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Do Better Committee Assignments Meaningfully Benefit Legislators? Evidence from a Randomized Experiment in the Arkansas State Legislature

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Abstract

A large literature argues that the committee assignment process plays an important role in shaping legislative politics because some committees provide legislators with substantial benefits. However, evaluating the degree to which legislators benefit from winning their preferred assignments has been challenging with existing data. This paper sheds light on the benefits legislators accrue from winning their preferred committee assignments by exploiting rules in Arkansas' state legislature, where legislators select their own committee assignments in a randomized order. The natural experiment indicates that legislators reap at most limited rewards from winning their preferred assignments. These results potentially raise questions about the robustness of widely held assumptions in literatures on party discipline and legislative organization.

Keywords: Committees, party leaders, state politics, natural experiment, re-election.

Scholars have long argued that legislators gain appreciable advantages from serving on their preferred committees. Fenno (1973) first identified legislators' three main goals—achieving re-election, crafting good public policy, and securing influence in their chamber—and argued that committee memberships can help legislators achieve all of them. Scholars since Fenno have consistently found empirical evidence that legislators who receive their preferred committee assignments are more likely to win re-election (Bullock 1976; Crain and Sullivan 1997; Fowler et al. 1980; Heberlig 2003; Katz and Sala 1996; Maltzman 1997; Milyo 1997; Shepsle 1978; Smith and Deering 1983).[1] Scholars have also argued that valuable committee assignments help legislators gain prestige and power among their colleagues as they vie for leadership positions (Fenno 1973; Manley 1970; Shepsle 1978), and raise more money (Dow

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[1] We know of only a few studies in the large literature on committee assignments that have suggested the benefits to legislators are limited (Bullock 1972; Hogan 2004).

et al. 1998; Grier and Munger 1991; Grier and Munger 1993; Milyo 1997; Romer and Snyder 1994). While the benefits of committee assignments have been primarily studied in Congress, similar patterns have been found in state legislatures (e.g., Hedlund and Patterson 1992; Kanthak 2009). Numerous scholars thus argue that membership on certain committees is instrumental in legislators' attempts to attain re-election, achieve their policy goals, and gain influence among their colleagues.

The existence and magnitude of these advantages is important to understand for several reasons. Most importantly, leading theories of legislative politics argue that control over committee assignments is a key tool party leaders use to discipline legislators (e.g., Coker and Crain 1994; Cox and McCubbins 1993; Crook and Hibbing 1985; Kanthak 2004; Roberts and Smith 2003; Rohde and Shepsle 1973; Sinclair 1995; Stratmann 2000). However, endogeneity may confound existing work investigating the impacts of committee assignments on legislators' careers: if party leaders tend to systematically place some legislators on more desirable committees, observational differences between legislators across committees may be biased estimates of the causal effect of committee membership (although see Grimmer and Powell 2013).

We add to the growing literature using randomized experiments to study legislative politics[2] with novel evidence on the causal effects of winning preferred committee assignments on legislators' careers from the Arkansas state legislature. In Arkansas, parties play no role in making standing committee assignments; instead, legislators choose their own assignments in the order of their seniority. Crucially, for legislators who have served the same length of time, this seniority order is determined by a random lottery. Some legislators are thus randomly assigned to have a better opportunity to select their preferred assignments, a situation equivalent to randomly assigning party leaders' intention to reward some members with access to their most preferred committee assignments and consign others to their least preferred assignments.

We exploit this randomized lottery to test whether legislators who have a more complete and higher quality slate of committee assignments to choose from gain appreciable benefits over those who are forced to accept the assignments no other legislators want. We find no evidence that legislators are more likely to attain their principal goals as a result of attaining their preferred assignments.

THE RANDOMIZED COMMITTEE LOTTERY IN ARKANSAS

The random assignment of Arkansas legislators in the committee assignment process occurs as follows. Each legislator in Arkansas' two state legislative chambers has a seniority number, and legislators choose their own standing committee

[2]E.g., Kellerman and Shepsle 2009, Rogowski and Sinclair 2012, Grimmer and Powell 2013, Grose 2014.

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assignments in the order of this seniority number.[3] This seniority number is first determined by how long a member has served in the chamber, with the lowest numbers (and thus the first choice of committee assignments) going to those who have served longest. Crucially, however, the seniority number of legislators who have served the same length of time is randomly determined: before their first term, legislators draw numbers written on slips of paper out of a hat to determine their seniority within their freshman class. Their relative seniority within their cohort stays with them for the remainder of their time in the legislature.

Although legislators' seniority is randomized across their entire cohort, committee assignments in the House are allotted within four separate "caucus districts" corresponding to the four congressional districts in Arkansas. Because only a certain pre-set number of legislators from each caucus district can sit on each committee, House members only compete with legislators in their caucus district for committee seats.

Legislators thus choose their committees in a fully randomly assigned order only within chamber-cohort-caucus groupings. We therefore compute a metric *Relative Rank* to capture legislators' relative seniority of legislators within these fully randomized groupings. This *Relative Rank* metric gives the percentile ranking of each legislator's lottery number relative to the legislators in their year-chamber-cohort-caucus district on a 0 to 1 scale. Legislators assigned to 1 are the most senior in their year-chamber-cohort-caucus district group (and thus can select the best committee assignment available to those in their caucus district elected at the same time) and legislators with a 0 are the least senior. Likewise, a *Relative Rank* value of 0.5 would mean that the legislator is at the 50th percentile and chooses in the middle of her group.

To illustrate how *Relative Rank* is determined, Table 1 presents a fictional 25-member Arkansas House populated with legislators in their first or second term. Note that all legislators in their first term have lower seniority numbers than the legislators in their second term, shown in part (a). The resulting *Relative Rank* metric is shown for our fictional legislature in part (b). Legislators are arranged in groups by their cohort and caucus district and then sorted by their randomized seniority number within these groups because legislators pick their own assignments in direct succession within these groups. Thus, for example, within caucus district A, legislator 4 would pick first, followed by legislator 6 and 11. Once the senior members finish picking, legislators 14, 15, 18, and 23 would then pick the remainder of the assignments allocated to district A.

[3]Legislators serve on two standing committees. Legislators choose their first committee in the order of seniority and then choose their second committee in the same order. As Supplementary Figure 1 in the online appendix shows and we discuss, this arrangement leads to significant heterogeneity in the quality of legislators' committee assignments, with legislators choosing first systematically serving on different committees from those who choose later in the process.

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Table 1
Hypothetical Example of how *Relative Rank* is Computed

(a) Grouped by cohort and seniority			*(b) Grouped by cohort caucus district, and seniority*			
Term number (cohort)	**Random seniority**	Caucus district	Term number (cohort)	**Random seniority**	**Caucus district**	**Relative rank**
2	**1**	D	2	**4**	**A**	**1**
2	**2**	B	2	**6**	**A**	**0.5**
2	**3**	B	2	**11**	**A**	**0**
2	**4**	A	2	**2**	**B**	**1**
2	**5**	B	2	**3**	**B**	**0.67**
2	**6**	A	2	**5**	**B**	**0.33**
2	**7**	C	2	**9**	**B**	**0**
2	**8**	D	2	**7**	**C**	**1**
2	**9**	B	2	**10**	**C**	**0**
2	**10**	C	2	**1**	**D**	**1**
2	**11**	A	2	**8**	**D**	**0**
1	**12**	D	1	**14**	**A**	**1**
1	**13**	B	1	**15**	**A**	**0.67**
1	**14**	A	1	**18**	**A**	**0.33**
1	**15**	A	1	**23**	**A**	**0**
1	**16**	C	1	**13**	**B**	**–**
1	**17**	C	1	**16**	**C**	**1**
1	**18**	A	1	**17**	**C**	**0.67**
1	**19**	D	1	**20**	**C**	**0.33**
1	**20**	C	1	**25**	**C**	**0**
1	**21**	D	1	**12**	**D**	**1**
1	**22**	D	1	**19**	**D**	**0.75**
1	**23**	A	1	**21**	**D**	**0.5**
1	**24**	D	1	**22**	**D**	**0.25**
1	**25**	C	1	**24**	**D**	**0**

Notes: This table illustrates how Relative Rank is calculated using a hypothetical 25-member Arkansas House populated with legislators who were either just elected or are serving their second term.

In summary, we use legislators' *Relative Rank* as our independent variable and analyze its effects within the fully exchangeable legislators who share the same chamber-cohort-caucus district. Note that, as a result, we do not analyze only one experiment; instead, we pool the results from a series of many smaller experiments, one in each year-chamber-cohort-caucus district group (see Table 1). For this reason, we also drop legislators who have no peers in their cohort and caucus district (such as legislator 13 in Table 1) from the analysis; these legislators have no counterfactual peers for comparison. We account for this pooling across the year-chamber-cohort-caucus district groups by including fixed effects for these groups in the analysis.

CONTRASTING *RELATIVE RANK* AND TYPICAL MEASURES OF LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE ASSIGNMENT QUALITY

One may wonder why a committee assignment lottery in the Arkansas legislature would provide useful data for broader theories of legislative organization. Box 1

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compares the determinants of the committee assignment process in Arkansas to the process elsewhere in order to illustrate the benefits of studying this question in the Arkansas context.

Box 1
The Benefits of Using Arkansas to Study the Effects of Committees

	Typical process	Arkansas lottery
Major determinant of committee assignment desirability	Party leader regard and strategy	Lottery assignment
Is this determinant exogenous?	No	Yes
How is this determinant measured?	With proxies	Directly

In most other legislatures, party leaders are thought to hold some legislators in higher regard than others as a result of their service and loyalty to the party. This regard cannot be measured directly and is sometimes proxied with party unity scores (e.g., Cox and McCubbins 2005). Moreover, party leader regard and strategy is also endogenous to other aspects of the legislators' career that might influence their assignment choices and legislators' behavior, such as the safeness of legislators' seats.

Unlike the regard party leaders have for legislators, this first stage of the assignment process (*Relative Rank*) is both exogenous and directly measurable in Arkansas. Although there are undoubtedly other factors that influence whether legislators achieve their goals, these factors will be uncorrelated with the assignment mechanism in our data—the randomized lottery—whereas in traditional data they may be highly correlated with the assignment mechanism—the strategic decisions party leaders make. Moreover, although party leader regard cannot be measured in other legislatures, we can observe legislators' *Relative Rank* directly.

In neither Arkansas nor in other legislatures can we directly measure the desirability of each committee to each legislator. However, as with other studies, we are not ultimately interested in the average effects of legislators being assigned to particular committees; we are interested in the effect of legislators' ability to win the assignments they want.[4] Because a chance to choose one's own assignment is randomly determined in Arkansas, we can measure the impact of legislators having a better chance of getting their preferred assignments (the first stage of the process) directly on their outcomes. This makes increases in *Relative Rank* similar to hypothetical exogenous increases in party leader regard we would ideally deliver in other legislatures.

[4]This distinction is important because different committees may have different values to different legislators. For example, legislators from rural districts may accrue greater benefits from being placed on the Agriculture committee than legislators from urban districts.

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Table 2
Balance of Covariates across Relative Rank and Seniority Score

Independent variables	Dependent variable: relative rank	Dependent variable: absolute seniority rank
Legislator is a democrat	0.023	−4.732
	(0.031)	(2.845)
Median age	−0.001	−0.018
	(0.004)	(0.322)
Median household income (in $10,000s)	0.007	0.258
	(0.019)	(1.699)
Black percent	−0.128	−4.161
	(0.087)	(7.834)
Asian percent	−1.281	−32.54
	(1.485)	(133.4)
Hispanic percent	−0.383	−6.980
	(0.256)	(22.98)
Rural percent	−0.022	−5.063
	(0.065)	(5.811)
Constant	0.542**	48.63**
	(0.175)	(15.78)
R^2	0.0120	0.0094
N	673	673

Notes: In the first column, the dependent variable is the scaled random seniority rank of each legislator within their caucus district. The variable ranges from 0 to 1, with legislators assigned to 1 as the most senior. In the second column, dependent variable is the seniority rank of each legislator within their caucus district. The variable ranges from 1 to 100 in the House and 1 to 35 in the Senate, with legislators assigned to 1 as the most senior. *No results are significant at the 0.10 level.*

ADDITIONAL CHECKS: THE DESIRABILITY OF COMMITTEES AND PRE-TREATMENT BALANCE

Although our statistical model does not rely upon measures of each committee's desirability to each legislator, the Appendix verifies that committees in Arkansas are at least meaningfully heterogeneous in their desirability to legislators (see especially Figures A1 and A2 in the supplementary Appendix).

Table 2 also presents a balance check on whether the legislator's partisanship or characteristics of their districts[5] predict either the relative rank metric or legislators' original seniority numbers. In both cases, the pre-treatment covariates do not predict legislators' treatment status. This gives us additional confidence that the randomization was successful and no other confounding factors lead some legislators to gain their preferred committee assignments within chamber-cohort-caucus district groupings.

[5]Unfortunately, the US Census only began providing this legislative district level data beginning with the 2000 Census. However, the seniority selection process has remained the same throughout the past several decades, so we do not expect that our results would have differed if we had access to such data for previous decades.

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DATA AND DEPENDENT VARIABLES

Our analysis uses 2,173 legislator-term observations from the period 1977–2011.[6] We analyze thirteen dependent variables related to three aspects of legislators' careers and goals: legislators' electoral success, chamber leadership, and policy productivity.

For electoral goals, we used data from Carsey et al. (2007) and the Arkansas Secretary of State's website on whether each legislator won re-election, lost their primary re-election, lost their general re-election, ran for or won higher office, retired, was opposed in the general election, and was opposed in the primary election, as well as their general and primary election vote shares. We collected the amount of campaign money that each incumbent raised from www.followthemoney.org.

For chamber leadership, we collected data from the *Arkansas Legislative Digest* on whether legislators served in party or chamber leadership.

Policy productivity variables were only available for the years 2005–2008. For those years we collected data from the *Arkansas Legislative Digest* on the number of bills legislators filed and the number of bills they passed, a metric many other scholars have used to measure policy productivity and effectiveness.

Last, we used members' roll call votes from 1997–2010 to measure the percentage of the time they vote with their party on roll calls where the majority of Democrats opposed the majority of Republicans (*Party Unity*); and the percentage of the time they vote with their party on roll calls where the majority of Democrats opposed the majority of Republicans *and* their party *lost the vote*, i.e., when the majority of their party is rolled (*Party Unity (Losing Votes)*).

RESULTS: ARE COMMITTEE ASSIGNMENTS VALUABLE TO LEGISLATORS?

Table 3 presents the estimated benefits that legislators gain from obtaining their preferred committee assignments. In all the regressions the independent variable is *Relative Rank*, the scaled randomized seniority of legislators within their year-chamber-cohort-caucus district that allows them to pick from a much larger and more desirable set of committees. Because *Relative Rank* varies from 0 to 1, the coefficient on this variable indicates the estimated difference between the most and least senior member within each cohort—that is, between the cohort members who have the most and least choice in their assignments. These limiting cases are roughly analogous to the situations in which a hypothetical party leader wished to reward

[6]There are 2,431 legislator-term observations during this period. However, only 2,173 of these observations are used because some legislators were the only ones elected in their caucus district in their cohort, and thus were not subject to any randomization, and because some committee assignment data was missing from 1977.

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Table 3

Effect of Seniority within Cohort (*Relative Rank*) on Outcomes of Interest (OLS)

	Electoral goals											
	Win re-election		*Lose primary*		*Lose general*		*Run for higher office*		*Win higher office*		*Retire*	
	F.E.	No F.E.	F.E.	No F.E.	F.E.	No F.E.	F.E.	No F.E.	F.E.	No F.E.	F.E.	No F.E.
Coeff.	0.012	0.026	−0.001	−0.004	0.001	0.001	−0.002	−0.002	0.008	0.008	−0.009	−0.018
Std. Error	(0.021)	(0.029)	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.018)	(0.023)
# Obs.	1,875	1,875	1,875	1,875	1,875	1,875	2,084	2,084	2,084	2,084	1,875	1,875
# F.E.	433	–	433	–	433	–	441	–	441	–	433	–
	Opposed in general		*Opposed in primary*		*Vote share in general*		*Vote share in primary*		*Money raised*			
	F.E.	No F.E.	F.E.	No F.E.	F.E.	No F.E.	F.E.	No F.E.	F.E.	No F.E.		
Coeff.	0.014	0.010	0.005	0.000	−0.012	−0.016	−0.026	−0.006	−9,164	−2,895		
Std. Error	(0.019)	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.021)	(0.031)	(0.020)	(0.038)	(0.022)	(6,512)	(6,327)		
# Obs.	1,875	1,875	1,875	1,875	207	207	223	223	453	453		
# F.E.	433	–	433	–	133	–	163	–	61	–		
	Chamber goal		**Policy productivity goals**				**Roll call voting**					
	Serve as chamber leader		*Number of bills filed*		*Number of bills passed*		*Party unity*		*Party unity (Losing votes)*			
	F.E.	No F.E.	F.E.	No F.E.	F.E.	No F.E.	F.E.	No F.E.	F.E.	No F.E.		
Coeff.	−0.002	−0.002	−2.83	−2.54	−0.74	−0.56	0.002	0.001	−0.005	−0.003		
Std. Error	(0.013)	(0.013)	(1.85)	(2.19)	(1.25)	(1.51)	(0.013)	(0.014)	(0.022)	(0.024)		
# Obs.	2,084	2,084	264	264	264	264	1,043	1,043	1,001	1,001		
# F.E.	441	–	30	–	30	–	133	–	133			

Notes: Fixed effects refer to the groups in which the randomization takes place (i.e., for each year-chamber-cohort-caucus district group). The independent variable for all regressions, relative rank, is the scaled random seniority rank of each legislator within their randomization group. The variable ranges from 0 to 1, with legislators assigned to 1 as the most senior. Coefficients represent the estimated effects of being the most senior member instead of the least senior member. No outcomes are significant at the 0.10 level. Ns differ in regressions with dependent variables for which data is not available for all years.

a loyal legislator with the best available committee assignment that more senior members had not already taken or, alternatively, consign a disloyal one to the last remaining assignment after all others legislators' wishes were granted.[7]

The dependent variables, each described in the previous section, are listed under each of the headings in Table 3. For each outcome, we present the results from a regression without any fixed effects and the results from a regression with fixed effects for year-chamber-cohort-caucus district (i.e., the groups within which the randomizations occur). Table 3 shows that legislators' relative rank does not have a statistically significant effect on any measures of their election outcomes. Legislators who have their pick of committee assignments are not meaningfully more likely to win their primary or general election bids, raise campaign money, run for or win for higher office, deter opponents, or increase their vote share. We also find that legislators are no more likely to write nor pass bills as a result of their seniority. Further seniority does not affect legislators' probability of becoming a party leader, nor how they vote.[8]

In their totality, the results are consistent across outcomes and highly surprising in light of decades of relatively unchallenged conventional wisdom about the benefits legislators accrue from winning their preferred committee assignments. We find no statistically significant effects for a legislators' seniority on the outcomes of interest we identified (with a generous threshold of $p < 0.10$). Further, our estimates are based on a large number of observations and have substantively small standard errors. For example, the 95% confidence interval for the estimate of the decreased probability that a legislator loses a general election because of their seniority extends only to 1.2 percentage points.[9]

EXTERNAL VALIDITY

As with any data in the social sciences, results from this one setting are ultimately not dispositive about other contexts. For example, Arkansas implemented legislative

[7]Legislators can be expected to choose their most preferred available choice since they choose for themselves (i.e., in a "serial dictatorship" arrangement; see Satterthwaite and Sonnenschein 1981).

[8]This rules out an alternative explanation for the null findings, namely that legislators receive electoral benefits from more attractive committee assignments but use this additional "political capital" to vote more with their party. In this way, committee membership might grant members leeway to vote against their constituents' preferences (Cain, Ferejohn, Fiorina 1987, 87). However, the results show that legislators with more attractive committee assignments are not more likely to vote with their party. The reliable pattern in other legislatures that party leaders place more loyal legislators on more prestigious committees may be a result of party leader attempts to stack committees with reliable loyalists.

[9]We also tested whether the results varied by legislators' tenure in office by rerunning the models and including dummy variable for legislators in the second term and another for legislators serving in their third-plus term (i.e., their third, fourth, fifth, etc. term) and interaction terms between these dummy variables and relative rank. The results of the analysis are presented in Table A2 of the supplementary materials. The results confirm the findings here. In a few cases the effect of relative rank is significant, but in those few cases it goes in the wrong direction.

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term limits in the 1990s, which may have decreased the value of committees.[10] Similarly, one party dominated Arkansas for most of the time period under study, possibly decreasing the need for members of the majority party to secure benefits from their committee assignments.

Despite these differences, there are many ways in which the Arkansas legislature is similar to other legislatures. For example, the majority party in Arkansas exercises power that is comparable to the level of power enjoyed in other states (Anzia and Jackman 2013). Similarly, committees have sole jurisdiction over large policy areas, supervise regulatory agencies, are responsible for doling out substantial sums of state money, and are de facto veto points for legislation in their jurisdiction. The committees and parties in the Arkansas legislature are similar enough to those in other legislatures that scholars should take interest in these results and consider revisiting the importance of committee assignments to legislators' career goals. That committee assignments have large effects on legislators' careers is a central assumption in many theories of party discipline and legislative organization, but most existing studies are unable to identify the causal effect of assignments on legislators' success. At least in Arkansas, where persuasive causal identification is possible, legislators appear to reap at most relatively minor benefits from winning their preferred committee assignments.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

For supplementary material for this article, please visit Cambridge Journals Online http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/XPS.2014.30.

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[10]Although we cannot definitely speak to what would have occurred, had Arkansas not implemented term limits when it did, we reran the main analysis (i.e., Table 3) with interaction terms for each decade to see if in one of the early decades relative rank had a significant effect. The results, which are provided in the supplementary materials (see Table A3), show that the effects do not change much at all. In fact, the only coefficient that achieves statistical significance actually points in the wrong direction.

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