The Changing Roles of House Party Leadership Organizations:
The House Republican Policy Committee

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2 March 2014

Forthcoming, Congress and the Presidency

This research was supported by a Congressional Research Award from the Dirksen Congressional Center. I am grateful to the Dirksen Center and its director, Frank Mackaman, as well as to the other archivists and librarians who have helped make my research possible, including Carolyn Hanneman (Carl Albert Center, University of Oklahoma) and Leslie Conrad (Shuster Papers, Saint Francis University). I also thank Andrew Clarke and Carl Marchioli for valuable research assistance. A portion of this research was prepared for presentation at the 2012 American Political Science Association meetings.
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Abstract

Over 100 members in each of the two House party caucuses participate in the parties’ formal organizations—the extended party leadership. What purposes do these institutional components of the parties serve, and how and why have they changed over the last three decades? This paper begins to answer these questions through a case study of the Republican Policy Committee based on primary documents as well as quantitative analysis. I show that the Republican leadership has used the committee for participation, coordination, and communication functions within the Conference, but that the roles of the committee have changed substantially in response to strengthening party government conditions, GOP majority status, heightened competition for control of the House, and the individual goals of key Republican leaders. Among other changes, the committee became more important for coordinating policy positions and strategy during the 1980s, but the strong, centralized majority leadership in the 1990s diminished this important coordination function and left the committee with an emphasis on partisan communication.
Beneath the highly visible top leadership in the House of Representatives is a network of organizations that comprise the extended party leadership systems. On the Republican side, the system includes the Republican Policy Committee, the Republican whip organization, the Republican Steering Committee, the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC), and the Republican Conference as an organization. The institutionalized House Democratic party similarly consists of a Democratic whip system, the Democratic Steering and Policy Committee (DSPC), and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC), as well as the Democratic Caucus organization. In each caucus, these organizations together involve over 100 members, and they have greatly expanded in scope since the 1970s. The extensive set of House party organizations with large memberships in both the majority and the minority parties raises many questions—most importantly, what roles do the extended leadership structures play in the House, and how and why have the roles of these organizations changed as the congressional parties have strengthened over the last three decades?

Despite extensive attention to party leadership and partisan behavior in the House, existing literature has given very little attention to these key questions about party leadership organizations. The standard works on the gradually growing strength of post-reform party leadership provide a glimpse of the Democratic caucus’ whip system, Steering and Policy Committee, and task forces in the 1980s, portraying the leadership structures as inclusive, open, and providing critical tools for communication in a diverse majority (Rohde 1991; Sinclair 1995; see also Canon 1989 and Loomis 1984). More recent work on the whip systems has begun to outline their roles in loyalty and information flow (Burden and Frisby 2004; Evans et al. 2003; Evans and Grandy 2009; Meinke 2008), while archive-based analysis has provided some sense for the impact of party caucus meetings on party support (Forgette 2004) and for the processes of the party steering committees (Frisch and Kelly 2006). Another small body of work has presented empirical evidence on the selection of members into the extended leadership (Grofman, Koetzle, and McCann 2002; Heberlig and Larson 2012). Overall, what we know about party leadership organizations is fragmented, emphasizes the post-reform Democratic majority, and exists mostly as supporting material in studies focused on other issues. Yet these institutional components of the
congressional party are important to understand for at least two reasons: they shed light on the crucial interactions between the party’s top leaders and the rank-and-file that affect the party’s pursuit of policy and electoral goals, and they are windows into the changing nature of the party and the effects of that change.

This paper seeks to elaborate on the evolving roles of the parties’ leadership organizations by drawing together multiple types of evidence on a particularly underexamined component of the extended leadership, the House Republican Policy Committee. I find that the committee has served at times as a valuable, participatory venue for coordination on strategy and policy, but that a series of factors help to explain movement away from this organizational role and toward a more peripheral function as part of the conference’s communication efforts and linkages to the broader party network. This shift, I argue, is explained in part by party government dynamics in the House. Under more intense demands to challenge the majority on policy and strategy, the GOP leadership for a time used the committee to coordinate a fairly diverse conference in a competitive environment. Then, as the party became more homogenous and seized majority control, it entered a period featuring heightened competition for party control of the chamber and a developing external party network. The leadership, with its centralized control over process and policy, moved the committee away from coordination and deployed it primarily for communication purposes. However, I also show that this party-government explanation tells only part of the story: looking closely at evidence of the committee’s trajectory shows that the goals of key Policy Committee chairs and other leaders help to explain the timing and nature of important changes.

In what follows, I elaborate on this theoretical framework and consider the Republican Policy Committee as an example of the operation of and changes in the House party leadership systems. Relying on primary documents from the archived papers of Republican leaders and other sources, I briefly review the committee’s origins and then examine its role in the minority during a time of changing House politics (1970s-1980s) and in the post-1994 Republican majority. I then provide a quantitative analysis of the Republican Policy Committee’s membership across both time periods to explore patterns in the party’s organizational choices more systematically. A concluding section offers some more general observations
about House extended party leadership structures based on the Republican Policy Committee case and considers some consequences of changes in the committee’s role.

Theoretical Framework and Methods

Goals and Choices over Leadership Structures

Since the 1970s, party leadership organizations like the Republican Policy Committee have changed in their scope—that is, the size and representativeness of their membership—in their activity, and in their autonomy, or the degree to which they operate with some independence of the top elected leadership. In thinking about these changes, we can begin with the basic question of who holds the authority to make these determinations. Because these are intraparty institutions, the party caucus is the starting point, and caucus rules have come to define broadly the parameters of most House party leadership organizations. However, crucial decisions about how the organizations operate—for instance, when to involve the policy committee in a major party policy decision—are under the authority of top party leadership, which enjoys flexibility in determining the role of these institutions. Process evidence also suggests that lower-level leaders, such as the chair of the Republican Policy Committee, retain considerable ability to determine the priorities and activity of individual party committees, at least under some circumstances.

The institutions of the House parties, then, are defined in part by all party members and in part by the top leaders that exert extensive control over them. As a consequence, the extended leadership is more readily adaptable to the top leadership’s objectives than are other party-relevant House institutions, such as the Rules Committee and the speakership. Understanding when and how these organizations change, then, requires consideration of individual member goals, of elected party leaders’ goals, and of the collective goals in the party. For rank-and-file members of the party, involvement in the extended leadership advances several important individual goals including reelection, policy, and power. While the balance of reasons varies from member to member, the individual goals of the rank-and-file together yield a collective goal of access to party power bases and institutional resources that the extended leadership framework facilitates.¹

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From the perspective of the party, the individual goals of members translate into several broader collective goals. As Smith and Gamm have argued, parties in Congress pursue both electoral and policy goals—they seek to build and maintain electoral majorities and to pursue party policy (Smith 2007; Smith and Gamm 2009). The parties build and maintain electoral majorities by increasing the value of the party’s “brand name,” and they work to overcome collective action problems that threaten to derail efforts to seek policies party members prefer. Extended leadership structures serve both goals directly, and they provide an indirect service toward both goals as well by allowing the leadership to connect members’ interest in access to support for electoral and policy objectives. Finally, note that the top elected leaders in the two House parties are not simply neutral vehicles for these collective party goals—recent work on congressional leadership (Green 2007; Green 2010; Strahan 2007) shows that party leaders bring individualized goals that drive key choices within the context of existing party power and goals.

Interpretive Framework

Several related theoretical perspectives help to link the individual and collective goals that have an influence on party leadership organizations. The familiar arguments of conditional party government theory (CPG) predict that the power of congressional party leaders will vary according to members’ delegation of authority to assert strong policy-process leadership; members should become increasingly willing to delegate that authority as the party becomes more cohesive and as the two parties become more polarized (Rohde 1991; Aldrich and Rohde 2000; Aldrich and Rohde 2001). Although CPG dynamics are weaker for minority parties since the minority’s influence over legislative outcomes is so limited (Smith 2007), the minority party’s members retain a strong interest in the party’s policy choices and its public positioning for electoral gain. As a result, there is reason to expect CPG conditions to shape the minority caucus’ organizational decisions and its use of party mechanisms. Extensions and refinements of the basic CPG concept have brought in other important factors, including the role of collective electoral goals (Smith and Gamm 2009) and the relative size of the caucus (e.g., Lebo, McGlynn, and Koger 2007). For the purposes of this analysis, Forgette’s findings about House caucuses are also especially relevant: he
finds that *coordination* becomes a critical component of leadership activity under conditions of stronger party government (Forgets 2004).

Beyond conditional party government dynamics, additional factors contribute to the interplay of goals and change in leadership structures. The development of party institutions can be seen as path dependent in the sense that the imperatives of stronger, more centralized party leadership may conflict with the ongoing demand for rank-and-file access to party power. As a result, the party may sustain participatory partisan organizations that were created under weaker party government conditions while changing or limiting the function of those party structures—an example of institutional change by “superimposing new arrangements on top of preexisting structures intended to serve different purposes” (Schickler 2001, 252).

Finally, the individual goals of key party leaders should add to the explanation for how and when leadership organizations change. Strahan (2007; 2011) and Green (2007; 2010) each demonstrate that leadership choices, while linked to the party’s collective policy and electoral interests, must also be understood in light of leaders’ own motivations and choices, particularly where there is some uncertainty among party members about the specifics of the party’s direction.

Together, these three related perspectives help to frame the interaction of rank-and-file, leader, and collective party goals as they affect the party’s organization decisions. Conditional party government points toward variation in how the extended leadership is controlled, with party organizations providing a mechanism for consensus building and information flow to the leadership when party government conditions are weaker; top leaders should prioritize efficient coordination and a cohesive set of participants under stronger conditions. Majority party status should strengthen these trends. In a related way, following Gamm and Smith’s perspective, the collective goals pursued by the organizations may change according to the electoral context, with heightened competition for control of the House motivating the leadership to use organizations influence public perception and electoral strength, even at the expense of policy-oriented work. Finally, the individual goals of leaders should affect party organizations in several ways: elected leaders with strongly held personal party objectives may further
homogenize the membership and narrow the role of the organizations, while the relatively malleable nature of extended leadership structures means that the personal preferences of lower-level party leaders may be important to the timing and direction of changes in the organizations’ roles.

Methods

To explore these expectations, I have examined House party leadership structures using multiple data sources and analytical approaches. For the Republican Policy Committee, I use archived evidence from the papers of former party leaders in the House, including Robert Michel (R-IL), Dick Armey (R-TX), Mickey Edwards (R-OK), and Bud Shuster (R-PA). The primary-source evidence from the archives includes internal memoranda and notes, member-to-member letters, minutes of meetings, and leadership vote counts and analyses, among other types of evidence. Drawing on these documents, which I supplement with secondary sources and archived internet documents, I have traced the committee’s development chronologically, emphasizing key decisions about the committee and evidence of its activity and placing these findings in a theoretical context. This first, qualitative mode of analysis is accompanied by quantitative hypothesis testing on the composition of the committee from the 1970s through the 2000s, using data collected from archived primary documents and secondary sources.

House Republican Policy Committee: Origins

The modern Republican Policy Committee has its immediate roots in the late 1940s, when Minority Leader Joseph Martin (R-MA) responded to demands for greater policy participation by creating the Republican Policy Committee after the dramatic losses of the 1948 election. Martin had little interest in making regular use of the committee, and the body was of little significance during the subsequent decade (Jones 1964, 21-27; see also Bone 1958, 168-169). Then, in 1958, after another election that hit congressional Republicans hard, junior members of the Conference again demanded a more meaningful role in the development of party policy and public positioning. The conference created an open and “revitalized” Policy Committee, led by John Byrnes (R-WI), in 1959 (Jones 1970, 153; Jones 1964, 38). As Table 1 illustrates, the structure of the Policy Committee drew together the top leadership, regionally
elected representatives, junior members representing recent classes of Republican representatives, and at-large appointees.

The position of the committee shifted somewhat between the last Eisenhower Congress and the first Kennedy Congress, as the committee’s late-1950s role in coordinating a congressional minority with White House leadership was superseded by a more clear-cut responsibility for formally articulating the out-party’s views (Jones 1964, 83). Jones presents evidence to suggest a meaningful substantive role for the committee in the Kennedy era, showing that its official policy positions (28 in the 87th Congress) were associated with much higher levels of voting agreement than on roll calls overall (1964, 88)—at a minimum, the Policy Committee was successfully singling out important issues on which the party could coalesce and advertise a clear position. Through the late 1960s, the Policy Committee continued to focus on party position taking (Jones 1970, 159-60), and it was joined in the mid-1960s by the Republican Research Committee, a spinoff of the Policy Committee that focused on long-range minority party policy (Jones 1970, 38, 158-159).

**The House Republican Policy Committee Under Democratic Majorities**

As the Republican party continued in its long period in the congressional minority, the Republican Policy Committee persisted as a useful organization for the particular tasks of minority party leadership. Into the 1970s, the organization of the Policy Committee remained similar to its early 1960s structure (see Table 1), with leadership, regional, class, and appointive representation. In the late 1970s, under Policy Committee chairs Del Clawson (R-CA) and Bud Shuster (R-PA), the committee worked to articulate minority responses to the Democratic-driven House agenda. Weekly meetings of the committee focused on response to the current House legislative agenda, and the committee produced policy positions based on member deliberation informed by representatives from standing committees responsible for the week’s agenda items (*National Journal* 1977). In the second session of the 96th Congress (1980) the Policy Committee met 32 times, issued 25 official policy statements, and identified 54 key roll-call votes. Staff memos and agendas show that the committee’s focus was substantive, with detailed
consideration of near-term legislative issues on the agenda for most meetings. The focus of the committee’s work was overwhelmingly on articulating opposition to specific Democratic legislative proposals and, on occasion, providing arguments for alternative Republican policies. The committee’s 24 policy statements in 1977\(^5\) include a statement in opposition to Democratic revisions to the Hatch Act (HR 10), a call for support of the motion to recommit on the Tax Reduction and Simplification Act of 1977 (HR 3477), and arguments for specific changes needed for Republican support of the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1977 (HR 6161).\(^6\) The legislative focus of the committee changed temporarily during the 1980 election season, when the committee issued numerous statements attacking the opposition generally or outlining an alternative agenda for electoral purposes. In September 1980, for instance, the committee endorsed a series of “Republican Pledges” for the election and prepared boilerplate press releases on a Carter administration defense policy issue for Republican House challengers to use in their local races.\(^7\)

Members of the Committee, it appears, made a serious effort to represent the views of the Republican membership on questions before the committee. Bud Shuster, as a regular member of the Policy Committee in the 95th Congress, polled the members in his region on specific issues by distributing reply cards. Members indicated their views on pending legislation and on whether the Policy Committee should stake out an official Republican position on those bills.\(^8\) Policy statements sometimes drew fine distinctions based on divisions within the Conference. A June 1980 statement, for example, explained the committee’s strong endorsement of the Motor Carrier Act of 1980 (HR 6418) but indicated that “the Policy Committee is aware of disagreement among Members with reference to Section 8, and takes no position on amendments to be offered to that section.”\(^9\)

William Connelly’s unpublished interview-based research on the Republican Policy Committee provides a view of how the committee functioned a few years later, in the mid-1980s (Connelly 1988).\(^10\) As it had during the Carter administration, the committee focused on short-term responses rather than on long-term policy planning. In doing so, it served to “facilitate communications generally among House Republicans” over immediate agenda items (Connelly 1988, 15). In providing short-term policy information to members and providing a sense of the rank-and-file positions to the leadership, the
committee served to *ratify* rather than independently formulate House Republican policy, in the view of Dick Cheney (R-WY), a chair of the Policy Committee during the mid-1980s (Connelly 1988, 16). Connelly’s respondents described the Republican Policy Committee, *inter alia*, as a “safety valve,” a “lightning rod,” and a “screaming platform” (1988, 12-15). Between the committee’s communication of consensus policy views and its role in transmitting views from the membership to the leadership, the Republican Policy Committee in the 1970s and 1980s offered the sort of coordination goods that a relatively cohesive congressional party needs.

*The Committee Enters a Partisan Era*

The archival evidence shows that the Republican Policy Committee became more focused in its activity during the late 1980s and early 1990s, particularly under Policy Committee chair Mickey Edwards (R-OK). In the 100th Congress, a Conference document described the Policy Committee’s role to include holding “policy meetings on a need basis to air views on issues of concern to the Conference,” issuing “policy statements on issues and disseminat[ing] the statements to the Members and the press,” and considering “resolutions or other matters brought before the Republican Conference and referred to the Policy Committee and report[ing] findings on such subjects to the Leadership and the Conference.”

The committee’s formal role at this time, then, had both an internal Conference component and an external component focused on publicity and outreach. Records suggest both activities were important in the late 1980s and early 1990s. From the perspective of rank-and-file members, involvement in this component of the extended leadership clearly held value in the Reagan-era House. Letters to the leadership and internal notes show that members actively sought out appointment to the committee.

The committee met regularly in the 1980s and early 1990s in two forms: typically, the committee met weekly in a forum open to Conference members to “hear the views of any member of the Conference who wishes to address items on the agenda,” and then the membership of the committee would meet in executive sessions “to reach the decisions based on input from members of the Conference.” Mickey Edwards formalized this pattern in the 101st Congress, and the committee continued to meet fairly regularly in this fashion into the 1990s. Data from 1990, for instance, shows that the committee met 21
times in open forum and 14 times in executive session in a six-month period. The open-forum sessions were attended by GOP members beyond the Policy Committee’s formal membership, and topics discussed ranged widely, with the leadership communicating on strategy, members discussing forthcoming agenda items and procedure, and attendees considering positions on upcoming issues. An early 1989 committee meeting, for example, included information on Newt Gingrich’s (R-GA) strategy against Speaker Jim Wright as well as discussion of a Republican task force on the savings and loan crisis, among other topics. About 50 Republican members attended the meeting.

Edwards described the committee’s substantive activity as “decide,” “develop,” and “disseminate.” In other words, the Republican Policy Committee would consider and mediate between policy options on selected issues, develop “a consensus Republican position” on some key matters, and “attempt to influence the public debate outside the institution” on those issues. In choosing issues, the focus was on subjects “actually moving through the legislative process,” and not on very long-term matters, which traditionally were the venue of the Republican Research Committee. Following this framework, the Republican Policy Committee’s central activity was deliberation on and production of coherent near-term policy positions (National Journal 1989). Some of the committee’s activity took a broad view of the issue agenda for a congressional session, in contrast to the reactive model of the late 1970s and early 1980s. For instance, the committee held forums in 1990 on the agenda for that year, and it helped to produce a lengthy document on leadership issue priorities for the 101st and 102nd Congresses. In another example, the committee in 1994 held several open forum meetings to consider issue positions for the midterm elections.

During the late-minority period, the committee experienced some overlap with the Republican Research Committee, which typically had focused on long-term policy. The Research Committee in the 1980s contributed to the party’s coordination and communication efforts through its task-force efforts at policy development, and it joined the Policy Committee in serving party and member needs that the minority party had fewer institutional resources to fulfill. In 1988, for example, as Congress and the president moved toward an election-year omnibus drug bill, the Republican Research Committee helped
to formulate a minority draft bill in a task force. The Republican proposal, which emphasized stronger legal sanctions on the drug trade and drug users, shaped a series of Republican amendments added to the majority-preferred bill before House passage, and the Research Committee supported the floor debate with a position paper addressing arguments about the constitutionality of the GOP criminal law provisions (Lawrence 1988a, 1988b, 1988c). In the following Congress, Duncan Hunter’s (R-CA) expansion of the Research Committee’s scope led to conflict with Edwards (at the Policy Committee) over the appropriate role for the two related party committees, a rivalry that seemed to be baked into the design of the two similar organizations. The Research Committee would continue, in the last few majority-Democratic Congresses, to engage on immediate legislative issues, involving itself in the 1989 debate over the Nicaraguan contras and taking an active role in opposing Clinton policies on health care and gays in the military, to name a few examples.

The Minority Republican Policy Committee in Action: Campaign Finance Reform

Campaign finance reform—a perennial issue in the late 1980s and early 1990s—provides a detailed illustration of the Republican Policy Committee playing a significant role in the minority period. In the late 1980s, House Republicans, a bipartisan House task force, both Senate caucuses, and the Bush White House offered a variety of proposals on campaign finance reform, and in the House, the issue drew out divisions not only between the congressional parties but also within them. As is typically the case with the politics of campaign money, the controversy focused not only on principles of competitive elections and free speech but also on the electoral interests of the congressional parties (e.g., Moscardelli and Haspel 2007). In early 1989, in an attempt to kick-start the issue after reform failed in the Senate during the 100th Congress, Minority Leader Bob Michel (R-IL) initiated a debate within the House Republican Conference. The issue had the effect of dividing more senior Republicans and the activist junior members of the Conference who, as Congressional Quarterly put it, “sought to overthrow a system they consider[ed] the bulwark of the House’s Democratic majority” (Alston 1989).

To work for a party position on the complex and divisive issue, House Republicans employed the extended party leadership system to hear the views of members and arrive at a Conference position on
existing proposals. Starting in July 1989, the Republican Policy Committee held a series of meetings to
discuss the controversial components of campaign reform that were then on the table. First, the GOP co-
chair of the bipartisan campaign finance task force (Guy Vander Jagt, R-MI) presented the Policy
Committee with the existing task force proposals, including those on which the bipartisan leadership had
been unable to reach agreement. 23 Over the next several weeks, the Policy Committee met at least seven
times to deliberate over the campaign finance issue. A large number of House Republicans—more than
half of the Conference—attended these open Policy Committee meetings, with members both supporting
elements of reform and expressing intense opposition. Policy Committee members heard from some
discontented rank-and-file members that “reform sucks” and “the party wants to destroy itself.” 24 As a
result of these meetings, the Policy Committee marked up a list of proposals—including restrictions on
PAC activity, new tax incentives for individual donations, and relaxed limits on party contributions—and
rejected others, including spending limits on House races and a proposal to limit use of franked mail. 25
The Policy Committee then presented the significantly changed package of reforms to the full
Conference, and the Conference supported a very similar version. 26

The end result of the committee’s activity was a proposal that could command broader support in
the Conference relative to the initial GOP proposals. The Republican Policy Committee provided a
legitimate context in which the minority leadership could work out a broad compromise. The procedure
was not a bottom-up process of independent policy development; rather, the top elected leadership began
with a framework and used the Policy Committee as a location for testing its viability, gathering views,
channelling intraparty conflict, and revising the proposal accordingly to arrive at a more unified position.
Within the more intensely partisan political environment of the 1980s, the committee allowed the
leadership to coordinate with the rank and file and satisfy the conflicting demands within the Conference.

Coordination: Strategies and Positions

The committee’s more routine activity in the late minority period also involved coordination on
strategy as well as policy positions on immediate issues before the House. Although other elements of the
party’s organization, particularly the whip system, undoubtedly served the minority’s strategic-
coordination needs as well, evidence from the 1980s and 1990s shows that the Policy Committee’s regular forums provided an opportunity for coordination on political strategy as well as for communication of leadership policy positions. On a basic level, the Policy Committee meetings allowed the leadership to communicate directly with the rank-and-file in an open setting. At one meeting in late 1990, for instance, Minority Leader Michel addressed budget negotiations, Bill Archer (R-TX, ranking member on Ways and Means) discussed supporting President Bush’s veto of the Textile, Apparel, and Footwear Trade Act, and Tom Delay (R-TX) explained his resolution “calling for the House to postpone adjournment until the House . . . agreed upon a budget for FY91.” On other occasions, the Policy Committee met to address legislative strategy on issues such as budgets, health care, and family and medical leave.27 The committee also took on an overt coordination role in the minority’s use of the (newly public) discharge petition procedure in the 103rd Congress (Jacoby 1993). In addition, the minority Policy Committee facilitated broader party strategy by linking House Republicans with important outside party actors. Under Henry Hyde’s (R-IL) chairmanship, in particular, the regular forum meetings involved frequent meetings with a range of figures including Bob Gates, Elliot Abrams, and Richard Perle.28

The committee’s role in strategic coordination complemented its more formal activity on substantive policy positions. Detailed records of the committee’s official positions are available for a number of Republican-minority Congresses, including the 101st and 102nd Congress under Mickey Edwards’ chairmanship.29 These records reveal the types of issues on which the Policy Committee took public positions and allow some very basic analysis of how the committee’s positions related to floor voting results.

[Table 2 about here]

The Republican Policy Committee issued 26 resolutions or statements30 in 1989, the first session of the 101st Congress. Seventeen House floor votes were clearly associated with one of these committee positions. As Table 2 shows, the committee positions are selective in that they do not address all high-profile, controversial issues from the session. Some of the 1989 policy positions highlight the
committee’s efforts to support the new Bush administration’s legislative agenda, including its statement on defense policy and resolutions in support of capital gains tax cuts and the White House’s drug control strategy. Other resolutions and statements reflect either the minority party’s work to define a coherent alternative position or the minority’s short term reactions to the majority’s maneuvers or difficulties—e.g., the resolution supporting one standing committee’s bill in conflict with another. Voting patterns on the 17 floor votes demonstrate that the committee’s formal positions tended to address issues that were, not surprisingly, party unity votes by the traditional definition (more than half of one party opposing more than half of the other party). But beyond that general observation, note that much of the committee’s activity centered on issues that split off a substantial minority of either the Democratic caucus or the Republican conference. On a number of issues, Republicans were nearly unified but Democrats were split, as on the GOP minimum wage alternative, the repeal of catastrophic health care, the capital gains tax compromise, and the Nicaraguan elections bill. In these instances, the Policy Committee’s actions appear to support the party’s collective efforts to communicate a public message while muddling the majority’s message. In many other cases, the GOP had a sizable internal minority opposed to the party position, and the Policy Committee’s activity (as in the campaign finance example discussed above) likely played a role in coordinating Republican members around a cohesive position on a potentially difficult issue. Overall, the committee’s formal actions at this time suggest an effort to serve multiple collective interests of the conference as a whole, as defined by top leaders, and not those of one particular leader or faction—a conclusion that is reinforced by the voting agreement of the minority leader, minority whip, and Policy Committee chair on all 17 votes. The Policy Committee was acting on issues that sometimes divided the caucus but on which the top leadership team was entirely unified. In party government terms, the committee’s work allowed the leadership to pursue coherent coordination around a Republican position, meeting demands for stronger leadership action when the caucus was fragmented.

The examples in Table 2 show that the committee identified issues of considerable existing or potential Republican Conference agreement to signal through official resolutions and statements; no more than 1/3 of House Republicans voted against the Conference majority on these Policy Committee items.
Republican agreement on these issues is higher than on other 1989 party votes. 83.3% of Republicans voted together, on average, on the 1989 votes related to Policy Committee positions, while only 78.9% voted together on average across all party unity votes \((p=.10)\). The committee’s signaling did not elevate GOP agreement beyond typical levels for high-profile votes: 82.5% of Republicans voted together on CQ Key Votes on average in 1989 \((p=.42)\). The set of issues the committee chose, however, is quite different from the set of key votes CQ identified in 1989. This evidence suggests a committee effort to define a clear, short-term Republican set of positions on which at least a large majority of the Conference could agree.

The Effect of White House Party Control

As the Policy Committee stepped up its efforts at short-term coordination in the late 1980s, it found itself frequently working to produce a Republican consensus behind policy led by the White House—policy positions that, by the time of the George H.W. Bush administration, could be divisive in the House Republican conference (Connelly and Pitney 1994, 32-33). Clinton’s 1992 victory shifted the center of gravity in GOP policy making back to Congress for the first time in 12 years. The expectation might be that the White House loss would leave Republican leadership organizations with a greater substantive role in setting minority policy directions. But, with the party out of power entirely, the House GOP conference became significantly more unified in the 103rd Congress, making the Policy Committee’s consensus-seeking role less necessary, and the Republican leadership chose to narrow rather than expand the committee’s activity in practice. First, House Republicans reorganized their staffing\(^32\) to strengthen the capacity for substantive legislative work in the Minority Leader’s office, doing so at the direct expense of the Policy Committee, which lost a well-paid staff position that the conference had previously assigned to the committee (Glasser 1993). The committee’s focus, in turn, shifted toward public communication of the minority party’s views.

By the very end of the Republican minority era, the committee’s official statements had taken on a more partisan tone, appearing to be more for public political consumption than committee products from the late 1980s (or even a decade earlier) had been. The 1994 Republican Policy Committee issued 23
official policy statements. Most responded to the White House and congressional majority’s agenda items in a short-term fashion, but the content reflects a movement toward external messaging rather than internal coordination. The titles of the policy statements, which included “Rigged Rule for the EPA Bill” and “Child Pornography: Dirty Pictures and Dirty Politics in the House of Representatives,” illustrate the shift.33

The overtly political tone from the Policy Committee was not an entirely new phenomenon since the committee had sometimes made an effort to communicate the minority’s political messages to a broader audience. Even in the early 1980s, under Dick Cheney’s chairmanship, the Policy Committee was a center for talks about integrating leadership plans with Conservative Opportunity Society (COS) ideas and making conservative ideas “more politically salable” (Cohen 1984). The Cheney committee also used its research activity to analyze data on PAC contribution patterns in the 1984 election to highlight the disproportionate corporate PAC contributions to Democratic incumbents and to cast the Democratic majority as “fraudulent” (Cohen 1985).34 Under Edwards, the committee staff assembled an extensive plan to communicate Republican positions via the committee,35 apparently because of both Policy Committee member expectations and Edwards’ own goals within the leadership.36 But by the start of the Clinton Administration, the committee’s core functions appeared to shift away from internal coordination and toward public partisanship.

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In its overall structure and official roles, then, the Republican Policy Committee of the late minority period showed considerable continuity with the committee of earlier decades. But, in response to several intersecting factors, the Policy Committee had begun to change in observable ways. As the Reagan agenda began to spin down and party government conditions strengthened, the agitation for more active and ideological leadership increased within Conference groups such as the COS. Correspondingly, the Republican Policy Committee in the 1980s took a visible role in coordinating both policy and procedural postures for the minority. The evidence is not consistent with any expectation that the committee would itself create a cohesive Conference, but it is consistent with the view that the
committee’s role responded to demands and, together with other parts of the House Republican party, facilitated a gradually more aggressive minority party strategy.

It is necessary to take into account the goals of individual leaders as well to understand fully the minority-era Republican Policy Committee. The committee’s activity levels in its early decades, according to Connelly’s findings (1988), shifted according to the goals of the chair. The records of the leadership further make clear that individual leaders linked the committee’s work to their own goals. Bud Shuster (R-PA), committee chair in the 96th Congress, increased the committee’s visibility and activity and drew on this record in his bid for the minority whip post in the 97th Congress. Memos from Mickey Edwards’ transition to Republican Policy Committee chair in the 101st Congress show that the new chair had a very clear notion of the committee’s role and position in the party and set out a plan to pursue it. Importantly, his own goals as a leader clearly reinforced his vision of an active committee that promoted and publicized cohesive positions within and beyond the Conference. The Policy Committee was consistent in its formal roles and structure through decades of Republican minority status, but it was adaptable in its activity and use as both the partisan context and the goals of the leadership changed.

The Republican Policy Committee After 1994

“We bridge the gap between the wonks and the pols.”
--Paul Wilkinson, Executive Director, Republican Policy Committee (National Journal 2003)

With the 1994 midterm election, Republicans took a majority of seats in the House of Representatives for the first time in four decades, and the new Speaker, Newt Gingrich, would prove to be an aggressive and partisan leader. Gingrich’s own goals of advancing conservative policy drove a centralized and confrontational approach to governing in the new GOP majority (Strahan 2007), an approach that was made feasible by the strong party government conditions in place in the 1990s (Aldrich and Rohde 2000). In the 104th and 105th Congresses, the Speaker used a range of tools to exert significant control over policy and process—the “amplification of a preexisting trend” toward centralized leadership (Sinclair 2006, 127).
The centralizing changes under Gingrich’s leadership affected the GOP’s long-standing internal organization in fairly dramatic ways. A new leadership-dominated Steering Committee replaced the decentralized Committee on Committees as the conference’s committee-selection body (Frisch and Kelly 2006, 53-55; Strahan 2007, 148-152). The three-decade-old Republican Research Committee, which had offered members opportunities to participate in task-force based deliberation on minority policy directions, was simply disbanded (Burger 1994a; Camia 1994). Along the same lines, Speaker Gingrich implemented a fundamental shift in the institutional position of legislative service organizations (Hammond 1998), apparently with the intent of neutering the Republican Study Committee (RSC), an increasingly active center of conservative activity in the conference (Alberta 2013). These internal changes accompanied the more familiar changes to the standing committee system and the majority leadership role in the policy process.

Although the Gingrich-led Republican majority extensively overhauled other components of its extended leadership system, the Republican Policy Committee experienced little structural change at the start of the majority era. But the committee’s significance would diminish and its role would narrow with the new institutional resources of majority status and the approach of the new top leadership and Policy Committee chairs. As the Conference grew with the large 1994 freshman class, the Policy Committee also expanded, with additional appointed, regional, and freshman/sophomore class representatives, but the overall proportion of the Conference on the committee remained around 20 percent (see Table 1 and Figure 1). The well-established format for the committee’s work—regular Conference-wide forums followed by executive sessions to produce official statements—continued into the majority era, but evidence from leadership files and, later, from the committee’s website suggests that the forums became infrequent and the Republican majority leadership focused the Policy Committee on executive session meetings and staff work.39

[Figure 1 about here]

The Policy Committee’s rules publication in the 1990s continued to describe the committee as “the House majority’s principal forum for discussion of specific legislative initiatives, for the enunciation
of official Republican priorities on issues, and for the resolution of inter-jurisdictional policy disputes within [the] Conference.” And, on a few occasions in the 104th and 105th Congresses, the committee did play a role in legislative processes, under the close control of the top leadership. For instance, in the 104th Congress, Republican leaders pursued a strategy of attaching policy “riders” to the House’s annual appropriation bills to implement controversial policy choices efficiently. Under a plan by Majority Leader Richard Armey (R-TX), the Policy Committee reviewed and approved the controversial policy amendments (Evans and Oleszek 1997, 123; Burger 1995). The leadership also used the Policy Committee in the 105th Congress to debate and develop strategy for controversial Republican legislation to reform ethics rules and processes. The Ethics Committee was under a bipartisan moratorium for most of 1997 as a task force worked on a package of reforms and then as the parties conflicted over the new rules. Republicans, including some members of the leadership team, were divided internally over the reforms, and the Policy Committee was a venue for presentations from task force members and GOP deliberations ahead of the leadership’s decision to move the reform package forward for a floor vote (Eilperin 1997a; Eilperin 1997b).

But these functions were not especially common in the 1990s, and other text in the Policy Committee’s rules better captures the committee’s role at the time: “Many issues that call for a clear statement of majority policy are not properly addressed (or cannot be timely addressed) by legislation. The Policy Committee . . . is uniquely well suited to issue such statements after careful deliberation and opportunity for all Members to be heard.” Under chair Christopher Cox (R-CA), the committee met frequently and issued piquant statements on issues, typically offering only general, broad positions for political purposes, such as a 1999 policy statement on “The Clinton-Gephardt Abandonment of Social Security” and a 1997 statement on “How The ABA Became a Left-Wing Lobbying Group.”

The majority Policy Committee’s meetings—and meetings in a series of issue-focused subcommittees—primarily served as an opportunity for members to pick up information on the party’s priority issues, usually from outside experts. The committee, for instance, met in some form about 40 times per session in 2001, 2002, and 2003, often to hear informational briefings from key Bush
Administration officials. In addition to hosting meetings with administration officials and other conservative figures, Cox set up a Congressional Policy Advisory Board, which included a number of leading conservatives outside the House, in the late 1990s and early 2000s. With this focus, the Cox-era Policy Committee helped to integrate the House Republican Conference with the Republican party network in and out of government.

The Republican Policy Committee, then, remained active in the first several GOP-majority Congresses, but its now-twofold practical purpose shifted farther away from the meaningful coordination role it had served under strengthening party competition in the late 1980s. For the leadership, the committee served as a partisan mouthpiece, building on a trend that had begun at the end of the Republican minority period, especially after Republicans lost the White House in 1992. For the sizable membership of the committee, the committee offered a close link to high-profile congressional leaders, conservative thinkers, and Republican administration officials, and it provided a venue for gaining background information on conservative positions. The records of committee activity from the early 2000s show that it was providing an informational benefit to members with strong policy or advancement goals even if it was no longer emphasizing informational coordination for the party’s short-term policy purposes. For leaders and rank-and-file participants, the committee also represented a significant center for party staff work, part of the rapidly expanding leadership staff system (Glassman 2012), and the Policy Committee received its own dedicated staff lines for the first time in the early 2000s. In short, the Policy Committee survived the centralization of very strong party government at the start of the Gingrich speakership, but as it lost its remaining policy and strategic roles, it was repurposed to serve the interests of a strong leadership. Those interests included public communication as well as providing a venue that sometimes rewarded loyal members with information and connections.

As the party’s top leadership made less strategic use of the Policy Committee in the majority, the committee’s perennial chair Christopher Cox (1995-2005) exerted a substantial influence over the committee’s direction. Even in the minority, Policy Committee chairs had adapted the organization’s focus to their particular goals—with its reduced profile in the post-1994 conference, the committee was
perhaps even more responsive to the chair’s priorities. Cox’s personal policy goals centered on foreign 
affairs, particularly the economic, military, and human rights policies of China and Russia; he gained a 
good deal of attention in the late 1990s as the chair of a House select committee that produced a 
controversial report on military and trade issues with China (Doherty 1999; McCutcheon 1999). Cox 
devoted a considerable amount of the Policy Committee’s attention to controversies over China, and 
Russia to a lesser extent, during his lengthy chairmanship. The Policy Committee was particularly 
involved in the debate over most-favored-nation trading status for China in the 105th Congress 
(Schlesinger 1997), and it produced an extensive 1997 report on China accompanied by eleven pieces of 
legislation.45 The 27 major Policy Committee policy statements issued in the 105th Congress include 
positions on China’s environmental record, Bill Clinton’s visit to Tiananmen Square, Chinese tobacco, 
missile defense, and human rights and trade in China.46 This narrow focus fueled controversy among 
House Republicans. Cox’s positions on Chinese trade were not a consensus view within the party 
(Crabtree 2000), and as Cox began to openly pursue career advancement outside of the House, the contest 
to succeed him featured criticism of his “‘one-man-shop’ approach” to the committee’s role. A staffer in 
the Republican leadership observed that, “beyond a report on China and Russia, no one is quite sure what 
the Republican Policy Committee did with their time, their extensive budget and their energy . . . Any 
new chairman will have to be more aggressive and accountable to the conference” (Fonder 2001).

Debate over the committee’s role continued with Cox’s departure from the House in 2005 (Roll 
Call 2006). After several short-term leadership changes, the committee was led from 2006-2010 by 
Thaddeus McCotter (R-MI), who sought to focus the committee on broad philosophical principles rather 
than on immediate policy impact (Heil 2007). McCotter conflicted with Republican leaders47—
particularly whip Eric Cantor (R-VA)—but he was able to shift the committee in his preferred direction.48 
Yet McCotter’s own goals and his growing distance from the rest of the leadership appear to have kept 
the Policy Committee from any more central role in opposition policy, political coordination, or even 
communicating Republican positions. Near the end of his tenure as chair, McCotter even urged the
conference to eliminate the Policy Committee entirely, a move that top leaders, including Cantor and Kevin McCarthy (R-CA), opposed (Kucinich 2010).

With the GOP again in the majority after the 2010 elections, the Policy Committee's new chair Tom Price (R-GA) brought new visibility to the chair’s position if not to the committee as an active organization. A conservative Tea Party Caucus member and former chair of the RSC, Price took an active role in GOP messaging, particularly on budget and health care issues, and he was frequently quoted in the press as a conference leadership voice (e.g., Brady 2012). Like many of his predecessors, Price seemed to use the Policy Committee position as a stepping stone for his leadership goals (Newhauser 2012), and he took an active campaigning role in the 2012 elections (Haberkorn 2012), publicly describing his most important job in the leadership as an electoral one: maintaining a GOP House and flipping the Senate to Republican control. When Price unsuccessfully pursued a step up the leadership ladder, losing a bid for conference chair in the 113th Congress, his successor at the Policy Committee, James Lankford (R-OK), continued the pattern of using the committee as a platform to offer a leadership voice. Both Price and Lankford, in contrast to McCotter, generally seemed to be team players with the rest of the GOP leadership. In the post-2010 majority, the Committee produced little public evidence of coordination activity—a 2011 meeting with Alan Greenspan on the debt ceiling issue is a rare exception (Palmer 2011)—and largely conformed to the ambitions of its chair, sometimes serving collective electoral goals in the process. Although the conference of the 112th and 113th Congresses was larger and featured some consequential internal divisions, Republican leaders chose other venues for internal coordination on policy and strategy, using the whip system and conference meetings for the kinds of functions that the Policy Committee had sometimes filled in the 1980s and early 1990s (Draper 2012).

Overall, after its long-awaited return to the majority in 1995, the Republican Conference pursued a centralized leadership approach that was not particularly compatible with an active Policy Committee that routinely had a hand in the party’s short-term policy positions and strategy as the Edwards-led committee did a few years before. The shift to majority control, strengthening party conditions (including very narrow GOP majorities), and a powerful risk-taking Speaker all left the Policy Committee adrift as a
party entity—not enough of a threat to centralized leadership (like the Committee on Committees or Republican Study Committee) to revamp or eliminate, but retaining enough value to individual members and the committee chair to keep in place. Individual members benefitted, at least under Cox’s chairmanship, from the formal effort to link the party’s networks with the House GOP. The individuals elected to chair the committee could and did shape the committee to their individual objectives, including both their ambitions within the party’s leadership hierarchy and their personal policy concerns. But without the substantive expectations that the minority party committee had, the committee by the late 2000s was serving as a mouthpiece for the chair with little evidence of active member participation.

**Republican Policy Committee Membership**

The Policy Committee’s membership always has been a mix of top Conference leaders, regionally selected representatives, and leadership appointees. The committee’s long-standing structure (see Table 1) indicated a concern with maintaining representation for leadership, regions, and more junior members. Throughout the its history, the Policy Committee has opened its doors to participation in some activities by those who were *not* formal members, as the routine two-stage process of the 1980s committee illustrated. In this sense, the committee’s coordination and participation benefits have not been restricted solely to its formal membership. However, formal involvement in the extended leadership, including the Policy Committee, has value for rank-and-file members. Jones noted the perceived benefits of membership in his early study based on members’ comments (Jones 1964, ch. 4), and later analyses of party leadership organizations have also stressed their value for members’ own power, policy, and even electoral goals (e.g., Little and Patterson 1993). Archival evidence of members actively seeking appointment to the committee further bolsters the view that formal membership has offered perceived advantages for members.

Increasing numbers of appointive members as well as *ex officio* positions, particularly in the early 1990s, suggest that the leadership has sought to exert more control over the committee’s membership, either to shape its activity or to use the posts as reward, or both. Thus, evidence on who formally participates in the Policy Committee sheds light on strategic leadership decisions over appointments and
organizational structure. The choices conference leaders make about committee structure and membership may reflect an interest in inclusiveness above all, implying that members with different voting records, constituency circumstances, and seniority would be similarly likely to be represented. Alternatively, party leaders may choose to overrepresent loyal members as a reward or to advance more effective signaling of a party message. The top leadership also may wish to reward those with more seniority or members in an electorally secure position that will allow greater attention to party activity.

The narrative section above strongly suggests that the leadership would have the incentive to constitute a relatively inclusive committee where policy and strategic coordination was an important focus. When party government conditions and majority status moved the committee away from this coordination role and toward partisan communication, the leadership should have placed a priority on loyalty to the conference. These expectations can be tested more systematically with quantitative data on the composition of the Policy Committee over time.

The logit analyses in Tables 3 and 4 provide a look at the Congress-by-Congress representativeness of the Policy Committee between 1975 and 2008, examining whether Republicans with certain characteristics were more likely to be members of the Committee. The unit of analysis is the individual member, and the dependent variable indicates whether each representative was a Policy Committee member in the Congress of record. The independent variables test whether higher levels of party loyalty, distance from the conference’s ideological center, seniority, or electoral security significantly predict membership on the committee.50 Because the southern and western regions were taking on increasing importance as the party’s base during this time period (Black and Black 2002; Frisch and Kelly 2006, ch. 2), additional dummy variables in the models test whether members from the south or west were more likely to be members of the committee.

[Tables 3 and 4 about here]

In the late-1970s, when the committee was relatively small but dominated by the leadership and leader appointees, more loyal and more senior members were more likely to be on the committee compared with other Conference members. In the 97th Congress, as the committee expanded somewhat to
include more ranking committee members and freshmen and sophomore class members, committee members’ loyalty was not significantly different, on average, from other GOP members; after the 97th, Policy Committee member seniority also was not significantly different from that of the rank-and-file. From the 98th Congress through the 102nd, the Policy Committee was, as a whole, roughly representative of the Conference on party loyalty, tenure, and electoral security, and regional bias continued to be absent. As the Republicans began to use the committee for more partisan messaging and, later in the majority, for building connections with the administration and outside groups, the committee returned to overrepresentation of more party-loyal members. Policy Committee members were more loyal than other members in the 103rd-106th and 108th Congresses. More senior members were significantly overrepresented in the 103rd and 104th, as well as in the 106th, but this general skew toward a more loyal and more senior membership under the Cox-era committee fades later in the time period, with the committee favoring southerners and ideologically typical GOP members by 2008.51

In sum, the Republican Policy Committee’s structure has encouraged a fairly representative organization, but the committee has at times overrepresented loyalists and more senior members. These patterns of representation are broadly consistent with the trends in the committee’s activity. The Policy Committee of the late 1980s and early 1990s, which looked like the Conference on these key dimensions, was used to coordinate and signal positions on the minority’s short term positions. As that role fell away and the committee focused on communicating partisan messages to (and receiving them from) outside audiences, the committee’s overall composition leaned toward more loyalty and seniority, but that trend ended in the more recent committee with its leadership turnover and ill-defined role in the Conference.

Discussion

Roles of Leadership Organizations

The Republican Policy Committee provides a lesson on the roles of the relatively little-understood party leadership organizations in the House. The committee’s activity in the minority as well as in the majority illustrates at least three of the important ways that the top party leadership employs these partisan structures. First, the Republican Policy Committee provided a venue for participation by
The participatory function was particularly important for the minority-era committee when Republicans had fewer institutional opportunities. The Republican Policy Committee’s coordination function was important during a portion of the period studied here. The Republican leadership used the committee to coordinate on policy positions and strategy, particularly during the later minority period. As the campaign finance example illustrates, this function sometimes took the form of more extended discussion that provided substantive information to shape policy, but more commonly the committee’s coordination involved clarifying strategy for rank-and-file members and identifying policy positions central to the party’s collective goals. As Forgette has demonstrated in his study of House caucus activity (2004), this coordination activity is central for congressional parties and it can have a significant impact on cohesion. Finally, the Republican leadership has used the Policy Committee for more general communications functions. Some of the communications role involved links between the House GOP and other party actors in the White House and outside of government, which became a central role during the George W. Bush administration. Much of the committee’s communication function, though, took the form of conveying party positions to a public audience, which the committee emphasized as early as the 1970s.52

Change in Leadership Organizations

A close look at the Republican Policy Committee has also highlighted changes that House parties have made to their extended leadership structures since the 1970s reform era. Changes that follow from strengthening party government are clearly evident in the committee’s modern history. As polarization and cohesion increase, in Aldrich and Rohde’s description, party members “give their legislative party institutions and party leadership stronger powers and greater resources” and they expect “that the party will use those powers and resources more often” (2000, 34). We know that these party government consequences can occur in stages, as in the case of the 1970s-1980s Democratic caucus, which strengthened some of the power of its leadership and its institutions for party coordination well before further polarization and cohesion led to demands for more assertive centralized leadership (Rohde 1991). Although CPG dynamics are weaker for a minority party, the Republican conference followed a
somewhat similar path in its changing use of the Policy Committee. Under weaker party competition in
the 1970s, the minority Republican Policy Committee’s actions were largely reactive, but the Republican
leadership used the committee more assertively in the 1980s for intraparty coordination and to articulate
policy differences. The committee was coordinating positions and strategy within the conference on
issues that generated some internal divisions but unified the top leadership. This shift coincides with a
surge in party government conditions in the second half of the 1980s (Aldrich, Berger, and Rohde 2002)
and with a strengthened majority Democratic leadership at the same time.

However, the effects of party government on the Policy Committee were punctuated by the rise of
a Republican majority. The majority of the 104th Congress was very cohesive and its control of the
chamber was narrowly held. Under these conditions, the leadership diminished the Policy Committee’s
coordination role as it centralized control in the top leadership and strengthened other elements of the
leadership structure, particularly the whip system. The need for internal coordination did not disappear
after 1994, but the majority was willing to delegate to the leadership the authority needed to undertake
that coordination in venues that were more suited to central control than the Policy Committee. In doing
so, the GOP followed a path that the Democratic majority had taken with its parallel organization, the
Democratic Steering and Policy Committee, in the mid- to late-1980s (Meinke 2010).

At the same time, the very strong competition for majority control of Congress in the 1990s and
after appears to have driven the leadership to shift the Republican Policy Committee toward the
majority’s collective electoral goals. Republican leaders shaped a loyalist Policy Committee under a
centralized majority and used it to communicate electorally useful party messages and to connect House
Republicans with the increasingly important expanded party network outside the House (see Koger,
Masket, and Noel 2010).

Conditional party government provides a backdrop for understanding the overall trajectory of the
committee, but the nature of the 1980s and 1990s changes in the Republican Policy Committee also
illustrate both the path-dependent nature of extended party organizations and the role of individual
leaders’ goals. On an organizational chart, the Policy Committee of the 1990s Republican majority looked
quite a lot like the committee of three decades before. The majority preserved and even enlarged the
committee, maintaining the participatory opportunities and elected chair position that held value for
individual members’ goals. Rather than dismantling the committee, the leadership allowed it to continue
in form with changing functions that better suited the majority’s centralized approach and focus on
collective electoral goals.53

Along with these path-dependent constraints, the goals of individual leaders also contribute a
necessary element to the story. Recent research on the top leadership (e.g., Green 2011) emphasizes the
effects of leader goals; the history of the Republican Policy Committee brings into focus the effects of
lower-level leaders in shaping party structures and choices. For instance, in the 1980s, Mickey Edwards’
leadership ambitions helped to shape the committee’s role in coordination; by the 1990s, under the new
majority leadership, Christopher Cox was able to turn the committee’s attention to his preferred policy
issues.

Consequences of Change in the Policy Committee

This research has focused primarily on understanding the trajectory of the Policy Committee as a
window into leadership organizations and how they have been affected by major changes in the House
since the 1970s. The foregoing discussion, though, raises an additional question: how do the changing
roles of the Policy Committee (and other party organizations) affect the party caucuses and the House?
The answers to this question are necessarily speculative, but a few observations can be made. The change
and decline in the Policy Committee does limit the House majority’s internal institutional capacity that
could be used for building consensus around strategy and policy directions at a time when the party is
finding such consensus-building nearly impossible. The changes in the committee have in some ways
acquiesced to growing party pressures outside the chamber—the 1990s-2000s committee has tried to link
the party with the strengthening party networks outside the House—but those pressures in turn seem to
present a major obstacle to restoring the committee to a meaningful coordination role. The small but
influential contingent of the House GOP that is deeply skeptical of party leadership is unlikely to value
participation in a diverse, representative party organization, and these members in turn do not build long-
term linkages with the party that inclusive participation helped to forge in earlier years in both Republican and Democratic organizations. In this environment, the Republican conference has relied on the more exclusive whip organization, on one hand, and on broad-based full conference meetings without the kind of intermediate-level participation that the Policy Committee had sometimes offered. During the years of a very unified GOP majority, this organizational framework was effective, particularly since the loyalist whip organization provided a suitable venue for coordination. This system of internal party organization may not be especially well suited to the current Republican majority, which operates under strong polarization conditions but with difficult internal divisions. But if these party leadership challenges in the Republican majority reflect the strength of party forces outside the chamber opposed to the mainstream conference leadership, it is not clear that a broader internal organization focused on participation and coordination, even if it could be restored, would provide adequate counterpressure.
Notes

1 This parallels Schickler’s view (2001, 5) of members’ collective interest in access to institutional power bases.
2 Qualitative and quantitative analysis of archived primary documents was relatively rare in congressional scholarship but has become commonplace in recent years, particularly in studies of congressional leaders and political parties. For examples see Frisch and Kelly (2006), Green (2006), Harris (2006), Kolodny (1998), Peters (1997), Strahan (2007, ch. 4), and, on the general approach, Frisch et al. (2012).
3 Data sets on organization membership were constructed using archived membership rosters and lists from CQ Almanac, CQ’s Politics in America, Congressional Yellow Book, and Congressional Staff Directory.
5 Republican Policy Committee Policy Statements, various dates, 95th Congress, Shuster Papers, Congressional Papers, United States, Box 35A, Folder 1.
6 Republican Policy Committee Statement #10, Revisiting the Hatch Act, 10 May 1977; Republican Policy Committee Statement #4, The Tax Reduction and Simplification Act of 1977, 1 March 1977; Republican Policy Committee Statement #12, Clean Air Act Amendments of 1977, 23 May 1977, Shuster Papers, Congressional Papers, United States, Box 35A, Folder 1.
8 Reply card examples from 95th Congress in Shuster Papers, Congressional Papers, United States, Box 35A, Folder 1.
9 Republican Policy Committee Endorses Regulatory Reform of Trucking Industry, 10 June 1980, Statement No. II-10, Shuster Papers, Congressional Papers, United States, Box 36A, Folder 18.
10 Connelly was an APSA Congressional Fellow with Dick Cheney during Cheney’s leadership of the Policy Committee in the 99th Congress (1985-1987), and he conducted extensive interviews with members and staff during that time period (Connelly 1988).
11 A Profile: The Republican Policy Committee, Robert Michel Papers, Dirksen Congressional Center, Leadership Series, Box 11, Folder: Republican Conference Leadership Responsibilities. The Committee’s official role is described similarly in the 103rd Congress in: A Blueprint for Leadership, Office of the Republican Leader, Michel Papers, Leadership Series, Box 16, Folder: 103rd A Blueprint for Leadership.
12 Letters and lists in Michel Papers, Leadership Series, Box 4, Folder: 97th Congress Republican Policy Committee and Box 6, Folder: 98th Republican Policy Committee.
13 Mickey Edwards, invitation to Republican Policy Committee meetings, 3 Feb 1989, Richard K. Armey Papers, Carl Albert Center, University of Oklahoma, Legislative Series, Box 58, Folder 14.
17 Mickey Edwards to Gordon Jones and Vicki Martyak, 21 March 1989, Edwards Papers, Legislative Series, Box 81, Folder 19.
18 Edwards to Duncan Hunter, 2 March 1989, Edwards Papers, Legislative Series, Box 44, Folder 1.
20 Edwards wrote to Hunter: “I regret that we seem to be having a problem in drawing the line between the activities of the Research Committee, which are properly those of long-range development of Republican alternatives, and those of the Policy Committee, which is charged with dealing with those issues currently being considered by the Congress.” Edwards to Hunter, 2 March 1989, Edwards Collection, Legislative Series, Box 44, Folder 1.

22 This discussion of House campaign finance reform efforts draws generally on Congress and the Nation, 1989-1992 (1993) for background.

23 Republican Policy Committee records, 20 July 1989, Edwards Papers, Legislative Series, Box 81, Folder 22; Michel to Mickey Edwards, 19 July 1989, Michel Papers, Staff Series, Van Der Meid Files, Box 6: Campaign Reform: Policy Committee Consideration.

24 Edwards to Michel, 7 August 1989, Edwards Papers, Legislative Series, Box 80, Folder 14; Handwritten notes on 20 July 1989 Policy Committee meeting, Michel Papers, Staff Series, Van Der Meid Files, Box 6: Campaign Reform: Policy Committee Consideration.

25 Dave to Mickey [Edwards], 7 August 1989, Edwards Papers, Legislative Series, Box 80, Folder 14; also Alston 1990.

26 File on Republican Conference Consideration, Michel Papers, Staff Series, Van Der Meid Files, Box 6. See also Alston 1989.


30 There does not appear to be an important distinction between the committee’s resolutions and statements in this period, although the resolution wording is usually used for specific pending legislation.

31 Bob Michel, Newt Gingrich, and Mickey Edwards voted with the party majority on each of the issues on which they cast a vote. Gingrich, it should be noted, was elected to fill the vacant whip post at the end of March 1989; he was not yet an elected leader for the first two roll-calls in the table.

32 Quarterly Republican Conference report, 20 April 1993, Arney Papers, Legislative Series, Box 57, Folder 21.

33 Republican Policy Committee publications, Michel Papers, Legislative Series, Box 79, Folder: 103rd Republican Policy Committee.

34 Connelly (1988, 13) also discusses the political nature of Policy Committee products, noting that “Policy Committee staff research, rather than provide a pale reflection of minority staff work on the standing committees, has generally taken the form of more overtly political, partisan propaganda for purposes of press releases and speeches.”


37 Shuster supporters to Michel, 1 Oct 1980, Michel Papers, Leadership Series, Box 2, Folder: 96th Leadership Contest. 96th Congress—Second Session Key Votes, undated, Shuster Papers, Congressional Papers, United States, Box 36A, Folder 18.


44 Unlike most other House Republican and Democratic partisan organizations, the Republican Policy Committee was directly dependent on the Conference and/or the Minority Leader/Speaker for its staff and funding from its inception through the 1990s (Jones 1964, 44; Glasser 1993).


47 See Hooper (2011), Kucinich (2010), and Whittington (2007) on conflicts between McCotter and other leaders.


49 Interview with Tom Price, C-SPAN Newsmakers, C-SPAN, June 15, 2012.

50 Party loyalty is measured as the average of the member’s attendance-adjusted support for party unity votes across the two sessions of the Congress. Ideological distance represents the absolute value of the member’s distance from the median Republican’s first-dimension DW-Nominate score in the Congress of record. Seniority is operationalized as the log of terms served. Electoral security is the member’s share of the two-party vote in the last House election.

51 A separate analysis of only the appointed Republican Policy Committee members during the same time frame revealed very few significant differences between the leader appointees in each Congress and other rank-and-file House Republicans. One exception to the general representativeness of the at-large appointees is in the 104th Congress, where the 12 leader-appointed Policy Committee members were both more loyal and more distant from the conference median than the rank-and-file. Republican Policy Committee appointee data is missing for the 94th-95th and 99th-100th Congresses; the described analysis excludes those Congresses.

52 The roles of party leadership organizations are not limited to participation, coordination, and communication. Other leadership structures—particularly the whip organizations but also the steering committees—are used by the leadership for persuasion and accountability, although the Republican Policy Committee does not directly illustrate these functions.

53 The Policy Committee has occasionally been targeted for elimination, most recently when Thaddeus McCotter publicized the question in 2010. Certainly the committee’s budget line, while not particularly large compared with other leadership organizations, makes it a potentially attractive target for spending cuts. Still, the fact that the committee has continued into the spending-focused 112th and 113th Congresses suggests that GOP members find the additional elected leadership post, and perhaps the remaining opportunities for rank-and-file involvement, to be potentially valuable. If Republican leaders do not return the Policy Committee to a role of more significance in the near future, though, it would not be surprising to see it suffer the Research Committee’s earlier fate.
References


Roll Call. 2006. “Policy Committee Candidates: In Their Own Words,” January 25.


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Table 1. House Republican Policy Committee Structure, 87th, 96th, and 104th Congresses

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<td>Majority Whip</td>
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<td>Conference Chair</td>
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<td>NRCC Chair</td>
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<td>Conf. Vice Chair</td>
<td>Conf. Vice Chair</td>
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<tr>
<td>RRC Chair</td>
<td>RRC Chair</td>
<td>RRC Chair</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>Ex Officio: Standing Committees</strong></td>
<td>5 Rules Committee Members</td>
<td>Rules Ranking Member</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Ways &amp; Means Chair</td>
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<td>Appropriations Chair</td>
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<td></td>
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<td><strong>Regional Representatives</strong></td>
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<td>10 Members</td>
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<td><strong>Class Representatives</strong></td>
<td>5 Members*</td>
<td>3 Members</td>
<td>7 Members</td>
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<td><strong>At Large Appointees</strong></td>
<td>3 Members</td>
<td>7 Members</td>
<td>12 Members</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>41</td>
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</table>

*In the 87th Congress, one member represented each class from the 83rd through 87th Congresses; these class representatives were nonvoting members of the Policy Committee.

Sources: Jones 1964, 52-54; Robert H. Michel Papers, Leadership Series, Box 4, 97th Congress Republican Policy Committee Folder; Richard K. Armey Papers, Legislative Series, Box 56, Folder 23.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
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<th>Total Votes</th>
<th>GOP Votes</th>
<th>Dem. Votes</th>
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<tr>
<td>2/24/89</td>
<td>Calling for “measured consideration” of HR 5, Foreign Ownership Disclosure Act</td>
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<td>3/14/89</td>
<td>Supporting Earned Income Tax Credit</td>
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<td>3/16/89</td>
<td>Statement on Minimum Wage Principles (Roll-call: Goodling amendment to HR 2, 3/23/89)</td>
<td>203-221</td>
<td>159-17</td>
<td>44-204</td>
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<tr>
<td>4/25/89</td>
<td>Calling on Federal Reserve to avoid high interest rates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5/2/89</td>
<td>Supporting capital gains tax cuts</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5/2/89</td>
<td>Supporting repeal of Section 89 of Internal Revenue Code—nondiscrimination provisions of 1986 Tax Reform Act (Roll-call: Previous question on rule for FY1989 supplemental, preventing Gekas amendment, 5/24/89)</td>
<td>218-205</td>
<td>0-173</td>
<td>218-32</td>
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<tr>
<td>5/2/89</td>
<td>Supporting spending cuts in FY1991 budget resolution (Roll-call: Passage, H Con Res 106, 5/4/89)</td>
<td>266-160</td>
<td>107-64</td>
<td>159-96</td>
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<tr>
<td>6/6/89</td>
<td>Condemning Tiananmen Square violence</td>
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<tr>
<td>6/6/89</td>
<td>Opposing Gonzalez amendment in committee to HR 1278 requiring banks to fund Affordable Housing Program (Roll-call: Bartlett amendment, 6/15/89)</td>
<td>209-212</td>
<td>166-6</td>
<td>43-206</td>
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<tr>
<td>6/6/89</td>
<td>Opposing Frank housing provisions of HR 1278</td>
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<tr>
<td>6/15/89</td>
<td>Opposing Family Medical Leave Act (Roll-call: Passage, 5/10/90)</td>
<td>238-190</td>
<td>39-136</td>
<td>199-54</td>
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<td>7/12/89</td>
<td>Supporting Agriculture committee version of Tongass Timber Reform Act and oppose Interior committee version (Roll-call: De La Garza substitute, 7/13/89)</td>
<td>146-271</td>
<td>112-55</td>
<td>34-216</td>
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<td>7/24/89</td>
<td>Statement on defense policy (Roll-calls on HR 2461: Synar Stealth bomber amendment, Spratt Mobile MX amendment, Frank Midgetman amendment, 7/26/89)</td>
<td>259-161</td>
<td>49-124</td>
<td>210-37</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>224-198</td>
<td>21-151</td>
<td>203-47</td>
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<td>168-255</td>
<td>60-113</td>
<td>108-42</td>
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<td>8/4/89</td>
<td>Statement on Campaign Reform Package from Republican Policy Committee</td>
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<td>9/21/89</td>
<td>Supporting Repeal of Catastrophic Health Care Coverage (Roll call: Donnelly amendment to HR 3299, 10/4/89)</td>
<td>362-67</td>
<td>164-10</td>
<td>198-57</td>
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<tr>
<td>9/21/89</td>
<td>Supporting EITC for child care (Roll call: Edwards amendment to HR 3299, 10/5/89)</td>
<td>141-286</td>
<td>134-41</td>
<td>7-245</td>
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<tr>
<td>9/21/89</td>
<td>Supporting Ways and Means Compromise on capital gains (Roll-call: Rostenkowski amendment to HR 3299 deleting tax cut, 9/28/89)</td>
<td>190-240</td>
<td>1-176</td>
<td>189-64</td>
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<tr>
<td>9/21/89</td>
<td>Supporting president’s national drug control strategy</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/21/89</td>
<td>Supporting Drug War Bond Act</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>10/3/89</td>
<td>Supporting passage of budget reconciliation (Roll-call: Passage, HR 3299, 10/5/89)</td>
<td>334-91</td>
<td>146-28</td>
<td>188-63</td>
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<tr>
<td>10/3/89</td>
<td>Supporting HR 3385 on elections in Nicaragua (Roll-call: Passage, 10/4/89)</td>
<td>265-156</td>
<td>165-11</td>
<td>100-145</td>
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<tr>
<td>10/17/89</td>
<td>Supporting drug control strategy</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Roll-call</td>
<td>Yea</td>
<td>Nay</td>
</tr>
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<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>10/17/89</td>
<td>Supporting HR 3402, The Polish and Hungarian Democracy Initiative of 1989 (Roll-call: Passage, HR 3402, 10/19/89)</td>
<td>349-49</td>
<td>128-36</td>
<td>221-13</td>
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<tr>
<td>10/25/89</td>
<td>Opposing rescinding budget sequestration until passage of reconciliation and appropriations bills.</td>
<td>--</td>
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Source: Information on Republican Policy Committee resolutions and statements from Mickey Edwards Collection, Legislative Series, Box 81, Folders 25 and 26.
Table 3. Republican Policy Committee Full Membership, 94\textsuperscript{th} through 103\textsuperscript{rd} Congresses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th>96\textsuperscript{th}</th>
<th>97\textsuperscript{th}</th>
<th>98\textsuperscript{th}</th>
<th>99\textsuperscript{th}</th>
<th>100\textsuperscript{th}</th>
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<th>102\textsuperscript{nd}</th>
<th>103\textsuperscript{rd}</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Party Unity</td>
<td>0.036*</td>
<td>0.025</td>
<td>0.041**</td>
<td>0.011</td>
<td>-0.002</td>
<td>0.010</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>-0.020</td>
<td>0.014</td>
<td>0.043*</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.020)</td>
<td>(0.016)</td>
<td>(0.019)</td>
<td>(0.016)</td>
<td>(0.015)</td>
<td>(0.015)</td>
<td>(0.016)</td>
<td>(0.014)</td>
<td>(0.019)</td>
<td>(0.024)</td>
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<td>Ideo. Distance</td>
<td>-2.128</td>
<td>-0.201</td>
<td>0.435</td>
<td>-0.555</td>
<td>-1.948</td>
<td>0.168</td>
<td>-2.544</td>
<td>-1.795</td>
<td>-1.683</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.777)</td>
<td>(2.066)</td>
<td>(1.635)</td>
<td>(2.086)</td>
<td>(1.950)</td>
<td>(2.303)</td>
<td>(2.772)</td>
<td>(2.690)</td>
<td>(2.281)</td>
<td>(2.815)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vote Share</td>
<td>-0.018</td>
<td>0.035*</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>0.018</td>
<td>0.008</td>
<td>-0.014</td>
<td>-0.005</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>-0.006</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.030)</td>
<td>(0.019)</td>
<td>(0.015)</td>
<td>(0.016)</td>
<td>(0.017)</td>
<td>(0.018)</td>
<td>(0.014)</td>
<td>(0.015)</td>
<td>(0.011)</td>
<td>(0.014)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tenure (log)</td>
<td>0.531**</td>
<td>0.780**</td>
<td>0.847***</td>
<td>0.683**</td>
<td>0.400</td>
<td>0.573</td>
<td>0.603</td>
<td>0.088</td>
<td>0.174</td>
<td>0.623**</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.255)</td>
<td>(0.391)</td>
<td>(0.295)</td>
<td>(0.299)</td>
<td>(0.354)</td>
<td>(0.393)</td>
<td>(0.378)</td>
<td>(0.337)</td>
<td>(0.239)</td>
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<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>-0.241</td>
<td>-0.514</td>
<td>0.130</td>
<td>-0.563</td>
<td>-0.137</td>
<td>0.212</td>
<td>0.039</td>
<td>0.0222</td>
<td>-0.524</td>
<td>-0.285</td>
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<tr>
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<td>(0.518)</td>
<td>(0.569)</td>
<td>(0.510)</td>
<td>(0.497)</td>
<td>(0.515)</td>
<td>(0.498)</td>
<td>(0.497)</td>
<td>(0.515)</td>
<td>(0.463)</td>
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<td>-0.879</td>
<td>0.342</td>
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<td>0.024</td>
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<td>-0.487</td>
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<td>(1.659)</td>
<td>(1.937)</td>
<td>(1.810)</td>
<td>(1.930)</td>
<td>(2.332)</td>
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\*\*\*p<.01, \*\*p<.05, \*p<.10, two-tailed tests

\textit{Note:} Cell entries are rare-events logit coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.
<table>
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<th>107th</th>
<th>108th</th>
<th>109th</th>
<th>110th</th>
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<tr>
<td>Party Unity</td>
<td>0.098***</td>
<td>0.106**</td>
<td>0.073**</td>
<td>0.067</td>
<td>0.120**</td>
<td>0.038</td>
<td>-0.020</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.037)</td>
<td>(0.048)</td>
<td>(0.033)</td>
<td>(0.044)</td>
<td>(0.0590)</td>
<td>(0.044)</td>
<td>(0.031)</td>
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<td>Ideo. Distance</td>
<td>2.526</td>
<td>3.158</td>
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<td>0.507</td>
<td>-1.999</td>
<td>-1.720</td>
<td>-5.535***</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.718)</td>
<td>(2.142)</td>
<td>(1.841)</td>
<td>(1.804)</td>
<td>(2.147)</td>
<td>(1.990)</td>
<td>(1.740)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote Share</td>
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<td>-0.004</td>
<td>-0.017</td>
<td>-0.0005</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>-0.0004</td>
<td>-0.012</td>
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<td>(0.012)</td>
<td>(0.013)</td>
<td>(0.013)</td>
<td>(0.015)</td>
<td>(0.017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>(0.247)</td>
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<td>South</td>
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<td>(0.651)</td>
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<td>(5.823)</td>
<td>(4.010)</td>
<td>(2.860)</td>
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</table>

N = 236  228  220  220  228  232  200

***$p<.01$, **$p<.05$, *$p<.10$, two-tailed tests

Note: Cell entries are rare-events logit coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.
Figure 1. Republican Policy Committee Membership