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Joining Patterns Across Party Factions in the US Congress

<https://doi.org/10.1515/for-2017-0047>

Abstract: How does the influence of party factions change over time? This article only begins to tackle this question by looking at which party caucuses newly elected members join. I focus on joining patterns in the current 115th Congress to shed light on which factions are more or less influential in Congress today. I show, first, that almost all incoming members joined an ideological faction when they entered office. Furthermore, the Republican Study Committee attracted the most incoming Republicans; the New Democratic Coalition and the Congressional Progressive Caucus attracted the most incoming Democrats. The moderate factions lagged behind the more conservative and liberal factions in the Republican and Democratic parties, respectively. These joining patterns of newly elected members have important implications for the current and future influence that factions can expect to have in the party and chamber.

Introduction

The study of political parties has seen a reversal of fortune in recent years. This is in no small part due to the rise in partisan polarization in the US Congress over the last few decades. In the pre-polarized era, the two parties were diverse coalitions of legislators, representation was highly localized, and members of Congress were best described as ambassadors of their district. Legislators focused on where they, rather than their party, stood on issues and how they, rather than their party, voted on policies. Members engaged in a variety of activities to build name recognition among their constituents: they took positions, claimed credit, and brought home the bacon (Fenno 1973; Mayhew 1974). But that model of representation has become increasingly outdated as partisan attachments have grown stronger and as the partisan vote has replaced the personal vote (Abramowitz and Webster 2015; Jacobson 2015). The model of representation that currently characterizes American politics is very much a partisan one.

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Yet under the larger banner of the Republican and Democratic labels, differences across members of Congress remain. Party factions have formed, flourished, and dissolved throughout American history (Rubin 2017). Clarke (2017) makes a compelling argument that ideological factions within the two parties provide candidates with complementary “party sub-brands” that they can use to appeal to activists, the media, and donors. Members of Congress join party caucuses for reasons that are similar to why they join parties in general: to help them achieve their electoral and policy goals (Aldrich 1995; Clarke 2017). Even in the current context of high partisan polarization, factions that effectively communicate party sub-brands are able to construct a donor base beyond the party fundraising apparatus (Clarke 2017). Thus, while neither party is as ideologically diverse as in the mid-20th century, one broader goal of this emerging research on party factions is to move “beyond a dichotomous view of American political representation” (Clarke 2017, p. 3).

When we look inside partisan teams, it is clear that some party factions are in a sweeter spot than others. Not all sub-brands have equal value in the chamber because not all factions have the same amount of leverage. In the 1990s, for example, the Tuesday Group of moderate Republicans was an influential bloc on a range of policy issues. They worked behind the scenes to shape legislation on environmental protection, reproductive health care, and social welfare programs. On the Democratic side, the Blue Dog coalition of moderates similarly wielded significant leverage on social and economic issues and often joined with the Republicans to support tax cuts and military and defense spending. The moderates of yesterday were numerous and cohesive enough to shape and influence the legislative agenda because they could show their votes. In recent years, however, the policy fortunes of the Tuesday Group and the Blue Dogs have diminished dramatically. The internal balance of power has shifted toward liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans and away from the moderate factions in both parties.

How does the influence of party factions change over time? This article only begins to tackle this question by looking at which party caucuses newly elected members join. I focus on joining patterns in the current 115th Congress to shed light on which factions are more or less influential in Congress today. I find that almost all incoming members joined an ideological faction when they entered office. Furthermore, the Republican Study Committee attracted the most incoming Republicans; the New Democratic Coalition and the Congressional Progressive Caucus attracted the most incoming Democrats. The moderate factions lagged behind the more conservative and liberal factions in the Republican and Democratic parties, respectively. These joining patterns of newly elected members have important implications for the current and future influence that factions can expect to have in the party and chamber.

Inside Partisan Teams

The congressional environment has changed dramatically in recent decades. The two parties have become increasingly polarized with each election cycle, and the distance between the Republicans and Democrats is now at a post-Reconstruction high (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006). Slim congressional majorities have further intensified ideological differences, as partisan control is continually up in the air. Lee (2016) describes the tradeoffs that parties face between messaging and legislating under different institutional arrangements. When majorities are slim, parties invest more efforts in promoting their party's image and undercutting that of the opposition. Yet when majorities are stable and solidified, more party efforts are focused on legislating. Today, neither party is resigned to being in the minority, and both are hopeful they will either remain in or soon become the majority (Lee 2016).

The goal here is to look closer inside partisan teams and examine differences in the fortunes and power of party factions (see also Clarke 2017 and Rubin 2017). One basic way to think about party factions is as either more or less influential. The balance of power in the party caucus tilts toward the stronger faction and away from the weaker faction. Perhaps the most obvious way to assess whether a faction is influential is its size. As the size of the faction changes, so too does its influence and clout within the party. For example, just three decades ago, members of the conservative Republican Study Committee (RSC) comprised between 10 and 20 percent of the Republican Party, whereas nearly 70 percent of Republicans in Congress today are members (Mann and Ornstein 2012). In the 1980s, the RSC lacked the policy impact it has today as a result. Similarly, on the Democratic side, the liberal Congressional Progressive Caucus (CPC) has been growing in influence as well. The CPC has experienced a "remarkable reversal of political fortune" in recent years (Brodey 2015). The number of members has increased steadily since its founding in 1991, and the CPC now boasts more than 70 members, the largest share of the full Democratic caucus it has ever had (Brodey 2015).

By comparison, the policy impact of the Tuesday Group of moderate Republicans and the moderate Blue Dog coalition of Democrats has continued to decline in recent decades. In a 2013 article in the *National Review*, former moderate Republican Steve LaTourette discussed the policy impact of moderates in Congress: "It's a question of numbers. If you think that the Republican Study Committee has 150 members out of 233 and the Tuesday Group's sitting at 36, 40 – well, the math doesn't work in their favor" (Strong 2013). Former moderate Democrat and founder of the Blue Dog Coalition John Tanner similarly lamented, "The Blue Dogs could play a critical role if they could get a critical mass" (Kane 2014).

In short, liberal Democratic and conservative Republican factions have seen their numbers and influence soar over the past several election cycles, and many more legislators now share the ideological worldview of ideologues than that of moderates. As a result, the balance of power within the Republican Party has shifted toward the far-right House Freedom Caucus and the conservative Republican Study Committee and away from the moderate Tuesday Group. Within the Democratic Party, intrapartisan power has shifted toward the Congressional Progressive Caucus and away from the Blue Dog coalition of moderate Democrats.

While those in the political center have long held a prominent place in studies of congressional politics, scholars have recently begun to explore how the legislative clout of the median legislator varies under different circumstances. Rubin (2017) suggests that legislators located at the floor median require the scaffolding of an intraparty organization to secure pivotal status. Potentially pivotal members can more fully exercise their authority over party leaders and other party factions when they manage to stay together and coordinate their defection (Rubin 2017). In sum, the size and cohesion of intraparty ideological factions shapes their ability to chart the party's policy course. The moderates of yesterday were able to put pressure on the party leadership and wield some control over the legislative agenda because they could credibly show or withhold their votes.

Changing Fortunes for Ideological Moderates

For my recent book, *Opting Out of Congress: Partisan Polarization and the Decline of Moderate Candidates*, I conducted interviews with more than 20 former moderate members of Congress to better understand the changing fortunes of liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats in Congress. The central argument is that the rise in partisan polarization and the increasingly out of step position of ideologically moderate members has hindered their ability to influence the policy agenda, advance within the party and chamber, and forge bonds with their fellow co-partisans. As a result, in the contemporary Congress, the benefits of serving in congressional office are too low for moderates to run (Thomsen 2017).

In the book, I draw on these interviews to illustrate how the policy leverage of moderates has diminished as their numbers have declined. One former moderate Republican who served in the 1990s said, "The moderates used to mean something. They were oftentimes the difference on whether legislation would pass or fail." Another explained, "We would appoint a delegation to see the Speaker, Majority Leader, or Whip, and say I've got 40 votes in my pocket that are no unless you bend the policy. We were a force to be reckoned with. If we didn't go with

them, they didn't have a majority. We could influence policy on a daily basis." A high-level staffer of a former congressman similarly noted, "You matter to the extent that your votes matter. The whip paid attention to moderates not because he liked moderates but because he knew we controlled a bloc of votes. If we'd get [the votes], he wouldn't run over us."

With respect to party rewards and choice committee assignments, one moderate member who served on the Transportation Committee for over a decade gave this account: "When we lost the majority in 2006, [the ranking member] determined that my future wasn't on the Railroad Subcommittee, it was on the Coast Guard Subcommittee, which was not a very good post. I objected, and he said, 'Well, it's your labor votes. We can't have you do that.' I went to [the Speaker] and he said he'd talk to [the ranking member]. He did, and it didn't make any difference." The member concluded, "They can't kill you, but what they can do is indicate, well, you're done. You're not going to be in charge of railroads anymore."

In addition to their diminished policy impact and access to party rewards, a third factor has made legislative service increasingly difficult for those in the middle: the congressional environment itself. Many of the members I interviewed spoke at length about how the job became "frustrating," "unsatisfying," and "increasingly confrontational." These day-to-day struggles do wear on members: "Every day going in and being the odd man out... It's grueling; it's exhausting; it's corrosive." In short, the fortunes of liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats have dramatically diminished over time, and it is possible that moderate party factions have a harder time attracting newly elected members of Congress as a result. The next section examines joining patterns across different party factions more closely.

Which Factions Do Newly Elected Members Join?

The joining patterns of incoming members provide a window into the current and future influence of party factions. Newly elected members join party caucuses for a variety of reasons, such as ideological orientation, party recruitment efforts, and campaign support. Whether joining is sincere or strategic cannot be discerned, but joining can be taken as reflective of the perceived influence of the faction. Due to the importance of numbers for the degree of policy leverage that factions have, the ability to grow coupled with the ability to stay unified is crucial for a faction that seeks to increase its standing within the party. And given that most members "die in their ideological boots," attracting newly elected members is likely the easiest way for a party faction to increase its membership (Poole 1998).

The remainder of this article examines the party caucuses that newly elected members joined when they entered the current 115th Congress. Seven caucuses are of interest here, four in the Republican Party and three in the Democratic Party. On the Republican side, I focus on the Republican Study Committee (RSC), the House Freedom Caucus (HFC), the Republican Main Street Partnership (RMSP), and the Tuesday Group (TG). The Republican Study Committee was founded in 1973 and has historically been a conservative faction of the party. Now the RSC is the largest Republican caucus, with 154 members (64 percent of the delegation). The House Freedom Caucus is the party's most conservative faction today. Its roster is not publicly available, but the HFC is estimated to include between 35 and 40 members. Despite its relatively small size, the HFC has a significant impact on the direction of the party. In a recent analysis of the first 200 days of the Trump presidency, Clarke and Jenkins (2017) uncover suggestive evidence that the HFC is maneuvering into a position of influence with Trump as well.

The Republican Main Street Partnership (RMSP) was founded in 1994 and is a more moderate faction within the Republican Party, along with the Tuesday Group (TG). The RMSP has 74 members, and the TG is estimated to have between 40 and 50 members, but like the House Freedom Caucus, the Tuesday Group has no official roster of members.¹ The Tuesday Group is also less influential than the Freedom Caucus, perhaps because its members are less cohesive and less willing to withhold their support than HFC members (Scott 2017). Pearson (2015) similarly finds that Republican leaders have been willing to discipline moderates but reward recalcitrant conservative MCs. In an analysis of the 104th and 105th Congresses, she shows that members of the Tuesday Group had fewer resolutions considered on the floor and fewer of their amendments were made in order. Tea Party Republicans, by contrast, had more of their amendments considered in the 112th Congress (Pearson 2015, p. 170).

On the Democratic side, I focus on the Congressional Progressive Caucus (CPC), the New Democratic Coalition (NDC), and the Blue Dog Coalition (BDC). As noted above, the Congressional Progressive Caucus is the most liberal faction, and at 75 members, is now the largest Democratic caucus. The New Democratic Coalition is to the right of the CPC, but its members are liberal on social issues. The NDC was founded in 1997, and although its membership has ebbed and

¹ The exact estimates for the Tuesday Group and the Freedom Caucus are unknown because membership lists are not available; these figures come from online reports based on statements to the media. Across dozens of reports and articles, there is substantial overlap in the individuals who are identified as members and the estimated size of the faction, which gives us additional confidence in these figures.

flowed over time, it is currently sizeable at 61 members. The Blue Dog Coalition is the most conservative faction in the party, and its members are more conservative on economic as well as social issues. The Blue Dogs are the smallest Democratic faction, and they have suffered substantial losses in recent years. Its membership has shrunk to 18, down from more than 50 just four congresses ago (Bland 2014).

There were 62 newly elected US House members in the current 115th Congress, 34 Republicans and 28 Democrats (Center for Responsive Politics 2017).² Of these, 10 did not join any of the seven caucuses detailed above; 30 joined one and 22 joined two.³ Seven of the 34 Republicans joined both the Republican Study Committee and the Republican Main Street Partnership. Two joined both the Tuesday Group and the Republican Main Street Partnership; three joined both the Republican Study Committee and the Freedom Caucus. Unsurprisingly, no members who joined either moderate faction also joined the Freedom Caucus. None of the Democrats joined all three of the caucuses, though six of the 28 joined both the New Democratic Coalition and the Blue Dog Coalition and four joined the New Democratic Coalition and the Congressional Progressive Caucus. Similar to the Republicans, none of the Democrats who joined the Congressional Progressive Caucus also joined the Blue Dog Coalition.

The breakdown of which factions newly elected members joined in the current 115th Congress is shown in Figure 1 below. The values sum to more than the total number of newly elected members because some joined two caucuses. On the Republican side, the majority of newly elected members joined the Republican Study Committee, which makes sense given that most Republicans who are elected to Congress today are ideological conservatives. Of the newly elected members, the RSC added 23 to its ranks (68 percent of incoming Republicans), whereas the Republican Main Street Partnership added 13 (38 percent of incoming Republicans). Of the two main GOP factions, in terms of raw numbers, the RSC seems to be the fastest growing faction by far, with the RMSP trailing behind.

Both the Freedom Caucus and the Tuesday Group attracted significantly fewer incoming members than the other two Republican caucuses, though it is difficult to be certain given that the rosters of both are not publicly available. They are also smaller than the other two factions, though the Freedom Caucus has ambitions to grow its membership and invests more energy into candidate

² For the full list, see here: <https://www.opensecrets.org/members-of-congress/new-members-list?sort=S>. This list includes special elections that took place in 2017 as well.

³ As noted above, the exact estimates for the Tuesday Group and the Freedom Caucus are unknown because membership lists are not available; however, media coverage of both organizations references newly elected and veteran members alike.

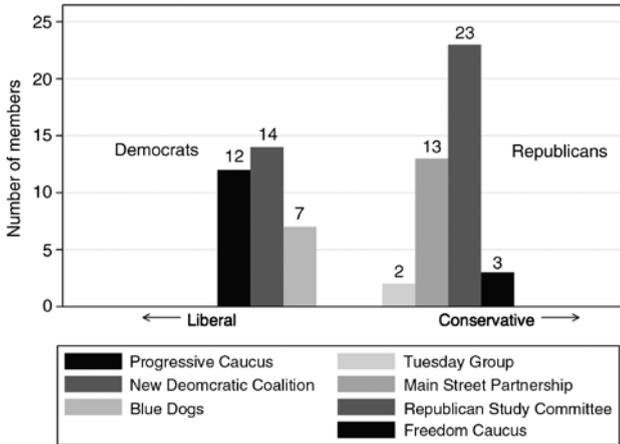


Figure 1: Newly Elected Members Across Party Factions.

Membership figures are for the current 115th Congress. Figures were accessed from each of the caucus websites (when available).

recruitment than the Tuesday Group. In particular, the Freedom Caucus targets open seats and meets with prospective candidates, and leaders believe it is realistic to grow by 20–30 members in the future (Meyer 2016).

On the Democratic side, the New Democratic Coalition added the most newly elected members to its ranks (14; 50 percent of incoming Democrats), but the Congressional Progressive Caucus did not trail far behind (12; 43 percent of incoming Democrats). The Blue Dog Coalition had a comparatively good year from an historical standpoint: seven of the 28 newly elected Democrats joined the BDC (25 percent of incoming Democrats), and its membership even increased from the previous Congress. Although the differences across caucuses are less stark on the Democratic side, it is nevertheless clear that the CPC and the NDC are more attractive options to incoming members than the Blue Dog Coalition. Like the Republicans, this is unsurprising given that most of the Democrats who run for and are elected to Congress today come from the liberal end of the ideological spectrum (Thomsen 2017).

What is also remarkable is how the percentage of incoming members who join the CPC has steadily grown. For example, following the 1992 elections, one year after its founding, 12 of the 65 incoming Democrats joined the CPC, or 18 percent of all incoming Democrats, compared to nearly half in the current 115th Congress. Leaders of the Congressional Progressive Caucus also have high hopes for the future. In an interview with Minnesota Public Radio, former CPC co-chair Keith Ellison said that they are trying to turn the caucus into a liberal version of

the Republican Study Committee. Among their goals is to raise money to help elect progressive candidates (Neely 2011). The energy within the Freedom Caucus, the Republican Study Committee, and the Congressional Progressive Caucus with respect to expanding their ranks suggests that the shift away from the ideological center by both parties is unlikely to slow down any time soon.

Conclusion

The rise in partisan polarization has been at the forefront of congressional scholarship, and party factions have received less attention as a result (but see Clarke 2017 and Rubin 2017). Yet factions provide an important window inside partisan teams and they have implications for which direction the party as a whole is likely to head next. The decision of individual members to join different ideological caucuses is an indication of how attractive party factions are to new members and a sign of how much influence factions can expect to have in the future.

This article provides a brief look into faction joining patterns in the current 115th Congress to shed light on which factions are more or less influential in Congress today. I find that almost all incoming members joined an ideological faction when they entered office, which is consistent with Clarke's (2017) findings that members utilize party sub-brands to further their electoral and policy goals. On the Republican side, the conservative Republican Study Committee attracted by far the most incoming Republicans. On the Democratic side, newly elected members were more evenly split between the Congressional Progressive Caucus and the New Democratic Coalition. In terms of numbers alone, the Tuesday Group and the Blue Dog Democrats trailed behind the RSC, the NDC, and the CPC. While the Freedom Caucus punches above its weight in the policy arena, their commitment to candidate recruitment illustrates the value they place on expansion and growth. Increasing the size of the voting bloc is a key way in which factions exert political leverage.

In the contemporary context, the diminished stature of the moderate factions may be creating a cycle where fewer and fewer new members want to join what they may view as a sinking ship. It is unclear how the fortunes of moderates will change, though there are glimmers of hope for those who seek to insert more bipartisanship and compromise into the legislative process. One new initiative seems particularly promising. Created in January 2017, the Problem Solvers Caucus is a bipartisan group of about 40 members of Congress, half Republicans and half Democrats, co-chaired by Republican Tom Reed (NY) and Democrat Josh Gottheimer (NJ). What makes this caucus different from the factions discussed

above is its composition of equal numbers of Republicans and Democrats. The Caucus is in its early stages but their plan to fix the Affordable Care Act, reduce insurance premiums, and stabilize health care markets was the only bipartisan plan offered in Congress. It is unclear whether the Problem Solvers Caucus will be able to attract a significant number of legislators and band together on policy issues, and they will likely face resistance from party leaders and fellow members in the years ahead. However, the bipartisan structure and organization of the Problem Solvers Caucus provides hope for legislators and citizens who think the partisan politics of today is damaging to the legislative process and are ready to change course.

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