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Incentives and Competition for Information in Congress

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Incentives and Competition for Information in Congress

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Dedication

This report is dedicated to my parents, without whom none of the work would have been possible.

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Abstract

Incentives and Competition for Information in Congress

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Policymakers need a wide array of information for multiple purposes. Acquiring information often is costly, so it is assumed that incentives must be provided to overcome these costs and stimulate information gathering. It is further assumed that increasing the number of actors engaged in acquiring information creates free-rider problems. Policymakers also value for jurisdictional and reputational reasons, so that they may compete for information without incentives to do so. In 2007, the U.S. House of Representatives created a select committee to address energy and environment issues, but did not give that committee legislative authority. The new committee could not compete with others for the ability to write or amend legislation, so its presence should not have changed the standing committee's information gathering patterns. In fact, committees did alter their hearing patterns in response to the select committee's work. Information has jurisdictional and reputational value to policymakers in addition to the incentives it can help them obtain, and policymakers will act to acquire information even without explicit incentives to do so.

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1. Introduction

Policymakers rely heavily on information for multiple purposes. Information may highlight public problems, reduce any uncertainty about the likely effects of different policy proposals, help make binary voting decisions and provide signals to others about one's competence and expertise. In order to understand how and why policymakers use information, it is important to understand how and why they acquire information.

Incentives are often thought to drive information acquisition patterns; it is commonly assumed that policymakers must be given the opportunity to shape outcomes in order for them to incur information costs (Bawn 1996; Gailmard 2009; Gilligan and Krehbiel 1987; 1990; Krehbiel 1991; Patty 2009). When multiple actors are charged with gathering information about the same issue, their competition for the available incentives benefits the institution in which they serve. Other scholars emphasize the jurisdictional and reputational benefits to acquiring information (Aberbach 1990; Baumgartner and Jones 1993; King 1997; Sheingate 2006; Talbert, Jones, and Baumgartner 1995).

This paper examines information gathering in the congressional committee system. Committees are critical to legislatures' information flows by serving as a division of labor that facilitates learning about multiple, complex issues simultaneously. Committees are thought to compete primarily for the ability to translate their information into legislation, but information is valuable to committees for other reasons; acquiring information can help a committee define issues favorably to create jurisdictional benefits and new lines of authority, gain access to additional information, and build a positive

reputation within the institution. The case of the House Select Energy Independence and Global Warming Committee from 2007 shows that congressional committees compete for information even without being provided with legislative incentives. The Select Committee was created to elevate attention to energy and environmental issues, but House leaders did not provide the new panel with incentives that are considered important for stimulating committee information gathering. The Select Committee could not report its own bills or amend other committees' legislation, so it did not compete with standing committees for floor space or agenda control. Yet, the Select Committee's information patterns still altered how several standing committees prioritized energy and environment issues.

The article proceeds in six sections. The first section discusses the role of incentives in legislative information patterns, as well as the other benefits that committees derive from acquiring information. The second section describes the 2007 creation of the House Select Energy Independence and Global Warming Committee. This committee was not given legislative authority, so it did not compete for traditional incentives for translating its information into policy. The third section describes the House data used to analyze changes in committee information patterns. The fourth section shows how the Select Committee altered standing committees' information acquisition patterns on energy and environment issues without competing for legislative incentives. The fifth section discusses alternative explanations for the 2007 changes to standing committee information patterns. The sixth section concludes.

2. Incentives and Information in Congress

Congress is charged with solving public problems (Parker and Davidson 1979). In order to address the array of problems on the governmental agenda, the institution thus needs information to monitor the environment, develop legislation, and oversee federal programs (Bimber 1996; Hammond 1986; Krehbiel 1991; Lupia and McCubbins 1994; Rich 2004; Weiss 1989). Acquiring information requires time, attention, and other resources. Not only do these activities incur costs themselves, but a decision-maker's time and attention are limited; using resources to gather information about one issue means that others must be ignored (Jones 2001), creating opportunity costs. Congress occasionally delegates information gathering to federal bureaucrats (Epstein and O'Halloran 1994; Gailmard and Patty 2007; Huber and Shipan 2002; Lupia and McCubbins 1994; McCubbins, Noll, and Weingast 1987; McCubbins and Page 1986) and to interest groups (Esterling 2004; McCubbins and Schwartz 1984), but congressional committees remain the primary information processing venue within the institution.

The committee system encourages specialization, allowing Congress to learn about multiple issues simultaneously (Asher 1974; Cooper 1970; Gilligan and Krehbiel 1987, 1990; Krehbiel 1991; Lupia and McCubbins 1994). Committees often receive incentives such as control over floor debate (Gilligan and Krehbiel 1987; 1990; Krehbiel 1991) and a chance to dominate conference negotiations (Bawn 1996) to help offset their information costs and encourage information gathering and transmission. Committee jurisdictions often overlap, so they often gather information on similar issues (Baumgartner, Jones, and MacLeod 2000; King 1997; Sheingate 2006). Doing so is

thought to produce competition for the legislative incentives (Bawn 1996). Overlap and competition benefit the institution by ensuring that more information is produced (Milgrom and Roberts 1986), increasing political control (Niskanen 1979), and creating redundancies that protect against system breakdowns (Landau 1969). Studies of information costs and incentives emphasize competition for the legislative incentives while often excluding consideration of information's other benefits. The ability to translate one's information into policy through legislation is considered to be the most important incentive; indeed, information is believed to be unimportant without that ability (Patty 2009). Congressional committees are not expected to gather or transmit any information absent legislative incentives.

Information can serve multiple purposes, and it can be important for committees to acquire even if it is not immediately translated into outcomes. Congressional committees use information to strategically define problems and manage the subsystem environment (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). Seeking out and acquiring information prompts new sources to emerge that help committees identify further problems that need to be addressed (Aberbach 1990). Increasing the amount and variety of information a committee exposes itself to at one point in time may allow that committee to shift the boundaries of policymaking authority and worth as a future policy venue (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; King 1997; Sheingate 2006; Talbert, Jones, and Baumgartner 1995). Committees also are critical to legislative information flows, and members of Congress often take decision cues from colleagues on committees with jurisdiction over the issue in question (Bianco 1997; Kingdon 1973; Porter 1974; Sabatier and Whiteman 1995), so

acquiring information about federal programs helps increase the value of a member's committee assignments and reduce the chance that a member is perceived as unknowledgeable (Aberbach 1990).

Members of Congress face information-rich environments (Entin 1973). In the 1970s, Congress responded to the executive branch's informational advantage on many issues by re-organizing its committees, increasing member staff and creating or adapting several information agencies including the General Accounting Office and the Office of Technology Assessment. Overlap and entropy among committee jurisdictions increase the supply of information and the strategic opportunities available to legislators (Baumgartner, Jones, and MacLeod 2000; Sheingate 2006; Workman, Jones, and Jochim 2009), and the successful committee changes Congress adopted in the 1970s improved information sharing and coordination (Adler and Wilkerson 2008). However, adding additional committees is thought to create collective action problems and lead to shirking (Bendor, Glazer, and Hammond 2001), particularly when the additional committee is charged only with oversight – standing committees are expected to free-ride on the special committee's information (Gailmard 2009). Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) undertook just such an exercise in 2007, creating a new Select Energy Independence and Global Warming Committee without giving it the ability to report its own legislation or amend other committees' bills. The next section describes the committee's creation.

3. Creating the Select Committee

During the 2006 congressional election campaign, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and other congressional Democrats sought to create a contrast with President George W. Bush and the House Republican majority with a “Six for '06” agenda, which included energy issues, reducing federal student loan interest rates, and increasing the minimum wage. House Democrats successfully achieved majority party status through those elections and used the 110th Congress's first week to vote on an energy efficiency bill and other “Six for '06” legislation. As the new Speaker of the House, Pelosi also stated her intention to create a new committee to highlight global warming and energy issues, and announced the chamber would take up climate change legislation by July 4 of that year. Her directives caused consternation among senior Democrats, particularly House Energy and Commerce Committee chair John Dingell (D-Mich.), who had served as that panel's senior Democrat for four decades (either as chair or ranking member) and who often worked to protect the auto manufacturers that comprise part of his constituency (Mufson 2007; Eilperin and Grunwald 2007).

Pelosi was not the first congressional leader to create a special committee for addressing a salient public problem; homeland security, intelligence, Indian affairs, and aging are all issues for which Congress created a select committee before making those committees standing or permanent. Other special committees addressing international events or investigating the executive branch have existed for short periods of time. Pelosi compromised with Dingell and other committee leaders by agreeing that the new Select Energy Independence and Global Warming Committee would not have legislative

authority. According to H Res 202, 110th Congress (which officially established the committee), the Select Committee only had authority to investigate and recommend policies and strategies for reducing U.S. dependence on foreign energy sources and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Pelosi tapped Rep. Ed Markey (D-Mass.), the Energy and Commerce Committee's third-ranking Democrat, to chair the new panel, while Rep. Jim Sensenbrenner (R-Wis.), the Science and Technology Committee's ranking member, served in the same capacity on the Select Committee.

The Select Committee could not directly translate its information into legislation, meaning it was not provided with what is considered the primary incentive for congressional committees to gather information, nor were other committees competing with the new panel for that incentive. In this situation, standing committees should be expected to let the Select Committee incur information costs on certain energy and environment issues without changing their own patterns. Rather than engage in free-riding, however, several standing committees reacted to the Select Committee's information patterns by seeking out similar information on their own. The next section outlines the data used to show that the Select Committee was able to successfully alter standing committee information patterns even without competing for legislative incentives.

4. Data and Methods

The Select Energy Independence and Global Warming Committee was not authorized to markup and report legislation, so its activity consisted entirely of hearings. Any effect on the standing committees' information patterns is therefore most likely found in the hearing process. Committee hearings highlight important issues, help focus member and staff time and attention and send signals to other political actors about what issues and policy dimensions are salient and how they should be defined (Aberbach 1990; Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Diermeier and Feddersen 2000; Fisher 1983; Ogul 1976). Individual committees vary in their attention to particular issues and susceptibility to new signals and issue intrusion (May, Sapotichne, and Workman 2009), so the Select Committee's effects are likely seen at the individual committee level rather than in the aggregate.

I have argued that committees have multiple reasons to acquire information in addition to whatever legislative incentives are provided. Information can help committees learn about new problems and clarify or redefine old ones, establish or strengthen their jurisdictions and authority over particular policy domains, and establish or strengthen their reputations within the institution (Aberbach 1990; Baumgartner and Jones 1993; King 1997; Sheingate 2006; Talbert, Jones, and Baumgartner 1995). These additional uses mean that information should remain important to committees even absent the competition for legislative incentives. These competing expectations can be expressed as the following simple hypotheses:

Free-Riding Hypothesis: All standing committees will have decreased or kept constant their 2001 – 2006 levels of information gathering on energy and environment issues in 2007, except on issues that would be translated into legislation.

Multiple Benefits Hypothesis: Standing committees will have increased their 2001 – 2006 levels of information gathering on energy and environment issues in 2007, in response to the Select Committee's information patterns.

I test these hypotheses using congressional hearings data from 2001 – 2007. The Select Committee was charged with gathering information on energy and the environment, so a baseline of congressional hearings on those issues is needed in order to test whether the Select Committee's information acquisition patterns affected the standing committees in 2007. I calculated the levels of committee attention to energy and environment issues using the Policy Agendas Project's Congressional Hearings dataset (Baumgartner, Jones, and Wilkerson 2002). Measuring committee information patterns as a proportion controls for yearly fluctuations in overall hearing activity. Table 1 lists each committee that held a hearing on energy or the environment from 2001 to 2007, with the proportion of their hearings devoted to those issues and the total number of hearings each committee held that year in parentheses.

Table 1. U.S. House Committee Attention to Energy and Environment Issues, 2001 – 2007.

Committee	Energy/Environment Proportion (Total Number of Hearings)							2001 – 2006 Avg.	2007
	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006			
Agriculture	0.214 (14)	0.167 (12)	0.048 (21)	0.111 (18)	0.125 (24)	0.313 (16)	0.163	0.143 (14)	
Appropriations	0.025 (79)	0.025 (81)	0 (63)	0 (58)	0 (50)	0 (47)	0.008	0 (50)	
Armed Services	0 (23)	0 (25)	0 (17)	0 (29)	0 (59)	0.011 (93)	0.002	0.017 (60)	
Budget	0.052 (19)	0 (15)	0 (14)	0 (12)	0 (11)	0 (9)	0.009	0.077 (26)	
Energy & Commerce	0.250 (80)	0.159 (63)	0.143 (63)	0.155 (71)	0.147 (75)	0.250 (72)	0.184	0.262 (42)	
Financial Services	0.020 (51)	0.056 (36)	0 (63)	0.019 (54)	0 (68)	0 (57)	0.016	0 (84)	
Foreign Affairs	0 (64)	0.018 (56)	0 (72)	0 (89)	0 (142)	0.010 (97)	0.005	0.028 (141)	
Government Operations	0.039 (128)	0.042 (118)	0.049 (144)	0.056 (143)	0.141 (135)	0.107 (121)	0.072	0.100 (70)	
Homeland Security	--	--	0 (33)	0 (26)	0.049 (61)	0.022 (46)	0.012	0 (88)	
Judiciary	0 (52)	0 (61)	0 (63)	0 (54)	0.011 (88)	0.013 (78)	0.004	0.032 (95)	
Natural Resources	0.380 (79)	0.291 (79)	0.417 (84)	0.320 (25)	0.553 (38)	0.480 (25)	0.407	0.377 (53)	
Science & Technology	0.300 (50)	0.268 (41)	0.189 (37)	0.219 (32)	0.235 (34)	0.267 (30)	0.246	0.322 (59)	
Small Business	0.079 (38)	0 (29)	0 (50)	0.061 (33)	0.083 (36)	0.036 (28)	0.043	0.068 (59)	
Transportation	0.159 (63)	0.071 (42)	0.174 (46)	0.263 (38)	0.122 (41)	0.186 (59)	0.163	0.150 (80)	
Ways & Means	0.075 (53)	0 (45)	0 (34)	0 (39)	0.019 (52)	0 (35)	0.016	0.040 (25)	

“Energy” and “environment” are both broad policy areas with multiple dimensions, so these hearing patterns can be examined even more closely. The House floor took up HR 3221, the New Direction for Energy Independence, National Security, and Consumer Protection Act, in August following Speaker Pelosi’s request for energy legislation. In order to compare the Select Committee’s information pattern with this major energy and environment bill, I each of the Select Committee’s 2007 hearings and each of HR 3221’s titles according to the Policy Agendas Project’s topic coding scheme.¹ Codes for HR 3221 titles that correspond to other bills introduced in the 110th Congress were taken from the Congressional Bills Project dataset (Adler and Wilkerson 2007). Eleven of the Select Committee’s 22 hearings in 2007 focused on the environment, with nine hearings devoted to energy policy.² Of the 11 environment policy hearings, nine dealt with global warming and air pollution issues. By contrast, two-thirds of HR 3221’s nine titles concerned energy issues, with none addressing environment policy outright. The other three titles focused on labor and employment, small business issues, and transportation. Half of the bill’s energy titles addressed alternative and renewable energy, meaning that issue was the subject of more titles than any other.

As Table 1 shows, only six committees held hearings on energy or environment issues every year in this period – Agriculture, Energy and Commerce, Government Oversight, Natural Resources, Science and Technology, and Transportation. I include only these six “high-attention” committees in examining whether information patterns on narrower policy dimensions changed in 2007. In order to measure changes in committee information patterns, I calculated the difference between each committee’s 2007

¹ HR 3221 was later amended by the Senate and became the legislative vehicle for the Democrats’ economic stimulus legislation; the titles coded here refer to the bill originally brought to the House floor, when energy and the environment were still the bill’s main foci.

² The other two hearings were devoted to agriculture issues and public lands

proportion of attention to the relevant policy issue and its average proportion from 2001 – 2006. Table 2 lists each of these committees’ average proportion of hearings for each dimension from 2001 – 2006 along their 2007 proportion, with the total number of hearings in parentheses.

Table 2. U.S. House Committee Attention to Energy/Environment Dimensions, 2001 – 2007.

Committee	Energy-Environment Hearings Devoted to the Environment		Environment Hearings Devoted to Global Warming		Energy Hearings Devoted to Renewable Energy	
	2001 – 2006 Avg. Prop. (# of Hearings)	2007 Proportion (# of Hearings)	2001 – 2006 Avg. Prop. (# of Hearings)	2007 Proportion (# of Hearings)	2001 – 2006 Avg. Prop. (# of Hearings)	2007 Proportion (# of Hearings)
Agriculture	0.739 (16)	0.500 (2)	0 (11)	0 (1)	0.75 (5)	1.0 (1)
Energy & Commerce	0.490 (79)	0.636 (11)	0.293 (37)	0.571 (7)	0.100 (43)	0.25 (4)
Government Operations	0.355 (57)	0.857 (7)	0.042 (21)	0.500 (6)	0.015 (36)	0 (1)
Natural Resources	0.727 (119)	0.75 (20)	0 (85)	0.067 (15)	0.103 (34)	0.400 (5)
Science & Technology	0.398 (56)	0.526 (19)	0.307 (23)	0.300 (10)	0.186 (33)	0.222 (9)
Transportation	0.875 (47)	0.75 (12)	0 (42)	0.222 (9)	0.200 (5)	0 (3)

The next section examines whether standing committees chose to free-ride on the Select Committee’s information patterns in 2007 or adapt their own patterns in response.

5. Findings

The Select Energy Independence and Global Warming Committee was not given the authority to write or amend legislation, meaning the committee could not translate whatever information it acquired into legislation. The committee also could not compete with others over receiving restrictive rules, control over floor debate, or claim to any potential conference committee appointments. Competition for these sorts of legislative incentives is thought to drive committee information gathering (Bawn 1996; Gilligan and Krehbiel 1987, 1990; Krehbiel 1991; Patty 2009). Moreover, adding a new committee without legislative authority is believed to create free-riding (Gailmard 2009). In addition to creating a new committee, Speaker Pelosi asked the committees to produce energy legislation, so any change in standing committee information patterns in 2007 should result from their competition over influencing the House's legislative output and not reactions to the Select Committee's information patterns. Figure 1 shows the differences in 2007 House committee information gathering on energy and environment issues and each committee's 2001 – 2006 average.

Figure 1. Changes in Overall Energy and Environment Information Acquisition Patterns.

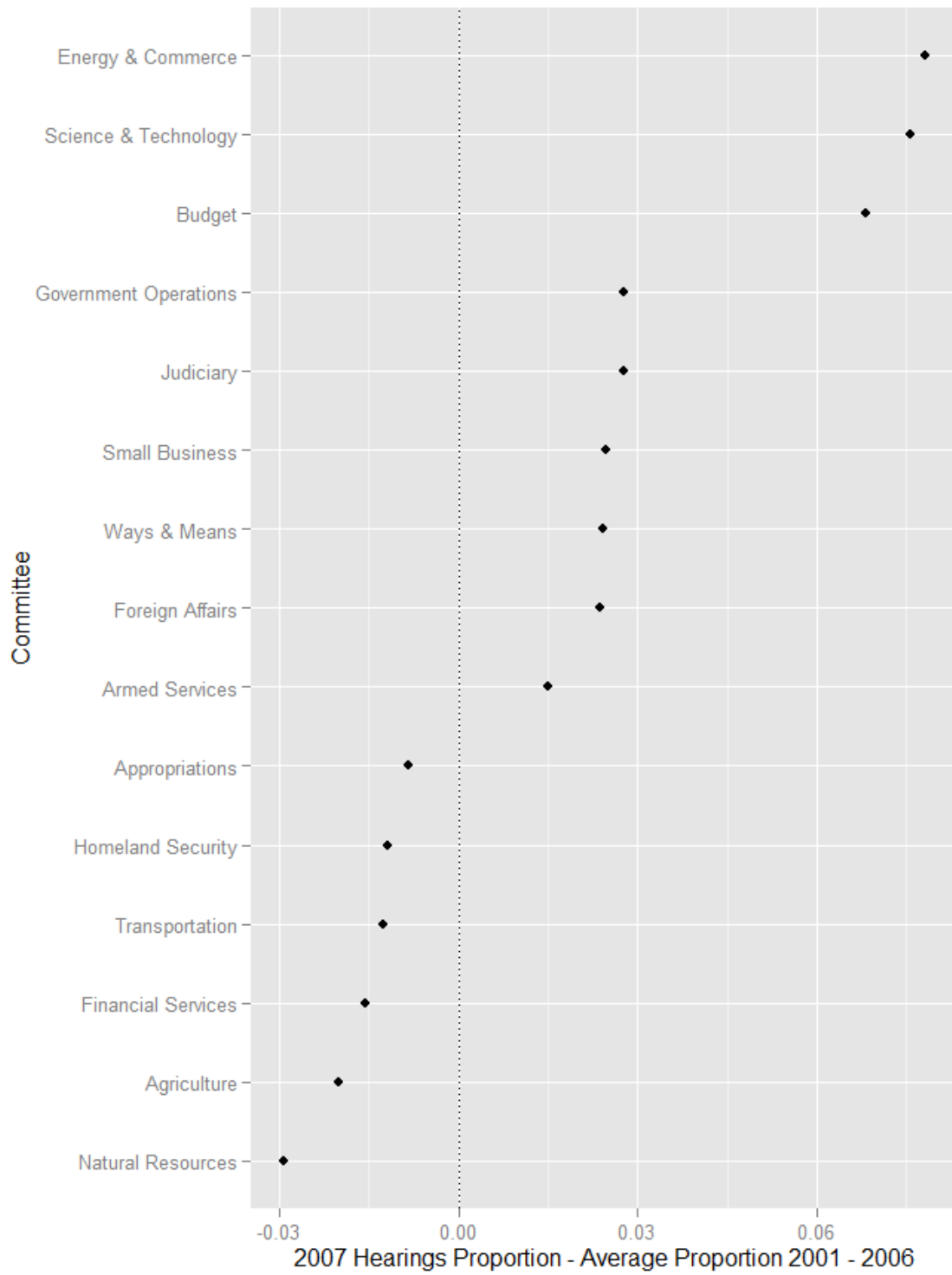


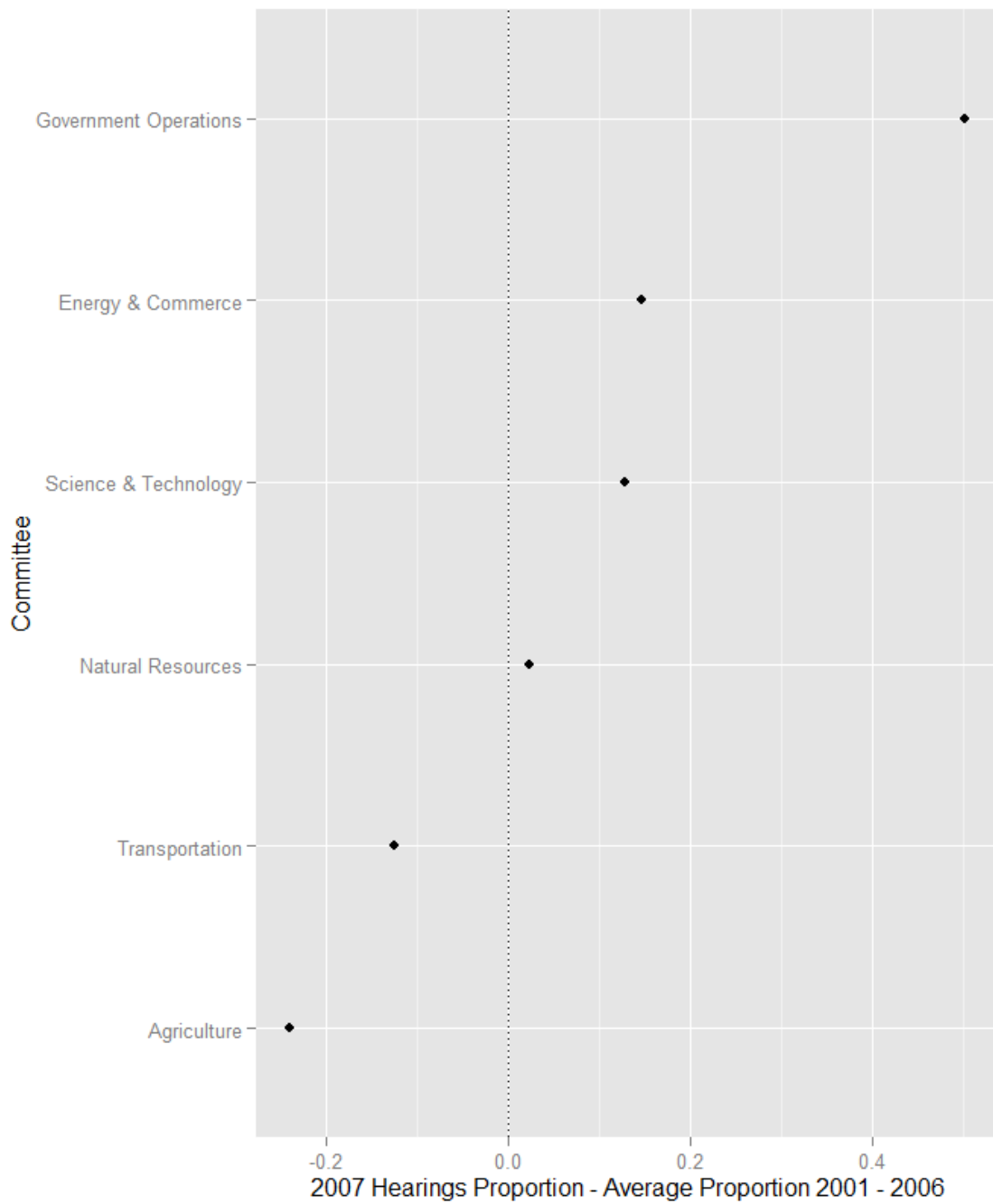
Figure 1 reveals that nine of the 15 committees acquired relatively more information on energy and environment issues in 2007 than they did on average from 2001 – 2006. It is important to note that the House Budget Committee received only two energy and environment bills to the House Budget Committee from 2005 – 2006, while the Judiciary Committee received four (Adler and Wilkerson 2005; 2006). Both of these committees acquired more information on energy and environment issues in 2007 despite a general lack of involvement in those policy areas, and HR 3221, the major energy and environment legislation introduced in 2007, was not referred to either committee. The House Budget and Judiciary Committees, then, increased their attention to energy and environment issues in 2007 even without legislative incentives to do so on their own, let alone incentives for which to compete with the Select Committee.

Figure 1 covers changes in overall attention to energy and environment issues among individual House committees in 2007. These issues carry multiple attributes, so committees may have acquired information about different dimensions than did the Select Committee. Traditional theorizing about when and how information will be gathered suggests that committees will only compete for information that will be directly translated into policy. The House Energy and Commerce Committee began hearings on HR 3221 in April and the bill was formally introduced in July, so if standing committees competed for the ability to translate their information into legislation, they should have shifted their attention to the policy dimensions that were later included in HR 3221 (specifically alternative energy). If committees value information for jurisdictional and reputational reasons in addition to the legislative incentives it brings, the standing

committees' shifts should have acquired information on issues similar to the Select Committee (namely global warming).

None of HR 3221's nine titles specifically addressed environment policy, while a plurality of the Select Committee's 2007 hearings focused on that issue. If committees only gather information that will be translated into legislation, then committees should have reduced or held constant the level of information they acquired on the environment relative to energy policy in 2007 than they had on average from 2001 – 2006. If the standing committees took their cue from the Select Committee and worked to maintain or expand their jurisdictions and reputations, then they should have acquired more information about the environment relative to energy. To test this proposition I calculated the average proportions of energy-environment hearings devoted to the environment for all committees that held at least one hearing on energy or the environment every year from 2001 – 2006, the Natural Resources, Science and Technology, Energy and Commerce, Agriculture, Transportation and Infrastructure, and Government Reform Committees, along with their 2007 proportions of energy-environment hearings devoted to environment policy. Figure 2 displays the differences between these committees 2007 proportion and their 2001 – 2006 averages.

Figure 2. Changes in Information Gathering on Environment Issues Relative to Energy.



According to Figure 2, the Government Operations, Energy and Commerce, Science and Technology, and Natural Resources Committees all increased the amount of

information they gathered on environment policy relative to energy in 2007, even though none of HR 3221's titles directly addressed this policy area. In fact, only two committees, Agriculture and Transportation, focused more on gathering information about energy policy relative to the environment even though two-thirds of HR 3221's titles concerned energy policy. Figure 2 thus presents additional evidence that committees compete for information even without translating that information into legislation. Committees acquire information because it can enhance their jurisdictional and institutional authority in addition to being provided with incentives to help offset their costs.

“Energy” and “Environment” are still broad policy areas with multiple dimensions, so these data can be examined even further. 82 percent of the Select Committee's environment-focused hearings (nine out of 11) were devoted to the global warming and air pollution dimension. The other two hearings cut across multiple environment policy subtopics, which are given a separate code. Because none of HR 3221's titles addressed environment policy, it follows that none directly addressed global warming, either. The standing committees that acquired relatively more information on environment issues in 2007 may have chosen to free-ride on the Select Committee's global warming information pattern and focus their attention on other policy dimensions, in which case committees should be expected to have held constant or decreased their pattern of acquiring information about global warming and air pollution in 2007. Figure 3 displays the differences between each high-attention committee's 2007 proportion of environment hearings devoted to global warming and its 2001 – 2006 average.

Figure 3. Changes in Information Gathering on the Global Warming Dimension of Environment Policy.

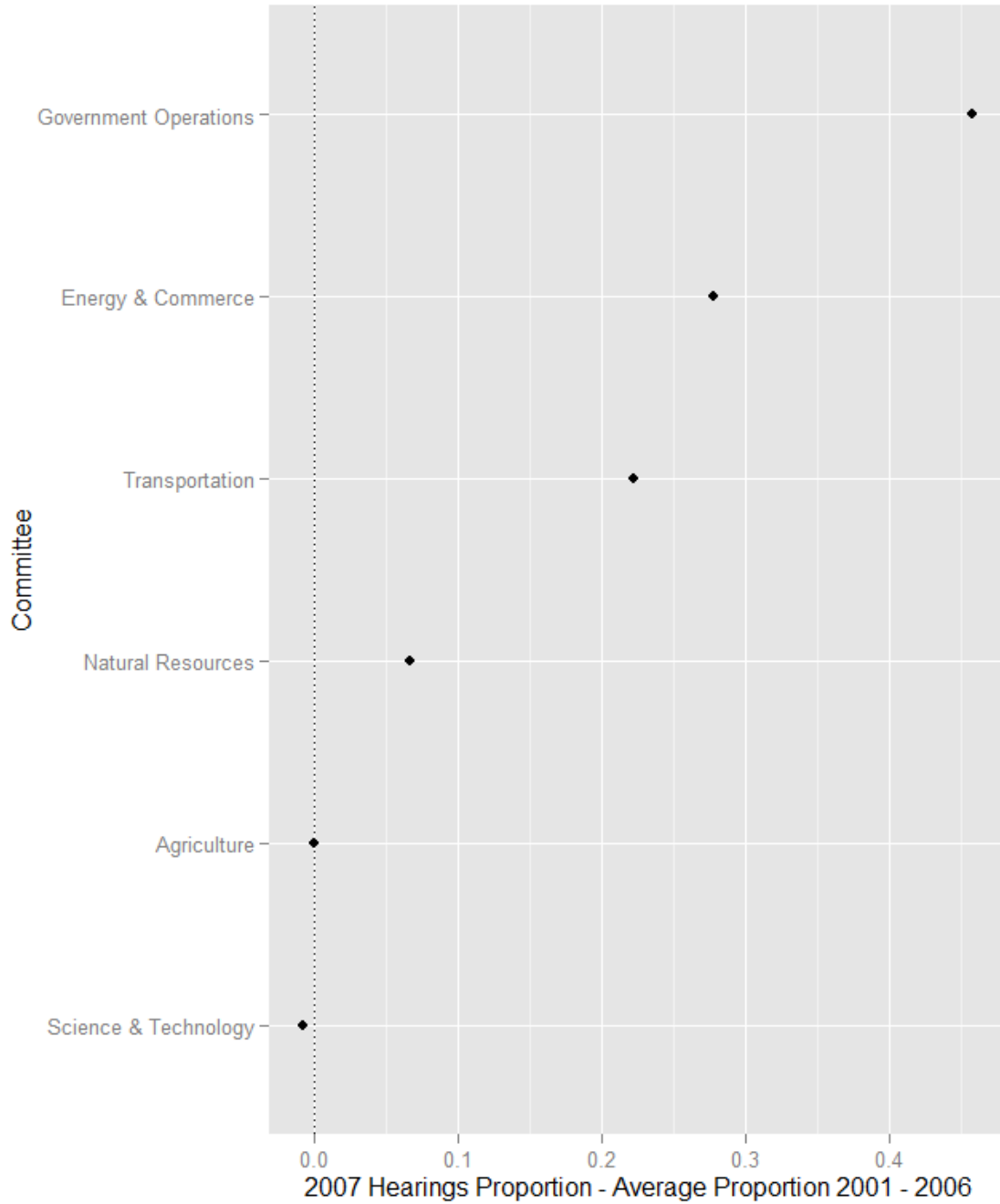


Figure 3 shows that four of the six high-attention committees increased the amount of environment policy information they gathered specifically concerning global

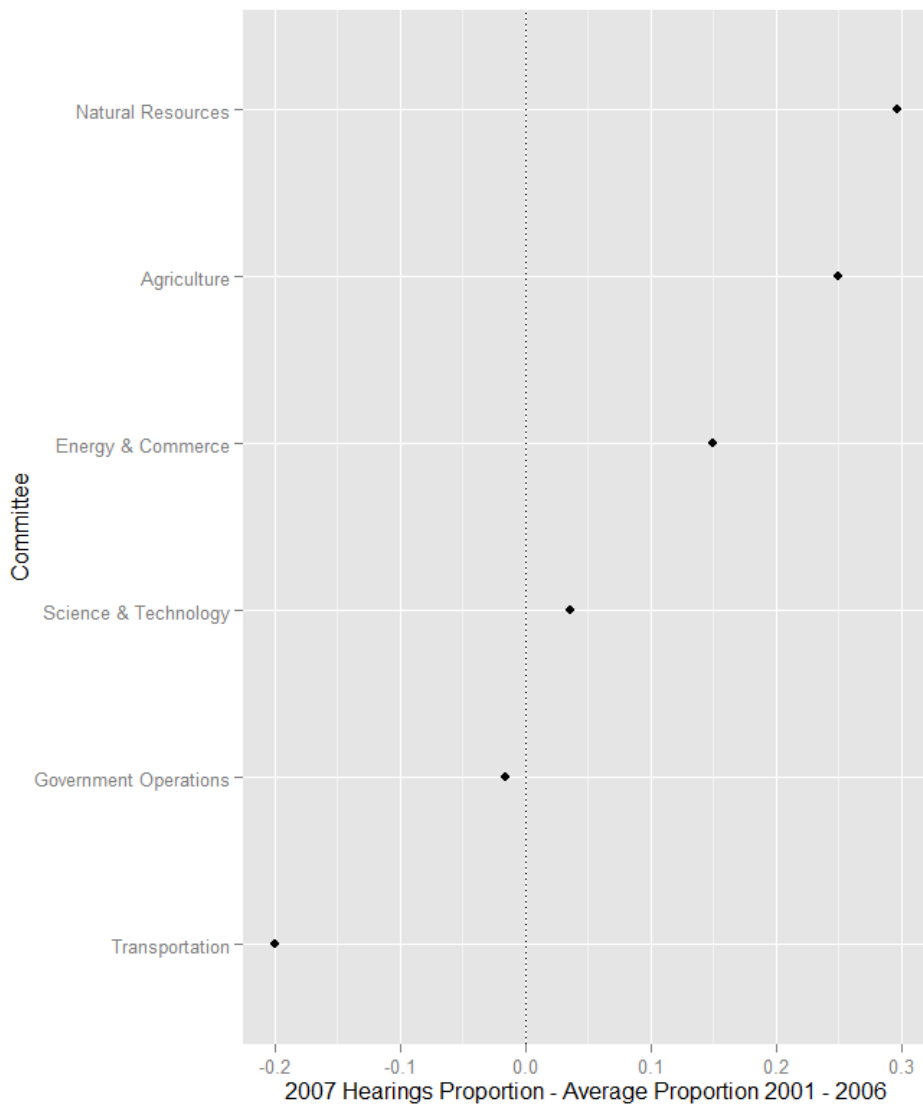
warming and air pollution dimension in 2007. The Government Operations, Energy and Commerce, Transportation, and Natural Resources Committees all held relative more environment hearings on global warming in 2007 than they had on average in the preceding six-year period. Neither the Natural Resources nor Transportation Committee held any global warming-related hearings from 2001 to 2006, so their 2007 information pattern truly represented attempts to gain new information even absent a legislative incentive to do so. Additionally, Figures 2 and 3 show that the Government Operations Committee's pattern of acquiring environment information relative to energy policy and its acquisition of global warming information when focusing on the environment each showed the largest increase among high-attention committees in 2007. Similar results can be found for the Energy and Commerce Committee, which displayed the second-largest increase for each of these measures. The results so far make plain that the House Government Operations and Energy and Commerce Committees began strongly competing with the Select Committee for information about global warming issues in 2007 even though they were not competing for incentives to translate that information into legislation.

As with the environment, energy policy is multidimensional. Not only were two-thirds of HR 3221's titles devoted to energy issues, but fully half of those six titles concentrated on alternative and renewable energy.³ If committees only gather information when they are given incentives to translate that information into legislation, then standing

³ The others: Titles VI and IX addressed energy conservation, while Title VII concerned natural gas and oil.

committees should have focused their energy-related information gathering on the renewable energy dimension. Figure 4 displays the differences between each high-attention committee's 2007 proportion of energy hearings devoted to alternative and renewable energy and its 2001 – 2006 average.

Figure 4. Changes in Information Gathering on the Renewable Energy Dimension of Energy Policy.



According to the results shown in Figure 4, four of the six high-attention committees – Natural Resources, Agriculture, Energy and Commerce, and Science and Technology, gathered more information on renewable energy than they had on average from 2001 – 2006, consistent with the notion that committees will compete for certain information in the face of legislative incentives to do so. These standing committees acquired more information on alternative and renewable energy relative to other energy issues in 2007, and more of HR 3221’s titles concerned that issue than any other policy dimension. Interestingly, the Transportation Committees held relatively fewer hearings on renewable energy than its previous six-year average, suggesting that free-riding can occur even in the presence of legislative incentives. Taken in conjunction with the previous results, Figure 4 re-emphasizes that committees do not acquire information for either incentives or jurisdictional reasons, but for both.

6. Alternative Explanations

The evidence presented thus far shows that congressional committees acquired information for its ability to enhance their jurisdictional authority and institutional reputation, learn about and define emerging problems and solutions, satisfy policy interest *and* because they are provided with incentives to do so. I have argued that the Select Energy Independence and Global Warming Committee's information acquisition pattern stimulated other committees to gather similar kinds of information even through the Select Committee was not competing for legislative incentives. Nevertheless, four alternative explanations may be posited for the standing committee information pattern changes observed above. Public pressure, partisanship, ideology, or committee members' dominant goals all may have produced the shifts in committee information gathering rather than the Select Committee's influence. This section will address each of these explanations in turn.

The first alternative explanation is that committees gathered more information on issues the public thought needed addressing and engage in problem solving (Adler and Wilkerson 2012). Changes to a committee's environment (such as the level of public concern) can affect its oversight patterns (Aberbach 1990). Certain committees thus may have responded to public pressure by holding more hearings on energy and environment issues. The Policy Agendas Project's Most Important Problem (MIP) dataset contains the proportion of Gallup survey respondents who list a particular issue as the "most important problem facing the nation" from 1946 to 2011. If committees responded to public pressure, then higher percentages of respondents should have called energy or the

environment the most important problem (or an increase for both issues) in 2006 or 2007.

Figure 5 shows the MIP percentages for energy and the environment from 2001 – 2007.

Figure 5. “Most Important Problem” Responses on Energy and Environment, 2001 – 2007.

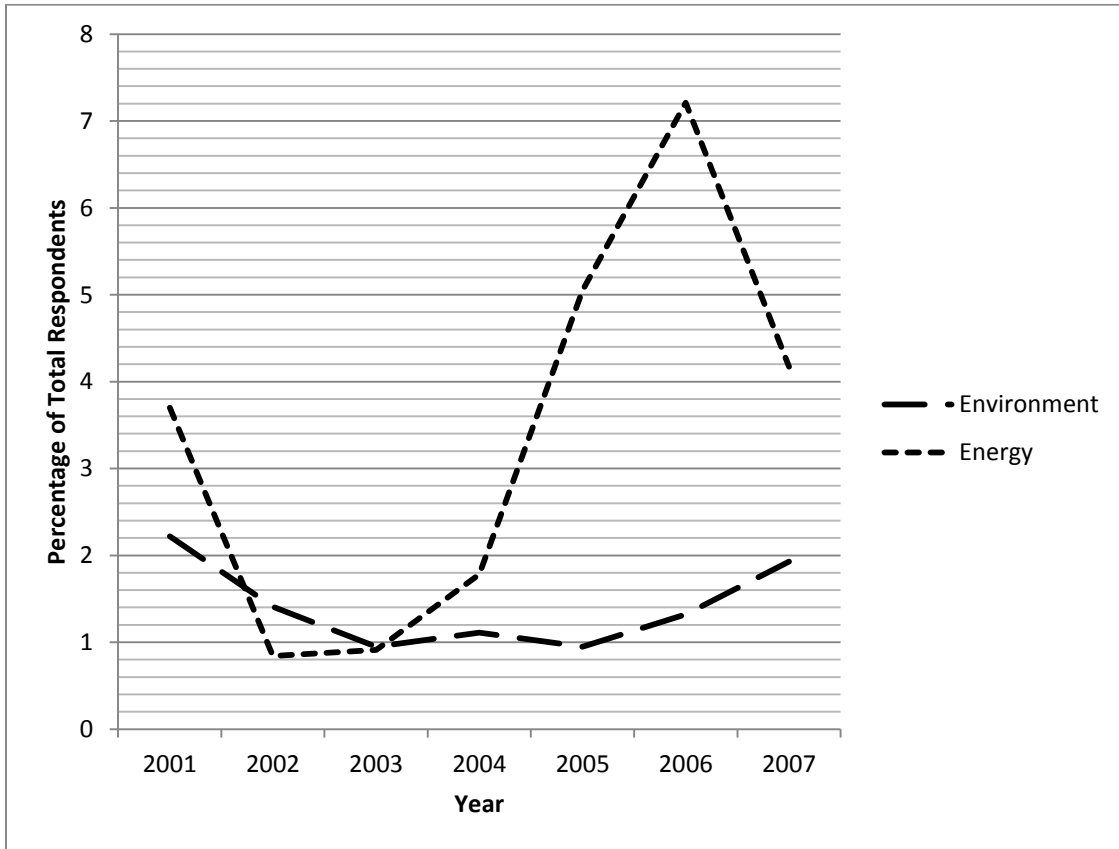


Figure 5 shows that a higher percentage of respondents cited energy as the most important problem facing the country in 2006, so it may be the case that the increased committee activity on energy issues in 2007 was a response to this environmental change, either directly or because Speaker Pelosi responded to the increased public concern by prioritizing energy legislation which in turn provided committees with incentives for

which to compete. However, the public pressure explanation cannot account for why several committees acquired more information on environment issues, even at the expense of energy policy information, when there was no significant increase in Gallup respondents prioritizing environment policy. Figure 5 shows a gradual increase in the percentage of respondents prioritizing environment policy in 2006 and 2007, but that percentage remained lower than its 2001 level. According to Figure 2, four high-attention committees acquired more information on environment policy relative to energy in 2007, but such a change seems to be contra contemporary changes in public opinion.

The second alternative explanation is that a House majority party switch caused shifts in committee hearing patterns. The Democratic Party, who took control of the House in 2007, is more closely identified with environmental issues in the electorate (Petrocik 1996; Petrocik, et al. 2003), and so a partisan explanation would find the increased amount of information acquired on environment issues exhibited by several committees only natural. This argument cannot explain, however, why the shifts in committee attention shown above did not occur in all committees. If Democrats are more engaged in environment policy, then all committees should have worked to acquire more information on those issues. However, the Agriculture and Transportation increased the amount of energy information they received relative to environment policy. It also should be noted that the House's major legislation in this area concerned energy, and did not directly address environment policy. Even if the Democrat's "ownership" of environment policy interacted with the competition for legislative incentives within the House to produce the patterns found here, this does not alter the conclusion that the combination of

member interest and incentives accounts for the information pattern shifts found above, rather than one or the other. The ideological and member-goal explanations will be addressed in tandem.

“Preference outliers” may be more apt to free-ride, since their information is more likely to be amended and thus they are less likely to have their information costs offset with restrictive rules. As Bendor, Glazer, and Hammond (2001, 251) point out, “[b]ecause such an agent will be ignored, it is pointless for him to pay the information-gathering cost.” At the same time, ideologues to adapt more slowly (Denrell and March 2001), so we might expect those committees chaired by ideologically extreme members to display delayed response to the Select Committee’s information pattern and continue gathering similar information of their own. Alternately, more liberal committee chairs might have been more apt to focus on environment issues. Further, Sinclair (1986) adapts Fenno’s typology of member goals (1973) to build hypotheses about committee information acquisition. She specifically suggests that committees with members interested in serving their constituencies have no incentive to seek out information on their own, while members predominantly interested in policy have an innate interest in searching out new issues, which their committees’ information acquisition patterns should reflect.

To examine the ideological and member goal propositions, I have calculated Pearson correlations between each committee chair’s ideology and each committee’s “goal-type” and whether a committee decided to free-ride on the Select Committee’s information acquisition patterns. Ideology is measured with each committee chair’s DW-

NOMINATE scores and lifetime League of Conservation scores (Bayard, et al. 2006), each taken from the previous congress. If moderate committee chairs are more likely to free-ride, then such behavior (either a constant or decreased 2007 information acquisition pattern) should be positively correlated with DW-NOMINATE scores (higher values indicate conservatism) and negatively correlated with LCV Lifetime scores (higher values indicate greater congruence with the League of Conservation Voters' positions). If liberal committee chairs are more likely to free-ride, then free-riding should be negatively correlated with DW-NOMINATE scores and positively correlated with LCV Lifetime scores. The committee goal-types are taken from Smith and Deering (1990); the House Homeland Security Committee, created after that work, is coded as a “constituency” committee due to the high number of distributive decisions committee members make (Coates, Karahan, and Tollison 2006). Sinclair (1986) suggests that policy committees will be negatively associated with free-riding, while constituency committees will be positively associated with free-riding. Table 3 lists each committee chair's ideologies and each committee’s dominant member goal, and whether that committee altered its acquisition pattern for a particular kind of information. Table 4 displays the resulting correlations.

Table 3. Committee Characteristics and 2007 Information Acquisition Patterns.

Committee	Chair DW-NOMINATE	Chair LCV Score	Dominant Member Goal	Overall Energy-Environ. Info.	Energy	Global Warming	Renewable Energy
Agriculture	-0.193	39	Constit.	Free-ride	Free-ride	Free-ride	Acquire info
Energy & Comm.	-0.435	71	Policy	Acquire info	Acquire info	Acquire info	Acquire info
Govt Oper.	-0.486	90	Policy	Acquire info	Acquire info	Acquire info	Free-ride
Natural Rscs	-0.344	65	Constit.	Free-ride	Acquire info	Acquire info	Acquire info
Science/Tech.	-0.172	63	Constit.	Acquire info	Acquire info	Free-ride	Acquire info
Transport.	-0.539	72	Constit.	Free-ride	Free-ride	Acquire info	Free-ride
Approps.	-0.48	84	Prestige	Free-ride	–	–	–
Armed Services	-0.205	40	Constit.	Acquire info	–	–	–
Budget	-0.291	76	Prestige	Acquire info	–	–	–
Financial Svcs	-0.582	92	Policy	Free-ride	–	–	–
Foreign Aff.	-0.418	96	Policy	Acquire info	–	–	–
Homeland Sec.	-0.487	72	Constit.	Free-ride	–	–	–
Judiciary	-0.651	76	Policy	Acquire info	–	–	–
Small Business	-0.554	91	Constit.	Acquire info	–	–	–
Ways & Means	-0.473	80	Prestige	Free-ride	–	–	–

Table 4. Correlations Between Committee Characteristics and 2007 Information Acquisition Patterns.

	Committee Chair Ideology		Committee Goal-Type	
	<i>DW-NOMINATE</i>	<i>LCV Score</i>	<i>Constituency</i>	<i>Policy</i>
Committee free-riding on:				
<i>Energy/environment hearings</i>	-0.14	-0.07	0.20	-0.56*
<i>Energy-environ. hearings devoted to environ.</i>	-0.02	-0.52	0.50	-0.5
<i>Environment hearings on global warming</i>	0.91	-0.73	0.50	-0.5
<i>Energy hearings on renewable energy</i>	-0.76	0.67	-0.25	0.25

* $p < 0.05$, two-tailed

Table 5 provides little support for the notion that ideology influenced adaptation to the Select Energy Independence and Global Warming Committee's hearing signals. None of the correlations are statistically significant. Moreover, the correlations between committee chair ideology and free-riding do not display a consistent direction. As measured by DW-NOMINATE scores, free-riding on energy-environment information, information about the environment relative to energy, and renewable energy within the energy domain is associated with more liberal committee chairs, but associated with moderate committee chairs for global warming within environment policy. When interest group ratings are used, liberal chairs also are positively associated with committee free-riding on renewable energy information, but moderate chairs are associated with free-riding in the other areas examined here.

There is slightly more support for Sinclair's (1986) hypothesis that policy-oriented committees will be more likely to seek out new information, and therefore less likely to free-ride on other committees' information patterns. Policy-oriented committees are negatively associated with free-riding on others' overall increased information gathering on energy and environment issues. However, as with the ideology results, Sinclair's hypotheses are not consistently supported. None of the other correlation coefficients are statistically significant, and the correlations between committee goal-type and free-riding on information about renewable energy suggest that policy-oriented committees were positively associated with free-riding, while constituency committees were more active in gather information about this issue.

7. Conclusion

Congress uses political and analytic information for a variety of purposes. Prioritizing and gathering this information requires time, attention, and other resources, so it has been theorized that principals provide incentives to agents who then compete to keep the principals properly informed. In Congress these incentives typically take the form of policy discretion – the ability to write legislation and prevent others from altering it. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi created a new Select Energy Independence and Global Warming Committee in 2007, but the committee could not propose or markup legislation. It was thus ineligible for legislative incentives such as restrictive rules, control over floor debate, and conference committee appointments, neither could it compete with standing committees for these incentives.

Information is believed to be unimportant unless it can be translated directly into policy (Patty 2009), but the data examined here indicate that congressional committees seek out information even without legislative incentives to do so. Contrary to expectations that creating committees without legislative authority creates collective action problems (Gailmard 2009), few committees were content to free-ride on the Select Energy Independence and Global Warming Committee's information gathering, and instead held hearings of their own on global warming and energy and environment issues generally. Two committees (Judiciary and Foreign Affairs) increased their attention to these issues even though they have been and remain uninvolved in crafting energy or environment-related legislation. Still other committees acquired new information on issues that were not significant parts of the pending New Direction for Energy

Independence, National Security, and Consumer Protection Act (HR 3221). Legislative incentives remain an important means of stimulating information gathering; however a full account of information's value to policymakers recognizes that committees also acquire information for jurisdictional and reputational reasons.

These results suggest future directions for studying information's role in policy making. House Republicans let the Select Committee's authorization expire when they claimed the majority in 2011. Despite his initial objections to its creation, the committee's top Republican Rep. Jim Sensenbrenner came to argue that the Select Energy Independence and Global Warming Committee should be preserved as a valuable oversight tool (Reilly 2007; Sensenbrenner 2010). In light of this paper's findings and Rep. Sensenbrenner's willingness to serve as chair of a committee without any legislative authority, more work could be done to explore how information enhances a committee's reputation. Committees' prominence in legislative information flows suggests that specialists perceive costs to "not knowing" about their area of expertise (Aberbach 1990). As informal groups have risen in Congress to provide members with additional means of collecting and receiving information (Stevens, Mulhollan and Hammond 1987), an important question remains of how committees have reacted to these threats to their privileged status as information processing units.

Committees vary in their individual susceptibility to new informational signals (May, Sapotichne, and Workman 2009). Indeed, the only alternative hypothesis that received even minimal support is that policy-oriented committees are sometimes more likely to seek out their own information and thus less likely to free-ride on others' work, however

this hypothesis was not consistently supported by the data presented here. Sheingate (2006) finds that jurisdictional proximity affects a committee's likelihood of taking up new issues; at the same time, this study finds that several committees with jurisdictions only tangentially related to energy and the environment increased their hearing activity on those issues, suggesting that committees with "slack" in their issue attention can more readily take on additional information. Future research could more closely examine the individual factors that affect committee information acquisition patterns in order to more precisely determine when legislative incentives are needed to overcome information costs and when they are simply a nice bonus.

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