Veterans in Congress: The Policy Impact of Veterans in the U.S. House of Representatives

Abstract:
For much of the Cold War period, a significant majority of legislators were veterans. These Americans provided a bridge between civilian and military leadership. Today, that bridge is disappearing. Scholars now provide warnings about a chasm developing between the military and civilian worlds. Will a Congress of nonveterans enact different, less, or worse defense policies than a Congress dominated by veterans? Will they be less active, or less likely to invest the necessary amount of time, energy, and staff in the oversight of the military? To discern the policy impact of electing veterans to Congress, I examine whether veterans in the 92d (1971-1973), 103d (1993-1995), and 112th (2011-2013) Congresses are more likely to support and advocate for defense policy than their nonveteran colleagues, once one accounts for ideological, district, and institutional influences.

Utilizing a specially created database, I investigate House members' commitment to defense policy through their activity in roll-call voting, bill sponsorship, bill cosponsorship, amending the National Defense Authorization Act, and their participation in committee hearings. By contrasting various forms of behavior throughout the legislative process and across multiple generations of veterans, as well as during times of war and peace, I demonstrate how behavioral differences among veterans and nonveterans affect the decision calculus concerning whether or not to pursue certain policy initiatives. Finally, instead of utilizing a dichotomous construct to distinguish between veterans and nonveterans, I differentiate among veterans based upon members' military service histories.

By carefully studying behavior throughout the legislative process, I demonstrate that even though veterans and nonveterans often vote a party line, politically significant social identities, like being a veteran, do influence the nature of proposals placed on the national agenda and the choices made about those proposals. However, the translation of preferences into policy is often mediated by the position of members within the institution, their relationship to their party caucus, and the member's level of military experience. Untangling the impact of military service on policy preferences and legislative choices allows us to consider the implications of the decline of veterans in Congress and sheds light on what the future might hold.

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Research & Analysis on military veterans in civic & political leadership. The number of veterans in Congress has been steadily declining since the end of the Vietnam War, when three quarters of Congress had served in uniform. Today, veterans make up less than 19 percent of Congress. However, the 2016 election seems to indicate that the trend is reversing. “The number of veterans in both the House and Senate will remain about the same, and the number of veteran House nominees was roughly the same as in 2014,” said Seth Lynn, Executive Director of Veterans Campaign.