

To: DCSI American Politics Class
From: Mary Olivia Rentner
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Re: Congressional Norms and Practices

Polarization

- Congressional norms have been altered by polarization which has further divided people by their political ideologies
 - *Social interactions* can show the extent and level of unity between members of opposite political parties
 - *Respect for norms* can show the extent and level of polarization
 - *Congressional staffers* can show the extent and level of influence norms have on partisanship
- Partisan polarization has increased among members of Congress and contributed to the polarization of the country as a whole. People see how their representatives act toward members of the other party and those actions are mimicked, in a broader sense, in the us versus them mentality held by many Americans.

Social Interactions

Congress has been divided by political parties for a long time, but there used to be more unity. Fact-finding trips (Congressional delegations or CODELs) are taken by members of Congress to foreign countries. It was a norm for members of Congress to travel in bipartisan groups that led to social connectedness and comradery between Republicans and Democrats (Alduncin 2017).

Examining the 95th to the 112th Congresses, Alduncin (2017) determined that members in more recent Congresses tend to travel less often and travel with people of very similar ideology to themselves. It was determined that this increase in isolating travel happened concurrently with the increase in polarization. The Congressional norms for travel have changed and have led to an increase in affective polarization and partisan polarization. When people with differing ideologies spend time together traveling, they form friendships based on the things they have in common. If a Congressman or Congresswoman feels like they are similar to someone who does not share their political beliefs, they are less likely to dismiss the entire party as “other” and “wrong,” but they will make more attempts to be bipartisan and understanding of differences. Without these uniting interactions, members of Congress will continue to see political parties as in-groups and out-groups with the out-group being evil and full of people with whom they are not willing to work with to find a solution to an issue.

In addition to travel, the congressional-wide softball leagues and freshmen orientations used to be bipartisan. Recently, those social practices have become separated along party lines (Alduncin 2017). Members are not interacting in a professional setting or a private setting. There is also a trend toward not living in DC during your time in Congress. This limits the day to day interactions that normalize friendship and communication with people of other ideologies.

Respect for Norms

Procedural disobedience (violating the rules of the chamber) and disobedience by violating the norms of Congress are both tactics used by the minority party in Congress to regain power in a situation in which the majority party has too much control (Alexander 2018). This does not happen often because, according to Alexander (2018), there is respect for and costs of breaking the rules and norms. Congressional norms can become enforceable rules by vote of the majority party, especially after the minority party violates the norms in an effective way. An example is the use of cell phones in the chamber. Democrats used their phones to draw attention to their protest when they were trying to pass gun control legislation. The majority party, the Republicans, decided after this violation of norms that they would make it a rule that there would be fines for someone who used a phone in the chamber (Alexander 2018).

Congressional norms and practices change to reflect the state of civility between members of Congress. When the minority party loses respect for norms and is disobedient more often than they were previously, it shows a lack of willingness to work with the majority party (Alexander 2018). Partisan polarization is shown in the degradation of norms, and if polarization increases, respect for rules may not be enough to prevent constant disobedience. The degradation of norms is a sign that polarization is present in Congress. Once there is polarization and degradation is prevalent, the breakdown of norms contributes to the increasing polarization in Congress which then leads to more degradation of norms.

Congressional Staffers

Staffers are relied upon to advise the Representatives they work for on voting and to share their expertise during policy creation. Their responsibilities have increased greatly since the end of World War II, but the norm for the role of a staffer has been about the same since the 1990s (Montgomery 2017).

The Congressional Management Foundation (2013) reports that salaries are low and hours are long for a staffer, so mainly it is the very motivated who apply to have this job. The very motivated are often more partisan. Montgomery (2017) also points out that these partisan staffers are likely to be more loyal to the party than to the congressperson for whom they are working. The party can offer staffers more career opportunities and staffers work for multiple members of Congress during their career. This movement of partisan staffers between members makes the legislation decisions of members of a party more similar and ideologically extreme (Montgomery 2017).

Partisan polarization has increased as the Congressional norms for the role and importance of staffers has increased. Staffers have been part of the facilitation of party division in Congress, but there are many other norms, rules, and environmental factors influencing their role.

Congress and Polarization:

Congressional rules are similar to norms because they are also impacted by, and impact, polarization. Congressional rules on party leadership are a good example of this. There are rules about the power held by the majority party's leadership. Those rules give power to the party, which leads to an increased need for ideological alignment. When both parties are focused on ideological alignment, affective polarization increases because they become more separate.

Party factions within Congress also relate to norms and polarization. Factions are usually more ideologically extreme than the rest of the party. When parties align ideologically, factions can pull the party more to the extremes and the result is partisan polarization. Congressional Delegation trends show how party factions divide members of Congress, even within their own party. Members usually travel with members of their own party, but specifically with members on the same point of the political spectrum as them. So, they further isolate their interactions with anyone who is different than they are.

Disagreement and Future Research:

- There is more research to be done about which is more impactful: how polarization alters Congressional norms or how the impacted norms change to make polarization more severe.
- Scholars are still studying the extent to which other factors influence the connection between Congressional norms and polarization, such as the influence of the majority leader, the president, the media, and the public.

References

Alduncin, Alex, David C. W. Parker, and Sean M. Theriault. 2017. "Leaving on a Jet Plane: Polarization, Foreign Travel, and Comity in Congress." *Congress & the Presidency* 44, no. 2 (Feb): 179-200. doi:10.1080/07343469.2016.1270370.

This article offers helpful information and analysis of the social connectedness of Congress. It discusses Congressional Delegations, softball leagues, living in D.C., daily interactions, and more becoming separated by political alignment. It focuses on how traveling to foreign countries created unity and a social connection. Polarization has made partisan travel rare. Data on the Congressional Delegations (CODELs) that used to facilitate bipartisan travel, reveal the changing habits of Congressmen and Congresswomen. They also examine who is more likely or less likely to travel at all. This is a good source because it points to changing Congressional norms and it takes polarization into account as a factor influencing and being influenced by changing norms. This source would be good for someone interested in the evolution of Congress and someone who wants to understand the impact of polarization on social unity.

Alexander, Brian. 2018. "Procedural Disobedience: Minority Resistance in the US House of Representatives." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 51, no. 01 (Jan): 124-128. doi:10.1017/s1049096517001998.

Montgomery, Jacob M., and Brendan Nyhan. 2017. "The Effects of Congressional Staff Networks in the US House of Representatives." *The Journal of Politics* 79, no. 3 (July): 745-761. doi:10.1086/690301.

N/A. 2013. "Life in Congress: Job Satisfaction and Engagement of House and Senate Staff." *The Congressional Management Foundation*. http://www.congressfoundation.org/storage/documents/CMF_Pubs/life-in-congress-job-satisfaction-engagement.pdf (September 9, 2013).