



Dupont Summit 2016

Science, Technology, and Environmental Policy

December 2, Historic Whittemore House, Washington, DC

Presentation

“Congressional Committee Seniority and Gridlock: Public Policy Consequences”

Congressional gridlock is again in the news and apparent even to the casual observer as the 114th Congress has consistently refused to take legislative action across a broad range of public policy arenas, particularly during the 2016 presidential candidate selection season. The importance of seniority as one of the congressional folkways is well documented since as early as 1960 (Matthews), although we have very little quantitative analysis of seniority. An examination of two different electoral classes of members of the House of Representatives should allow us to better understand the effects of congressional committee seniority in the legislative process. This paper will examine the members of the electoral classes of 1974 and 1994 as their policy careers develop in the twenty years after their initial elections. These elections produced historically large classes of incoming freshmen. It is reasonable to expect similar public policy impacts for the two classes; but instead we observe two distinct patterns of policy influence in the approach to resource and science policy broadly defined. This expanse of congressional time captures both the policy innovation of the Class of 1974 in helping transform the U.S. public lands through pursuit of a sustained preservation agenda, along with the contemporaneous gridlock caused by disagreements about reducing the size of the federal government, a policy agenda championed by the Class of 1994.

Congressional committees of course differ from one another (Fenno, 1973) and policy streams and entrepreneurs are important components of the policy process (Kingdon, 1984). Further, periods of punctuated equilibria have been demonstrated across a wide range of policy arenas (Baumgartner and Jones, 2009; 2005; 2015). This paper will examine the role of seniority within the House Natural Resources Committee¹, explicitly comparing the large incoming class of Democratic freshmen elected in 1974 and the somewhat larger group of Republicans elected to the House in 1994.

Presenter

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