

PROBLEM SOLVERS OR PROBLEM CREATORS:
THE PROBLEM SOLVERS' CAUCUS AND POLARIZATION IN THE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

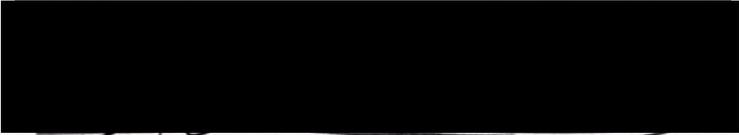
Scarlett A. Neely

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Dr. Sean Theriault
Department of Government
Supervising Professor



Dr. Alison Craig
Department of Government
Second Reader

ABSTRACT

Author: Scarlett Neely

Title: Problem Solvers or Problem Creators: The Problem Solvers' Caucus and Polarization in the United States House of Representatives

Supervising Professors: Dr. Sean Theriault, Dr. Alison Craig

In 2017, No, Labels, an organization dedicated to a return to bipartisan behavior in the United States House of Representatives spurred the creation of the Problem Solvers' Caucus. The caucus established bylaws to encourage collaboration between parties, including forcing a bipartisan voting bloc and requiring each prospective caucus member to bring a member of the opposite party to join as well. Upon its creation, the caucus had different reputations—some thought it a refreshing group with a promising future, while others were skeptical about the group's true motives. Despite any criticisms of the way caucus members conduct themselves, it is important to recognize how imperative its proclaimed goal is: a return to a Congress that collaborates, works through differences, and creates lasting, sustainable policy for our nation.

In my thesis, I first explore the history of caucuses and the formation of the Problem Solvers Caucus. Then, I look at the bipartisan measures and methods of lawmaking the caucus is employing in order to steer the House to bipartisan behaviors. I next attempt to find the caucus's effect on its members by examining the DW-Nominate Scores and Lugar Bipartisan Scores of members of the Problem Solvers' Caucus before and after its creation to ensure that members are truly exhibiting bipartisan voting behavior as compared to the rest of the House. Ultimately, I find that the caucus and its members truly are more moderate and bipartisan non-caucus members, but that membership in the caucus has no significant effect on the level of bipartisanship in the House overall. Finally, I discuss the implications of my findings, and what it could mean for the future of our democracy.

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Chapter One

Introduction

A survey of American citizens today on the current state of their political climate would likely yield expected results. We hear it all the time—polarization, divisiveness, unproductivity, toxicity, hopeless—words people hear daily on the radio, on the news, while listening to podcasts, and talking to their peers. But what is worse is that due to our amazing technological advances and access to current events and news as soon as it breaks, the American public is no longer living in a separate, distant sphere from its political system. As a result, political developments feel more personal and take a larger toll on the public psyche. When a friend disagrees with you politically, it feels like a personal insult. When a politician makes a statement on an issue, it is taken to heart and either defended fervently or fought with spite. Elections have the emotional rollercoaster of feeling like a breakup or winning the lottery. So when the political system feels sharply divided, it means that our public feels divided as well, and the disconnect seeps into their personal lives and relationships to poison the very cohesion of our society.

Where did we go wrong? What happened to the elusive cooperative and goal-oriented government that everyone seems to recall from a not-so-distant past? And can we ever return to a well-oiled political system that functions on serving its people rather than fighting against one another?

In 2010, a group of activists decided that some change needed to happen. The group came together in what they would call No Labels—an organization with a powerful mission statement calling for bipartisanship, working relationships, and respect to return to the US

government. For No Labels, this mission is huge. If their goals are left unmet, they worry about an unraveling of our democracy as we know it today.

The group began its work through a few elections, bolstering campaigns of candidates from both sides of the aisle who vowed to work with the other side to solve problems. To counter the lack of personal relationships, trust, and dialogue between members of opposite parties needed to facilitate cooperation and change, the organization also worked as a convener for members of Congress. The goals of such meetings were to identify members who may be willing to work across the party aisle, convince them how important it is to do so, and bring these members together informally to meet and form relationships off of the floor. In 2017, the members selected to participate in this process formalized into the Problem Solvers' Caucus, and decided that the caucus would be the perfect avenue for getting achieving stable, sustainable policies. The caucus soon grew in size and also adopted bylaws and rules meant to maintain that its members remain bipartisan voices dedicated to working together, including voting as a unified bloc on the floor if 75 percent of the caucus agrees on taking a stance on a piece of legislation and vowing to not campaign against or in any way oppose a fellow member of the caucus who faces a challenger during their re-election.

Upon its formalization in the 115th Congress, the caucus dove into some key legislative issues, including healthcare, infrastructure, DACA, and gun safety. Additionally, the group quickly became frustrated with the system of rules in place that gives the majority party overreaching power to choose what bills are successful in the legislative process—even at the expense of bipartisan pieces of legislation. As a result, the caucus launched campaigns in 2018 to attack these rules and “Break the Gridlock.” To achieve this end, the caucus focused in on the position of Speaker—after Paul Ryan announced his resignation, it was apparent that the House

would have a new Speaker who would have the power to do away with some of the dangerous rules. The caucus decided to come up with a package of demands for the new Speaker and to hold votes for whomever he or she may be—no matter which party ended up taking control of the House. When Pelosi was elected Speaker, she agreed to some of these rules changes when the caucus threatened holding their votes, and amended the Vacate the Chair motion and added some changes to the current House rules that favors bipartisan legislation in the legislative process.

Now, the Problem Solvers' Caucus is at a crossroads. Having achieved some of its short-term goals for House-wide bipartisanship, it is time to turn to a longer-term scheme for restoring the House to regular order and a return to the lost ethos of collaboration. The way to do so, of course, is to practice what they preach—individual members ought to take the bipartisan lessons and relationships they learn within the caucus and apply them to their interactions with members of the opposing party on the floor and beyond. If the Problem Solvers' Caucus is truly dedicated to promoting collaboration and a “country over party” mindset, then they need to lead by example and pave the way for current and future House members to engage in similar behaviors. If they are successful, then we can begin to truly see a shift in our political climate toward the better. I track the voting behaviors of the Problem Solvers' Caucus to hold the members accountable for the commitments they made in joining the caucus. I attempt to measure the impact of the Problem Solvers Caucus on the operations of Congress by comparing member voting behaviors pre- and post-caucus formation, as well as the behaviors of their non-caucus colleagues over the same time period. The goal is to measure the impact of the Problem Solvers' Caucus on bipartisanship and polarization in Congress and to explore the implications of their behavior for our democracy. I perform this investigation in a number of steps.

First, I study the conditions under which other caucuses formed and what goals and tactics traditional caucuses have and use. I then delve into how the Problem Solvers' Caucus does or does not fit into the traditional mold, and examine the foundation and evolution of the caucus from their first battles through the current ones. Recently, the caucus has been attracting major media attention, and so I assess the opinions, praises, and criticisms of the caucus in today's political coverage. To examine the behaviors of caucus members, I will collect and analyze Nokken-Poole ideology scores and Lugar Bipartisanship scores in order to measure votes across Congresses and compare caucus member behavior to that of their colleagues not in the caucus. I hypothesize that caucus members will be closer to the ideological center than their peers, and that they will be more bipartisan in the votes they cast than non-caucus members of their respective parties. Finally, to discuss my findings, I will explore what a measure of success means for solving polarization, and what the implications of success or failure of bipartisanship means for the future of our nation.

Chapter Two

The Problem Solvers' Caucus

The History of Caucuses

In Congress, policies are created through agreement—the legislation that can garner votes is what is ultimately passed. Naturally, coalitions form around a certain ideological or issue-based spectrum. The United States' two party system creates a division between the ideological left and right, creating a natural divide on issues. In the past, the two parties were not divided by such a wide gap along the ideological center, and votes were dictated by senior members of Congress to the junior members of their respective parties. Before the 1970s, Congress was very much governed by its structure, and a system of institutionalized seniority and natural leadership was part of a norm that junior members followed mostly without question. The uncontested, unspoken rules allowed for a smooth-running Congress, where decisions along party lines were generally made without too much fuss.¹

Beginning in the 1970s, party strength began to rise as junior members began to buck their party leaders in order to pursue personal primary goals. A number of factors were transforming the way in which the public engaged with politics and voting: television was on the rise and gave voters an easy way to see their elected officials, campaign finance laws began changing, and politicians began to rely less on their parties for fundraising and gaining recognition and instead turned to consulting firms for campaign management.² Members now

¹ Susan Webb Hammond, "Congressional Caucuses and Party Leaders in the House of Representatives," *Political Science Quarterly* 106, no. 2 (Summer 1991): [284-286], PDF.

² Congressional Research Service, *Congressional Member Organizations: Their Purpose and Activities, History, and Formation*, by Robert Jay Dilger, research report no. R40683 (n.p., 2013), [4].

felt a new sense of obligation to poll the needs of their electorate, and to meet their demands more directly. As a result, choosing to follow party leadership was often no longer a viable option if these junior members wanted to keep their seats; they needed a way to create their own coalitions and leadership structures in order to directly challenge the party hierarchy which stifled their chances at reelection and prevented them from serving their own personal interests.

As a result, in the 1970s and 1980s, the number of congressional caucuses soared. Before 1969, only three caucuses were registered with the Committee on House Administration. By 1990, there were more than 100. These caucuses formed under the conditions of rank-and-file members of Congress feeling as though party leadership was failing to meet the policy expectations that they required in order to please their electorate, make substantial change outside of just what their parties were pursuing, and stay in office.³

Caucuses are, in short, groups of members who band together under one issue or interest with the goal of influencing policy. They often form in times where the political system appears to be unrepresentative of certain groups or ideas, and they act as a response to the failure of the two-party system to quickly adapt to the crosscutting nature of issues that we see today. Because today's hottest policy issues mostly divide the parties along ideological lines, new caucuses centered around a particular issue usually retain a membership of only one party. Not only is this formation convenient for lawmakers with a specific focus, but it is also more recently an effective way to see their preferred policy make it to a vote. An increase in the ideological polarization of the electorate has made elections less favorable for moderate candidates, and the divide is reflected in a deeply partisan, divided House membership which lacks a stable moderate

³ Hammond, "Congressional Caucuses," [278]

voting bloc.⁴ As a result, leadership is forced to appeal to partisan desires in order to secure their big policy agenda rather than attempting to appease a smaller group of centrists who may not be as dependable.⁵

Caucuses employ the use of several rules-centered tactics in order to ensure their effectiveness as specific policy activists; often, such tactics take the form of membership by-laws and guidelines on how members vote (or refuse to do so) on particular issues. The structure of rules and purpose of caucuses vary greatly; for example, the House Democratic caucus and the Republican conference mainly serve as unifying grounds for their parties. In their weekly meetings, they discuss any issues that may arise and the party's stances on the issues, so that members can vote along party lines if they choose. Other caucuses require that their members vote in one unified way on particular issues in order to engage in more statement-based policymaking. In particular, the latter caucus structure poses some dilemma for House leadership. While the purpose of caucuses may be to unify groups of members who share common interests, when they choose to engage in voting behaviors that largely impact the policy process, these groups are in a way only adding to the fragmentation of Congress. If the goal of leadership is to unite members in order to pass big policy bills, it seems almost counterintuitive to have to garner the votes of groups that may add to the difficulty of securing these votes in the first place.

Party polarization has led to a systemic conundrum—in an atmosphere which often stifles the opinions and policy goals of those in the minority, coalitions need to form in order to ensure

⁴ David W. Brady, "Party Coalitions in the US Congress: Intra- V. Interparty," in *The Oxford Handbook of American Political Parties and Interest Groups*, by Louis Sandy Maisel (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), [4-6].

⁵ Hammond, "Congressional Caucuses," [290]

their voices are heard. However, in the process of forming such coalitions, they become so vital for the leadership agenda that members who are more moderate are left out of the policy process completely, which in turn further pushes people to the right and left of where they naturally align, further fueling polarization. In the process, we are seeing a shift in the attitudes of our politicians as they fight to maintain control of their districts. The efficient system of balances and productivity that our founding fathers painstakingly crafted in Article I of the Constitution is now rampant with political divisiveness, bias, and stagnation; the American way of life is suffering as a result.

No Labels

A remedy to these frightening ailments of the congressional system was the thesis behind the formation of No Labels, a political organization with grassroots origins that was founded with the intention of finding a solution to restoring compromise and peace to our democracy. Their mission is to foster relationships between members of both parties so that they may work together to create lasting change and sustainable policy outcomes for the American people. The organization was founded in 2010 as a response to the trend that the political system was taking, especially in response to the “democratic wave” of President Obama’s campaign that took the nation by storm. In his first year and a half in office, President Obama worked with House Democrats to pass the controversial Affordable Care Act, which received a swarm of backlash from political opponents who deemed the policy package as too over-arching and controlling. Many members of Congress on the political right also felt as though their opinions and offers of compromise were ignored by the president throughout the entire process, and complained that Democratic leadership intentionally shut out all Republicans in a one-sided policy marathon.

Even after the ACA was passed and the House turned to less high-profile policy items, Republicans claimed that the new method of leadership did not end, stating that it was nearly impossible to even have a Republican-authored bill see the House floor.

Thus, the famous Tea Party built their coalition upon sentiments of alienation, and they found support among their colleagues as they spearheaded a Republican backlash against what they perceived to be grave political injustices committed by the Democratic party. In 2010, Republicans flipped the House in their biggest seat-gain since 1946, and were quick to use similar exclusionary lawmaking tactics that they had fought hard against less than a year before.

Since this monumental power shift in modern congressional history, Congress has adopted a policy process that behaves like a pendulum. Elections swing power from one side to the other, and often in divisive, unproductive ways. Once one party is in power, it turns to exclusivity in its policy making strategy, and often spends much of its time unraveling the policy progress of the previous party while crafting and implementing their visions of what those programs ought to look like. Such exclusivity and refusal to maintain opposing programs leads to policy instability for the American people. Important issues like healthcare, education, or tax programs are left in uncertainty for citizens and industries as coverage or laws surrounding these policies are subject to change every two years with each election.

Policy instability and the harm it has for citizens and their ways of life is the reason why No Labels decided to seek a new remedy to polarization: abandoning systemic-based approaches in favor of a more personal, relationship-driven approach. The organizers of No Labels carefully selected a handful of representatives whom they believed displayed a track record of cooperation and respect toward their colleagues of the opposite party. The selected members met several times in order to brainstorm tactics to answer the problems that they believed to be causing the

deep divide within politics: politicians choosing parties over people, the failure of media to cater to and represent the interests of those lying in the political center, and above all else, the failure of members of Congress to build friendships during their time on the hill.

No Labels decided that the latter problem was the root cause of all the others—that lack of personal relationships was causing a lack of respect for each other, and an almost dehumanization of the people that our politicians are working with every day.⁶ They decided to develop a framework upon which willing members could band together despite party in order to come up with good policy that would be sustainable in the long run because of its bipartisan origins. Thus, in 2017, the members selected to participate in the brainstorming process formalized into the Problem Solvers’ Caucus, and decided that the caucus would be the perfect avenue for change rather than settling for the back-and-forth, unsustainable policies that seemed to be the new norm.

The organization claims that this approach was not new; rather, it is a return to the way that Congress used to operate. In the past, such inventive measures were not necessary. For example, President Reagan and Speaker Tip O’Neil had a famous political relationship framed on their vastly different ideologies that often clashed. Despite this, they still passed some impactful pieces of legislation during their time in office together. They had what they joked to be a “6 pm friendship”—after the work day, they were friends rather than political enemies. The president and Speaker’s cordial relationship was made possible because the two men (and all

⁶Liz Morrison, interview by the author, Washington, D.C., April 10, 2019. During the spring of my junior year, I was fortunate enough to travel to Washington, D.C. as a J.J. Pickle Research Fellow in order to conduct research for my thesis. While I was there, I reached out to the Vice President of No Labels, Liz Morrison, for an interview. She was gracious enough to agree, and was very willing to answer all of the questions I had. I thoroughly enjoyed her hospitality and our chat.

other Washington politicians) actually lived in D.C.. Until Newt Gingrich's 1994 campaign against "corrupt" political system and government, members of Congress were forced to spend time with one another because they lived in the same neighborhoods, attended the same churches, and sent their children to the same schools. They were able to organically develop after-hours, real relationships that built trust and respect.⁷

Gingrich's message spread across the Republican party and across the nation, and encouraged to spend more time back home in their district instead of in the "toxic" Washington that voters came to have a distaste for. Spending more time in district and less time getting to know fellow members of Congress has only further allowed for partisanship and constant campaigning and thinking ahead to re-elections instead of real, impactful, and focused policy work. Now, upon arriving in Washington, members are segmented by their parties from the start. As a result, the personal relationships, trust, and dialogue needed to facilitate cooperation and make change are seriously lacking.⁸

The Problem Solvers' Caucus

The Problem Solvers' Caucus became official in the 114th Congress and worked hard on bipartisan approaches to key legislative issues such as healthcare, infrastructure, DACA, and gun safety. The caucus soon grew in size, and also adopted bylaws and rules meant to maintain that its members remain bipartisan voices dedicated to working together.

Other than their established voting bloc rule and agreeing to not campaign against one another, the Problem Solvers Caucus also adopted a "Noah's Ark" rule, which mandates that

^{7, 7} Morrison, interview by the author.

each person who would like to join the caucus bring with them a member of the opposite party to keep party membership numbers equal. Any representative may request to join the Problem Solvers Caucus at any point during their time in congress, whether that be immediately upon swearing-in or into their second decade of service. But, all potential new members are interviewed before being allowed to join the caucus to ensure that only people who are willing to collaborate and are dedicated to working at decreasing toxic partisanship can join. It is a self-identifying caucus, which means that only members can identify themselves as caucus members—No Labels doesn't publish a list. No Labels insists on caucus members maintaining discretion over their publicized status because they believe that it is necessary in today's political climate. Some caucus members may live in deeply-set party districts that they feel may react negatively if members were to say that they work with the opposite party. So, members may choose to not disclose their caucus membership.⁹

The Problem Solvers' Caucus is, by nature, an unconventional caucus. First, it is not centered around one policy issue for which it advocates, but rather an ideal state of cooperation and bipartisanship that it hopes to impose upon Congress. Second, it requires that there remain an equal balance of membership from both parties. Finally, from what we can measure of ideology, caucus members are aligned more centrally than their colleagues. The three key features beg the question: could the Problem Solvers' Caucus be an exception to the usual fragmentation that other coalitions pose?

To answer this question, I examine the role that the caucus plays in working with leadership. Normally, due to coalitions being more partisan in nature, leadership has to appeal to ideologically right or left demands in bringing forward policy proposals to move through the

⁹ Morrison, interview by the author.

House, effectively encouraging partisan behavior and divisiveness. So, if the Problem Solvers' Caucus is able to maintain a large enough voting bloc threat, House leadership must work to secure caucus votes if they want a good chance at passing big policy bills. In theory, this could be good for fixing polarization, especially considering the equal balance of Democrat and Republican membership. Ideally, party leadership will have to appeal to both sides of the aisle when crafting policy so they might earn the guaranteed votes of the caucus's voting bloc.

In practice, however, it is hard to say if the caucus can really carry this effect. Primarily, if the caucus does not maintain high enough membership numbers, then leadership won't feel a threat from their voting bloc, and thus will not see the need to directly appeal to caucus demands. Second, it is hard to measure individual members' commitment to the thesis of the caucus; they may say they are committed to bipartisanship, and they may be more ideologically central than other members of their party, but at the end of the day, party hold over members is pretty powerful. If not every member of the caucus is dedicated to maintaining a moderate agenda, then the 75 percent of votes needed to vote in a block suddenly becomes a very hard threshold to meet.

Finally, it is important to examine individual member behavior outside of when they voting as a member of the Problem Solvers' Caucus. That is, when they aren't being held to a voting bloc, are they still engaging in bipartisan behavior? If members are truly dedicated to a restoration of cooperation and bipartisan lawmaking, then outside of when they are behaving as caucus members, they ought to still represent the thesis of the caucus. If they fail to do so, the caucus loses credibility as a true change-driven entity, and the institution of Congress fails to really benefit from any changes for which the caucus is claiming to push.

Chapter Three

Evolution of the Problem Solvers' Caucus

Caucus Battles

At its conception in 2017, the Problem Solvers' Caucus immediately got to work in spearheading bipartisan versions of major policy fights that Democrats and Republicans had been fighting over for the past few Congresses. The caucus specifically chose controversial policies, including reforming the health care system, immigration policies, infrastructure funding procedures, and gun safety measures, because of the weight of importance such policies had on the American people's quality of life. The policies selected are also ones that No Labels deemed most susceptible to instability in programs and everyday life for the American citizenry, as after each election the party that ended up in power immediately got to work unraveling major advances the opposite party had made during their reign.

Health Care

The first policy the Problem Solvers' Caucus tackled was health care. On July 31, 2017, the new caucus released the first bipartisan health care plan in response to the seven-year old Affordable Care Act that continued to pose some problems for Americans even years after its initial passage. Choices for insurance coverage were waning while premiums continued to soar.¹⁰ An August deadline loomed for health insurers to decide whether or not they were going to offer plans in local individual markets, and Democrats and Republicans showed no signs of coming

¹⁰ No Labels, Problem Solvers Caucus Health Care Fix, July 31, 2017, accessed October 1, 2019, <https://www.nolabels.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/PSC-HealthCareFIX-one-pager-1.pdf>.

anywhere close to meeting in the middle on stabilizing insurance markets. Thus, the caucus felt compelled the caucus to release a bipartisan five-part plan for fixing the health care system.

First, the Problem Solvers proposed keeping insurance premiums affordable by making cost sharing reduction payments mandatory in order to satisfy the demands of insurance companies while taking some of the stress of meeting deductibles and co-pays for consumers. Second, the proposal created a federal dedicated stability fund for states to tap into in order to reduce premiums for consumers with chronic and pre-existing conditions while limiting their losses. Third, the plan attempted to take the pressure to provide health care off of small businesses by increasing the threshold requiring businesses to provide services to their employees from 50 to 500, and increasing hour criteria for a full-time employee. Fourth, the bipartisan proposal eliminated the medical device tax that many consumers claimed to be feeling the effects of in their medical care costs. Finally, the plan would allow for states to more easily come up with their own plans and collaborate to provide the best and cheapest health care services to their citizens.¹¹

The five-part, bipartisan plan was the first policy proposal that the caucus produced, and it far bypassed the caucus's voting bloc threshold of 75% of caucus approval. Though the caucus was still in its formative stages at this time, it appears as though its stated commitment of bipartisan collaboration on life-changing policies was believed in from the start. While the proposals were not met with widespread approval from the larger House, the new caucus continued to craft bipartisan proposals through the next year.

Immigration

¹¹ No Labels, Problem Solvers.

The next issue the Problem Solvers' Caucus turned to was immigration. On January 29, 2018, the caucus released a set of four solutions they deemed the most critical in their DACA-Border Security Proposal. The proposal came on the heels of a tumultuous autumn in which the Trump administration vowed repeatedly to repeal Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, raising vicious debates among different states and lawmakers from both sides of the aisle. In the proposal, the caucus proposed a solution to the DACA discrepancy, suggesting a conditional pathway to earned citizenship for children who entered the US after 2012. To address family migration in relation to children who receive DACA status, the caucus proposed prohibiting immigrant parents from being sponsored by their child with DACA status. Instead, parents would be eligible for a 3-year renewable legal status and work authorization as long as their children retained DACA status.

In their immigration proposal, the Problem Solvers' Caucus also decided to tackle a solution to the visa system by proposing an elimination of the Diversity Visa Lottery. Instead, under their suggested system the annually awarded visas would be split in half between underrepresented "priority countries" and recipients of Temporary Protected Status. Finally, the caucus gave recommendations for how funds from President Trump's FY18 Budget Request ought to be allocated for border security: \$1.591 billion for barrier infrastructure along the border, and \$1.123 billion for non-barrier infrastructure including surveillance technology and Border Patrol retention. They also proposed additional border security measures, such as improving border access roads and implementing Border Patrol oversight measures.¹²

¹² The Problem Solvers Caucus, "Problem Solvers Caucus Principles," news release, January 29, 2018, accessed November 15, 2019, https://gottheimer.house.gov/uploadedfiles/psc_agreement_1.29.18_final.pdf.

In crafting this policy proposal, the caucus fully utilized the geographical diversity of Congress in order to craft proposals that were multi-dimensional and representational. Adopting measures from Congressman Hurd's *SMART Act*, Congresswoman McSally's amendment to the *Build America's Trust Act*, and Congressman Espallat's *ICE and CBP Body Camera Accountability Act*, the caucus displayed a willingness to incorporate ideas from fellow members of Congress from a spectrum of backgrounds and ideas, which is right on par with their mission statement.

Infrastructure

January 2018 was a busy month for the Problem Solvers' Caucus. Along with their DACA-Border Security proposal, the designated Problem Solvers Caucus infrastructure working group released a report and plan on how to address the mounting problem of updating and maintaining the nation's infrastructure and address the growing problem of backlogged infrastructure maintenance. The co-chairs of the working group, Congressman John Katko and Congresswoman Elizabeth Esty, worked with other caucus members and their staff to explore the future of our transportation, energy, communication, and resource systems in a six-part report based on bipartisan solutions.

The first issue tackled in the report was the problem of the nation's surface transportation infrastructure failing to keep up with growing demand of maintenance and renovation. Due to a backlog of funding, our current infrastructure is deteriorating in poorer, more rural parts in the country, sometimes resulting in unsafe conditions for citizens. To combat these conditions, the Problem Solvers' Caucus proposed tactics to first stabilize funding for the Highway Trust Fund

to ensure long-term funding for infrastructure, and then to employ the use of financing to generate enough revenue to accelerate and improve infrastructure modernization projects.

The second focus of the infrastructure report addressed ports and inland waterways; specifically, the failure of Congress to reauthorize funding for canal dredging to uniformly accommodate ships. The Caucus's proposed solution was to restore the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund to be used for its intended purpose of being directed toward port and harbor maintenance. The report also turned to water and wastewater infrastructure in its examination of infrastructure issues. The caucus recognized that many areas of the country are faced with unsafe drinking water which threatens the safety and well-being of citizens daily. Lack of sustainable water infrastructure can also harm the economies of these communities by scaring away potential opportunities for new businesses or people to move in and increase money flow in the area. Ultimately, inadequate water infrastructure stems from a trend of underfunding for our water and wastewater systems, as well as increased federal regulatory mandates without financial support from Congress for communities to implement the required changes. In response, the caucus proposed strengthening and increasing state access to the Clean Water and Drinking Water State Revolving Funds to simplify the process of states applying for financial support in implementing federal regulatory mandates and updating water systems. They also suggested a regionalization of water systems in order to have smaller and more streamlined oversight on communities, and to ease the process of regulation enforcement.

Next, the Problem Solvers' Caucus explored solutions to ensure that our nation's energy infrastructure is keeping up with scientific innovations in new energy-generating processes and growth in renewable and alternative energy resources. Their proposal to address the problems of complicated regulations and permit processes that hindered growth of the energy sector included

funding, and cyber and physical security. In funding, the caucus suggested supporting utility service loan programs that specifically provide infrastructure improvements to rural communities and to support research programs within the Department of Energy through continued funding to encourage innovation, increased efficiency, and discoveries in environmentally-safe energy practices. In cyber and physical security, the caucus proposed expanding cyber awareness and incident response training programs to state and local levels in order to better monitor vulnerabilities within energy infrastructure as well as increasing awareness and response to insider threats to vulnerable facilities.

The caucus decided to embrace and support a fully technologically-connected nation in its next infrastructure topic of broadband and communications networks. Accepting the importance of the internet in our citizens' daily social and commercial lives, as well as its necessity among governments, schools, and hospitals, the caucus called upon Congress to match technology's contributions to innovation and our economy by investing the resources to make it available in every corner of our country in a call-to-action that mimics the commitment to rural electrification in the 1930s. The caucus encourages Congress to partner with the Federal Communications Commission to update financial contributions to the Universal Service Fund, which connects and modernizes rural areas to keep them up-to-date with modern technologies. The caucus also suggests a larger push for cities to adopt USDOT's Smart City Challenge, which uses data collection techniques in order to analyze what technology services could improve city efficiency.

Finally, in the Problem Solvers' Caucus's infrastructure report, the working group suggested a bipartisan, long-term reauthorization of the Federal Aviation Administration in order to empower and enable airports and air traffic control systems to make improvements in order to

compensate for the predicted growth in air travel demand. The caucus recognizes the importance of aviation for our economy, trade, and emergency response, and stresses the importance of ensuring the efficiency and modernization of our aviation infrastructure.¹³

In crafting the multi-issue infrastructure report, the caucus was clever in its selection of bipartisan leaders of the infrastructure working group in crafting a compilation of policies designed to be a framework for a plan which addressed the need for expansion and modernization of United States infrastructure. The group met with more than 100 outside stakeholder organizations, the Administration, and leaders in Congress to develop these bipartisan policy options that covered needs in rural and urban areas, and which lawmakers from both sides of the aisle could agree would result in an improved quality of life for all Americans.

Gun Safety

Following the tragic events at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, in February 2018, and days before the student-led March for Our Lives protests across the country, the Problem Solvers Caucus launched a gun safety working group in order to find bipartisan approaches to meaningful legislation to reduce gun violence. The caucus reached agreement on what they collectively deemed commonsense measures regarding school safety and mental illness research, which successfully passed the House of Representatives and Senate in the omnibus funding agreement.

The working group, co-chaired by Congressman Fred Upton and Congresswoman Debbie Dingell, partnered with stakeholders and non-caucus members to decide what could be

¹³ The Problem Solvers Caucus, *Rebuilding America's Infrastructure*, February 2018, accessed November 15, 2019, https://reed.house.gov/uploadedfiles/psc_infrastructure_report.pdf.

considered sensible policy to both parties so that some progress could be made in preventing gun violence and ensuring school safety. After research and discussion, the working group settled on a collection of policies that they felt represented all opinions on the issue of gun safety, and which could move Congress toward finding a solution to the gun violence epidemic. The Problem Solvers Caucus as a voting bloc agreed to support H.R. 4477, the Fix NICS Act of 2017; H.R. 4909, the STOP School Violence Act of 2018; H.R. 4811, the Securing Our Schools Act of 2018; and supported directed appropriations to fund mental health programs that were laid out in the 21st Century Cures Act. All of these measures were passed by the House of Representatives and Senate. The caucus also agreed to support H.R. 3999, which called for a ban on the manufacture, sale, and use of “bump stocks” and similar devices, and H.R. 4471, the NICS Denial Notification Act of 2017.¹⁴ Despite the divisiveness of the topic of gun safety, the caucus was able to band together to approve bipartisan, common-sense legislation in the face of the tragic, tumultuous politics surrounding the subject.

Break the Gridlock and The Speaker Project: The 2018 Midterm Elections

After the Problem Solvers’ Caucus became official in the 114th Congress, they immediately got to work on crafting bipartisan approaches to key legislative issues such as healthcare, DACA, infrastructure, and gun safety. The caucus focused this policy agenda through their 75% voting bloc rule and other bylaws in order to ensure the continued use of bipartisanship in their proposals and thus signal to House leadership that they were serious about working across the aisle to produce sustainable policy solutions. Shortly after the congress

¹⁴ The Problem Solvers Caucus, "Problem Solvers Caucus Applauds Passage of School Safety Measures and Mental Health Resources," news release, March 23, 2018, accessed November 15, 2019, <https://gottheimer.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=637>.

started, the caucus quickly found that they were not getting anywhere in the legislative process. They watched as their proposals and work barely received committee hearings, and thus rarely made it to the floor for a vote—their legislation was practically dead on arrival, which caused the caucus to take a step back to evaluate what was preventing their bipartisan measures from passing. In order to find a solution, they decided to seek an answer in the official House Rules, and quickly found where they thought the issue seemed to lie. The caucus’s findings are what sparked the creation of their “Break the Gridlock” and Speaker Project campaigns.

The caucus found a troubling trend in the use of the House Rules by the majority party to secure the advancement of choice pieces of legislation. They traced this pattern back to 1994, when Newt Gingrich first used the House Rules to consolidate the majority party’s power, and thus turned the legislative process into a game which only those deemed suitable to play by leadership can participate. The Speaker or majority party always remains in control of how far legislation moves in the process, and what policies ever see the light of day. Over the years, the use of this power has become more and more radicalized, and finally came to a head in 2015, when the Freedom Caucus used the Motion to Vacate the Chair against Speaker Boehner to compel him to resign, and then again when they threatened Speaker Ryan with the same action.

To the Problem Solvers’ Caucus, this behavior was the epitome of partisan warfare and abandonment of the duties of a representative, which they claimed was a result of the majority party being allowed to abuse the rules of the House to tie the hands of the Speaker in order to bring him away from moderate leanings and more toward the edges of the majority party, thus forcing partisanship and total control.¹⁵ To combat this misuse of House rules, and to ensure that whoever succeeded Speaker Ryan after the 2018 Midterm Elections would carry out a more

¹⁵ Morrison, interview by the author.

bipartisan agenda, the caucus set forth two campaigns: Break the Gridlock and The Speaker Project.

The Speaker Project

The Speaker Project was launched first in response to Speaker Ryan's announced resignation at the beginning of 2018. In a thirty-page report, the caucus brought to light the opportunities present to the American people: mere months before a midterm election, it was evident that a new Speaker would rise to the top in January. In their Speaker Project report, the caucus pushed the notion that a citizen's vote for a representative essentially translated to a vote for a future Speaker once the new Congress convened early in 2019.

In its report, the Problem Solvers' Caucus challenged the modern-day power and political positioning of the Speaker of the House. They note that on the one-hand, the Speaker has a unilateral say in how legislation is shaped and how the floor agenda is set, while once-powerful committees and rank-and-file members stay on the sidelines and are forced to simply watch as policies unfold without their voices having much impact. On the other hand, while Speakers have a powerful control over floor operations, they remain on a tight leash by loud opposition within their own party under the threat of manipulation and usurpation. The report acknowledges the dangers of this internal contradiction of House operations: the Speaker is bound by the opinions of a few instead of by the opinions of the public, and policy proposals that may be supported by a majority of House members could never even see the floor due to the threats of a radical few members. Thus, bipartisan legislation tends to die as Speakers are forced to please ideological fringes of their party at the expense of more moderate, sustainable, and commonsense policy solutions.

The Speaker Project's main goal is a restoration of House Rules to allow governing that is responsive to the will of the American people rather than to internal congressional pressures. To do this, they propose changing the process of Speakers being only chosen by the majority party to future Speakers garnering support from both parties before each new Congress; removing the motion to vacate the chair so that radical House members can't manipulate the Speaker into following a certain agenda; and promoting transparency and accountability in the House to decrease the occurrence of the minority party being removed from the policymaking process. In order to accomplish these goals, they cite three major leveraging points: the election of leadership in individual party caucuses that will support these proposals, withholding votes for the Speaker on the first day of a new Congress if they do not agree to support bipartisan efforts, and withholding votes on a rules package that doesn't change rules to favor The Speaker Project's main goals.¹⁶

Break the Gridlock

Break the Gridlock was proposed in July 2018 as a collection of rules changes that the caucus thought were capable of breaking the partisan divide in Congress. The purpose of the proposal was to set forth these rules ahead of the 2018 Midterm Elections in hopes of getting the rules changes talked about in the elections in order to bolster support for them amongst the American public and make the House rules a voting issue. The caucus was dedicated to imposing the proposed rules changes regardless of which party won the majority and would assume the Speakership. At the time of its release, all thirty-six members of the Problem Solvers' Caucus

¹⁶ No Labels, The Speaker Project, June 2018, accessed November 15, 2019, https://www.nolabels.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/180606_Speaker-Project_Book_Single-Pages.pdf.

had come out in support of Break the Gridlock and the idea of pushing for rules changes come January, and each of them worked with their colleagues outside of the caucus in attempts to bolster widespread consensus on the issue within the House.

Break the Gridlock was comprised of four main goals each aimed at encouraging a bipartisan and smooth-running House. Each individual goal broke down into several rules changes that would be vital to Break the Gridlock's success. The first goal was to encourage and reward consensus driven governing in order to get more bipartisan written and sponsored bills passing to the floor. In order to accomplish this goal, the report proposed revising the Motion to Vacate the Chair rule to prevent one House member from being able to call a vote of no-confidence for the Speaker, effectively rendering the Speaker hostage to the wishes of even the most radical fringes of either party. Instead, the caucus suggested replacing the rule with a process dictated by public petition that requires one-third of House members to see a floor consideration and a majority of floor votes to successfully remove the Speaker from her office. The second and third proposals to achieve consensus driven governing is to require that all committees retain an equal party ratio, and to require a 3/5 supermajority for passage and consideration of bills presented under closed rules; all remaining legislation would remain open or structured. Finally, the caucus proposed requiring any structured rule to have at least one germane amendment from each party if offered to prevent presented bills from being edited in a one-sided manner. All of these proposals, if adopted, would allow for the House to operate in a bipartisan manner with a focus placed more on issues-based legislating instead of on playing party politics.

The second goal that the Problem Solvers' Caucus proposed in Break the Gridlock was to foster passage of member initiatives solving constituent priorities. In order to accomplish this,

the caucus proposed a multi-part solution in order to encourage committee and floor consideration of individual member initiatives by establishing a fast-track procedure for bipartisan legislation to receive priority consideration. The fast-track procedure would be enforced by mandating that any legislative bill that gains at least two-thirds of sponsorship by all House members or a majority of members from each party must pass the committee mark-up process and be reported to the Rules Committee in 30 legislative days or less. Also, any germane amendment to a bill offered in committee that has at least 20 Republican and 20 Democrat cosponsors must be allowed floor consideration by the Rules Committee. Further, committee-passed bipartisan bills must receive privileged consideration in order to reach the floor. Break the Gridlock's proposals would ensure that bills and amendments targeted at member constituencies and have wide bipartisan appeal may get a fair chance at the legislative process, and do not get tied up in partisan committees who may announce the bills or amendments dead without even hearing them. The last two proposals offered in order to foster passage of member initiatives aimed toward constituents take a more hands-on approach for members, allowing all members of Congress to be granted a markup on at least one piece of legislation that has at least one cosponsor from the opposite party and is referred to a committee on which they serve and establishing a bipartisan annual joint meeting at the start of each congress in order to encourage bipartisan cooperation.

The third goal of Break the Gridlock was to accomplish bipartisanship through increased accountability and transparency. To do this, the Problem Solvers' Caucus proposed requiring a minimum of a three-business-day notice of a Committee markup and requiring a majority vote on all Committees to enable the Chair to waive jurisdiction over legislation that has been assigned to the committee. Finally, the fourth goal in Break the Gridlock was to elect a Speaker

that was representative of the entire body. To the caucus, this was the most crucial goal of all, because a Speaker willing to agree to these proposed rules changes is necessary for their implementation.¹⁷

The Problem Solvers' Caucus's Speaker Project and Break the Gridlock campaigns launched in 2018 were meant to change the toxic state of the House through a grassroots approach. The caucus devised these campaigns in a way that were easily accessible and marketed to the American public, and thus served as an educational tool in the midterm elections. Their reports caused citizens to go to their members asking for rules changes, making members realize that their divisive actions were directly impacting their constituents' views about the legislative process. After the Democrats took the House in 2018 and decided that they would elect Nancy Pelosi as Speaker, the caucus held their votes for her until she agreed to their proposed rules changes set forth in Break the Gridlock. After a stand-off that lasted about a week, Speaker Pelosi agreed to some key changes, including the revision of the Motion to Vacate the Chair rule, the requirement that a bill get a floor vote in at least 25 days if it gets 290 signatures, and a mandatory priority status for bills that get 20 Democrat and 20 Republican signatures during the committee process.

These rules changes gave some power back to the more rank-and-file members of the House, and they are in effect now to open more avenues for bipartisan bills to get through the legislative process.¹⁸

The Problem Solvers Caucus Today

¹⁷ The Problem Solvers Caucus, Break the Gridlock, July 25, 2018, accessed November 15, 2019, https://www.nolabels.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/break_the_gridlock_packet-1.pdf.

¹⁸ Morrison, interview by the author.

When the 116th Congress convened in 2019, the Problem Solvers' Caucus knew that the years ahead would be filled with a heightened political fervor as the Democratic primaries played out leading up to the 2020 presidential election. In response, the caucus decided to try and stay focused on finding solutions to problems that did not have too much political or ideological emotion behind them—issues such as fixing NAFTA or lowering the prices of prescription drugs—while at the same time developing a bipartisan approach for citizens and lawmakers to engage with the upcoming elections.

The 2020 Presidential Election Unity Guide

Within the first few months of the 116th Congress, No Labels and the Problem Solvers' Caucus released a comprehensive guide to the Democratic Primaries and 2020 Elections with the goal of creating an unbiased source of information on the issues leading political discussions. The guide is meant to be interactive for citizens, with spaces to write in individual candidate stances on certain key issues such as health care, energy and climate change, and immigration, and even serves as an electoral journal for citizens to decide which issues they are most passionate about and what they value in a candidate. In the guide's introduction, No Labels calls for the American People to stand up and demand for a change in the way our elections are run, claiming that the extreme ideologies that our politicians exhibit these days do not represent the beliefs of 2/3 of Americans. To combat the continued disenfranchisement of the American public, No Labels says that we must begin to elect political leaders who are going to actively search for common ground between both parties in order to force reunification of our divided country.

The Ultimate Guide also proposes what No Labels calls a “Unity Agenda”—after a presentation of the facts of a controversial policy and the way that both parties view that issue, the organization presents a “unified” version of the issue which, if implemented, would have a potential of pleasing both sides of the aisle. Further, the organization provides a set of questions that citizens and media can ask President Trump and the Democratic candidates at political events throughout the next two years. As a way to promote the Unity Guide and a bipartisan, commonsense approach to 2020, No Labels also organized a town hall in New Hampshire set for November 2019 in which all Democratic primary candidates are invited to discuss their outlooks on the race and on their ideas for a more unified approach to solving hot policy topics.¹⁹

The Border Crisis Brings the Problem Solvers’ Caucus National Attention

The Problem Solvers’ Caucus’s desire to pursue a non-controversial agenda throughout the 116th Congress appeared to be abandoned when in June 2019 they essentially forced the House to accept the Senate’s version of a bill to address the border crisis that was getting national coverage for poor living conditions for migrants and their children who were crossing the US/Mexico border. The House’s version of the bill, which Speaker Pelosi and top Democratic leaders had crafted, included a humanitarian focus that would explicitly protect migrant children at the border and provide appropriate holding facility conditions. The Problem Solvers’ Caucus, fearing that the humanitarian language would prolong the passage of the support package in the Senate, formed a voting bloc with the support of the Democrats in the

¹⁹ No Labels, Ryan Clancy, and Margaret White, *The Ultimate Guide to the 2020 Election: 101 Nonpartisan Solutions to All the Issues that Matter* (New York: Diversion Books, 2019). Following my interview with Liz Morrison at No Labels, she was kind enough to gift me a copy of *The Ultimate Guide* months before its release to the public.

caucus that would have prevented the passage of the House version of the bill if it would have come to a vote, causing House leadership to pull the version from consideration. The Senate's version of the bill passed, guaranteeing financial aid for the Trump administration to handle the border crisis with little strings attached.

The decision for caucus Democrats to oppose the House's version of the bill stirred up much controversy in the House, and turmoil even spilled over into Twitter when Congressman Mark Pocan of Wisconsin took to the social media platform to tweet the following message:

Since when did the Problem Solvers Caucus become the Child Abuse Caucus? Wouldn't they want to at least fight against contractors who run deplorable facilities? Kids are the only ones who could lose today.²⁰

— Rep. Mark Pocan (@repmarkpocan) June 27, 2019

Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of the Bronx joined in to speak out against the caucus, calling their tactics extremely concerning and horrifying and claiming that “The Problem Solvers Caucus is emerging [as a] Tea Party within the Democratic Party.”²¹

Despite the harsh language from the left, the caucus remained unfazed in their conviction that their actions were the right thing to do. Congressman Tom Reed, the Republican co-chair of the caucus, justified the caucus's decision to oppose the House's version of the bill by citing the urgency of the bill: “We want to deliver this relief to the humanitarian crisis to the border immediately, and not play political games or any type of extremism in regards to blocking and

²⁰ Jerry Zremski, "Tom Reed's 'Problem Solvers' solve a problem, making enemies and friends in the process," The Buffalo News, July 8, 2019, accessed November 15, 2019, <https://buffalonews.com/2019/07/08/tom-reeds-problem-solvers-solve-a-problem-making-enemies-and-friends-in-the-process/>. This Tweet was deleted soon after being posted after demands from Speaker Pelosi to cease inter-party fighting online.

²¹ Zremski, "Tom Reed's,"

creating gridlock in the House.”²² The Democrat co-chair, Congressman Josh Gottheimer, expressed similar sentiments: “We just wanted to make sure that none of us went home without getting something done for children and families at the border.”²³

While the caucus did well in not directly fueling accusations and furthering tensions, their actions still lead to widespread disarray in the House as the Democratic party effectively split and defected from party leadership. Some conflicts that occurred online even resurfaced in floor debates, leading to high intensity conversations and fighting amongst the parties on the floor. This visceral reaction begs the question: if encouraging a policy that pleases both sides of the aisle results in such fighting within one party, can the Problem Solvers’ Caucus really claim that they are eliminating divisive, high-stakes lawmaking?

Rebuilding Democracy

In September 2019, No Labels partnered with the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University to release an intensive report proposing ways to address hyperpartisanship. The report criticizes current policies aimed at reducing gridlock and partisanship such as addressing the problem of gerrymandering or campaign finance, claiming that these reforms not only have a minor impact on these issues, but also fail to address the deeper roots of the dilemma our nation is facing. No Labels calls for a new approach to looking at partisanship and divisiveness, citing James Madison’s approach to unwanted political phenomena: weaken the causes of the phenomena, mitigate the effects of the phenomena, or

²² Zremski, "Tom Reed's,".

²³ Border Bill Splits Democratic Caucus, last modified June 28, 2019, accessed November 15, 2019, <https://www.outsidethebeltway.com/border-bill-splits-democratic-caucus/>.

both. In keeping mind this strategy, No Labels and the Maxwell School proposed six ideas to “rebuild” our democracy.

First, the report proposes creating a new political infrastructure for pragmatic candidates. This infrastructure would take the vague shape of a political party, functioning in elections as a way to bolster financial support for candidates who embody commonsense characteristics and are outspoken about finding policy solutions that lay in the middle of the party extremities. Second, the report calls for the adoption of strategic targeted spending for constituencies. This targeted spending would be able to be added to must-pass appropriations bills to steer a reasonable amount of funds to local projects that are likely to be popular for legislators’ districts, in turn making it easier for rank-and-file members to cast tough votes on other bills that are not as popular with their party leadership or constituents.

Third, the report recommends imposing term-limits on Supreme Court Justices. In theory, this would lower the partisan fever in Washington and reduce the power of the presidency to potentially appoint several justices while other presidents may not appoint any at all. The report suggests a term limit of 18 years, and also proposes staggering the terms, so that the Supreme Court nomination process is regularized and less of a political fight each time it occurs. Over time, it would work out that each president would get to nominate two Supreme Court justices in a given four-year term.

The fourth proposal in the report is to reinstate some version of the Fairness Doctrine, which was a policy that required those with broadcast licenses to present controversial issues deemed important for public knowledge in an honest and equitable way. In 1969, a complaint against the doctrine that it violated first amendment rights made it all the way to the Supreme Court, but the court ultimately upheld its constitutionality; however, in the process, it

implemented a lower standard of scrutiny to broadcasters than applies to other forms of media. No Labels argues that this change in the doctrine is what has led to today's phenomenon of "fake news," which allows partisan ideologues to label their programs as news and "report" to viewers with no caveats of biased information being shared. Reinstating the Fairness Doctrine as it was originally written would, as the report argues, at least shed more attention to the misbehavior of networks and thus cause public pressure for such networks to stop their untruthful reporting practices.

Fifth, the report calls for the public to demand greater accountability from campaign consultants by establishing a consultant ethics committee to monitor and discipline misconduct in the industry. The report deems this as a necessary step to a less politically volatile system because some campaign consultants do not act in ways that could be considered decent politics. An ethics committee could impose rules such as forbidding false or misleading attacks on political opponents, as well as preventing appeals to voters based on racism, sexism, religious intolerance, or any other type of unlawful discrimination. Finally, the report calls for enforceable regulations to ensure truth in social media. Citing the distorted video of Speaker Pelosi that was uploaded to Facebook last year and which Facebook ultimately refused to take down, the report stresses the necessity of a prohibition on outright. With technologies continuously advancing and allowing for the easier editing of photos and videos in order to literally put words into politicians' mouths, it is becoming increasingly paramount to impose stricter accountability for all social media platforms.

The above recommendations are a target on forces outside of Congress that are fueling the partisan delusion that is manifesting in the populace of our nation. By addressing these issues, No Labels and the Maxwell School believe that civil, decent politics can return to the

decision-making process starting with the people and the media and extending to our institutions. The biggest threat to our nation is not necessarily partisanship; the scariest aspect of today's political climate is the public's growing contempt for its own government. No Labels argues that inaction is no longer acceptable—if we are ever to return to a political system able to function on enhancing the quality of life for its citizens, we must restore the faith of the American people in that very system.²⁴

²⁴ No Labels and Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, *Rebuilding Democracy*, September 2019, accessed October 1, 2019, <https://www.nolabels.org/blog/press/beyond-redistricting-and-campaign-finance/>.

Chapter Four

Caucus Member Behavior

Opinions of Caucus Behavior

To evaluate the effectiveness of the Problem Solvers' Caucus, I analyze caucus member behavior for a number of reasons. It is useful to look at opinions of the caucus from both inside and out in order to gauge how the caucus pursues its agenda in the House. Opinions from within the caucus are as expected; members are convinced that the caucus is doing important work in the House, and that their bipartisan agenda and methods of carrying it out have been effective. Outside of caucus membership, however, opinions of the caucus are not as unified. Over the last year, tensions between other House members and the caucus have soared as the caucus has made the news on multiple occasions after being called out for their problem-creating antics. At the same time, caucus members have gotten media attention for breaking with their party to vote on controversial issues. So, in looking at opinions of the caucus, it is important to keep in mind the context under which they are given.

Opinions from Within the Caucus

Within the caucus, opinions of its work are all favorable. Of course, because of the closed nature of the caucus, the complete membership list is not completely known; what is known, though, is out of the members themselves, none have ever decided to leave the caucus. In fact, the members tend to be quite vocal on their passion for the work they do in the caucus, and try and bring up their focus on bipartisanship on the floor and in interviews. Members appear truly dedicated to the caucus's cause, and it is not on accident—all potential members must go through

a screening and interview process before they are allowed to join so that membership remains focused and enthusiastic about problem solving.

Pride in Problem Solvers Caucus membership manifests itself in similar ways across parties and members. Co-chairs Tom Reed (R-NY) and Josh Gottheimer (D-NJ) regularly publish press releases about caucus agenda updates and initiatives, as well report findings and policy proposals from the working groups. Members are good to give interviews on hot topics and bring the caucus's message to the forefront of debates. In June 2019, during national coverage on the migrant crisis at the US-Mexico border, Problem Solver Lloyd Smucker (R-PA) traveled to the border personally to witness what has happening and publicized his experiences, claiming to give a bipartisan, facts-based view on behalf of the caucus. When the 9/11 Victims Compensation Fund passed, Josh Gottheimer praised it as a bipartisan measure of which both parties were proud. And Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick (R-PA) boasts that he brings up the Problem Solvers' Caucus in every interview he gives about his time in Congress because of its potential to save the country.

Problem Solvers Caucus members are not afraid to promote the caucus's work to their constituencies either. In an interview to KAZU, a local radio station, on October 8, 2019, Jimmy Panetta (D-CA) was asked how the Problem Solvers' Caucus's strive for bipartisanship was going. Panetta replied very enthusiastically, commenting that at the start of the 116th Congress the caucus grew substantially from new House membership and that he was excited to see new faces ready to work toward bipartisan solutions. He also credited the conversations that the caucus initiates in their weekly meetings, and said that they have speakers come to talk to them

to provide facts on key issues so that the caucus can begin brainstorming ways to approach policy issues in a way that will please each party.²⁵

Abigail Spanberger (D-VA) also praised the caucus's effectiveness in addressing policy in an interview with a local newspaper in September, where she voiced her frustration with the current extremes of policy debate around important issues such as immigration reform. Her frustrations with the gridlock in Congress stemmed from what she cited as difficult, emotional issues that cause an almost personal type of division, and thus suggested a pragmatic approach to addressing them: "We can stop and take the emotion out of it and have a rational conversation about how our legislation can actually impact people's lives."²⁶ Spanberger cited the emotion-driven conversations in her reasoning to join the Problem Solvers' Caucus in the first place, so that she could have the opportunity to work closely with legislators who held a different political perspective so she could fully understand all issues and how people think about them.

Opinions from Outside the Caucus

Outside of Problem Solvers Caucus membership, opinions of the success or reputation of the caucus tends to take a much different shape. The most vocal opinions outside of the caucus are from other House members who express a feeling of betrayal from their fellow party members on certain key party-line votes that the caucus decided to take a different side on. Caucus members also face backlash from primary challengers back home who believe that the

²⁵ Jimmy Panetta, interview by KAZU News, KAZU, last modified October 8, 2019, accessed November 15, 2019, <https://www.kazu.org/post/congressman-jimmy-panetta-where-we-re-top-issues-affecting-our-community#stream/0>.

²⁶ Jeff Poole, "Spanberger holds town hall in Orange," Orange County Review, September 21, 2019, accessed November 15, 2019, https://www.dailyprogress.com/orangenews/news/spanberger-holds-town-hall-in-orange/article_33c76dce-dc97-11e9-9b95-9b88ed2377fa.html.

member is not partisan enough to continue representing the district. Positive press does exist outside of the caucus though. The caucus and its members have made headlines for their voting bloc, which has led members to defy personal party in the name of bipartisanship and smooth House operation.

New Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) has not spared the Problem Solvers' Caucus in her loud ascent into House politics, and the caucus has been on the receiving end of a few of her famously scathing Tweets. In the early days of March 2019, she went online to attack the caucus after last minute amendments were tacked onto a piece of gun legislation that was supposed to quietly pass the House. The added amendment that raised controversy was one that would require undocumented immigrants to be reported to ICE if they purchased a firearm; the Problem Solvers' Caucus voted in support of it. Ocasio-Cortez took to Twitter to shed more light on what went down in the committee process, first suggesting that the caucus as right-wing group masquerading as something else, and then criticizing the legislative process for allowing a small group to have such power:

“The same small splinter group of Dems that tried to deny Pelosi the speakership, fund the wall during the shutdown when the public didn't want it, & are now voting in surprise ICE amendments to gun safety legislation are being called the 'moderate wing' of the party... these tactics allow a small group to force the other 200+ members into actions that the majority disagree with. I don't think that's right.”²⁷

²⁷ Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, "Mind you, the same small splinter group of Dems...", Twitter, March 2, 2019, 5:46 a.m., <https://twitter.com/aoc/status/1101841278013267970?lang=en>.

Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez's comments echo the sentiment of many other more radical representatives who are displeased with the power the caucus has over its members as well as the weight it is able to carry in House operations. It is becoming more and more common for the Problem Solvers Caucus to decide to take a firm stand on hot issues as they grow in size and recognition, and as a result, votes are gained or lost from unexpected members, which puts a damper on party agendas.

The effects of these firm stances are making their mark outside of Congress as well. As the caucus receives more attention in the media, the American public becomes more informed, and constituencies are able to form opinions about their members' actions on the Hill. For example, such opinions have manifested in Josh Gottheimer's (D-NJ) district, as a local Councilmember has announced that she will challenge the congressman in his Democratic primary in 2020. Arati Kreibich specifically cites Congressman Gottheimer's failure to support pieces of legislation that she says would have a profound impact on his constituency, such as the Social Security 2100 Act that made its way to the House back in September. Kreibich blames Gottheimer's inaction on his leadership role in the Problem Solvers Caucus: "Who is he working for? Voters in NJ-5 or the Problem Solvers Caucus?"²⁸

Outside caucus opinions have escalated even beyond these accusations. In November 2018, days before the Midterm Elections, *The Washington Post* published an article on the Problem Solvers' Caucus titled, "House Problem Solvers Caucus have solved few problems." The article quotes several representatives and staffers on their opinions of the caucus, and takes

²⁸ "NJ5 Candidate Arati Kreibich Slams Opponent for Silence on Social Security Bill," Insider NJ, last modified September 11, 2019, accessed November 15, 2019, <https://www.insidernj.com/press-release/nj5-candidate-arati-kreibich-slams-opponent-silence-social-security-bill/>.

bold stands against the caucus as an institutional façade meant to trick voters into re-electing partisan members who claim some arbitrary “bipartisan” label: “the Problem Solvers offer little more than... an election-year talking point that vulnerable incumbents can tout without accomplishing much.”²⁹ The article goes on to say that caucus Democrats in particular are more conservative than the rest of the party, and often side with Republicans on key pieces of legislation, and that caucus Republicans voted in line with the White House’s policy agenda 93% of the time.³⁰ The consensus among staffers and representatives on the Hill is pretty apparent: the Problem Solvers’ Caucus is all bark and no bite, a caucus made up of conservative Democrats and hardline Republicans from shaky districts who are attempting to appease their changing voter blocks back home.

So How Do Caucus Members Actually Behave?

The conflicting opinions of the Problem Solvers’ Caucus lead to the question: are caucus members behaving in a bipartisan way, and are they contributing to a less polarized House of Representatives? From an outside perspective, it seems like they aren’t—the rest of the House remains disillusioned to their goals, and skeptical of individual caucus member intentions in joining the caucus. It is also interesting to note that after the 2018 midterm elections, a little over half of the caucus lost their seats in flipped districts. The loss of caucus members appears to have proved some doubters right in believing that the caucus posed as a cover-up to concerned voters.

²⁹ Jeff Stein, "House Problem Solvers Caucus has solved few problems, bipartisan critics allege," Washington Post, November 5, 2018, accessed November 15, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2018/11/05/house-problem-solvers-caucus-has-solved-few-problems-bipartisan-critics-allege/>.

³⁰ "Tracking Congress In The Age Of Trump," FiveThirtyEight, accessed November 15, 2019, <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/congress-trump-score/>. This is a really neat tracker that updates congressional alignment with Trump in real-time.

However, the concept of a “phony caucus” does not add up when we consider the comments that Rep. Jimmy Panetta made about the growth in caucus membership at the start of the 116th Congress; if the Problem Solvers’ Caucus is nothing more than a catchy club, why are so many freshmen interested in its cause?

In an interview with Liz Morrison, Vice President of No Labels, I asked her if there are any mechanisms in place to hold caucus members accountable for upholding the caucus’s vision outside of working with the caucus. She responded:

“It’s hard to enforce specific expectations upon the members. These aren’t just moderate members—some are quite partisan, and they aren’t going to just give up certain policy areas. The focus of the caucus isn’t to get people to change their policy positions, it’s just to get them to work together to get something done rather than nothing, and to put country over party. They can do this by taking commonality rather than being partisan all the way, and through compromise. No Labels encourages this behavior outside of the caucus as well. Members are expected to believe the caucus ideals to the core and practice what they preach beyond acting within the caucus.”³¹

The caucus seemed to lack a system of enforcement in order to ensure that members were actually working toward what they were supposed to be, and the secretive nature of the caucus also lends itself to some skepticism. I decided to run the numbers myself, and analyze caucus voting behavior as it compares to the rest of the House.

To analyze Problem Solvers Caucus voting behaviors, I examined two different measures: Nokken-Poole Scores and Lugar Bipartisan Scores. Nokken-Poole scores are

³¹ Morrison, interview by the author.

measures of ideology as gathered by roll-call votes, and are broken up by separate Congresses in order to gain a more holistic ideological picture of Representatives. Nokken-Poole scores are scaled from -1 to 1, with a negative score being left-leaning, and a positive score being right-leaning; for example, the most radical Democrat in the House would have the score closest to -1. The closer to zero the Nokken-Poole score, the more moderate the member. Lugar Bipartisan Scores measure the frequency with which a Member co-sponsors a bill introduced by the opposite party and the frequency with which a Member's own bills attract co-sponsors from the opposite party, thus in effect tracking the bipartisanship of each member. Lugar Scores are also scaled on a negative/positive score, with a more positive score connoting higher bipartisanship. Scores are also scaled by Congress, meaning that an individual members' score will always be reflective of their bipartisanship in comparison to the rest of the House.

I chose to examine these two scores because while they measure two different behaviors of voting with party and co-sponsoring legislation of the opposite party, when viewed together I feel they provide a holistic view of whether or not members are behaving in bipartisan ways. The Problem Solvers Caucus claims to support a vision of the House free from hyperpartisanship, and so viewing caucus Nokken-Poole and Lugar Bipartisanship scores compared to the rest of the House can show us if caucus-members are truly engaging in this thesis.

Also, in examining these two measures, it is important to keep in mind their distinction; Nokken-Poole scores measure ideology, or where a member falls on a scale of left or right. Lugar scores measure bipartisanship as calculated by co-sponsorship frequency. These two scores are not necessarily correlated. Two members who are calculated as deeply partisan in opposite ideologies on a Nokken-Poole scale may have neighboring districts, and thus want to

collaborate on state-specific legislation.³² Or, the opposite could occur: some members who tend to not collaborate with members of the opposite party may measure as more moderate on the Nokken-Poole scale. Thus, I think that analyzing these two scores in caucus members can shed meaningful light on their true behaviors: if they are following the caucus's mission, they will probably be both more moderate on the Nokken-Poole scale and more bipartisan on the Lugar scale than their non-caucus colleagues. Further, in analyzing the trends we find in our data, we can try find similarities across the two different scores; a similar pattern in scores would be a stronger indication of a bipartisan trend in member behaviors, especially since these two scores are not necessarily aligned with one another.

Nokken-Poole

First in analyzing whether or not the members of the Problem Solvers' Caucus are actually dedicated to a House that is less polarized and more bipartisan, we can examine Nokken-Poole Scores, specifically on the first dimension. Dimension 1 scores measure member ideology based on how members vote on roll-call floor votes which require votes of all present members. The scores are calculated based on how often members vote with or against their own party. If we are expecting caucus members to be more moderate than the rest of the House, we should see their Dimension 1 score be closer to zero. We look at the Dimension 1 score for two reasons: first, it is the most commonly used today and the easiest to understand; a score closer to zero means that a member votes in a more bipartisan way. Second, it serves as a perfect starting

³² Another example of Nokken-Poole and Lugar scores not correlating would be when Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez collaborated on a piece of legislation with Senator Ted Cruz that would allow birth control pills to be available over-the-counter. Although they reside in different chambers, the sentiment is the same: hyperpartisan members sometimes work on legislation together.

point in the route to finding if members are actually behaving in the way they should—if caucus members are not more moderate than others in their party, we immediately know that something is wrong. There is also a Dimension 2 to Nokken-Poole scores, but congressional scholars remain puzzled as to what the dimension's scores mean, and results are often unpredictably skewed. Therefore, I chose to disregard the second dimension in my analysis.

To get a holistic view of caucus members both before and after caucus conception, I examine the 113th, 114th, and 115th Congresses. The 113th Congress was the last full congress before the Problem Solvers Caucus formed, so we can see caucus member behavior absent of any pressures caucus membership might place on them. The 114th Congress is the congress in which the caucus was formed, and the 115th Congress is the first full congress with the Problem Solvers Caucus in existence. By viewing caucus member behavior side-by-side before, during, and post caucus conception, we can analyze whether or not the caucus had an impact on the way members behave.

I also separated my analysis into parties in order to get an exact look at how caucus members are behaving in comparison of their parties and in the House in general.

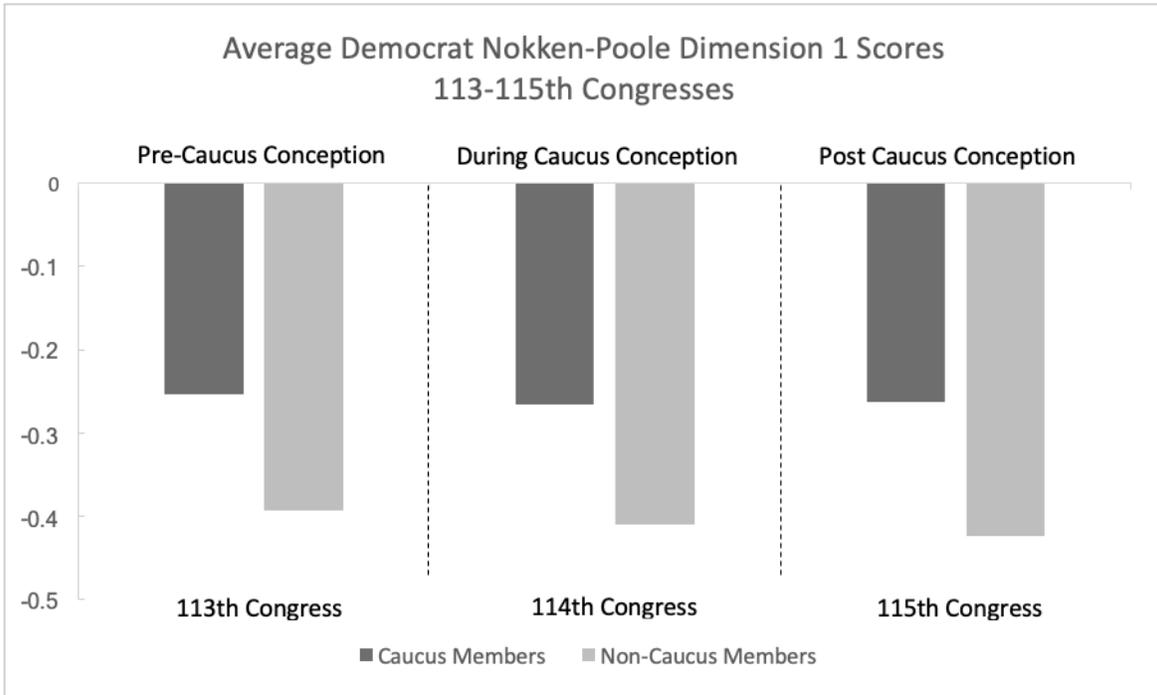


Figure 1: Average Democrat Nokken-Poole Dimension 1 Scores in the 113-115th Congresses

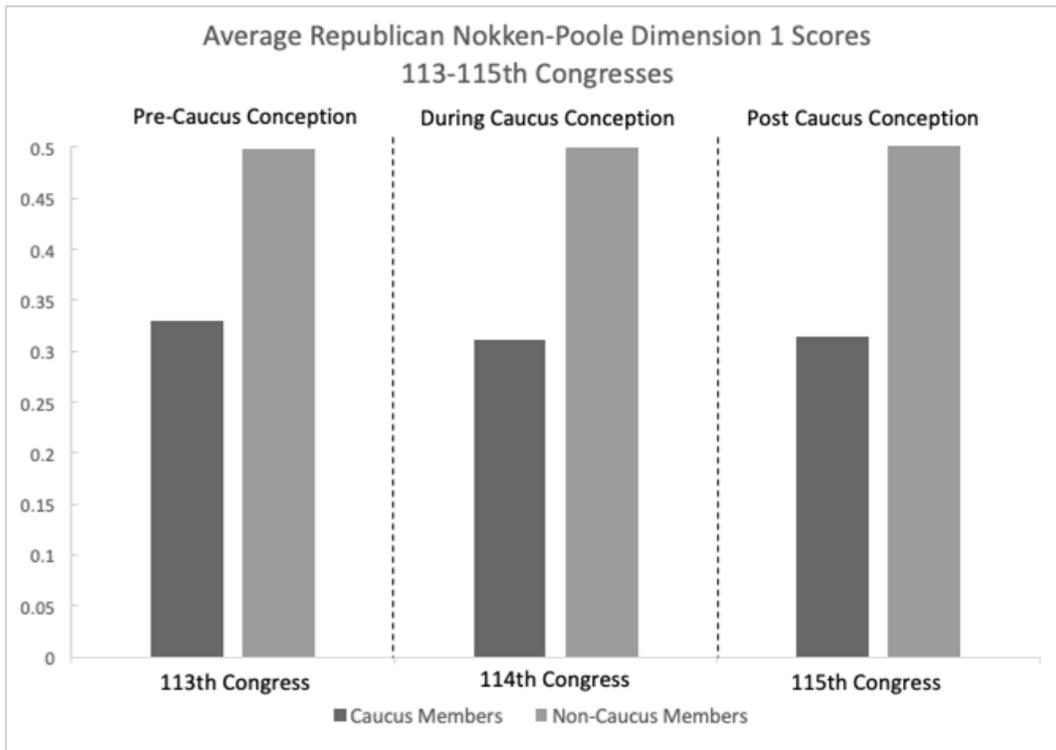


Figure 2: Average Republican Nokken-Poole Dimension 1 Scores in the 113-115th Congresses

The results we get for our Dimension 1 scores are as we would expect—caucus members are significantly more moderate in their role-call votes than their House counterparts. Interestingly, though, Average Nokken-Poole Dimension 1 scores remain relatively unchanged for both caucus and non-caucus members from the 113th to the 115th Congress. This means that the ideological divide between the parties in the House has remained at the same levels over the past six years. Further, the stable scores of caucus members suggests that the caucus has no effect on member behavior to influence more moderate voting behavior. Rather, it appears that it is the representatives who are already more moderate than their party counterparts who elect to join the caucus.

The caucus has now been in existence for almost three entire congresses, and throughout the years it has gained and lost members, which influences its ideological composition. To examine the changes that the caucus experienced in each Congress, I decided to analyze Dimension 1 scores for the 115th Congress by itself. I decided the 115th Congress created the best picture of member behavior because it is the first full Congress in which the caucus existed, and it is also a congress which ended right before a historic power-switch in the House where Democrats regained control of the majority. In the aftermath of the 2018 Midterm Elections, the caucus also lost roughly half of its membership, forcing it to rebuild its ranks in the 116th Congress. To analyze the impact that this turnover had on the caucus, I broke my analysis into three parts: “veteran” caucus members who were a part of the original cohort when the caucus formed in the 114th Congress and who remained members into the 115th Congress; “new” caucus members who joined in the 115th Congress; and “future” caucus members. The “Future” category are representatives who served in the House in the 115th Congress, but who didn’t become

caucus members until the 116th Congress. Thus, the scores represented by this category in the below graphs are indicative of their voting behavior in the 115th Congress.³³

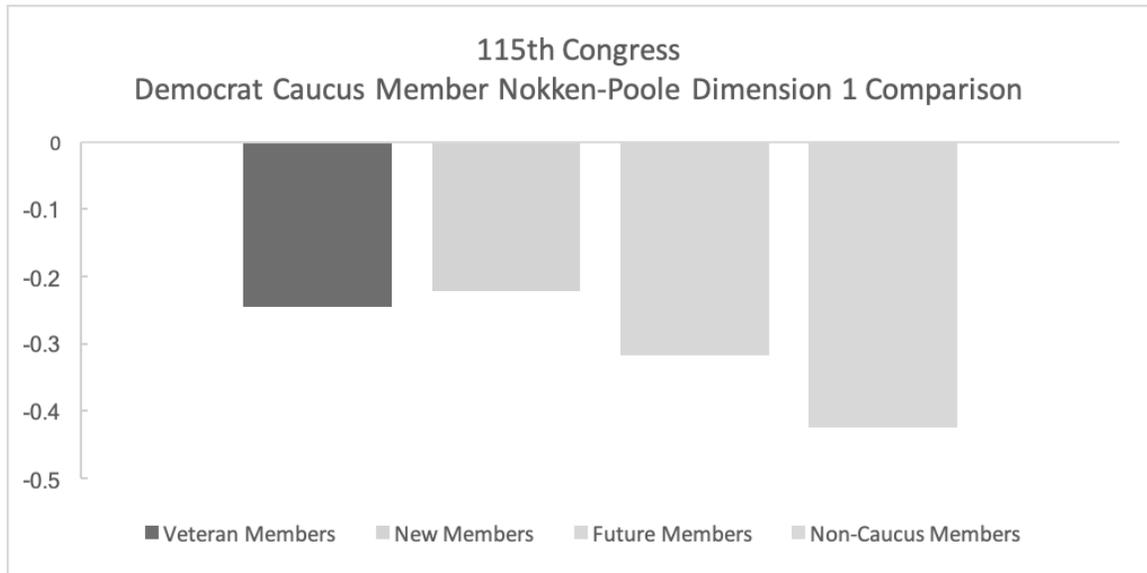


Figure 3: Democrat Caucus Member Dimension 1 Comparison

³³ In a future extension of this project, I would love to examine voting behaviors of new caucus members elected in the 116th Congress as well as the voting behaviors of the caucus as a whole in the 116th Congress. As I write this thesis, however, the 116th Congress is ongoing, and thus I do not feel I yet have sufficient data to interpret these behaviors.

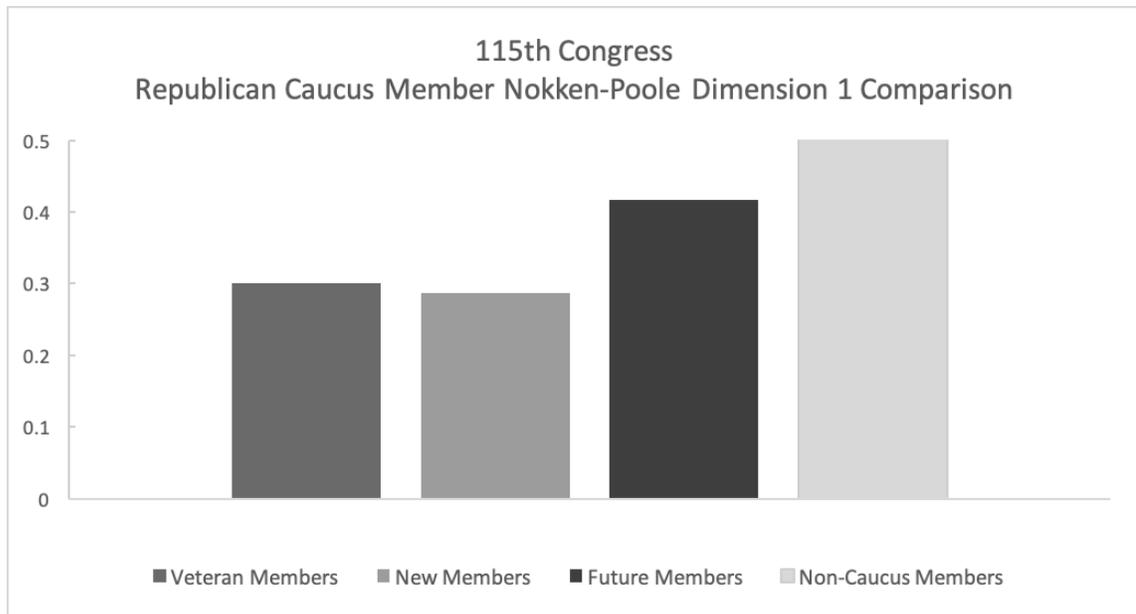


Figure 4: Republican Caucus Member Dimension 1 Comparison

I interpret the above figures to show us that the Problem Solvers’ Caucus is getting less picky about who it is letting in the caucus—for “future” caucus members who will join in the 116th Congress, we see a significant jump in both parties toward the ideological averages that non-caucus members hold. The shift could be for a number of reasons; it could be that there are less moderate members to choose from, so the caucus is being forced to now allow more ideological-leaning members in for membership expansion. Or, it could signify a shift in the meaning of being a moderate—perhaps the ideological “middle” has grown. Finally, it could be that more members who do not identify as a moderate are expressing interest in joining a group that is dedicated to having bipartisan discussions and brainstorming new, institutional-based solutions, which could cause such a significant change in Dimension 1 score.

Lugar Bipartisan Scores

Next, we turn to Lugar Bipartisan Scores to determine if the caucus is engaging in bipartisan policymaking efforts through bill writing and co-sponsorship. In order to look for this, we want to see if caucus bipartisan scores are more positive than those of the rest of the House; in other words, caucus members should be above the x-axis, and non-caucus members ought to fall below. First, I analyze the general bipartisan scores for the caucus in its entirety, then I break it down by party to see if I can recognize any larger trends.

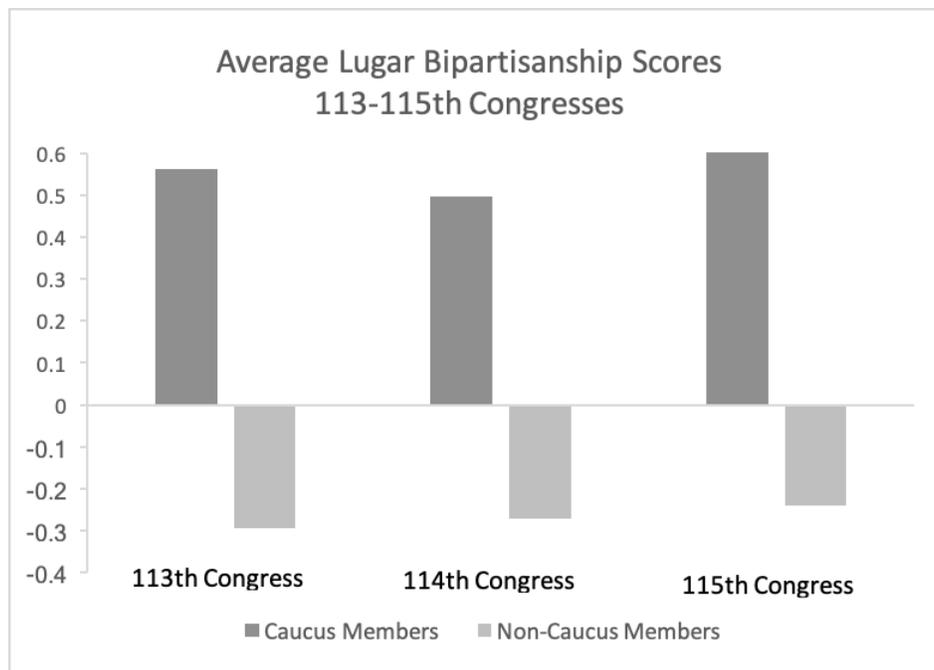


Figure 5: Average Lugar Bipartisanship Scores 113-115th Congresses

In an initial analysis, everything looks in order—caucus scores are significantly scaled to the positive compared to the rest of the House, which gives us our answer: the Problem Solvers’ Caucus membership is in fact bipartisan as a whole. In order to get a more in-depth analysis, though, we can break down this data further to see if we can glean more insight into how bipartisanism within the caucus works.

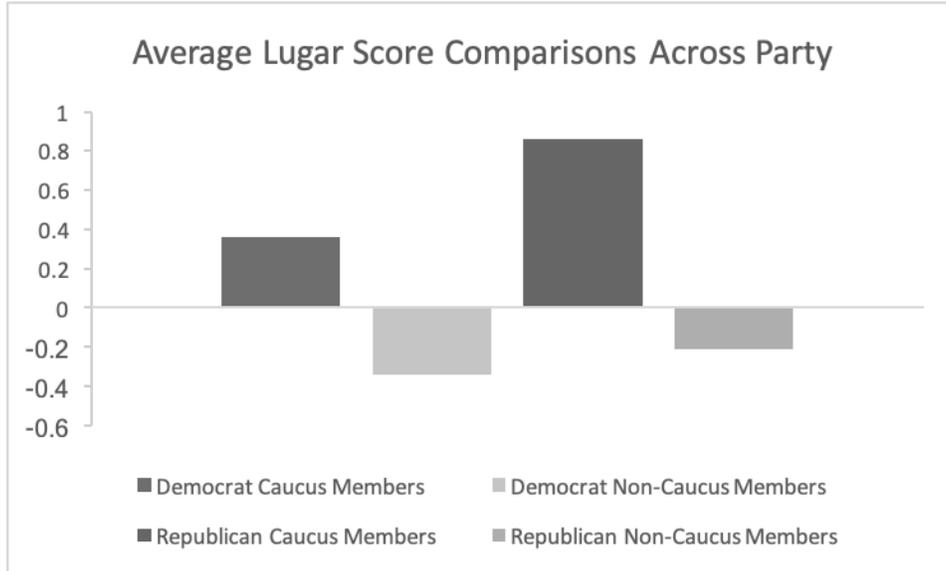


Figure 6: Average Lugar Score Comparisons Across Party

In Figure 6, we have a breakdown of average bipartisanship scores by party. Looking at this table, we can see that across caucus and non-caucus membership, Republicans are more bipartisan than Democrats. This doesn't necessarily tell us anything about the Problem Solvers Caucus itself, other than that the bipartisanship scores of caucus members from each party mimic those of the larger House. Of note, though, is the difference between Republican levels of bipartisanship and those of the Democrats. Both within and outside the Problem Solvers' Caucus, House Republicans are twice as bipartisan as House Democrats. This also means that House Democrat caucus and non-caucus members appear to be equally scaled on the Lugar scale between partisan and bipartisan, while House Republican caucus and non-caucus members see a very stark difference in partisan and bipartisan levels.

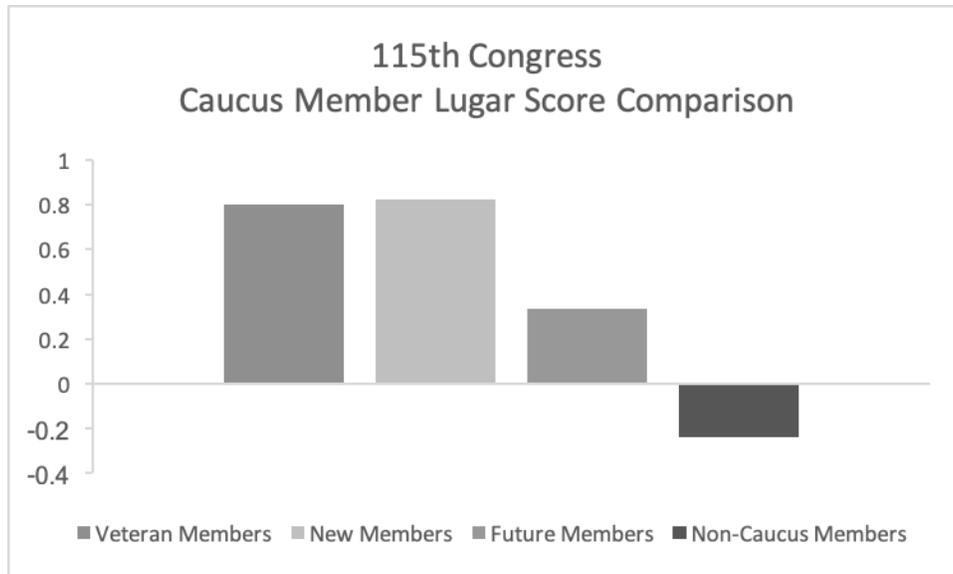


Figure 7: Caucus Member Lugar Score Comparison in the 115th Congress

In Figure 7, we have a breakdown of the 115th Congress by caucus membership similar to how we viewed Nokken-Poole Dimension 1 scores: veteran members, new members, and future members. Interestingly, the results we see perfectly mimic our analysis of the Dimension 1 trend—into the 116th Congress, the caucus is accepting significantly less bipartisan members than they were before the 2018 Midterm elections. The similarity to this data to what we found in our analysis of 115th Congress Nokken-Poole scores is impressive; a perfect match in data trends across two different measures of member behavior which do not necessarily coincide further supports my conclusion that the Problem Solvers’ Caucus is lowering its ideological and bipartisan standards for who is being allowed into the caucus.

Finally, I want to take a look at the entire Congress as a whole to see how bipartisanship scores have changed from the 113th Congress to the 115th so that we can get an accurate comparison of the Problem Solvers Caucus’s actions to the House as a whole.

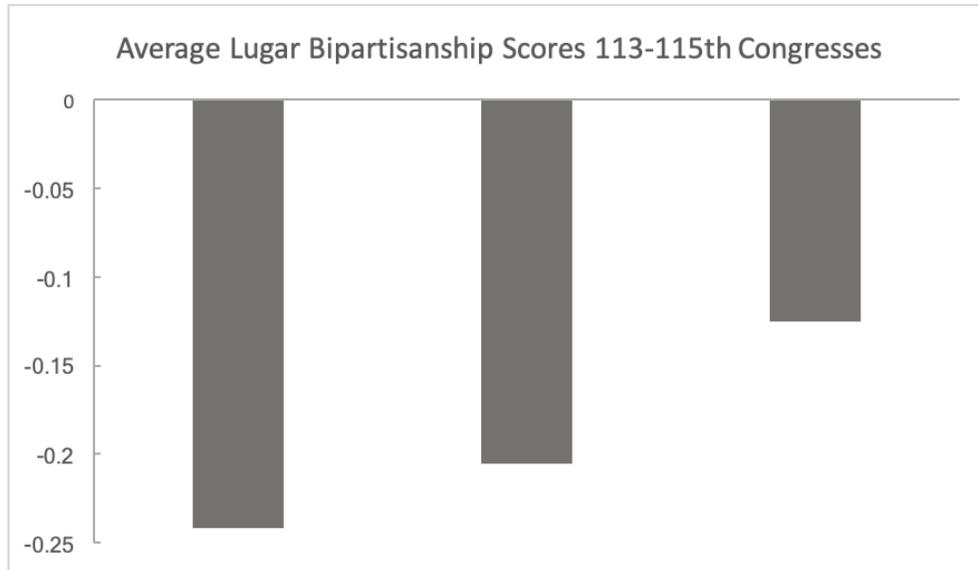


Figure 8: Average Lugar Bipartisanship Scores 113-115th Congresses

When we analyze both parties together and the House as a whole, we see that over time, the House has gotten significantly more bipartisan, even as Nokken-Poole Dimension 1 scores have remained relatively stable for caucus and non-caucus members. Problem Solvers' Caucus membership did not grow significantly enough in the 115th Congress to justify this shift, so this suggests that House members are becoming more willing to work across the aisle in crafting and sponsoring legislation even outside of any environmental pressures the Problem Solvers' Caucus could create that would directly influence them to do so.

Case Study

There is one ambiguity in my data analysis that I cannot leave unaddressed before establishing my conclusions, and that is exploring the impact of the Problem Solvers' Caucus itself on member behavior. I have found that the caucus as a whole is much more bipartisan and ideologically moderate than their non-caucus counterparts, but I want to hone in more on

individual behavioral changes of members of the caucus who served in Congress prior to joining the caucus. The way to do this is to look specifically at members who joined the caucus in the 115th Congress after serving in one or more congresses beforehand.

There are four House representatives who served in the 114th Congress prior to joining the Problem Solvers' Caucus in the 115th Congress: Ami Bera (D-CA), Leonard Lance (R-NJ), Kyrsten Sinema (D-AZ), and Dave Trott (R-MI). Of these four representatives, all but Dave Trott served in the 113th Congress as well. I will thus begin with an analysis of Congressman Trott's behaviors pre- and post- caucus membership before moving onto an analysis of the more veteran members' behaviors and of these four representatives' trends as a whole.

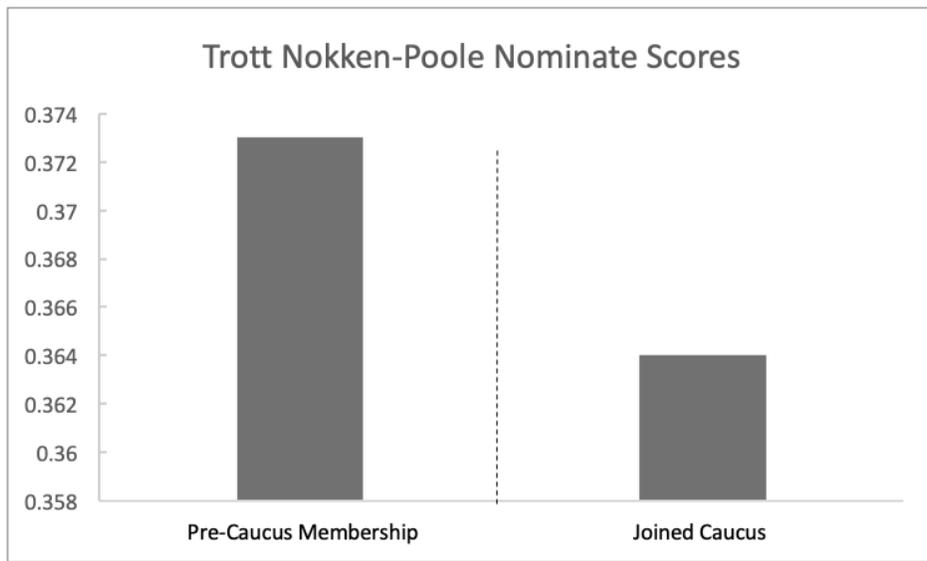


Figure 5: Dave Trott Nokken-Poole Nominate Scores 114-115th Congresses

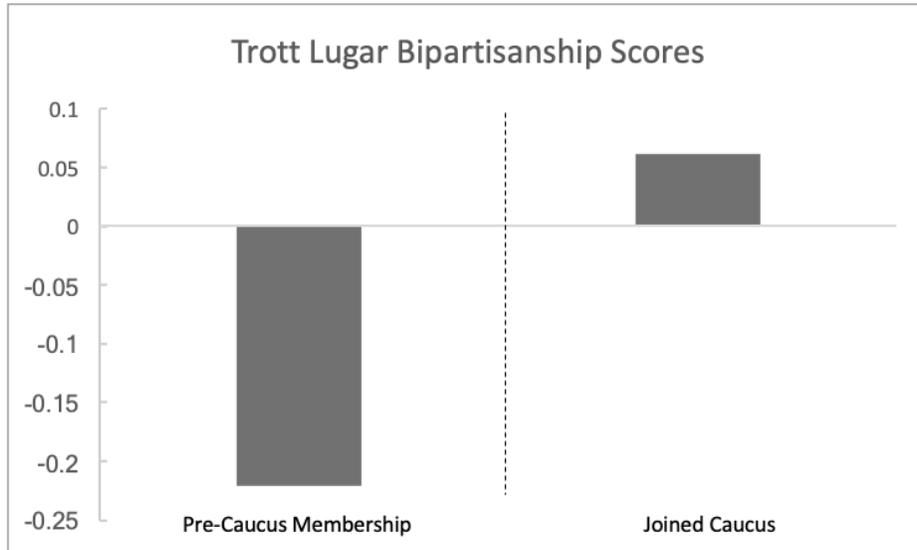


Figure 6: Dave Trott Lugar Bipartisanship Scores 114-115th Congresses

Congressman Dave Trott’s Nokken-Poole and Lugar scores indicate that upon joining the caucus, his behaviors made a significant shift; namely, he became more moderate than the rest of his party, and experienced a shift from being non-bipartisan according to the Lugar Bipartisan Index to being bipartisan. The Problem Solvers’ Caucus could be the explanation to these shifts: belonging to a strong voting bloc could explain the shift in roll call votes away from voting strictly down party lines, and membership in a bipartisan caucus certainly allows for more co-sponsorship from caucus members of the opposite party. While these explanations seem logical, they still point to a possibility that membership in the Problem Solvers’ Caucus can cause a shift in member behavior. To further explore this trend, we can turn to the three representatives who joined the caucus in the 115th Congress after serving for two prior congresses. I’ll first examine Representative Leonard Lance’s behaviors, since he is the other Republican representative who was elected to a congress prior to joining the caucus.

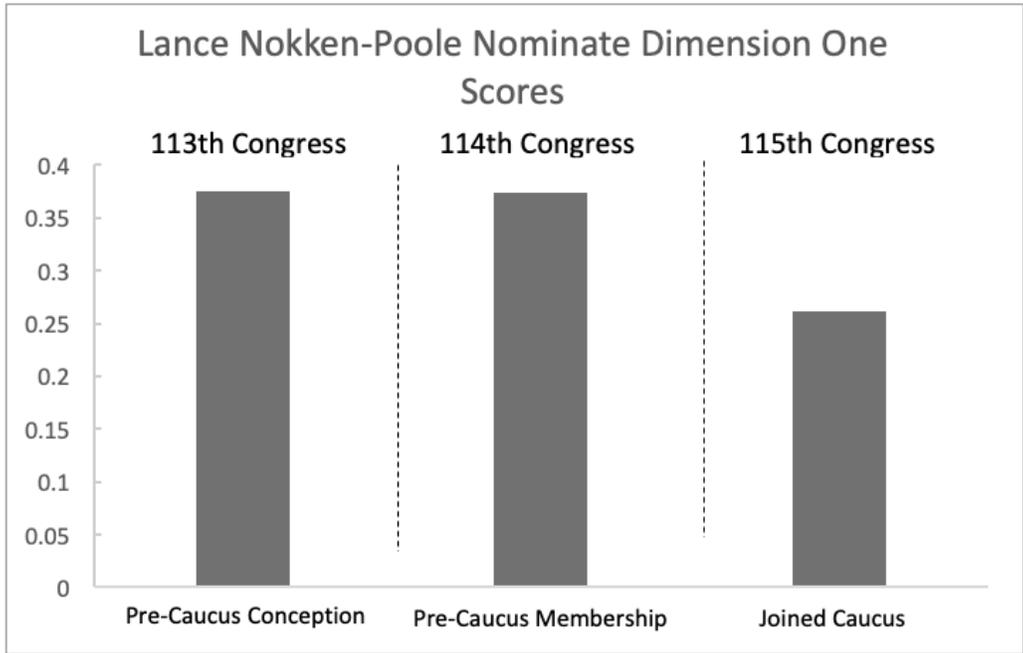


Figure 7: Leonard Lance Nokken-Poole Nominat Scores 113-115th Congresses

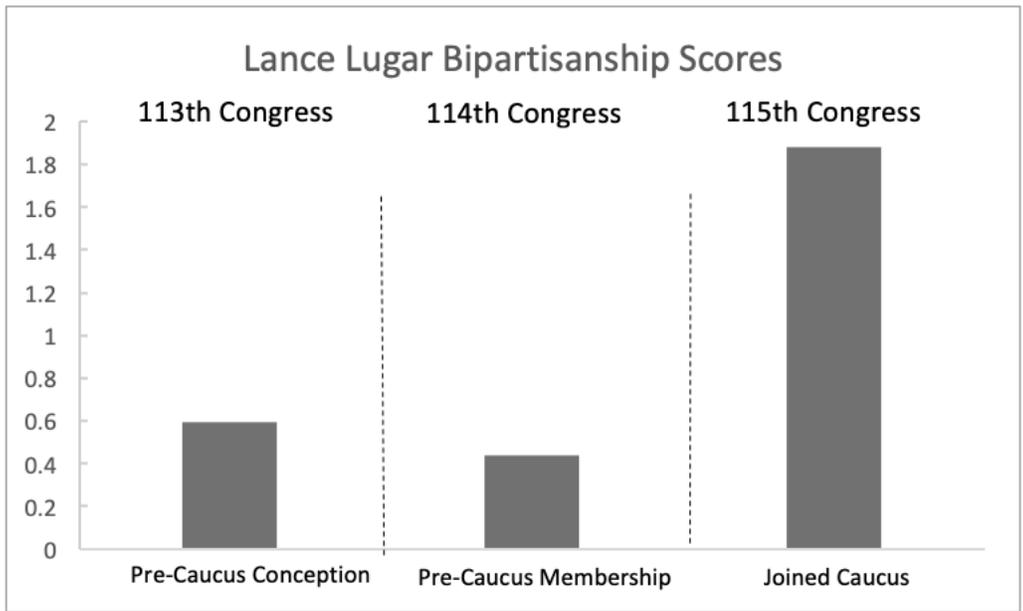


Figure 8: Leonard Lance Lugar Bipartisanship Scores 113-115th Congresses

Like his Republican colleague, Congressman Lance's Nokken-Poole scores trend to being more moderate once he joins the Problem Solvers' Caucus, even after they stayed relatively stable

prior to caucus membership. There is a slight variation in Lance’s Lugar scores, though. While Congressman Trott went from being non-bipartisan to bipartisan, Congressman Lance was bipartisan in both congresses prior to joining the Problem Solvers’ Caucus, but there is a significant shift Lance’s Lugar score to the more positive once he joined the caucus. These scores align with what we found with Congressman Trott: upon joining the caucus, Congressman Lance became more moderate and more bipartisan. Next, I will turn to the Democratic representatives who served prior to joining the caucus, beginning with Congresswoman Kyrsten Sinema:

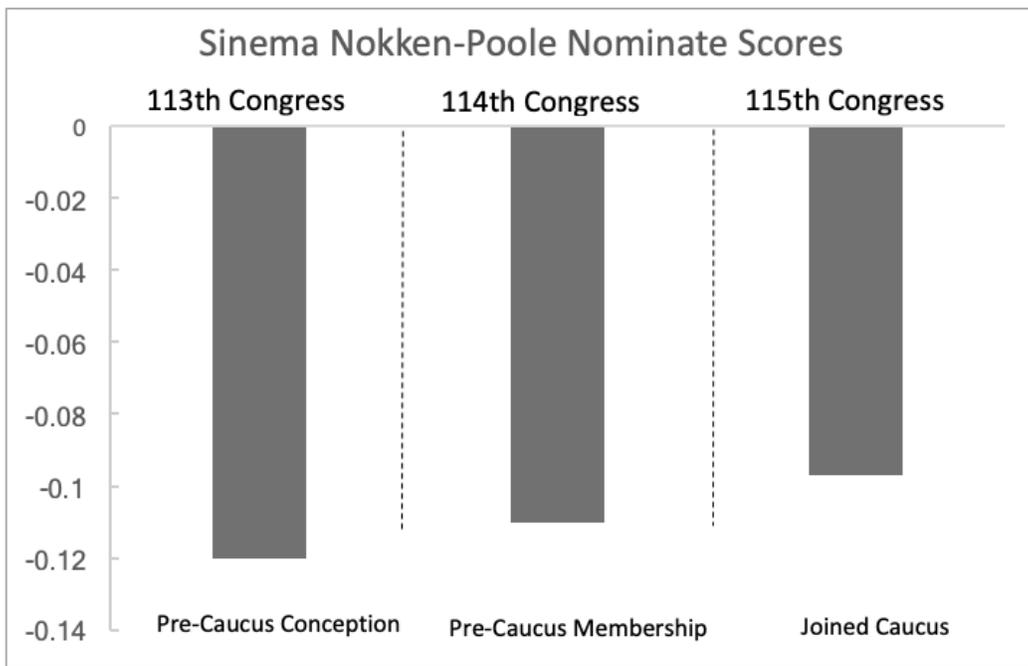


Figure 9: Kyrsten Sinema Nokken-Poole Nominate Scores 113-115th Congresses

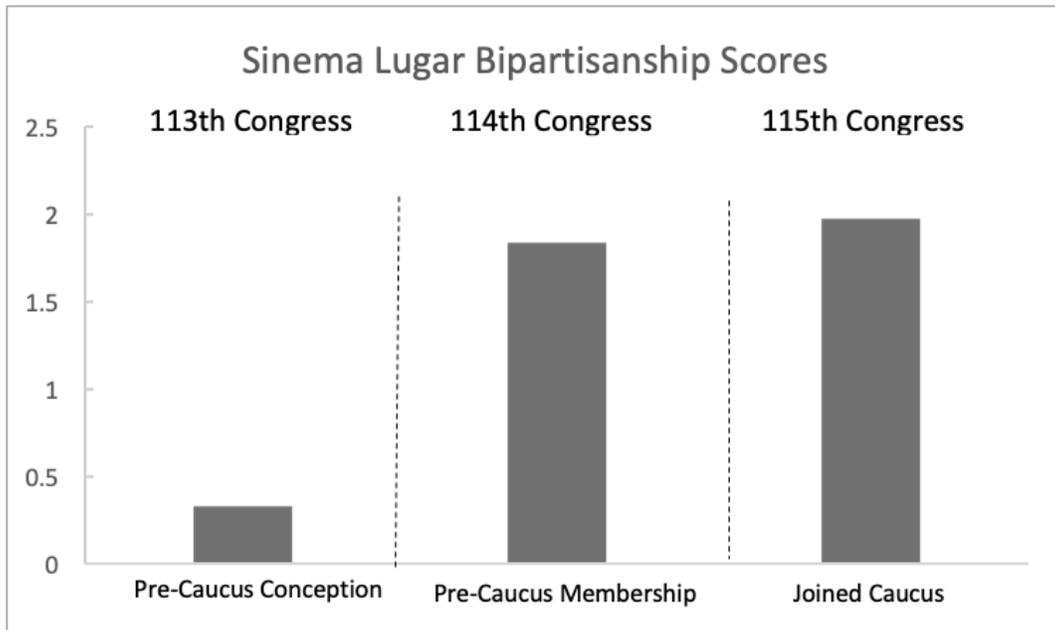


Figure 10: Kyrsten Sinema Lugar Bipartisanship Scores 113-115th Congresses

Overall, Congresswoman Sinema’s scores show us the same trends as Trott and Lance’s: she became more moderate and bipartisan when she joined the Problem Solvers’ Caucus. But, we do see a bit of a difference in her behavior before the 115th Congress. While the scores of Congressman Lance remained relatively stable between the 113th and 114th Congresses, it looks like Congresswoman Sinema began the shift to more moderate and bipartisan behaviors after the 113th Congress. So, rather than the caucus being the direct reason for a shift in her behaviors, it could very well be that she made the decision on her own to behave differently, and then joined the caucus once she decided that their thesis aligned with her own and that she would have an easier time collaborating across the aisle as a caucus member. Ultimately, I believe that these three representatives provide an interesting suggestion to the nature of the caucus’s role in member behavior, which is that the caucus acts as an avenue for representatives to use that allows them to easily engage in bipartisan, moderate behavior outside of the often-harsh watch of party leadership.

Of course, there is an exception to every rule, and I found that exception in my analysis of Ami Bera. His behavioral trends pre- and post- caucus conception are quite contrary to my other findings.

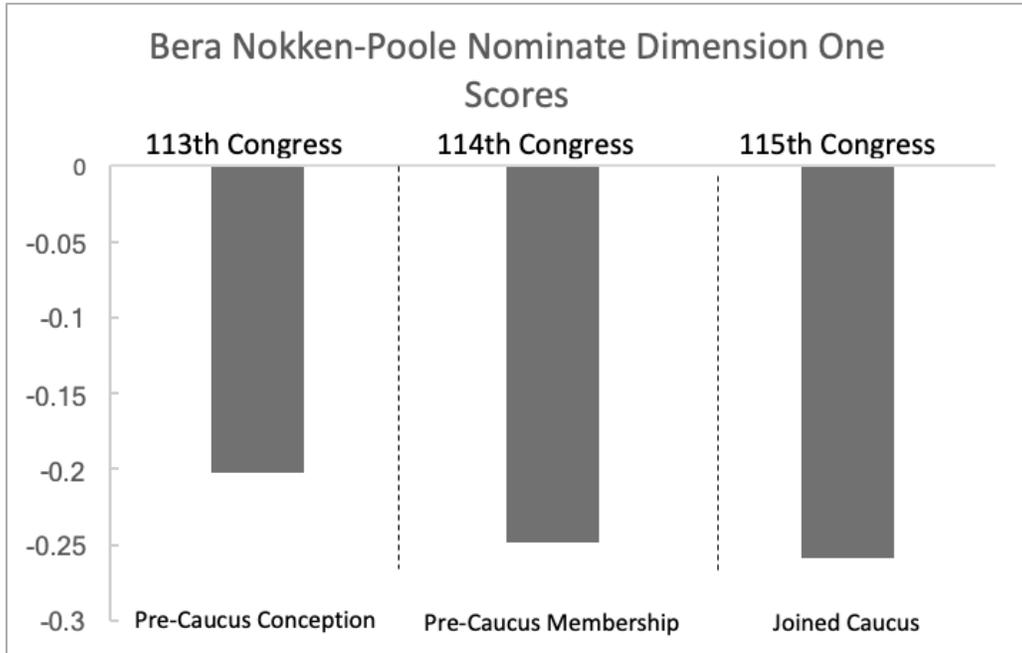


Figure 11: Ami Bera Nokken-Poole Nominate Scores 113-115th Congresses

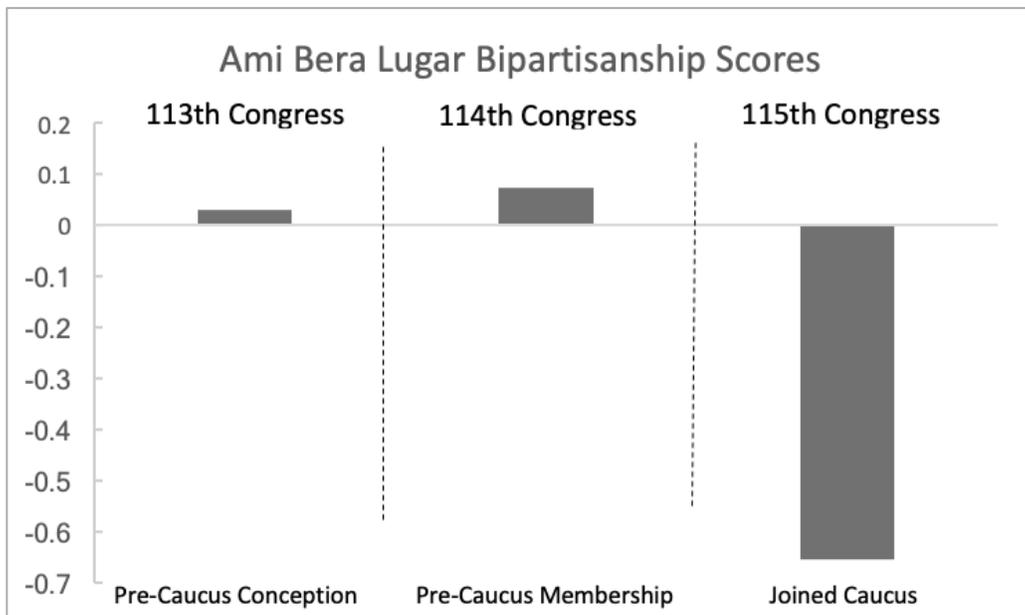


Figure 12: Ami Bera Lugar Bipartisanship Scores 113-115th Congresses

Unlike in my analyses of Trott, Lance, and Sinema, Congressman Ami Bera actually became more partisan after joining the Problem Solvers' Caucus, and switched from a bipartisan, positive Lugar score to a negative, non-bipartisan Lugar score. Not only does this not follow our previous findings, but it also defies my initial hypothesis of caucus member behaviors. To examine the cause of these scores, I examined his district and the races Congressman Bera has won. I found that his district is quite split; he was first elected in a surprise upset when he challenged a long-serving Republican incumbent in his district. In 2014 and 2016, prior to the 113th and 114th Congresses, he won over his Republican challenger only by a few percentage points. Then, in his 2018 race after joining the Problem Solvers' Caucus, he easily won in a landslide victory over the Republican challenger.³⁴

This information does provide a possible explanation for his decision to join the caucus but act in such an unpredictable way. If Ami Bera fears a tumultuous electorate back home, he has a lot of voters that he must please: young, passionate Democrats who helped elect him; older, equally passionate Republicans who kept his California district red for so long; and the more moderate voters of each party who are more likely to swing their votes each election, but who could be key in securing a victory if captured. In joining the Problem Solvers' Caucus, it is this latter group that would most likely be pleased—a demonstrated willingness to work with the opposite party could be refreshing for moderate voters. At the same time, voting more partisan on roll call votes and sponsoring more legislation from Democrats looks appealing to the passionate Democratic voters in his district who he needs to keep happy. Congressman Bera could very well be walking this very delicate line in trying to appease the voters in his district,

³⁴ "Ami Bera," Ballotpedia.

and judging from his overwhelming victory in 2018, it seems to be working. In his case, then, it appears as though while the opportunity to be more bipartisan may exist within the caucus, Representative Bera is simply choosing not to seize it as much as other caucus members.

Overall, from our case studies of four representatives who served in congress prior to joining the Problem Solvers' Caucus, there remains one suggestive trend, which is that joining the caucus does seem to correlate with a shift to more bipartisan and moderate behavior. Despite the discrepancy we found in Congressman Bera's scores, we can still see this significant shift in Lugar bipartisanship scores from the 114th to the 115th Congresses for these four representatives:

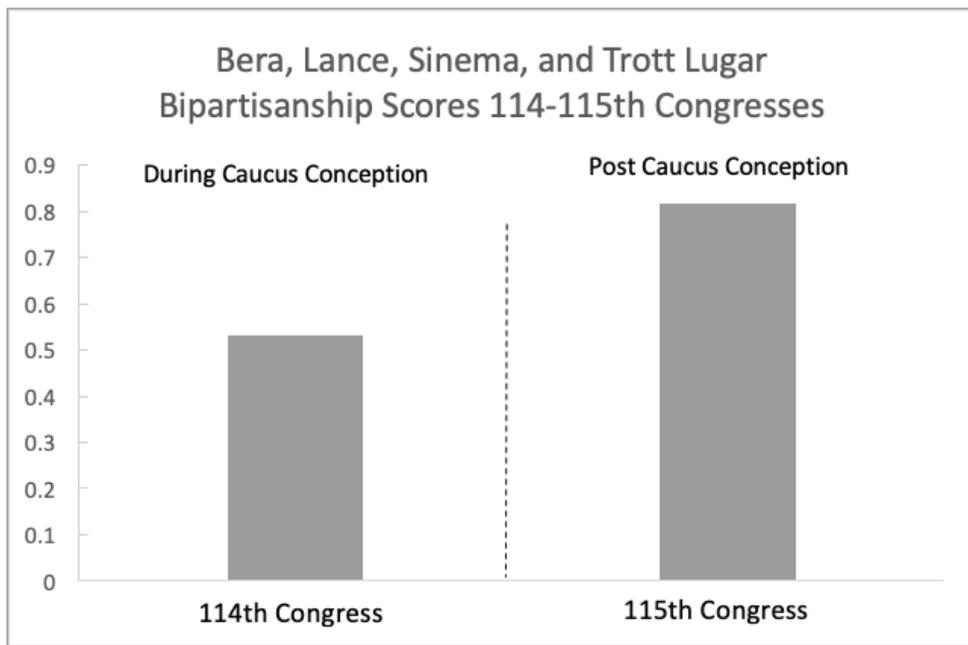


Figure 13: Bera, Lance, Sinema, and Trott Lugar Bipartisanship Scores 114-115th Congresses

From this case study, our strongest take-away can be that the Problem Solvers' Caucus provides the means for representatives to engage in more moderate and bipartisan behaviors; whether or not members choose to take advantage of such opportunities, though, remains up to them. This means that the caucus itself can have some impact in caucus member behavior in that without

caucus membership, representatives would have a more difficult time working with members of the opposite party.

Findings

From my data analysis, I have four main conclusions. First, the members of the Problem Solvers' Caucus really are engaging in the behaviors they say they are: on average, caucus members are more ideologically moderate and bipartisan than their non-caucus counterparts. This trend has maintained since the caucus's creation in the 114th Congress, and the general levels of ideology and bipartisanship have remained relatively unchanged over time.

Second, being a member of the Problem Solvers' Caucus appears to have a correlation with more moderate and bipartisan voting behaviors. While representatives who join the caucus are already significantly more moderate and bipartisan than their party counterparts, upon joining the caucus there still is a further shift in these behaviors. While we cannot draw a direct causation from this conclusion, we can at least recognize that the correlation could suggest that the caucus does not act as an agent of change for non-bipartisan representatives, but rather acts more as an avenue for bipartisan lawmaking that members who already tend toward bipartisanship can utilize.

Third, the Problem Solvers' Caucus seems to have not greatly affected the House as a whole. Caucus member behavior has remained the same over Congresses, and Nokken-Poole Dimension 1 scores for non-caucus members has also remained the same. Despite the lack of variability in score, the House as a whole has become more bipartisan, signifying that non-caucus members must be making a shift on their own to being more willing to work across the aisle.

My final finding is that the caucus's standards seem to be evolving over time, as found in my breakdown of my data by party. In the 116th Congress in particular, the Problem Solvers' Caucus started to accept less moderate and bipartisan members as in the past, and the reasons for doing so are unclear. I suspect that it could be for three main reasons: a shrinking of the pool of moderate and bipartisan members for the caucus to choose from; a shift in the ideological "middle"; or an increase in interest for more partisan-behaving members to explore the caucus ideals. The caucus membership standards lend themselves to a question: does a less selective caucus recruitment process signify a shift in the dedication to the cause of bipartisanship for the Problem Solvers Caucus?

Chapter Five

Conclusion

Is the Caucus Successful?

Now that we have analyzed the data for the Problem Solvers' Caucus's behavior over the past three Congresses, it is time to turn to the biggest question left: has the caucus been successful in fixing polarization in the House of Representatives? In order to answer this question, we have to first decide how exactly we want to measure success. When we talk about "fixing" polarization, we are not looking for a complete elimination of polarization—a goal of such magnitude would be near impossible, especially in the six years since the caucus's conception. Instead, we are looking for just a decrease in inefficient member behaviors such as voting down party lines on key issues or lack of co-sponsorship with opposite parties. In looking at whether or not the Problem Solvers' Caucus has been successful in its endeavor to restore bipartisan lawmaking to the House of Representatives, we simply need to look for a decrease in polarization to see if the caucus has lived up to its goals as an institutional solution to an even bigger institutional problem.

Measuring Success

In our analysis of the average Lugar bipartisan scores for all members across the 113-115th Congresses, we saw that there is a significant shift in the House as a whole toward more bipartisanship behaviors from the 114th to the 115th Congress. However, how can we know if this shift is due to the actions of the Problem Solvers' Caucus or not? In essence, we cannot. What we can do is look at trends associated with the caucus and see how they may contribute to the House's increased bipartisanship levels. There are two main concepts to keep in mind in this

endeavor. First, in our portrayal of caucus and non-caucus member Lugar scores across the 113th-115th Congresses does show a small, yet noticeable shift in the Lugar scores of the House toward that of the Problem Solvers'. Second, our analysis of Nokken-Poole Dimension 1 ideologies by party show that ideology of caucus and non-caucus members has not significantly changed across the 113-115th Congresses. While this doesn't by itself tell us anything, it is worth noticing that there was not an increase in ideological polarization in the House, even after the famous 2016 elections which have been characterized as a monumental ideological battle within the nation.

These two factors suggest that the Problem Solvers' Caucus is at least not correlated with a negative impact on House polarization and gridlock. The caucus has declared itself dedicated to working as an entity to defy stagnant, polarized ideological stances to engage in bipartisanship via individual member actions such as personally working with the opposite party to craft legislation as well as through their voting actions as a unified bloc in the House. While ideological polarization has not marginally improved, the gridlock that has characteristically persisted the House seems to have improved over the years since the caucus's conception. We cannot infer causation from these correlations, but it still presents an interesting case against those critics who claim that the caucus simply acts as a cover-up for more nefarious, self-serving interests of caucus members. Even if it has been on accident, the caucus has made some headway into potentially improving polarization in the House in the long run, especially in taking account the rules changes enforced at the start of the 116th Congress. An extension of this project in the future could examine the average Lugar scores of the 116th Congress to see if these trends continue.

Looking Ahead

Particularly in today's political climate, even the correlation between the caucus's formation and a bipartisan shift in the House is huge. As I have discussed throughout my thesis, the current state of polarization and divisiveness that our nation is experiencing feels unprecedented. As the technological era continues to modernize the country and we experience population and economic growth on an unimaginable scale, our policies are struggling to keep up as our elected officials remain in a deadlock over political battles in Congress. The current state of the nation and Congress puts the Problem Solvers' Caucus in a key position in history to actually make a difference in the way our political system is being run, and to help jump-start Congress into regenerating substantial, sustainable policies that will aide our nation in its growing pains and leaps into the future. Particularly in looking ahead to the 2020 Elections, it feels as though the country is on the cusp of a political revolution that will blaze the trail for diverse generations to come to engage with politics in a brand-new way. The Problem Solvers' Caucus has the opportunity to ride this wave, and if they choose to and succeed, they will surely earn the bipartisan, solution-driven reputation they seem to desire.

The implications of the caucus's success or failure are monumental. If they are successful in relieving the system of the pressures of polarization, it means democracy as we know it will be able to survive for many years to come, and we will truly know that it is able to withstand the toughest trials and tests that we can throw at it. If they are unsuccessful, however, the effects could also be felt for years into the future—as the caucus gains traction in media presence, more and more of the American public will turn their eyes to the caucus in hopes of seeing some solution to the turmoil that they are sensing in our government. A failure of the caucus to uphold

the value of bipartisanship could lead to a hit to our citizenry's political morale and hope that would impact the effectiveness of our government and leaders for generations to come.

Moving forward, I think that the Problem Solvers' Caucus can do more to ensure that its message of promoting bipartisanship and compromise is taken more seriously throughout the House and thus carried out. First, it needs to be more transparent. The secrecy surrounding the caucus of its membership and meetings is helping to fuel the widespread rumors of it being a conservative façade for moderate candidates. Second, the caucus needs to ensure that the entirety of its membership is sacrificing party alignment equally. This inequity is also sparking rumors, but also discredits the caucus's core message of compromise across the board. Finally, the caucus should continue its less-rigorous membership recruiting methods moving forward as they have done thus far in the 116th Congress. If the caucus targets more radical members in its endeavors, its message and actions will look even more authentic and impressive, and the House of Representatives will begin to function in a smoother, more bipartisan way as other radical members begin to follow suit.

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BIOGRAPHY



Scarlett A. Neely was born in the small Southeast Texas town of Orange, Texas on February 16, 1998, and remained there for the entirety of her first eighteen years. Her childhood consisted of working and playing on her family’s cattle ranch, and she believes her upbringing instilled in her values of tenacity, persistence, and determination. Upon her graduation from Orangefield High School, Ms. Neely decided to spread her wings and head for the big city. She enrolled in the Plan II Honors program at the University of Texas at Austin in 2016, and double majored in Government with an academic focus on the United States Congressional System.

In college, Scarlett dedicated her time outside of classes to work in the State Legislature. She worked as a Legislative Assistant for a Texas Representative in the 85th Legislative Session, and as a Legislative Aide for a boutique lobbying firm in the 86th Legislative Session. In both roles, she dedicated long hours and tireless dedication beyond what was expected of her, and worked on several legislative projects and formed lasting professional relationships within state government. She will cherish the memories and friends she made along the way forever. Ms. Neely also dedicated much of her collegiate career to congressional research, and was proud to be selected as a J.J. Pickle Research Fellow her junior year, through which she conceived her idea for this thesis, and had the opportunity to conduct interviews and research in Washington, D.C. in order to present her preliminary findings to the Department of Government. To round out her collegiate career, Scarlett spent the spring of her senior year living and interning in Washington, D.C. as a Bill Archer Fellow. She interned at The Brookings Institution in the Governance Studies department, with a focus on American Congress and Government.

Scarlett graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 2020, and will begin work at Deloitte as a Human Capital Strategy Analyst in Government and Public Services Consulting in the fall. She has plans to attend law school in the future, and is excited to dedicate her life to public service in order to advocate for and help improve the lives of people in her hometown, her state, and her country. Her upbringing instilled in her a passion for civil rights, particularly regarding women’s rights and equality, and she strongly believes in the power of government to act as an agent for positive change in individual lives. She can’t wait to pursue her life’s mission of working with law and policy to help ensure that no one has to feel as though they are prohibited from succeeding in their dreams for a better life.