Introduction

Legislative productivity is examined via bill sponsorship to test whether sponsorship activity is influenced by a representative's dispositional or district characteristics in the 111th Congress—a Congress more partisan than many in recent history.

Research Question

Why do some representatives sponsor more legislation than others? When measuring legislative output via bill sponsorship, what if any dispositional characteristics influence the legislative output of members of 111th Congress?

Literature Review

- The study of bill sponsorship sheds light on how representatives act within the political system, and if the current system encourages or inhibits certain legislative activity by certain legislators (Rouse & Bratton 2011).
- Dispositional characteristics e.g., race, gender, ethnicity, political ideology, and friendships affect legislative output and productivity (Schiller 1995; Swers 2002).
- Race, gender, and ethnicity strongly impact legislative activity of members of congress who are institutionally disadvantaged e.g., women, Latinos, African Americans, minority party members, and ideological extremists (Rocca & Sanchez 2008; Tam Cho & Fowler 2010).

Methods

Data for the 442 members of the 111th Congress taken from Thomas.gov, Almanac of American Politics, and Vote Smart. A single-variant model was used to illustrate the relationship between dispositional characteristics, district characteristics and bill sponsorship activity.

Hypotheses

H1: Representatives who are not racial or ethnic minorities are most active in the 111th Congress. 
H2: Female representatives sponsor more legislation than male representatives.
H3: Minority legislators more likely to engage in higher sponsorship activity when they are a significant minority (both chamber wise and group wise)
H4: Female minority representatives sponsor more legislation than male minority representatives.
H5: Female representatives who are democrats and not ethnic or racial minorities will sponsor more legislation.
H6: Majority party sponsors more legislation than minority party.

Results

The breakdown of group sponsorship activity in the 111th Congress illustrates which groups were most active and by extension may wield the most influence. For example, although women are not a minority in the American population, they are a minority in terms of congressional representation as they represent 18% of the bills sponsored. This graph reveals that despite minority advancement Congress is still dominated by white males.

- In the 111th Congress male representatives sponsored more legislation than female representatives, meaning that H2 is not supported.
- The average female Democratic representative sponsors 19.51 bills while the average female Republican sponsors 11.81 bills.
- Latino Democrats sponsor more bills than Latino Republicans. However, proportionally, Latino Republicans sponsor a higher number of bills than Latino Democrats.
- There are no black Republicans in the 111th Congress, so black interests represented in 111th Congress came from black Democrats.

Conclusion

- Regardless of dispositional characteristics, in the 111th Congress, representatives of the majority party utilize sponsorship as a means to set the party agenda and reach legislative goals.
- The polarization in the 111th Congress subverts the activity of the minority party. H2 was not supported by the results (female reps. do not sponsor more legislation than male reps.), contrary to findings from past literature.
- Change in female sponsorship activity may be due to party polarization. Future research should further explore the relationship between female sponsorship activity and party polarization.
- Majority party monopolization of sponsorship counters previous literature arguing that sponsorship is a vehicle used by minorities and majority party members. Which begs the question: what other avenues are available to minority representatives to achieve their legislative agenda? If sponsorship is not a viable tactic what other opportunities do minorities and minority representatives have to engage in legislative behavior?
- Preliminary analyses assessing the relationship between dispositional and district characteristics and sponsorship activity in the current partisan political environment allows scholars to develop more informed, nuanced, and reliable hypotheses about legislative behavior.

Future Research

- Future research could incorporate data from 109th, 110th, and 112th Congresses to chart the development of party polarization and its impact on minority legislators and representation.
- Future research might also include running a multivariate statistical model to explore the relationship between dispositional and district characteristics.
- In this current context, scholars should further explore the relationship between agenda setting and dispositional & district characteristics.

References


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