Member Career Opportunities and the Internal Organization of Legislatures

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University of Iowa

Legislatures employ a variety of organizational schemes to determine how positions of power are distributed within them. I propose and test a theory relating the internal organization of a legislature to the political career goals of its members. Examining the lower legislative house in California, Connecticut, and New York, I demonstrate that each body offers its members a different political career path, and that the particular ambition is promoted by the internal organization of the legislature. New York assemblymen have career ambitions and seniority matters in gaining positions of power in that body. California assemblymen have progressive goals and operate in a system which allows any member to gain power quickly. In Connecticut, where legislators have discrete ambitions, seniority is not important and power is centralized.

The way in which a legislature organizes to conduct its affairs is obviously significant, as has been demonstrated by empirical studies (e.g., Fenno, 1965; Patterson, 1978; Dodd and Oppenheimer, 1985) and formal models (e.g., Shepsle and Weingast, 1981). Legislative bodies in this country have adopted various organizational schemes. Power in some is decentralized among many members, while in others it is concentrated in the hands of just a few. The allocation of positions of power in a minority of legislatures is based on member seniority; in most others, that factor is ignored in favor of other less systematic and impersonal criteria. These differences have important consequences for the ways in which legislatures operate.

In this paper, I propose and test a theory relating the internal organization of a legislature to the political career goals of its members. My intent is not to establish why a legislative body adopted a particular organizational structure, but rather to explain why once one is in place, it tends to endure. I argue that any body offers the majority of its members only one of three possible career opportunities. The particular sort of career path presented is determined by the combination of financial incentives given to stay within the body and the prospects for using the office as a means to achieve other elective positions. I relate these different career opportunity structures to the internal organization of legislatures; the manner in which positions of power,

I thank Nelson Polsby, Allan Sindler, Raymond Wolfinger, and John Wright for their comments on various drafts of this paper. Any errors are, of course, my responsibility.
such as the speakership and committee chairmanships, are distributed; the stability of committee memberships; and the level of participation in decision making by individual legislators.

The specific legislatures examined are the lower houses in California, Connecticut, and New York during the period 1977 to 1981. These particular bodies were chosen because they are good examples of three different career patterns: progressive, discrete, and static (Schlesinger, 1966, p. 10). While not in any sense ideal types, these legislatures vary from each other in the career opportunity members could pursue through service in them, which I link to their particular internal organization structure.

**Internal Organization and Career Ambitions**

By "internal organization" I mean the system by which members of a legislature distribute positions of power, such as the speakership and committee chairmanships. A stable organization is one where there is little leadership turnover and such positions are gained through a process with an objective, systematic component, usually a seniority rule. Also, committee memberships do not change to any great degree. An unstable system is one where leadership positions and committee memberships suffer high turnover, and where important posts are awarded in an unpredictable, subjective manner, as in rewarding members of a winning coalition regardless of any other qualifications.

Over its history, the U.S. House of Representatives has evidenced both patterns. Polsby's (1968) seminal study demonstrates that initially the House was unstable; it suffered from high turnover and little leadership or committee membership continuity. Positions of power were distributed on the basis of coalitional success, not length of service. But, as turnover decreased and members began adopting career or long-term perspectives toward their service, a more stable system employing seniority evolved to impersonally and objectively reward them the longer they stayed in the House. Thus, the internal organization of the House was adapted to meet the changing career needs of its members. Indeed, the body has become so refined that, as Fenno (1973) convincingly demonstrated, committees have adopted different structures and ways of conducting business so as to appeal to and satisfy particular member goals.

My hypothesis is that legislative organization reflects the career needs of legislators. A body with members who intend long service should be stable and employ a system for the distribution of power which rewards them systematically. As with the U.S. House of Representatives, such a legislature should be characterized by a seniority system.

Legislatures where members do not anticipate long service should be unstable but, because the career goals of their members may not be the same,
they take on different patterns of internal organization. The organization of a body where members have progressive career goals should allow any member to gain important positions quickly. Power should be decentralized so members have the ability to promote their own political fortunes, with junior members being able to influence legislative decisions. In a legislature where almost all members have discrete ambitions, power is likely to be centralized in the hands of a few (Garceau and Silverman, 1954), if only to provide the cohesiveness and continuity necessary to allow the organization to function. Here, seniority matters little, but most legislators do not have much influence on decision making.

The causal relationship between career goals of members and internal organization is not obvious. If legislators operate in an environment without any constraints on their actions, they are free to alter the internal organization of a body to better meet their needs. But legislators face significant obstacles in changing the existing conditions of legislative service. For example, in many states legislators face either legal restrictions on the amount of any raise in pay and when it can be made effective, or have their pay set by an external body. Moreover, under any circumstances, pay is politically difficult to increase, for the same reasons which limit the freedom of the U.S. Congress in this area (e.g., Fisher, 1980). Advancement opportunities are difficult to manipulate because they are essentially structural in nature. The reshaping of any legislature’s internal organization is hard because members with a stake in the current system will resist changes, as witnessed with such attempts in Congress.

Thus, in effect, the causal relationship is that the existing internal organization attracts those individuals who find that it meets their career needs. The way a legislature distributes power within itself can change, as it has in the U.S. House, but not quickly, easily, or often. It is, for the most intents and purposes, fixed.

Incentives to Continue Service

The three legislatures examined here varied enormously in the career incentives they offered potential and incumbent members. Legislators in New York and California were relatively well paid. In 1980, New York assemblymen earned $23,500, while their California counterparts received $25,555. The salary in each body was supplemented by per diem payments, and members were covered by life, health, and retirement programs. California assemblymen were even given funds to lease an automobile, and a credit

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1The circumstances under which such changes occur is an important question which would be best addressed by examining legislatures over time, as advocated by Cooper and Brady (1981) and done by Polsby (1968).
card to pay for its gas and maintenance. Thus, assemblymen in California and New York could afford to consider legislative service as their career.

Legislators in these two states were also provided impressive facilities, including personal offices, both in the capitol and their district. Personal and committee staffs increased the legislators' abilities to deliver constituent services. Funds were given to pay for constituent newsletters. The electoral value of these resources to potentially career-minded legislators is obvious.

The situation in Connecticut House of Representatives differed dramatically. The annual salary for 1982 and 1983 averaged $8,500 per year, a $1,000 increase over the salary in 1979 and 1980. Legislators serving in 1982 were also given $.15 per mile for travel to and from Hartford, $2,000 to cover unvouchered expenses, and were covered by a health insurance program but not life insurance. A minimal and optional retirement program was offered but required ten years of service to collect.

This very modest level of financial incentives might have proved adequate if the time demands of service were minimal. But, the House was in session an average of sixty-seven days per year and, according to figures compiled by the Council of State Governments (1982, pp. 206–7), in 1979 and 1980, only the legislatures of New York and Massachusetts considered more bills and resolutions than did the Connecticut General Assembly. Obviously, membership required significant sacrifice of time as well as income for most legislators.

The working conditions also militated against long tenure. Representatives were only first provided their own desk and telephone in 1979, the same year in which a reallocation of space in the capitol afforded each of them a private office cubicle. A 1980 survey (Deziel, 1981, p. 16) revealed that 75% of the legislators were unsatisfied with their office space. No staff was provided to individual legislators, only to the leadership and committees (Swanson, 1984, p. 87). All constituent problems and services were handled personally by legislators. Thus, there was no incentive for members to serve long tenures.

Prospects for Political Advancement

There are many reasons why legislators might terminate their service. Obviously, one way legislators leave is through defeat at the polls or retirement in expectation of such a loss. This does not appear to be a significant cause for departure in any of the legislatures studied here. Members of the lower houses in California, Connecticut, and New York were reelected at rates over 90%, most by margins exceeding twenty percentage points.

If members did not leave involuntarily, then they might have departed in order to run for higher office. The prospects for advancing to higher office varied greatly among these legislatures. In 1980, the eighty members of the
California Assembly had a multitude of higher electoral positions for which to run: forty state senate seats, forty-three seats in the U.S. House, six state constitutional offices,\(^2\) and the mayor's seats in Los Angeles, San Diego, and San Francisco. Most who left the assembly to run for higher office were successful; around 80% of the assembly members who ran for the state senate or U.S. House of Representatives between 1974 and 1980 were elected.

New York assemblymen did not enjoy the same advancement prospects. The 150 members of the lower house had only sixty state senate seats and thirty-nine spots in the U.S. House of Representatives for which to shoot. Moreover, the natural incentive to move from the larger assembly to the smaller state senate was greatly reduced by the fact that members of the upper house serve the same two-year term.

Other avenues of political mobility in New York were appointment to government office or selection or election as a judge. What these moves had in common is their complete dependence on the assemblyman's good standing with his state and local party organizations (Scarrow, 1983, p. 51). Whatever upward mobility out of the assembly existed, whether by election or appointment, was controlled by party organizations. Even ambitious members who entered the assembly with the intention of moving up had to wait until others agreed to their progression. Very few members were free agents, able to control fully their own political futures.

Connecticut representatives also suffered from few advancement opportunities. The 151 members of the House had only thirty-six state senate, six U.S. House, and five statewide positions for which to aspire. Moreover, as in New York, the incentive to move to the state senate was reduced because senators serve the same two-year term. According to Swanson (1984, p. 11), "Many lawmakers come to the Capitol with no particularly strong ambitions for higher office. They stay a short time and then return to private life."

Comparative figures on the use of legislative service as a springboard to higher office in these three legislatures are given in table 1. In the first column are the mean turnover rates for each body. The second column presents the mean percentage of the total membership that left each session to run for higher office. As we would expect, California had a substantially higher percentage of members who left for a chance at higher office. Connecticut and New York have about the same low percentage.

The third column in table 1 presents a different calculation which sheds more light on the contrasts among the legislatures: the proportion of those members who left voluntarily and ran for a higher office. Seventy percent of California assemblymen who departed did so to pursue immediate election to higher office. This figure is twice that of New York where only 34% made such an attempt. But 68% of those who left the New York Assembly did

\(^2\)These are governor, lieutenant governor, secretary of state, attorney general, comptroller, and treasurer. In 1981, all of these offices except governor were held by ex-assembly members.
TABLE 1

THE USE OF LEGISLATIVE OFFICE AS A SPRINGBOARD TO OTHER ELECTED POSITIONS


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean Turnover</th>
<th>Mean % in Body Who Leave to Run for Higher Office</th>
<th>Mean % Who Voluntarily Leave to Run for Higher Office</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New York (1976–1978)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

move to some governmental position when appointed offices and judgeships are included. Fewer than one out of four Connecticut representatives left to run for higher office. The difference between New York and Connecticut results from contrasting career opportunity structures. The majority of New York assemblymen were political careerists; many who left that body would be expected to continue in government. Most Connecticut representatives were not interested in a long-term, full-time commitment to public service.

The Distribution of Membership Seniority

The distribution of member seniority in 1981 for each legislature is presented in table 2. Because the U.S. House of Representatives is considered the epitome of a career body, its seniority distribution can be used as a baseline against which to compare the other legislatures.

The New York Assembly and the U.S. House look similar, especially at the fewest years of service. The only substantial difference is in the percentage of members who have served ten or more years. Over one quarter of the United States House membership had been in office at least ten years while 19% of the New York Assembly had served that long. 3

3Several reasons to explain this difference can be advanced. First, members of the assembly have somewhat better advancement prospects than do their congressional counterparts. Consequently, assemblymen are more likely to have an opportunity to move up than members of the house. Second, while the financial incentives offered in New York are adequate to allow legislative service to be undertaken as a career, they do not equal those offered members of Congress. Thus, outside opportunities to increase one's income may seem more attractive to a veteran assemblyman than to a representative, resulting in the former terminating his or her elective career.
Table 2
1981 Membership Seniority Distribution, in %

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Calif.</th>
<th>Conn.</th>
<th>N.Y.</th>
<th>U.S. House</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 years</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–2 years</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3–4 years</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–6 years</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7–9 years</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 or more years</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The lower houses in California and Connecticut had many more junior members and fewer senior ones than the other legislatures. In both bodies, more than 50% of the legislators were freshmen or sophomores. California had a somewhat higher percentage of veteran members than did Connecticut. This is not surprising because California offered substantially better financial incentives. Although most California assemblymen enter office with the intention of moving up, that opportunity may not occur early in their career. The assembly affords them the chance to wait for their opening. In Connecticut, the low pay and relatively heavy workload provided no incentive for long service.

Internal Organization and Stability

The New York Assembly, with career-minded members, should be stable and seniority should count heavily in the allocation of positions of power, and in determining which lawmakers influence legislation. The organizational systems in California and Connecticut should be unstable because of high turnover, but because the career goals of their members are not the same,

4For example, Assemblyman Tom Bates's (D-Berkeley) political advancement has been stymied for several years because the U.S. House member and state senator who represent the same geographic area are also Democrats who have held their positions longer than Bates has been in office. According to an interview (Tom Bates Safe in Re-Election Quest, 1984): "Bates also said he was somewhat stuck in his current position as an assemblyman. He said he could not even conceive of running against Ronald V. Dellums for his congressional seat. And Nicholas C. Petris is running for re-election to the state Senate this year, so Petris' seat is closed for another four years. 'That means there is nothing for me to run for four years until (and if) Petris retires,' Bates said."

5Few Connecticut legislators, however, favor making the job a full-time, well-paying office. A 1980 survey of general assembly members (Deziel, 1981, p. 13) showed 63% opposed to such a plan. Thus, it appears that the legislature is attracting a majority of members to whom its amateur characteristics are appealing.
the systems are different from each other. The organization of the California assembly should be compatible with the legislators’ progressive career goals. Power should be decentralized so all members, junior and senior alike, have the ability to promote their own political fortunes. Connecticut’s legislators have discrete ambitions; the leadership should be powerful, although seniority should matter little in gaining such positions. The internal organization of each legislative body will be examined against these expectations.

New York. The speaker in the New York Assembly is the most powerful member of the assembly for many reasons: he appoints all committees and names their chairmen, controls all legislative floor activity, and allocates office space, committee budgets, and other resources. As leader of the majority party, the speaker also selects the majority leader and the holders of other party posts (Hevesi, 1975; Witt, 1974, pp. 49–50; Zimmerman, 1981, pp. 128–29). The office’s powers are so extensive that the speaker controls (Hevesi, 1985, p. 156), “not only the flow of legislation but also the destinies and careers of individual members.”

The speaker, who is chosen by the majority caucus, usually has considerable seniority (Zimmerman, 1981, p. 128). The speaker in 1981, Stanley Fink, had served ten years prior to gaining that post, which, according to Rosenthal (1981, p. 154), represented “a relatively rapid rise in New York.” Fink’s immediate predecessor had waited twenty-two years. They were not the most senior members of the majority party in either case, but each had served for many years.

The power to appoint all committees and party leaders allows the speaker to determine members’ progression to positions of influence. This authority might be employed in an arbitrary and personal fashion, with those rewarded being allies without regard to any objective or impersonal criteria. The speaker would only be constrained from abuses by the possibility of membership dissatisfaction producing enough votes to name a new speaker. Under such circumstances, seniority would count little in committee assignments and in the selection of committee chairmen and party leaders. However, because of assembly members’ long-term career perspectives, we could also conceive of their desire for a more standardized and objective system, probably seniority-based, for the distribution of positions of power.

These two systems are in obvious conflict, but the tension between them could be reduced by combining certain aspects of each. Such a blending might produce a system in which seniority would be a major factor in gaining power but would not be absolute. The speaker would retain some flexibility in making assignments.

This compromise is, in fact, a reasonable characterization of the New York Assembly’s internal power distribution system. In his study of the assembly, Hevesi (1975, p. 73) observes of committee chairmanships that “the stan-
dards for appointment are generally, but not exclusively, seniority and of course loyalty to the leader.” The seniority of members appointed committee chairmen from 1977 to 1981 ranged from 6.3 years to 7.6 years. This significant level of prior service is consistent with the seniority-based system needed by the assembly’s members. The speaker’s flexibility in appointing chairmen is demonstrated by Speaker Fink’s removal of the chairmen of the Banking and Codes committees right after he gained power in 1979. While the speaker had the unchallenged ability to replace these senior legislators as chairmen, he still needed to give them some consolation prizes: positions as assistant majority leader and majority whip. Likewise, in 1981, seven chairmen from the previous session were not reappointed: four were moved to chairmanships of more important committees, and three were given party positions.

In a body where seniority matters, it would be expected that veteran legislators would earn the right to be appointed to the more important committees. The Rules committee, by far the most powerful body in the Assembly, had a mean seniority of more than eleven years in 1981. Almost 90% of the Assemblymen with ten or more years of service were on the Rules Committee. No freshmen were appointed. The other committees with above average levels of seniority were predictable: Ways and Means, Banks, Judiciary, Real Property Taxation, and Labor. Very few freshmen were appointed to these bodies. At the other end of the spectrum were committees like Health, Child Care, Aging, and Consumers Affairs and Protection, all of which were stacked with large numbers of freshmen and sophomore members. Moreover, the percentage of members who continued service on the more important committees was far higher than on the less important committees.

Evidence on the New York Assembly indicates strongly the importance of member seniority in gaining positions of power. Committee chairmanships were not awarded on the basis of absolute seniority, but only those members who had served for a number of terms got them. The most prestigious and important committees were populated by veteran assemblymen; the least important had the most recently elected members. Thus, a stable system of rewarding more senior legislators developed.

California. In the California Assembly, as in New York, the system is oriented around the speaker. The speaker makes all committee and subcommittee assignments—except to the Rules Committee—for both majority and minority party members, names all committee chairmen, and fills his party’s

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6 The Rules Committee is considered the leadership body. The speaker serves as chairman, and between 1977 and 1982, an average of nine chairmen of other committees also were appointed. On the power of the Rules Committee, see Hevesi (1975, pp. 20–22); Berle (1974, p. 32); Metz (1972, p. 37); and Zimmerman (1981, p. 133).
leadership posts. The holder of this office also controls all activity on the assembly floor.

Seniority, however, counts for little in the California Assembly; power is distributed by the speaker in a subjective and personal manner. Assembly Speaker Willie Brown (Is the Party Over?, 1981, p. 27) has stated, “the Speaker in California has an awesome amount of power over House organization and I don’t use it based on party participation or party loyalty; I use it based on Speaker loyalty.” In this system, a freshman’s vote for speaker counts as much as any member’s and correct votes are usually rewarded. Junior members can attain power quickly (Bell and Price, 1975, pp. 147–48; Salzman, 1980). It is not unusual for legislators with little seniority to occupy important positions of power. The majority party floor leader in 1981, for example, had served less than two terms at the time of his selection. Of the twenty-five committee chairmen appointed at the beginning of the 1981 session, nine were just starting their second term and three others were in their third.7

The speaker rewards his friends and punishes his enemies through the use of his power to make committee assignments. Surprisingly, the most sought seats are not on the Ways and Means Committee, the body which wields the most influence within the assembly. Rather, the most requested assignments in 1981, for example, were to the Finance and Insurance, and Government Organization committees (Rios, 1981). Members of the Finance and Insurance Committee which oversees the state’s banking and insurance industries, and Government Organization which controls the horse racing and alcoholic beverage industries, receive far more in campaign contributions than do their colleagues on other committees. Service on these two bodies, then, has great political benefit and is desired because it can help members finance reelection bids or attempts for higher office. Positions on Ways and Means are not as coveted because power and prestige in the body are less important to legislators who harbor progressive ambitions.

The speaker retains his position by doing more than rewarding his supporters with leadership posts or sought after committee assignments. As leader of the majority party, the speaker is expected to help finance his party members’ reelection campaigns. Failure to do so can lead to a revolt, as it did in 1979–1980, when Speaker Leo McCarthy was challenged by his own political lieutenant, Majority Party Floor Leader Howard Berman (Pollard, 1980; Salzman, 1980). Many assembly Democrats thought that McCarthy was not helping them achieve reelection and that Berman’s political organiz-

7It should be noted that the 1981 numbers may be somewhat unusual because Speaker Willie Brown had given a number of chairmanships to low seniority Republicans who had supported his speakership bid. But this does not diminish the point that members with little seniority can gain powerful posts.
zation would provide them with more than enough money to stay in office (Pollard, 1980, p. 198), and might even be of help when they wanted to run for higher positions (Salzman, 1980, p. 49).8

While both McCarthy and Berman lost the fight—Willie Brown broke the deadlock by assembling a coalition of Democrats and Republicans—the point is clear. The speaker, as the most powerful individual in the body, is supposed to use his influence to get campaign funds to help make his party's assemblyman electorally secure. This lesson was not lost on Speaker Brown. During the 1982 election, by which time his bipartisan coalition had broken apart, Brown secured the allegiance of assembly Democrats by becoming the state's largest contributor to legislative races (Cook and Capps, 1984).

Overall, the California Assembly's internal organization is structured in a way which is compatible with its members' career goals. By operating under a system which rewards political skills rather than seniority, assembly members have the chance to exercise power within the body and over public policy early in their tenure. The assembly leadership is permeable; low seniority members can get committee chairmanships and party posts. Ambitious legislators can make their mark early, collect the political resources they need, and soon be in a position to exploit any opportunity to try for higher office.

Connecticut. In the Connecticut House, like the California Assembly, there is no systematic reward for career longevity. Power is concentrated in a relatively small group of legislators: the speaker, committee chairmen, and a few leaders of the majority party. Some of these individuals are among the more senior members of the legislature, but others are not. Few representatives outside this elite ever serve long enough to acquire the substantive knowledge and political skill necessary to challenge the leadership's control of the legislative process.

The speaker is the most powerful individual in the house. The holder of this office refers all bills to committees, controls the flow of legislation to the house floor and the subsequent debate on it (Swanson, 1984, pp. 31, 78). All majority party member committee assignments are made by the speaker, who also designates committee chairmen. Up until 1971, the speaker by tradition was limited to one term, with the majority leader acceding to the higher office in the next session (Goodwin, 1981, p. 113; Swanson, 1984, p. 31). Now the norm is two-term tenures.

The speaker and party leaders are elected to their positions by their re-

8Typically, the speaker is only interested in helping finance his party's candidates for the assembly because those are the people whose support he needs to stay in charge. Berman's organization—actually the "Waxman-Berman machine" (see Willens, 1982)—contributed to Democratic campaigns for many positions, not just the assembly. Thus, Berman could be thought to be of some potential future assistance in running for higher office.
spective party caucuses. The speaker is not necessarily a particularly senior member of the house. The holder of the position from 1979 to 1983, Ernest Abate, had only four years of service when he was selected. Abate's immediate predecessor had served eight years when he became speaker. Like the speaker, many representatives holding party positions have little seniority. In 1981, for example, of the nineteen individuals elected majority leader, deputy majority leader, or assistant majority leader, three had served just two years and another six had only four years of seniority. Thus, important party positions can be attained in a relatively short time. Seniority does not guarantee getting influential party posts. This is not a trivial matter because party leadership exercises considerable power over the legislative process. A 1983 survey of Connecticut legislators (Swanson, 1984, p. 34) reveals that over three quarters of members of both parties think that party leaders have either great power over outcomes on all issues, or at least on major ones. The same overwhelming majority agreed that power is either very or somewhat concentrated in the party leadership.

Committee chairmen are more senior than the house's general membership. Between 1977 and 1981, no freshmen were given chairmanships, but seven appointees were just starting their second terms. There is a slight tendency for high prestige committees (Swanson, 1984, pp. 47–48) to be led by relatively senior representatives. Low-prestige committees, however, generally have even more experienced chairmen than high-prestige committees, and fairly junior people have led moderate prestige committees.

Only five of the fourteen committees in operation from 1977 to 1981 had the same chairman all three terms. Roughly half the turnover in committee chairmen was caused by members leaving the house. The other 50% of the changes occurred when representatives left chairmanships but continued to serve in the house. Indeed, 17% of the deposed leaders continued to serve on that same committee. Overall, there is little evidence of a systematic seniority system, or of much stability in committee leadership.

Freshmen hold slots on the most prestigious committees. The membership of the Finance Committee, ranked the second most important in the house, is close to half freshmen. Even the most prestigious committee, Appropriations, is composed of almost 25% first-terms. In terms of mean membership seniority, there is very little to distinguish high-prestige committees from low-prestige ones. Surprisingly, the committee ranked the least important, Banks, had the highest average seniority and the lowest percentage of freshmen.

Length of service in the Connecticut House of Representatives has very little to do with acquiring positions of power. Indeed, of the sixty-nine representatives who served in 1977, 1979, and 1981, thirty-five, or 51%, served

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9The Connecticut General Assembly is one of two state legislatures—Maine is the other—to operate exclusively with joint committees.
on either Appropriations or Finance at some time during those three terms. Of those who served in both 1979 and 1981, 33% were on Appropriations at least one term. Thus, service on prestigious committees seems a reasonable expectation for most representatives. The system is fluid, with frequent turnover in institutional, party, and committee leadership positions. Power is attainable quickly, but few members hold on to it for long.

A Comparison of the Stability of Committee Assignments. The pattern of internal power distribution in each of these bodies appears compatible with the political career goals of its members. But, when compared to each other, does committee membership stability in these legislatures differ in anticipated ways? The New York Assembly, given its members’ career orientation, should be the most stable. California and Connecticut should have greater instability because of higher turnover and the short-term outlook of their membership.

The first column of table 3 provides evidence in support of these propositions. Committees in New York have a mean of 40% new members at the beginning of a term, while committees in California and Connecticut average 61% and 55% new members respectively. Moreover, as the second column shows, the mean percentage of those eligible to return to a committee who do so is markedly higher in New York than in California and Connecticut.

Stability in committee memberships on the individual level is shown in table 4. This table summarizes data on the continuity of individual members’ committee assignments in each legislature. New York assemblymen, as expected, have the most stable slate of assignments with 72% of their posts over two terms and 42% over three terms being the same. Because New York assemblymen intend to serve for long periods, the way they organize them-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean % New to Committee</th>
<th>Mean % Eligible Return to Committee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conn. (1979–1981)</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 4
AGGREGATE INDIVIDUAL MEMBER COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP CONTINUITY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent Same Assignments Over:</th>
<th>Two Terms*</th>
<th>Three Terms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calif.</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conn.</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*The figure for New York may be inflated relative to the other two legislatures because the two sessions used for New York were under the same speaker, while California and Connecticut each experienced a switch. The figure for three sessions contains a change in the speakership for all three bodies. But in all three legislatures, the same party was in control during the sessions studied.

10 Seniority on a committee is used to distribute committee and subcommittee chairmanships in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives. Seniority in the body is used as the explicit criterion for gaining committee chairmanships in the New Mexico State Senate (Hain, Clark, and Clark, 1981, pp. 42–43).
with ten or more years of service serve on it. Thus, in this body seniority appears to be critical in career advancement.¹¹

Seniority appears much less important in California and Connecticut. Each of those bodies has some number of freshmen as members of their most important committee. Likewise, only a quarter or fewer of the veteran legislators in those two lower houses were appointed to these committees. One implication for members of these legislatures is that they can quickly attain positions of power. A second implication is that increased seniority in the body is no guarantee of holding powerful positions in the future. Thus, their short-term perspectives are reinforced.

More evidence on the relative importance of seniority in each legislature is presented in table 6. Here, the mean number of years of legislative service of members on the most important committees are compared with the mean for the entire legislature. The difference between the average seniority of Rules Committee members and the general memberships' average is substantial, in excess of six years. The magnitude of difference between members of the most important committees and all legislators in California and Connecticut is much smaller, illustrating the lack of importance attached to seniority in those bodies.

**Participation in Decision Making.** What is the role of the individual member in the legislative process? Do junior legislators enjoy more power in some bodies than in others? The California Assembly's nonseniority-based

| Table 5
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent of Committee Membership That is Freshmen</th>
<th>Percent of Veteran Legislators on Committee*</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N.Y. (1979) Rules</td>
<td>0</td>
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*Percent of total number of legislators with ten or more consecutive years of service who serve on this committee. In California, the total number of veterans was eight, in Connecticut there were ten, and in New York, twenty-four.

¹¹The fact that so many chairmen of other committees serve on the Rules Committee may skew these numbers. The second most important committee, Ways and Means, had just 7% freshman members and 11% of veterans serving on it, and had a mean seniority level of 6.5 years.
system with its lack of committee service continuity results in a means of conducting legislative business which is driven by the activities of individuals. The great majority of bills are singular products, introduced and carried throughout the process by legislators acting as entrepreneurs (Muir, 1982, pp. 57–78). Even minority party members enjoy some success in authoring legislation and getting it passed (Muir, 1982, p. 144). The participation of junior members is encouraged by senior colleagues (Bell and Price, 1975, pp. 15–16, 80). Indeed, much of the assembly’s workload is handled by first and second term members (Bell and Price, 1975, p. 170). There is very little difference between freshmen and veteran assemblymen in the numbers of bills that they introduce or that get passed. The contrast between the active role junior members of the assembly play compared to the passive role of their counterparts in the U.S. House has been lamented by veterans of both bodies (BeVier, 1979, p. 223; Bell and Price, 1975, p. 169).

Most important pieces of legislation in the New York Assembly are introduced by senior legislators, particularly committee chairmen. Freshmen usually do not get the opportunity to author significant bills. Party interests, however, can override this tendency. According to the Secretary of the Ways and Means Committee (A Committee Secretary’s View of the Process, 1980, p. 55), “It is no secret that one of our prime considerations is the protection of marginal district Assemblymen. . . . One of the ways that these marginal district Assemblymen are protected is to assign them good bills and help them carry them through the Assembly and through the legislative process.” Thus, only a few junior legislators—those with marginal electoral pros-

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**Table 6**

**Mean Member Seniority in Legislature and on Most Important Committee**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean Seniority of all Members in Legislature</th>
<th>Mean Seniority of Committee Members</th>
<th>Diff.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calif. (1981) Ways &amp; Means</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>+1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conn. (1981) Appropriations</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>+ .7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N.Y. (1979) Rules</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>+6.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

pects—get the chance to affix their name to major bills. Most freshmen must bide their time, waiting to accumulate enough seniority to gain influence in the body (Williams, 1981, 1982; Dionne, 1981).

The ability of freshman in the Connecticut House to participate is even more restricted. Representatives are limited in their influence because they can only propose legislation in an informal one-page summary. Committees have the exclusive right to formulate legislation in formal statutory language. Consequently, all bills sent to the floor are committee bills (Swanson, 1984, pp. 74–75; Rosenthal, 1981, p. 199). The effect of this rule is to place great power over legislation in the hands of committee chairmen, who, in turn, are under the tight control of the majority party leadership (Swanson, 1984, p. 50). This centralized system isolates most individual legislators from the decision-making process. For example, 74% of the representatives think the general membership of the body does not have adequate participation in the appropriations process (Deziel, 1981, p. 52).

**Conclusions**

The conclusion to draw from the data presented in this paper is clear: the means of internal organization in each of these legislatures attracts members whose career goals are consistent with it. Career-minded assemblymen in New York operate in a system which is stable and which rewards their longevity through the utilization of seniority as the important criterion for advancement. Members of the lower house in California are politically ambitious. The assembly system is unstable in that positions of power are distributed in an arbitrary manner with little or no regard for seniority. Thus, members with political skills can gain influence early and use it to their long-range career advantage. The same might be true of the Connecticut House of Representatives because it also has an unstable system which does not base rewards on longevity. The house's lack of advancement opportunities and career incentives, however, renders its leadership permeability something of a hollow prize.

These institutional structures are enduring for at least two reasons. First, as noted earlier, they are difficult to change because of structural, constitutional, and personal reasons. Second, the existing structure attracts individuals whose career goals are consistent with it and, therefore, unlikely to seek to change it. The way a legislature is organized meets the needs of most, if not all, of the body's members. Scholars concerned with questions of institutional design must keep that in mind. When members' needs change, organization can change, as Polsby (1968) demonstrated, but under most circumstances they stay the same.
REFERENCES