



Congressional seniority and pork: A pig fat myth?



Anthony Fowler^{a,*}, Andrew B. Hall^b

^a Harris School, University of Chicago, United States

^b Stanford University, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 April 2015

Received in revised form 7 July 2015

Accepted 27 July 2015

Available online 11 August 2015

Keywords:

Elections

Legislatures

Distributive politics

ABSTRACT

Representatives in American legislatures win reelection at astounding rates, even when they fail to represent the median voter in their districts closely. One popular explanation for this puzzle is that incumbents deliver non-ideological benefits to the district through “pork-barrel politics,” i.e., the distribution of federal spending. We put this explanation to the test by measuring the causal link between senior representation and pork. In short, we find no such link (sausage or otherwise). Employing both differences-in-differences and regression discontinuity designs, we find that a senior member of Congress, on average, brings no more pork to her district than the counterfactual freshman representing the same district at the same time. As a result, voters have no pork-based incentive to reelect their experienced incumbents, and pork-barrel politics cannot explain the incumbency advantage.

© 2015 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

More than nine out of ten members of Congress seeking reelection win.¹ At the same time, American legislators often vote contrary to the preferences of their constituents. For example, Democrats and Republicans do not converge to the preferences of the median voter in their district (Ansolabehere et al., 2001; Bafumi and Herron, 2010; Lee et al., 2004) and this representational gap does not improve with legislator seniority (Fowler and Hall, *in press*) or for narrow issues where the district has strong preferences (Fowler and Hall, 2015).² How can incumbent legislators enjoy such electoral success even when they represent the policy interests of their constituents poorly? In this paper, we consider one common explanation for this puzzle: the vaunted ability for incumbents to “bring home the bacon.” We demonstrate that a senior member of Congress brings home no more pork than would a counterfactual freshman legislator newly elected to serve the same district at the same time.

Isolating the causal link between seniority and pork is difficult. A host of hard-to-observe factors influence incumbent success (and hence, seniority) while also affecting how much pork districts receive. To pick just a few examples that are salient in many democratic settings, turnout (e.g., Martins and Veiga, 2014), pro-incumbent election laws (e.g., Stratmann, 2005), scandals (e.g., Costas-Pérez et al., 2012), natural disasters (e.g., Healy and Malhotra, 2009), party match and strategy across levels of the government (e.g., Ade et al., 2014; Ansolabehere and Snyder, 2006; Dahlberg and Johansson, 2002; Fourniaies and Mutlu-Eren, 2015), and incumbent effort and quality (e.g., Alt et al., 2011; Anzia and Berry, 2011; Bechtel and Hainmueller, 2011; Fowler, 2015; Jacobson, 1989) are all factors the political economy literature identifies as being important for sustained incumbent electoral success and as being possibly linked to outlays. To address these issues of omitted variables and selection, we need a design-based identification strategy.

We employ two independent, design-based empirical strategies to estimate the effect of a district having a senior vs. freshman representative on the level of discretionary spending going to the district. The first, a differences-in-differences (DD) design, examines

* Corresponding author at: 1155 East 60th St., Room 165, Chicago, IL 60637, United States.

E-mail addresses: anthony.fowler@uchicago.edu (A. Fowler), andrewbhall@stanford.edu (A.B. Hall).

¹ This figure can be deduced from official election returns. Or see, for example, Jacobson (2001).

² Such questions of representational “fit” or “quality” are hardly limited to the U.S. context. Stadelmann et al. (2014), for example, studies similar questions in the Swiss setting. Freier and Odendahl (2012) similarly look at policy differences (i.e., divergence) between parties in Bavarian municipalities, and Fiva et al. (2014) does likewise in the Norwegian context.

changes in spending in districts that switch from having a senior legislator to a first-term representative (or vice versa) and compares these changes to those in other districts where such a switch did not take place.³ The second is a regression discontinuity design (RD) that exploits the quasi-random outcomes of very close elections between an incumbent and challenger. Both designs estimate the effect of electing a senior vs. freshman representative from a district's perspective.⁴ These design-based inferential strategies are necessary because simple correlations between pork and seniority within a legislature do not address the question of interest. For example, senior members of Congress typically represent different types of districts than junior members. Therefore, finding that senior members typically bring home more pork than junior members would not tell us whether an individual district would receive less pork if it replaced its senior representative with a rookie.

In the U.S. House of Representatives (1984–2007), we estimate that the effect of electing a senior representative as opposed to a freshman is substantively negligible and statistically indistinguishable from zero. This null result is not a product of noise; we report confidence intervals that reject any substantively large positive effect. Interpreting the upper bounds of our estimates, we can statistically reject any effects greater than \$60 per person per year, and the real effect is likely to be far smaller than this bound. While some readers may be frustrated by our lack of non-zero estimates, we believe our null results represent a significant contribution for several reasons. First, scholars typically assume that seniority is important for distributive politics, and they often assert that pork-barreling is an explanation for the incumbency advantage. We demonstrate that there is little evidence for these assertions, ruling out several popular theories but opening the door to new theories. Second, publication bias skews the reporting of empirical results, leading to many false positive results which are rarely overturned (Franco et al., 2014; Gerber and Malhotra, 2008). The only way to counteract this bias is to report and publish null results.

Although a rich literature on the distribution of federal funds exists, its focus is not usually on the effect of legislator seniority.⁵ When it does consider issues of seniority, findings are decidedly mixed, likely due in some part to differences in data and time periods analyzed, but more importantly because of a lack of clean causal identification. Examining the cross-sectional relationship between seniority and pork, Moore and Hibbing (1996) find a positive association for the U.S. House but not the Senate, Alvarez and Saving (1997) find no significant relationship, and Arnold (1979) finds, if anything, a *negative* relationship. Levitt and Poterba (1999) study state delegation seniority with an eye towards economic outcomes and find positive results, but the identifying assumptions are strong. Using weaker assumptions but studying a slightly different question, Knight (2005) finds a link between committee membership and transportation pork, and Berry and Fowler (in press) find that chairs of Appropriations subcommittees deliver more pork within their policy domains. In an identification strategy close in spirit to our own, but applied to a different setting, Roberts (1990) finds that the exogenous switch from a senior senator to a freshman causes a decrease in stock market valuations of firms connected to the incumbent politically.

Finally, using a regression with district and time fixed effects, DeBacker (2011) reports a small, statistically insignificant association between seniority and pork. While DeBacker's design and data are similar to our own, this approach also involves a highly parametric specification embedded in a more complex structural model. We take advantage of current data and simple research designs to more directly assess the effect of seniority for pork. We focus on simple, binary comparisons of more and less senior incumbents using DD and RD designs to extract causal estimates with relatively weak assumptions.

Measuring the link between seniority and pork informs theories of representation. Voters care about distributive benefits. Increases in pork in various forms lead to higher vote shares for incumbents (Levitt and Snyder, 1997; Stratmann, 2013), and voters respond positively to legislators' "credit claims" about pork (Grimmer et al., 2012b). By determining the extent to which reelecting incumbents brings voters more pork, we can assess whether incumbents perform well in elections because voters have pork-based incentives to reelect them, and we can determine whether the U.S. House is institutionally arranged to ensure that senior members can bring home more pork.

Three factors confine our analysis. First, our econometric identification strategies leverage districts that switch representatives or have close elections, which are by nature districts with vulnerable or retiring incumbents—an external validity challenge.⁶ Nevertheless, seniority theories clearly predict that these legislators should reap the benefits of their seniority. Indeed, an important feature of seniority theories is that members enjoy benefits based purely on seniority, regardless of any other factors. McKelvey and Riezman (1992), for example, view seniority as a shift in recognition probability for all senior members in the context of a divide-the-dollar game. One might even predict that more vulnerable incumbents should in fact receive *more* pork, to prop up the party's chances in its most tenuous districts (see for example Berry et al., 2010). In this vein, Grimmer (2013) shows that marginal senators are much more likely to focus their "home style" on appropriations. Our study is therefore meaningful despite this specialized sample.

Second, we can only measure observed pork. We do not speak to other forms of unobservable or unquantifiable goods that senior members may offer to their districts. Discretionary spending is itself an important issue, and many theories single it out for scrutiny. We are therefore comfortable confining our findings to this form of pork.

Third, the institutional value of seniority is *variable* and our study may be focusing on an era in which partisan politics have supplanted the seniority system in the U.S. House (e.g., Hall and Shepsle, 2014). While the data needed to test the value of seniority in the heyday of the "textbook" congress does not exist, there is no doubt that the seniority system continues to be a source of

³ First we compare experienced legislators with any amount of seniority to freshmen legislators. In case this is too weak a "treatment" group, we then perform a series of tests comparing increasingly senior members against freshmen, excluding the "in-between" group of junior non-freshmen legislators. Results are consistent across all tests.

⁴ We are not interested in the hypothetical (and practically irrelevant) effect of altering the seniority of a legislator while holding all else equal. Senior legislators differ from freshmen in many ways, and all of those differences are part of the effect of interest.

⁵ For other questions, see for example Balla et al. (2002), Bickers and Stein (1991), Levitt and Snyder (1995), Levitt and Snyder (1997), and Stein and Bickers (1994), among many others.

⁶ This problem is less severe for the DD design, because 92% of districts see both senior and freshman representatives at some point during the period of study.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5067908>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5067908>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)