Determinants of legislative success in House committees*

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Abstract. We examine the factors that are associated with whether a bill passes the committee stage in the U.S. House of Representatives. Probit results for the 97th and 98th Congresses show that a bill is more likely to pass (1) if the sponsor chairs the committee that considers the bill or a subcommittee of that committee; (2) the higher the number of Democratic cosponsors who sit on the committee; (3) if the bill has bipartisan cosponsorship from members who sit on the committee that considers the bill. However, in the multivariate probit model including the above mentioned variables, other variables previously found to be important, e.g., the total number of cosponsors, whether or not the sponsor sits on the committee that considers the bill, and the party affiliation of the sponsor, are not statistically significant. Also a variable related to a public choice model of committee behavior, the difference between the sponsor's ideology (as measured by ADA score) and the ideology of the committee's median member, has no effect on a bill's probability of committee passage.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine the factors that determine whether or not a bill is reported out from the committee stage of the U.S. House of Representatives. We build on the earlier work of Browne (1985) and Crain, Leavens, and Tollison (1986). Our dependent variable will be a binary variable: whether or not a bill passes the committee stage of the U.S. Congress. In contrast, Crain, Leavens and Tollison focus mainly on whether a bill succeeds on the House floor, and Browne deals with whether a bill becomes a law. Moreover, Browne's research deals with state legislatures, not Congress. Like these earlier articles, however, our explanatory (independent) variables will be characteristics of the bill's sponsors and cosponsors.1 However, as will be shown below, we find that the variables in Crain, Leavens and Tollison and

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in Browne lack statistical significance when entered into a regression equation with the set of variables we identify as most important.

There are two major reasons why we should be interested in which bills pass the committee stage in Congress. First, the committee stage appears to be the most important screening step in the legislative process. For example, in the 97th Congress, House and Senate members introduced 9,551 public bills, but only 10% of these bills passed the committee stage. In contrast, of those that passed the committee stage, 70% passed at least one chamber and 37% became law. Second, recent articles argue that congressional committees can block legislation that they dislike, and enact legislation that they favor because of an implicit institutionalized logroll involving committee jurisdictions and because committees can effectively influence the conference stage of the legislative process (Shepsle and Weingast, 1987a and 1987b). Moreover, because of factors such as committee anticipation of floor amendments, deference to committee expertise, bargaining that has already taken place within the committee, and the use of closed and semi-closed rules, it is rare for substantively major changes to be made in a successful bill, although, sometimes, the committee may prepare a substitute bill as an amendment that reflects the committee’s own position.

Before we proceed to the details of the analysis, we wish to consider an important potential confounding factor in specifying our key variable, the fact that the content of a bill may change during the committee stage. Because committees report the original bill only if they do not make substantial changes to it (Congressional Quarterly, 1982; 412) — albeit there may be substitute bills proposed as amendments to the original bill that reflect the committee’s own position — it is reasonable to treat the bill reported by the committee as the same as the bill of that number sent to the committee. If a committee makes substantial changes to a bill, it will report a “clean bill” (with a new bill number) now listing the committee’s chairman or a subcommittee chairman as the new bill’s sponsor. Thus, “sponsorship” has a different meaning in the context of “clean bills” than for bills that are not substantially changed in committee, since the former category of bills is certain to be sponsored by a committee or subcommittee chair and virtually certain to be reported to the floor. In order to avoid the problems in the comparability of sponsorship on clean bills as opposed to other bills, we delete all clean bills from our sample.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 identifies hypotheses about what variables might theoretically be expected to be important in determining whether a bill passes the committee stage. Section 3 uses these variables to specify a probit model. Section 4 presents the empirical results. Section 5 contrasts these results to those of previous research. Section 6 contains our discussion and conclusion.