How Shifting Priorities and Capacity Affect Policy Work and Constituency Service

Evidence from a Census of Legislator Requests to U.S. Federal Agencies

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Abstract

When elected officials gain power, do they use it to provide more constituent service or affect policy? The answer informs debates over how legislator capacity, term limits, and institutional positions affect legislator behavior. We distinguish two countervailing effects of increased institutional power: shifting priorities and increased capacity. To assess how institutional power shapes behavior, we assemble a massive new database of 611,239 legislator requests to a near census of federal departments, agencies, and sub-agencies between 2007 and 2020. We find that legislators prioritize policy work as they gain institutional power (e.g., become a committee chair) but simultaneously maintain their levels of constituency service. Moreover, when a new legislator replaces an experienced legislator, the district receives less constituency service *and* less policy work. Rather than long-serving and powerful elected officials diverting attention from constituents, their increased capacity enables them to maintain levels of constituency service, even as they prioritize policy work.

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1 Introduction

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

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

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

We test these competing expectations with a new dataset of constituency service and policy work: a near census of legislator contacts with federal agencies from 2007 to 2020. Recent work using data on congressional correspondence has yielded important findings regarding distributive politics (Mills and Kalaf-Hughes, 2015), the policy strategies of cross-pressured legislators (Ritchie, 2018), , and the role of ideology in congressional oversight (Lowande, 2019). Except for work by Lowande et al. (2019) on descriptive representation and Powell et al. (2023) on money in politics, this emerging scholarship has focused on policy work (not constituency service). Adding to this work, our theory and research design focus on simultaneous shifts in constituency service and policy work.

Given the difficulty in collecting these data, previous work has been restricted to small subsets of agencies and, thus, a small subset of policy domains. Our larger dataset enables us to comprehensively test how the behavior of legislators shifts as they gain institutional power and ensures that our conclusions are not limited to subsets of the executive branch.

To assess absolute and relative shifts in legislator contacts to agencies, we hand-code the content of 511,029 (of our total 611,239) requests as policy work or constituency service. Doing so also yields many illuminating descriptives about modern legislator behavior. For example, over 80% of contacts are on behalf of constituents, and less than 20% focus on policy work.

We find evidence for both of the countervailing effects of experience and institutional power that we theorize, supporting both theories of legislator behavior that focus on *legislator capacity* and those that focus on *shifting priorities*. As expected by theories focusing on both capacity and priorities, more experienced and powerful legislators do significantly more policy work. Critically, however, the magnitude of the effect of increasing capacity on constituency service offsets the effect of shifting priorities toward policy work. Even as legislators' attention shifts towards policy as they gain power in Washington, they maintain or increase levels of constituency service. Moreover, when voters in a district replace an experienced legislator with a new legislator, they receive less constituency service *and* less policy work on their behalf. Voters do not face a trade-off between powerful and attentive representatives.

These findings are robust; they are not the result of exogenous variation in constituent demand, differences across districts, or differences across legislators. Our research designs limit the influence of any potential

variation in constituent demand by leveraging within-legislator and within-district comparisons. Moreover, through a series of additional analyses, we find little evidence that constituents shift demands to more established legislators when a new representative is elected.

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

We proceed as follows. Section 2 explains divergent predictions about how institutional position and tenure affect legislators' behavior. Section 3 explains our data collection process and summary statistics. Section 4 shows that as legislators gain experience and institutional power, they maintain or increase their levels of constituency service, even as they shift their priorities toward policy work. Section 5 examines alternative explanations. Section 6 highlights the implications of these findings for theories of legislative behavior and institutional reform debates.

2 Do Experience and Power Increase or Decrease Constituency Service?

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

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

As elected officials garner more experience in Congress, one prediction from formal models of accountability is that legislators will provide more constituency service as their capacity to do so increases. An influential set of formal theory papers argues that voters are fundamentally engaged in a screening task: attempting to identify elected officials who can 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 chances of reelection if they can exceed constituents' expectations of the level of service that another candidate would provide. These models predict that as a legislator's resources and capacity increase, they will increase their level of constituency service (Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita, 2006, Proposition 1).

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

The low level of congressional capacity in the modern Congress serves as a major constraint on Congress's ability to function (LaPira et al., 2020). Experience in office and institutional power may increase an individual legislator's capacity in many ways. Because many of these mechanisms are observationally equivalent, we focus on capacity in general and three mechanisms by which experience and institutional power may affect behavior: 1) increased resources, 2) increased organizational efficiency, and 3) an increased likelihood of success when making a request.

Mechanism 1: Increased Resources

As legislators acquire more institutional power, they usually gain more resources. For example, becoming chair of a Congressional committee allows legislators to direct committee staff and a larger budget. Staff provide legislators with the capacity to accomplish their goals (DeGregorio, 1994; Hall, 1996; Hertel-Fernandez et al., 2019; Montgomery and Nyhan, 2017; McCrain, 2018; Crosson et al., 2020; Reynolds, 2020) and may counteract the power of lobbyists (Hall and Deardorff, 2006). Even if committee resources are earmarked for policy work, they can still increase a chair's capacity for constituency service if they free up personal office resources for constituency service.

Mechanism 2: Increased Organizational Efficiency

More organized legislator offices are better able to help constituents navigate the federal bureaucracy. On average, more experienced legislators should have better systems that allow them to make more constituency service requests than new legislators. For example, Ommundsen (2023) finds that more experienced legislators and senior staff are more productive. Newly-elected legislators must hire staff, open district offices, and establish procedures in their office for handling constituency service requests. In terms of formal models, office organization increases legislators' capacity (Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita, 2006).

Mechanism 3: Increased Likelihood of Success

In fulfilling statutory missions, agency officials use broad discretion to prioritize resources as they process visa, permit, and grant applications, regulating compliance with environmental, health, and labor laws, and much more. Legislators are in a position to influence these decisions. Agency staff often assign special importance to elected officials' requests, tagging congressional correspondence as "VIP." Agency protocols require faster response deadlines and higher signature levels for replies to members of Congress. Bureaucrats actively build relationships and reputations that enhance their standing among members of Congress and those who have their ear (Carpenter, 2001). If agency staff aim to grow their coalition of political supporters, we expect them to accommodate congressional requests frequently.

As legislators gain power, bureaucrats may become more responsive. More powerful legislators can more easily alter an agency's budget or create additional work through Congressional hearings. As a result, agencies may prioritize requests from more powerful members of Congress. For example, Mills and Kalaf-Hughes (2015) find that the Federal Aviation Administration was more likely to grant the requests of senior members of Congress. Lowande (2019) finds that agencies systematically prioritize the requests of majority party legislators. A related literature finds that seniority and committee membership affect the distribution of earmarked spending in agency budgets (Lazarus, 2010). Increased marginal returns may incentivize more powerful legislators to make more requests (Cain et al., 1987).[1]

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

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

2.2 Shifting Priorities: Why Experience and Power Could *Decrease* Constituency Service

Political science literature on Congressional careers offers a different set of expectations for how legislator behavior may change in response to increased experience and power. In addition to reelection goals, legislators have policy goals, and different institutional positions allow legislators to advance different goals (Fenno, 1973). As Butler et al. (2012, 475) conclude, "The service-policy divide is thus an important theoretical lens through which legislative behavior can be viewed." As legislators gain experience and power, the marginal impact of the resources they allocate to policy work increases. Powerful legislators thus have incentives to shift their attention to policy work.

As legislators spend more time in Washington, they may also become detached from their district. Fenno (1978) documents how some members of Congress catch "Potomac fever." As legislators spend more time in office and attain more influential institutional roles, legislators might focus on policy priorities and less on the particular demands of their constituents.

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

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

Formal models of legislator behavior predict that as legislators prioritize policy work in Washington, the ratio of constituency service to policy work will decrease. All else equal, they will then provide lower levels of constituency service to their district. In the model in Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita (2006), this would occur as legislators place a lower priority on constituency service.

If legislators' priorities shift over their careers or as they gain power, more experienced and powerful legislators will allocate more *staff* to policy work over constituency service. Likewise, if members shift their *attention* from their district to their career in Washington (in Congress or after), their relative level of attention to constituent issues will decrease.

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

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

Table 1 and Figure 1 show potential changes in the absolute volume of constituency service and the ratio of constituency service to policy work due to *changes in capacity* and *shifting priorities*. The bottom left cell of Table 1 shows our expectations if capacity increases but priorities remain unchanged (Subfigure a of Figure 1). The top right cell of Table 1 shows our expectations if priorities change and capacity remains unchanged (Subfigure b

of Figure 1) or insufficiently changed (any outcome in the lower, lighter-shaded region of Figure 1, Subfigure d) to compensate for a given magnitude of priority shift. The top-left cell of Table 1 shows our expectations if both mechanisms affect behavior *and* the magnitude of the effect of increased capacity is large enough to overcome the countervailing effect of shifting priorities (any outcome in the upper, darker-shaded region of Figure 1, Subfigure d, including the outcome shown in Subfigure c).

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

	Sufficient increase in capacity	**Insufficient change in capacity**
Priority shifts to policy work	• Δ Level of service: 0 or $\uparrow$ • Δ Ratio of $\frac{\text{service}}{\text{policy}}$: $\downarrow$	• Δ Level of service: $\downarrow$ • Δ Ratio of $\frac{\text{service}}{\text{policy}}$: $\downarrow$
No change in priorities	• Δ Level of service: $\uparrow$ • Δ Ratio of $\frac{\text{service}}{\text{policy}}$: 0	• Δ Level of service: 0 • Δ Ratio of $\frac{\text{service}}{\text{policy}}$: 0

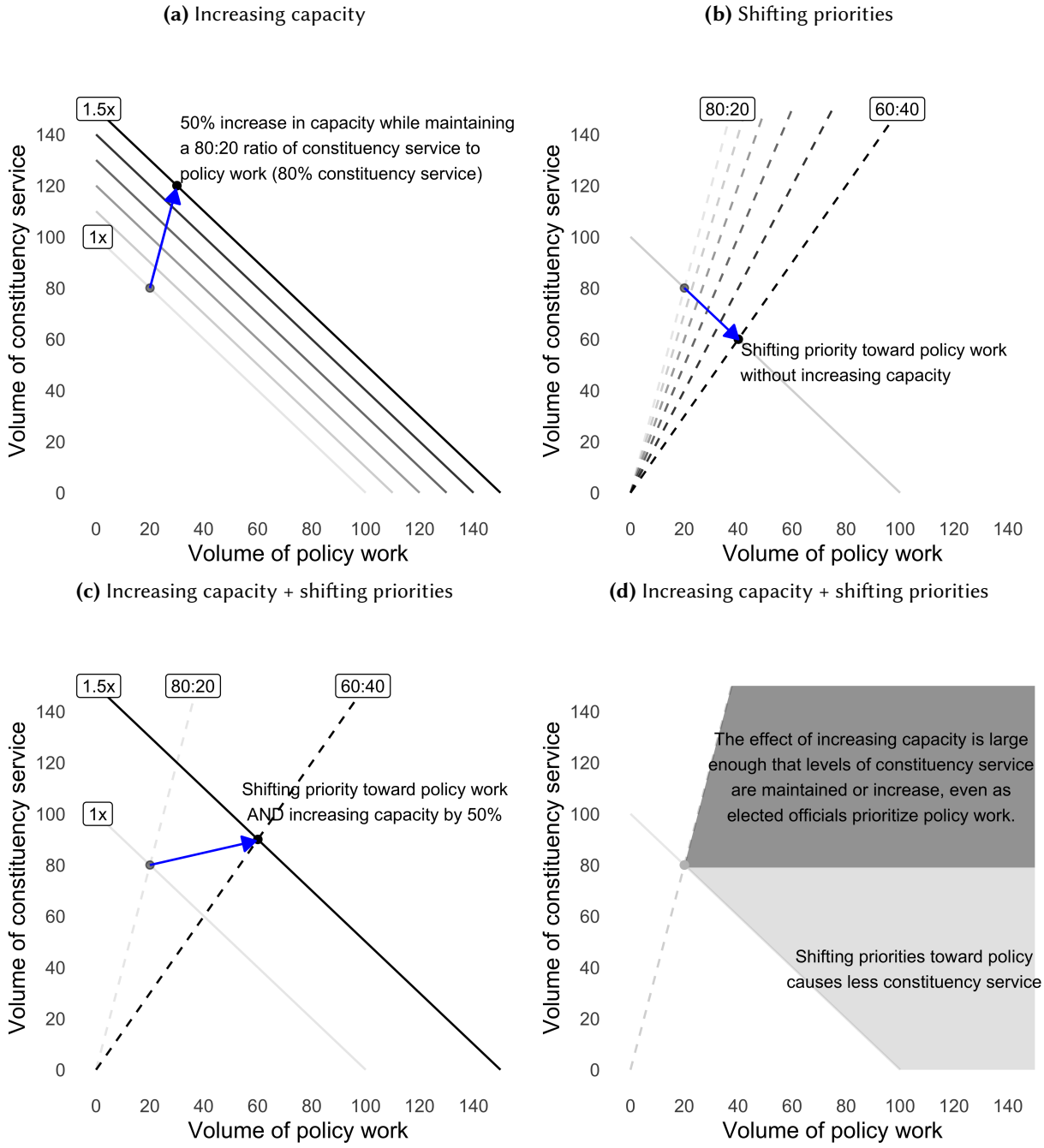
Figure 1 formalizes the potential outcomes implied by our theory to clarify the conditions under which constituency service will increase or decrease as an elected official's capacity and priorities change. For simplicity, Figure 1 assumes a baseline capacity of 100 (e.g., 100 requests to federal agencies per year) and a baseline ratio of constituency service to policy work of 80:20 (80% constituency service). It visualizes potential outcomes for changes in capacity extending up to 150% of baseline capacity. The level of policy work, x, done by elected official, i, depends on their capacity, c, and relative priority for constituency service versus policy work, $p \in [0, 1]$ (observed as the share of requests that are constituency service rather than policy work) such that $x_i = c_i(1 - p_i)$. An elected official's level of constituency service, y_i, likewise depends on their overall capacity and priorities such that $y_i = c_i p_i$. For any given level of capacity, $y_i = c_i - x_i$ specifies a line of possible divisions of capacity between policy work and constituency service. Increasing capacity pushes this "capacity frontier" line to the upper right (Figure 1, Subfigure a). Where on this line a legislator falls at any point in time depends on their relative priority for policy work and constituency service (Figure 1, Subfigure b). If capacity and priorities shift simultaneously, priorities can shift toward policy while levels of constituency service are maintained or even increase (Figure 1, Subfigure c). The relative magnitude of these two effects determines whether constituency service will increase or decrease (Figure 1, Subfigure d). When $c_{i1}p_{i1} > c_{i2}p_{i2}$, constituency service decreases between time 1 and time 2. When $c_{i1}p_{i1} < c_{i2}p_{i2}$ constituency service increases. When $c_{i1}p_{i1} = c_{i2}p_{i2}$, there is no change in constituency service.

2.4 Alternative Explanations for Changes in Constituency Service: Constituent Demand

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

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

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



Legislators may also use their official resources to encourage requests from constituents for help navigating the federal bureaucracy through workshops, newsletters to constituents, social media posts, or stories in local papers. Such constituent outreach may be a primary way constituencies discover that their elected officials can help. If legislators use increased staff budgets or organizational capacities to solicit constituent requests, constituent demands may increase as legislator power increases (Cain et al., 1987). This is entirely consistent with our theory that increased power and capacity enable legislators to provide both constituency services and policy work. Our theory and tests do not require that legislators allocate resources to soliciting constituency

service demand as they gain power, but if they do, the underlying cause would be shifting legislator capacity, not some exogenous shift in constituent demand that could confound our analysis. Thus, changes in constituent demand that result from legislators' efforts are not a problem for our analysis. Indeed, constituent service outreach may be a key mechanism for the capacity effects we theorize.

A more challenging form of constituent demand could exist if constituents redirect their requests toward legislators whom they see as more powerful. Constituents might expect more powerful legislators to be more helpful and, as a result, direct their demands toward those legislators. If constituents strategically redirect their demands from representatives who lost a chair position to representatives who gained a chair position, this could partially confound our analysis. More realistically, if constituents redirect requests for help away from new legislators toward longer-serving legislators, we might observe increases in demand targeted at more experienced legislators of a delegation whenever a less experienced legislator replaces another more experienced member of their state's delegation. To address such concerns, we conduct a series of analyses to test alternative constituency demand-driven explanations in Section 5. We find little evidence of requests spilling over to more experienced and powerful members within a state delegation.

3 Data: A Census of Legislator Requests to Federal Agencies

To assess how experience and power affect constituency service, we filed 434 Freedom Of Information Act (FOIA) requests with all federal departments, agencies, and sub-agencies for all records of incoming communication from members of Congress between January 1, 2007, and the date of our request.[2] Between February 2017 and February 2024, we received records on 611,239 instances of members of Congress contacting 92 federal agencies from 2007 to 2020.[3] These contacts include letters from individual legislators, committee chairs in their capacity as committee chairs, and groups of legislators. We had sufficient information on 511,029 of these contacts to hand-code for whether they focus on constituency service or policy. Models in Section 4.1 and Section 4.2 use the full sample. Models in Section 4.3 and Section 4.4 use the hand-coded sample.

3.1 Data processing and coding

Upon receiving records of congressional requests, we extracted author names from the text matching variations of legislators' names using `legislators` R package (Judge-Lord and Greifer, 2022). We then merged in data about members' districts, partisanship, institutional positions, and careers (Lewis et al., 2024), committee membership and leadership positions [Stewart and Woon (2017); the @unitedstates-project (2025), and committee oversight (Lewis and Selin, 2012).[4]

We use the text or summaries of letters to classify legislators' reasons for contacting federal agencies into five types: requests on behalf of (1) individual constituents, (2) individual corporations, (3) nonprofits and local governments, (4) policy work on behalf of specific industries, or (5) general policy work. Our coding process began with the authors coding a representative sample of records using our codebook (see Supplemental Information). We then trained research assistants to continue the coding. The first several thousand letters were double-coded. For example, of over 10,000 letters for the Environmental Protection Agency, the first 2,500

[2] 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 federal judges requiring compliance with our request. Our efforts yielded records from every department except the State Department, which has an infamous backlog and has been processing our requests for over seven years. Our data also include most independent agencies, commissions, boards, executive offices (e.g., the White House Council on Environmental Quality and U.S. Trade Representative), and pseudo-governmental institutions like Amtrak and the U.S. Export-Import Bank. By rigorously pursuing a census of records, we limit any response bias that may exist in more easily obtained samples.

[3] Some agencies did not provide records for the full span of years. Our models include legislator-agency fixed effects to account for any left censoring, ensuring that our comparisons leverage variation within each agency. Because FOIA requests often take several years, data for years after 2020 are still incomplete.

[4] Our procedures and code for converting the raw records from federal agencies into the dataset required for our analysis are available at github.com/judgelord/correspondence.

were double-coded. Our overall inter-coder agreement was 0.78, which rose to 0.9 when we removed coding decisions where coders were uncertain.

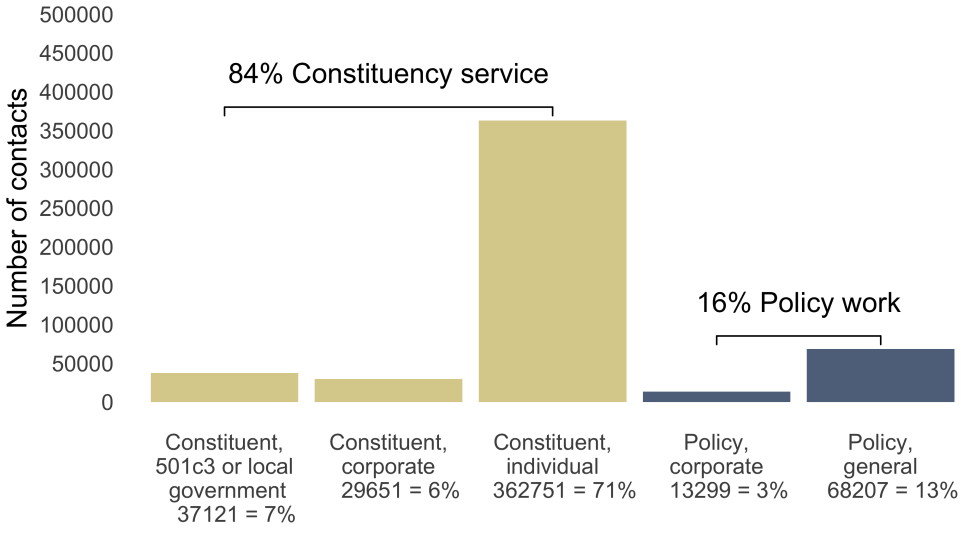
3.2 Who Contacts the Bureaucracy and Why?

Before testing theories of how legislator behavior changes as they acquire experience and power, we use our extensive new data set to answer outstanding descriptive questions about legislator behavior in U.S. politics. These descriptive findings regarding the level, variation, and reasons for legislator requests to federal agencies are only possible with our census of legislator requests. Overall, we find a general focus on constituency service but massive variation across legislators.

Legislator Contacts with Federal Agencies Focus on Constituency Service

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

Figure 2: Legislator Requests to Federal Agencies by Type, 2007-2020



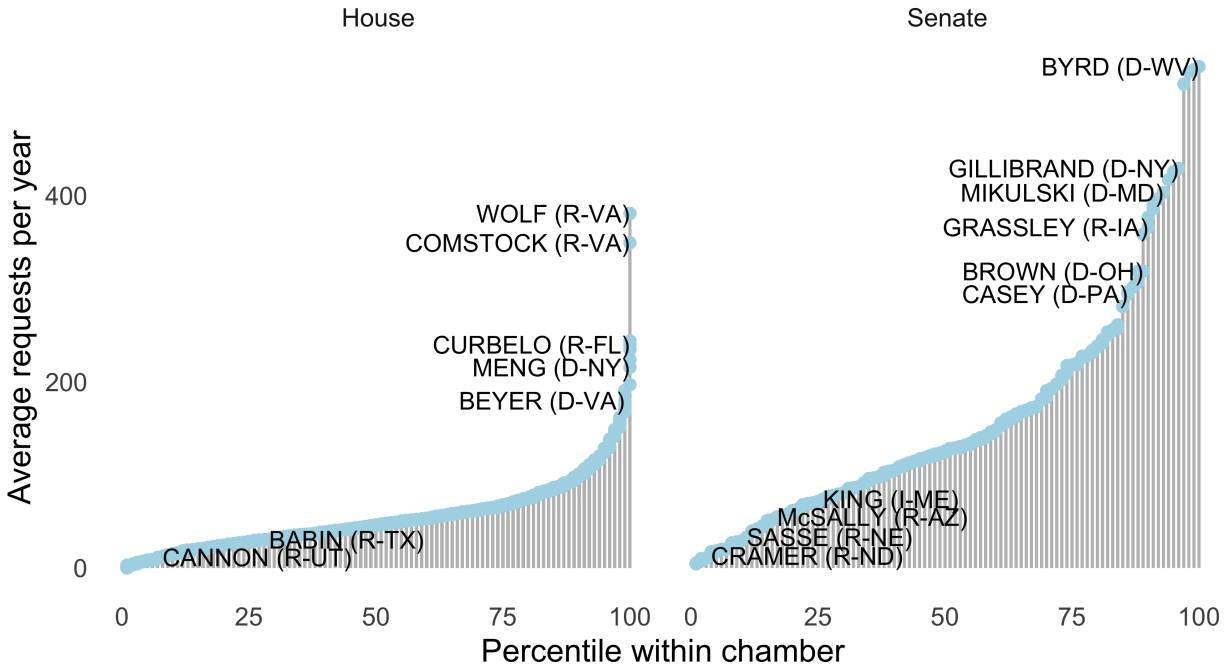
To assess whether legislators shift their priorities as they gain experience and power, we further group requests into a broader "constituency service" category (including service for individuals, corporations, and nonprofits) and "policy work" category (including both general and industry-focused policy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

Levels of Contact with Federal Agencies are Highly Unequal

Legislators vary significantly in how often they contact federal agencies. Since 2016, Gini coefficients for inequality in the number of contacts per year among members of each chamber range between 0.56 and 0.90, exceeding the Gini coefficient for income inequality in every country the World Bank reported in 2023. To visualize this variation, Figure 3 shows the average number of contacts per year for House members (left panel)

and senators (right panel).[5] On average, senators in our data contacted agencies 148 times per year, while House members averaged 54 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.

Figure 3: Variation in Average Legislator Requests by Percentile



Among the most prolific senators, Senator Byrd (D-WV) averaged 538 contacts per year, Senator Nelson (D-FL) averaged 535, and Senator Webb (D-VA) averaged 533 contacts per year. Rep. Barbara Comstock averaged 349 contacts per year. Comstock replaced Rep. Frank Wolf (R-VA), who averaged 381 contacts per year and inherited many of his staff. Nevertheless, Comstock's first year saw the volume of contacts on behalf of Virginia's 10th district dip slightly to 245, the lowest level in our time period.

4 The Effect of Institutional Power and Experience

Using this dataset of requests to federal agencies, we estimate the effect of institutional power on legislator behavior. First, Section 4.1 and Section 4.2 test theories rooted in legislator *capacity* by modeling the effects of institutional power and experience on a legislator's total number of requests to federal agencies. Next, Section 4.3 test theories rooted in legislators' *priorities* by modeling the effects of institutional power on a legislator's ratio of constituency service to policy work. Section 4.4 then examines the impact of power and experience on a legislator's *level* of constituency service, showing that increasing capacity allows legislators to maintain levels of constituency service even as they prioritize policy work.

4.1 The Effect of Institutional Power on Legislator *Capacity*

Our analysis in this section is at the legislator-agency-year level. Our primary models are difference-in-differences regressions, similar to the specifications in Berry and Fowler (2016). Our most stringent specifications test for differences within legislator-agency pairs (Equation 1).[6]

[5] Figure 1 in the Supplemental Appendix shows the number of requests per legislator over time.

[6] We drop ten member-year level observations where members switched chambers mid-congress.

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

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

Assuming that legislators' trends in the number of requests to a given agency follow parallel paths over time, β represents the average effect of changing institutional position on their number of requests *per agency*. We focus on three measures of institutional power: (1) whether they are a committee chair, (2) whether they are the ranking member of a committee, and (3) whether they are members of a prestige committee. Each position represents a different way legislators can acquire more power. As a legislator becomes a committee chair or ranking member, they have increased responsibilities when drafting and revising legislation. They also have increased access to committee resources, including power to direct committee staff. Similarly, legislators who join more prestigious committees gain opportunities to shepherd policy through the legislative process.[7]

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, (Grimmer and Powell 2013, @BerryFowler2016)). To violate the parallel trends assumption, legislators must differentially alter their rates of contacting federal agencies 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. Because legislators may make more requests to a president of the same party (Berry et al., 2010), it is a particular concern that legislators obtain new committee assignments when their party moves into or out of the majority or at the same time as the president's party changes. To address these concerns, we include indicators for whether the legislator's party is the majority in year t, (m_{it}) and if the legislator is from the same party as the president in year t (p_{it}). We cluster standard errors at the legislator level (ϵ_{ijt}).

We also include indicators for legislators' first six years in Congress (House or Senate), $\sum_{s=1}^{6} \eta_s \text{tenure}_{it}$ as controls. This specification, however, is not the best specification to assess how electing a less experienced representative affects the number of requests made on behalf of a given district. In Section 4.2, we test the effect of legislator experience by estimating how electing a new representative affects the number of requests made on behalf of a district with a difference-in-differences specification at the district level.

Table 2 shows estimates of the effect of institutional power on the number of requests a legislator makes to federal agencies. All coefficients represent the average additional requests per year *per agency* (per legislator per year effects are simply these coefficients times 92, the number of agencies).

Model 1 (the first column of Table 2) shows differences across legislators. Legislators with more institutional power make more requests. Committee chairs, ranking members, and members of prestige committees all make

[7]To measure committee prestige, we take a revealed preference approach (what members think is most valuable) using party rules that limit members to serving on only one of certain desirable committees. For House members, these "exclusive" committees are Appropriations, Energy & Commerce, Financial Services, Rules, and Ways & Means (Congressional Research Service, 2022). For Senators, these exclusive ("Super A") Committees are: Appropriations, Armed Services, Finance, and Foreign Relations (Congressional Research Service, 2024).

Table 2: The Effect of Institutional Power on Total Requests to Federal Agencies

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Dependent variable	**Count**	**Count**	**Count**	**Log(Count+1)**
Committee chair	0.819**	0.249**	0.250**	0.047**
	(0.163)	(0.092)	(0.092)	(0.012)
Ranking member	0.903**	0.167†	0.175†	0.031**
	(0.172)	(0.101)	(0.101)	(0.011)
Prestige committee	0.400**	0.073	0.072	0.010
	(0.072)	(0.049)	(0.049)	(0.007)
First year	−0.175**	−0.487**	−0.488**	−0.106**
	(0.055)	(0.078)	(0.077)	(0.012)
Second year	−0.099	−0.396**	−0.415**	−0.048**
	(0.083)	(0.081)	(0.080)	(0.011)
Third year	0.069	−0.181**	−0.184**	−0.034**
	(0.064)	(0.069)	(0.067)	(0.009)
Fourth year	0.055	−0.202**	−0.237**	−0.022*
	(0.102)	(0.074)	(0.071)	(0.009)
Fifth year	0.000	−0.126*	−0.117†	−0.025**
	(0.059)	(0.064)	(0.064)	(0.007)
Sixth year	0.031	−0.084	−0.068	−0.015*
	(0.124)	(0.077)	(0.076)	(0.007)
Majority	−0.141*	0.019	0.023	−0.010*
	(0.060)	(0.033)	(0.033)	(0.004)
President's party	−0.135*	0.027	0.029	0.011**
	(0.056)	(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.004)
All legislators	✓	✓		✓
Served at least 2nd term			✓	
Observations	435,999	435,999	417,987	435,999
Year x agency fixed effects	X	X	X	X
Legislator x agency fixed effects		X	X	X

† p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01

This table shows how the number of requests changes as legislators acquire power. Column 1 shows average differences across committee positions and years in Congress. Column 2 presents difference-in-differences estimates. Column 3 subsets to legislators who serve at least three years. Column 4 makes the Log of the counts + 1 the dependent variable. All coefficients represent average additional requests per year per agency per legislator. Legislator per year effects are simply these coefficients times the number of agencies in the data.

substantially more requests than other legislators. Because we estimate the effects of becoming a committee chair and being a member of a prestige committee in the same model, these effects are additive: prestige committee chairs may make more requests than non-prestige committee chairs who make more requests than non-chairs.

However, these cross-sectional differences may be the result of other legislator characteristics. If party leaders assign legislators who are better at their jobs to more prestigious committee positions, then the estimates from Model 1 confound legislators' overall ability with their institutional position. To address potential confounding, Models 2-4 (Columns 2-4 of Table 2) show the difference-in-differences specification in Equation 1.

More Powerful Legislators Make More Requests to Federal Agencies

Across all measures of institutional power, acquiring power increases the number of requests a given legislator makes. Becoming a committee chair causes an increase of 0.25 requests *per agency* (95-percent confidence interval [0.07, 0.43]. Across all 92 agencies, this represents an increase of approximately 23 additional requests per year, **a 27% increase** over the average requests per year in our data.

Other measures of institutional power included in these models (ranking member and prestige committee member) are also associated with increased levels of contact with federal agencies, but these effects are only significant at the .05 level in the cross-sectional model (Models 1) and, for ranking member, in the difference in differences design with the logged number of contacts as the dependent variable (Model 4).

Evidence about the effects of majority party status or having a co-partisan president is less conclusive. Majority party status is negatively associated with contacting agencies only in Models 1 and 4. On average, having a co-partisan president is negatively associated with contacting agencies (Model 1). However, models of within-legislator variation seem to show that gaining a co-partisan president leads to making more requests (only statistically significant with the logged number of contacts as the dependent variable in Model 4).

Figure 4: Predicted Number of Total Requests to Federal Agencies (Within Legislator Difference in Differences), 2007-2020

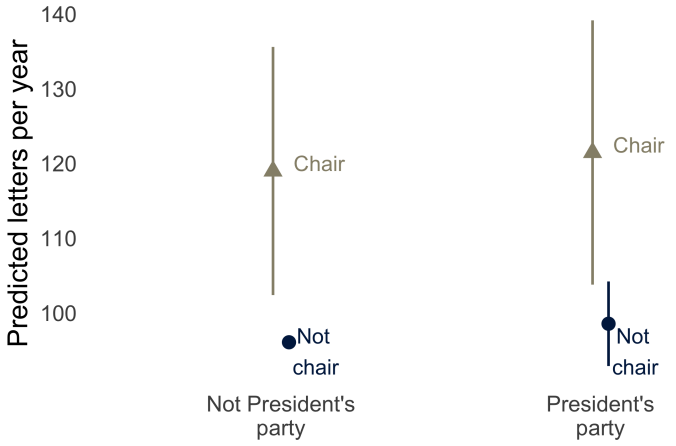


Figure 4 shows the predicted total number of letters per year by whether a legislator is a member of the president's party and whether they are a chair (comparing predictions for counterfactuals where the same legislator did and did not receive a chair position in their sixth year).[8] For an average member in our data, a chair

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

position causes an increase from about 90 to about 115 requests per year, regardless of whether the president is a co-partisan.

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

The results in Table 2 show that when legislators acquire more power, they make more requests of agencies. We now turn to the effect of experience: how does a district's overall representation change after a new legislator replaces an experienced legislator?

4.2 The Effect of Electing a New Representative

Section 4.1 demonstrated that acquiring institutional power gives legislators the capacity to contact agencies more. This section shows similar capacity effects as they gain experience in the institution. 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. Within-district comparisons enable us to assess the costs or benefits of electing a new representative compared to an incumbent.

Even without the aid of statistical models, we can see effects in the raw counts of requests on behalf of a district before and after a new legislator replaces a more experienced legislator. For example, Figure 5 shows the change in contacts from legislators representing Wisconsin's 7th district in the House (top) and the Senate (bottom). Consistent with the pattern shown in cross-sectional and difference-in-difference designs described below, newly-elected Representative Sean Duffy initially provided less constituency service than twenty-term Representative Dave Obey but was on par with Obey's average number of contacts by year three. Indeed, the only year in our data with fewer contacts from the representative of Wisconsin's 7th district than the average member of the House (the dotted line in the top panel of Figure 5) was Representative Duffy's first year in Congress. Figure 5 shows similar dips in the level of service in the transition from Senator Feingold to Senator Johnson and from Senator Kohl to Senator Baldwin.

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

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

γ_i is a district-specific fixed effect that accounts for each district's particular demographic characteristics, along with average levels of demand from district residents. δ_t is a year fixed effect that controls for common shocks. Our key result of interest, β_1, is the effect of a district electing a new representative. To understand how the effect of a new representative changes over time, we estimate district-level differences for a legislator's second (β_2) through sixth-year (β_6).[9] (Seven or more years is the reference category.)

Electoral Turnover Has Costs When districts elect a new representative or senator, people in the district experience a sharp decrease in requests made on their behalf. Rather than experienced legislators forgetting

[9] Despite showing nearly identical results, within-district analysis differs fundamentally from within-legislator analysis. In each election, each district allows its incumbent to acquire another term or replaces them. This differs from within-legislator comparisons because legislators can only acquire more tenure or leave the chamber. A within-legislator analysis estimates the service provided by incumbents with more or less experience; it cannot estimate the impact of the choice of an incumbent versus a new representative.

Figure 5: The Effect of Electing New Legislators in Wisconsin on Total Requests to Federal Agencies

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.

The first column of Table 3 provides cross-sectional differences across districts represented by a new member and legislators in their first six years in office (Equation 2 minus the district fixed effect, γ_i). Districts represented by new legislators receive substantially lower levels of service. On average, districts with a new representative have 34 fewer requests made on their behalf. The magnitude of this difference shrinks for districts represented by legislators in their second year (30 fewer 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 demographics and demand for service, Column 2 of Table 3 provides the estimated effects from the difference-in-differences specification from Equation 2. In this specification, we see a large causal effect of a new member taking over: electing a new member causes the number of requests on behalf of a given district to **decrease by 30%** , or 25 letters per year (95-percent confidence interval [-33.98, -16.02]).

The effect of electing a new representative, however, dissipates quickly. Districts have significantly fewer requests made on their behalf when represented by a legislator in their second year, but not as drastic as the difference observed in the first year. After the second year, the differences are smaller. This phenomenon—new legislators providing substantially fewer requests—persists when examining the House (Column 3) and the

Table 3: The Effect of Electing a New Representative on Total Requests to Federal Agencies

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Dependent variable	**Per year**	**Per year**	**Per year**	**Per year**
New member	−34.426**	−24.571**	−8.705**	−119.168**
	(4.163)	(4.582)	(2.467)	(16.345)
Second year	−30.189**	−20.334**	−4.400	−90.755**
	(5.559)	(5.226)	(3.449)	(21.569)
Third year	−13.871**	−4.120	6.567*	−47.812**
	(4.408)	(4.516)	(2.555)	(15.220)
Fourth year	−14.326*	−4.575	9.233*	−35.995†
	(6.549)	(5.989)	(4.595)	(20.834)
Fifth year	−13.436**	−5.257	2.226	−31.704*
	(3.824)	(3.829)	(2.307)	(13.025)
Sixth year	−10.889	−2.710	5.211	−5.532
	(7.816)	(7.506)	(5.990)	(26.684)
All districts	✓	✓		
House only			✓	
Senate only				✓
Observations	7, 666	7, 666	6, 224	1, 442
District fixed effects		X	X	X
Year fixed effects	X	X	X	X

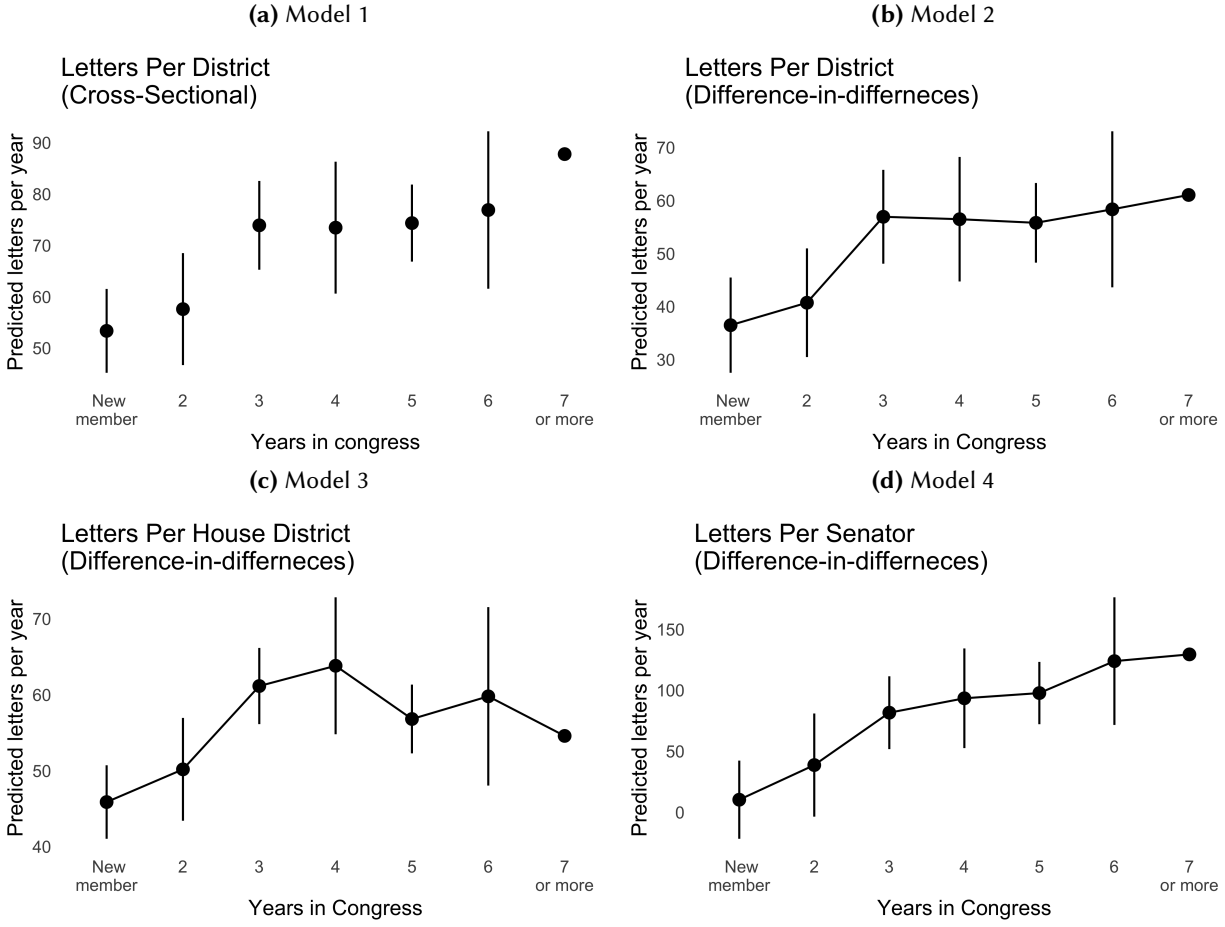
† p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01

This table shows how contacts on behalf of a district vary across districts. Model 1 is a cross-sectional comparison excluding district fixed effects. The second column is a district x year difference in differences model. Column 3 is the difference in differences model subsetted to U.S. House districts only. Column 3 shows the difference in differences model subsetted to U.S. Senate delegations only.

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

For each model in Table 3, Figure 6 shows the predicted total number of letters per district per year by whether a district is represented by a new legislator (compared to counterfactuals where the same legislator has been serving for seven or more years).[10]

Figure 6: Predicted Number of Total Requests to Federal Agencies Per District, 2007-2020



[10] Predictions are based on a district with average annual contacts.

4.3 The Effect of Experience and Institutional Power on Legislator *Priorities*

To assess legislators' ratio of constituency service to policy work, we use the 511,029 hand-coded requests described in Section 3. The dependent variable is the number of constituency service requests divided by the number of policy requests per legislator per year. These models test whether legislators' priorities shift among goals as they gain experience and power. Otherwise, they are the same as Equation 1.

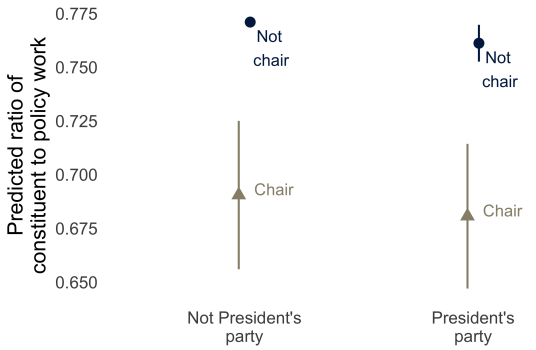
While the ratio of constituency service to policy work is conditional on the levels of each, the inference we make about the ratio does not depend on these levels; we are not using the ratio to infer the level (e.g., that a lower share of constituency service means a lower level). Instead, our theory regarding prioritization is about the ratio, regardless of the level.

Constituent Service is a Smaller Proportion of the Work of Experienced and Powerful Legislators

Table 4 shows that legislators decrease the ratio of constituency service to policy work as they obtain experience and powerful positions in Congress. The first column of Table 4 shows how the ratio differs *across* legislators with different committee positions. Column 2 of Table 4 provides the estimated effects from the difference-in-differences specification. We estimate that becoming a committee chair causes the ratio of constituency service to policy work to decrease by 0.08 (95-percent confidence interval [-0.12, -0.05]). Becoming a ranking member causes the ratio to decrease by 0.04 (95-percent confidence interval [-0.07, -0.01]).

Figure 7: Predicted Ratio of Constituency Service to Policy Work (Within Legislator Difference in Differences), 2007-2020

(a) Predicted Ratio by Presidents' Party



(b) Predicted Ratio by Years of Service in Congress

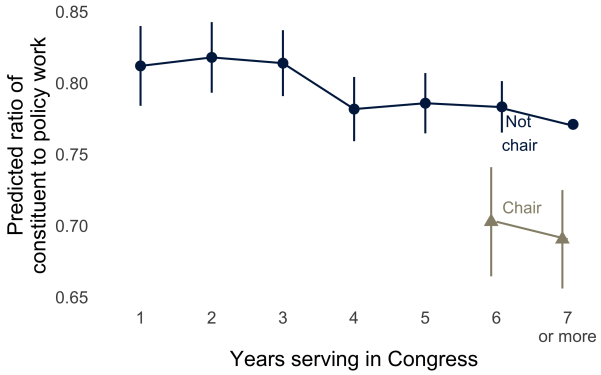


Figure 7 shows the predicted ratio of constituency service to policy work. Subfigure *a* shows predictions by committee chair status and whether that member has a co-partisan president. We estimate chair effects for our most senior category of "7 or more years" (a plausible time for acquiring a chair position). Subfigure *b* shows predictions for counterfactuals where the same legislator did and did not receive a chair position in their sixth year. There is a significant difference when members gain a committee chair position or four or more years of experience. Notably, whether a member has a co-partisan president does not cause a significant difference.

Taken together, these findings about how the ratio of constituency service to policy work varies across legislators show that as legislators acquire more power and experience, their contacts with the bureaucracy become more policy-focused.

4.4 Experienced and Powerful Legislators Maintain Levels of Constituency Service, While Also Prioritizing Policy Work

Increasing capacity and shifting priorities are not mutually exclusive. When legislators acquire capacity, they make more requests of federal agencies. At the same time, higher-capacity legislators allocate a larger share

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

	(1)	(2)
Dependent variable	**Ratio**	**Ratio**
Committee chair	−0.066**	−0.081**
	(0.017)	(0.018)
Ranking member	−0.005	−0.039**
	(0.014)	(0.015)
Prestige committee	−0.010	0.000
	(0.008)	(0.000)
First year	0.052**	0.041**
	(0.010)	(0.014)
Second year	0.056**	0.047**
	(0.009)	(0.013)
Third year	0.059**	0.043**
	(0.010)	(0.012)
Fourth year	0.027**	0.011
	(0.010)	(0.011)
Fifth year	0.032**	0.015
	(0.010)	(0.011)
Sixth year	0.029**	0.012
	(0.009)	(0.009)
Majority	0.022**	0.001
	(0.006)	(0.006)
President's party	−0.030**	−0.010*
	(0.005)	(0.004)
Observations	31, 719	31, 719
Year fixed effects	X	X
Legislator fixed effects		X

† p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01

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

of their efforts toward policy work. That is, we found support for both theories. In this section, we show that the net result of these two simultaneous effects from 2007 to 2020 was that more experienced and powerful legislators did not decrease their *levels* of constituency service, even though they allocated a larger *share* of their attention towards policy.

In Table 3 of the Supplementary Information, we use our hand-coding of agency contacts to assess how legislators' levels of constituency service requests change as their capacity changes. Using the same difference-in-differences specification as in Model 2 of Table 2, we find that a given **legislator** who becomes committee chair makes an additional 0.02 constituency service contacts per agency per year, an increase that is not statistically significant (95 percent confidence interval [-0.1, 0.14]). All models in Table 4 of the Supplementary Information show significant increases in policy work as a legislator gains experience or a committee leadership position.

Similarly, in Table 5 of the Supplementary Information, we use our hand-coding of agency contacts to assess how the level of constituency service requests coming from a given **district** changes when a new member is elected. Using the same difference-in-differences specification as in Model 2 of Table 3, we find that electing a new member causes a significant decrease in the level of constituency service. When a district replaces an experienced member with a new legislator, we estimate 11 fewer *constituency service* contacts per year (95 percent confidence interval [-17.79, -4.1]). All models in Table 6 of the Supplementary Information show significant decreases in policy work done on behalf of a district persisting for at least five years after a new legislator replaces an experienced legislator.

In short, the "shifting priorities" effects were insufficiently large to overpower the "increasing capacity" effects to cause an overall decrease in constituency service among longer-serving or more powerful legislators. Instead, **districts that replaced an experienced legislator with a new legislator saw a significant decrease in both policy work *and* constituency service** for at least two years. The capacity effects overcame the effects of shifting priorities, meaning that longer-serving legislators did more constituency service, not less.

5 The Effects of Demand for Constituency Service

While constituent demand affects the level of constituency service legislators provide, demand-side shifts do not appear to explain the within-legislator or within-district variation we observe with changing committee positions and longer tenure in Congress. Constituent demand does not shift among legislators in ways we would expect to see if shifting constituent demand explained the within-legislator or within-district variation shown in Section 4.

5.1 District Characteristics Affect the Provision of Constituency Service

We find that population size correlates with the overall number of legislator requests. These correlations provide face validity for our measures of legislator behavior, but they also suggest that cross-sectional comparisons may conflate legislator choices with district characteristics.

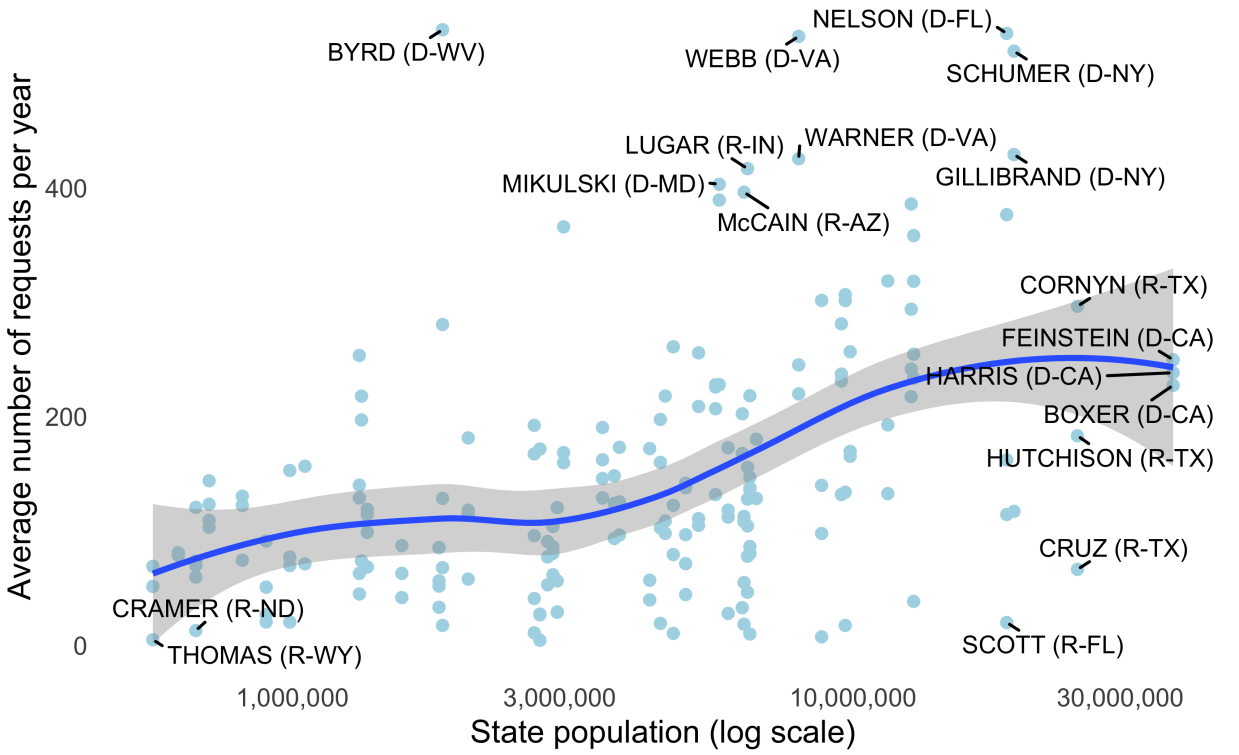
We expect senators who represent larger states to make more requests. Senators from larger states have a larger number of constituents to serve, and they receive a larger budget to handle that increase in requests. Figure 8 shows this is the case: senators from larger states provide more service on average. While the number of legislator requests is associated with population size, Figure 8 also shows significant variation in the level of service senators provide, even among states of similar sizes.

5.2 Do Voters Demand More of More Powerful Legislators?

Can variation in demand for constituency service explain why legislators increas contacts with agencies when they gain experience and committee leadership positions?

We limited the influence of demand when assessing how power and experience affect the levels of constituency service above. For example, our empirical strategies in Section 4 all account for demand based on the characteristics of the district. Because our analyses include either legislator-agency or district fixed effects, we compare how the levels of constituency service change, holding constant demand related to fixed district

Figure 8: Average Number of Total Requests per Senator per Year 2007-2020 by State Population



characteristics. Furthermore, demand generated by legislators is plausibly part of the increased constituency service that we attribute to increased capacity and experience.

Yet, we might expect that a legislator's experience or power could affect constituency demand, even without legislators using their increased capacity and resources to generate demand. For example, constituents could direct their demands to legislators who are more powerful or who have served longer. This section investigates whether such shifts in constituent demand could plausibly explain our results. We find no evidence that higher constituent demand drives experienced members' higher levels of constituency service.

Suppose constituents shift demand based on legislator experience (as required for constituent demand to explain our results). In that case, we should observe them redirecting demands away from newly elected legislators toward other representatives. The most plausible target for these constituent demands would be one of the senators representing the constituent's state. While less plausible, if a new senator replaces a more senior senator, demand could also shift to more senior members of the House.

To assess whether constituents redirect demand toward other, more experienced legislators when new members replace their more experienced incumbent representative, we examine how experienced legislators' levels of constituency service change in response to having new representatives in their state. Using district and year fixed effects, we estimate a series of difference-in-differences regressions where the treatment is new members in the state. Because we are interested in assessing whether constituents with new legislators direct their constituency service demands to more experienced legislators, we restrict the regression to incumbents. Because House members generally do not provide constituency service to people outside their district, we measure the effect of a new Senator in a state delegation. For Senators, we measure new members in the state in two ways: either the proportion of a state delegation that is new or an indicator of whether there is a new

Table 5: Spillover Effects? Examining Whether Constituent Service Requests Are Redirected to Experienced Legislators when a New Legislator is Elected

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Dependent variable	**Per year (CS-only)**	**Per year (CS-only)**	**Per year (CS-only)**
New senator in delegation	3.455†		
	(2.077)		
New member in delegation			−12.535*
			(6.051)
New proportion in delegation		0.583	
		(15.486)	
Observations	7, 074	1, 380	1, 380
All districts	✓		
Senate only		✓	✓
District fixed effects	X	X	X
Year fixed effects	X	X	X

† p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01

The first column estimates the effect of a new Senator replacing an experienced Senator on the level of constituent service that other legislators in the state provide. Columns 2 and 3 show the effect of a new member of a delegation or the portion of new members of a delegation on senators from that delegation.

legislator (House or Senate) in the delegation. As in Section 4.2, we measure the number of requests a district's representative makes in a particular year. Since we aim to test whether constituent demand drives our results, Table 5 shows estimates using requests hand-coded as constituency service. The results for total requests are nearly identical (see Supplemental Information).

The first column of Table 5 estimates the effect of an a new Senator replacing an experienced Senator on all other incumbent legislators from the state shows a marginally significant impact (p<0.1) on the level of constituency service that other legislators provide. Columns 2 and 3 of Table 5 focus only on Senators. They show that either a new member in the delegation or the proportion of new members does not increase incumbents' constituency service (indeed, we see a statistically significant decrease in model 3). These inconsistent weak, null and negative impact of new legislators in a state delegation provides reassurance that there is little evidence of constituents redirecting demand toward other, more experienced legislators in response to having new representatives in their state delegation.

6 Discussion

Most legislator contacts with federal agencies focus on constituency service. While there is massive inequality in the quantity of service that different members provide, we show that this is not the result of long-serving members devoting less attention to their district over time, as the "Potomac Fever" hypothesis suggests. Legislators prioritize policy work as they acquire positions of institutional power. However, simultaneous increases in capacity that come with experience and institutional power more than offset shifting priorities, such that the district constituency receives no less particularistic service from long-serving and powerful legislators.

6.1 Implications for Theory

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

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

Elected officials continue to dedicate substantial resources to constituency service well into their careers and after achieving high-status institutional positions. This evidence that constituency service is a core function of congressional offices calls for renewed attention to the motivations for and effects of constituency service in contemporary American politics. As we collected and coded these data, we spoke to numerous staffers and agency officials. A recurring theme in the data and stories we heard was how constituency service casework led to other activities, including oversight investigations and legislation. Moreover, our data show new legislation leading to new forms of constituency service as legislators helped their constituents attain newly legislated benefits, deal with new paperwork requirements, or avoid new regulatory requirements. While constituency service may have underlying electoral motivations, as formal models suggest, it is also a prominent yet understudied form of legislator behavior in its own right.

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

6.2 Implications for Policy

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

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

6.3 Future Research

While we've focused on understanding the impact of experience and institutional power in this paper, many questions remain ripe for future research. On this same topic, future research should delve into the mechanisms

by which increasing experience and capacity shape legislator behavior. This could include explicit measures of office organization and efficiency and more nuanced measures of institutional power. This could also include measuring agency responsiveness to legislator requests. Likewise, research could examine mechanisms related to shifting priorities.

Perhaps the most pressing question is explaining the massive inequities in legislators' provision of service and policy work we found. This variation is even greater than can be explained by the substantively large effects of experience and power, suggesting that the "service-policy divide" (Butler et al., 2012) offers an incomplete picture of how legislators use their capacity. Why do some legislators provide so much constituency service and others so little?

Finally, future work could include legislators' substantive areas of expertise. Does expertise increase a legislator's capacity to act in certain areas (e.g., certain agencies), leading to more capacity for constituency service? Does increased institutional power lead legislators to develop expertise, for example, in certain committee work or specialized policy work that builds their capacity to influence certain agencies?

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

7 Conclusion

As legislators gain experience and power, they shift their priorities to policy work. Simultaneously, they gain institutional positions that increase their capacity to make more requests to federal agencies. Consistent with our theory that experience increases capacity, we also show that legislators make fewer requests at the start of their careers. New legislators do substantially less constituency service and policy work than their more experienced colleagues. Crucially, for the period we study, the increase in capacity was large enough relative to the shift in attention toward policy work that legislators maintained or even increased levels of constituency service as they gained institutional power. Voters do not face a trade-off between powerful and attentive representatives.

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Supplemental Information: How Shifting Priorities and Capacity Affect Policy Work and Constituency Service

Evidence from a Census of Legislator Requests to U.S. Federal Agencies

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1 FOIA Data

Our data represent a near census of requests to federal departments, agencies, and sub-agencies. We received records from every department other than the Department of State,[1] and most independent agencies, commissions, boards, executive offices (e.g., the Council on Environmental Quality and U.S. Trade Representative), and pseudo-governmental institutions like Amtrak and the US Export-Import Bank. Table 1 shows the distribution of all 627,356 records we have processed. In the paper, we focus on 611239 of these requests sent from these agencies from January 1, 2007, to December 31, 2020. Because FOIA requests often take several years, data for years after 2020 are still incomplete.

1.1 Variation in Responses to Identical FOIA Request

Responses to our FOIA requests (Table 1) varied significantly. Most agencies offered logs of congressional correspondence, which record a date, sender, summary of the request, and other information used by agency staff to process and respond to requests. Logs generally include any written requests, as well as many phone and email records. For example, between May 2015 and December 2017, the Department of Justice Office of Administrative Law Judges received 132 emails, 109 telephone calls, and only 54 letters. Between 2007 and 2017, the Postal Regulatory Commission received 100 emails, 30 faxes, 173 letters, and 118 calls. In this paper, we use "contacts" and "letters" interchangeably to refer to all modes of correspondence.

Small agencies and regional offices had staff search their email history or provided hand-written 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.

2 Contact Codebook

We provide the following codebook to a team of hand-coders to code each case of Congressional contact with federal agencies and extract information about the legislator. The codebook provides steps to move from raw correspondence logs to data formatted for our analysis. We also developed subagency-specific coding rules throughout the hand-coding process where certain regular expressions indicated certain types of requests. For example, where documents containing the word "rulemaking" consistently indicated that a legislator's request involved an agency's proposed rule, we assigned all observations yet uncoded by hand and containing the word "rulemaking" to the "Policy-Rulemaking" category.[2]

We classify legislator requests into five categories: "Individual Constituent Service" (i.e., individual casework or advocacy on behalf of a group such as employees of a company), "Nonprofit or Local Government Constituent Service" (e.g., help with a grant application), "Corporate Constituent Service" (e.g., help with a specific government contract), "Corporate Policy" (policy work explicitly aimed to benefit a specific industry, like tariffs and subsidies), and "General Policy" (broader policy work related to legislation, budgets, or rulemaking that is not advocating

[1] The Department of State has a notorious FOIA backlog of approximately 10,500 cases. In 2018, the FOIA office estimated they would fill our May 2018 request in 2024. As of February 2025, we are still waiting for this data.

[2] Procedures and code for converting the raw records from federal agencies into the dataset required for our analysis are available at github.com/judgelord/correspondence, along with each script's full revision history and all written communication with RAs about processing and coding these data.

Table 1: FOIA Response Table

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

The Department of State has a notorious FOIA backlog. The FOIA office initially expected to fill our May 2018 request in 2024. We are still waiting.

for an individual constituent or corporation). For example, Representative Tauscher 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 define constituents broadly, so they need not be in a member's district. In practice, most legislators screen constituents by home address and redirect non-resident constituents to the member who represents them. 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.

2.1 General Congressional Correspondence Log Coding Guidelines

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

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

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

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

2.2 Coding Types of Congressional Correspondence

1 = Personal Service

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

2 = Commercial Service - Transactional

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

- General Examples: Help with a grant application, payment, loan, or contract (buying anything from or selling anything to a government agency). Help with an individual case of tax assessment, fine, or regulatory enforcement action. Help with public relations on behalf of a business.
- Specific Examples: allocation of radio spectrum, a case against a company, tax dispute, contract for the purchase of military surplus, crop insurance distribution, debt settlement, foreclosure assistance, a fine for a law violation, etc.

3 = Government and Nonprofit Service - Transactional

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

4 = Commercial Service - Policy

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

- General Examples: Authorization of or appropriation to a government program targeted towards a particular industry or industries. Regulation of industry or commercial practice or competition.
- Specific Examples: Milk prices, insurance or loan eligibility criteria, purchasing policies, crop insurance rates, pollution criteria, classification of products for trade or taxation, conservation appropriation, worker visa types, restrictions, or caps, etc.

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

Examples of Policy Work:

- Lawmaking
- Request for policy-relevant information. This includes prospective legislation, legislation under consideration, or already implemented legislation that requires oversight.

- Oversight
- Committee requesting a report or testimony at a hearing
- Requesting clarity on an agency rule
- Lobbying administrative policy
- Agency rulemaking with non-commercial implications (comments on agency rulemaking may often be (3))
- Political work
- Meeting with organized constituent groups (e.g., workers, people with disabilities, environmentalists) about policy (meetings with industry groups generally fall under (4)).
- Media requests

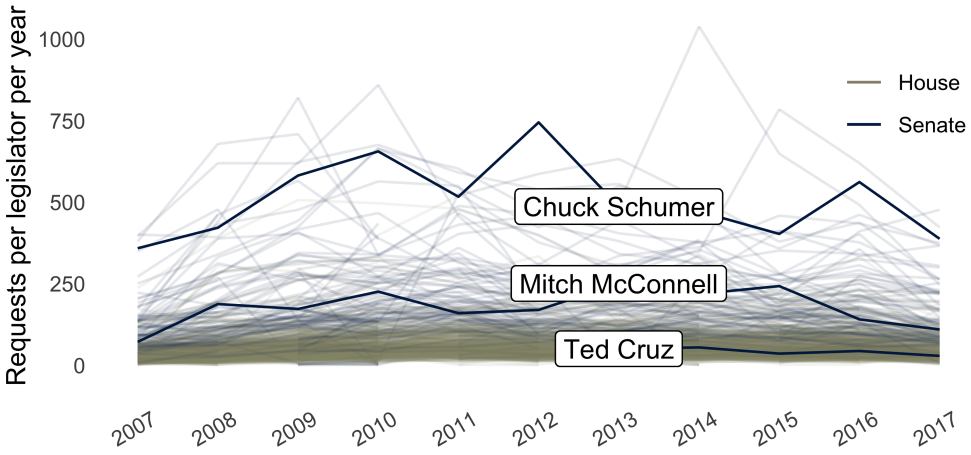
6 = Other

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

3 Variation in Legislator Requests by Year

To visualize the year to year variation for individual legislators Figure 1 shows the number of requests per legislator over time, highlighting three Senators at the upper, middle, and lower parts of the distribution.

Figure 1: Variation in Legislator Requests by Year, 2007-2017



4 Additional Models

4.1 Interpreting Experience Effects

In the paper, we draw inferences about the effects of legislator experience from a within-district design, showing that new legislators make fewer requests than the more experienced legislators they replaced. The within-legislator design shows results consistent with this conclusion (shown here in Table 2). However, we interpret indicator variables for years of experience in the within-legislator design with caution given the complexity of this model with time shocks and experience increasing in time, which has the potential to cause identification issues in interpreting the estimates for years of experience in the within-legislator design. Including years of experience as a control is appropriate and important for correctly chair effects, which are clearly identified in these models.

If we interpret this alternative measure of experience as identified, the within-legislator models show further support for the conclusions of the within-district models. Legislators make significantly fewer requests to agencies in their first few years than they after they have gained more experience. As with the district-level models, the effect of capacity gained with experience is largely in the first two years. Subsequent increases are less significant.

Figure 2 shows the predicted total number of letters in Congress and committee chair status (comparing predictions for counterfactuals where the same legislator did and did not receive a chairmanship in their sixth year).[3]

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

Table 2: The Effect of Institutional Power on Requests to Fedearal Agenices

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Dependent variable	**Count**	**Count**	**Count**	**Log(Count+1)**
Committee chair	0.819**	0.249**	0.250**	0.047**
	(0.163)	(0.092)	(0.092)	(0.012)
Ranking member	0.903**	0.167†	0.175†	0.031**
	(0.172)	(0.101)	(0.101)	(0.011)
Prestige committee	0.400**	0.073	0.072	0.010
	(0.072)	(0.049)	(0.049)	(0.007)
First year	−0.175**	−0.487**	−0.488**	−0.106**
	(0.055)	(0.078)	(0.077)	(0.012)
Second year	−0.099	−0.396**	−0.415**	−0.048**
	(0.083)	(0.081)	(0.080)	(0.011)
Third year	0.069	−0.181**	−0.184**	−0.034**
	(0.064)	(0.069)	(0.067)	(0.009)
Fourth year	0.055	−0.202**	−0.237**	−0.022*
	(0.102)	(0.074)	(0.071)	(0.009)
Fifth year	0.000	−0.126*	−0.117†	−0.025**
	(0.059)	(0.064)	(0.064)	(0.007)
Sixth year	0.031	−0.084	−0.068	−0.015*
	(0.124)	(0.077)	(0.076)	(0.007)
Majority	−0.141*	0.019	0.023	−0.010*
	(0.060)	(0.033)	(0.033)	(0.004)
President's party	−0.135*	0.027	0.029	0.011**
	(0.056)	(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.004)
All legislators	✓	✓		✓
Served at least 2nd term			✓	
Observations	435,999	435,999	417,987	435,999
Year x agency fixed effects	X	X	X	X
Legislator x agency fixed effects		X	X	X

† p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01

This table shows how the number of contacts changes as legislators acquire more experience and power. Column 1 shows the average differences across committee positions and years in Congress. Column 2 presents the difference-in-differences estimates. Column 3 subsets to legislators who serve at least three years. Column 4 takes the Log of the counts + 1 as the dependent variable. All coefficients represent the average additional requests per year per agency; per legislator, per year effects are simply these coefficients times the number of agencies in the data.

Figure 2: Predicted Number of Total Letters (Within-Legislator Difference in Differences), 2007-2020

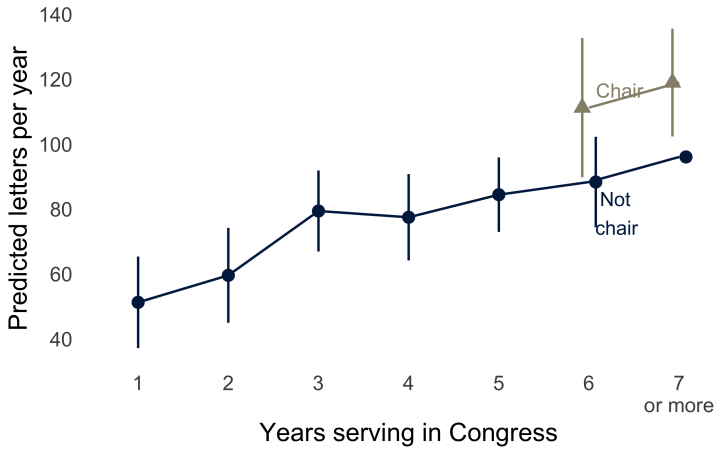


Figure 2 uses the coefficients in legislators' first six years in office from Table 2. The reference group is representatives who have served longer than six years.[4]

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

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

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 make fewer requests to agencies in their first year in office. As they acquire experience, they make more requests to federal agencies. This member-level models show that the experience gained between the first and second year in Congress causes an increase of 0.09 requests *per agency*. The experience gained between the first and seventh years is associates with an increase of 0.49 per agency. Across all 92 agencies in these data, this represents an increase of 45 additional requests per year, **a 53% increase** over average number of requests per year in our data. There is a smaller increase after the second year. The experience gained between the second and seventh year is associated with an increase of 'r 0.4 per agency, an increase of approximately 36 additional requests per year. After a legislator's third year, increases in capacity level off. By their sixth year, their behavior no longer differs from more experienced legislators in Model 2.

As with the district-level models in the paper, the findings in Table 2 are robust to alternative specifications. Despite the difference-in-difference design, we might still be concerned that the set of legislators who served a third year differs from those who served a first year. If this were the case, our findings would result from both the experience and a selection effect due to House members who win reelection, a potential indication that they are better able to perform the job than other legislators. To address the potentially different samples each year, the third column of Table 2 assesses the changes in the number of contacts of federal agencies for

[4]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, or join prestige committees in their first six years, and almost none in their first two years in Congress.

legislators who serve for at least three years. The pattern is similar: legislators initially make fewer requests in their first two years than in subsequent years. Column 4 in Table 2 shows that the results are robust to analyzing $\log(Y_{ijt} + 1)$, ensuring that our results are not because of outliers. Additional models below estimate the same models as Table 2 on hand-coded subsets of the data, showing similar results.

4.2 Legislator-level Constituency Service Only Models

Table 3 is identical to Table 2 except that we subset the data to only legislator requests hand-coded as constituency service. Column 2 of Table 3 provides the estimated effects from the difference-in-differences specification in Equation 1. More experience increases the level of constituency service that legislators provide. The effect of being a committee chair is positive but not significant at the .05 level.

We estimate that the experience gained between the first and second year in Congress causes an increase of 0.02 requests *per agency*. The experience gained between the first and seventh years causes an increase of 0.25 per agency. Across all 92 agencies in these data, this represents an increase of 23 additional requests per year, **a 40% increase** over average number of constituency service requests per year in our data. There is a smaller increase after the second year. The experience gained between the second and seventh year causes an increase of r-beta$second‘ per agency, an increase of 22 additional requests per year. After a legislator's third year, increases in capacity level off. By their sixth year, their behavior no longer differs from more experienced legislators in Model 2.

Figure 3: Predicted Number of Constituency Service Requests to Federal Agencies

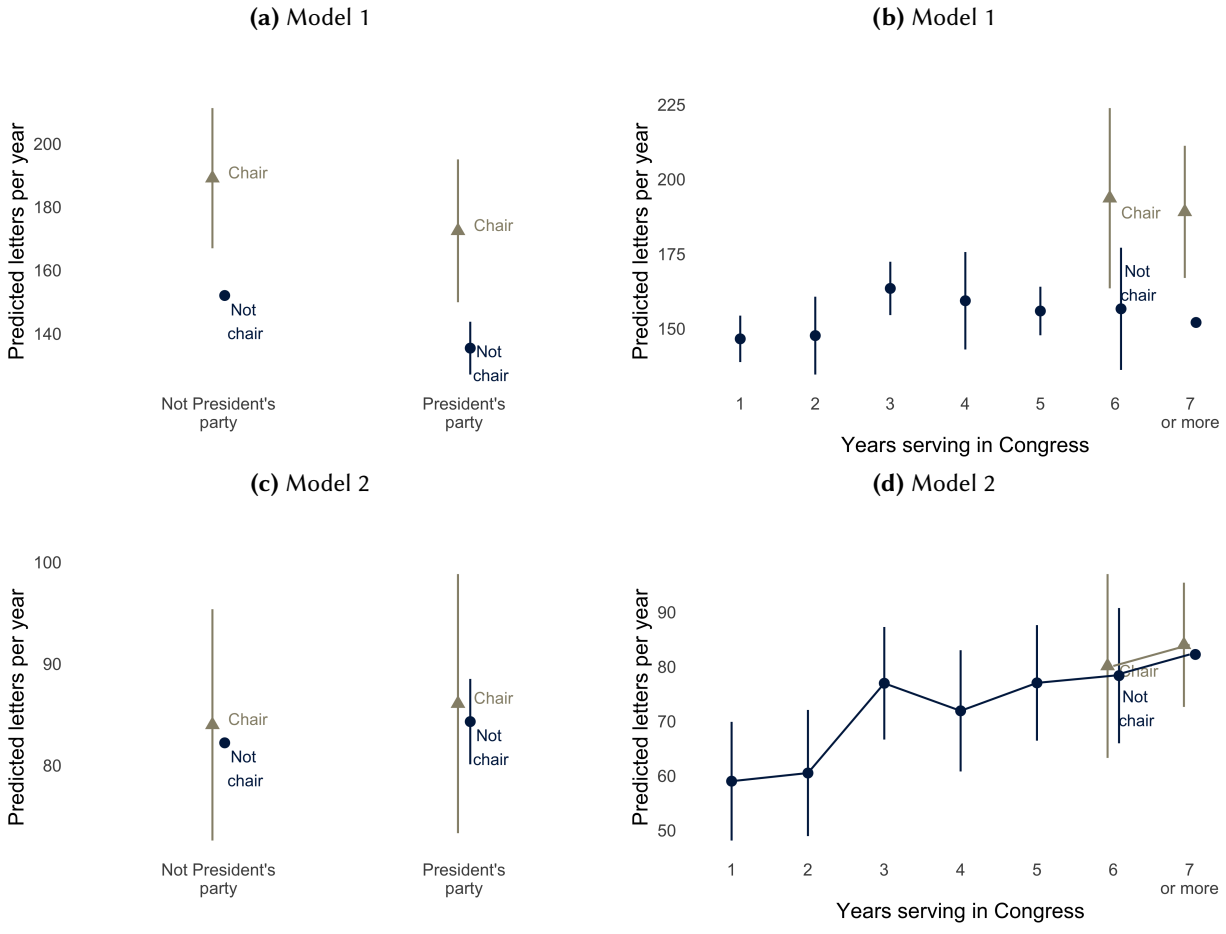


Table 3: The Effect Experience and Institutional Power on Constituency Service

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Dependent variable	**Count**	**Count**	**Count**	**Log(Count+1)**
Committee chair	0.403**	0.019	0.021	0.009
	(0.123)	(0.063)	(0.063)	(0.007)
Ranking member	0.561**	0.064	0.073	0.011
	(0.130)	(0.074)	(0.074)	(0.007)
Prestige committee	0.259**	0.029	0.026	0.005
	(0.056)	(0.034)	(0.034)	(0.005)
First year	−0.060	−0.253**	−0.251**	−0.063**
	(0.043)	(0.060)	(0.059)	(0.008)
Second year	−0.048	−0.236**	−0.257**	−0.023**
	(0.072)	(0.064)	(0.063)	(0.008)
Third year	0.124*	−0.057	−0.057	−0.014*
	(0.050)	(0.057)	(0.055)	(0.006)
Fourth year	0.079	−0.112†	−0.141*	−0.009
	(0.091)	(0.062)	(0.059)	(0.007)
Fifth year	0.042	−0.057	−0.045	−0.012*
	(0.045)	(0.059)	(0.060)	(0.005)
Sixth year	0.050	−0.042	−0.035	−0.006
	(0.114)	(0.069)	(0.069)	(0.005)
Majority	−0.148**	0.028	0.031	−0.004
	(0.051)	(0.027)	(0.027)	(0.003)
President's party	−0.181**	0.023	0.023	0.009**
	(0.046)	(0.023)	(0.023)	(0.003)
All legislators	✓	✓		✓
Served at least 2nd term			✓	
Observations	435,999	435,999	417,987	435,999
Year x agency fixed effects	X	X	X	X
Legislator x agency fixed effects		X	X	X

† p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01

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

4.3 Legislator-level Policy Work Only

Table 4 is identical to Table 2 except that we subset the data to only legislator requests hand-coded as policy work. Column 2 of Table 4 and Figure 4) provide the estimated effects from the difference-in-differences specification in Equation 1. Across all measures of institutional power, we find that more power increases the level of policy work that legislators provide. Consider first the effect of being a committee chair.

We estimate that the experience gained between the first and second year in Congress causes an increase of 0.03 requests *per agency*. The experience gained between the first and seventh years causes an increase of 0.09 per agency. Across all 92 agencies in these data, this represents an increase of 8 additional requests per year, approximately half of the average number of requests per year in our data. There is a smaller increase after the second year. The experience gained between the second and seventh year causes an increase of 0.06 per agency, an increase of 5 additional requests per year. After a legislator's third year, increases in capacity level off. By their sixth year, their behavior no longer differs from more experienced legislators in Model 2.

We estimate that becoming a committee chair causes an increase of 0.17 policy requests (95-percent confidence interval [0.1, 0.25]). Across all 92 , this represents an increase of 16, **a 133% increase** over the average requests per year in our data. There is a smaller increase for individuals who become ranking members and those who join a Prestige Committee, though the increase is statistically significant for the prestige committee. Becoming a ranking member of a committee causes an increase of 10 contacts, while joining a prestige committee causes a 16 increase in the policy requests a member of Congress makes.

Figure 4: Predicted Number of Policy Requests to Federal Agencies

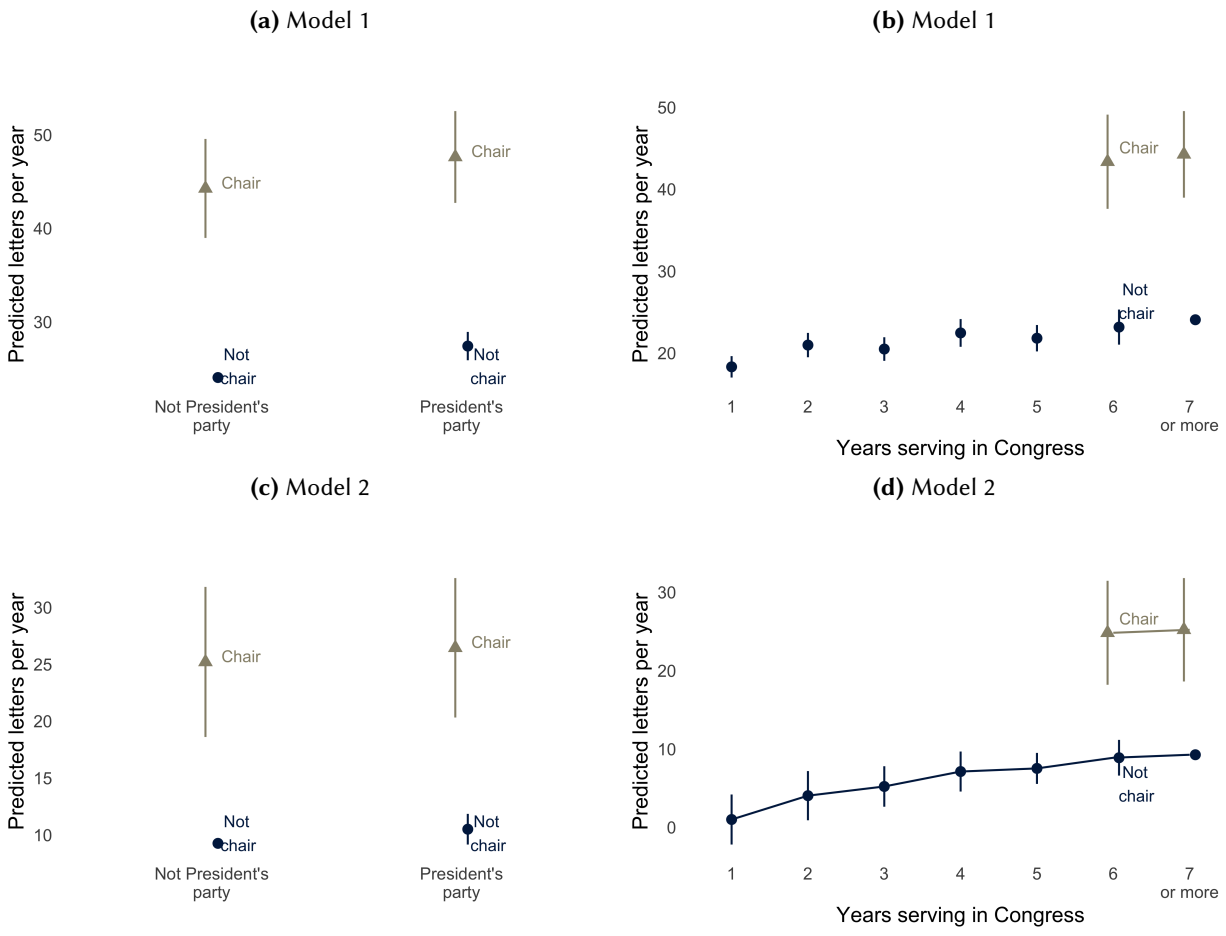


Table 4: The Effect Experience and Institutional Power on Policy Work

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Dependent variable	**Count**	**Count**	**Count**	**Log(Count+1)**
Committee chair	0.220**	0.173**	0.174**	0.040**
	(0.029)	(0.037)	(0.037)	(0.007)
Ranking member	0.164**	0.105**	0.106**	0.027**
	(0.030)	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.006)
Prestige committee	0.063**	0.023*	0.025*	0.005
	(0.010)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.003)
First year	−0.063**	−0.090**	−0.087**	−0.034**
	(0.007)	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.005)
Second year	−0.034**	−0.057**	−0.054**	−0.021**
	(0.008)	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.005)
Third year	−0.039**	−0.044**	−0.045**	−0.016**
	(0.008)	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.004)
Fourth year	−0.018†	−0.023	−0.024†	−0.009*
	(0.009)	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.004)
Fifth year	−0.025**	−0.019†	−0.020†	−0.009**
	(0.009)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.003)
Sixth year	−0.010	−0.004	−0.004	−0.007*
	(0.012)	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.003)
Majority	−0.001	−0.006	−0.006	−0.003†
	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.002)
President's party	0.037**	0.014†	0.013†	0.006**
	(0.008)	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.002)
All legislators	✓	✓		✓
Served at least 2nd term			✓	
Observations	435,999	435,999	417,987	435,999
Year x agency fixed effects	X	X	X	X
Legislator x agency fixed effects		X	X	X

† p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01

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

4.4 Within-District Constituency Service Only Models

Table 5 and Figure 5 show district-level results for only legislator requests hand-coded as constituency service.

Figure 5: Predicted Number of Constituency Service Requests per District, 2007-2020

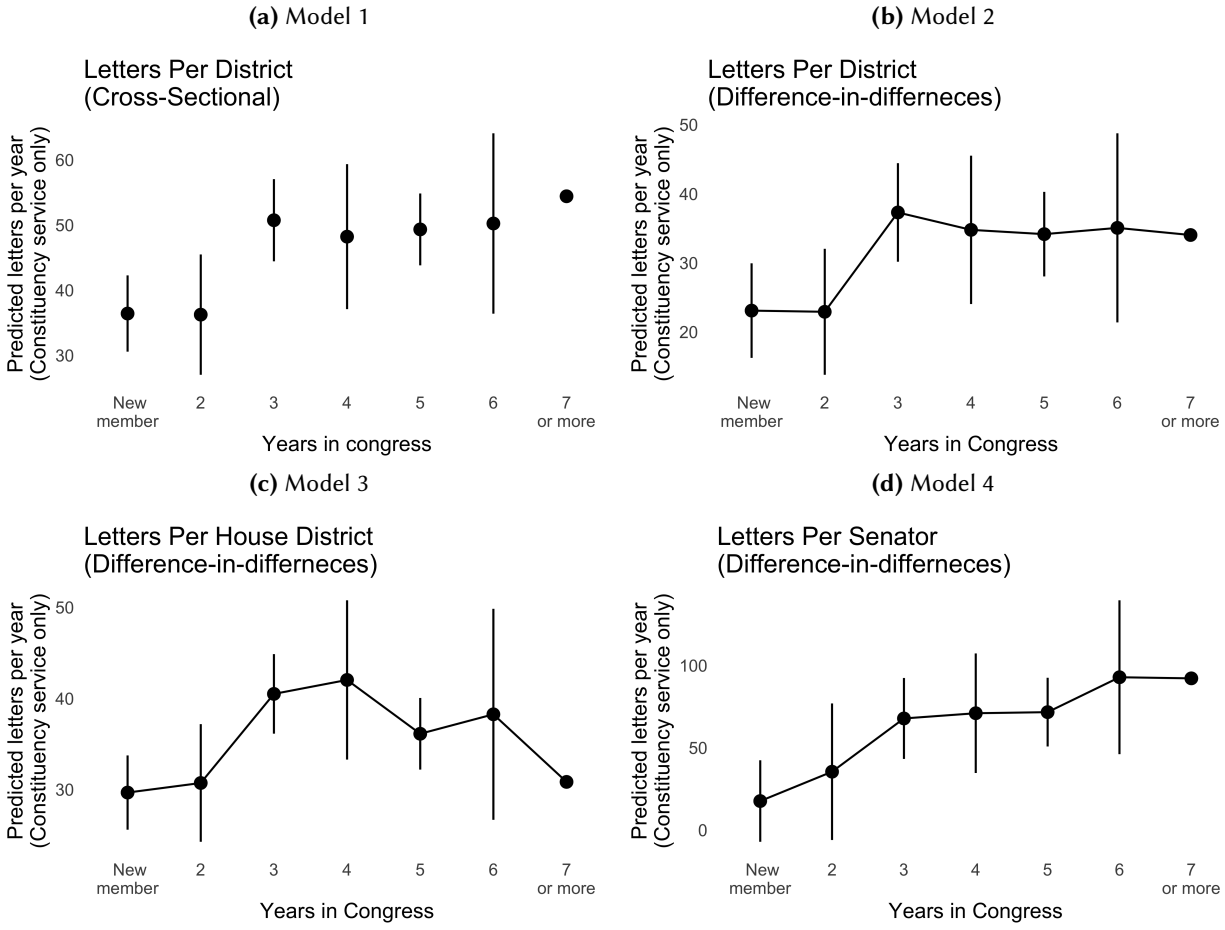


Table 5: The Effect Experience and Institutional Power on Constituency Service

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Dependent variable	**Per year**	**Per year**	**Per year**	**Per year**
New member	−17.991**	−10.947**	−1.170	−74.505**
	(2.983)	(3.492)	(2.076)	(12.617)
Second year	−18.162**	−11.118*	−0.119	−56.682**
	(4.707)	(4.654)	(3.291)	(21.140)
Third year	−3.676	3.267	9.653**	−24.350†
	(3.212)	(3.637)	(2.224)	(12.520)
Fourth year	−6.196	0.747	11.185*	−21.175
	(5.671)	(5.476)	(4.455)	(18.510)
Fifth year	−5.084†	0.126	5.280**	−20.518†
	(2.810)	(3.121)	(2.003)	(10.634)
Sixth year	−4.177	1.033	7.415	0.675
	(7.056)	(6.983)	(5.904)	(23.821)
All districts	✓	✓		
House only			✓	
Senate only				✓
Observations	7, 666	7, 666	6, 224	1, 442
District fixed effects		X	X	X
Year fixed effects	X	X	X	X

† p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01

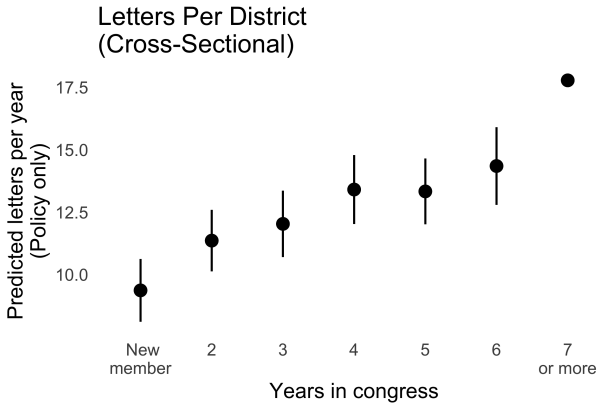
This table shows how the number of hand-coded constituency service contacts changes as a district elects a new representative. Column 1 shows cross-sectional average differences. Column 2 shows within-district estimates from the difference in differences specification. Columns 3 and 4 show the within-district estimates for data subset to House and Senate seats, respectively.

4.5 Within-District Policy Work Only Models

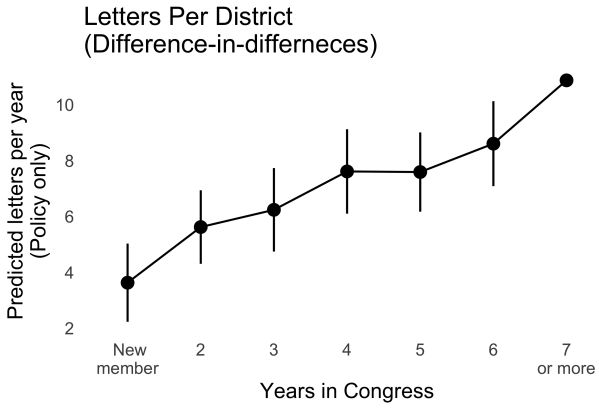
Table 6 and Figure 6 show district-level results for only legislator requests hand-coded as policy work.

Figure 6: Predicted Number of Policy Requests per District, 2007-2020

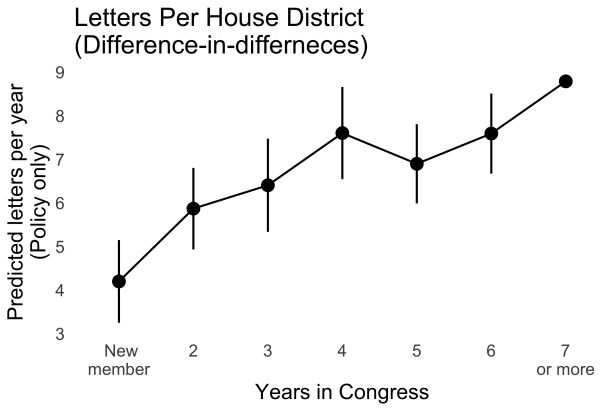
(a) Model 1



(b) Model 2



(c) Model 3



(d) Model 4

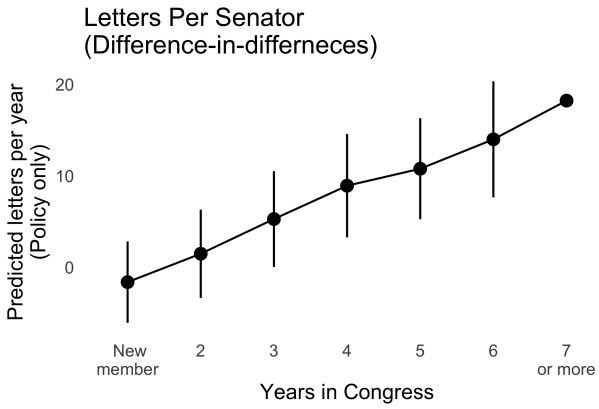


Table 6: The Effect Experience and Institutional Power on Policy Work

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Dependent variable	**Per year**	**Per year**	**Per year**	**Per year**
New member	−8.410**	−7.247**	−4.591**	−19.843**
	(0.641)	(0.714)	(0.484)	(2.268)
Second year	−6.417**	−5.254**	−2.920**	−16.738**
	(0.628)	(0.671)	(0.477)	(2.460)
Third year	−5.747**	−4.638**	−2.385**	−12.948**
	(0.678)	(0.763)	(0.545)	(2.675)
Fourth year	−4.372**	−3.262**	−1.188*	−9.301**
	(0.704)	(0.771)	(0.539)	(2.882)
Fifth year	−4.447**	−3.284**	−1.892**	−7.446*
	(0.672)	(0.724)	(0.463)	(2.816)
Sixth year	−3.430**	−2.268**	−1.197*	−4.231
	(0.793)	(0.776)	(0.468)	(3.236)
All districts	✓	✓		
House only			✓	
Senate only				✓
Observations	7, 666	7, 666	6, 224	1, 442
District fixed effects		X	X	X
Year fixed effects	X	X	X	X

† p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01

This table shows how the number of hand-coded policy work contacts changes as a district elects a new representative. Column 1 shows cross-sectional average differences. Column 2 shows within-district estimates from the difference in differences specification. Columns 3 and 4 show the within-district estimates for data subset to House and Senate seats, respectively.

4.6 Within-District Models with Partisan Turnover

The main district-level models in the paper focus on estimating the effect of legislator experience by leveraging turnover within districts. We compare the service that a district receives before and after electing a new legislator and in the following years as legislators gain experience in office.

As a robustness check, we replicate our within-district results using a subset of district-year-count observations where turnover in a district allows us to assess the partisanship of the prior member holding that seat. We interact an indicator of whether the prior member was of the "same party" with all other indicators (i.e., whether the member is new, serving in years 1-6, or serving longer than 6 years). We compare the service that a district receives before and after electing a new legislator and in the following years, accounting for whether that member is of the same party. However, a structural constraint of the data means that this robustness check is limited to observations where turnover within a redistricting cycle gives us a measure of whether the legislator replaced a member of the same party or of another party.

The table below accounts for redistricting by treating post-redistricting districts as new entities, not the same district as the one with the same number prior to redistricting (i.e., we do not count cases where a district elects someone of the same or different party as the district with the same number had before redistricting). Since some states completely re-number their districts, there is no way to be sure that a new District 4 has any relationship to the District 4 under the previous redistricting map (though it often may have significant overlap) without creating some spatial measure of the percent of shared census tracts, or something like that, which we do not attempt.

Many NAs exist for the "same party" variable because we only observe it when there is turnover *within* a redistricting cycle. Seats that do not turn over for an entire cycle (e.g., 2002-2012) are FALSE ("0") for "new member" and have no value for "same party." Other districts are NA until there is turnover. Thus, adding "same party" causes significant data loss due to NAs. Specifically, we go from **7666 observations in the district-level models presented in the paper to 2822 observations in Table 7 when we include "same party" in the models below.** This data loss is not random: it omits less competitive districts entirely, left censors all districts until turnover, and limits the analysis to newer legislators.

To measure turnover in the Senate where "districts" have two members, we code "same party" as FALSE if there is a change in the partisanship of a state's Senate delegation. This captures the parallel dynamic of single-member House districts. If there are two Democrats and one is replaced by a Republican, the "same party" is FALSE. If there are two Democrats and a Democrat is elected, the "same party" is TRUE. If there are a Democrat senator and a Republican senator representing a state, and the Democrat is replaced by a Republican, "same party" is FALSE. As per the VoteView convention, Senate delegations are District "0" (e.g., "alabama_0"). Split Senate delegations appear as "Democratic Party;Republican Party" in the table below.

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:

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

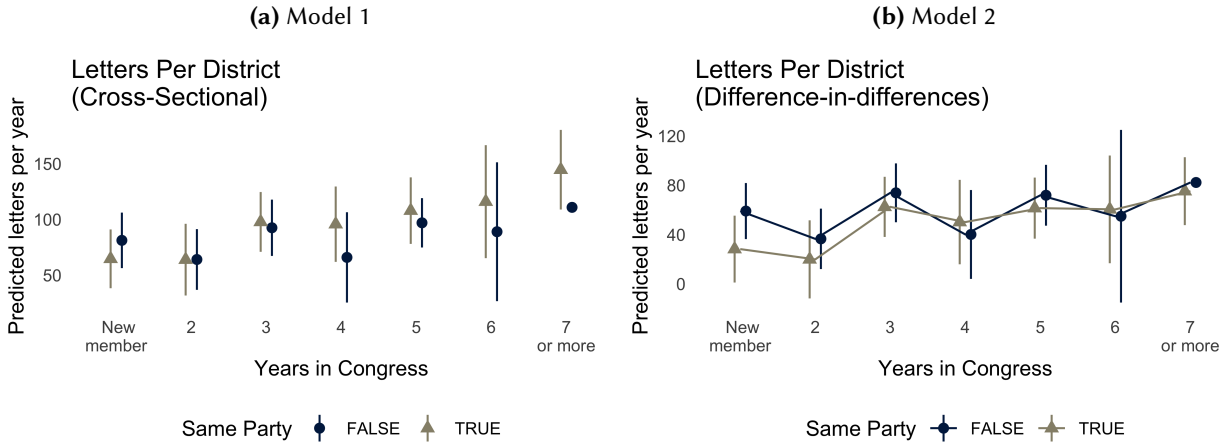
γ_i is a district-specific fixed effect that accounts for each district's particular demographic characteristics, along with the levels of demand from district residents. δ_t is a year fixed effect that controls for common shocks. Our key result of interest, β_1, is the effect of a district electing a new representative. To understand how the effect of a new representative changes over time, we estimate district-level differences for a legislator's second (β_2) through sixth-year (β_6).[5]

[5]It is worth noting that this treatment is fundamentally different for a district than within-legislator variation. In each election, each district allows its incumbent to acquire another term or replace them. This differs from within-legislator comparisons because

The first column of Table 7 provides a simple difference-in-means for districts represented by a new member and legislators in their first six years in office, compared to a legislator serving seven or more years. There are no significant differences in service between cases where the new legislator belongs to the same party or a different party than the previous holder of the seat.

To account for differences in district size, demographics, and demand for constituency service, the second column of Table 7 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 in constituency service requests. The effect of electing a new representative, however, dissipates quickly. This phenomenon–new legislators providing substantially fewer requests–persists when examining the House (Column 3) and the Senate (Column 4) separately, though results for the House are not statistically significant in this restricted model. In short, new legislators make fewer contacts for their constituents than established legislators.

Figure 7: Predicted Number of Total Letters per District, 2007-2020



Despite the increased uncertainty caused by the much smaller (and non-random) sample of districts where turnover allows us to measure the new "same party" variable, our main results (direction, statistical significance, and magnitude of effects) are largely the same: legislators contact the bureaucracy significantly less in their first two years in office, even holding district constant. Because the new models contain a large number of interaction terms, we present predictions at modal values in Figure 7. Figure 7 shows the predicted total number of letters per district per year by whether a district is represented by a new legislator and whether that legislator replaced a member of the same party (compared to counterfactuals where the same legislator has been serving for more than six years).[6]

4.7 Spillover models

In the paper, we show estimates using requests hand coded as constituency service. Using district and year fixed effects, we estimate a series of difference-in-differences regressions where the treatment is new members in the state. Because we are interested in assessing whether constituents with new legislators direct their constituency service requests to more experienced members, restrict the regression to incumbent legislators.

Table 8 shows that the results are nearly identical for total requests, using our full sample (not just observations we were able to hand code. Table 9 further shows that there are also no positive spillover effects on

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.

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

Table 7

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Dependent variable	**Per year**	**Per year**	**Per year**	**Per year**
New member	−29.636*	−23.178*	−5.726	−59.353*
	(12.715)	(11.591)	(13.975)	(24.403)
New member x same party	−50.373**	−23.779†	12.661	−74.273*
	(18.089)	(13.729)	(9.430)	(31.816)
Second year	−46.808**	−45.709**	−2.477	−88.831**
	(13.908)	(12.498)	(11.333)	(30.589)
Third year	−18.336	−8.392	−0.818	−0.411
	(12.896)	(12.174)	(13.041)	(30.666)
Fourth year	−44.929*	−42.147*	−0.493	4.518
	(20.686)	(18.377)	(17.162)	(30.076)
Fifth year	−13.885	−10.366	−15.299	17.073
	(11.301)	(12.583)	(11.054)	(31.988)
Sixth year	−21.885	−27.370	−1.759	130.998
	(31.805)	(35.706)	(24.924)	(169.982)
Second year x same party	−33.944†	−9.583	22.054*	0.401
	(17.711)	(15.329)	(10.953)	(39.652)
Third year x same party	−28.534	−4.330	21.610*	−53.187
	(17.892)	(15.188)	(9.678)	(39.246)
Fourth year x same party	−3.978	17.093	36.267*	−42.671
	(24.630)	(20.148)	(17.304)	(38.065)
Fifth year x same party	−22.848	−3.375	24.389*	−55.532
	(16.859)	(15.631)	(9.659)	(34.705)
Sixth year x same party	−6.799	12.608	37.033	−145.917
	(36.816)	(40.529)	(32.902)	(171.269)
Same party	33.793†	−7.052	−18.174	27.238
	(18.234)	(14.041)	(14.297)	(21.801)
All districts	✓	✓		
House only			✓	
Senate only				✓
Observations	2, 222	2, 222	1, 523	699
District fixed effects		X	X	X
Year fixed effects	X	X	X	X

† p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01

This table shows how the service a district receives changes when a new member of the same or a different party is elected. Model 1 is a cross-sectional comparison excluding district fixed effects. The second column shows within-district effects from a district x year difference in differences model. Columns 3 and 4 show the within-district estimates for data subset to House and Senate seats, respectively.

Table 8: Spillover Effects: Total Requests Redirected to Expierenced Legislators when a New Legislator is Elected

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Dependent variable	**Per year**	**Per year**	**Per year**
New senator in delegation	3.412		
	(2.565)		
New member in delegation			−14.839*
			(6.874)
New proportion in delegation		−16.719	
		(18.696)	
Observations	7, 074	1, 380	1, 380
All districts	✓		
Senate only		✓	✓
District fixed effects	X	X	X
Year fixed effects	X	X	X

† p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01

The first column estimates the effect of an experienced Senator being replaced by a new Senator on the level of service that other legislators in the state provide (total requests to federal agencies per year). Columns 2 and 3 show the effect of a new member of a delegation or the portion of new members of a delegation on senators from that delegation.

policy work. Indeed, requests from other members of a state delegation may go down when an experienced member of there delegation is replaced by a new member. This is consistent with our theory that these effects are driven by capacity, perhaps even collective capacity of a delegation, not by constituents demanding more of more experienced and powerful legislators.

The first column of Table 8 and Table 9 estimates the effect of an experienced Senator being replaced by a new Senator for all other incumbent legislators. Columns 2 and 3 of Table 8 and Table 9 show, respectively, that either a new member in the delegation or the proportion of new members in the delegation results in insignificant or negative effects on requests when focusing on senators only. This consistent null or negative finding regarding the impact of new legislators in a state delegation provides reassurance that there is no evidence of constituents redirecting demand toward other, more experienced legislators in response to having new representatives in their state delegation.

Table 9: Spillover Effects: Policy Requests Redirected to Expierenced Legislators when a New Legislator is Elected

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Dependent variable	**Per year (Policy-only)**	**Per year (Policy-only)**	**Per year (Policy-only)**
New senator in delegation	−0.090		
	(0.526)		
New member in delegation			−1.104
			(1.357)
New proportion in delegation		−7.488†	
		(3.775)	
Observations	7, 074	1, 380	1, 380
All districts	✓		
Senate only		✓	✓
District fixed effects	X	X	X
Year fixed effects	X	X	X

† p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01

The first column estimates the effect of an experienced Senator being replaced by a new Senator on the level of policy work that other legislators in the state do (policy-related requests to federal agencies per year). Columns 2 and 3 show the effect of a new member of a delegation or the portion of new members of a delegation on senators from that delegation.