Nicholas Baugh

Johns Hopkins University Advanced Academic Programs

Unleashing Open Data with Python

**Abstract:**

Partisanship has increased consistently for decades. While necessary at a healthy amount, the level of partisanship since the 1970s has increased at an unprecedented level. The roles of party sorting, the media, and legislative effectiveness increasing partisanship is well known. However, this paper aims to investigate an additional key factor in increasing partisanship: the influence of the Speaker of the House. Using two multivariate linear regression models, the paper uses data collected by the Center for Effective Lawmaking to measure legislative effectiveness as the dependent variable to predict the impact of the Speaker, along with both demographic and legislative data. Results show that the Speaker has a negative impact on legislative effectiveness. Given prior research and this paper’s findings, it offers insight for a new area of focus to reduce partisanship through addressing the negative effect of the Speaker of the House on legislative effectiveness.

**Introduction:**

Congress gets its power from the United States Constitution. Specifically, Article 1 establishes the legislative branch and outlines the powers provided to one of the three branches of federal government. Within Article 1, Congress is prescribed the power to create and pass laws.1 The legislative branch is the only branch of government given this responsibility. With this significant power, it is important that Congress is a well-functioning machine, otherwise the people who elect those to serve are not being represented.

The Constitution also outlines the powers for an important individual within Congress: the Speaker of the House. The Speaker of the House is vaguely defined, in that the only definition of the position is to have the power to impeach.2 It is with this ill-defined definition that the position as leader in the House of Representatives has transformed into an unrelenting power-grab, aimed at promoting personal agendas over the public good.

Congress is a key institution within the United States, yet it seems that bipartisanship has declined significantly over the past decades, and partisanship has increased. There is ample debate of who is to blame, but one individual who requires a deeper investigation in their role in partisanship is the Speaker of the House. Moreover, this paper hypothesizes that the Speaker of the House has a negative impact on legislative effectiveness, which in turn leads to even more partisanship.

**Literature Review:**

The topic of partisanship is well researched. Over decades of countless research political scholars have identified some key factors driving partisanship, including party sorting, the media and the legislative effectiveness of Congress. There’s one entity that transects all three key factors, the Speaker of the House. Given the association the Speaker has to all three factors, the role the Speaker plays in partisanship requires further research.

Partisanship is defined as “the quality or state of being partisan: strong and sometimes blind adherence to a particular party, faction, cause or person.”3 This definition provides understanding of what partisan individuals are: loyal and unwavering in supporting their cause. It is this topic that scholars like Morris Fiorina investigate and find that members in Congress have become significantly more partisan since the 1970s. Specifically, Fiorina makes the argument that the political class is far more polarized than the American public.4 This argument is seen in data that displays ideological differences among those in Congress has deepened, with Republicans becoming more conservative and Democrats becoming more liberal.5

However, other research argues that while polarization may be detrimental among political elite, it is similarly bad among the American public as well. As Lupu finds, there is a positive relationship between political polarization and mass polarization. Meaning, as the American public perceive partisanship becoming worse, they themselves become more partisan as well.6 This is important because as the Pew Research Center finds, compared to the American public’s median of polarization, 92 percent of Republicans are to the right, while 94 percent of Democrats are to the left.7 Lastly, not only is partisanship increasing, but it is more structured and has intensified to the point where each party views the other with hostility.8

From this research it is clear to see that both the political class and general public suffer from partisanship. The loyalties created from partisans in America lead to both elected officials and the American public to face a deep, confrontational divide. However, the research and data is contested by some political scholars. Levendusky and Malhotra’s findings give a different view of the partisanship issue in that they find people believe the country is more polarized than it is by a factor of two, on average.9 Research across the board displays partisanship is a serious issue in American politics, but it remains up for debate on the significance of partisanship in America today.

With partisanship being understood in both the political elite and the general public, it is also necessary to understand what pushes the partisan poles to the extremes. A key understanding to why partisanship continues to deepen can be partially explained by party sorting. Party sorting is a newer issue that researchers have critically analyzed. Party sorting is understood as individuals aligning themselves into a party that matches their ideological beliefs. As Baldassarri and Gelman find, party sorting goes hand-in-hand with polarization. Specifically, they identify that the political elite drive party sorting, and the general public follow suit, even if their own ideological view differs.10

This idea is further expounded on by Fiorina, who finds that the more ideologically aligned Republicans and Democrats have replaced the more moderate members of their parties, whose ideologies are not fully aligned with the party. Specifically, right-leaning Democrats and left-leaning Republicans are replaced by normal Democrats and Republicans, respectively.11 In essence, party sorting has removed moderate members in each political party, giving party leaders the ability to push further left or right in their ideologies since there is no longer pushback from the more moderate members.

Another key driving force in partisanship is the media. In the 21st century it is nearly impossible to escape the news cycle and echo chambers. Iyengar and Hahn’s findings display that the public tend to select media outlets based on their political preferences for both serious and non-serious news.12 The echo chambers created can be dangerous as well. As Levendusky finds in his experiment, partisan media tends to polarize voters and deepen their partisan ideologies.13 The media on its own can deepen partisanship among the general public and political elite. But, when combined with party sorting, the negative impact can render legislative effectiveness in Congress to nothing, while pushing the general public to demonize the opposite political party.

Over the previous paragraphs the significance of partisanship and some of the key factors driving it were discussed. However, there is another impact factor to consider: partisanship’s impact on legislative effectiveness. In a study conducted by Hitt, Volden and Wiseman, the three discover that the majority party has a negative relationship with legislative effectiveness.14 This is not the only research conducted on legislative effectiveness. Snowe identifies that legislative success is directly related to lessening partisanship. Moreover, for a more effective Congress, partisanship needs to decrease.15

There is ample research on partisanship, party sorting, the media, and legislative effectiveness. However, there is a gap in political research on the role that the Speaker of the House plays in partisanship. As stated earlier, this paper hypothesizes that the Speaker of the House has a negative relationship on legislative effectiveness, which increases partisanship. The purpose of the Speaker as outlined in the U.S. Constitution has significantly changed today from the vague description of being able to impeach. Now, the purpose of the Speaker is to drive partisanship to increase in an effort to keep a majority and remain in power.

**Methods:**

The data used in this paper is from a dataset created by the Center for Effective Lawmaking (CEL). CEL is created by the University of Virginia and Vanderbilt University.16 The dataset contains a variety of variables on U.S. House members from 1973-2022, with the main measure being legislative effectiveness. “Legislative Effectiveness” is a measure calculated that contains 15 indicators that provides a value for each member of the House of Representatives on their ability to move their policy items through Congress and into law.17

The data on legislative effectiveness displays interesting and important trends. First, figure 1 displays the average range of legislative effectiveness in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1973 to 2022 by each Congress. The top line represents the maximum, the bottom line represents the minimum, the middle line represents the mean, and the shaded area represents the interquartile range. As the top line in Figure 1 below displays, legislative effectiveness is declining over time. However, the minimum value for legislative effectiveness has slightly increased over time.

Secondly, Figure 2 displays each member of Congress’ legislative effectiveness score in each Congress, separated by the majority and minority parties. As figure 2 shows on the y-axis, the minority party in the House of Representatives is far less effective than the majority party with lower legislative effectiveness across almost all Congress’. Understanding that the majority party is more effective legislatively is important when considering the role of the Speaker. Legislative effectiveness is the dependent variable, and therefore these two tables provide important details and statistics on trends and on who is effective in Congress.

Figure 1:

Chart, histogram

Description automatically generated

Figure 2:

Chart, scatter chart

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As established, legislative effectiveness is the dependent variable. The variables being utilized in this paper are “leg\_effectiveness” as the dependent variable, and the independent variables are “speaker”, “dem” (whether the member is a Democrat or Republican), “black” (if the member is black or white), “female” (if the member is a female or male), “minority\_leadership” (if the member is in minority leadership), “comm\_chair” (if the member serves as a committee chair), “subcomm\_chair” (if the member serves as a subcommittee chair or vice chair), “seniority” (number of years served in Congress), and “bills\_signed” (total number of bills signed into law by a member of Congress in each session). All variables except for leg\_effectiveness, bills\_signed and seniority are binary variables. Table 1 below provides summary statistics on all the variables being used in the models.

Table 1:

Table

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To test the hypothesis that the Speaker of the House has a negative impact on legislative effectiveness, which in turn leads to even more partisanship, there are two linear regression models being run in Python. Both are multivariate linear regression models that utilize different variables. Model 1 has leg\_effectiveness as the dependent variable, and the independent variables are speaker, dem, black, female, majority\_leadership and minority\_leadership. Model 2 builds off model 1, which has leg\_effectiveness as the dependent variable, and the independent variables are speaker, dem, black, female, majority\_leadership, minority\_leadership, comm\_chair, subcomm\_chair, mem\_on\_power\_comms, seniority and bills\_signed.

It is important to run two multivariate models to compare and ensure that other influential variables are included on legislative effectiveness. With control variables like race, gender and political party, along with other variables like committee positions, seniority and number of bills signed the true impact of the Speaker on legislative effectiveness can be better understood.

**Results:**

Table 2 below displays the first multivariate regression model. The intercept, leg\_effectiveness has a coefficient of 0.944, and a standard error of 0.022. The main independent variable being analyzed, speaker, has a coefficient of -1.133, and a standard error of 0.311. Notably, all variables are statistically significant at the 1% percent level in this model. However, the R2 value is low, at 0.013, with the adjusted R2 value at 0.012. The other variables have the following coefficients and standard errors, respectively, dem (0.177, 0.030), black (-0.223, 0.058), female (-0.196, 0.047), minority\_leadership (-0.602, 0.105) and maj\_leadership (0.718, 0.114).

Therefore, from the results in Table 2, we reject the null hypothesis in model one and confirm being Speaker has a negative impact on legislative effectiveness. More specifically, the average House member has a legislative effectiveness value of 0.944 in this model, and becoming Speaker reduces that value by 1.133. However, there are variables not included in this model that impact legislative effectiveness, as the R2 value indicates, and results must be considered with this in mind.

Table 2:

Table

Description automatically generated

Table 3 below displays the results of the second multivariate model. The intercept, leg\_effectiveness has a coefficient of 0.218, with a standard error of 0.014. The main independent variable, speaker, has a coefficient of -0.500, and a standard error of 0.157. In this model, with the addition of the variables outlined above, the R2 value increased to 0.753, with the adjusted R2 also being 0.753. We again see that all variables are statistically significant in the regression model at the 1% level. The other variables have the following coefficients and standard errors, respectively, dem (-0.108, 0.0.015), black (-0.123, 0.029), female (0.092, 0.023), minority\_leadership (-0.177, 0.053), maj\_leadership (0.196, 0.057), comm\_chair (1.379, 0.039), subcomm\_chair (0.505, 0.018), mem\_on\_power\_comms (-0.101, 0.018), seniority (0.024, 0.002), and bills\_signed (0.802, 0.006).

Therefore, this second model shows that being speaker does have a negative impact on legislative effectiveness. Specifically, the average House member has a legislative effectiveness score of 0.218, but becoming Speaker reduces legislative effectiveness by 0.500. In model two, we reject the null hypothesis, and given the high R2 value, confirm that being Speaker does have a negative impact on legislative effectiveness.

Table 3:

Table

Description automatically generated

**Discussion:**

This paper aims to answer the question of what role the Speaker of the House plays in partisanship. From prior research, it is clear what some of the well-known factors, specifically, party sorting, the media and reduced legislative effectiveness all impact partisanship and drive it to increase. This paper aims to add the Speaker of the House to this list given their role in the three factors identified through prior research.

The political elite and members of Congress drive party sorting and utilize the media to amplify their messages. This includes the Speaker of the House, who is arguably more influential than any other member in the House of Representatives. Each U.S. House member represents on average approximately 747,000 individuals.18 However, given the power the Speaker has, their impact on party sorting and reach through media will be far more widespread than any other member in the House.

Combining this with ability to set priorities and create agenda’s, the Speaker is in an extremely powerful position to lead a chamber that increases legislative effectiveness. However, as the regression results show, being the Speaker has a negative impact on legislative effectiveness at the individual level. In an environment where re-election is always looming, it is difficult to imagine a Speaker allowing all members of Congress to be more effective than himself or herself. Given the decline in legislative effectiveness in the House since the 1970s, it can be observed that the Speaker does not want the House to be an effective chamber, but rather one that seeks partisan political victories in order to secure the Speaker’s continued position of power.

The Speaker is a part of these three critical driving components of partisanship today. This very issue is observed in the current Congress. Current Speaker Kevin McCarthy took fifteen rounds of voting to be elected Speaker by the House, which resulted after a deal was made between the Speaker and far-right Republican members. Specifically, reports of the deal include allowing one lawmaker to force a vote to remove the Speaker, commitments to cut government spending, adding extremely conservative members to powerful committees, and requiring a 72 hour notice before a vote takes place on legislation.18 The personal agendas and desire for power by the Speaker comes at a cost of legislative effectiveness within the chamber, sorting their own party to allow more extreme views, and providing extreme views on influential positions and consistent media coverage.

It is with this in mind that the argument is made that the Speaker is a key driver of partisanship. Partisanship is not a one-dimensional issue, as there are many factors that work alongside each other to push Republicans and Democrats further to the left and right in their ideological views. However, the Speaker has the ability to single-handedly transcend party lines to work for the American people as a whole. The Speaker presides over the entire House and can not only set agendas, but also the political mood. As observed today, the Speaker is working to garner and maintain individual power at the cost of deepening a partisan divide in not only Congress, but the entire United States.

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