

Just One of Those Things: Parties and Exclusive Committees in the U.S. House

Steven S. Smith¹  and Patrick Rickert²

¹School of Politics and Global Studies, Arizona State University, Washington University in St. Louis (Emeritus), Tempe, AZ, USA and ²Department of Political Science, Rollins College, Winter Park, FL, USA

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Corresponding author: Steven S. Smith;
Email: stevensmith@asu.edu

Abstract

When and why did House parties identify exclusive committees? The nexus of parties and standing committees defines the distribution of power in the U.S. House of Representatives, shapes legislators' careers, and affects Congress's ability to address the nation's problems. Yet, political science provides inadequate and often misleading characterizations of the parties and the most important standing committees. We provide missing detail and offer a historical perspective on party efforts to arrange standing committees in the period since the revolt against Speaker Joseph Cannon in 1909–1910. Our narrative offers a foundation for explaining party efforts to regulate committee membership and meet legislators' demands. For the first time, we define three periods in committee assignment limitations. In doing so, we place key events in historical context: We report that the modern exclusive committees (Appropriations, Rules, and Ways and Means) did not become defined until the 1950s; the identification by the two parties of a larger set of exclusive committees for which a one-assignment limitation applied began decades earlier; the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946 placed a one-assignment limitation in House rules that had been party practice for three decades by then. In recent decades, deep partisanship has been accompanied by a loosening, not tightening, of restrictions. In fact, there are no fully exclusive committees remaining in practice.

When and why were exclusive committees identified by the two parties in the U.S. House of Representatives? There is no answer in today's political science. Our narrative and analysis provide the first long-term view of party management of the committee system that must be understood to answer this question.

The parties, standing committees, the parent chamber, and relationships among them, define the distribution of power in the U.S. House. The parties asserted control over committee assignments in the antebellum period, creating an opportunity for the majority party to shape the composition of committee majorities and leading political scientists to label House parties “organizational cartels” even before they became “procedural cartels” late in the 19th century.¹ Central to making committee assignments in the 20th century, we emphasize, was setting limitations on the number of assignments members may hold. Textbook accounts of modern House standing committees describe three (or four or five) committees as “exclusive” committees. Appropriations, Rules, Ways, and Means, and, in recent Congresses, Commerce and Financial Services are considered to be so important to party interests, such a good platform for their members' campaign fundraising efforts, and so prestigious that a member of one of those committees may not serve on another standing committee.

Those three House committees, quite deservedly, drew the attention of political scientists who provided the first detailed scholarly accounts of the internal politics of committees. Fenno's landmark study of the Committee on Appropriations, *The Power of the Purse: Appropriations Politics in Congress*,² and Manley's complementary study of the Committee on Ways and Means, *The Politics of Finance: The House Committee on Ways and Means*,³ were motivated by the central role of those committees in drafting legislation in two of the most important policy domains, spending and taxation. The Committee on Rules, which controls the flow of major legislation to the House floor, is the central actor in most theoretical accounts of party influence in the House.⁴

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¹Jeffrey A. Jenkins and Charles Stewart III, *Fighting for the Speakership: The House and the Rise of Party Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

²Richard F. Fenno Jr, *The Power of the Purse: Appropriations Politics in Congress* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1966).

³John E. Manley, *The Politics of Finance: The House Committee on Ways and Means* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1970).

⁴John Aldrich and David W. Rohde. “The Logic of Conditional Party Government: Revisiting the Electoral Connection,” in L. Dodd and B. Oppenheimer, eds., 7th ed. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2001: 260–92. Stanley Bach and Steven S. Smith. *Managing Uncertainty in the House of Representatives: Adaptation and Innovation in Special Rules*. (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1988). Gary Cox and Matthew McCubbins. *Setting the Agenda: Responsible Party Government in the U.S. House of Representatives*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Because of their centrality to the legislative process, these committees are key to understanding policymaking in the United States and the parties' approaches to putting certain legislators in charge of writing legislation.

Left at that the story is seriously deficient. No study or textbook of the modern Congress reports when and why exclusive committees were first created. Moreover, and perhaps more remarkable, no textbook of recent decades observes that Republicans have long allowed some of its exclusive committee members to serve on other standing committees, even having a formal party rule to address the matter in the case of Rules Committee membership. Democrats have been more observant of exclusivity, but it has been hardly noticed that they, too, have granted many waivers to their rules in recent years. In the 118th Congress (2023–2024), every Rules member, Democrat and Republican, had a second assignment; some even had an assignment to a second “exclusive” committee.

These deficiencies in treatments of party-committee relations are more than mere curiosities or trivial one-time or temporary matters. Political scientists have theorized about the allocation of committee assignments for decades, but their treatments of exclusive committees have been sketchy, lacked historical depth, and have not yet accounted for recent developments that put some of those ideas to the test. Moreover, the House has endured a generation of deep partisan polarization, keen inter-party competition for control of the House, and strong central party leadership that was not in place when the most influential studies of committee assignments were conducted in the 1970s and 1980s.

Our central concerns are gaps in our knowledge and their implications of theoretical accounts of party-committee relations. In seeking to determine when and why were exclusive committees identified by the two parties, we will observe how the two parties differ, the modest role of the legislative reorganization acts of 1946 and 1970, and the somewhat surprising effect of intensifying inter-party competition and partisan polarization on party treatment of exclusive committees.

The core of this paper is, necessarily, a narrative account of committee assignment limitations employed by the parties since the revolt against Speaker “Uncle Joe” Cannon in 1909–1910. We uncover three distinct eras in committee assignment practices since 1911:

- The first era, 1911–1953, is a long period in which about a dozen committees were recognized as exclusive. The era encompasses the consolidation of the committee system under the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946, which reflected longstanding practices far more than creating new ones, and stretched to 1953, which proved to be the starting point for a second era.
- The second era, from 1953 to 1994, provided for three exclusive committees and is the era that informs even today's textbook treatments of committee assignments.
- A third era, the period since 1994, is marked by the designation of two more committees exclusive and a loosening of restrictions on members of “exclusive” committees.

Remarkably, accounts of exclusive committees and committee assignment limitations have not given attention to this periodization of important developments. Explanations of party practices, of course, turn on timing and circumstances, which, in this context, have been ignored. We provide a new account, one that replaces standard accounts that focus on the second era, sets an appropriate context essential for understanding the importance of the

Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946 and emergence of modern exclusive committees, and illustrates the path dependence and multiplicity of political motivations common to long-term patterns of institutional change. We return to these themes at the end of the paper.

1. The partisan construction of standing committees

Masters's 1961 paper is the first political science publication to observe that three committees—Appropriations, Rules, and Ways and Means—were “exclusive” committees.⁵ Masters reported this was the practice of the House Democrats and House Republicans followed a “similar practice.” When and why the rule or practice was adopted was not reported by Masters or anyone else. Subsequent studies simply asserted Masters's account as sufficient or incorrectly claimed that those committees gained this status (alongside a categorization of the other committees into “semi-exclusive” and “nonexclusive”) in the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946.^{6,7} All studies since 1961 have accepted Masters's categorization without question.

Since Masters's paper appeared, fitting the exclusive committees into theory and empirical tests has been a challenge. Studies of the committee assignments that legislators request and receive often set aside Rules and Ways and Means because they were seldom requested. For the Democrats, Ways, and Means members, as their party's committee on committees, were appointed outside of the committee assignment process that applied to other committees. Appointments to both Rules and Ways and Means were known to be strongly influenced, if only informally, by the speaker.⁸ In 1973, Democrats transferred committee assignment duties from Ways and Means Democrats to a new Steering and Policy Committee, made their speaker chair of the committee, and gave the speaker sole authority to nominate Rules members.⁹ The 1973 reforms put Ways and Means back in committee assignment studies but moved Rules out of play. As a result, more recent studies of assignment winners and losers generally have included Appropriations and Ways and Means but excluded Rules.¹⁰

⁵Nicholas A. Masters, “Committee Assignments in the U.S. House of Representatives.” *American Political Science Review* 55 (1961): 345–57.

⁶It is not obvious why these committees gained such vaunted reputations. In the *Congressional Record* in 1940, Wright Patman makes reference to the “big six” committees – Appropriations, Banking and Currency, Interstate and Foreign Commerce, Judiciary, Rules, and Ways and Means (CR 12 Sep 1940).

⁷Kenneth A. Shepsle, *The Giant Jigsaw Puzzle: Democratic Committee Assignments in the Modern House*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). Irwin N. Gertzog, “The Routinization of Committee Assignments in the U.S. House of Representatives.” *American Journal of Political Science* 20 (1976): 693–712.

⁸Nicholas A. Masters, “Committee Assignments in the U.S. House of Representatives.” *American Political Science Review* 55 (1961): 345–57. Charles L. Clapp, *The Congressman: His Work As He Sees It*. (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1963). John E. Manley, *The Politics of Finance: The House Committee on Ways and Means*. (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1970). George Goodwin Jr., *The Little Legislatures: Committees in Congress*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1970). Committee on Rules. *A History of the Committee on Rules*. Government Printing Office. 97th Congress, 2d Session, 1983.

⁹David W Rohde and Kenneth A. Shepsle. “Democratic Committee Assignments in the House of Representatives: Strategic Aspects of a Social Choice Process.” *American Political Science Review* 67 (1973): 889–905. Shepsle, *The Giant Jigsaw Puzzle*. Bruce A. Ray, and Steven S. Smith. “Committee Size in the U.S. Congress.” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 9 (1984): 679–95.

¹⁰E. Scott Adler and John S. Lapinski, “Demand-Side Theory and Congressional Committee Composition: A Constituency Characteristics Approach.” *American Journal of Political Science* 41 (1997): 895–918. Gary Cox and Mathew McCubbins. *Legislative*

Westfield,¹¹ in contrast, gives some attention to the exclusive committees in his study of the growth of committee sizes, which, of course, is directly related to assignment limitations. His theory is that leaders expand committees in response to demand and acquire an ounce of loyalty each time they do so, but a seat's value to members and leaders is diluted as committee seats multiply. The experience of Rules and of Ways and Means, which did not exhibit the same pattern of growth as other committees in the period since 1947, led him to conjecture that the particularly high value of seats of those committees motivated party leaders to be particularly sensitive to any dilution in value—and party influence—that would come with increasing their sizes. This twist on the core theory was offered with no direct evidence about leaders' motivations. Westfield also did not have a meaningful explanation for the size of Appropriations, often the largest House committee; he merely observed its increases in size were not as proportionate to party representation in the House as were most other committees, implying that it therefore fit the pattern of Rules and Ways and Means.

These and more recent studies of committee assignments¹² leave us wanting on two counts. First, and most important, we learn nothing about the origin of the modern treatment of a small number of committees as exclusive, which may lead to limited or even incorrect inferences about legislators' strategies in organizing a committee assignment process. Second, the effects of intense partisanship on party treatment of exclusive committees in the most recent decades are beyond the time frame of existing studies, and studies that do include the modern era spend little time theorizing about the particular role of exclusivity.¹³ Our understanding of party treatment of committee assignment limitations remains, perhaps misleadingly, in the 1960s.

2. Themes in a theory of committee assignment limitations

Previous scholarship demonstrates that five forces shape most legislative strategies and important features of congressional policy making, including the parties' committee assignment practices. First, and most obvious, are the sizes of the parties. The sizes and party ratios of House committees are a direct effect of party sizes in the full House. The majority party, if united, controls committee sizes and ratios to further its efforts to achieve electoral and policy goals.¹⁴ The minority party can negotiate with the majority party, but ultimately its practices must adjust to the number of committee slots the majority party allocates to it. The committee assignment practices of the two parties are necessarily entwined with each other.

Leviathan: Party Government in the House. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). Shepsle, *The Giant Jigsaw Puzzle*. Ray and Smith, "Committee Size in the U.S. Congress".

¹¹Louis P. Westfield, "Majority Party Leadership and the Committee System in the House of Representatives," *American Political Science Review*, 68 (December 1974): 1593–604.

¹²Scott A. Frisch and Sean Q. Kelly, *The Politics of Committee Assignments in the U.S. House*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006).

¹³E. Scott Adler and Adam Cayton, "Shelter in a Storm: Campaign Fundraising, Party Competition, and the Changing Nature of Congressional Committee Assignments." *Congress & the Presidency* 48 (2021): 287–318. Nicole Asmussen and Adam Ramey, "When Loyalty is Tested: Do Party Leaders Use Committee Assignments as Rewards?" *Congress & the Presidency* 45 (2018): 41–65. Pearson, Kathryn, *Party Discipline in the U.S. House of Representatives*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015).

¹⁴Steven S. Smith, *Party Influence in Congress*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Second, the majority party and its major factions seek negative and positive agenda control¹⁵—to block unfriendly legislation and advantage desired legislation. In practice, agenda control involves the efforts of the speaker and committees, the membership of which are determined by the parties' committee assignment processes, to block or forward legislative proposals for action on the floor. As a factor in committee assignment decisions, agenda control weighs most heavily for a few committees and party organs whose jurisdiction over procedural and substantive policy most directly affect the majority party's interests. From the early Congresses, the Committee on Ways and Means, initially with jurisdiction over both revenues and expenditures, was central to party interests. Appropriations was formed in the Civil War to reduce the power of Ways and Means and Rules became an agenda-setting central arm of the speaker in the 1880s, leaving these committees as noticeably distinctive in the breadth of their jurisdictions and their centrality to party and factional interests at the end of the 19th century.

Third, factional politics within the parties, including conflicting state delegation interests, influence choices about committee sizes and assignments. Factional conflict may shape both the mechanisms for making committee assignments and assignment decisions. This is well understood feature of party reforms of the Democrats in the early 1970s, when the liberal faction successfully advocated transferring the committee assignment duty from Ways and Means Democrats to a leader-led steering committee. We should be aware of this possibility in other eras, too.

Fourth, the desire of every legislator to acquire valuable committee assignments generates tensions even in the best of times for a party. Because parties seek to gain and maintain majority party status, party leaders want to be responsive to members' requests for committee assignments that may improve their reelection prospects. At times, this may require that party, leadership, and faction interests in controlling committee sizes and composition be compromised to accommodate members' requests for coveted assignments.

Fifth, the duration of basic political conditions—the size, competitiveness, and polarization of the parties—affects the degree to which committee assignment practices settle into a pattern that is reflected in members' expectations and party and chamber rules. Long stretches of control of the House tend to produce vested interests in a set of party practices and fix patterns that are disrupted only when internal party factionalism erupts or changes in party control occur.

These general propositions serve as guidelines for our characterizations of key developments in assignment limitations since 1911. No rigorous test of their implications is intended. Rather, we accept that all five factors shape the parties' committee assignment regimes and observe their application to the history of exclusive committees in the House. We return to these themes after reporting important details of the last century of developments.

3. Committee assignment limitations since the revolt against speaker cannon

With the need to fill holes and extend threads in our accounts of House parties and committee assignment limitations, we provide a chronological narrative organized by three major eras that

¹⁵Cox and McCubbins, *Setting the Agenda*. Smith, *Party Influence in Congress*.

the narrative itself defines. House parties, we show, created, elaborated, and revised limitations on committee assignments in a path-dependent pattern that reflected resistance to radical change from legislators with a vested interest in inherited arrangements. Wherever we can, we provide direct evidence from journalistic and archival sources on the motivations, actions, and policies of key actors within the parties.¹⁶ We document the record of committee seats and members' assignments with data drawn from Cannon, Nelson, and Stewart,¹⁷ Stewart and Woon,¹⁸ and Frisch and Kelly,¹⁹ along with data we collected for the most recent Congresses.

4. Post-Cannon, 1910–1952s

The revolt against Speaker Joseph Cannon in 1909–1910 left the two parties with a need to invent new committee assignment processes and spurred a decade of innovations. Cannon's Republican caucus had become wholly dependent on the speaker to manage this task, but the Democratic minority had some limited experience in recommending committee lists to Cannon. When the Democrats took majority control of the House in 1911, they had the House adopt a rule requiring that standing committees be elected by the House.²⁰ The Democrats immediately made the party's members on Ways and Means, which was chaired by the majority leader, their committee on committees. Although this was properly viewed as a democratizing reform in response to rank-and-file members' expectations, the influence of the majority leader, then Oscar Underwood (D-AR), was greatly enhanced. The Democratic caucus barred Ways and Means members from taking a second assignment, making it an exclusive committee, primarily to avoid giving those Democrats the power to appoint themselves to other valuable committees. The Democrats also initiated the practice of having the carryover Ways and Means members reelected to the committee by the House during the first or second day of a new Congress so that they could get an early start in arranging the slates for other committees, with vacancies on their own committee filled a few days after. This practice was continued until Ways and Means Democrats lost their committee on committees duties in 1973.

The 1911 Democratic caucus also adopted a resolution that no member should be appointed to more than one of fourteen major committees, although major committee members could have other "nonmajor" assignments.²¹ To accommodate most Democrats, the sizes of these committees were increased modestly from 19 or 20 to 21, with Democrats taking 14 seats on each while holding only 58 percent of all House seats.²² At the time, the House had over 60 committees, most of which conducted little or no legislative business while the fourteen major committees did most of the work of the House. While Ways and Means, Appropriations,

and Rules were among the fourteen,²³ there were no other special limitations for members of those three committees. By virtue of his chairmanship of Ways and Means and influence on committee assignments, Underwood—and, to a lesser degree, Claude Kitchin (D-NC), his successor as Ways and Means chair—overshadowed Speaker Champ Clark (D-MO) as a force among House Democrats during the 1910s in structuring the assignment process.

In contrast, the Republicans allowed the minority leader, James Mann (R-IL), a Cannon ally, to compose committee lists, subject to caucus approval, which represented a minimal change in party practice after the uprising against Cannon, who, Mann noted, advised him on making assignments.²⁴ Four years later, Mann, still in charge of committee lists, faced an embarrassment of riches with sixty new Republican members who needed committee assignments. Still in the minority, Mann was left with the committee seats allocated by the majority party and struggled to find desirable seats for the new members. His response was to limit members to one seat on nine major committees, thereby creating a handful of exclusive committees, and to give most other members two committees.

In 1917, the slim Democratic majority had the House adopt a rule that each party's committee list resolution was not divisible, thereby protecting the parties' committee lists from objections and cross-party deals on the floor. Republicans, many of whom resented Mann's heavy-handedness and partiality in making assignments, created a committee on committees for the first time, adopted a party rule that a floor leader could not chair or serve as ranking member on Ways and Means, and barred committee chairs from sitting on Rules. Mann, however, named himself to the committee on committees and had a subcommittee that he chaired devise committee lists that the full committee approved.

The new Republican majority of 1919 treated most of the major committees, sometimes referred to as "principal committees," by assigning a standard 13-8 party ratio on major committees, with the exceptions of Ways and Means (14-8) and Rules (7-5).²⁵ Remarkably, Mann lost to Frederick Gillett (R-MA) to be the Republican nominee for speaker that year and then refused to be considered for majority leader, but he remained in charge of committee assignments. Often overlooked is that Gillett and Mann proposed competing plans for reorganizing the committee on committees. Gillett's plan gave each state with a Republican a seat and one vote on the committee on committees; Mann's plan gave a seat to each state with a Republican but gave each committee member votes equal to the number of Republican members from the state. Mann's plan, which was adopted because it appeared to be more democratic, gave Mann control of the committee on committees because of his advantage over Gillett backers among large-state Republicans.²⁶ He proceeded to have the committee create a subcommittee of one, himself, to construct the party's committee lists for the nonmajor committees.²⁷ In 1921, Mann created a subcommittee of three members on which he sat to prepare all committee

¹⁶See Appendix: Notes on Sources.

¹⁷David Cannon Garrison Nelson, and Charles Stewart. Historical Congressional Standing Committees, 1st to 79th Congresses, 1789-1947. https://web.mit.edu/cstewart/www/data/data_page.html#1.

¹⁸Stewart III, Charles, and Jonathan Woon. Congressional Committee Assignments, 103rd to 105th Congresses, 1993-998. https://web.mit.edu/cstewart/www/data/data_page.html#2.

¹⁹Frisch and Kelly, *The Politics of Committee Assignments in the House of Representatives*.

²⁰*Congressional Record*, April 4, 1911, 11.

²¹George Rothwell Brown. *The Leadership of Congress*. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1922).

²²*Congressional Record*, April 11, 1911, 163.

²³For the period before 1946, contemporary journalistic accounts, congressional and personal documents, and later scholarship inconsistently identifies between nine and fourteen committees as "major." The discrepancy lies in each party having different lists of major committees and some committees moving from major to non-major status during the time period. No account exists that detail precisely what committees were considered major in each Congress, so we acknowledge that there is some incompleteness and inconsistency in our account.

²⁴Congressional Record, April 11, 1911, 165.

²⁵LAT 6 March 1919, 14.

²⁶WP 2 March 1919, S4.

²⁷NYT 12 March 1919, 1.

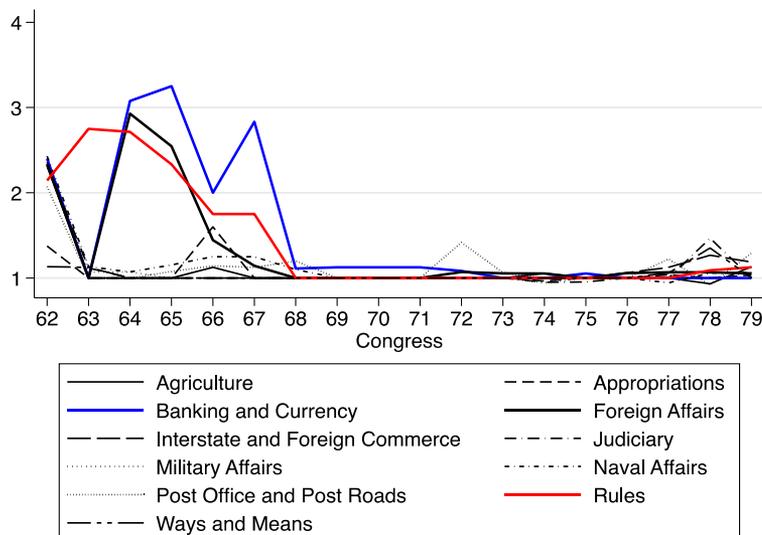


Figure 1. Mean Committee Assignments for the Democratic Members of Committees on Galloway’s List of Exclusive Committees, 62nd to 79th Congresses (1911–1946).

lists.²⁸ In fact, using a subcommittee of the committee on committees, eventually called an executive committee, along with the large-state advantage, became the long-term practice of the party and skewed top committee appointments in favor of large state delegations.²⁹ The practice was not successfully challenged until the late 1980s.

It is noteworthy that the first post-Cannon decade produced different strategies for making committee assignments in the two parties. In the minority, Republicans stayed with one-man rule. Once again in the majority, they adopted the Mann plan, which allowed their committee assignment process to remain dominated by members from a handful of large-state delegations. The Democrats, in contrast, relied on the party leadership to identify new members for the party’s Ways and Means contingent, often showing a bias in favor of members who would cooperate with the leadership and protect regionally vital policies, while balancing other factional interests. These patterns remained relevant decades later.³⁰

In 1920, the consolidation of eight House standing committees with some appropriations jurisdiction into a single appropriations committee, eliminating seven committees and making other modest changes, left a committee system that would experience only minor alterations until 1946. The appropriations consolidation created a committee that immediately was about as important to legislators and their parties as Ways and Means. Nevertheless, the parties continued to identify ten or more committees as major committees and to limit members to no more than one assignment on them.

In 1921, a Republican majority party attempted to apply its list of major committees and its assignment limitation to the minority Democrats, too. The party conference adopted a resolution to that effect and informed the Democrats, which led the Democrats to adopt a resolution of protest. Republicans stuck with their position, but the Democrats nevertheless sent to the House a committee list on which assignments for two members violated the Republican rule. The majority leader objected, but Republicans then met in conference and decided to allow the two Democrats to receive their

party-determined assignments. Otherwise, Democrats abided by the Republican rule that year.³¹

Only one observer, Galloway³², even mentions this pre-1946 period. Galloway, who directed the staff of the reform committee in 1945 and 1946, asserted that eleven committees were exclusive between the 66th and 80th Congresses (1919–1946): Agriculture, Appropriations, Banking, Foreign Affairs, Interstate and Foreign Commerce, Judiciary, Military Affairs, Naval Affairs, Post Office, Rules, and Ways and Means. Galloway did not have the dates or the list of committees right, and he did not acknowledge that the practices of the two parties differed somewhat. In Figures 1 and 2, we report the mean number of committee assignments for the Democratic and Republican members of each committee on Galloway’s list of eleven exclusive committees for each Congress between 1911 and 1946. A mean of 1.0 indicates that members of a committee held a mean of just one committee assignment—on that committee. A mean higher than 1.0 but lower than 2.0 indicates that a fraction of a committee held more assignments. Because some members were allowed a second minor assignment, the means tend to be slightly higher than 1.0, even for committees considered exclusive. From Figure 1, we can readily infer that Democrats treated all but four of Galloway’s committees as exclusive from 1911 through the 1946. One committee, Agriculture, became exclusive in 1913 and remained so. Banking, Foreign Affairs, and Rules were not regularly exclusive until the 1920s. Republicans, as we have indicated, delayed the identification of exclusive committees for a couple Congresses in the 1910s and then did not treat Banking and Rules as exclusive during most of the period. They added Foreign Affairs to the list in 1921.

The most obvious deviation from Galloway’s summary claim is the loosening of exclusivity for Republicans when they were a very small minority for three Congresses, 1933–1938. With the Democrats maintaining large committees to accommodate their members, the Republicans’ small minority party could not have filled its seats without breaking the practice of exclusivity, which

²⁸NYT 3 April 1921, 15.

²⁹Goodwin, *The Little Legislatures*.

³⁰Goodwin, *The Little Legislatures*. Masters, “Committee Assignments in the U.S. House of Representatives”.

³¹CR 18 April 1921, 408; AC 16 April 1921, 1; NYT 19 April 1921, 18; HDC, April 9, 1921; HDC April 13, 1921.

³²George B. Galloway, *History of the House of Representatives*. (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1976).

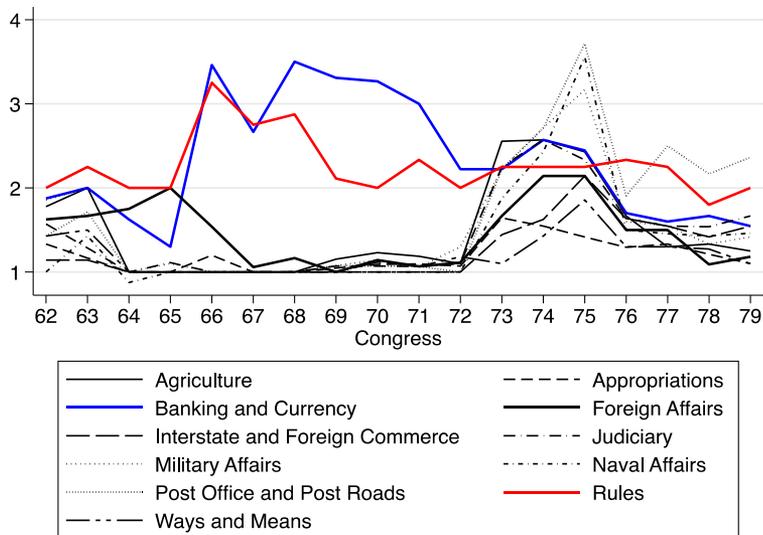


Figure 2. Mean Committee Assignments for the Republican Members of Committees on Galloway's List of Exclusive Committees, 62nd to 79th Congresses (1911-1946).

was almost two decades old by then. The members of every previously exclusive committee approached or exceeded two assignments on average in those Congresses. Republicans reverted to their pattern of exclusive committees once they returned to a sizable minority party in 1939, which suggests that the Republicans were quite committed to the scheme of having about a dozen exclusive committees that Mann imposed 24 years earlier.

The treatment of Rules by the two parties during the period is more of a puzzle, one that we have not solved. Democrats, but not the Republicans, included Rules among exclusive committees during this period. In 1922, Democrats treated Rules as exclusive (Figure 1) and explicitly included it among 13 "exclusive" committees in 1923.³³ As far as we can determine, Republicans did not formally recognize Rules as exclusive until they implemented the LRA of 1946 in 1947 (see below). On the face of it, Rules was as important to Republicans as Democrats.³⁴ For both parties, writing special rules for the consideration of major legislation was a regular duty for Rules. In the 1920s, conflict over the ease of getting progressive legislation to the floor put the committee put the committee in the middle of Republican factional politics that had implications for a wide range of legislation.³⁵ We have not found evidence for a plausible explanation for the differences between the parties in this respect.

Plainly, the identification of ten or more exclusive committees was standard practice for about three decades by the time the House and Senate created a joint committee to consider reforms of their committee systems in 1945. In 1943, two years before the joint committee convened and shepherded the LRA of 1946 to enactment, the *Washington Post* reported that a Democratic caucus rule provided that a major committee member cannot serve on "any other committee." However, the *Post* noted, the Democrats waived the rule for the "first time."³⁶ That same year, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that a California Democrat had to give up three

committees to take a seat on Agriculture and two other Democrats took major committee seats, making them ineligible "for any other committee seat."³⁷

Starting well before 1911, majority parties reserved special sizes and ratios for Rules, Ways and Means, and eventually Appropriations, and this continued thereafter. In 1919, we have noted, the Republicans identified twelve major committees, giving ten of them the same size and party ratio and reserving special sizes and ratios for Rules and Ways and Means. When Democrats complained about having to drop a member from Ways and Means, Republicans increased the committee the number of their own slots to maintain their ratio while accommodating the Democrat. Once the appropriations consolidation occurred in 1920, Appropriations acquired a sizable membership with a 20-15 party composition. It immediately created twelve subcommittees, matching the number of regular appropriations bills at the time and shifting the initial writing of those bills to the subcommittees. Appropriations grew to 39 in 1935 under the Democrats, to 40 in 1939 to 42 members in 1945. Ways and Means remained a modest 15-10 and Rules was 8-4 in 1945, as they had been for many years. By the 1940s, considerable variation had been acquired for other major committees, but nearly all of them had grown to only about twenty-eight members.

The approaching end of World War II and the New Deal experience motivated Congress in 1945 to authorize a Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress and consider reform its committee infrastructure. The resulting Legislative Reorganization Act (LRA) of 1946 reduced the number of House committees from 48 to 19 by consolidating the jurisdictions of committees. The LRA set a one-committee limit for all members for assignments to the 15 "major" committees, which were considered "exclusive" ("major" and "exclusive" were terms that had been used interchangeably since 1915). The act granted members the ability to take a second seat on one of the four remaining minor committees. A new Republican majority in 1947 incorporated the LRA provision in the standing rules as House Rule X.4 with little discussion.

The creation of fifteen exclusive committees, most of similar size, was entirely consistent with the firmly established practice of setting an assignment limitation for about a dozen committees. To

³³HDC, 2nd caucus, 1923.

³⁴The Rules Committee history (Committee on Rules, 288) indicates that the Democrats made Rules exclusive in 1925, without citing a source. The evidence depicted in Figure 1 indicates that no second assignments were given to Rules Democrats in 1923.

³⁵Committee on Rules, *A History of the Committee on Rules*.

³⁶WP 31 Jan 1943, 10; also see HDC, 78th Congress, 2nd caucus; WP 31 January, 1943, 10.

³⁷LAT 20 Jan 1943, 9.

be sure, the consolidation of the committee system under the LRA cost many members chairmanships or assignments to minor committees and drew criticism. The accompanying addition of staff, the creation of the Legislative Reference Service, and other institutional improvements were emphasized, too. But the one-committee limit was hardly mentioned in the hearings and reports of the joint committee or the floor debate that followed. It appeared to be treated as a natural by-product of consolidating the committee system and improving the legislative and oversight capacities of committees. In fact, it was extending a well-established practice to a few more committees.

It bears notice that factional politics in the House were transformed in the late 1930s and 1940s. The return of more Republicans, mostly conservative Republicans, at the expense of New Deal Democrats, and the breakaway contingent of southern Democrats, beginning in 1937, led to the emergence and growing strength of the “conservative coalition.” In the 1940s, 1950s, and into the 1960s, the conservative coalition held the balance of power in the House on a variety of issues—most prominently civil rights, but also on social welfare, health insurance, labor rights, and other issues. The retention of control of the House—and its key committees—by conservatives became a significant factor in House politics, including committee assignment politics over those decades. For Democrats, factional interests became a central feature of committee politics.

In 1951, Democrats chose to bring committee assignments to the floor without the intermediate step of gaining approval of the party caucus,³⁸ a practice that continued for years, as we confirmed by inspecting the minutes of Democratic caucus meetings held at the Library of Congress. Since 1911, the caucus had required the committee on committees to report nominations for committee assignments to the caucus for approval before they were sent to the House floor. The change in policy precluded caucus meetings in which appointments could be challenged by liberals and state delegations and gave Ways and Means Democrats, usually in consultation with Rayburn, greater leeway in allocating committee assignments. Liberals, through the Democratic Study Group, eventually proposed to institute caucus review in the mid-1960s but the issue was dropped at the time after Speaker John McCormack (D-MA) promised more favorable treatment of liberals. Not until the 1970s did the party reinstate the requirement of caucus approval.

Post-LRA of 1946, 1953–1994

The committee limitation rule of the LRA of 1946 was in place for only three Congresses. In January 1953, the Republicans became a small majority party and agreed with minority Democrats to make only small changes in committee sizes, which, Republicans soon discovered, left them with too few members to fill their seats on the fifteen major committees. After the House had organized and he realized the scope of the problem, Majority Leader Charles Halleck (R-IN) asked the House to drop the committee limitation rule. Halleck insisted that his request to drop the one-committee limit “does not in any way represent any retreat or departure from the original purpose and intent of the Reorganization Act.”³⁹ In fact, he emphasized, only eighteen Republicans would receive a second major committee assignment. Democrats did not object, almost certainly because they did not want a cutback in the number of committee seats for their party that would occur if, alternatively, the committee sizes were cut.

³⁸NYT 24 January 1965, 44.

³⁹CR January 13, 1953, 368.

The elimination of the 1946 rule drew no attention or commentary at the time, which undoubtedly helps to explain why scholars overlooked the transition.

The Puzzle of the 1950s. Minority Democrats did not immediately exploit the rules change. They continued to observe the LRA limitations during the 83rd Congress (1953–1954). After winning a House majority in the 1954 elections, Democrats still assumed that the LRA’s limitations would apply, but they quickly began discussions about loosening up, at least for some high-demand second assignments. In fact, perhaps in response to the discussions, requests for second assignments were made from at least a few members. The correspondence of Wilbur Mills, the third-ranking Ways and Means Democrat in 1955, indicates that Mills recommended to those members that they consult with Speaker Sam Rayburn (Mills Papers), who, we infer, eventually approved the change in practice. The Democratic caucus seldom met during this period and, an inspection of caucus minutes for the period shows, did not adopt a rule or resolution on committee assignment limitations. Any change in practice almost certainly occurred in the interaction between the speaker and Ways and Means Democrats. The immediate result was that a few members were allowed second assignments to a few committees that had been among the fifteen major committees subject to the one-assignment limit (see below).

The next few Congresses were transitional to the modern practice of identifying a small number of exclusive committees. Figures 3 and 4 show a very incremental increase in the mean number of assignments for committees *other* than the top three.⁴⁰ By 1958, over a hundred members had two or more committee assignments.⁴¹ Halleck may have intended to operate in a manner consistent with the spirit of the reorganization act, but Democrats certainly did not do so in the subsequent Congress. We know from sketchy journalistic accounts⁴² and Masters’s report⁴³ that by the late 1950s the Democrats recognized just three committees as exclusive and another set of committees as major, allowing members of the latter set to have a second nonmajor assignment. Masters also reports that the Republicans followed a similar practice, although this does not appear to have been recognized as a formal limit, at least at first.

The 1953–1960 period warrants a closer look than we can give it with direct evidence. We can infer that the change in practice was not a matter of *adding* formal restrictions for the top three committees in response to some new demand; rather, it was a matter of loosening restrictions for most major committees over a few Congresses but leaving the three top committees as exclusive. Unfortunately, the historical record of decisions made within the parties’ committees on committees is sparse. The 1953 rule change and Masters’s 1961 article suggest that the intervening Congresses generated a change in party practices, which we have documented in Figures 3 and 4. Archival materials, including the committee assignment notebooks used by Ways and Means Democrats, and personal papers from members of the parties’ committees on committees do not include a statement of policy about three exclusive committees. Thus, the puzzle is how and why, in the mid-1950s, the committees on committees, particularly the

⁴⁰The “other” committees in Figures 3 and 4 are the 12 committees that were listed as exclusive in the LRA of 1946 other than Appropriations, Rules, and Ways and Means: Agriculture, Armed Services, Banking, Education and Labor, Foreign Affairs, Commerce, Interior, Judiciary, Merchant Marine, Post Office, Public Works, and Veterans’ Affairs.

⁴¹Galloway, *History of the House of Representatives*.

⁴²NYT 12 January 1959, 22.

⁴³Masters, “Committee Assignments in the U.S. House of Representatives”.

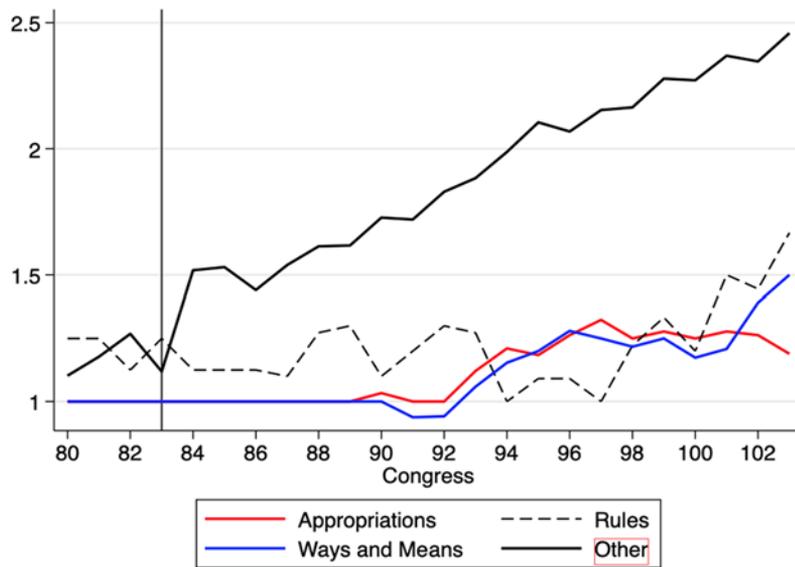


Figure 3. Mean Committee Assignments for Democratic Members of Exclusive and Other Committees, 80th to 103rd Congresses (1947–1994).

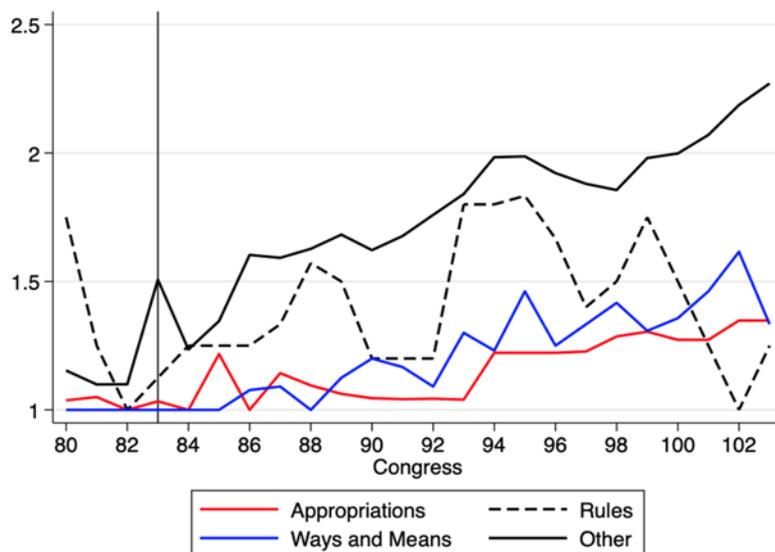


Figure 4. Mean Committee Assignments for Republican Members of Exclusive and Other Committees, 80th to 103rd Congresses (1947–1994).

Democratic committee, retained exclusivity as a guiding principle for appointments to Appropriations, Rules, and Ways and Means but eased off for other prominent committees. For the Democrats, the practice began in 1955 and loosened further in the next two Congresses. We return to theories of legislative organization below to consider possible explanations.

The Republicans. Figure 4 confirms that Republicans, too, kept members of Appropriations, Rules, and Ways and Means from receiving second assignments to other major committees in the 1950s, as Masters reported (there always were exceptions for members of the three or four most minor committees). Nevertheless, Republican committee on committees documents from the early 1960s lists major and minor committees and includes on the major list all of the committees given major status in the 1946 Act, including the “top three” committees (Halleck Papers). Those documents also include lists of committee requests that show that members expected to give up a committee, with a few exceptions for minor committees, if they won an appointment

to one of the top three committees. We have not found reports or documents that indicate any formal recognition of exclusive committees by the Republican committee on committees or its executive committee. Thus, at least at the time Masters was writing, Republicans lived with the guidance of the 1946 act, as Halleck said they would in 1953, and a less formal recognition of three exclusive committees.

Members of “Other” Committees. To get firmer confirmation of the origin of the modern committee categories, we show in Figures 5 and 6 the number of assignments per member for the twelve committees in the “other” category in Figures 3 and 4. These are the committees considered exclusive under the LRA of 1946 other than the top three. As shown in Figure 5, the Democrats’ serving on Interior and Insular Affairs, Merchant Marine and Fisheries, and Veterans’ Affairs (“minor committees”) appear distinctive immediately in 1955. Members of other committees average a small increase in the number of assignments as some of those members gained seats on one of these newly treated nonexclusive

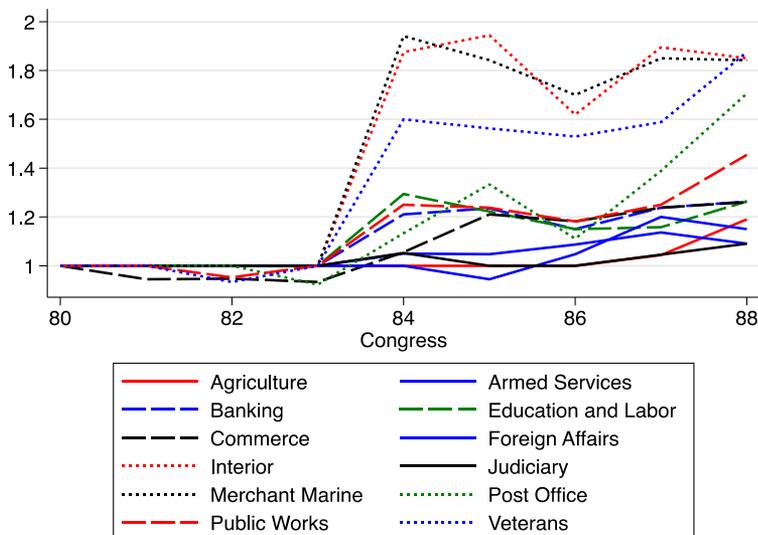


Figure 5. Mean Committee Assignments for Democratic Members of “Semi-exclusive” and “Non-exclusive” Committees, 80th–89th Congresses (1947–1964).

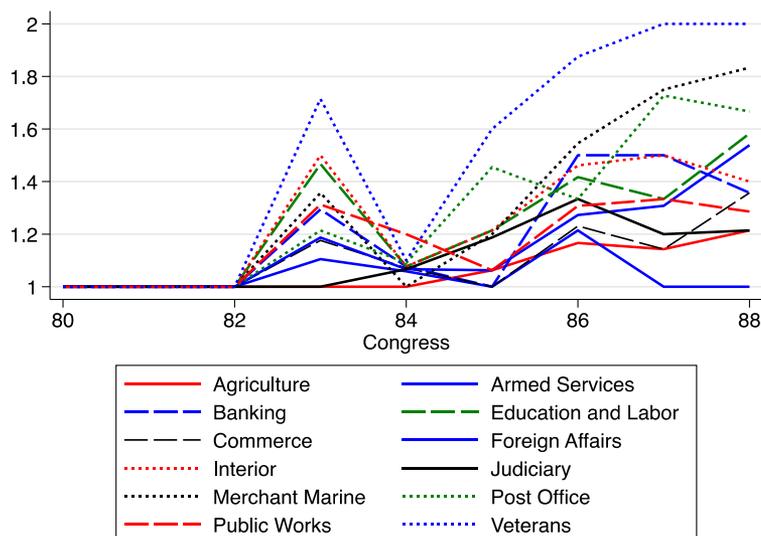


Figure 6. Mean Committee Assignments for Republican Members of “Semi-exclusive” and “Non-exclusive” Committees, 80th–89th Congresses (1947–1964).

committees. Government Operations, not an exclusive committee under the LRA rule, also acquired new members this way.⁴⁴ This process of allowing members of committees once recognized as “major” to serve on a second “minor” committee represents the emergence of the “semiexclusive” and “nonexclusive” categories that Masters mentions, although we do not have evidence about precisely when those labels were first used. In fact, the 1963 committee on committees’ “notebook” uses the terms “exclusive,” “major,” and “nonexclusive” to describe the categories. It was doing so for the first time, which may indicate the informality of the arrangement and unsettled terminology of the practice at the time.⁴⁵

⁴⁴Under the LRA of 1946, Committee on Expenditures (renamed Committee on Government Operations until 1952) and House Administration could be second assignments for members of the majority party. District of Columbia and Un-American Activities could be second assignments for any member. These committees are not included in Figures 5 and 6, but they were second assignments before and after the 1953 rule change. Government Operations became a more common second assignment during the 1950s and 1960s.

⁴⁵Herlong Papers, B28 Notebook 1.1, 1.2, 2.1, 2.2; Thompson Papers, Box 12, File 5.

For Republicans (Figure 6), the pattern is not quite so well ordered. With their return to minority status in 1955 came a substantial cut in the number of Republican committee seats, slowing their ability to give second assignments. Republicans gave second assignments to Post Office and Veterans’ Affairs that year (and Government Operations, not shown) and eventually to Merchant Marine and Fisheries.

Dissatisfaction with their conservative-led committees motivated Democratic liberals to begin organizing in the late 1950s to express and act on reform proposals. Their theme for the next two decades would be strengthening the caucus, through which they hoped to gain control over the committee on committees and the standing committee chairmanships. Starting in 1956 and more formally organizing in 1959, the Democratic Study Group (DSG) pressured Speaker Rayburn to increase the size of Rules to provide seats for more liberals, which eventually happened in 1961. After the election of another wave of liberal Democrats in the 1964 elections, liberals backed a range of reforms, including the reinstatement of caucus approval of committee lists and the creation of a second Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress. With

respect to caucus approval of committee assignments, Speaker McCormack agreed to restart the pre-1951 process, noting that the party retained the formal rule for doing so.⁴⁶ The joint committee was created later in 1965. Its 1966 report led eventually to the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970, but the reform committee skirted the tricky issue of the House committee structure and assignment limitations and left those issues for the Democratic caucus to address.

At the same time, Republicans considered new assignment limitations. To reenergize the party and overcome the party's weak performance in the 1964 elections, the newly elected minority leader, Gerald Ford (R-MI), went along with conference activists who wanted to establish party committees that would propose party reforms. One committee, the Committee on Organizational Structure, chaired by Albert Quie (R-MN), addressed the challenge of cutting the number of Republican committee slots forced by the party's reduced numbers following the 1964 elections. It recommended to Ford and the committee on committees that seven committees be made exclusive: Appropriations, Armed Services, Education and Labor, Foreign Affairs, Judiciary, Rules, and Ways and Means.⁴⁷ By doing so, Quie's committee hoped there would be more seats on other committees available for members, including members who would otherwise be bumped off committees. The committee on committees may have liked the idea, but the executive committee that Ford chaired did not act the recommendation.⁴⁸

For the Democrats, committee assignment reforms were taken up soon after the LRA of 1970 was enacted. In early 1970, at the urging of party liberals, the caucus created the Committee on Organization, Study, and Review, chaired by Julia Butler Hansen, and charged it with reporting committee reforms to the caucus by January 1971. Little noticed was the quick adoption of a Hansen committee recommendation to formally limit caucus members to two assignments on standing committees. The Hansen committee remained active over the next two Congresses proposing (a) the creation a Steering and Policy Committee, chaired by the speaker, that would handle committee assignments and recommend committee lists to the caucus, (b) empowering the caucus to challenge any Steering recommendation, (c) providing for a separate caucus vote on each committee chair and allowing a secret ballot upon the request of a fifth of the caucus, and (d) giving the speaker the power to nominate Rules members.⁴⁹

It is often overlooked that, in 1973, the caucus adopted another Hansen committee recommendation to formally adopt, as a party rule, the three categories of committees. The rule defined the three categories of committees and setting a committee assignment limitation that allowed a member one exclusive committee, one-major committee and one-nonmajor committee, or two non-major committees.⁵⁰ Thus, as a by-product of a larger reform effort, the Democratic caucus finally codified the practice that was in place since the 1950s. The adoption of the rule was overshadowed by discussion of other reform proposals and did not represent a

large change in practice, but it surely reflected reformers desire to establish formal rules and limit the discretion of the committee on committees, still in the hands of Ways and Means Democrats at the time.

While the Democratic caucus was adopting a series of reforms in 1973, the party also backed the creation of a House reform committee to evaluate committee jurisdictions and related issues that would have to be addressed in House rules. The Select Committee on Committees, chaired by Richard Bolling (D-MO), was created in early 1973. The committee considered a variety of plans to restructure committee jurisdictions and assignments and ultimately proposed a return to the LRA of 1946 model. It recommended that standing rules of the House provide for 15 exclusive committees, on which members could receive one assignment and all members would be expected to take one, and seven nonexclusive committees on which some members could take a second assignment. Action on the Bolling plan was slowed to enable a review by the Hansen committee, which devised a plan of its own that made only modest changes in committee jurisdictions and left the subject of committee assignment limitations untouched. Both plans were brought to the House floor in late 1974 and the Hansen plan was adopted by the House. The outcome left the issue of committee assignment limits for the parties to determine, a subject that the Democratic caucus had recently addressed. After the intense period of reform in the early 1970s, which concluded with the removal of three committee chairs by a more liberal caucus following the 1974 elections, the Democrats settled down to a process that changed little over the next two decades.

In the meantime, House Republicans continued their established practices under the leadership of Ford and John Rhodes (R-AZ). We have reviewed both the Ford and Rhodes papers and observed recognition of the one-committee limit for members requesting a transfer to a top-three committee. A second assignment to a "nonmajor" or minor committee is common for exclusive committee members, but, at least through the mid-1970s, exceptions to the one-assignment practice were rare.

In the 1980s, House Republicans began experiencing turmoil within their ranks. Long-term minority status appeared to be the primary source of frustration (WSJ 5 June 1987, 52), but so, too, was the eagerness of many younger Republicans, particularly southern conservative Republicans organized as the Conservative Opportunity Society, to have more influence over party strategy. One target of agitators was the executive committee of the committee on committees, which was still operated under the 1919 Mann plan that allowed it to be dominated a few large-state members whose votes equaled the number of Republicans in their state delegations. Small-state Republicans had representation, but it was grouped by delegation size (three-member delegations, two-member delegations, etc.) and, proportionately, had far fewer votes than large-state delegations. Over the years, this arrangement gave large-state delegations a huge advantage in gaining membership on top committees.

Virtually unmentioned in journalistic and political science accounts, the large-state delegations' control over committee assignments was overthrown following the 1986 elections. Small-state Republicans, apparently led by Whip Trent Lott (R-MS), swung a deal with Texas Republicans to coordinate their votes on the executive committee to win places on the top committees. States like Illinois, whose delegation had long benefited by Minority Leader Bob Michel's (R-IL) presence, failed to acquire seats that they would have received in the past. In the view of traditionalists like Michel, the coalition politics of the renegades

⁴⁶Roger H. Davidson, David M. Kovenock, and Michael K. O'Leary. *Congress in Crisis: Politics and Congressional Reform*. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1966).

⁴⁷Ford Papers, folders 7356-7.

⁴⁸Peabody Papers.

⁴⁹Roger H. Davidson and Walter J. Oleszek, *Congress Against Itself*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977). Rohde, David W. "Committee Reform in the House of Representatives and the Subcommittee Bill of Rights." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 411 (1974): 39-47.

⁵⁰Davidson and Oleszek, *Congress Against Itself*. WP 10 Jan 1973, A2; CQA, 1976, 26-40.

undermined the evaluation of committee candidates on the basis of personal merit. The renegades insisted that the decades-old scheme of representation and reliance on the executive committee stacked the deck against them and required a concerted effort to address the imbalance on top committees.⁵¹

Michel responded to the experience by naming a Task Force on Conference Rules and Procedures, chaired by Robert (Bob) Lagomarsino (R-CA). Before the Lagomarsino task force had a chance to meet and formulate its recommendations, the executive committee, chaired by the party leader, took the step in early 1987 of approving formal recognition of Red, White, and Blue categories of committees—paralleling the exclusive, semi-exclusive, and non-exclusive categories of the Democrats—to address some of the concerns about fairness in allocating committee assignments.⁵² The conference resolution that confirmed this arrangement provided that at the beginning of each Congress the executive committee “will reaffirm or redesignate the committee categories.”⁵³ The adopted proposals grandfathered members whose current assignments would violate the new policy. The reforms also restructured the committee on committees by eliminating the full committee/executive committee arrangement and replacing it with a committee on committees with a regionally-elected membership along with the top two party leaders. As a part of the task force proposal, the conference gave the leader the power to nominate Rules members.

With the adoption of the Lagomarsino recommendations by the Republicans, both parties had more formally recognized exclusive committees. Moreover, for the first time since before 1947, a committee beyond the top three was added to the exclusive list. Even though Energy and Commerce was recognized as having the broadest jurisdiction of any committee, its exclusive status only came after the Republican rules codification. Both parties, however, allowed their committee on committees to include waivers of these limitations as a part of their recommended committee lists and had already begun to do so by 1987. For the Republicans, the post-1988 election committee assignments were the first since the 1910s that were not determined by an executive committee of the committee on committees.

Agitation about the operation of standing committees and assignment limitations continued, although much of the concern focused on the number of subcommittees. With Democrats taking the lead, a new Joint Committee of the Organization of Congress reported a set of recommendations at the end of 1993 that included a two-assignment limit for House members and recognized the exclusive and major committee categories in limiting them to five subcommittees. Neither house acted on the recommendations before Democrats lost their House and Senate majorities in the 1994 elections.

⁵¹CQWR 17 May 1987, 961.

⁵²The recognized categories were (Lagomarsino Papers, folders 3, 4, 10):

- Red—a member of one of these committees may not sit on other standing committees: Appropriations, Energy and Commerce, Rules, and Ways and Means.
- White—a member of one of these committees may serve on one White committee and one Blue committee: Agriculture, Armed Services, Banking, Foreign Affairs, Interior, Judiciary, Public Works, and Science & Technology.
- Blue—a member may sit on two Blue committees if not a member of any other standing committee: all others.

Ethics—no category.

⁵³Lagomarsino Papers.

5. Gingrich and post-Gingrich, 1995–present

The Lagomarsino categories, which had been incorporated in Republican conference rules by reference, did not survive the Republicans’ transition to majority status and the rise of the Gingrich regime after the 1994 elections. The new Republican majority gave their new speaker-elect, Newt Gingrich (R-GA), an opportunity to centralize power.⁵⁴ Gingrich dropped the Lagomarsino categories, changed the name of the committee on committees to the Steering Committee, and added more elected party leaders and leader appointees to the committee, thereby dumping from the assignment committee several of the senior Republicans who had been regional representatives on the committee for several Congresses. In new party rules, he gave himself, as speaker, five votes and the majority leader two votes. Four other party leaders had one vote apiece, as did four committee chairs (Appropriations, Budget, Rules, and Ways and Means), nine regionally elected members, and each of two sophomores and three freshmen,⁵⁵ making the nine regionally elected members a minority of the Steering Committee. The composition of the Steering Committee evolved in subsequent Congresses, but the absence of formally recognized exclusive committees and a large leadership advantage on the steering committee has been maintained. Gingrich’s choices won all the key committee posts, including committee chairmanships.

Gingrich also cut committee sizes, although not as much as some committee chairs preferred. Gingrich, in fact, stepped in to preserve seats that could be used to reward freshmen members.⁵⁶ Republicans abolished three committees—District of Columbia, Merchant Marine and Fisheries, and Post Office and Civil Service—and transferred their jurisdiction to other committees. Energy and Commerce was renamed to Commerce. The cuts in committees and committee sizes and new party ratios forced a sizable number of Democrats to lose committee assignments, even on top committees. For example, a loss of fifteen Appropriations seats and loss of majority status forced ten Democrats off the committee. The Gingrich-era committee sizes set a baseline from which committees would grow again over the next quarter century, but, for the Republicans, the exclusivity of top committees effectively became a matter of leadership discretion.⁵⁷

Gingrich’s Steering Committee did not immediately or radically change committee assignments for its members on the committees previously designated “red,” or exclusive. The Steering Committee continued to recognize Appropriations, Commerce, Rules, and Ways and Means as distinct and still does, even without any reference to assignment limitations in the conference rules. These four committees already were not truly exclusive committees even years before Republicans took the majority in the 1994 elections, as Figure 4 shows,⁵⁸ when Republicans began to allow a significant number of exceptions, eventually even for Rules.

The Democrats’ fall to minority status following the 1994 elections had modest effects on their attitudes about exclusive

⁵⁴CQW 19 November 1994, 3319–23, 3326; CQW 10 December 1994, 3493–4; WP 21 November 1994; WSJ 17 November 1994, A5.

⁵⁵CQW 11 April 2005, 3493–4.

⁵⁶CQW 10 December 1994, 3493–4.

⁵⁷Carol Hardy Vincent and Elizabeth Rybicki. “Committee Numbers, Sizes, Assignments, and Staff: Selected Historical Data.” Congressional Research Service 96–109, February 1, 1996.

⁵⁸See also Roger H. Davidson “The Advent of the Modern Congress: The Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946.” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 15 (1990): 357–73.

committees. They, too, made Commerce an exclusive committee for any member who joined in the 104th Congress onward. By making Commerce exclusive, Richard Gephardt (D-MO), the new minority leader, reduced very modestly the competition among Democrats for other assignments at a time that Democrats had lost a large number of committee seats. Commerce had one of the widest and most salient jurisdictions, which enhanced the influence of its members and made it easy for its members to attract campaign donations from affected interests.⁵⁹ The modesty of the effect was due to the grandfathering of members continuing their Commerce membership, many of whom remained on the committee for years.⁶⁰

Gephardt also had his caucus split the Steering and Policy Committee, which had been in place since 1973, into a committee assignment committee, the Steering Committee, and a Policy Committee to address legislative issues.⁶¹ The immediate result was to create more positions on party committees, which helped Gephardt find new jobs for Democrats losing standing committee assignments and for representatives of important groups and factions within the party. The Gephardt arrangement did not last. Gephardt's successor, Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), recombined the committees in 2003, leaving Pelosi as chair of a party committee with the old name, the Steering and Policy Committee.⁶²

In 2005, Democrats added Financial Services (formerly Banking) to their list of exclusive committees and did so for the same reason as for Energy and Commerce—limiting the number of assignments for members who have an exceptional ability to raise large sums in campaign contributions because of their committee assignments. That year Democrats had fallen to their lowest number of House seats since 1948 and were again squeezed for good committee slots. Limiting assignments to a top committee was again a way to retain opportunities for members of non-exclusive committees. For the Democrats, formal recognition of five exclusive committees has remained in place since then. Republicans have not readopted a rule recognizing exclusive committees since it was dropped by Gingrich in late 1994.

Intensified partisan competition for control of the House in the new century generated greater emphasis on party “teamship.” In 2004 and 2005, Minority Leader Pelosi intensified scrutiny of exclusive committee members. In mid-2004, she had the party caucus adopt a rule that the Steering and Policy Committee must approve of subcommittee chairs or ranking members on exclusive committees. In early 2005, Democratic Steering and Policy Committee took the unusual step of reviewing the voting records, positions on key issues, and party due payments of members of the exclusive committees. The move represented an explicit signal from Pelosi that members of the top committees were expected to be team players, although many observers noted that Pelosi was only doing what Republican leaders had been doing since the 1990s. Oddly, this followed Pelosi's efforts two years earlier to appoint more conservatives and junior members to top committees, but the 2005 scrutiny of some members did not cause any members to lose an exclusive assignment. Remarkably, Pelosi again called a Steering and Policy meeting in July 2005 to discuss fifteen

Democrats who voted with Republicans on a trade bill. While no retribution was approved at the time, Pelosi was reported as indicating that there were special expectations for members with top committee assignments.⁶³

While exclusive committee status remains formally bestowed on Rules, in recent decades neither party has treated it as exclusive in practice. Republicans have granted waivers for its Rules members to acquire second assignments for some time. This was a minor matter when they were in the minority in the 1980s and early 1990s when Republicans had only four Rules members and they had little work to do on the committee. In recent decades, the pervasive involvement of speakers of both parties often left Rules members as bystanders in the design of special rules and reduced interest in serving on the committee. When in the majority in 2005, four Republicans voluntarily left Rules for other committees in 2005 complaining about having little voice in a speaker-run committee.⁶⁴ Moreover, frequent change in party control of the House has regularly forced the five low-ranking members of the old majority to lose their Rules seats. Acquiring new volunteers became such a problem for the Democrats in 2007 that they recruited members with the promise that they could retain another significant committee assignment.⁶⁵

The multiple goals of committee assignments are well represented in the Pelosi era. While Pelosi ratcheted up expectations for party loyalty for exclusive committees after taking over leadership of the Democratic caucus and its Steering and Policy Committee, she also was responsible for considerable loosening of assignment restrictions for members of exclusive committees.⁶⁶ This represented not only a response to demand, but it also facilitated Pelosi's effort to diversify the membership of the top committees with more junior and underrepresented-group legislators and to reward loyal members.

Party rules governing assignment limitations have changed little over the last two decades. Republicans have not added any explicit limitations to their conference rules but continue to treat Appropriations and Ways and Means as exclusive, with exceptions. They continue to have a rule that grants a new member of Rules has the option of being “on leave with seniority” from any existing committee assignment (Rule 12(b)(3)). Assignees to Rules have not used this provision. Instead, Rules members simply have held two active committee assignments, even chairing subcommittees elsewhere.

Democrats retain their detailed rules on committee limitations. These include defining five exclusive committees whose members may have a second assignment on Budget or House Administration. The overall two-committee limitation does not apply to members of House Administration or Ethics. An assignment a member may receive beyond these limits is considered temporary and accrues no seniority.⁶⁷

Table 1 shows the breakage in the system of exclusive committees in the 118th Congress (2023–2024). The table is designed to show the frequency of two or more assignments among exclusive committee members. While the Republicans do not consider Financial Services to be exclusive, we include it for the sake of comparison.

⁵⁹RC 31 March 2004, RC 2 April 2004, RC 29 September 2004, RC 21 January 2005.

⁶⁴CQW 11 April 2005, 894–6.

⁶⁵CQW 16 2007, 1080.

⁶⁶CQW 11 April 2005, 894–6.

⁶⁷Michael Greene, “Rules Governing House Committee and Subcommittee Assignment Procedures.” Congressional Research Service. R46786. August 26, 2022.

⁵⁹RC 1 December 2014.

⁶⁰CQWR Dec 17, 1994, 3543.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²RC 12 March 2003.

Table 1. Other Committee Assignments of Exclusive Committee Members, 118th Congress, 2023

	Democrats					Republicans				
	App	Rules	W&M	E&C	FS	App	Rules	W&M	E&C	FS
Agriculture	2	1	0	2	1	0	0	1	1	4
Appropriations (App)	**	0	0	0	0	**	<u>2</u>	0	0	0
Armed Services	0	0	2	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
Budget	4	0	5	2	0	3	4	6	2	1
Education and the Workforce	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	3	2	1
Energy and Commerce (E&C)	0	0	0	**	0	0	<u>1</u>	0	**	0
Ethics	0	0	0	0	0	3	1	1	0	1
Financial Services (FS)	0	0	0	0	**	0	2	0	0	**
Foreign Affairs	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	7
Homeland Security	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	1	1
House Administration	3	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	2
Judiciary	0	2	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	1
Natural Resources	2	2	0	1	1	1	0	0	2	0
Oversight and Accountability	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	2	3
Rules	0	**	0	0	0	<u>2</u>	**	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	2
Science, Space, and Technology	0	0	0	1	1	5	0	1	2	2
Small Business	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	3
Transportation and Infrastructure	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Veterans' Affairs	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	1	0
Ways and Means (W&M)	0	0	**	0	0	0	<u>1</u>	**	0	0
Total members	27	4	18	23	23	34	9	25	29	29
Assignments per member	1.41	2.5	1.56	1.35	1.35	1.68	2.67	1.64	1.52	1.97

Several features of today's assignments stand out. Republicans have far more exceptions to the traditional meaning of exclusive committee membership than Democrats. For the ninety-five exclusive committee Democrats, twenty-one assignments involve an exclusive committee member on a semi- or nonexclusive committee. Without Financial Services in the count, forty-two of ninety-seven exclusive committee Republicans hold a second assignment.⁶⁸ For Democrats, holding an exclusive committee assignment and a second assignment remains the exception to the rule. For Republicans, it is becoming the norm.

⁶⁸Budget and Ethics are excluded from these counts. House and party rules allow exclusive committee members second assignments on these committees.

6. Theories of legislative organization and the emergence of three exclusive committees

Our purpose has been to provide direct evidence for House committee assignment limitation practices, particularly for the top committees, but we exhausted available sources in our effort to identify when and by whom the parties left three committees as exclusive in the 1950s. We do not want to leave the subject without considering the possibility that existing theories of legislative organization in Congress give us clues about how to address the transition. Several nonexclusive categories of theory might be entertained as candidate explanations for the 1950s change in practice: leadership power (Westfield), the electoral interests of parties and members (cartel theory), the policy interests of parties and members (conditional party government), the legislative

and electoral interests of rank-and-file members at stake in committee assignments, and leaders' interest in maintaining peace in the family. We can provide only a brief comment on each.

Leadership power. Westfield speculated that leaders want to retain a high value for seats on the top committees in order to retain leverage with members who hold them.⁶⁹ Unfortunately, Westfield fails to observe that the established "property right norm"—that members retain their seats once they are acquired—undermines the subsequent leverage that leaders might otherwise have. Moreover, Westfield says nothing about the fact that the three committees had been exclusive for decades *along* with several other committees for decades and were left the only exclusive committee only in the 1950s.

Electoral interests. Several theoretical accounts assign priority to members' electoral interests and partisans' shared electoral interest in maintaining or gaining majority party status. They take several directions, two of which warrant special consideration because of their prominence in theorizing about legislative organization.

Mayhew addresses the three exclusive committees of his era in the context of explaining how Congress manages collective action and coordination challenges that arise from members devoted to their personal reelection.⁷⁰ This is a problem of institutional maintenance—Mayhew implies that the top committees are given jurisdiction and prestige for the purpose of minimizing the harm to the institution expected to result from the self-interested behavior of rank-and-file legislators. He asserts that

the three 'control committees' of the House—Rules, Appropriations, and Ways and Means—are delicately arranged to contribute to institutional maintenance...The inducements to serve on them are the power and prestige within the House that go with membership... [W]hat makes the committees interesting is the set of services each supplies to congressmen as individuals and to the Congress as an institution.⁷¹

He continues by explaining the special jurisdictions of the three committees (spending, taxes, agenda setting) and how those committees address the collective interests of the House.

Unfortunately, Mayhew is not helpful to us. He avoids emphasis on the exclusive status of the three committees by following Goodwin in labeling them "control committees,"⁷² although, in citing Fenno's study of the committees, he gives emphasis to the prestige associated with exclusive status. He, like Fenno and Westfield, ignores the very short history of limiting exclusivity to three committees—less than two decades at the time the Mayhew and Fenno books were published. He also implies that, at some point, the House "delicately arranged" control committees, an act of the House that never occurred. There is no mention that the special treatment of the three committees was a party matter, not a House matter, and that the parties had somewhat different records in how they limited assignments to those committees.

Cox and McCubbins are more helpful. They, like Mayhew, assume the preeminence of electoral interests but emphasize that legislative parties are organized to pursue the collective electoral

interests of members who share a party label.⁷³ The common interest is to maximize the number of seats the party wins, which is advanced by giving members politically useful assignments and enhancing the party's reputation by pursuing popular legislation. The former means being responsive to members' assignment requests; the latter may involve intraparty deals among members and factions. For committees with limited jurisdictions and narrow policy externalities, leaders have little interest in controlling committee assignments or policy choices. For committees with broad-externality jurisdictions, leaders want committee membership to be "representative of the party as a whole."⁷⁴ The three exclusive committees and several others are treated as having broad or uniform externalities so for those committees the party acts like a cartel to more carefully screen members. The three exclusive committees' jurisdictions are simply more important to a party's legislative reputation and electoral success. A majority party would seek control over the type of member appointed to those committees. The longstanding emphasis on appointing "responsible" and "loyal" members endorsed by the leadership, as noted by Cox and McCubbins and others, certainly confirms the special attention party leaders give to those committees throughout most of the twentieth century. Thus, the prediction was that top committee members would be both representative of and loyal to their parties. After examining several measures of interparty differences in voting behavior, Cox and McCubbins find only inconsistent support that members appointed to committees fit their predictions but add that, at the margin, party loyalty is a factor in committees assignments, particularly on transfers to the exclusive and nonexclusive (but not semi-exclusive) committees from other committees.⁷⁵

The Cox and McCubbins analysis, unfortunately, yields another dead end. The empirical study starts with committee assignment requests and decisions in the 86th Congress (1959–1960), for which the three categories of committees developed by House Democrats were already in place. The theory may imply that parties give special attention to the three top committees, but it does not explain how that translates into a desire to leave these committees as exclusive when loosening restrictions for members of other committees. Indeed, for over four decades in the first half of the twentieth century, when a dozen or so major committees were regularly treated differently, no exclusivity needed to be assigned to the top three committees for the party leadership to treat them differently. As we have indicated, they were appointed before other committees throughout the period because their functions were important in the early days of a new Congress.

Policy interests. A third class of theory, "conditional party government" (CPG) (Aldrich and Rohde 1997, 2000, 2001), emphasizes that party polarization has a positive relationship with centralization of policy making in majority party leadership.⁷⁶ CPG accounts, even when addressing the leadership of Speaker

⁷³Cox and McCubbins, *Legislative Leviathan*.

⁷⁴*Ibid*

⁷⁵See also Barbara Hinckley, *The Seniority System in Congress*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1971). Steven S. Smith and Bruce A. Ray. "The Impact of Congressional Reform: House Democratic Committee Assignments." *Congress and the Presidency* 10 (1982): 219–240.

⁷⁶John H. Aldrich and David W. Rohde. "The Transition to Republican rule in the House: Implications for theories of Congressional Politics." *Political Science Quarterly* 112 (1997): 541–67. John H. Aldrich and David W. Rohde. 2000. "The Consequences of Party Organization in the House: The Role of the Majority and Minority Parties in Conditional Party Government." In: *Polarized Politics: Congress and the President in a Partisan Era*. 31–72.

⁶⁹Westfield, "Majority Party Leadership and the Committee System in the House of Representatives".

⁷⁰David R. Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

⁷¹Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection*.

⁷²Goodwin, *The Little Legislatures*.

Gingrich, do not mention how polarized parties and strong leaders make different choices about committee assignment limitations than less polarized parties with weaker leaders. We might infer from loosening of committee assignment limitations in the 1950s that relatively low levels of party polarization and policy-making centralization in that era made the leadership more willing to accede to members' assignment requests. However, that observation would not provide an explanation of the reservation of three committees as exclusive. Nor would it account for Speaker Rayburn's apparent involvement—what is likely to have been his direction—in setting a new practice.

Factional Interests. Also at play, perhaps inevitably, were factional interests, particularly the southern interests represented among the top Ways and Means Democrats and the speaker. The combination of retaining exclusive status and fixing their size and party ratios for the three remaining exclusive committees advantaged Democratic conservatives in the mid-1950s. While the sizes of other committees varied from Congress to Congress, Rules retained an 8-4 party ratio from 1947 until 1961; Appropriations had a 30-20 ratio from 1951 through the 1960s (with the exception of 1965–1966), and Ways and Means retained a 15-10 ratio from 1947 to 1975 (with the exception of 1965–1966). These fixed sizes and party ratios, along with the electoral security enjoyed by southerners, limited turnover, and locked in factional advantage. It also allowed the leadership to be very selective when the few vacancies occurred. While there were winners and losers, this, too, can be viewed as reflecting an effort by Democratic speakers Sam Rayburn of Texas and John McCormick of Massachusetts to avoid alienation of southerners and maintain the party's House majority.⁷⁷

Members' demands. These observations lead us to conclude that explanations driven primarily by the motivations of party leaders, either as a product of their role in leading cartels or as a by-productive of polarized parties, are inadequate, at least by themselves. Instead, we turn to member demands and the leadership response. Observers have given heavy emphasis to members' demands as a driving force in setting committee sizes and assignment limitations.⁷⁸ Members ask their leaders to accommodate their demands for seats, which, over the long term, generates an increasing the number of seats and committee sizes.

A reasonable corollary is that intensified electoral pressures on rank-and-file members and threatened losses of majority control would intensify pressure on majority leadership to be accommodating. In fact, the pre-1955 decade was a period of five successive elections that produced changes in party control of the House. The circumstances would have made many members concerned about their next election and made leaders sensitive to the electoral needs of their colleagues. Inter-party competition, spawning electoral uncertainty and changes in party control, more than policy polarization or leverage-seeking leaders, may have altered the political incentives for both rank-and-file members and leaders.

And that may not be all there is to it. Previous studies give little emphasis to rank-and-file members' interest in limiting the inequality in legislative influence and electoral resources that

can be generated by the organization of the legislative process. The experience of the early twentieth century—the revolt against Speaker Cannon, the maintenance of a system that nominally gave all members major assignments—raises the possibility that members' concern for equity in the allocation of committee assignments is a consideration that weighs on leaders and committees on committees from time to time. While equity more conspicuously affects the demands of state delegations and regional groups for important committee seats, it also is likely to shape individual and factional demands. This creates a balance between responsiveness to demands for seats and attention to equity. We can view this as a case of “keeping peace in the family,” which is described by Sinclair and treated by Cox and McCubbins as a key function of party leadership.⁷⁹ It is an organizational problem that leaders would be expected to address.

Equity was openly discussed at times through the twentieth century. The LRA of 1946 put the one-assignment limitation in place, with equalizing committee jurisdictions as much as possible; the Republicans' Quie committee of the mid-1960s proposed the identification of seven committees, to which most Republicans could be assigned, with exclusive membership; the joint committee that led to the LRA of 1970 gave committee assignment limitations serious consideration; and the Bolling efforts of the late 1960s emphasized the allocation of jurisdictions to recognize policy problems that had arisen since the 1946 Act, equalize workloads, and set new assignment limitations. In most cases, resistance from members who would be forced to give up assignments under new limitations led party leaders and leading reformers to give up on reinstating limitations similar to those placed in the LRA of 1946. In adopting the first wave of Hansen committee proposals in 1973, the Democrats locked in then-current practice (three exclusive committees, limiting all members to *two* assignments). In doing so, the Hansen reforms imposed a party rule to limit further loosening of assignment limitations by the committee on committees.

The concern for equity may have figured in the developments of the 1950s, too. As leaders showed responsiveness to demands for second assignments, they may have needed to retain the sense of fairness that the 1946 Act embodied by preventing members of three top committees from getting second assignments at the expense of others. We have noted the archival evidence that the issue of second assignments among Democrats was referred to Speaker Rayburn by prominent a prominent member of the committee on committees.

7. Revisiting themes

We have observed three eras in House parties' management of committee assignment limitations. From the 1910s to the 1950s, the parties followed a practice of identifying 10-15 committees as major or exclusive. The committee structure and assignment limitations LRA of 1946 reflected that accepted practice. From the 1950s into the 1990s, the parties adopted and largely observed the practice of recognizing the three or five exclusive committees. Since the 1990s, party interests have become more central to legislators' calculations and party leaders more assertive in making assignments. This has produced new practices—the addition of two exclusive committees and, at the same time, more waivers to accommodate members of exclusive committees who seek second

⁷⁷Manley, *The Politics of Finance*. Committee on Rules, *A History of the Committee on Rules*. Hinckley, *The Seniority System in Congress*.

⁷⁸Westfield, “Majority Party Leadership and the Committee System in the House of Representatives. Shepsle, *The Giant Jigsaw Puzzle*. Ray and Smith, “The Impact of Congressional Reform: House Democratic Committee Assignments.” Cox and McCubbins, *Legislative Leviathan*. E. Scott Adler, *Why Congressional Reform Fail: Reelection and the House Committee Systems*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). Frisch and Kelly, *The Politics of Committee Assignments*.

⁷⁹Barbara Sinclair. *Majority Leadership in the U.S. House*. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983). Cox and McCubbins, *Legislative Leviathan*.

assignments. Most political science accounts ignore the first and third of these eras and treat the second era as the norm for the House. Our account rectifies that oversight.

8. Mixed motivations

The thread that runs through most, but not all, developments is the desire of party leaders to be responsive to rank-and-file legislators demands for assignments.

At most times, this takes the form of creating more committee seats as legislators request more assignments. The ability of leaders to respond is constrained by majority/minority status, the sizes of the parties, committee chairs' interest in keeping their committees small and manageable, and the interest of state delegations and factions in controlling some committees. The result is a historical record that represents "disjointed pluralism" in the treatment of exclusive committees—the mix of factors that drove change varied from episode to episode.⁸⁰ The pressure to be responsive is perpetual, but it has not always proven to be a fully dominant consideration.

It bears emphasis that the desire to be responsive to rank-and-file demands for useful assignments runs deeper and wider than often noticed, even deeper and wider than Westfield demonstrated. Since the time of Czar Cannon, reformers repeatedly sought to equalize the jurisdictions of a set of committees large enough to allow all members to receive a "major" committee assignment. True equalization probably was never possible, but the recurring reform efforts in the 1910s, 1940s, 1960s, 1970s, and even the 1980s to identify a dozen or more committees with large, attractive jurisdictions and limiting members to one assignment to a major committee reflects an exceptionally long-term commitment to an ideal arrangement of House committees.

In the 1950s, for which we found direct evidence of members seeking electorally useful second assignments, the parties varied from the ideal pattern but retained exclusivity for three committees. These three committees were viewed as more powerful than the other long-recognized major committees. All three had fixed sizes for most of the post-World War II period. Two of them, Rules and Ways and Means, were fixed at relatively small sizes and their members were denied second assignments. Appropriations, which did most of its business through subcommittees, also was fixed in size but at a much larger size relative to other committees. It is as easy to explain the treatment of these committees as a product of fairness, at least in the eyes of most members, as it was a matter of leaders seeking to retain a high value to assignments to those committees.

9. Path dependence

We are not surprised that duration of a set of committee assignment practices matters. The decades-long eras of committee assignment practices also reflect a strong path dependence and incrementalism in the treatment of exclusive committees. Entrenched, powerful legislators—standing committee chairs, committees on committees members, and elected party leaders—often lined up against significant changes in committee assignment practices that have advantaged them, their states, and their party factions. Even the LRA of 1946, so frequently lauded as a clear break with the past,

represented minimal change in the identification of major committees and the imposition of statutory assignment limitations. In the early 1970s, when the relationships among the majority party caucus, leadership, and standing committees was undergoing significant change, the party's committee assignment limitations changed little. This resistance to change is consistent with Adler's argument that committee system reforms are rare in large part due to members' uncertainty about how reforms will affect the electoral benefits they have acquired under the existing system.⁸¹ Still, the LRA's consolidation of the committee system and the break in practice in 1953 produced a remarkably rapid change in treatment of the principal committees, leaving only three exclusive committees for a few decades.

These features of assignment limitation history conform to the "increasing returns" perspective outlined by Pierson.⁸² First, the key processes involve multiple possible equilibria and contingency. That is, multiple possible arrangements were possible at the start of each era and early choices were quickly reinforced by positive returns. Decisions made to identify certain committees for assignment limitations tend to be followed in subsequent Congresses. For example, we do not know for certain why Democrats of the 1910s excluded some committees for their list of major committees subject to an assignment limitation. It is reasonable to hypothesize that the committees chosen met the political interests of most party members and eliminated unacceptably large inequities that had characterized the Cannon era. We know that Republicans soon adopted a very similar practice, which was retained with minor modifications through the enactment of the 1946 act and into the 1950s. The associated property-right and seniority norms emerged at the same time as members sought reappointment to coveted committees and gained committee leadership posts. For individual members, this was plainly a matter of enjoying positive returns for the retention of the system and to do so over the long term of many House careers, even with changes in party control of the House.

Second, timing and inertia mattered. The revolt against Cannon in 1909–1910 and change in party control after the 1912 elections led to assignment limitations for committees in place at the time, limitations that were retained with minor changes for nearly four decades. The costs of making substantial changes in the arrangement of assignment limitations involve collective action and coordination and were potentially high throughout the 20th century. For the parties, continuity in the arrangement of assignment limitations minimized conflict within the family by granting most assignments in an automated process under uniform rules and avoiding a lengthy and divisive debate as the parties organized for each new Congress. Even in 1945 and 1946 during the consideration of the Legislative Reorganization Act, when reducing the number of committees and assigning oversight duties and staff to them was a priority, the House accepted with little controversy the parties' existing practice of identifying a dozen or more committees for a one-assignment limitation. Chairmanships were lost, of course, but few active committees were eliminated, some of the committees became subcommittees, and members enjoyed major assignments as they had for three decades by then. Start-up costs of the post-1946 arrangement were minimized for the House and its parties.

⁸¹ Adler, *Why Congressional Reforms Fail*.

⁸² Paul Pierson. (2000). Increasing returns, path dependence, and the study of politics. *American political science review*, 94(2), 251–67.

⁸⁰ Eric Schickler, *Disjointed Pluralism: Institutional Innovation and the Development of the U.S. Congress* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

Third, as implied by these observations, unpredictable events can alter legislators' interests in the committee system and motivate new practices. Sudden changes in the sizes of the two parties, particularly a change in party control, change affect views of committee sizes, party ratios, and assignment limitations. The rise of the United States in world affairs enhanced the attractiveness of the foreign affairs committee and added it to the list of major committees with an assignment limitation. The New Deal and World War II generated the LRA of 1946, which placed committee assignment limitations in the rules of the House for the first time but lasted only until a new, small majority party could not fill its assigned seats a few years later.

Answered and Unanswered Questions

Our narrative answers most but not all of the questions that we posed. We have highlighted important elements of these evolving relationships:

- The use of exclusive committees emerged in both parties in the 1910s, establishing a pattern of assignment limitations that lasted into the 1950s.
- The LRA of 1946 was grounded in over three decades of experience with party-based assignment limitations.
- A turning point in 1953, brought about by a small majority party caught short-handed in filling its committee seats, led to a loosening of the decades-long pattern and eventually reduced the number of exclusive committees to three.
- The parties' leaders and committees on committees, rather than the full party caucuses, set most assignment limitation policies.
- Party rules on committee categories were established late in the process of recognizing three exclusive committees.
- The pre-1953 system of naming a dozen or more committees as exclusive remained popular with reformers of both parties in the following decades but were readily rejected by the parent parties.
- Democrats, primarily in the long era of the majority control of the House from the 1950s to the 1990s, observed exclusivity more faithfully than did Republicans.
- The era of hyper-partisanship and centralized policy making in party leaders has been associated with the broadening of exclusive status to additional committees and, at the same time, more frequent waivers and concessions to members of exclusive committees, making those committees less perfectly exclusive than they had been for decades.

Several of the developments warrant special notice. First and foremost, the LRA of 1946, sometimes seen as a dramatic break from the past in the organization of the committee system and the number of committee seats, reflected well-established practices. Barring more than one assignment to any of a dozen or more committees was a common practice for 36 years before the LRA of 1946 formalized it in chamber rules. "Sharing the wealth" was the norm in both parties early in the post-Cannon years. This practice may have tempered but did little to reduce factional and state delegation competition for seats on committees, factors that continued to affect decisions on committee sizes and party ratios that set the framework for assignments.

Second, the emergence of three exclusive committees in the 1950s did not reflect an explicit collective party choice to create elite committees. Appropriations, Rules, and Ways and Means had been considered elite since the nineteenth century and had distinctive party ratios that were fixed to the advantage of the majority party and seldom changed, but they were not treated as a recognized,

separate category of exclusive committees until the 1950s. Over just two or three Congresses in the mid-1950s the parties defined those committees as a category of their own. For the Democrats, this was done without a meeting or decision of the party caucus; it was the by-product of choices made by those legislators already delegated committee assignment duties—the party's leaders and committee on committees. In both parties, the definition of exclusive committees took the form of withholding the loosening assignment limitations for their members. This surely was a response to demand but with special care—to both share the wealth and to control top committees for the party and a conservative faction.

Third, while exclusivity for the three committees became a near-perfectly observed policy of the parties' committees on committees in the 1950s, it did not take the form of adopting new party rules until much later. Factionalism played a significant role in the eventual adoption of rules. For the Democrats, the rules were formalized in the late 1960s and early 1970s when liberals asserted themselves in response to a committee on committees and leadership they did not trust. For Republicans, the rules were formalized as more junior Republicans in the 1980s sought to weaken the influence of an older generation of legislators who were thought to poorly represent the parties' electoral and policy interests. Nevertheless, when a strong Republican speaker, backed by a newly dominant wing of his party, asserted himself in the 1990s, the formal constraints on his control over assignments were readily erased.

Fourth, the treatment of exclusive committees in recent decades illustrates the mixed motives underlying party choices about assignment limitations. While the parties came to recognize Commerce and Financial Services as exclusive, reflecting demands to spread valued assignments widely, the commitment to the principle of exclusivity fully evaporated for Rules in recent decades and frayed for Appropriations and Ways and Means. This may seem counterintuitive—intensifying partisanship is associated with a fraying of the exclusivity principle for the original three exclusive committees. While the jurisdictions of all three committees remain as important as ever, their independence of party leadership in determining policy outcomes has been sharply limited. Meeting the demands for second assignments of members on these committees, particularly Rules, is not viewed as inconsistent with party control of agenda setting. To the contrary, retaining loyal members on Rules by addressing their concerns about the on-again/off-again membership on the committee associated with frequent changes in party control may be integral to party control of House agenda setting.

There is one important question for which we do not have a satisfactory answer. We have not found direct evidence of a decision by party leaders or committees on committees of the 1950s to leave just these three committees as exclusive committees. Republicans could have made such a decision in 1953 when, in the majority, they had the House lift the assignment limitations of the LRA of 1946. Democrats, as the minority party in 1953 and majority party thereafter, could have made a similar decision. Both parties' had a recognizable practice by the late 1950s, but legislators' personal papers, party minutes, journalistic accounts, and floor debate provide no direct evidence of decisions that had to have been made during the period. While we know that the limitations of the LRA were set aside and gradually loosened so that members of all other committees could acquire second assignments, we cannot report the thoughts of those involved in granting assignments about the assignment limitation reserved for Appropriations,

Rules, and Ways and Means. That remains for future research.

10. Final note

The historical perspective on exclusive committees and committee assignment limitations we have provided helps us evaluate explanations that are shaped by sequence, often making apparently well-institutionalized arrangements appear more temporary and conditional than would otherwise be appreciated. The top three committees of the House were long recognized for their special importance. Through two-thirds of the twentieth century were usually appointed before other committees and are still appreciated for their importance to party success. However, they were not uniquely exclusive until House parties had four decades of experience with grouping them with a dozen or more “major” or “exclusive” committees. And their exclusivity has broken down in recent decades. Only in that context can we appreciate the distinctiveness of their treatment in the last half of the twentieth century.

Appendix: Notes on Sources

1. Archives

We have inspected several sets of archival records in our effort to identify the parties’ formal rules and informal practices in limiting committee assignments. These are listed here with the terms used in this paper to identify them.

HDC: House Democratic Caucus Record, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (<https://www.loc.gov/item/mm79018242/>)

Ford Papers: Gerald R. Ford Congressional Papers, 1949-1973, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library and Museum (<https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/guides/findingaid/fordcong.asp>)

Halleck Papers: Charles Halleck Papers, 1900-1968, Lilly Library, Indiana University (https://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/findingaids/view?doc.view=entire_text&docId=InU-Li-VAA8583)

Herlong Papers: Syd Herlong Congressional Papers, Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida (<https://findingaids.uflib.ufl.edu/repositories/2/resources/48>)

Jonas Papers: Charles R. Jonas Papers, 1918-1984, Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina (<https://finding-aids.lib.unc.edu/04528/>)

Lagomarsino Papers: The Robert J. Lagomarsino Collection Federal Papers, John Spoor Broome Library, California State University Channel Islands (<https://library.csuci.edu/collections/lagomarsino/lagomarsino-federal.htm>)

Mills Papers: (Wilbur) Mills Collection, Bailey Library, Hendrix College (<https://www.hendrix.edu/archives/>)

Peabody Papers: Robert L. Peabody Interview Research Notes, 1964-1967, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library and Museum (<https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/guides/findingaid/peabodyinterviews.asp>)

Rhodes Papers: John J. Rhodes Minority Leader Papers 1968-1980, ASU Library, Arizona State University (<http://www.azarchivesonline.org/xtf/view?docId=ead/asu/rhodesminority.xml>)

Rostenkowski Papers: Dan Rostenkowski Papers 1958-1995, University Archives & Special Collections, Loyola University Chicago (<https://www.luc.edu/archives/cpsa.shtml>)

Thompson Papers: Clark W. Thompson III Congressional Papers, W.R. Poage Legislative Library, Baylor University (<https://www.baylor.edu/doc.php/349882.pdf>)

2. Newspaper and Magazine Citations

Because we cite many newspaper and reference book accounts, we provide abbreviated in-text citations using these acronyms:

LAT Los Angeles Times
 NYT New York Times
 AC Atlanta Constitution
 CR Congressional Record
 WP Washington Post
 CQA CQ Almanac
 CQW CQ Weekly
 CQWR CQ Weekly Report
 WSJ Wall Street Journal
 RC Roll Call