

Ryan J. Vander Wielen
Research Statement

My primary research agenda concerns U.S. congressional politics, with secondary projects spanning American politics and elections. While I am broadly interested in congressional research, the central focus of my work is on the effects that institutional arrangements have on the distribution of influence within Congress. I ask the question, How does the conflict between distributive forces and demands for efficiency result in structural arrangements that give a subset of the membership an advantage in the formation of policy? Policy implications can be conceptualized in a variety of ways, and my research agenda seeks to address the multiple perspectives. To date, much of my research has explored the consequences that institutions have on the location of policy on ideological scales. Future research will consider aspects such as distributive equity, efficiency, and functionality. Given that a central component of my research agenda concentrates on policy implications, I pursue questions regarding congressional institutions that I believe are pertinent to the policy that ultimately emerges from this body.

My broad research goal of contributing to our understanding of institutional dynamics in Congress, along with a strong interest in real-world politics, has led me to pursue research on conference committees, the *ad hoc* committees used to reconcile differences between the two houses. My dissertation research focuses on the policy implications of conference committee politics. We know very little about this conciliation mechanism despite wide recognition of the potentially vital position that conference committees have in the legislative process. Conference committees are the final stage at which members can change legislation before it returns to the floor for a final vote under closed rule. Therefore, legislators serving on conference committees are afforded the opportunity to shape legislation, and influence policy, in a way that other legislators cannot. In the study of conference committee politics, we know the least about the influence they have on policy outcomes. While a few scholars have argued about the potential bias of conference outcomes, remarkably little theorizing and empirical study has been devoted to the subject.

My dissertation research develops a theory of conference committee decision making, generates testable propositions regarding the conditions under which outcomes will be biased, and tests those propositions. The propositions are derived from spatial models of a bicameral legislature that account for imperfect information that actors have regarding the preferences of other actors, the uncertainty surrounding conference appointments, and sincere voting by the rank-and-file members. I test the propositions with ideal point estimation techniques that allow me to measure movement in voting coalitions from the vote on final passage in each chamber to the vote on the conference report. This work will, I anticipate, generate multiple journal articles.

I plan to expand this research to other aspects of conference committee politics. Specifically, I will examine the role of limited purpose conferees in the reconciliation process. In recent Congresses, party leaders have, with greater frequency, appointed to conferences members with authority to vote on only part of the legislation under negotiation. Presumably, party leaders have done this to influence policy outcomes in some manner. I ask two questions. In what ways do limited conferees influence policy outcomes? And why only recently have we begun to see limited purpose conferees appointed with such frequency? In addition, I plan to do a thorough analysis of the nature of legislation that is most likely to go to conference. If, as my research shows, conference committees are capable of biasing policy outcomes, it is important to better understand which legislation is most susceptible to such bias. This additional work on conference

committee politics, along with the dissertation research, will produce a book that offers a comprehensive analysis of the policy implications of inter-cameral bargaining.

My long-term plans include conducting research on the evolution and policy consequences of party leadership and party related agenda-setting procedures (i.e., right of first recognition, etc). These institutional mechanisms, like conference committees, can provide a subset of the membership with comparatively greater influence over the policy formation process, thus having potentially significant implications for resulting policy. As a broad topic of future research, I would also like to look more closely at the circumstances under which adherence to self-imposed and self-enforced constraints within congress break down. Institutional stability in Congress is effectively a function of the willingness of the membership to observe endogenously created and enforced structures. This idea is closely tied to the theme of exploring the effects that institutions have on the distribution of influence within Congress, since there must be stability in institutions for members to pursue policy influence by exploiting institutional access. We would, for example, expect standing committees to have a much different effect on the policy formation if the chambers only selectively observed committee jurisdiction. Inspired by the recent consideration by Senate Republicans of the nuclear option, this idea, I believe, has applications to research in comparative legislatures.

Beyond my congressional studies, I look forward to exploring questions in other areas of American politics such as inter-branch relations, public administration, interest groups, elections, and voting behavior. My broad interest in American politics has already led me to do research on elections, voting behavior, judicial politics, and public administration. Although my primary focus has been and will remain congressional politics, I plan to continue integrating these and other topics into my research agenda.

In pursuing these plans, I envision a research program that involves a mix of solo and collaborative work. While I intend to work independently on several future projects, I welcome the opportunity to work with others in bringing ideas to fruition. I find that collaborative work is personally fulfilling and frequently produces research that draws upon the different strengths of those involved. Through the intimate observation of other scholars' skills and approaches, collaboration can be integral to professional development.

My academic studies have involved extensive training in quantitative methods and formal theory, and my work tends to favor quantitative analysis of theoretical models. I believe that due to the nature of my theoretical inquiries many of these questions are best addressed by such an approach. This being said, I see much value in qualitative methods and believe that they can be a fundamentally important means of testing the robustness of the assumptions that underlie theoretical models. Through qualitative methods, researchers can ensure that theoretical models are consistent with reality.