Growing body of research suggests that the legislative agenda in Congress favors the preferences and interests of wealthy Americans and well-organized corporations. But how do these groups influence legislative action? In this paper, we report the results of an original survey experiment of more than 400 Washington, DC-based congressional staffers who participated in the 2017 Congressional Capacity Survey. The vignette experiment manipulates the identity of the individual or interest making the request, the substantive nature of the request, and the information provided by the petitioner to the staffer. We then explore if they grant access based on the requester’s identity, how likely they would be to use the information to make a decision, whether they would make a recommendation consistent with the request, and how representative they believed the requester to be of their boss’s constituents. Together, our results shed light on debates over the nature of substantive representation of constituent preferences, lobbying influence, and legislative behavior in Congress in an era of rising political polarization and inequality.
It is well established wealthy donors and large corporations have more access to Congress than average voters. It is less clear, however, how or if such special access yields legislative action. Since at least Schattschneider (1960), political scientists have been concerned about elite and upper-class influence in representative institutions. Amidst recent high and rising levels of income and wealth concentration in the United States, scholars have increasingly focused on whether outsized economic resources afford political actors privileged access and influence in the policymaking process (Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012; Hacker and Pierson 2010; Jacobs and Skocpol 2005; Schlozman et al. 2012). While some have questioned the relationship between economic resources and political clout (Ansolabehere et al. 2003; Branham et al. 2017; Prasad 2018), other research has documented that greater economic resources afford wealthier individuals and private sector businesses more opportunities to shape public policy (Drutman 2015; Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2018; Kalla and Broockman 2016b; Miler 2010; Page and Gilens 2017). This research complements a growing body of work documenting how political elites, including state legislators and senior staff in Congress, often misperceive the public opinion of their constituents in ways that favor concentrated economic interests (Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2019; Broockman and Skovron 2018). These studies of opinion misperceptions suggest that the greater access that wealthy and well-organized interests enjoy may change how politicians perceive their constituents. But does access alone change how legislators and their staff surrogates routinely behave in the legislative process?

We take up this question in this paper, asking whether and how congressional staff use information from different political actors. Using an original survey of over 400 DC-based congressional staffers in 2017, we report the results of a vignette experiment that hypothetically requests a meeting with their office. The script varies the identity of the requester, whether the requester seeks legislation to be introduced or blocked, and the substantive nature of the information offered in support of the request. The experiment then asks whether congressional staff grant advantaged access to particular political interests and then whether that access could be used to shape legislative action. We thus ask what induces legislative personnel to be responsive beyond simply granting a meeting by courtesy?
The experiment does not reveal preferential access to donors qua donors, but our findings do underscore the importance of ideologically aligned think tanks for shaping how staff interpret and use information to make choices about how to act on it. Congressional staff are substantially more likely to say that they use policy evidence from a think tank of their own ideological leaning and side with those organizations in making recommendations to their bosses. The same is not true if supporting evidence is a credible poll of constituent opinion.

Together, our results speak to several ongoing research agendas within the study of American politics. By considering the behavior of congressional staff, we add to a growing literature recognizing the importance of these individuals in the legislative process. While scholars of congressional politics have long recognized that Members of Congress manage legislative enterprises (Malbin 1980; Salisbury and Shepsle 1981), it is only relatively recently that research has directly considered how the training, resources, incentives, and background of staffers might affect the legislative process (Hammond 1996; LaPira and Thomas 2017; McCrain 2018; Montgomery and Nyhan 2017; Romzek and Utter 1997; Furnas nd; Crosson et al. ress; Furnas et al. ress). Our survey experiment underscores how staffers’ preferences for particular kinds of information might bias the political strategy and policy recommendations staffers make to their bosses (Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2019; Miler 2010).

Similarly, our findings about staffers’ use of partisanship as a lens through which they filter information and make recommendations to their bosses suggests ways in which ongoing political polarization might be self-reinforcing within Congress (McCarty et al. 2006; Sinclair 2006; Furnas nd). If staff are disproportionately responsive to information from co-partisans, including policy analysis and information about the public opinion in their districts or states, then their offices are likely to act along increasingly partisan lines (see also Curry 2015).

Lastly, this experiment carries implications for broader debates over the representation of different organized interests in American politics—and in particular, whether and how economic inequalities might translate into inequalities of political representation (Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012; Gilens and Page 2014). While our results do not indicate that staffers admit to preferring donors over others (but see Kalla and Broockman 2016b; Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2019), we do find that staffers defer to actors who bring think tank-sponsored research to bear on their advocacy efforts. This suggests a
very important role for think tanks in shaping the policy proposals that Congress considers during the legislative process—and that donors or other wealthy interests that fund think tank agendas may have a powerful indirect role in influencing agendas in Congress (Esterling 2004; Medvetz 2012; Drutman 2015; Hollis-Brusky 2015; Fagan 2019).

Our results further highlight the importance of partisanship in accounting for gaps in economic representation in Congress, suggesting how partisans represent very different political coalitions, with attendant implications for the legislative action they pursue (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016; Grossmann and Isaac nd; Lax et al. 2019). This paper reinforces such findings, indicating that staff in Congress are responsive to very different kinds of arguments, data, and research depending on which side of the aisle they work. Selective attention to some sources of policy research and information thus may help to explain why Republicans appear so responsive to the well-off while Democrats appear more responsive to the interests of the more economically disadvantaged.

**MOTIVATION**

Congressional staff play a crucial role in the policymaking process, serving as gatekeepers for Members’ time and attention, communicating with constituents and other stakeholders, assembling information on constituent views and pending policies, strategically identifying supportive coalitions, and making recommendations about the actions that their bosses should take. Professional staff routinely make recommendations on whether to introduce or co-sponsor legislation, what questions to ask during committee hearings, what remarks to make on the floor, or what public statements to issue to the press. Despite the fact that they serve at the pleasure of Members and are often hired to reflect those Member’s personal priorities, both qualitative and quantitative research has indicated that staff can and do exert independent effects on their bosses’ behavior (Montgomery and Nyhan 2017; LaPira and Kosar ress).

In a recent survey of senior congressional staff, Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger, and Stokes (2019) find evidence that these individuals often misperceive the opinions of their constituents on highly salient policy issues, like health reform, gun control, the minimum wage, and climate change regulation (see also Chin and Geva 2000; Kalla and Broockman 2016a). These misperceptions, moreover, appear to relate to the interactions that staffers have with economically advantaged actors, like donors and private
sector businesses, raising the possibility that the access that these interests enjoy may be shaping the behavior of legislative staff. Building on that study, we ask whether and how legislative staff might act on the information provided to them by different political interests—and whether in doing so, staffers might be biasing the information and recommendations that they offer to their bosses. As we indicated above, these questions provide an important test of research questioning whether and how inequalities of economic resources might manifest themselves in the political process.

DATA

We evaluate these questions with a survey experiment embedded in the 2017 Congressional Capacity Survey (CCS). As far as we are aware, it is the largest academic survey of congressional staffers to date. It was fielded between August 9th and November 4th, 2017. Using a complete census of congressional staffers purchased from LegiStorm, we identified 8,485 prospective respondents who worked in D.C. offices who have some responsibility to contribute to legislative operations, broadly defined. The survey was sent to all 8,458 staffers using their congressional email addresses. Staffers and offices were contacted by a variety of outside validator organizations to encourage them to participate in the survey. Recipients were reminded to participate in the survey two times following initial outreach.

The final response rate of the survey was 5.2 percent (441 of 8,485). The CCS respondents comprise a diverse and largely representative sample of congressional staff on most observable characteristics. Figure 1 shows the unweighted difference in means between the survey respondents and a separate

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1 We excluded staffers that worked in offices with strictly administrative, facilities, or maintenance missions (such as House Office of Logistics and Support and Senate Office of Printing, Graphics and Direct Mail).
2 Validators included LegBranch.com, the R Street Institute, PopVox, congressional Management Foundation, Pew Charitable Trusts, Bipartisan Policy Center, Stennis Center, and various congressional staff.
3 More details on the survey timeline and outreach procedure can be found in the 2017 CCS methodological addendum, reproduced in Appendix A.
4 Respondents are political appointees in 133 House personal offices, 27 House committee or leadership offices, 60 Senate personal offices, and 24 Senate committee or leadership offices. The typical respondent is a 25 to 29 year old white male employed as a mid-level legislative assistant in a majority party member’s office with roughly four years experience on Capitol Hill.
FIGURE 1. Balance between survey respondents and random sample of staffers

- Senate (%)
- Republican (%)
- Leadership Office (%)
- Committee Office (%)
- Legislative Staffers (%)
- Senior Staffers (%)
- Junior Staffers (%)
- Female (%)

- Log Salary
- Tenure (Years)
- Number of Employers

Difference in Means (Survey Sample − Random Sample)

DW–Nominate Dim1 (for Dems)
DW–Nominate Dim1 (for Reps)

Difference in Means (Survey Sample − Random Sample)
random selection sample of 450 non-respondents for whom complete career history data was purchased from LegiStorm.

Balance is very strong on career trajectory covariates (number of prior employers, tenure, salary), several key institutional covariates (party, chamber), and the party and ideology of staffers’ bosses. All respondents were given inverse probability weights using a post-stratification procedure conditioning on the joint distribution of chamber, office type (personal, committee, other), and party (Democratic, Republican, other) in the population, using the sampling frame purchased from LegiStorm (Lumley et al. 2004; Lumley 2017). The maximum weight applied to any case was 4.82, and the minimum 0.749. We report detailed balance statistics, both pre- and post-weighting in Appendix A.

It is important to note that despite the potential limitations of this sample, these data are the largest experimental sample of Congressional staffers. The difficulty surveying this population and scarcity of data of this kind have made direct study of congressional staff behavior a comparative blind spot in the study of Congress. These data are thus the best currently available to assess these fundamental questions of representation, information processing, and policy-making by congressional staffers.

**EXPERIMENT DESIGN**

As part of the 2017 CCS we included a vignette experiment with a fully randomized factorial design, (Alexander and Becker 1978; Yates 1978). The vignette presents a staffer with a hypothetical scenario intended to mimic a commonplace occurrence within Congress: an individual representing some constituency, group, or organization who contacts a staffer in pursuit of a policy goal by offering evidence in support of their position. In the broadest sense, this can be thought of as an instance of in-person lobbying or policy advocacy, whether it is by a registered lobbyist or not. We manipulated three factors in this contact vignette: 1) the *Identity* of the individual requesting the meeting, 2) the *Action* the individual was requesting, and 3) the supporting *Information* the individual offered. The vignette was worded as follows:

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5Hertel-Fernandez et al. (2019), for instance, focused on surveying only the most senior members within an office, i.e., chiefs of staff and legislative directors.
Legislative staff like yourself rely on information from a variety of sources. Suppose you received a request for a meeting with a \{Identity\}. The individual is asking your office to \{Action\} They offered to give your office \{Information\}.

The three manipulated factors in the vignette were able to take the following values. Their selection was fully randomized.

\textit{Identity}
\begin{itemize}
  \item Constituent
  \item Donor to your Member’s Campaign
  \item Lobbyist representing a national consumer group
  \item Lobbyist representing a large, national business
\end{itemize}

\textit{Action}
\begin{itemize}
  \item Propose a new bill
  \item Stop a bill currently under consideration
\end{itemize}

\textit{Information}
\begin{itemize}
  \item Polling from your constituency that shows report for their position.
  \item Evidence of how their proposal will help jobs and unemployment in your constituency from an analysis they conducted.
  \item Evidence of how their proposal will help jobs and unemployment in your constituency from a center-left think tank.
  \item Evidence of how their proposal will help jobs and unemployment in your constituency from a center-right think tank.
\end{itemize}

Following the vignette, we present respondents with four questions. In the first three they were asked to rate how likely they would be to 1) take the meeting, 2) use the information provided by the individual to prepare recommendations for their boss, and 3) side with this individual in their recommendation to their boss. Staffers answered these three questions on a 5-point Likert-type scale with likelihood anchors. In the fourth question respondents were asked how representative they thought this individual was of their district or state’s opinion as a whole, which they answered on a 5-point Likert-type scale with a representativeness anchor.\footnote{Exact question wording is available in Appendix C}

In summation, the design gave us a $4 \times 2 \times 4$ factorial design, for a total of 32 possible conditions, and four different dependent variables. In our preregistration, we proposed to test all factorial combinations using pairwise t-tests.\footnote{Open Science Foundation pre-registration available here: https://osf.io/45ypc} Our sample left us substantially under-powered for this analytic procedure,
though we report these results in Appendix B as promised in our pre-registration. Insofar as we are able to find results given the sample size, they indicate the strong influence of alignment between staffer partisanship and the information source presented.

Because of our limited sample size relative to the number of possible conditions, we opt to estimate the Average Marginal Component Effect (AMCE) of the levels of each factor. The AMCE of a particular element (e.g., Identity = Constituent) is the marginal effect of that element averaged over the joint distribution of the other manipulated factors (e.g., Action and Information) (Hainmueller et al. 2014).8

In the analysis which follows, we report the AMCE for each attribute in the factorial design. Following Hainmueller et al. (2014) we estimate AMCE from fitting an ordinal least squares (OLS) design. All models are estimated using post-stratification weights and heteroskedasticity consistent standard errors (HC3).

**RESULTS**

We first turn to the lowest stakes outcome for a staffer: the likelihood of a staffer taking a meeting with the individual described in the request. These results are shown in Figure 2.

Agreeing to take a meeting is a low risk commitment, since the staffer is not expected to act on any request other than offering time. Agreeing to take a meeting is substantially less meaningful than publicly committing to side with a petitioner when making recommendations to one’s boss. As such, it is not surprising that the results here are the weakest. Compared to a request from a constituent (the reference category), staffers tend to report a lower likelihood of taking meeting with donors or lobbyists. In most cases, however, the estimated negative average marginal component effect of these identities are not statistically distinguishable from null effects. The notable exception here is that Democratic staffers do appear less likely to take meetings with donors. The results here suggest that, consistent with (Chin and Geva 2000) but contrary to Kalla and Broockman (2016b), donors are not granted

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8While Hainmueller et al. (2014) identify AMCE in the context of conjoint experiments, they note that it naturally arises as a causal estimand of interest in any factorial design as well, and is applicable to both choice and ratings based dependent variables. Our application here is to a ratings based factorial design, rather than the choice based conjoint which is the focus of their paper.
meetings more than geographic constituents are. That said, we should be cautious in interpreting the negative result for donor access given the possibility of social desirability bias. Moreover, it may well be the case that our results differ by the position that staff hold in an office, a subject we will investigate in further research.

**FIGURE 2. How likely would you be to take a meeting with this individual?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity</th>
<th>Average Marginal Component Effect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Lobbyist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer Lobbyist</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Model**
- All Staff
- Dem Staff
- Rep Staff

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stop bill</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Information Source**
- Center-left Think-tank
- Center-right Think-tank
- Own Analysis

**Notes:** The dependent variable is a numerical transformation of a five-category Likert-type scale. The baseline category for the identity variable is “constituent,” the baseline category for the information source variable is ‘supportive polling,’ and the baseline category for the action variable is ‘propose bill.’

We also find no relationship between the evidence being offered or the action being requested and staffers reported likelihood to take a meeting.

In Figure 3, we present results from an analysis of our second dependent variable, staffers’ reported
FIGURE 3. How likely would you be to use the information this individual provided to prepare recommendations for your boss?

Average Marginal Component Effect

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity</th>
<th>Donor</th>
<th>Business Lobbyist</th>
<th>Consumer Lobbyist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model</td>
<td>All Staff</td>
<td>Dem Staff</td>
<td>Rep Staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action</td>
<td>Stop bill</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Source</td>
<td>Center-left Think-tank</td>
<td>Center-right Think-tank</td>
<td>Own Analysis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: The dependent variable is a numerical transformation of a five-category Likert-type scale. The baseline category for the identity variable is “constituent,” the baseline category for the information source variable is “supportive polling,” and the baseline category for the action variable is “propose bill.”
likelihood of using the information provided as they prepare recommendations to their boss. Compared to agreeing to take a meeting, this dependent variable implies a higher level of commitment from respondents because using the information suggests an actual behavioral change which could impact outcomes. Overall, staffers report being much less likely to use information provided by donors. This is particularly true among Democratic staffers. We also find a statistically distinguishable difference between Democratic staffers’ and Republican staffers’ reported likelihood to use policy evidence from a center-right think tank (Payton et al. 2003).

The estimated effects of other identities, action requested, or evidence presented are not distinguishable from zero. With the exception of policy evidence from a center-right think tank, the estimated effects among Democratic staffers and Republican staffers are not statistically distinguishable from each other.

Next, we address the results from our analysis of how likely a staffer would be to side with the petitioner when making recommendations to their boss. Compared to granting access and using information, making a recommendation consistent with the request represents the highest level of commitment by a staffer. Staff are expected to maintain their own credibility with their superiors, so choosing to side with a request represents a significant professional commitment. Moreover, as gatekeepers, merely meeting with a person or consuming information presumes no further action, whereas raising it to the level of a superior takes a step in the direction of some traceable action (Arnold 1990). Results of this analysis are presented in figure 4.

When looking at all staffers, we find minimal evidence that staffers are, on average, more likely to side with either a center-left or center-right think tank—and if anything, staffers may be less likely to side with partisan-aligned groups compared to individuals offering their own analysis (the reference category in the experiment). When we disaggregate our results by staffer party, however, we see a very different picture. Democratic staff are substantially more likely to side with the positions offered by center-left think tanks and less likely to side with center-right ones. Republican staffers exhibit the mirror tendency, favoring center-right evidence and discounting center-left sources. The estimated effect of evidence from center-right and center-left think tanks is statistically distinguishable between Democratic and Republican staffers. For both Democrats and Republicans, the penalty associated with
FIGURE 4. How likely would you be to side with this individual in your recommendation to your boss?

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<tr>
<th>Identity</th>
<th>Average Marginal Component Effect</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Donor</td>
<td>-0.75 -0.50 -0.25 0.00 0.25 0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Lobbyist</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consumer Lobbyist</td>
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Action

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<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Average Marginal Component Effect</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stop bill</td>
<td>-0.75 -0.50 -0.25 0.00 0.25 0.50</td>
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Information Source

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<tr>
<th>Information Source</th>
<th>Average Marginal Component Effect</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Center-left Think-tank</td>
<td>-0.75 -0.50 -0.25 0.00 0.25 0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Center-right Think-tank</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Own Analysis</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Model

- All Staff
- Dem Staff
- Rep Staff

Notes: The dependent variable is a numerical transformation of a five-category Likert-type scale. The baseline category for the identity variable is "constituent," the baseline category for the information source variable is ‘supportive polling,’ and the baseline category for the action variable is ‘propose bill.’
offering information from a non-aligned think tank is roughly twice the benefit gained from offering information from an aligned think tank.

Aside from identifying strong information source effects for this outcome, we also find that staffers are more likely to side with an individual requesting that their boss take action to stop a bill currently under consideration. This result may help explain the status quo bias and inaction in the contemporary legislative outcomes.

Where figures 2, 3, and 4 present dependent variables which ask staffers to report whether they would be likely to take certain actions depending on the attributes of the lobbying vignette. In addition to these action outcome measures, we also asked respondents a question about how they perceived the hypothetical individual making the request: "How representative do you think this individual is of your district or state’s opinion as a whole?" Results of our analysis of this outcome are shown in figure 5.

Recent research has documented that political elites, including legislators and staffers, are systematically biased in their perceptions of public opinion (Broockman and Skovron 2018; Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2019). Our experimental analysis of staffers’ evaluations of the representativeness illuminates which factors may shape staffer conceptions of representativeness.

All staffers view donors, business lobbyists and consumer lobbyists as less representative of their district or state’s opinion than constituents. However, this effect is not statistically distinguishable from zero among Republican staffers for donors or business lobbyists, or for consumer lobbyists among Democratic staffers. These results suggest staffers perceive these labels as partisan heuristics.

As we turn to the effect of the information being offered by petitioner it is particularly important to note that baseline category is that they present supportive polling from their constituency. As before, we observe strong effects for individuals presenting information from center-left or center-right think tanks on partisan staffers. This is striking; both Democratic and Republican staffers find individuals presenting policy evidence from an ideologically aligned think tank more representative than individuals presenting polling supportive of their position from the staffers’ bosses’ constituencies. Republican staffers rate those offering policy evidence from a center-left think tank as less representative of their constituency’s opinion. Democratic staffers evaluation of those presenting information from a center-right think tank is statistically indistinguishable from those presenting supportive polling. For
FIGURE 5. How representative do you think this individual is of your district or state's opinion as a whole?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity</th>
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Notes: The dependent variable is a numerical transformation of a five-category Likert-type scale. The baseline category for the identity variable is “constituent,” the baseline category for the information source variable is ‘supportive polling,’ and the baseline category for the action variable is ‘propose bill.’
both think tank sources, the effect on Republican and Democratic staffers are the polar opposites of each other.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

For anybody hoping to influence Congress, our findings have a clear lesson: bring policy evidence from an aligned partisan think tank. In one sense, this is an encouraging finding. It suggests that on balance, staffers want to see solid analysis before they recommend a policy, and that they know that their bosses want to see that same analysis before supporting a policy. On the other hand, it warns of epistemic closure among partisan staffers. Congressional staff may be professionally socialized to be unwilling to hear the other side.

Our evidence reinforces existing findings about the endemic polarization in Washington. Our largest observed effects came when we mentioned ideology, even though we omit brand names such as the Brookings Institution and Heritage Foundation. It may hardly be surprising that Democrats discount information from center-right think tanks while using information from center-left think tanks, while Republicans do the opposite. But to the extent that think tanks in theory aim to provide objective fact-based analyses, these findings pose questions. Certainly, center-left and center-right think tanks sometimes come to the same conclusions. In such cases, the messenger surely matters more than the underlying conclusion. But if they consistently agreed, why should only one side be trusted? Healthy democratic deliberation presumes that all views are considered, even if they are to be rejected or used solely to develop counterarguments. But with strict time constraints, ideological think tanks offer simple, quick heuristics for credible information.

Similarly, we might read the low weight that both sides give to meeting with and including information from donors as an encouraging finding. But we should be careful not to over interpret these descriptions, given the social desirability of staffers saying they will meet with constituents, and the undesirability of admitting that donors hold sway over offices. It is quite possible that staffers have convinced themselves that they are not likely to grant meetings to donors because that is a more comfortable belief to hold, even if it is not necessarily true, as other evidence suggests (Kalla and Broockman 2016a). This contradiction merits more research — if staffers believe that donors hold little
influence over their office, this may make them less aware of the more subtle ways in which money influences outcomes and less supportive of campaign finance reforms. Interestingly, our findings suggest that, as compared to constituents, staffers are more likely to side with donors than they are to either meet with or use information from donors. This merits further inquiry as well.

Still, it may be equally likely that donors qua donors do indeed have little direct influence. One explanation for why staffers might be more likely to meet with lobbyists is because lobbyists usually provide useful information about policy, whereas donors rarely do. Indeed, (Kalla and Broockman 2016b) find that the most likely staffer to grant meetings to donors is Chief of Staff, who is typically designated within an office to be the liaison to partisan constituencies. These meetings are low-risk and often granted as a professional courtesy. Lobbyists are also likely to be more persistent, since it is their job to meet with staffers with designated policy portfolios. Because most members care what different interest groups think about different issues, staffers are likely to want to at least present the lay of the interest group landscape to members.

These findings also suggest a possible mechanism consistent with recent scholarship showing that while both Democrats and Republicans listen only to co-partisans, Republicans support policies more favored by rich constituents than poor constituents, whereas Democrats tend to support policies more in line with poor and middle class voters Lax et al. (2019). Perhaps think tanks act as intermediaries, validating low-tax, anti-regulatory concerns of wealthy donors primarily on the political right (see, e.g. Smith 2009; Mayer 2016), while left-of-center think tanks tend to advocate for policies that benefit the middle class more directly. If think tanks indeed serve as important sources of acknowledged influence, this suggests they merit further study. For example, how do the research and policy agendas of left and right think tanks differ? What policies do they lift up? What policies do they ignore? And how do corporate and wealthy donors who fund think tanks shape these agendas? Recent observational work by Lerner (2018), Fagan (2019), Furnas (nd) and others have begun to take seriously the role of think tanks as ideological actors involved in shaping congressional outcomes. Our experimental findings suggest that this nascent literature is well-poised to address important questions of influence. We believe the role of think tanks in party-networks and as conduits of interest group preferences is worthy of increased attention in the discipline.
Finally, we note that both Democrats and Republicans are more likely to side with those who say they want to stop a bill. There are several plausible explanations for this finding. First, introducing new legislation is a very public act, while efforts to stop legislation tend to be substantially less visible. Those worried about push-back their actions may initiate might tend to favor obstructive action over introducing a new bill. Alternately, staffers’ tendency to side with those seeking to stop legislation may reflect either a generalized skepticism borne out of experience among staffers: that there are more bad ideas than good ideas in legislation. Or, simply the experiment reveals the individual basis of the broader status quo bias. Multiple veto points creates conditions that make it much less risky to say "No, thanks," than it is to painstakingly build complex supportive coalitions to move the needle on a pet policy. And, it may also simply reflect the fact that lawmakers are asked to support many policies, so must be selective.

The bottom line is these data reveal that not all lobbyist meeting requests and subsequent meetings are treated the same by staffers. Staffers do want information and analysis, and they want it from ideologically aligned experts. Think tanks offer an easy heuristic signal for credibility and belief confirmation. As with most heuristics, they frequently lead to correct decisions, but may also introduce blind-spot errors in even the most routine actions. As a result, think tanks have become important interlocutors in the Washington influence spheres, as both originators and validators of important policy ideas. However, think tanks depend on private funding, and their funding is not always transparent. Many think tanks are funded by corporations or foreign governments, but do not always disclose these sources. Indeed, many business lobbyists advise their clients that before they advocate any policy, they should fund a trusted think tank to do research supporting their position. These often opaque motivations should raise concerns about moneyed interests, information, and action in Congress.

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Grossmann, Matt and William Isaac (n.d.). Oligarchy or class war? political parties and interest groups in unequal public influence on policy adoption.


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APPENDIX A: 2017 CONGRESSIONAL CAPACITY SURVEY

METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX
Appendix: 2017 Congressional Capacity Study

Overview

The 2017 Congressional Capacity Study is a collaborative research project conducted by a core team of political scientists: Timothy LaPira (James Madison University), Alexander Furnas (University of Michigan), Alexander Hertel-Fernandez (Columbia University), Lee Drutman (New America), and Kevin Kosar (R Street Institute). The project collected original qualitative and quantitative data collection in two stages. In Stage #1, from February through June, 2017, the team conducted in-person interviews with 52 senior staff in House and Senate personal, committee, party leadership, and chamber administrative offices in Washington, DC. In addition, the team interviewed four former members of Congress and seven former staff from the House and Senate committee offices. In Stage #2, from August through December, 2017, the research team fielded an online questionnaire targeting all congressional staff primarily located in Washington, DC in offices. The sampling frame purposely broad based on staffers’ geographic location to best capture those who contribute to Congress’s legislative, appropriations, oversight, or general public policy operations. Both stages of the project were monitored by the James Madison University Institutional Review Board to protect participants’ confidentiality.¹ The research project was generously funded by the Hewlett Foundation’s Madison Initiative, in support of the R Street-New America Legislative Branch Working Group and the collaborative research project team.

Stage #1: Former member of Congress and Senior Staff Interviews

Purpose

The interviews were meant to investigate senior staffers’ and former members’ perspectives on legislative office management and operations, including career backgrounds and expertise, perspectives on personnel knowledge, skills, and abilities, and views on institutional and professional goals. The objectives were to collect original narratives on opportunities and challenges of working in a characteristically polarized Congress and to probe interviewees for qualitative data to prioritize the more systematic and objective data collection in the subsequent survey stage of the study.

Interviewee Selection and Recruitment

The research team constructed a sampling frame from an institutional subscription to a legislative staff contact list distributed by LegiStorm, LLC. An initial list of senior staff in House and Senate member offices with job titles of Chief of Staff Administrative Assistant (if no Chief of Staff was listed), and Legislative Director, Communications Director were compiled. A second list of senior staff with job titles Staff Director in all permanent chamber and joint legislative committees and subcommittees were compiled. Staff were directly contacted with a request for in-person meetings in Washington offices, with an intention to vary interviewees by chamber, office type, party, gender, ethnicity, and the

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¹ James Madison University IRB Protocols #17-0333 (Phase 1) and #18-0030 (Phase 2).
home state or district of the principal member and chair or ranking member. The selection was not intended to be random, but instead focused on those most willing to share their valuable time. In addition, we asked several interviewees to identify former members of Congress and staff colleagues no longer working in Congress who may be willing to share their hindsight perspectives after having worked in Congress.

When explicitly permitted, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and anonymized. In roughly a dozen cases, transcripts were likely to reveal the interviewee’s identity were not made available to the research community outside than the five co-principal investigators approved by institutional review board protocols.

**Semi-structured Interview Protocol**
In general, interviews were semi-structured to balance several competing goals, including establishing rapport by allowing respondents to take the conversation in the direction they felt most comfortable, to maximize the amount of novel, idiosyncratic information not otherwise available from existing sources, and to uncover information that the research team could not possibly conjecture *ex ante* (Leech 2002). The interviews varied in practice, but were intended to ask variations of the following questions:

1. Can you tell me about your background?
   PROBING QUESTIONS:
   - How did you end up in this position? What has been your career trajectory?
   - When did you start thinking about Congress as career?
   - Did you originally work on the campaign side, or did you do more policy work?

2. What skills and characteristics do people need to be effective in a position like yours?
   PROBING QUESTIONS:
   - If pay/hours were adequate, would you want to spend your whole career on the Hill?
   - If your boss was not returning after the next election (for whatever reason), would you seek another job on the Hill?
   - Do you think you’ll still be working on the Hill in 5 years?
   - Has this job met your expectations?
   - What are things you like *most* about your job? *Least?*

3. What is more important, specific policy expertise or a deep understanding of how things really work on Capitol Hill?
   PROBING QUESTIONS:
   - Do you prefer working on policy details or on winning elections?
   - IF “BOTH” - In what context is one more important than the other?

4. Some people say there are three types of members – partisan, policy, and constituent service. What kind of office do you think you have?
   PROBING QUESTIONS:
   - Do you think this is valid? If so, where does your office fit? If not, is there a better typology?
   - What is your office most known for on Capitol Hill? [IF “constituency service,” then: what is it most known for inside Washington?]

5. What goals are most important to your member?
6. [WRAP-UP] Are there any questions that I have not asked that you think are important for me to understand how Congress manages its legislative work?

Generally, interview times typically ranged between 30-45 minutes, with some conversations lasting 90 minutes or more.

**Stage #2: Staff Survey**

**Purpose**
The survey questionnaire sought to find out more about the backgrounds, career paths, policy views, technical knowledge, substantive expertise, and job experiences of congressional staffers, as well as the procedures and organizational structures that allow them to assist members of Congress to do their work in the most effective and democratically responsive ways. The sampling and fielding process was purposely intended to seek as broad and representative sample of congressional staff as possible.

**Sample Construction**
We constructed the sampling frame from the full Legistorm contact list as of July 18, 2017 that included individual’s names, employers, and official email addresses. The contact list contained the full census of 10,512 legislative branch employees with a Washington, DC office address. The contact list included 729 House, Senate, and bicameral offices and organizational units. The list excluded legislative support agencies (such as the Congressional Research Service, Government Accountability Office, and the Congressional Budget Office) that employ personnel as federal civil servants. From this list of organizational units, the research team selected 633 organizational units with names suggesting the primary mission contributed to legislative operations, as broadly as could be determined by public information about the office. Primarily, these units focus on members’ personal offices, standing committees, and party leadership offices. Secondarily, we included “other” administrative offices (such as the House Parliamentarian) and institutionalized caucuses or member organizations (such as the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control and the House Republican Study Committee). The sampling frame excluded offices with exclusively administrative, facilities, or maintenance missions (such as House Office of Logistics and Support and Senate Office of Printing, Graphics and Direct Mail).

Table A1 summarizes the 8,485 individuals in our sampling frame this process considered to be primarily employed as political appointees in the legislative branch. The table cross-tabulates prospective respondents by chamber and office type, including 540 member offices, all standing, permanent select, and joint committees, official party leadership

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2 LegiStorm constantly updates records from House and Senate public payroll and disbursement data. As with any human resources data, individuals are constantly moving in and out of positions, and positions are continuously being created or eliminated at the discretion of individual offices. Our sampling frame is accurate as of the date of purchase.

3 LegiStorm does not maintain payroll disbursement records from the Office of Personnel Management, even though legislative service agency personnel serve the legislative branch.
offices, and “other” institutional offices with a legislative function, such as House Legislative Counsel.

Table A1. Sampling Frame Contacts by Chamber and Type of Office

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The process intentionally made no assumptions about individual staffers within an office based on common job titles to maximize the variety of staff. This sampling frame conservatively biases toward over-coverage of prospective participants that may reasonably be thought of as politically appointed staff engaged in legislative operations. The *ex ante* expectation is that response rates would be artificially deflated because we were likely asking non-legislative staff employed in “legislative offices” to participate. We expect these non-legislative staff employed in “legislative offices” to be more likely to decline to participate in survey.

**Fielding Process, Pre-registration, and Timeline**

The survey was offered exclusively online using the James Madison University license to the Qualtrics survey platform. The survey was offered in three sequential data collection stages between August and December. Each of the 8,485 prospective staffers were contacted directly by email with a personalized link to identify respondents with existing biographical data and to maintain strict confidentiality. In addition to direct contacts, the research team recruited senior legislative staffers in our professional networks to ask them to spread the word as much as they were willing, and partnered with external validator groups including PopVox, Congressional Management Foundation, Pew Charitable Trusts, Bipartisan Policy Center, and the Stennis Center to promote participation.

Pre-registration documentation was filed with Open Science Framework before data collection was initiated. An addendum was added to the pre-registration while data collection was ongoing, but prior to any data analysis.

The fielding process was conducted over the course of five months in 2017, including:

2. August 4-15: Initial invitation emails sent in batches of 100.
3. August 9: Finalized “Congressional Capacity Staff Survey” pre-registration documentation submitted for review.
4. August 13: Pre-registration documentation approved and embargoed.
5. September 21: Email response declines and survey completions identified, dropped from first follow-up contact list.
6. September 21-October 2: First reminder email sent.
7. October 30: Second round email response declines and survey completions identified, dropped from second follow-up contact list.
8. October 30-October 31: Second and final reminder email sent.
12. December 31: Pre-registration embargo completed.

Response Rates and Margins of Error
The overall response rate was 5.2 percent (441 of 8,485). The margin of error at the 95 percent level of confidence is 4.5 percent. In addition, survey respondents were blocked for two banks of questions.

First, staff were asked a series of questions about chamber-specific parliamentary procedures, so subsample margins of error for House staff is 5.9 percent and Senate staff is 7.7 percent at the 95 percent level.

Second, staff were selectively or randomly assigned to one of three policy domain blocks for a series of questions about policy substance and information source credibility. Selections were determined by a question reading, “Please indicate how frequently you work on each of the following issues for your boss in a typical week when Congress is in session: never, occasionally, or daily,” for a list of 24 policy domains adapted from the Comparative Agendas Project Master Codebook (http://www.comparativeagendas.net/pages/master-codebook). Domain specialists were selected into the relevant block if they responded “daily” for “Budget and Appropriations,” for “Health,” or for “Defense” and/or “International Affairs.” Respondents indicating specialization in more than one domain were randomly assigned to one of their specialties. All other respondents were randomly assigned to one of the three domains. The actual valid subsamples were 30.3 percent (125 of 412) in the budget and appropriations (margin of error = 8.7 percent, 95 percent level), 29.1 percent (120 of 412) in health policy (margin of error = 8.9 percent, 95 percent level), and 40.5 percent (167 of 412) in national security policy (margin of error = 7.5 percent, 95 percent level); 6.6 percent of the sample were missing responses to questions in these blocks. Questions for chamber and policy domain are comparable across blocks, so generally responses may be aggregated up to the full sample to maximize statistical power.

Post-stratification Weights and Sample Balance
Post-stratification survey weights were calculated using the ‘survey’ package in R (Lumley 2004, 2017). For the purpose of calculating weights, respondents were counted as having taken the survey for the purpose of inclusion in the numerator if they if they agreed to Q68

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4 The subtopic code 105, “National Budget” corresponds with our “Budget and Appropriations.” All other CAP Master Topic level policy domains correspond perfectly.
and responded to any other question in the survey. The provided (psweight) are the inverse probability of selection for each respondent conditioning on the joint distribution of Chamber, office type, and party in the population, using the sampling frame purchased from LegiStorm. Because of a persistent gender imbalance, we calculate a second weight variable (psweight_g) conditioned on party, chamber and gender. The results of a series of balance tests between respondent sample and a random sample of the non-respondents are shown in Table 2, for unweighted as well as both sets of post stratification weights.
Table A2: Balance tests for non-response bias

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Notes: Unweighted PostStratification Weights by party, chamber, gender.
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*p* value for a bootstrapped KS test, all other variables *p* value presented is for a *t* test.

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|     |     | 0.789 | 0.003 | 0.030 | 0.003 | 0.003 | 0.003 | 0.003 | 0.003 | 0.003 |
Linking back to biographical data
In addition to the variables collected with the survey instrument, respondents were subsequently linked back to additional biographical data purchased from LegiStorm. The fully merged data set for replication and a detailed description of these variables can be found in the data codebook at <DATAVERSE OR OTHER PERMANENT REPOSITORY TO BE MADE AVAILABLE WITH PUBLICATION>.

Works Cited
APPENDIX B: PAIRWISE T-TESTS

Here we report the results of pairwise t-tests between sets of treatment conditions that we originally pre-registered. Anticipating a significantly higher response rate, we expected to have the statistical power necessary to conduct pairwise tests between the treatment conditions. Because of our lower than anticipated sample size, we have chosen to test our pre-registered hypotheses in terms of average marginal effects of each component we manipulated. However, for the sake of transparency, in this appendix we report the pairwise t-test analysis that we pre-registered. It is important to note that these tests are considerably under-powered.

The 4x2x4 factorial design of this survey experiment yielded 32 possible treatment conditions. There are, therefore, 992 pairs of treatment conditions that can be tested pairwise for each of four dependent variables, which results in a total of 3,968 pairwise tests on the full dataset. However, because we are interested in differential effects of identity and information source among Democratic or Republican staffers, we also need to conduct these test in partisan sub-samples of staffers. All told, this amounts to 11,904 pairwise t-tests. Of course, when testing such a high number of hypotheses it is extremely important to account for multiple testing. Here we correct for false discovery rate (Benjamini and Hochberg 1995). Of these nearly twelve thousand pairwise tests, there were 828 pairs that were statistically distinguishable from one another at a generous $\alpha = 0.10$ level prior to correcting for the false discover rate in this large number of tests. After accounting for multiple testing, 46 pairs are statistically distinguishable at $\alpha = 0.10$ according to their false discovery rate corrected p-value. These pairs are listed in the table below.

These results are broadly in line with the average marginal component affects we report in our main analysis. We observe significant pairwise differences only in the dependent variables for a staffer recommending that their boss side with the petitioner, and for the staffer’s perception of how representative a petitioner is of their boss’s constituency. And, in particular, we observe these differences in the partisan sub populations when at least one of the sources of information being offered by the petitioner has a clear ideological valence. Most frequently, the two conditions with significantly different means are conditions with opposite source valences.

The clear implication of these (mis)alignment between the ideology information source provided
TABLE 1. Pairwise T-tests between treatment conditions which are significant at $\alpha = .10$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition 1</th>
<th>&gt; or &lt;</th>
<th>Condition 2</th>
<th>Dep Var</th>
<th>Subset</th>
<th>Adj P Value</th>
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</table>

Note: Conditions are given as an (Identity, Action, Information provided) tuple. Identities: Constit = Constituent, ConsLob = Consumer Lobbyist, BizLob = Business Lobbyist. Actions: Propose = Propose Bill, Stop = Stop Bill. Information: LeftTT = information about jobs and employment from a center-left think tank, Right TT = information about jobs and employment from a center-right think tank, Own Analysis = information about jobs and employment from an analysis they (Identity) conducted, and Polls = polling about the issue in your boss’s constituency.
by the petitioner and the partisanship of the staffer responding have a large effect on the likelihood of the staffer to recommend siding with the petitioner or viewing the petitioner as representative of their boss’s constituency.

APPENDIX C: QUESTION WORDING

Legislative staff like yourself rely on information from a variety of sources. Suppose you received a request for a meeting with a ${e://Field/ident}$ The individual is asking your office to ${e://Field/action}$ They offered to give your office ${e://Field/info}$

ident Factor 1: source identity
(1) constituent.
(2) donor to your Member’s election campaign.
(3) lobbyist representing a large, national business.
(4) lobbyist representing a national consumer group.

ident_short factor 1
(0) Constituent (n=131)
(1) Donor (n=128)
(2) Corporation (n=154)
(3) Consumer (n=136)

action Factor 2: requested legislative action from source
(1) propose a new bill.
(2) stop a bill currently under consideration.

action_short factor 2
(0) Propose (n=279)
(1) Stop (n=270)

info Factor 3: information provided to support legislative action request
(1) evidence of how their proposal would help jobs and employment in
your constituency from a center-left think-tank.
(2) evidence of how their proposal would help jobs and employment in
your constituency from a center-right think-tank.
(3) evidence of how their proposal would help jobs and employment in
your constituency from an analysis they conducted.
(4) polling from your constituency that shows support for their position.

Info_ short factor 3
(0) Left tank (n=152)
(1) Right tank (n=136)
(2) Self (n=123)
(3) Polling (n=138)

takemeeting: How likely would you be to take a meeting with this
individual?
(1) Very unlikely
(2) Somewhat unlikely
(3) Neither likely nor unlikely
(4) Somewhat likely
(5) Very likely

useinfo: How likely would you be to use the information this individual
provided to prepare recommendations for your boss?

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recommend to boss: How likely would you be to side with this individual in your recommendation to your boss?

(1) Very unlikely
(2) Somewhat unlikely
(3) Neither likely nor unlikely
(4) Somewhat likely
(5) Very likely

representativeness: How representative do you think this individual is of your district or state's opinion as a whole?

(1) Very unlikely
(2) Somewhat unlikely
(3) Neither likely nor unlikely
(4) Somewhat likely
(5) Very likely