

Book Review

Alison W. Craig. 2023. *The Collaborative Congress: Reaching Common Ground in a Polarized House*. Cambridge University Press. \$110 cloth. 225 pages.

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The U.S. Congress faces near-constant critiques about its inability to problem solve, coordinate, and circumvent partisan gridlock. Pundits, polls, and congressional scholars alike bemoan the rise of polarization at the hands of powerful party leaders and decreased congressional capacity. But Allison Craig brings rare good news for the many skeptics – and hopeful students – of Congress. Craig offers an understudied, behind-the-scenes look at how rank-and-file members influence significant policymaking through member-to-member collaboration. Contrary to the dominant literature on congressional policymaking, Craig finds that not all policy decisions are determined by powerful party leaders. Not only does this book offer a glimmer of bipartisan hope, but provides a much-needed understanding of how rank-and-file members meaningfully impact the congressional agenda in a centralized environment.

Using a novel set of data of internal “Dear Colleague” letters, case studies, and interviews with congressional staff in the U.S. House, Craig finds robust evidence of what she terms a “collaborative Congress.” She frames this collaborative world under an updated “Two Congresses” theory: there is the partisan, public-facing, and leader-led media narrative we often ascribe to, as well as a flourishing world of rank-and-file collaboration. Craig finds that not only is this desire for coordination and compromise consistent across congressional sessions, but it is successful: legislative collaboration improves the chances of success at all stages of the legislative process – from introduction, to committee and chamber passage, to being signed into law.

However, the goals and motivations for collaboration, particularly bipartisan collaboration, is not inherently obvious in a competitive congressional setting (Lee 2016) – after all, collaboration requires compromising, often away from one’s initial (policy) preference. Building on social exchange theory, Craig argues that compromise between two or more legislators occurs when participants perceive some benefit – whether it be from the partner’s perceived institutional advantages, personal electoral gain, or a greater chance at legislative success. Likewise, there are some costs that are too high – ideological differences, particularly on social issues, do not foster productive collaboration. This forms the base for Craig’s analysis of the

motivations, participants, and successes of collaboration explored throughout the remainder of the book.

Much of the book's analysis centers on an original collection of over 90,000 Dear Colleague Letters (DCLs) from 1999 through 2010. These letters are written and distributed by members of Congress at the preliminary stage of legislative development, often to draw attention to an issue or attract new supporters. Because collaboration is an inherently behind-the-scenes process, DCLs sent by two or more members of Congress serve as a proxy to capture when members are choosing to proactively collaborate on a given issue. Although the DCL data is somewhat dated, the below findings are supported with modern-day case studies and recent interview data.

Using computational text analysis, Craig finds that first, collaboration is common: across the ten-year period of study, around half of DCLs are sent by two or more members of Congress. The use of text-as-data also allows for a detailed analysis of the content of these letters – and as likely expected, certain issues are more amendable to collaboration. But for skeptics of the prevalence and substance of congressional collaboration, Chapter 4 brings positive results: collaboration is common for substantive and significant issues across the policy spectrum – with issues related to the environment, health care, and foreign policy among the most common content types. Craig does an excellent job of parsing through the details of collaborative policies, noting that while many of the issues rank-and-file members take on are often not the partisan, headline-attracting conflicts of the time (“Obamacare repeal”), but are focused on substantive policy developments that ultimately affect constituents (vision exams for children, FDA oversight on tobacco products, etc.). Thus, while members often avoid collaborating on partisan, or social issues, they *are* focusing on serious and meaningful ones.

After establishing the prevalence and breadth of collaboration, the remainder of the book considers the social aspect of collaboration – which members are most likely to collaborate and why, and what are the ultimate benefits of collaboration? Chapter 5 details the personal pressures that lead members to collaborate, divided between incentives to collaborate such as electoral demands or ideological positioning, and opportunities for collaboration such as existing connections via state delegations or demographic groups. While it's clear that existing social connections beget collaboration, one of the more unexpected findings is the strategic use of collaboration by ideologically extreme members, who Craig argues rely on collaboration as a way to appeal to the larger chamber and to push their passionate agenda. While there are inherent limits to who members collaborate with, Chapter 6 shows via network analysis that bipartisan collaboration is often more common than copartisan collaboration. Interview data further supports this finding, as staff

repeatedly express value in bipartisan collaboration, holding the expectation that it often leads to greater legislative success.

Chapter 7 proves this staff-level observations to be correct. By considering not only stand-alone legislation, but legislative language included in larger, omnibus-style bills, or “legislative hitchhikers” (Casas, Denny, and Wilkerson 2020), Craig finds that collaboration among members increases the likelihood of legislative success at every stage of the policymaking process. However, it is worth noting that by the final stage of legislative action (bill passage and signage), collaboration legislation is successful regardless of whether the endeavor bipartisan or within the same party.

Overall, Craig presents compelling evidence that congressional collaboration allows rank-and-file members of Congress to pursue substantive policy issues important to them and their constituents – and importantly, that the payoff of compromise is often worth it, as collaborative projects are more likely to be successful than non-collaborative legislative introductions. However, while Craig makes a convincing case for the importance of collaboration and social connections (Chapter 8), the future is murky. The factors that are noted throughout the book that motivate members to collaborate, such as personal and electoral gain are potentially at risk. The rightward shift of House Republicans, and the rise of anti-compromise, Freedom-Caucus-adjacent members to positions of leadership, does not bode well for incentives of bipartisan compromise. And as districts and regions become more geographically sorted, bipartisan regional ties also may decline.

However, this attention to the importance of congressional capacity and opportunities for member-level socialization are undoubtedly essential to improving and encouraging legislative collaboration. Like all things related to the current era of the U.S. House, proactive efforts to encourage substantive policymaking and moderation must prevail for the incentive structure of congressional collaboration to flourish. Fortunately, Craig’s book provides ample evidence that not only does collaboration benefit members, but it works – and as scholars, pundits, and members of Congress alike grapple for a way to break out of partisan gridlock, this book provides a helpful and uplifting roadmap.