

Team Players: How Committee Staffers Pave the Way for Legislative Action in Congress

Casey Burgat and Charlie Hunt

Abstract

Even in an era when much of the policymaking in Congress is governed by partisanship and party leadership, congressional committees continue to be engines for legislative activity. It is therefore crucial that we understand how to make committees as efficient and productive as possible. One facet of committee operation that has until now been overlooked in the literature on congressional productivity is how staffers enable committees to fulfill their jurisdictional responsibilities. To assess this fully, we make two theoretical observations: first, that different types of committees have different legislative needs; and second, that based on their expertise and experience, some staffers are better positioned than others to satisfy these needs. In this study, we argue first that committee staffers are crucial drivers of legislative productivity for the committees in which they work; and second, that committees are most productive when they are purposefully staffed with aides whose experience and expertise best fit the legislative needs of that committee. We propose a Theory of Purposeful Staffing of Committees, and test our hypotheses using an original dataset of all House committees, committee staff, and legislative output data from 2001-2016. Our findings strongly reflect our expectation that committees are far more productive when outfitted with staff whose abilities are well-fit to its needs.

Prepared for presentation at the State of Congressional Capacity Conference; New America Foundation, Washington, DC; March 1-2, 2018

Much of the scholarship on policymaking and legislative productivity in Congress in recent years has focused primarily on partisanship (i.e., Lee 2009), the centralization of policy crafting in congressional leaders (Curry 2015), and their multifaceted effects on who dictates the policymaking process and legislative outcomes. While not misplaced, this focus can shortchange some of the many important ways in which Congress can improve the quality and quantity of their legislative output, particularly within the committee process by which Congress is supposed to develop policy and push it through the chambers.

Congressional committees and the legislative outcomes they produce remain relevant in a number of important ways. From a policymaking perspective, committees are known as the places where issue expertise resides and true deliberation on policy alternatives can occur. This is most often researched from the perspective of lawmakers and the expertise, experience, and policy interests they possess. Membership on committees is often purposeful, where members are assigned based on educational, occupational, or geographic interest in a particular policy area, in part because this matching is likely to lead to legislative productivity ([Francis and Bramlett 2017](#)). Committees delineate these jurisdictions in order to provide increased attention to specific issue areas. In doing so, the chambers achieve a division of labor that allows lawmaker specialization across the vast number of government issues, ultimately resulting in a more efficient use of member time and more reasoned, thoughtful policy.

In this project, however, we argue that the advantages committees provide in terms of cultivating issue specialization and efficiency are at least as, and perhaps even more, relevant in the composition of committee staff. We will show that committees are purposefully staffed in order to execute on their jurisdictional expectations, as well as on the motivations of their members. As a result, committees are demonstrably more productive on multiple crucial

measures when equipped with the right staff. We define the “right staff” as those whose job descriptions match in substance two of the types of committees first delineated by Fenno ([1973](#)) -- policy and constituency-oriented reelection committees. Even when controlling for specific committee, chairperson attributes, majority/minority status in both chambers, and other political and committee-level variables, we find that staff whose experience is tailored to that type of committee are responsible for a significant boost in committee legislative output on three crucial measures.

This research closes a critical gap in our understanding of how committees operate and the actual driving forces behind their productivity as the legislative engines of Congress. It extends to congressional staff the nuances of policy specialization we apply to lawmakers, and it shows that committees not only take these staffer-level characteristics into account, but that they are wise to do so due to the resulting boost in certain types of legislative productivity. Our results should induce congressional scholars to rethink how staffers can be best used to increase capacity in each chamber, and how committees with different substantive goals might employ more effective types of staffing to further increase legislative output and efficiency.

Previous Research on Congressional Staff

Not long after the boom in the number of congressional aides granted to lawmakers and committees following the Legislative Reorganization Acts (LRA) of 1946 and 1970 did congressional scholars begin to analyze their roles within congressional offices. Early congressional staffing studies focused primarily on aide demographics and educational background variation (Kofmehl, n.d.; Hammond 1975; Fox and Hammond 1977; Hammond 1984), but soon transitioned into identifying how hired staffers affect the work of their bosses and where they fit into the legislative process on Capitol Hill.

Given substantial increases in the size of congressional districts, as well as the scope and complexity of government (Wilson 1989; Davidson et al. 2017; Leal and Hess 2004), researchers have found that members have become increasingly reliant on hired aides to help execute all aspects of their jobs (Hall 1998; Malbin 1980). Whereas in previous eras lawmakers made use of staffers largely for administrative, secretarial, and constituent service duties, a greater division of labor within congressional offices has allowed staffers to become necessary institutional resources for lawmakers to accomplish legislative and communications activities, as well (Romzek and Utter 1997; Price 1971; Hall 1998; C. DeGregorio 1988). As put by Fox and Hammond, “Congressmen have come to view staff assistance as important to policy formation, to constituent service, and to the power acquisition that is central to congressional activity” (Fox and Hammond 1977).

Most scholarly attention has focused specifically on the policy aides that are most intimately involved in crafting, negotiating, and advancing proposals through the legislative process, particularly in efforts to determine their degrees and conditions for influencing the actions of their member-bosses (C. A. DeGregorio 2010; C. DeGregorio and Snider 1995; Fox and Hammond 1977; Hammond 1996; Patterson 1970; Price 1971). Through largely observational analyses, certain policy aides were regularly found to impact the policy focuses and decisions of lawmakers (Kingdon 1989). Malbin (1980) referred to such aides as ‘unelected representatives.’ Others classified influential aides as ‘unelected issue leaders’ (C. A. DeGregorio 2010; Hammond 1996) and ‘political professionals’ (Romzek and Utter 1997), though conditioned their influence on experience levels (C. A. DeGregorio 2010) or the degrees to which member’s trusted their loyalty (C. DeGregorio 1995).

In an effort to keep pace with an explosion of staffing and bureaucratic specialization within the executive branch, as well as to help lawmakers cope with their expanding workloads, the 1946 and 1970 LRAs also increased staffing capacity at the committee level. In contrast to personal office staffers, committee aides are devoted full time to their committee's specific jurisdictional and policy issue areas "to provide committees with substantive expertise relevant to the subject matter of each committee" (Deering and Smith 1997, 163).

Unsurprisingly, scholars have found even increased member reliance on committee aides for policy helps largely due to their greater experience levels and longer congressional tenures (Aberbach 1987; Brady 1981; C. DeGregorio 1988; Malbin 1980; Price 1972; Salisbury and Shepsle 1981; Deering and Smith 1997). However, just as there are differences in expertise and influence within personal offices, studies have found not all committee staffers automatically enjoy influential status. After observing Senate committee activities and procedures, Price (1971; 1972) makes the distinction between 'policy entrepreneurs' and 'policy professionals'-- the former are in constant search of opportunities for the implementation of policy solutions, whereas the later are more willing to let committee members dictate where their policy attention should be spent. In either case, the committee staffer is viewed by lawmakers as a vital repository of long-serving institutional memory and issue area expertise who contributes vitally to committee production. Polsby (1969) writes that the specialization and issue area expertise of committee staffers allows for lawmakers to "increase the efficiency of their explicit analytical activities and enhanc[e] their own knowledge and power" (70-71).

Theory and Empirical Expectations

Though often they remain nameless to the general public, and even to other legislative offices, much of the work done on Capitol Hill is executed by these congressional staffers. Given the harsh time constraints and the vast demands of their position each member faces, lawmakers rely heavily on their hired aides. This member reliance on aides exists not just because lawmakers would never be able to adequately respond to the endless list constituent service, policymaking, and communications duties required of their office without staffers, but also because aides often bring their own specialized experience and expertise in accomplishing these varying tasks (Romzek and Utter 1997). Thus, it is not surprising that congressional studies and lawmakers themselves regularly contend that congressional staffers increase the capacity of lawmakers and the institution (Malbin 1980).

Though typically studied only within personal offices, the staffer and increased capacity relationship has largely been ignored in the very places most scholars assume staffer expertise to be at their highest levels and impact on legislative activity to be greatest: congressional committees. A primary contention of this project is that this member reliance, and staffer capacity effects on increased productivity, is even more pronounced at the committee level.

As ample evidence has shown, members rely on their personal staffers to create a more efficient, more productive operation of their personal office-enterprise. Dependence of committee members on committee staffers is even more pronounced for at least two reasons. First, and most importantly, committee activities are but one subset of a member's responsibilities and attention. Put directly, lawmakers only spend a portion of their time and attention on matters within their assigned committees; for committee aides, on the other hand, committee matters make up their entire job description.

Committee staffers largely serve at the discretion of the chair or ranking member depending on which party employs them, and are expected to consistently execute on the priorities of their respective party's leaders and committee members even when members are not actively engaged in committee activities. These member priorities manifest into a variety of committee outputs that are largely developed, researched, and advanced by full-time committee aides. In other words, common committee outputs---policy creation, oversight activities, and committee hearings---all occur and require significant and regular staffer attention relatively independent of committee members. Once the direction and focus of the committee is set by its leaders and members, much of the work towards specific outputs is executed by its aides. Importantly, members often act on the work of committee aides only at the culmination of staff work, such as voting to report a bill out of committee that was largely researched, negotiated, and written by committee aides.

Another reason member reliance is more pronounced at the committee level is committee staffers are viewed as distinct sources of issue expertise and institutional memory on the issues within each committee jurisdiction, and represent an invaluable resource for the committee to effectively operate. This is true for a variety of reasons. First, committee aides typically maintain longer congressional tenures than staffers employed in personal offices. This longer service allows staffers to become well-versed in the ways of the Hill, develop all-important contacts and relationships across offices and parties, and become fluent in the intricacies of legislative research, policy crafting, and political motivations that often propel or stifle legislative action.

Second, committee staffers enjoy a more limited issue portfolio than personal aides. Whereas committee staffers are expected to become experts on the issues relevant to their committee's jurisdiction, personal office staffers are more policy generalists whose portfolios are

so broad that issue area expertise is much harder to develop. More narrow policy focus allows for committee aides to be better-versed in the minutia of policy details, likely obstacles, and legislative histories that are vital to successful policy creation. Moreover, more tenured aides with concentrated portfolios allow for committee staffers to develop and maintain relationships with policy stakeholders and pivotal players within and outside the institution, identify policy windows for legislative entrepreneurship, as well as better anticipate likely consequences and costs associated with their legislative proposals.

Third, because committee staffers are employed by the entire committee rather than a member facing reelection every two years, committee work is often accompanied with less political volatility. As such, committees offer staffers an opportunity to execute on issues in more depth with less regard to the day-to-day political happenings of the institution. For staffers who have committed to a career in Congress, committees provide them a more concentrated issue portfolio and a more stable source of employment when compared to personal offices where turnover among staffers is high and tenures are far shorter.

It is already apparent that staff support is not only helpful, but necessary to legislative productivity for individual members of Congress, congressional committees, and for the institution as a whole. But, the above reasons should lead us to expect that committee staff are just as, and likely even more essential to the operations of committees and serving the needs of its elected members than the literature finds with personal staffers. After all, “Committee staff influence the agenda-setting decisions of chairs, advocate or even champion legislative proposals, conduct investigations, negotiate on behalf of committees and their chairs, and work to build coalitions in committee, on the floor, and in conference. The assistance of quality staff can give a committee...a substantial advantage over competitors in legislative politics” (Deering

and Smith 1997). At a time when concerns about congressional gridlock and productivity are paramount, increased staffer support should increase the ability of a committee to function, produce, and execute on its specific priorities¹. Therefore:

Hypothesis 1: The higher the capacity of congressional committee staff, the greater the legislative output will be in committees.

But, as congressional observers and members alike readily admit, not all committees are created equal. Congressional committees vary in many ways, from the sizes of their membership and appropriations to their respective jurisdictions, purposes, and key issue areas. Some committees, such as the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, function primarily as oversight bodies whose main goal is investigate and deter government waste, fraud, and abuse. Other committees, like the House Committees on Financial Services and Energy and Commerce are more policy-laden with intricate and uber-complicated matters that affect huge portions of the American public and economy. Still others have more of an intra-chamber focus, whose jurisdictions and issue responsibilities inevitably affect all other members within the chamber. The House Committees on Rules and Appropriations are prime examples.

As Richard Fenno famously articulated *Congressmen in Committees* (Fenno 1973), differences in committee assignments for members are best understood through the lens of a

¹ We propose that committees' ability and decision to take up and accomplish specific legislative goals is conditioned on whether they have the necessary staff capacity to accomplish them. A possible alternative explanation for the importance of staff reverses this causal effect: In this line of thinking, committees decide to pursue certain types of legislative activity, and then staff their committees based on these specific goals. We believe this proposition is faulty on a theoretical level since appropriations for committees (and therefore for staffing decisions) are set by Congress in advance of each year, so within-year staffing adjustments are difficult logistically and would require supplemental appropriations. On an empirical level, we could lag our staffing variables by one year; if our effects held, then it is difficult to argue that the decision to act legislatively comes first rather than staff capacity. However, in two of the years in our sample, party switches in control of the House precipitated large staff changes that cause us to drop observations. Second, and more importantly, lagging these variables creates a mismatch in all years between election years and non-election years: in effect, non-election year staffing is predicting election year outputs, and vice versa. Even so, lagging preserves most, though not all, of our effects.

lawmaker's personal goals as a Representative.² In interviewing members of twelve different committees, Fenno concluded three primary goals could largely explain members' committee pursuits: reelection, good public policy, and engendering influence within the chamber. Subsequent interviews with members regarding their views of the differences between congressional committees conducted by Bullock (1976) and Deering and Smith (1984) confirm the bulk of Fenno's findings.

Due to these differences in committee types, and of particular interest for this project, committees differ in their value to lawmakers in their pursuit of their individual goals. In connection with Fenno's three goals, and as originally operationalized by Deering and Smith (1984), lawmakers view different committees as either *prestige*, *policy*, and *constituent service* committees, and their service on these committees assists in members executing on their primary motivation.³ As suggested by the names, prestige committees are more hospitable to legislators advancing their individual goals of maintaining and increasing their influence, power, and reputation within the chamber; policy committees allow for more focused attention on legislative solutions to national problems and attract more issue-minded members; and constituent service committees are viewed by members as extensions of their district and grant members primarily motivated by reelection an opportunity to provide representation and concentrated benefits to their constituents (74-75). Our analysis will focus primarily on *policy* and *constituent service* committees, while re-assigning *prestige* committees to one of the two former types.⁴

² Congressional scholars have regularly adopted this goal-motivated framework in explaining lawmaker activity (Mayhew 1974, 2008; Fiorina 1989; Adler and Lapinski 1997).

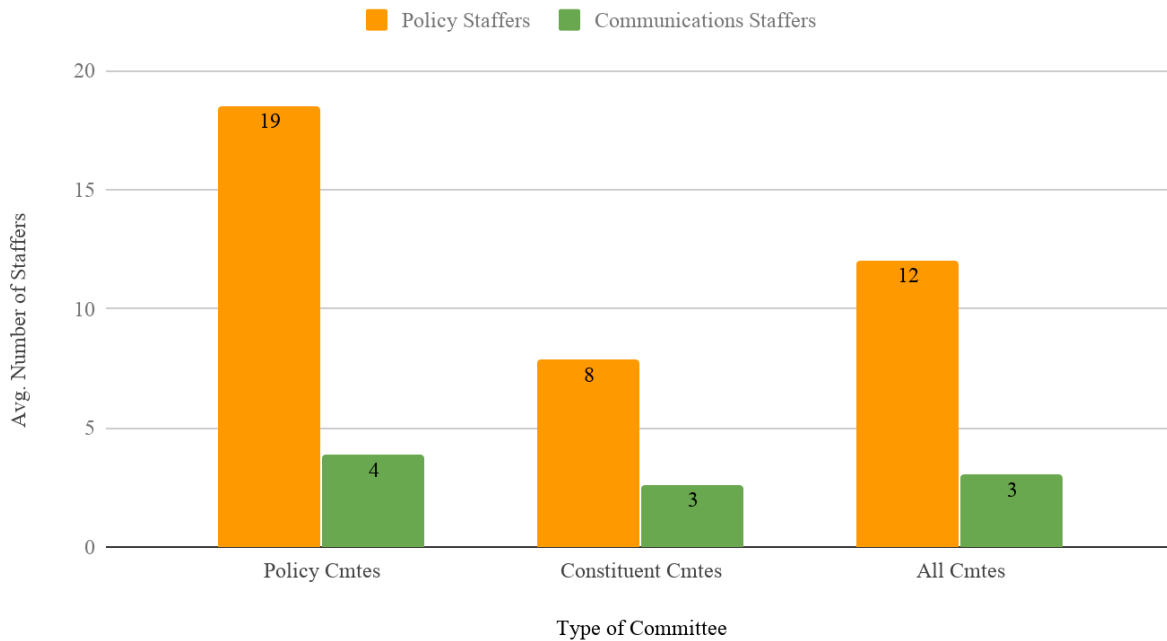
³ Given the changes in congressional politics and the way the chambers conduct legislative business that have occurred since Deering and Smith's original categorization of committees, we have updated some of their original coding based largely on the changing jurisdictions, merging, and splitting of committees that were present in their time, as well as new committees (i.e. House Homeland Security) that are either new or adapted from others. Our updated coding scheme for House committees can be found in the Appendix.

⁴ This is based in part on changes in the roles of these committees since Fenno and Deering and Smith wrote. In practice, most prestige committees also function as more policy- or constituent-oriented committees.

Vitality, and as previously discussed, the time constraints of members and the issue expertise of committee aides means that much of the actual work being conducted in pursuit of these varying member goals is, in fact, being executed by committee staffers. Because committees are demonstrably diverse in their purposes and methods, and staffers are such in terms of their expertise and unique legislative experience, we should expect members to logically and purposefully staff their committees with aides that are best able to execute on the priorities of that particular committee, and deliver more effectively on its valued legislative outputs. Therefore, a second primary contention of this project is that congressional committee output is affected by both the type of committee and the particular type of staffers executing its work.

Figure 1 offers some preliminary descriptive evidence of this theory of purposeful committee staffing. Policy staffers nearly always outnumber communications staffers on all committees, but the discrepancy is much wider in policy committees, since that's where the most policy expertise and specialization is necessary. Prestige and constituent service committees, on the other hand, are much more balanced between policy and communications staffers, indicating that communications staff are more proportionally necessary in these committees in order to deliver on legislative outputs designed to improve the reputation of members within the chamber and with their constituents, respectively.

Figure 1: Average Number of Staffer Types by Committee Type, 2001-2016



Our formalized hypotheses, however - along with the advanced statistical models we use to test them - are concerned not just with the matching of appropriate staffers with appropriate committees, but with whether this matching leads to greater legislative output within the committee itself. The purposeful and careful staffing of committees, we argue, is liable to produce different ecosystems of legislative activity in these different types of committees. As such, we are proposing staffer and committee-specific hypotheses: that when certain types of committees are staffed with appropriately-experienced staffers, they will vary favorably in their legislative activity outputs. For example, committees that demand higher degrees of policy-rich output should be expected to allocate more of their resources to positions involving policy-crafting. In this case, policy staffers provide the expertise and experience that should positively affect the three legislative outputs we test here. In policy-oriented committees, policy staffers are necessary to drive legislation through the committee process (bills reported), to facilitate debate and discussion within the committee on legislation (number of hearings), and to make that policy

more viable when it leaves the committee (bills passing chamber). These proposed effects are summarized in Hypothesis 2:

Hypothesis 2: The higher the capacity of *policy-oriented* House committee staff, the greater the legislative output will be in *policy-oriented* committees.

Committee staffer expertise and its ensuing benefits, however, are not limited to policy. Specialization at the committee level also comes in the forms of communications support. As with policy aides, communications staffers should be better-suited to some committees than others due to differing member goals and committee purposes. We argue that communications staffers in the House are well-placed to increase the legislative output of constituent-oriented committees. Members of these committees are primarily concerned not necessarily with substantive policy, but with communicating the activity of the committee - whatever its format - to their constituents in order to “credit-claim” in the parlance of Mayhew ([1974](#)). These committees put communications staffers in a position to spur productivity for several reasons. First, legislation in these committees is often easier to understand and communicate to constituents - this creates a greater-than-usual demand for the expertise communications staffers provide. A second reason is that these staffers’ expertise incentivizes members to produce legislation: knowing that they can rely on communications aides to help publicize and claim this credit for their work is a necessary prerequisite for members to produce constituent-pleasing legislation effectively. And third, in many cases in constituent committees, much of the legislation involves regularly-expected bills that must be passed and are largely the same year-to-year, such as the Farm Bill in the House Agriculture Committee, or the National Defense

Authorization Act (NDAA) in the Armed Services Committee. As such, we expect the following more specific conditions to play out for constituent-oriented committees:

Hypothesis 3: The higher the capacity of *communications-oriented* House committee staff, the greater the legislative output will be in *constituent-oriented* committees.

Data and Methods

This project combines a number of preexisting datasets on committee activity and legislative outputs, as well as an original and comprehensive dataset on committee staffing capacity. Each dataset spans from 2000-2017. Such a broad time parameter offers a significant number of cases by which we can estimate the effects of staffing. It also provides a particularly tough but important test for the power of congressional capacity in an age where much of congressional activity is thought to be governed by partisanship (Lee 2009). If staff capacity can continue to have an effect in even the most party-dominated environments for policymaking, it is a signal that staffers are not merely helpful, but truly essential in addressing and executing on committee priorities, including passing important legislation through regular procedures in Congress.

Notably, this project studies the impact of committee staffer impact on committee outputs only within the House of Representatives. This is the case for several reasons. First, because there are far fewer members of the Senate, committees are composed of a greater proportion of the chamber across the board, significantly diluting the leverage gained by serving on such a committee relative to other Senators who do not. Relatedly, the average Senator serves on more than double the number of congressional committees than the average House member and nearly

triple the number of subcommittees (Ornstein et al. 2013). As a result, Senators are in a far better position to execute on policy concerns no matter if it is a primary motivator of theirs. Third, Senate rules and procedure grant Senators more opportunities for individual members to affect policy changes independent of the committee process. Fourth, Senators enjoy much larger personal office staff sizes that are better able to execute on all aspects of their office, from policymaking to constituent service to communications efforts aimed at increasing the visibility and prestige of the Senator. For these reasons, in addition to Senators' bigger and more diverse constituencies, our analysis is limited to committees within the House where we are more likely to find such marked distinctions in how members view committee assignments and responsibilities (Deering and Smith 1997).

In order to assess the impact of congressional committee staffing capacity on committee activity, this study employs three important measures of legislative outputs: substantively "important" bills voted out of committee, important bills passed by the chamber that were under the jurisdiction of that committee during its life cycle, and hearings held by each committee.

The first two measures -- important bills voted out of committee and those passed by the chamber-- were collected from Adler and Wilkinson's (2006) "Congressional Bills Project."⁵ Vtally, this data categorizes bills as "important" bills of substance as opposed to ceremonial bills of little importance.⁶ These bills are a better measure of the impact of committee staffers on committee productivity, as more substantive legislation typically demands increased committee aide experience, issue expertise, and staffer attention for advancement of these issues relative to

⁵ Available at www.congressionalbills.org/

⁶ Congressional Bills Project describes their process for coding "important" vs. "not important" bills as "based on the presence of certain words in a title (below) and can be used to exclude bills that are arguably of minor importance. For example, bills to name buildings are fairly common and a large proportion of the laws that are passed." A full explanation of their coding methods is available on the "Codebooks" page of their website (see Footnote 5).

ceremonial measures. We use by-year counts of these “important” bills that have been reported out of the committee in which they were referred, as well as counts of bills which after having been referred to this committee, passed the chamber in which they originated.⁷ Both of these measures are strong indicators of substantive legislative output from the committees, and also measure the committee’s influence in the chamber in which they reside.

The third measure of output used in this project is an original dataset of aggregated counts of committee hearings held in all House committees during the analyzed time period. Committee hearings measure a slightly different element of legislative output as compared to legislation-based activities. Whereas legislative proposals require attention towards studying specific provisions, their subsequent impacts, and drafting them into legislative language, congressional hearings are far more outward facing operations where committee members are able to publicly garner attention to themselves and their issue stances through their hearing statements and lines of questioning. Importantly, committee hearings demand committee staffer attention for their successful planning and execution. For weeks and months prior to the public event of the hearing, committee aides reach out to potential expert witnesses, study and develop briefing materials for committee members, and research, plan, and write potential lines of questioning for member use. At any rate, committee hearings are a critical measure that members of Congress and committees generally clearly value a great deal.

Committee staffing data used in this project is drawn from Legistorm’s personnel compensation database which dates back to 2001. Legistorm cleans and digitizes official staffer compensation information submitted by all congressional offices, personal and committee, to the

⁷ Congressional Bills Project captures all bills that passed or did not pass the chamber, whether they were in fact reported out of committee or not. Therefore, the “number of important bills passed” variable captures both reported bills and non-reported bills that went to the floor. We also are not concerned about overdispersion of individual bills: More than 80% of all bills were only referred to one committee in one chamber, and greater than 95% were only referred to two - and most of these were the two appropriate committees from each chamber.

Clerk of the House. These pay records itemize payments made to each individual staffer, the title held by the staffer, and the office in which the payment originated. The House reports these payments via a statement of disbursements every three months.

Our data breaks down the number of staffers assigned to a committee in a given year, as well as the types of positions they hold. Using the job titles listed within the official compensation records, we have reliably aggregated the counts of staffers into four distinct position categories for each committee year: policy, communications, administrative, and other (see operationalization of these groupings by title in Table 8 located in the Appendix).⁸ This differentiation of staffers by job titles is a primary way in which our data is well-suited to addressing the question of whether staffers of a certain type and expertise are able to influence the legislative work undertaken by committees.

We also have incorporated a number of important controls that are likely to condition the legislative output achieved by any committee. First, we obtained counts of number of members per committee-year to help control for the possibility that committees with more members would produce greater legislative output. Second, we use the Policy Agenda Project's topic codes based on CQ Almanac publications and aggregate by committee-year to determine the number of major policy topics each committee addresses. This variable indicates which committees have wider policy jurisdictions, and thus, are in a better position to produce more of our outputs under consideration. Third, we include a dummy variable for instances in which the chair of the committee vacated the post within the year as well as the tenure length of the committee chair. Fourth, we include binary variables indicating whether there was a unified Congress (both chambers of the same party) in that year, and whether it was an election year to account for

⁸ These staffer counts include any aide that received a payment from the committee within a given year, including paid interns, fellows, part-time, shared, and temporary employees.

House members being preoccupied with electoral politics rather than committee production.

Fifth, we include a binary variable indicating whether a committee-specific authorization bill re-emerged that year, as these bills can consume much, if not all, of the committee's attention and resources to secure its passage. Finally, we created a variable indicating exogenous policy shocks, which increase demand for legislative and hearing outputs.⁹

Finally, we break down these committees by three previously-addressed categories that classify committees by policy, prestige, or constituent orientation in their value for members (Deering and Smith 1997). We split our samples of committees into these three categories to investigate differential effects from different types of staffers based on where they might have the most impact, as we expect in Hypotheses 2-4.

In order to hold as much committee-specific variation constant as possible, we employ conditional fixed-effects negative binomial regression to predict per-year counts of important bills reported out of committee, important committee-reported bills that passed the chamber, and committee hearings held. The effects measured by these models will therefore capture variation only within each committee itself to ensure that member- or committee-specific variables cloud the results. Due to non-normal distributions of our primary independent variables - committee staff counts - we have also taken the natural logarithm of these variables to capture percent change rather than per-staffer change for more accurate specification, even distribution, and generalizability of results. We also do this because one additional staffer is likely to have a different effect in a committee that already has 70 staffers, as opposed to one that only has 10.

⁹ For example, the House Homeland Security Committee, which is in charge of FEMA's budget, was given a positive value for this variable in 2005 and 2006, when and shortly after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast; similarly, the House Financial Services Committee was given the same designation during and following the financial crisis of 2008-2009.

This allows us to standardize effects to a greater extent.¹⁰ Full descriptive statistics of key variables can be found below in Table 1, and a sample overview of committee-years and staffer counts can be found in the appendix.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min.	Max.
Imp. Bills Reported from Cmte.	14.43	20.68	0	143
Imp. Cmte. Bills Passed Chamber	9.50	13.96	0	91
Number of Hearings Held	55.24	37.31	0	176
Total Staff	59.09	31.00	10	180
Policy Staff	11.32	12.79	0	57
Communications Staff	3.64	2.58	0	13
Unified Congress	0.65	0.48	0	1
Election Year	0.47	0.50	0	1
Cmte. Chair Turnover	0.02	0.17	0	2
Cmte. Chair Tenure Length	1.72	1.54	0	7
Cmte. Size (Members)	43.80	17.01	9	82
Exogenous Policy Shock	0.06	0.25	0	1
Cmte. Authorization Year	0.02	0.15	0	1
Cmte. Jurisdiction Count	6.67	4.21	1	17
Policy Committee	0.43	0.50	0	1
Constituent Committee	0.24	0.43	0	1

Results

As previously stated, we ran a number of different models to capture the differences expected by our four hypotheses. First, we ran fixed-effects negative binomial regressions on each of our measures of legislative output in all House committees to assess Hypothesis 1, which predicted that increases in total staff support of all types would lead to increases in legislative

¹⁰ However, running our models with either staff counts or logged staff counts produced substantively and statistically similar results.

output. Table 2a shows the raw regression results of these models for each of our three measures of output.

Table 2

Effects on All Committee Output in the House, 2001-2016

Dependent Variable	Important Legislation Reported	Important Legislation Passed Chamber	Number of Hearings Held
Total Staff Support	0.18 (0.13)	0.11 (0.15)	0.23** (0.11)
Unified Congress	0.08 (0.07)	0.17** (0.08)	-0.12** (0.05)
Election Year	-0.77*** (0.08)	-0.79*** (0.09)	-0.10* (0.05)
Cmte. Chair Turnover	-0.57* (0.30)	-0.40 (0.31)	-0.29 (0.18)
Cmte. Chair Tenure Length	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.02)
Cmte. Size (Members)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01** (0.01)	0.02*** (0.01)
Exogenous Policy Shock	-0.32** (0.14)	-0.33** (0.16)	0.02 (0.09)
Cmte. Authorization Year	-0.17 (0.25)	-0.27 (0.28)	-0.36** (0.18)
Cmte. Jurisdiction Count	0.06* (0.03)	0.04 (0.04)	0.02 (0.03)
Constant	0.35 (0.64)	0.17 (0.72)	0.11 (0.57)
N	302	302	288

Note: Results found using conditional fixed-effects negative binomial regression

*p < .1, **p < .05, ***p < .01

These results are a modest confirmation of Hypothesis 1. All three measures are positively affected by total staff support, though only two of them reach statistical significance. The coefficients also tell us about substantive significance, which we will address more intuitively below. For example, according to our model, a 100% increase in the total staff support a committee has leads to a 25% increase in the amount of important legislation reported out of

that committee. It also results in a 25% increase in the number of hearings held in that calendar year.

Hypothesis 1, however, reflects a weakness in previous work on both congressional committees and congressional staff: that all committees, and all staff, are created equal. Our findings that accompany Hypotheses 2 and 3 aim to rectify this mistake by breaking down our primary dependent and independent variables by type of committee and type of staff. First, we address Hypothesis 2: that increases in policy-oriented staff will lead to increases in legislative output particularly in policy-oriented committees. To test this, we limited our sample only to policy-oriented House committees, and split our staffing variable into “policy” and “communications” staff support to demonstrate the differential effects. Table 3b shows the raw regression results of these models for each of our three measures of output.

In these results, we find much stronger and expected confirmation of Hypothesis 2. For all three measures of legislative output, we find substantively large and statistically significant effects from policy staff support, while communications staff support predicts either flat or negative effects on output in policy committees. These results, shown in Table 3b confirm our theoretical expectations discussed earlier: not only that staffers generally can help increase legislative productivity, but that matching staffers with the right kinds of expertise and skills to the appropriate committees will increase this productivity even further.

Table 3

Effects on Policy Committee Output in the House, 2001-2016

Dependent Variable	Important Legislation Reported	Important Legislation Passed Chamber	Number of Hearings Held
Policy Staff Support	0.30*** (0.12)	0.35*** (0.13)	0.03 (0.09)
Communications Staff Support	0.16 (0.14)	0.25 (0.15)	-0.07 (0.12)
Unified Congress	0.30*** (0.10)	0.41*** (0.12)	-0.07 (0.09)
Election Year	-0.85*** (0.10)	-0.84*** (0.11)	-0.21*** (0.08)
Cmte. Chair Turnover	-0.53* (0.30)	-0.42 (0.32)	-0.29 (0.19)
Cmte. Chair Tenure Length	-0.04 (0.04)	-0.06 (0.04)	-0.03 (0.03)
Cmte. Size (Members)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Exogenous Policy Shock	-0.46** (0.20)	-0.57** (0.22)	-0.01 (0.14)
Cmte. Authorization Year	N/A	N/A	N/A
Cmte. Jurisdiction Count	-0.03 (0.06)	-0.07 (0.08)	0.05 (0.05)
Constant	1.63** (0.75)	1.03 (0.94)	1.74** (0.71)
N	144	144	140

Note: Results found using conditional fixed-effects negative binomial regression

*p < .1, **p < .05, ***p < .01

Hypothesis 3 makes a similar prediction: that increases in communications staff support rather than policy or administrative support will lead to increases in legislative output for constituent-oriented committees. As found by Adler and Lapinski ([Adler and Lapinski 1997](#)), constituent service committees are likely to use legislation with concentrated benefits to committee member-districts as a means of satisfying constituent service demands. Constituent service committee members are trying above all to communicate their activity on these committees back to their constituents, who they understand to value the output from these

committees more than others. Table 4 displays the raw regression results from a sample limited only to constituent committee output in the House. These results appear to confirm Hypothesis 3, and indicate that appropriate staffer-to-committee matching has effects beyond just policy-oriented committees. On all measures of output, increases in communications staff support predict manifold increases in output on constituent committees, particularly on specific legislative matters.

Table 4

Effects on Constituent Committee Output in the House, 2001-2016

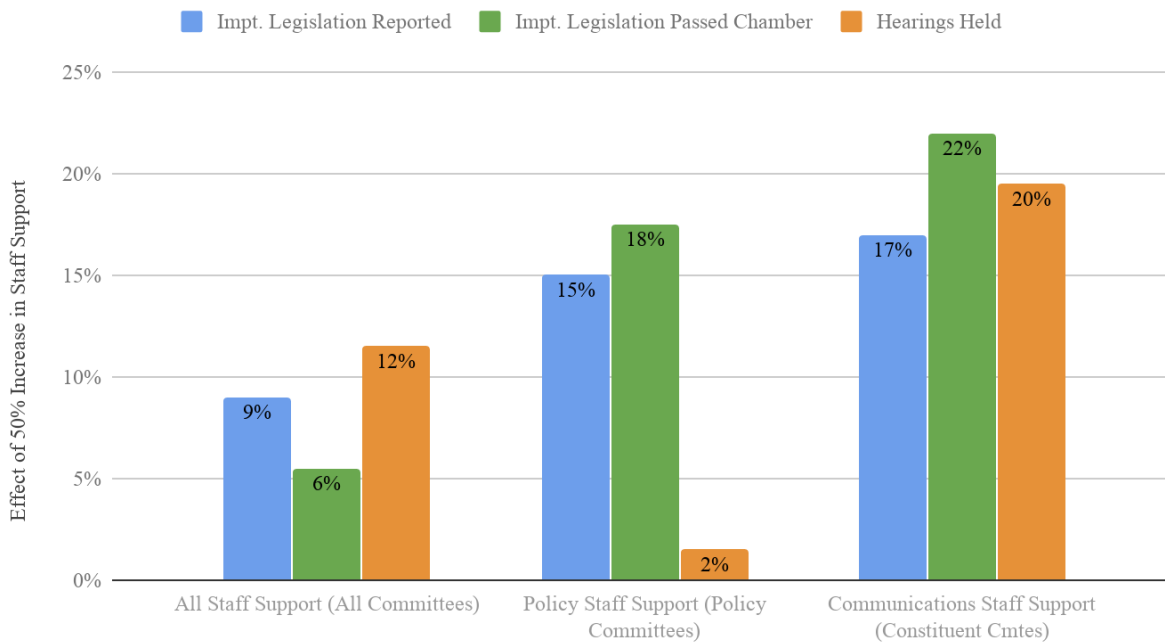
Dependent Variable	Important Legislation Reported	Important Legislation Passed Chamber	Number of Hearings Held
Policy Staff Support	0.08 (0.11)	0.14 (0.10)	-0.24*** (0.09)
Communications Staff Support	0.34* (0.19)	0.44** (0.19)	0.39** (0.16)
Unified Congress	-0.12 (0.11)	0.00 (0.10)	-0.05 (0.09)
Election Year	-0.91*** (0.12)	-1.03*** (0.12)	-0.08 (0.08)
Cmte. Chair Turnover	N/A	N/A	N/A
Cmte. Chair Tenure Length	0.06 (0.05)	0.02 (0.05)	-0.06* (0.04)
Cmte. Size (Members)	0.03*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)	0.02*** (0.01)
Exogenous Policy Shock	-0.11 (0.23)	-0.25 (0.27)	-0.07 (0.19)
Cmte. Authorization Year	-0.22 (0.19)	-0.40* (0.23)	-0.20 (0.16)
Cmte. Jurisdiction Count	0.32 (0.21)	0.15 (0.25)	0.04 (0.11)
Constant	-1.08 (0.86)	-0.18 (1.15)	0.88 (0.64)
N	80	80	83

Note: Results found using conditional fixed-effects negative binomial regression

*p < .1, **p < .05, ***p < .01

To simplify the interpretation of the results of the previous four tables, we have created Figure 2 to isolate the substantive effects¹¹ of our independent variables of interest on the different measures of legislative output. Note that in this figure we reported effects on the *percent increase* in legislative output. We do this because, due to the use of fixed effects, our coefficients predict per-committee increases in legislative output. Therefore, since each committee (and committee type) produces different average counts of legislation, average predicted counts across all committees would be a non-intuitive measure. Thus, we use predicted percentage increases, which provide a standardized indicator that can be applied to the average legislative output per-committee.

Figure 2: Average Effects of Cmte. Staff Support on Legislative Output, 2001-2016



¹¹ We note here that three of the marginal effects displayed in Figure 2 were not statistically significant: the 9% effect on Important Legislation Reported, and the 6% effect on Important Chamber-Passed Legislation in the first set of results (All Staff Support, All Committees); and the 2% effect on hearings held in the second set of results (Policy Staff Support, Policy Committees); though all point in the expected direction; however, all other effects reflected in Figure 2 are statistically significant.

From left, the four groupings in Figure 2 represent the expectations of each of our four hypotheses regarding which types of staff would have larger influences on which types of committees in the House. The increases indicated by the bars in these four groupings predict the result of a 50% increase in committee staff support. In all cases, increases in staff support had substantive effects on legislative output, confirming Hypothesis 1; and in all cases but one, differentiating among staffer and committee types produced more sizable increases in legislative output than simply pooling all types of staff and committees, confirming Hypotheses 2-4.

Discussion

These results should encourage congressional scholars and reformers to consider not just how staff can improve legislative productivity, but where and with which types of staff these efforts are most likely to be successful. Our results indicate not only that committee staffers have positive effects on legislative output in the chamber in a general sense, but that the purposeful staffing of congressional committees based on the type of committee and resulting staff needs can and does exponentiate these effects.

At a conceptual level, these results also confer another reason that individual member preferences and career-oriented goals should play a larger role in any effort to solve legislative gridlock in Congress. Committees, their purposes, membership, and outputs are not preordained or structured beyond the control or preference of members. Members' career circumstances and choices dictate how they form their committee membership preferences; these preferences in turn aggregate into distinct purposes, needs, and output for different types of committees. Our analysis indicates that taking these preferences into account and pairing them with the necessary

expertise and experience provided by the appropriate staffers is a natural way to ensure that committees, and Congress generally, function as efficiently as possible.

Works Cited

- Aberbach, Joel D. 1987. "The Congressional Committee Intelligence System: Information, Oversight, and Change." *Congress & the Presidency* 14(1): 51–76.
- Adler, E. Scott, and John S. Lapinski. 1997. "Demand-Side Theory and Congressional Committee Composition: A Constituency Characteristics Approach." *American journal of political science* 41(3): 895–918.
- Brady, David W. 1981. "Personnel Management in the House." *The House at Work*: 151–82.
- Bullock, Charles S. 1976. "Motivations for U. S. Congressional Committee Preferences: Freshmen of the 92nd Congress." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 1(2): 201–12.
- Curry, James M. 2015. *Legislating in the Dark: Information and Power in the House of Representatives*. University of Chicago Press.
- Davidson, Roger H., Walter J. Oleszek, Frances E. Lee, and Eric Schickler. 2017. *Congress and Its Members*. CQ Press.
- Deering, Christopher J., and Steven S. Smith. 1984. *Committees in Congress*. Washington, DC: CQ Press.
- . 1997. *Committees in Congress*. SAGE.
- DeGregorio, Christine. 1988. "Professionals in the US Congress: An Analysis of Working Styles." *Legislative Studies Quarterly*: 459–76.
- . 1995. "Staff Utilization in the U.S. Congress: Committee Chairs and Senior Aides." *Polity* 28(2): 261–75.
- DeGregorio, Christine A. 2010. *Networks of Champions: Leadership, Access, and Advocacy in the U.S. House of Representatives*. University of Michigan Press.
- DeGregorio, Christine, and Kevin Snider. 1995. "Leadership Appeal in the US House of Representatives: Comparing Officeholders and Aides." *Legislative Studies Quarterly*: 491–511.
- Fenno, Richard F. 1973. *Congressmen in Committees*. Little, Brown.
- Fiorina, Morris P. 1989. *Congress: Keystone of the Washington Establishment*. Yale University Press.
- Fox, Harrison W., and Susan Webb Hammond. 1977. *Congressional Staffs: The Invisible Force in American Lawmaking*. Free Press.
- Francis, Katherine, and Brittany Bramlett. 2017. "Precongressional Careers and Committees: The Impact of Congruence." *American Politics Research* 45(5): 755–89.
- Hall, Richard L. 1998. *Participation in Congress*. Yale Univ Pr.

- Hammond, Susan Webb. 1975. "Characteristics of Congressional Staffers." *Legislative Staffing*: 60–85.
- . 1984. "Legislative Staffs." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 9(2): 271–317.
- . 1996. "Recent Research on Legislative Staffs." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 21(4): 543–76.
- Kingdon, John W. 1989. *Congressmen's Voting Decisions*. University of Michigan Press.
- Kofmehl, Kenneth Theodore. "Professional Staffs of Congress." <http://agris.fao.org/agris-search/search.do?recordID=US201300599956>.
- Leal, David L., and Frederick M. Hess. 2004. "Who Chooses Experience? Examining the Use of Veteran Staff by House Freshmen." *Polity* 36(4): 651–64.
- Lee, Frances E. 2009. *Beyond Ideology: Politics, Principles, and Partisanship in the US Senate*. University of Chicago Press.
- Malbin, Michael J. 1980. *Unelected Representatives: Congressional Staff and the Future of Representative Government*. Basic Books.
- Mayhew, David R. 1974a. *Congress: The Electoral Connection*. Yale University Press.
- . 1974b. *Congress: The Electoral Connection*. Yale University Press.
- . 2008. *America's Congress: Actions in the Public Sphere, James Madison Through Newt Gingrich*. Yale University Press.
- Ornstein, Norman J. et al. 2013. "Vital Statistics on Congress: Data on the US Congress—A Joint Effort from Brookings and the American Enterprise Institute." *Strengthening American Democracy* (4).
- Patterson, Samuel C. 1970. "The Professional Staffs of Congressional Committees." *Administrative science quarterly* 15(1): 22–37.
- Polsby, Nelson W. 1969. *Policy Analysis and Congress*.
- Price, David E. 1971. "Professionals and 'Entrepreneurs': Staff Orientations and Policy Making on Three Senate Committees." *The journal of politics* 33(2): 316–36.
- . 1972. *Who Makes the Laws?*
- Romzek, Barbara S., and Jennifer A. Utter. 1997. "Congressional Legislative Staff: Political Professionals or Clerks?" *American journal of political science* 41(4): 1251–79.
- Salisbury, Robert H., and Kenneth A. Shepsle. 1981. "Congressional Staff Turnover and the Ties-That-Bind." *The American political science review* 75(2): 381–96.

Wilson, James Q. 1989. "Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It."
<https://www.ncjrs.gov/app/abstractdb/AbstractDBDetails.aspx?id=121149>.

Polsby, N. W. (1969). Policy analysis and congress. Public Policy, 18(1), 61-74.

Appendix:

Table 8 - List of House Committees by Committee Type

Policy Committees House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence House Small Business Committee House Education and the Workforce Committee House Energy and Commerce Committee House Financial Services Committee House Foreign Affairs Committee House Judiciary Committee House Science, Space and Technology Committee
Prestige Committees House Appropriations Committee House Budget Committee House Homeland Security Committee House Ways and Means Committee
Constituent Service Committees House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee House Agriculture Committee House Armed Services Committee House Natural Resources Committee House Veterans' Affairs Committee
Other Committees House Rules Committee House Ethics Committee House Oversight and Government Reform Committee House Administration Committee

Table 9 - Operationalization of staff groupings by title:

Leadership Positions

Staff Director
Deputy Staff Director
Republican Staff Director
Democratic Staff Director

Policy Positions

Legislative Director
Policy Director
Policy Adviser
Legislative Assistant
Legislative Correspondent
Legislative Counsel
Counsel
Legislative Aide
Legislative Analyst
Legislative Associate
Policy Coordinator

Communications Positions

Communications Director
Press Secretary
Deputy Press Secretary
Press Assistant/Aide
Speechwriter
Digital/Social Media
Digital Media Manager
Digital Media Director
Social Media Manager
Social Media Director
New Media Manager
New Media Director
Web Manager
New Media

Administrative Positions

Office Manager
Scheduler
Financial Administrator

Financial Services Administrator
 Director of Operations
 Deputy Director of Operations
 Director of Information Technology
 Systems Administrator
 Clerk
 Chief Clerk
 Research Assistant
 Staff Assistant
 Fellow
 Special Assistant

Professional Staff Positions

Senior Professional Staff Member
 Professional Staff Member
 Subcommittee Professional Staff Member

Table 10 - Sampling of Committee-Years, Committee Types, and Numbers of Staff

Committee Name	Year	Committee Type	All Staff	Policy Staff	Comms. Staff
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs ¹²	2003	Constituent	18	0	1
House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure	2016	Constituent	61	11	5
House Committee on Natural Resources	2015	Constituent	68	11	9
House Committee on Ethics ¹³	2004	Other	10	8	0
House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform ¹⁴	2005	Other	173	34	3
House Committee on Small Business	2014	Policy	22	5	5
House Committee on the Judiciary	2016	Policy	52	24	5
House Committee on Financial Services	2004	Policy	63	28	2
House Committee on Energy and Commerce	2014	Policy	82	40	7

¹² Committee with lowest number of policy staff.

¹³ Committee with lowest number of total staff, and lowest number of communications staff (several had zero)

¹⁴ Committee with highest number of total staff.

House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology	2005	Policy	83	11	2
---	------	--------	----	----	---