

# Potomac Fever or Constituent Ombudsman?: Testing Theories of Legislative Capacity and Priorities

Devin Judge-Lord\*      Justin Grimmer<sup>†</sup>      Eleanor Neff Powell<sup>‡</sup>

January 28, 2022

## Abstract

When Members of Congress gain experience and institutional power, do they use it to provide more constituent service or affect broad public policies? To examine how increased experience and power affect legislators' behavior, we assemble a massive new database of 487,890 Congressional requests to federal agencies between 2007 and 2020 obtained through over 429 FOIA requests, a near census of departments, agencies, and sub-agencies. Leveraging variation within legislator-agency pairs, we find that shifts in both capacity and attention explain legislator behavior. When legislators acquire more clout in Washington—particularly committee chairmanships—powerful legislators provide more constituency service, even as they allocate a larger share of their efforts towards broader policy goals. After their election, new legislators incur start-up costs and provide less service, but this difference erodes after two years. In a series of robustness checks, we show that our findings are not the result of variation in constituent demand, nor is it merely a result of voters more easily recognizing more experienced legislators. Rather than experienced and powerful legislators focusing their efforts in Washington and away from their district, we demonstrate that legislators use their increased resources to provide more constituency service.

---

\*Postdoctoral Fellow, Harvard University, DevinJudgeLord@fas.harvard.edu.

<sup>†</sup>Professor, Stanford University and Senior Fellow, Hoover Institution

<sup>‡</sup>Booth Fowler Associate Professor, University of Wisconsin-Madison

# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Do Experience and Power Increase or Decrease Constituency Service?</b>	<b>6</b>
2.1	Why Experience and Power Could Increase Constituency Service: Increasing Capacity Hypothesis . . . . .	6
2.2	Why Experience and Power Could Decrease Legislators' Constituency Service Efforts: Shifting Priorities Hypothesis . . . . .	9
2.3	Alternative Explanation for Changes in Constituency Service: Constituent Demand . . . . .	11
<b>3</b>	<b>A Census of Legislator Requests to Federal Agencies</b>	<b>13</b>
3.1	Who Contacts the Bureaucracy and Why? . . . . .	16
3.1.1	Legislator's Contact with Federal Agencies Focus on Constituency Service . . . . .	16
3.1.2	Levels of Contact with Federal Agencies are Highly Unequal . . . . .	17
<b>4</b>	<b>The Effect of Experience and Institutional Power</b>	<b>19</b>
4.1	The Effects of Experience and Institutional Power on Levels of Constituency Service . . . . .	20
4.1.1	The Effect of Institutional Power on Levels of Constituency Service . . . . .	22
4.1.2	The Effect of Legislator Experience on Levels of Constituency Service . . . . .	24
4.1.3	The Effect of Electing a New Representative on the Level of Constituency Service . . . . .	26
4.2	The Effect of Experience and Institutional Power on Legislators' Priorities . . . . .	29
<b>5</b>	<b>The Effects of Demand for Constituency Service</b>	<b>31</b>
5.1	District Characteristics Affect the Provision of Constituency Service . . . . .	31
5.2	Do Voters Demand More of More Powerful Legislators? . . . . .	33
5.3	The Limited Effects of Prestige and Tenure on Name Recognition . . . . .	34
5.4	No Evidence that Demand for Constituency Service Shifts Toward More Experienced Legislators . . . . .	36
<b>6</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>A</b>	<b>FOIA Data</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>B</b>	<b>Contact Codebook</b>	<b>40</b>
B.1	Congressional Correspondence Log Coding Guidelines . . . . .	40
B.1.1	TYPE . . . . .	41

# 1 Introduction

One of the oldest traditions of representation in American politics is constituency service—how elected officials help channel and articulate individual constituents’ requests to government institutions. Constituency service is when Members of Congress “provid[e] help to individuals, groups, and localities in coping with the federal government” (Fenno, 1978).<sup>1</sup> Advocating on behalf of their constituents to federal agencies is a crucial facet of modern legislators’ jobs, and its growth has been used to explain incumbency advantage (King, 1991). Yet despite the centrality of constituency service in theories of congressional representation, constituency service remains one of the most opaque and least understood congressional activities.<sup>2</sup> Over thirty years ago Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina (1987) began their seminal book The Personal Vote: Constituency Service and Electoral Independence with that same observation, and much of what we know empirically today about constituency service comes from their surveys of legislators, legislative staff, and constituents. The disproportionate academic focus on legislative activities has left unanswered long-standing questions about how legislators balance the pursuit of legislative goals with constituency service provision.

In this paper, we test competing expectations about how experience and power affect how legislators balance the provision of constituency service with more general policy work. On the one hand, based on formal models of accountability (Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita, 2006), we might expect that if constituency service enables elected officials to demonstrate competence to their constituents, then increased institutional power and resources will result in increased levels of service to constituents. This increase in service may occur as legislators use the increased resources that come with better committee assignments to put more effort

---

<sup>1</sup>This tradition of constituency service can be traced back to the first congresses when constituents sought assistance with Revolutionary War pensions (Eckman, 2017). Constituents seek assistance with a wide range of topics from Social Security, Disability, and Veterans Benefits to Citizenship Applications to complaints about pollution and employment discrimination.

<sup>2</sup>As our data show, modern constituency service encompasses much more than the oft-cited examples of helping constituents with federal benefits. Members also serve constituents by seeking to help intercede on their behalf with a host of lesser-known federal agencies and advocate for state or local governments or nonprofits who apply for federal grants, permits, or disaster recovery funds.

into constituency service to satisfy the primary goal of reelection. Experienced, incumbent legislators may also have an advantage if newly elected members of Congress incur start-up costs when they enter office. If start-up costs affect constituency service, even legislators who will eventually be just as competent will initially provide less constituency service compared to the legislator they replaced. The level of service should then rise as legislators and the staff they hire establish systems for soliciting and handling constituency service opportunities.

On the other hand, based on accounts of how legislators’ shift priorities over their careers (including arguments for legislative term limits), 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 the district and their constituents. This is articulated in theories of representation that focus on how elected officials shift priorities and allocate their limited attention. A focus on prioritization and attention allocation highlights a potential tradeoff between experienced legislators who wield institutional power in Washington and newly elected legislators who may be more attentive to their district. As legislators acquire power in the institution, it is often asserted that they catch “Potomac fever” and devote less attention to constituents back in the district (Fenno, 1978). A similar argument is made in the popular press (Edwards, 2005) and evoked in rallying cries to “drain the swamp” of politicians accused of paying too much attention to the Washington policy elite and not enough attention to their constituents back home (Rosenblatt, 2016).

We test these competing expectations with a novel data set: a near census of legislator contacts with federal agencies from 2007 to 2017. We build on recent work using data on congressional correspondence that has yielded important findings regarding the policy strategies of cross-pressured legislators (Ritchie, 2017), distributive politics (Mills and Kalaf-Hughes, 2015), descriptive representation (Lowande, Ritchie and Lauterbach, 2018), and the role of ideology in congressional oversight (Lowande, 2018), but has necessarily been limited to more specific legislator-agency pairs. Our larger data set enables us to comprehensively test how legislators allocate their efforts and ensure our conclusions are not dependent upon a

specific subset of federal agencies. To test how legislators allocate their effort when contacting agencies, we hand code the content of 487890 requests as constituency and find over 80% of requests are made on behalf of constituents, and less than 20% are focused on more general policy work.

We find increased experience and power cause legislators to increase levels of constituency service, even though more experienced and powerful legislators also allocate a larger share of their contact with federal agencies to general policy work. Using a within-legislator-agency pair difference-in-differences design, we show that more power in Congress—as measured through committee chairs—causes legislators to provide more constituency service. This is true even as the ratio of policy work to constituency service also increases. This occurs because resources provided to legislators with increased power are fungible, enabling legislators to increase their attention to their district while also increasing their attention to policy work.

We also find clear evidence that new legislators pay start-up costs in the provision of constituency service. Using a similar difference-in-differences design, we show that newly elected legislators make fewer constituency service requests. In a different design focused on the number of contacts per district, we show that electing a new legislator causes a large drop in requests from a district’s representative to government agencies. Moreover, these findings are robust; they are not the result of changing name recognition or the strategic redirection of constituent service requests.

Our results provide new insights into how elected officials gain and allocate power over the course of their careers. We demonstrate that experience and power in Congress not only enable legislators to do more policy work, their increased capacity also enables these legislators to increase the amount of constituency service that they provide to their district. Constituents with experienced legislators may thus benefit from that experience and increased prestige—there is no tradeoff between increased policy work on Capitol Hill and particularistic goods in the district.

This paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 explains divergent predictions about how legislators’ behavior will be affected by institutional position and tenure in Congress. Section 3 explains our data collection process and provides basic summary statistics. Section 4 shows that legislators with more experience and better committee assignments do more constituency service, even as they shift their priorities toward policy work. Section 5 provides robustness checks for our results and explores alternative explanations. Section 6 highlights implications of these findings for theories of legislative behavior.

## **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 (Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita, 2006).

Legislators’ experience and acquisition of power in Congress likely affect how they strike a balance between delivering service to constituents and working on broader legislation. But comparative statistics from formal models of accountability have divergent predictions of how increased power and experience will affect legislators’ attentiveness to the district. Building on multi-task models of representation (Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita, 2006; Gordon and Landa, 2009), we explain why we might expect increased experience and power to either increase or decrease the levels of constituency service legislators provide.

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

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.

Critically, constituents' demands for service do not go away, even as legislators acquire power in the institution. For example, after Richard Lugar (R-IN) lost a primary election to Richard Mourdock (R-IN) in 2012, analysts argued that "At its heart, Lugar's defeat was attributable to the fact that he broke the political golden rule: Never lose touch with the people who elected you".<sup>3</sup> More generally, we might expect that even if constituents appreciate their representative's power over policy, they still expect their elected officials to be attentive to the district and demonstrate their competence with constituency service. If this intuition is correct, elected officials should, to sustain their reelection chances, continue to provide constituency service proportional to their resources and capacity to do so.

All else equal, 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). There are three mechanisms: increased resources, increased organizational capacity, and an increased likelihood of success when making a request.

**Increased Resources** As legislators acquire more institutional power in Washington, 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. Even if these resources are earmarked for policy work, they can increase the resources legislators have available for constituency service. This is because legislators with more access to committee resources can use those resources for policy work, freeing office resources for

---

<sup>3</sup>[https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/post/why-dick-lugar-lost/2012/05/09/gIQAj9cfCU\\_blog.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/post/why-dick-lugar-lost/2012/05/09/gIQAj9cfCU_blog.html)

constituency service.

**Increased Organizational Capacity** Helping constituents navigate the federal bureaucracy requires organizational capacity. Experienced legislators have 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. When a new legislator is elected to office, they face a substantial administrative burden. Not only must that legislator hire new staff and open district offices. The legislator also needs to establish protocols, priorities, and procedures in their office for handling constituency service requests. They also lack many of the “standard” responses that more established offices use to handle particular problems. In terms of formal models, office organization increases the resources the legislator has available (Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita, 2006). As legislators build an office and establish protocols, these start-up costs should subside, allowing legislators to make full use of the resources available to their office. As a result, we would expect new legislators to make fewer constituency service requests, but only for the time that it takes to establish their constituency service operation within the office.

**Increased Likelihood of Success** As legislators become more powerful, agencies should be 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 the service requests from the most powerful members of Congress. The increased likelihood of response provides legislators with the opportunity to demonstrate their effectiveness to their constituents. This increases the marginal return on making requests, providing more prestigious legislators with more incentive to make those requests. 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 present analysis below.

The observable implications of theories of constituency service rooted in capacity and resources are thus that legislators with more than a year or two of experience and more



powerful institutional positions like committee chairs will do more constituency service work.

## **2.2 Why Experience and Power Could Decrease Legislators' Constituency Service Efforts: Shifting Priorities Hypothesis**

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 legislators spend time and gain power in Congress, 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 from their district. Richard Fenno documents that some members of Congress catch “Potomac fever.” While newly elected legislators may remain primarily focused on reelection, senior legislators may prioritize other goals. As legislators acquire power in Congress, it is often asserted that they “go Washington” and devote less attention to constituents back in the district (Fenno, 1978). It seems intuitive that as they spend more time in Washington and attain more influential institutional roles in Congress, legislators might focus on other priorities resulting in less attention paid to constituents. Fenno (1973) identifies five goals: reelection, power in the House, good public policy, a career beyond the House, and private gain. As Fenno describes in *Congressmen In Committees*, different institutional positions (congressional committees) allow legislators to advance different goals.

The “Potomac fever” concern is that shifting attention and priorities toward policy goals will swamp any change in their capacity as legislators gain experience and power. If the Potomac fever hypothesis is right—that legislators shift attention from their district to policy work—we expect that legislators provide *less* constituent service as they gain experience and power on Capitol Hill.

A parallel argument about legislator behavior emerges in public advocacy for institutional reforms, particularly with activists who advocate for term limits. These activists argue that elected officials who are repeatedly re-elected to Congress become detached from their district. For example, Ted Cruz (R-TX) argued in favor of term limits in a Senate hearing, stating that the politicians at the time of founding traveled to Washington and then planned to return to their district. In its place, Cruz argued that “Today, members of Congress aren’t doing that. Instead, far too many of our politicians come to Washington to stay”. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez made a similar indictment against Joe Crowley in her successful primary challenge. She would regularly remind audiences that Crowley had “been there for 20 years” and then ask, “What has this power been used for? It’s not being used for us.”

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. For example, in the model in Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita (2006), this would occur as legislators place a lower priority on constituency service. If legislators shift their priorities through their careers, more experienced legislators will allocate their staff to policy work, and legislators who acquire more institutional power would focus their time on law-making and policy oversight rather than constituency service work. Likewise, if members shift their *attention* from the district to a career in Washington (in Congress or after), their relative level of attention to constituent issues will also decrease.

**Relative vs. Absolute Shifts** Of course, legislators experience career shifts that may affect both their resources and the priority they place on constituency service. The net effect of these off-setting shifts on levels of constituency service will depend on the relative size of legislators’ resource increase compared to the size of the shift in their priorities. Thus, it is possible that increased capacity more than compensates for this shift in focus away from constituency service as they gain power. If this occurs, we would expect the ratio of

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	Potomac Fever	Level of Service: $\uparrow$ Ratio of $\frac{Policy}{Service}$ : $\uparrow$	Level of Service: $\downarrow$ Ratio of $\frac{Policy}{Service}$ : $\uparrow$
	No Change in Priorities	Level of Service: $\uparrow$ Ratio of $\frac{Policy}{Service}$ : No Change	Level of Service: No Change Ratio of $\frac{Policy}{Service}$ : No Change

policy work to constituent service to increase as legislators gain experience and power, but we would also expect the absolute level of constituency service to increase.

Table 1 shows expected changes in the absolute volume of constituency service and the ratio of policy work to constituency service due to *shifting priorities* and *changes in capacity*. The top-left cell of Table 1 shows our expectations if both theories are true *and* the magnitude of the effect of increased capacity is large enough to overcome the countervailing effect of shifting priorities.

## 2.3 Alternative Explanation for Changes in Constituency Service: Constituent Demand

Our theoretical puzzle is to understand how gaining power and experience in Washington affects how legislators serve constituents. But often, legislators depend on constituents to first 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 would still be substantively interesting, such an explanation for constituency service provision does not inform debates about how legislators' effort changes with their time and institutional position in Washington.

Of course, we should expect that constituent demand will inform what agencies legislators contact. For example, some districts will contain groups—such as veterans or social security recipients—who will request particular kinds of constituency service from their rep-

representatives. Our research design attempts to limit the influence of this kind of constituent demand by examining how an individual legislator’s rates of contact change within particular agencies. By looking at the same member representing the same constituents in the same district within the same agency, we should be limit the extent to which differing constituent populations could interfere with our results.

A more challenging form of constituent demand exists if constituents redirect their requests towards legislators who they expect to be more powerful. For example, we might hypothesize that as legislators acquire more power in Washington, their constituents more easily recognize them and are thus more likely to receive requests for help from constituents. Constituents might also expect that more powerful legislators could more effectively provide constituency service and, as a result, direct service requests towards those legislators. Similarly, it could be the case that as legislators gain more experience in Congress, constituents more easily recognize them and, as a result, are more likely to target them with their demands.

To address these sorts of constituency demand concerns centered on constituents directing their demands toward legislators they know better, in Section 5 we focus on a series of robustness checks to rule out alternative constituency demand explanations. In particular, we examine the limited effects of prestige and tenure on legislators’ name recognition and assess whether there is evidence of constituents redirecting their queries away from new legislators toward incumbent legislators from the same state.

While we will assess the implications of constituent demands for our results in our robustness check section, we also note that constituent demand could also result from the level of resources and attention legislators allocate to providing constituency service. Elected officials can encourage requests for help navigating the federal bureaucracy through workshops, newsletters to constituents, social media posts, and even stories in local papers. Thus increases in constituents’ demands may simply reflect elected officials’ capacity and efforts to solicit demand for constituency service.

### 3 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.<sup>4</sup> Between February 2017 and February 2021, we received data on 487890 instances of members of Congress contacting federal agencies. We focus on requests made from 2007-2017, resulting in a data set of 451780 contacts.<sup>5</sup>

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,<sup>6</sup> and most independent agencies, commissions, boards, executive offices (e.g., the Council on Environmental Quality and US 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, 118 calls. In this paper, we use “contacts” and “letters” interchangeably to refer to all modes of correspondence.

---

<sup>4</sup>In 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 compliance our request. By rigorously pursuing a census of records, we limit any response bias that may exist in more easily-obtained samples.

<sup>5</sup>Some 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 an agency, limiting the opportunity for left-censoring to affect our results.

<sup>6</sup>The 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.

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.

**Data processing and coding** Upon receiving records of congressional requests, we extracted names matching variations of legislators’ names. We then merged in data about their position in Washington, district, and career. In the online Appendix, we provide our procedure and replication code for converting the raw records from federal agencies into the data set required for our analysis.

For a sample of 371255 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 (Appendix B). We then trained Research Assistants. 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 subsetting our

analysis to coding decisions where the coders had a great deal of certainty. 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.<sup>7</sup>

We classified legislator requests into five categories: “Individual Constituent Service” (i.e., 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 “Policy” (general policy work related to legislation, budgets, or rulemaking). We define constituents broadly such that they need not be in a member’s district. For example, 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.

---

<sup>7</sup>Hundreds 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.

### 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 American 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 in their level of contact with federal agencies. 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 quite similar districts.

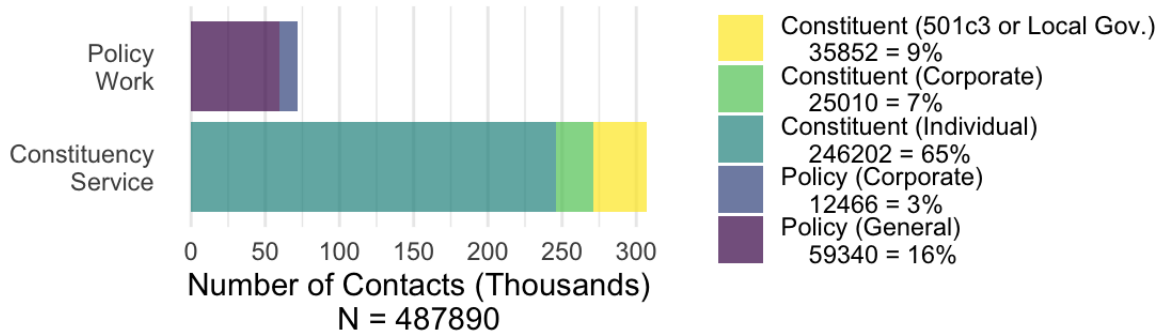
#### 3.1.1 Legislator’s Contact with Federal Agencies Focus on Constituency Service

Overall, when legislators contact federal agencies, they are helping constituents navigate the federal bureaucracy. Figure 1 shows the proportion of contacts for each of the five types of legislator requests in our hand-coded sample described above. The left-hand bar shows that 65% of all contacts with federal agencies are made on behalf of individual constituents. Constituent service requests on behalf of individual corporations are a smaller percentage, 6%, and 10% of requests are on behalf of nonprofits and local governments. General policy work and policy work on behalf of specific industries account for less than 20% of all requests made to federal agencies.

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 a broader “policy work” category (including both general and industry-focused policy work). These two categories match those we go on to test in section 4.1. Using this broader classification, we find 74% of contacts that



Figure 1: Legislator Requests to Federal Agencies by Type 2007-2020



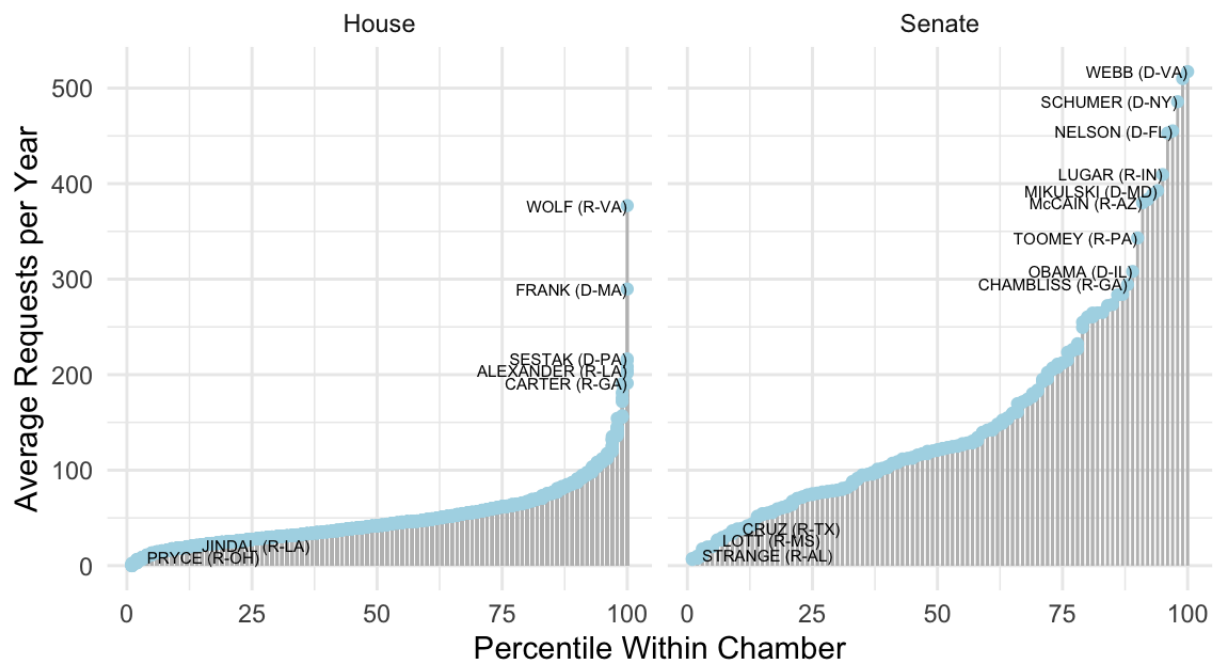
chairs of committees make with federal agencies are focused on constituency service (compared to 82% for non-chairs), and 78% of contacts from members of prestige committees are focused on constituent service (compared to 81% for members of non-prestige committees). Descriptively, constituency service is the main reason for legislators' requests regardless of their position in Congress or tenure in office. However, legislators in more powerful positions do appear to increase the ratio of policy work to constituency service.

### 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 2 shows the average number of contact rates per year for House members (left-hand panel) and senators (right-hand panel). In the Senate, Robert Byrd (D-WV) averaged 510 contacts per year. Other senators—such as Charles Schumer (D-NY) and John McCain (R-AZ)—have similarly high levels of contact with federal agencies. But other senators contact at a much lower rate. On average, senators in our data contacted agencies 156 times per year.

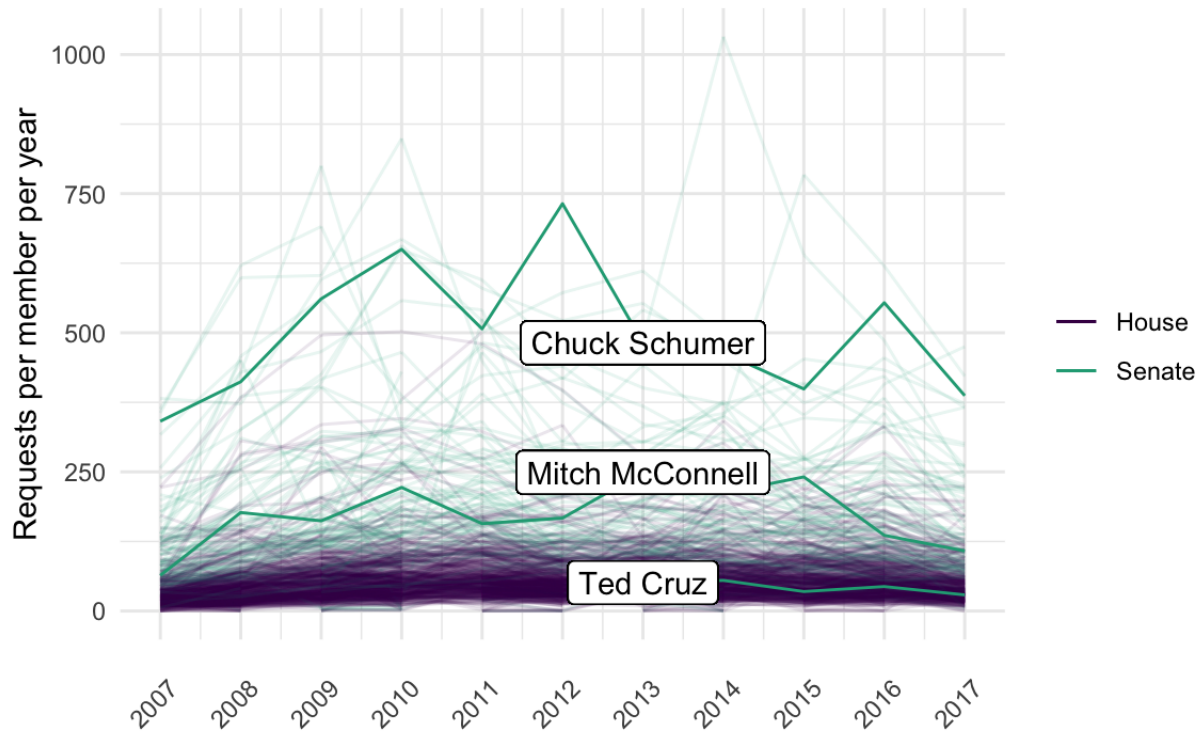
We see a similar level of variation in the House, but with lower overall levels of contact with federal agencies, reflecting lower resources and fewer constituents than senators. Frank Wolf (R-VA) averaged 377 contacts per year. Like the Senate, other members of the House

Figure 2: 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.

Figure 3: 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 considerable variation in the level of contact both within and across legislators.

contacted at a much lower rate. 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 large variability in the levels of contact across House members.

Figure 3 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 data set of requests to federal agencies, we now assess how legislators' changing position in Congress affects their provision of constituency service. First, we test theories

rooted in legislator capacity by modeling the effects of institutional power on the overall *level* of constituency service. Next, we test theories rooted in legislators’ priorities by modeling the effects of institutional power on the overall *ratio* of policy work to constituency service. Finally, we estimate the combined substantive impact of increasing capacity and shifting priorities taken together.

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

Our primary models are a series of difference-in-differences regressions, similar to the specifications in Berry and Fowler (2016). Our most stringent specifications examine changes that are within legislator and agency pairs.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, we estimate regressions of the form:

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

Where  $Y_{ijt}$  represents the number of requests legislator  $i$  makes to agency  $j$  in year  $t$ . Our analysis in this section thus focuses on the legislator-agency-year level.  $\gamma_{ij}$  is a fixed effect for the legislator-agency pair. This fixed effect accounts for legislators’ characteristics, such as legislators who are more skillful at filling constituency service requests than other legislators. Critically for our research design, this fixed effect also enables us to account for time-invariant constituent demand for constituency service with an agency, ensuring differences in constituent demand do not drive our results. It also accounts for characteristics such as the population of a state, its residents’ demographic characteristics, and local industries that might be particularly likely to request help with specific agencies. This difference-in-difference design ensures that coefficients  $\beta$  capture variation related to changes in institutional power or experience, not other factors that may vary across districts, legislators, or

---

<sup>8</sup>We drop five member-congress level observations for congresses where the member switched political parties.

agencies. The model also accounts for the different periods for which data were available from each agency.  $\delta_{jt}$  is an agency-year fixed effect. This takes into account agency-level common shocks across legislators in the provision of constituency service.

Assuming that legislators' trends in the level of requests follow parallel paths,  $\beta$  represents the average effect of changing institutional power on a legislator's provision on constituency service. We focus on three measures of a legislator's committee 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. We focus on these committee positions because each represents a different way legislators can acquire more power while in Congress. 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 the opportunity to shepherd policy through the legislative process.<sup>9</sup>

As Berry and Fowler (2016) note, changes in legislators' committee assignments are 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 assumptions, it would need to be the case that legislators differentially altered their rates 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 party changes. To address these concerns, we

---

<sup>9</sup>We 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.

include an indicator for whether the legislator’s party is the majority in year  $t$ ,  $m_{it}$  and if the legislator of Congress is from the same party as the president in year  $t$ ,  $p_{it}$ . Throughout, we cluster our standard errors at the legislator level.

In this same regression we also include indicators for legislators’ first six years in Congress,  $\sum_{s=1}^6 \eta_s \text{tenure}_{it}$ . The effects of interest  $\eta_1, \eta_2, \dots, \eta_6$  describe how a legislator’s provision of constituency service at levels of seniority between one and six years differ from legislators who serve beyond six years. We focus on constituency service levels in each of the first six years of a legislator’s tenure in Congress to assess how constituency service changes over their initial years in Congress. This design allows us to assess the extent to which new legislators face start-up costs. This specification, however, is ill-equipped to assess how electing a new representative affects the amount of constituency service a district receives. We address this in Section 4.1.3 by examining 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-year level.

Table 2 provides the coefficient estimates from Equation 1. We focus first on the estimated effect of increased committee prestige. Table 2 shows that as legislators acquire more prestige, their rates of constituency service increase. All coefficients represent the average additional requests per year *per agency*; per legislator per year effects are simply these coefficients times 83 (the number of agencies). Model 1 (the first column of Table 2) shows that this is true in a cross-sectional comparison across legislators. Model 1 excludes the legislator-agency and year-agency fixed effects, but it does include controls for majority status and being from the same party as the president.

#### 4.1.1 The Effect of Institutional Power on Levels of Constituency Service

Table 1 shows that committee chairs, ranking members, members of prestige committees, and oversight committee members provide substantially more constituency service than other legislators. However, these cross-sectional differences conflate a legislator’s institutional po-

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

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Committee Chair	0.712 (0.152)	0.206 (0.0951)	0.209 (0.0951)	0.0366 (0.0136)
Ranking Member	0.852 (0.156)	0.123 (0.0967)	0.136 (0.0970)	0.0250 (0.0119)
Prestige Committee	0.470 (0.0665)	0.0790 (0.0508)	0.0746 (0.0519)	0.0210 (0.0103)
First Year	-0.255 (0.0519)	-0.139 (0.0489)	-0.144 (0.0473)	-0.0124 (0.00979)
Second Year	-0.0713 (0.0585)	0.0177 (0.0474)	0.0248 (0.0469)	0.0239 (0.00908)
Third Year	-0.0198 (0.0625)	0.0764 (0.0450)	0.0595 (0.0444)	0.0338 (0.00823)
Fourth Year	0.00126 (0.0664)	0.0707 (0.0455)	0.0522 (0.0431)	0.0260 (0.00806)
Fifth Year	-0.0515 (0.0611)	0.0280 (0.0377)	0.0266 (0.0367)	0.0164 (0.00701)
Sixth Year	-0.0156 (0.0728)	0.0504 (0.0536)	0.0744 (0.0516)	0.000378 (0.00762)
Majority, President's Party	✓	✓	✓	✓
Legislator $\times$ Agency Fixed Effects		✓	✓	✓
Year $\times$ Agency Fixed Effects		✓	✓	✓
All Legislators	✓	✓		✓
Serve At Least Second Term			✓	
Dependent Variable	Count	Count	Count	Log(Count + 1)
Observations	412111	412111	388997	412111

Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered at legislator level

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.

sition with other legislator characteristics. If legislators who are better at their jobs or exert more effort are also selected for more prestigious committee positions, then the estimates from Model 1 confound legislators' overall ability with their institutional position.

To address potential confounding in across-legislator comparisons, the estimates from Model 2 (Column 2 of Table 2) 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 constituency service that legislators provide. Consider first the effect of being a committee chair. We estimate that becoming a committee chair causes an increase of 0.206 constituency service requests *per agency* (95-percent confidence interval [0.02, 0.39]). Across all agencies, this represents an increase of approximately 13.6 additional constituency service requests per year, 20% of the average number of 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 0.123 contacts per agency while joining a prestige committee causes a 0.079 per agency increase in the number of constituency service contacts a member of Congress makes.

The findings in Table 2 are robust to alternative specifications and measures of the dependent variable. For example, we might be concerned that legislators with exceptionally high constituency service levels drive the results. The fourth column shows that 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 power in Washington 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.

#### 4.1.2 The Effect of Legislator Experience on Levels of Constituency Service

As legislators acquire more power in Washington, they increase their provision of constituency service. While this suggests that more powerful legislators are paying more attention to their constituents, it could still be the case that as legislators gain experience in Washington, they decrease their constituency service provision. To test whether this is the case, we use the estimates in Table 2 but now focus on the coefficients in legislators' first six years in office. The reference group is representatives who have served longer than six



years.<sup>10</sup>

The first column of Table 2 shows that there are 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 in Congress 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 year in office. As they acquire experience in Congress, they make more requests to federal agencies. In their first year in office, legislators provide 0.16 fewer requests per agency than legislators in their second year and 0.215 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: resulting in about 14.6 more constituency service requests per year. 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 serve in their third year are different than the legislators who

---

<sup>10</sup>Interpreting 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, join prestige committees in their first six years in Congress, almost none in their first two years.

serve in the first years. If this were the case, then our findings would be the result of 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 in each year, the third column of Table 2 assesses the changes in the number of contacts of federal agencies for legislators who serve in Congress for at least three years. The pattern is similar: legislators initially provide less constituency service in their first two years than they do in subsequent years. And 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.

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

In the previous section, we showed that legislators make fewer requests to federal agencies in their first year in office but that the number of requests stabilizes after their third year. 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 make this comparison, we change the level of our analysis 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:

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

Where  $\gamma_i$  is a district-specific fixed effect that accounts for each district’s particular demographic characteristics, along with the levels of demand from district residents.  $\delta_t$  is a year fixed effect that takes into account common shocks. Our key result of interest,  $\beta_1$ , 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 ( $\beta_2$ ) through sixth-year ( $\beta_6$ ).<sup>11</sup>

The first column of Table 3 provides a simple difference-in-means for districts represented by a new member and then for legislators in their first six years in office. Comparing across districts, 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 for districts represented by legislators in their third through sixth years.

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 her second year of service receive

---

<sup>11</sup>It is worth noting that this treatment is fundamentally different for a district than within-legislator variation. In each election, each district either allows its incumbent to acquire another term or replaces her. This is different 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.

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

	(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 the diff-in-diff on legislators who survive their first election.

12 fewer constituency service requests—still a substantively significant decrease in contact with federal agencies, but not as drastic as the first year decrease. 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 well-established elected officials.

**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 in Congress.

Table 4 shows that legislators increase the ratio of policy work to constituency service as they obtain more experience and prestigious committee assignments in Congress. The first column of Table 4 shows how the proportion of policy work to constituency service differs *across* legislators' in their first six years in office and for legislators who acquire committee positions. We find that a higher proportion of legislators' contacts are focused on constituency service in their initial years in office. While the ratio of policy work to constituency service is conditional on the levels of each, the inference we wish to 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, the theory of prioritization is directly 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: that legislators are prioritizing one thing over the other.

Column 2 uses a difference-in-differences regression to assess how tenure in Washington affects the proportion of contacts focused on constituency service.

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

	(1)	(2)
Prestige	0.0220 (0.00777)	-0.0105 (0.0101)
Chair	-0.0744 (0.0157)	-0.0875 (0.0175)
Ranking Minority	0.000387 (0.0138)	-0.0346 (0.0142)
First Year	0.0428 (0.00918)	0.0223 (0.0115)
Second Year	0.0744 (0.00888)	0.0546 (0.0111)
Third Year	0.0400 (0.00888)	0.0235 (0.0107)
Fourth Year	0.0357 (0.00970)	0.0192 (0.0108)
Fifth Year	0.00801 (0.00994)	-0.00254 (0.0105)
Sixth Year	0.0533 (0.00933)	0.0431 (0.00940)
Majority		✓
Legislator Fixed Effects		✓
Year Fixed Effects		✓
Observations	6442	6442

Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered at legislator level

This table shows how the proportion of contacts focused on constituency service changes as legislators acquire more experience and power in Congress.

## 5 The Effects of Demand for Constituency Service

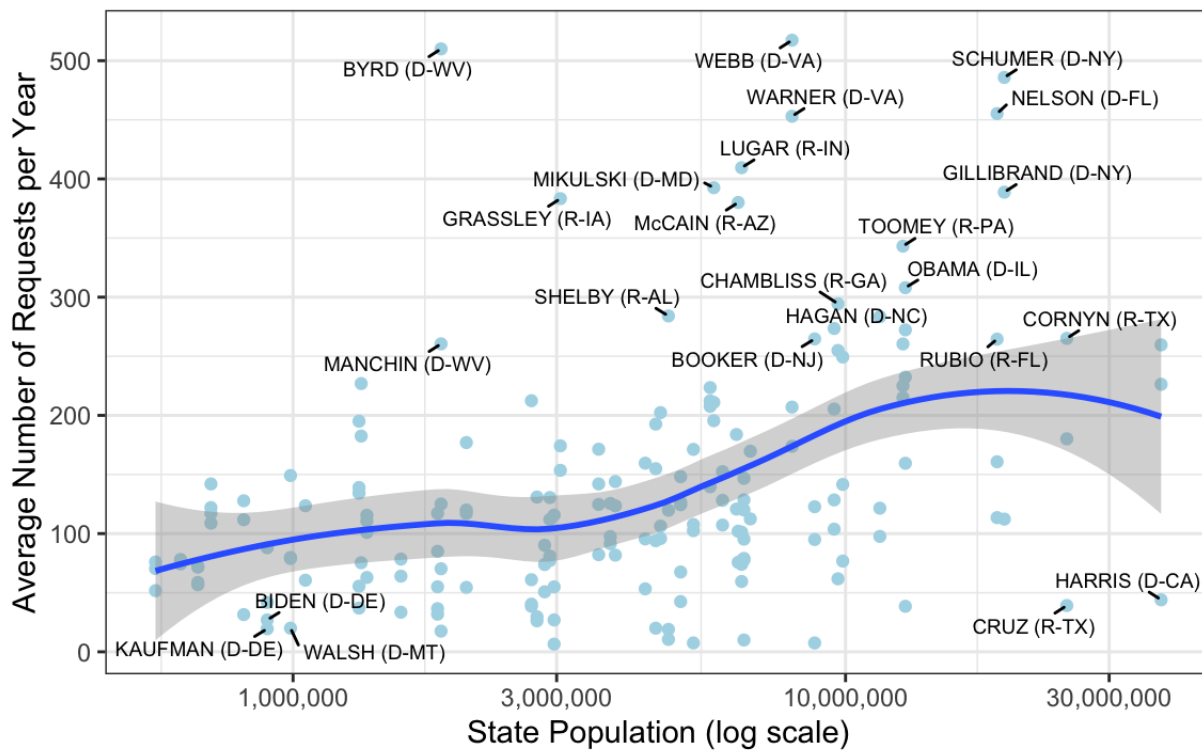
This section shows that demand for constituency service affects the level of constituency service that members provide. However, it does not appear that demand-side shifts can explain the specific within-legislator or within-district variation we observe with changing committee assignments and increased tenure. First, we show that constituent demand does drive legislators’ constituency service requests to the agencies best suited to address the district’s needs. Then, we show that this demand does not shift within or across legislators in ways that 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 characteristics of districts. 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 4](#) 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

Figure 4: Average Number of Requests per Senator per Year 2007-2017 by State Population.



associated with population size, Figure 4 also shows significant variation in the level of service that senators provide, even among states of similar sizes.

We expect the number of times a legislator contacts a particular agency to correlate with their districts' demographic composition. To assess the correlation between demographic characteristics and the rates legislators contact agencies, we focus on two example agencies: the Veterans Administration (VA) and the Social Security Administration (SSA). We measured the prevalence of two groups in the district: veterans—the residents who might plausibly need assistance navigating the VA—and residents who are over 65 years of age—and therefore satisfy the age eligibility for social security. We then run a simple bivariate regression of the total number of contacts a legislator made to each agency on the proportion of constituents who are veterans or who are over 65. In both instances, we find a correlation between district composition and the number of times legislators contact the agency.



## 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 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 characteristics of the district. Districts composed of veterans might see more demand for assistance with the Veterans' Administration, or districts with older residents might have greater demand with the social security administration. 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, theories of legislator capacity suggest that legislators use their increased capacity and resources to solicit constituency service requests and thus generate demand. Constituent demand driven by shifts in behavior is indeed a necessary part of the increased constituency service we attribute to increased capacity and resources in Sections 4.1.

Yet, we might expect that a legislator's experience or power in Congress could affect constituency demand, even without legislators using their increased capacity and resources to generate demand, as implied by theories focusing on legislator capacity. Constituents could, for example, direct more of their demands to legislators who are more powerful or who have been in Congress for longer because they don't know or trust new representatives (holding constant legislators' levels of soliciting constituency service requests). In this section, we investigate whether that additional constituent demand could plausibly explain our results. We find limited effects of legislator tenure on demand for constituency service using two distinct approaches.

First, building on the theoretical discussion in Section 2, we might worry that legislators' increasing prestige leads them to have higher name recognition, causing constituents to direct their demands to them. While more experienced legislators do have higher name

recognition, name recognition increases do not align with the increases in constituency service that legislators provide their constituents, making name recognition a poor explanation for the increased level of constituency service.

Second, if constituents direct their demands to more experienced or powerful legislators, we should observe spillover across legislators. When new members are elected, constituents should redirect their demands for service to more experienced legislators who are better known to the constituent seeking help. We find no such increase in the level of constituency service provided by more experienced legislators. When a new legislator replaces an incumbent, other members of Congress and same-state senators do not increase in their level of constituency service. This lack of spillover from new to experienced representatives suggests that constituents are not merely directing demands to more experienced legislators. Instead, members of Congress can both solicit and fulfill constituency service demands when they have more experience and capacity (e.g., an organized office and resources that come with committee appointments). As their capacity expands, they are able to solicit and provide more constituency service.

### **5.3 The Limited Effects of Prestige and Tenure on Name Recognition**

To assess how increased power and time in Congress affect legislators' name recognition, we use the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) cumulative file. CCES collects a set of survey responses from 2006-2018, providing 452,755 individual-level responses. All respondents were asked if they approved of their representative in the US House and both senators. If the respondent provided an assessment of the elected official, we coded the respondent as recognizing the legislator's name. If the respondent selected the option that they had never heard of the representative or were not sure, then we code them as not recognizing the legislator.

We estimate the average name recognition for each legislator in each survey  $Y_{it}$ , or the

proportion of respondents who provide an evaluation of the legislator. We then use difference-in-differences regressions to assess how legislators’ name recognition changes as they spend more time in Congress.

Table 5: Limited Changes in Name Recognition

	(1)	(2)
Second Year	-0.0385 (0.00642)	-0.0230 (0.00641)
Fourth Year	-0.0263 (0.00646)	0.000275 (0.00682)
Sixth Year	-0.0281 (0.00676)	-0.0112 (0.00634)
Eighth Year	-0.0132 (0.00663)	0.00132 (0.00674)
Legislator Fixed Effects		✓
Year Fixed Effects		✓
Observations	3667	3667

Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered at legislator level

First, we discuss the cross-sectional version of this model, which shows an increase in name recognition but is severely confounded because name recognition likely leads to reelection and more time in office. Additionally, changes in name recognition do not follow the same pattern as changes in constituency service. Whereas changes in constituency service even after the first two years in office, name recognition continues to increase. If name recognition were driving our results, we would expect to see constituency service increase in legislators’ fourth, sixth, and eighth years; none of which we saw in Table 2. (Recall that across specifications in Table 2, levels of constituency service provided were stable after year 2, controlling for legislator and district characteristics.)

The effects of time in office on name recognition do not align with observed shifts in constituency service from Table 2. The first column of Table 5 shows average name recognition of legislators’ tenure in the House and Senate. Legislators who are newer to Congress have lower levels of name recognition than other legislators who have been in Congress for longer. Further, we continue to see lower levels of name recognition for legislators at the end

of their second year, then for legislators serving in their 10th year and beyond. Both the persistence of this difference and the rate at which it changes suggest that name recognition is a poor explanation for why legislators provide more constituency service after their first year. Even second-year legislators—when the decrease in constituency service has already begun to attenuate—continue to have lower name recognition.

Within-legislator variation in name recognition does not appear to explain shifts in levels of constituency service that we observe.

## **5.4 No Evidence that Demand for Constituency Service Shifts Toward More Experienced Legislators**

This section presents a more direct test of whether constituent demand explains variation in the level of constituency service that legislators provide. 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 merely redirect demand for constituent service in response to legislators' experience. In that case, the level of constituency service that incumbent legislators provide should increase when new representatives replace other incumbents from their state. 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 towards other representatives. The most natural target for the constituent demands would be one of the senators representing the constituent's state. A more experienced House member may also receive more demands for constituency service.

To assess whether constituents redirect demand towards 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 House members and senators in the state who are new or an

indicator for whether there is a new House member or senator in the state. As in Section 4.1.1, we measure the number of requests made by a district’s representative in a particular year. Using this dependent variable, we estimate a series of difference-in-differences regression where the treatment is new members in the state. We include district and year fixed effects. Further, we restrict the regression to incumbent legislators only.

Table 6 presents the estimates of this regression. The first two columns are estimated on all incumbent legislators. 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 6 reveal the same pattern when focusing on senators only. The estimated effects of new legislators do not approach statistical significance.

Table 6: Little Evidence of Spillovers from New Legislators				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
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				

## 6 Conclusion

Using a new data set on legislators’ requests made to federal agencies, we show that as legislators gain experience and power, they both gain capacity and shift priorities toward policy work. 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. We also show that the institutional power gained through prestigious committee appointments, especially committee chairs, increases legislators’ capacity and that

they use this capacity to provide more constituency service and do more policy work.

Our results are broadly consistent with the predictions about constituency service provision from multi-task selection models, such as Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita (2006). Constituent service helps explain incumbency advantage in these models because it provides legislators the opportunity to demonstrate their ability to their constituents. Our results show that legislators take advantage of this opportunity, particularly as they become more powerful. With greater capacity, experienced and powerful legislators have an advantage in providing service over new representatives. Constituency service thus advantages incumbents because switching to a new representative implies a decline in particularistic services to the district.

The findings from this paper also flip some of the concerns motivating proposed institutional reforms on their heads. For example, advocates of term limits often argue that elected officials lose touch with their district. In contrast, we show that the more experienced legislators provide more attention to their district, even as they take on more policy work.

Taken together, our findings show that the reelection motivation remains a potent force for even the most powerful legislators in Washington. Rather than use increased power in the institution as an excuse to be less attentive to the district or increased time in Washington to be less interested in their constituencies, our results show that legislators with more power and experience provide more service to their district. Even if legislators catch “Potomac Fever,” they still remember their job as constituent ombudsman.

## References

- Ashworth, Scott and Ethan Bueno de Mesquita. 2006. “Delivering the Goods: Legislative Particularism in Different Electoral and Institutional Settings.” Journal of Politics 68:168–179.
- Berry, Christopher, Barry Burden and William Howell. 2010. “The President and the Distribution of Federal Spending.” American Political Science Review . Forthcoming.

- Berry, Christopher R. and James H. Fowler. 2016. "Cardinals or Clerics? Congressional Committees and the Distribution of Pork." American Journal of Political Science 60(3):692–708.
- Cain, Bruce, John Ferejohn and Morris Fiorina. 1987. The Personal Vote: Constituency Service and Electoral Independence. Harvard University Press.
- Eckman, Sarah J. 2017. "Constituent Services: Overview and Resources." Congressional Research Service. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R44726.pdf>. Date Accessed: August 20, 2018.
- Edwards, Chris. 2005. "Potomac Fever." National Review. <https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/potomac-fever>. December 12, 2005.
- Fenno, Richard. 1973. Congressmen in Committees. Little Brown and Company.
- Fenno, Richard F. 1978. Home Style: House Members in their Districts. Addison Wesley.
- Gordon, Sanford C and Dimitri Landa. 2009. "Do the advantages of incumbency advantage incumbents?" The Journal of Politics 71(4):1481–1498.
- Grimmer, Justin and Eleanor Neff Powell. 2013. "Congressmen in Exile: The Politics and Consequences of Involuntary Committee Removal." Journal of Politics 75(4):907–920.
- King, Gary. 1991. "Constituency Service and the Incumbency Advantage." British Journal of Politics 21(1):119–128.
- Lowande, Kenneth. 2018. "Politicization and Responsiveness in Executive Agencies." Journal of Politics .
- Lowande, Kenneth, Melinda Ritchie and Erinn Lauterbach. 2018. "Descriptive and Substantive Representation in Congress: Evidence from 80,000 Congressional Inquiries." <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/lowande/wp-content/uploads/sites/581/2018/06/dr-v2.pdf>. Date Accessed: August 20, 2018.
- Mills, Russell and Nicole Kalaf-Hughes. 2015. "The Evolution of Distributive Benefits: The Rise of Letter-Marking in the United States Congress." The Journal of Economics and Politics 22.
- Ritchie, Melinda N. 2017. "Back-Channel Representation: A Study of the Strategic Communication of Senators with the US Department of Labor." Journal of Politics .
- Rosenblatt, Adam. 2016. "Please, no more calls to 'drain the swamp.' It's an insult to swamps." Washington Post. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/12/29/please-no-more-calls-todrain-the-swamp-its-an-insult-to-swamps/?utm\\_term=.3b4221e90db3](https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/12/29/please-no-more-calls-todrain-the-swamp-its-an-insult-to-swamps/?utm_term=.3b4221e90db3). Dec. 29, 2016.

# Appendix

## A FOIA Data

Department	Components FOIAed	Records received	N
Agriculture	29	29	9516
Commerce	19	18	8038
Defense	49	13	9739
Education	1	1	4689
Energy	8	2	6580
Health and Human Services	15	10	104145
Homeland Security	14	13	39633
Housing and Urban Development	2	1	33968
Justice	23	5	2611
Labor	22	12	53341
State	1	0	0
the Interior	11	8	6079
the Treasury	7	5	23869
Transportation	10	7	26787
Veterans Affairs	6	3	77842
Independent Agencies	77	47	81053
<b>Total</b>	<b>294</b>	<b>174</b>	<b>487890</b>

## 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 a series of steps to move from raw correspondence logs to data formatted for our analysis.

### 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 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 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), also 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, 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)