

**The Use of Seniority in the Selection of State Legislative Committee Chairs:  
An Examination of a National Phenomenon at the State Level**

David Prince

Department of Political Science

University of Mississippi

dprince@olemiss.edu

Prepared for presentation at the 1998 Southern Political Science Association

annual meeting, Atlanta, Georgia

October 28-31, 1998

### **Abstract**

The 1994 elections saw the Republicans come to power in the House of Representatives for the first time in forth years. The 1994 elections also resulted in Republicans gaining control of many state legislatures. Upon coming to power at the national level, the Republicans implemented changes in the committee system. The Republicans did not adhere to a strict system of seniority in the selection of committee chairs. Using regression analysis, this paper attempts to determine if the factors that affect seniority at the national level were significant at the state level. Through this analysis, changes in leadership and changes in the number of committees was found to be the major determinants in explaining changes in seniority in state legislatures.

The committee system is at the heart of the functioning of the United States Congress and in turn the committee chair is at the heart of the functioning of the committee. Wilson (1885, 58) writes, “The leaders of the House are the chairmen of the principal Standing Committees.” He continues by writing that there are many different leaders in the House of Representatives:

The House has as many leaders as there are subjects of legislation; for there are leading classes of legislation, and in the consideration of every topic of business the House is guided by a special leader in the person of the chairman of the Standing Committee, charged with the superintendence of measures of the particular class to which that topic belongs (Wilson 1885, 58-59).

During the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, committees acquired much of their present day authority and power. They became major policy making bodies and helped to set the agenda for the Congress. Committees were no longer just used to figure out the technical aspects of legislation, but in many cases, were given authority to legislate exclusively in certain areas. They also began to gain the power of killing legislation before it ever reached the floor of the House of Representatives. By the turn of the century, committees had gained a great deal of autonomy not only from the chamber itself, but also from the political parties. Much of the real power rested with the chair of the committee who exercised tremendous control over the committee’s business (Smith and Deering 1990).

In contrast with the national level, little research has been conducted on the committee system at the state level. Rosenthal (1974, 7) wrote: “When it comes to standing committees, congressional research is considerably ahead while state legislative research lags far behind.” He wrote that any study concerning standing committees must basically begin from scratch. “Little presently exists from which to generalize or on which to base conclusions” (Rosenthal 1974, 7-8).

C. I. Winslow (1931) produced one of the few early works on standing committees in state legislatures that covered the subject with any depth. Winslow, in his study, provides statistical data on the structure of standing committees for every state. Included as part of his study, he provides information about the number of committees, the size of committees and the number of committee assignments. In addition to his statistical information, he conducted a study of Maryland and Pennsylvania in which he found that the committee's action on a bill is final in 80 percent of the cases.

Rosenthal's (1974) work was one of the few in-depth works conducted on committees in state legislatures since Winslow's 1931 work. He examined various aspects of committee performance in several states, but little in-depth analysis of state committee systems has been undertaken. In the intervening years since Rosenthal's book, some progress has been made concerning committee systems at the state level. Much of the research at the state level has tended to focus on the committee decision making process (Hamm 1980; Hamm and Hedlund 1994; Basehart 1980). Additionally, the importance of committees in the states has been examined in various studies (Francis 1989; Francis and Riddlesperger 1982; Francis 1985).

Additionally, Reeves (1993) examined the leadership styles of committee chairs. Collie and Roberts (1992) examined the prestige factor of various committees and why members choose to chair certain committees, and other scholars studied the allocation of desirable committee assignments and why some assignments are more sought after than others (Munger 1988; Endersby and McCurdy 1996; Hedlund and Patterson 1992). Even with these advances at both the national and state level there is still much to be learned.

### **1994 Republican Reforms**

The 1994 elections served to change, in many respects, the way we think about politics. Prior to the 1994 elections, many scholars had written about why the Republicans were entrenched in the White House while the Democrats controlled the Congress. In addition to winning the Senate, for the first time in

forty years the Republicans were able to gain control of the House of Representatives, resulting in divided government with Democrats controlling the presidency and the Republicans controlling Congress. This governmental structure served to change many of the traditional thoughts of governmental control. Many interesting questions have arisen as the result of the change in the balance of power. Is this type of governmental structure temporary or have we entered a new era in party control and institutional dominance?

House Republicans implemented many changes to the committee system as part of their “Contract with America.” It is important that we briefly review some of the reforms implemented by Republicans so we can better understand the changes in the use of seniority in the context of the total Republican reform package. Their changes have decreased the power of the committees and put more power into the hands of the leadership. Many of these changes are unlikely to be undone in the future even if the Democrats regain control of Congress. Several of the reforms continue past trends started under Democratic control. Additionally, Democrats will benefit from many of the changes if they regain control. They will be in a better position to pass their programs instead of competing for power among themselves.

One of the first reforms of House Republicans was the elimination of proxy voting in committees. Proxy voting is the process that allows a committee chair, or a designee of the chair, to cast votes for members that are not present. Proxy voting puts a great deal of power in the hands of the committee chair. A chair that has proxies in hand can easily defeat amendments by the minority party. When the committee leader controls the proxies of committee members, minority members are unable to work out deals with members of the majority and perhaps defeat the position of the committee chair (Smith and Deering 1990).

The Republicans had attempted to eliminate proxy voting for committees in the past, but in 1995 they followed through with its elimination, even though it tended to hurt the majority party (Davidson and Oleszek 1995). The Republicans have to make sure all of their members are present at committee votes or risk losing to a Democrat minority that is present and votes together. The elimination

of proxy voting is an effort to decrease the power of committee chairs, and thus return power to the leadership which selects the members of the committees. Additionally, the elimination of proxy voting increases the accountability of members. Members can no longer just avoid going on record about a particular issue by just not showing up to vote. With the elimination of proxy voting, the member has to show up and be accounted for, or risk the loss of the vote to the Democrats.

In addition to the elimination of proxy voting in committees, the Republicans also reduced the size of committee staff and the number of standing committees and subcommittees. The elimination of staff, however, will primarily affect the Democrats, because the Republicans will have more staff since they are in the majority.

Republicans, in their reform of the committee system, eliminated three standing committees-- the District of Columbia, Post Office, and Merchant Marine and Fisheries committees, and transferred their functions to other standing committees. The Senate eliminated some subcommittees, but did not eliminate any of its standing committees. This is probably not the drastic cut that many members would have liked to have seen. The elimination of these committees, by the House, basically brings the House of Representatives in line with the Senate. The Senate eliminated its District of Columbia and Post Office committees in 1977, and has never had a Merchant Marine and Fisheries committee. The jurisdictions of the District of Columbia and the Post Office committees were placed under the Government Reform and Oversight Committee, while the duties of the Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee were placed under the jurisdiction of three other committees.

The elimination of the standing committees in the House of Representatives probably has few political ramifications for the Republicans. The Post Office, District of Columbia and Merchant Marine and Fisheries committees basically served Democratic constituencies. The postal and maritime unions are overwhelming Democratic. The District of Columbia is also overwhelmingly Democratic, which is evident by its vote in presidential elections.

In addition to the elimination of three committees, the House Republicans also renamed some of the committees to reflect Republican interest. For example, the Committee on Education and Labor was renamed the Committee on Economic and Educational Opportunities. Education and Labor generally reflect Democratic ideas and constituencies whereas the name of Economic and Educational Opportunities is more in line with Republican constituencies.

On March 15, 1995 the Republicans approved a 30 percent cut in the funding for committees in the House of Representatives. The House Republicans also consolidated several committees' accounts. The various sources from which committees received funds were consolidated into one account. Previously, committees had received funds from three sources. Under House Resolution 107 committees were to draw funds only from one source (*Congressional Quarterly Almanac* 1995).

In addition to the elimination of standing committees and the slashing of committee budgets, the Republicans also eliminated subcommittees and attempted to limit the number of subcommittees that each standing committee can have. Republicans limited each committee to no more than five subcommittees, with the exception of the Appropriations, Government Reform and Oversight, and Transportation. (Davidson and Oleszek 1995).

Republicans also cut the size of committees, but they probably did not go as far as some would have liked. It is extremely difficult to cut the number of seats on committees when there are a large number of members wanting seats. This is especially true on the most prestigious committees. Matters were complicated by the large number of freshman members who entered the House in 1994. The leadership can use committee assignments to reward those members who are loyal to the party position. With a reduced number of seats, it becomes more difficult to use committee assignment as a reward mechanism.

The Republicans are able to set the ratio of majority to minority members on each committee, and as the majority party, the Republicans have a greater number of seats than Democrats. The Republicans have generally given themselves 55 percent of the seats on each committee, but on the most important

committees such as Appropriations, Budget, Rules, and Ways and Means, they have given themselves even a higher proportion of the seats in order to make sure they are able to enact their programs.

In a further effort to centralize power in the leadership, members are limited to six years as chair of a committee. Limiting the terms that a member can serve as chair prevents the member from building up his or her own power base and influence. The limiting of terms of chairs should help in breaking down the decentralized system of power that has been present for many years.

All of the reforms implemented by the Republicans make it extremely important that we understand the mechanism for the selection of committee members and committee chairs. The committee system is at the heart of the functioning of Congress, therefore we must understand its functioning to understand how the legislative body as a whole functions. While seniority is still an important criterion in the selection of committee chairs and committee assignments, it is not the sole factor in the selection of a chair. Party loyalty has become an extremely important factor in the selection of committee chairs as was seen in the 104<sup>th</sup> Congress. For example, Robert L. Livingston was chosen as chair of the House Appropriations Committee despite the fact that Joseph M. McDade of Pennsylvania, John T. Myers of Indiana, C.W. Bill Young of Florida, and Ralph Regula of Ohio had more seniority than Livingston (*Congressional Quarterly Almanac* 1995). Thomas Bliley Jr. of Virginia was selected as chairman of the Commerce Committee, but Carlos Moorhead of California and Billy Tauzin of Louisiana had more seniority than Bliley. Members selected to chair committees were more supportive of the Republican agenda, and therefore, would quickly report legislation out of committee that reflected the items in the “Contract with America.” The party leadership did not want an item in the contract killed because a chair refused to report it.

With the election of a large freshman class to the 104<sup>th</sup> Congress, many of these individuals do not want to wait for years before they become chair of a committee. With term limits placed on committee chairs, freshmen will be able to move up the ranks much faster than would have previously been the case. The



term elimination of committee chairs will serve to further decrease the use of seniority in the selection of committee members. This study will examine the breakdown in seniority that is present at the national level and attempt to determine if the same trend is present at the state level.

Historically, most legislative bodies have adhered to a strict seniority system when selecting committee chairs and committee members. However, recent trends have seen a decrease in the use of seniority for selecting committee members and chairs at the national level. This research will seek to explain this trend to ascertain if it is only a national level phenomenon, or if the importance of seniority is also decreasing at the state level.

### **Theory and Hypotheses**

The section will identify three hypotheses which will be tested in this study. Research has been conducted which examined the behavior of committee chairs, but paid scant attention to the assignment of committee chairs. As previously shown, a breakdown in seniority was present in 1994 at the national level. No research has been conducted which examines if this is a trend just present at the national level or if the breakdown of seniority is also present at the state level. This research will hopefully add to our knowledge of state legislative committees by addressing a phenomenon which has not been looked at in great detail previously. Additionally, this study will suggest possible areas for future studies on state committees.

When there is a change of control from one party to the other it is logical that the new party will want to change the committee system to reflect the interests and goals of the party. Additionally, it is logical that when there is a change of leadership, the new leader will want to change the committee system to reflect his or her personal interest. Fenno (1973) identified three goals of members of legislative bodies. They desire to be reelected, gain influence, and establish good public policy. Since members have these three goals they would naturally shape the committee system to assist in reaching these goals. Reeves (1993) also showed how members in power positions, such as committee chairs,

use the committee system to promote their own agenda.

Hypothesis # 1: When there is a change in leadership the use of seniority in the selection of committee chairs will decrease.

Hedlund and Hamm (1996) found that in most legislative chambers few rules existed which required the strict use of seniority in the selection of committee positions. Many party leaders stated that while seniority is used in the selection process of committee members, it should not be a constraining factor. This hypothesis is consistent with what occurred after the 1994 elections at the national level. Many senior members were passed over for committee assignments when the speakership in the House of Representatives changed from one individual to another. This hypothesis will be used to test for the effects of changes in leadership on the seniority system in state legislatures.

Hypothesis # 2: When there is a change in party control the use of seniority in the selection of committee chairs will change.

This hypothesis is also consistent with what was present at the national level in 1994 with the change of party control in the United States Congress. With the change of control from one party to another, there was also a change in the use of seniority. In the case of House Republicans, seniority was not as much of a criterion in the selection of chairs as had been the case during much of the Democratic tenure.

Hypothesis # 3: When the number of committees increases, the use of seniority in the selection of committee chairs will increase.

The third hypothesis results from the rule in most legislatures that limits members to chairing one committee. As the number of committees increases, there are more committee assignments to go around. One would especially expect a legislative body with a large number of committees and a small number of seats in the body to have an especially high number of senior members who are chairing committees.

There were four major changes which took place at the national level in 1994. The first four independent variables explained in the next section arise from these four phenomena. First, 1994 saw a change in party control of the Congress from the Democratic party to the Republican party. This occurrence was also seen in many state legislatures. As shown in table 1, Republicans were able to gain control of eight upper houses and 11 lower houses. The second factor present in 1994 was a change in control from the Democratic party to the Republican party.

[Table 1 About Here]

In some state legislatures Republicans had not been in control since Reconstruction. The third factor was a change in control from a party that had been in control for forty years. Finally, 1994 saw a change in leadership at the national level with the speakership in the House changing from Tom Foley to Newt Gingrich and Bob Dole becoming the new majority leader in the Senate.

In some state legislatures Republicans had not been in control since it should be accounted for in the analysis. As stated by Francis (1985), state legislative leaders have many important decisions to make, including decisions about how the committee system will be structured.

### **Independent Variables**

#### *Change In Party Control*

Two different change variables will be used in this study. The first change variable is a dummy variable which indicates if there is a change in control from one party to another. If there is a change of control from one party to another the variable will be coded as a one. If there is no change in party control the variable will be coded as a zero. A second change variable, that will be used in a separate regression analysis, is a variable coded as a one if there is a change of control from Democratic to Republican, and as a minus one if there is a change in control from Republican to Democrat. If there is no change in party control the variable will be coded as a zero. These variables are included in the study to determine if

changes in seniority are the product of a change in control of the legislative body, and in the case of the directional change variable, to determine if a certain party is more likely to decrease the use of seniority. In some instances, when a new party comes into power they desire to make changes in the structure of the legislature. A party that has controlled the legislature in the previous session is unlikely to make major changes since it has governed with the system in place.

#### *Years Out Of Power*

The number of years a party has been out of power could have an effect on the changes made when they come to power. When a party has been out of power for an extended period of time, it is more likely to implement change than if the party had been out of power for only one term. For purpose of this study, 1950 was used as the cut off date for determining this variable. In many cases, especially in the South, some states had not witnessed a change in party control since Reconstruction. The use of 1950 provides a long enough time period to determine if the number of years out of power are affecting changes in the committee system. The number of years out of power is used instead of the number of legislative terms to take into account varying length of legislative session among states.

#### *Control of the State Legislature*

A third independent variable included in this study is control of the state legislature. The variable will be coded as a dummy variable with one representing Republican control and zero representing Democratic control. Republicans at the national level decreased the use of seniority upon coming to power. The purpose of this variable is to determine if Republican control at the state level results in a decrease in the use of seniority in the selection of committee chairs. This variable will not be used in the regression analysis that includes the directional change control variable.

### *Leadership Change*

A fourth independent variable to be included in this study is change in leadership. For lower houses of state legislatures the variable will indicate if there has been a change in the Speaker of the House from one term to the next term. If there was a change in the speakership then the variable will be coded as a one. If there is no change in the office of the speaker then the variable will be coded as a zero.

For upper houses of state legislatures two potential leadership positions exist. Some upper houses have a majority leader and a President Pro Tempore, while others have only one of the positions. For upper houses the leadership variable will measure whether there has been a change in the majority leader or the President Pro Tempore. The variable will be coded as zero if there is no change in either position and as one if there has been a change in one of the two positions. The two positions are included due to the fact that the real position of power varies from one legislative body to another. Some states have only one of the two positions in their legislature, therefore change in each of the leadership positions are combined into one variable of leadership change for inclusion in the regression analysis. Future research might involve the determination of where power exists in each of the states, but this was impossible to determine for this study due to a lack of information.

### *Professionalism*

The effects of professionalism will be controlled for in this study. Generally speaking, the more professional a legislative body the greater the use of seniority. For this study a measurement of professionalism was created which employed three determinants of professionalism- compensation, length of session and staff. These are factors which are consistent with Squire (1992) and Mooney (1995).

Professionalism is measured for each term considered. Compensation is the first part of the professionalism measurement and consists of the salary that each member receives plus their per diems for the year. If a legislature meets

biannually then the salary is divided in half to reflect what the member would make for one year.

The second factor used in the measurement is the length of session. The length of session was the number of days that a legislative body could legally meet over a two-year period, excluding a special session. A two-year period was used to allow for the fact that some states only meet every other year while others meet for different numbers of days for each year during a two-year term. In some cases the legislature may have met for the maximum number of days while in others they did not. For purpose of this research the maximum number of days is used due to the difficulty in obtaining the data for the states examined in this study.

The final factor included in the professionalism measurement is staff. There are three categories of staff - personal staff, district staff and shared staff. Since theoretically, personal and district staff is more important than shared staff, they are weighed more. For each type of staff a score was calculated equaling zero if none were present, one if part-time staff were present and two if full-time staff were present. Each state was given a score based upon if each of the three categories were full-time or part-time. Shared staff was weighted half of what personal and district staff were weighted. This resulted in a scoring ranging from zero, indicating no staff, to five designating full-time staff in each of the three categories. A state that had part-time staff in each of the categories would receive a score of 2.5.

The final measurement of professionalism is determined by taking a ranking for each of the three components and combining them to produce an overall ranking of professionalism. Each of the three components was given equal weight in the final measurement. To produce the final rankings the three rankings were added together resulting in a score from three, indicating a ranking of one in each of the three categories, to 147 indicating a ranking of 49<sup>th</sup> in each of the three categories. The rankings for 1995 are presented in Appendix A. The results for professionalism are consistent with those of Squire (1992).

### **Changes in the Seniority System**

For the purpose of this research, seniority will be defined as continuous service within a house of a legislative body. Prior service by a member will be used to break ties between members whose continuous service dates back to the same year. For example, if two members had continuous service since 1982, but one of the members had been in the legislature previously the member with the prior service would be the senior member. Additionally, for this study, the most senior member is selected from those that are not chairing another committee. For example, if a member of a committee has more seniority than the committee chair, but he or she is chairing another committee then the committee is considered to be chaired by the senior member assuming that there are no other members on the committee with more seniority than the chair who is not hearing a committee.

For examination in this study seven states were chosen—New York, Pennsylvania Texas, North Carolina, Minnesota, Montana, and Alabama. These states were selected due to their representation of the nation as a whole. The selection process included picking states which fit into the three categories of professionalism. States were selected which were considered to be highly professional, non-professional, and those which ranked in the middle. A second criterion used in the selection process was a state which had experienced a change in party control and states which had not experienced a change in party control during the time period examined in this study. Using these two criteria one can establish a 3 by 2 matrix with the goal of selecting states which fit into each category. Appendix B shows the matrix which was used in the selection process.

The first category in the matrix is a highly professional state that has not experienced a change in party control or either legislative house. New York was selected to fulfill this category. New York ranks at the top of the professionalism measure established in this study as well as the study conducted by Squire (1992). Additionally, New York has not seen a change in party control during the time frame looked at in this study. During the 12 years examined in this study, the

Republicans have controlled the Senate in New York, while the Democrats controlled the House.

The second criterion, which has to be fulfilled in the selection process, is a state that is highly professional and has experienced a change in party control. Pennsylvania was selected as a state which ranks near the top in terms of professionalism and has experienced a change of party control. Pennsylvania saw the Republicans gain control of the state house after the 1994 elections. This was consistent with what was seen at the national level with Republicans gaining control after the 1994 elections.

The third criterion is a state which ranks in the middle in terms of professionalism and has not experienced a change in party control. Texas ranked in the middle of the measure of professionalism which was established in this study, as well as the study conducted by Squire (1992). Texas has seen the Democrats control both houses of the state legislature during the time frame examined in this study.

The fourth criterion in the selection process is a state that ranks in the middle in terms of professionalism and has experienced a change in party control. Two states included in this study fall into this category. First, North Carolina which ranks in the middle of most professionalism measurements saw a change in party control in the state house after the 1994 elections with the Republicans gaining control. Minnesota also fits this fourth criteria with the Democrats gaining control of the state house after the 1986 elections. Minnesota was included to help determine if changes in seniority are the product of a change of control from one party to another, and are not just the product of a change from the Democratic party to the Republican party.

The fifth criterion in the selection process was a state which ranked low in terms of professionalism and had not experienced a change in party control during the period under examination. Alabama was selected as a state which is non-professional and has seen the Democrats entrenched in power for decades.

The final criterion used in the selection process was a state which was ranked low in terms of professionalism, and had experienced a change in party



control during the time period which was examined. Montana has tended to be a very competitive state with control of the state legislature alternating between the two parties. The Democrats controlled the state Senate in 1985, 1991 and 1993, with the Republicans controlling the Senate in 1989 and 1995. The 1987 term saw control of the Senate split evenly between the two parties. The state house has also tended to be highly competitive in Montana with the Democrats in control in 1989 and 1991 and the Republican having a majority in 1987, 1993 and 1995. The house also saw control evenly divided between the parties in 1985.

### **Methods**

The data for this study were obtained from the legislative libraries in Texas, Montana, and Minnesota, the Public Information Office in Alabama, the Library of the Senate in Pennsylvania, the Office of the Speaker of the New York State Assembly, and the North Carolina Manual. The selection process of the states for this study was set forth in the previous section. Each committee in the lower and upper house of the seven states selected was examined to determine if the senior member was chairing the committee. For each committee the members of the majority party were compared based upon their years of continuous service and it was determined if the chair was the most senior member. Members with more seniority than the chair were excluded if they were chairing another committee. The final measure of seniority is the percentage of committees chaired by the senior member for each chamber of the state legislatures beginning in 1985 and ending in 1995. This time period should be long enough to determine what factors affect seniority.

After measuring seniority a change score was computed for each state with 1985 being used as the baseline in the analysis. This measure shows the degree to which seniority increases or decreases from the previous years. This was done because the actual level of seniority may vary from state to state. The change in seniority is the dependent variable for this study.

For this study, the professionalism measurement discussed previously will be incorporated. Additionally, the leadership change variables will also be

included in the regression analysis. The regression analysis will include the directional change variable which was used previously. A separate regression analysis will include the change of control variable that was also previously discussed.

In addition, the change in the number of committees in the legislative body will be included to take into account the fact that legislative bodies with more committees have more chairmanships to go around. This could be a major factor in explaining the change in the percentage of committees, that are being chaired by the senior member. Regression analysis will be run for both the upper and lower houses of state legislatures in the effort to determine which factors help to explain the change in the use of seniority within that body.

## **Results**

There are some general observations that can be made when examining the seniority system in the seven states selected for this study. First, upper houses tend to have a higher percentage of committees chaired by the senior member. Out of the forty-two cases examined in this study, only seven cases were found where the lower house had a higher percentage of committees chaired by the senior member, and out of those seven, cases four occurred in Pennsylvania.

There may be several reasons why a lower level of the use of seniority was found in lower chambers. The answer may lie in the autonomous nature of individuals within each chamber. The rules may give the Speaker more power in the committee assignment process in lower houses. Additionally, lower houses may have shorter terms of office thereby decreasing the opportunity for individuals to build up their own power structure. Lower houses may see a greater turn over in membership, thereby decreasing the opportunities for members to build up personal power structures within the legislature. Members may see the lower house only as a stepping stone to a higher position. In addition, upper chambers tend to be smaller than lower chambers, thereby increasing the power of individuals and increasing the likelihood of a member receiving an assignment as a committee chair. If there are a large number of committees and a

small number of members the percentage of senior members chairing a committee should be greater.

The case of Alabama is interesting in the fact that the percentage of committees chaired by the senior member is generally lower than in the other states examined in this study. In the lower house in Alabama, 1985 is the only year that had more than 50 percent of the committees chaired by the senior member. For the other five cases in Alabama, the range is from 28 percent to 41 percent. The upper house has numbers which are slightly higher than the lower house with four of the six cases having more than 50 percent of the committees chaired by the senior member. However, the numbers are still below what is present in upper houses in the other six states.

There may be several explanations to explain why there are low percentages of committees being chaired by the senior member in Alabama. First, the Democratic party has historically dominated Alabama. There are cases in the history of Alabama politics in which one hundred percent of the legislature consisted of Democrats. The leadership may not be as responsive to the members when there are such large majorities within the legislature. The leadership is in a better position to use the committee system to advance their personal agenda and can use the committee assignment process as a means of rewarding those who have supported the leaders. Additionally, the existing system has become so entrenched that it may be difficult to implement changes.

North Carolina is another state that offers some interesting findings concerning the seniority system. In the lower house of the North Carolina legislature we see a drastic change in the numbers of committees chaired by the senior member from the 1987 term to the 1989 term. In 1987 over 85 percent of the committees were chaired by the senior member. The total dropped to less than 10 percent in 1989. The major reason for this drastic change was reorganization of the house. In 1987 the house consisted of 58 committees. In 1989 after the reorganization, the total dropped to 13. This made it more difficult to give out committee assignments. In some cases, subcommittee chairmanships were seen as being more important than full standing committees. In 1991 the

North Carolina House saw an increase to 13 percent of the committees being chaired by the senior member. By 1993 the figure had increased to 48 percent. 1991 also saw an increase in the number of standing committees to 23 in the state house. The increase in the number of committees chaired by the senior member may be the product of the increase in the number of standing committees.

### *Regression Analysis*

The regression analysis for this study thesis reveals some interesting results. The regression analysis was successful in discovering some of the factors that explain change in the seniority system in lower houses. However, changes in upper houses were not explained through this research.

The first regression analysis involved use of a variable that indicated if there was a change in control from one party to another. The change variable was found to be significant, leading to the conclusion that there is an increase in committees chaired by the senior member when there is a change in party control (see Table 2). This finding is consistent with what was predicted in hypothesis number two that stated, when there is a change in party control the use of seniority in the selection of committee chairmen will change. One would expect that a change in party would bring about a change in the use of seniority in the selection process. However, the finding that is probably most surprising is that a change in party control would bring about an increase in the use of seniority in the selection process. One would logically predict that a change in party would result in a decrease in the use of seniority in legislatures because members lack their own built in power structure since they have been out of power.

[Table 2 About Here]

A change in the speaker had the opposite effect than a change in control had on the seniority system. When there is a change in the speaker the number of committees chaired by the senior member decreases. This finding is consistent with what was predicted in hypothesis number one that when there is a change in the leadership the use of seniority will decrease. These results are consistent with

what was present at the national level after the 1994 elections. Many senior members were passed over for assignments in the effort to place members in those positions who were more responsive to the Republicans' Contract With America.

The change in the number of committees was also significant for lower houses, leading to the conclusion that the greater the number of committees the greater the use of seniority. This result is consistent with what was predicted in hypothesis number three. We see an increase in the use of seniority when there is an increase in the number of committees within the legislative body. This is a logical result which one would expect to see. As the number of committees increases the number of committee chairs increases thereby making it more likely for a member to receive an assignment as the chair of a committee. In general, most legislatures limit members to chairing one committee. With this limitation, it increases the likelihood that a chair will be the senior member when there are a large number of committees.

A regression analysis was also run using a directional change variable. When Republicans gain control of the legislature the use of seniority increases. This result also provides support for hypothesis number two. When party control changes the use of seniority will also change. This result is in contrast to what was seen at the national level following the 1994 elections.

A change in the speaker also proved to be significant using the directional change model. When there is a change in the speaker the use of seniority in the selection process of chairs decreases. This result is consistent with what was predicted in hypothesis number one. It is interesting to note that with a party change we are seeing an increase in the use of seniority in the committee selection process while we see a decrease in the use of seniority when there is a speaker change. This may lie in the idea of the speaker using the committee system to further his or her own personal agenda. In order for the speaker to best advance his or her agenda, one needs people which are loyal and supportive to the speaker in important positions. Therefore, the speaker probably does not want to use seniority as the sole criterion in the selection of committee chairmen. Many

scholars prescribe to the personal power agenda of leaders and using the committee system to promote their own interest increases the political power of the speaker.

The regression analysis for upper houses did not reveal any significant results. The R Square value for upper houses was only .04, meaning that only 4 percent of the variation in the percent change of committees chaired by the senior member could be explained by the change in the number of committees, change in leadership, change in control, professionalism, and the years out of power. In contrast, 51% of the variation in the percent change of committees chaired by the senior member could be explained by the same independent variables in lower houses. Upper houses generally are not as large as lower houses, therefore, there are not as many people to select from for committee assignments, and in some cases, nearly every member will receive an assignment as chair. Additionally, the results are consistent with what was seen at the national level in 1994, the breakdown of seniority appeared in the house nationally and at the state level. The decrease of the use of seniority did not appear in the upper house at either level. More research, however, needs to be conducted to determine why these differences exist between lower and upper houses.

Several conclusions can be made from the results reported in this study. First, change in control leads to a greater use of seniority and a change in speaker results in a decrease in the use of seniority. Second, the greater the number of committees the greater the use of seniority. Finally, seniority tends to be of more importance in lower houses where Speakers generally control the committee assignment process.

### **Conclusions**

Hypothesis number one is supported through this research, but only for lower houses. Change in the speaker is shown to lead to a decreased use of the seniority system in state legislatures. This result is consistent with what was seen at the national level following the 1994 elections. It also provides some evidence that speakers use the committee system to advance their own political goals.

Hypothesis number two is also upheld, but only for lower houses. This study offers evidence that when there is a change in party control there is a change in the use of seniority in the selection of committee chairmen. The testing of this hypothesis also led to another finding that when Republicans gain control of a legislature the use of seniority will increase. This result is in contrast with what was seen at the national level.

Hypothesis number three is supported in the results, but only for lower houses. An increase in the number of committees was shown to lead to an increase in the use of seniority. This was what one would expect to find since the number of chairmanships would increase as the number of committees increases.

In this study much was learned about the committee system in lower houses of state legislatures. However, little advance was made in upper houses. Additional research needs to be undertaken which considers other factors that may help to explain committee structure in upper houses. The answer may lie in the fact that there is no way to predict changes in upper houses and that any attempt is just a fruitless exercise. One can conclude that a change in leadership may be the most important factor in determining the number of committees in a state legislatures, and in turn changes in the number of committees lead to changes in the use of seniority. Additionally, one can probably infer from this study that individual members probably possess more power in upper houses than in lower houses. It appears that the speaker is in the position to shape the structure of the committee system in accordance with his or her own desires. On the other hand, Senate leaders do not appear to have the same prerogatives.

Many of the state legislatures were modeled after the national system and what is seen at the national level may help to explain what is seen at the state level. In the United States Senate individual members have a great deal of power. The desires of the leadership can be defeated by individual members. On the other hand, the Speaker of the United States House of Representatives has tools at his disposal that allow him to exercise tighter control over the operation of the House. Future research needs to investigate the rules under which state

legislatures operate. In this investigation one may find the answer to why changes occur in committees in upper houses.

Additionally, many of the years presented in this study saw little party turnover in the state legislature, therefore this may help to explain why some of the results proved to be statistically insignificant. Additional research needs to be undertaken that looks at a wider range of legislative sessions. Special attention needs to be paid to periods of American history in which there has been a large turnover in party control. An examination of the Watergate era, in which Democrats won in mass numbers, may help to more clearly determine if committee change is a product of a change in control of the legislature, or if it is a product of Republican control. Additionally, other factors need to be considered in future research. Through a better understanding of changes in the committee system, we will be in a better position to understand the legislative process and the legislation that is the product of that process.



## References

- Basehart, Hubert Harry. 1980. "The Effect of Membership Stability On Continuity and Experience In U.S. State Legislative Committees." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 5: 55-68.
- Collie, Melissa P., and Brian E. Roberts. 1992. "Trading Places: Choice and Committee Chairs in the U.S. Senate, 1950-1986." *Journal of Politics* 54: 231- 245.
- Congressional Quarterly Almanac*. 1995. Washington, D.C. : CQ Press.
- Davidson, Roger H. And Walter J. Oleszek, eds. 1995. *The 104<sup>th</sup> Congress: A Congressional Quarterly Reader A Supplement to Congress and Its Members*. Washington: Congressional Quarterly Press.
- Endersby, James W., and Karen M. McCurdy. 1996. "Committee Assignments in the U.S. Senate." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 21: 219-233.
- Fenno, Richard F., Jr. 1973. *Congressmen in Committees*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
- Francis, Wayne L., and James W. Riddlesperger. 1982. "U.S. State Legislative Committees: Structure, Procedural Efficiency, And Party Control. " *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 7: 453-471.
- Francis, Wayne L. 1985. "Leadership, Party Caucuses, and Committees In U.S. State Legislatures." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 10: 243-257.
- Francis, Wayne L. 1989. *The Legislative Committee Game*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Hamm, Keith E. 1980. "U.S. State Legislative Committee Decisions: Similar Results In Different Settings" *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 5:31-54.
- Hamm, Keith E., and Gary Moncrief. 1982. "Effects of Structural Change In Legislative Committee Systems On Their Performance in U.S. States." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 7:383-399.
- Hamm, Keith E., and Ronald D. Hedlund. 1994. "Committees In State Legislatures." In *The Encyclopedia of the American Legislative System*, ed. Joel H. Silbey. New York: Charles Scribner & Sons.

- Hedlund, Ronald D., and Samuel C. Patterson. 1992. "The Electoral Antecedents of State Legislative Committee Assignments." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 17:539-559.
- Hedlund, Ronald D., and Keith Hamm. 1996 "Political Parties as Vehicles for Organizing U.S. State Legislative Committees." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 23: 383-408.
- Mooney, Christopher Z. 1995. "Citizens, Structures, and Sister State: Influences on State Legislative Professionalism." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 20: 47-67.
- Munger, Michael C. 1988. "Allocation of Desirable Committee Assignments: Extend Queues versus Committee Expansion." *American Journal of Political Science* 32: 317-344.
- Reeves, Andree E. 1993. *Congressional Committee Chairmen*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press.
- Rosenthal, Alan. 1974. *Legislative Performance In The States*. New York:Free Press.
- Smith, Steven S., and Christopher J. Deering. 1990. *Committees in Congress*. Washington: Congressional Quarterly Inc.
- Squire, Peverill 1992. "Legislative Professionalization and Membership Diversity in State Legislatures." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 17: 69-79.
- Wilson, Woodrow 1885. *Congressional Government*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.
- Winslow, C. I. 1931. *State Legislative Committees: A Study in Procedure*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

TABLE 1  
State Legislative Control 1993 to 1995

	Upper House		Lower House	
	1993	1995	1993	1995
Republican	17	25	14	25
Democratic	30	23	34	22
Even Control	2	1	1	2

Note: Nebraska is excluded because they have a unicameral nonpartisan legislature.

TABLE 2  
Percentage Change Of Seniority, 1985-1995

	Unstan- dardized Coefficient	Standardized Coefficient	T-Value	Significance
Lower Chambers				
Intercept	.0045			
Years Out of Power	-.00014	-.012	-.076	.940
Professionalism	.00076	.065	.518	.860
Change In Control	.154	.299	2.110	.042
Speaker Change	-.107	-.296	-1.946	.060
Committee Change	.015	.586	4.785	.000
N= 42	R Square = .512		Adjusted R Square = .444	
Upper Chambers				
Intercept	-.109			
Years Out Of Power	.0029	.271	1.348	.186
Professionalism	.00045	.047	.241	.811
Change In Control	.057	.113	.479	.635
Leadership Change	.029	.097	.583	.564
Committee Change	.012	.195	1.204	.237
N= 42	R Square = .088		Adjusted R Square = -.038	
Regression Results Using Directional Change In Control Variable				
Lower Chambers				
Intercept	.047			
Years Out of Power	-.00078	-.069	-.453	.653
Professionalism	-.00016	-.014	-.115	.909
Change In Control	.122	.246	1.996	.054
Speaker Change	-.094	-.260	-1.732	.092
Committee Change	.015	.596	4.843	.000
N = 42	R Square = .506		Adjusted R Square = .438	
Upper Chambers				
Intercept	-.077			
Years Out of Power	.0022	.213	1.323	.194
Professionalism	-.000052	-.005	-.033	.974
Change In Control	-.015	-.031	-.192	.849
Leadership Change	.035	.117	.720	.476
Committee Change	.011	.184	1.146	.259
N = 42	R Square = .083		Adjusted R Square = -.044	

## APPENDIX A: Professionalism Ranking For 1995

- |                    |                   |
|--------------------|-------------------|
| 1. California      | 42. New Mexico    |
| 2. New York        | 43. Kentucky      |
| 3. Pennsylvania    | 44. Utah          |
| 4. Illinois        | 45. New Hampshire |
| 5. New Jersey      | Montana           |
| 6. Michigan        | 47. North Dakota  |
| Ohio               | 48. South Dakota  |
| 8. Wisconsin       | 49. Wyoming       |
| 9. Massachusetts   |                   |
| 10. Delaware       |                   |
| Missouri           |                   |
| 12. Iowa           |                   |
| 13. Alaska         |                   |
| Hawaii             |                   |
| 15. Florida        |                   |
| 16. North Carolina |                   |
| 17. Washington     |                   |
| Oklahoma           |                   |
| 19. Connecticut    |                   |
| 20. Virginia       |                   |
| 21. Maryland       |                   |
| South Carolina     |                   |
| 23. Minnesota      |                   |
| Louisiana          |                   |
| 25. Texas          |                   |
| Tennessee          |                   |
| 27. Colorado       |                   |
| 28. Oregon         |                   |
| Idaho              |                   |
| 30. Arizona        |                   |
| Kansas             |                   |
| 32. Vermont        |                   |
| 33. Mississippi    |                   |
| 34. Nevada         |                   |
| 35. West Virginia  |                   |
| 36. Indiana        |                   |
| 37. Maine          |                   |
| 38. Alabama        |                   |
| 39. Arkansas       |                   |
| Georgia            |                   |
| 41. Rhode Island   |                   |

## APPENDIX B: Party Change By Level of Professionalism

		Level Of Professionalism		
		High	Medium	Low
Change In Party Control	Yes	California Illinois Michigan New Jersey Ohio Pennsylvania Wisconsin	Alaska Arizona Connecticut Florida Iowa Minnesota North Carolina Oregon South Carolina Tennessee Washington	Indiana Maine Montana Nevada North Dakota South Dakota Vermont
	No	Delaware Massachusetts Missouri New York	Colorado Hawaii Idaho Kansas Louisiana Maryland Oklahoma Texas Virginia	Alabama Arkansas Georgia Kentucky Mississippi New Hampshire New Mexico Rhode Island Utah West Virginia Wyoming

Notes: The 1995 Professionalism Ranking Was Used in the Determination of the professionalism level.