Committee Comity and Legislative Effectiveness∗

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Abstract

When considering the factors that contribute to legislative behavior on Capitol Hill, scholars are apt to point to demographic characteristics such as age, gender, and race, or legislative positioning, such as whether a member is serving in the majority or minority or whether or not they hold a committee chair. Few have considered, however, the role of inter-personal relationships in legislative activity. In this paper, we move beyond the traditional measure of legislator-centered effectiveness toward an understanding of the effectiveness of congressional committees, and suggest that the relationship—or lack thereof—between a committee chair and ranking member and among members of the committee will be predictive of the committee’s legislative output. Utilizing a novel dataset of congressional travel, original cosponsorships, and a newly developed measure of committee effectiveness, we seek to uncover how the relationships formed between committee chairs and ranking members outside the pressures of Capitol Hill and away from the media’s camera lens affect their committee’s overall productivity.

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1 Introduction

What explains a congressional committee’s effectiveness at developing or advancing legislation? Why is a committee sometimes effective, and sometimes not? Despite decades of study of congressional committees (e.g., Curry 2019, Deering and Smith 1997, Fenno 1966; 1973, Krehbiel, Shepsle and Weingast 1987), questions of committee effectiveness have received little attention. In this paper we offer one possible explanation—the quality of the relationship between the chair and ranking member and among other committee members. In brief, we have reason to believe that a committee may be more functional, and thus more effective, if the chair and ranking member have a better personal or professional relationship. If members of the committee, especially the chair and ranking member cannot get along, in contrast, the committee may struggle to perform its basic legislative and oversight tasks.

Narratives about relationships playing a critical role in contemporary Capitol Hill politics are commonly recited by D.C. insiders. This narrative has received some empirical support in recent years (Curry and Roberts 2022, Hanges et al. 2019), but the importance of relationships has not been a core component of the political science scholarship on lawmaking. This is, in part, because relationships among lawmakers are neither easily observed or quantitatively measured. It is also because predominant explanations for legislative collaboration and effectiveness expect lawmakers will work together and be more effective because they share partisan (e.g., Lee 2009, Theriault 2008), ideological (e.g., McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2006, Poole and Rosenthal 1985), or constituency-based reasons to work together, (e.g., Bishin 2009, Fiorina 1989), or because they hold position of institutional power that enable legislative success (Volden and Wiseman 2014). Nevertheless, scholarship on legislator networks and cue-taking (Box-Steffensmeier, Ryan and Sokhey 2015, Fong 2019, Fowler 2006, Ringe, Victor and Carman 2013), information-processing (Curry 2015, Krehbiel 1992), and the importance of Capitol Hill norms (Hanges et al. 2019) provide a foundation for understanding a role for relationships.

1For example, the Bipartisan Infrastructure bill that passed in 2021 was able to come together in part because a group of senators often met on Senator Joe Manchin (D-WV)’s boat. As Senator Chris Coons (D-DE) remarked, “The bill probably would have fallen apart, after there were some strong crosscurrents, if not for the trust and relationships that were built, including during time on the boat.” See Terris, Ben, “Washington’s Hottest Club is Joe Manchin’s Houseboat,” Washington Post, August 6, 2021.
In this paper, we provide an assessment of the role that the relationships between chairs and ranking members and among committee members play in committee effectiveness. To do so, we have taken three steps. First, we developed very general expectations for how relationships may affect legislating on Capitol Hill, drawing from scholarship in organizational psychology, especially that which focuses on relationships in the workplace, as well as from political science. Second, we conducted 21 in-depth interviews with high-level congressional staff to explore these dynamics, including with respect to the relationships between committee chairs and ranking member. These interviews yielded important, and testable, insights about how relationships may influence legislative effectiveness. In particular, they pointed to two indicators of relationship on Capitol Hill—congressional delegation (CODEL) travel and original cosponsorship of legislation. In short, legislators who travel together are more likely to develop a relationship, and subsequently more likely to collaborate on legislation together (Curry and Roberts 2022).

Third, we built on the interview findings and conducted quantitative analyses to assess if committees headed by a chair and ranking member who have traveled together, or introduced legislation together, are more effective. These analyses involved, first, producing an original dataset of which members traveled, and which traveled together, as part of official CODELs from 1994 through 2020; second, isolating all instances in which chairs and ranking members shared original cosponsorship on introduced legislation; and third, producing a unique measure of a committee’s effectiveness.

Our findings, so far, provide mixed support for the assertion that committees are more effective when they are headed by a chair and ranking member who have developed a relationship. In our previous work we found that travel — an indirect indicator of the presence of a relationship — was directly related to legislative collaboration. Our results here do not demonstrate a relationship between travel and committee effectiveness, but we do find a relationship between previous legislative collaboration and committee effectiveness. These mixed findings suggest that more study is needed to fully understand the role that relationships do, or do not, play in committee effectiveness.

2 Interpersonal Relationships

The extant literature in both psychology and political science underscore why and how relationships can matter within organizations, including for leaders in a legislature. Combined, these strands
of research suggest that relationships—personal or professional—can aid collaborative efforts, and influence the effectiveness of leaders. These findings, in turn, have implications for how we might understand how relationships affect how a committee’s leaders work together, and how effective they may be in working together to run their committee.

2.1 Organizational Psychology

Research in organizational psychology finds that relationships within the context of workplaces can help individuals better engage with each other and produce better outcomes. Specifically, positive co-worker relationships are shown to lead to greater engagement, commitment, and effectiveness for individuals (Colbert, Bono and Purvanova 2016). Relational conflict, on the other hand, has numerous downsides, including limiting receptivity to new ideas (Pelled 1996) and encouraging promise-breaking (Jehn and Bendersky 1985). In other words, individuals with good relationships with their colleagues are more likely to engage with them and work effectively, while those without them are likely to exhibit behaviors that undermine collaboration and cohesive organizational work.

These general findings appear to stem from both the abilities of groups, or dyads, of individuals to work together, as well as from the increased opportunities that are afforded to popular, or well-regarded, individuals in an organization. Regarding the former, research on “multiplex” workplace friendships—those in which a personal relationship coincides with a professional relationship—finds those with more multiplex friendships are more productive, as they are more collaborative and engender greater trust among colleagues. Those with poorer or fewer “multiplex” workplace relationships are less productive (Chiaburu and Harrison 2008, Sias 2005, Ingram and Zou 2008). Regarding the latter, more popular individuals in an organization receive more professional help from colleagues, which results in greater job satisfaction (Scott 2012), less severe punishments for failure or misbehavior (Mitchell and Liden 1982), and higher likelihoods of rising to leadership positions (Scott 2012). “Ostracized” individuals in an organization—essentially the opposite of popularity—are less likely to cooperate with coworkers (Howard, Cogswell and Smith 2020, Leung et al. 2011).

Finally, there is some evidence that the relationships leaders cultivate within their organization can matter, as can a leaders’ ability to get along with others, in general. Leaders who cultivate relationships characterized by greater trust, open communication, and information-sharing are found
to perform better in their roles (Erdogan and Enders 2007, Gerstner and Day 1997, Humphrey, Nahrgang and Morgeson 2007 and find more support from their subordinates (Ilies, Nahrgang and Morgeson 2007). Moreover, leaders who are more extroverted and agreeable are found to develop better relationships and produce better outcomes within their organization compared to those who are introverted and disagreeable (Nahrgang, Morgeson and Ilies 2009).

2.2 Legislative Studies

Scholars of legislatures have often found that relationships matter within those institutions. For instance, Young (1966) finds that members of Congress who lived in the same boarding houses often voted together, a finding he attributes to personal relationships that formed in these boarding houses. White (1957) and Matthews (1960) describe how senatorial success in the 1940s-50s turned on a senator’s ability to get along with senior senators and gain access to an elite inner club. Similarly, Caro (2002) emphasized the role personal relationships played in Lyndon Johnson’s successful leadership and rise to prominence in the Senate of the 1950s. Following this theme, Taylor (2019) attributes the effectiveness of more senior lawmakers to the personal bonds they form across a long career in Washington. Moving outside the U.S. Congress, Arnold, Deen and Patterson (2000) use interview data from the Ohio legislature to show that legislators who are personal friends are more likely to vote together. A few contemporary studies of legislatures in other countries provide evidence that relationships or social interactions may influence legislative politics (see, e.g., Harmon, Fisman and Kamenica 2019, Saia 2018).

On the other hand, as Sinclair (1989) notes, by the 1980s many of the social dynamics that once brought members together inside the U.S. Congress had eroded. Fewer members moved their families to D.C. and thus members had much less time to interact with each other outside the halls of Congress. Similarly, Uslaner (1993) argues, changes to broader American society permeated Congress and engendered a lack of trust on Capitol Hill. Alduncin et al. (2014) see this decline reflected in data on foreign travel among members of Congress, observing less bipartisan travel in recent years (see, also, Alduncin, Parker and Theriault 2017). While Lawless, Theriault and

2This study focused on the early 19th century Congress and the results were subsequently called into question (Bogue and Marlaire 1975).

3Caldeira and Patterson (1987) report similar findings for the Iowa legislature.
Guthrie (2018) find that while women are more likely than men to engage in the kind of social activities that may beget collegiality, these activities are found to have little impact on legislative outcomes in the contemporary Congress.

There are notable exceptions to these conclusions, however. A report produced by Hanges et al. (2019) finds that the long-standing norms scholars observed about the mid-20th century Congress — comity and reciprocity among legislators, the development of relationships and respect across the aisle, the minimization of conflict wherever possible, and the integration of new members into the norms and “folkways“ of Capitol Hill (see, Davidson 1969, Fenno 1962, Manley 1965, Matthews 1959; 1960) — continue to influence how lawmakers approach each other and work together. Specifically, they find that legislators who are “other-directed” in their personality and behaviors are more likely to be influential within the institution, compared to those who are caustic, who grandstand, or who are perceived as unhelpful. They also find that relationships were “…the single most dominant answer that legislators gave when asked about how they chose whom to work with when reaching across the aisle” (p. 39). This building of relationships engenders trust, which allows members to bridge partisan divides and work together.

There is also growing body of research that suggests that lawmakers’ social networks may still influence the decisions they make, and even the votes they take, by influencing their information-exchanges (Fowler 2006, Ringe, Victor and Carman 2013). Fowler (2006) finds that the cosponsorship network in Congress is much denser than those found in other settings, while Kirkland (2011) finds that lawmakers who build even “weak ties” with legislators outside their close, personal networks are more likely to build more support for their legislative efforts. Similarly, Kirkland and Kroeger (2018) assess the network of companion bills across chambers and find that having connections in the opposite chamber who sponsor similar legislation increases legislative productivity.

2.3 Committees and Committee Leaders

Relatively little has been written about how the relationships among committee members—specifically between the chair and ranking member of a congressional committee—may affect their effectiveness or the productivity of the committee they lead. However, there are good reasons to suspect they will.
Committees traditionally have been the epicenter of bill development on Capitol Hill (Deering and Smith 1997, Denzau and Mackay 1983, Krehbiel, Shepsle and Weingast 1987, Shepsle and Weingast 1987, Snyder Jr 1992). Congress has become a more party-centric institution in recent years, with party leaders playing a more pivotal role in the legislative process (Bendix 2016, Curry and Lee 2020, Hanson 2014, Howard and Owens 2020, Sinclair 2016, Wallner 2013). However, even under these conditions, committees are still found to play a large role in both bill development and passage (Adler and Wilkerson 2013, Clemens, Crespin and Finocchiaro 2015, Curry 2015; 2020, Curry and Lee 2020, Hanson 2020, Hanson and Reynolds 2018) in part because committees tend to harbor policy-relevant knowledge and expertise among their members and staff which is needed to write legislation and build support for it (Curry 2019, Gilligan and Krehbiel 1990).

Moreover, because congressional lawmaking remains largely a process of bipartisan accommodation, with the vast majority of legislation needing bipartisan support to become law (Curry and Lee 2020, Krehbiel 1998, Mayhew 2005) a committee’s chair and minority ranking members will need to work together to craft successful legislation. Within the context of a committee, this means that a chair and ranking member will need to be able to work together, and negotiate with each other, in order to set the committee’s agenda, develop legislative language, and build support among both majority and minority party committee members in order to move legislation forward. In this way, the relationship between a chair and ranking member may be particularly important for developing and advancing legislation on Capitol Hill, and may influence how effective a committee is in doing so from year to year.

3 Assessing Relationships & Committee Effectiveness in Congress

We assess how the inter-personal relationships both in committees generally and between chairs and ranking members affect the effectiveness of congressional committees using a mixed-methods approach. Combining quantitative and qualitative analyses strengthens our approach in at least a few important ways. First, it helps us go in-depth into questions of why and in what ways relationships matter on Capitol Hill, using interviews to explore consequences of relationships that we may not have expected among a subset of actors who were willing to participate in our study. The quantitative data analyses then allow us to test the findings and intuitions uncovered in the
interviews on a broad and representative set of lawmakers. Second, in probing how actors on Capitol Hill understand and view relationships, we are able to leverage the interview findings to identify unique and quantifiable indicators of relationships and relationship-building activities to then test with the quantitative analyses. Finally, interviews help us understand why relationships appear to matter on Capitol Hill, at least insofar as actors in the legislative process understand their importance.

Our approach started with exploratory interviews with high-level congressional staff. These interviews aimed to uncover not only how actors in the legislative process view and understand the value (or lack thereof) of relationships and relationship building (in other words, why relationships matter or do not matter and how they matter or do not), but to uncover clear indicators of relationships among specific legislators, or indicators of legislators being more relational in their behaviors, activities, or propensities.

We then built on the interviews with several analyses of a unique dataset of all official foreign travel by members of the House of Representatives between 1994-2020. These analyses utilize measures of who traveled with whom and when, as an indicator for which pairs of legislators are more likely to have a positive inter-personal relationship, and which legislators are individually more likely to be predisposed to building relationships. The intuition for these analyses is built out of the interviews. Every one of our interview participants indicated that travel was the primary cause, and the best indicator, of relationship building in Washington. Our analyses assess whether travel networks in committees lead to more legislative collaboration and effectiveness within committees.

3.1 Interviews

We have completed 21 in-depth interviews with current and former high-level congressional staff. The interviewees include both Democratic and Republican staff\(^4\) with experience working in positions of importance for rank-and-file legislators, committee chairs and ranking members, and/or party leaders. Some of the interviewees have worked on Capitol Hill only in the last decade. Others began their careers as early as the 1970s.

\(^4\)Currently, our sample of respondents skews toward Republicans: about two-thirds of our interviewees are or were Republican staff.
Because interviews with elites on Capitol Hill are difficult to obtain (Beckmann and Hall 2013, Curry 2017) we used a snowball-sampling approach to connect with potential interviewees. Using existing contacts on Capitol Hill, initial interviews were scheduled. These interviewees then referred us to others. Each subsequent interview provides opportunities for referrals, and access to more potential interviewees “snowballs.” This process afforded access to individuals who otherwise may not respond to cold requests.

The interviews themselves were semi-structured and in-depth, typically lasting about one hour. Each interview took place in 2020 or 2021, with 13 of the interviews conducted face-to-face and the rest conducted via video conferencing. Each interviewee was asked questions from within three buckets of inquiry: (1) Are relationships important for legislative action? (2) Why and how do they matter (or not)? And, (3) how do good (and bad) relationships develop on Capitol Hill? The specific questions asked within each of these buckets, however, varied as each interview progressed, allowing us to explore sometimes new or unexpected lines of inquiry in response to interviewees answers to initial questions. Nevertheless, each interview focused on getting interviewees to discuss these three broad themes.

The interviews were recorded with pen and paper. All interviewees were granted anonymity, and are referred to here only as “staffers.” In addition, the use of names and pronouns in interviewee’s responses were often scrubbed, redacted, or altered in order to protect the interviewees and the individuals they were discussing. Analyses of the resulting transcription texts was done in a holistic manner, to “... explore how individual comments fit together as parts of a more meaningful whole” (Soss 2014, 16). In other words, we analyzed the body of text produced looking for patterns and assessing the degree to which information provided by our interviewees, taken together, fit (or did not fit) with the expectations laid out above.

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5Our original plan had been to conduct all the interviews in person. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic required us to move our interviewing efforts to a virtual format.

6This is owing to our assessment that actors in Washington have become increasingly skittish about being open and uninhibited in their answers to interview questions when they know the audio is being recorded on a device. In order to avoid interviewees censoring themselves, we avoid producing any such recording.
3.2 Quantitative Data

Our quantitative analyses build on our interview data and findings, testing insights from the interviews about the connection between relationships and legislative collaboration. In doing so, the analyses employ quantitative indicators of relationship building and collaboration that emerged from the interviews themselves. We also structure our analyses to address as much of the selection bias in our data as possible.

3.2.1 Quantitative Indicators

The first indicator is a measure of substantive legislative collaboration. Several of the staffers we interviewed indicated that cosponsorship of legislation, generally, was not a good indicator of who collaborated with whom to substantively draft and introduce a policy proposal. However original cosponsorship was often an indicator of serious collaboration. Original cosponsors, in Hill parlance, are those whose names are affixed to the legislation when it is first introduced. While only one of those members will be designated as the sponsor, the original cosponsors are understood on Capitol Hill as close collaborators, and often equal partners, on that legislation.\(^7\)

Not only do original cosponsorships signify serious collaboration, several staffers explained that bipartisan original cosponsorship as a key indicator of whether the legislation was a serious, legislative effort. In other words, when a bill has a bipartisan set of original cosponsors, it is seen as a serious and bipartisan legislative effort by actors on the Hill, in part because it is a signal that legislators on both sides of the aisle collaborated to produce it.\(^8\) As one senior staffer put it:

The stupidest thing you can do up there, in our committee, is to introduce a partisan bill. You’re basically saying, hey Democrats, here’s our bill, don’t get on it. Sometimes maybe you do that if it’s a messaging bill. But otherwise you need a Democratic

\(^7\)The reason only one member is labeled as a sponsor is due to chamber rules. Only one member can be designated as sponsor of legislation. Original cosponsorship is one way members work around this restriction and recognize collaborative authorship.

\(^8\)The data we have on bill outcomes support this assertion as bills with opposite party original cosponsors were much more likely to successfully move through the legislative process. For bills that had only same party original cosponsors 8.2 percent passed the House and only 1.8 percent were enacted into law. By contrast, of the bills that had opposite party original cosponsors, 22.1 percent passed the House and 6.4 percent were enacted into law.
cosponsor if its going to have any chance. . . . Really, the best thing you can do is have a bill introduce in the House and Senate with Democratic and Republican sponsors on both.9

We draw the data on original cosponsors from GovTrack. GovTrack keeps track of the sponsors and cosponsors of each bill, as well as the date on which each cosponsor signed on. Members of Congress can sign on to a bill as a cosponsor at any time after its introduction. However, members who are listed as cosponsors at the time of introduction are understood as the original cosponsors. For our purposes, members whose dates of cosponsorship are the same as the date of the bill’s introduction (i.e., the same as the day the sponsor “signed” the bill) are recorded as original cosponsors.

The second quantifiable indicator our interviews uncovered is member travel on official foreign trips, or CODELs, as an indicator of relationships and relationship building propensities. According to our interviews CODELs signify two things. First, they are the key driver of relationship building between members. As discussed below, our interview participants universally agreed that the extent to which two members traveled together is the best objective indicator of a relationship potentially formed between them. Second, traveling on CODELs is a significant indicator of which members of Congress are likely to be inclined toward positive relationship building, having both the skills and interest in building relationships with and among their colleagues. In this way, CODEL travel functions as an indicator of both the likelihood of a relationship between two or more members of Congress, and an indicator of which members of Congress are individually likely to be better, and more focused, at building relationships.

Importantly, CODELs are organized in a way that provides opportunities to all members of Congress to participate, but with notable biases toward members of Congress perceived as potentially friendlier. In this way, any member willing and interesting in trying to build relationships could find a way to travel, but travel also can serve as an indicator of which members are, and are understood to be, more relational. CODELs are organized by committee chairs and typically must include members of each major party.10 Committee members are encouraged to participate

9Interview, 02-07-20

10One staffer explained to us that larger trips were often desirable as they increased the odds of securing official government aircraft and other resources.
in CODELs. In fact, many of our interview subjects suggested that committee chairs and ranking members often encourage new members to go on CODELs. The trips give committee leaders an opportunity to get to know the new members and allow new members to get to know other members. Nevertheless, chairs and party leaders do retain discretion over who can travel. As one of our interviewees told us, “We knew who the bad eggs were and we’d keep them off the trip. We wouldn’t invite them. [Member name] was a pain in the ass so we’d keep her off the trips.”

Former Speaker John Boehner (R-OH) pointed to denying requests to go on CODELs as a way of punishing wayward members:

Sometimes, when I made the determination that a certain member was acting in a way that was hurting the team, or just being a total jackass, I had a tough decision to make... I went to the committee chairs and make it clear that it wouldn’t be a problem for me if we basically lost their plane ticket. Sometimes I said it more directly than that... And the knuckleheads never got to go on CODELs. Period (Boehner 2021, 28-29).

Data on these trips are publicly available. Every quarter, each congressional committee that authorizes official travel for staff or members of Congress must report such travel to the Clerk of the House of Representatives. These reports include the name of the traveler, the countries visited, the dates of arrival and departure in each country, and costs expended on each leg of the trip. The Clerk compiles each committee’s quarterly report into one larger report that is printed in the Congressional Record.

We obtained 372 reports covering all official travel from the first quarter of 1994 to the first quarter of 2020. These raw text files unfortunately featured many rows and columns of extraneous information and lacked much information that we needed to conduct our analyses. Extensive data cleaning was necessary to get these data ready for analysis. For example, the reports include all travelers on a trip, not just members of Congress. In addition, the way trips were reported required us to fill in many missing names and to infer the year of each trip based on the quarter in which the trip was reported.

11 Interview, 02-07-20-2
Importantly, these data did not include any sort of ID number, so we were forced to merge in IDs based on member’s name. This created a number of duplicates and mismatches. As such, it was necessary to manually inspect all 31,163 observations by hand to verify that the correct ICPSR ID was assigned. For example, our matching algorithm occasionally confused Rep. Adam Smith and Rep. Adrian Smith. Similarly, House staffer Meghan Gallagher was often confused with Rep. Mike Gallagher. In the 112th Congress, both Donald Payne, Sr. and Donald Payne, Jr. were serving in Congress, so to verify which Rep. Payne traveled to five countries in the 112th Congress we consulted the Clerk’s reports to determine which committee authorized the travel. We discovered that the Foreign Affairs Committee authorized these trips and was able to determine that Donald Payne, Sr. was serving on this committee so we attributed this travel to him.

The end result is the most extensive, complete, and accurate portrait of House travel that has been compiled to date. The analyses we present below are only a starting point of what we think is possible to do with these data.

3.2.2 Committee Effectiveness

To evaluate the effect of these measures capturing Capitol Hill relationships, we rely on a new measure of committee effectiveness. Borrowing from Volden and Wiseman’s (2014, 2018) legislative effectiveness scores (LES) and Cottle’s (2022) Senate committee effectiveness scores (CES), we developed a similar metric by which each House committee can be evaluated for its legislative effectiveness in the 103rd Congress through the 115th Congress.

Using Volden and Wiseman’s designation of legislation as commemorative, substantive, or substantive and significant, we assign all legislation referred to any House committee between the 103rd and 115th Congress a significance value.\(^\text{12}\) Combining these significance codes with data from the Congressional Bills Project (Adler and Wilkerson 2020) on each of these bills’ status, we sort legislation by the committee to which the legislation was primarily referred. We then added an identifier to each bill indicating if it was reported out of the committee to which it was primarily referred, if it passed the House, and if it was ultimately signed into law.

\(^{12}\)See Volden and Wiseman (2014) pp. 20–21 for a detailed explanation of the coding strategies for these three classifications of legislative significance.
In the same manner that Volden and Wiseman weigh their legislative effectiveness scores, we assign weights to each bill depending on its previously assigned substantive significance: commemorative, substantive, and substantive and significant. Lastly, we normalize each committee effectiveness score by multiplying each score by the total number of committees (21) and dividing the score by the number of progress checkpoints (4). This produces scores with a mean of one and minimum value of zero.

After sorting and assigning all legislation to each of these significance categories and progress checkpoints, we are left with a unique committee effectiveness score for each of the 21 House committees in the 103rd Congress through the 116th Congress. Figure 1 depicts these committee effectiveness scores, ranging from a minimum score of zero (Ethics Committee, 115th Congress) to a maximum of 4.018 (Ways and Means Committee, 112th Congress).

It is clear based on the effectiveness scores presented in Figure 1 that there exists substantial variation in committee effectiveness scores not only within, but across committees. To control for varying baseline levels of legislative productivity and expected legislative action across committees we utilize the same tool the House employs to account for a committee’s level of relative importance.
and expected legislative activity: exclusivity. Those committees that are more legislatively active are deemed “exclusive” by each party, thereby limiting the number of exclusive committees on which a member can serve.

Figure 2 displays the committee effectiveness scores for all exclusive House committees, and Figure 3 displays the effectiveness scores for non-exclusive committees. As expected, the average CES for exclusive committees (1.380) is greater than that of non-exclusive committees (0.928).

This new House committee effectiveness score represents the first attempt to quantitatively capture the level of productivity of House committees, and allows us to evaluate the effect of our
quantitative indicators on a given committee’s output. The next section details the findings of our exploratory interviews before turning to the quantitative analyses.

4 Interview Findings

Our interviews touched on a number of topics important to understanding inter-personal relationships and their consequences on Capitol Hill. Here, we present interview data that speak to specifically to (1) the perceived importance of travel for relationship building, (2) insights into why and how relationships among committee chairs and ranking members may matter.

4.1 Relationships & Travel

We asked each interviewee their perspective on what enabled relationships to form on Capitol Hill. A number of progenitors were noted: intensive committee work, socializing away from work, strategic behavior, repeated positive interactions on the Hill, serendipity, and more. However, members and staff traveling together, especially on CODELs, was the most commonly noted. In fact, every single interview participant—100%—noted travel was the single best way to develop relationships in the contemporary Congress:

Travel is the best thing you can do to build relationships.¹³

When [my boss] came in, he made a concerted effort to forge relationships with [his Democratic counterpart on committee]. They traveled together. That was a big help—the CODEL trips over seas.¹⁴

Staff travel together, too. . . . That makes a difference just like when members travel together.¹⁵

Travel helps develop relationships because it “can be really intense and it creates bonds. When you’re with people for 16 hours a day on a plane... It’s intense. People behave very well.”¹⁶

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¹³interview, 02-05-20-4
¹⁴interview, 02-06-20-4
¹⁵interview, 07-28-20
¹⁶interview, 02-07-20-3
other words, especially with foreign travel, the hours are long, and the time is spent together is in close quarters:

[Travel] was the most intense time members spent together. They’d be up early and with each other from breakfast until they went to bed. They are small enough groups that you get to know the other people.\textsuperscript{17}

Both staff and members spend time together in close quarters, often not great conditions. Its like a trip with an extended family. I think they make a big difference. They share these moments together.\textsuperscript{18}

Our interviewees also emphasized that a significant benefit of travel is not just that it gets members together, but it does so away from the usual pressures of the job, and away from the media and cameras:

Being on a plane, being in a foreign country, with no outside pressure and no press really frees members up. They can be more candid with each other.\textsuperscript{19}

When you’re out of your element in a group, the dynamics change greatly. There’s a lot more opportunity through that shared experience to break down political barriers.\textsuperscript{20}

Travel allows for a different kind of time spent together. While committee work or other events in D.C. may create bonds, time spent on CODELs or other trips typically involves more social interactions, and, “When you get to know people outside of the 9-5, it’s different.”\textsuperscript{21} It also helped that these experiences often involve family:

Spouses have their own program on these trips—their own meetings. The spouses spent time together, too, and then the members and the spouses are all together for dinner.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{17}interview, 02-05-20-3
\textsuperscript{18}interview, 07-28-20
\textsuperscript{19}interview, 02-05-20-4
\textsuperscript{20}interview, 01-15-21
\textsuperscript{21}interview, 02-06-20-6
\textsuperscript{22}interview, 02-06-20-4
This kind of time, spent together over dinner with wives and husbands, can help members connect and establish a relationship in a way they may never otherwise.

4.2 Relationships and Committee Leadership

Our interviewees believed relationships could affect the abilities of most members of Congress to collaborate together (see, Curry and Roberts 2022). However, we found them to expect this to be especially true among committee chairs and ranking members. As one put it very succinctly, “Nothing is more influential in the ability of a committee to act than the relationship between a chair and ranking member.”

Another noted:

Every single piece of legislation I worked on on Capitol Hill, that had any element of success relied in significant part on the relationships between the members of Congress, in particular the chairs and ranking member on the committee of jurisdiction, and their committee staffs.

The reason a good relationship among a chair and ranking member is so important stems from the same things that enable relationships to engender collaboration among any other members: a good relationship helps build trust between the members, which enables better communication, and ultimately allows them to work together more effectively to lead the committee. As one staffer told us, “When there is a good relationship with these people, with trust, it helps things along, particularly if it is the chair and ranking member of a committee.”

Another focused on honesty in communication: “It was about them being honest with each other about what their needs what, what their red lines were.”

This kind of dynamic between a chair and ranking member could enable the pair to sometimes set aside partisanship and long-standing disagreements, and find a way forward on legislation within the committee. Our interviewees often emphasized how things were different between sets of chairs and ranking members on a specific committee, noting how things worked better under pairs with

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23 interview, 07-28-20
24 interview, 08-19-20
25 interview, 02-07-20-1
26 interview, 02-06-20-4
better relationships than those who could not get along. Explaining why her committee so much less productive than in the past, one staffer attributed it to a change in leadership:

[The previous chair and ranking member] had a great relationship and that affected how the committee worked. He wanted [the ranking member] to be receptive before they would try to move a bill. Comparatively, I don’t think [the new chair] and [the new ranking member] have as good a working relationship.\(^{27}\)

For many of our interviewees a good relationship between a chair and ranking member can make all the difference, allowing them to set aside partisan divides that may have hamstrung the committee in the past. As one explained about a change in leadership on a committee he worked with:

When they became chair and ranking member of the committee . . . they decided they were going to put aside partisanship . . . This is a committee that for the prior 10 years had been beset by partisan rancor, and since has been beset by partisan rancor. Amongst members of the committee we had a bipartisan relationship working at the time. . . . They were able to get the committee to work that way.\(^{28}\)

Another described how a good relationship between a chair and ranking member allowed a committee to diffuse what was typically a committee full of partisan fighting:

[The committee’s jurisdiction] is a very contentious topic, and they have very contentious mark-ups—these 12 hour a day mark-ups. But we get through them without fistfights because the tenor and the tone of the debate. That tenor and tone is set by the chair and the ranking member on a committee, and it will dissipate down to the rank-and-file.\(^{29}\)

Our interviews also often highlighted how much a committee got done when the chair and ranking member got along. “This was a committee that had been beset by partisanship and hadn’t passed authorizing legislation for a decade,” one told us, but, “We passed three authorization bills

\(^{27}\)interview, 02-05-20-

\(^{28}\)interview, 08-19-20

\(^{29}\)interview, 02-06-20-4
in a row in one Congress. It was crazy! It hadn’t been done for a decade. That was the kind of relationships they had.”

Ultimately, the ability of a chair and ranking member was often connected to the ability of committee to get things done:

One example of something that got done because of these relationships was the passage of AGOA (the African Growth and Opportunity Act) . . .

One example is the Music Modernization Act . . .

Conversely, poor relationships among key players could create barriers to potentially fruitful collaborations. Our interviewees repeatedly noted things that did not happen, in their estimation, because of poor relationships:

It never happened. Not because we didn’t agree, but because we couldn’t work together.

The [reauthorization bill] is a good example. It was the biggest failure during our time on the committee.

In sum, our interviewees connected travel to relationship building and the existence of relationships. They also connect the quality of the relationship between a chair and ranking member to their ability to work together, manage the committee, and get things done. The next section looks for these links in our quantitative data.

5 Quantitative Findings

Moving to our quantitative analyses, we utilize our measure of committee effectiveness as our outcome variable to assess the effect of relationships on legislative productivity. Our independent

30 interview, 08-19-20
31 interview, 02-07-20-3
32 interview, 02-07-20-2
33 interview, 02-06-20-6
variables include our dyadic measure of the number of trips a chair and ranking member have taken together, the number of terms the chair and ranking committee have served together, the absolute value of the difference in the chair and ranking members’ DW-NOMINATE scores, and the number of shared committee assignments. We also include indicator variables for same state, same entering class, and exclusive committees, as well as the average of the chair and ranking members’ individual Legislative Effectiveness Scores before they entered their leadership position on the committee.

Overall, we find little support for our theoretical expectation that joint travel establishes a relationship that can be observed by a committee’s productivity. As seen in Table 1, our measure of shared travel does not have a significant effect on a committee’s effectiveness score. We do, however, find theoretically consistent relationships for many of our quantitative indicators and our dependent variable of committee effectiveness. Chairs and ranking members who lead exclusive committees are more legislatively productive, those who have served together for more terms are more effective at leading their committees, as are those who have higher baseline legislative effectiveness scores.\textsuperscript{34}

Interestingly, we find that chairs and ranking members who have a greater absolute difference in their respective NOMINATE scores lead more effective committees. This result might be theoretically counter-intuitive as one would expect a chair and ranking member who are more ideologically similar to collaborate easily, yet this finding is consistent with our interview accounts. Our interviews suggest that members who have existing relationships are able to set aside partisan differences for the purposes of legislative productivity.

In further teasing out the relationship between travel and committee effectiveness, we utilize a network-based, committee-level variable of shared travel. If the effect of traveling on a committee’s productivity goes beyond the relationship established between a chair and ranking member, perhaps the density of a committee’s travel network might be positively correlated with committee effectiveness.\textsuperscript{35} We find little support for this hypothesis. Table 2 presents the results of this model, with the same quantitative indicators as Table 1, yet replaces the chair and ranking member

\textsuperscript{34}The average LES variable is calculated by taking the mean of the chair and ranking member’s legislative effectiveness scores in the Congress prior to the pair taking the helm of the committee.

\textsuperscript{35}Network density is calculated by dividing the number of existing dyad edges by the number of possible edges. In this case, the density of a committee’s travel network is the number of trips members take with other committee members divided by the number of possible trip combinations on a given committee.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Committee Effectiveness Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dependent variable:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trips taken together (total)</td>
<td>0.014 (0.010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terms leading committee</td>
<td>0.175* (0.090)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absolute difference in NOMINATE</td>
<td>0.762*** (0.272)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of shared committee appointments</td>
<td>0.090 (0.134)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same class</td>
<td>0.415** (0.189)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same state</td>
<td>0.183 (0.257)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusive committee</td>
<td>0.292** (0.133)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average LES prior to leading committee</td>
<td>0.220*** (0.038)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>0.190</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Ordinary least squares estimation with standard errors in parentheses.

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01
travel variable with the density of each committee travel network. While all of the indicator variables behave as expected, we do not find statistically significant evidence that density is positively correlated with committee effectiveness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable: Committee Effectiveness Score</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Committee travel density</td>
<td>-2.654* (1.591)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terms leading committee</td>
<td>0.168* (0.089)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absolute difference in NOMINATE</td>
<td>0.712** (0.274)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of shared committee appointments</td>
<td>0.104 (0.133)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same class</td>
<td>-0.400** (0.188)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same state</td>
<td>-0.172 (0.257)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusive committee</td>
<td>0.310** (0.132)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average LES prior to leading committee</td>
<td>0.216*** (0.038)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.108 (0.294)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
<td>0.192</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Ordinary least squares estimation with standard errors in parentheses.

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

In line with our expectations about the cross-party relationships chairs and ranking members form on trips abroad, perhaps it is the density of bipartisan travel ties that will have the greatest effect on committee productivity. To test this hypothesis, we use a similar network measure as described above, yet now capture the proportion of bipartisan travel ties that a committee has out of all possible cross-party, within-committee ties. Table 3 presents the results from this model, which employs the same quantitative indicators as above. Again, we do not find there to be a statistically significant relationship between bipartisan travel density and committee effectiveness.

Turning now to our more direct measure of legislative relationships, we do find significant effects of joint original cosponsorship on a committee’s effectiveness. Table 4 displays all the same quantitative indicators as Table 1, yet replaces the travel-based measure of relationships with a
Table 3: Committee Effectiveness Bipartisan Network Density

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Committee Effectiveness Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Committee bipartisan travel density</td>
<td>$-2.257$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.420)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terms leading committee</td>
<td>$0.172^*$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.089)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absolute difference in NOMINATE</td>
<td>$0.714^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.275)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of shared committee appointments</td>
<td>$0.105$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.133)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same class</td>
<td>$-0.398^{**}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.188)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same state</td>
<td>$-0.169$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.257)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusive committee</td>
<td>$0.301^{**}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.132)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average LES prior to leading committee</td>
<td>$0.218^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.038)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>$-0.133$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.291)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R$^2$</td>
<td>0.191</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Ordinary least squares estimation with standard errors in parentheses.

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01
measure of the total number of pieces of legislation on which a chair and ranking member jointly served as original cosponsors. The effect size is not substantively large, but we do find this measure of relationships does have a consistent effect on a committee’s legislative productivity.

Table 4: Committee Effectiveness and Legislative Collaboration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable: Committee Effectiveness Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joint original cosponsorships (total)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terms leading committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absolute difference in NOMINATE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of shared committee appointments</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Exclusive committee</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average LES prior to leading committee</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Ordinary least squares estimation with standard errors in parentheses.
*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

All of the other quantitative indicators behave similarly in this cosponsorship model as they do in the travel model. Taken together, these models provide mixed results for the interview findings, yet do suggest that those chairs ranking members who engage in more legislative collaboration lead more effective, productive committees.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, we provide an assessment of how inter-personal relationships on Capitol Hill affect legislative behavior. Specifically, we focus on how relationships developed between the chair and ranking members of congressional committees and between committee members at large contribute
to the effectiveness of the committee at reporting legislation that is referred to the committee. To that end, we combine elite interviews with high-level congressional staff with quantitative analyses of travel, sponsorships, and committee outputs to analyze the connection between inter-personal relationships and legislative behavior.

The interviews highlight that actors on Capitol Hill believe relationships to be crucially important, in part because they build trust and communication among lawmakers. This mutual trust and open and honest communication are highlighted in organizational psychology as important factors in effective workplaces. Our interviewees agree that this is true on Capitol Hill, as well: chairs and ranking members who trust each other and can communicate openly find it easier to work together, negotiate, and advance their policy interests together. The interviews also highlighted travel, especially foreign travel, taken by groups of lawmakers as an important experience that helps members develop these positive and productive relationships, because of the bonds and mutual understanding that time together can foster.

Our quantitative analyses build on the interview findings and provide decidedly mixed results. Using data on which members of Congress participated in foreign CODELs, we do not find evidence that chairs and ranking members who travel together produce higher effectiveness scores for their committees, nor do we find evidence that committees with more well-connected travel networks behave in a more productive manner. We do, however, find a relationship between original cosponsorship behavior between the chair and ranking member and committee effectiveness. We take this as mixed evidence for our interview findings. We know from our prior work that legislators who are travel together more are more likely to engage in bipartisan collaborations on legislation, yet we do not find a direct link between travel and committee effectiveness. Our finding of a link between cosponsorship behavior and committee effectiveness is generally supportive of our expectations.

Yet, the absence of a direct relationship between travel and committee effectiveness is puzzling to us given the strength of our interview evidence. There are a number of reasons why this may be true. It could simply be that our interview evidence is the exception rather than the rule and that the posited relationship simply does not exist in the full population of congressional committees. It could be that the key relationships form many years before joint committee service and we simply do not have a long enough time series or lag structure in the travel data to uncover the relationship. It
could that factors other than travel are better predictors of congressional relationships. We simply do not have enough data to sort out these potentialities.

Our findings also demonstrate and underscore that the behavior of lawmakers in the contemporary Congress is not fully explained by spatial, rational, and economic models that focus on ideology, partisanship, and constituency. Lawmakers’ relationships also appear to affect who they work with, their collaborative efforts, and potentially more. Moreover, the kind of norms and expectations for behavior that were described as important in the mid-20th century congresses—including the emphasis on comity, reciprocity, and getting along—still appear to matter at some level. Lawmakers still would rather work with others that they can get along with, trust, and work with congenially. This dimension of congressional politics is relatively under-appreciated in political scholarship. But our combined qualitative and quantitative findings suggest it deserves more attention for its ability to explain things—including bipartisan cooperation—that otherwise can be hard to explain in the contemporary, polarized Congress.
References


**URL**: https://bsos.umd.edu/faculty-staff/conference-organizational
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