

**The new kids are on the block:**

**Incentives for congressional caucuses to  
disregard seniority in leadership  
assignments**

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# The Puzzle:

- Scholars propose that the (now) informal seniority system works as a useful heuristic for the caucus to elect more senior members (see Taylor, 2019)
  - This has a number of assumptions tied to it.
- This project seeks to test whether these assumptions hold and whether the strict definition of a heuristic applies here.

# What the Literature Says

- First, what do caucuses look like in Congress?
  - Some had argued that parties mattered very little in shaping MC behavior (Mayhew 1974; Aldrich 1995, 2011; Krehbiel 1991)
  - Others have argued that they are more powerful (Rohde 1991; Cox and McCubbins 2005)

- Second, what motivations to MC's and the collective have?
  - Fenno says that they have three goals:
  - Reelection
  - Achieve more power
  - Good policy
  - Mayhew states that they are primarily concerned with reelection
  - The caucus has goals to ensure that they retain majority status (Rohde 1991)

- Third, what does the seniority system look like and what is its utility?
  - Seniority is a good thing in congress - increases information (Krehbiel 1991)
  - Can also build coalitions with seniority to achieve individual goals (Taylor, 2019)

- Reasons to believe there are other factors at play here
  - If information is important, we know that MC's satisfy and have a number of opportunities to pool information that isn't entirely related to their time in Congress (Austen-Smith 1993, Hall and Deardorff 2006, McCrain 2018).

- Reasons to believe there are other factors at play here
  - It doesn't *really* help electorally:
  - Voters seem to not really care about relative seniority of their representative (McKelvey and Riezman 1992).
  - Voters look at tangible benefits provided to their district, things that are easy to know where they come from and how they are beneficial to the area (Ansolabehere and Pettigrew 2014).
  - Do not have too much more bargaining power because you are senior (Kellerman and Shepsle 2009).
  - Voters tend to also support those who are ideologically extreme (Utych 2019). Implying more moderate and senior MC's, who may better build bipartisan coalitions, with all else equal, do not benefit electorally.

# What I argue

- Seniority can be helpful in many situations but not all.
- There is some endogeneity here.
- Leadership positions are a bargain (Rubenstein Infinite Horizon Solution Concept)
- Those who provide benefits that are assumed to be perfectly correlated with more experience in Congress can rise to power without being more senior.
  - For example, a young democrat like AOC may signal the Democrat's willingness to embrace young politicians and activists
  - Another example, Lawyers and/or former lobbyists, academics, and policy experts who have relevant and a deep understanding of a particular and relevant area to a policy issue within a committee's jurisdiction



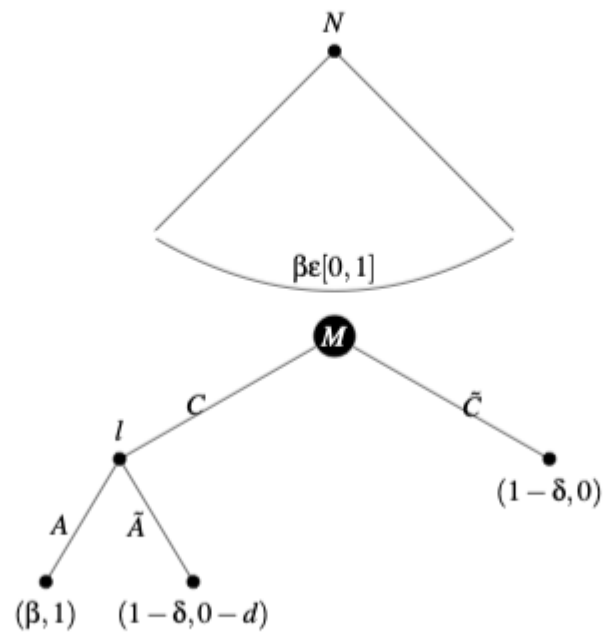
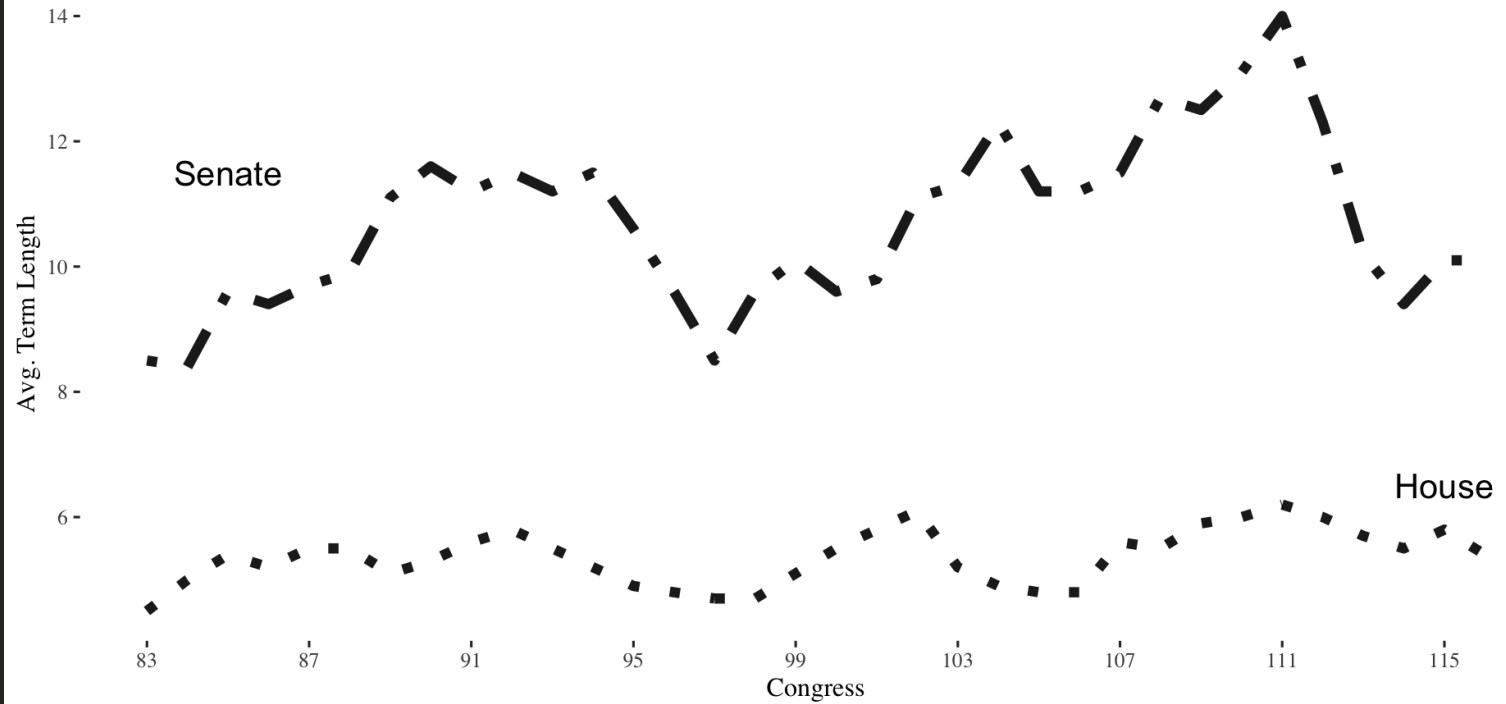


Figure 1: Incentives for finking on seniority system

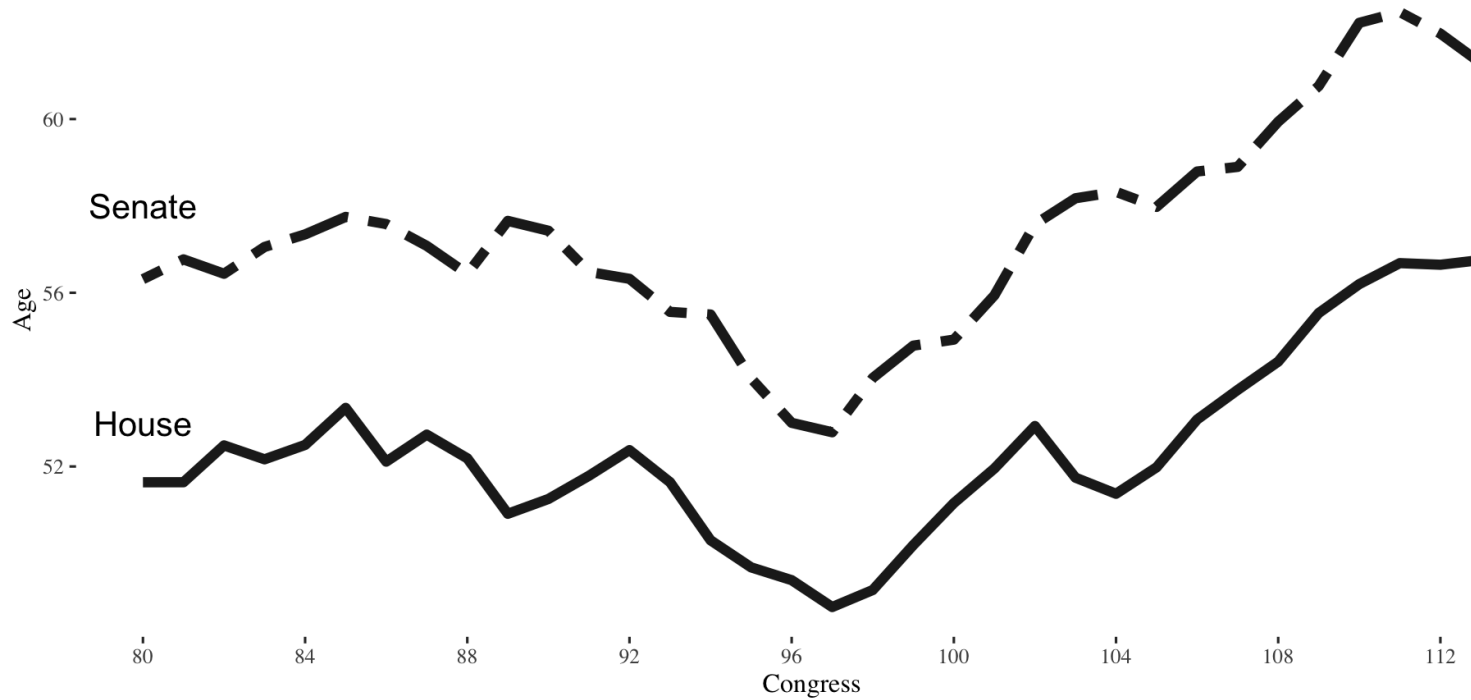
# Empirically What Does Congress Look Like (Eventual Empirical Analysis)

Figure 1. Average MC Term-Length Over Congressional Sessions



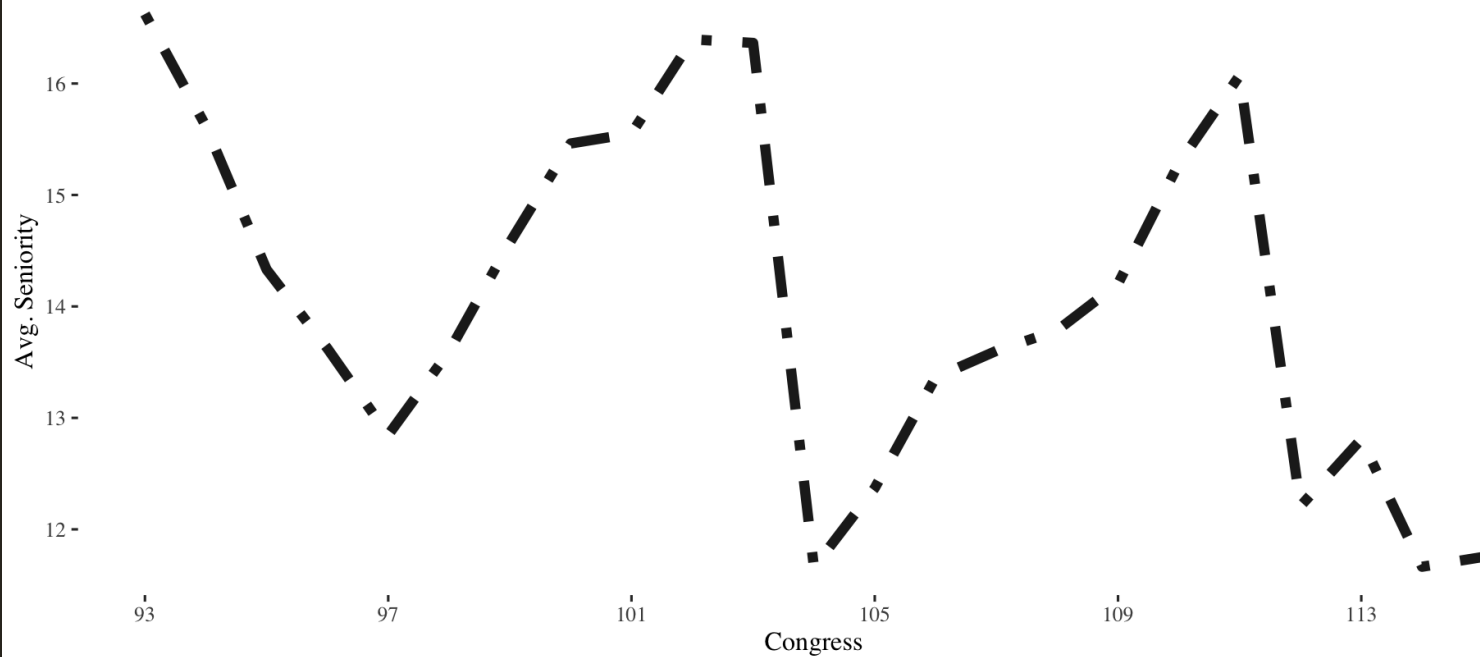
Damon Roberts | Data Source: Brookings Institute Vital Statistics on Congress.  
Note: Average Term Length of all members of Congress in that particular congressional session.

Figure 2. Average Age Over Time



Damon Roberts | Data Source: FiveThirtyEight.Com Congress Age Project.  
Note: Average Age Calculations are across all Members within that particular session of Congress.

Figure 3. Average Seniority - House



Damon Roberts | Data sources: Volden and Wiseman Legislative Effectiveness Data - House data from 1973-2018.

Notes: Data is constrained only to those who hold a subcommittee or committee chair position, a majority or minority leadership position, or a seat on the Appropriations committee.

Average Seniority is an average calculated from subtracting the current term's first calendar year from the member's first term's first calendar year in Congress.

# Questions/Comments?