

**Home Style Choices:  
House Members and the Distribution of Their Representational Allowances**

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**Abstract:** Members of Congress must make numerous decisions about how to allocate their representational resources. These decisions include how and what type of staff to hire, how many mass mailings to send to district residents, and how often to travel home. Beginning with the 104<sup>th</sup> Congress, House members now use an exceptionally flexible account system known as the Members Representational Allowance (MRA). It provides members with more flexibility to choose an optimal mix of representational resources than the earlier system of separate resource accounts. In this paper, I examine the “home style choices” members make by examining their MRA expenditures during the 106<sup>th</sup> Congress. A number of key political factors influence MRA allocation decisions, including electoral vulnerability, seniority, career choices, and access to other non-MRA resources.

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## **Home Style Choices: House Members and the Distribution of Their Representational Allowances**

The euphoria of winning election to the U.S. House of Representatives soon gives way to the hard reality that numerous difficult decisions need to be made quickly. Far removed from the campaign's focus on lofty promises of policy influence and change, these are practical, often prosaic, choices about resource allocation. They include questions about the size, composition, and spatial allocation of staff; the quantity and location of district offices; and types and location of office equipment. As that first term commences the new member must make further choices about the frequency and nature of travel to and around the district as well as choices about the frequency and nature of outreach communications to constituents within the district.

These decisions constitute more than just the mechanical enterprise of setting up what, in many respects, is organizationally the equivalent of a significant small business operation. Rather, these allocation decisions reflect a member's representational priorities as pursued under constraints. In the aggregate these decisions can affect the nature of a member's career, even the longevity of that career. Likewise in the aggregate, these decisions form a sort of representative profile – or home style (Fenno 1978) – since most allocation decisions directly involve aiding, communicating, and otherwise interacting with constituents. As a legislator progresses through a House career, the constraints and priorities likely change and, presumably, the representative profile changes as well.

Over the history of Congress the resources available to members have increased; in particular, steep increases after World War helped fuel the rise of the incumbency effect (Erikson 1971; Mayhew 1974; Fiorina 1977; Gelman and King 1990; King 1991). Yet, while numerous studies use different aspects of representative resource allocation to explain incumbency levels, surprisingly little research has been done on the allocations themselves. Furthermore, of the research that does exist, none examines the current system, which was instituted in 1996 soon after the Republicans became the majority party in the House. Prior to 1996, representational allowances were separated into exclusive categories. The 1996 reform created the Members' Representational Allowance (MRA), which is a combined account. From this single account a legislator pays for all staff, office expenses, franking, and domestic travel.

As I explain in more detail below, in practice this system gives members far more flexibility in how he or she allocates resources. It provides more flexibility to choose an optimal mix of resources given that member's preferences and constraints. At the same time the presence of a variety of resource mixes among the different legislators provides a rich research opportunity to examine the home style choices members make.

This paper presents a first effort at presenting and explaining the allocational patterns of MRAs. It proceeds as follows. First, I provide a brief overview of the adoption of the MRA system in 1996 along with an explanation of how the MRA system functions. Using 106<sup>th</sup> Congress data from the National Taxpayers Union, I then go on to examine how MRA allocation varies by member. The conclusion considers broader implications and possible avenues of further research.

## ADOPTION OF THE MEMBERS' REPRESENTATIONAL ALLOWANCE

By most contemporary standards the allowances members of the House granted themselves in the 1<sup>st</sup> Congress (1789-1791) were modest. Individual members had no publicly provided offices, nor staff. After contentious debate, Congress allocated members of the House \$6 compensation for each day of congressional attendance and a \$6 per day travel allowance (Congressional Quarterly 1992: 3). Both houses also adopted the franking privilege, in keeping with both the House of Commons and the Continental Congress (Committee on House Administration 2005).

In 2005 the average House member enjoys extensive office space in one of several office buildings, maintains multiple offices in the district, disperses eighteen regular staff across the Washington and district offices, utilizes an array of computers, printers, fax machines, and multi-media equipment, and can take virtually unlimited numbers of trips back to the district. A complete history of how the U.S. legislator went from a desk, footlocker, and quill pen to multiple offices, a small army of staff, and the now ubiquitous Blackberry remains to be written.<sup>1</sup> That story could tell us a great deal about the ways representation has changed and adapted as the United States transitioned from a rural, mainly agrarian, global backwater to an urban, highly industrialized global superpower. It might also provide a variety of insights about the development and institutionalization of Congress that contrasts with the conventional literature.

Consider, for example, the issue of party in Congress. There have been claims of a partisan element in virtually every aspect of congressional politics including roll call voting (e.g., Cooper, Brady, and Hurley 1977), the adoption of House rules (e.g., Binder 1997), the use of procedure (e.g., Cox and McCubbins 1993), the provision of pork to districts (e.g., Leavitt and Snyder 1995), committee composition (e.g., Young and Heitshusen 2003), and committee staff allocations (e.g., Heitshusen 1999). Yet, the representational resources of the sort I discuss here – i.e., travel monies, the franking privilege, personal staff, etc – are not allocated according to party. Likewise it does not appear to be the case that partisan motives explain the adoption of various resources. Two quick examples will suffice here. Two major transition points in resource allocations were 1893 and 1996. In 1893 the House created a personal staff system (Fox and Hammond 1977) while in 1996 the House created the MRA system. These were both periods of very high party polarization yet both reforms treated the parties equally and both passed with no controversy under voice votes.<sup>2</sup>

My purpose in this paper is to focus on the members' use of their representative resources, regardless of how those resources were put in place over time. My narrower purpose in this section is to focus on the adoption and implementation of the current MRA system.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The only representative resource area that is well developed in the literature is staffing, though the focus often splits between committee and personal staff. Examples of this literature include Heaphey and Balutis 1975; Fox and Hammond 1977; Malbin 1980; Schiff and Smith 1983; and DeGregorio 1997.

<sup>2</sup> The main caveat to this non-partisan claim concerns committee staff. Committee staff are allocated unequally across the two parties. Thus it is possible that some majority party members with access to committee staff can use that staff to substitute for personal staff policy-specialists.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout the paper I will largely ignore the issue of compensation for members, though arguably compensation indirectly affects representation efforts.

## **REPUBLICAN REFORMS**

Immediately prior to adoption of the MRA, members' representational resources were dispersed across three annual-based accounts: the clerk-hire allowance, the official expenses allowance, and the official mail allowance. The clerk-hire allowance covered staff salaries. The official expenses allowance covered member and staff travel, district office rent, non-franking based constituent communications, equipment, telephones, and other miscellaneous expenses. The franking allowance covered those items defined under the franking provision (a matter of some controversy over the years). These include mass mailed newsletters, postcards inviting constituents to attend "Town Hall" meetings, as well as more personalized and targeted outreach mailings addressing, for example, specific policy issues (Congressional Management Foundation 1994).

This system did allow some limited transfers from one account to another. At the start of the 104<sup>th</sup> Congress members could transfer up to \$75,000 in or out of their clerk-hire allowance and their official expenses allowance. They could transfer up to \$25,000 into, but not out of, their franking allowance. Given the size of the total accounts this provided modest flexibility at best. According to the Congressional Management Foundation (1994: 157), in 1991 veteran members spent on average: \$485,384, \$169,727 and \$99,074 on clerk-hire, official expenses, and franking, respectively. Corresponding numbers for freshmen members were \$439,230, \$196,168, and \$107,425.

This brief description belies what in fact was a highly complicated system that had come about slowly through hundreds of different statutes and precedents. Thus one motivation for reform was simply to streamline the system and improve member accountability. Another motivation was to give members more control and flexibility over their representational spending (Congressional Record, 3/19/96, H2360). As I noted earlier, the legislation itself was not controversial. The House of Representatives Administrative Reform Technical Corrections Act (H.R. 2739) provoked virtually no floor discussion and easily passed both chambers. Indeed, it passed the House under suspension of the rules with a voice vote while in the Senate it passed by unanimous consent. The legislation was signed into law by President Clinton on August, 20, 1996 (Congressional Record, 9/3/1996, D878).

## **THE MEMBERS' REPRESENTATIONAL ALLOWANCE**

The new law scrapped the old system of separate accounts in favor of the single MRA system. MRAs for each member are determined by the House Administration Committee based on population,<sup>4</sup> district office space costs, and district distance from Washington. MRAs are annual (calendar year); any funds not obligated by year's end are lost, and members are personally liable for cost overruns (Congressional Management Foundation 2004). House rules provide strict limitations on allowable MRA usage. For example, a member's personal expenses, campaign expenses, political expenses, and committee expenses can not be reimbursed by the MRA. In addition, members can supplement the MRA with personal funds, but not with campaign or committee funds (Members' Congressional Handbook 2003).

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<sup>4</sup> More precisely the criterion is the number of postal drops in the district, which varies largely by population.

The *Members' Congressional Handbook* (Committee on House Administration 2003) provides specific requirements and guidelines for using MRAs. Some of these guidelines are directly applicable to allocation choices and thus I summarize some of the more salient features by category. Table 1 contains a detailed overview of acceptable MRA expense.

### *Staffing*

The MRA pays for all personal staff salaries, excluding benefits (Committee on House Administration 2003). Based on the 1996 act, members can employ no more than eighteen permanent staffers and four additional staffers (2 U.S.C. § 92).<sup>5</sup> Despite the limit in total staff, House rules do grant members considerable latitude in setting salaries. This gives members flexibility in the experience and expertise mix of the staff, although 2001 salaries were upper bounded at \$140,451 (Committee on House Administration 2003). Staffers can be allocated across offices as the member chooses.

### *Official and Representational Expenses*

The MRA pays for a wide variety of expenses contained under the general rubric “official and representational expenses.” These include general expenses ranging from small appliances to costs related to holding “Town Hall Meetings” (Committee on House Administration 2003). Official and representational expenses also include charges related to running district offices (e.g., rent), communications, purchasing equipment, and travel. The MRA can reimburse official domestic travel expenses to and from the district for both members and staff. There is no limit on the number of trips taken as long as travel does not take place on sixty consecutive days (Committee on House Administration 2003).

Most communications are subject to clearance by the Franking Commission, which is composed of members and chaired by the chair of the Committee on House Administration. While there is no limit on the amount of franking the member uses (subject to MRA budget constraints, of course) there are limits on the types and timing of communications.<sup>6</sup> Likewise there are a variety of different regulations governing district office space and the circumstances of domestic travel. For example, members must pay fair market value for privately owned space. That is, members cannot receive a full or partial contribution of office space for their official district offices.

## **HOW MEMBERS' SPENT THEIR MRA DURING THE 106<sup>TH</sup> CONGRESS**

Using data compiled by the National Taxpayer's Union, figure 1 provides the average breakdown of relative spending within the MRA and across general categories. Communications includes all frank expenses as well as publications and reproduction, but not telecommunications

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<sup>5</sup> Additional staffers include part-time and temporary employees, employees on leave without pay, and interns.

<sup>6</sup> Initially MRA procedures did include a cap on total franking expenditures. This was lifted in 1999 (VandeHei and Wallison 1999).

which is included under office expenses.<sup>7</sup> Other office expenses include rent, equipment, supplies and materials, and telecommunications. The not spent category is the average percentage of the MRAs not spent. As noted earlier, House rules do not allow members to save unspent monies for future use.

As figure 1 indicates, staff takes up the biggest piece of the MRA pie (66%) by a large margin. (In fact, when the MRA was adopted some argued that members would use the added flexibility to boost staff salaries [Love and Burger 1995.]) After staff the next largest spending category is office expenses (17%), followed by communications (7%) and travel (3%). On average members do not spend 6% of their MRA.

Table 2 provides a detailed breakdown of the amounts included in these categories. Several points about table 2 are worth noting. First, the averages in figure 1 belie tremendous amounts of spending variance. For instance while the average member spent \$90,331 on the frank during the 106<sup>th</sup> Congress, far higher (\$152,427) and far lower (\$28,235) amounts lie within a standard deviation of the mean. Differences in the frank are illustrated in a different manner by the first column of table 2, which shows the number of items mass mailed. Mass mailings varied dramatically. In fact some members, such as Sonny Callahan (R-AL), sent no mass mailings at all during the 106<sup>th</sup> Congress.

Table 2 also suggests some relatively clear party differences. Republicans on average spent less of their MRAs than Democrats. (As shown below, this difference holds up with more rigorous controls). Democrats outspent Republicans in every category except travel and publication and reproduction, though there is notable variance across the two parties in all the spending categories. Note too the large differences between freshman and veterans in some categories. Freshman spend far more on communications than do veterans, a bit less on office costs (excepting equipment), and less on staff. As I argue below, this makes perfect sense in political, theoretical, and practical terms.

Given the large amount of spending variance, and the interesting spending differences across types of members, the task remains to develop some basic theoretical expectations and then pit them against more rigorous methods than the descriptive statistics provided in table 2.

## **EXPLAINING MRA ALLOCATION**

To understand how and why a member allocates representational resources we must first begin with goals. What are members trying to achieve? The most common assumption, of course, concerns re-election -- members try to maximize their chances of re-election. Use of this assumption has yielded substantial insights in congressional organization and behavior, but it leads to obvious distortions and even irrational implications. Say it takes 75% of a member's resources to maintain a .80 probability of re-election, but in the face of diminishing returns the member would have to devote her last 25% just to gain to an extra .05 worth of safety. A

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<sup>7</sup> Publication and reproduction likely include some items that are not strictly communication related. Nonetheless, the frank and publication and reproduction categories are so highly correlated ( $r=.67$ ) that it is reasonable to combine them into a single category. Unfortunately the data does not allow for distinguishing telecommunications costs from other office costs.

member wholly concerned with maximizing re-election allocates the remaining 20% despite the poor return.

Fenno offered a different approach. He suggested that legislators pursue different goals – re-election, good public policy, institutional leadership, and, in some cases, progressive ambition. Many scholars find Fenno’s approach intuitively appealing and have put it to quite productive use, e.g., Hall (1996) and Schickler (2001). Yet treating goals as mixed can lead naturally to the trap of tautology since virtually any behavior can be explained as rooted in one of the goals.

Another way of thinking about goals is the approach by Strøm (1997) and applied by Heitshusen, Young, and Wood (2005). Like Fenno, Strøm sees legislators in terms of multiple goals, but he argues that the goals are logically ordered within a hierarchy beginning first with the need for re-selection (or re-nomination in the U.S. context), followed by re-election, and then policy or institutional leadership goals. Legislators operate under uncertainty so a legislator never knows for certain whether a particular quantity or mix of resources will achieve the desired goal or goals. Thus we can think of “strategic choices as trade-offs under risk” (Strøm 1997: 161).

Clearly not all goals are created equal. In most contexts re-nomination and re-election must be the primary goals. Failure to return to office makes other goals such as policy influence, institutional power, or future higher office far more difficult if not impossible to achieve. What of the distinction between re-nomination and re-election? Most of the congressional literature does not distinguish between re-nomination and re-election in the way Strøm makes the distinction. For a variety of reasons this is lamentable, because much theoretical leverage could be gained in the U.S. context by bringing concern over re-nomination into the picture. (Perhaps this is even truer today as “innovations” in gerrymandering effectively nullify party competition in general elections.) As in Australia (Heitshusen, Young, and Wood 2005) the U.S. members of the House who typically have to look out for re-nomination problems are probably those members who represent the safest general election seats. This could make “safe” seat incumbents more concerned with pleasing the party base on roll call votes and policy emphasis. In Australia, for example, safe seat MPs engage in more party work and use staff for more expressly party-oriented tasks. I have no direct way of making party versus general constituency distinctions in the MRA data. It may be the case, for example, that a member in a safe seat targets more mass mailings to known fellow party members than to general constituents. Yet, I think it more likely that such members take advantage of general election safety to pursue other types of goals that are the type pleasing to a partisan base (especially the activists in the base) such as policy influence. For this reason I too will not directly address the issue of re-nomination and focus instead on re-election.

We might think of re-election simply as a type of political constraint. It is hard to believe that legislators seek re-election simply to seek re-election itself. To be sure, winning election must provide its own psychic rewards, but it seems reasonable that most members see re-election as a necessary step to achieving higher ordered goals. Yet, re-election is necessary so it forces members to direct resources towards it. As the uncertainty of re-election drops, a member is then able to direct more resources towards the higher-ordered goals; the specific hierarchy of these

higher-order goals depends on the preferences of the individual members, be it a preference for working on particular policy problems, running for higher office, gaining institutional power, serving constituents, or some combination.

An extreme reduction in re-election uncertainty occurs when a member opts to retire. Thus if there is a systematic component to MRA use, we should see dramatic shifts in its use for retiring members. Likewise other political factors such as party, seniority (Fenno 1974), and seeking higher office may shape representational allocation as well. Likewise members with institutional power may allocate their MRA differently both because of differing goals – since such leaders often, though not often, are electorally safe – but also because such leaders have access to other types of staff.

Yet, explicit political factors should not be the only factors affecting MRA allocation. There are a variety of non-political constraints that may play a role and there are constituent demand issues that likely affect MRA allocation as well. For example, as Fenno (1974) demonstrated, the distance of the district from the District of Columbia affects travel. I will test whether distance increases the travel allocation. Other possible constraints include the geographic size of the district, the districts population, and district cost of living.<sup>8</sup>

Also there is the issue of constituent demand. Demand for constituency services likely varies by district and this could affect some aspects of MRA, especially office expenses and staffing. Thus I include controls for some of the factors likely to generate more requests for casework, such as the number of immigrants in the district.

While demand and constraints likely affect spending choices, it is important to consider the effects of the MRA system on flexibility. Under the old system members had to spend money from exclusive accounts. This effectively reduced flexibility and made it harder for members to choose an optimal mix of spending. Consider an example that should be familiar to most academic faculty. Suppose a department granted its faculty separate annual accounts of \$100, \$100, and \$500 for photocopying, long distance, and conference travel, respectively. A faculty member who makes frequent long distance phone calls or sends many long distance faxes may feel badly constrained by the \$100 limit. He may have to make fewer calls than is optimal for research or (egads!) pay for the calls out of his own pocket. Yet, he goes to conferences and rarely needs photocopies. He may go to conferences and make photocopies just because the money is there, but it is not his highest valued use of the money. Contrast that with a different faculty member who greatly values conference travel but would sooner go to the dentist than spend extensive time on the telephone. Her research may be greatly constrained by the conference budget, yet the phone budget goes virtually untouched. Were the accounts combined, so that faculty have \$700 for all three items, in whatever mix they prefer, then the chatty professor can get more value out of the money, by spending more on long distance, while the jet

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<sup>8</sup> Despite the one person-one vote standard, House districts do vary substantially. This is for two reasons. First, all states are constitutionally guaranteed one seat. This effectively creates different sized districts across the states (as opposed to within them). Also, the further away from redistricting the more likely population sizes will differ due to differential migration rates. In the 106<sup>th</sup> Congress House districts varied from 493,782 (Wyoming's At Large) to 1,062,153 (Nevada's 2<sup>nd</sup>). As noted earlier, the MRA is adjusted for population, cost of living, and distance differences but I include these controls anyway in case the adjustment is insufficient or there are otherwise differences in allocation across categories of MRA due to them.



setting professor is happier by spending more on conference travel and less on other items. In essence the MRA allows House members to choose the optimal mix of spending (given overall budget constraints and the types of factors already discussed)

What of the MRA categories themselves? For analysis purposes I divide the MRA into four categories: communications, office, staff, and travel. Communications includes both the frank and publication and reproduction. Office includes all expenses except communications, staff pay, and travel costs. The key question is where do these various categories fit in the scheme of goals? To be sure, there can be elements of multiple goals in each category. But nonetheless I can make some reasonable assertions about preponderance. Communications is the most obvious. During the 106<sup>th</sup> Congress, 81% of franking costs went towards mass mailing. Given the strong correlation between the frank and publication and reproduction it is likely that a great deal of these costs go towards mass mailing as well. Thus while communications costs includes a variety of different purposes – including casework – their primary purpose appears to have a direct electoral component. Of all the MRA categories this is the one most likely to correlate with electoral factors, such as electoral safety and retirement, most directly.

Office expenses are more ambiguous. Policy-tasked staffers tend to be at the Washington office while most of the expenses in the office category occur in the district offices (e.g., the Washington office is rent-free). Given that constituency-service work is the main task of the district offices, it is reasonable to assert that office expenses are constituency in nature. Staff is the most ambiguous of all. Yet, in general policy-tasked staffers are more expensive than constituency-tasked staffers (Congressional Management Foundation 2000b). Thus, controlling for other factors, such as member seniority, added staff expense likely comes from more focus on policy. Travel too has different components, especially since so many members' families now keep their residences in the districts, but travel has a clear electoral component. I thus expect that the electorally vulnerable will travel more. As a career is established and a member focuses more on policy and leadership efforts, the travel budget will decrease.<sup>9</sup>

#### COMPLEMENT OR SUPPLEMENT

As a first cut on the data I consider whether the different categories of spending are complements or substitutes. That is, do we see some categories of spending increase with other categories or vice versa? Table 3 shows Pearson's  $r$  coefficients across the various categories. One clear finding is that staff comes at the expense of communications. Members who value more staff do so at the sacrifice of more communications (and vice versa). A bit weaker substantively is the negative relationship between office expenses and staff. In contrast travel is positively (albeit rather weakly in substantive terms) associated with both communications and office expenses and not related to staffing. Note too that the portion of the MRA not used is negatively associated with all the other categories of spending, though most strongly with staffing (which of course makes sense given the relative amount of staff costs demonstrated in figure 1). Members who spend less on staff tend to spend less on the MRA overall.

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<sup>9</sup> Note that the MRA does not pay for expressly political travel. So, for example, a member with leadership ambitions may travel to other districts to help raise money for political allies, but a trip like that normally would be paid for with campaign finances of one sort or another. Likewise committee travel comes out of non-MRA budgets. Thus leadership ambition and policy travel is largely distinct from MRA travel.

## REGRESSION ANALYSIS

I produced OLS estimates of MRA allocation across five categories: overall spending, communications, office, staff, and travel. In all cases the dependent variable is the percentage of the MRA used for that category, be it total spending, communications, etc. (Using actual dollar amounts rather than percentages yields virtually identical results.)<sup>10</sup> I used three general types of independent variables: political variables, constraints, and demand variables. As a measure of electoral safety I used the member's percentage vote in the 1998 election. Other independent political variables include party, the year the member was first elected, whether the member was a freshman, whether the member retired at the end of the Congress, whether the member ran for higher office at the end of the Congress, and whether the member was a full committee chair or one of the top five majority or minority party leaders.

Constraints are district characteristics that may constrain a member's spending flexibility. These include district geographic size, district population, district cost of living, and the distance from the district to the District of Columbia. Finally, demand variables include demographic categories that may be associated with higher demand for constituency service. These include the percentage of veterans in the district, the percentage of the district's residents over the age of sixty-two, the percentage of immigrants in the district, the percentage of impoverished families in the district, and the percentage of non-white district residents. The appendix provides a more detailed explanation of the variables and their sources.<sup>11</sup>

### *Results*

Table 4 shows the results. The Total Spending category represents the percentage of MRA that members spent. Recall that any amount saved is not kept by the member, thus a member does not get to "invest" or otherwise build up larger MRAs by saving. Note first the Previous Margin variable. For Total Spending the relationship is negative and statistically significant. The more electorally vulnerable, the more of the MRA a member spends. Looking across the MRA categories, this result is clearly driven by communications expenditures. In overall MRA terms, the effect is not terribly large, but it turns out that electoral vulnerability does increase mass mailings by a considerable "per piece" amount. Running the same model but using the number of mass mailed items as the dependent variable indicated that for each percentage decrease in a member's margin, the number of mass mailed items he or she sent out increased by 6,020. In short, the more electorally vulnerable the more a member engages in advertising through mailed communications, especially mass mailings, which take up the bulk of franking expenditures.

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<sup>10</sup> OLS is not always appropriate in cases such as this where the dependent variable is censored. I also produced Tobit estimates and the results were virtually identical, thus I opt for the more familiar linear estimates. Likewise, ideally the different categories should be run as part of a system of equations rather than independent equations, since the use of one category of spending affects the use of other categories. I will address this issue in revisions.

<sup>11</sup> I also tested two types of ideology variables. Poole and Rosenthal's familiar DW-NOMINATE scores (dimension 1) is very correlated with party and thus was not used in lieu of party. Using the ideology measure or party had no impact on the other results. I also tested models using the National Taxpayer Union vote score. It was correlated with party, though less so than the NOMINATE scores, but proved unrelated to MRA spending.

Returning to table 4, Republicans spend about 2.5 percentage points less of their total MRA than Democrats. (A single percentage point equates to over \$19,000, based on the average MRA granted to members of \$1,935,163.) Interestingly, the same party relationship holds for all categories except travel, though the effect is significant (in a two-tailed test) only for staff. Republicans spent 1.67 percentage points less on staff than Democrats. This effect has several interpretations. The first is simple fiscal conservatism. The second, obviously related, possibility is that since the Republican base of voters is more fiscally conservative than the Democratic base Republican members get more political credit by boasting of MRA savings. For example, Virgil Goode (R-VA) received glowing publicity in the *Danville Register-Bee* when he was ranked as the thriftiest member for the third year in row. The designation came from the National Taxpayer's Union and was based on MRA usage (Whitehurst 2003). The fact that the key savings occurs with staff raises a third possibility. As the majority party, many Republicans have access to more committee staff than Democrats. This may result in some greater flexibility in constructing personal staff. Yet, I do include an explicit control for committee chairs, who, of course, have the greatest control over committee staff. (Including a variable for subcommittee chairs does not reduce the partisan effect.)

The Year First Elected variable shows no overall effect but some interesting results for office, staff, and travel expenditures. This variable is scored for the year the member was elected, so a positive value refers to more recently elected members. Newer members spend a bit more on office and travel, while longer serving members spend more on staff. The most obvious explanation for this latter effect is that longer serving members have more senior, and thus more highly paid, staff. In fact, this is consistent with the results found by in a survey of staff salaries (Congressional Management Foundation 2000b). The other possibility is that the more established members begin to fill out their team with more policy-oriented staffers. This type of staffer is generally more expensive than constituency-tasked staffers (Congressional Management Foundation 2000b) and thus increases staff costs.

While freshmen exhibit no statistically significant overall difference in MRA allocation, they do differ notably across three categories: communications, staff, and travel. Freshmen spent 3.17 percentage points more on communications than did other members – a clear indication that freshmen are attempting to cement a presence in the district through advertising. In contrast, freshmen spent less on staff than did veterans, in part perhaps because freshmen are counseled to hire just immediate core staff in the beginning so that the new members can develop a better sense of their staffing needs after gaining more experience in office (Congressional Management Foundation 2000a). Also, while the control for time in office should account for some of this effect, newer members are likely to have less experienced, and thus cheaper, staff (Congressional Management Foundation 2000b). Interestingly, freshmen are a bit less likely to travel than veterans, spending about one-half of a percentage point less on travel costs.

Retiring members show dramatic differences in relation to their colleagues. Members were counted as retiring if they voluntarily left the House at the end of the 106<sup>th</sup> Congress, without at the same time running for (or making it known they were running for) another office. Retiring members spent over seven percentage points (or about \$135,000) less of their MRAs

than their non-retiring counterparts. The differences hold across all the categories. Retiring members communicate less,<sup>12</sup> travel less, and spent less on district and staff than other members.

Note also the higher office result. This variable accounts for all members who left the House to run for higher office. These members spent considerably more on communications (4.59 percentage points) than other members. Franking restrictions make it difficult for a member to send large mailings outside the district but still it makes sense for these members to blanket the district with an eye towards strengthening their base. There were no other statistically significant categories, though the negative relationship for staff comes close, which may indicate that a member's staffers were resigning early, perhaps to go on the campaign payroll.

Finally, I included a control variable for whether the member was a full committee chair or party leader. These members have access to other staffers and this may free their resources up either for savings or other areas. Indeed, chairs and leaders spend less overall and the savings come from staff.

The models include a variety of constraint and demand variables meant to capture other influences on spending. Yet, logically these factors should not affect all the categories of spending. I included district geographic size since it may affect district travel costs and the office expenses. Population may affect office<sup>13</sup> and communication expenses, but probably not staffing and travel. Cost of living might affect office costs due to differences in rent as well as staff costs due to the need to pay district personnel higher salaries in higher costs areas. Yet, cost of living should not affect communications costs nor travel costs. Finally, distance from the District of Columbia is included as a surrogate for costs of travel to and from the district and the District.<sup>14</sup> The various demand variables might affect overall spending, office costs, and staff, but are unlikely to dramatically affect travel costs or communications costs, which are strongly driven by mass mailing.<sup>15</sup>

In general, the demand variables simply fail to provide much explanation for resource allocation, but there are some inconsistent constraint affects. Increased distance does increase travel costs, as does increasing geographic size of the district. Population boosts the costs of communications (more mailing targets) but overall population is negatively associated with spending, suggesting, perhaps, that MRA adjustments for population are generous, if not overly so.

## CONCLUSION

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<sup>12</sup> In fact, using the same set of independent variables in a model with the number of mass mailed items as the dependent variable shows that retiring members sent on average 172,913 fewer pieces of mass mail.

<sup>13</sup> My intent here was to use size as a surrogate for the number of district offices a member keeps open which in turn affects office costs because of higher rental and equipment costs.

<sup>14</sup> Recall that the MRA is adjusted based on population, cost of living, and distance from the District of Columbia. Yet, even with these adjustments these factors may affect overall spending or specific categories of spending.

<sup>15</sup> I also ran models in which the all the independent variables are specified for each category of dependent variable. The political variable results are not affected by including the extra variables.

In this first analysis of how House incumbents allocate their Members' Representational Allowances a number of interesting findings emerge. As an overall observation, clearly there is a systematic, political content to MRA allocation. Home style choices are not random nor are they wholly determined by non-political constraints or constituent demand. More specifically, electorally vulnerable members spend more of their MRAs than do more secure members, and much of this extra expense goes towards sending mass mailings to constituents. There are distinct party differences with Republicans spending less of their MRA on average with the key savings coming from differences in staff expenditures. More senior members of Congress do not spend more (or less) of their overall MRA, but do put more resources into staff and less into their district offices, which suggests, in part, that the more senior members are moving towards policy or other concerns and away from strictly electoral concerns. Freshmen in an effort to begin building their incumbency advantage pour substantially more of their resources into communications. Retiring members dramatically reduce their overall spending while members running for higher office pour more into communications. Finally, members who have substantial access to non-personal staff – namely committee chairs and party leaders – are able to spend less of their MRA with the savings coming from personal staff costs.

All of this suggests considerable room for a variety of research directions. As MRA data accumulates it will be possible to perform a time series analysis rather than the type of cross-sectional “snapshot” taken here. That will allow for more precise depictions of, for example, career patterns (Hibbing 1991). Another interesting route to take is to look at the “other side” of the equation by looking at the effect of MRA allocational decisions on congressional elections. Finally, as argued earlier, the development of representational resources over the history of the House (and the Senate) remains virtually unstudied and promises a rich avenue of research along several dimensions.

## APPENDIX

*Member Representational Allowance:* Sources for the MRA data came from the National Taxpayer Union's website: [www.ntu.org](http://www.ntu.org). Data for 1999 and 2000 were combined into a single 106<sup>th</sup> Congress dataset as were various categories of spending. Website accessed: July 2004.

*Previous Margin:* Calculated as the incumbents percentage of the vote in the 2000 general election. Source: *Politics in America*.

*Republican:* Dummy variable score 1 if Republican, 0 otherwise.

*Year First Elected:* The year (1990, 1992, etc) the member was first elected to the House (continuous service only). Source: *Politics in America*.

*Freshman:* Scored as 1 if the member was elected in 1998 or later. Source: *Politics in America*.

*Retiring:* Scored as 1 if the member retired at the end of the 106<sup>th</sup> Congress without running or announcing to run for higher office. Primary source: *Politics in America*.

*Higher Office:* Scored as 1 if the member ran for higher office (or announced a run for higher office) sometime during the 106<sup>th</sup> Congress. Primary source: *Politics in America*.

*Chair or Leader:* Scored as 1 if the member was a full committee chair or one of the five party leaders (Speaker, Majority Leader, Majority Whip, Minority Leader, Minority Whip). Source: *Politics in America*.

*Geographic Size of District:* District size in square miles: Source: Adler (2005) who in turn derived it from *Congressional Districts in the 1990s*.

*Distance from District:* As the crow flies mileage from the District of Columbia to the largest city in the district.

*Population:* District population during the 106<sup>th</sup> Congress. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census. Website: <http://censtats.census.gov/pub/Profiles.shtml>. Accessed: January 2005.

*Cost of Living:* Cost of living in city closest or within district. Source: Congressional Management Foundation (2000b) as derived by the ACCRA.

*Veterans:* Proportion of district composed of civilian veterans. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census. Website: <http://censtats.census.gov/pub/Profiles.shtml>. Accessed: January 2005.

*Seniors:* Proportion of district composed of residents sixty-two and older. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census. Website: <http://censtats.census.gov/pub/Profiles.shtml>. Accessed: January 2005.

*Immigrants:* Proportion of foreign born living in district. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census. Website: <http://censtats.census.gov/pub/Profiles.shtml>. Accessed: January 2005.

*Families in Poverty:* Proportion of district families in poverty in 1999. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census. Website: <http://censtats.census.gov/pub/Profiles.shtml>. Accessed: January 2005.

*Non-White:* Proportion of non-white residents in the district. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census. Website: <http://censtats.census.gov/pub/Profiles.shtml>. Accessed: January 2005.

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**Table 1**  
**Overview of Expenses Covered by the Members' Representational Allowance**

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**Staff**

The MRA pays for up to eighteen full time employees and four additional employees. In 2001 the maximum staffer salary was \$140,451. The MRA is not normally charged for staffer benefits.

**Official and Representational Expenses**

*General*

- small appliances (e.g., microwaves)
- certificates of recognition
- clipping services
- decorating expenses
- drug testing
- educational expenses for members or staffers
- staff hiring expenses
- incidental, non-social food and beverage expenses
- limited gifts and donations
- purchase of various greeting cards (e.g., recognizing constituent birthdays)
- interpreting and translating services
- messenger services
- photography expenses
- purchasing various publications (e.g., *CQ Weekly*)
- staff meeting expenses
- office supplies
- telecommunications costs in member or staffer residences
- costs related to town hall meetings, including "electronic" town hall meetings

*District Offices*

- cable television
- custodial services
- furniture
- rent
- parking
- office repair costs
- security
- signage
- storage
- utilities

*Communications*

- advertisements related to official duties
- audio and video expenses
- booth expenses (e.g., at county fairs)
- distribution of publications
- electronic communications (e.g., email, fax)
- franked mail
- newspaper inserts
- some postal expenses not covered by the frank
- print and production
- stationary
- various web site expenses (website space on house.gov does not charge to the MRA)

*Equipment*

This category includes computer related hardware and software. The Chief Administrative Officer provides guidelines for ensuring inter-office compatibility for Washington office equipment.

*Travel*

This category includes expenses-related district travel by members, staffers, or vendors (campaign, committee, and political travel excluded). Vendor travel can be paid when the vendor travels in support of a member's office (e.g., to provide training). The travel budget can include expenses such as leasing a car and mileage.

There is no limit on the number of trips taken as long as sixty consecutive days of travel is not exceeded.

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**Source:** Committee on House Administration (2003)

**Table 2**  
**Average MRA Spending in the 106<sup>th</sup> Congress**  
 mean  
 (standard deviation)

	Communications			Office Costs			Staff Pay	Travel	Total Spending (\$)	MRA Spent (%)
	Number of Items Mass Mailed	Frank (\$)	Publication & Reproduction (\$)	Rent (\$)	Equip. (\$)	Misc. (\$)	(\$)	(\$)		
All Members	496,186 (427,313)	90,331 (62,096)	50,557 (43,333)	152,784 (37,956)	125,218 (37,922)	59,620 (19,375)	1,273,017 (137,336)	61,730 (29,873)	1,813,258 (144,865)	93.7 (6.8)
Republicans	459,451 (419,879)	84,489 (60,170)	51,631 (44,428)	145,459 (33,217)	123,632 (34,776)	54,514 (16,900)	1,258,115 (130,897)	64,495 (31,442)	1,782,337 (144,685)	92.0 (7.3)
Democrats	537,105 (433,071)	96,796 (63,991)	49,417 (42,162)	160,688 (41,033)	127,255 (40,920)	64,933 (20,309)	1,291,633 (137,122)	58,995 (27,936)	1,849,716 (124,347)	95.7 (4.8)
Freshmen	688,068 (435,494)	125,371 (62,968)	91,043 (56,118)	143,984 (36,541)	147,491 (46,960)	68,432 (22,819)	1,183,438 (160,882)	63,836 (25,499)	1,823,594 (171,327)	95.1 (5.3)
Non-Freshmen	471,828 (420,607)	85,883 (60,632)	45,417 (38,587)	153,901 (38,032)	122,391 (35,707)	58,501 (18,631)	1,284,389 (129,937)	61,463 (30,402)	1,811,946 (141,357)	93.5 (6.9)
Full Committee & Party Leaders	468,269 (434,700)	82,021 (58,845)	35,753 (32,279)	147,095 (45,709)	118,742 (36,151)	56,112 (24,199)	1,299,967 (139,177)	53,359 (29,142)	1,793,048 (169,352)	91.7 (8.9)
Non-Leaders	499,327 (426,925)	91,266 (62,454)	52,222 (44,127)	153,425 (36,997)	125,947 (38,091)	60,015 (18,752)	1,269,985 (136,975)	62,672 (29,844)	1,815,532 (141,915)	93.9 (6.5)

Source: National Taxpayers Union

**Table 3**  
**Are MRA Categories Complements or Substitutes?**

Pearson's r Coefficients

	Communications	Office	Staff	Travel	Not Used
Communications	--	.02	-.45 <sup>***</sup>	.09 <sup>*</sup>	-.26 <sup>***</sup>
Office	.02	--	-.20 <sup>***</sup>	.10 <sup>**</sup>	-.33 <sup>***</sup>
Staff	-.45 <sup>***</sup>	-.20 <sup>***</sup>	--	.07	-.59 <sup>***</sup>
Travel	.09 <sup>*</sup>	.10 <sup>**</sup>	.07	--	-.14 <sup>***</sup>
Not Used	-.26 <sup>***</sup>	-.33 <sup>***</sup>	-.59 <sup>***</sup>	-.14 <sup>***</sup>	--

\*\*\* p < .01 \*\* p < .05 \* p < .10.

**Table 4**  
**OLS Estimates of Different Categories of MRA Spending in the 106th Congress**  
(standard error)

Variable	Total Spending	Communications	Office	Staff	Travel
Intercept	169.29* (93.80)	14.51 (69.56)	-129.61 (46.88)	409.62*** (101.33)	-108.43*** (20.25)
<i>Political Variables</i>					
Previous Margin	-0.08*** (0.02)	-0.08*** (0.02)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.02)	-0.001 (0.005)
Republican	-2.53*** (0.63)	-0.64 (0.43)	-0.51 (.31)	-1.67** (0.68)	0.11 (0.126)
Year First Elected	-0.04 (0.05)	-0.004 (0.04)	0.07*** (0.02)	-0.17*** (0.05)	0.06*** (0.01)
Freshman	0.27 (1.04)	3.17*** (0.78)	0.39 (0.52)	-2.65** (1.12)	-0.48** (0.23)
Retiring	-7.08*** (1.36)	-2.42** (1.01)	-3.16*** (0.68)	-1.042 (1.46)	-0.50* (0.29)
Higher Office	1.85 (2.34)	4.59*** (1.76)	0.37 (1.17)	-3.46 (2.53)	0.60 (0.51)
Chair or Leader	-3.36** (1.49)	0.20 (1.11)	-0.09 (0.75)	-3.06* (1.59)	-0.41 (0.32)
<i>Constraints</i>					
Size (SqMi)	1.16e-05 (1.03e-05)		5.09e-06 (5.03e-06)		1.53e-05*** 2.20e-06
Population	-7.67e-06** (4.36e-06)	8.54e-06*** (2.92e-06)	9.36e-07 (2.18e-06)		
Cost of Living	0.04 (0.03)		0.03** 0.01	0.02 (0.03)	
Distance from D.C.	-7.38e-04 (4.64e-04)				3.75e-04*** (8.25e-05)
<i>Demand Variables</i>					
Veterans	0.17 (0.18)		-0.10 (0.08)	0.10 (0.18)	
Seniors	0.06 (0.12)		0.03 (0.06)	0.06 (0.12)	
Immigrants	0.09* (0.05)		-0.005 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.05)	
Families in Poverty	0.18** (0.08)		0.07* (0.04)	0.14* (0.08)	
Non-White	0.001 (0.03)		0.03** (0.01)	-0.03 (0.03)	
R <sup>2</sup>	.24	.18	.24	.17	.25

\*\*\* p < .01 \*\* p < .05 \* p < .10 n = 435 Note: Dependent variables are percentages spent from the overall MRA.

**Figure 1**  
**Relative Amounts of MRA by Spending Category**  
**106th Congress**

