

Gift Travel in the U.S. House of Representatives

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Abstract

Members of Congress take more than 2,000 trips sponsored by private organizations and interest groups every congress. Using a new data set of gift travel from 2007 to 2019 and interviews with former members of Congress, current and former congressional staffers, and staffers from interest groups that fund trips, we attempt to answer two core questions about this increasingly frequent behavior. Why do members take privately sponsored trips and what types of groups are driving this behavior? We argue that members of Congress take trips because they believe it makes them more effective legislators by exposing them to real-world consequences of their policy decisions and forcing them to build relationships with their fellow members. Trip sponsors, alternatively, seek to persuade and build relationships with members of Congress that ultimately shape their legislative coalitions. We find that trip-taking is associated with greater legislative effectiveness, in particular for Democrats, and that the provision of policy-specific information is a valuable benefit from taking these trips.

Keywords

U.S. Congress, congressional travel, gift travel, privately sponsored travel, money in politics, interest groups

Members' time is precious, yet interest groups must somehow persuade them to give some of it up (Fenno 1978, 34). Hosting an all-expense-paid trip, so-called *gift travel*, can be just the ticket to deepening an interest group's relationship with a member of Congress. Free, carefully planned trips have an allure that other venues lack, and interest groups have increasingly taken advantage of them to build relationships and share information in Congress. Why do members accept these trips and what do interest groups hope to get out of them?

Much scholarly research has been devoted to understanding how members allocate their time and how pressure groups influence their decisions about politics and policy (Baumgartner et al. 2009; Bawn et al. 2012; Hall and Deardorff 2006; Kingdon 1995). Members tend to rely heavily on donations from interest groups, trade associations, and Political Action Committees of all affiliations to fund their reelection efforts (Brunell 2005; Grier, Munger, and Roberts 1994; Milyo, Primo, and Groseclose 2000). The relationship between special interests and elected officials has been the subject of public suspicion and scholarly scrutiny for decades with persistent concerns about potentially corrupting influences (Ansolabehere, Snowberg, and Snyder 2005; Lowenstein 1989, 1995; Persily and Lammie 2004; Rosenson 2009; Thompson 2005; Welch 1982). Despite this fascination, scholars have historically failed to find direct linkages

between campaign contributions and roll-call votes (Welch 1982; Wright 1990). Scholars have, however, found interest groups influence members in other ways, such as contributions timed before key votes or committee markups (Hall and Wayman 1990; Stratmann 1998), the provision of information or labor to members' offices (Hall and Deardorff 2006), and even contributions in exchange for meetings with members or changes to legislative language (Kalla and Broockman 2016; Langbein 1986; McKay 2018, 2019).

This paper sheds light on the interest group-member relationship with a new quantitative data set of privately funded trips as well as interviews with former members of Congress, current and former congressional staffers, and staffers from interest groups that fund this travel. We address two core aspects of these increasingly popular trips attended by both members themselves and their staffers. First, why do members go on privately sponsored trips? What do they hope to gain and how do they conceptualize the risks and rewards of attending such trips? And second, what types of groups are sending

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members on trips? Groups send members on trips with some expected return on their investment; why do they choose a trip instead of a different approach to facilitating influence? Taken together, these two sets of questions allow us to provide a comprehensive overview of gift-travel behavior from both the member and group perspectives.

Members and staffers recognize the risk that a privately sponsored trip poses for their reputation and reelection prospects (Interviews 2020; Rosenson 2009).¹ But they also believe taking these trips allows them to become more effective legislators. Trips provide a valuable opportunity to build relationships with fellow lawmakers and staffers, gain perspective on the consequences of their policy decisions, and learn from area experts. Especially as partisan polarization has Capitol Hill in a seeming death grip, these trips provide cover for interacting with members of the opposite party and the ability to humanize their colleagues across the aisle (Interviews 2020). While one might think such relationships are not necessary for a functioning legislature, evidence of Congress' fraying social fabric has been well-documented (Alduncin, Parker, and Theriault 2017; Curry and Roberts 2020; McGee and Theriault 2020), and efforts to increase civility among members show up in multiple recommendations from the 116th Congress' bipartisan Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress (Kilmer and Graves 2020). From the sponsor's side, trips are a powerful tool with which interest groups attempt to persuade and educate members and build relationships with them to shape legislative coalitions. Sending a member or her staffers on a trip to a conference or a site is a special opportunity to focus their attention on information of the sponsor's choosing. In addition, members' fellow trip-attendees provide a ready-made coalition to coalesce around any new legislation they may introduce on issues relevant to the sponsor's mission.

We find that gift travel is dominated by a small number of active groups, especially issue-specific, nonprofit education, and industry groups. Nearly 60 percent of all reported trips are associated with only 25 sponsors. In general, committee chairs and party leaders take more trips, likely due to their agenda-setting power. For members, gift travel is associated with higher legislative effectiveness; the increase in a member's Legislative Effectiveness (LE) score (Volden and Wiseman 2014) associated with a single trip is about as much as serving an additional year in Congress. Digging deeper, we find this effect is mostly attributable to increases in LE scores among Democratic members, particularly for domestic trips. Moreover, we find that solo trips—those in which only one member of Congress is in attendance (though other people may be)—appear to be the driver of the travel-effectiveness relationship. This finding suggests

that policy-specific information is likely the largest benefit to members from these trips, with coalition-building opportunities possibly being a secondary boon. For travel-sponsoring groups, we find evidence that those seeking to change members' preferences sponsor more trips and send more members on them. Last, we note that our data do not permit claims of causality or tests of causal direction. While we can say with a high degree of confidence that more effective lawmakers take more solo privately sponsored trips, for example, we cannot conclude that such trips made them more effective.

In the next section, we explore the scholarly debate around why members of Congress travel. Following that section, we consider the motivations of sponsoring organizations and review the literature at the intersection of interest groups and Congress. Next, we present our novel quantitative data set, discuss the contours of gift travel in the House of Representatives, and discuss our methodology. Finally, we present our results and discuss their implications.

Congressional Travel and Legislative Effectiveness

In compliance with House ethics rules, when members take privately sponsored trips, they and their sponsors must report them to the Clerk of the House.² These reporting rules, as Rosenson (2009) argued, likely exist in response to perceptions of corruption among the public.³ This suspicion was confirmed by former members who discussed congressional travel as if the changes to ethics rules in 2007 marked a paradigm shift in their behavior: "When I came to Congress, people were taking trips all the time and no one was reporting anything" (Former Member of Congress, Interviews 2020).⁴

The data presented in this paper come from the period after the rule changes. Now under closer scrutiny, why would members continue attending privately sponsored trips? Our interviewees believed that a poorly screened trip can threaten a reelection campaign (see also Alduncin et al. 2014; Parker 2014; Rosenson 2009). But there certainly are still merits to attending some trips and, if a challenger did bring up a trip in a campaign, the key for members is in marketing the trip correctly to constituents. Frequently this meant attending trips only if a member's district or longstanding policy work could be tied to it (Interviews 2020).

"The main defenders of privately sponsored travel are members themselves, who assert that it serves valid educational, informational, advocacy, and party-building purposes" (Rosenson 2009, 247). Interviews conducted for this project confirm Rosenson's assertion with members' argument that they attended trips to get a better sense of the issues on the ground, gain a new perspective

on a situation or locale, or learn from area experts. Members shared experiences as varied as visiting domestic oil pipelines to staying in refugee camps abroad (Interviews 2020). Staffers defended privately sponsored travel too, with one current staffer putting it this way: “These really are work trips. It serves a purpose for what we do in Congress. There’s room and potential for abuse, but it’s very important.” Going on, they cited in particular the valuable opportunities to make new connections with other staffers they might not otherwise interact with and the future opportunities to collaborate on substantive policy via those connections (Interviews 2020). This logic echoes work that operationalizes the social fabric of Congress via CODELS and finds that polarization has strained the previously bipartisan nature of many trips, especially among extremely conservative Republicans (Alduncin, Parker, and Theriault 2017).

The chorus of voices on Capitol Hill and in the academy are clear. Members go on trips to become better representatives and to further the interests of the United States abroad. A direct test of this claim is long overdue and fortunately scholars have developed a novel quantitative measure designed to evaluate members’ legislative effectiveness.⁵ Legislative Effectiveness scores, developed by Volden and Wiseman (2014), are generated by evaluating a weighted combination of 15 indicators based on the bills sponsored by members of Congress (see also Volden and Wiseman 2018). The scores focus on the different stages of the legislative process from a bill’s initial sponsorship through its becoming law (if it makes it that far). The scores also take into account whether the bill was merely a commemorative measure or if it had substantive and/or significant content.⁶ If members are going on privately sponsored trips with the expectation that they will gain new insight into an issue, industry, or region, one outcome we should expect—especially if members suspect they may need to justify their trip—is the sponsorship of a bill addressing concerns related to their discoveries from the trip.

The mere introduction of new bills alone is only one aspect. Members, staffers, and scholars all also claim that congressional travel is a valuable way to grow a member’s network within Congress (Alduncin et al. 2014; Interviews 2020; Rosenson 2009). Therefore, we should not only expect members to introduce more bills than they otherwise might following a trip, but members should also have more success with such proposals because they conceivably have a ready-made coalition of fellow travelers to coalesce around new legislation. The intersection of these two claims makes LE scores an ideal measure for evaluating the merits of gift travel for members of Congress. In fact, Volden and Wiseman (2014) noted that a key aspect of their conceptualization of legislative effectiveness relies on the idea that members are

able to cultivate a set of skills for working with their fellow members, making them more effective over time. They note that members “can learn from one another. They can build close working relationships with staffs and other members through connections” (Volden and Wiseman 2014, 36). While they do not suggest congressional travel as a way to build connections explicitly, many of those interviewed for this project did, including one current staffer who put it this way:

There are so few opportunities for staffers from different parties to interact with one another that I have built relationships with [staffers of the other party] and done things with them after one of these trips. Right across the hall we have [offices of members belonging to the other party] but we never see them. There’s not that kind of interaction, even with the proximity. But on a trip, you’re going to get to know them as human beings and then they’re not just the opposition, they are human beings who see things differently than we do. (Current Staffer, Interviews 2020)

Relationship building is key to legislating and taking a privately sponsored trip provides an ideal opportunity for more effective coalition building during the trip and afterward. We therefore propose the following first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Members who attend more trips are, on average, more effective lawmakers.

The potential for gift travel to support legislative effectiveness is also supported by congressional investigation. The final report from the bipartisan Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress provided members’ direct testimony on exactly how the loss of civil bipartisan interactions has impacted Congress and its members. It recommended bipartisan retreats for members at the opening of each Congress to encourage work across party lines (Kilmer and Graves 2020; McGee and Theriault 2020). Scholarly research also finds extended trips with their colleagues facilitate the critical relationships that underpin legislating in Congress (Curry and Roberts 2020).

Not all members are equally predisposed to bipartisan elbow-rubbing, however. Being on the ideological extremes of Congress, especially for Republicans, is associated with less trip-taking behavior more generally (Alduncin, Parker, and Theriault 2017). This evidence is consistent with other work that finds ideological extremity has been asymmetric in Congress, with conservative activists pushing Republican members to the right or replacing them altogether with more conservative members in a way that has not yet been replicated by activists on the left (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016; Theriault 2008, 2013). The parties’ House factions also manifest a clear ideological asymmetry: the Republicans’ have three

conservative factions and only one moderate group, whereas the Democrats' sole liberal faction is counterbalanced against two moderates ones (Bloch Rubin 2017; Clarke 2020).

Taken together, this research suggests we may find differences in gift-travel behavior driven by the ideological extremity of members. If these patterns transfer to gift travel, ideologically extreme Republicans should be less likely to accept trips due to fear of being seen as out-of-step with conservative activists. Since liberal Democrats have not moved as far to the left as Republicans have to the right, and also do not face the same pressures from activists, they should be more inclined to travel. We therefore propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: More ideologically extreme Republicans take fewer trips, on average.

Finally, since Rosenson's (2009) earlier work on gift travel employing data from non-governmental sources, the rules for congressional travel have changed significantly. With governmental data reported under the new rules, we intend to reevaluate her findings that being in a position of institutional power, serving in Congress for longer, and being non-white all still increase trip-taking,⁷ and whether membership on the Appropriations, Ways and Means, or Rules Committees, and electoral vulnerability decrease it.⁸

Organizations Pursuing Members of Congress

Travel sponsors are the initiators and organizers of gift travel. They design the trips' itineraries and compile their invitation lists, though the actual guest list is determined by members' availability and interest.⁹ These events take a great deal of planning, paperwork, and expense, so what groups organize them and how do they expect to benefit?

Most interest groups taking advantage of gift travel are issue-oriented organizations, followed by industry-backed groups, and a handful of constituency and media organizations. Sponsors' trips can be categorized into two broad types: (1) site visits and (2) conference-like events.

Site visits generally involve flying guests to a destination, domestic or international, so they can experience a situation unfolding in an area or the impact of policy decisions made on Capitol Hill. One staffer for a sponsoring organization described the rationale behind these trips:

Oftentimes, [members] just don't have context. They barely understand U.S. poverty so, when you talk about international poverty, they don't know what that looks like. "Wait, this is

what it's like?" A lot of it is contextualizing what really happens. (Trip Sponsor, Interviews 2020)

Giving members such context is one way for interest groups to educate members about the conditions in a given area.¹⁰

The other type of trip is educational in a more traditional way. Sponsors host conferences, or conference-like events, to gather experts to discuss a series of topics tied to the sponsor's area(s) of concern.¹¹ Conference-like events vary considerably; for example, some consist only of a series of panels while larger-scale events may have keynote speakers with panels afterward; other events may also include interactive learning experiences, simulations, or floor shows to further educate members about conditions in a policy area or industry (Interviews 2020).

Different types of trips make sense for different types of organizations. Broadly speaking, groups choose to send members or staffers on trips for two different purposes (and sometimes they pursue both simultaneously): persuasion and coalition building. In developing these theoretical pathways for influence we seek to emphasize the view that lobbying is a menu of strategies groups pursue (Hall and Deardorff 2006). While lobbying is not allowed on these trips—an issue we will revisit later—the scholarly literature on lobbying provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding the types of influence trip sponsors pursue. In discussing persuasion and coalition building by sponsors, we contribute mainly to the literatures on lobbying as a form of persuasion and as information subsidy.

Persuasion

When sponsors choose to send members or their staffers on trips to persuade them, they do so with two distinct motivations: (1) education or (2) preference change. Aligning with scholarship of the policy process, which emphasizes the importance of information in defining policy problems and formulating policy proposals (Baumgartner and Jones 2015; Brock 2021; Fagan and McGee 2020), our sponsors attested they sent members or staffers on trips to educate them about problems and policies related to their mission. Trips thus function as a source of high-quality information subsidy for problem or solution definition for interested members. They can also act as a potential antidote to confirmation bias exacerbated within the Capitol Hill information bubble (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016; Lewallen, Theriault, and Jones 2016). In this vein, one sponsoring organization staffer said their main purpose was to "break down the barrier between what members are working on and what the reality is in the field" (Trip Sponsor, Interviews 2020).

Multiple sponsoring organization staffers stated an ambivalence toward changing minds explicitly; for example, one noted, “We don’t push policy on these trips going into meetings saying you need to say this or that. [. . .] We don’t care what the staffers believe or do not believe. We are not lobbying. It is just educational” (Trip Sponsor, Interviews 2020). Similarly, sponsors may also be seeking to engender an interest in a country or topic that the member had virtually no knowledge of, or opinion on, before.

Of course, many groups do send members on these trips to change minds. In particular, staffers described a desire to change preferences over the long term:

The effect we are looking to have is a wide, big view of changes we are seeking, so legislation is not the point. The more people we can convince to think about the world the way that we do, the better. (Trip Sponsor, Interviews 2020).

When canvassing sponsoring organization staffers about how they pick their attendees, a few did note they wanted the most powerful members, but the most common answer was to target the relevant committees for their issue area(s) (Interviews 2020). Other groups noted the targeting of members from certain influential caucuses such as the Congressional Black Caucus or the Republican Study Committee, whereas others sought members from states of interest or people interested in the issue explicitly or at least who are open-minded about it. When targeting staffers in particular, sometimes groups seemed to take into account how much power they had in their office or even tried to estimate their long-term career trajectory to target more lasting influence in the policy arena (Interviews 2020). The targeting of powerful members, and especially committee chairs, is a common strategy observed by scholars when attempting to understand the connection between members and exogenous actors or groups (Baumgartner et al. 2009; Fourinaies 2017; Rosenson 2009; Wright 1990). We therefore propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Members who chair committees or are party leaders take more trips.

Again, these findings underscore the diversity of gift travel and the many different and intersecting motivations for groups to choose to sponsor a trip for members or their staffers.

Coalition Building

Sponsoring organizations are not naive about the social dynamics they produce on these trips. When thinking about building coalitions, sponsors consider two different dynamics: (1) building relationships among attendees

and (2) building relationships between the member and their organization. Groups see both a benefit in having access to influential policymakers and in their getting to know one another better. Many staffers we spoke to understood that merely by grouping members together they were potentially influencing coalitions for future legislation on their issues and others:

[Sometimes during trips we see staffers interacting saying things like,] “will your boss work with my boss on this?” This had nothing to do with the trip. Wait, this is another person that I like that my boss can get something done with. (Current Staffer, Interviews 2020)

Most importantly, these groups—almost across the board—sought bipartisanship on their trips. One sponsoring organization staffer spoke extensively on this point (and many others mentioned it at length too):

Members and staff like [bipartisan trips] better. You’re creating an environment with issues that are not partisan. People end up venting about frustrations about partisanship. It opens up a door [to] other kinds of conversations. You develop personal connections to people, then the partisanship stuff becomes secondary. “I know what their dog is called.” Hill staffers need trust with people. You don’t get that opportunity in D.C. really. (Trip Sponsor, Interviews 2020)

Even in the modern polarized Congress, the value of bipartisanship in enacting coalitions cannot be understated (Curry and Lee 2019) and neither can members working together behind the scenes on issues that are not central to either party’s brand (Craig 2020).

Most groups are not just spending money to facilitate better relationships among those working on Capitol Hill though, they also seek to foster relationships for themselves and their organizations. One sponsoring organization staffer put it bluntly,

There’s no better way to build a relationship with someone than to spend 16 hours a day with them. You talk about a lot of different things in those cars, stuck in traffic. To come back and have a different level of trust, of knowing each other, trust, it’s really beneficial. (Trip Sponsor, Interviews 2020)

In particular, it seems organizations are seeking two types of things from these new relationships. First, they hope the attendees, or their offices, are more likely to pick up the phone when they call; and, second, they hope their organization’s staffers will be on the minds of policymakers when they are working on these issue areas. In fact, when asking staffers how they assess the effectiveness of their trips, many indicated they expect increased interaction with attendees whether via impact surveys, attendance at follow-up events like briefings or brown-bag lunches, or even being formally invited to testify at

hearings (Interviews 2020). Multiple groups went further, noting that they track changes to legislation or new bill introductions in their respective issue areas (Interviews 2020). And, as we will come to demonstrate, many of the most prominent groups sponsoring these trips are universities or nonprofit educational institutes. These sponsors are also likely to be burnishing their own reputations for being active participants in policymaking. Proven access to those at the policymaking table likely bolsters funding opportunities for nonprofits, which is certainly a salient factor of many of these organizations (Brown and Trout 2004; Chavez, Stephens, and Galaskiewicz 2004; Lu 2015). Overall, it is clear that many groups view these trips very much as opportunities for future influence and relationship building, even if that influence is just the chance to continue to educate policymakers on an issue.

Other groups seek to change members' policy positions. Scholars have long argued that preference change, or even flat-out vote-buying, occurs when interest groups and legislators connect (Hall and Wayman 1990; Kalla and Broockman 2016; McKay 2018, 2019; Powell and Grimmer 2016; Stratmann 1991; Welch 1982; Wright 1990). Measuring position change and linking it to exogenous groups is a notably difficult task and one that many scholars have attempted (Baumgartner et al. 2009; Fourniaies 2017; Hall and Wayman 1990). In trying to understand if trip sponsors seek to change minds, we use an item on the reporting forms in which the sponsor discloses whether they employ lobbyists.¹² Our assumption is that groups hiring lobbyists are more intent on policy influence.

Hypothesis 4: Groups that employ lobbyists sponsor more gift travel.

Finding that groups with lobbyists sponsor more travel would provide a first test of this critical question of attempting to influence policy. In spite of the prohibition against lobbyists' participation, staffers from many different groups discussed the role lobbyists played at their events and the ways that other organizations get around the lobbyist prohibition, sometimes simply ignoring them. Staffers suggested most often that lobbyists are simply invited to attend but not plan the event. Other times lobbyists participate on the panels, field questions, or even lead tours during the event (Interviews 2020). Another staffer went so far as to describe a scheme wherein groups form shell organizations to host privately sponsored trips and then invite their main group's lobbyists to the event that way.

Variables

Our dependent variables are members' reported number of gift trips per congress and Legislative Effectiveness

scores. We calculated the number of trips from the gift-travel filings available from the U.S. House Clerk's website.¹³ In their raw form, the filings have many duplicates, so we kept only one report per member per travel departure date and then summed the number of unique departure dates to create the *trips* variable. To calculate the number of trips members took solo or with other members, we first created a trip ID variable for every unique *event*, that is, combination of departure date and travel sponsor. For example, all trips departing March 3, 2011, sponsored by the Heritage Foundation are associated with the same event and so receive the same trip ID. This led to a *single-member trip* count using events with exactly one traveler and a *multi-member trip* count using events with more than one.

Our independent variables come from the Center for Effective Lawmaking's data repository. Win percentage is the member's vote share in the election entering the current Congress. Seniority is the number of years the member has been in office. Chair, subcommittee chair, and power committee are indicator variables for members who chair committees, subcommittees, or sit on the "power" committees of Appropriations, Rules, or Ways and Means. Party leader indicates a leadership role for a party in the chamber, including chief deputy whip and above.¹⁴ Ideological extremity is the absolute distance of the member's first-dimension DW-NOMINATE score from the chamber median. Finally, black, Latino, and female are demographic indicators.

Data and Methodology

Members' offices reported spending 54,971 days on 13,219 privately sponsored trips between 2007 and 2019 for an average of 21 days per congress. The majority (63%) of trips have only one congressional guest. While gift travel is widespread—89 percent of members took at least one trip in each congress in this period—it is not distributed equally. Trips per congress is characterized by a left-skewed distribution with a median of 4 and mean of 5; see Figure 1 for a histogram.

Gift travel has become more popular over time (see Figure 2). During the 110th Congress, members took just 1,200 trips, by the 115th the number had risen to 2,919. By the 115th, only 21 members reported no gifted trips. Given that members' time is so limited, it would seem impossible for the number of trips to grow substantially year after year. The resolution to this apparent paradox is that *staffers* are attending more and more trips, while members' frequency of travel has remained relatively stable (see Figure 3). Staffers are also taking a larger proportion of the domestic trips, whereas members are taking the lion's share of the trips overseas. In the 115th Congress, for example, 57 percent of members' voyages were international while only 19 percent of staffers' trips were.

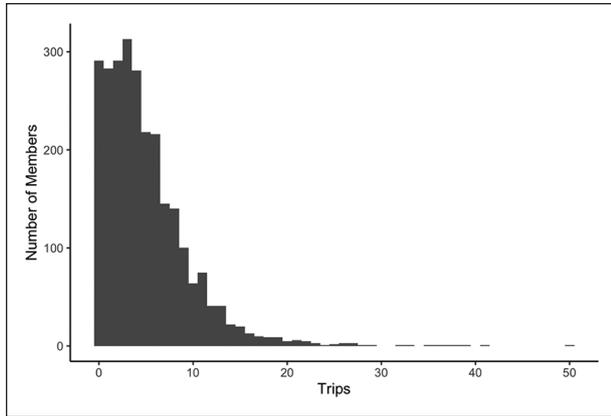


Figure 1. Histogram of gift trips per member per Congress (2007–2019).

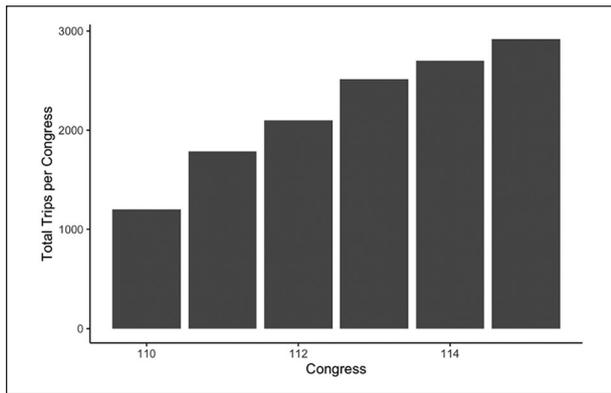


Figure 2. Total gift trips per Congress.

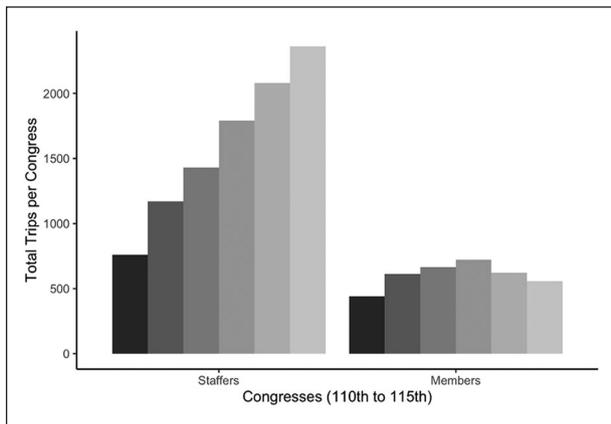


Figure 3. Total gift trips per Congress by staffers and members.

Table 1 reports descriptive statistics for travel-relevant groupings of members of Congress. Most noticeably, Republicans travel more than Democrats and agenda-setting members travel more than the rank and file.

Who sponsors these trips? They are a subset of the interest group universe that leans toward issue-focused and industry-backed organizations, with a smattering of constituency-focused groups and information-related institutions such as media companies and universities (which we have grouped within the “other” category).¹⁵ Industry- and issue-focused groups each make up about 35 percent of all sponsoring organizations in these congresses, with constituency groups accounting for about 6 percent and the “other” category taking up the remaining 22 percent. Although industry- and issue-focused groups make up roughly equal parts of the groups participating in privately sponsoring congressional travel, issue-oriented groups are responsible for 68 percent of all guests while industry groups account for 21 percent. Constituency and “other” groups account for only 2 percent and 10 percent, respectively. Similar to lobbying (Kim, Stuckatz, and Wolters 2020), gift travel is dominated by a small number of heavy users: nearly 60 percent of all reported trips are associated with the top 25 sponsors.

Our analyses focus on members’ legislative effectiveness and the number of trips they take per congress. As such, the data are clustered within persons as well as within time periods. Given that we also have time-invariant covariates that fixed-effects would not allow us to estimate (e.g., gender and race) as well as slow-moving time-variant covariates (e.g., ideological extremity, seniority, and positions of leadership) (Bell and Jones 2015; Clark and Linzer 2015), we estimate regression models with random effects for member and time period (King and Roberts 2015). We model legislative effectiveness with a linear-normal model and the count of trips per congress with a negative binomial model.

Findings

Results from the random-effects negative binomial regression model of members’ trip behavior are presented in Table 2. The coefficient estimates corroborated Hypothesis 3 that members in positions of power take more trips. The estimated effects for being a party leader or committee chair suggest that such members are highly sought-after guests for gift travel, all else equal. The coefficient on committee chair is the largest in the model, with party leader in a close second. Being a member of a power committee is actually negatively, though weakly, associated with gift travel, while seniority and chairing a subcommittee appear to bear no relationship to travel frequency. We suspect that the power committees are not especially important to sponsors because they chiefly target committees whose jurisdictions cover their interests. Given the centralization of power in Congress to party leaders over the past few decades (Curry 2015; Sinclair 2012), it is possible that a sponsor desiring significant

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Gift Travel.

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Republican	5.5	4.6	1,346
Democrat	4.5	4.8	1,275
Rank and file	4.9	4.6	2,473
Leader	7.7	5.5	148
Non-chair	4.7	4.1	2,495
Chair	11.0	9.7	126
Non-power committee	5.1	4.8	1,979
Power committee	4.7	4.6	642
Low seniority	4.5	3.6	1,116
Mid seniority	4.8	4.2	751
High seniority	6.0	6.3	754
Low win pct.	4.3	4.2	941
Mid win pct.	5.2	4.5	861
High win pct.	5.8	5.4	801
Low extremity	4.8	5.0	873
Mid extremity	5.4	4.6	873
High extremity	4.9	4.5	872

Low, mid, and high levels are terciles.

alterations in appropriations or tax policy could conceivably achieve those goals by targeting party leaders.¹⁶ This finding adds interesting nuance because it suggests that in general sponsors target committee chairs in their area(s) of interest, but for bigger-ticket items they may rely on party leaders instead.

To aid interpretation, we can calculate the estimated increase in the number of trips that being a party leader or committee chair provides, holding the continuous covariates at their medians and dichotomous covariates at their modes.¹⁷ Using this method, committee chairs are predicted to take 4.1 more trips per congress than non-chairs; similarly, party leaders take 2.4 more trips than rank-and-file members. Since non-chairs are predicted to accept approximately 5 gifted trips each congress, the effect of being a committee chair is to almost double the number of trips they take. The negative effect of being on a power committee is comparatively minor: such members go on about 0.4 trips fewer per congress than members on other committees.

The other variables in the model also provide some insight into who travels and why. Electoral safety makes it slightly more likely for members to accept trip invitations. Members who win 80 percent of the vote take about 0.61 more trips per congress than members who win a slim 51 percent majority. The model predicts that unchallenged members take roughly 1.1 more trips per congress than their marginal peers. As was clear from the descriptive statistics, Democrats take fewer trips on average than Republicans, and black representatives travel more than white representatives.

Table 2. Who Travels? Members' Number of Gift Trips.

Variable	Model 1
Win percentage	0.00*** (0.00)
Chair	0.55*** (0.08)
Subcommittee chair	-0.06 (0.04)
Power committee	-0.10* (0.05)
Party leader	0.43*** (0.07)
Seniority	0.00 (0.01)
Extremity	-0.14 (0.14)
Democrat	-0.64*** (0.14)
Extremity × Democrat	0.60* (0.26)
Female	-0.04 (0.06)
Black	0.42*** (0.09)
Latino	-0.10 (0.10)
Legislative Effectiveness Score (LES)	0.05*** (0.01)
Intercept	1.13*** (0.15)
Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC)	12,960
No. of obs.	2,600
No. of members	802
No. of Congresses	6

Effects are maximum likelihood estimates of a negative binomial model with random effects for member and Congress. Standard errors are in parentheses.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Ideological extremity appears to work differently depending on the member's party, though not exactly as hypothesized. Democrats who are at the liberal end of their party are estimated to take 2.3 more trips per congress than their moderate counterparts. The effect is rivaled in magnitude by being a party leader and surpassed only by being a committee chair. Unexpectedly, Republicans of all ideological stripes appear to avail themselves of privately sponsored travel to the same degree.

Hypothesis 4 posits that sponsoring organizations with hired lobbyists should be more active—inviting more guests and hosting more events—than sponsors who do not invest in lobbying Congress. Groups retaining lobbyists host 17.0 guests on average per congress

whereas non-lobbying groups host a mere 3.4 guests ($p < .001$). Lobbying groups also host more events on average: 3.1 to 1.6 ($p < .001$), a full trip and a half more per congress on average. Even with random effects for sponsor and congress soaking up much more of the variance in hosting gift travel, results from negative binomial regressions of guests and events per congress show a smaller though still positive and significant effect on an indicator variable for hiring a lobbyist (see Table 8 in the supplemental materials).

Turning now to the relationship between privately sponsored travel and legislative effectiveness, we estimate that each trip is associated with an average increase of 0.02 in members' Legislative Effectiveness score (first column in Table 3). Although this may seem small, it is important to note that, while Legislative Effectiveness scores (LES) theoretically range from 1 to 10, 75 percent of its observed values are less than 1.3. That said, for trip-taking to, on average, exhibit a large relationship with lawmakers' effectiveness, members need to go on a considerable number of trips. The coefficient on trips suggests that 10 trips are associated with a 0.21 higher Legislative Effectiveness Score; and 20 trips with 0.42 higher a score, though few members take this many in a given congress. The average trip count, around 5, is associated with a bump in effectiveness of 0.105, or 8 percent of a standard deviation in LES. To put this in some perspective, the marginal effect of a gifted trip is roughly equal to an additional year of seniority in the House.

Because Republicans tend not to rely on separate issue networks of trusted policy professionals, whereas Democrats do, and because of their general philosophical objections to involving the federal government in policymaking at the national level, we expect Republican members' gift travel to be less associated with legislative productivity than that of Democrats (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016). Adding an interaction term in this equation would permit us to ask whether Republicans and Democrats differ in this respect. The interaction of party and trips reveals that Democrats' gift travel is positively related to legislative effectiveness while no relationship can be discerned for Republicans (see column 3 of Table 3; Figure 4 for a visualization). The estimated Legislative Effectiveness score for Democrats increases 0.028 for every trip they take, which is about 33 percent larger than the estimate for all members in the non-interactive model. These estimates lend support to the hypothesis that gift travel is positively related to lawmaking activity for members and their offices, though only for Democrats. Further analyses, available in the supplemental materials, show that this positive association among Democrats' holds only for domestic trips, not those overseas.

Table 3. The Effect of Gift Trips on Legislative Effectiveness Scores.

Variable	Model 2	Model 3
Trips	0.02*** (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Trips × Democrat		0.03** (0.01)
Win percentage	-0.00* (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Chair	2.61*** (0.11)	2.65*** (0.11)
Subcommittee chair	0.41*** (0.06)	0.41*** (0.06)
Power committee	-0.15* (0.06)	-0.15* (0.06)
Party leader	0.16 (0.10)	0.16 (0.10)
Seniority	0.03*** (0.01)	0.03*** (0.01)
Extremity	-0.91*** (0.08)	-0.94*** (0.08)
Democrat	0.00 (0.06)	-0.12 (0.07)
Female	-0.01 (0.07)	-0.01 (0.07)
Black	0.05 (0.10)	0.01 (0.10)
Latino	-0.18 (0.11)	-0.18 (0.11)
State Leg. × Professionalism	0.34* (0.14)	0.32* (0.14)
Intercept	1.11*** (0.13)	1.21*** (0.13)
Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC)	7,675	7,576
No. of obs.	2,600	2,600
No. of members	802	802
No. of Congresses	6	6

Effects are maximum likelihood estimates of a linear model with random effects for member and Congress. Standard errors are in parentheses.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Solo versus Group Travel

Whether the relationship between privately sponsored travel and legislative effectiveness differs for trips members take alone and trips they take with one another is an important theoretical consideration. This analysis helps distinguish two goals of gift travel: supplying members with high-quality policy information and building relationships among them. While both types of travel involve a heavy provision of information, multi-member trips may offer the opportunity for members to build comity.

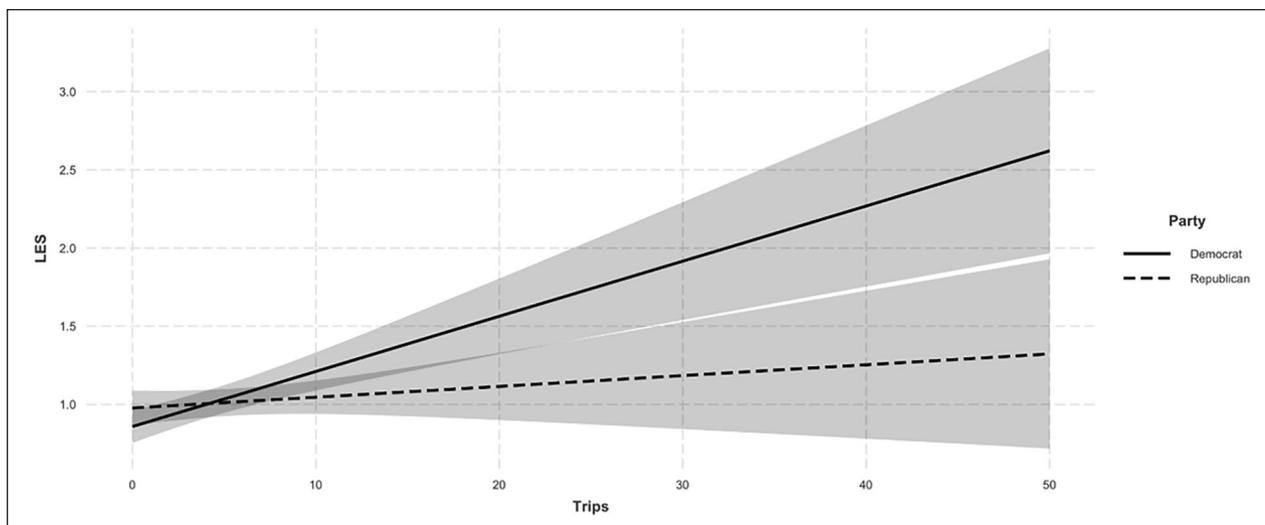


Figure 4. Differential effect of gift trips on Legislative Effectiveness Scores by party.

In Table 4, we re-estimate our model of LE scores with separate trip counts and find that single-member trips have a strong positive association with legislative effectiveness; multi-member trips have a small *negative* relationship with effectiveness. These findings suggest that solo trips may be more tailored to their legislative agendas or be more focused on policy information. The negative coefficient on multi-member trips may indicate a tendency for group travelers to be slightly less focused on passing bills, which we note is the main aspect being measured by LE scores. Relationships fostered on group trips may translate instead into other non-legislative activities such as providing financial support in an upcoming election or even to legislative activity outside the purview of LE scores, such as amendments or hitchhiker bills (Casas, Denny, and Wilkerson 2020). The pattern may also be due to the differences we have already seen between the parties. Given that gift travel and LE scores are positively related only for Democrats, it is no surprise that Democrats travel solo more often, taking on average 4.8 single-member trips to Republicans' 3.3 ($p < .001$). Republicans, furthermore, travel in teams more often, going on 1.2 multi-member trips on average over the study period, compared with 0.68 ($p < .001$) for Democrats.

Conclusion

Every year, members of Congress go on expense-paid trips with interest groups as their dotting hosts. Each trip is an opportunity for members, staffers, policy experts, industry representatives, and whomever else the travel sponsor chooses to invite to meet and discuss whatever the sponsor has put on the agenda. Knowing that accepting these trips can suggest venality, why do members take them? And knowing that the guests may be

circumspect, why do interest groups arrange them? Like any relationship built on exchange, even in exchange under the guise of a gift, both parties expect to gain something from engaging in it (Mears 2020). In interviews, travel sponsors often made the case that they had to program their events to be genuinely enjoyable and fair-minded, lest their guests get bored or feel advertised to. Members and their staffers, too, were clear that they chose to attend a trip if they saw it as valuable to their constituency and legislative agenda.

Our findings are consistent with the theory that interest groups use gift travel as a means of influencing the legislators who have the institutional capacity to affect policy-making and the motivation to become champions of the interest group's cause (Porter 1974). Gift travel is a powerful way to accomplish these goals because it offers a platform for providing high-quality information and memorable experiences. For some sponsors, gift travel is a unique tool for winning over new allies because it allows members to bear witness to serious problems; for others, it is a way to inform members of select expert opinion. Both our qualitative and quantitative data suggest that congressional guests are chosen selectively, based on their ideology, policy jurisdiction, and power within the chamber.

Some privately sponsored travel appears to provide its recipients with informational and relational benefits that result in greater effectiveness at lawmaking. Our analyses suggest that the informational benefits reign supreme, but relationships are critical in Congress and can be difficult to quantify. Our interviewees said that members, and particularly their staffers, can strike up friendships at expense-paid meetings that enable them to call on one another when they are working on a legislative initiative. They can also become allies of the organizations that first provided the

Table 4. Differential Effect of Single-Member and Multi-Member Trips on LES.

Variable	Model 4
Single-member trips	0.12 *** (0.01)
Multi-member trips	-0.01 * (0.01)
Win percentage	-0.00 (0.00)
Chair	2.56 *** (0.11)
Subcommittee chair	0.40 *** (0.06)
Power committee	-0.16 * (0.06)
Party leader	0.15 (0.10)
Seniority	0.02 *** (0.01)
Extremity	-0.90 *** (0.08)
Democrat	-0.07 (0.06)
Female	0.00 (0.07)
Black	-0.04 (0.10)
Latino	-0.19 (0.10)
State Leg. × Professionalism	0.30 * (0.14)
Intercept	1.28 *** (0.13)
Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC)	7,607
No. of obs.	2,600
No. of members	802
No. of Congresses	6

Effects are maximum likelihood estimates from a linear model with random effects for member and Congress. Standard errors are in parentheses.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

gift travel and then continue to receive updates on the problems that those organizations work to solve.

The existence of such legislative subsidy seems to be concentrated in one party and associated with one type of gift travel: domestic travel among Democratic members. Most domestic travel—and increasingly more of it—is taken by staffers, which suggests that the privately funded trips most associated with higher legislative effectiveness are those attended by Democratic staffers in particular.¹⁸ Former staffers emphasized how these trips were not junkets, recalling how chock-full they were with seminars, lectures, and presentations. Combined with the finding

that more liberal members tend to travel more, gift travel among Democrats appears to serve as a kind of progressive-policy boot camp. Furthermore, since ideological extremity is associated with *lower* Legislative Effectiveness scores, progressive Democratic members may use gift travel to boost their expertise in an effort to improve their legislative effectiveness.

That a positive relationship between legislative effectiveness and travel occurs only among Democratic members raises the question of what value Republicans, multi-member, and international gift travelers (typically members) derive from their travels. While we can only speculate as to what value it does provide, we can note that it would be unlikely that Republicans and their sponsors engaged in private travel without considering its costs and benefits. All parties we spoke with were keenly aware of the appearance of accepting gift travel or the expense of providing it. The lack of a legislative boost for Republicans may therefore be chosen rather than accidental. Their sponsors may be less interested in legislative gains than in relationship building, perhaps with a preference to maintain the status quo rather than to change it (Baumgartner et al. 2009). In this sense, gift travel could be highly effective for Republican members. It's just that their goal is not passing legislation.¹⁹

While the association between gift travel and legislative effectiveness is detectable, future work needs to better understand the causal pathway between them. Do members' LE scores increase as a result of gift travel because they pass laws on the policy issue they learned about? Or do they become better lawmakers in general as a result of building relationships with other travelers? More granular data connecting gift travel content to bill content would help explain how often private travel influences legislation.

Further work should also explore the sponsors' side of the gift travel exchange. Paying for a dozen members of Congress and policy experts to fly out and sit together in a conference room somewhere for 3 days is not an inexpensive affair. Travel sponsors often need to justify these expenditures to their funders, so they are thinking about the value they are deriving from these trips. When do new sponsors join in the fray and when do they drop out? Since most gift travel is funded by the same few organizations, a closer examination of their itineraries and guest lists may be a fruitful place to look to learn what most of these trips are like. A deeper understanding of the way that gift travel operates within the national legislature will contribute to our knowledge of how interest groups influence policymaking.

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Supplemental Material

All data and replication code necessary to reproduce our results, figures, and tables were uploaded to the Harvard Dataverse and are available at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/TM8V2K>. Supplemental materials for this article are available with the manuscript on the *Political Research Quarterly* (PRQ) website.

Notes

1. See the online supplemental materials at <http://prq.sagepub.com/> for details on our interview processes.
2. According to Rule XXV, clause 5 of the Rules of the House of Representatives, members must disclose reimbursement for such travel within 15 days of return. The Clerk of the House makes a report of these disclosures public on its website (i.e., <https://disclosures-clerk.house.gov/PublicDisclosure/GiftTravelFilings>). For more information on gift travel compared with other types of congressional travel, please see the supplemental materials.
3. The Senate regulates gift travel slightly differently, but still requires such disclosure and in fact is generally stricter in its pre-trip oversight. For more information, please see the supplemental materials.
4. See: Public Law 110-81, also known as the Honest Leadership and Open Government Act of 2007. This statute codified that members of the House must adhere to internal House rules about gifts in a variety of different contexts. Particularly relevant for this paper, it reduced the time-to-disclosure requirement from 30 days to 15 days and it specified the terms under which lobbyists may be involved in privately sponsored trips. A Congressional Research Service Report about these changes notes the following: "in addition to merely prohibiting a lobbyist from financing such 'officially connected' travel, as in the former Rules, lobbyists or foreign agents are now not allowed to plan, organize, request, or arrange for such a trip for which a Member or employee of the House may accept expenses, unless the event is being sponsored by an institution of higher education, or when such participation concerning a one-day event is *de minimis*. Furthermore, a lobbyist or foreign agent is prohibited from accompanying

the Member or staffer on 'any segment' of a trip, except one sponsored by an institution of higher education" (Maskell 2007). The key things to note about these changes is that they strengthened (somewhat) disclosure requirements and they signaled to members that they could be on the hook for trips sponsored by private groups, especially if lobbyists were found to be involved after the fact.

5. While LE scores are widely used in the literature, it is important to note that they are not a flawless metric. They focus mainly on lawmaking and therefore do not account for other parts of legislators' jobs, capture behind-the-scenes activities, or capture dilatory activity. The scores also struggle to capture activity such as the utilization of hitchhiker bills (Casas, Denny, and Wilkerson 2020). Despite these shortcomings, we still believe they serve as a valuable measure of effective lawmaking.
6. These indicators specifically include how many bills each legislator introduces, how many of those bills receive committee action, how many pass out of committee and receive action on the floor, how many pass from the House floor, and finally how many become law. Each of these five indicators are constructed separately for bills that are commemorative, substantive, and both substantive and significant (Volden and Wiseman 2014, 19). Volden and Wiseman go on to suggest a useful way for thinking about LE scores is to see them as "the relative share of all legislative activities that can be attributed to each lawmaker" in a given two-year Congress (Volden and Wiseman 2014, 25).
7. Rosenson (2009) also found that ideological extremity increases gift travel. We propose a party-specific hypothesis based on research that characterizes the partisan polarization of this era as asymmetric in nature.
8. Rosenson (2009) tested member retirement, but such data are not readily available and claims about retirement are not a direct concern of this project.
9. The sponsors we spoke with, for whom group travel was the norm, said that they would invite around 20 to 30 guests, and typically aimed for groups of no more than 10. Single-member trips are presumably more targeted.
10. Some trips are site visits explicitly designed to facilitate relationships among members, making them atypical in many ways. Comity-building trips remind us that even though we are able to make broad statements and place trips into useful boxes, we must retain the understanding that diversity exists within these categories and we are discussing thousands of trips over an extended period of time.
11. We decided on the name conferences or conference-like events because there seems to be limited but significant variation within this category, as noted in the main body of the paper. Trips in this category aim to educate attendees about an issue or area in a traditional educational format of some kind akin to a conference or an aspect of a conference.
12. If they do, the lobbyists' involvement in the trip is required to be *de minimis*.
13. The Clerk makes the last six years of gift-travel reports available to public online. We accessed the data for the 112th-115th Congresses in April and May 2017 at <https://disclosures-clerk.house.gov/PublicDisclosure/GiftTravelFilings>. Since the reports for the 110th and 111th

Congresses were not available in tabular format because the six-year window had closed, we wrote a web-scraping program to download them through the website's search function. All raw data are available from the authors upon request.

14. Leadership positions are coded as identified in the *Almanac of American Politics*.
15. Following Fagan, McGee, and Thomas (2021), we categorized travel sponsors into one of four broad categories based on mission statements and affiliations posted on their websites: constituency, issue, industry, and other. Constituency groups focused on representing citizens, usually of a certain demographic; issue groups championed a cause or group of causes; industry groups were affiliated with a firm, industry, or trade association; and the "other" category collected the rest. These were mostly universities and media outlets that invited members for interviews, speeches, or seminars. Although constituency groups advocate on issues, the reason they are not issue-based groups is that their goal is to act on behalf of a demographic group and not on one single issue. For instance, the American Israel Education Foundation, exemplary of an issue-based group, is a Jewish organization that focuses on a specific issue: U.S.-Israel relations. The mission of the American Jewish Committee, a constituency group, is to "safeguard the welfare and security of Jews," which is a broader and oriented toward the constituency as a whole. Industry-focused groups act to further business interests (an issue-focused group whose issue is their profit), but they are not lobbying groups.
16. This finding is also consistent with Rosenson (2009).
17. These estimates are robust to a variety of theoretically relevant covariate values, such as holding them at the means for leaders and the rank and file.
18. Models separating out the effects of staffer and member trips bear this out: staffers' trips have a strong positive association with higher LES; members' trips have no apparent association (see supplemental materials for full regression estimates).
19. Grossmann and Hopkins (2016) found that when Democrats are in control of the federal government, they tend to have higher rates of legislative productivity as well as introduce and pass more bills. In general, Democrats are just more active in attempts to legislate when they are in charge. This pattern contributes to their LES and mirrors the asymmetric behavior uncovered here. See Chapter 6 of their book for further explication.

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