

American Political Science Review

Gift Travel in the U.S. House of Representatives

--Manuscript Draft--

Manuscript Number:	
Full Title:	Gift Travel in the U.S. House of Representatives
Article Type:	Letter
Section/Category:	American Government & Politics
Corresponding Author:	Philip R. Moniz, M.A. University of Texas at Austin Austin, Texas UNITED STATES
Corresponding Author's Institution:	University of Texas at Austin
Corresponding Author's Secondary Institution:	
Order of Authors:	Philip R. Moniz, M.A. Zachary A. McGee, M.A.
Order of Authors Secondary Information:	
Abstract:	The relationship between interest groups and members of Congress plays out in many ways, some of which have received great scholarly attention while others have gone relatively unnoticed. We present a study highlighting the gifted trips that members take at the invitation and reimbursement of nongovernmental organizations. We introduce this "gift travel" as a tool that interest groups use to influence and exchange information with members. We analyze all gift-travel reports provided to the Clerk of the House from 2007 to 2017. Members reported spending 42,388 days engaged in gift travel during that time, with each member traveling an average 19 days per biennium. We find that interest groups target powerful members over the rank and file; and that more ideologically extreme members are more likely to go on gifted trips. Our analysis opens a new avenue for research on the interaction between members of Congress and interest groups.
Suggested Reviewers:	David Parker Montana State University Bozeman dparker@montana.edu Studies Congress and has published on legislator travel
Opposed Reviewers:	
Additional Information:	
Question	Response
Please enter the manuscript word count (maximum 12,000 words for Articles, 4,000 words for Research Notes)	3789
Please enter the total number of pages of your manuscript.	19
In the box provided, please list all names of participants (panels or chairs) and institutions of talks and conferences where a version of this manuscript was presented.	None
In the box provided, please insert your acknowledgments.	The authors would like to thank Tse-min Lin and Sean Theriault for their invaluable feedback.
What is the primary subfield to which the article speaks?	American Politics

What is the primary methodological approach employed in this article?	Statistical-Observational
Author Comments:	We initially submitted a draft of this manuscript as an article, but were told that the material and length of the paper were better suited to the letter format, and that, should we revise the manuscript and re-submit it as a letter, the paper would be sent out for review. We follow the Review's advice with this submission. Thank you for your earlier feedback.

Gift Travel in the U.S. House of Representatives

Philip R. Moniz & Zachary A. McGee

Philip R. Moniz is Graduate Student, University of Texas at Austin, Department of Government, 158 W 21st ST STOP A1800, Austin, TX 78712-1704; pmoniz@utexas.edu; 508-725-7527. Please send all correspondence to this author.

Zachary A. McGee is Graduate Student, University of Texas at Austin, Department of Government, 158 W 21st ST STOP A1800, Austin, TX 78712-1704; zmcgee@utexas.edu.

Gift Travel in the U.S. House of Representatives

Anonymous

January 6, 2018

Abstract

The relationship between interest groups and members of Congress plays out in many ways, some of which have received great scholarly attention while others have gone relatively unnoticed. We present a study highlighting one such overlooked method by which interest groups influence members of Congress: gifted trips that members take at the invitation and reimbursement of nongovernmental organizations. We introduce this "gift travel" as a tool that interest groups use to influence and exchange information with members. We analyze all gift-travel reports provided to the Clerk of the House from 2007 to 2017. Members reported spending 42,388 days engaged in gift travel during that time, with each member traveling an average 19 days per biennium. We find that interest groups target powerful members over the rank and file; and that more ideologically extreme members are more likely to go on gifted trips. Our analysis opens a new avenue for research on the interaction between members of Congress and interest groups.

Gift travel is an important, but overlooked, example of representative behavior. Members receive campaign contributions from hundreds of PACs and private individuals, but they go on relatively few trips each Congress. We argue that going on an expense-paid trip over the course of several days, versus accepting donations, is more meaningful for a relationship between a member and an interest group. Time is a valuable and scant resource on Capitol Hill. Any time spent on gifted trips during recess is time not spent in the district;¹ and, any time spent while the House is in session needs to be coordinated with leadership to ensure no important votes will be missed. In other words, gift travel requires much more activity from the member than simply receiving a check and we provide the first study of this type of travel. In turn, we argue that interest groups provide members with gift travel as an attempt to buy access and influence their policy preferences.

Gift travel has already been highlighted by the popular media as potentially corrupting. For example, at the end of May 2013 ten members of Congress, along with thirty-two staffers and dozens of state legislators, traveled to Baku, Azerbaijan. Gathering on the shore of the Caspian Sea, they took part in an all-expense-paid conference and cultural visit. The members and their staff listened to speeches given by the president of Azerbaijan, three former advisers to President Obama, and attended at least three briefings pertaining to the country's state-owned oil company. The representatives, many of whom brought along their spouses, also partook in local festivities, such as a fireworks show for Republic Day of Azerbaijan, and a tour of the Old City.

The trip sparked controversy when it was reported that the Azerbaijan-affiliated nonprofits that sponsored the travel had used money originating from a state agent,

¹Note that occasionally gifted trips occur with state delegations, which may entail members visiting their own districts. Most trips occur outside of members' districts.

the very same state-owned oil company that had held information sessions during the conference (Tucker and Olsen 2014). As per House rules, the members had all received approval from the House Ethics Committee before going to Baku, but, upon returning to the United States, they failed to report the foreign and corporate sponsorship they witnessed there (Tucker and Olsen 2014). The *Washington Post* speculated that the trip, and the courtship of which it was a part, may have played a role in a few of the members' decisions to sponsor amendments that exempted an Azerbaijani pipeline project from a sanctions bill that was under consideration at the time (Choma 2015; Higham, Rich, and Crites 2015). The Office of Congressional Ethics ultimately recommended to the House Ethics Committee that the investigation into nine members who violated House code and federal law be further reviewed, and it was handed off to the Department of Justice (OCE 2015).

The Baku trip in particular highlights the potential for gift travel to be gamed by the sponsors, the laxness of the self-reporting system, and the difficulty in connecting what goes on during these trips with legislators' preferences and behavior. While this particular trip was unusual because it broke House rules, and maybe federal law (e.g., the Emoluments Clause), in many other ways it was an ordinary instance of gift travel. Members were invited by a nonprofit to listen to speeches in and tour around a foreign country. The speeches, briefings, and mingling were all a part of what a member typically experiences on a gift-travel trip. To be clear, gift travel occurs when a member, or one of her staff, goes on an expense-paid trip sponsored by a non-governmental organization, such as a trade association, think tank, cable channel, or university. When members go on these sponsored trips, they must report it to the Clerk of the House.²

²According to Rule XXV, clause 5 of the Rules of the House of Representatives, members must disclose reimbursement for such travel within 15 days of return (Wickham 2015). The Clerk of the House makes

Members reported spending 42,388 days engaged in gift travel over the 2007-2017 period, with each member traveling an average 19 days per biennium.

Learning about gift travel behavior informs us about how members spend their valuable time and resources on an unseen realm of information exchange sponsored by groups seeking influence in the policy process. Unfortunately, we still lack answers to basic questions such as “how much gift travel do members go on” and “what organizations are the most popular sponsors?” This paper provides a first look at this specific kind of travel behavior while also attempting to understand the dynamics between these members and the interest groups sponsoring their trips.

We theorize that sponsoring organizations seek short-term policy influence, information exchange, and the opportunity to have the member’s attention and build a long-term relationship. Therefore, we conjecture that groups target members who are strategically positioned to influence policy. Such members should be among the party leadership (Cox and McCubbins 2005; Curry 2015), electorally safe (Grimmer and Stewart 2013), senior (Snyder 1992), and relatively moderate ideologically (Alduncin, Parker, and Theriault 2017; Krehbiel 1998). Sponsors are typically specialized organizations, like trade associations or think tanks, and must balance their preferences for power, policy-interest, and feasibility. While everybody might want to get the ear of the Speaker, only the most resourceful sponsors are apt to do so. Others must take what they can get, and use their finances wisely (Barber, Canes-Wrone, and Thrower 2017).

We present three major findings. First, party leaders, committee chairs, and ranking

a report of these disclosures public on its website. Rule XXV is also clear that no such gift travel can be paid for by a registered lobbyist or by the agent of a foreign principal, and neither can a registered lobbyist or agent of a foreign principal be present at any time during the trip. There are a few exceptions where members of Congress may have their travel paid for by foreign governments. These exceptions are usually when foreign governments pay for in-country expenses or travel for members visiting the sponsoring country. There are limitations for how long these foreign-government-paid trips may be, and oftentimes these trips must be pre-approved by the relevant committee.

members travel much more than the rank and file. Second, seniority is not a significant predictor of the number of gift travel trips a member goes on, and electoral safety has only a trivial effect. Third, and unexpectedly, more ideologically extreme members travel more than their moderate colleagues. We will now turn to our data and detail what we know about gift travel. We close the paper with a discussion of our findings, the implications thereof, and suggestions for avenues of future research on gift travel.

Data

The data for this analysis come from reports filed to the Office of the Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives. Every year since 2007, the Clerk has published all gift travel reports (Dent 2015, 11). This paper analyzes these reports from the 110th through the 114th Congresses (2007-2017). These data, after cleaning, collapsing duplicate trip entries, and aggregating by member, consist of 2,180 observations, which are at the level of the member per Congress. Over the course of the ten-year period for which we have data, each member traveled an average 19 days per congress and reported spending a total of 42,388 days engaged in gift travel.³

Sponsors; or, the Givers

It is worth pausing to observe some basic facts about the organizations behind all this gift travel: the sponsors. A glance at the list of reports quickly shows that there is not a standard or system by which members are filling out their gift-travel paperwork.

The Clerk's data do not provide a simple answer to the question of how many unique

³Note that although every trip is reported in connection with a member, members themselves do not go on all trips; sometimes staffers are sent in their stead.

organizations are taking advantage of gift travel because filing is left up to the members and their staffs. It is up to them to spell the name of the sponsor correctly, use the full name or an abbreviation, and, indeed, know exactly who it is that is sponsoring the trip. After attempting to correct for typos and various names for the same organization, we found that a total of 1,466 nongovernmental sources provided reimbursement for travel to members of Congress between 2007 and 2017. The true number is doubtless smaller, but it seems safe to say that at least 1,000 different organizations gave at least one gift-trip in that ten-year period, which equates to about 250 organizations per Congress, with each congressional cohort experiencing about 2,500 trips.

We also might wonder whether travel sponsors are an egalitarian bunch, each giving roughly the same number of trips per congress, or whether the travel-sponsor universe is characterized more by a few heavy hitters that account for the bulk of members' gift travel year after year. As it turns out, a small number of familiar names are responsible for a hefty portion of the number of trips taken each congress. Only about 4% (63 out of 1466) of the sponsoring organizations averaged at least one trip per congress, or five total in the data set. This datum would imply that only five or six dozen organizations are taking the cost of putting members on trips as a regular part of business. The other 95% or so appear to be using gift travel only sparingly, perhaps in relation to special opportunities to alter policy or changes in the policy information environment (Jones and Baumgartner 2005).

The sixty-two organizations that on average sponsored one or more trips per congress account for 72% of the all the reported trips in our data set. That is, roughly three out of every four trips are sponsored by the same sixty-three groups. The concentration of gifting behavior among a handful of sponsors is an important descriptive fact to note.

Our theoretical expectation is that more powerful members will travel more often, and if the same sponsors are doing so over and over, then this makes it likely that travel sponsors are generally well-funded and strategic, not circumstantial or one-off givers.

To get some notion of who the big players are, let's look briefly at the top five sponsors. The most active sponsor, by far, is an organization called the Congressional Institute, which provided travel subsidies an average of 371 occasions per congress. Judging from the reports, the Congressional Institute seems to invite great numbers of members, usually around 150 of them, to places near Washington, such as Hot Springs, Virginia. The Institute claims to advocate for congressional reform; for example, promoting the idea of a joint committee that will propose changes to rules and procedures followed in the House and Senate. The remaining groups are the American Israel Education Foundation (146 trips per Congress), the Aspen Institute (107), the Heritage Foundation (88), and the Humpty Dumpty Institute (46) round out the top five. The Aspen Institute and the Heritage Foundation are think tanks; the Humpty Dumpty Institute is an international NGO; and the American Israel Education Foundation is an interest group, self-described as being part of America's pro-Israel lobby. Each of these organizations clearly has a policy solution to offer or a policy problem it hopes to push onto the congressional agenda.

Dependent variable

We have one primary dependent variable: *trips*. It is a count, i.e., a sum of binary items (traveled or did not), and it is over-dispersed.⁴ Further, there is heterogeneity across

⁴Overdispersion occurs when the observed variance is larger than the expected variance from a given model (Collett 2003). The count is the number of separate journeys reported by each member to the Clerk of the House; each unique report counts as one trip.

individuals' probabilities of traveling. Each member of Congress does not have an equal probability of being selected to travel by a sponsoring organization. Party leaders or committee chairs are especially prone to this heterogeneity because these members hold more power or policy expertise than rank-and-file members. Therefore, we estimate a negative binomial regression using maximum likelihood. We include fixed-effects for each Congress.

Not all members go on gift travel, but most of them do. Of the 2,180 total members, 292 (13.4%) did not go on a single trip. Similarly, 253 members (11.6%) went on exactly one, 42 (11.4%) went on two, 255 (11.7%) went on three, with 4.8 trips being the mean. Figure 1 shows a histogram of the number of trips taken by all the members. The figure is heavily right-skewed (mean = 4.8, sd = 4.7, median = 4), with only 30 members going on 20 or more trips. The member to go on the most trips, 50, was Fred Upton (MI-R), both a committee chairman and a senior member. Louise Slaughter (NY-D), another senior member in a high-ranking committee position, though in the minority party, went on zero trips during the 114th Congress.

Democrats travel less often, on average, compared to Republicans (see Figure 2). The average number of trips among Democrats is 4.3, but the variance is large ($\sigma^2 = 23.7$). Republicans, on average, go on one more trip than Democrats; their average is 5.2, but again, the variance is large ($\sigma^2 = 20.3$).

Results

Do members of Congress differ in how many gifted trips they go on? What characteristics separate those who travel often from those who stay in Washington or only travel to

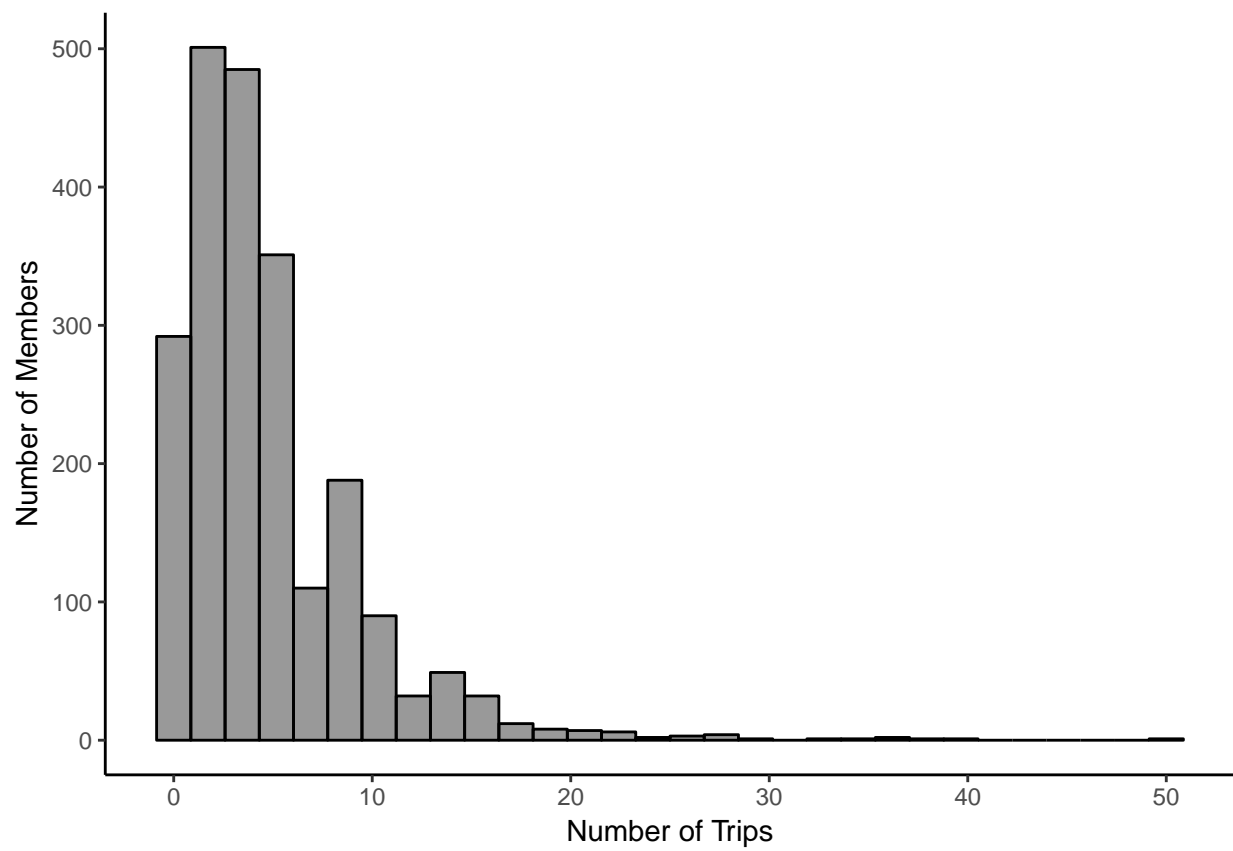


Figure 1: Histogram of Trips (2007-2017)

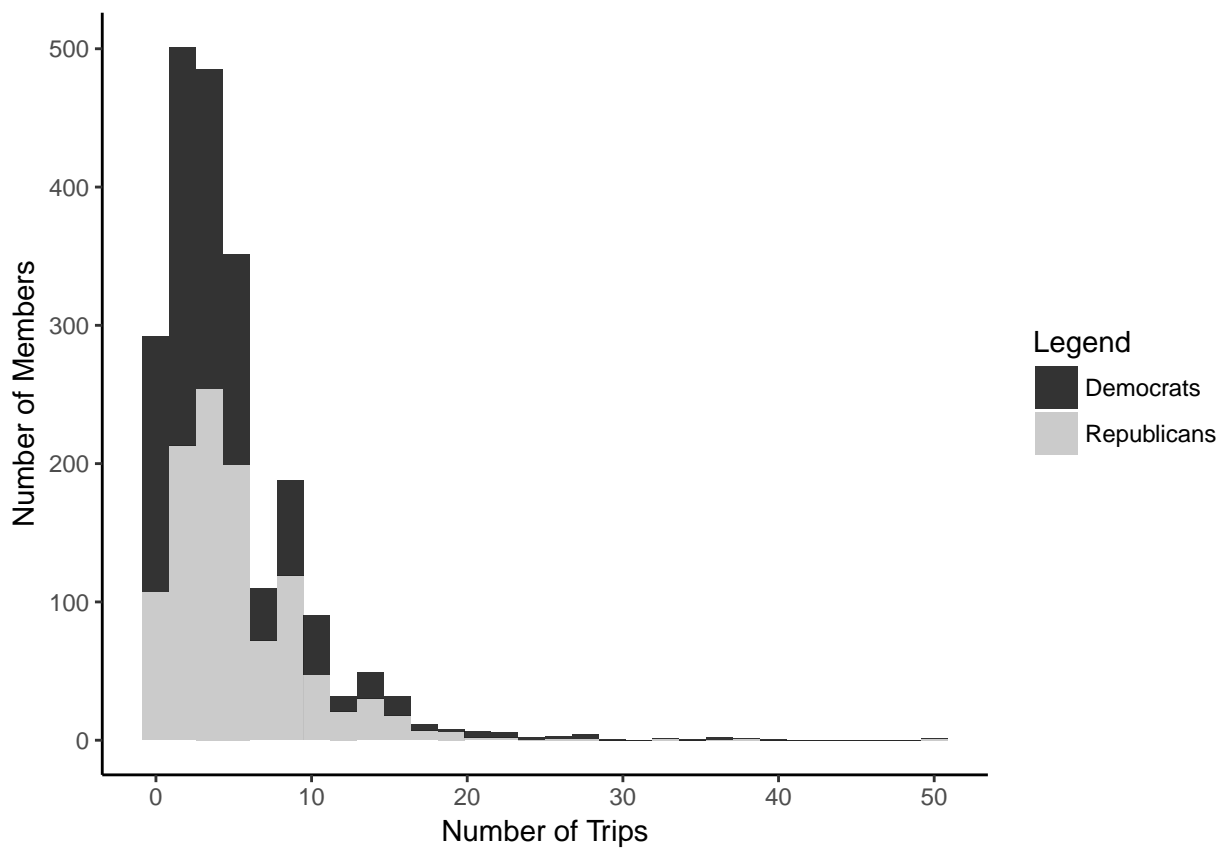


Figure 2: Histogram of Trips per Congress (2007-2017) by Party

their districts? The results reported in Table 1 offer answers to these questions. As expected, members in positions of power—party leaders, committee chairs and ranking members—on average go on significantly more gifted trips than the rank and file. The statistically significant parameter estimates for these position-of-power variables indicate that powerful members travel more, but the coefficients alone do not give us a clear idea of how many more trips per Congress they go on. For the substantive meaning of the estimates, we calculate the contribution each explanatory variable makes to the predicted number of trips, and we plot the changes in Figure 3. For instance, holding all other power variables at zero and the continuous variables, *seniority*, *win percentage*, and *ideological extremity*, at their sample means, the effect of being party leader is sizable: a party leader is predicted to go on 5.49 trips per Congress, three more trips than a rank-and-file member, an increase of 113%. The effect of being a committee chair is almost identical in size to that of being a party leader, while the effect of ranking member differs across party.

The interactive effect of ideological extremity and party on the number of gift-travel trips members go on is the second major finding of this paper. It is important not only because the magnitude of its effect is large but also because it reveals how ideology works to attract sponsors toward members in different degrees depending on their party. The first thing to note is that ideologically extreme members are more likely than their moderate colleagues to venture out at the invitation of sponsoring organizations. The large positive effect of ideological extremity holds for members of both parties. But the size of the effect is larger for Democrats than it is for Republicans. The estimated number of trips for Republicans rises from 2.1 to 3.3 (57% increase), while the number for Democrats jumps from 0.9 to 4.8 (433% increase). So, what a Democrat may lack

Table 1: Effects on Total Number of Gifted Trips - 110th-114th Congresses

	Count of Total Gifted Trips	
Ideological Extremity	0.348*	(0.142)
Democrat	-1.886***	(0.276)
Win Percentage	0.005**	(0.001)
Ranking Member	0.627***	(0.132)
Seniority	0.008	(0.005)
Committee Chair	0.761***	(0.082)
Party Leader	0.755***	(0.129)
114th Congress	0.850***	(0.062)
113th Congress	0.776***	(0.061)
112th Congress	0.602***	(0.061)
111th Congress	0.407***	(0.061)
Ideological Extremity x Democrat	1.698***	(0.270)
Ranking Member x Democrat	-0.490**	(0.171)
Constant	0.224	(0.179)
Observations	12	2,180
Log Likelihood		-5,478.676
θ		2.129*** (0.104)

Table 2: Predicted Number of Trips

	0	1
Committee Chair	2.58 [2.33 - 2.85]	5.52 [4.62 - 6.59]
Democrat	2.58 [2.33 - 2.85]	2.17 [1.97 - 2.39]
Party Leader	2.58 [2.33 - 2.85]	5.49 [4.20 - 7.17]
Ranking Member (Republican)	2.58 [2.33 - 2.85]	4.83 [3.75 - 6.22]
Ranking Member (Democratic)	2.17 [1.97 - 2.39]	2.49 [1.98 - 3.15]

Note: Standard errors reported in parentheses

in committee power in the eyes of sponsors, she may make up for if her views are sufficiently liberal.

We also find some interesting null effects and observe two noteworthy trends. First, though we expected otherwise, more senior and electorally safe members are no more likely than their marginal freshman counterparts to take a trip on someone else's dime. Second, since gift travel has been reported in its current fashion, members have only gone on more and more trips per congressional term. Descriptive analysis as well as the coefficient estimates for each congress in Table 1 show that the popularity of gift travel has only increased over time. Lastly, it is important to note that, all things considered, Republicans of the rank and file go on an average 2.6 total trips per congress, which is 0.4 trips (18%) more than similar Democrats do. In other words, Republicans have been jetsetting for free more than Democrats have.

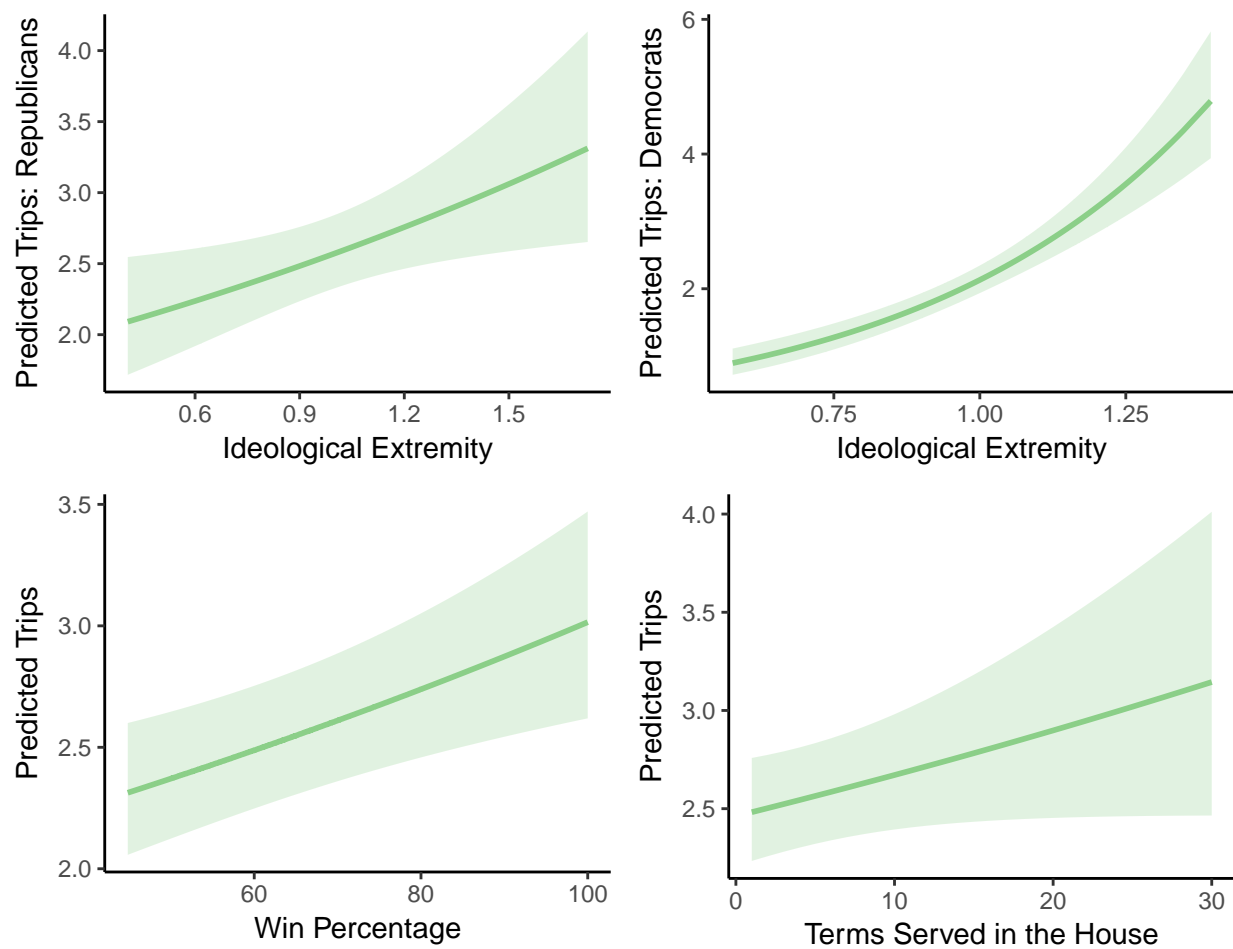


Figure 3: Predicted Trips Taken per Congress

Discussion

We have modeled the gift-travel behavior of members of Congress as a function of their party, their time spent in office, the safeness of their seat, their role as either leader or rank and file, committee leadership, and ideological extremity (or the degree to which they vote with their party and not with the other). In the aim of parsimony, we have estimated a single model for both parties while measuring the effect of party and including interaction terms for the relationships that were statistically significant. The most important of these was the interactive effect of party on ideological extremity. Our results were surprising in two ways. First, far from being a damper on travel, ideological extremity was found to be a catalyst for more trip-taking. Second, its catalyzing effect was sharply pronounced for Democratic members, the most ideologically extreme of whom were estimated to travel over 400% more per Congress than the most moderate. Why this should be so is not immediately obvious. The logic of rank-and-file members retaining influence by banding together via intraparty organizations provides some support here (Rubin 2017).

The specific targeting of powerful members (i.e. party leaders, committee chairs, and ranking members) indicates, at minimum, that more research needs to be done on the mechanism of gift travel. If possible, an explication of what types of groups sponsor any gift travel at all and a closer look at activity within the U.S. House following trips would shed light on any question of quid pro quo corruption from these excursions.

Furthermore, in line with scholarship regarding the travel of members via Congressional Delegations (CODELs) (Alduncin et al. 2014; Alduncin, Parker, and Theriault 2017), scholars could examine who travels with whom and how often. Using what the Clerk of the House provides, future research could work to determine which members

were visiting the same locations at the same times, and use this information to investigate how member-level attributes relate to the partisan nature of their gift-travel behavior. Many trips gifted during the congresses analyzed here involved members traveling together, and it is possible that partisan polarization may affect gift travel in ways similar to CODELs.

Future scholarship on member travel should also try to better specify the relationship between sponsors and members. A measure of sponsor ideological similarity would go a good ways in specifying the relationship, as would a more nuanced coding of the committee-related variables. Like sophisticated donors, sponsors may also target the committees most relevant to their policy goals, or ones ideologically similar to them (Barber, Canes-Wrone, and Thrower 2017). Our analysis speaks to who travels and how much, but future work should investigate whether those who travel more do so because they receive trips from a wide variety of sponsors or because they are given trips again and again by the same big organizations.

One final note is that all trips are not the same, and what we have modeled here is a mere count of the quantity of trips taken by members of Congress. Some trips are domestic, others are overseas; some trips are a day long, others are a week long; some are taken alone, others are experienced in groups. The varieties of trip offer us several more questions we could ask about what these excursions mean.

Gift travel is an overlooked aspect of members' relationships with interest groups and non-governmental organizations. Many questions remain unanswered. How does gift travel change over extended periods of time? What is it good for? Researchers should appreciate the potentially important things we have to learn from this unusual form of documented lobbying and travel, and we hope to work toward answering these

questions in the near future.

References

Alduncin, Alexander, Sean Q. Kelly, David C. W. Parker, and Sean M. Theriault. 2014. “Foreign Junkets or Learning to Legislate? Generational Changes in the International Travel Patterns of House Members, 1977-2012.” *The Forum* 12 (3). doi:10.1515/for-2014-5021.

Alduncin, Alexander, David C. W. Parker, and Sean M. Theriault. 2017. “Leaving on a Jet Plane: Polarization, Foreign Travel, and Comity in Congress.” *Congress & the Presidency*, February, 1–24. doi:10.1080/07343469.2016.1270370.

Barber, Michael J., Brandice Canes-Wrone, and Sharece Thrower. 2017. “Ideologically Sophisticated Donors: Which Candidates Do Individual Contributors Finance?” *American Journal of Political Science* 61 (2): 271–88.

Choma, Russ. 2015. “Lawmakers Who Traveled to Azerbaijan Urged Action Benefiting State Oil Company That Funded Trip.” *Center for Responsive Politics*, May. Washington, D.C.

Collett, David. 2003. *Modeling Binary Data*. 2nd ed. Boca Raton, FL: Chapman & Hall/CRC.

Cox, Gary, and Matthew McCubbins. 2005. *Setting the Agenda: Responsible Party Government in the U.S. House of Representatives*. New York: University of Cambridge Press.

Curry, James. 2015. *Legislating in the Dark: Information and Power in the House*

of Representatives. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Dent, Charles W. 2015. "In the Matter of Officially Connected Travel by House Members to Azerbaijan in 2013." Washington, D.C.: House Committee on Ethics.

Grimmer, J., and B. M. Stewart. 2013. "Text as Data: The Promise and Pitfalls of Automatic Content Analysis Methods for Political Texts." *Political Analysis* 21 (3): 267–97. doi:10.1093/pan/mps028.

Higham, Scott, Steven Rich, and Alice Crites. 2015. "10 Members of Congress Took Trip Secretly Funded by Foreign Government." *The Washinton Post*, May. Washington, D.C.

Jones, Bryan D., and Frank R. Baumgartner. 2005. *The Politics of Attention: How Government Prioritizes Problems*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Krehbiel, Keith. 1998. *Pivotal Politcs: A Theory of U.S. Lawmaking*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

OCE. 2015. "Statement of the Board of the Congressional Ethics on the Release of Findings of Fact Regarding Officially Connected Travel to Turkey and Azerbaijan." Washington, D.C.: Office of Congressional Ethics.

Rubin, Ruth. 2017. *Building the Bloc: Intraparty Organization in the U.S. Congress*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Snyder, James M. 1992. "Long-Term Investing in Politicians; or, Give Early, Give Often." *Journal of Law & Economics* 35 (April): 15–44.

Tucker, Will, and Lise Olsen. 2014. "Lawmakers' Trips to Baku Conference Raise Ethics Questions." *Houston Chronicle*, July. Houston.

Wickham, Thomas J. 2015. *Constitution, Jefferson's Manual, and Rules of the House of the Representatives of the United States One Hundred Fourteenth Congress*.

Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Publishing Office.