

Report on the Organizational Climates of Congress

Paul Hanges (Psychology)
Frances Lee (Government & Politics)
Kristina Miler (Government & Politics)
Jennifer Wessel (Psychology)



Table of Contents

Part I	Introduction.....	3
	Methodology and Data	6
Part II	The Structure of Intraparty Rewards.....	10
	Overview	10
	Rewarded Behaviors and Characteristics	11
	Discouraged Behaviors and Characteristics	16
	Consensus-Building vs. Winning Conflicts	19
	Summary.....	21
Part III	The Organizational Climate of Intraparty Conflict and Cooperation.....	21
	Overview of Findings	22
	Conflict with Intraparty Colleagues.....	23
	Conflict with Intraparty Leaders.....	26
	Leaders' Management of Intraparty Conflict.....	30
	Summary.....	34
Part IV	The Organizational Climate of Interparty Conflict and Cooperation.....	34
	Overview	34
	Perceptions of Interparty Conflict and Cooperation.....	35
	Finding Collaborators Across the Aisle	38
	Leaders' Response to Bipartisan Collaboration.....	43
	Summary.....	45
Part V	Congress as an Organization	47
	How Congress Differs from Other Organizations	48
	On the Job Learning	53
Part VI	Conclusions.....	56
	Looking Ahead	56
Appendix	Interview Protocol	59

I. Introduction

“Culture eats strategy for breakfast” is a saying often attributed to famous management consultant Peter Drucker. The adage is so often quoted because it resonates broadly. Organizations operate not just according to the strategies pursued by their leaders but according to the ingrained institutional norms, expectations, and patterns of behavior as understood by rank-and-file members.

The premise of this study is that we can gain a better understanding of Congress by attending to how the people who serve in the institution perceive norms and expectations for their behavior. What types of behaviors are rewarded and encouraged inside Congress? What are the “unwritten rules” that members and staff come to understand as they experience the institution? How do these organizational perceptions and practices, in turn, shape how members of Congress work with other members, both within and between the two major parties? What are the consequences for congressional outcomes?

Such questions require an interdisciplinary approach. The study of Congress is obviously a core topic in American political science. But political science of recent decades has largely turned away from questions of institutional culture and norms. There is an older scholarship on congressional norms, member role orientations, and folkways.² But since the so-called “economic turn” in legislative studies in the 1970s, research on Congress has emphasized members’ rational, strategic behavior.³ Political scientists studying Congress since the 1970s have drawn much less from work in psychology and sociology and have taken inspiration primarily from economics.⁴ As a consequence of this disciplinary shift, investigations of institutional culture, member socialization, norms, and folkways have fallen out of favor.

At the same time as legislative scholars stopped investigating questions of organizational culture and norms, the field of organizational psychology burgeoned. Between 1986 and 2004, there was a 50 percent increase in the number of PhD programs in organizational psychology and a 200 percent increase in the number of master’s programs. Likewise, the field’s professional association, the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, grew from around 3,000 members in 1992 to around 7,000 members in 2010. In 2014, the Bureau of Labor Statistics even

² Classic works in this vein include Herbert B. Asher, “The Learning of Legislative Norms,” *American Political Science Review* 67 (1973): 499-513; Roger H. Davidson, *The Role of the Congressman* (New York: Pegasus, 1969); Richard F. Fenno, “The House Appropriations Committee as a Political System,” *American Political Science Review* 56 (1962): 310-324; John R. Manley, “The House Committee on Ways and Means: Conflict Management in a Congressional Committee,” *American Political Science Review* 59 (1965): 927-39, and Donald R. Matthews, “The Folkways of the United States Senate: Conformity to Group Norms and Legislative Effectiveness,” *American Political Science Review* 53 (1959): 1064-1089.

³ David R. Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 2-3.

⁴ For a discussion of this shift, see Morris P. Fiorina, “Reflections on the Study of Congress, 1969-2009,” in *Oxford Handbook of the American Congress*, eds. Eric Schickler and Frances E. Lee (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 861-874.

ranked industrial-organizational psychology as one of the twenty fastest growing occupations in the U.S.⁵

Organizational psychology investigates the “the psychology of human cognition, affect, behavior, and performance applied to work and organizations.”⁶ As such, it covers precisely those topics that have gotten deemphasized in the legislative scholarship of recent decades, such as how members perceive the values and norms of organizations of which they are a part, how they are socialized into their organization, how they understand their organizational roles, and the pathways they see for advancement and success within their organization.

In particular, research on *organizational climate* bears relevance for the study of Congress. Organizational climates are the “shared perceptions among employees concerning the procedures, practices, and kinds of behaviors that get rewarded and supported” within particular organizations.^{7, 8, 9} Employees observe organizational practices and policies and communicate with one another about them, resulting in shared understandings of what is valued and discouraged inside an organization.

Climate scholars begin from the recognition that an organization’s formal rules and policies can differ markedly from actual practice and internal perceptions. A workplace, for example, can post tough policies for on-the-job safety, but if employees recognize that safety is less important than productivity or other organizational goals, safety will be less valued in practice than the company’s stated policies. Along these lines, climate scholars typically refer to organizational climates “for” particular activities. For example, a workplace can have a climate for safety, for quality, or for customer service.¹⁰

For this project, we wanted to gain a better understanding of the *climates for cooperation and conflict* inside Congress. Organizations differ in the extent to which members perceive that

⁵ Alan Farnham, “20 Fastest Growing Occupations,” ABC News, February 5, 2014. <https://abcnews.go.com/Business/americas-20-fastest-growing-jobs-surprise/story?id=22364716>.

⁶ Steve W. J. Kozlowski, “The Nature of Organizational Psychology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Organizational Psychology*, ed. Steve W. J. Kozlowski (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), Volume 1, p. 4.

⁷ Benjamin Schneider, (2000). “The Psychological Life of Organizations,” in *Handbook of Organizational Culture and Climate*, eds. Neal M. Ashkanasy, Celeste P.M. Wilderrom, & Mark F. Peterson (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), xvii – xxi.

⁸ Mark G. Ehrhart, Benjamin Schneider, and William H. Macey, *Organizational Climate and Culture: An Introduction to Theory, Research, and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

⁹ Benjamin Schneider, Mark G. Ehrhart, and William H. Macey, “Perspectives on Organizational Climate and Culture,” in *APA Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Vol. 1 Building and Developing the Organization*, ed. Sheldon Zedeck (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2011), 373-414.

¹⁰ Dov Zohar and David A. Hofmann, “Organizational Culture and Climate,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Organizational Psychology*, ed. Steve W. J. Kozlowski (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), Volume 1, p. 645.

cooperation is valued.¹¹ They also differ in terms of how conflict is handled and expressed.¹² Recognizing the importance of party organizations inside the institution, we explore how Congress's climates for cooperation and conflict can differ between members of the same or different parties.

Investigating an organization's climate means uncovering how an organization's members *perceive* what behaviors are rewarded and supported and what activities are discouraged or sanctioned. As applied to Congress, we thus need to ascertain how members and staff believe they can advance to greater influence in Congress and what sorts of behavior they see as valued and discouraged within the institution. An organization's internal climate can only be understood by consulting the perceptions of rank-and-file members.¹³

Organizational climate is especially important for understanding dynamic and fluid organizations.¹⁴ Dynamic organizations are self-contained, richly interconnected collections of individuals that have the ability to influence one another through the transmission of resources and information.¹⁵ A fluid organization exhibits loose boundaries (i.e., the self-containment property of dynamic organizations) between what is considered "inside" (i.e., organizational social structure) and "outside" (i.e., environment) the organization. Fluid organizations are "characterized by relationships, structures, processes, capabilities, and information that 'flow' between different entities" both inside and outside the organization.¹⁶ People outside a fluid organization can both see and influence the individuals inside. We maintain that Congress should be conceptualized as a dynamic and highly fluid organization, particularly in an era of social media, C-SPAN, and a 24-hour news cycle.

The study of Congress, however, has not been a focus for organizational psychology. Generally speaking, organizational psychology is the study of workplaces. Political organizations obviously differ from workplaces in many key ways. Most importantly, members of Congress are hired and fired by their constituents, rendering congressional leaders far less powerful in shaping their organizations than leaders of private and public sector workplaces. Even though congressional leaders have much more limited influence over personnel matters, organizational psychology remains relevant for understanding how individual members perceive their institution, their

¹¹ For example, see Sandy Bogaert, Christophe Boone, and Arjen van Witteloostuijn, "Social Value Orientation and Climate Strength as Moderators of the Impact of Work Group Cooperative Climate on Affective Commitment," *Journal of Management Studies* 49 (2012): 918-944. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-6486.2011.01029.x.

¹² Michele J. Gelfand, Lisa M. Leslie, and Kirsten M. Keller, "On the Etiology of Conflict Cultures," *Research in Organizational Behavior* 28 (2008): 137-166.

¹³ Schneider, "Psychological Life."

¹⁴ Bart Van den Hooff and Julia Kotlarsky, "Managing Dispersed Expertise in Fluid Organizational Forms," in *Expertise, Communication, and Organizing*, eds. Jeffrey W. Treem and Paul M. Leonardi (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), 232-250.

¹⁵ Paul J. Hanges, Robert G. Lord, Ellen G. Godfrey, and Jana L. Raver, "Modeling nonlinear relationships: Neural networks and catastrophe analysis," in *Handbook of Research Methods in Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, ed. Steven G. Rogelberg (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 2002) 431-455.

¹⁶ Van den Hooff and Kotlarsky, "Managing Dispersed Expertise."

prospects and roles within it, and the types of behavior that they believe will be rewarded and supported. Such questions are ripe for reconsideration.

Developments in both political science and psychology thus call for more interdisciplinary collaboration. Our goal in this project was to bring the insights and questions of organizational psychology to bear on the study of Congress. With the support of the Democracy Fund, the Hewlett Foundation's Madison Initiative, and the University of Maryland's College of Behavioral and Social Sciences, we undertook this study to interview members, former members, former and current high-level staff about their perceptions of the climates inside Congress toward conflict and cooperation.

Drawing inspiration from the instruments administered in organizational climate studies, we developed an interview protocol that asked subjects to reflect on their congressional experience. We queried subjects on themes such as: Do members become influential in Congress by being perceived as winning conflicts with other members or by building consensus among them? How do members approach disagreements they have with their colleagues? How do leaders handle conflicts among members: do they try to suppress them or instead hash them out? Is cooperation across the aisle encouraged or discouraged? How is Congress different from other organizations with which members have experience?

Because perceptions are key to understanding an organization's climate, for this project it was necessary to consult directly with those who have experience in working in Congress. Just this shift represents a departure from much work on Congress. Congressional scholars tend to focus on measurable institutional behavior and outcomes. But only interviews can shed light on congressional insiders' shared perceptions of their institution's climate for conflict and cooperation.

Rather than administering a survey instrument for purposes of quantitative analysis, however, we believed that greater value would be obtained by going into more qualitative depth. As such, we conducted structured interviews asking our subjects to offer not just answers to survey items but accounts of their personal experiences and examples that form the basis for their responses.

Methodology and Data

Our goal in this research was to conduct in-depth personal interviews with a sample of former U.S. House members and staff members to ascertain the organizational climate and culture of Congress. Of particular interest to us are how individuals interact with members of their own party, their party leadership, and members of the other party. We sought to understand the rewards and disincentives that affect cooperation and conflict between and within the two parties.

We designed our research study and conducted our interviews consistent with the tradition of abductive research, which is a common methodology used by qualitative researchers in the

organizational psychology literature.¹⁷ Examples of abductive research can be found in studies of work/job analysis within the personnel psychology literature¹⁸ as well as applied leadership research.¹⁹

In abductive research, researchers start their data collection with an initial conceptual framework in mind.²⁰ Here we used the conflict culture framework discussed in the organizational literature²¹ to structure our interviews and facilitate dialogue with our participants.²² This framework, however, serves only as the starting point because, unlike traditional quantitative methods (e.g., surveys or experiments), the interviews in abductive studies are loosely structured to allow the researcher to capitalize on unexpected responses or new insights from participants.

Another important feature of abductive research is that the initial conceptual frameworks or constructs are used as a starting point to understand the data, but there is also flexibility for the data to reveal additional elements. We used thematic analysis to identify the “patterns of meaning (themes)”²³ in our interviews. This approach allows for a “dialogue” between the interviews and identified themes through which new categories may emerge and irrelevant aspects of the original conceptual framework either disappear or are modified. Consequently, thematic analysis results in the original conceptual framework becoming contextualized into the language of the organization, in this case, the U.S. Congress. Once this contextualization has occurred, researchers can use the contextualized framework to assess its utility for addressing organizational issues and problems. We believe that this abductive research design along with thematic analysis were optimal for studying the organizational climate of Congress and determining the relevance of the conflict culture framework for understanding behavior in the U.S. Congress.

Our method for recruiting participants relied on outreach conducted by our partner organizations, the Association of Former Members of Congress and the Millennial Action Project. During these outreach efforts, potential participants were informed that a team of academic political scientists and psychologists were conducting research on congressional climate and were invited to participate in an interview. Potential participants were told that participation was completely voluntary and would be anonymous and not for attribution.

¹⁷ Saku Mantere, and Mikko Ketokivi, “Reasoning in Organization Science,” *Academy of Management Review* 38 (2013): 70-89.

¹⁸ Frederick P. Morgenson, Michael T. Brannick, and Edward L. Levine, *Job and Work Analysis: Methods, Research, and Applications for Human Resource Management (3rd Ed.)* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2020).

¹⁹ Paul J. Hanges, Jeffrey Lucas, Amy Baxter, Karen DeAngelis, James Dobbs, David McCone, Michael Norton, Todd Woodruff, Kelly Beavan, and Jordan Epistola, *Organizational Culture, Ethical Leadership, and Trust*. Report provided to US Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, 2019.

²⁰ Mantere and Ketokivi, “Reasoning in Organization Science.”

²¹ Gelfand, Leslie, and Keller, “Etiology of Conflict Cultures.”

²² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

²³ Virginia Braun, and Victoria Clarke, “Chapter 4: Thematic Analysis,” in *Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology: Vol. 2. Research Designs*, ed. H. Cooper (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2012) 57-71.

The recruitment efforts yielded 60 interviews,²⁴ of which two-thirds were former Members of Congress and one-third were House staff members. We made every effort to obtain a diverse and representative sample of the population of former House members and their staff. For example, our sample included House offices from every region of the country and 28 states, making it a geographic cross-section of Congress.

Turning first to our interviews with current and former Members of Congress, we focused on speaking with legislators with a range of perspectives and experiences so that the insights gained through our research would be widely applicable. We were successful in this goal on a number of dimensions, most notably partisanship. Of the legislators we spoke with, 60% were Democrats and 40% were Republicans.

Our participants included a range of moderate, liberal, and conservative legislators.²⁵ Among the Democratic members of Congress, approximately one-third are considered to be moderate (classified as more liberal than only 55% of the House based on their ideological score), and one-third could be considered very liberal (defined as being more liberal than 70% of their House colleagues). Similarly, among the Republicans who participated in our study, one-quarter of legislators are considered moderate (classified as more conservative than only 55% of the House) and one-quarter are very conservative (more conservative than 70% of the House).

The careers of the legislators we spoke with varied as well. The members in our sample served an average of 14 years in the U.S. House of Representatives, with tenure ranging from 2 years to 38 years. Additionally, members' careers in the House spanned the period from 1975 to today. Our sample of House members included two members of the Watergate class that first came into office in 1975, as well as members who began serving as recently as 2015 (see Figure 1). The sample of members we spoke with was predominantly male, which is consistent with the composition of Congress during this period (90% of our sample as compared to 89% of members who served from 1975-2017).²⁶

As a complement to the interviews with members of Congress, we also conducted twenty interviews with legislative staff members. These staff members were also recruited through our partner organizations, the Association of Former Members of Congress and the Millennial Action Project. We interviewed a nearly equal number of current and former House staff members (55% and 45%, respectively). Our sample of legislative staffers is more balanced along gender lines (60% male) but reflects a greater proportion of Democratic offices (75%).

²⁴ One interview is excluded because it had to be cancelled due to an unforeseen scheduling conflict, and we were unable to rebook it.

²⁵ Ideological classifications are based on the NOMINATE score, which is the conventional measure of relative ideological position of Members of Congress used in political science (see voteview.com). Each legislator is scored based on recorded votes in a given session, and then legislators are ranked such that relative comparisons can be made. For our purposes here, we use the relative ranking of each legislator in their last term in Congress to estimate the extent to which are considered conservative, moderate, or liberal.

²⁶ Center for American Women and Politics, Rutgers University.

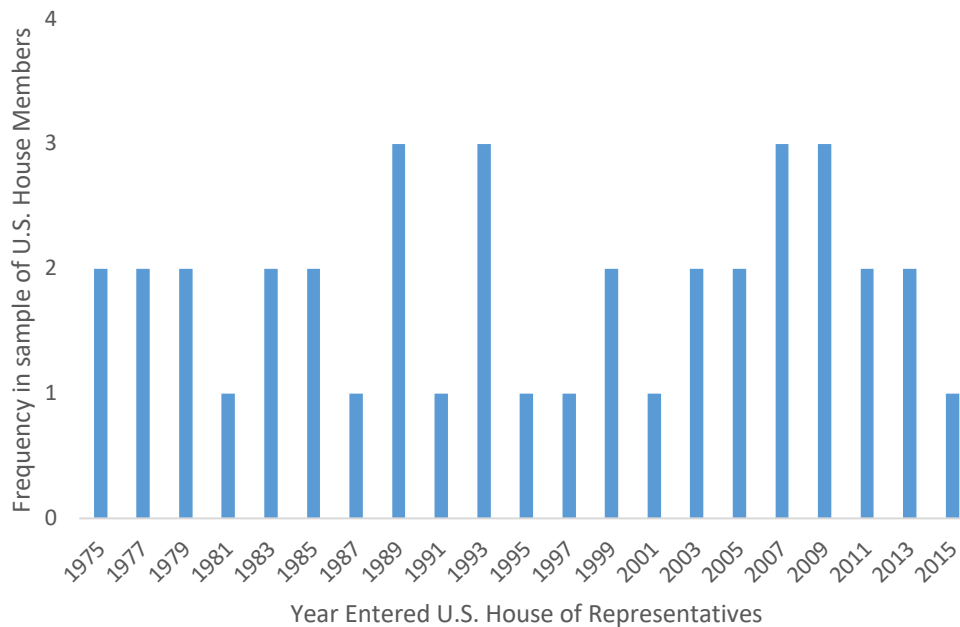


Figure 1: Sample of Members of Congress – Distribution by First Year in the House

Each interview was conducted in-person or by phone with one of the four primary researchers. In nearly all cases, interviews were audio recorded for transcription, but on the few occasions when subjects preferred we took notes instead.

We used a semi-structured interview protocol that included questions centered on a number of themes (see the Appendix for the full protocol). First, we asked questions about the organizational climate around intra-party conflict and cooperation. Our emphasis in these questions was first on understanding the structure of rewards inside members' parties. We wanted to know what behaviors increase members' influence within their parties and what behaviors reduce it. Then we wanted to understand the norms governing intra-party conflict. How should members approach disagreements with their colleagues? How do party leaders manage intraparty conflicts? Do they seek to suppress them or instead to hash them out?

Next, we asked respondents about the organizational culture around inter-party conflict and cooperation, which is at the heart of concerns about polarization and dysfunction in Congress. In this portion of the interviews, the focus is on understanding attitudes towards working across party lines, as well as respondents' own experiences working with members from the other party.

Finally, we asked respondents to reflect on their experiences working in Congress by drawing comparisons to other environments in which they worked. We also asked members and staff to reflect on what they know now that they couldn't have known before they worked inside of Congress. These final questions drew out candid and thoughtful reflections that underscore the value of talking to those inside the institution to better understand Congress.

Only minimal adjustments to the interview protocol were made when staff members were interviewed as compared to House members. Most interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, though some lasted much longer. Before beginning each interview, participants were told that the interview would be anonymous and neither their names nor any identifying description would be used in association with their remarks. Interviewers informed the participant that they would only be identified by their interview number. In addition, interviewers confirmed that participation was voluntary and affirmed the respondent's right not to answer any question(s) or to end the interview at any point. At this point, the individual being interviewed was asked if they had any questions or if they were ready to begin. The interview only began after confirming the interviewees' agreement.

II. The Structure of Intra-Party Rewards

Overview

In this section of the report, we focus on the reward structure inside Congress. People come to understand reward structures inside organizations via their own experiences as filtered through their communications with colleagues. They observe an organization's policies, practices, and procedures to ascertain behaviors that are rewarded, supported, and expected.²⁷ These individual interpretations then become an organizational climate as people share and refine their interpretations by speaking to others in their work social networks.^{28, 29} Reward structures as understood within an organization's social networks thus form the basis of an organization's climate. In this project, we sought to understand the reward structure Congress members perceive within their political parties.³⁰

In general, we find that the reward structure inside congressional parties is oriented around relationships. Members advance in influence via their success in cultivating the esteem of their colleagues. This entails developing a reputation for expertise and integrity. But it also means building a social network by doing favors for others, especially fundraising. Members seen as not considerate of others or unwilling to be "team players" have difficulty rising in influence. Success in consensus-building advances an individual member's standing within the party more than being

²⁷ Benjamin Schneider, Mark G. Ehrhart, and William H. Macey, "Organizational Climate and Culture," *Annual Review of Psychology* 64 (2012): 361-388.

²⁸ Stanley Wasserman, and Katherine Faust, *Social Network Analysis: Methods and Applications* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

²⁹ Daniel A. Newman, Paul J. Hanges, Lili Duan, and Anuradha Ramesh, "A Network Model of Organizational Climate: Friendship Clusters, Subgroup Agreement, and Climate Schemas," in *The People Make the Place: Dynamic Linkages Between Individuals and Organizations*, ed. D. Brent Smith (NY: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2008), 101-126.

³⁰ Michelle J. Gelfand, Kirsten Keller, Lisa M. Leslie, & Carsten de Dreu, "Conflict Cultures in Organizations: How Leaders Shape Conflict Culture and Their Organizational-Level Consequences," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 97:6 (2012): 1131-1147.

perceived as winning conflicts. Meanwhile, coalitions of members can enhance their influence by winning intraparty conflicts.

Rewarded Behaviors and Characteristics

When asked how members gain power and influence in their party, respondents provided many different answers. Here we focus on those that were repeatedly mentioned across interviews. In declining order, the member behaviors and characteristics that respondents perceive as rewarded with increased influence were: (1) expertise, (2) fundraising, (3) other-directed personality, (4) prior experience in leadership and (5) seniority.

Expertise. The single most frequently occurring theme among respondents was that members who develop expertise in either a content area or congressional procedure typically gained power and influence. Asked how members increased their influence within their parties, respondents replied:

“The time a member takes to study an issue or an issue area. Some members focus on becoming very, very particular in specialization, for example, in tax law or in national security, some defense thing. The people who do that are ones that others look to ... because they know that [such members] have the background and experience [on the issue].”³¹

“So you know, if there was somebody who was known as being a genius or being, you know, super expert, knowledgeable in a particular policy area ... that’s someone who would be known as influential in different ways.”³²

The reason expertise leads to power and influence is a function of the complexity of issues and legislation at the federal level, as well as the long timeframe involved in developing legislation. Influential members are:

“...very knowledgeable on the subject: budget, environment, education, tax, trade. [The representative has] to be known as knowledgeable. And if you are uncertain how to vote, you often would talk to [such members]. The people do not understand how complicated the issues are. ... When you amend the federal law, you’re amending a large body of law and also of administrative actions. And so the ramifications can be much greater than you anticipated and, in fact, the ramifications of a positive action can sometimes outweigh its benefits. [For example,] a lot of us spent a long time, years—three years at least—trying to figure out how to deal with the issue of managed care plans that arbitrarily restricted access to care.”³³

One respondent mentioned that representatives’ content expertise will increase their influence not only within a political party but also across party lines:

³¹ Interview number 2, April 26, 2018.

³² Interview number 19, June 14, 2018.

³³ Interview number 21, June 7, 2018.

“I think becoming known among party colleagues but not exclusively party colleagues for having some expertise in certain areas so that you’re available to be consulted on matters that are coming up on the floor or wherever.”³⁴

Interestingly, one respondent indicated that the power and influence obtained from expertise is not necessarily long-term:

“So influence could rise or fall at any time just based on the subject matter of the legislation. ... The House Republican conference had a doctors’ caucus to work on healthcare legislation. Those are members of Congress that are physicians or have some other health care background. They were very influential in the process because of their unique personal backgrounds.”³⁵

Consistent with the literature on expertise, being an expert requires continual development and updating to sustain a reputation for expertise over time.³⁶ Members must stay abreast of changing issues and circumstances. Otherwise, their knowledge domain can become outdated or no longer relevant. In addition, representatives’ influence will increase when their knowledge domain is relevant to some critical issue, but it will diminish when that domain loses saliency. Interestingly, one respondent suggested that focusing on developing expertise about congressional procedures might be more useful than focusing on a content domain:

“I think that you have a better chance of winning a leadership position if you are more conceptual and more focused on process. ... I contacted every Republican member of Congress by phone and in person. I tried to meet as many as I could and find out what’s important to them ... and I did tell them I was about process and I believed that we should let the process work. But I didn’t go up there and say, ‘Hey, these are my policy issues that I think we need to get done.’”³⁷

Fundraising. The second most frequently mentioned method for gaining power and influence was fundraising. Fundraising is obviously helpful for members’ own campaigns to retain their seats. But it is also a pathway to winning power and influence inside the institution:

“Money plays a big role in how you are assigned to committees. And committees are, of course, a source of power and prestige within your party. ... Every member of Congress has to pay dues to their party. ... However, if you want to be a committee chair, you know that the amount of money that you owe, your dues, [will] go up. So, obviously, the person who pays the most dues is the leader of the party. ... You don’t get a chairmanship unless you have paid your dues to the structure.”³⁸

³⁴ Interview number 43, November 18, 2018.

³⁵ Interview number 14, May 10, 2018.

³⁶ Timothy Kuhn, and Jens Rennstam, “Expertise as a Practical Accomplishment Among Objects and Values,” in *Expertise, Communication, and Organizing*, eds. Jeffrey W. Treem, and Paul M. Leonardi (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016): 25-43.

³⁷ Interview number 53, February 13, 2019.

³⁸ Interview number 12, May 8, 2018.

“I will also tell you that people earn influence in the House of Representatives and in the Senate if they have the ability to raise funds for their colleagues. So a lot of the people who emerge as leaders in the House of Representatives or in the Senate do so because they happened to be effective fundraisers. ... That isn’t the only reason they emerge, but it is a factor that supports their political rise within the institution.”³⁹

While fundraising and contributing to party coffers directly help members obtain formal leadership positions, these activities also help members rise in informal influence. Distributing funds assists members in building their social networks:

“First would be to help other members raise money. In other words, either you can contribute directly from your PAC or your campaign fund to a colleague or you can go and assist them in a fundraising event to show that you’re making an actual investment in their campaign and for them to be in Congress.”⁴⁰

“Helping colleagues in the party with their own political needs from time to time, whether that’s fundraising or appearing to help on campaign, whatever. Just generally bolstering those sorts of relationships with party colleagues. Fundraising [has] become an ever more prominent and objectionable, if not offensive, part of the deal.”⁴¹

A number of interview subjects observed that the importance of fundraising for power and influence within one’s own political party has become increasingly important:

“Members become influential within their party at this point in time, unfortunately, not necessarily because they have developed a great deal of knowledge about a particular topic, although I’m sure that’s true to some degree, but not to the extent it was in days gone by. They have a tendency to become more important in their party by their capacity to raise money for campaigns.”⁴²

“If someone was very effective at raising money and developing political support for their colleagues, that person is naturally going to be able to garner more votes in a leadership election. So, so [effective fundraisers were those who were] able to generate a support for, for leadership election”⁴³

Interestingly, a respondent observed that members differ in their capacity fundraising due to factors outside their control. Specifically, the type of districts members represent can enhance or inhibit a member’s use of funds to build their social network:

³⁹ Interview number 36, November 14, 2018.

⁴⁰ Interview number 53, February 13, 2019.

⁴¹ Interview number 43, November 8, 2018.

⁴² Interview number 4, May 12, 2018.

⁴³ Interview number 19, June 13, 2019.

“Now this is unfortunate because some people who are competent but in vulnerable districts and need money for their own race are at a disadvantage. So leadership tends to come from safe districts.”⁴⁴

Thus, representatives from uncontested (i.e., safe) districts are more likely to rise to leadership positions than representatives from swing districts. Representatives from competitive districts need more funds for their own campaigns and are thus less well positioned to assist other members with fundraising. As such, they stand at a competitive disadvantage as they seek to advance in influence.

Other-directed Personality. Our respondents indicated that personality and orientation toward others affected a member’s ability to rise in influence. Representatives who project “gravitas,”⁴⁵ can use “humor and charm”⁴⁶, are willing to “be part of the committee process”⁴⁷ and “engage as much as possible”⁴⁸ with their colleagues gain power and influence at a faster pace than representatives without these characteristics.⁴⁹ Further, representatives who have “empathy,”⁵⁰ “initiative,”⁵¹ and are “interested and involved”,⁵² and willing “to do some of the political heavy lifting”⁵³ gain power and influence. Representatives with good conversational and listening skills likewise gain influence. Meanwhile, “showboats”⁵⁴ have a more difficult time.⁵⁵

In short, the personality characteristics respondents mentioned underscore that consensus-building and orientation toward others are rewarded internally:^{56, 57, 58}

“It is much easier to campaign for a leadership position promising consensus and inclusion. ... But the ability to resolve conflict amongst your colleagues is very difficult.”⁵⁹

“There’s a term among legislators that he or she is a ‘legislators’ legislator,’ meaning that [a person is] somebody even among your peers you respect because you know they can work well with other legislators to find a common-sense solution. And so being

⁴⁴ Interview number 22, June 8, 2018.

⁴⁵ Interview number 20, May 30, 2018.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Interview number 29, September 28, 2018.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Interview number 22, June 8, 2018.

⁵⁰ Interview number 24, June 18, 2018.

⁵¹ Interview number 55, March 29, 2019.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Interview number 29, September 28, 2018.

⁵⁴ Interview number 35, October 10, 2018.

⁵⁵ Interview number 42, October 31, 2018.

⁵⁶ Interview number 2, April 26, 2018.

⁵⁷ Interview number 12, May 8, 2018.

⁵⁸ Interview number 24, June 18, 2018.

⁵⁹ Interview number 53, February 13, 2019.

the legislators' legislator those kind of people have a lot of influence in the process.”⁶⁰

Experience in Leadership. The next most frequent response indicated that representatives who have been or currently are in committee leadership position enjoy advantages for gaining additional influence.^{61, 62, 63, 64}

“Being in leadership – you’re “in the system” and you want to keep going up in it. Every profession has it – the person who wants to be president of the Rotary, or the president of the Realtors Association, but they’re not the ones selling real estate. There are “people who want to be ‘president of the class’ and manage the class rather than manage the details.”⁶⁵

Seniority. Seniority remains a pathway to influence, even though several respondents noted that its importance has decreased.⁶⁶ In today’s Congress, seniority is important less because it confers power directly than that it enables members to cultivate their social networks.^{67, 68, 69} Long tenure in the institution enables members to:

“...develop relationships with your colleagues: the friendships you’ve developed and the personal relationships. So that when it comes time for a leadership election, you have people you would call on that can support you or if you’re drafting or promoting legislation, you have people you can go to on key committees and in the House itself that will support your legislation.”⁷⁰

Seniority allows members to develop friendships inside the institution. It also aids members in building up a network of reciprocity by doing favors for other members or for their party more generally. Senior members have simply had more opportunities of strategically working with and helping others accomplish their tasks:

“I think participating in the efforts of the party to be successful on key party issues is important. For example, participating in the whip organization or, or simply having a reliable voting record on key issues that break down by party, helping colleagues in

⁶⁰ Interview number 14, May 10, 2018.

⁶¹ Interview number 14, May 10, 2018.

⁶² Interview number 31, October 1, 2018.

⁶³ Interview number 53, February 13, 2019.

⁶⁴ Interview number 13, May 9, 2018.

⁶⁵ Interview number 12, May 8, 2018.

⁶⁶ Interview number 31, October 1, 2018.

⁶⁷ Interview number 2, April 26, 2018.

⁶⁸ Interview number 3, April 24, 2018.

⁶⁹ Interview number 12, May 8, 2018.

⁷⁰ Interview number 2, April 26, 2018.

the party with their own political needs from time to time, whether that's fundraising or appearing to help on campaign.”⁷¹

“I always was honest with fellow members, and I built relationships with the chairmen and the ranking members, regardless of whether we were the ranking party or the majority party”⁷²

Seniority was also repeatedly referenced as a traditional pathway for gaining power and influence.^{73,74} Indeed, one respondent called tenure/seniority the primary route for becoming influential in one's political party.⁷⁵ Another respondent said:

“The US House is the “oldest bureaucracy.” With the seniority system (in the House), people get training from history (meaning members in office a long time and then their staff stick around even after they leave).”⁷⁶

Although seniority was the traditional path to power in Congress, interview subjects tended to emphasize that its importance has declined.⁷⁷ This is particularly true among Republicans who impose term limits on their committee leaders. Even so, seniority remains an advantage for members in building the social networks and relationships that are critical for informal influence.

Discouraged Behavior and Characteristics

Respondents were also asked about behaviors or characteristics that inhibited or prevented members from gaining power and influence within their party. As with the previous question, we focus on the responses that were repeatedly mentioned. In particular, we will discuss the following four themes: a) not being a team player; b) caustic personality; c) untrustworthiness / lack of integrity; and d) grandstanding.

Not being a team player. The most frequently mentioned characteristic inhibiting representatives from gaining power and influence in Congress was that the representative was perceived to be egotistical^{78, 79} and not a team-player.^{80, 81, 82, 83, 84}

⁷¹ Interview number 43, November 8, 2018.

⁷² Interview number 13, May 9, 2018.

⁷³ Interview number 2, April 26, 2018.

⁷⁴ Interview number 13, May 9, 2018.

⁷⁵ Interview number 25, June 15, 2018.

⁷⁶ Interview number 3, April 24, 2018.

⁷⁷ Interview number 31, October 1, 2018.

⁷⁸ Interview number 15, May 10, 2018.

⁷⁹ Interview number 16, May 10, 2018.

⁸⁰ Interview number 28, September 5, 2018.

⁸¹ Interview number 33, November 19, 2018.

⁸² Interview number 56, April 25, 2019.

⁸³ Interview number 38, October 28, 2018.

⁸⁴ Interview number 33, November 19, 2018.

“Somebody who is known as a team player will always have more influence or be thought of more than someone who is known to not be a team player.”⁸⁵

Representatives who were seen as mavericks or contrarians tended to experience isolation and acquired power and influence at a slower pace, if at all.^{86, 87}

“Mavericks within the Party, as you might expect, have a very difficult time of it because, you know, the legislature itself is an animal that really operates best when the whole herd is moving in the same direction. So the mavericks and those who routinely ... decide that they’re so independent and they’re so divorced from the mainstream of the party, are going to have a tough time of it, generally speaking.”⁸⁸

The representatives who are labeled non-team players are often inflexible in their opinions or unwilling to compromise on their positions.^{89, 90, 91}

“If you are identified with some issues that doesn’t match up with the party, that has an adverse impact.”⁹²

“If you’re so sure you’re right on everything, if that’s your mindset, it’s hard to be a leader because you get isolated. You get shunted off because most people recognize that nobody has all the knowledge, and that somewhere or other, you’re going to have to find a middle ground. ... And members who are sure they’re right are inflexible and therefore impossible. ... You can easily sidetrack them.”⁹³

“I think that the structure allows you to have your own voice, but you are going to get isolated if you’re constantly criticizing or blasting out on your own and you can’t work with others.”⁹⁴

Importantly, representatives who never disagree⁹⁵ with their party or are seen as compromising too quickly⁹⁶ do not fare much better than the mavericks and contrarians:

⁸⁵ Interview number 19, June 13, 2018.

⁸⁶ Interview number 9, May 8, 2018.

⁸⁷ Interview number 2, April 26, 2018.

⁸⁸ Interview number 32, October 17, 2018.

⁸⁹ Interview number 47, November 28, 2018.

⁹⁰ Interview number 49, December 5, 2018.

⁹¹ Interview number 57, May 8, 2018.

⁹² Interview number 30, October 10, 2018.

⁹³ Interview number 15, May 10, 2018.

⁹⁴ Interview number 50, December 6, 2018.

⁹⁵ Interview number 28, September 5, 2018.

⁹⁶ Interview number 30, October 10, 2018.

“It's interesting because sometimes if [your] vote is taken for granted [such that], ‘you'll always be with us.’ And so they don't talk to [you].”⁹⁷

Power and influence flows to representatives who strategically choose the context in which they disagree with their party:

“You have to pick the battle correctly, or you have to pick the right battle and calculate your strategy and be totally informed about what you’re doing and know what your objectives are.”⁹⁸

Caustic personality. The next most frequently mentioned characteristic that inhibits members from gaining influence was the representative’s personality.^{99, 100, 101}

“Someone who is kind of known for maybe not having a very helpful personality. Someone who kind of acted like a jerk or was kind of over-aggressive or brash or someone who was not particularly thoughtful when they made remarks. That type of person I would discount. ... That type of person was not very influential with me, just because they kind of rubbed me the wrong way.”¹⁰²

Representatives can also undermine their prospects for advancement if they are perceived as spreading rumors or making allegations concerning other representatives.¹⁰³

“Nothing travels faster than a lie or a rumor and nothing travels as slow as the truth. ... I remind them that in Washington and in politics, there are no secrets. People eventually find out what you said. You can say, ‘I’m only saying this to one person and [it will] never get out.’ It gets out. It just, it happens.”¹⁰⁴

Untrustworthiness/ Lack of Integrity. Being seen as untrustworthy or lacking integrity inhibits representatives from gaining power and influence.

“Lack of integrity is a better way to put it. Again, if people don't trust you, they won't work with you. ... If people didn’t think they could talk to you in confidence, they wouldn’t talk or they talk [without revealing anything].”¹⁰⁵

⁹⁷ Interview number 20, May 30, 2018.

⁹⁸ Interview number 33, November 19, 2018.

⁹⁹ Interview number 2, April 26, 2018.

¹⁰⁰ Interview number 16, May 10, 2018.

¹⁰¹ Interview number 56, April 25, 2019.

¹⁰² Interview number 19, June 13, 2018.

¹⁰³ Interview number 34, October 9, 2018.

¹⁰⁴ Interview number 20, May 30, 2018.

¹⁰⁵ Interview number 52, February 8, 2019.

Representatives get the reputation of being untrustworthy or lacking integrity when they lie to fellow members about how they would vote in the future,^{106, 107} disclose information that a member told the representative in confidence,¹⁰⁸ or because of some ethical scandal in their past.^{109, 110}

“If they have a checkered past ... it’s going to be difficult for them to rise up in the ranks, even if it’s never spoken out loud. If you are somewhat of a rogue who perhaps had legal difficulties in the past anybody who’s got that kind of a difficult history is probably not going to go very far.”¹¹¹

Grandstanding. Finally, showboating was frequently mentioned as a behavior that inhibits gaining power and influence.^{112, 113, 114}

“All those [representatives] that went on the floor, that had to talk on every subject, they became recognized after a while as not going to go very far. I mean, some people just had to speak on every subject and it turned a lot of members off.”¹¹⁵

In summary, the behaviors and characteristics that inhibit a representative from gaining power and influence center on factors that disrupt and tear apart the interpersonal and social networks within party. Representatives who are not team players, have caustic or abrasive personalities, tend to grandstand, or whom are judged as untrustworthy all have difficulties rising in influence. Such representatives experience isolation and disconnection from a party’s interpersonal and social networks. In a fluid institution like Congress, these personal behaviors and characteristics are subject to informal sanction.

Consensus-Building vs. Winning Conflicts

In seeking to understand the organizational climates around conflict and cooperation in Congress, we asked interviewees to reflect on whether members gained influence via consensus-building or by being perceived as winning conflicts within their parties. Respondents recognized that both types of strategies can increase a member’s power and influence under different conditions. They distinguished between members who are operating solo and those who are leading a coalition. Generally speaking, members operating on their own as individuals need to build some consensus around their position. By contrast, members who lead coalitions can gain in influence by being perceived as winning conflicts.

¹⁰⁶ Interview number 20, May 30, 2018.

¹⁰⁷ Interview number 55, March 29, 2019.

¹⁰⁸ Interview number 52, February 8, 2019.

¹⁰⁹ Interview number 46, November 16, 2018.

¹¹⁰ Interview number 56, April 25, 2019.

¹¹¹ Interview number 32, October 17, 2018.

¹¹² Interview number 35, October 10, 2018.

¹¹³ Interview number 52, February 8, 2019.

¹¹⁴ Interview number 59, May 29, 2019.

¹¹⁵ Interview number 37, October 18, 2018.

Several respondents suggested that consensus building within a political party was a pathway for individual representatives to gain power and influence.^{116, 117}

“If you can't build consensus, then all you're going to do is alienate your colleagues.”¹¹⁸

“[Members] usually get there by building consensus around that point of view. I think from what I've seen, a lot of it has to do with ... coalition building.”¹¹⁹

When members join together in coalition, however, the strategy of winning conflicts becomes more important as a pathway to increased influence.

“I think the best example there is the Freedom Caucus of two to four years ago. ... They controlled a big enough block of votes that at any time they could influence a vote. ... So if you get a large enough mass and represent a big voting bloc, you can certainly become influential, even if you are criticizing your party. ... The first couple of times they do something, everybody's pissed off at them. But then if they are consistently able to show that they have the votes ... a grudging respect comes along. ... [Other members] may not like them, but [they] respect the fact that they played the game and they won.”¹²⁰

“I built both the internal and the external coalition that gave me the mass to force a change. ... And so, when the water bill got done, I was able to have an impact on the language that was written.”¹²¹

“...if you can get enough votes up, you know, your party may not like it, but you're going to be influential and can't be ignored.”¹²²

Representatives that have good debating skills are viewed as important allies. Such members both help to grow a coalition as well as to represent it to others. When members are seen as acting on behalf of others rather than simply in the service of their own goals, they gain standing within the party. Members earn influence when they display:

“Good debate skills, good argument skills. ... [Being] willing to use those debate skills for something other than their own issues. ... Being a good combatant, somebody that others would see as somebody to have on my side.”¹²³

¹¹⁶ Interview number 13, May 9, 2018.

¹¹⁷ Interview number 28, September 5, 2018.

¹¹⁸ Interview number 27, August 3, 2018.

¹¹⁹ Interview number 44, November 9, 2018.

¹²⁰ Interview number 7, May 7, 2018.

¹²¹ Interview number 33, November 19, 2018.

¹²² Interview number 7, May 7, 2018.

¹²³ Interview number 52, February 8, 2019.

In conclusion, for individual representatives, consensus building is generally seen as their best strategy for gaining influence. But once members have formed a coalition around a set of issues, that coalition can gain power by being seen as winning conflicts. As discussed previously, dynamic, adaptive organizations such as Congress will exhibit this type of emergent behavior in which behavior differs at different levels of analysis.^{124, 125} Behavior admired and accepted for groups or coalitions can differ from that expected for individuals.

Summary

Our findings are clear that relationship-building and the development of social networks are of fundamental value to members. Even though there are individual characteristics that are rewarded (e.g., expertise, seniority, personality), these factors appear to affect a member's influence and institutional career primarily because they facilitate the growth and stabilization of a member's social network. Members seen as oriented toward others, as demonstrated by exhibiting empathy, attentive listening, and a willingness to help others with their issues and political needs are all likely to advance their institutional careers. On the flip side, members who do not work well with others, exhibit abrasive personalities, behave in unreliable or untrustworthy ways, or who grandstand all run into difficulties in amassing influence. For individual members, consensus building is valued over winning conflicts. But coalitions of members can gain greater weight within their party by being seen as winning conflicts. The central importance of relationships in Congress is consistent with patterns prevailing in fluid organizations more generally.

III: The Organizational Climate of Intraparty Conflict and Cooperation

In this section of the report, we offer an account of the organizational climate of intraparty conflict in Congress. Drawing upon our interviews, we examine the organizational norms governing the management of conflict within the congressional parties. In our interviews, we pursued three lines of questioning:

- How do members approach disagreements with party colleagues?
- Do members feel free to speak up when they disagree with leaders?
- Do leaders seek to suppress disagreements? Or get them hashed out?

We found a great deal of consensus on these questions. Our interviews suggest that norms are broadly similar in both parties. Likewise, the interviews did not point to significant over-time change in which members serving in more recent congresses described notably different practices and behavioral expectations than those who had served at earlier points.¹²⁶ Across the interviews, members offered remarkably similar descriptions of the norms governing intraparty conflict.

¹²⁴ Juliet R. Aiken, Paul J. Hanges, and Tiancheng Chen, "The Means are the End: Complexity Science in Organizational Research," in *Handbook of Multilevel Theory, Measurement, and Analysis*, eds. Stephen E. Humphrey and James M. LeBreton (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2018): 115-140.

¹²⁵ John E. Mathieu, and Margaret M. Luciano, "Multilevel Emergence in Work Collectives," in *Handbook of Multilevel Theory, Measurement, and Analysis*, eds. Stephen E. Humphrey and James M. LeBreton (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2018): 163-186.

¹²⁶ In a few cases, former members would opine about how things have changed since they left Congress, but in evaluating the interview evidence this report only focused on members' descriptions of their own personal experiences

Overview of Findings

The two congressional parties are characterized by a “*collaborative conflict culture*.”¹²⁷ A collaborative conflict culture is one in which members of an organization are “empowered to actively manage conflicts” but “cooperative behavior and resolving conflicts to serve the interests of the group is rewarded.”¹²⁸

A collaborative conflict culture is distinct from a dominating conflict culture where disagreeable, aggressive confrontation is common and favorably received. As will be evident below, members of Congress feel constrained to behave in a collegial manner and to avoid personalizing conflict with their fellow party members and leaders. Members and leaders have strong incentives to treat their party colleagues with respect because they work together on an ongoing basis and cannot afford to permanently alienate people from whom they will need support in the future. The interviews reveal that members clearly believe that resolving conflicts with their party colleagues is something they should try to do and that their success in doing so will be beneficial to them.

A collaborative conflict culture is also distinct from organizational cultures in which conflict is avoided such that disagreements are not confronted openly or members of an organization convey disagreement only by passive resistance. As will also be evident below, conflict within the congressional parties is pervasive and frankly acknowledged, and both members and leaders take it upon themselves to try to resolve conflicts in the interests of the party as a whole.

Both party leaders and rank-and-file members understand that given the diversity of member views and constituency interests, conflict within the party is inevitable. When members disagree, they are expected to approach their party colleagues and leaders to let them know about their objections and to seek accommodation, if possible. In resolving such conflicts, cooperative behavior and a willingness to “get to yes” is rewarded. Members who are perceived as “team players” are more likely to be selected for leadership roles and find that their own initiatives will be more favorably received by other party members.

Nearly all respondents described themselves as feeling free to speak up when they disagreed with their party leaders, though there are certain norms that govern and restrain such behavior. In particular, disagreements with leaders should generally be raised in private or in party caucus but not in public or in the press, though there was also recognition that not all members adhered to this norm. Similarly, verbal disagreement with party leaders is accepted, but active resistance of the party is frowned upon and subject to sanction. Tolerance of intraparty dissent is reasonably high, but members do at times experience pressure to go along with leaders, particularly on highly salient issues central to the party’s program.

Leaders are described as active managers of conflict who seek to negotiate their party’s rank-and-file to internal agreement. Leaders solicit input from individual members and party groups with

of the institution. In reviewing accounts of personal experiences, we did not find that members and former members serving in recent congresses offered notably different descriptions of the internal norms around intraparty conflict.

¹²⁷ Gelfand, Leslie, and Keller, “Etiology of Conflict Cultures.”

¹²⁸ Gelfand, Leslie, and Keller, “Etiology of Conflict Cultures,” 144.

different opinions. Leaders accommodate rank-and-file members when possible. When not possible, they may bring pressure to bear on recalcitrant members. However, such pressure tactics are used with restraint and only on particular issues.

Conflict with Intraparty Colleagues

Interview subjects frankly acknowledged that there is a great deal of intraparty conflict in Congress. One current staffer compared intraparty conflict to a forest fire that can only be managed and contained, not extinguished:

It's very difficult within the party, even with lots of similar party preferences. The big struggle is to bring unity within the party. I don't think there's really a way to resolve it...

It's like a forest fire – when it's out of control, you have to manage it, but you're never putting it out completely.¹²⁹

Describing party caucus meetings, a former member said, “Sometimes members did get angry.”¹³⁰ “I can remember some serious battles in our caucus meetings,” said another.¹³¹ A former staffer said, “there's certainly many conflicts in the party and ... most of them are ideological. There's push and pull.” But “everyone prefers to keep it in the family.”¹³² The term “family” came up repeatedly when subjects were queried about intraparty conflict. “The Democrats fight amongst themselves.”¹³³ It's like a family,” said a former member, “I will fight with my brother harder than I fight with anyone else. ... We fight with each other tremendously.”¹³⁴

Intraparty conflict has many sources. As one former member explained: “Sometimes those disagreements are regional, sometimes they're philosophical, sometimes they are issue-oriented, and sometimes they can become personal.”¹³⁵ Regional disagreements can be rooted in members' lack of knowledge:

I remember having other people approach me and say, ‘I don't know why you're so committed to this [heating oil assistance] program.’ I said ‘Well, in long winters that's the biggest thing for our seniors. They can't afford heat.’ So people who grow up in completely different circumstances, they are ignorant.¹³⁶

The congressional floor schedule is a source of conflict. Floor time is limited, and a member may want a roll-call vote on a particular issue while other party members may not want a vote held on that topic or a vote held when they cannot be present.¹³⁷ Personal conflict also occurs over “issue turf,” meaning between members who are competing to take leadership on particular policy areas. “Everybody wants to be the guru [on a particular issue],” such that there is ongoing competition

¹²⁹ Interview number 26, August 3, 2018.

¹³⁰ Interview number 15, May 10, 2018.

¹³¹ Interview number 6, May 4, 2018.

¹³² Interview number 50, December 6, 2018.

¹³³ In her 1983 book, Sinclair also found that members employed this “family” terminology to refer to intra-party conflict. See Barbara Sinclair, *Majority Leadership in the United States House* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1983).

¹³⁴ Interview number 17, May 15, 2018.

¹³⁵ Interview number 36, November 14, 2018.

¹³⁶ Interview number 21, June 7, 2018.

¹³⁷ Interview number 16, May 10, 2018.

among members on “who’s going to have the message on blah, blah, blah.”¹³⁸ Every member is “trying to be a leader. Everyone wants to have an impact, and it’s hard to do when you’re in a pond with 190 smart people.”¹³⁹

When conflicts with colleagues arise, interview subjects emphasize that they have strong reasons to get them worked out. “You cannot burn bridges,” explained a former member regarding conflicts with party colleagues. Such conflicts should be handled “with the recognition that while we may not agree today, we may agree tomorrow.”¹⁴⁰ One current staffer explained:

I know for our staff and our boss, we very much value our relationships [with other members]. Relationship building is one of our top priorities because we know it’s the best way to get things done for our constituency and for our district. ... [So] we have tried to avoid conflicts and if there’s something that might go wrong, we try to address it right away.¹⁴¹

When dealing with tensions with other party members, “it takes two to really blow up,” observed a former member who described a particular confrontation with a colleague. “And I just didn’t take the bait ... I didn’t escalate it.”¹⁴² This former member exercised restraint because “you might need that person next time on votes of some sort or support with something.”¹⁴³ Members have incentive to stay on good terms with colleagues because other members have the ability to harm their interests later: “People will remember that you stepped on their toe once,” said a former member. “It’ll slow down or stop anything that prevents you from getting key positions.”¹⁴⁴ In dealing with party colleagues, “you can’t be seen as feuding with someone, and those members who do feud with other members don’t really ever get very far.”¹⁴⁵

Working out conflicts is seen as part of individual members’ responsibility. Members feel empowered to take the initiative to address such conflicts. Their primary technique is simply to approach leaders and other members and have a conversation. When you disagree with a party colleague, you address it “one on one. ... You go and talk to them in person.”¹⁴⁶ “There was nothing wrong with going to the leader or the speaker or majority leader or whatever,” said a former member. “It was not unusual.”¹⁴⁷

Indeed, members often see it as their responsibility to warn party colleagues in advance if they cannot support them on particular issues or votes. “It’s almost like a family,” explained a former staffer. You should give “a member of your family the heads up that you’re going to disagree with

¹³⁸ Former staffer, interview number 9, May 8, 2018.

¹³⁹ Former member, interview number 15, May 10, 2018.

¹⁴⁰ Interview number 42, October 31, 2018.

¹⁴¹ Interview number 38, October 25, 2018.

¹⁴² Interview number 33, November 19, 2018.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Interview number 20, May 30, 2018.

¹⁴⁵ Interview number 27, August 3, 2018.

¹⁴⁶ Interview number 59, May 22, 2019.

¹⁴⁷ Interview number 37, October 18, 2018.

them. I think the worst thing you could do is not talk about it and then all of a sudden you end up voting a particular way and they're like, 'Oh really? I wasn't expecting that.'"¹⁴⁸

To successfully resolve these conflicts, interview subjects emphasized that conversations should happen in private. "You've got to find venues that accommodate more of a quiet conversation, and that was usually done off the floor."¹⁴⁹ "Everyone prefers to keep [intraparty conflicts] out of the media because it just doesn't help moving forward," said another.¹⁵⁰

To the extent possible, issues should also not be personalized. Thinking back to caucus meetings, reflected a former member, "I can't think of when I saw somebody attacking someone else. ... They would do it in a general way. Like, you guys are holding this vote and you're messing up, you're making it difficult for the rest of us. Please stop it."¹⁵¹ One member who violated this norm and used some congressional staff resources to publicize criticisms of specific colleagues found himself subject to social sanction in the party: "Boy, the shoes come down hard. ... How dare you do that? ... I mean he took a hard licking because other members said, 'you don't do that stuff; you don't attack another member this way.'"¹⁵² "If you get into a heated argument with somebody on an issue," recommended a former member, "leave it on the issue, and once it's dealt with, move on. Be wary, but don't hold a grudge."¹⁵³ Disagreements should "not be on a personal level but on a policy difference level."¹⁵⁴

Members also explained that they can get issues resolved by reaching out to more powerful allies. Members recognize that there are hierarchies in Congress grounded in seniority and leadership positions. Referencing some senior members of his state delegation, one former member explained, "I went in like a little brother. ... I would enlist their help in trying to solve whatever issues I was having. ... [W]hen you're at the bottom you have to rely on others to help get things accomplished who have the power or the respect within the party."¹⁵⁵

In sum: the interviews make it clear that intraparty conflict in Congress is routine and expected. But the norms are that members will take it upon themselves to try to resolve such conflicts. Members do so by avoiding escalation, seeking private venues for negotiation, and depersonalizing conflict to the extent possible. Members believe that good relationships with their party colleagues help them be effective inside the institution.

¹⁴⁸ Interview number 48, December 3, 2018.

¹⁴⁹ Interview number 29, September 28, 2018.

¹⁵⁰ Interview number 50, December 6, 2018.

¹⁵¹ Interview number 20, May 30, 2018.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Interview number 33, November 19, 2018.

¹⁵⁴ Interview number 42, October 31, 2018.

¹⁵⁵ Interview number 17, May 15, 2018.

Conflict with Intraparty Leaders

Members of Congress generally feel free to speak up when they disagree with leaders. “There’s not much fear of leadership,” generalized one former member recently retired after decades of service. “I always felt confident and comfortable speaking my mind and defying leadership requests.”¹⁵⁶ When another member was asked if members were comfortable disagreeing with leaders, the reply was: “Absolutely everyone. You know members of Congress aren’t shy, and they’re not quiet, and they speak their minds.”¹⁵⁷ “Members didn’t hold back for the most part about saying something where they agreed or disagreed with the direction leadership was going,” said another member.¹⁵⁸ “Members feel that they are able to let leaders know what they can and can’t do, and that’s just how it falls out,” summed up another former member.¹⁵⁹

Caucus meetings serve as a formal outlet for venting concerns and disagreements with leadership. At these sessions, “People would go to the microphone and air their feelings and it was a healthy way to have an informed discussion about critical issues and give people a chance to air their disagreements,” explained a former member.¹⁶⁰ “Open mic,” is the term one veteran staffer used to describe caucus meetings.¹⁶¹ Another former member described the caucus meeting as a “comfortable, safe setting” where you can “kind of air your laundry.”¹⁶²

Although members affirmed their freedom to voice disagreement, our interview subjects also make it clear that several norms govern this behavior. First, members should not surprise their leaders. If a member is going to oppose leadership, advance notice is warranted. One former member recollected that [then Majority Whip] “Kevin McCarthy used to say a line ... [from] the show *House of Cards*: ‘vote your conscience, vote your district, but don’t ever surprise me.’ I never surprised leadership.”¹⁶³

Several other interview subjects testified to the importance of notifying leaders in advance of opposition. “My perception of leadership [was] what they wanted first and foremost was not to be surprised,” said a former member.¹⁶⁴ Another former member explained that a smart member will learn to “never surprise the leadership. ... You know, they’ll cut you some slack if you don’t surprise them.”¹⁶⁵ Along similar lines, another former member said, “you quickly learn the best thing to do is to go to whoever the floor manager for the bill is and say, you know, ‘here’s my problem and I can’t be with you this time.’”¹⁶⁶ Another former member said, “If you’re smart, you’ve already kind of made leadership aware of certain things that are important to you prior to

¹⁵⁶ Interview number 59, May 22, 2018.

¹⁵⁷ Interview number 12, May 8, 2018.

¹⁵⁸ Interview number 57, May 8, 2019.

¹⁵⁹ Interview number 17, May 15, 2018.

¹⁶⁰ Interview number 8, May 7, 2018.

¹⁶¹ Interview number 28, September 5, 2018.

¹⁶² Interview number 12, May 8, 2018.

¹⁶³ Interview number 20, May 30, 2018.

¹⁶⁴ Interview number 24, June 18, 2018.

¹⁶⁵ Interview number 32, October 17, 2018.

¹⁶⁶ Interview number 43, November 8, 2018.

... standing up and making your position known.”¹⁶⁷ A veteran former staffer related how she would go to leadership staffers to warn them when her boss had an objection, “[Doing so] got me points. ... I was trustworthy in being responsive to our leadership.”¹⁶⁸

A second norm is that members should not go public with criticisms of their leaders. Obviously, this norm is not uniformly observed in practice, but it is clear from our interviews that public criticism of leaders is regarded quite differently from objecting to leadership in private or in caucus meetings. A former staffer explained, “I think almost to a tee that there’s space in both parties to raise your disagreements, concerns, thoughts, within those caucus meetings. I think there tends to be a little bit more of a line about externally doing that and falling out of lockstep with the party.”¹⁶⁹

The norm about not criticizing party leaders in public emerged as a recurrent theme in the interviews. “Disagreement is inevitable,” said a former staffer. “But leaders prefer not to have those conversations in public and rather ‘keep it in the family.’”¹⁷⁰ When a member has an objection, “the preferred way is to go to the speaker or the majority leader’s office to air it out quietly and work through it,” explained a former member. “It’s easier for you to have the conversation within the family,” said another former member, who went on to indicate that leaders are more likely to attempt to sanction a member who publicly criticizes them: “If you take it outside the family ... there are certainly ways that people at the top can kind of quell” dissent.”¹⁷¹ One former member summarized his rule of thumb as “praise publicly; challenge people privately.”¹⁷²

Third, members who oppose leaders are expected to explain their objections and seek resolution of their issues if possible. “If you were going to sort of step off the team, you just needed to tell them and explain it,” said a former member. When opposing party leaders, a member will be called upon to answer: “Why?”¹⁷³ When legislation is scheduled for floor consideration, party leaders ask the whips to find out party members’ positions. One former member explained the process as follows:

So the first area of conflict is when you are counter to where the whip would like you to be and someone in your office conveys the message, at which point then it rises to the member-to-member level. Somebody will approach me or whoever the person is on the floor and or call and say, ‘What’s up? What’s your concern?’ And you have that conversation and if it’s a close vote where they really need your vote like on the Affordable Care Act, it becomes a major production that can go on for weeks or months and trading of, um, things.

Another former member offered a similar description of the whip process: “If members don’t support the bill, then leaders call in those members to see what can be done to convince them. That’s how disagreement is handled. The process is sometimes agonizing.”¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁷ Interview number 32, October 17, 2018.

¹⁶⁸ Interview number 9, May 8, 2018.

¹⁶⁹ Interview number 1, April 17, 2018.

¹⁷⁰ Interview number 51, December 12, 2018.

¹⁷¹ Interview number 44, November 9, 2018.

¹⁷² Interview number 20, May 30, 2018.

¹⁷³ Interview number 21, June 7, 2018.

¹⁷⁴ Interview number 22, June 8, 2018.

Fourth, members who disagree with their leaders are expected not to try to obstruct or defy their party moving forward. When members are going to oppose leaders, they may be asked to keep their opposition quiet from other members for as long as possible. On votes where a member intends to depart the party line, leaders would “just ask you on that to—the favorite phrase—just ‘hold your fire,’ don’t cast your vote until the very last thing. ... And I always honored that. It didn’t cost me anything whether I voted first or voted last.”¹⁷⁵

The expectation is that members who are going to dissent will not actively fight their party. As another example, it is not unusual or frowned upon for a member to demand that party leaders take up an issue on the floor. But if party leaders decline to do so, it is “essentially party treason” to sign a discharge petition aimed at forcing floor consideration of the issue.¹⁷⁶ As a veteran former staffer explained:

I don’t think you pay a price for raising an alternative point of view. People expect you to either reflect your personal views or the interest of your district. ... I don’t think there’s any penalty for that. There is a penalty that’s paid when members are not willing to be flexible enough to allow the process to proceed.

Once a member has had a “fair hearing” from party leaders,¹⁷⁷ they are expected to stand down from active opposition even if they do not come fully on board to vote in favor. Again, of course, such norms may be honored in the breach, but it is clear that active opposition to their own party leaders is outside the norms for member behavior.

Although members are able to disagree with leaders, they also recognize that opposition can have negative consequences for their own careers. Members know that leaders have resources at their disposal to reward and punish. “Everybody who’s good in leadership has to have the ability to threaten people,” said one former member. “If you can’t threaten somebody, you can’t be a leader.”¹⁷⁸ Leaders’ possess “carrots and sticks ... [and members who] say bad things about the leadership very often are going to have problems.”¹⁷⁹ Note that the reference here is to sanctions of members who “say bad things” about leaders, rather than to sanctions of members who disagree with leaders. Members who compound their intraparty dissent with norm violations such as public criticism of leaders, a disinterest in working out their objections, or active obstruction are perceived as more vulnerable to sanction.

Interview subjects referenced a range of rewards and punishments that leaders can use to police the norms governing intraparty dissent.¹⁸⁰ Members who regularly oppose leaders will find it hard to move up in the congressional hierarchy by being assigned committee or subcommittee

¹⁷⁵ Interview number 30, October 1, 2018

¹⁷⁶ Former staffer, interview number 18, May 22, 2018.

¹⁷⁷ Interview number 47, November 28, 2018.

¹⁷⁸ Interview number 15, May 10, 2018.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Our findings about when and how leaders bring pressure to bear on members closely correspond to those in Steven S. Smith, *Party Influence in Congress* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007) and Matthew N. Green and Breanna Bee, “Keeping the Team Together: Explaining Party Discipline and Dissent in Congress,” in *Party and Procedure in the United States Congress*, eds. Jacob Straus and Matt Glassman (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 41-62.

leadership positions. As one former member put it, his criticism of a leader “bit me in the ass five years later when they wouldn’t give me the next step up.”¹⁸¹ Members who oppose leaders may have trouble getting projects for their districts funded; though, as one former member observed, such sanctions are less available to leaders with the decline of earmarking.¹⁸² Leaders also have the ability to sanction members by denying consideration of their favored initiatives. Leaders may “squash your amendments or stop your bills in [the] Rules [Committee],” remarked another former member.¹⁸³ Denial of opportunities to travel in congressional delegations abroad (i.e., “CODELS”) was another penalty mentioned in our interviews.¹⁸⁴

Members who regularly find themselves in opposition to leaders have incentives to form intraparty groups. These dissenting groups are openly tolerated and often formally consulted in intraparty negotiations. They are generally organized around ideological stances in the party ranging from hardline (such as the Freedom Caucus or the Progressive Caucus) to centrist positions (such as the Republican Main Street Partnership and the Blue Dog Democrats).

Banding together brings two key strategic advantages for members of such groups. First, organization affords “safety in numbers” as one former staffer explained, meaning that leadership is less able to sanction a whole group than a single individual.¹⁸⁵ Second, leaders are more likely to negotiate with an organized group, particularly when the group controls a sufficient number of votes to decide outcomes. As a former member put it, “If you have a block of votes behind you, [leaders] are going to be a little more reluctant to punish [you] because they need votes.”¹⁸⁶ Another former member echoed this perspective: “If we join together in our little clique ... we can exercise quite a bit of control because our votes, however few they may be, can often be the deciding factor.”¹⁸⁷ As will be discussed in the next section, leaders also feel obliged to consult with the full range of opinion within the party.

These factional organizations help get dissenting members a seat at the table in dealing with leaders. Speaking of such groups, a former member explained, “the more members you have identifying with your position, obviously the better off you are. So these caucuses try to have an impact on the leadership.”¹⁸⁸ Indeed, one of our interview subjects even complained about leaders “giving too much of a voice to a minority viewpoint” by deferring too much to a hardline intraparty group.¹⁸⁹

Although leaders do possess tools to sanction members, such tactics did not emerge as a major theme in the interviews. One former member even said that he encountered less party pressure than he had expected:

¹⁸¹ Interview number 15, May 10, 2018.

¹⁸² Interview number 24, Jun 18, 2018.

¹⁸³ Interview number 22, June 8, 2018.

¹⁸⁴ Interview number 31, October 1, 2018.

¹⁸⁵ Interview number 9, May 8, 2018.

¹⁸⁶ Interview number 33, November 19, 2018.

¹⁸⁷ Interview number 42, October 31, 2018.

¹⁸⁸ Interview number 30, October 1, 2018.

¹⁸⁹ Interview number 57, May 8, 2019.

I arrived as a new member with some apprehension about the ... strong-arm tactics by party leaders to whip me into shape. And ... that simply didn't happen, which isn't to say that there weren't instances in which party leadership felt strongly and voiced those feelings strongly. But in the relatively few occasions ... when I couldn't be with the party position on something, once you let people know that 'I'm sorry but I can't be with you on this one,' they respected that and left you alone.¹⁹⁰

Another former member commented that heavy-handed sanctions would backfire against leaders: "If they did exercise retribution against me ... they would martyr me and my base would be more excited and more confident of who I was and more supportive of me."¹⁹¹

Taken together, it is clear from our interviews that disagreement with party leaders is more than tolerated in Congress. Members have regular settings in which they can raise objections, and their input is welcomed. Norms, however, restrain and channel intraparty dissent. When members extend their opposition beyond voicing objections during internal party deliberations, they may be subjected to negative consequences. To protect themselves, some groups in the party opt to organize themselves into coalitions so as to negotiate with their leaders from a stronger position.¹⁹²

Leaders' Management of Intraparty Conflict

Resolving intraparty conflict constitutes a primary job description of congressional party leaders. When we asked our interview subjects whether party leaders tried to suppress internal conflicts, a common answer was: "They really can't stop disagreements."¹⁹³ "There's too many [conflicts] to suppress," said a veteran former staffer. "Leadership can't afford to try to get everybody to keep their mouths shut."¹⁹⁴ One former member said that one reason he never personally aspired to leadership was "you spend all your time arbitrating disputes."¹⁹⁵

Rather than seeking to suppress disagreement, interview subjects described party leaders as trying to hash them out. "I always found that leadership ... was very, very open to hearing other people's views."¹⁹⁶ When controversial issues are being considered, one former member recalled, leaders will often hold "a lot of, a lot of, *a lot of* meetings."¹⁹⁷

Leaders try to gauge members' views to uncover what legislation can command support.¹⁹⁸ One former member described leaders' approach as grounded in the "philosophy that ... the more voices in the process, the better the product winds up being."¹⁹⁹ Members thus get "plenty of opportunity" to voice their concerns, recollected one former member, given that party leaders hold

¹⁹⁰ Interview number 43, November 8, 2018.

¹⁹¹ Interview number 53, February 13, 2019.

¹⁹² Our findings on the motives governing the formation of party factions cross-validate those of Ruth Bloch Rubin, *Building the Bloc: Intraparty Organization in the U.S. Congress* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

¹⁹³ Former member, interview number 22, June 8, 2018.

¹⁹⁴ Interview number 7, May 7, 2018.

¹⁹⁵ Interview number 32, October 17, 2018.

¹⁹⁶ Interview number 22, June 8, 2018.

¹⁹⁷ Interview number 28, September 5, 2018.

¹⁹⁸ Leaders' practice of consulting rank-and-file members in advance of proposing legislation is described as "intelligence-gathering" in James M. Curry, *Legislating in the Dark: Information and Power in the House of Representatives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

¹⁹⁹ Interview number 19, June 13, 2018.

regular “listening sessions – and that’s exactly what they are.”²⁰⁰ One former member even described leaders as actively trying to elicit input from reticent members:

I think they wanted to draw out other people and other views ... like in any classroom setting, right? You got those couple of kids that always want to raise their hand. I think [leaders] were really good about drawing other points of view.²⁰¹

A former member described party leaders as responding to intraparty disagreement “respectfully and tolerantly” the “overwhelming majority of the time,” with “the exception being ... the few members in our caucus who were regularly irritants and sort of gratuitously unpleasant.”²⁰²

Party leaders seek to resolve intraparty conflicts because this is what their rank-and-file members expect them to do. Ultimately, leaders owe their positions to the support of rank-and-file party members. “Remember, they like being in leadership,” said a former member. “So they don’t want to be viewed by the rank-and-file members as always jamming things down their throats. ... They want to create a process that’s collaborative and allows members to voice their opinions and be part of the crafting of that legislation by consensus.”²⁰³ Leadership cannot command obedience from party members. “You’re herding cats,” said a former member. “The leadership starts not from a place of advantage but a place of disadvantage because they’ve got to sell the membership ... on it.”²⁰⁴

Leaders are described as managing intraparty divisions in three key ways. First, leaders must make members feel heard and included in decisionmaking. A sense of having received a fair hearing will induce support from some members even when they have not been accommodated in policy terms: “They want to feel that their concerns are being heard and not being dismissed,” said a former staffer. “It’s not always a question of having to accept a specific provision” in the legislation.²⁰⁵ “Sometimes people just want to be heard,” said another former staffer. “So then in the end people feel [that] they may not agree with it, but ... they feel like at least [the leader] tried.”²⁰⁶ A former member generalized, “The members of leadership who handled these types of conflicts the best were the ones who listened the best and who help members feel like they were being heard, even if they didn’t get their way at the end of the day.”²⁰⁷

A second way leaders manage divisions is to identify accommodations that will satisfy objections or holdouts. “They hear what everyone has to say,” said a current staffer. “[Then leaders] figure out a way where everyone has piece of the pie.”²⁰⁸ In building support, leaders often look beyond policy to other kinds of concessions, such as granting floor time to issues particular members care about or putting members in a leadership position, such as a party task force. Other approaches include “loosening language a little or by putting something into a report language or letting the

²⁰⁰ Interview number 14, May 10, 2018.

²⁰¹ Interview number 12, May 8, 2018.

²⁰² Interview number 43, November 8, 2018.

²⁰³ Interview number 14, May 10, 2018.

²⁰⁴ Interview number 32, October 17, 2018.

²⁰⁵ Interview number 47, November 28, 2018.

²⁰⁶ Interview number 50, December 6, 2018.

²⁰⁷ Interview number 19, June 13, 2018.

²⁰⁸ Interview number 51, January 24, 2019.

administration find a way of strengthening a provision in regulation rather than through explicit legislative language.”²⁰⁹ In building support for legislation, leaders will look especially to bring on board “strategic players,” meaning members who serve as cue-gives and whose support will bring along “20 or 25 other members.”²¹⁰

But leaders certainly consider legislative adjustments. Discussing the 2017 tax reform drive, for example, one former staffer explained that members were able to get favorable adjustments by personally reaching out to leaders early in the process: “Members of Congress went and talked to people on Ways and Means and they changed aspects of legislation.”²¹¹ Legislation can be more easily adjusted early in the legislative process, especially at the committee level or even prior to formal introduction. Members who are not “in the loop” on particular issues will find it difficult to intervene early in the legislative process. But after a certain point, members may find they are left with only the stark choice to vote yes or no ²¹²

In the end, leaders are not always able to adjust legislation to accommodate members’ policy demands. As one former member recalled:

I can think of times when ... [there was] language in a bill or an amendment ... that was not popular in my district. Or maybe would hurt my district in some way. And I just went to have a conversation with [leaders], and say: “Is there something we can do about this?” And usually the answer is no.

Of meetings with leaders seeking policy adjustments, a former staffer said, “On big issues you can [make] ... change on the margins. ... [But] there’s no substantive strategic massive shifts ... once the party leadership knows which direction they’re going to go.”²¹³

A third way leaders can manage intraparty division is by successfully pressuring members to get in line. Leaders can employ various tactics. Appeals to team loyalty may be made. For example, one former member was admonished: “You can’t give Nancy Pelosi a victory.”²¹⁴ Calls or a meeting with a top leader may be used:

[President George W.] Bush looks right at me ... and he said, “I’m not in a joking mood today, and I want your vote.” ... And then he got up and walked out. And [Vice President] Cheney is glaring at me.²¹⁵

Pressure may not be wielded in such a heavy-handed manner. A swing voter on the Affordable Care Act described being called into a late-night meeting with Speaker Pelosi to consult on an obscure provision of the legislation:

She asked me, what do I think? And I had a pretty strong opinion on it. ... So I gave my spiel and she said, “okay, well, then that’s what we’re going to do.” And so I came away

²⁰⁹ Former staffer, interview number 47, November 28, 2018.

²¹⁰ Former member, interview number 32, October 17, 2018.

²¹¹ Interview number 10, May 8, 2018.

²¹² Interview number 16, May 10, 2018.

²¹³ Interview number 1, April 17, 2018.

²¹⁴ Interview number 33, November 19, 2018.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

with the feeling that I had made a difference. ... There is no doubt in my mind that Pelosi ... didn't really care about it and was just trying to win my vote.”²¹⁶

Leadership pressure is also brought to bear simply because members know that leaders can either advance or block a member's career via their control over the distribution of leadership positions, along with the other institutional perks.

In dealing with members who remain unsatisfied after outreach and efforts at accommodation, leaders must also decide whether to give particular members a “pass,” meaning an understanding that they can oppose the party while still remaining a member in good standing. Many former members in our study mentioned receiving such understandings from time to time. “If I had a bill where I thought I couldn't vote for it based on my district and would let them know that, they accepted that and they understood,” recalled one former member.²¹⁷ Another former member described the process, “[Leaders] don't want to lose your seat. If you can't make a good argument [for why you can't vote with them] then they'll pull at you. But if you have a good argument, they understand.”²¹⁸ As a former member put it, “They may want you to vote a certain way, but they have to also trust that you know your district better than anyone else.”²¹⁹ Of members in competitive districts, a current staffer said, “leadership will still take a hard line publicly, but privately they understand your electoral position.”²²⁰

Leaders do not subject recalcitrant members to pressure on all types of issues. Arm-twisting is more likely to be employed on issues of great importance to the president or the party's program. “The more important the issue is, the bigger the issue, the more personal it is, the harder it is to object to leadership,” recalled a former member.²²¹ In addition, the norm is that members will not be subjected to much party whip pressure on moral and religious issues, such as abortion or the death penalty. “Certainly in my experience working ... in the leadership,” recollected a former staffer, “there were certain areas where there was just ‘hands off,’ where if you had an ethical issue and you said, ‘I just can't go there,’ [the leadership] understood that.”²²²

In managing intraparty divisions, leaders must handle the “pass” judiciously. They must evaluate carefully whether a member truly needs to be granted a concession. Does the member have a good argument? A leadership staffer explained that members cannot be given waivers in cases where they are merely fearful of taking tough votes. It's “very dangerous” for a leader to “sanction that kind of latitude.”²²³ A leader has difficulty asking some members to support the party on controversial issues while also giving other members freedom to vote against the party in the absence of a strong policy rationale. Leaders must police against waiver requests from members who are “always looking out for [them]selves,” members who are always seeking to extract

²¹⁶ Interview number 16, May 10, 2018.

²¹⁷ Interview number 14, May 10, 2018.

²¹⁸ Interview number 3, April 24, 2018.

²¹⁹ Interview number 14, May 10, 2018.

²²⁰ Interview number 56, April 25, 2018.

²²¹ Interview number 55, March 29, 2019.

²²² Interview number 47, November 28, 2018.

²²³ Ibid.

concessions from their colleagues, and members who are just “prima donnas.”²²⁴ One former member on the receiving end of tough treatment said leaders sometimes referred to members facing political difficulties as “crybabies.”²²⁵ In short, leaders must exercise judgement about when and to whom to apply pressure. Clearly, however, leaders’ discretion in such matters can be a source of intraparty conflict in its own right.

Taken together, our interviewees testify to the reality that party leaders head organizations characterized by considerable internal conflict. Leaders are thus tasked with the organizational responsibility of managing and resolving conflict in the party’s interest as a whole. They are expected to do so in an inclusive and consultative manner. Members demand to be listened to and to have their requests for accommodation considered. But members also recognize that leaders will employ pressure in particular cases, especially on issues central to the party’s platform. Such pressure can be a source of controversy, but it is also acknowledged as part of party leaders’ organizational role.

Summary

Taken together, congressional parties offer a “textbook case” of a collaborative conflict culture. Conflict is endemic in congressional parties, given that they are made up of independently elected members with diverse perspectives and constituencies to represent. But this conflict is managed collaboratively. Individual members are expected to take personal initiative to build good working relationships with their colleagues. Likewise, party leaders devote much of their time to consensus building and hashing out conflicts. As in other organizations characterized by a collaborative conflict culture, members and leaders strive to resolve these internal conflicts in the interest of the group as a whole. After all, legislation itself is inherently a collaborative enterprise in which conflict must be resolved for a party to achieve any of its policy goals. As one former member put it: “We fight a lot, but you know—we also I think all understand that we’re trying to get this greater good.”²²⁶

IV: The Organizational Climate of Interparty Conflict and Cooperation

Overview

In this section of the report, we discuss the dynamics of how members of the two parties work with one another. Of particular interest is whether legislators perceive working together to be possible, what factors make cooperating across parties more – or less – likely, how they seek out partners across the aisle to work with, and how others in Congress (especially party leaders) react to cooperation across the aisle. These questions provide insight into the broad dynamics of congressional cooperation (e.g., What is possible? What actually happens?) as well as into the specific behavior and choices of the respondents (e.g., How do you decide whom to work with?) and the perceived consequences of those actions (e.g., How do party leaders react?).

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Interview number 5, May 3, 2018.

²²⁶ Interview number 17, May 15, 2018.

Drawing on the research in organizational psychology, this part of the study considers whether Congress shows evidence of both a “collaborative conflict culture” as well as a “dominating conflict culture.”²²⁷ In the former, individuals within a workplace group are encouraged to use dialogue, negotiation, and joint problem-solving, whereas a dominating culture promotes confrontation and emphasizes publicly the merits of winning.²²⁸ Our interviews provide evidence of both types of climates in the U.S. Congress.

Overall we find that legislators and their staff are split in their assessment of whether cooperation across the parties is possible in the House, but there is overwhelming consensus that cooperation is less common today than in the past. Across the board, legislators and staff recount instances when they reached out across the aisle to work with a colleague, and the personal and institutional factors that promote this type of bipartisan collaboration are remarkably similar. Notably, there is evidence of bipartisan cooperation based on shared goals, social interaction, and trust, which are noted features of cooperative climates.²²⁹

The interviews also reveal that party leaders play a dual role when it comes to working across the aisle. On smaller issues that are not central to the party’s brand, party leaders are seen as taking a laissez-faire approach to their members working with members of the other party. However, on issues that are central to the party’s agenda or that could affect election outcomes (and hence, the partisan balance in the chamber), legislators see party leaders as actively discouraging cooperation across the aisle, preferring instead to advance partisan electoral goals. Our interviews are suggestive of a conditional organizational climate where elements of both collaborative culture and dominating culture are evident.

Perceptions of Interparty Conflict and Cooperation

Respondents were asked whether when there is conflict between the parties it is generally possible to find win-win outcomes that can be supported by both parties, or if there always have to be winners and losers. In acknowledging the likelihood that the parties will disagree in Congress, this question focuses on how that conflict can be resolved; specifically, whether there are cooperative or positive-sum solutions that allow both parties to win some of what they want, or whether resolving conflict is zero-sum such that for one party to get what it wants, the other party has to lose.

The majority of respondents said that it depends on the situation; under certain conditions, it is still possible to solve conflict with a win-win outcome, but that other conditions mean that there has to be a winner and loser. As one member said, “Even in today’s climate, even in as dysfunctional, combative as it appears to the public... there’s still win-win situations.”²³⁰ Importantly, there emerged across the interviews a sense of when these win-win outcomes were most likely to be achieved:

- when issues were of low salience
- when issues are not central to the parties

²²⁷ Gelfand, Keller, Leslie, and de Dreu, “Conflict Cultures in Organizations.”

²²⁸ Gelfand, Keller, Leslie, and de Dreu, “Conflict Cultures in Organizations.”

²²⁹ See Bogaert, Boone, and van Witteloostuijn, “Social Value Orientation.”

²³⁰ Interview number 42, October 31, 2018.

- when there is underlying issue agreement

Legislators and staff frequently point out that much of what Congress does are small bills that largely go unnoticed beyond Capitol Hill. These low-salience issues are generally much more bipartisan: “Most of the issues that run the government day-to-day, 99% are not controversial, not interesting, and get done ... have people from opposite parties who do try to work together.”²³¹ “[The voter is] not hearing about these kind of not as sexy issues that we’re all working on, on an everyday basis.”²³²

Similarly, legislators noted that win-win solutions were still possible if members could work together out of the spotlight. This perspective is captured in this former member’s comments, “You try to work things out, out of the limelight, so that no one loses face, so no one is embarrassed.”²³³ These settings were further contrasted with the partisan venues in which members meet today, “One organizational failure around here is that we don’t meet collectively. We meet only as parties. Ds and Rs. In those settings, we are just plotting how to score over the other side.”²³⁴

Legislators also noted that finding cooperative win-win solutions was much easier on issues that were not central to the party’s brand and that received little attention from party leadership. In these cases, legislators were better able to come to policy solutions or spending packages that pleased members of both parties without getting caught in the electoral partisan crossfire. “The more political things became, the more win-lose was the objective; so less political, the more opportunity there was for win-win.”²³⁵ “When you come to these big issues on the floor of the House or the floor of the Senate, between the parties – that’s what the parties are about. They’re about differences.”²³⁶

The ability to find win-win outcomes also varies by issue; “I’ve seen it both ways and I think it depends on the issue that you’re talking about, the policy issue.”²³⁷ On some issues where there is a genuine difference of policy opinion between the Republicans and Democrats that precludes finding an outcome that will please both sides. As one legislator said, “Some things ... there isn’t a compromise.”²³⁸ “I think no matter what, there’s going to be winners and losers Not everybody agrees on the same bill. The problem is that there are certain issues that Republicans and Democrats will never agree on.”²³⁹

The second most common response was that there always have to be winners and losers – and respondents who had this perspective often felt that this was the nature of politics. As one former member recounted, “I knew it probably wasn’t going to happen. And to me, that was part of

²³¹ Interview number 35, October 10, 2018.

²³² Interview number 38, October 25, 2018.

²³³ Interview number 17, May 15, 2018.

²³⁴ Interview number 25, June 15, 2018.

²³⁵ Interview number 29, September 28, 2018.

²³⁶ Interview number 35, October 10, 2018.

²³⁷ Interview number 38, October 25, 2018.

²³⁸ Interview number 28, September 5, 2018.

²³⁹ Interview number 41, November 1, 2018.

governing. I had something I wanted to get done, I put it in front of them, they said no. Such is life.”²⁴⁰ “I don’t know if it’s a newer trend because I was only in Congress for 15 years. ... Everybody would say Congress has always been bitter and partisan, and these things have always existed, and that’s supposed to be the way it works.”²⁴¹

A notable subset of legislators and staff who believed that having winners and losers was inevitable highlighted the electoral incentives that both parties have to deny the other side any political victories. “When these decisions happen, you have to take the politics – the electoral politics – into account. The majority wants to stay in the majority and the minority wants to win. That’s what happens. It’s not possible to have outcomes [that can be supported by both parties] politically.”²⁴² Sometimes one side may find it electorally advantageous for an issue to remain unresolved: “Both sides aren’t willing to give a win-win at the end of the day because maybe it’s easier to have a talking point to use in the next election.”²⁴³ “Ever since the control of the House has been on the line so narrowly, every major battle is about [the next] election. Everything is used for ‘will this or will it not affect the midterm elections,’ and how can we use it to our advantage.”²⁴⁴

In fact, some former members even commented that the other party losing was more important than your own party winning. As one member said, “It’s not about getting along. It’s not about trying to resolve disputes for the other party. It’s about beating the other party.”²⁴⁵ “It’s almost as if the perspective and the view is if everybody loses, then we can move forward.... You don’t want to be able to hand a win to the other side. It’s win or lose, or we’re both going to lose.”²⁴⁶ This sentiment was echoed by other interviewees: “It doesn’t really matter whether it’s good or bad policy, or bipartisan or not. In some cases, you just can’t let the other side win.”²⁴⁷

Notably, no one we spoke with believed that it was always possible to reach an outcome that both sides would champion as a win-win. However, a minority of legislators were more optimistic in seeing cooperation as much more prevalent than conventional wisdom suggests: “There are a lot of bills that pass the House on a day-to-day basis on a bipartisan basis. ... A lot of that happens and doesn’t get reported by the media.”²⁴⁸ “There’s a way to get it where both sides are happy.”²⁴⁹ “Absolutely, there are ways to have outcomes that are not just winners and losers. In fact, that’s the history of our nation, right?”²⁵⁰ “Nine times out of ten I’ve been able to get to a win-win.”²⁵¹

²⁴⁰ Interview number 11, May 8, 2018.

²⁴¹ Interview number 24, June 18, 2018.

²⁴² Interview number 56, April 25, 2019.

²⁴³ Interview number 48, December 3, 2018.

²⁴⁴ Interview number 24, June 18, 2018.

²⁴⁵ Interview number 35, October 10, 2018.

²⁴⁶ Interview number 1, April 17, 2018.

²⁴⁷ Interview number 18, May 22, 2018.

²⁴⁸ Interview number 14, May 10, 2018.

²⁴⁹ Interview number 22, June 8, 2018.

²⁵⁰ Interview number 10, May 8, 2018.

²⁵¹ Interview number 40, November 8, 2018.

Many legislators and staff commented that the congressional climate around working across party lines has changed over time. Numerous respondents note a shift towards the sense that there has to be winners and losers. In fact, legislators with varying career horizons shared the assessment that cooperative solutions to conflict between the parties had become more difficult: “In the past, there was always comity in a way to accommodate, but the politics have become quite vicious and it’s hard to have a win. ... After ’94 when the Republicans took over everything, that was a shift of indescribable dimensions.”²⁵² “It was getting less and less about win-win.”²⁵³ “These are the old days – back thirty years ago – and it’s changed quite a bit. ... We’ve been successful as a nation, as a democracy because we’re a Congress and members will work together on a variety of issues.”²⁵⁴ “When I first came to Congress in 2007, I think it was much easier for both parties to try to seek consensus and work together even though they may end up voting differently on a specific bill, finding ways for each party to take credit.”²⁵⁵

Numerous members attribute this to changes in the media and pressure from outside groups: “[Compromise] is possible, but it’s very hard right now, and it’s because the 24-hour news cycle, social media, the polarization of a lot of outside groups with money. ... There’s a lot that’s been done to eliminate the space for compromise.”²⁵⁶ “No media is interested in these stories. ... They feed on the conflict.”²⁵⁷ “[Politics is] determined increasingly by outside interest groups and more ideologically driven groups, groups that are very well funded, that advertise and attack and support. And I think that’s one of the reasons why the process has gotten so difficult even since I left.”²⁵⁸

Finding Collaborators Across the Aisle

In addition to the broader dynamics of policy outcomes, we also wanted to better understand how individual members of Congress and their staff identify whom to work with when they do decide to work across the aisle. In our conversations, members routinely offered stories of times in their own careers when they worked with a colleague from the other party. Additionally, respondents often commented that a member’s personal interest in working across the aisle was an important factor in understanding congressional behaviors:

If a member’s mindset is that this is their goal, and they’re going to identify the overlap with other legislators and pursue that legislation. It’s like an office has a Rolodex of Venn diagrams of other legislators, and you’re going through it to see who’s with you. You have to put a lot of thought and effort into it – you have to build that Rolodex. Then you test it. You dip your toes in and reach out to someone you think has overlapping interests and see if you’re right. If it works, then it becomes reinforcing. Maybe a joint forum went well, so now it’s what do you do next – sponsor a bill? Build a coalition? Start a caucus?²⁵⁹

²⁵² Interview number 9, May 8, 2018.

²⁵³ Interview number 13, May 9, 2018.

²⁵⁴ Interview number 34, October 9, 2018.

²⁵⁵ Interview number 8, May 7, 2018.

²⁵⁶ Interview number 33, November 19, 2018.

²⁵⁷ Interview number 24, June 18, 2018.

²⁵⁸ Interview number 19, June 13, 2018.

²⁵⁹ Interview number 26, August 3, 2018.

An interesting feature of the importance of personal relationships for the climate of Congress is that these friendships and the trust between members of different parties are not one-time collaborations, but rather develop into long-lasting partnerships. As one member said, “if you ended up working with somebody on an issue that you really liked, and you built a good working relationship with them, they would be a more natural person for you to go back to ... even if it might not be on the same topic.”²⁶⁰

In these interviews, we also asked respondents to reflect on how they chose whom to work with. Three factors quickly emerged as the dominant paths towards cross-party cooperation:

- personal relationships between members
- shared interest in a given policy area – sometimes driven by representing similar types of districts, but not always
- service on a congressional committee

The last of these paths captures the importance of both personal rapport, which is developed as committee members work together and get to know each other, and shared interest, which is reflected in the fact that both members are on the same committee.

Personal relationships with other House members is the single most dominant answer that legislators gave when asked about how they chose whom to work with when reaching across the aisle. Notably, this was true for members of both parties and for members that served recently, as well as those whose careers predated the current era of polarization. Many legislators and staff talked about personal friendships when explaining whom they reached out to when they wanted to work across the aisle: “Well, some of it is just personal friendship.”²⁶¹ “Who did I have a good personal relationship with? Who did I have a good rapport with?”²⁶² “Who’s close enough that I might be able to work with and who can I trust?”²⁶³ “Who does the member of Congress like working with?”²⁶⁴ “First, you had to find somebody who you liked well enough that you figured you could work with ... and the thing you have to understand about working between the parties is that it was a matter of trust. The whole place runs on trust.”²⁶⁵ “You reach out to people that you either have a friendship with or you are politically compatible with, and that may be the same thing.”²⁶⁶

The origins of these personal friendships vary, but legislators frequently highlighted several factors that affected their personal – and working – relationships: (1) shared experiences, including congressional travel, and (2) time spent together while in Washington D.C.

Members frequently described a shared experience that brought them together with a colleague whom they might not have otherwise known, and the trust that was built in this relationship. For instance, one member who was a veteran described his relationship with other veterans in the

²⁶⁰ Interview number 19, June 13, 2018.

²⁶¹ Interview number 12, May 8, 2018.

²⁶² Interview number 19, June 13, 2018.

²⁶³ Interview number 7, May 7, 2018.

²⁶⁴ Interview number 10, May 8, 2018.

²⁶⁵ Interview number 15, May 10, 2018.

²⁶⁶ Interview number 2, April 26, 2018.

House: “we knew each other, and that [military service] was another very important shared experience. ... We trusted each other and that gave you a starting place.”²⁶⁷ Other legislators noted their early shared experience in Congress: “Some of that comes out of the people you get to know, particularly in your first term as classmates. You’re going through the sort of boot camp experience together that is very much a bonding experience that can overcome a lot of other differences that typically are described in partisan terms.”²⁶⁸

Numerous legislators invoked congressional travel as an important venue for legislators to get to know one another. As one member told us, “Sometimes you just get to know people on CODELs [congressional delegations] or settings like that and realize you have a common interest.”²⁶⁹ This point was elaborated on by other members: “The other place this happens is when members take a trip together ... members are just talking to each other. Now that could happen on the House floor, but it doesn’t. Or if you’re on a bus for an hour and a half, that’s a place to chat. ... Members take note of other members’ overlapping interests and then staff follow up.”²⁷⁰ “Sometimes it’s the CODEL. Leadership realizes that those are the strongest opportunity to reach across the aisle and get to know each other.”²⁷¹

Members also talked about their time in Washington D.C. as a foundation for their personal friendships. Former members described seemingly unrelated personal interactions that generated trust, friendships, and sometimes the discovery of shared interest in an issue. “He and I played basketball together in the House gym. ... You get to know people, and that helps with working together.”²⁷² “I always found that building relationship with individuals made it much easier for me to find people to work with on specific pieces of legislation.”²⁷³

Although members talked about the value of socializing outside of the workplace, they also talked about the pressure they felt not to move their families to Washington D.C. upon taking office. Coupled with the expectation that they should return to the district whenever possible, the effect is that legislators do not linger with their colleagues in Washington. Once common-place occurrences like shared meals, attending sporting events, and family friendships are now rare, and legislators see this as a detriment to bipartisan cooperation. “I don’t think there’s any substitute for personal contact and relationships. ... If you get to know somebody and not just what they believe politically, but to know something about them personally or to know their families ... then you’re more likely to listen and to not dismiss whatever they’re saying off the top of your head.”²⁷⁴ “If you keep people apart ... it’s easy to demonize the other side. And that’s what happened.”²⁷⁵ “These days folks don’t know each other that well. There aren’t a lot of personal opportunities ...

²⁶⁷ Interview number 43, November 8, 2018.

²⁶⁸ Interview number 43, November 8, 2018.

²⁶⁹ Interview number 25, June 15, 2018.

²⁷⁰ Interview number 26, August 3, 2018.

²⁷¹ Interview number 3, April 24, 2018.

²⁷² Interview number 22, June 8, 2018.

²⁷³ Interview number 8, May 7, 2018.

²⁷⁴ Interview number 49, December 5, 2018.

²⁷⁵ Interview number 15, May 10, 2018.

[for] a normal conversation.”²⁷⁶ “Members of Congress [used to] move their family up, their kids went to the same school and played in the same little league baseball teams. They got to know each other.”²⁷⁷ “People are not talking to one another, members of Congress don’t know one another. You’ll walk down to the House or Senate dining room and you’ll see very little bipartisanship.”²⁷⁸

The second path to working with a member of the other party is based on common interests in an issue. Shared district or regional interests serve as the foundation for a lot of the bipartisan outreach between members of Congress.²⁷⁹ One member described flying back and forth from his district to Washington, D.C. each week with other members of adjacent districts (who flew into the same airport), “We’d see each other at the airport, we’d chat and we would work together on regional issues ... [sometimes] we’d be opposed, but simply getting to know them helped a lot.”²⁸⁰ Others describe the natural overlap of districts: “You may share an interest in your district. Maybe they have a coal plant in their district and you have a coal plant in your district. ... You try to find common interests within your districts.”²⁸¹ “We just generally take a district-oriented approach. We look at whose districts are we reaching out to – are they affected by this issue because that’s ... the selling point in most of our bills.”²⁸² “Geography can play into it ... You reach out to people who have similar issues [in their district].”²⁸³ “The issue had interest for many Texans ... we got the total [Texas] delegation together in a room and resolved the issues.”²⁸⁴

Shared interest in policy issues is also at the heart of legislators’ discussion of their membership in issue-based caucuses. Such working groups serve as a tool for identifying whom to work with from the other party. Legislators described these caucuses as “institutions [that] historically encouraged working across the aisle.”²⁸⁵ As another legislator explained, “just through that mechanism of regular meetings, you pick up opportunities for bipartisan cosponsorship of legislation.”²⁸⁶ “There are places ... you’ve got staff, but there’s no press, they’re not recorded, there’s no spotlight – members can just talk.”²⁸⁷ “Bipartisan members would form a caucus or form a working group ... so you have this part of the institution, a proper way to approach ... finding out who is on your side, or opposed, or undecided.”²⁸⁸

Legislators also described how they worked with a colleague from across the aisle to form bipartisan, issue-based caucuses: “we were both on Armed Services and we both realized that [the

²⁷⁶ Interview number 44, November 9, 2018.

²⁷⁷ Interview number 4, May 1, 2018.

²⁷⁸ Interview number 37, October 18, 2018.

²⁷⁹ On the enduring importance of state delegations in congressional collaboration, see also Sarah A. Treul, *Agenda Crossover* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

²⁸⁰ Interview number 30, October 1, 2018.

²⁸¹ Interview number 35, October 10, 2018.

²⁸² Interview number 48, December 3, 2018.

²⁸³ Interview number 24, June 18, 2018.

²⁸⁴ Interview number 6, May 5, 2018.

²⁸⁵ Interview number 3, April 24, 2018.

²⁸⁶ Interview number 14, May 10, 2018.

²⁸⁷ Interview number 26, August 3, 2018.

²⁸⁸ Interview number 34, October 9, 2018.

issue] wasn't getting the focus that we felt it needed, so we decided to form a caucus."²⁸⁹ "I created a House working group on [issue], an issue I care very much about ... and had a Republican with the same feelings."²⁹⁰ "We had completely different reasons for doing it, but we both had issues [in our district]."²⁹¹

Some legislators talked about the importance of belonging to caucuses defined by their moderate approach (rather than a specific issue) and highlighted the interaction between like-minded groups. These comments make clear that there is not only bipartisan cooperation at the individual member level, but also among groups of legislators: "We [New Democrats Coalition] also look for partners with the Tuesday group, which is the moderate Republican group."²⁹² "I was in a group called the Tuesday Group, and that was the more moderate Republicans. We would have regular meetings with Blue Dog Democrats and we would share ideas for legislation."²⁹³ "Both those groups [New Dems and Tuesday Group] pretty much align."²⁹⁴ "Problem Solvers is one of the few venues that exist where members on both sides can kind of talk about the issues from their point of view and consequently understand a little bit more."²⁹⁵

The third path to bipartisan collaborations highlights congressional committees and their role in facilitating working across the aisle. Sometimes this was because legislators who were not on the committee of jurisdiction sought out partners from across the aisle who were on the committee, thus giving their proposals greater credibility. More common, however, was that legislators talked about collaborating with committee colleagues: "[You] start by working across the aisle in committee."²⁹⁶

Other legislators elaborated: "If it was something in the jurisdiction of our committee, I tried to find a Democrat ... maybe somebody who was on my committee who had a common interest, or who could build support on their side of the aisle."²⁹⁷ "Often you find out [whom you can work with] based on who else is on your subcommittee or committee."²⁹⁸ "Where you would go typically to build that bipartisan collaboration is to other people in the committee who know these issues. ... You know these people, you've worked on these issues with these people and you can figure out how to do that."²⁹⁹ "Common interest – it's not that hard to find either a member who is focused on the same issue that you are or you serve with them on committee."³⁰⁰ "I think it came from

²⁸⁹ Interview number 17, May 15, 2018.

²⁹⁰ Interview number 34, October 9, 2019.

²⁹¹ Interview number 17, May 15, 2018.

²⁹² Interview number 40, November 8, 2018.

²⁹³ Interview number 14, May 10, 2018.

²⁹⁴ Interview number 40, November 8, 2018.

²⁹⁵ Interview number 44, November 9, 2018.

²⁹⁶ Interview number 5, May 3, 2018.

²⁹⁷ Interview number 19, June 13, 2018.

²⁹⁸ Interview number 22, June 8, 2018.

²⁹⁹ Interview number 47, November 28, 2018.

³⁰⁰ Interview number 24, June 18, 2018.

committee ... you're sitting around the committee room at 11:00pm eating a piece of stale pizza, you start making friends.”³⁰¹

In addition to working with committee colleagues, some respondents also indicated that committee leaders set the tone for bipartisan cooperation among committee members. Committees where the chair and ranking minority member had a cooperative relationship were seen as more encouraging climates for individual members to resolve conflicts cooperatively. This was heard both from the rank and file, as well as from legislators who were committee leaders themselves: “When I was the chairman of the subcommittee, the full committee, we were able to get a lot of things done because I really did try to work with everyone on both sides. ... So I would tell my ranking member, we’re the majority so we set the agenda, but there are certain bills we’ll be working on and you have an interest in it – you were elected, you represent as many people as I do, and my feeling was, why would you cut the other party out?”³⁰² “I sat down at the beginning of every session of Congress with my [ranking minority member] Republican colleague and we developed the agenda and then we worked in a bipartisan fashion through that process. ... It was a bipartisan effort from the beginning to the end.”³⁰³

It is also interesting to note that personal relationships were also discussed as important even when they did not eliminate the policy conflict, but instead served to humanize the opposition. The overwhelming consensus from the interviews is that personal relationships across the party aisle constitute a key element of creating a more civil and cooperative climate in Congress. One staff member described his liberal Democrat boss, “He would ... scream and yell and argue and all that stuff, and then everybody would go out and have dinner. But that’s because they got to know each other.”³⁰⁴ In short, even without clear legislative collaborations, those who work inside Congress widely believe that stronger personal relationships improve the congressional workplace.

Leaders’ Response to Bipartisan Collaboration

Former legislators and staff describe an institution with considerable partisan conflict and a culture in which winners and losers are common, but also one in which individuals often choose to cross party lines and work with member(s) from the other party. Given this inherent tension, how do party leaders react when individual members reach out and cooperate with members from the other party? Do leaders encourage or discourage working across the aisle?

Nearly all legislators and staff members report that party leaders’ reactions depend on the issue and especially the electoral context. Legislators reported that leaders discourage cross-party cooperation when it might be electorally beneficial to the other party. Specifically, multiple legislators said that leaders discourage working with a member of the other party if that member holds a vulnerable seat. In this situation, the party’s electoral goal of flipping control of a seat is at odds with the potential for bipartisan cooperation.

³⁰¹ Interview number 7, May 7, 2018.

³⁰² Interview number 31, October 1, 2018.

³⁰³ Interview number 37, October 18, 2018.

³⁰⁴ Interview number 4, May 1, 2018.

In many cases, leaders believe that withholding bipartisanship will make it easier to defeat vulnerable incumbents and win their seat in the next election. One legislator said, “[Leadership] told me, ‘you’ve cosponsored this bill with this person, but we’re not going to bring it forward because we really don’t want to give him a victory.’”³⁰⁵ “They try to withhold victories from people who have tough races.”³⁰⁶ “If you picked a Democrat who you wanted to help you ... and that Democrat was someone who was vulnerable – who the majority might be targeting to defeat in the next election, they [leadership] may not be as excited about me working with that person because they don’t want to get that person accomplishments or things to go home to talk about or campaign on.”³⁰⁷ “There’s kind of this messaging that goes around where it’s ‘don’t help this vulnerable Democrat by sponsoring a bill with them, because you don’t want to help them [electorally]. We have a chance of taking that seat and if you work with them, and they get a victory, then that’s going to make harder for us to beat them.’ So that kind of conversation does go on all the time.”³⁰⁸

When party leaders do allow their members to work across the aisle, most of the time this takes the form of looking the other way rather than active encouragement of such cooperation. Illustrative of this point, many legislators and staff told us that party leaders “do not discourage” working across the aisle, while only a few said explicitly that it was “encouraged.”

What accounts for leaders allowing for such cooperation? First, legislators said that when the issue is relatively small and not on the party’s agenda, leaders are much less likely to sanction working across the aisle. One illustrative quote from a legislator notes: “I don’t think they really care. ... It never rises to the point of being part of the leadership agenda. ... They just let this go unless it presents a problem for a larger issue.”³⁰⁹ “It’s a one-on-one thing on an issue that probably isn’t that high on the party’s agenda, so they really don’t care. It’s not part of a larger party position. The party Venn diagrams don’t overlap, but individual MC’s Venns do.”³¹⁰ In fact, legislators reported that “on non-divisive issues, it’s ... encouraged, or if it’s not encouraged, there’s no push back.”³¹¹ “[Bipartisanship] is rewarded when it advances leadership’s interests and discouraged when it opposes their interests.”³¹²

In contrast, party leaders are reported to discourage rank-and-file members from engaging in bipartisan cooperation on partisan issues, especially issues that are central to the party’s brand or their legislative agenda. This dynamic is captured well by one legislator’s experience: “I’ve had them come to me and say ‘don’t work on this. We’re trying to do something different.’”³¹³ “If you want to work in a bipartisan manner on issues that can be divisive or can be a political win for one and a political loss for the other, I think you’re generally discouraged from trying to find common

³⁰⁵ Interview number 33, November 19, 2018.

³⁰⁶ Interview number 24, June 18, 2018.

³⁰⁷ Interview number 19, June 13, 2018.

³⁰⁸ Interview number 18, May 22, 2018.

³⁰⁹ Interview number 9, May 8, 2018.

³¹⁰ Interview number 26, August 3, 2018.

³¹¹ Interview number 1, April 17, 2018.

³¹² Interview number 59, May 22, 2019.

³¹³ Interview number 33, November 19, 2018.

ground.”³¹⁴ “I think it’s just a question of party values.”³¹⁵ “When you start talking about substantive legislation, big issues that you’re working on ... [leaders] very strongly discouraged that type of collaboration.”³¹⁶

In addition, legislators report some instances in which leaders may recognize that an issue is at a stalemate, and allowing members to work across party lines may increase the chances of reaching an outcome. In these situations, leaders may see electoral benefits from bipartisan collaboration. As one legislator described it: “And they also knew that the more support you could build on the other side of the aisle, the easier at the end of the day it was ... it’s easier for leadership to put something like that on the floor.”³¹⁷ “[They] presented their leadership with a way to break the stalemate. And so ... they do welcome it at times because ... they’ve painted themselves into a corner and they can’t get out.”³¹⁸

Lastly, legislators report that when a member wants to work across the aisle on an issue that is uniquely important to their district, party leaders generally defer to that member’s electoral needs. In this way, legislators say that leaders understand that members need to do what it takes to win reelection, and indeed, this is also in the party leaders’ interest. “They didn’t typically discourage me from working with someone [in the other party] because ... they knew that it was good politics for me.”³¹⁹ “I think that most members in leadership understand that [bipartisan and moderate districts] are a political reality that these members have to represent.”³²⁰ Furthermore, a legislator maintaining their seat is also beneficial for the party, as this legislator describes letting their leadership know: “if it’s something that you need at home ... but if the leadership tells you ‘no, you can’t do that,’ and you’re gonna look at them and say ... you want me to be here to vote for you for speaker?”³²¹

Summary

Our interviews with more than fifty current and former members of the U.S. House of Representatives and their staff members paint a rather mixed picture for the state of cooperation in Congress. There is no doubt that partisanship is prevalent on Capitol Hill. The dominant – although not unanimous – impression is that the constant battle for majority control of the House means that each party wants to notch a win *and* have the other party lose. This outcome is seen as the most electorally advantageous because it provides the greatest contrast between the parties, thus giving voters a clear reason to elect the (winning) party’s legislators and gain/retain majority party status. In contrast, a win-win solution is seen as less possible – and for many, less desirable – because it not only helps one’s own party but also the other party in upcoming elections, and if both parties benefit, then neither has a *relative* advantage. It is this *relative* advantage that

³¹⁴ Interview number 1, April 17, 2018.

³¹⁵ Interview number 46, November 16, 2018.

³¹⁶ Interview number 16, May 10, 2018.

³¹⁷ Interview number 19, June 13, 2018.

³¹⁸ Interview number 9, May 8, 2018.

³¹⁹ Interview number 19, June 13, 2018.

³²⁰ Interview number 44, November 9, 2018.

³²¹ Interview number 27, August 3, 2018.

legislators and their staff report as being important for electoral victories, especially in competitive districts, and thus important to party leaders.

Looking ahead, it is hard to imagine how these dynamics described to us will change as long as party control of the House is competitive. It also suggests that there could be unintended – and undesirable – consequences of efforts to increase competition in House districts. More competitive districts would likely increase the instability of party control of the chamber, potentially decreasing further the incentives for the parties to cooperate on “win-win” solutions. In a highly competitive environment, both parties will likely focus on scoring political points in hopes of winning the grand prize of majority party status.

On the other hand, these stories of day-to-day workplace life in Congress reveal that many legislators and staff members are interested in working with colleagues across the aisle, and have experience doing so: “Most people elected would like to get something done. They like the opportunity to work together.”³²² Moreover, there are clear paths that lead to inter-personal cooperation, namely serving together on a committee, personal friendships, and common district interests. Legislators called for leaders to promote institutional settings in which personal relationships could develop. To the extent that the institution can facilitate and promote cooperation, there is potential for an increase in individual acts of bipartisan cooperation on less salient issues. This is bigger than it perhaps sounds since the vast majority of legislation considered by Congress is not high salience, so the potential for bipartisan cooperation is significant and meaningful.

In short, when it comes to working across party lines, there is much that is right about the U.S. Congress. Members seek out colleagues with shared policy goals and work together towards those goals. Respect, trust, expertise, and personal affinity are the underpinnings for cross-party cooperation, and they tend to create a reinforcing virtuous cycle of cooperation. Institutionally, our interviewees report that committee leaders set the tone for cooperation or conflict in their committee, which means that committee leaders who cooperate with the ranking minority member create an institutional venue in which cooperation is valued and promoted. However, there is also much that is wrong with the congressional climate when it comes to working across the aisle. Electoral competition pervades the calculations of party leaders, and even individual members. The focus on electoral implications and wanting to win/maintain the majority in the House results in behaviors that discourage working with the other party and encourage conflictual relationships.

³²² Interview number 31, October 1, 2018.

V: Congress as an Organization

In this section of the report, we summarize interviewee responses to questions concerning the distinctiveness of Congress as an institution and how members and staff navigated their time there successfully. Specifically, we posed the following questions:

- What distinguishes Congress from other organizations where you have worked/ jobs you have had?
- What do you wish you had known about Congress (or what would have been helpful to have known) before you began your tenure there?

Overview of Findings

Interviewee responses help us understand the unique nature of Congress, as well as how the institution fits into broader typologies of organizations. Many interviewees mentioned the important and rewarding mission/ purpose of the work, clearly defining the position of “member of Congress” as a calling (fulfilling work with societal implications), rather than a job (more about necessity) or a career (a path to advancement).³²³ In addition, our interview subjects characterize Congress as an extremely “open” organization. An “open” or “permeable” organization is one strongly influenced by environmental forces outside of the organization, such as a clientele, customer base, or market competition.³²⁴

Congress stands out as an organization characterized by a high degree of individual member autonomy, as well as ambiguity about the job or work itself. Organizations and positions that have a high degree of autonomy give the position holder / employee a great deal of discretion over how work is carried out.³²⁵ In such organizations, outcomes are highly dependent on individuals’ own self-directed behaviors, rather than some supervising or organizational entity.³²⁶ Autonomous jobs and workplaces often allow for a substantial amount of “job crafting,” in which employees are able to change what the job means to them, in terms of both tasks they undertake and with whom they work to achieve their goals.³²⁷ Ambiguity in workplaces typically refers to role ambiguity or the extent to which the goals and means to success associated with the position are unclear to the employee.³²⁸

Interviewees also discussed what they learned on the job in order to be successful in Congress. Most prominently, their insights focused on the relational nature of the organization. Members of Congress must work with others to achieve their goals. On-the-job learning also focused on the

³²³ Amy Wrzesniewski, Clark McCauley, Paul Rozin, and Barry Schwartz, “Jobs, Careers, and Callings: People's Relations to their Work,” *Journal of Research in Personality* 31:1 (1997): 21-33.

³²⁴ Daniel Katz, and Robert L. Kahn, *The Social Psychology of Organizations*, (New York, NY: Wiley Co: 1966).

³²⁵ J. Richard Hackman, and Greg R. Oldham, “Motivation Through the Design of Work: Test of a Theory,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance* 16:2 (1976): 250-279.

³²⁶ Hackman and Oldham, “Motivation.”

³²⁷ Amy Wrzesniewski, and Jane E. Dutton, “Crafting a Job: Revisioning Employees as Active Crafters of Their Work,” *Academy of Management Review* 26:2 (2001): 179-201.

³²⁸ John R. Rizzo, Robert J. House, and Sidney I. Lirtzman, “Role Conflict and Ambiguity in Complex Organizations,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* (1970): 150-163.

institutional intricacies of legislative work, as well as the length of time needed to accomplish legislative goals. A more detailed examination of these themes is presented below.

How Congress Differs from Other Organizations

When we asked how Congress differs from other organizations with which they had experience, interviewees focused on the unique mission and purpose of the institution. Most interviewees see congressional service as more than a job – a calling with deeper personal meaning. As one former member said:

So to me the higher purpose of a university or a business is to produce a ball bearing or an educated person. ...The higher purpose of government is stewardship and the protection of the governed, not of points of view.³²⁹

Former members underscored how Congress's unique responsibilities gave their work meaning, emphasizing "the gratification that a true public servant gets accomplishing something for the good of the people to move the country forward."³³⁰ A current staffer discussed how through the work, one can "see rewards right away and in a very profound and meaningful way."³³¹

Related comments focused on the importance of the work itself. As one former member stated, through the work one can "change somebody's life, with an action that doesn't involve what's going on in DC. Really. It doesn't involve legislation, it's constituent services."³³² A current staffer discussed the unique opportunity to "influence public policy, whether that's through legislation or by how you present things in the media."³³³

Another aspect of Congress that was mentioned as unique from private-sector work environments was the openness of the institution, meaning the extent to which outside entities influence the organization's work. For example, two former members discussed how elections and constituents influence their work:

You're accountable in [other types of] organizations to a board, advisory committees, corporate level higher than you, et cetera. But as a member of Congress ... your accountability is every two years, when you're re-elected. That's your accountability.³³⁴

The way that you are accountable to your constituency is ... unique and inventive. You have basically one day every other year that you get a report card of how you're doing, and that's Election Day. ... Ultimately it's one day when these 692,000 people are going to decide, "Well, do we like what you're doing? Do we like what you're doing enough to give you another two years of doing it?" The answer is either yes or no. It's binary. It's not like

³²⁹ Interview number 11, May 8, 2018.

³³⁰ Interview number 13, May 9, 2018.

³³¹ Interview number 41, November 1, 2018.

³³² Interview number 49, December 5, 2018.

³³³ Interview number 51, January 24, 2019.

³³⁴ Interview number 34, October 9, 2018.

there's much nuance.... [The question is whether] you're good enough or you're not good enough. That's kind of interesting and tough to replicate in another job.³³⁵

Our interviews with staffers echoed the characterization of Congress as an extremely open system. For example, one current and one former staffer discussed the unique influence of constituents on their work:

One policy we have in this office is that we will take a meeting with any constituent if they want to schedule a meeting in the DC office with us. So I've sat through some meetings [where] the topics are pretty terrible, but you have to. We're paid to listen to our constituents and take in their feedback and help them as best as we can.³³⁶

[A member has] got to figure out, well, what does my district want to do? What do my political supporters want? Is this going to help me or hurt me in fundraising or in my electoral campaigns? There's multiple variables that influence every individual as to how they operate within the whole. ... In the private sector there's a general agreement: We're all working for this company; this company's objective is this; we're all supposed to do everything we can. [In a private company,] I don't have to worry about whether my neighbor agrees with what I'm doing or not. But in politics you do.³³⁷

Another theme that emerged from the interviews is the uniquely autonomous work environment of Congress, in which rules and roles are not always clear. One former staffer discussed how compared to jobs in the private sector, Congress "gets to make up its own rules" in terms of the "prioritization of what they do." This staffer went on to explain this great latitude in prioritization of tasks by stating that "Congress doesn't have to actually do a whole hell of a lot. It has to make those decisions on its own."³³⁸

Two current staffers also distinguished Congress from other institutions in terms of degree of autonomy. Contrasting with federal (non-political) jobs, a staffer said, you "can't just not do something;" but in Congress "it's acceptable to say that you want to start the whole thing over and do it some different way."³³⁹ Another current staffer described Congress as "very dynamic" for staffers compared to other types of jobs, in that "you don't have to go to your boss, who has to go to their boss, who has to go to someone else, and then five months later you get asked to prepare a memo. Here, you have direct access to policymakers."³⁴⁰ One of the current staffers goes on to clearly state the autonomous nature of the work environment:

That there's no right way, and there's no wrong way. There are no rules. There are an infinite number of possibilities to an infinite number of problems. The only thing that serves as a compass is what your boss thinks. That's all. And for members, they have total latitude. I didn't know how wide the possibilities are.³⁴¹

³³⁵ Interview number 19, June 13, 2018.

³³⁶ Interview number 48, December, 3, 2018.

³³⁷ Interview number 47, November 28, 2018.

³³⁸ Interview number 47, November 28, 2018.

³³⁹ Interview number 26, August 3, 2018.

³⁴⁰ Interview number 51, January 24, 2019.

³⁴¹ Interview number 26, August 3, 2018.

Along similar lines, several interviewees mentioned the lack of clear hierarchy and connected it to the autonomous nature of the work. One former staffer likened every member of Congress to “an independent contractor” and described Congress as an organization where “there is not the same hierarchical structure” as in the private sector.³⁴² This seems particularly true when focusing on individual Congressional offices and the wide range of options for running one’s own staff, as discussed by a former member:

There’s a lot of discretion with your office budget. There’s always been a limit of how many actual people you can hire and the amount of pay. And your budget is audited ... but you have a lot of discretion. So you can have a half-time employee, or two half-time employees type thing. And you’re the decision maker as opposed to having to ask permission.³⁴³

It is important to note, however, that two former members discussed the unique power of leadership in Congress compared to other institutions, highlighting a divergent, more hierarchical view of member autonomy in Congress:

So much of the legislative process is lemmings sitting in their chairs in their offices waiting to be summoned by the leadership for the vote. ... Certain people could put up with that, and others can’t.³⁴⁴

If you want to get something done, you have to be accountable to those that are in the leadership chain.³⁴⁵

For those interviewees who saw Congress as a more autonomous environment, there was a connection made between the lack of clear structure and hierarchy and the importance of developing relationships with colleagues. As one former member pointed out, in Congress, “nobody works for anybody” which means “you cannot be demoted,” but also means that “you cannot accomplish anything on your own.”³⁴⁶ Another former member distinguishes this importance of working with others from other organizational contexts:

The marked difference [between Congress and other jobs/ organizations] is having to develop relationships, [to] build consensus with a large number of colleagues over a long period of time. The stamina required and the persistence required, and the openness to relationships with a wide variety of personalities and competing interests [are] just unlike anything that I experienced in a smaller medium-sized law firm office or managing a little NGO kinda operation. [In those settings] you tended to be associated with a smaller group of likeminded people pursuing an objective that everybody already agreed on. That’s not the case often in Congress.³⁴⁷

³⁴² Interview number 47, November 28, 2018.

³⁴³ Interview number 34, October 9, 2018.

³⁴⁴ Interview number 32, October 17, 2018.

³⁴⁵ Interview number 53, February 13, 2019.

³⁴⁶ Interview number 52, February 8, 2019.

³⁴⁷ Interview number 43, November 8, 2018.

Although autonomy at work is typically viewed positively by employees,³⁴⁸ there may be drawbacks to too much autonomy. One former member noted how the lack of strict rules and deadlines leads to the organization engaging in “management by crisis,” especially in recent years:

[Congress is] more and more managing crisis to crisis to crisis instead of managing prospectively as to what's good for the long term. Most organizations—almost any organization that wants to be viable—has to budget for the long term, whether it be a household or business or whatever. Congress almost as a matter of course now has become a management-by-crisis body.³⁴⁹

Along with the openness and autonomous nature of Congress as an institution, interviewees also discussed the relative ambiguity in terms of the role of a “member of Congress.” Specifically, there are a multitude of different potential roles for a member of Congress to inhabit, as discussed by three former members:

You're legislators. You've got to understand some legalese. You've got to understand people; you've got to understand PR. You've got to understand campaigns. You've got to deal with the media. It's probably the biggest skill set all wrapped into one person that I can imagine.³⁵⁰

There are so many different agendas for a member of Congress. He has a state agenda. He has his ideological agenda. He has a professional agenda. He has a caucus agenda. He has a political agenda.³⁵¹

Although many members are mostly focused on “policy issues,” they “have to learn a lot of behaviors” such as having a “stereotypical extroverted, gregarious personality type” in order to be successful [as members of Congress].³⁵²

Not only does ambiguity stem from the many different potential roles and priorities, but also the general uncertainty and lack of predictability in Congress, as described by one current staffer:

Sometimes people want a commitment so far down the road. Like for next year. I can't make any commitments because we don't have the House calendar. If there's a majority flip, I don't know when the calendar is going to come out, probably sometime in December. But somebody who's looking for a speaking engagement in April it's like, I don't know. I can't, we can't plan that far ahead.³⁵³

The many roles, lack of certainty, and resulting ambiguity of the position is connected to the openness of the system. Two former members discussed the balance members have to strike between many different stakeholders to whom they are accountable, from constituents to party leadership. Members can choose to “buck leadership and be a hero back home” or “go along with

³⁴⁸ Hackman and Oldham, “Motivation.”

³⁴⁹ Interview number 53, February 13, 2019.

³⁵⁰ Interview number 24, June 18, 2018.

³⁵¹ Interview number 29, September 28, 2018.

³⁵² Interview number 43, November 8, 2018.

³⁵³ Interview number 39, October 30, 2018.

leadership and put reelection chances at risk.”³⁵⁴ The “multi-lateral or multi-level approach” of Congress where there are many different stakeholders is more complicated than private-sector workplaces where there is one clear “allegiance and that is to your employer.”³⁵⁵ These multiple allegiances underlie the openness of the institution and generate ambiguity about members’ roles.

Another theme mentioned by interviewees was the uniquely high-stress nature of the work environment, including the fast-paced nature of the job and the long hours. One former member drew a comparison to corporate decisions that can “take forever” and observed that members of Congress must “make one hundred decisions every day.”³⁵⁶ On a similar note, a current staffer described the fast-pace of the work as requiring one to “understand a lot of very complex information” very quickly, which turns one into a “super processor of information.”³⁵⁷ One former member described the fast-paced schedule and the long hours, in which a member could have “twenty meetings a day” and then “you’re flying back to your district and you’re working on the weekends.”³⁵⁸ Another former member characterized being a member of Congress as “the most challenging and intense 13-hour day, 7-day-a-week job that I’ve ever had” and that “the average person does not appreciate how hard their members of Congress work.”³⁵⁹ Echoing these characterizations, a third former member discussed the stark difference in schedule when a member leaves Congress:

Now that I’m out, I love Fridays. I finally understand what TGIF means. Because I don’t have to spend all Saturday and Sunday going around the district attending multiple events all weekend long. Very few people understood that [being a member of Congress] was 24/7. Just to have a weekend free is exhilarating for me.³⁶⁰

One way Congress as an organization offsets the high-stress nature of the work environment is through special perks and unique resources. One former member describes how “the institution is set up to make your work life as easy as possible,” from shutting down Independence Avenue “so members can cross the street” to the existence of the House gym.³⁶¹ Similarly, another former member discussed the efficiency of being able to “pick up the phone myself or have my staff members pick up the phone to any branch of government and get through.”³⁶² A current staffer also noted how despite the fact that the “pace of work is much faster” than other jobs, “the volume of resources available to both staff and members to meet that increased pace is also there as well.”³⁶³

A final theme centered on the different types of people, personalities, and temperaments encountered in Congress as a unique feature. One former member specifically focused on some

³⁵⁴ Interview number 53, February 13, 2019.

³⁵⁵ Interview number 29, September 28, 2018.

³⁵⁶ Interview number 34, October 9, 2018.

³⁵⁷ Interview number 38, October 25, 2018.

³⁵⁸ Interview number 12, May 8, 2018.

³⁵⁹ Interview number 49, December 5, 2018.

³⁶⁰ Interview number 24, June 18, 2018.

³⁶¹ Interview number 34, October 9, 2018.

³⁶² Interview number 49, December 5, 2018.

³⁶³ Interview number 46, November 16, 2018.

members who “act like little princes and princesses,” behaving in ways that “you would not really tolerate in most workplaces.”³⁶⁴ Another former member summarized the diversity of personalities and priorities amongst the members of Congress overall:

I’ve often said that the House of Representatives is like the kitchen table of America. It’s where all of the competing interests in our vast and diverse country are reconciled. You have this incredible diversity and you have this incredible sort of conflict, if you will, about what the role of the federal government is. And it has gone on since the days of Jefferson and Hamilton, and it will continue as long as we have a democracy.³⁶⁵

On-the-Job Learning

In order to gain insight into how members come to learn how to navigate the institution, we asked interview subjects: “what do you wish you had known about Congress before you began your tenure there?” The most common answer to this question focused on the importance of cultivating and maintaining positive relationships. Interviewees typically stressed relationships internal to the institution, meaning with fellow members and staff. But they also underscored the importance of maintaining relationships with stakeholders beyond the institution. As one former member put it:

[I would] emphasize the value of interpersonal relationships, especially ... with staff and stakeholders. That’s something [important] in terms of being able to get information, answers, partners on an issue.³⁶⁶

Specifically, being able to work well with other members was cited as crucial to the legislative process. One former member said that if he had appreciated the importance of “horse trading” or “one hand washing the other” from the start he might have been able to “get more support on some of my ideas.”³⁶⁷ Relatedly, another member emphasized that it is important not to “rock too many boats too hard in the very beginning.”³⁶⁸ A former staffer also discussed how “the process is based upon trying to build consensus.”³⁶⁹

In addition to having positive relationships with other members, having a loyal, committed staff was cited by one former member as crucial to members’ overall success.

I wish I had known how crucial staff was. There are so many demands that you’ve got to surround yourself with not only competent staff that know the issues, know the players, but also have a sense of loyalty. And it took me a couple of years to get to that point where I had that staff. I think it set me back in my ability to chart a course for leadership, to chart a course for a chairmanship, to chart a course for better campaigning. You’ve got to surround yourself with competent people who are loyal to you, and finding that is difficult.³⁷⁰

³⁶⁴ Interview number 32, October 17, 2018.

³⁶⁵ Interview number 36, November 14, 2018

³⁶⁶ Interview number 46, November 16, 2018.

³⁶⁷ Interview number 49, December 5, 2018.

³⁶⁸ Interview number 42, October 31, 2018.

³⁶⁹ Interview number 47, November 28, 2018.

³⁷⁰ Interview number 53, February 13, 2019.

Interviewees cited different methods for maintaining positive relationships, including a former member who discussed the importance of trying “to understand other points of view and other interests”³⁷¹ and another former member who stressed to need to learn “how to keep your ego in check.”³⁷² A former staffer expanded upon the latter point about putting aside one’s ego, using the late Senator Ted Kennedy as an example:

If [Sen. Ted Kennedy had] never passed a piece of legislation, he [still] would have been Ted Kennedy. Every head would have turned every time he walked into a room. But he was a master deal cutter. He understood that he could walk into that room as an extremely high visibility, recognizable personality. But nobody’s going to vote for a bill because he was Ted Kennedy. He still had to sit down and gut out the compromises like everybody else. And that’s why he was known as a master legislator, because he could separate his personal goals and who he was and his aspirations and his personality from getting the legislative work done.³⁷³

Three former members remarked that they would have liked to have begun their congressional service with more knowledge about specific issues, both domestic and foreign. They discussed the “willingness to commit the time to understand” public policy issues,³⁷⁴ how they wished they “had known more about history” to aid in understanding international situations,³⁷⁵ and how they were not keenly aware before becoming a member how “certain regions of the country are affected differently by national legislation.”³⁷⁶ Related to understanding domestic and international policies, one former member noted that he wished he had understood how the legislative process worked for freshman members:

[I wish I’d known] how little influence you have on the institution unless you’re in leadership, unless you’re a committee chair or ranking member, or one of the top two or three folks in the party leadership. [It’s] just like being in high school. You are a freshman, there’s the star quarterback and the head cheerleader, and know you’re just a freshman, try to find your next class.³⁷⁷

One current staffer and one former member also mentioned wishing they had known the length of time it takes to do anything impactful, due to the bureaucratic nature of the work. Specifically, the current staffer discussed how it took “three years to work on a bill before it got passed in the House”³⁷⁸ and the former member discussed how the process of legislating is “kind of like steering a supertanker.”³⁷⁹

³⁷¹ Interview number 37, October 18, 2018.

³⁷² Interview number 32, October 17, 2018.

³⁷³ Interview number 47, November 28, 2018.

³⁷⁴ Interview number 29, September 28, 2018.

³⁷⁵ Interview number 31, October 1, 2018.

³⁷⁶ Interview number 34, October 9, 2018.

³⁷⁷ Interview number 30, October 1, 2018.

³⁷⁸ Interview number 38, October 25, 2018.

³⁷⁹ Interview number 49, December 5, 2018.

Finally, two current staffers diverged in opinion from the other interviewees. They noted that although they initially thought Congress would be different from other organizational settings, they found quite a bit of similarity between the institution and other workplaces:

I kind of wish I knew how normal it was. I was very intimidated when I came down to work here. I didn't really know what to expect. But then [I discovered], "Oh, if you can pretty much talk to constituents, communicate well with other people and communicate with your boss, you'll be fine." Which is [like] most jobs! This [job] just happens to be on the national scale and you're representing 720,000 people.³⁰

A lot of us staffers were political science majors and politics nerds – like myself – so a lot of these people [members] were like my sports stars or rock stars growing up, and then you meet them and you see that they're regular people. You know, they forget to bring their shoes to work. Or they forget things in a meeting. It highlights that anyone has the opportunity to do this – to be a member of Congress. It's a really cool mix of people that captures the mix of the United States.³⁸⁰

³⁸⁰ Interview number 56, April 25, 2018.

VI: Conclusions

The overarching aim of this study is to understand the organizational climate of Congress, including any sub-climates that may exist within or between the two dominant political parties. We conducted over fifty long-form interviews with current and former congressional members and staff, focusing specifically on how the organizational climate of Congress underlies issues of intraparty and interparty conflict and cooperation. Although our interviewee perspectives on Congress and its organizational climate were not a monolith, we found many common themes across participant responses. By using an organizational psychological lens to examine Congress, we improved our understanding of this unique organization and its norms surrounding both cooperation and conflict.

As evident in our questions, we felt it was important to separate discussions of intraparty and interparty conflict, as the parties are distinct entities which have their own unique organizational subclimates. Although we did not find any consistent differences between the Democratic and Republican parties in terms of their norms surrounding intraparty dissent, we do see overall that the parties have a different approach to conflict and cooperation than does Congress as a whole. Whereas interviewees tended to describe their party subclimate in Congress as one that allowed for (privately-expressed) dissent and was oriented toward building consensus, Congress as a whole was characterized as much less collaborative. Specifically, interviewees described a current congressional climate that permitted (though did not actively encourage) collaboration for smaller, non-controversial issues, but adopted a “winner-takes-all” mentality for more central issues.

Throughout our interviews, respondents emphasized the fundamental importance of forging positive relationships with party colleagues to gain influence within one’s party. Strong working relationships with members of the other party, however, was at best ignored by party leadership and at worst sanctioned. Perceived negative electoral consequences of aiding a member of the other party in legislative success was noted as a crucial disincentive to engaging in bipartisan behavior. Overall, interviewee responses point to a collaborative conflict culture within party, but a mix of collaborative and dominating conflict culture between parties.

Another common theme that emerged from our interviews is the role of leadership in shaping the climate of Congress. Many interviewees described Congress as a highly autonomous and ambiguous place to work, without clear rules or hierarchies. Members of Congress are not formally beholden to their party’s agenda or leadership demands. Party leaders have tools to sanction members for dissenting from the party’s agenda, but those tools are used rarely and there is a general understanding that members cannot always vote with their party. Members see risk in consistently breaking from their party, however, and the perceived lack of support for bipartisanship from party leaders does seem to affect the legislative behavior of rank-and-file members.

Party leaders may not have the same formal power over their members as traditional CEOs do over their employees, but party leaders do contribute to the climate of Congress, just as business leaders affect their workplace climates. Our interviews suggest that leaders foster norms that tend to work against, rather than for, inter-party cooperation. Interviewees describe leadership as ambivalent

toward rank-and-file members pursuing bipartisan efforts in low stakes situations, but they are actively against such efforts when the electoral majority may be affected.

Lastly, although inter-party cooperation on key issues is no longer normative in the broader climate of Congress, interviewees discussed many examples of engagement in bipartisanship. Most interviewees felt there could still be “win-win” outcomes for both parties under certain conditions, particularly when kept out of the public eye. In general, the members and staff we interviewed valued building positive working relationships with members of both parties and felt that forging strong relationships was essential to carrying out the key functions of Congress. Although party leaders do not incentivize individual members working across the aisle, members discussed facets of the climate that facilitate bipartisan collaboration, such as the nature of committee work and the kinship between moderate groups from both parties. Many interviewees perceive the work of Congress as a unique and important calling, with the goal of serving constituents and solving real-world problems. This perspective underlies a common desire to reach compromises between the parties, even as the institution’s norms have shifted away from a more collaborative to a more dominating conflict culture.

Looking Ahead

What implications might this research have for the individuals who work in Congress and for those interested in reforming the institution? Here we consider some potential ways in which what we now know about the current culture of Congress may inform conversations about how to improve the workplace culture moving forward. One key barrier to cooperation between the parties that emerged from our data is the prominence of a dominating, rather than collaborative, conflict culture in Congress as a whole. There are several top-down and bottom-up factors thought to be associated with promoting collaborative cultures, some of which are particularly relevant to this context.³⁸¹

From a top-down perspective, organizational leaders that empower their employees to make their own decisions and provide them with latitude to innovate and participate in discussions can facilitate more collaborative problem-solving. Further, it is important to have strong cooperative goals as an organization, with an emphasis placed on the collective well-being of the organization, rather than self-focused or subgroup-focused interests. Within the study of Congress, these recommendations correspond to steps towards decentralization of institutional power from a small group of party leaders to incorporate and empower a wider membership. Traditionally, one avenue towards this type of power-sharing has come through the committee system, but this is not the only path, and there are numerous informal and “unorthodox” ways in which members may be brought into discussions and problem-solving.³⁸²

³⁸¹ Gelfand, Leslie, and Keller, “Etiology of Conflict Cultures.”

³⁸² For a discussion of these dynamics, see Barbara Sinclair, *Unorthodox Lawmaking: New Legislative Processes in the U.S. Congress*, 4th Edition (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2011); James M. Curry and Frances E. Lee, “What is Regular Order Worth? Partisan Lawmaking and Congressional Processes,” *Journal of Politics* (Forthcoming); Molly Reynolds and Peter Hansen, “Just How Unorthodox? Assessing Deliberation on Omnibus Spending Bills,” (working paper, 2019).

Another element is the emphasis on the collective well-being of the organization, and on this point, there are promising efforts underway in Congress. In January 2019, the U.S. House established the bipartisan Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress to investigate and make recommendations on issues including: “procedures, including the schedule and calendar; policies to develop the next generation of leaders; staff recruitment, diversity, retention, compensation, and benefits; administrative efficiencies, including purchasing travel, outside services, and shared administrative staff; technology and innovation, and congressional mailing standards.”³⁸³ Notably the establishment of this committee received overwhelming support as the House voted in favor of its creation by a vote of 418-12, and its initial one year charge was extended to continue through the end of the 116th Congress.

From a bottom-up perspective, collaborative cultures are more likely to emerge with organizational members that are both agreeable and extroverted, with benevolent values that focus on others’ welfare. Importantly, it is suggested that these factors may not actually change the conflict culture via bottom up processes, unless individuals have opportunities to interact and create strong ties with multiple others. On this count, Congress could take steps to improve the organizational culture by making small reforms that promote members getting to know one another in more personal ways. Based on our interviews, such changes could be as small as establishing a weekly lunch that brings together, for instance, members of a state/regional delegation or cohort, regardless of partisan affiliation. Interviewees also highlighted the opportunities for personal relationship building when traveling as part of a congressional delegation, so efforts could be made to maintain (or expand) funding for CODELS, as well as to ensure bipartisan participation.

Among the more dramatic changes mentioned were revising the congressional calendar such that legislators spend more time in Washington and encouraging members to move their families with them when elected. Thus, a more dramatic reform might shift move to a calendar where legislative work is scheduled from Monday to Friday for two (or three) weeks in Washington, followed by one week “off” to return to the district. A more incremental alternative might be to extend the Washington work week by a day so that legislators would be together on Capitol Hill for four days a week rather than three. However, simply spending more time in Washington is not a panacea, the critical factor is that members spend time together building personal relationships and trust that can carry over into a more collaborative workplace culture.

Overall, research on the creation of collaborative cultures suggests that for Congress, there is a need to foster future collaborative leaders of both parties who empower rank and file members to participate more fully in conflict resolution. Cooperation needs to be incentivized more heavily, with members sharing a common goal of cooperation and betterment of the institution itself. Lastly, there is a need to change the structure and schedule of Congress to encourage interaction and creation of relational ties between members.

³⁸³ The U.S. House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, “Jurisdiction and Rules.” <https://modernizecongress.house.gov/about/jurisdiction-and-rules> (Accessed November 16, 2019).

Appendix: Interview Protocol

Part 1: Verbal Consent

Thank you for agreeing to meet. I work in the Psychology/GVPT department at UMD. I am one member of a team of four academics in Psychology and Government and Politics Departments who are interested in understanding the work environments of the U.S. Congress. I first want to go over a few points with you before we begin. This project is funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Democracy Fund. We are interested in understanding how the organizational climate and culture (organizational policies, procedures, norms, values) affect the way conflict and disagreements are resolved in of Congress and the Political Parties. This is the first study to test the utility of organizational climate and culture for understanding how conflict and disagreements are resolved in Congress and the Political Parties.

I will be asking you a few questions about your time working in Congress. There are no expected risks or benefits to participating, although our hope is that this project helps us gain a better understanding of conflict and cooperation in Congress. I first want to ask you if you consent to being interviewed and understand your rights as a participant to skip any questions and stop at any time? (wait for answer)

I also want to ask if you consent to being audio-recorded. We will later transcribe this interview for analysis and label it as a number (like participant 12) and will not connect it to your name. (wait for answer)

Are there any other questions you have concerning your rights or privacy before we begin?

Part 2: Interview Script and Questions

There are no right or wrong answers to the questions I will ask. Please respond freely and openly about your experiences in the U.S. Congress. We welcome examples that help illustrate your answers to our questions.

Organizational culture around intra-party conflict and cooperation:

- How do members become influential within their party?
 - Does influence come from being perceived as “winning” conflicts or from building consensus?
 - What, if anything, inhibits you from having influence within your party?
- When conflicts occur within the party, how are these conflicts handled?
 - How do members approach disagreements they have with party colleagues?
 - Do members feel free to speak up when they disagree with leaders?
 - Do leaders seek to suppress disagreements? Or get them hashed out?

Organizational culture around inter-party conflict and cooperation

- How would you describe how Congress works when there's conflict between the parties – is it generally possible to find a win-win outcomes that can be supported by both parties, or does there have to be winners and losers?
- On the occasions when you have worked with members across the aisle, how did you decide who (which offices) to work with?
- What is the stance of leaders toward members who work together across party lines – is it discouraged or rewarded?

Communications among members generally (both between and within parties)

- Does most negotiation over legislation happen in person in Washington DC? Or does this work progress even when members are away from DC?
- How do you stay connected to fellow members/ committees/ etc. when you are not in D.C.? Do you communicate by phone, email or video-conference when working on legislation, rather than face-to-face contact?

Adjustment for staff respondents:

- *Does legislative work progress even when members are not in DC?*
 - *If so, how do you keep working with other staff? (can probe further: in person, email, phone, etc.)*

Congress as a workplace – comparisons and lessons learned

- How does working in Congress compare to other workplace experiences you've had? Would you say it's similar or is it a unique workplace?
- Reflecting back, are there things about how Congress works that you know now but you couldn't have until you worked in Congress? Things you only learn from the inside?



COLLEGE OF BEHAVIORAL & SOCIAL SCIENCES

Office of External Relations
0145 Tydings Hall
2343 Preinkert Dr.
College Park, MD 20742

bsos.umd.edu
301.405.3475

Acknowledgments

On the cover: Authors' names are listed alphabetically. For funding, we are grateful to the Democracy Fund and the Hewlett Foundation's Madison Initiative. We thank our partners, the Association of Former Members of Congress and the Millennial Action Project for help with securing interviews. We thank Associate Dean Wayne McIntosh for seeing potential in an interdisciplinary project on this subject and for bringing together our team, and we thank Ted Knight for his work obtaining funding. For comments on an earlier draft, we thank Matt Green, Jim Curry, and other participants at UMD's Conference on the Organizational Climate of Congress. For excellent research assistance, we acknowledge Jordan Epistola and Joel Mabry. For transcriptions, we thank: Zack Bloom, Morgan Grizzle, Madeline Gresh, Zach Jablow, and Reyan Sheikh. For assistance with project administration, we are grateful to the College of Behavioral and Social Sciences, and the Departments of Psychology and Government and Politics, especially Ted Knight, Stephanie M. Drame, Sarah E. Goff, Michelle C. Slone, and Cissy Roberts.