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Determinants of abstention in the United States House of Representatives: an analysis of the 102nd through the 107th sessions

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**DETERMINANTS OF ABSTENTION IN THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES:
AN ANALYSIS OF THE 102ND THROUGH THE 107TH SESSIONS**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The Department of Political Science

by

Mileah Kay Kromer
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ii
LIST OF TABLES.....	iv
LIST OF FIGURES.....	v
ABSTRACT.....	vi
INTRODUCTION.....	1
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	4
HYPOTHESES.....	9
DATA AND METHODS.....	10
Ideological Extremity.....	10
Seniority.....	11
Electoral Safety.....	12
Leadership Status.....	13
Travel Distance to Washington, DC.....	13
FINDINGS.....	17
CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION.....	23
REFERENCES.....	25
VITA.....	27

LIST OF TABLES

1. Descriptive Statistics, Ideological Extremity.....	10
2. Descriptive Statistics, Seniority.....	11
3. Descriptive Statistics, First Term of Service.....	12
4. Descriptive Statistics, Last Term of Service.....	12
5. Descriptive Statistics, Electoral Margin.....	13
6. Descriptive Statistics, Majority Party Dominance.....	15
7. Variable Descriptions, Measurements, and Hypothesized Effects.....	16
8. Descriptive Information on High Abstainers, Per Session.....	17
9. Descriptive Information on Low Abstainers, Per Session.....	17
10. Influences on Abstention, 102nd through 107th Sessions.....	19
11. Influences on Abstention, Pooled Analysis.....	20
12 Expected Levels of Abstention.....	22

LIST OF FIGURES

1. Partisan Break Up, 102nd-107th Session.....15

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the factors that influence roll call voting abstention in the United States House of Representatives. I control for factors both at the individual level and the institutional level. My data set includes all members of the House of Representatives from the 102nd (1991-1992) through the 107th (2001-2002) sessions of Congress. It is my intention to contribute to our scholarly understanding of abstention behavior in the United States House of Representatives and to help future research on Congressional roll call voting behavior. I find strong empirical support for individual level effects, such as seniority, last of term of Congressional service, and ideology. I also find support that institutional effects, such as party dominance, impact roll call voting abstention.

INTRODUCTION

Since the early years of the discipline, Congressional roll call voting has long been of keen interest to political scientists. In recent years, scholars have examined voting behavior as a measure of ideology (Poole and Rosenthal, 1997), as a measure of policy preferences (Krehbiel, 1991), and as evidence of careerism (Hibbing, 1991). However, the almost single-minded scholarly focus on the decision to support or oppose a measure has overlooked the first choice that a representative makes: the decision to vote or abstain. As a practical matter, this first decision to participate can have consequences at least as important as those brought about by the Yea or Nay vote; moreover, understanding the decision to participate or abstain can contribute to our understanding of Congressional behavior overall. If we as political scientists seek to explain turnout in the mass public, surely turnout in elite political institutions should also capture our attention.

Abstention on roll call votes is a particularly interesting Congressional behavior to study because of the structure of our representative democracy. According to Federalist Paper Number 10, the purpose of a representative democracy is "to refine and enlarge the public views, by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country, and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations. Under such a regulation, it may well happen that the public voice, pronounced by the representatives of the people, will be more consonant to the public good than if pronounced by the people themselves, convened for the purpose". Article I, Section I of the United States Constitution states that "All Legislative Powers herein granted shall be vested in a Congress of the United States, which shall consist of a Senate and House of Representatives." Members of the House of Representatives are the most direct link of

representation for the populous. In principle, members of Congress should translate the desires of the populous by enacting legislation. House members, representing their specific constituencies, are the most direct voice of the people. When they abstain, no matter how insignificant the outcome of the vote cast would be, it silences the voice of the people. As Fenno notes, “It would be a tragedy if its representational strength goes unrecognized and unused because the very representatives who make it strong are afraid to acknowledge that strength or use it to help govern the country” (246-247). High to moderate levels of abstention raise serious questions about the nature of our representative democracy.

Despite the importance of the “to vote or not” choice, abstention behavior is an area in the Congressional roll call voting research that has not received adequate attention. Abstention has either been ignored in the literature or assumed to be random. Noll points out that “unpaired abstentions are usually assumed to occur randomly, such as when a legislator misses a plane or is too ill to be wheeled to the floor on a gurney” (98). Yet it is unlikely that abstention behavior is a stochastic one. We know as political scientists that members of Congress have particular motivations regarding policy making and position taking, and so it is likely that this first decision to participate is similarly calculated, rational choice on the part of the member. Nonetheless, the few authors that have studied abstention behavior (e.g. Poole and Rosenthal 1997, Fiorina 1974; Hibbing 1991) have produced mixed conclusions about the determinants and significance of abstention.

In this thesis, I address this gap in the literature by examining the factors that influence individual-level abstention on roll call voting. If roll call abstention is a calculated, rational choice of the member, then both individual level characteristics such as seniority, ideology,

party, and district distance from Washington as well as institutional level-characteristics such as balance of power within the chamber should influence abstention behavior.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As noted above, roll call abstention has been overlooked or dismissed as random in much of the research that examines it. Nonetheless, a number of works that focus on general participation in Congress have examined a variety of factors that influence the choice to participate.

Much of the prior literature on abstention behavior regards members of Congress as rational actors who are seeking re-election. Mayhew (1957) describes reelection as the proximate goal of every member of the House. It is the goal that must be attained before the member can pursue public policy goals. “The ultimate concern here is not how probable it is that legislators will lose their seats but whether there is a connection between what they do in office and their need to be reelected” (1957). Put differently, there is likely a connection between electoral “safety” in the district and behavior in Washington.

Drawing on this idea, Poole and Rosenthal (1997) argue that that members of Congress are rational actors and, as such, choose to vote or to abstain based on their goal of maximizing utility. The decision to vote or to abstain can be modeled with the familiar equation

$$R = P(B) - C + D$$

where R is the net reward from voting, B is the material benefit brought about by voting, P is the probability that one's vote will make a difference, C is the cost associated with voting, and D is the fixed benefit of voting. For instance, in the legislative setting B is the benefit brought about by the bill passing and $P(B)$ is the expected utility of passage. In the legislative setting the costs of voting might include missed opportunities to engage in other rewarding activities. In the legislature, as well as in the mass public, D may represent the satisfaction of exercising one's civic duty. Poole and Rosenthal predict that members will abstain if and only if

$$R = (P(B)) - (C + D) > 0$$

That is, members will abstain if and only if the benefits of abstention exceed the cost.

If members of Congress are rational actors pursuing re-election, what factors should influence turnout? Electoral margin is one such factor. If members are rational seekers of re-election, then members with a strong base or larger electoral margin will behave differently than those members from competitive districts. Cohen and Noll (1991) find that the behavior of legislators is driven by the reelection motive rather than a consideration of playing a pivotal role on any one roll call. They hypothesize that legislators view voting as costly because the time it requires could be used in providing constituency service or raising money for future campaigns. However, legislative outcomes influence constituents' evaluations of their legislators, even when neither legislators nor voters vote instrumentally (1991, 123). In an analysis of roll call votes with high issue salience, they found that an issue is more likely to be salient to the constituency if they are dissatisfied with the legislative outcome. In other words, legislators are more likely to abstain when there is little conflict between constituency preferences and legislative outcomes. When the constituency is satisfied by legislative performance, the member does not have increased incentives for high levels of participation.

Seniority is another factor that likely influences the choice to participate. If we assume that members conceive of benefits and costs primarily in terms of their reelection prospects, it makes sense that seniority may be associated with changes in participation. Fenno (1978) distinguished between freshman members and more senior members. He categorized members of the House into two different career stages: expansionist and protectionist. In the first, "expansionist" stage, members return home to the district quite often and are more concerned

with re-election. These members are likely to avoid any behavior (such as abstention) that could have an adverse effect on their re-election prospects. As a member becomes more senior and develops a strong electoral base in their home district, he or she moves into the "protectionist" stage, where they enjoy more behavioral freedom. In a quantitative study of roll call voting behavior of individual members from 1947 through 1982, Hibbing found that more senior members are less likely to participate in roll call votes (1991). As Hibbing notes, this "decline in participation over the course of a career is not a particularly earth shattering finding" (1991). On the other hand, Hibbing finds that "careerists" (or those who stay at least eight terms) have higher participation rates overall.

Seniority may also have an influence at the end of one's career, when members are presumably less concerned with re-election. Legislators who are leaving office (for retirement, running of higher office, or electoral defeat) will no longer have the incentive to present their electorate with a good voting record (Poole and Rosenthal, 1997, 213). They are more likely to "shirk" their duty to vote. Nonetheless, Poole and Rosenthal find that lame duck members behave the same as other members, even after they distinguish between voluntary and non-voluntary exits.

Geographic distance from the member's home district to Washington DC is another factor that likely influences participation. Fenno (1977) noted that a member of Congress has two separate careers, "one in the House and one at home" (171). These careers are not independent of each other, and the time spent on one career is time which is spent away from the other. Drawing on this idea, Poole and Rosenthal (1997) examine the possibility that members who live further away from the nation's capital may be more likely to abstain. They find that the effect of distance, while important, becomes less consistently important in the contemporary Congress.

They offer two reasons for this. First, it is possible that representatives who live close to Washington DC may actually find it easier to travel, and thus miss as many votes or more votes than those who are elected from distant districts. Second, it is likely that improvements in passenger-transportation technology makes travel much easier and less time-consuming, and that the differences in travel time varies much less across representatives in the contemporary Congress than it did even half a century ago.

The individual ideology of a member has also been shown to have an effect on roll call voting behavior. Hibbing (1982) found evidence that “representatives with extreme ideological positions are more likely to retire voluntarily than are moderates”. Poole and Rosenthal (1997) add that extreme ideological members may feel “alienated” from many roll call votes.

Therefore, extreme ideologues were more likely to abstain because they are further spatially from the roll call vote itself. It is reasonable to expect that more extreme members may be less supportive of their political party, and less likely to participate.

According to John Aldrich, “political parties lie at the heart of American politics” (1995, 3). Partisanship is considered to be the most consistent predictor of roll call voting behavior. The balance of power between the two parties is also likely a key determinant of abstention. The closer the division, the higher the likelihood that a vote would make a difference and the more incentive a legislator has to participate. Poole and Rosenthal argue that “turnout should be higher when preferences on a roll call are evenly divided rather than being lopsided”, because members of Congress will be more assured of making a difference (1997, 210). They found that in the 91st thru 100th sessions of the House that lopsided votes (votes that were not decided by a close margin) have higher abstention rates. Poole and Rosenthal do not control for party closeness of the chamber itself and only analyze the margins of individual votes. Patterson and

Caldeira (1988) find that as the House becomes more polarized between Democrats and Republicans, the levels of party line voting increase. It is reasonable to assume that the more polarized a House is the “closer” roll call votes will become. Roll-call voting behavior in the House has become increasingly polarized in recent years; the 1990’s can be characterized by a strong, autonomous party government in the House (Dodd and Oppenheimer 1997). This only increases the party’s need to influence their members’ roll call voting behavior. Given this previous research, it makes intuitive sense that the balance of power across parties likely plays a role in abstention behavior; members of both the majority and minority party will be less likely to abstain when the majority party held an advantage of only a few seats.

This prior literature has made important contributions to our understanding of the choice legislators make to participate. In this thesis, I contribute to this literature by modeling abstention behavior at the individual level, by focusing on the balance of power within the chamber, and by incorporating a wider range of explanatory variables. Modeling abstention at the individual level will provide better understanding of Congressional participation and voting behavior.

HYPOTHESES

In this thesis, I test the following hypotheses:

- H₁: Members who are ideologically extreme will abstain more than moderate members.
- H₂: Abstention will increase with seniority.
- H₃: Freshman members will be less likely to abstain than other representatives.
- H₄: Individual members in their last term of service will be more likely to abstain than other members.
- H₅: Electorally safe members will abstain more than those in relatively competitive districts.
- H₆: Leaders will abstain more frequently than non-leaders.
- H₇: Members who live farther from the capital will abstain more.
- H₈: The more dominant the majority party is in terms of numerical balance, the less likely it is that a member will abstain.

DATA AND METHODS

The data used in this research is compiled from three major sources: The Almanac of American Politics, the Poole and Rosenthal data set for Congress: A Political-Economic History of Roll Call Voting, and <http://thomas.loc.gov/>, the official website for the US Congress. The sessions of Congress used in this analysis are the 102nd thru the 107th. This is an appropriate time period for this study, because party control and balance of power across the two parties varied across these six sessions. The unit of analysis is the member of Congress; the dependent variable is the proportion of votes on which the legislator abstained.

I have also included several independent variables explained more fully below:

Ideological Extremism

Democrats and Republicans are very ideologically diverse even within their own party caucuses. As noted above, I hypothesized that ideological extremity is positively related to abstention. Poole and Rosenthal D-Nominate scores are a common way to measure member ideology in Congress. These scores range from -1 to 1, with -1 representing "very liberal" and 1 representing "very conservative". In this study, ideological extremity (EXTREME) is calculated the absolute value of the Poole and Rosenthal D-NOMINATE scores. That is, the EXTREME variable measures how far a member is from a moderate ideological position. I expect that higher values of EXTREME will be associated with a greater incidence of abstention.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics, Ideological Extremity

Session	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
102	0	0.84	0.346
103	0	0.84	0.3714
104	0	0.95	0.416
105	0.01	0.93	0.4233
106	0.02	0.93	0.438
107	0.02	1	0.4359

Seniority

Hibbing (1991) finds that member seniority has a major effect on roll call voting behavior. As noted above, I expect that seniority will be positively related to abstention. Although not explicitly outlined by Hibbing, being a freshman may have an inverse effect, because freshman representatives may be particularly concerned with the expectations of their constituents and colleagues. Therefore, as noted above, I expect that freshman members will be less likely to abstain. Conversely, members may be more likely to abstain at the end of their service.

I include three variables that are designed to measure seniority. First, SENIOR is a variable that measures the length (in years) of continuous membership in the House. Second, FRESHMAN is a dummy variable which is coded 1 if the representative is serving in his or her first session of the House, and 0 otherwise. Third, I include as an independent variable a measure of whether a member was a "lame duck" or was serving in their last term in Congress. This variable (LAMEDUCK) is a dummy variable coded 1 if the member is in his/her final term of membership and 0 otherwise.¹

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics, Seniority

Session	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
102	1	51	11.92
103	1	53	10.08
104	2	41	9.59
105	1	43	9.53
106	1	45	10.16
107	1	47	10.84

¹ This variable does not distinguish among the reasons for becoming a lame duck. While it is true that there are a variety of reasons why members of Congress leave the institution (illness, retirement, political ambition, legal troubles, or defeat), all of these factors would likely contribute to increased abstention. Therefore all members serving in their last term are coded as 1, and all continuing members are coded as 0.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics, First Term of Service

Session	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Total Freshman In Session
102	0	1	0.1152	49
103	0	1	0.2592	111
104	0	1	0.212	91
105	0	1	0.1793	77
106	0	1	0.1011	43
107	0	1	0.0972	41

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics, Last Term of Service

Session	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
102	0	1	0.23
103	0	1	0.183
104	0	1	0.161
105	0	1	0.092
106	0	1	0.092
107	0	1	0.144

Electoral Safety

According to Mayhew (1974), the primary goal of any member of Congress is to gain reelection. During election years, an opponent can easily use the Congressional voting attendance record as a means of discrediting his or her opponent. Therefore, as noted above, I expect that members who are electorally at risk are less likely to abstain than members holding relatively safe seats. The variable MARGIN is the percentage of the vote that the member won in his/her district in the last election. Members who were recently elected in a close race are likely to abstain less than other, safer members; and I expect MARGIN to be negatively related to abstention. In other words, as MARGIN increases, so should levels of abstention.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics, Electoral Margin

Session	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
102	43	100	68.99
103	44	100	63.22
104	43	100	66.15
105	43	100	64.26
106	48	100	70.47
107	48	100	68.66

Leadership Status

In the U.S. House of Representatives, there are a variety of possible leadership positions, including party leader, committee leader, and subcommittee leader. As noted above, the behavior of leaders may be different in important ways than the behavior of rank-and-file members. Members who have these added responsibilities have more time constraints than the average rank and file member. Members serving in the top leadership positions are expected to spend their time persuading rank and file members to support the party position, and committee and subcommittee chairs are expected to spend their time researching, writing, and amending legislation. These commitments may cause the member to abstain more frequently. For instance, the member with the highest rate of abstention in the 106th and 107th sessions of Congress was Denis Hastert, Speaker of the House. To control for the effect of holding leadership positions within the House, I created 3 dummy variables: PLEAD, COMLEAD, and SUBLEAD. PLEAD is coded 1 if the member is in a party leadership position, 0 otherwise. COMLEAD is coded 1 if the member is a committee chair, 0 otherwise. SUBLEAD is coded 1 if the member is a subcommittee chair, 0 otherwise.

Travel Distance to Washington, DC

According to Fenno, members have two careers, “one in the House and one at home” (171). Members from districts surrounding (or, in driving distance to) the Washington D.C. area are likely to behave differently than those whose districts require a lengthy travel time. Even

with more frequent and quicker flights to and from DC, members who live farther away like face a completely different set of travel time constraints. I therefore expect such members to abstain more frequently than members who live closer to Washington D.C. To control for this I include a variable (DISTANCE) which measures the number of miles between the member's state capital to Washington, DC. I use the state capital as the comparison standard because I expect little behavioral difference between, for instance, the member in the 1st district of Texas from the member representing the 22nd district of Texas. The maximum distance for a member to travel is 3,806 miles (Alaska) and the shortest distance is 32.96 miles (Maryland). The average value for DISTANCE is 1,087 miles with a standard deviation of 901 miles.

In this thesis, I perform two sets of OLS analyses. The first set of analyses are six cross sectional OLS analyses, one of each session Congress. By analyzing each session separately, I can account for session specific effects. Each cross sectional analysis will include all independent variables described above.

As noted above, I hypothesized that the closer the difference between the majority and minority party is, the greater the incentive for both parties not to abstain. In order to examine the effect of party balance on membership abstention behavior, I conduct an OLS regression analysis of all six sessions under consideration; that is, all six sessions are pooled. Majority Party Dominance (PARTYDOM) is measured as the difference in percentage of seats between the majority and minority parties, and is expected to be positively associated with abstention. Descriptive information on Majority Party Dominance is included in Table 6 and Figure 1.

Table 6: Descriptive Statistics, Majority Party Dominance

Session	Democrats	Republicans	Percentage of Seats (majority party)	Percentage of Seats (minority party)	Majority Party Dominance
102	267	167	61.4%	38.4%	23.0%
103	258	176	59.3%	40.5%	18.9%
104	204	230	52.9%	46.9%	6.0%
105	206	228	52.4%	47.4%	5.1%
106	211	223	51.3%	48.5%	2.8%
107	212	221	50.8%	48.7%	2.1%

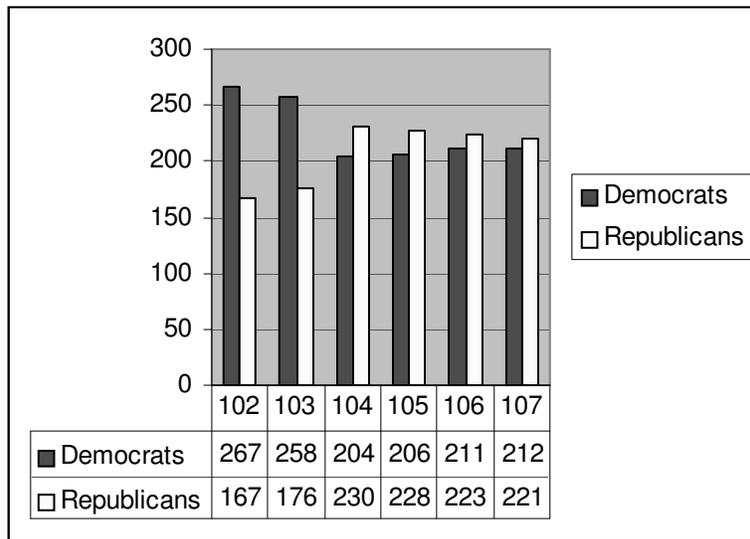


Figure 1: Partisan Break Up, 102nd-107th Session

Finally, because of the importance of party in structuring Congressional behavior and outcomes, I control for partisanship (coded 1 as Democrat, and 0 otherwise). Poole and Rosenthal argued that majority party members would be more free to abstain from voting; therefore, in the pooled analysis, I also control for majority party status. In Table 7, I present summary information regarding the measurement of the variables, and the direction of their relationship with abstention.

Table 7: Variable Descriptions, Measurements, and Hypothesized Effects

Variable	Variable Description	Coded	Hypothesized Effect
PERABS	Total proportion of abstention	Continuous Variable Proportion of times member abstained on roll call votes that session	(dependent variable)
PARTYDOM	Measure of party dominance	Continuous Variable Difference between seats controlled by majority party and minority party	Positive
PARTY	Partisanship of the member	Dummy Variable (1 if Democrats, 0 otherwise)	Ambiguous
EXTREME	Measure of ideology	Continuous Variable Absolute value of DNOM score	Positive
LAMEDUCK	Last term of service	Dummy Variable (1 if in last term of service, 0 otherwise)	Positive
DISTANCE	Distance to Washington	Continuous Variable Distance (in miles) from member's state capital to Washington, DC	Ambiguous
SENIOR	Measures the years served in Congress	Continuous Variable Length of service (in years)	Positive
FRESHMAN	First year members of Congress	Dummy Variable (1 for first term, 0 otherwise)	Negative
PLEAD	Member of party leadership	Dummy Variable (1 if party leader, 0 otherwise)	Positive
COMLEAD	Committee Leader	Dummy Variable (1 if committee leader, 0 otherwise)	Positive
SUBLEAD	Subcommittee Leader	Dummy Variable (1 if subcommittee leader, 0 otherwise)	Positive
MARGIN	Percentage of electoral safety	Continuous Variable Percentage of votes won in previous election	Positive

FINDINGS

First, I compare “high abstainers” to “low abstainers”. High abstainers are defined as representatives who abstained on at least 10% of roll call votes. Low abstainers are defined as representatives who abstained on less than 4% of roll call votes. Information regarding the electoral safety, ideological extremism, and status as “lame duck” representatives or as first year representatives is presented in Tables 8 and 9.

Table 8: Descriptive Information on High Abstainers, Per Session

Session	“Safe” Members ¹	Extremists ²	Last Session	Freshman	Number of High Abstainers
102	44.8% (30)	7.5% (5)	58.2% (39)	4.5% (3)	67
103	57.1% (20)	5.7% (2)	40.0% (14)	11.4% (4)	35
104	48.3% (14)	0% (0)	48.3% (14)	0% (0)	29
105	54.2% (13)	0% (0)	41.7% (10)	0% (0)	24
106	70.7% (29)	7.3% (3)	31.7% (13)	2.4% (1)	41
107	67.2% (21)	0% (0)	41.9% (13)	0% (0)	31
Total	55.8% (140)	4% (10)	45.0% (113)	3.2% (8)	251

¹ Electoral margin in last election of at least 65%

² For conservatives, $dwnom \geq .75$; for liberals, $dwnom \leq -.75$

Table 9: Descriptive Information on Low Abstainers, Per Session

Session	“Safe” Members ¹	Extremists ²	Last Session	Freshman	Number of Low Abstainers
102	43.7% (97)	0.9% (2)	12.6% (28)	18.0% (40)	222
103	31.1% (84)	0.7% (2)	14.4% (39)	31.9% (86)	270
104	43.9% (136)	1.9% (6)	11.3% (35)	26.5 (82)	310
105	29.7% (87)	2.0% (6)	6.5% (19)	22.9% (67)	293
106	48.8% (120)	2.4% (6)	4.9% (12)	14.2% (35)	246
107	44.2% (114)	4.7% (12)	8.9% (23)	14.3% (37)	258
Total	38.3% (725)	2.1% (40)	9.2% (175)	21.9% (414)	

¹ Electoral margin in last election of at least 65%

² For conservatives, $dwnom \geq .75$; for liberals, $dwnom \leq -.75$

It is clear that abstention is not commonplace; nonetheless, many legislators miss at least ten percent of all roll call votes. The information presented in these tables provides preliminary support for several of my hypotheses. Recall that in H_1 , I hypothesized that members who are ideologically extreme will abstain more than moderate members. The results here are somewhat mixed. On average, about 2% of low abstainers were extreme ideologues. Extreme ideologues

made up only slightly more of the high abstainers (3.42%). My second hypothesis, that electorally safe members would abstain more, is supported. On average, 57% of high abstainers were from electorally safe districts compared to 40.23% of low abstainers were from safe districts.

The comparison between low and high abstainers suggests that the amount of abstention depends in large part on seniority. In H₃, I hypothesized that freshman members will be less likely to abstain than other members. Across all sessions, freshman members made up only 3% of the high abstainers groups, but 21% of the low abstainer groups. The strongest support was found for the fourth hypothesis, that individual members in their last term of service will be more likely to abstain than other members. Only 9.7% of low abstainers were in their last terms of service, compared to 43% of high abstainers. Clearly, the high abstainers were substantially more likely to be serving in their last session.

The results in these preliminary analyses indicate that there are some individual level characteristic variations that have an impact on levels of abstention. However, one of the contributions of this thesis is to consider the effect of each variable while controlling for all the others. Therefore, I perform six cross-sectional OLS analyses, followed by a pooled OLS analysis. In Table 10, the results of the six cross-sectional OLS analyses are presented and in Table 11 the pooled analyses results are presented.

Table 10: Influences on Abstention, 102nd through 107th Sessions

Variable	Session					
	102	103	104	105	106	107
(Constant)	-0.002 {-0.152}	-0.041** {-2.865}	-0.019 {-1.559}	-0.024* {-1.860}	0.004 {.248}	0.005 {.470}
Partisanship (PARTY)	0.016** {2.858}	0.007 {1.538}	0.021*** {5.448}	0.009** {2.198}	0.006 {1.130}	0.002 {.473}
Ideological Extremity (EXTREME)	0.056*** {3.648}	0.056*** {4.295}	0.019* {1.669}	0.031** {2.291}	0.049** {2.806}	0.031** {2.569}
Last term of service (LAMEDUCK)	0.049*** {7.683}	0.037*** {6.564}	0.029*** {5.901}	0.0217*** {3.084}	0.064*** {6.715}	0.028*** {5.306}
Distance to DC ¹ (DISTANCE)	0.005* {1.668}	-0.002 {-0.635}	0.002 {.947}	0.003 {1.240}	-0.001 {-.627}	-0.001 {-.445}
Seniority (SENIOR)	0.001* {1.903}	0.001*** {3.29}	0.001*** {4.085}	0.002*** {5.645}	0.001** {2.412}	0.001*** {3.543}
First term of service (FRESHMAN)	-0.012 {-1.219}	-0.003 {-0.53}	0.001 {.088}	0.002 {.384}	-0.011 {-1.077}	-0.012* {-1.650}
Party leadership (PLEAD)	0.0003 {0.042}	-0.003 {-0.45}	0.001 {.145}	-0.009 {-1.144}	0.004 {.814}	0.006 {1.091}
Committee leadership (COMLEAD)	-0.014 {-1.538}	-0.003 {-0.391}	-0.012 {-1.443}	0.001 {.153}	-0.018* {-1.676}	-0.006 {-.813}
Subcommittee leadership (SUBLEAD)	0.003 {0.48}	-0.008 {-1.482}	-0.002 {-.517}	-0.009** {-2.111}	-0.002 {-.406}	-0.005 {-1.168}
Electoral margin (MARGIN)	0.0001 {0.468}	0.0007*** {3.738}	0.0002* {1.809}	0.0004** {1.986}	0.0001 {.604}	0.0002 {1.055}
r ²	0.21	0.190	0.23	0.19	0.13	0.15
adjusted r ²	0.187	0.175	0.207	0.171	0.11	0.127

Dependent Variable=PERABS

NOTE: Standard errors are in parentheses.

*p<0.10, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01

¹In thousands of miles

The results indicate that, as hypothesized in H₁, members who are ideologically extreme abstain more than moderate members, and that this result holds even when controlling for partisanship. Seniority also has the hypothesized effect on abstention: more senior members tend to abstain more. Moreover, even when controlling for seniority, members in their last term of service abstain more frequently than mid-career legislators; indeed, the standardized coefficients of the variables indicate that lame duck members are the most likely to abstain. As hypothesized in H₅, representatives elected from relatively safe district consistently abstain more frequently; this effect is statistically significant in three of the sessions analyzed.

The third hypothesis, that freshman would be less likely to abstain, receives less support in these analyses. It is only in the expected direction in four of the six sessions, and the parameter estimate reaches statistical significance only in the last (107th) session considered. Similarly, the sixth hypothesis receives at best mixed support; party leaders and committee leaders do not consistently abstain more often than non-leaders. Subcommittee chairs do abstain more frequently than others, but the estimate is only significant in the last session analyzed. Finally, H₇ received little support; distance from the nation's capital has a significant effect in only one of the six sessions.

In Table 11, the results of the pooled OLS analysis are presented.

Table 11: Influences on Abstention, Pooled Sessions ²

Variables	Parameter Estimates
(Constant)	-0.018** {-3.046}
Majority Party Dominance (PARTYDOM)	0.038*** {3.252}
Partisanship (PARTY)	0.011*** {4.961}
Majority Party (MAJPARTY)	0.0008 {.422}
Ideological Extremity (EXTREME)	0.0413*** {7.342}
Last Term of Service (LAMEDUCK)	0.036*** {13.881}
Distance to DC ¹ (DISTANCE)	.008 {.811}
Seniority of Member (SENIOR)	0.0014*** {8.674}
First Term of service (FRESHMAN)	-0.007** {-2.320}
Party Leader (PLEAD)	0.001 {.217}

² In an alternative analysis, I omitted the PARTYDOM variable and included five dummy variables to control for session specific effects. The results were substantively the same as those presented.

(Table 11 continued)

Committee Leader	-0.004
(COMLEAD)	{-1.215}
Subcommittee Leader	-0.005**
(SUBLEAD)	{-2.292}
Electoral Margin	0.0003***
(MARGIN)	{4.020}
r ²	0.151
adjusted r ²	0.148

Dependent
Variable=PERABS

NOTE: Standard errors are in parentheses.

*p<0.10, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01

¹In thousands of miles

The results of the pooled analysis support most the hypotheses presented above. Extremists abstain more frequently than moderates. More senior members abstain more frequently, and being in one's last year of service has the most pronounced effect on abstention. Freshman are less likely to abstain than others. Safe members are also more likely to abstain. Distance does not have a significant effect. Contrary to expectations, subcommittee chairs are less likely to abstain. The pooled analysis indicates that majority party dominance does have an effect on the degree of abstention; greater dominance between the parties leads to more abstention.

Expected levels of abstention for hypothetical cases are presented in Table 12. These expected levels underscore the importance of seniority in determining abstention. While the differences across seniority levels is not enormous, it is clear that more senior members are more likely to abstain. Moreover, ideological extremity appears important; moderate members appear to abstain less.

Table 12: Expected Levels of Abstention

Hypothetical Case	Predicted Abstention
Legislator in first year	0.065
Legislator in fifth (but not last) year	0.077
Legislator in tenth (but not last) year	0.083
Legislator in tenth and last year	0.115
Legislator in twentieth (but not last) year	0.092
Legislator in twentieth and last year	0.128
Legislator in Chamber where Parties are Balanced (party dominance=.02)	0.08
Legislator in Chamber where Majority Party Dominates (party dominance=.23)	0.09
Very Extreme Legislator (extreme=1)	0.066
Very Moderate Legislator (extreme=0)	0.108

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

My findings both complement and add to much of the prior literature on abstention. Analyzing the 102nd through 107th Congress, I find that more extreme members are more likely to abstain; this reinforces Poole and Rosenthal's findings from earlier Congresses. Moreover, I find that this effect persists even when controlling for partisanship. This finding is consistent with relatively extreme members feeling alienated from typical legislative proposals, and relatively moderate members having a higher stake in the process and outcome. Moreover, like Hibbing, I find that seniority is associated with abstention; senior members abstain more frequently. Like Poole and Rosenthal, I find that members in their last term are substantially more likely to abstain than other members; I contribute to prior literature by demonstrating that this effect holds even when controlling for seniority. It is likely that, as Poole and Rosenthal reason, "lame duck" members feel less beholden to their constituencies, and are more free to "shirk". I also contribute to prior literature by demonstrating that first-year representatives are more likely to participate, even when controlling for overall seniority. In previous literature, the seniority effect has been viewed as based in part on the electoral safety that senior incumbents often enjoy; however, in this analysis, the seniority effect remained quite large even after controlling for electoral margin. Like earlier literature, I find little effect of distance from the nation's capital. As Poole and Rosenthal suggest, innovations in travel and communication may have erased the importance of distance.

This thesis also contributes to prior literature in several additional ways. First, I find that the numerical balance across the parties matters, even when controlling for majority party status and partisanship. It is likely that minority members feel more compelled to participate when there is a higher chance of victory, and majority members feel more compelled to participate

when there is a greater chance of defeat. Second, I examine the effect of leadership; in the pooled analysis, contrary to expectations, subcommittee leaders were less likely to abstain. Much of the work of Congress takes place in these subcommittees; it is possible that these members are selected in part because of their productivity. Moreover, they may serve as information specialists whose role is to give cues to other members; therefore their participation may be particularly important. They may also be particularly heavily lobbied by interest groups and other outside parties. More research should be done examining the role of leadership in participation. Third, I find that Republicans are consistently less likely to abstain. The reasoning for this is unclear; it is possible that Republicans built up norms during their years in the minority party, particularly in the early 1990s when it became clear that majority party status was within striking distance. And fourth, I contribute to prior literature by examining the effect of margin; electorally safe members are more likely to abstain. This finding is compatible with the rational choice argument that the decision to abstain is based in large part on a cost-benefit analysis. If the primary goal of members of Congress is to be (re)elected, more electorally vulnerable members have more of an incentive to be productive.

There are several promising avenues for future research. First, more work should be done examining the distinct effects of partisanship and majority party status of the individual member, and party balance within the chamber. More research should be done examining institutional-level effects, individual member effects, and individual roll-call effects. Finally, more research should be done applying these theories of participation to participation defined broadly, beyond abstention.

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