

How Shifting Priorities and Capacity Affect Policy Work and Constituency Service: Evidence from a Census of Legislator Requests to U.S. Federal Agencies

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Abstract

When elected officials gain power, do they use it to provide more constituent service or affect policy? The answer informs debates over how legislator capacity, term limits, and institutional positions affect representation. We distinguish two countervailing effects of increased institutional power: shifting priorities and increased capacity. To assess how institutional power shapes behavior, we assemble a massive new database of 611239 legislator requests to a near census of federal departments, agencies, and sub-agencies between 2007 and 2020. We find that legislators prioritize policy work as they gain institutional power (e.g., become a committee chair) but simultaneously maintain their levels of constituency service. Moreover, when a new legislator replaces an experienced legislator, the district receives less constituency service *and* less policy work. Rather than long-serving and powerful elected officials diverting attention from constituents, their increased capacity enables them to maintain levels of constituency service, even as they prioritize policy work.

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1 Introduction

One of the oldest traditions of representation in American politics is constituency service—how members of Congress help channel and articulate the demands of individuals, groups, and localities to the federal government (Fenno, 1978). Advocating on behalf of their constituents to federal agencies is a crucial part of a modern legislator’s job, and its growth has been used to explain the incumbency advantage (King, 1991). Yet, despite the centrality of constituency service in theories of congressional representation, constituency service remains one of the least understood congressional activities.

This paper examines how increasing power affects the provision of constituency service. On the one hand, institutional power may enable legislators to provide more constituency service. Formal models of accountability imply that if constituency service enables elected officials to demonstrate competence to their constituents, then increased institutional power and capacity will result in more constituency service effort to secure reelection (Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita, 2006). Experienced incumbents may also have an advantage over challengers if newly elected officials incur start-up costs that reduce their capacity to provide constituency service.

On the other hand, we might expect that as legislators spend more time in Washington and gain prestige, they become more focused on general policy work and less attentive to their district and constituents. This dynamic is central to theories of representation that examine the trade-offs legislators face in their careers. Many assume that the effect of shifting priorities is large enough to cause long-serving legislators to catch “Potomac fever” and devote less attention to constituents back in their district (Fenno, 1978). Such reasoning is the primary justification for term limits. Related arguments are common in the popular press (Edwards, 2005) and evoked in rallying cries to “drain the swamp” of legislators focused on Washington politics (Rosenblatt, 2016).

We test these competing expectations with a massive new dataset of constituency service and policy work: a near census of legislator contacts with federal agencies from 2007 to 2020. Recent work using data on congressional correspondence has yielded important findings regarding the policy strategies of cross-pressured legislators (Ritchie, 2018), distributive politics (Mills and Kalaf-Hughes, 2015), and the role of ideology in congressional oversight (Lowande, 2019). Except for work by Lowande, Ritchie and Lauterbach (2019) on descriptive representation, this emerging scholarship has focused on policy work (not constituency service). Adding to this work, our theory and research design focus on simultaneous shifts in constituency service and policy work.

Given the difficulty in collecting these data, previous work has been restricted to small

subsets of agencies and, thus, a small subset of policy domains. Our larger dataset enables us to comprehensively test how the behavior of legislators shifts as they gain institutional power and ensures that our conclusions are not limited to subsets of the executive branch. To assess absolute and relative shifts in legislator contacts to agencies, we hand code the content of 511029 requests as policy work or constituency service. Doing so also yields many illuminating descriptives about modern congressional representation. For example, over 80% of contacts are made on behalf of constituents, and less than 20% are focused on policy work.

We find evidence for both of the countervailing effects of institutional power that we theorize, supporting both the *increased capacity theory* and the *shifting priorities theory* of representation. Critically, the magnitude of the effect of increasing capacity on constituency service offsets the effect of shifting priorities toward policy work. Thus, the amount of constituency service remains constant even though legislators' attention shifts towards policy as they gain power in Washington. Constituents do not face a trade-off between powerful and attentive representatives.

These findings are robust; they are not the result of exogenous variation in constituent demand, differences across districts, or differences across legislators. Our research designs limit the influence of any potential variation in constituent demand by leveraging within-legislator and within-district comparisons. Moreover, through a series of robustness checks and additional analyses, we find no evidence that constituents shift demands to more established offices when a new representative is elected. When House members lose an election, there is no corresponding increase in constituency service requests from the state's Senate delegation.

While this study does not aim to examine the effects of institutional reforms, our results have implications for debates over congressional staffing and term limits. Advocates for increasing congressional staffing have long argued that declining capacity has hamstrung Congress (Reynolds, 2020). Consistent with these arguments, we show that legislators with access to more staff resources do more policy work. Advocates for term limits assert that powerful career politicians become alienated from their constituents. We show, however, that even as legislators gain power, they remain focused on providing constituency service. In fact—in contrast to arguments from term limit supporters—the biggest decrease in constituency service occurs when a new legislator replaces an experienced legislator. Our findings imply that the turnover that term limits induce would cause a sharp decrease in the volume of work from legislative offices.

We proceed as follows. Section 2 explains divergent predictions about how institutional position and tenure will affect legislators' behavior. Section 3 explains our data collection process and summary statistics. Section 4 shows that as legislators gain experience and

institutional power, they maintain or increase their levels of constituency service, even as they shift their priorities toward policy work. Section 5 provides robustness checks for our results and explores alternative explanations. Sections 6 and 7 highlight implications of these findings for theories of legislative behavior and institutional reform debates.

2 Do Experience and Power Increase or Decrease Constituency Service?

How elected officials balance their work on broad policy goals and delivering particularistic service to their constituents and district presents a significant tension for representation. Building on multi-task models of representation (Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita, 2006; Gordon and Landa, 2009), we explain why increased experience and power may either increase or decrease the levels of constituency service legislators provide depending on the relative magnitudes of the effects of increasing capacity and changing priorities.

2.1 Increasing Capacity Hypothesis: Why Experience and Power Could Increase Constituency Service

As elected officials garner more experience in Congress, one prediction from formal models of accountability is that legislators will provide more constituency service because their capacity to do so increases. An influential set of formal theory papers argue that voters are fundamentally engaged in a screening task: attempting to identify elected officials who are competent and effectively deliver representation to the district (Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita, 2006; Gordon and Landa, 2009). Under this model of representation, constituency service helps reelection-minded legislators increase their chance of reelection if they can exceed constituents' expectations of the level of service that another candidate would provide. These models predict that as a legislator's resources and capacity increase, they will increase their level of constituency service (Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita, 2006, Proposition 1).

Critically, constituents' demands for service do not go away. Even if constituents value their representative's power over policy, they still expect their elected officials to be attentive to the district. Moreover, if constituency service helps with reelection, legislators may invest in *creating* demands (for example, by advertising constituency services) that they can then meet.

Research suggests that the low level of congressional capacity in the modern Congress serves as a major constraint on Congress's ability to function (LaPira, Drutman and Kosar, 2020). Experience in office and institutional power may increase an individual legislator's

capacity in many ways. Because many of these mechanisms are observationally equivalent, we focus on capacity in general and three general mechanisms by which experience and institutional power may affect behavior: 1) increased resources, 2) increased organizational capacity, and 3) an increased likelihood of success when making a request.

Mechanism 1: Increased Resources As legislators acquire more institutional power, they usually gain more resources. For example, becoming chair of a Congressional committee provides legislators with a better ability to direct committee staff and a larger budget. New committee chairs often bring in new staff who are loyal to their priorities (Fox and Hammond, 1977; DeGregorio, 1995). Staff provide legislators with the capacity to accomplish their goals (DeGregorio, 1994; Hall, 1996; Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger and Stokes, 2019; Montgomery and Nyhan, 2017; McCrain, 2018; Crosson et al., 2020; Reynolds, 2020) and may counteract the power of lobbyists (Hall and Deardorff, 2006). Even if committee resources are earmarked for policy work, they can still increase a chair's capacity for constituency service if using committee resources for policy work frees up their personal office resources for constituency service.

Mechanism 2: Increased Organizational Efficiency Better organized legislator offices are more able to help constituents navigate the federal bureaucracy. On average, experienced legislators should have better systems that allow them to make more constituency service requests than new legislators, who face “start-up” costs that decrease the number of requests they make to agencies. Newly-elected must hire staff, open district offices, and establish protocols, priorities, and procedures in their office for handling constituency service requests. They also lack the standard procedures that more established offices use to handle particular problems efficiently. In terms of formal models, office organization increases legislators’ capacity (Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita, 2006). As legislators build an office and establish protocols, these start-up costs should subside as legislators use the resources of their office more efficiently. For example, Cottle (2022) finds that more experienced legislators and senior staff are more productive. As a result, we expect new legislators to make fewer requests, but only for the time it takes to establish their office organization.

Mechanism 3: Increased Likelihood of Success In fulfilling statutory missions, agencies must prioritize resources and use broad discretion in processing visa, permit, and grant applications, regulating private entities’ compliance with environmental, health, and labor laws, and much more. Legislators are in a position to influence these decisions. As public servants, agency staff may assign special importance to elected officials’ requests. For ex-

ample, bureaucrats often tag congressional correspondence as “VIP,” and agency protocols often require faster response deadlines and higher signature levels for them. Bureaucrats have incentives to build relationships and reputations that enhance their standing among members of Congress and those who have their ear, and they actively do so (Carpenter, 2001). In short, complying with legislator requests may help agencies achieve their own goals. If an agency aims to grow its coalition of political supporters, we expect them to accommodate congressional requests frequently.

As legislators become more powerful, agencies may be more responsive. More powerful legislators can more easily alter an agency’s budget or create additional work through Congressional hearings. As a result, agencies may prioritize requests from more powerful members of Congress. For example, Lowande (2019) finds that agencies systematically prioritize the requests of majority party legislators. Mills and Kalaf-Hughes (2015) find that the Federal Aviation Administration was more likely to grant the requests of senior members of Congress.¹ A related literature similarly finds that seniority and committee membership affect the distributive politics of earmarks (Lazarus, 2010). Increased marginal returns may incentivize more powerful legislators to make more requests (Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina, 1987).

Because this third mechanism operates as a multiplier on institutional power and organizational capacity, it is observationally equivalent to the first two mechanisms for our analysis. In short, the observable implications of theories emphasizing the effects of capacity and resources are that legislators with more experience and more powerful institutional positions like committee chairs will do more constituency service work.

2.2 Shifting Priorities Hypothesis: Why Experience and Power Could Decrease Legislators’ Constituency Service Efforts

A different set of expectations for how legislator behavior may change in response to increased experience and power is present in the political science literature on Congressional careers tracing back to Fenno (1973). Legislators do not only care about reelection; they also have policy goals. As Butler, Karpowitz and Pope (2012, p. 475) conclude, “The service-policy

¹Because we are studying legislator behavior rather than agency behavior, this mechanism only requires that more powerful legislators occasionally believe that they are more likely to get a response. Regarding agency behavior, there is active scholarly debate over whether agencies respond differently to more powerful legislators. In contrast to canonical theories set out by Arnold (1979), Berry, Burden and Howell (2010) find no evidence that committee membership shaped the distribution of executive-branch spending. Ritchie and You (2019) find that legislator requests influenced Department of Labor decisions, but notably, this influence was not correlated with oversight committee membership. Likewise, Mills and Kalaf-Hughes (2015) even find that the Federal Aviation Administration was *less* likely to grant the requests of members of their authorizing committee, which they attribute to the agency punishing committee members for recent budget cuts.

divide is thus an important theoretical lens through which legislative behavior can be viewed.” As legislators gain experience and power, the marginal impact of the resources they allocate to policy work increases. Powerful legislators thus have incentives to shift their attention to policy work. If this theory is right, as legislators gain power and experience, they should increase the ratio of policy work to constituency service.

As legislators spend more time in Washington, they may become detached and alienated from their district. Fenno (1978) documents that some members of Congress catch “Potomac fever.” Different institutional positions allow legislators to advance different goals (Fenno, 1973). As legislators spend more time in office and attain more influential institutional roles, legislators might focus on policy priorities and less on the particular demands of their constituents. While newly elected officials may remain primarily focused on reelection, longer-serving officials may prioritize other goals.

If the shifting priorities hypothesis is right—that legislators shift attention from their district to policy work—we expect that legislators provide *relatively less* constituent service compared to policy work as they gain experience and power. The “Potomac fever” concern is that, as legislators gain experience and power, the magnitude of the effect of shifting attention and priorities toward policy work is large enough to swamp any increase in capacity. If this strong (“Potomac fever”) version of the shifting priorities hypothesis is true, we should find that legislators provide *less* constituent service in absolute terms.

A parallel argument about legislator behavior is the foundation of arguments for institutional reforms, particularly arguments for term limits. For example, during a 2019 Senate committee hearing, Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) argued in favor of term limits by stating that at our nation’s founding, politicians traveled to Washington to serve in Congress “for a time but usually returned to their homes and their affairs,” while today, “far too many of our politicians come to Washington to stay,” (US Term Limits, 2019).

Formal models of representation predict that as legislators prioritize policy work in Washington, the ratio of policy work to constituency service will increase. All else equal, they will then provide lower levels of constituency service to their district. In the model in Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita (2006), this would occur as legislators place a lower priority on constituency service. If legislators’ priorities shift over their careers or as they gain power, more experienced and powerful legislators will allocate their staff to policy work over constituency service. Likewise, if members shift their *attention* from their district to their career in Washington (in Congress or after), their relative level of attention to constituent issues will decrease.

2.3 The Countervailing Effects of Increasing Capacity and Shifting Priorities on Constituency Service

The increased capacity and shifting priorities hypotheses are not mutually exclusive. Legislators' career shifts may simultaneously increase their resources and decrease their relative priority on constituency service. The net effect of these countervailing shifts on the levels of constituency service they provide thus depends on the *relative* magnitude of legislators' capacity increase compared to the magnitude of their shift in priorities. Increased capacity may offset a *relative* shift away from constituency service as a legislator gains power. If this occurs, we expect the absolute level of constituency service to stay the same or increase as legislators gain experience and power, even as their ratio of policy work to constituent service increases. Alternatively, if the effect of increased capacity is relatively small or the effect of shifting priorities relatively large, absolute levels of constituency service may decline as a legislator gains power.

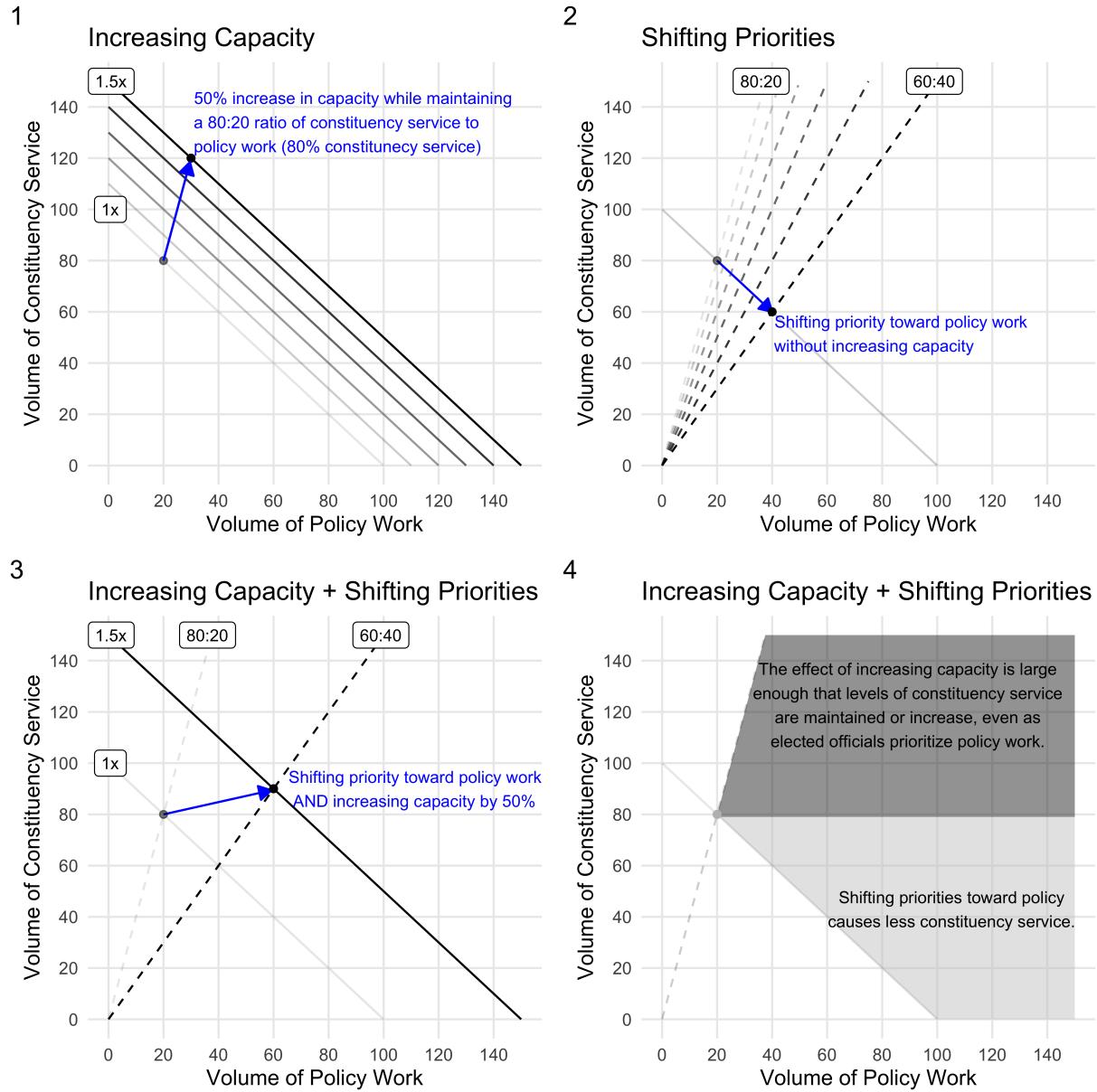
Table 1 and Figure 1 show potential changes in the absolute volume of constituency service and the ratio of policy work to constituency service due to *changes in capacity* and *shifting priorities*. The top-left cell of Table 1 shows our expectations if both mechanisms affect behavior *and* the magnitude of the effect of increased capacity is large enough to overcome the countervailing effect of shifting priorities (any outcome in the upper, darker-shaded region of Figure 1, Subfigure 4, including the scenario shown in Subfigure 3).

Table 1: Divergent Predictions for the Change in the Levels of Constituency Service and Policy Work as Legislators Gain Experience and Power

		Increasing Capacity Hypothesis	
		Increase in Capacity	No Change in Capacity
Shifting Priorities Hypothesis	Priority Shifts to Policy Work	Level of Service: 0 or ↑ Ratio of $\frac{Policy}{Service}$: ↑	Level of Service: ↓ Ratio of $\frac{Policy}{Service}$: ↑
	No Change in Priorities	Level of Service: ↑ Ratio of $\frac{Policy}{Service}$: 0	Level of Service: 0 Ratio of $\frac{Policy}{Service}$: 0

Figure 1 formalizes the potential outcomes implied by our theory to clarify the conditions under which constituency service will increase or decrease as an elected official's capacity and priorities change. For simplicity, Figure 1 assumes a baseline capacity of 100 (e.g., 100 contacts with federal agencies per year) and a baseline ratio of constituency service to policy work of 80:20 (80% constituency service). It visualizes potential outcomes for changes in capacity extending up to 150% of some baseline level of capacity. The level of policy work, x , done by an elected official, i , depends on their overall capacity, c , and relative priority

Figure 1: The Countervailing Effects of Increasing Capacity and Shifting Priorities on Constituency Service



This figure is a visual representation of the potential outcomes implied by the formalization of our theory. The figure assumes a baseline capacity of 100 (e.g., 100 contacts with federal agencies per year) and a baseline ratio of constituency service to policy work of 80:20 (80% constituency service). Subfigure 1 (Upper Left Quadrant) shows what happens if capacity increases by 50%, and no shift in priorities. Subfigure 2 (Upper Right Quadrant) shows what happens if priorities shift from 80:20 to 60:40 constituency service to policy work, and there's no shift in capacity. Subfigure 3 (lower left quadrant) shows what happens if both capacity increases by 50% and priorities shift from 80:20 to 60:40. If both capacity increases and priorities shift, the net outcome on volume of constituency service and volume of policy work depends on exactly how much each changes. Subfigure 4 (lower right quadrant) illustrates the range of possibilities that could occur when both capacity increases and priorities shift. Subfigure 3, is just one possible scenario of this more general form.

for constituency service versus policy work, $p \in [0, 1]$ (that is, the share of contacts that are constituency service rather than policy work) such that $x_i = c_i(1 - p_i)$. An elected official's level of constituency service, y_i , likewise depends on their overall capacity and priorities such that $y_i = c_i p_i$. For any given level of capacity, $y_i = c_i - x_i$ specifies a line of possible divisions of capacity between policy work and constituency service. Increasing capacity pushes this "capacity frontier" line to the upper right (Figure 1, subfigure 1). Where on this line a legislator exists at any point in time depends on their relative priority for policy work and constituency service (Figure 1, subfigure 2). If capacity and priorities shift simultaneously, priorities can shift toward policy while levels of constituency service are maintained or even increase (Figure 1, subfigure 3). The relative magnitude of these two effects determines whether constituency service will increase or decrease (Figure 1, subfigure 4). When $c_{i1}p_{i1} > c_{i2}p_{i2}$, constituency service decreases between time 1 and time 2. When $c_{i1}p_{i1} < c_{i2}p_{i2}$ constituency service increases. When $c_{i1}p_{i1} = c_{i2}p_{i2}$, there is no change in constituency service.

2.4 Alternative Explanation for Changes in Constituency Service: Constituent Demand

We aim to understand how gaining power and experience in Washington affects how legislators serve constituents. But often, legislators depend on constituents to ask for help navigating the federal bureaucracy. An alternative explanation for why legislators' rates of constituency service provision vary is that they receive differing numbers of requests from their constituents for reasons that are not a result of legislators' capacity and experience. While such variation in constituent demand is substantively interesting, such an explanation for constituency service provision does not inform debates about the extent to which legislators' capacity and priorities change with their time in office and institutional position.

Of course, constituent demands inform which agencies legislators contact. For example, some districts contain groups—such as veterans or social security recipients—who request particular kinds of constituency service from their representatives. **Our research design limits the influence of this kind of variation in constituent demand by examining how an individual legislator's rates of contact change *within* each agency. By looking at the same member representing the same constituents in the same district to the same agency over time, we limit the extent to which differing constituent populations could interfere with our results.**

Legislators may also use their official resources to encourage requests from constituents for help navigating the federal bureaucracy through workshops, newsletters to constituents,

social media posts, and even stories in local papers. Such constituent outreach may even be a primary way that constituencies discover that their elected officials can help with problems they may have with the bureaucracy. If legislators use increased staff budgets or organizational capacities to solicit constituent requests, constituent demands may increase as legislator power increases (Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina, 1987). This is entirely consistent with our theory that increased power and capacity enable legislators to provide both constituency services and policy work. Our theory and tests do not require that legislators allocate resources to soliciting constituency service demand as they gain power, but if they do, the underlying cause would be shifting legislator capacity, not some exogenous shift in constituent demand that could confound our analysis. Thus, changes in constituent demand that result from legislators' efforts are not a problem for our analysis. Indeed, constituent service outreach may be a key mechanism for the capacity effects we theorize.

A more challenging form of constituent demand could exist if constituents redirect their requests toward legislators whom they expect to be more powerful. Constituents might expect that more powerful legislators could more effectively provide constituency service and, as a result, direct their demands toward those legislators. If constituents strategically redirect their demands for help from representatives who lost a chair position to representatives who gained a chair position, this could partially confound our analysis. More realistically, if constituents redirect requests for help away from new legislators toward longer-serving legislators, we might observe increases in demand targeted at more experienced legislators of a delegation whenever a less experienced legislator replaces another more experienced member of their state's delegation. To address these sorts of concerns, in Section 5, we conduct a series of robustness checks to rule out alternative constituency demand-driven explanations. We find no evidence of requests spilling over to more experienced and powerful members within a state delegation.

3 Data: A Census of Legislator Requests to Federal Agencies

To assess how experience and power affect constituency service, we filed 429 Freedom Of Information Act (FOIA) requests with all federal departments, agencies, and sub-agencies for all records of incoming communication from members of Congress between January 1, 2007, and the date of our request.² Between February 2017 and February 2021, we received

²In addition to our initial requests, collecting these data included over a thousand follow-up and clarification emails, dozens of hours on the phone with FOIA officers, and nearly 100 appeals of incomplete records or inappropriate denials, including multiple cases where we pursued and won orders from judges requiring

data on 627356 instances of members of Congress contacting federal agencies. We focus on requests made from 2007 to 2020, resulting in a data set of 611239 contacts.³

Data processing and coding Upon receiving records of congressional requests, we extracted names matching variations of legislators' names. We then merged in data about members' districts, institutional positions, and careers, including ideology scores (Lewis et al., 2018), committee membership (Stewart and Woon, 2017), and committee oversight (Lewis and Selin, 2012). The Appendix provides procedures and replication code for converting the raw records from federal agencies into the data set required for our analysis.

For 511029 requests, we use the text or summaries of letters to classify legislators' reasons for contacting federal agencies. Our coding process began with the authors coding a representative sample of records using our codebook (see Appendix). We then trained Research Assistants to continue the coding. The first several thousand letters were double-coded. For example, of over 10,000 letters for the Environmental Protection Agency, the first 2,500 were double-coded. Our overall inter-coder agreement was 0.78, which rose to 0.9 when we subsetted our analysis to coding decisions where the coders had a great deal of certainty.

3.1 Who Contacts the Bureaucracy and Why?

Before testing theories of how legislators' efforts to provide constituency service change as they acquire experience and power, we first use our extensive new data set to answer outstanding descriptive questions about representation in U.S. politics. These descriptive findings regarding the level, variation, and reasons for legislator requests to federal agencies are only possible with our census of legislator requests. Overall, we find massive variation across legislators. We also find surprising consistency in the purpose of the communication; when legislators contact federal agencies, it is almost always to provide constituency service; only a small fraction focused on policy work. Further, we find that legislators are responsive to their constituency's demographic characteristics, but there is still significant variation in levels of service from similar districts.

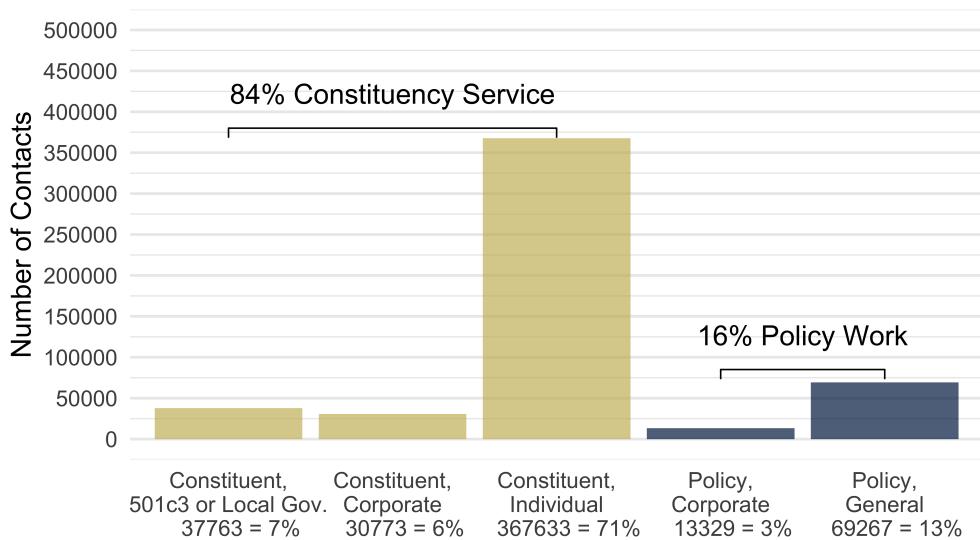
compliance with our request. By rigorously pursuing a census of records, we limit any response bias that may exist in more easily-obtained samples.

³Some agencies did not provide records for the full span of years. Our models include legislator-by-agency fixed effects to account for any left censoring, ensuring that our comparisons leverage variation within each agency, limiting the opportunity for censoring to affect our results.

3.1.1 Legislator's Contact with Federal Agencies Focus on Constituency Service

Overall, when legislators contact federal agencies, they are helping constituents navigate the federal bureaucracy. Figure 2 shows the proportion of contacts for each of the five types of legislator requests in our hand-coded sample described above. The center bar shows that 71% of all legislator requests to federal agencies are on behalf of individual constituents. Constituent service requests on behalf of individual corporations are a smaller percentage, 6%. 7% of requests are on behalf of nonprofits and local governments. General policy work and policy work on behalf of specific industries account for just 16% of all requests made to federal agencies.

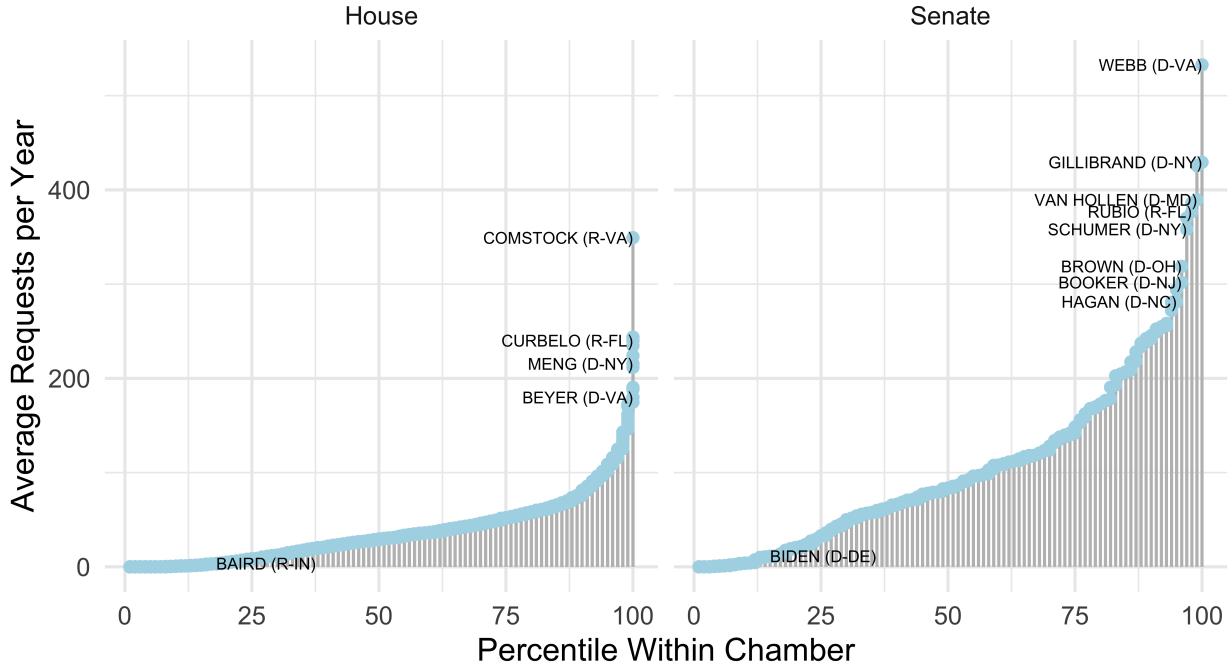
Figure 2: Legislator Requests to Federal Agencies by Type 2007-2018



To assess whether legislators shift their priorities as they gain experience and power, we further group requests into a broader “constituency service” category (including service for individuals, corporations, and nonprofits) and “policy work” category (including both general and industry-focused policy work) for our tests in section 4.1. We find that 76% of requests from committee chairs are constituency service (compared to 85% for non-chairs). Descriptively, most legislator requests are constituency service. However, legislators in more powerful positions have a higher ratio of policy work to constituency service.⁴

⁴We say that a House member is on a prestige committee if they are on Appropriations, Ways and Means, Rules, Budget, or Armed Services and if a senator is on Rules, Foreign Relations, Commerce, Budget, Armed Services, or Appropriations.

Figure 3: Variation in Average Legislator Requests by Percentile



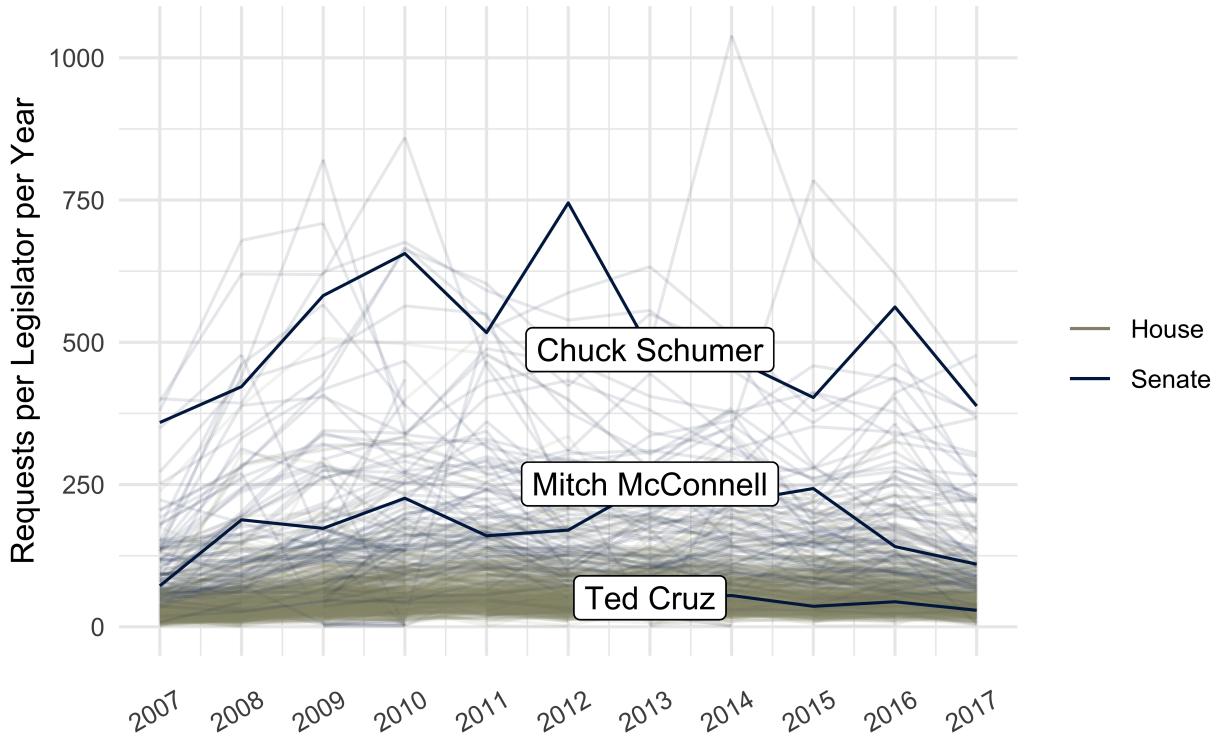
This figure presents the average number of contacts with federal agencies per year for House members (left-hand panel) and senators (right-hand panel), where the legislators' counts are sorted by their per year percentile rank. This reveals that senators and House members regularly contact federal agencies, but there is considerable variation in the level of contact across legislators.

3.1.2 Levels of Contact with Federal Agencies are Highly Unequal

Legislators vary significantly in how often they contact federal agencies. Gini coefficients for the number of contacts per year for the House and Senate are similar to those for income inequality in Mexico and the United States, respectively. Figure 3 shows the average number of contact rates per year for House members (left-hand panel) and senators (right-hand panel). Senator James Webb (D-VA) averaged 533 contacts per year. On average, senators in our data contacted agencies 117 times per year.

We see a similar level of variation in the House, but with lower overall levels of contact with federal agencies, reflecting lower resources and fewer constituents than senators. Frank Wolf (R-VA) averaged 377 contacts per year. Like the Senate, other members of the House wrote at much lower rates. For example, in her first year in Congress, Michele Bachmann wrote only six letters in our data but would average 31 letters per year by the end of her time in Congress. Overall, House members averaged 52 contacts with federal agencies per year. But like the Senate, we find massive variation in the levels of contact across House

Figure 4: Variation in Legislator Requests by Year 2007-2017



This figure presents the number of contacts with federal agencies per year for House members (left-hand panel) and senators (right-hand panel) over time. This reveals that senators and House considerible variation in the level of contact both within and across legislators.

members.

Figure 4 shows the number of requests per legislator over time, highlighting three Senators at the upper, middle, and lower parts of the distribution.

4 The Effect of Experience and Institutional Power

Using this dataset of requests to federal agencies, we estimate the effect of institutional power on legislator behavior. First, we test theories rooted in legislator capacity by modeling the effects of institutional power on a legislator's overall *level* of constituency service. Next, we test theories rooted in legislators' priorities by modeling the effects of institutional power on a legislator's *ratio* of policy work to constituency service.

4.1 The Effects of Experience and Institutional Power on Levels of Constituency Service

Our primary models are difference-in-differences regressions, similar to the specifications in Berry and Fowler (2016). Our most stringent specifications examine changes within legislator-agency pairs (Equation 1).⁵

$$Y_{ijt} = \beta' \text{Committee Position}_{it} + \sum_{s=1}^6 \eta_s I(\text{tenure}_{it} = s) + \gamma_{ij} + \delta_{jt} + m_{it} + p_{it} + \epsilon_{ijt} \quad (1)$$

Our analysis in this section is at the legislator-agency-year level. Y_{ijt} is the number of requests legislator i makes to agency j in year t . γ_{ij} is a fixed effect for the legislator-agency pair. This fixed effect controls for legislators' characteristics, such as legislators who are more skillful at filling constituency service requests than others. Critically for our research design, this fixed effect also **accounts for time-invariant constituent demand**, ensuring that differences in constituent requests across legislators do not drive our results. It also accounts for state and district characteristics, including population, demographics, and local industries that might be particularly likely to request help from specific agencies. This difference-in-difference design ensures that coefficients β capture variation related to changes in institutional power, not other factors that may vary across districts, legislators, or agencies. The model also accounts for the different periods for which data were available from each agency. δ_{jt} is an agency-year fixed effect. This takes into account agency-specific shocks that may affect legislator requests.

Assuming that legislators' trends in the number of requests to a given agency follow parallel paths over time, β represents the average effect of changing institutional position on a legislator's provision of constituency service. We focus on three measures of a legislator's position: (1) whether they are a committee chair, (2) whether they are a ranking member of a committee, and (3) whether they are members of a prestige committee. Each position represents a different way legislators can acquire more power. As a legislator becomes a committee chair or ranking member, they have increased responsibilities when drafting and revising legislation. They also have increased access to committee resources to accomplish policy goals, particularly the power to direct committee staff. Similarly, legislators who join more prestigious committees gain opportunities to shepherd policy through the legislative process.

As Berry and Fowler (2016) note, changes in legislators' committee assignments are

⁵We drop five member-congress level observations for congresses where members switched political parties.

often due to circumstances outside of the legislator’s control, such as changing majority status, retirements on a committee, or exclusion due to losses from a previous election (Grimmer and Powell, 2013). To violate the parallel trends assumption, legislators must differentially alter their provision of constituency service in anticipation of joining particular committees. To help avoid this violation, we include a series of controls that capture time-varying characteristics of a legislator that might confound our inference about the effect of committee prestige. Because legislators may make more requests to a president of the same party (Berry, Burden and Howell, 2010), it is a particular concern that legislators obtain new committee assignments when their party moves into or out of the majority or at the same time as the president’s party changes. To address these concerns, we include indicators for whether the legislator’s party is the majority in year t , (m_{it}) and if the legislator is from the same party as the president in year t (p_{it}). Throughout, we cluster standard errors at the legislator level.

We also include indicators for legislators’ first six years in Congress, $\sum_{s=1}^6 \eta_s \text{tenure}_{it}$ as controls. This specification, however, is not the best specification to assess how electing a less experienced representative affects the amount of constituency service a district receives. In Section 4.1.3, we test the effect of legislator experience by estimating how electing a new representative affects the number of constituency service requests made on behalf of a district with a different difference-in-differences specification at the district level.

4.1.1 The Effect of Institutional Power on Levels of Constituency Service

Table 2 shows estimates from Equation 1. All coefficients represent the average additional requests per year *per agency*; per legislator per year effects are simply these coefficients times 92 (the number of agencies).

Model 1 (the first column of Table 2) shows a cross-sectional comparison across legislators. Legislators with more institutional power have higher rates of constituency service. Committee chairs, ranking members, and members of prestige committees provide substantially more constituency service than other legislators. However, these cross-sectional differences may be the result of other legislator characteristics. If legislators who are better at their jobs or exert more effort also receive more prestigious committee positions, then the estimates from Model 1 confound legislators’ overall ability with their institutional position.

To address potential confounding, Model 2 (Column 2 of Table 2) shows the difference-in-differences specification in Equation 1. Across all measures of institutional power, we find that acquiring power increases the number of requests that a given legislator makes. Becoming a committee chair causes an increase of 0.29 requests *per agency* (95-percent confidence interval [0.12, 0.47]). Across all 92, this represents an increase of approximately

Table 2: The Effect of Experience and Institutional Power on Constituency Service

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Dependent Variable	Count	Count	Count	Log(Count+1)
Committee Chair	0.762 (0.160)	0.291 (0.089)	0.292 (0.089)	0.053 (0.012)
Ranking Member	0.835 (0.165)	0.157 (0.090)	0.165 (0.091)	0.035 (0.010)
Prestige Committee	0.575 (0.075)	0.088 (0.046)	0.086 (0.047)	0.024 (0.009)
First Year	-0.277 (0.053)	-0.426 (0.075)	-0.425 (0.074)	-0.102 (0.011)
Second Year	-0.167 (0.081)	-0.317 (0.075)	-0.338 (0.074)	-0.040 (0.011)
Third Year	0.007 (0.063)	-0.146 (0.066)	-0.150 (0.065)	-0.031 (0.009)
Fourth Year	-0.002 (0.098)	-0.164 (0.068)	-0.197 (0.065)	-0.017 (0.009)
Fifth Year	-0.031 (0.058)	-0.103 (0.062)	-0.095 (0.062)	-0.024 (0.007)
Sixth Year	0.010 (0.121)	-0.056 (0.072)	-0.042 (0.071)	-0.013 (0.007)
Majority	-0.105 (0.055)	0.019 (0.030)	0.021 (0.030)	-0.012 (0.004)
President's Party	-0.117 (0.052)	0.044 (0.026)	0.046 (0.026)	0.013 (0.004)
All Legislators	✓	✓		✓
Served At Least 2nd Term			✓	
Observations	435 744	435 744	420 270	435 744
Year x Agency FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Legislator x Agency FE		✓	✓	✓

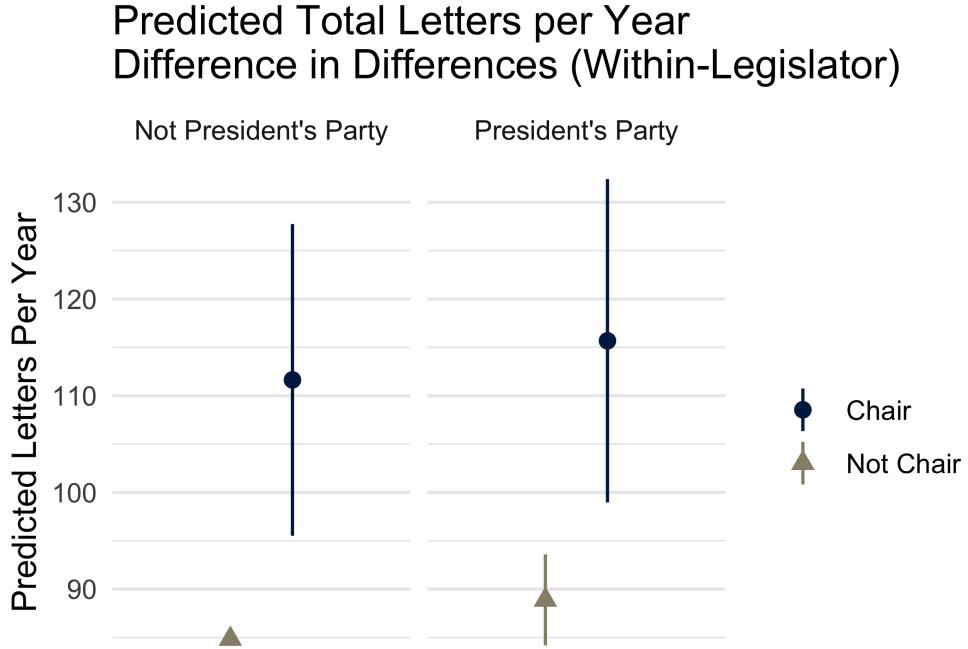
Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered by legislator.

This table shows how the number of contacts changes as legislators acquire more experience and power. Column 1 shows the average differences across committee assignments and years in Congress. Column 2 presents the difference-in-differences estimates. Column 3 subsets to legislators who serve at least three years. Column 4 takes the Log of the counts + 1 as the dependent variable.

27 additional requests per year, 21.3% of the average requests per year in our data.

Figure 5 shows the predicted total number of letters per year by whether a legislator is a member of the president's party and whether they are a chair (comparing predictions for counterfactuals where the same legislator did and did not receive a chair position in their

Figure 5: Predicted Number of Total Letters (Within Legislator Difference in Differences) 2007-2018



sixth year).⁶ There is a significant increase when a legislator becomes a committee chair. There is no significant difference when a member has a co-partisan president.

The findings in Table 2 are robust to alternative specifications and measures of the dependent variable. For example, we might be concerned that exceptionally productive legislators drive the results. The fourth column shows we obtain the same findings if we use $\log(Y_{ijt} + 1)$ in our difference-in-differences specification. Further, our results are not due to differential attrition. The third column shows that we obtain nearly identical results if we restrict our analysis to legislators who serve beyond three years.

This section has shown that acquiring institutional power causes legislators to increase constituency service levels. This increase occurs across all three measures of committee position that we examine but is most robust for committee chairs.

⁶Predictions are based on a legislator-agency pair where (1) the legislators' average annual contacts equaled the overall average, (2) the legislators' number of contacts with the agency equal the average received by that agency, (3) and the agency received an average number of letters.

4.1.2 The Effect of Legislator Experience on Levels of Constituency Service

4.1.3 The Effect of Electing a New Representative on the Level of Constituency Service

We now turn to a related question: how does the level of constituency service to a district change after the election of a new representative? Rather than examining changes in the number of requests by making within-legislator comparisons, we now make within-district comparisons to assess how electing a new legislator affects the total number of requests a district's representative makes. In other words, within-district comparisons enable us to assess the costs or benefits of electing a new representative compared to an incumbent.

To illustrate our findings regarding the effect of legislator experience on contact with the federal bureaucracy, Figure 6 shows the change in contacts from legislators representing Wisconsin's 7th district in the House (top) and the Senate (bottom). Consistent with the pattern we observe in cross-sectional and difference-in-difference designs described below, newly-elected Representative Sean Duffy initially provided less constituency service than twenty-term Representative Dave Obey but was on par with Obey's average number of contacts by year three. Indeed, the only year in our data with fewer contacts from the representative of Wisconsin's 7th district than the average member of the House (the dotted line in the top panel of 6) was Representative Duffy's first year in Congress. Figure 6 shows similar dips in the level of constituency service in the transition from Senator Feingold to Senator Johnson and from Senator Kohl to Senator Baldwin. The only years in which Wisconsin's senators contacted the federal bureaucracy fewer times than the Senate average (the dotted line in the bottom panel of 6 were Baldwin's first year and Johnson's first five years in the Senate.

To make this type of district-level comparison systematically, we change the level of our analysis from the legislator to the district and focus now on the number of contacts made from the representative of a particular state or district i in a year t , Y_{it} . We again use a difference-in-differences approach to account for district-specific characteristics and over-time changes in how legislators provide constituency service. Specifically, we estimate regressions of the form:

$$Y_{it} = \beta_1 \text{New Member}_{it} + \sum_{s=2}^6 \beta_s \text{tenure}_{s[it]} + \gamma_i + \delta_t + \epsilon_{it} \quad (2)$$

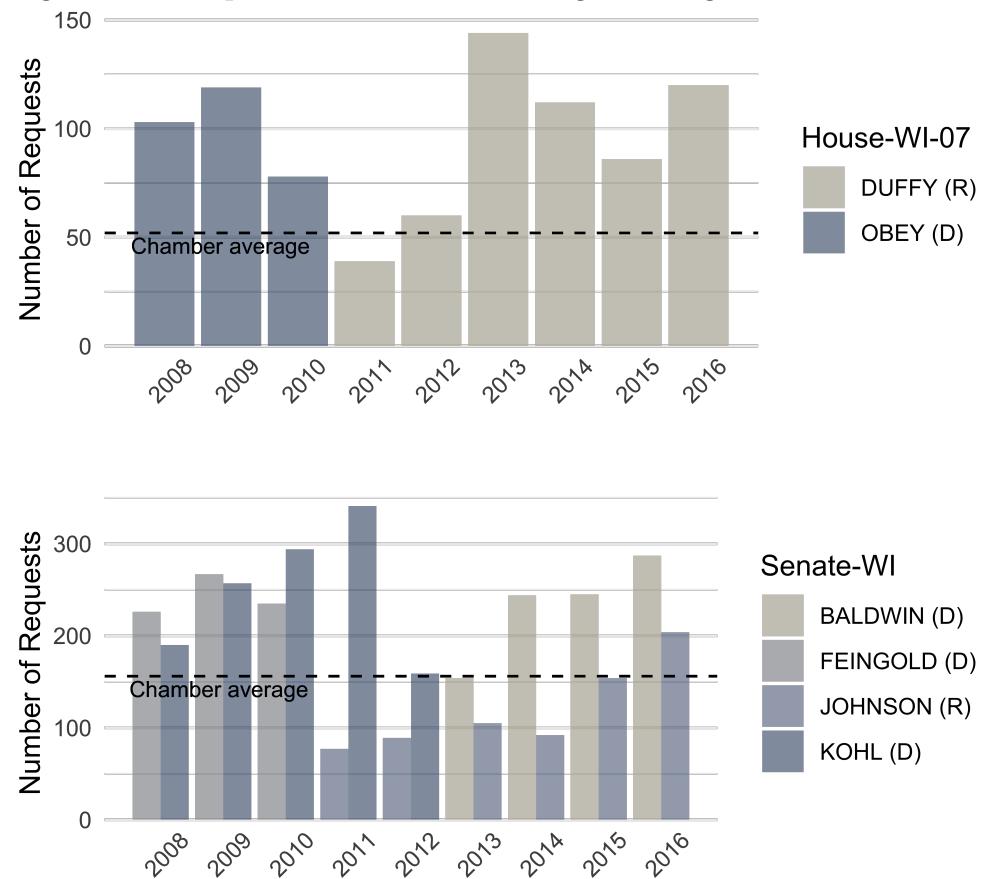
γ_i is a district-specific fixed effect that accounts for each district's particular demographic characteristics, along with the levels of demand from district residents. δ_t is a year fixed effect

that controls for common shocks. Our key result of interest, β_1 , is the effect of a district electing a new representative. To understand how the effect of a new representative changes over time, we estimate district-level differences for a legislator's second (β_2) through sixth-year (β_6).⁷

The first column of Table 3 provides a simple difference-in-means for districts represented by a new member and legislators in their first six years in office. Districts represented by new legislators receive substantially lower levels of constituency service. On average, districts with a new representative have 35.2 fewer constituency service requests made on their behalf. The magnitude of this difference shrinks for districts represented by legislators in their second year (23.75 fewer constituency service requests). It then reaches a relatively stable number

⁷It is worth noting that this treatment is fundamentally different for a district than within-legislator variation. In each election, each district allows its incumbent to acquire another term or replaces her. This differs from within-legislator comparisons because legislators can only acquire more tenure or leave the chamber. A within-legislator analysis estimates the service provided by incumbents with more or less experience; it cannot estimate the impact of the choice of an incumbent or a new representative incumbent.

Figure 6: Example: The Effect of Electing New Legislators in Wisconsin



for districts represented by legislators in their third through sixth years.

Table 3: The Effect of Electing New Members on a District's Level of Constituency Service

Dependent Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
New Legislator	-35.23 (4.445)	-35.55 (4.500)	-14.89 (2.627)	-123.5 (13.84)
Legislator 2nd Year	-23.75 (4.464)	-20.31 (3.949)	-4.402 (2.662)	-79.99 (11.34)
Legislator 3rd Year	-13.08 (4.886)	-13.53 (4.448)	-1.630 (2.586)	-49.48 (16.07)
Legislator 4th Year	-12.43 (5.216)	-9.077 (4.276)	0.268 (2.736)	-26.92 (16.30)
Legislator 5th Year	-14.92 (4.416)	-11.58 (3.591)	-3.810 (2.128)	-31.58 (13.11)
Legislator 6th Year	-13.56 (5.104)	-5.216 (3.790)	-1.638 (2.239)	-2.500 (14.46)
District Fixed Effects		✓	✓	✓
Year Fixed Effects		✓	✓	✓
All Districts	✓	✓		
House Only			✓	
Senate Only				✓
Observations	6578	6578	5338	1240

Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered at district level

This table shows how constituent service at the district level changes over time. Model 1 is a cross-sectional comparison excluding district and year fixed effects. The second column is a district x year difference in differences model. Column 3 focuses is the diff-in-diff subsetted to legislators who survive their first election.

To account for differences in district size, demographics, and demand for constituency service, the second column of Table 3 estimates the difference-in-differences from Equation 2. In this specification, we see a large causal effect of a new member taking over: electing a new member causes a decrease of 36 constituency service requests (95-percent confidence interval [-44, -27]), a sizable change in the number of service requests representatives make on behalf of their new constituents. The effect of electing a new representative, however, dissipates quickly. Districts represented by a legislator in their second year of service receive 12 fewer constituency service requests—still significantly fewer contacts with federal agencies, but not as drastic as the difference observed in the first year. After the second year, the differences are smaller in magnitude. This phenomenon—new legislators providing substantially fewer requests—persists when examining the House (Column 3) and the Senate

(Column 4) separately. In short, new legislators make fewer contacts for their constituents than established legislators.

The Costs of Newly Elected Members Taken together, our results demonstrate that new legislators provide much less constituency service. Legislators in their first year provide much less constituency service than they do in their second year and reach a stable level of service in their third year. Further, when districts elect a new representative or senator, they experience a sharp decrease in constituency service requests made on their behalf. Rather than experienced legislators forgetting about their districts, our evidence suggests that newly elected legislators experience substantial start-up costs and struggle to provide the levels of service that experienced legislators deliver to their constituents.

4.2 The Effect of Experience and Institutional Power on Legislators' Priorities

To assess legislators' ratio of policy work to constituency service, we use the hand-coded data described in Section 3. The dependent variable in Table 4 is the number of policy requests divided by the number of constituency service requests per legislator per year. These models test whether legislators' priorities shift among goals as they gain experience and power.

Table 4 shows that legislators increase the ratio of policy work to constituency service as they obtain more prestigious committee assignments. The first column of Table 4 shows how the proportion of policy work to constituency service differs *across* legislators for legislators who acquire committee positions.

While the ratio of policy work to constituency service is conditional on the levels of each, the inference we make about the ratio does not depend on these levels; we are not using the ratio to infer the level (e.g., that a lower share of constituency service means a lower level). Instead, our theory regarding prioritization is about the ratio, regardless of the level. Levels may interact with the ratio, but not in ways that do not mean the same thing for our theory, i.e., legislators prioritize one thing over the other.

Column 2 of Table 4 provides the estimated effects from the difference-in-differences specification. We estimate that becoming a committee chair causes the ratio of constituency service to policy work to decrease by 0.08 (95-percent confidence interval [-0.05 , -0.12]). Becoming a ranking member of a committee causes a decrease of 0.04 in the ratio.

Figure 7 shows the predicted ratio of constituency service to policy work by committee chair status and whether that member has a co-partisan president or not (comparing predictions for counterfactuals where the same legislator did and did not receive a chairship in

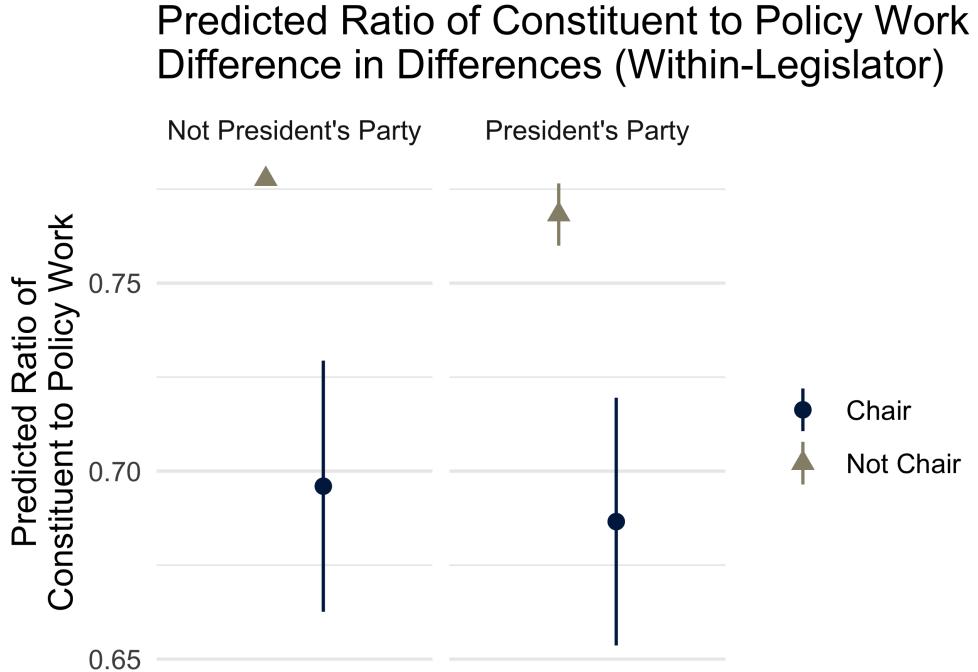
Table 4: The Effect of Experience and Institutional Power on the Ratio of Policy Work to Constituency Service

Dependent Variable	(1)	(2)
	Ratio	Ratio
Committee Chair	−0.073 (0.016)	−0.082 (0.017)
Ranking Member	−0.008 (0.013)	−0.041 (0.014)
Prestige Committee	0.024 (0.008)	−0.008 (0.009)
First Year	0.055 (0.010)	0.036 (0.014)
Second Year	0.055 (0.008)	0.036 (0.013)
Third Year	0.068 (0.009)	0.043 (0.012)
Fourth Year	0.030 (0.009)	0.006 (0.011)
Fifth Year	0.032 (0.010)	0.012 (0.011)
Sixth Year	0.029 (0.008)	0.010 (0.009)
Majority	0.017 (0.006)	−0.003 (0.006)
President’s Party	−0.024 (0.005)	−0.009 (0.004)
Observations	6441	6441
Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓
Legislator Fixed Effects		✓

Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered by legislator.

This table shows how the proportion of contacts focused on constituency service changes as legislators acquire more experience and power in Congress. Column 1 shows average differences across committee assignments and years in Congress. Column 2 presents difference-in-differences estimates.

Figure 7: Predicted Number of Total Letters (Within Legislator Difference in Differences) 2007-2018



their sixth year). We estimate chair effects at year six as a plausible year at which a chair position would be acquired. There is a significant difference between the same legislator as a committee chair and a counterfactual where they are not. Notably, whether a member has a co-partisan president does not cause a significant difference.

5 The Effects of Demand for Constituency Service

This section shows that demand for constituency service affects the level of constituency service that members provide. However, demand-side shifts do not appear to explain the specific within-legislator or within-district variation we observe with changing committee assignments and increased tenure. We show that this demand does not shift within or across legislators in ways we would expect to see if shifting constituent demand explained the within-legislator and within-district variation in constituency service discussed in section 4.1.1.

5.1 District Characteristics Affect the Provision of Constituency Service

The characteristics of their districts help inform which agencies legislators contact. We find that population size correlates with the overall number of requests and that constituency characteristics—the proportion of veterans and the proportion over 65—correlate with the distribution of requests across agencies. These correlations provide face validity for our measures of representation, but they also suggest that cross-sectional comparisons may conflate legislator choices with district characteristics. Given this potential conflation, our models below include fixed effects for each legislator-agency pair, leveraging within-district and within-agency variation.

We expect senators who represent larger states to make more requests. Senators from larger states have a larger number of constituents to serve, and they receive a larger budget to handle that increase in requests. Figure 8 shows that this is the case: senators from larger states provide more constituency service on average. Senators from larger states, like John Cornyn (R-TX), Barbara Boxer (D-CA), and Pat Toomey (R-PA), average more requests per year than legislators from smaller states. While the number of legislator requests is associated with population size, Figure 8 also shows significant variation in the level of service senators provide, even among states of similar sizes.

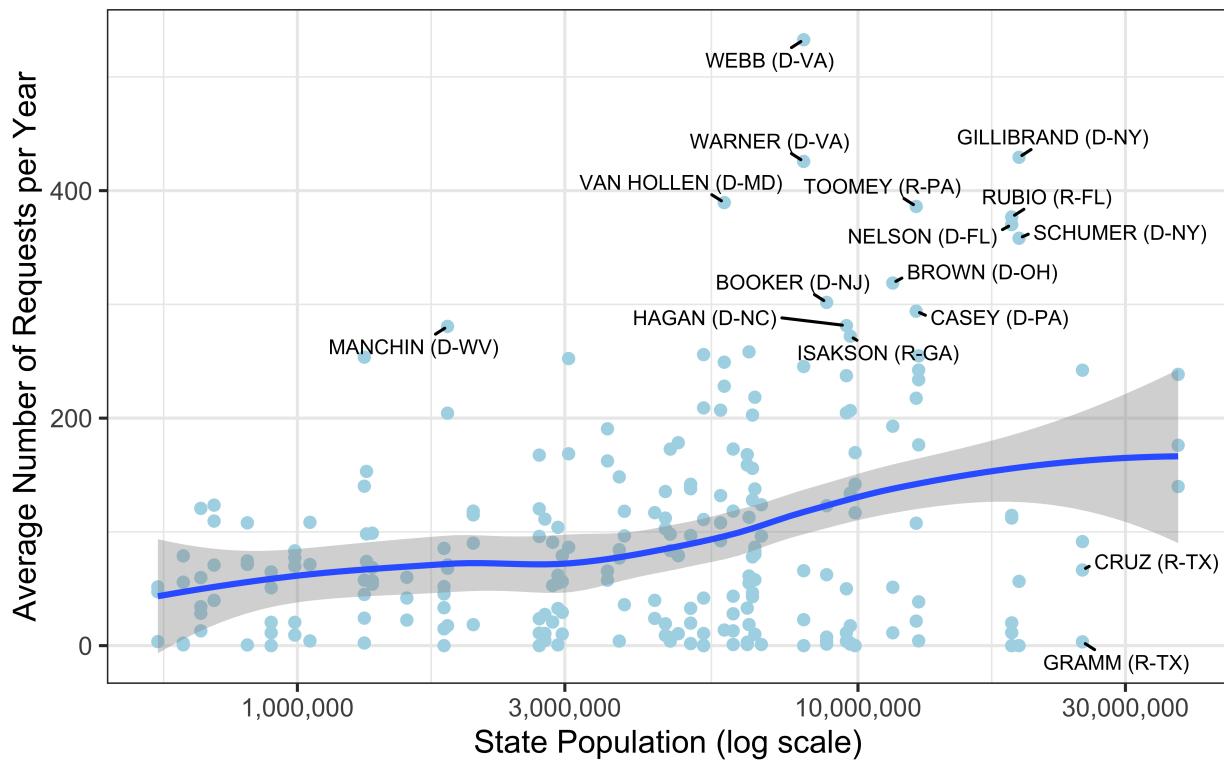
5.2 Do Voters Demand More of More Powerful Legislators?

Can variation in demand for constituency service explain why more experience and prestigious committee positions provide more constituency service?

We limited the influence in demand when assessing how power and experience affect the levels of constituency service above. For example, our empirical strategies in Sections 4.1, 4.1.2, and 4.2 account for static demand based on the characteristics of the district. Because our analyses include either legislator-agency or district fixed effects, we compare how the levels of constituency service change holding constant demand related to fixed district characteristics. Furthermore, demand driven by shifts in legislator behavior is a plausible part of the increased constituency service we attribute to increased capacity and resources.

Yet, we might expect that a legislator's experience or power could affect constituency demand, even without legislators using their increased capacity and resources to generate demand. For example, constituents could direct more of their demands to legislators who are more powerful or who have served longer because they don't know or trust new representatives (holding constant legislators' levels of soliciting constituency service requests). This section investigates whether that additional constituent demand could plausibly explain our

Figure 8: Average Number of Requests per Senator per Year 2007-2018 by State Population.



results. We find limited effects of legislator tenure on demand for constituency service.

This section presents a more direct test of whether constituent demand explains variation in legislators' level of constituency service. If constituents shift demand to more experienced legislators, and such a shift could explain levels of constituency service, then we should observe such shifts when a new member is elected. Suppose constituents shift demand based on legislator experience (as required for shifts in demand to explain our results). In that case, they should redirect their demands away from newly elected legislators toward other representatives. The most natural target for the constituent demands would be one of the senators representing the constituent's state.

To assess whether constituents redirect demand toward other more experienced legislators when new members replace their more experienced incumbent representative, we examine how experienced legislators' levels of constituency service change in response to having new representatives in their state. We measure new members in the state in two ways: either the proportion of a state delegation that is new or an indicator of whether there is a new legislator in the delegation. As in Section 4.1.1, we measure the number of requests a district's representative makes in a particular year. Using this dependent variable, we estimate a series of difference-in-differences regressions where the treatment is new members in the state (Table 5). We include district and year fixed effects. We restrict the regression to incumbent legislators only because we are interested in assessing whether constituents with new legislators direct their constituency service requests to these incumbents.

Table 5: No Evidence of Spillovers from New Legislators

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Dependent Variable	Count	Count	Count	Count
Proportion New Legislators	5.143 (8.089)		-1.494 (20.06)	
At Least One New Legislator		1.625 (2.031)		3.847 (4.812)
District Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Senators Only			✓	✓
Observations	6080	6080	1182	1182

Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered at district level

The first two columns of Table 5 are estimates for all incumbent legislators, and they show that neither the proportion of new members nor a new member significantly affects the level of constituency service that other legislators in the state provide. Columns 3 and 4 of Table

⁵ reveal the same pattern when focusing on senators only. Across all four specifications, the estimated effects of new legislators do not approach statistical significance. This consistent null finding regarding the impact of new legislators in a state delegation provides reassurance that there's little (to no) evidence of constituents redirecting demand toward other, more experienced legislators in response to having new representatives in their state delegation.

6 Discussion

Most legislator contacts with federal agencies focus on constituency service. While there is massive inequality in the quantity of service provided by different members, we show that this is not the result of long-serving members devoting less attention to their district over time, as the “Potomac Fever” hypothesis suggests. We find evidence that legislators prioritize policy work as they acquire positions of institutional power. However, simultaneous increases in capacity that come with positions of institutional power more than offset shifting priorities. Critically, the magnitude of the effect of increased capacity is large enough that the district constituency receives no less particularistic service from long-serving and powerful legislators.

6.1 Implications for Theory

Our finding that shifts in capacity and priorities simultaneously affect contacts with agencies implies that scholars of legislator behavior should focus both on the levels of effort legislators provide and how they divide that effort. Legislator requests to the bureaucracy are one of many types of behavior that are likely affected by simultaneous changes in capacity and priority. In addition to correspondence with federal agencies, the volume of legislative work, oversight reports, or hearings produced by a legislator’s office depends both on their capacity to do that work and the relative priority of each task.

Further, our findings suggest that the mechanisms we identify—organizational efficiency, office resources, and likelihood of success—help explain legislator behavior. The dramatic decrease in requests when new legislators take office is consistent with the organizational efficiency mechanism. Becoming a committee chair increases the resources available to a legislator and their volume of contact with federal agencies. Both results are consistent with legislators making more requests to federal agencies when they are likely to perceive greater rewards.

The fact that elected officials continue to dedicate substantial resources to constituency service well into their careers and after they have achieved high-status institutional positions is evidence that constituency services is a core function of congressional offices. This calls

for renewed attention to the motivations for and effects of constituency service in modern U.S. democracy. As we collected and coded these data, we spoke to numerous staffers and agency officials. A recurring theme in the data and stories we heard was the interaction between constituency service casework and other activities, including oversight investigations and legislation. Conversely, new legislation often resulted in new forms of constituency service as legislators helped their constituents attain newly legislated benefits, deal with new paperwork requirements, or avoid new regulatory requirements. While constituency service may have underlying electoral motivations, as formal models suggest, it is also a prominent yet understudied form of legislator behavior in its own right.

Our finding that experience and institutional power allow legislators to do more policy work while maintaining levels of constituent service complements recent scholarship on representation. The same legislators who Grose (2011), Dinesen, Dahl and Schiøler (2021), Lowande, Ritchie and Lauterbach (2019), and others find doing more casework for minority groups also likely to do more policy work on behalf of those groups (in line with Mendez and Grose (2018)) and higher rates of advocacy for nonprofits that serve those groups. While legislators must prioritize limited time (Kaslovsky, 2022), institutional power adds to the capacity of a legislative office as an institution to pursue both policy work and constituency service. Because institutional power comes with resources, representation matters not just in Congress but also in powerful positions like committee chairs.

6.2 Implications for Policy

The large effects of legislator capacity that we find add to a recent wave of scholarship on the impact of congressional staffing. LaPira, Drutman and Kosar (2020) document many effects that decreasing staffing levels may have on the functioning of Congress. Because increased staff for committee chairs is a likely mechanism for the capacity effects we find, our results offer a key outcome measure and effect sizes that may correspond to additional staff. While committee chairs simultaneously obtain other forms of power like agenda control, to the extent that our results reflect the capacity boost of committee staff, our evidence suggests that congressional staff likely have measurable and potentially large effects on the volume of work legislators can do.

Advocates for term limits often argue that elected officials lose touch with their district. In contrast, we show that more experienced legislators provide as much or more service to their district, even as they do more policy work. Moreover, our results show that new legislators have less capacity to make requests to federal agencies. Removing experienced legislators would likely decrease levels of constituency service.

6.3 Future Research

Future research should further examine the mechanisms by which increasing experience and capacity shape legislator behavior. This could include explicit measures of office organization and efficiency and more nuanced measures of institutional power. This could also include measuring agency responsiveness to legislator requests. Likewise, future research could examine mechanisms related to shifting priorities. Finally, future work could include legislators' substantive areas of expertise. Does expertise increase a legislator's capacity to act in certain areas (e.g., certain agencies), leading to more capacity for constituency service? Does increased institutional power lead legislators to develop expertise, for example, in certain committee work or specialized policy work that builds their capacity to influence certain agencies?

The massive new dataset we introduce here will help scholars answer these questions. With data from nearly all parts of the vast U.S. federal bureaucracy, future work can advance the study of descriptive representation, expanding on work by Lowande, Ritchie and Lauterbach (2019), who find that women, minority, and veteran members do more casework on behalf of groups that share their identity. The new data we collect will allow similar tests of representation for other demographic groups, including seniors, farmers, and low-income populations, to name just a few. Likewise, more data will allow new tests of prior work showing that members use lobbying the bureaucracy to advance policy goals when they conflict with their party's agenda (Ritchie, 2018). Our systematic data allow tests of variation across policy domains and government functions.

Critically, our systematic approach to data collection allows more general tests of legislator behavior. Any sample focusing on a few policy domains or agencies will over-represent legislators sitting on certain oversight committees and representing certain constituencies. Our near-census of legislator contacts minimizes such confounders and will allow researchers to test more general theories of legislator behavior, as we have done here.

7 Conclusion

As legislators gain experience and power, they both gain the capacity to make more requests to agencies while simultaneously shifting priorities to policy work. Crucially, the increase in capacity is large enough relative to the shift in attention toward policy work that legislators maintain or even increase levels of constituency service as they gain institutional power. Consistent with our theory that experience increases capacity, we also show that legislators make fewer service requests at the start of their careers and that new legislators make

substantially fewer service requests than their more experienced colleagues.

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Appendix

A FOIA Data

Our data represent a near census of requests to federal departments, agencies, and sub-agencies. We received records from every department other than the Department of State,⁸ and most independent agencies, commissions, boards, executive offices (e.g., the Council on Environmental Quality and U.S. Trade Representative), and pseudo-governmental institutions like Amtrak and the US Export-Import Bank.

Variation in Responses to Identical FOIA Request Responses to our FOIA requests varied significantly. Most agencies offered logs of congressional correspondence, which record a date, sender, summary of the request, and other information used by agency staff to process and respond to requests. Logs generally include any written requests, as well as many phone and email records. For example, between May 2015 and December 2017, the Department of Justice Office of Administrative Law Judges received 132 emails, 109 telephone calls, and only 54 letters. Between 2007 and 2017, the Postal Regulatory Commission received 100 emails, 30 faxes, 173 letters, and 118 calls. In this paper, we use “contacts” and “letters” interchangeably to refer to all modes of correspondence.

Small agencies and regional offices had staff search their email history or provided handwritten records, which we then transcribed. Department Secretary offices generally queried a correspondence tracking database designed to track all correspondence. Still, our FOIA requests to sub-departmental components almost always recovered additional congressional correspondence records missing from central databases. As one central office FOIA officer put it, “Legislative Affairs is supposed to be the front door for the department, but if somebody knows somebody, well...” (personal communication, February 21, 2018). Because of such idiosyncratic relationships, capturing correspondence patterns that “go around” a Department Secretary’s office is key to avoiding erroneous inferences about legislator behavior. For example, when chairs of the Homeland Security committee wrote about immigration enforcement issues, they almost always contacted the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) office of the Executive Secretary, but, at the same time, the Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) component of DHS directly received thousands of requests from a different set of legislators. Our systematic data collection ensures that we capture the totality of legislators’ behavior.

⁸The Department of State has a notorious FOIA backlog of approximately 10,500 cases. The FOIA office expects to fill our May 2018 request in 2024.

Department	Components FOIAed	Records received	N
Agriculture	29	29	9603
Commerce	19	18	7791
Defense	49	13	9806
Education	1	1	4676
Energy	8	2	6256
Health and Human Services	15	10	109701
Homeland Security	14	13	153151
Housing and Urban Development	2	1	32158
Justice	23	6	3096
Labor	22	12	62353
State	1	0	0
Transportation	10	7	26885
Veterans Affairs	6	3	90808
Interior	11	8	6067
Treasury	7	5	23853
Independent Agencies	77	47	81152
Total	294	175	627356

B Contact Codebook

We provide the following codebook to a team of hand-coders to code each case of Congressional contact with federal agencies and extract information about the legislator. The codebook provides steps to move from raw correspondence logs to data formatted for our analysis. We also developed subagency-specific coding rules throughout the hand-coding process where certain regular expressions indicated certain types of requests. For example, where documents containing the word “rulemaking” consistently indicated that a legislator’s request involved an agency’s proposed rule, we assigned all observations containing the word “rulemaking” yet uncoded by hand to the “Policy-Rulemaking” category.⁹

We classify legislator requests into five categories: “Individual Constituent Service” (i.e., individual casework or advocacy on behalf of a group such as employees of a company), “Nonprofit or Local Government Constituent Service” (e.g., help with a grant application), “Corporate Constituent Service” (e.g., help with a specific government contract), “Corporate Policy” (policy work explicitly aimed to benefit a specific industry, like tariffs and subsidies), and “General Policy” (broader policy work related to legislation, budgets, or rulemaking). We define constituents broadly, so they need not be in a member’s district. For example,

⁹Hundreds of scripts for processing the raw data from each agency and applying any inductively-generated regular-expression-based coding are available on our GitHub, along with each script’s full revision history and all written communication with RAs about processing and coding these data.

Representative Tauscher of Wisconsin wrote to the Defense Commissary Agency on behalf of the Jelly Belly Candy Co., based in California. Jelly Belly was then “given a chance to resolve issues” with their contract. We coded this case as “Corporate Constituent Service,” part of our broader measure of constituent service. We also consider constituent service as broader than individual casework. For example, we coded Senator Rubio asking the IRS for special treatment for residents of hurricane-affected parts of Florida as “Individual Constituent Service.” We note these “hard cases” to illustrate the boundaries of our coding scheme. Most contacts were easily parsed into either individual casework or policy work related to hearings, regulations, and legislation.

B.1 Congressional Correspondence Log Coding Guidelines

The first step is to identify the columns that contain the member of Congress (or Committee), the date that the member-initiated correspondence, and the column that best describes the subject. These should be named FROM, DATE, and SUBJECT.

We aim to classify the subject of correspondence between members of Congress and government agencies. You can do this using keywords (potential keywords in *italics* below), but it may also require googling subject lines (e.g., what does this acronym mean in this context!?) and inferring why the legislator made the request. Doing so may require identifying a member’s relevant policy positions. For example, if the subject is “mining regulations” or “open internet,” a member’s voting history on related bills or donations from the industry may help us infer if the letter was policy work on behalf of the industry (type 4) or not (type 5). Limiting your search to a date range around the letter date may yield relevant public statements. If you have questions, find something interesting, or, in your efforts to classify a confusing correspondence, you discover information like a related public statement, note it in the NOTES column. In some cases, columns other than the SUBJECT may offer helpful information. This may be difficult at first, but it will get easier.

The outcome is a spreadsheet with the first columns being FROM, DATE, SUBJECT, TYPE, CERTAINTY, ALT_TYPE.

Below are five potential codes for the TYPE and three potential codes for your level of CERTAINTY that it is this type. If you are less than Very Certain (i.e., if only Fairly Certain or Toss Up), record your second best guess as ALT_TYPE; otherwise, leave this column blank. Only leave NOTES if you think it would be helpful for the team to revisit the entry.

B.1.1 TYPE

1 = Personal Service

Definition: Individual, non-commercial constituent service.

Examples: Help with a government form, passport, visa, back pay, military honor, enlistment, criminal case, request for personal information (e.g., one's FBI file), disability application, worker compensation, personal complaint, discrimination case, job application, health insurance, financial services complaints, etc.

2 = Commercial Service - Transactional

Definition: Anything related to a specific individual case by a business (including business owners like farmers and consultants).

General Examples: Help with a grant application, payment, loan, or contract (buying anything from or selling anything to a government agency). Help with an individual case of tax assessment, fine, or regulatory enforcement action. Help with public relations on behalf of a business.

Specific Examples: allocation of radio spectrum, a case against a company, tax dispute, contract for the purchase of military surplus, crop insurance distribution, debt settlement, foreclosure assistance, a fine for a law violation, etc.

3 = Government and Nonprofit Service - Transactional

Definition: Same as for (2-Commercial Service), but for municipal or state governments (including cities, counties, etc.) or non-business-oriented nonprofit organizations (i.e., NOT ones that represent an industry or trade association)

4 = Commercial Service - Policy

Definition: Anything applying to a class of commercial activity or businesses (e.g., shipping, airlines, agriculture), including legislation, bills, acts, appropriations, authorizations, etc.

General Examples: Authorization of or appropriation to a government program targeted towards a particular industry or industries. Regulation of industry or commercial practice or competition.

Specific Examples: Milk prices, insurance or loan eligibility criteria, purchasing policies, crop insurance rates, pollution criteria, classification of products for trade or taxation, conservation appropriation, worker visa types, restrictions, or caps, etc.

5 = Policy Work - NOT in the service of any individual, business, or specific industry.

Examples of Policy Work:

- Lawmaking
- Request for policy-relevant information. This includes prospective legislation, legislation under consideration, or already implemented legislation that requires oversight.
- Oversight
- Committee requesting a report or testimony at a hearing
- Requesting clarity on an agency rule
- Lobbying administrative policy
- Agency rulemaking with non-commercial implications (comments on agency rulemaking may often be (3))
- Political work
- Meeting with organized constituent groups (e.g., workers, people with disabilities, environmentalists) about policy (meetings with industry groups generally fall under (4)).
- Media requests

6 = Other

Suggest a new category in the NOTES column only if you cannot fit it under 1-4. For example, requesting dirt on one's political opponents could be called "partisan" as none of the above. Other specific types: thank you (for thank you notes with no other information), congratulations (for congratulatory correspondence on appointments or retirements with no other information), family member (for correspondence on behalf of a family member)

C Additional Models

C.1 Interpreting Experience Effects

In Section 4.1.2, we draw inferences about the effects of legislator experience from a within-district design, showing that new legislators provide less constituency service. The within-legislator design shows results consistent with this conclusion. However, we interpret indicator variables for years of experience in the within-legislator design with caution given the complexity of this model with time shocks and experience increasing in time, which has the potential to cause identification issues in interpreting the estimates for years of experience. Including years of experience as a control is appropriate and important for correctly chair effects, which are clearly identified in these models.

If we interpret this alternative measure of experience as identified, it shows further support for the conclusions of the within-district models. Legislators make significantly fewer requests to agencies in their first year than they do the following year. Subsequent increases are less significant.

We estimate that the experience gained between the first and second year in Congress causes an increase of 0.24 requests *per agency*. The experience gained between the first and seventh years causes an increase of 0.51 per agency. Across all 92 agencies in these data, this represents an increase of approximately 46 additional requests per year, 45.5% of the average number of requests per year in our data. There is a smaller increase after the second year. The experience gained between the second and seventh year causes an increase of 0.28 per agency, an increase of approximately 25 additional requests per year, 24.5% of the average number of requests per year in our data.

Figure 9 shows the predicted total number of letters in Congress and committee chair status (comparing predictions for counterfactuals where the same legislator did and did not receive a chairmanship in their sixth year).¹⁰

Figure 9 uses the coefficients in legislators' first six years in office from Table 2. The reference group is representatives who have served longer than six years.¹¹

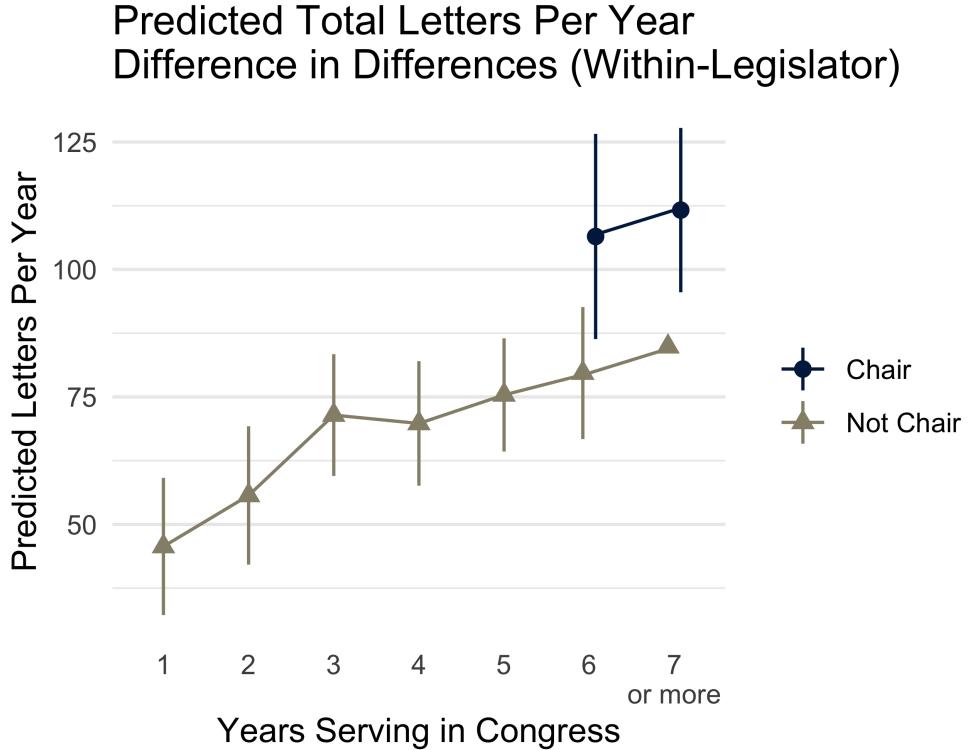
The first column of Table 2 shows large cross-sectional differences: legislators in their first year make fewer contacts than more experienced legislators. First-year legislators make approximately 0.255 fewer requests per agency than legislators in their seventh year or beyond. This difference shrinks in the second year and then is mostly gone. But we advise caution in interpreting the differences in Column 1 because they conflate the effect of increased experience with other characteristics that may correlate with whether a legislator remains in office and, thus whether we observe them in later years.

To account for possible differences in legislators who obtain different levels of tenure, the second column of Table 2 estimates the difference-in-differences specification in Equation 1. The tenure coefficients show that legislators provide less constituency service in their first

¹⁰Predictions are based on a legislator-agency pair where (1) the legislators' average annual contacts equaled the overall average, (2) the legislators' number of contacts with the agency equal the average received by that agency, (3) and the agency received an average number of letters.

¹¹Interpreting these coefficients requires that we assume the effects of tenure and committee assignment are linearly separable. This assumption is reasonable because most legislators do not become chairs, ranking members, or join prestige committees in their first six years, and almost none in their first two years.

Figure 9: Predicted Number of Total Letters (Within Legislator Difference in Differences) 2007-2018



year in office. As they acquire experience, they make more requests to federal agencies. In their first year in office, legislators provide 21.33 ($92 \times (.512 - .275)$) fewer requests per agency than legislators in their second year and 29.07 ($92 \times (.512 - .189)$) fewer requests than legislators in their third year—both differences are statistically significant at conventional levels. The overall increase in levels of constituency service from a legislator’s first to third year is similar in size to the increase that comes from becoming a member of the oversight committee. Once legislators enter their fourth year, their behavior no longer differs from more experienced legislators. We find small and statistically insignificant differences for legislators in their fourth through sixth years. As legislators acquire experience and build their office’s organizational capacity in their first two years, they make more contacts with federal agencies.

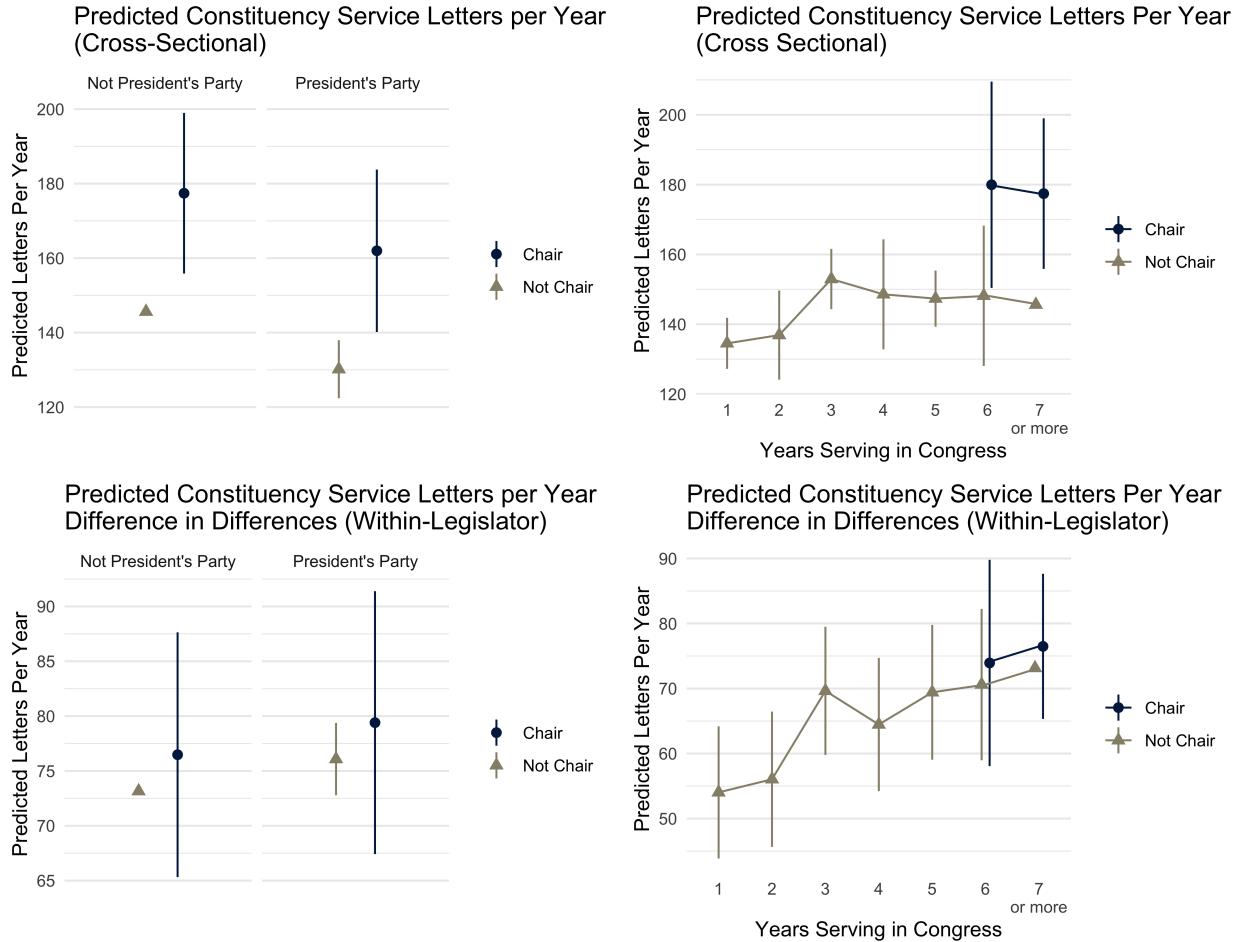
As with the analysis of committee prestige, the findings in Table 2 are robust to alternative specifications. Despite the difference-in-difference design, we might still be concerned that the set of legislators who served a third year differs from those who served a first year. If this were the case, our findings would result from both the experience and a selection effect due to House members who win reelection, a potential indication that they are better able to perform the job than other legislators. To address the potentially different samples each year, the third column of Table 2 assesses the changes in the number of contacts of federal agencies for legislators who serve for at least three years. The pattern is similar: legislators initially provide less constituency service in their first two years than in subsequent years. Column 4 in Table 2 shows that the results are robust to analyzing $\log(Y_{ijt} + 1)$, ensuring

that our results are not because of outliers. Additional models below estimate the same models as Table 2 on hand-coded subsets of the data, showing similar results.

C.2 Constituency Service Only

Table A1 is identical to Table 2 except that we subset the data to only legislator requests hand-coded as constituency service. Column 2 of Table A1 provides the estimated effects from the difference-in-differences specification in Equation 1. More experience increases the level of constituency service that legislators provide. The effect of being a committee chair is positive but not significant at the .05 level. We estimate that the experience gained between the first and second year in Congress causes an increase of 0.02 requests *per agency*. The experience gained between the first and seventh year causes an increase of 0.21 per agency. Across all 92 agencies, this represents an increase of approximately 19 additional requests per year, 21.9% of the average requests per year in our data. There is a smaller increase after the second year. The experience gained between the second and seventh year causes an increase of 0.19 per agency, an increase of approximately 17 additional requests per year, 19.6% of the average requests per year in our data.

Figure 10: Predicted Number of Constituency Service Requests



C.3 Policy Work Only

Table A2 is identical to Table 2 except that we subset the data to only legislator requests hand-coded as policy work. Column 2 of Table A2 and Figure 11) provide the estimated effects from the difference-in-differences specification in Equation 1. Across all measures of institutional power, we find that more power increases the level of policy work that legislators provide. Consider first the effect of being a committee chair. We estimate that becoming a committee chair causes an increase of 0.17 policy requests(95-percent confidence interval [0.11, 0.24]). Across all 92 agencies, this represents an increase of approximately 16 additional requests per year, 96.8%^c of the average requests per year in our data. There is a smaller increase for individuals who become ranking members and those who join a Prestige Committee, though the increase is statistically significant for the prestige committee. Becoming a ranking member of a committee causes an increase of 0.11 contacts per agency while joining a prestige committee causes a 0.17 per agency increase in the policy requests a member of Congress makes.

Figure 11: Predicted Number of Policy Requests

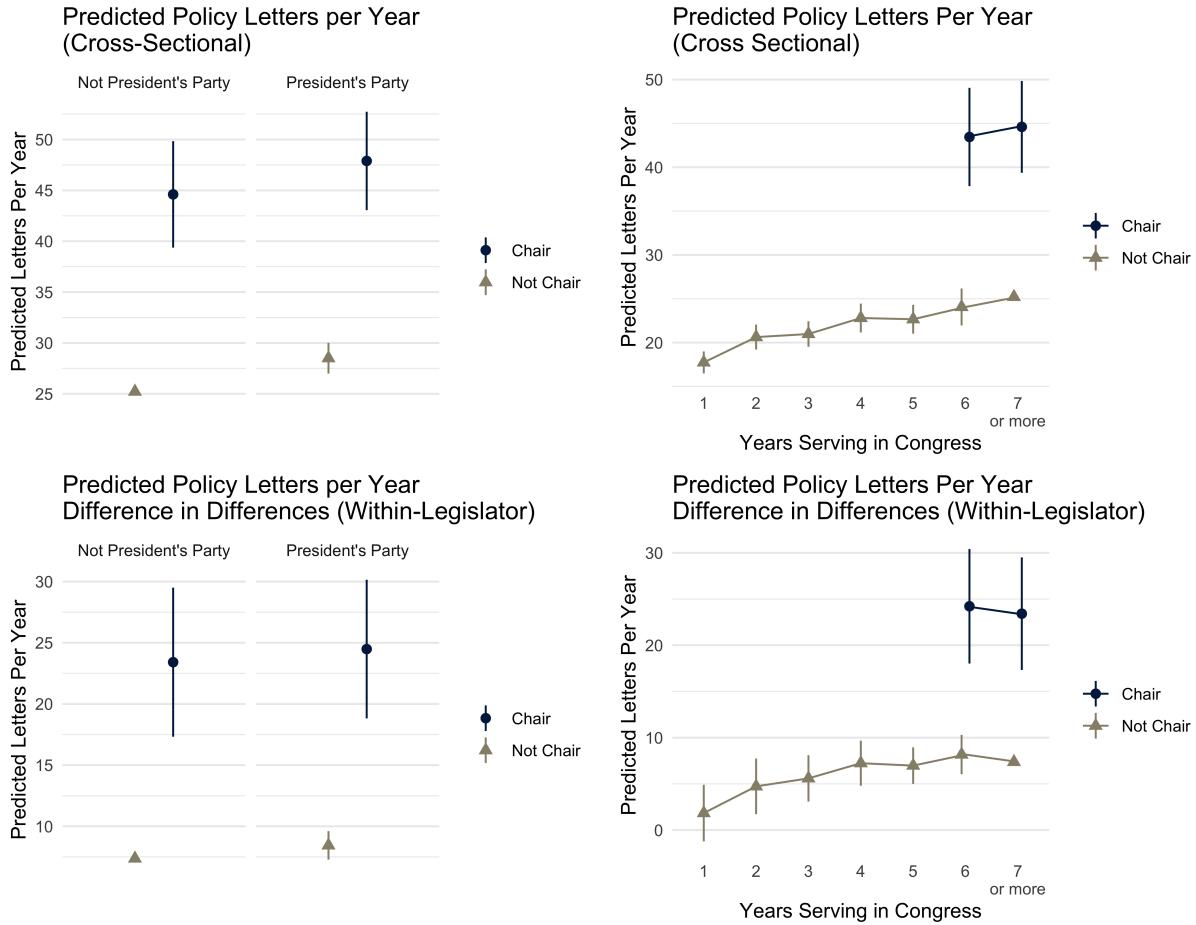


Table A1: The Effect Experience and Institutional Power on Constituency Service

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Dependent Variable	Count	Count	Count	Log(Count+1)
Committee Chair	0.346 (0.120)	0.036 (0.062)	0.037 (0.062)	0.013 (0.007)
Ranking Member	0.508 (0.124)	0.056 (0.062)	0.064 (0.062)	0.012 (0.007)
Prestige Committee	0.413 (0.058)	0.026 (0.032)	0.025 (0.032)	0.012 (0.006)
First Year	-0.120 (0.041)	-0.208 (0.056)	-0.207 (0.055)	-0.061 (0.008)
Second Year	-0.095 (0.071)	-0.186 (0.058)	-0.205 (0.056)	-0.019 (0.007)
Third Year	0.080 (0.048)	-0.038 (0.055)	-0.039 (0.053)	-0.012 (0.006)
Fourth Year	0.032 (0.087)	-0.094 (0.057)	-0.122 (0.054)	-0.007 (0.006)
Fifth Year	0.019 (0.045)	-0.041 (0.057)	-0.028 (0.058)	-0.011 (0.005)
Sixth Year	0.028 (0.111)	-0.028 (0.065)	-0.019 (0.064)	-0.005 (0.005)
Majority	-0.114 (0.047)	0.028 (0.025)	0.031 (0.026)	-0.006 (0.003)
President's Party	-0.168 (0.043)	0.032 (0.018)	0.033 (0.018)	0.010 (0.003)
All Legislators	✓	✓		✓
Served At Least 2nd Term			✓	
Observations	435 744	435 744	420 270	435 744
Year x Agency FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Legislator x Agency FE		✓	✓	✓

Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered by legislator.

This table shows how the number of contacts hand-coded as constituency service changes as legislators acquire more experience and power in Congress. Column 1 shows the average differences across committee assignments and years in Congress. Column 2 presents the difference-in-differences estimates. Column 3 subsets to legislators who serve at least 3 years in Congress. Column 4 takes the Log of the counts + 1 as the dependent variable.

Table A2: The Effect Experience and Institutional Power on Policy Work

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Dependent Variable	Count	Count	Count	Log(Count+1)
Committee Chair	0.211 (0.029)	0.174 (0.034)	0.175 (0.034)	0.041 (0.007)
Ranking Member	0.156 (0.030)	0.107 (0.027)	0.108 (0.027)	0.028 (0.006)
Prestige Committee	0.053 (0.010)	0.031 (0.010)	0.032 (0.010)	0.010 (0.003)
First Year	-0.081 (0.007)	-0.060 (0.017)	-0.059 (0.017)	-0.027 (0.005)
Second Year	-0.050 (0.008)	-0.029 (0.017)	-0.026 (0.017)	-0.015 (0.005)
Third Year	-0.046 (0.008)	-0.019 (0.014)	-0.021 (0.014)	-0.011 (0.004)
Fourth Year	-0.026 (0.009)	-0.001 (0.014)	-0.003 (0.014)	-0.004 (0.004)
Fifth Year	-0.028 (0.009)	-0.004 (0.011)	-0.006 (0.011)	-0.005 (0.003)
Sixth Year	-0.013 (0.012)	0.009 (0.012)	0.010 (0.012)	-0.004 (0.003)
Majority	0.002 (0.006)	-0.003 (0.006)	-0.003 (0.006)	-0.002 (0.002)
President's Party	0.036 (0.008)	0.012 (0.006)	0.012 (0.006)	0.005 (0.002)
All Legislators	✓	✓		✓
Served At Least 2nd Term			✓	
Observations	435 744	435 744	420 270	435 744
Year x Agency FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Legislator x Agency FE		✓	✓	✓

Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered by legislator.

This table shows how the number of hand-coded policy work contacts changes as legislators acquire more experience and power in Congress. Column 1 shows the average differences across committee assignments and years in Congress. Column 2 presents the difference-in-differences estimates. Column 3 subsets to legislators who serve at least 3 years in Congress. Column 4 takes the Log of the counts + 1 as the dependent variable.