety of implications and raised questions about how MCs operate as policymakers. I will turn my attention to reviewing these matters up next, in the concluding chapter.

## CHAPTER 6: Studying Policy Wonks Today and in the Future

In their 2016 book, *Relic: How Our Constitution Undermines Effective Government – And Why We Need a More Powerful Presidency*, two scholars of the American presidency, William Howell and Terry Moe, give a brutal assessment of Congress's policymaking capacity. Howell and Moe's broadside has three salvos. First, they point out that members of Congress are parochial, concerned primarily with protecting special interests in their districts. Second, they argue that congressional policymaking is myopic, generating policies that frontload benefits and ignore long-term consequences. Finally, Howell and Moe underscore that the joint effect of this parochialism and myopia seriously undermines principles of good bureaucratic design, leading to agency duplication, overlap, and mismatch. Howell and Moe's solution is to make a major constitutional fix: give the presidency a fast-track legislative proposal power.

As I write this in the run-up to the 2018 midterm elections, it is fair to say that there would be many opponents to giving the presidency additional powers.[22] However, the wisdom of Howell and Moe's proposed reform is a question to engage with another day. Their and others' critiques of Congress are cogent and forceful, backed up by persuasive research that speaks to American governmental dysfunction. I fully agree with the notion that today's political environment should prompt political leaders, citizens, and scholars to contemplate tinkering with American lawmaking institutions. Reasonable people can agree that the bottoming out of trust in

[22] I am not the first observer of Congress to have this response to Howell and Moe's work. For a similar take, see Burgat and Kosar (2017).

government and the seeming inability of government to get ahead of looming crises is a cause for serious concern. It may be that major reforms are in order.

However, I have shown in this dissertation that it is not necessary to give up on Congress. There are many members of Congress who *are* dedicated legislators. Some MCs have consistent, specialized, and active agendas, as we would expect of Madison and Hamilton's masters of the public business. Furthermore, I have presented evidence that these MCs see results, with more of their bills advancing in the legislative process. This finding accords with observations made by Henry Waxman, who I have referenced in the preceding chapters. Waxman might agree with many of Howell and Moe's critiques of Congress. In the closing pages of his memoir, he writes that his career in Congress taught him that "significant achievements often seem likely to be long, hard, and wearying" (Waxman and Green 2009, 224). But Waxman's conclusion is quite different: he underscores that with the right legislative strategy, it is possible for MCs to do "good work [that] can make a difference in the lives of millions of Americans – which, in the end, is a lawmaker's highest purpose" (Waxman and Green 2009, 224).

Waxman's point echoes how the Framers felt about lawmakers. Hamilton, Madison, and their colleagues knew that governing a republic would be difficult, and they still designed the American constitutional system to be, first, built on the foundation of legislative power and, second, reliant on the work of representatives who become policy wonks. Thus, rather than further aggrandizing the presidency, I join those who argue that it is time to think about institutional reforms that can help rehabilitate Congress's legislative capacity. However, as we contemplate changing the gears in the black box of federal policymaking, caution is in order. As I described in my opening chapter, political scientists have done far less research on the

antecedents and consequences of legislative entrepreneurship than they have on other aspects of legislative behavior. Put simply, to date there is not a good answer to the question of why some MCs are policy wonks while others are not.

My work is this dissertation is a step towards providing such insight. With an eye to the normative concerns about the performance of Congress and its members, I have argued that it is important to study policy wonks, have provided a conceptual discussion of what this term means, outlined a theoretical and empirical framework for studying this behavior, and have conducted a set of analyses designed to explain variation in the degree to which MCs are masters of the public business. My research builds on that of other scholars who have studied policy entrepreneurship, but it is unique in that I make policy wonks my primary empirical and theoretical focus. The research strategy I have presented thus provides a launching point for a series of studies that can help political scientists learn more about Madison and Hamilton's legislators, as well as inform citizens and leaders as they consider ways to strengthen Congress as the central institution of national policymaking.

**Summary of Research and Implications**

I view the overall takeaway from this dissertation as twofold. First, by providing a conceptualization and operationalization of legislative commitment, I have demonstrated that focusing on policy wonks can be a fruitful line of investigation for congressional scholars. In the first three chapters, I described an approach for measuring the extent which MC commit to legislating, and I drew on previous scholarship to make predictions about the factors that are related to MCs being policy wonks in Congress. In doing so, I established that the behavior of policy wonks is a crucial theoretical element in American constitutional design, that it relates

closely with contemporary concerns about Congress's policymaking capacity, and that there are workable research strategies for investigating this congressional behavior.

The second major conclusion I draw from this research is that legislative commitment is a predictable behavior, structured by same forces that scholars typically associate with other congressional activities. In Chapter 4, I demonstrated that legislative commitment has associations with the institutional positions of MCs, the contextual features of their districts, and MCs' personal characteristics. While not all my results were in line with my expectations, they do validate the idea that members of Congress commit to legislating as a function of the perceived costs and benefits of doing so. Factors like holding privileged institutional positions or the extent to which constituents demand policy-based representation can decrease costs and increase potential benefits of policy-related activities, and my results echo this. The results in Chapter 5 also support the idea that MCs choose to commit to legislating strategically. My analysis provides evidence that MCs decide to commit to legislating based on a rational, strategic calculation. My results showed that representatives do not suffer dramatic electoral penalties when they behave as a policy wonk and, further, that committing to legislating is associated with career advancement and legislative effectiveness.

The normative implications of these findings are mixed. Madison and Hamilton expected that Congress would self-populate with masters of the public business. I think this is true, because I can identify members based on their legislative commitment score who are dedicated lawmakers. However, the institutional incentives in Congress are not all aligned to promote this outcome. Perhaps most importantly, MCs do not have to be policy wonks to win elections, and the evidence does not suggest that being committed to legislating is met with much electoral

response. In fact, perhaps unsettlingly so, my findings suggest that too much electoral competition in Congress might actually be a bad thing for institutional capacity. Members seem more comfortable investing in lawmaking when they are in the majority, more senior, and in leadership positions, while shifts in majority control have disruptive effects. These findings should also be considered in light of the intense competition for control of the chamber, which likely creates uncertainty and drives members to spend time supporting the party.

Another normatively worrisome result from this research is the substantial differences between how MCs represent affluent and less-affluent populations. I find that whether an MC is a policy wonk is related to the economic status of an MCs constituency. Scholars have contended with the problem of inequality in representation in the past, with disturbing findings about the likelihood that elite interests dominate over those of the working class (see, e.g., Gilens 2014). My results lend strength to this viewpoint. If poorer constituents have MCs that are less devoted to lawmaking, there is no surprise that these citizens' preferences are less likely to be reflected in the crafting and implementation of national policy.

What should prospective institutional tinkerers make of these results? First, much is uncertain. MCs may end up being policy wonks for idiosyncratic reasons, and nothing in my results suggests that any single factor is determinative. However, this does not mean that reforms that would support legislating in Congress would be useless. Clearly, some MCs arrive in Congress and want to legislate, and MCs do it even when the benefits are diffuse. There is also enough evidence here for me to feel comfortable saying that MCs' lawmaking patterns are structured by cost-benefit analyses, meaning that MCs should be responsive to measures that would decrease the costs of legislating to them and increase the potential benefits. There are a

variety of proposals that might build off this finding, some of which have already been suggested by Congress watchers (see, e.g., Burgat and Kosar 2017; Carrington 2018; Congressional Galston 2012; Mills and Selin 2017, Reynolds 2015). While crafting a specific proposal is a project for the future, my general recommendation would be to keep in mind this critical finding: during the time I examine, individual MCs were working to generate policy ideas, and the pattern of them doing so demonstrates that they did so in response to incentives. This can be a foundation for future reforms.

**Future Paths for Research**

My work in this dissertation opens the door to a fruitful research agenda. One extension will be to expand the temporal scope of the project. I studied ten Congresses in this project, which was an adequate place to begin, but expanding the timeframe of the analysis both backwards and forwards could offer more insights. Congress was a very different place in the 1980s prior to the Republican takeover. A long period of stable Democratic control meant that many members spent their entire careers in the majority, amassing seniority, and holding committee leadership positions. Given the relationship I find between MCs being policy wonks and these institutional positions, I suspect that the dynamics shaping this behavior in the 1980s were quite different and would merit additional investigation. The same is likely true of the period from 2008 until today. The increasingly intense competition for congressional control and fierce partisanship in the chamber have seemed to only amplify of late. Whether this is having a corrosive impact on MCs' attending to policy work is simply unknown. With additional data gathering, an addition to this study could provide a better sense for how MCs have changed (or not) as lawmakers across time.

Along with getting a wider view, a closer-up examination of legislating is also in order. As I have referenced, Fenno's observational studies, and especially *Representation at the Grassroots*, provided great theoretical insights. A return to this style of scholarship, to see firsthand how lawmaking is done in the tumultuous period of the Trump administration, would lend substantial credibility to this research. In my view, a key assumption needs to be tested about legislative behavior: just how hard *is it* to legislate? The entire cost-benefit framework that I apply to studying policy-related behavior in this dissertation is premised on the idea that writing legislation is resource intensive. I argue that members have to be making a strategic choice about how to divide their energies across policy and non-policy behaviors, but this is difficult to claim in the abstract. If I could provide a close account of a bill writing process, I would have a better sense of the costs and benefits involved, as well as the strategic motivations that go into writing legislation. Fieldwork in the next year can help to validate the research.

Another avenue forward is to continue to refine the measurement strategy I used in this project. I believe it is appropriate to use the components of intensity, specialization, and consistency as guides for assessing whether MCs are masters of the public business. However, I think there are ways to improve my approach. Figuring out how to distinguish wonks and non-wonks and how to construct a continuous measure were major obstacles in this project. Experimenting with different weighting schemes and different ways to combine the components could improve the measure's reliability and precision. Thinking about how to incorporate other forms of legislative activity would also be helpful. I focused on bill sponsorship, which I believe is a good proxy for other kinds of legislative behavior. However, leveraging other behaviors like amendments and cosponsorship would be an advance. There may also be a way to get into the

text of legislation, using the content of bills to characterize their complexity, their similarity to other pieces of legislation, and other markers that would reflect how much time and effort went into their design.

More attention to political communication would also enhance the project. Although I gathered some stories and profiles of individual MCs for this project, a more robust and comprehensive effort to study how policy wonks are covered by the media would add an additional dimension. From previous work, we know that some MCs work to build an impression of influence, taking credit for accomplishments and communicating this with constituents (Grimmer, Westwood, and Messing 2014). However, there is very likely variation in the extent to which policy wonks engage in this behavior and their skill at doing so. Whether a policy wonk is successful could be contingent in part on his or her communication strategy, and it is also possible that some MCs affect the personae of a policy wonk but do not back this up with legislative accomplishments. If the face of policy wonks is different than the MCs that are doing the work, then there may be a mismatch between what citizens think Congress is doing and what is really happening.

Finally, the finding that MCs from less affluent districts are less committed to legislating merits additional study. Increasing inequality is one of the key economic and social trends in the first quarter of the 21st century. Additionally, the continued salience of identity politics in the first term of the Trump administration suggests that MCs may find that playing to racial, ethnic, and economic anxieties is a politically expedient strategy. The implications for policymaking could be very serious. If policies are designed to appeal to citizens' sense of social identity or if government policy continues to be geared towards elite preferences, it is hard to imagine trust in

government recovering or improvements in congressional lawmaking efficiency. I am prepared to accept the possibility that the best days of the policy wonk are behind and ahead of us; it seems unlikely that it is today.

**Closing Thoughts**

I opened this dissertation with the claim that studying Congress in the first quarter of the 21st century is not for the faint of heart. Of course, I could name any number of professions that are more harrowing and at least as intellectually rigorous as being a legislative scholar. But, truly, conducting research about an institution that is so broadly criticized and held in such low regard does take a certain toll. At the most quotidian level, it makes for tough conversations when someone asks what you do for a living. At the most existential, it provokes a certain anxiety about the prospects for democratic governance. Learning about the pathologies of democratic institutions, including Congress, raises fears about the ability of societies to organize politically, overcome collective action problems, and address the problems that citizens face.

Focusing on policy wonks offers something of a respite. Madison and Hamilton believed – or perhaps they had faith – that representatives would become masters of the public business. As I have described, there are certainly MCs that live up to their expectations. Policy wonks like those I have examined in this project adopt intense, specialized, and consistent legislative agendas, and, in doing so, they get things done for their constituents and the nation. Even so, there remain unanswered questions about why MCs do this, what they stand to gain or lose from it, and whether anything can be done to support this normatively desirable behavior.

More work needs to be done on each of these fronts. However, as I move forward, I am confident that advancing this research agenda can help scholars to teach students about why

Congress works or doesn't, it can inform the decisions of voters, and it can guide the actions of reformers who want to see the institution satisfy its constitutional purpose. To extent that this helps a legislative scholar sleep easier in the future, so much the better.

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