Who Has the Ear of Congress?

Information sources and Congressional policy development

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Abstract

Who do congressional members and their staff go to for information, presumably for development of policy? We know staffers carry out a great deal of the work in Congress, from answering constituent requests to writing legislation and negotiating policy. The members have delegated a great deal of authority to them. But where are these staffers getting their information. This paper explores two different information sources – lobbyists and trade associations, and constituents. Using original survey data collected from over 500 current and former congressional staff, this paper finds that staffers seek out information from trade associations and lobbyists more than constituents; and age, issue importance to the home state or district, office type, and chamber are all significant predictors of that choice.

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If you have turned on the television, radio, or logged onto the internet recently, you have most likely been bombarded with political pundits debating the myriad of influences on members of Congress. For the most part, these talking heads have been critical of the influence of so called special interests on Congress. But, how much do these interest groups truly influence policymaking in Congress? Do members go to them for information more often than other groups? Is this a problem, or is it representation at work?

Using an original data set (Hagedorn 2015), this paper will explore who congressional members and, specifically, their staff go to for information, presumably for development of policy, and what affects that information source. We know staffers carry out a great deal of the work in Congress and are vital to the process (Hammond 1990; Hall 1993; DeGregorio 1994), from answering constituent requests to writing legislation and negotiating policy (Hagedorn 2015). The members have delegated a great deal of authority to their staff, and the staff members are on the front lines of national policy making (Hagedorn 2015). But where are these staffers getting the necessary expert information to advise their bosses, the members of Congress?

This paper explores two different information sources: constituents; and lobbyists and trade associations. It also examines what factors might affect that source of information choice. In a republican form of democracy, one might hope members primarily listen to their constituents, but is this reality? Lobbyists and interest groups are surrounded by a negative cloud in recent days, but is this justified? Do they provide the best and most reliable information? They also represent a number of engaged constituents, which the member obviously realizes (see Fenno 1977); does this make a difference?

The paper begins with a look at the existing literature on the role constituents and interest groups play in policy development in Congress, as well as a more specific look at information sources and the use of experts in Congress. This section will also include the theoretical foundations for the research and the hypotheses to be tested. The results and analysis section provides some preliminary answers to the research question.

The question of where Congress goes to for information, and what affects that, is a vital one. It furthers our understanding of not only congressional influences, but also policy development. This project is unique in that it surveys current and former congressional staff, the ones who are arguably doing a majority of the policy development. In this research, congressional staffers act as proxies for where Congress gets its information. I ask staffers directly how often they use constituents and lobbyists for information, rather than relying on lobby filings or quantitative data on how many constituent contacts Congress receives, which are at best imperfect proxies for their influence on policy.

This research has normative implications, as well. It is important for questions of representation and how moneyed interests affect policy. In a republican government, staffers and members, should be listening to constituents. But, is this feasible? It is possible lobbyists for groups in the home state or district serve an important purpose in that they consolidate information and policy preferences for members and make distribution back to constituents easier. They could be a type of clearinghouse for important policy information and policy making. While the final topic is outside the data capabilities for this project, we still can examine what affects information sources.

**Review of Relevant Literature and Theoretical Development of Hypotheses:**

The focus of this research will rely on literature from a few different areas. The first is that which studies the role constituents play in Congressional policymaking. The second is what role interest groups play. Included will also be the previous work on information and the use of experts in policymaking. Representation will permeate all of these areas. Since Congressional staff are the focus of the survey, a brief primer on them will be included. This paper will attempt to bridge all of these literatures into a comprehensive look at information sources for Congressional policymaking.

Congressional Staff: A Primer:

Before delving into the research on information sources, it is appropriate to provide an introduction to congressional staffs. More in-depth analyses of staff are available in numerous locations (see Fox and Webb Hammond 1977; Malbin 1980; Hagedorn 2015), thus this is a brief look at the job descriptions of these staffers.

Congressional staffers are found in all types of offices on Capitol Hill: personal, committee, and leadership.[[1]](#footnote-1) Historically, most staffers have been found to be young (20s and 30’s), male, and white (Malbin 1980; Fox and Hammond 1977; Hagedorn 2015). The positions of chief of staff and legislative director were historically held primarily by men, while women are found in the entry-level positions of staff assistant and secretary. Hagedorn (2015) found this to be changing, with more women in leadership positions, but they are still over-represented in the lower positions in the office. Further, college aged interns often answer the phones in congressional offices, especially in House offices, where budgets are smaller. These young staffers are expected to work very long, unpredictable hours, for little pay (Romzek and Utter 1997) and are constantly on call to their bosses. They are expected to be experts on their policy areas[[2]](#footnote-2), while simultaneously being yelled at by irate constituents. It should come as no surprise, their tenure is brief and turnover is common on Capitol Hill.

While most congressional research has assumed members of Congress are doing all of the policy work, when Hagedorn (2015) surveyed congressional staffers she found staffers are the ones developing policy and presenting those ideas to their bosses[[3]](#footnote-3). The members are then following up on these ideas and turning them into federal policy (Hagedorn 2015). Because of these findings, staffers are appropriate proxies for determining where information comes from and how it is used.

Constituent Influence on Congress:

When we think of constituent influence on Congress, our minds turn to representation, which is how the views of the member’s state or district get turned into policy or action in Congress. As this paper is more specifically about how members use information provided by constituents for policymaking, how that exchange occurs will be explored. Thus, it will outline how effective constituent phone calls, emails, etc are on Congress.

Today there are numerous ways we can try to engage in a dialogue, or simply shout our opinions, to our elected representatives: in-person meetings, protests, email, phone, letter, petition, and social media. There are countless websites and services that contain the contact information for our members of Congress both in Washington and in their states or districts, with many organized interests publishing how-to guides on contacting your member of Congress (see, for example, Union of Concerned Scientists “How to Have a Productive Phone Call with your Legislator’s Office).

In recent months, we have seen coordinated campaigns to protest a number of the current administration’s policies. In February 2017, Sen. Schumer’s office reported receiving 1.5 million calls a day in opposition to President Trump’s Cabinet nominations (Killough 2017), and three days in January and February saw the highest call volume in the history of the Capitol switchboard (Schulz 2017). This seems to counter the old idea that voters know little about what their members of Congress are actually doing (Miller and Stokes 1963). Former staffers enter the fray to argue Facebook posts and Tweets are not read, but phone calls are the most effective[[4]](#footnote-4) (Mangla 2016).

According to the Congressional Management Foundation (2011) and survey of over 1000 congressional staffers, the mail volume coming into Senate offices has increased over 548% between 2002 and 2009. During that same time period, House offices reported a 158% increase in mail volume (Congressional Management Foundation 2011). While 86% of Congressional offices are responding to emails from constituents in kind, greatly shortening the response time, 58% of surveyed staffers say they are taking more time than they did two years ago in responding to constituent correspondence (CMF 2011). Further, congressional offices are responding to this massive increase in communications with the same number of staff (Hagedorn 2015), leaving precious little time for policy research and development.

Voters are definitely increasing their communications with their federal elected officials, but to what end? In terms of representation, it is understood that public opinion and publicly salient issues affect policy outcomes (Stimson, MacKuen and Erikson 1995; Jones and Baumgartner 2004), but possibly only when they are up for reelection (Rothenberg and Sanders 2000; Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002). In a survey of the Michigan State Legislature, Bergen and Cole (2012), found that when state legislators were contacted by constituents, they were more likely to support a specific piece of legislation, but other work (Cluverius 2017) has found the calls have nearly no effect on policy outcomes. Miler (2010, 2013) argues that the more often you contact your member of Congress, the more likely that member is to see you as relevant to your issue of choice. The media reports that staff and members claim the contacts are important, but do not change votes (Schulz 2017).

The established research predominately focuses on one-sided communication, however: from the voters to the members, and further how overall public opinion affects policy outcomes in Congress. It does not address if members seek out constituents for information on policy, or if the information coming from constituents is being used to develop new policies, rather than the passive reception of information regarding votes on existing policy.

The present research looks at that avenue of communication and information seeking. Due to the mixed findings on the effectiveness of constituent input, it can be hypothesized that staff and members do not actively seek out policy information from constituents. Further, as noted earlier, staffers’ time is increasingly dominated by responding to constituent correspondence. Congress lacks the time and resources to preemptively contact an adequate number of average constituents to get their thoughts on new or existing policy. Additionally, staffers do not have access to large numbers of engaged and interested constituents, who are not affiliated with an interest group, to take their temperature on policy. Thus:

*H1: Members of Congress (staff) rely less on constituent provided policy information than that provided by interest groups.*

As noted earlier, staffers are quite young, especially when one takes into consideration the amount of responsibility and authority they have in congressional policy development. However, all staffers must start at the bottom of the office hierarchy. When they are new to their jobs, it is quite logical they have less exposure to the relevant interest groups. They do not know the policy networks. This could mean they turn to constituents and take advice from those who call the office on a regular basis. Thus:

*H2: The younger the staffer, or the shorter their tenure in the office, the more they will rely on constituents for policy information.*

Interest Group Influence on Congress:

Before delving into the research on interest group influence on congressional policy making, it is important to understand the state of the interest group world. According to the website Lobbyist.info (2018), a lobbying information tracker and watchdog, there are currently over 37,000[[5]](#footnote-5) registered federal lobbyists and 4600 lobbying firms. It should be noted not all lobbyists work for lobbying firms, however. *The Hill* newspaper puts out a yearly list of the top lobbyists in the areas of hired guns (lobbying firms), corporate, grassroots, and associations[[6]](#footnote-6) (Staff 2017). Every interest group also has a lobbyist or government affairs professional on staff; most large corporations also have in-house lobbyists, or belong to a trade association which has a lobbyist(s).

According to OpenSecrets.org and the Center for Responsive Politics (CRP), the total amount spent on lobbying in 2017 was $3.34 billion (2018). This was not how much lobbyists spent on campaigns and elections, but the amount spent on lobbying the federal government, which includes the executive branch. In 1998, this amount was $1.45 billion (Opensecrets.org and CRP). The top five spenders for 2017 include: US Chamber of Commerce with $82,190,000, National Association of Realtors with $54,530,861, the Business Roundtable with $27,380,000, the Pharmaceutical Research & Manufacturers of America with $25,847,500, and Blue Cross/Blue Shield with $24,330,306 total spent on lobbying in 2017 (Opensecrets.org and CRP). Only one of the top five was a private company (BC/BS) and the rest are trade associations.

Both lobbyists and trade associations are included in this research, and they will be treated similarly for the purposes of information sources. Members of Congress and their staff understand some lobbyists are what The Hill (2017) refers to as “hired guns,” which are those who work for independent lobbying firms and have numerous clients, which often span a number of different interests, issue areas, and industries[[7]](#footnote-7). Members and their staff also understand trade associations most likely have in-house lobbyists or government affairs professionals who represent their interests to Congress. These trade associations hire additional lobbyists from independent firms to represent their interests, as well. Congress is aware of this and speaks this language.

In political science, interest groups are like-minded individuals who band together to inform and influence public policy (Truman 1951). As can be seen from the amount of money these organized individuals are spending on lobbying, it is not hard to agree with the researchers who argue money drives the lobbying and interest group effort (Schattschneider 1975, Walker 1983, Hansen 1985). But to what effect? We know money (specifically, campaign contributions) does not lead to changed votes in Congress (Baumgartner et al 2009), with interest groups not trying to buy votes, but access. Members of Congress, no matter how much money is spent trying to influence them, are still concerned with representation and reelection (Mayhew 1974). They tend to listen to the organized interests from their districts or states (Hall and Wayman 1990. Further, members of Congress need to know these groups provide reliable information and they will come in handy again in the future (Hansen 1991). Interest groups and lobbyists are well aware of this and focus their activities on the members and staff who agree with them and in locations where they represent a large number of constituents.[[8]](#footnote-8)

However, the research is split on who lobbies who and when; one side argues members of Congress listen to the groups with which they already agree and it’s about reinforcement, not changing minds (Matthews 1960; Bauer, Pool, and Dexter 1972; Hall and Wayman 1990; Hojnacki and Kimball 1998). The other side claims most members are only lobbied by one group; all issues, according to pluralism, have at least two sides, and the side which lobbies is the one that disagrees with the member’s policy stances[[9]](#footnote-9) (Austin-Smith and Wright 1992; Smith 1995). Interestingly, like a traditional prisoner’s dilemma, in the absence of opposition, the group that represents the interests with which the member usually supports is less inclined to lobby because it is expensive (Austin-Smith and Wright 1992). But if the opposition does mobilize, so must they.

Lobbying the House and Senate might seem to be very similar from the outside, but according to lobbyists, it is anything but (Baker 2008). Lobbyists who want to focus on big picture items that affect the whole country, go to the Senate; if they have a small technical issue, they go to the House (Baker 2008). If lobbyists want to meet directly with a member, they go to the House (Baker 2008); meeting with a Senator is much more rare and only done if the lobbyist has brought a contingent from the home state. Further, we know Senators have delegated a great deal of authority to their staff, and lobbyists are well aware of how this works, thus they are not offended when they meet with staff members (Hagedorn 2015). Lobbyists also trust Senate staff more than House staff, according to Baker (2008), as they are usually older, more experienced, and have more authority with their bosses (Hagedorn 2015). Even though lobbyists would prefer a Senator spearhead their issue, they also know the House is more predictable and thus they are not likely to encounter many legislative and political surprises (Baker 2008).

What are these lobbyists and interest groups doing, though? There is a great deal of research which says interest groups play a large role in setting the agenda of Congress (Kingdon 1995; Baumgartner and Jones 1991, 2009), but we are left without strong evidence of how this occurs. One way, which this research will focus on, is the transfer of information to congressional staff for the purpose of influencing policy.

*Use of Experts:*

Necessary to the discussion of interest group involvement in policy development and their influence on Congress is a brief look at how members of Congress use experts for information (see Baumgartner and Jones 2009, Kingdon 1995). Much of that expertise is organized and provided by interest groups and is delivered through the congressional committee system. This research is vital to the present project, which compares how often interest groups are looked to for information and what affects that choice.

Government affairs professionals who work for interest groups and lobbyists are not simply paid mouthpieces for their causes and groups; they are experts. They are academics, lawyers, former government or elected officials, economists, scientists, or have worked in the industry. When committees seek out these individuals to provide expert testimony on policies or legislation, they target those who share the same policy views as the committee chair (Talbert, Jones, and Baumgartner 1995; Devins 2005). Committee staffers are pressured to not call upon objective academic witnesses, who may disagree with the chairman (Devins 2005). That means some groups never get their opposing voices heard in committee hearings because the committee chair disagrees with them (Leyden 1995). The testimony is one-sided, and serving as a reinforcing tool to established policy views (Diermeier and Fedderson 2000).

Since we already have seen how some researchers argue interest groups are only targeting those members with whom they agree, and members are seeking out likeminded experts, what we are left with is a cyclical echo chamber. Further, Kollman (1997) finds that liberal (conservative) groups tend to lobby committees made up predominantly of liberal (conservative) members, whom all share the same biases on policy. The full ramifications of this are not completely understood, but we can assume policy outcomes are affected (Kollman 1997).

It has already been hypothesized that members rely more on interest group information than that provided by constituents, but what affects that choice? From the previous literature, we know interest groups are providing information to members of Congress, at least to committees, and it appears to be reinforcing the members’ policy preferences. I argue that member involvement and interest affect that choice of information. As the level of importance increases, so does the need for quality information, which is provided by interest groups and trade associations. The complexity of the issue will have a similar effect on the information source. Members need expert information when developing and negotiating complex issues.

*H3: The more the member is interested and/or involved with the policy issue, the more likely interest groups and trade associations will be sought out for information.*

*H4: The more complex the policy issue, the more likely interest groups and trade associations will be used for information.*

In terms of representation, members have a desire to represent those issues which are important to their district or state. One might think, therefore, they would seek policy information from constituents, but it is understood that a good lobbyist or trade association represents constituents and a member is aware of that. The group also is a known commodity and has a reputation for quality policy input. Contacting them is much less costly than contacting 20 or even 100 constituents to get their views.

*H5: The more important the issue to the state or district, the more a member will seek out information from interest groups and trade associations.*

**Research Design, Data, and Analysis:**

The data used in this paper was obtained through original online surveys of current and former Congressional staff. This survey was administered in December 2013 and January 2014. The survey instrument was developed and tested with input from current and former staff[[10]](#footnote-10), current APSA fellows, and faculty members.

The survey was sent via official US government email to every Washington, DC based staffer who handled a policy issue for their boss or committee, according to the online database Legistorm[[11]](#footnote-11). Personal, leadership, and committee staff were surveyed in both the US House and US Senate. Policy issues are handled by chiefs of staff, general counsels, policy advisors, legislative directors, legislative assistants, and legislative correspondents in the personal offices of members. Within the committees, I contacted those individuals with the titles of: staff directors, counsels, clerks, professional staff members, analysts, and researchers. In leadership offices, policy is predominately handled by policy advisors and analysts. This survey asked staffers a number of questions relating to their role in the policy process, as well as simple demographic information. Anonymity of individual staffers and their offices was absolutely assured.

The survey was administered using Qualtrics; this program was chosen because of its professional appearance and ease of data analysis (as opposed to others such as SurveyMonkey). It was sent to 5444 current congressional staffers. Of this number, some emails were rejected or were undeliverable to the recipient, mainly due to the House and Senate server firewalls; thus the email and survey were received by 4952 staffers. It was also sent to former staff, using the snowball approach. I began by sending the survey to 75 of my former colleagues from both the House and Senate, who then forwarded it to others.

As for the success of the survey, 446 partial or full responses from current staffers were received, which is a 9% response rate. 83 former staff responses were received. The response rate cannot be calculated for them, due to the sampling technique. The sample size for this data set is 530.

Dependent Variables

As the research question asks which of two groups – lobbyists/trade associations and constituents – members of Congress (staffers) seek out for policy information and what affects that choice, there are three different dependent variables. All three are extremely similar, however, and are built from the same question on the survey, which was: “With your top issue in mind, in the last year, how often did you rely on the following for information?” The choices included: constituents, trade associations, and lobbyists, among other options.[[12]](#footnote-12) Options included: never, rarely, sometimes, often, all the time.

Earlier in the survey, respondents were instructed: “In the past year, think of the one top issue on which YOU worked, the issue that took/has taken the majority of your time. What was that issue?” Congressional staffers handle numerous different policy issues, which can all be focused on one committee of jurisdiction[[13]](#footnote-13), or numerous committees. These staffers become the policy experts in that area and they all are well aware of the one issue which has dominated their time for the last year.

The first dependent variable measures how often a staffer seeks out information from constituents[[14]](#footnote-14). The results were: never (coded as 0, 21%), rarely (coded as 1, 22%), sometimes (coded as 2, 28%), often (coded as 3, 22%), all the time (coded as 4, 7%). The N of this variable is 310, the mean is 1.73, and the standard deviation is 1.22. All further dependent variables are coded the same as this one.

The second dependent variable addresses how often a staffer seeks out information from a trade association. In this situation, it is understood trade associations and lobbyists are very similar, in that all trade associations have a government affairs professional or registered lobbyist on staff who works with Congress. The results were: never (6%), rarely (10.6%), sometimes (35.7%), often (36%), all of the time (11%). The N of this variable is 311, the mean is 2.35, and the standard deviation is 1.03.

The final dependent variables measures how often a staffer seeks out information from a lobbyist. The results were: never (12.6%), rarely (20.4%), sometimes (35.9%), often (23.6%), and all of the time (7.4%). The N of this variable is 309, the mean is 1.93, and the standard deviation is 1.11.

A note should be made about the measurement of these variables. Yes, the choices are vague and do not offer the respondent a concrete way to indicate exactly how often they get information from these sources (like once a week, once a month, etc). However, as the information sources were all listed together, staffers were able to compare and contrast the different information sources as they filled out the survey. Thus, when they indicate they are seeking out information from trade associations more “often” than the other two, it quantitatively means something.

Independent Variables

The second hypothesis deals with age and tenure of the individual staffer, which are the first key independent variables. These variables are created from direct questions on the survey. The categories for age are[[15]](#footnote-15): 21-25 (coded as 1, 8.8%), 26-30 (coded as 2, 28%), 31-35 (coded as 3, 27.5%), 36-40 (coded as 4, 12.4%), 41-45 (coded as 5, 6.5%), 46-50 (coded as 6, 5.2%), and 51-60 (coded as 7, 8.5%), and over 60 (coded as 8, 2.9%). The mean is 2.52 and the standard deviation is 2.22. These preliminary numbers back up the claim that staffers are quite young.

Tenure of the staffer in the individual office was also created from a direct question on the survey. The categories for tenure are: Less than 1 year (coded as 0, 21.3%), 1-2 years (coded as 1, 20.5%), 2-3 years (coded as 2, 15.5%), 3-4 years (coded as 3, 9%), 4-6 years (coded as 4, 15.4%), 6-8 years (coded as 5, 7%), 8-10 years (coded as 6, 4%), 10-15 years (coded as 7, 5.8%), 15-20 years (coded as 8, 0.2%), 20-25 years (coded as 9, .8%), more than 25 years (coded as 10, .4%). The mean of this variable is 3.44 and the standard deviation is 1.84. From these survey results, we can see that tenures are very short among congressional staff.

The next independent variables deal with the member’s involvement and interest in the specific issue in question. On this survey, the staffers were asked to rank how involved and interested their bosses were on their issue, on a scale of 0 to 10, with 10 being the highest involvement and interest. On the involvement variable, the mean is 6.82 and the standard deviation is 2.42. The mean of the interest variable is 7.2 and the standard deviation is 2.49. Thus, we see relatively high interest and involvement with the top issues of the staffer.

The fourth independent variable in this analysis is the complexity of the specific policy issue in question. Again, the staffer was asked to rank the complexity of their top issue, with the options: not at all (0, 0.6%), below average (1, 1.5%), average complexity (2, 24.9%), above average (3, 42.3%), and very complex (4, 30.8%). The mean of this variable is 3 and the standard deviation is .8. Staffers have an inherent knowledge of how complex their issues are, as compared to others.

The final key independent variable looks at how important this policy is to the member’s home state or district. The staffers ranked the importance from not at all (coded as 0, 1.8%) to extremely important (6, 17.4%). This variable has a mean of 4.23 and a standard deviation of 1.46.

Along with the key variables, a number of other variables are included in the full models. These include party (Democrat coded as 0, 42.1%, Republican coded as 1, 56.3%), chamber (House coded as 0, 52%; Senate coded as 1, 48%), and type of office (dummy variables created for personal - 65% of respondents, leadership - 3.6%, and committee - 31%).

Results and Analysis

The first hypothesis posits that, overall, members of Congress and their staff rely less on constituents for information in developing policy than trade associations and lobbyists. While these numbers can be seen in the earlier description of the variables, Figure 1 makes for an easier comparison. We can see from these results that trade associations are the most popular of the three information sources. 21% of all respondents responded that they have never consulted a constituent for policy information. This supports the first hypothesis, which receives further support with trade associations being asked for information often and all of the time. As noted earlier, trade associations, interest groups, and lobbyists can be used interchangeably in the world of members of Congress and their staff.

**Figure 1: How often do you use for Information**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Never** | **Rarely** | **Sometimes** | **Often** | **All the Time** |
| Constituents | 21% | 22% | 28% | 22% | 7% |
| Trade Associations | 6% | 11% | 36% | 36% | 11% |
| Lobbyists | 13% | 20% | 36% | 24% | 7% |

Table 1 tests the remaining hypotheses on the three different dependent variables, using OLS analysis. The second hypothesis theorized age and tenure would be significant in predicting that staffers seek out information from constituents, specifically the younger and shorter the tenure in the office. This is the only hypothesis which focuses on the staff specifically, with staffers standing in as proxies for member interests in the remaining hypotheses. As can be seen in Table 1, age is significant in predicting the use of constituents for policy information, but it is in the opposite direction. This shows us that as a staffer gets older, she will seek out more input from constituents. While this is contrary to the hypothesis, it does give an idea that as staffers get older and more mature, they are more comfortable seeking out constituent comments, possibly improving representation in the process. Age was not significant in the other two models. Staff tenure, on the other hand, was not significant in any of the three models. Thus, the second hypothesis receives no support in these results.

The third hypothesis deals with member involvement and interest in a specific policy issue and that as they increase, so will the dependence upon lobbyists and trade associations for information. Neither member interest nor member involvement in the policy were significant in predicting the use of trade associations or lobbyists for information in developing policy. They were not significant in the constituent model either. It is difficult to figure out what might be going on here; one explanation is that as this involvement and interest increase, they might be relying more on committee staff, or other outside expert opinions like the Administration or academic sources, rather than these three options.

Complexity of the policy issue is the focus of the fourth hypothesis. It theorizes as the complexity increases, so does the dependence upon trade associations and lobbyist information. Complexity was not significant in any of the models of this analysis. Again, it is possible members are simply receiving their complex information from other sources besides these.

The final hypothesis argues that issues which are important to the member’s home state or district will increase the information gathering from trade associations and lobbyists. This hypothesis did receive support; as the importance increased, so did reliance upon lobbyist information. Interestingly, it was also significant in the constituent model. Thus, these members are depending on both lobbyists and constituents for information on policies which are important to their state. This is an important representation story; members take these issues seriously and are covering all of their information bases.

In the full models, party, chamber, and type of office were included. Chamber was significant in all three models, meaning that senators are seeking out information from all three sources at a significant level. This could be a factor of the increased professionalism of the Senate and that staff have smaller policy portfolios, which simply means they have more time to devote to gathering information on these issues. House staffers on the other hand have been likened to drinking out of the fire hose.[[16]](#footnote-16) They have limited time to gather information from multiple sources and often simply recommend their member vote the way they have in the past. In an additional nod to positive representation, personal offices sought out information from constituents, which means they are doing what most voters expect them to do.

It should be noted, these models are underspecified, with low R-squared numbers in all three. This should give us pause when making any conclusions from them. There are clearly more factors affecting the use of all three information sources.

**Discussion**

This research asks an interesting question: where do members of Congress go for policy information and what affects that choice? This paper specifies that members seek out and use information from trade associations most regularly. Further, Senators and their offices use this information at significant levels. Older Senate personal office staffers, working on an issue which is important to their home, seek out information from constituents. Senate staffers overall, working on important state issues, use information from lobbyists.

Interestingly, member interest and involvement, issue complexity, and staff tenure had no effect on the source of policy information. Party played no role in any of the models. Thus, neither Democrats nor Republicans can claim they only use information from constituents, and neither can place blame upon the other for talking to lobbyists, have been brutalized in the media.

Previous research has not asked staff or members where they go to for information. Instead this research has looked at who testifies before congressional committees and counts that as a viable information source, when we know that information is biased based on who chairs the committee. It is predetermined information. Earier research has also looked at who registers to lobby and whom they lobby. However, this misses the point. Just because a trade association or lobbyist is visiting a member of Congress or their staff, does not mean that member actually uses them for policy information. They could be, and often are, passive receivers of the message from the lobbyist, never using it to develop policy.

In terms of future research, other information sources should be explored. That is within the capabilities of this data and will be an interesting addition to the analysis. In addition to the exploration of additional dependent variables, work should be done trying to theorize what else is causing the use of constituents or lobbyists for information. These models, as mentioned, were vastly underspecified. Something else is clearly going on here and that must be explored. Is it something about the staffer? Or is it something about the specific member and their committee assignments, their home state or district? Or is it issue specific? Do salient issues have an effect on that information source? These additional questions could give a more complete picture of how policy is made in Congress.

Normatively, this is an interesting story for representation. Yes, constituents are used for information, but trade associations and lobbyists are used more. This is a positive pluralism story. Members of Congress and their staff appreciate expert information, and that information is provided by the real experts, which in this case are the trade associations and lobbyists whose entire livelihood is based upon knowing that policy issue. Lobbyists, trade associations, and interest groups have received a bad rap in recent years, but they are simply representing organized interests. Often, the individuals in these groups represent voters in the states or districts of these members. Why shouldn’t they be used for expert opinions? Members of Congress should be applauded for pursuing numerous information sources which know the issue, and which also represent their constituents, rather than simply using outdated, or worse yet, no information.

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**Table 1: Information Sources in Congressional Policy Making**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Constituents | Trade Associations | Lobbyists |
|  |  |  |  |
| Age | .11\* | -.03 | -.003 |
|  | (.04) | (.04) | (.04) |
| Staff Tenure in Office | .02 | -.01 | -.01 |
|  | (.03) | (.03) | (.03) |
| Member involvement in policy (0-10) | .04 | -.01 | -.01 |
|  | (.04) | (.04) | (.04) |
| Member interest in issue (0-10) | .01 | .04 | .03 |
|  | (.04) | (.04) | (.04) |
| Issue complexity (0-10) | .06 | .001 | .13 |
|  | (.09) | (.08) | (.09) |
| Issue importance to home state/district | .1\* | .06 | .1\* |
|  | (.05) | (.05) | (.05) |
| Member’s party affiliation (D=0, R=1) | .04 | -.05 | -.02 |
|  | (.06) | (.05) | (.06) |
| Chamber (House 0, Senate 1) | .32\* | .31\* | .29\* |
|  | (.14) | (.13) | (.14) |
| Personal office (0=no, 1= personal) | .86\* | -.01 | -.02 |
|  | (.15) | (.14) | (.15) |
| Constant | -.38 | 1.89 | .89 |
|  | (.38) | (.35) | (.37) |
| N | 275 | 275 | 274 |
| R-squared | .18 | .04 | .06 |

Coefficients reported, standard errors in parentheses, \*p<.05

1. Author served as policy advisor to two different United States Senators in Washington over a period of 7 years, thus many of these observations are personal experiences, backed by original survey data. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Each policy staffer has a portfolio of specific issues which they handle for their member of Congress or committee. They become the office experts on these issues. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This was also her experience while working in Congress, which helped provide a theoretical framework for the research. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ironically this advice was doled out via Twitter by former Utah congressional staffer Emily Ellsworth [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This number is much smaller according to OpenSecrets. They report 11,444 registered federal lobbyists in 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Examples of corporate entities on this list include: Northrup Grumman, Sprint, General Electric, and Pfizer. Examples of associations include: Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, Internet Association, Business Roundtable, and American Medical Association. Examples of grassroots organizations include: Environmental Working Group, National Rifle Association, Common Cause, and the National Education Association [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Again, these observations are the author’s own, from serving seven years in the United States Senate. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. An example of this is the National Association of Wheat Growers spending a majority of their time and energy lobbying members from Montana and North Dakota, but not focusing much attention on members from Rhode Island. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In interesting case study involves a personal experience of the author, who was involved with the negotiation and development of the Clear Skies legislation in 2005, as a staffer for a member of the Environment and Public Works Committee. Most of the lobbyists and interest groups who came to lobby the author were very opposed to this legislation; she heard from very few in favor. Similar to the above mentioned literature, the author’s boss was in favor of the legislation, thus those supportive groups did not feel they needed to spend resources on advocating a position which the Senator already held. Incidentally, this initiative died in the Senate in early 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The author also provided a great deal of personal input for the survey. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Legistorm is updated daily with staff information, which is important because of high turnover on Capitol Hill (and the key reason the printed staff directories or the Congressional Yellow Book were not used). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Other options included: Other staffers from various places, congressional support (like CRS and CBO), White House staff, Administration officials, academics, and the press. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This is more common in Senate personal offices. House personal staffers handle numerous different committees’ issues. Committee staffers focus their attention on very specific issues within their policy area. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The term “constituents” was included without explanation or by indicating they were constituents who were not associated with a trade association or interest group. It should be noted many knowledgeable and helpful constituents are also members of trade associations. Congressional staff view these individuals as members of that group. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The initial category on the survey was 20 and under, but this had no respondents. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. This anecdote was provided to the author by one of her staff mentors, who has worked for over 20 years in Washington. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)