

The Legislative Effectiveness of Party Factions: The Case of the House Freedom Caucus

Florian Gawehns
Trinity College, CT

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Abstract

Intraparty factions are credited with enhancing legislators' influence by providing organizational resources, bargaining leverage, and a signal to voters. But factional power may not translate into greater individual legislative effectiveness, and some may prioritize negative agenda control and position-taking over conventional lawmaking. This paper examines this distinction through the case of the House Freedom Caucus (HFC), a faction whose influence has rested on challenging Republican leaders and disrupting the legislative process. Using Legislative Effectiveness Scores and propensity-score matching, I compare HFC members with observationally similar Republican legislators across the 114th through 118th Congresses. I find no evidence that HFC membership improves individual legislative effectiveness after accounting for preexisting differences between members and comparable Republicans. Yet this pattern changes in the 118th Congress, when HFC members' legislative effectiveness increased following the institutional concessions extracted during the fight over Kevin McCarthy's speakership. The findings suggest that factional influence and individual lawmaking effectiveness are distinct forms of power, and that the benefits of faction membership depend on both organizational strategy and institutional opportunity. More broadly, the HFC demonstrates why scholars should treat congressional factions as distinct organizations whose impact can vary across institutional contexts and over time.

Words (bibliography excluded): 7240

Introduction

The “catch-all” nature of America’s two-party system incentivizes lawmakers to seek differentiation from their fellow partisans. Intraparty factions¹ are therefore a permeating feature of congressional politics, providing legislators with opportunities to coordinate around shared ideological, electoral, and policy goals. Existing research generally finds that faction membership can provide legislators with lawmaking, career, and messaging benefits. Yet the role of the House Freedom Caucus (HFC) remains contested. While the group built its reputation around challenging Republican party leaders and pushing House Republicans further to the right, it is unclear whether membership in the HFC benefits lawmakers in their *individual* lawmaking effectiveness. Do legislators become effective lawmakers because they join the HFC, or does the HFC attract individuals who are predisposed toward other pathways of political influence?

Existing quantitative work emphasizes common features across factions, contributing to an understanding of party factions as a generic organizational form. I argue instead that factions may differ systematically in their organizational goals and strategies. The HFC is distinctive because its strategy is built on negative agenda setting, procedural confrontation, and antagonism toward Republican leaders rather than conventional lawmaking. This orientation may attract legislators who are less predisposed toward legislative productivity. If so, HFC membership should not necessarily translate into greater individual legislative effectiveness. At the same time, the institutional environment in which a faction operates may affect its members’ ability to pursue conventional legislative goals. The effect of faction membership therefore depends not only on who joins a caucus, but also on what the organization’s goals are and the institutional opportunities available to its members.

¹ I use “intraparty caucus” and “faction” interchangeably throughout this paper.

The protracted fight over the speakership in January 2023 provides an important test of this latter possibility. HFC members leveraged their pivotal position to secure greater influence over House procedures, crucial committee seats, and greater inclusion in House Republicans' decision-making process during negotiations with Kevin McCarthy. The subsequent speakership of Mike Johnson appears to have further strengthened the HFC's position within the Republican conference and created opportunities for members to pursue conventional legislative goals. If institutional inclusion facilitates legislative productivity, HFC members should therefore have become more effective at moving their bills through the legislative process, even if their underlying strategic orientation toward conventional lawmaking remained unchanged.

To address the selection problem posed by the types of legislators who join the HFC, I combine Legislative Effectiveness Scores (LES) developed by Volden and Wiseman (2014) with HFC membership data and use propensity score matching to construct a comparison group of non-HFC legislators with similar observable characteristics. HFC membership is the treatment, and legislative effectiveness is the outcome. Legislators are matched on ideology, district partisanship, seniority, and committee leadership, producing balanced samples of HFC members and nonmembers across Congresses. Across multiple specifications, I find no statistically significant difference in legislative effectiveness between matched HFC and non-HFC legislators. Restricting the analysis to periods when Republicans are in the minority – when some studies predict enhanced factional advantages – yields similarly null results. The 118th Congress, however, provides an important qualification. HFC members experienced a substantial increase in legislative effectiveness following their greater institutional inclusion. The gap in lawmaking effectiveness between HFC members and other Republicans narrowed considerably.

These findings qualify existing accounts of the role of party factions in Congress. First, HFC membership does not appear to increase members' legislative effectiveness once observable differences between HFC members and comparable legislators are taken into account. Instead, the findings are consistent with the HFC attracting legislators who are less oriented toward moving their individual bills through the House. The HFC's operation is more focused on negative agenda control, procedural threats, and position-taking – forms of political power that are not captured by conventional measures of legislative productivity. Second, the HFC's experience in the 118th Congress demonstrates that the benefits of faction membership can vary with the institutional opportunities available to faction members. Greater inclusion gave HFC legislators greater ability to move their legislative priorities through committees and onto the House floor, even though they continued to lag other Republicans in conventional lawmaking effectiveness. Finally, the paper underscores the importance of treating congressional factions as distinct organizational actors rather than aggregating ideologically similar factions. Factions may differ in their internal goals, organizational strategies, and modes of influence, making their effects on individual legislators contingent on both organizational purpose and institutional context.

Literature Review

A growing body of research has examined why legislators form and join ideological intraparty caucuses, and what those organizations accomplish once established. The foundational insight from this literature is that intraparty factions solve collective action problems that individual members cannot address on their own. By offering selective benefits – access to leadership, signals to constituents and donors, and the conversion of public goods into excludable group accomplishments – these organizations give members incentives to coordinate

with likeminded lawmakers (Bloch Rubin 2017). Internal decision-making rules further reinforce cohesion, translating numerical strength into bargaining leverage over the broader party (Bloch Rubin 2017; Clarke 2020). The downstream effects have been well documented: ideological caucuses have moved legislation, blocked it, reshaped party strategy, rewritten chamber rules, and affected leadership elections (Green 2019; Green and Crouch 2022; McGee 2020). They have also cultivated independent financial ecosystems, building donor networks and funding streams that reinforce members' ideological distinctiveness from the party mainstream (McGee 2017; Clarke 2020; Gaynor 2022). Importantly, membership in a party faction signals incumbents' ideological type to their districts, yielding potential electoral benefits in their primary or general election (Pomirchy 2024).

Established in 2015 by a small group of the House's most conservative Republicans, the House Freedom Caucus became known for its confrontational tactics, its hardline policy positions, and its allyship to Donald Trump.² The caucus was designed by founding members such as Jim Jordan, Mick Mulvaney, and Mark Meadows as an invitation-only club restricted to those who are willing to break with party leadership – creating an antagonistic relationship with party leaders from the outset. Its binding voting rule – if 80 percent of members support a motion, the caucus votes as a block – was intended maximize the faction's bargaining leverage (Lizza 2015). Unlike the Tea Party Caucus, which counted more than fifty House Republicans and ceased to function as an organized entity after only two Congresses (Gervais and Morris 2012; Ragusa and Gaspar 2016), the HFC's smaller membership and its distinct rulebook have

² The HFC's relationship with Donald Trump was no love at first sight. The caucuses' ideological project - to "to advance an agenda of limited, constitutional government in Congress" (Jordan 2015) - was in tension with then-candidate Trump's idiosyncratic populist-nationalist blend of conservatism that deviated from mainstream GOP orthodoxy on trade, social security, the debt, and other issues. His combative rhetoric, his popularity with the GOP base, and his determination to dismantle President Obama's signature policies, however, quickly endeared HFC members to him early in his first term.

since contributed to its continued operation as a more cohesive organization (Homan and Lantis 2020, 170).

The HFC organized around conservative principles and was determined to hold Republican leaders to account for “broken promises.” Rep. Raul Labrador (ID), the group’s first unofficial spokesperson, said in 2015 that the goal was to “push the entire conference to the right” (Gehrke 2015). Over the past decade, the HFC repeatedly demonstrated its ability to stall or kill legislation, extract concessions on procedure and agenda-setting, and exert decisive influence over leadership contests (Green 2019; McGee 2020). Former Speaker John Boehner's characterization of its members as “legislative terrorists” captures both the frustration the HFC generated and the institutional disruption its tactics caused. Importantly, the HFC played a major role in weakening norms of procedural party unity – party’s cartel power (Cox and McCubbins 1993) – that were in place throughout much of the 20th century. Although the HFC’s tactics saw mixed success on a range of policy proposals (Bloch Rubin 2022), HFC-modeled intraparty caucuses have now spread to the state level, driven by dissatisfaction with the ideological direction of state Republican parties and conservative entrepreneurs with an ambition to nationalize the HFC’s confrontational populism (Green and Gawehns 2024).

However, institutional visibility and individual legislative effectiveness are conceptually distinct. It is not clear whether the HFC’s collective power has translated into its effectiveness at the individual level. Scholars have noted that members concentrated at the ideological extremes of a party have a tendency for rhetorical grandstanding – staking out visible, uncompromising positions on highly divisive issues that burnish personal ideological credentials while contributing little to actual policy change (Kirkland and Slapin 2019). The costs of this behavior fall unevenly: individual members pay little cost (or benefit), while the broader party absorbs the

reputational damage (Green 2019). This tension between the HFC's considerable institutional footprint and the potentially limited legislative returns for its individual members motivates the present study. I ask whether HFC membership has enhanced or constrained lawmakers' *individual* legislative effectiveness over time, and what this pattern reveals about the benefits of HFC membership specifically and caucus membership in general.

Clarke, Volden, and Wiseman's (2024) study of the benefits of factions for individuals' legislative effectiveness provides important context for this question. They find that faction membership enhances individual legislative effectiveness among minority-party legislators, which they attribute to factions' capacity to provide organizational resources and greater autonomy from party leadership. They find little evidence that members of conservative or ideologically extreme caucuses are systematically less effective than other factions – a finding that undermines the assumption that such legislators avoid traditional lawmaking. This null result, however, may be a product of aggregation: Clarke, Volden, and Wiseman code the Republican Study Committee, the Tea Party Caucus, the Liberty Caucus, and the HFC alike as “conservative caucuses,” collapsing organizations with different membership rules, internal cohesion, and strategic orientations into a single category. The RSC is a large, low-barrier caucus, while the Tea Party Caucus quickly ceased to function as an organized entity (Ragusa and Gaspar 2016). The HFC, by contrast, maintains restricted membership and binding internal rules. A category built to capture ideological position may therefore obscure the organizational variation that determines the effectiveness of a caucus as distinctive as the HFC.

The HFC: From Obstruction to Inclusion

The HFC is an organization whose strategy is built on obstruction and threat-making rather than conventional coalition-building (Green 2019). Its members are often characterized as

uninterested in pursuing productive legislation, using their leverage as a pivotal bloc to move GOP legislation to the right – even at the risk of torpedoing the larger Republican agenda. Whereas most historical ideological factions, such as the Democratic Study Group or the Republican Study Committee (RSC), have functioned as loosely bounded associations oriented toward developing alternative policy positions and disseminating them to the broader party conference (Hammond 1998), the HFC was founded in 2015 with an explicit set of binding internal rules: a capped, closed membership, and a supermajority threshold required before the group would take an official position (Green 2019). This organizational architecture addresses the coordination problem inherent to any faction seeking to exercise disciplined bargaining power (Bloch Rubin 2017): By committing members *ex ante* to follow a group decision reached under a demanding threshold, the HFC could credibly signal unified action to party leadership in a way that more informally organized predecessor factions could not. Since 2015, the HFC has demonstrated its willingness to undermine the larger party strategy in pursuit of a more conservative policy agenda.

A second point of departure from other party factions concerns the object of the group's leverage. Other ideological caucuses, including the RSC, have generally directed their efforts at shaping legislative outcomes from within the existing leadership structure, using their numbers to extract concessions while treating the Speaker and other top leaders as negotiating partners rather than targets (Bloch Rubin 2017). The HFC, by contrast, has repeatedly used its leverage against its own party's leadership, most notably contributing to Speaker John Boehner's resignation in 2015 and later in its role in the prolonged floor fights over Kevin McCarthy's election as Speaker. This willingness to treat procedural motions such as rules votes and motions to vacate the chair as leverage points rather than routine but important housekeeping matters

reflects an exploitation of chamber rules consistent with research showing that a numerically small but internally disciplined bloc can wield influence disproportionate to its size when margins are narrow (Jenkins and Monroe 2015).

The nature of the caucus also means that HFC membership is associated with a legislative strategy that places greater emphasis on position-taking and intra-party bargaining than on the conventional advancement of legislation. These behaviors should persist regardless of party status: The literature on party factions has traditionally emphasized the pivotal nature of majority party factions that constitute a large enough bloc providing necessary votes for the passage of party-line legislation. Lawmakers seem to agree with this view, as confirmed by HFC member Keith Self (TX): “Our narrow majority in the House is what actually gives the Freedom Caucus a voice. If we had a 35- or 40-vote margin, the Freedom Caucus would be irrelevant” (Brooks 2026). Yet, others argue that party leaders actively suppress faction influence when their party controls the chamber because majority leaders prevent faction proposals that conflict with leadership priorities from advancing through their agenda power (Clarke, Volden, and Wiseman 2024). Minority-party leaders have much less ability to do this. They cannot control the legislative agenda, so they have fewer tools to prevent members of their own factional lawmakers from pursuing their own proposals.

I posit that these competing views converge on the same prediction for HFC members’ legislative effectiveness. The “majority suppression” logic suggests that because the HFC’s bloc voting power is oriented toward extracting concessions and disciplining leadership rather than advancing its own legislative priorities, party leaders have both the incentive and the institutional tools to keep HFC proposals off the floor. The situation in the minority, however, is different because minority leaders cannot suppress faction proposals the way majority leaders can – which

frees up factional legislators to pursue individual effectiveness gains. Yet if HFC members are selected for position-taking and obstruction rather than traditional lawmaking goals, this institutional opening should go largely unused: the absence of suppression does not generate effectiveness among legislators who are not oriented toward pursuing it in the first place. The HFC's underperformance should therefore persist across both majority and minority status, but for different reasons – leadership suppression in the former, lack of members' own legislative ambition in the latter.

Hypothesis 1: HFC members have lower Legislative Effectiveness Scores than other non-HFC Republicans, regardless of majority or minority status.

Additionally, I argue that this mechanism will change over time, as the relationship between the HFC and House Republican leaders has changed from an adversarial hostage-taking approach to a more accommodating, inclusionary approach under Kevin McCarthy and Mike Johnson. Specifically, I see the beginning of the 118th Congress as a watershed moment for HFC members' ability to shepherd their preferred legislative proposals through the chamber.

The chaotic 118th Congress began with Republicans narrowly taking control of the House after a closer-than-expected showing in the 2022 midterm elections, a slim majority that immediately contributed to a prolonged and contentious Speaker election. Kevin McCarthy secured the speakership in January 2023 only after a protracted, 15-ballot fight in which a bloc of roughly twenty hardline Republicans – many affiliated with the HFC – who refused to support him, leveraging the GOP's narrow majority to obtain major concessions (Schnell 2023). To win over the holdouts, McCarthy agreed to a series of institutional and procedural changes that effectively redistributed power away from the Speaker and toward rank-and-file conservatives. He pledged to place HFC affiliates on the powerful House Rules Committee, giving them direct

influence over which bills reach the floor and under what terms (Solender and Knight 2023). In addition, he also accepted a rule change that allowed a single member to trigger a “motion to vacate,” making it far easier to dispose (or threaten to dispose) the Speaker, along with commitments on spending and legislative process reforms favored by House conservatives. These concessions ultimately placated enough members to secure their votes but also left McCarthy in a structurally weakened position as Speaker.

McCarthy’s attempt in leveraging the “politics of inclusion” – giving outsiders a seat at the table in order build a stable coalition – gave GOP rebels a stake in legislative outcomes. His strategy worked on occasion: Former HFC chair Jim Jordan helped lobby caucus members to tone down their opposition to the debt limit compromise bill which ended up passing the House in the spring of 2023 (Green 2023). Jordan’s rise to chair of the House Judiciary Committee — and his candidacy for Speaker following Kevin McCarthy's ouster later that year — would have been considered unthinkable less than a decade earlier and signaled the HFC’s changed role within the Republican conference.

McCarthy’s decision to agree to major HFC demands also meant partial success for the HFC’s attempt to pursue its agenda for rules reform. The HFC secured several procedural concessions aimed at decentralizing power from Republican leadership to rank-and-file members, although it failed to achieve many of its broader institutional objectives (Saksa 2022; Baer 2023). Throughout the 118th Congress, Republicans struggled to keep their cartel power as a majority party on organizational and procedural matters, resulting in a historically chaotic and unproductive Congress because of frequent GOP floor defections (Solender 2024).

The Speakership election fundamentally changed the balance of power between the HFC’s and Republican House leaders. The caucus had demonstrated that it had gained enough

influence to force party leaders into making substantial concessions. Among other points of leverage, the HFC now had two of its own among the nine Republicans on the House Rules Committee: Chip Roy and Ralph Norman. Together with libertarian HFC ally Thomas Massie they could defeat a rule when siding with the committee's four Democrats. As a result, McCarthy's successor Mike Johnson utilized House procedures typically reserved for uncontroversial bills: suspension of the rules. Suspension of the rules allows consensus bills to move quickly through the full House but requires a two-thirds majority. Consequently, several pieces of important legislation passed the House with bipartisan majorities through suspension.³

Johnson's reliance on suspension of the rules for major bipartisan legislation suggests the HFC's institutional gains had real limits: when HFC's Rules Committee seats threatened to obstruct bills leadership needed to pass, Johnson simply routed around the committee altogether, preserving an exit option unavailable to leadership in earlier Congresses only because it required accepting a two-thirds threshold and Democratic votes. This suggests that HFC's institutional inclusion expanded members' opportunities to shape and advance legislation without giving them full control over the chamber's agenda. Because Legislative Effectiveness Scores reward exactly this kind of access — sponsorship, committee advancement, and floor consideration — HFC members' successful bargaining with McCarthy and Johnson should translate into higher individual lawmaking effectiveness relative to their performance in prior Congresses, even as the Speaker retained tools to sideline the HFC when necessary. I therefore expect this shift in institutional power to narrow the gap between HFC and non-HFC Republicans identified in H1.

³ The Tax Relief for American Families and Workers Act of 2024, the Lower Costs, More Transparency Act, the National Defense Authorization Act, several continuing resolutions, Senate appropriations bills, and other bills passed under suspension (Dayton and Watney 2025).

Hypothesis 2: The gap in Legislative Effectiveness Scores between HFC members and other Republicans narrows in the 118th Congress following the institutional concessions extracted from McCarthy after the Speakership fight.

An important scope condition shaping the HFC's ascendancy within the GOP lies outside the chamber altogether: Donald Trump's role as the Republican Party's preeminent figure and de facto enforcer of party discipline. Unlike McCarthy, whose speakership depended almost entirely on internal chamber bargaining, Johnson governed under the shadow of a party leader with the standing to make or break a Speaker's position independent of formal legislative leverage – a dynamic evident when Trump's public backing helped stabilize Johnson's speakership during motion-to-vacate threats against him in April of 2024 (Schnell 2024). Because HFC members have aligned themselves closely with Trump, Johnson's dependence on Trump's favor gave the caucus a second, extra-institutional channel of influence layered on top of the procedural concessions won from McCarthy: In a presidency-centric party (Alexander and Jacobs 2023), a good relationship with Trump will help Republican lawmakers to advance their legislative agenda. HFC Chair Andy Harris reflected on the HFC's changed standing at the group's 10th anniversary celebration in 2025: “From secretly meeting in a basement somewhere afraid of leadership, now you're in a ballroom in Willard where the speaker came through that door yesterday to praise us.” (Mondeaux 2025).

Data and Research Design

The study of members of Congress' policymaking effectiveness has benefited greatly from Volden and Wiseman's legislative effectiveness research program. Their Legislative Effectiveness Scores (LES) measure how successful a member of Congress is at advancing their sponsored bills through the lawmaking process, relative to their peers. For each Congress, the

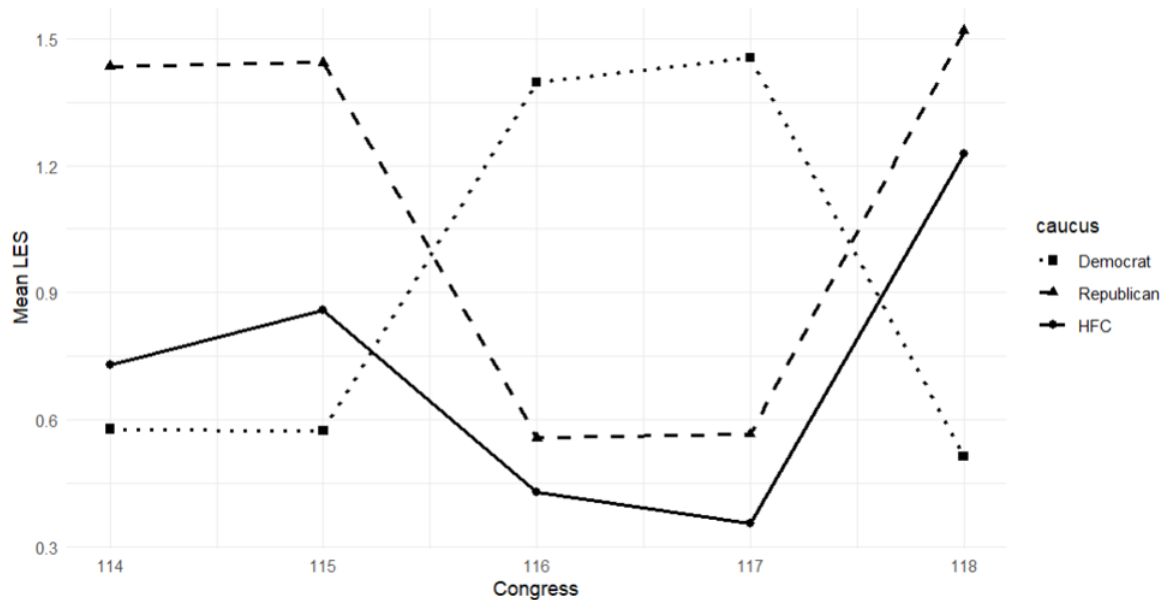
score tracks every bill a member introduced across five stages: whether it received action in committee, action beyond committee, passage in the House, and enactment into law (Volden and Wiseman 2014). Bills are also weighted by substantive significance, sorted into three tiers – commemorative, substantive, or substantive and significant – so that passing a major policy bill counts for more than passing a ceremonial one. Combining these fifteen bill-level indicators (five stages $\times$ three significance levels) into a weighted average produces a single score for each legislator in each two-year Congress. Scores are normalized to average 1 within each Congress, meaning a score above 1 indicates above-average lawmaking effectiveness and below 1 indicates below-average effectiveness, making the measure comparable across members and over time.

For this study, I combine available LES data with an indicator variable for membership in the House Freedom Caucus, using data on caucus membership from its founding during the 114th Congress (the HFC’s founding) to the 118th Congress – the last Congress for which LES data is available. Because the caucus keeps its official membership roster confidential, I rely on publicly available accounts of individual members’ caucus membership. In practice, HFC members are generally open about their affiliation, and journalists routinely identify members in reporting on the caucus.

Figure 1 plots mean Legislative Effectiveness Scores (LES) by caucus affiliation across the 114th through 118th Congresses. Democratic and Republican trend lines move inversely with majority status: whichever party holds the House majority shows substantially higher LES, consistent with the well-documented majority-party advantage in lawmaking effectiveness. HFC members, by contrast, remain the lowest-performing group across the 114th through 117th Congresses regardless of which party controls the chamber – tracking well below their Republican co-partisans even when Republicans hold the majority. In the 118th Congress,

however, HFC scores jump up sharply, reaching effectiveness levels almost on par with other non-HFC Republicans. This development is consistent with H2.

Figure 1: Mean LES per Congress



Because HFC membership is not randomly assigned, a naive comparison of legislative effectiveness between HFC and non-HFC Republicans may confound the relationship between caucus membership and legislative effectiveness with preexisting characteristics associated with selection into the caucus. To address this selection problem, I employ propensity-score nearest-neighbor matching with a caliper. The propensity score is estimated as the predicted probability of HFC membership conditional on members' ideology, district partisanship, seniority, and committee chair status. Each HFC member is then matched to the nearest non-HFC Republican based on the estimated propensity score, using one-to-one matching and imposing a caliper of 0.1 standard deviations of the propensity-score distribution. Observations without a sufficiently close counterpart are excluded from the matched sample.

This procedure creates a comparison group of non-HFC Republicans with observable characteristics similar to those of HFC members, reducing imbalance in the covariates that may

otherwise confound comparisons of legislative effectiveness. I then estimate the association between HFC membership and LES within the matched sample, controlling for the matching covariates and Congress fixed effects. The resulting estimates therefore compare HFC members with observationally similar Republican legislators rather than with the Republican conference, providing a more stringent test of whether HFC membership is associated with individual legislative effectiveness. Legislators were matched on ideology (DW-NOMINATE), district partisanship (vote share), seniority (years served), and committee chair status, yielding two well-balanced groups of 130 legislators each – HFC members and non-members – spanning the 114th through the 118th Congress (see Table 1). The matching procedure substantially reduced observable differences between HFC members and their matched counterparts. All covariates except seniority exhibit absolute standardized mean differences below 0.10, with most below 0.05, indicating strong covariate balance across the matched sample. A t-test using clustered standard errors reveals no statistically significant difference in LES scores between the two groups, indicating that HFC membership alone does not predict legislative effectiveness once preexisting differences are accounted for.

Table 1: Balance of HFC Members & Matched Controls

Covariate	HFC members	Matched controls	Std. mean difference
DW-NOMINATE	0.635	0.633	0.024
Vote percentage	65.75	66.02	−0.025
Seniority	3.81	4.10	−0.126
Committee chair	0.015	0.023	−0.076
Majority party	0.615	0.662	−0.095

Results

I estimate the effect of HFC membership using both matching and regression adjustment. The matched sample reported in Table 2 (N=260) restricts comparisons to Republicans with similar ideological and institutional characteristics, while the full sample (N=1,139) includes all

House Republicans. Under the assumption that selection into the HFC is adequately captured by the observed covariates, the matched analysis estimates the average treatment effect of HFC membership relative to comparable non-HFC Republicans. The sharp attenuation from the bivariate to the adjusted models — from a large, significant negative coefficient to a small, non-significant one — indicates that HFC members' lower effectiveness is largely attributable to observable differences in ideology or committee position. Once controls are included, HFC membership is not associated with a statistically significant difference in legislative effectiveness among matched legislators. These findings suggest that HFC membership does not, by itself, confer the legislative effectiveness benefits identified in existing research on congressional factions, consistent with H1.

Table 2: Regression Estimates

	Bivariate	All Republicans	Matched Sample
(Intercept)	1.133*** (0.047)	1.594*** (0.248)	0.929* (0.496)
HFC Member	-0.409*** (0.076)	-0.033 (0.097)	-0.104 (0.102)
Ideology (DW-NOMINATE)		-1.121*** (0.333)	-1.514* (0.565)
District Vote %		-0.009*** (0.003)	0.007 (0.005)
Seniority		0.023** (0.017)	0.005 (0.017)
Committee Chair		1.420*** (0.246)	1.759*** (1.102)
Majority Party		0.676*** (0.072)	0.521*** (0.126)
Number of Obs.	1139	1139	260
R2	0.021	0.301	0.259

p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Standard errors clustered by legislator. Congress fixed effects included but not shown.

Table 3 reports differences in mean legislative effectiveness between HFC and non-HFC Republicans across the full sample and by congressional majority status. Across all Republican

House members, HFC members have a lower mean LES than non-HFC Republicans (0.718 versus 0.866), but the difference is not statistically significant ($t=1.45$, $p=.147$). The results are similar when separating minority and majority-party Congresses. During the 116th and 117th Congresses, when Republicans were in the minority, HFC members have slightly higher mean effectiveness than non-HFC Republicans (0.376 versus 0.364), with little difference between the groups ($p=.886$). During Republican majority Congresses, HFC members have substantially lower mean effectiveness than non-HFC Republicans (0.932 versus 1.123), although this difference also falls short of conventional levels of statistical significance ($p=.169$). Thus, the data provide no evidence that HFC membership is associated with greater individual legislative effectiveness, either when Republicans hold the majority or when they are in the minority. The selection interpretation is supported across all conditions – the HFC attracts legislators who would underperform traditional effectiveness benchmarks regardless of institutional context.

Table 3: LES for HFC Members under Majority and Minority Status

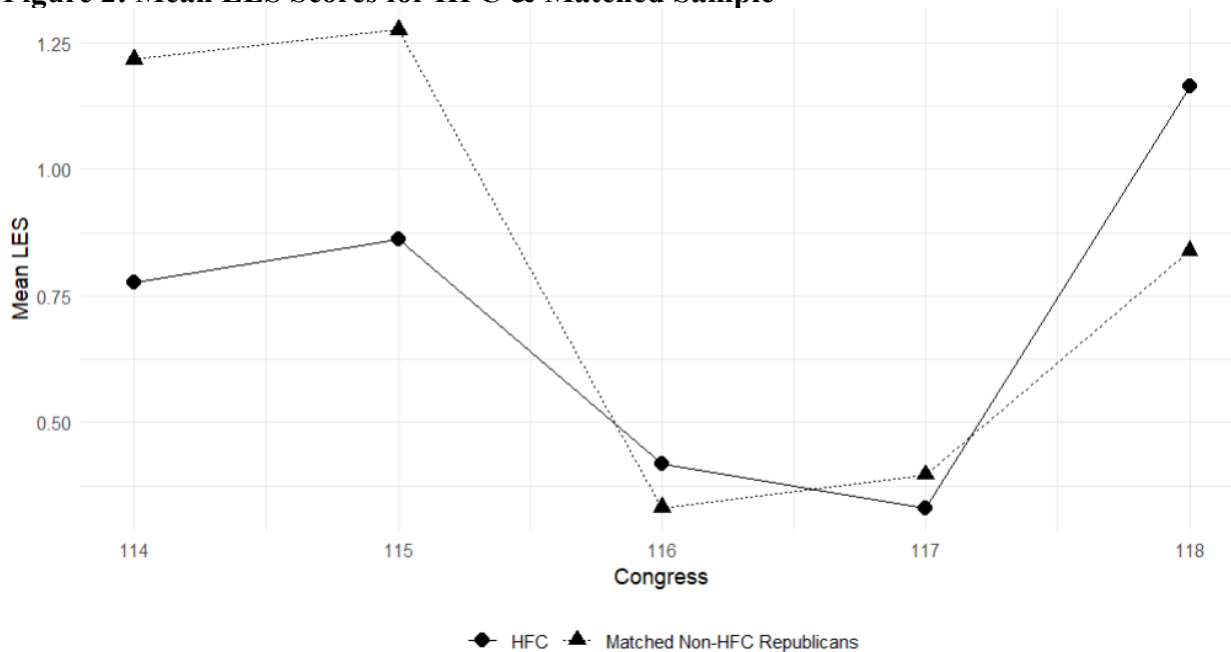
Sample	Non-HFC Mean	HFC Mean	t	p
Full sample	0.866	0.718	1.45	0.147
Minority congresses (116th–117th)	0.364	0.376	-0.14	0.886
Majority congresses (114th, 115th, 118th)	1.123	0.932	1.38	0.169

Figure 2 plots mean Legislative Effectiveness Scores (LES) for House Freedom Caucus (HFC) members and the matched sample of non-HFC Republicans. The comparison reveals a consistent pattern of lower legislative effectiveness among HFC members in the early Congresses, with the largest gaps occurring in the 114th and 115th Congresses. The two groups converge in the 116th Congress under minority status before diverging again in the 117th. Notably, both groups' effectiveness increases in the 118th Congress, when Republicans controlled the House, but the increase is considerably larger among HFC members. Their mean

LES rises from approximately 0.34 in the 117th Congress to 1.16 in the 118th, compared with an increase from approximately 0.40 to 0.85 among matched non-HFC Republicans. Thus, while HFC members generally exhibit lower legislative effectiveness than otherwise similar Republicans, the 118th Congress represents a notable departure from this pattern, providing evidence for H2.

The fact that HFC scores surpass those of the matched sample during the 118th Congress undermines the potential counterargument that intraparty caucus influence “naturally” rises over time. Figure 2 shows that there is little difference between HFC members and matched Republicans during the two Congresses in which Republican were in the minority – the mean LES of both groups are virtually indistinguishable. Yet, matched Republicans underperform in the 118th Congress compared to previous majority-GOP Congresses. In contrast, HFC members now outperform their otherwise similar peers – in line with the institutional balance-of-power argument developed above.

Figure 2: Mean LES Scores for HFC & Matched Sample



The fact that HFC scores surpass those of the matched sample during the 118th Congress undermines the potential counterargument that intraparty caucus influence “naturally” rises over time. Figure 2 shows that there is little difference between HFC members and matched Republicans during the two Congresses in which Republican were in the minority – the mean LES of both groups are virtually indistinguishable. Yet, matched Republicans underperform in the 118th Congress compared to previous majority-GOP Congresses. In contrast, HFC members now outperform their otherwise similar peers – in line with the institutional balance-of-power argument developed above.

Figure 2 also undermines a simple selection story. If HFC members were just permanently ineffective legislators, we would see no comparable rise in the 118th Congress. Instead, it appears that the HFC benefited from a changed opportunity structure within the House Republican conference. The concessions McCarthy made to secure the speakership — Rules Committee seats, the single-member motion to vacate, favorable committee assignments — appear to have translated into measurable lawmaking gains for HFC members in the 118th. These concessions offered the HFC opportunities to shape which proposals reached the floor and under what conditions. In particular, the restoration of the motion-to-vacate mechanism gave individual members a credible threat to challenge the Speaker, while HFC representation on the Rules Committee provided members with a direct role in controlling the legislative agenda. In short, the prolonged fight over Kevin McCarthy’s speakership demonstrated that the HFC could exercise meaningful leverage over the House Republican leadership.

The significance of the episode extends beyond the collective power of the caucus. The speakership fight demonstrated to individual HFC members that their votes could determine the survival of party leadership and, by extension, the conditions under which legislation could move

through the chamber. McCarthy's dependence on a small number of conservative holdouts created a form of individual bargaining leverage that had been less apparent in previous Congresses. Thus, the increase in HFC members' legislative effectiveness in the 118th Congress may reflect not a fundamental shift in their orientation toward conventional lawmaking, but a change in the strategic environment in which they operated. Having demonstrated that they could make or break a Speaker, individual HFC members possessed greater leverage over the legislative process and greater incentives for party leaders to accommodate their preferences. The 118th Congress therefore represents an important case in which the HFC's capacity for procedural disruption translated into greater individual effectiveness within the formal lawmaking process.

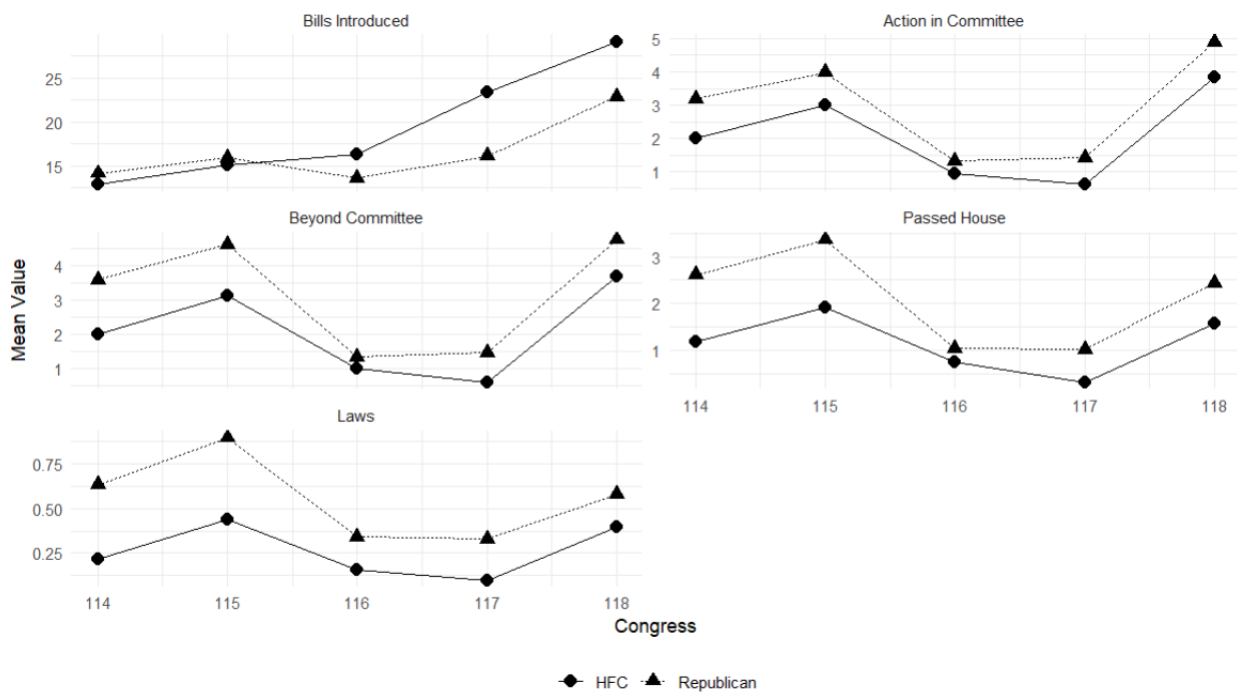
In October 2023, Rep. Matt Gaetz – despite his reputation as a far-right insurgent not a member of the HFC – invoked the motion-to-vacate rule to force a vote on McCarthy's speakership after McCarthy relied on Democratic votes to avert a government shutdown. He and seven Republicans joined Democrats to remove McCarthy, the first Speaker to ever be ousted by their own party through a formal vote (Edmundson 2023). House Republicans failed to agree on a successor for three weeks, paralyzing the House before electing Mike Johnson as Speaker. The episode demonstrated that a small number of conservative Republicans could credibly threaten party leadership and, with Democratic cooperation, determine the fate of the Speaker. The HFC's relationship with House Republican leaders improved markedly after Johnson took over.⁴

The component measures in Figure 3 indicate that the 118th Congress increase in HFC legislative effectiveness was broad-based rather than driven by a single stage of the lawmaking process. HFC members introduced more legislation and experienced marked increases in committee action, advancement beyond committee, House passage, and enactment. Although

⁴ In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, Johnson recalled telling HFC members after his election, "I don't come to you, I come from you. I get up with the same exact thing in mind that you have" (Beavers 2026).

they continued to lag other Republicans at most stages of the legislative process, the simultaneous improvement across all five components suggests that the HFC's enhanced bargaining leverage in the 118th Congress translated into greater success in moving their preferred bills. It is notable, however, that Republicans struggled with the final stages of the lawmaking process: House passage and getting legislation signed into law. Figure 3 shows a drop-off across the Republican conference in those categories compared to previous majority-GOP Congresses.

Figure 3: LES Components over Time



The increase in HFC members' legislative effectiveness in the 118th Congress occurred against the backdrop of an unusually weak and internally divided House majority, in which the capacity of Republican leaders to enact legislation depended disproportionately on a small number of lawmakers. The GOP majority's failure rate to achieve passage of its own proposals ("disappointment vote") was unusually high at 23 percent of party unity votes, down from 36

percent in 2023, but still the highest failure rate for a House majority in decades (Lesniewski and Kelly 2025).

The high number of disappointment votes is at least partly the result of a sharp increase in floor amendments, and the change in the scale of this activity is striking. HFC members accounted for 204 of the 377 floor amendments offered during the 118th Congress – approximately 54 percent of all amendments – and thus offered more amendments collectively than were offered by the entire House during the 117th Congress (188). Generally, a member can offer an amendment on the House floor without having previously introduced the substance of that amendment as a separate bill. These amendments would therefore not be counted as standalone bills receiving a floor vote and, accordingly, not be picked up by LES. During the 118th Congress, the leading HFC members in floor amendments were former HFC chair Scott Perry (offered 51, 5 of which were adopted), Lauren Boebert (offered 25, 11 adopted), Chip Roy (offered 23, 17 adopted), former HFC chair Andy Biggs (22, 2 adopted), Andy Ogles (22, 11 adopted), then-HFC chair Bob Good (21, none adopted), and Marjorie Taylor Greene⁵ (19, none adopted).⁶ Some of these amendments were included in House appropriations bills, and some reflected the HFC’s libertarian bent, for example on civil liberties (e.g., Roy’s attempt at FISA reform) and its preference for a more isolationist foreign policy (see Homan and Lantis 2020).

The prevalence of HFC amendments is notable not only as evidence of increased legislative activity, but also because floor amendments provide members with an opportunity to directly shape legislation under consideration. Their extensive use in the 118th Congress therefore

⁵ The HFC voted to remove Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene from the group in June 2023 after her personal attacks against other HFC members. Rep. Andy Harris said, “I think the straw that broke the camel’s back was publicly saying things about another member in terms that no one should” (Carney 2023).

⁶ Other HFC members who offered floor amendments were Paul Gosar with 6, Warren Davidson 6, Andrew Clyde 4, Diana Harshbarger 4, and Ben Cline 1.

suggests that HFC members have gained greater access to the legislative agenda, using a more open floor process to alter, constrain, or publicly contest legislation even when they were unable to advance their own standalone legislation.

Although the quantitative analysis ends with the 118th Congress, data on HFC bills collected for the current 119th Congress provide preliminary evidence that the increase in HFC members' legislative effectiveness may extend beyond the 118th Congress. Under unified Republican government, the HFC again occupied a pivotal position in the passage of key Republican agenda items. During negotiations over the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA), HFC members used the threat of withholding their votes to press Republican leaders for more conservative provisions, including repeal of clean-energy subsidies enacted under the Inflation Reduction Act (Frazin 2025). Their opposition to the Senate version of the OBBBA became consequential enough that President Trump personally lobbied HFC members during the final negotiations over the legislation (Bennett 2025). As Lee (2026) observes, opposing legislation that is certain to pass carries relatively little cost, whereas threatening to defeat a president's central domestic agenda is another matter. The 119th Congress therefore provides preliminary evidence that the HFC's increased influence was not merely a product of divided government or an unusual leadership configuration. At the same time, it remains unclear whether this influence will persist. The HFC and the Republican conference face a major transition in 2026, with the potential return to minority status after the midterm elections and the departure of several prominent caucus members – including Chip Roy, Andy Biggs, Ralph Norman, Byron Donalds, Tom Tiffany, and Barry Moore – to seek higher office (Brooks 2026). These changes will test whether the HFC's leverage can be reproduced by a new generation of more junior members.

Conclusion

This study began with a simple question: does membership in the House Freedom Caucus make legislators more effective lawmakers? The evidence presented here suggests that the answer is more conditional than existing accounts of factional benefits imply. Across the 114th through 117th Congresses, HFC members were no more effective than otherwise similar Republican legislators, and their lower levels of legislative effectiveness were largely accounted for by observable differences between HFC members and other Republicans. In the minority, where existing research suggests faction members may enjoy greater autonomy and legislative benefits, HFC members were no more effective than other Republicans. These findings indicate that faction membership does not automatically translate into greater individual capacity to move legislation through the conventional lawmaking process.

These findings also demonstrate that factional influence and individual legislative effectiveness are distinct concepts. The HFC has exercised substantial influence in Congress, but much of that influence has operated through mechanisms that conventional measures of legislative effectiveness are not designed to capture. Threatening to withhold votes, challenging party leaders, leveraging procedure, blocking legislation, and forcing concessions can give a faction considerable power without necessarily increasing its members' success at sponsoring and advancing legislation. Indeed, a faction organized around challenging party leadership may attract or cultivate legislators for whom these forms of political influence are more valuable than conventional legislative productivity. The HFC's relatively low effectiveness during its first several Congresses is therefore not necessarily evidence that the organization lacked power.

The 118th Congress provides an important qualification. HFC members' legislative effectiveness increased sharply after some of its members used their pivotal position in the 2023 speakership contest to obtain greater institutional access, including representation on the Rules

Committee and changes to House procedures. The same legislators who had consistently lagged other Republicans in conventional legislative effectiveness suddenly became substantially more successful at moving legislation through the lawmaking process. This change is difficult to reconcile with a simple account in which HFC members are inherently or permanently ineffective lawmakers. Instead, it suggests that the institutional position of a faction can determine whether its political leverage translates into the kinds of legislative opportunities captured by LES. When HFC members operated primarily as outsiders challenging party leadership, their influence was expressed largely through negative agenda control and public threats. When party leaders became dependent on their support and incorporated them more fully into the legislative process, that same bargaining leverage could be converted into conventional legislative productivity.

This finding has broader implications for the study of congressional factions. Existing research has sought to identify general benefits of faction membership, but the HFC suggests that the consequences of membership depend on what a faction is organized to do and on the institutional opportunities available to it. Ideological similarity alone may therefore be insufficient for understanding factional effects. Two caucuses occupying similar ideological positions can differ substantially in their internal cohesion, relationships with party leadership, and preferred strategies of influence. Treating them as interchangeable risks obscuring the mechanisms through which factions affect their members and their parties.

These conclusions should be interpreted with two important limitations in mind. First, the matching design improves comparability between HFC members and other Republican legislators but cannot rule out selection on unobserved characteristics. The evidence is therefore consistent with, rather than definitive proof of, the argument that HFC members are

disproportionately oriented toward forms of political influence other than conventional lawmaking. Second, LES captures only one dimension of legislative influence. It is well suited to measuring success in advancing sponsored legislation, but it cannot fully capture a faction's ability to block proposals, alter the agenda, extract concessions, or constrain party leadership. Future research should therefore examine factional influence using a breadth of evidence that captures other forms of legislative power.

Ultimately, the case of the HFC suggests that the consequences of faction membership hinge less on membership itself than on the interaction of three conditions: the type of lawmaker who joins, what the faction is organized to accomplish, and how much institutional leverage its members possess. Faction membership is neither uniformly beneficial nor inherently detrimental to individual lawmakers precisely because these conditions vary – and, as the preceding analysis shows, they varied substantially even within the HFC's own history. Its trajectory from an insurgent organization operating largely outside and against Republican leadership to a pivotal bloc with direct access to leadership resources illustrates how quickly those conditions can change. Understanding congressional factions therefore requires moving beyond the question of whether they matter to ask what kind of power a faction exercises and under what institutional conditions that power converts into legislative influence.

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