

Left out of the Room Where it Happens: Barriers to Serving in Senior Congressional Staff Roles May Limit “Representative” Science Policymaking

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Executive Summary: Policymakers are expected to represent the constituents of their districts and states. Given that the individual life histories and experiences of congressional staffers may influence their attitudes and decisions, it is crucial to understand more about the people serving in these roles, their diversity, and which communities are and are not well-represented. By conducting interviews with twenty-six current and former senior legislative staffers in the United States House of Representatives and Senate involved in drafting science policy, this study examines challenges to acquiring and maintaining key positions in scientific policymaking at the federal level. The results shed light on why some individuals have an unequal advantage to obtain senior staff roles while others struggle to stay in Congress long enough to achieve elite legislative positions. They also suggest that a lack of opportunities for already marginalized communities may lead to inadequate representation in decision-making, especially on science policy issues related to justice and equity. Ultimately, this article makes policy recommendations to foster greater diversity in senior staff roles and to bring the perspectives of more Americans into the science policy decision-making process.

I. Introduction

While elected leaders garner public attention in policy decisions, they rely on their staff to develop robust policies (Montgomery and Nyhan 2017). Malbin (1980) describes these individuals as the nation’s “unelected representatives” because they shape policy without electoral accountability. This largely unseen community gathers key information, meets with lobbyists and constituents, and drafts legislative language. Congressional staffers are tasked with making decisions that represent the attitudes and preferences of the people in each state or district but are often undervalued as critical influencers in policymaking (Hertel-Fernandez, Mildemberger, and Stokes 2019).

In her seminal work, Pitkin (1976) described that political representation should act in the interest of

constituents. While decades of research have provided evidence that policy positions shift in response to public attitudes (Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995; Caughey and Warshaw 2018), not all constituencies have had the same ability to influence legislative outcomes equally (Bartels 2008; Grossmann, Isaac, and Mahmood 2021). Henderson et al. (2021) found that the most well-resourced and organized groups have the greatest impact on staffers and ultimately policy outcomes in ways that can reinforce existing biases and limit representative policymaking.

When making policy decisions, staffers can be influenced by their emotions, values, beliefs, unique identities, and experiences (Dunham 2018; Steenbergen and Colombo 2018). Membership in specific social groups may also lead to

in-group-out-group bias (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). For these reasons, it is important to examine the people serving in congressional staff roles and consider how their experiences and identities may shape and have shaped science policy. Because staffers are prone to this type of decision-making, it's important that there be representation from diverse life experiences.

The career choices that lead individuals into these elite staff roles have been influenced and constrained by societal stereotypes, visible role models and mentors, socialization, discrimination, access to guidance and assessment, isolation from networks, education, imposter syndrome, and other sources of stress (Kerka 2003; Blau and Kahn 2016; Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi 2023). Such factors not only define who works in Congress but might influence their decisions.

Multiple analyses indicate a lack of racial diversity among staffers in the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate, particularly in senior roles (Ratliff, Neikrie, and Beckel 2022; Brenson 2022). On science issues that touch on public health, the environment, and technology—especially those related to justice and equity—it is possible that the communities most impacted lack a voice in the policy process.

Given congressional staffers play a key role in determining member and party positions, guiding appropriations, and establishing legislative priorities, this study of current and former senior legislative staffers in the United States House of Representatives and Senate aims to assess challenges to acquiring and maintaining staff roles in the context of science policy choices at the national level.

II. Methods

This exploratory qualitative study used grounded theory (GT) methodology (Corbin and Strauss 2008) to develop theories as testable ideas grounded in the data. GT follows a systematic process that uses logic and constant comparisons during analysis (Charmaz 2014) to identify important ideas and keyword relationships that explain the outcomes of interviews (Wolfswinkel, Furtmueller, and Wilderom 2013).

GT was initially used to: (1) identify where participants seek scientific information and (2) what sources of information they trust. Twenty-six current and former senior congressional policy staffers were interviewed by asking a series of open-ended questions to learn about their experiences (Appendix I). Questions were refined as new information came to light in a cyclical process through an inductive approach. Patterns in the data determined significant themes based on staffers' unique lived experiences and insights.

Although the initial research design was set up to understand where high-ranking legislative staffers seek out scientific information, challenges to work and participate in the science policy process as a staffer emerged as an important theme during the study.

Staffers were recruited through snowball sampling (Noy 2009), a technique in which existing study subjects recruit future subjects from among their acquaintances. The study protocol was approved by Michigan State University's Institutional Review Board and participants received a written and oral introduction to the study and gave written consent to participate before each interview occurred (Appendix II).

As a previous congressional staffer in the U.S. Senate 16 years before this research, I had unique access to recruit participants, including those in offices who stated they would not otherwise speak with scientists or participate in interviews. While this limits replicability, it provides a unique opportunity to examine a community that does not appear in prior research.

All interviews were conducted between March 14, 2022 and September 14, 2022, ranging in length from sixteen minutes to more than two hours. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted via Zoom (Qumu Corp.). Multiple recent studies comparing video interviews with in-person interviews have reported no reduction in rapport or personal disclosure, interview duration, or substantive coding (Jenner and Myers 2018; Johnson Scheitle, and Ecklund 2021). All subjects consented to be recorded and were assured confidentiality.

i. Participants

The sample of 26 current and former staffers was thought to be ideologically and geographically diverse, including those who last worked in 11 Republican and 15 Democrat offices, of whom 16 were male and 10 were female (Table 1). Genders were distributed similarly between political parties. Two participants were people of color, which may reflect that there have been historically low percentages of senior staffers of color, or be a result of the snowball sampling method. Four individuals disclosed that their personal party affiliation did not match the party of the most recent office where they worked, although this was not a question asked. This is notable because the personal party affiliation of staffers may influence their decisions. All staffers included in the sample held top-level positions in the U.S. Senate and House for periods up to 40 years in Washington D.C. Those with less than five years of experience on Capitol Hill arrived with significant leadership experience elsewhere in and out of government.

Participants' most recent roles included chief of staff (10), legislative assistant or researcher (11), and legislative or staff director (5). Although many had held multiple roles in more than one office over different administrations, the current or last position they held took place in personal (19) and committee offices (7).

Current and former staffers were included to compare the responses of those presently in staff roles with others who had distance from Congress and additional time to reflect on the experience. Eight individuals were current or recently departed legislative staffers and 18 worked during previous administrations. The 19 member offices represented constituents geographically distributed across the United States, including the Southwest (4), Northeast (4), Midwest (3), West (4), and Southeast (4). They had diverse educational backgrounds including history, law, political science, the military, marketing, science, and history. All held a bachelor's degree and half (13) had an advanced degree. Two participants earned PhDs, and both were in science-related fields. All participants were involved in drafting and recommending science-related legislation to members of Congress and gave written consent to participate in the research (Appendix II).

Data were aggregated, analyzed, and grouped into categories associated with the study questions, related phenomenon, strategies, causation, consequences, conditions, and context (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Selective coding enhanced identification of themes that reflected the views of participants and theme saturation occurred after 26 interviews. No additional interviewees were sought.

III. Results

While questions were designed to explore legislative decision-making on science policy, challenges to work and to participate in the policy process as a staffer came up in 85% of interviews without prompt (22 of 26, Table 2). Among participants that addressed this topic, four interrelated sub-themes emerged: 1) financial constraints, 2) missed opportunities, 3) high turnover, and 4) lifestyle differences.

i. Financial constraints

Insufficient income to live in Washington, DC, especially as early-career staffers, limits access to securing and maintaining congressional staff roles. More than half of the 22 interviewees who described challenges to maintaining staff positions discussed the financial constraints of working on Capitol Hill. There was a shared sense that current salaries do not match increased living expenses and inflation in the U.S. capital. Despite the outside prestige of holding these coveted staff roles, many found that working as a staffer required independent wealth or outside support.

"[Staffers] are on food stamps, you know. [When I was there, they] were making way under \$30,000 and trying to live in DC on that, even with roommates... DC has become just a much more gentrified, expensive place." (P9)

Staffers also described tremendous economic disparities among different populations living in Washington, D.C., where wealthy lobbyists live and work alongside staffers and others with vastly different incomes.

"The K Street crowd is raking [money] in and then you have this sort of generalized system where certain people are going to make a reasonably comfortable salary and hold a standard of living. And like all these people

interact, but they live very, very different lifestyles. And then there's just everyone else who lives [in DC], who also has to live in this incredibly expensive town. It's crazy." (P7)

ii. Missed opportunities

The financial constraints described above limit early-career staff opportunities in ways that define who can afford to stay long enough to work their way up into elite policy making roles in the U.S. government. Some participants expressed concern that a lack of staffers from some marginalized groups within congressional offices limits which constituencies are visible in decision-making. In turn, people from underrepresented groups with fewer resources to visit Congress may go unseen by staffers who do not relate to or interact with them.

"Staffers not reaching out [to constituents without the means to contact them] disproportionately affects vulnerable people and poor people more than any one political party... It basically affects people that don't have the means to get their ear and that could be anybody marginalized for whatever reason." (P1)

iii. High staff turnover

Several staffers described the appeal of leaving their positions on Capitol Hill because they felt they were not fairly compensated financially for their work given their level of training. They understood they could earn more money in other professions once they had accrued congressional experience that they could leverage into higher-paying jobs. Some expressed concern that the high rate of staff turnover on Capitol Hill largely due to low salaries leads to the loss of institutional memory which is critical for informed science policies.

"One of the sad things [related to high turnover] on the Hill to the extent that happens, is that you lose that institutional memory and that's the greatest asset in that place. Knowing what happened before and who to talk to get you where you want to go." (P12)

iv. Lifestyle differences

Staffers recognized clear economic and lifestyle differences among their colleagues. Many resented

that independent wealth and family support allowed some staff to live comfortably while others without the same means had to struggle with month-to-month expenses. A second job outside of Congress allowed some participants to afford to stay in early-career staff roles. Positions with added benefits could help support other needs.

"I was a 21-year-old staffer making \$18,000 a year [... I had student loans, but it was what I wanted to do]. And so, I worked full-time in the Senate office, and then I worked 25 hours a week in a clothing store at the Pentagon City Mall. So, I worked two to three nights a week and most often both weekend days. And not only did that get me enough money to afford my loans and my rent and food, but I also got a discount [on] my work wardrobe." (P24)

IV. Discussion

The results of this exploratory study reveal that financial constraints serve to define and reinforce the people who serve as senior congressional staffers, leading to a policy-making community distinct from the American public. Staffers able to afford to participate in early career roles can remain long enough to work their way up the congressional staff hierarchy to elite positions. As participants identified, insufficient pay likely heightens the challenge of recruiting and retaining staff from diverse backgrounds, which contributes to a congressional workforce that looks very different from the general U.S. population.

Periera (2020) described that decision-makers view their constituencies in ways significantly influenced by inequalities in political voice and personal biases. Misperceptions and blind spots among senior staffers may occur, in part, because their lived experiences primarily reflect those from communities with the resources required to maintain influential staff roles.

Where staffers are not representative of the public at large, science policy recommendations and outcomes may be primarily designed to best serve constituents who share the identities and experiences of those present. For example, many Indigenous communities view the relationships between the environment and the people inhabiting it in complex ways that differ from western science

(Schneider 2023). On issues related to resource extraction and the use of modern technology, tribal values have been largely ignored or unseen in crafting management institutions.

In another context, the Flint water crisis demonstrates a case of environmental injustice caused in part by political disenfranchisement in ways that disproportionately affected urban people of color and the poor (Highsmith 2018). Both of these cases illustrate instances when marginalized communities lacked a voice in science-related decision-making. Communities were not adequately represented or understood by people who did not share their experiences and identities yet held legislative power. These examples led to extreme outcomes, but the backgrounds and experiences of congressional staff may affect policies on a wide spectrum of scientific issues related to public health, the environment, and technology.

Phenomena such as confirmation bias may lead staffers to seek or interpret evidence in ways that are partial to their existing beliefs and expectations (Nickerson 1998). They could judge evidence that aligns with prior attitudes as more significant than arguments that counter their beliefs (Pereira, Harris, and Van Bavel 2023). When new information challenges a staffer's worldview, motivated reasoning might drive them to construct justifications for acting in ways that lead to desired outcomes (Kunda 1990; Maio and Olson 1998; Christensen and Moynihan 2020). They may interpret data in a manner that fits or reinforces their already-held beliefs based on their own lived experiences that do not reflect broader public preferences and attitudes (Boholm 1996). These kinds of biases, even subconsciously, could lead to conclusions influenced by characteristics like class and race.

Participants in this study described that most entry-level staff positions require financial dependence on family members or a second income. Although junior roles are poorly compensated, they are necessary for gaining the experience that sets early-career professionals on track to climb the congressional staff hierarchy. While staffers interviewed in this study held high-ranking positions, many emphasized that early-career

financial hardships significantly define the identities of the senior staff community on Capitol Hill.

A 2022 report by Issue One found that 13% of all congressional staffers make less than a living wage in Washington, D.C., or less than \$42,610 for an adult with no children (Ratliff, Neikrie, and Beckel 2022). Looking more granularly at the numbers, financial hardship is greatest for entry-level positions. Over two-thirds (70%) of staff assistants—an early-career position—earn salaries below living wage figures, making a median average of \$38,730 (Ratliff, Neikrie, and Beckel 2022).

While it is not possible to determine the exact percentages of congressional staffers serving in senior legislative roles by race or socioeconomic status (Legistorm 2023; Brenson 2022), data indicate that some underrepresented groups feel constrained by socioeconomic factors. The House Office of Diversity and Inclusion (2021) reported that just 34% of congressional staffers in offices of members of Congress feel satisfied with their financial compensation and nearly half (45%) reported they had “seriously considered looking for employment elsewhere.”

The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies described a trend of Black staff members leaving Congress due to a limited career pipeline, low pay, and cultural hardships (Brenson 2020). These challenges may contribute to why people of color currently account for over 41% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau 2022), yet hold less than one-quarter of all staff positions in the 118th Congress (LegiStorm 2023).

A senior staff community that is largely white and wealthy would be unlikely to have equal exposure to different sub-constituencies that they govern. This may lead to a mismatch of staff perceptions and collective preferences (Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenerger, and Stokes 2019; Pereira 2020). It is also possible that staffers may favor information coming from people in their racial or ethnic group over others (Aronson, Wilson, and Akert 2010). Without firsthand experience or contact with some constituencies, especially on issues related to justice and equity, science policies may fall short of representative decision-making.

V. Policy recommendations

The recommendations that follow offer a blueprint for better representation and recognition of traditionally underrepresented groups in Congress:

i. Provide early career staffers with adequate financial compensation.

A push by congressional staff to unionize began in 2022, citing insufficient compensation and benefits as the top reason they are organizing (Congressional Workers Union 2023). The U.S. House of Representatives and Senate could raise the minimum wage for entry level congressional staffers so they can live and work in Washington D.C. without requiring private wealth or additional income from outside sources. This would enable a more diverse and representative body of early-career staffers to stay in the congressional staff pipeline long enough to develop the expertise they need to acquire senior roles.

ii. Actively solicit the opinions of traditionally underrepresented communities on science policy issues.

Research has demonstrated that the most active and resource-rich people tend to be most visible to policymakers because of systemic bias and the influence of money in Congress (Miler 2010; Kalla and Broockman 2016; Broockman and Skovron, 2018). Rather than wait to respond to calls and emails from constituents, senior staffers can directly reach out to underrepresented groups to request their opinions on proposed legislation through efforts such as provoked petitioning. Henderson et al. (2021) also suggested a stronger array of intermediary organizations to ensure that all Americans are able to voice their views to their Senators and Representatives.

iii. Improve staff training to recognize diverse constituent priorities.

Conscious and unconscious biases may reinforce misperceptions of constituent attitudes and opinions (Kunda 1990; Boholm 1996; Nickerson 1998; Maio and Olson 1998; Christensen and Moynihan 2020; Pereira, Harris, and Van Bavel 2023). As the examples cited earlier outlined, a staffer without

first-hand experience in marginalized communities may not be adequately equipped to take informed and equitable action on science policy issues related to resource management, public health, and more. Training congressional staff at all levels to be aware of these challenges may encourage them to seek out less visible communities when making decisions.

iv. Convene community leaders for listening sessions with senior staff.

By establishing regularly scheduled opportunities for D.C.-based senior staffers to build relationships with diverse groups of community leaders, they will develop a better understanding of the unique challenges, attitudes, and policy preferences of their constituents. Convening repeatedly over time would serve to foster trust and encourage staff and policymakers to work together to design effective and inclusive science-related policies.

Together these recommendations would enable congressional offices to better see and serve all constituents. If successful, they may help dismantle structural inequalities and promote justice and equity by bringing the perspectives and talents of a more representative group of Americans into the science policy process (Brenson 2022).

VI. Conclusion

This exploratory qualitative study revealed that financial constraints may limit who achieves senior legislative staff positions in the U.S. Congress. As a result, conscious and unconscious bias can lead to science policy outcomes that do not adequately reflect the true interests of the American public.

Nearly 60 years ago, Pitkin (1967) argued that we are challenged to construct institutions and train individuals in ways that promote a genuine representation of the public. These findings suggest that while this challenge persists in the U.S. Congress, we can implement policies that will foster a more diverse senior staff community and improve representative science policymaking in ways that recognize the attitudes and preferences of historically marginalized communities.

Appendix A: Tables

Participant	Sex	Geographic region	Political Party	Years
1	F	NE	D	<5
2	M	MW	R	5-10
3	M	Committee	D	<5
4	F	Committee	D	15-20
5	M	Committee	D	11-15
6	F	Committee	D	<5
7	M	MW	D	5-10
8	F	Committee	R	<5
9	M	SE	D	15-20
10	M	SW	D	35-40
11	M	SW	R	5-10
12	M	W	D	<5
13	M	SW & W	R	10-15
14	M	NE	D	15-20
15	F	SW	D	5-10
16	M	Committee	R	5-10
17	M	SE	R	<5
18	M	SE	D	15-20
19	F	NE	D	5-10
20	F	SE	R	5-10
21	M	W	D	<5
22	F	Committee	R	5-10
23	M	W	D	<5
24	F	NE	R	15-20
25	M	W	R	25-30
26	F	MW	R	<5

Table 1. Table describing participants.

F = Female; M = Male; D = Most recently in a Democratic office; R = Most recently in a Republican office; NE = Northeast; MW = Midwest; SE = Southeast; SW = Southwest; W = West; Committees may be made up of members from different geographic regions

Theme	Frequency	Relative Frequency
Challenges to working as a staffer	22/26	.85
Sub-theme	Frequency	Relative Frequency
Financial constraints	16/22	.73
High turnover	16/22	.73
Missed opportunities	14/22	.64
Lifestyle differences	8/22	.36

Table 2. Theme and Sub-theme frequency. Theme frequency accounts for the number of times this theme occurred out of 26 interviews. Sub-theme frequency accounts for the number of interviews in which each sub-theme occurred out of the 22 that discussed the theme identified as limits to representation.

Appendix B: Questionnaire

Questions for staffers

Anticipated time: Approx. 15-30 minutes

- 1) How long have you worked as a staffer?
- 2) Have you had any science training?
 - a. If yes, tell me about that.
 - b. If no, what did you study
- 3) Do science policy issues interest you personally?
- 4) In your work, do you deal with science policy issues?
 - a. If yes, when it comes to science policies, what are your resources?
 - b. If no, move on.
- 5) Who do you trust most for accurate information related to science policies?
- 6) Are you familiar with the term PFAS?
 - a. If yes, your boss needed more information related to PFAS exposure risk, where would you look for information?
 - b. If no, where would you look first to learn more? (Read off examples, what they are, and ask where they'd go next?)
- 7) Are you familiar with the term GMOs?
 - a. If yes, your boss needed more information related to GMOs, where would you look for information?
 - b. If no, where would you look first to learn more?
- 8) Are you familiar with climate change?
 - a. If yes, your boss needed more information related to climate change, where would you look for information?
 - b. If no, where would you look first to learn more?
- 9) Do you feel party affiliation influences the way you seek out information about specific issues?
- 10) Do you feel party affiliation influences the way other staffers seek out information about specific issues?

Appendix C: Research Participant Information and Consent Form

Study Title: Exploring the Role of Legislative Staffers in Decision Making on Science Policy.
Researcher and Title: Sheril Kirshenbaum, Academic Specialist and Rebecca Jordan, Professor
Department and Institution: Community Sustainability, Michigan State University
Contact Information: Sheril Kirshenbaum (sheril@msu.edu) Rebecca Jordan (jordanre@msu.edu)

BRIEF SUMMARY (This is a general informed consent requirement)

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Researchers are required to provide a consent form to inform you about the research study, to convey that participation is voluntary, to explain risks and benefits of participation including why you might or might not want to participate, and to empower you to make an informed decision. You should feel free to discuss and ask the researchers any questions you may have.

You are being asked to participate in a research study of how legislative staffers make decisions on science policy issues. Your participation in this study will take approximately 30 minutes. You will be answering questions in an interview. To participate in this research, you will only need to consent to allow researchers to record your responses. Your name will not be attached to these interviews in any way. If you decide not to take part in this research study, you should know that there will be no penalty to you.

There are no foreseeable risks to your participation in this study.

You will not directly benefit from your participation in this study. However, your participation in this study may contribute to the general understanding of how scientific information informs and moves within legislative offices. Participation is voluntary, you may choose not to participate at all, or you may refuse to participate in certain procedures or answer certain questions or discontinue your participation at any time without consequence.

PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

The purpose of this research study is to learn how legislative staffers make decisions on science policy issues.

WHAT YOU WILL BE ASKED TO DO

You will be asked to answer interview questions about your background and role in decision making on science policy issues. Researchers will look at this information.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS

You will receive no direct benefit.

POTENTIAL RISKS

There are no foreseeable risks to your participation in this study.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Data and consent forms will be kept for a period of five years on a password protected hard drive and then all information will be deleted.

YOUR RIGHTS TO PARTICIPATE, SAY NO, OR WITHDRAW

You have the right to say no to participate in the research. You can stop at any time after it has already started.

There will be no consequences if you stop and you will not be criticized or penalized.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have concerns or questions about this study, such as scientific issues, how to do any part of it, or to report an injury, please contact the researcher (Sheril Kirshenbaum, 446 W. Circle Drive, Justin S. Morrill Hall of Agriculture, East Lansing, MI 48842, sheril@msu.edu and 517-355-0123).

If you have questions or concerns about your role and rights as a research participant, would like to obtain information or offer input, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, us anonymously if you wish, the Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program at 517-355-2180, Fax 517-432-4503, or e-mail irb@msu.edu or regular mail at 4000 Collins Rd, Suite 136, Lansing, MI 48910.

DOCUMENTATION OF INFORMED CONSENT.

Checking the box below means that you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
check box Date

You can have a copy of this form to keep. If you wish, please contact sheril@msu.edu.

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