

Partisan and Strategic Considerations in Conferee Selection in Congress

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Abstract

Students of congressional politics have long recognized that the Rules Committee serves as a procedural and strategic tool of the House leadership. More specifically, scholars agree that the House Speaker's ability to influence the legislative agenda is accomplished by means of his appointment power. To date, however, little research has addressed the strategic use of conferee appointments when differences in legislation are reconciled in conference. We hypothesize that conference committee appointments can, in fact, take on such a role. We do not believe that the strategic selection of conferees is necessarily constant, however. In this paper, we address two questions that we argue are fundamental in assessing whether or not the House Speaker utilizes the conferee selection process in aiding a partisan agenda. Initially we analyze the means by which the Speaker is capable of manipulating conference committee outcomes. We then proceed to discuss the conditions under which the Speaker utilizes such agenda-setting powers. To explore these questions systematically, we examine conference committee appointments from the beginning of Tip O'Neil's speakership to the present. We apply spatial modeling to the salience of bills, ideology of conferees, and ideology of the Speaker. We find distinct trends in the utilization of conferee appointments to conference committees for strategic reasons.