



Measuring legislative collaboration: The Senate press events network



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ABSTRACT

Scholarship regarding the causes and consequences of legislative collaboration has drawn several insights through the application of network analysis. Previously used measures of legislative relationships may be heavily driven by non-relational factors such as ideological or policy-area preferences. We introduce participation in joint press events held by U.S. Senators as records of collaboration and the networks they comprise. This measure captures intentional relationships between legislators along the full timeline of collaboration. We show that there is substantial community structure underlying press event networks that goes beyond political party affiliation, and that press event collaboration predicts overlap in roll call voting.

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1. Introduction

Notions of complex interdependence among legislators pervade theories of congressional decision-making (e.g., vote trading, Carsey and Rundquist, 1999; bargaining, Baron and Ferejohn, 1989; information exchange, Groseclose, 1994; and coalition-building, Lee, 2000; Madonna, 2011). Though such theories offer predictions regarding roll call voting, roll calls provide a limited view of the interactions between legislators. Legislative networks, on the other hand, offer a direct means of assessing patterns of interactions and interdependence. Congressional scholars have begun to focus on the study of legislative networks, in which the fundamental unit of analysis is the relationship between two legislators, however that relationship is defined. The network framework offers the opportunity to (1) formulate and test theory about legislative interactions, and (2) observe the effects of legislative interactions on important legislative outcomes, such as roll-call votes or the passage of legislation. In order to study interactions among legislators, the essential measurement step is to define an interaction that is meaningful to the legislative process. Cosponsorship of legislation has served as the most commonly studied operationalization of congressional networks (Fowler, 2006a,b; Zhang et al., 2007; Cranmer and Desmarais, 2011; Desmarais and Cranmer, 2012). Others include networks that have been constructed using

co-membership on congressional committees (Porter et al., 2005) and co-membership in congressional caucuses (Ringe and Victor, 2013).

The existing research on congressional networks offers insights into the causes and consequences of overlap in legislative decisionmaking (e.g., cosponsorship) and overlap in organizational membership (e.g., committees and caucuses). These domains constitute an important piece of the puzzle in understanding legislative collaboration, but the relational component of previously studied congressional networks might be overshadowed by individual preferences (in the case of cosponsorship) or institutional constraints (in the case of shared committee membership). We introduce an alternative measure of collaboration in Congress that complements extant measures – joint press events in the U.S. Senate. Senators commonly hold individual press events to express their policy positions, claim credit for distributive benefits, and promote their initiatives. When Senators join collaborators in their publicity activities, they activate relational benefits. Senators have an incentive to organize collaborative press events because events that include multiple senators tend to receive more news coverage than events that include just a single member (Sellers and Schaffner, 2007). At the same time, the physical spaces in which such events take place generally preclude very large numbers of senators from appearing at a single event and, in any event, there are undoubtedly diminishing returns to adding additional senators to any given press event. Most importantly, press events are quite costly to organize and participate in, as compared to voting or cosponsoring legislation. When multiple senators hold a press event together, such an event is the result of non-trivial coordination by the senators and their staffs. Thus, co-participation in press

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events provides us with an indication of which senators have close working relationships with each other.

In this paper, we use data on joint press events from the 97th to 105th congresses to study the structure of collaboration in the Senate. We first introduce the press events network and describe how this network differs from the most extensively studied congressional network – the cosponsorship network. After demonstrating the value of the press events network for measuring meaningful collaborative relationships between senators, we consider whether press event collaboration predicts agreement in roll call voting, adjusting for other determinants of legislative choice. Our findings indicate that the structure of the press event network departs considerably from that of the cosponsorship network, most notably in the extent to which and the point at which the network begins to reflect the partisan polarization that now characterizes the chamber. Considering the relationship between roll call agreement and press event collaboration, we find that senators who hold press events together also vote together. Linking these two findings, we conclude with a discussion of the implications of this new network for our understanding of polarization in the United States Senate.

2. Networking legislators

In this section we consider the alternative approaches to operationalizing legislative networks and discuss, from a theoretical perspective, what we offer through the use of joint press events to operationalize connections. In measuring legislative networks, scholars are usually interested in understanding the dynamics of legislative collaboration. As Kirkland and Gross (2014, p. 101) note in their study of cosponsorship networks in the U.S. Congress, “the construct we are attempting to capture is collaboration.” In describing the relational benefits of caucuses, which they use to operationalize legislative networks, Victor et al. (2013, p. 4) indicate, “caucuses offer an opportunity for MCs to collaborate on issues for which they share policy priority.” To measure collaborative relationships, scholars have looked to co-support of legislation and co-membership in policy-focused legislative organizations. We argue that the use of joint press events complements extant measures due to the costly and intentional nature of the relationships formed through joint press events, the lack of institutional constraints on co-participation in them, and the incentives members have to limit the number of participating senators.

Cosponsorship is the relational process that has received the most attention in legislative networks scholarship. At the aggregate/chamber level, Tam et al. (2010) show that the structure of cosponsorship networks in the U.S. House and Senate varied significantly over the last quarter of the 20th century and that when the two chambers behave like a ‘small world’ – consisting of several tightly overlapping communities – Congress passes a higher number of important laws. Cosponsorship network structure relates to legislative outcomes at the individual legislator level as well: legislators receiving a strong degree of support from their colleagues through cosponsorship, as measured through centrality and other measures of connections in the cosponsorship network, exhibit a high degree of success at various stages in the legislative process (Fowler, 2006a; Kirkland, 2011). Scholars have also looked to legislative sub-organizations as a means through which to establish connections among legislators. Porter et al. (2005) and Porter et al. (2007) look at co-committee membership networks. Studying the House in the 101st – 108th congresses, Porter et al. (2007) show that the committee assignment network is significantly more hierarchical in Republican controlled congresses. Considering yet another legislative sub-organization, Ringe and Victor (2013) show that the memberships of legislative caucuses bridge across party and committee organizations – supplementing the formal organizational

structure where it fails to provide the substantive and political information members crave.

For all their strengths, the major shortcoming of extant measures of legislative networks is that overlap between legislators may be driven by correlated preferences (e.g., for legislation or policy areas) and/or institutional forces (e.g., the committee assignment process) and may not be indicative of active collaboration between or among legislators. To understand why this distinction is important, we outline the motivations for senators to intentionally build collaborative relationships.

2.1. Collaboration on discrete policy proposals

Collaboration can occur as two or more senators work together over time to develop expertise and to build support for a discrete policy proposal (or proposals). This process of complementary specialization and integrated coalition-building serves as a primary motivation for legislators to seek out collaborators. The end result of legislators’ partnerships can be seen in prominent examples of eponymous legislation attributed in name to dyads or triads of senators – McCain–Feingold, Nunn–Lugar, Gramm–Rudman–Hollings to name a few. Consider the following description by Senator Richard Lugar (R-IN) of how his collaboration with Georgia Democrat Sam Nunn on the Nunn–Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction (CRT) Program (the program responsible for securing and dismantling nuclear weapons in former Soviet republics that became law in 1992) came to be.¹

Well, it started in 1986 when Sam and I were invited to be a part of a delegation to go to Geneva, Switzerland. It was the hope for a beginning of arms control talks with the Soviet Union, which did not pan out in that period of time. . . . But we both found that we had an intense interest in the subject. And so, as a result, in subsequent years, Sam and I were both in Europe, [and we] banded together to visit often with delegations of Russians that we had met in Geneva or a derivative of that in Geneva. So we could begin to see the unraveling of the Soviet Union and the dangers that were clearly there that were not being met by arms control, which was very helpful (Lugar, 2011).

In this case, a conversation on a trip to Europe activated relational benefits that ultimately proved instrumental in the passage of important legislation six years later.

2.2. Other benefits of collaboration

But collaborative relationships need not be so instrumentally focused on discrete policy proposals to be beneficial. A second mechanism through which being central in a network of collaborators might yield legislative benefits would be if better-connected legislators are simply better situated to mobilize their many friends quickly when opportunities to pass laws emerge. Given how quickly policy windows can open and close, senators with a broad network of personal relationships might have a head start in building coalitions. In his obituary of Edward Kennedy (D-MA), CQ’s Seth Stern described Kennedy’s ongoing efforts to build personal relationships with colleagues.

Kennedy . . . always made . . . efforts to connect with his colleagues – and their aides – long before he wanted to work with them on a bill. He carefully courted them with gifts and

¹ The fact that Nunn and Lugar were not members of the same party, did not hail from the same state or region, and never shared a committee assignment during their long careers in the Senate may illustrate the limitations of co-membership and/or constituency-based networks as indicators of collaboration.

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