

Changing Principals: Committee Chair Effectiveness in a Partisan Congress

Patrick Rickert, Nicholas Waterbury, and Bryant Moy
Department of Political Science, Washington University in St. Louis

Introduction

Congressional scholars have written much about the change from the committee-oriented system of the textbook Congress to the modern party-oriented Congress (e.g. Rohde 1991; Sinclair 2006; Smith 2007; Theriault 2008). While we have explanations of why the shift to party occurred, we do not have a clear picture of how the once powerful committee system was dominated. This research aims to clarify how party leaders in the House solidified their control through the extant committee structure.

Theory

In 1994, Republicans unexpectedly won control of Congress for the first time in 40 years. Newt Gingrich, the newly elected Speaker of the House, was seen as the architect of this victory and given unprecedented ability to shape caucus rules. He eliminated three committees and cut the number of subcommittees by nearly a third. He also changed the rules for the House Republican Steering Committee, which was in charge of committee assignments and chairmanships, by giving the party leader 5 votes and the deputy leader 2 votes, meaning that the whole party leadership directly controlled 14 of 35 votes. Gingrich selected committee chairs, violating the norm of seniority for three committees. We argue that Gingrich's control of the selection mechanism allowed him to install loyal principals that he then guided important party legislation through, while rendering ineffectual classically important players like subcommittee chairs.

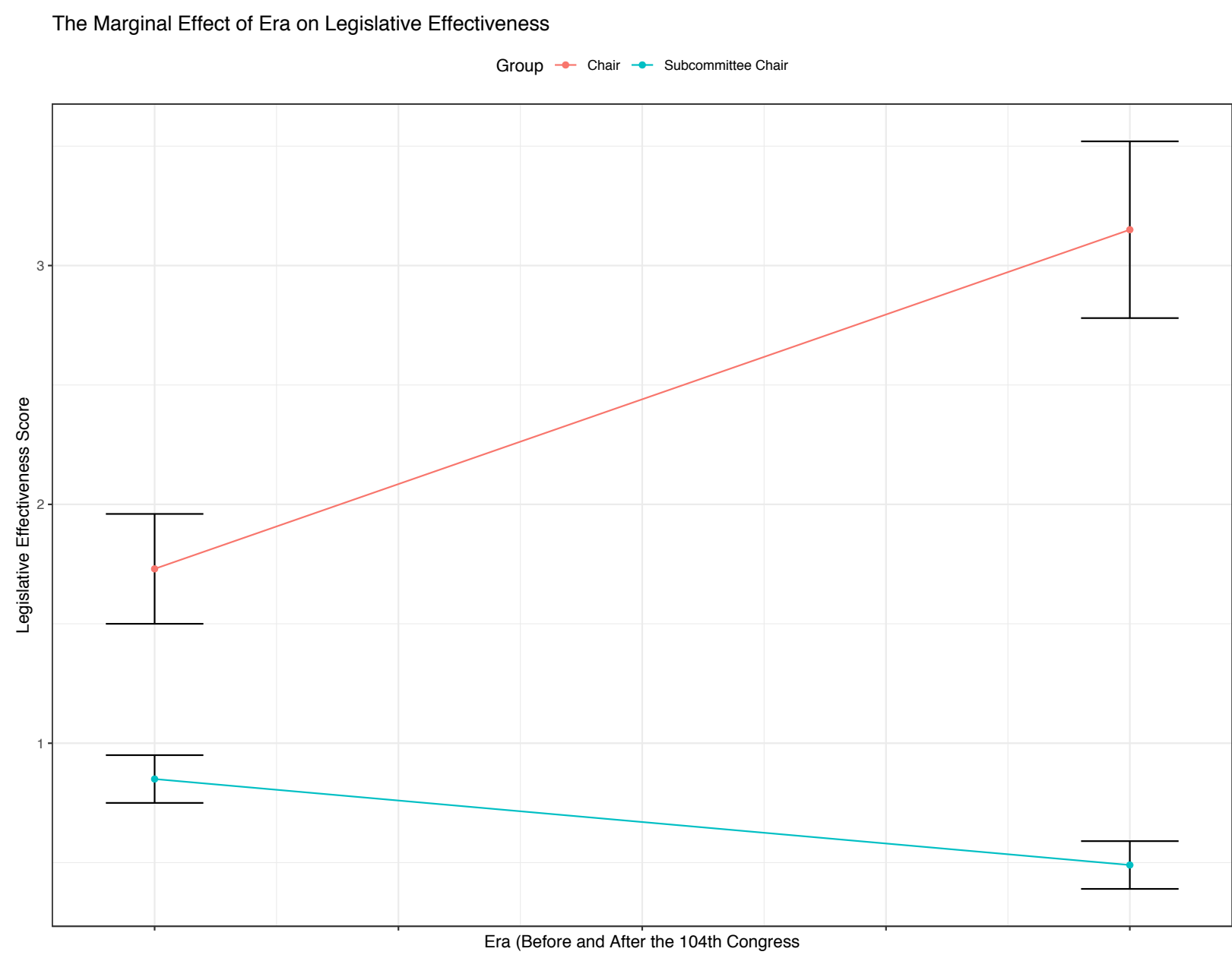
Data and Methods

All data is Volden and Wiseman's (2014) legislative effectiveness data or component elements thereof. The legislative effectiveness score is a composite measure of how far a member's bills make it in the legislative process relative to other members and how important those bills are.

Hypotheses

- H1: Committee chairs should have higher legislative effectiveness following the Republican Revolution
- H2: Subcommittee chairs should have lower legislative effectiveness following the Republican Revolution
- H3: The effect for committee chairs should be largely a function of increased substantive and significant legislative output.

Results



Additional Results

There were several results of this study that were beyond the scope of this poster. We detail them briefly below:

- Lowered subcommittee chair effectiveness is attributable to a consistent lower likelihood of introducing any type of bill.
- Across the entire House, subcommittee chairs went from being responsible for nearly three-quarters of legislative productivity to less than half.
- There is no periodization effect of chair or subcommittee chair effectiveness in the Senate corresponding to the Republican Revolution.

Conclusions

Two broad conclusions can be drawn from this work. First, we show that committee chairs were an integral part of the shift to party-oriented government. Party leaders, particularly Gingrich, took advantage of control over the rules to install loyal agents as committee chairs. Then they funneled legislation through these chairs while gatekeeping legislation from others. Thus, chairs were both less powerful and more effective as party leadership solidified its control. Secondly, this further develops the bounds of how legislative effectiveness scores can be used in congressional research. Our analysis demonstrates that they can inform us about broad changes within Congress in addition to information about individual legislators. However, the scores also require caution as legislative effectiveness is a product of institutional environment as well as individual skill.

Selected References

- Evans, C. L., & Oleszek, W. J. (1997). *Congress Under Fire: Reform Politics and the Republican Majority*. Houghton Mifflin College Div.
- Rohde, David W. 1991. *Parties and Leaders in the Postreform House*. University of Chicago Press.
- Sinclair, Barbara. 2014. *Party wars: Polarization and the politics of national policy making*. University of Oklahoma Press.
- Volden, Craig and Alan E. Wiseman. 2014. *Legislative Effectiveness in the United States Congress: The Lawmakers*. Cambridge University Press.

Important Result

Despite the apparent shift to party, committee chairs were nearly twice as effective after the Republican Revolution. Subcommittee chairs were much less effective, which is consistent with Gingrich's efforts to subdue subcommittees. We investigate the mechanism behind increased committee chair effectiveness below.

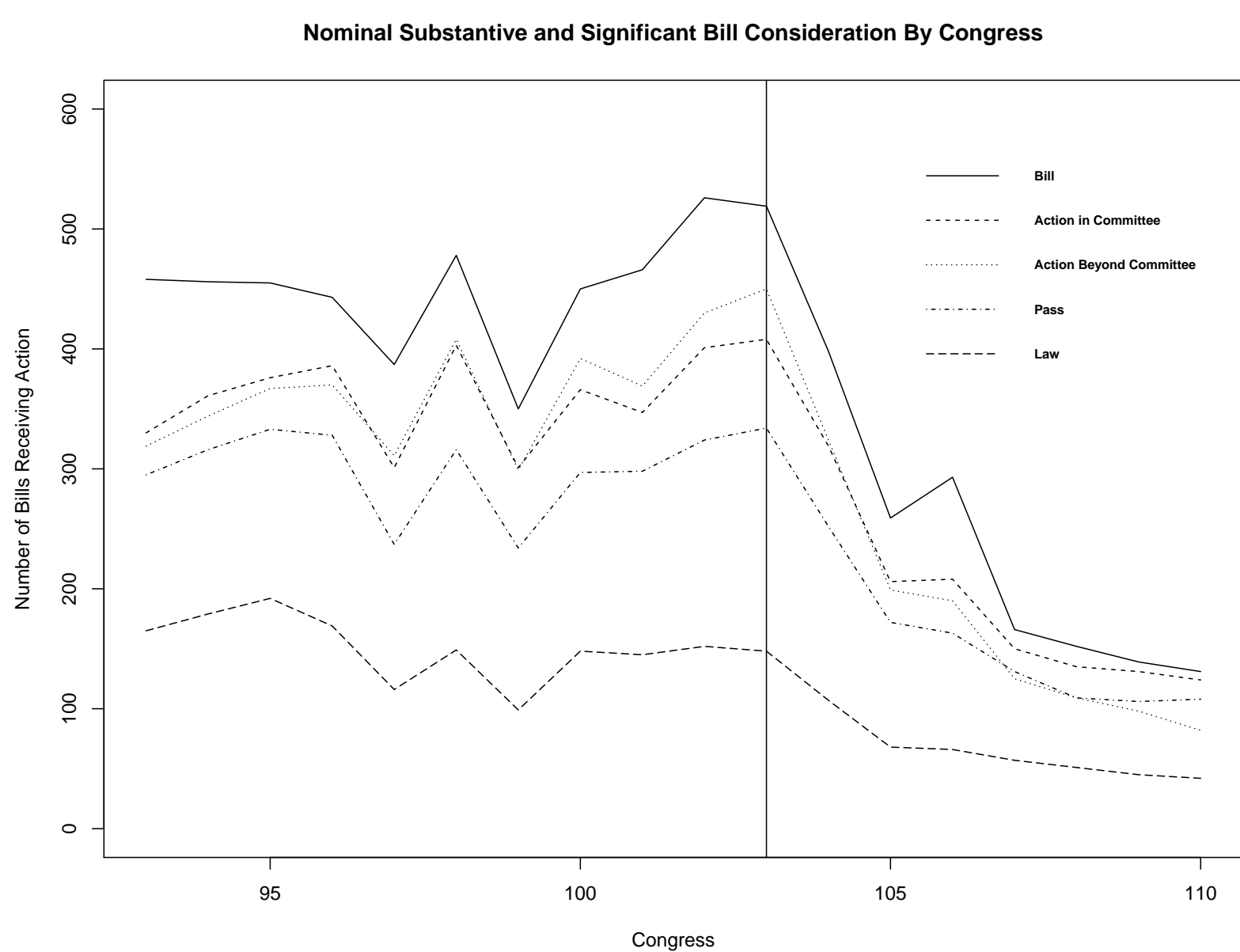
Mechanism

Table 1: Proportion of Substantive and Significant Bills Attributable to Each Committee and Subcommittee Chair

	Chair	Mean Pre-104th	Mean Post-103rd
Bill Introduced		0.0127	0.0178*
Action In Committee		0.0138	0.0192*
Action Beyond Committee		0.0128	0.0176*
Pass		0.0134	0.0191*
Law		0.0147	0.0199*
Subcommittee Chair			
Bill Introduced		0.0057	0.0049*
Action In Committee		0.0061	0.0052*
Action Beyond Committee		0.0060	0.0056
Pass		0.0060	0.0052*
Law		0.0058	0.0053

Results

Figure 1: The number of bills receiving consideration at each stage by Congress All Congresses following line after the Republican Revolution



Important Result

The mechanism results indicate that the increased legislative effectiveness was due to gatekeeping, as many fewer bills made it to and through the House after the Republican Revolution, paired with the fact that committee chairs were responsible for a significantly higher proportion of substantive and significant legislation at each stage of the legislative process following 1994 election.