

The Evolution of Policy

E. Scott Adler
University of Colorado
esadler@colorado.edu

John Wilkerson
University of Washington
jwilker@u.washington.edu

Prepared for delivery at the 2009 Congress and History Conference, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA. This project would not have been possible without the research assistance of Jeremy Gelman, Bill Jaeger, and Josh Ryan, and the many scholars who made their data available, including Sarah Binder, Fang-Yi Chiou, Michael Crespín, Bryan Jones, John Lapinski, Michael Malbin, Keith Poole, David Rohde, Andrew Rudalevige, and Larry Rothenberg. We also acknowledge helpful comments from Gerald Gamm, Charles Shipan and Craig Volden. Laurel Harbridge co-authored an early paper related to this project presented at the 2003 American Political Science Association meetings.

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Abstract

We propose and test a governing theory of legislative organization that offers new predictions about policy change in legislatures. The theory starts with the observation that legislative agenda space is scarce. In an environment of limited capacity, a legislature that is able to establish priorities can accomplish more. Elsewhere, we have argued that governing priorities offer a more compelling explanation for why lawmakers support a standing committee system organized around issues. In this paper, we search for evidence of this commitment by testing whether governing priorities explain the timing and importance of policy changes across 27 issue areas over an 18-year time period.

Introduction

Textbooks portray the policymaking process as if Congress starts from scratch every two years. Although legislative entrepreneurs may face significant competition for attention, the agenda is wide open and ready to be exploited by the most creative and determined legislators. This textbook perspective is not very different from the process emphasized in contemporary legislative theories, which highlight the policy preferences of lawmakers as the central determinants of when policy change occurs.

In this paper, we propose and test an alternative perspective that highlights two critical but often overlooked features of lawmaking. The first is *scarcity*. Lawmakers act in an environment where policy demands exceed available resources. The second is *policy-caretaking responsibilities*, what we term “governing obligations.” The U.S. Congress devotes much of its time and resources to overseeing and maintaining federal programs. Although we know that the scope and impact of these obligations has expanded dramatically over time (Smith 2003), the amount of effort devoted to such responsibilities has never been systematically studied. In addition, Congress must also respond in a timely manner to changing public expectations spurred by external events, such as crises or presidential initiatives.

Where existing research portrays preference shifts as central to explaining policy change, we hypothesize that in an environment of limited capacity, governing agendas will take priority over preference-driven agendas. We begin by illustrating how a governing perspective highlights a different function of legislative agenda setting than what is emphasized in the extant literature. We then argue for a focus on explaining *policy* change that is distinct from a current research emphasis on explaining *statutory* change. A systematic investigation of 27 issue areas over an 18-year time period finds that governing considerations offer the best explanation for when policy changes occur in Congress.

Legislative Agenda Setting: Power versus Efficiency

The typical study of legislative agenda setting focuses on its “power” implications. The central question is whether proposal power provides certain actors with an agenda setting advantage that translates into favorable policy outcomes. On the one hand, an agenda setter (e.g. committee or party leader) may be able to exercise *negative* agenda control to prevent certain proposals from being considered. On the other hand, the agenda setter may be able to exercise *positive* agenda control to influence which alternatives are considered and in what order (e.g. Patty and Penn 2008). While some prominent theories predict that agenda control confers power (e.g. Shepsle and Weingast 1987), others predict that it does not (e.g. Krehbiel 1991).

In addition to *proposal* agenda control, there is also *issue* agenda control. Proposal agenda control is about shaping the policy alternatives that lawmakers consider. Issue agenda control is about deciding which topics will be taken up by the legislature. For example, Cartel theory – a version of partisan theory – assumes that any proposal considered by the chamber will be amended to the chamber median (Cox and McCubbins 2005). How can the

majority party exercise power if it cannot control the policy alternatives that are considered? According to Cox and McCubbins, the party's power rests with its ability to prevent *issues* from being considered. The only issues that make it to the floor are those where the party median prefers the chamber median's policy to the status quo.

Public policy and media studies have also devoted considerable attention to understanding why certain issues are more likely to make it onto the governmental agenda (Kingdon 1995; Jones and Baumgartner 2005). The working assumption of these studies is the notion that agenda space is scarce. If only a limited number of issues can be considered, what determines whether a particular issue makes it onto the agenda? Although policy and media studies sometimes entertain the possibility that processes internal to a legislature may influence the issue agenda,¹ the impact of such variables is rarely studied. The overwhelming emphasis is on external factors, such as focusing events, media coverage, and interest groups.

In this study, we are interested in how internal as well as external processes shape legislative issue agendas. Limited legislative capacity means that not all policy demands can be accommodated. We argue that certain types of issues – governing issues – are privileged agenda items because they are central to the reelection prospects of incumbent lawmakers.² Constituents expect Congress to manage existing programs well. They also expect Congress to be responsive to salient events and to the priorities of the president. As a result, lawmakers share a collective interest in supporting an internal agenda setting process that improves Congress' ability to perform these responsibilities to the satisfaction of voters.

For example, many programs - such as highway construction or elementary and secondary education - are on temporary authorization schedules that compel Congress to revisit them on a regular basis. Anecdotally, lawmakers do seem willing to defer to such schedules. Legislative attention to the issue of highway construction flows and ebbs according to when important transportation laws are scheduled to expire (Adler, Harbridge, and Wilkerson 2003). When the collapse of an interstate bridge in 2007 drew public attention to the nation's "crumbling infrastructure," the media turned to see how Congress would respond. Transportation Chairman Oberstar replied that his committee would address the problem, but on its own schedule: "In the next reauthorization bill, which will come up in 2009, we're not going to settle for a bargain-basement transportation bill" (Brown 2007).

Why would a Congress wait to make such changes to transportation policy? More generally, why would the Congress that passes an education reform bill write its legislation to encourage future Congresses to revise what it had developed with considerable effort?

¹ For example, internal factors such as a shift in lawmakers' preferences or a program sunset can help to open a "policy window" (Kingdon 1995).

² Perceptions of congressional performance influence public approval for Congress, and public approval affect reelection support for incumbents of both political parties (Jones and McDermott 2003; Adler, Ensley, and Wilkerson 2008).

Contemporary theories that portray policy preferences as central to understanding policy change do not offer easy answers to these questions.

The highways example suggests *legislative commitment* to an agenda setting process that supersedes lawmakers' preferences with respect to particular proposals. The Transportation and Infrastructure Committee oversees dozens of programs (including but not limited to the Coast Guard, Merchant Marine, public buildings, flood control, water power, and transportation generally). A committee that is able to control when the legislature takes up an issue can plan and, as a result, better manage its extensive policy responsibilities. If the activities of committees have consequences for incumbent lawmakers more generally, then those lawmakers may have incentives to defer issue agenda setting power to committees.

In a recent paper, we report that legislation addressing governing issues is managed differently from legislation addressing other "discretionary" issues (Adler and Wilkerson 2009). Successful governing bills are nearly always sponsored by committee of referral members, and most often by committee leaders. This is much less likely to be true for other legislation. We also find evidence of committee deference where governing issues are concerned. The position of the committees of jurisdiction is significantly more likely to prevail on the floor than the majority party's position.

The central purpose of this study is to ask whether the same governing considerations help to explain policy evolution in Congress. Should authorizations and "shocks" be treated as occasional exceptions that do not substantially undermine the textbook perspective, or are serious revisions to that perspective warranted?

Studying Policy Change

Public policy scholars have been studying policy change for many years (Kingdon 1995; Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Birkland 1997). Although attention to policy change has a shorter history within legislative studies, it is becoming more common as new datasets become available (e.g. Grant and Kelly 2008). The focus of attention to date has been on statutory change rather than policy change per se. Mayhew (1991) and numerous follow-up studies have sought to explain variations in the number of major laws enacted across Congresses (Kelly 1993; Howell et al. 2000; Coleman 1997b). Maltzman and Shipan (2008) study "significant revisions" to the major laws identified by Mayhew. Binder (2003) studies law success *rates* by Congress, defined as the proportion of issues on the public agenda that lead to enactments. Lapinski (2008) and Clinton and Lapinski (2006) further differentiate enactments by subject as well as significance, while Berry, Burden, and Howell (2006) and Patashnik (2008) study the durability of federal discretionary programs.

These studies make valuable contributions to our understanding of the dynamics of *lawmaking*. *Policy*, in contrast, is often the product of multiple laws. Federal aviation policy, for example, has been shaped by the Federal Airport Act of 1946 and the Federal Aviation Act of 1948, the ensuing laws -- the Airport and Airways Development Act of 1970 and the Federal Aviation Act of 1958, respectively -- and many other statutes addressing

matters such as airline insurance, pilot records, air traffic management, etc. To make matters more complicated, changes in aviation policy are sometimes incorporated into laws that are primarily about other subjects. An investigation of any one of these laws in isolation would fail to provide a complete picture of how aviation policy has evolved over time. To fully appreciate patterns of policy change, it is essential to trace policy changes *wherever those changes have occurred*.

Studying the Evolution of Policy

Dependent Variable

A Measure of Policy Change

Our interest in particular areas or “realms” of the law requires a case selection process that starts with issues rather than laws. The Policy Agendas Project (hereafter, *PAP*) classifies events – e.g. bills, laws, hearings, etc. – by primary issue or topic. The *PAP* includes 19 major topics and 226 subtopics. The human annotators working on the Policy Agendas Project are specifically instructed to classify events *by issue*, not program.

The logic of this system is that it enables scholars to study how attention to particular issues evolves or migrates across decision-making venues. For example, there is no *PAP* code for Medicare. There is a “health” major topic (3) and about a dozen health subtopics. If a Medicare reform bill proposed an expansion of prescription drug coverage, it would fall into subtopic 335 (“prescription drug coverage and costs”) which would also include bills that alter prescription drug coverage through other means (e.g. a veteran’s health bill).³ Thus, bills assigned to 335 provide a metric for attention to the issue of prescription drugs that transcends attention to that issue within a particular program.

The analysis in this paper is based on a stratified sample of the two most legislatively active subtopics within each major topic. Overall, the sample is broadly reflective of policymaking across the social, economic, and foreign policy spectra (see Table 2), and encompasses more than half of all important policy changes occurring during the period of study.⁴

[Table 2 about here]

³ Bills that address multiple health topics with no obvious emphasis are assigned to a ‘catch-all’ health category (e.g. 300 for health).

⁴ Starting with the universe of all laws enacted between 1980-1998, we filtered out all enactments solely dealing with the budget, defense, and appropriations laws. Then, using the size of coverage in *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, we selected the subtopics in every major topic with the most coverage. A second subtopic was selected from each major topic if it was also in the top 50 subtopics for *CQ* coverage. As discussed later on, it is not always easy to locate the laws where relevant policy changes occur. This was the primary reason for temporarily excluding subtopics such as employee benefits (503) and tax policy (107). All told, the subtopics selected accounted for 67 percent of all non-appropriations enactment coverage in *CQ*, and included discussion of 576 separate laws enacted during this period.

To measure the *degree* of policy change in each subtopic area, we rely on the observations of a group of experts – the editors of the *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* (hereafter “CQ”). CQ is an annual compilation directed at an elite audience that includes policymakers, lobbyists, academics, and other congressional observers. Most of each volume is devoted to legislation although many proposals and laws receive no CQ attention whatsoever. Those that do are generally more consequential: CQ’s on-line archive of the *Almanac* describes itself as offering “[a]n unbiased look at the issues that mattered most in a given year.”

We limit our attention to CQ articles on enactments (articles that reference specific P.L.s). Each article has been classified for its primary *PAP* subtopic. Importantly, the subtopic refers to the emphasis of the *article*, not the emphasis of the referenced law. *Degree of policy change* is the sum of CQ article lines devoted to a given subtopic during a given congressional term. If CQ covered three laws altering prescription drug coverage in a term, our measure would be how much coverage those three laws received. While the subtopic of an article is often identical to the subtopic of the law being covered, this is not always true. For example, an omnibus crime law could be covered in multiple CQ articles, with each article highlighting a different provision of that law. We would only count the articles that were primarily about the crime subtopic of interest. Alternately, if a CQ article emphasized a particular provision of a broader law, our measure would be that emphasis rather than the broader subject of the law.⁵

One likely question about article length is whether it is capturing something other than the degree of policy change, such as political controversy? We are not aware of any alternative markers of “degree of policy change” that might be used to address this potential criticism. However, it is possible to ask whether the amount of CQ coverage of *laws* is a valid indicator of law importance. To begin, Figure 1 shows that spikes in CQ coverage of highway construction laws (subtopic 1002) does correspond to enactments of massive transportation laws in 1987, 1991, and 1998.

[Figure 1 about here]

A more systematic approach is to compare CQ law coverage of laws to an alternative marker of the importance of laws. Clinton and Lapinski (2006) have developed one such indicator. After acknowledging that any measure of significance will have its limitations, they define a significant law as “a statute or constitutional amendment that has been identified as noteworthy by a reputable chronicler-rater of the congressional session” (Clinton and Lapinski 2006). Their methodology combines assessments by twenty “raters” with known benchmarks of the legislative process to generate a “significance” score for each law enacted since 1789.⁶ For 3000 statutes enacted between 1969 and 1996 (the current available year of Lapinski’s data), the Pearson correlation (without any data transformations) between their measure and ours is a solid .59.

⁵ If our goal were to measure the overall importance of the law, then we would want to count all of the articles.

⁶ The amount of CQ coverage per statute is one of the twenty “ratings” of legislative significance used by Clinton and Lapinski.

The advantage of using the CQ coverage versus the Clinton and Lapinski score is the ability to separate *policies* from *statutes*. Recall that an enactment can get multiple CQ articles (many do), but we only include those articles that are relevant to the specific subtopic of interest. For example, when an omnibus bill is passed but only a small portion alters aviation policy, we are able to include only the article that primarily deals with changes in aviation law.

Governing Considerations and Policy Priorities

The central argument that we intend to test is whether governing considerations are important drivers of the legislative agenda, and of policy change in particular. For the purposes of this research, we focus on two types of high priority governing issues - expiring laws and salient issues.

Policy Expirations

In *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policy*, Kingdon suggests that reauthorizations consume a large proportion of legislative attention. One committee staffer told him, “Nine out of ten times, we’re occupied with expiring legislation. I know that doesn’t sound very inspiring, but, frankly, that’s the truth” (Kingdon 1995, 186; see also Walker 1977; Sinclair 1986). Remarkably, the impact of reauthorizations on the legislative agenda has received little systematic attention. Hall (2004) suggests that reauthorization calendars strongly influence policy possibilities. He cites the case of Head Start. Although President-elect Bush indicated that reforming Head Start was one of his top priorities, he did not include Head Start in the massive education reform bill he submitted to Congress shortly after his election. A preference-based explanation would presume that he lacked the votes to pass it. *The New York Times*, in contrast, explained: “Mr. Bush’s aides said this week that they would not seek to move Head Start until the program is eligible for reauthorization by Congress, in 2003” (Steinberg 2001, quoted in Hall 2004, 1).

Prior to the mid-1900s, nearly all authorizations were permanent. After World War II, Congress began to use temporary authorization more frequently in foreign and defense policymaking (beginning with the Marshall Plan and the Russell amendment), and then in domestic policymaking (Cox 1996, 91; Hall 2004). By the 1970s, it was estimated that over 25 percent of all enactments were reauthorizations.

Short-term authorizations are tools that can serve many purposes. The main justification for their increased use has been that they enhance the policy influence of the committee of jurisdiction. Aberbach (1990) and Cox (1996, 83-84) note that having to revisit a program encourages members to engage in oversight and use the leverage associated with a reauthorization to influence agencies and the Appropriations committee. The House and Senate both have rules prohibiting unauthorized appropriations. In the absence of such rules, the influence of authorizing committees vis-à-vis Appropriations would be much weaker. But short-term authorizations also have costs (or benefits depending on one’s perspective). In theory, they restrict the gatekeeping powers of committees by compelling

action (Hall 2004, 57). Frequent reauthorizations also constrain the time available for other legislative initiatives (Walker 1977; Cox 1996, 87; Evans 2001).

Our specific contention is that expiring authorizations encourage legislative action in two ways. In contrast to a situation where a program is permanently authorized, *a failure to act will result in a reversion point that is often quite different than the status quo* (Krehbiel 1998). The reversion point is usually the elimination of existing programs. Lawmakers have an unusually strong incentive to address looming sunsets, particularly since existing laws and programs already benefit their constituencies. Second, the prospect of eventual reauthorizations – even years into the future – serve as policy making “focal points” for policy advocates. Given scarce time and agenda space, *reauthorization schedules help to promote structure in a policy environment where no policy outcome constitutes a policy equilibrium* (Shepsle and Weingast 1987). Collectively, lawmakers benefit from adhering to this structure.

Testing the effects of expiring authorizations on policy change requires knowledge not only of when programs or provisions are scheduled to expire, but also their importance. The impact of expiring authorizations can also vary by policy area. For some policy areas, a single expiring provision may incorporate the bulk of the enabling language for a statute. For example, the 1980 “Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act” (CERCLA) provided the federal government with the authority to clean up hazardous and toxic waste sites and to hold polluting entities accountable. Although the law contained many pages of authorizing language, one provision served as the keystone of the law – the “Superfund” tax on the petroleum and chemical industry. In other policy areas – such as the massive “farm bill” – authorizing statutes include dozens of separate expiring provisions. To make things more complicated, these multiple provisions often expire (sunset) in different years.

Although it might make sense to distinguish expiring provisions based on significance, in this paper our measure is a simple count of the number of expiring provisions in each of our issue areas for each congressional term. Thus, for each congressional term, we have a *total count of the number of provisions relevant to the subtopic that are set to expire*.

Counting expiring provisions was no simple task. The only compilation of expiring authorizations is a Congressional Budget Office (CBO) report, *Unauthorized Appropriations and Expiring Authorizations* (MacDonald 2007). CBO combs each new statute at the end of the congressional term and notes provisions within them that expire at some time in the future. CBO also compiles information about which provisions previously identified will expire in the coming year.⁷ Unfortunately, CBO’s approach does not provide an accurate accounting. For example, by CBO’s account, the enormous farm bill passed in 1990 included 15 expiring provisions, and 7 of which were to sunset in 1995 or 1996. We combed the same law, and discovered over 100 expiring provisions. At least 66 of these were timed to sunset in 1995 or 1996.

⁷ This methodology was reported in a private conversation with the CBO official who was, at the time (2003), responsible for creating this report.

We subsequently learned that the CBO aggregates separate expiring provisions, but as far as we could tell there was no discernable methodology behind its decisions. Therefore, we returned to the original statutes and replicated the CBO's general procedures for our sample of policy subtopics. The PAP also classifies statutes for topic. We began by pulling all statutes within our subtopics that were enacted up to five years before the start of our period of study. We then combed through each statute, noting any provisions that included an explicit expiration date. (There is no common protocol for indicating program expiration. The only reliable approach was to visually inspect every line of every statute.)

For each expiring provision contained in these issue relevant laws, we recorded the name of the statute, the title or specific program that was on a temporary authorization, and when it was scheduled to expire. To ensure that we did not miss other relevant expiring provisions because the laws that included them primarily addressed other topics, or because they were contained in laws enacted before the start of our survey, we conducted a second sweep by searching the on-line *CQ Almanac* and *Lexis-Nexis Congressional Histories*. For example, this second sweep often identified provisions contained in omnibus statutes. We then reviewed and excluded expiring provisions that did not belong. Our accounting of expiring programs only includes those that are germane to the subtopic. For example, a farm bill might include a program expiration that was not specifically relevant to the limited number of agricultural subtopics that were our focus. Those expirations were excluded.

All told, across the 27 subtopics of this study, we identified almost 1600 total expiring provisions (Table 1). It is clear from the table that policymaking in some issue areas is not driven by recurring calendars because there are few if any expiring provisions during the period of study (e.g. "Air pollution, Global Warming, and Noise Pollution"). In other policy areas, such as higher education or agriculture, expiring provisions seem to be an important part of the policymaking process. "How important?" is the primary question of this study.

Public Salience

A second, less clear-cut, category of high priority issues includes those that gain public attention due to external events or "shocks." Outrage over the Exxon Valdez oil spill killed a promising effort to open the Alaskan National Wildlife Refuge to drilling, and prompted Congress to pass legislation strengthening environmental safeguards (Birkland 1997). On Sept. 11, 2008, a bipartisan Congress sent legislation to the White House transferring \$8 billion dollars from the general fund to the highway trust fund. This "rescue package" was prompted by a rapid decline in federal gas tax revenues brought about by higher gas prices. "We must act," said Rep. John Lewis (D-GA). "The trust fund is broke, out of money. Our state and local governments, drivers, construction workers and many others suffer when highway projects are delayed" (Abrams 2008). Although no formal deadline compelled action in these cases, they evoked a similar collective sense of urgency among lawmakers who sensed that the public expected them to respond with legislation.

Devising a continuous measure of public demand for policy change is not an easy task. Voters are not consistently polled on specific issues over time (Stimson 1999). “Most important problem” survey data exist, but these surveys only indicate the percentage of the public that considers a given issue (e.g. the economy) the “most important” problem. As a result, MIP data are of questionable value for ranking changing public concern about a particular issue (Wlezien 1995).

Binder turns to newspaper editorials (specifically *The New York Times*) as a “proxy for the public or political salience of the issue, a proxy that can be used to divide the agenda into progressive levels of significance” (Binder 2003, 37). A central advantage of Binder’s approach is that it is highly detailed. Her list includes specific descriptions rather than assignments to general categories. This means that we can classify changing editorial attention for whether it addresses the specific issue areas of our study. In addition, the measure we develop will be continuous instead of dichotomous. However, we will also need to consider whether editorial topics simply reflect the legislative agenda. In particular, perhaps the *NYT* is more likely to editorialize about expiring programs.

We are interested in program expirations because in an environment of limited capacity, the need to maintain existing programs will take precedence over other, more discretionary, legislative agendas. Similarly, we anticipate that other issues will have legislative priority because they are public priorities. As described above, Binder argues that editorials in *The New York Times* are a “proxy for the public or political salience of the issue.” We classify the brief (less than one sentence) descriptions she develops for *PAP* subtopic. Since most un-authored editorials are of approximately the same length, we use the number of editorials to indicate the public salience of the issue.

Other Explanations for Policy Change

Many potentially important predictors of policy change can be found in the existing literature. We group them into five categories: *policy preference coalitions*; *majority party coalitions*; *committee effects*; *inter-branch influences*; and *policy-specific effects*. Whenever possible, we employ measures that are identical to those used in prior studies, and in some cases test multiple specifications of the variable of interest. In other cases, we make adjustments or substitutions when existing measures geared towards studying statutory change are not appropriate to a study of policy change. Table 2 provides a complete list of variables and measurement/data sources.

[Table 2 about here]

Policy Preference Coalitions

It is very common for scholars to argue that the configuration of lawmakers’ preferences in combination with institutional arrangements determine which policy status quos are candidates for change (Krehbiel 1998). These spatial perspectives on lawmaking contend that as the gap between the policy preferences (read: ideology) of the pivotal actors widens, existing laws are less likely to be revised (Brady and Volden 1998). This *gridlock*

interval is central to understanding variations in policy accomplishment over time (Chiou and Rothenberg 2003, 2006). Lapinski (2008) proposes that partisan polarization serves as a short cut to capturing the dynamics of the gridlock interval, and uses a *one-chamber polarization* score as a proxy for polarization in both chambers. Alternatively, Maltzman and Shipan highlight the *divergence of preferences across the two chambers*: “laws are less likely to be amended when partisan control of government is divided and when the House and Senate have distinct policy preferences” (2008, 259-60; we address divided government below). In addition we use another measure of aggregate shifts in the policy priorities of lawmakers by examining the change in the percent of total bills introduced by all members that are devoted to a specific major topic area (House only).

Majority Party Coalitions

Perhaps as commonplace in the literature is the notion that partisan majorities are central to explaining policy change (Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005). Although the underlying foundation is still preference-oriented, parties have the advantage of agenda control to the extent that party members exercise discipline. Berry, Burden, and Howell (Berry, Burden, and Howell 2006) assert that the durability of federal programs can be explained by alterations in partisan composition or partisan strength of the enacting majority. Lapinski (2008) makes a similar argument that the larger the *majority party advantage*, the more resources at its disposal to make changes to law. Given the emphasis on majority party authority to push its issues, we also test a variable that accounts for the correspondence between the majority party and issues it “owns” (Pope and Woon 2008; Woon and Pope 2007; Petrocik 1989)

Committee Effects

Many studies also assert that committees and their chairs control the pace and direction of policy change within their jurisdictions (Deering and Smith 1997; Fenno 1973; Weingast and Marshall 1988). By these accounts, committees are not simply tools of the parties or beholden to the chamber median – they possess “committee power.” Therefore, as the composition of a committee changes, policy change becomes more likely.

We first define the primary committee of jurisdiction as the one that receives the majority of bill referrals in the issue area for our period of study. We then test two indicators of committee change. Our measure of *leadership change* is whether the committee chairman of the current term differs from that of the previous term. Our measure of *committee preference change* is the absolute difference in Poole and Rosenthal’s Common Space scores for the median member from one term to the next, aggregated across the House and Senate committees of jurisdiction.

Inter-branch Influences

The other side of Pennsylvania Avenue is undoubtedly critical for understanding policy change (Jones 1994). Numerous scholars have addressed the argument that *divided government* dampens legislative productivity (Binder 2003; Mayhew 1991; Howell, Adler,

Cameron, and Riemann 2000; Maltzman and Shipan 2008). Moreover, presidents may have a positive impact on the agenda through the issues they choose to champion (Rudalevige 2002).

Binder (2003) asserts that *presidential support* for an issue can be surmised if it is mentioned in the president's State of the Union address. However, one can easily think of instances in which presidents have floated trial balloons during the State of the Union speech only to have them sink like a lead zeppelin (think George W. Bush and hydrogen cars). Malbin and Rudalevige have created a database of presidential messages regarding legislation or potential legislation. In our view, messages provide a better measure of the issues on the president's radar screen. In addition, we assume that issues that are mentioned more often are more important to the President. We classify presidential messages by PAP subtopic to construct a measure of presidential issue priorities by term.

Policy-specific Conflict

Finally, a number of studies consider the contentiousness or divisiveness of the policy area itself. For example, MacDonald's (2007) argument, in his analysis of the factors influencing the reauthorization of expiring laws, is that more *conflictual policies* are less likely to be renewed. On the other hand, Maltzman and Shipan argue that, "divisive laws are less likely to be protected against future laws" (Maltzman and Shipan 2008, 257). Binder (2003) seems to adopt both possibilities when she examines the partisan polarization of issues. That is, polarization helps to push certain bills forward in the House, but can hurt a bill's progress in the Senate, where minority party support is often critical for success. Thus it is possible that policy areas experiencing political upheaval are less stable and therefore more likely to produce change, or that change in policy areas experiencing political upheaval is less likely because building a winning coalition is more difficult.

Our focus on policy change instead of statutory change compels us to develop new measures of contentiousness. Following Binder (2003), we measure issue specific partisan polarization by the frequency of party unity votes on legislation related to a given issue area during the preceding congressional term.

Analysis

The dependent variable is the amount of enactment coverage (by printed lines) in the *CQ Almanac* within each selected subtopics for each congressional term. Because this is a count variable, we adopt a Poisson technique particularly well suited to addressing overdispersion – negative binomial. In addition, because of the excessive number of observations that are zero for the dependent variable (no lines of *CQ* coverage) we employ a zero-inflated version of negative binomial (the **zinb** model in STATA), with the number of statutes enacted in each policy subtopic per term as the predictor of excess zeros.⁸ Since we expect clear differences in the intercept by policy subtopic, as well as potential

⁸ In all cases a Vuong test indicated that the zero-inflated negative binomial model was a better fit to the data than the standard negative binomial model.

problems with serial correlation, we estimate the models with both fixed-effects and clustering on policy subtopic. These are the most conservative estimations possible. (Coefficients for the fixed effects are not reported in the tables.) In addition, though we do not report these coefficients, we analyzed all the same models with a log transformation of our dependent variable, which revealed not substantive difference in the findings.

Our objective here is to test the effects of the alternative independent variables described above across a variety of model specifications. In addition to asking whether a variable significantly impacts the likelihood of policy change, we are also interested in the robustness of our variables of interest to alternative specifications.

Model 1 in Table 3 predicts the amount of policy change in an issue area in a congressional term using just the number of expiring provisions and the amount of editorial coverage of the issue. The findings are largely as we predict. The number of expiring provisions has a positive and significant effect. What makes this finding particularly remarkable is that we have not controlled for any lagged effect of renewals. For instance, we know that in 1986 Congress failed to reauthorize the enormous highway projects bill. It eventually did, *in the next term* (over President Reagan's veto), but such delayed policy responses are not captured in the results reported.

[Table 3 about here]

The public salience of this issue has a similar positive and significant relationship to policy change. It is also important to note that numbers of expiring provisions and public salience are not strongly correlated (Pearson's $R = -.150$). Thus, expirations of large programs (highways, higher education, farming, etc.) do not explain variations in the public salience of issues as measured by *NYT* editorials.

These findings are very robust as the remaining models demonstrate. For example, in model 2a, 2b, and 2c, we incorporate three different indicators of policy preference coalitions and find that they have no substantial relationship to our dependent variable. Yet there is no real change in our main findings regarding expiring provisions and public salience. (We also tested Chou and Rothenberg's four different specifications for the size of gridlock interval [not shown]. None were significant predictors of policy change.)

Model 3 considers majority party strength. The governing variables (expiring provisions and issue salience) continue to have the same positive and significant effects. The size of the majority in both chambers does not affect policy change in these models. The majority party's strength as measured by its *gain* in seats from the previous term, and whether the issue is "majority party-owned" also have no impact on policy change (not shown).

Model 4 assesses committee influence. Changes in committee of jurisdiction leadership and the changing membership composition have no impact on policy change, whether tested together (reported) or modeled separately (not reported).

Model 5 examines inter-branch influences. Whether the government is unified or divided has no discernable effect on levels of policy change. However, the more frequently the president communicates about an issue, the more likely it is that Congress will make policy changes in that issue area. Importantly, presidential attention does not seem to be explained by the presence or absence of big expiring programs (Pearson's $R = .087$).

Model 6 offers no support for the hypothesis that the historical partisan divisiveness of the issue area impacts the level of policy change.

Finally, Table 4 tests in two different specifications all of the proposed explanations for policy change in a single model. The first all-inclusive model was typical of the findings using different combinations of the independent variables for the alternative explanations. Only three variables are always significantly predictive – the two governing variables of expiring provisions and public salience, and the president's agenda. What is particularly striking, of course, is the fact that after controlling for these three variables, none of the variables pertaining to preferences, partisanship or congressional structure help to explain policy change.

There was one combination of independent variables that did yield some significant relationships for other covariates (All-inclusive model 2). Here we see that smaller differences in the preferences of the two chambers has a significant and positive effect on policy change – and this relationship is in the predicted direction. (This was also the only variable from the alternative explanations of policy change – besides presidential agendas – that was statistically significant when modeled *without* the governing variables.) However, the statistically significant coefficient on turnover in the relevant Senate committee chair is not in the predicted direction.

[Table 4 about here]

Discussion

Contemporary studies of policy change commonly assume that lawmaking is primarily a discretionary activity where the preferences of lawmakers are the main determinant of when new laws are enacted and existing ones are reformed. We find that preference-centered models offer an incomplete account of why issues get onto the legislative agenda. Institutionally embedded and externally driven agendas are central to understanding policy change in Congress. The most important and most robust predictors of the timing and magnitude of policy changes across 27 issue areas over 18 years are expiring laws, the public salience of issues, and presidential priorities. Other longstanding predictors, such as the size of the majority party or the gridlock interval were rarely significant, and much less stable across alternative model specifications.

These findings should lead to significant revisions in how scholars conceive of lawmaking. Scholars appreciate that defense and appropriations are annual schedules to ensure that they make it to the top of the agenda every year. We have tested whether similar governing considerations apply to policymaking more generally. Failing to recognize the

importance of internal agenda setting processes of this kind creates the potential for serious misconceptions about the policymaking process.

For example, an observer could easily infer that spikes in bill introductions and hearings followed by enactments were evidence of successful entrepreneurial efforts to draw attention to issues and push through policy changes. This is the motivating model of a longstanding literature examining “legislative effectiveness.” A potential limitation of this approach, as should now be evident, is that lawmakers might also be sponsoring bills and convening hearings in response to an *anticipated* policy changes. In a separate paper, we have tested this possibility and confirmed that program expirations in time t systematically predict bill introductions and legislative hearings in time $t-1$ (Adler, Harbridge, and Wilkerson 2003).

We are not suggesting that policy preferences do not influence policy. However, this study does highlight a potential limitation of previous literature. In the main, prior studies simply ask whether preference measures are significantly related to the presence or absence of a policy change. For example, Maltzmann and Shipan (2008) seek to explain the timing of “significant revisions” to existing major laws. Major revisions are noted in this binary variable, while other changes to the same law in other years are assigned the same value as no change at all. Our approach, in contrast, provides an opportunity to assess the relative *importance* of preferences compared to alternative explanations, and it does so with a more nuanced measure of policy change. It would be interesting to explore whether employing a more nuanced measure would alter the results of prior studies of statutory change.

Lawmakers’ preferences surely influence the substance of the policies enacted by Congress. An education reauthorization enacted by a Republican Congress will almost certainly differ from one enacted by a Democratic Congress. To appreciate how preferences impact policy, scholars will need to study policy change at a more detailed level than is currently the case. But even here, we anticipate that preferences are only one of the considerations shaping policy. In many policy areas, lawmakers do not possess strong preferences. They know little about the issue, much less the policy, and have little electoral incentive to be concerned about either – unless something goes wrong. How do policies develop in such an environment? Who sets the agenda? How do proposals evolve from inception to enactment and why? These are important questions that we look forward to examining in the future.

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Figure 1: Lines of CQ Coverage of Highways Enactments, 1983-1999

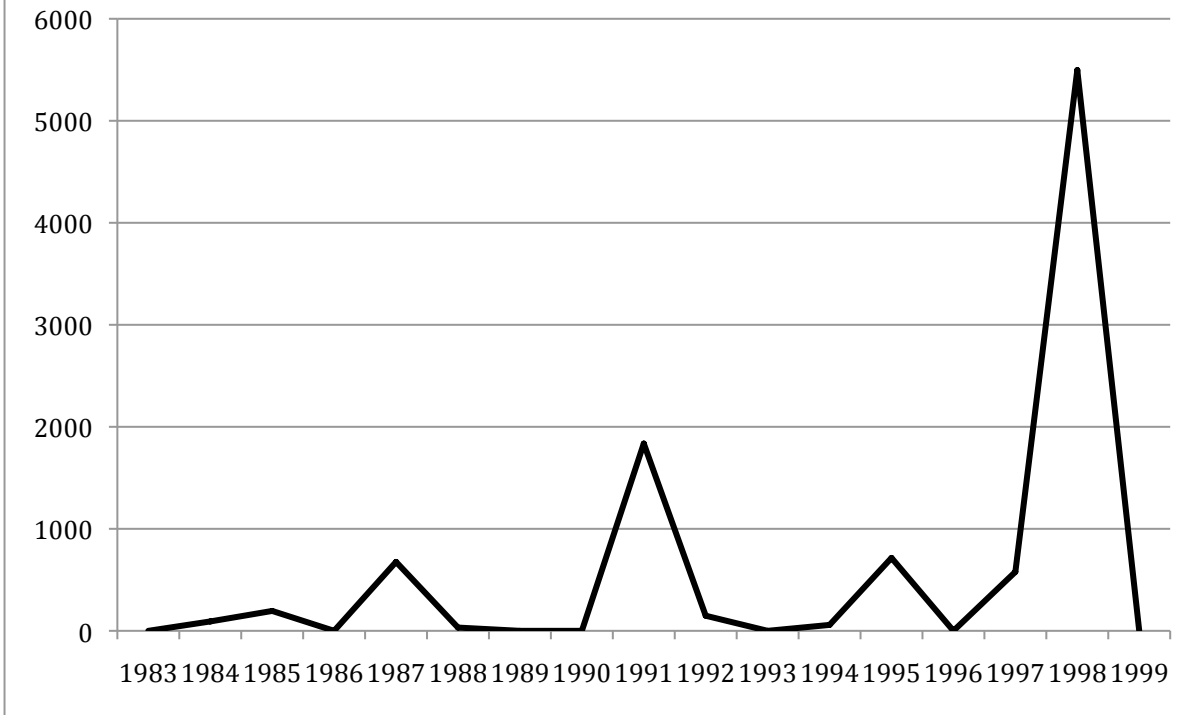


TABLE 1: Policy Agendas Project Subtopics Studied

Policy Subtopic	Subtopic Code	Expiring Provisions
Taxation, Tax policy, and Tax Reform ^a	107	82
Civil Rights, Minority Issues, and Civil Liberties, General (includes combinations of multiple subtopics)	200	6
Handicap or Disease Discrimination	205	18
Insurance reform, availability, and cost	302	31
Regulation of drug industry, medical devices, and clinical labs	321	17
Government Subsidies to Farmers and Ranchers, Agricultural Disaster Insurance	402	255
Food Inspection and Safety (including seafood)	403	7
Employee Benefits ^a	503	0
Immigration and Refugee Issues	530	34
Higher Education	601	212
Elementary and Secondary Education	602	164
Hazardous Waste and Toxic Chemical Regulation, Treatment, and Disposal	704	31
Air pollution, Global Warming, and Noise Pollution	705	2
Energy Conservation	807	25
Highway Construction, Maintenance, and Safety	1002	217
Airports, Airlines, Air Traffic Control and Safety	1003	57
Illegal Drug Production, Trafficking, and Control	1203	37
Police, Fire, and Weapons Control	1209	19
Poverty and Assistance for Low-Income Families	1302	28
Elderly Issues and Elderly Assistance Programs (Including Social Security Administration)	1303	50
Housing and Community Development	1401	211
U.S. Banking System and Financial Institution Regulation	1501	34
Securities and Commodities Regulation	1502	10
Telephone and Telecommunication Regulation	1706	30
Broadcast Industry Regulation (TV, Cable, Radio)	1707	12
Trade Negotiations, Disputes, and Agreements	1802	32
Export Promotion and Regulation, Export-Import Bank	1803	26
U.S. Foreign Aid ^a	1901	21
Latin America (South America, Central America, Mexico , Caribbean Basin , Cuba) ^a	1914	0
Government Efficiency and Bureaucratic Oversight	2002	9
Government Employee Benefits, Civil Service Issues	2004	21
Natural Resources, Public Lands, and Forest Management ^a	2103	0
Water Resources Development and Research ^a	2104	25

^aSubtopics not used for the current analysis.

TABLE 2: Independent Variables

	Data Source	Expected Effect	Mean	St. Dev.	Min.	Max.
<u>Governing Theory</u>						
Expiring Provisions in Law	(Authors)	+	6.564	15.329	0	117
Public Salience	Binder's data on editorials from <i>The New York Times</i> , coded by <i>PAP</i> subtopics	+	17.403	17.924	0	105
<u>Policy Preference Coalitions</u>						
Chamber Preference Distance	Absolute difference in chamber preferences using Poole and Rosenthal's DW-NOMINATE scores	-	0.029	0.025	0.007	0.084
House Polarization	Absolute difference in House Democratic and Republican mean preferences using Poole and Rosenthal's DW-NOMINATE scores	-	0.713	0.091	0.603	0.856
House Priority Change	Change in percent of total bills devoted to this major topic area (House only)	+	0.000	0.011	-0.044	0.038
<i>Alternative Specification (analyzed but not recorded in tables)</i>						
Gridlock	Choiu and Rothenberg's four different measures of the size of the gridlock interval (party free, party agenda, party unity, and presidential leadership)	-	0.738	0.057	0.644	0.81
<u>Majority Party Coalitions</u>						
House Majority Party Size	Percent of House seats controlled by the majority party	+	0.571	0.038	0.51	0.61
Senate Majority Party Size	Percent of Senate seats controlled by the majority party	+	0.547	0.012	0.53	0.57
<i>Alternative Specification (analyzed but not recorded in tables)</i>						
Gain of Majority Party Seats	Net gain of seats for the majority party in both chambers, 0 if no gain or loss	+	9.667	19.391	0	63
Majority Party Issue	House and Senate controlled by same party, and that subtopic is determined by Petrocik (1989) to be "owned" by the majority party =1, otherwise=0	+	0.374	0.485	0	1

TABLE 2, continued: Independent Variables

	Data Source	Expected Effect	Mean	St. Dev.	Min.	Max.
<u>Committee Effects</u>						
Turnover in House Committee Chair	If the term of a new chair of the primary committee of jurisdiction=1, otherwise=0	+	0.222	0.417	0	1
Turnover in Senate Committee Chair	(same)	+	0.366	0.483	0	1
Change in Committee Preferences	Absolute difference in the preferences of the primary committee of jurisdiction from previous term using Poole and Rosenthal's COMMON SPACE scores	+	0.166	0.206	0	0.964
<u>Inter-branch Influences</u>						
Unified	Both chambers and presidency controlled by same party=1, otherwise=0	+	0.111	0.315	0	1
Presidential Agenda	Aggregation of presidential message by subtopic from Malbin and Rudalevige's data on presidential messages	+	0.401	0.354	0	1
<u>Policy-specific Conflict</u>						
Party policy conflict	Percent of roll call votes in subtopic for previous term that were party unity according to Rohde's data	+/-	0.009	0.013	0	0.086

TABLE 3: Models Predicting Policy Change

	Model 1		Model 2a		Model 2b		Model 2c	
	Robust Coefficient	S.E.	Robust Coefficient	S.E.	Robust Coefficient	S.E.	Robust Coefficient	S.E.
<u>Governing Theory</u>								
Expiring Provisions in Law	0.023***	0.007	0.022***	0.006	0.022***	0.006	0.023***	0.007
Public Salience	0.025***	0.010	0.024**	0.009	0.025**	0.010	0.026***	0.009
<u>Policy Preference Coalitions</u>								
Chamber Preference Distance			-3.337	3.616				
House Polarization					0.966	1.848		
House Priority Change							-4.487	7.004
<u>Majority Party Coalitions</u>								
House Majority Party Size								
Senate Majority Party Size								
<u>Committee Effects</u>								
Turnover in House Comm Chair								
Turnover in Senate Comm Chair								
Change in Committee Preferences								
<u>Inter-branch Influences</u>								
Unified								
Presidential Agenda								
<u>Policy-specific Conflict</u>								
Party policy conflict								
Constant	4.869***	0.575	5.079***	0.564	5.335***	1.253	4.821***	0.549
alpha	1.085	0.128	1.080	0.129	1.088	0.128	1.083	0.128
Vuong test	12.350	0.000	12.380	0.000	12.220	0.000	12.370	0.000
N	243		243		243		243	

TABLE 3, continued

	Model 3		Model 4		Model 5		Model 6	
	Robust Coefficient	S.E.	Robust Coefficient	S.E.	Robust Coefficient	S.E.	Robust Coefficient	S.E.
<u>Governing Theory</u>								
Expiring Provisions in Law	0.022***	0.006	0.022***	0.006	0.023***	0.007	0.024***	0.009
Public Salience	0.025**	0.010	0.024***	0.009	0.022**	0.009	0.024***	0.009
<u>Policy Preference Coalitions</u>								
Chamber Preference Distance								
House Polarization								
House Priority Change								
<u>Majority Party Coalitions</u>								
House Majority Party Size	-2.134	4.383						
Senate Majority Party Size	2.345	10.423						
<u>Committee Effects</u>								
Turnover in House Comm Chair			0.067	0.299				
Turnover in Senate Comm Chair			-0.179	0.190				
Change in Committee Preferences			-0.210	0.891				
<u>Inter-branch Influences</u>								
Unified					-0.442	0.321		
Presidential Agenda					29.313***	11.267		
<u>Policy-specific Conflict</u>								
Party policy conflict							0.818	0.588
Constant	4.849	5.090	4.962***	0.604	4.968***	0.607	4.739***	0.550
alpha	1.083	0.128	1.079	0.129	1.016	0.123	1.056	0.108
Vuong test	12.170		12.270		13.120		12.850	
N	243		243		243		243	

TABLE 4: All-inclusive Models Predicting Policy Change

	All-inclusive 1		All-inclusive 2	
	Robust Coefficient	S.E.	Robust Coefficient	S.E.
<u>Governing Theory</u>				
Expiring Provisions in Law	0.022***	0.007	0.021***	0.007
Public Salience	0.019**	0.008	0.015**	0.007
<u>Policy Preference Coalitions</u>				
Chamber Preference Distance			-12.824*	6.692
House Polarization	-2.538	12.712		
<u>Majority Party Coalitions</u>				
House Majority Party Size	-9.493	32.310	1.187	4.341
Senate Majority Party Size	23.231	45.254	-13.291	21.890
<u>Committee Effects</u>				
Turnover in House Comm Chair	0.040	0.335	0.143	0.291
Turnover in Senate Comm Chair	-0.159	0.200	-0.476**	0.202
Change in Committee Preferences	-0.352	1.022	0.077	1.063
<u>Inter-branch Influences</u>				
Unified	-0.882	0.692	-0.508	0.638
Presidential Agenda	26.771***	9.907	27.007***	9.610
<u>Policy-specific Conflict</u>				
Party policy conflict	0.688	0.508	0.782	0.485
Constant	0.738	10.763	13.184	10.884
alpha	0.985	0.110	0.963	0.112
Vuong test	13.210		13.070	
N	243		243	