From consensus to fracture: Reagan, the contras, and the politics of intelligence oversight

Abstract: Congress has a long history of deference to the Executive with regard to foreign policy and the intelligence community. During the Cold War in particular, Congress often wished to be kept at arm's reach from covert operations conducted by Democratic and Republican presidential administrations. Yet in the 1980s, Members of Congress began to assert themselves over the Reagan administration's covert operation to provide aid and weapons to the contras in Nicaragua. We articulate a theory showing how backbenchers moved intelligence committee members away from deference and into a more polarized, adversarial posture. We then investigate the mechanisms of this theory with a novel dataset of speeches of Members of Congress, 1981-1983, on the topic of Nicaragua. We find that intelligence committee members' rhetoric began to shift towards the rhetoric of backbenchers as more revelations about the covert operation are made public. These findings suggest that the modern confrontational attitude of Congress toward the intelligence agencies has its roots in the 1980s, rather than the 1990s, and demonstrate a new mechanism by which Congress oversees the executive.

Introduction

In 1981, the incoming Reagan administration initiated a series of policy changes in order to support anti-regime rebels in Nicaragua. By December, the Administration had presented a covert action finding to Congress. Internal deliberations make clear that the Administration and the CIA aimed at undermining the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua both internationally and domestically through paramilitary operations. This, however, was not how the plan was presented to Congress. Intelligence committees were told that the operation would be small and primarily aimed at stopping the flow of weapons from Nicaragua to neighboring El Salvador (Gates: 1996, 245). Over the next few years, the Administration's support for the 'contras' became one of the most controversial operations of the Cold War. It engendered divisions and partisanship in Congress and eventually escalated to a full-blown scandal, Iran-Contra (Byrne 2014). While it is true that – in the post-Watergate and post-'season of inquiry' era (Townley 2021) – Congress adopted a more adversarial posture towards the executive and the intelligence community, a confrontation was not a foregone conclusion. In other areas, for example the support for the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan, Congress was supportive of covert operations and – at times – adopted a more assertive posture than the executive itself (Crile 1993, Bolsinger 2024). How did such a high degree of partisanship and confrontation emerge over the 'contras'? What dynamics led to an open confrontation between the executive and Congress?

We articulate a modified understanding of how Congressional support towards – or opposition to – covert action by the Presidency emerges. The type of confrontation exhibited by Members of Congress towards the intelligence community and the executive is not merely the adoption of a reflexive, distrustful stance. Instead, confrontation emerges due to pressures from entrepreneurial individual Members of Congress that then reshape the preferences of their colleagues. Specifically, we maintain that Congressional deference towards the intelligence agencies is undermined by ideological or electoral considerations of backbench Members of Congress, broadly construed under the umbrella of polarization. Partisans willing and able to create a wedge issue on foreign policy, by taking more dovish or more hawkish positions, will do so. If this partisan division reaches the committee system itself, then deference towards the administration and intelligence committees will evaporate. We adopt the model of committees as moderate preference outliers and informative bodies (Weingast & Marshall 1988; Prince & Overby 2005) and demonstrate the extent to which this is undone by covert operations and partisan backbenchers' demands for accountability. This paper incorporates elements of theories of intelligence oversight (Smist 1994; Zegart 2011; Johnson 2013; Trenta et al 2024) with theories of bureaucratic delegation (McCubbins & Schwartz 1984; Epstein & O'Halloran 1994; Brown et al 1997), trying to reconcile arguments of a deferential, "Cheerleading" legislative role relative to the intelligence community alongside strong incentives in the bureaucratic delegation literature to rein in the intelligence community.

To test this claim, we focus on the early years of the Reagan Administration's operations in Nicaragua. We analyse the period 1981-1983, assessing how confrontation emerged, and the role in which backbench Members of Congress chose to be adversarial. We draw on an original dataset of nearly 3,700 speeches and conduct quantitative text analysis on them to investigate the prevalence of confrontation from backbenchers and intelligence committee members. We also draw on a wealth of primary sources, particularly from the National Security Archive, the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and the CIA CREST archive, and personal papers of leading Members of Congress, as well as secondary source materials, to test our proposition. We find that members of the intelligence committee acted in a more deferential manner than other members of Congress, but only up to a point. As the administration ran roughshod over Congressional attempts to constrain, resolve from members of relevant Intelligence Committees hardened and they joined backbenchers in substantially constraining the executive. We note that this presents a junction between prior, committee-centric, and post, party-centric, attitudes among Intelligence Committee members.

We therefore offer three contributions in this paper: first, the theoretical work brings together the elements of two distinct theories, showing how bureaucratic delegation and intelligence oversight can result in an expectation of backbencher position-taking moving the Intelligence Committees to their position, rather than the committees moving backbenchers. Second, we introduce an original dataset of the content of Congressional speeches regarding Nicaragua during the early years of the Administration and, crucially, before the early steps that would lead to the Iran-Contra scandal. We analyse these data using both qualitative and quantitative techniques to provide methodological resilience and necessary contextualisation. Third, we identify a novel mechanism in our finding – the rhetoric of the intelligence committee differs from backbenchers, converges during major scandal, but then diverges again. However, backbenchers maintain pressure on the intelligence community, signalling somewhat a role reversal between the intelligence committees as preference outliers and backbenchers as uninformed and uninterested. In other words, it is backbenchers, and not the Committees that raise alarm about intelligence activities and focus the attention of Committee members. More importantly, the means by which this happens

In the following sections, we outline our novel theoretical contribution and detail the mechanisms by which the intelligence agencies, members of Congress on intelligence committees, and the rest of Congress dealt with each other as the covert operation unfolded. Next, we investigate primary-source texts from the time to explain how the primary actors in the scandal thought about this relationship. We then interrogate a quantitative dataset of floor speeches by members of Congress, showing how rhetoric around Nicaragua evolved between 1981 and 1983. We conclude by noting that the post-Nicaragua landscape differs from the early decades of the Cold War in the insertion of partisanship and adversariness into a previously – largely - bipartisan and deferential approach to covert and semi-covert overseas operations.

Context

Based on prior literature, there is a specific format for how Cold War-era covert operations would proceed and be revealed to Congress. The White House and the intelligence agencies would agree on a course of action. Afterward, they would selectively disclose some details to individual members of Congress (Trenta et al. 2024). Specifically, the members of Congress most likely to be partially informed are the chairs and ranking members of intelligence- and defence- focused Committees. Those chairs/ranking members would then decide to inform other members of the Committee, in order to obtain bipartisan support to pass any funding packages required to ensure the success of the covert operation, and to signal to rank-and-file members from both parties to guarantee floor passage (Barrett 2017).

Yet this model began to break down in the mid-1970s, and clear fractures began emerging in the 1980s, with several contributing factors. In this paper, we give a particular emphasis on aid to Nicaraguan rebels and a Reagan administration all too willing to fund them even to the extent of risking cordial relations with Congress. The operation to provide funds, training, and weapons to the Contras was handled by the Reagan administration in such a way that members of Congress felt compelled to provide aggressive resistance to the covert action itself. While our story does not cover the entirety of the Reagan administration's relations with Congress[1], we highlight major events and demonstrate with a mixed-methods approach the extent to which our backbenchers made the heads of the Intelligence committees move toward their preferred policy positions.

Theory

We argue that lawmakers will act in two distinct ways. Lawmakers seated on the relevant committees – those on intelligence, defence, national security, and foreign affairs – will behave consistent with theories on bureaucratic delegation and committee-members-as-preference-outliers (Brown et al., 1997; Prince & Overby 2005). By contrast, rank-and-file members will express position-taking behavior, ignoring the expertise of the relevant committee members. Further, we anticipate that the Committee group will be comprised of ideological moderates on foreign intervention, while rank-and-file members will act as ideologues – even if they are moderates in other issue domains.

Intel Community members – moderate preference outliers

The modern bureaucratic delegation literature sets out to solve how bureaucrats as actors differ from other organizational actors, and how the processes of bureaucracy constrain organizations from making rapid changes to a system. In many theoretical debates on political organization, scholars often deal with the federal bureaucracy of the United States as a motivating case, or even the only case (Huber & McCarty 2012; Epstein & O'Halloran 1994, McCubbins, Noll, & Weingast 1987). In this article, we apply these theories as appropriate given the topic.

Early debates centered on how elected officials constrained bureaucrats from moving policy in a unidimensional policy space. In these accounts, bureaucrats and politicians exist in an information asymmetry: the bureaucrat knows more about policy than the politician and has an incentive to move policy away from the politician's preferred position. This threatens the linkage between voters, politicians, and policy. At the same time, the politician wants the bureaucrat to be able to move policy to provide the most benefit for citizens and only react when voters do (McCubbins & Schwartz 1984). Procedural control is the answer – placing hurdles to slow down the bureaucracy and signal changes far in advance. Therefore, bureaucratic red tape becomes a weapon by Congress to stop agencies from moving quickly or radically from the status quo (McCubbins, Noll, & Weingast 1987). At the center of these debates were standard principal-agent models, both formal and atheoretical (Gailmard & Patty 2012).

The literature has moved on to introducing the distinction between the presidency, Congress, and the bureaucrat themselves. In this world, Congress wishes to control the bureaucracy, and to hold the presidency accountable, but implements procedures in a discretionary, rather than universal or uniform, manner (Epstein & O'Halloran, 1994). The agents still retain considerable power to make policy, but efforts are made not to reduce budgets but to require multiple points of accountability in order to improve efficiency (Wiseman 2009). Additional work focuses on bureaucratic capacity: the ability of the agency to accomplish its objectives and how Congress can adequately fund these agencies (Huber & McCarty 2004).

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[1] There is a larger literature on the reform of Congressional committees in the 1970s as Southern Democrats' sway over the committee structure was overhauled by a larger cohort of younger, more liberal Northern and Western Democrats. With regard to the intelligence committees, the Hughes-Ryan Amendment of 1974 is the most relevant.

We lay out several assumptions in this paragraph. As it pertains to the intelligence community, we argue that members of Congress understand they do not possess the expertise or ability to rapidly adjust to global events the way intelligence agencies are able to. This broad discretionary authority granted to intelligence agencies further permits them to engage in activities that Congress does not have the political capital or will to pursue with traditional foreign policy tools (Zegart 2001). At the same time, these members of Congress do not want these agents to harm their electoral prospects; activities that stray too far from the stated goals of elected representatives would require Congress to be more vigilant in policing intelligence agencies. Unlike domestic bureaucrats, however, Congress can benefit from the discretionary activities of intelligence agencies as their behavior will – usually – not affect domestic citizens. Only very salient issues will raise attention and ire from voters. Therefore, the less attention given to the activities of intelligence agencies, the better it is for some members of Congress to react and constrain their behavior in semi-private (Johnson, 2017).

This is particularly the case for members of relevant intelligence committees. These individuals have more power to constrain intelligence agencies than the rest of Congress and select into committees due to their relative expertise and interest in the subject matter (Sprague 2008). Their expertise on the issue should make them deferential to intelligence agencies, as well as capable of restraining agents when intelligence activity harms the electoral goals of committee members. When these members speak on the intelligence community, it will be in measured tones and vaguely refer to the capabilities of the bureaucracy.

Yet the theory requires adaptation to the unique problem facing members of Congress and intelligence agencies. The literature on committee members suggests that these committee members make policy that appropriately constrains the bureaucracy and improves the quality of life, and then inform their colleagues how to vote and behave regarding the new policy. This runs into difficulty when in-the-know politicians – committee members – have strong incentives to not publicize how the bureaucracy is behaving. If backbench members do not know the preferences of the preference outliers, they have incentives to position-take.

Backbenchers as position-takers

Position-taking in Congress is a means for backbench politicians to stake a clear distinct policy preference, even from their own party, as a means of cultivating a personal brand (Carey & Shugart 1995). A position-taking lawmaker wants to be perceived as making changes – or calling for changes – rather than engaged in the difficult work of finding compromise to effectively pass policy changes (Grimmer 2013). Not all backbench members of Congress are engaged in position-taking on any given issue; it is far more likely that an ideologue deeply dissatisfied with the status quo will make a public statement criticizing the policy than a relative moderate.

In the case of the intelligence agencies, position-taking allows a lawmaker to make government activity salient, including covert or semi-covert activity (Zegart and Quinn 2010). This may benefit opposition politicians who want to harm the electoral prospects of the governing party, or dissatisfied members of the majority party who wish a different factional view to take predominance within the governing party. In either case, they will use their ability to make public speeches, and the associated exposure from the media, to draw attention to the actions of the intelligence community.

Unlike domestic policy, where opponents of a policy can simply voice their opposition, it has traditionally been unpopular to support isolationism as opposed to American interventionism.[2] The backbench critic needs to cast their critique in a different light. This critique traditionally appears as more hawkish rather than less so; they will argue that the intelligence agency will need to be more robust in its policy or approach. This is to ensure that the backbencher themselves receives public attention to boost their re-election campaign. If this is a covert action, this has the twin threat of also raising the salience of American intervention. This type of position-taking is not dissimilar to position-taking in authoritarian regimes, where such behavior is designed to signal to powerful constituencies their loyalty (Schuler 2020). This is demonstrated in the case of previous Cold-War era covert operations, such as the overthrow of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala, where backbenchers tended to be more ideological than members on relevant committees (Trenta et al. 2024).

Only under the most egregious circumstances will legislators wish to cast themselves as more 'dovish' than the administration. Such circumstances are indeed rare, and it requires the administration to truly overstep its bounds. The types of lawmakers willing to speak out, and those willing to go further to make substantial policy changes, remain poorly understood. While the electoral benefits are clear, the risks are large: failure to both take a distinct position and then make substantive policy changes carries a large probability of electoral backlash as voters reject fecklessness in favor of action.

We anticipate a new model: when lawmakers see themselves as more 'dovish' on average than the administration, they will start to pressure the 'links' in the chain of committee members to selectively disclose information to backbenchers, for use in producing electoral 'wedges' between themselves and the administration. First, rank-and-file members will exert pressure on intelligence and defence Committees to be more transparent. This can take the guise of demanding more reports from the intelligence agencies, and then for Committee meetings to be made public rather than private. Second, backbenchers will try to disrupt the committee chair selection process as part of a larger intraparty policy fight. Indeed, in the 1970s liberal backbenchers in the Democratic Party made strides to overcome the control of powerful committees held by moderate Southern Democrats. Third, bipartisan unity between the chair and ranking member is likely to come under partisan strain as the party of the White House and the opposition develop stronger incentives to turn the issue into a salient, wedge issue to win votes in upcoming elections. While still within the larger theoretical context of reactive Congressional approaches to bureaucratic delegation (McCubbins & Schwartz 1984; Balla & Deering 2013; Drezner & Fowler 2025), our argument maintains that the mechanism by which the 'fire alarm' is raised differs with respect to foreign policy.

Hypotheses

In the case of Nicaragua, we argue that some elements of the original model held up in the early months of the covert operation. First, the leadership of the intelligence community were reluctant to speak out against the administration, while backbenchers are more likely to speak out. Second, as backbench pressure grows, rhetoric will become more and more radical. By this we mean to say that it will be more ideologically extreme and take on more positive or negative sentiment. However, other elements will differ; primarily that instead of radical rhetoric being more hawkish, it will be more dovish: the administration's position as the most hawkish possible makes differentiation as a dove the only viable outcome for backbenchers.

From these propositions, we can derive two expectations. First, that members of Congress who sit on committees relevant to the intelligence community will be less vocal on any given covert operation, and second, when they do speak, will do so in measured tones. By contrast, backbench members of Congress are more likely to speak out and will do so in a more ideologically radical tone. In the case at hand, backbenchers outside the committees, particularly Democrats opposed to aid to the Contras, tried to exercise pressure on the intelligence committees. Committee leadership initially "ignored" backbenchers but – particularly when listening to co-partisan backbenchers – became more interested and willing to fight as the Administration's lies mounted. Ultimately, committee leaders embrace backbencher rhetoric.

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[2] This is true for the post-World War 2 era of foreign policy. Before World War 2, isolationism was more popular. Since 2000, isolationism in both political parties has become attractive to voters and politicians again.

To test our expectations, we look at the case of Nicaragua and the Reagan administration's support for the Contras in the early 1980s. This offers a unique opportunity to explore how Congress moved to constrain the intelligence community and the presidency. We develop a structured narrative informed by primary and secondary sources from the time to articulate a story of how the intelligence community operated, as well as oversight from Congress. We use a dataset of nearly 3,700 speeches in Congress during the early months of the covert operation to observe whether backbenchers use more radical, more hawkish language than members of relevant committees.

The rationale for exploring our analysis using mixed-methods is to identify and isolate the cases under which the intelligence committees diverged from, then converged with, the rest of Congress as it concerned the administration's actions, 1981-1983. In our structured narrative, we explore primarily specific events that had an impact on inter-branch relations as information about the Nicaragua covert operation unfolded. We highlight three specific periods of time, broadly corresponding to the calendar years 1981, 1982, and 1983, to analyze the floor speeches of Members of Congress and identify the extent to which the rhetoric of intelligence committee members differed from backbenchers.

Reagan, Casey, Congress and the contras: from support to confrontation and back

Before the finding

In 1981, the Reagan Administration came to power with the aim of revamping the intelligence community and covert operations (Trenta 2024: 214). Taking the fight to the Soviet Union and its proxies required an aggressive CIA. This was particularly true in the case in Central America. Having witnessed the fall of the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua, the Carter Administration had developed doubts about the Sandinista junta that had taken power. Already in 1980, the administration had signed a presidential finding authorizing the CIA to support opposition leaders and groups in Nicaragua. The money was to be spent on propaganda and organization (Kagan 1996: 151; Glad 2011: 244). Its posture progressively hardened, especially in the context of the Sandinista leadership's support for the guerrilla in neighbouring El Salvador (Brzezinski 1981, Muskie 1981). But the Administration never considered providing money for training and weapons, or 'lethal aid' in CIA parlance. One of the recipients of these CIA funds had been Jose Francisco Cardenal, who had begun to organize political and military groups in Miami after he resigned from the Sandinista Council of State in May 1980 (Kagan 1996: 150).

In early 1981, under Reagan, these early efforts were expanded. In July, new CIA Director William Casey became convinced that Nicaragua's efforts to support the guerrilla in El Salvador posed a threat to the whole hemisphere (Gates 1996: 244). To deal with the region, Casey replaced Nestor Sanchez (a long-time Latin America hand) with Dewey Clarridge, whose gung-ho approach Casey shared. By November a new covert action plan was approved. The CIA started working to build and expand paramilitary forces that soon took the name of 'contras' – from *contra-revolucionarios* - and became the linchpin of the Reagan Administration's covert plan. As National Security Advisor Richard Allen (1981) wrote to the president, the 'ultimate goal' of this paramilitary force would be to 'liberate Nicaragua.' The CIA envisaged a three-pronged approach: build popular anti-Sandinista support in Nicaragua and Central America, support the opposition through the formation and training of forces to collect intelligence and conduct paramilitary operations, rely on non-US personnel[3] for the latter task with the option of involving CIA personnel more directly if needed (Leogrande 1998: 144). Within the Administration, the 'contra option' had emerged as a third way between those who wanted to give diplomacy a chance, including elements at the State Department, and those who wanted a more aggressive operation along the lines of the covert intervention in Guatemala, for example Undersecretary Fred Ikle at the Pentagon (Leogrande 1998: 110).

On December 1st, the National Security Planning Group (NSPG), the body in charge of covert operations and key foreign policy decisions, compiled a finding, which Reagan signed on the same day. Reagan's finding included $19 million to support and train a group of 500 men. The finding and the new National Security Directive (17) accompanying it were the first official measures of an effort the Administration had started already in the spring.

Casey's briefing to Congress and early responses

Early on, the administration had been concerned with how Congress could react. A memorandum sent from Richard Fairbanks (Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations at the State Department) to Michael Barnes (Chairman of the Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs) deflected concerns from members of Congress over 'press reports about training camps within the United States.' These training activities Fairbanks suggested, training activities were not illegal since those training were not planning to militarily invade other countries (Fairbanks 1981). [4] Representative David Bonior of Michigan had been particularly vocal about the training camps on the basis of travels to the region and an early article in *Parade* magazine (Gille 2024). The administration wanted to get ahead of any Congressional inquiries around the legality of its activities. Further according to Fairbanks (1981), the administration kept close tabs on swing-district Democrats in the summer of 1981 to gauge their support for action against the Sandinistas.

The state of congressional politics during the 1970s and 1980s were broadly in favor of discretionary action by the intelligence community by the start of the covert action in Nicaragua. As Diana Bolsinger wrote having looked at the early 1980s: 'All things being equal, legislators focus their oversight activities on those programs and issues most likely to improve their chances for reelection. Intelligence is rarely among these prioritized issues (Bolsinger 2024, 826).' Within the intelligence community, deference was given to committee chairs: the committee kept materials about the covert action within a small circle. Those individuals who did wish to participate, they were selected by the party leadership and were more ideologically moderate than their peers (Zegart 2011).

The rationale for the Administration's plans in Nicaragua – or at least the version the Administration soon communicated to intelligence committees – was an effort to stop the transfer of weapons from Nicaragua to El Salvador. From the start, though, frictions and obfuscations emerged. Mixed messages were also sent to local allies. As Gutman (1988: 55) noted Clarridge and the CIA told contras leaders that 'the United States had agreed to support action against the Sandinista government using the resistance forces and wanted to "liberate" Nicaragua.'

When briefing the Intelligence Committees on the finding, Casey presented the program as relatively small and with limited aims. He did not reveal the broader CIA agenda. Only the House Intelligence Committee had questions and was unpersuaded by Casey's answers. The Chairman of the Committee, Democrat Edward Boland agreed with Casey that the Agency would regularly brief the Committees on the program. This led to an early confrontation in February of 1982. Asked to brief the committees on Central America, Casey brought Clarridge along to participate. The latter shocked Committee members when he admitted that the force trained by the CIA now stood at 1100 men. It had more than doubled in the space of two months, raising early suspicions about the nature of the program (Persico 1991: 281).

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[3] This was a reference to the early agreement reached with the military junta in Argentina to conduct most of the training of the contras (Leogrande 1998: 145).

[4] Be that as it may, the training of the contras was moved to Honduras, part of a tri-partite agreement with Argentina (see note above).

In March 1982, the *New York Times* reported that Congress was raising concerns that too much leeway was being given to the CIA to oversee the operation (Gelb 1982). Further reporting noted that the CIA was given broad authority to support 'political and paramilitary operations against Cubans and Cuban supply lines in Nicaragua and elsewhere in Central America...questions were raised [in Congressional briefings] about who would actually control the paramilitary unit' (Gelb 1982). The Committees, however, remained overall supportive of the Administration's position. They shared the view that Nicaragua and Cuba posed a threat to the region and that the American people should be convinced of such threat (Haig 1982). This was also based on extensive 'highly classified' briefings conducted by the Administration with leading members of Congress (Einaudi 1982).

A second element of friction emerged in the summer of 1982 when the former Sandinista leader Eden Pastora defected and started launching a campaign against the Sandinistas. Clarridge and the CIA were very supportive of Pastora's efforts, hoping to build a united opposition front, but more cautious CIA officials saw how this posed a problem for the Agency's relations with Congress (Riding 1982). The Agency had justified its program as an effort to interdict weapons going from Nicaragua to El Salvador. Now the Agency was supporting Pastora's activities to undermine the Sandinistas from Costa Rica, in the South. Some called for a new intelligence finding (Gates 1996: 246), instead, Casey and the CIA decided to lie to the Committees and simply justify relations with Pastora as an effort to talk to all anti-Sandinista political forces (US Congress 1987: 32). Casey wrote to colleagues within the Agency that no further details should be shared with the Committee and that the Agency needed to avoid 'micromanagement' by the Committees (Gates 1998: 246).

At this point, though, the issue of Nicaragua and the contras remained a minor one in Congress. Only some outliers were calling for constraints on the Administration's activities in Central America. In June, Senator Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.), of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, offered a floor amendment to prohibit the use of military construction funds to build or upgrade airfields in Honduras. The concern was that activities in Honduras might provoke Nicaragua. The amendment was defeated as were other in the House, by Tom Harkin (D-IA), aimed at forestalling a military confrontation in Latin America (Arnson 1989: 110).

Newsweek and the media revelations: towards Boland I

In November, the nature of the 'contras' operation was blown open with a detailed story, likely fed at least in part by Casey himself, published in *Newsweek*. From the start, the story challenged the rationale the Administration had presented to the Committees. While the official justification was the interdiction of weapons, it read, 'the operation has another objective to harass and undermine the Cuban-backed government of Nicaragua.' The operation, the story continued, had become too large and risked getting out of control (Newsweek 1982). If until then the story and the covert operation had largely been contained, *Newsweek* made the support for the contras a matter of public and Congressional concern. Furthermore, by late 1982, other media stories were starting to appear regarding both the ineptitude of the 'contras' army and their human rights abuses (Leogrande 1998: 310). In November, the House Foreign Affairs Committee sent a critical letter to the Administration lamenting that it was taking 'far reaching decisions' without appropriate consultation (US House of Representatives 1981).

In December, Congressman Harkin spurred by both the *Newsweek* story and reports of contras abuses, presented an amendment to the FY 1983 Department of Defense Appropriations Bill. The amendment would have denied any funding for military activities in or against Nicaragua (Sullivan 1987). Harkin was supported by several in Congress who criticized both the Administration and the too timid approach taken by the House intelligence committee and its chairman, Boland. Harkin's strategy, as Victor Johnson, Staff director of the House of Representatives Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, recalled, aimed at redressing the disparity in information between the intelligence committees and the rest of Congress. Proposing legislation aimed at getting more information out of the committees and at making (at least part of) it public (Johnson 2024). Unlike many of the backbenchers calling for Congress to more forcefully sanction the administration, Boland was a traditional New Deal Democrat who saw his role on intelligence committees as far more deferential and cooperative. His aim, from the start, had been to demonstrate that the House could be trusted with intelligence secrecy and relied upon to carry out responsible oversight (Smist 1994: 226).

Boland made a clear appeal. He understood the concerns of many in Congress, but he argued that the body should not legislate 'without the benefit of all the facts. That is why,' he added, 'the intelligence committee was established.' The aim of the Committee was to keep the nation safe while maintaining 'sensible and prudent oversight.' Boland continued that he also understood his obligations towards Congress and – for this reason – he proposed his own amendment to the same bill (Kagan 1996: 243)

The amendment – likely worked out with the Administration (CQ Almanac 1983: 2) - aimed at prohibiting the use of funds 'for the purpose of' overthrowing the government of Nicaragua. It passed 411-0 (Kagan 1996: 243). As Robert Kagan detailed the end result was mixed. The Boland amendment left open loopholes that the Administration could exploit and a last-ditch attempt by Harkin to further close such loopholes was defeated. The administration, in fact, could and did argue that its intent was not to overthrow. At the same time, more dovish members of Congress had achieved a public vote on the contra issue and had been able to make a covert operation a matter of public record (Kagan 1996: 244). The amendment certainly gave the Administration ammunition to argue that the Committees were already aware of the size and nature of the program, and the aim of the amendment was to guarantee its continuation, not to curtail it (N/A 1983).

After Boland I: confrontation to unstable negotiations

As soon as the amendment was approved, elements of confrontation re-emerged. In January 1983, Daniel Moynihan (D-NY), Vice-Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Patrick Leahy (D-VT) a member of the Committee visited Central America. What they saw was a large army (4-5000) of contras (10 times those authorized in the initial finding) who aimed at overthrowing the Sandinistas. After the trip, Senator Leahy warned the Committees in a series of briefings highlighting how, in the region, covert action was preceding policy, and 'growing beyond that which the Committee had initially understood to be its parameters' (US Congress 1987: 33). Moynihan wrote directly to Casey: 'We have labored six years to restore the intelligence community to a measure of good spirits and self-confidence,' his letter read, 'all of which is dissipating in another half-ass jungle war' (Snider 2008: 289).

Throughout early 1983, journalists, who had been given open access to (some) contras training camps filed stories on the ever-expanding program. Congressional delegations to the region continued. The aim of these delegations remained to test whether the Administration was operating within the boundaries set by Boland. Having travelled to the region, Democratic Congressmen and Senators concluded that – at a minimum - the Administration was violating the spirit if not the letter of the Boland amendment. The House Intelligence Committee staff circulated a memorandum for members highlighting the options open to challenge the Administration's policy. 'The options,' *The Washington Post* reported, 'included calling a secret House session to demand a halt to the action, striking funds from the CIA budget and informing the public about the covert action' (Tyler 1983). These strategies, then, in line with our hypotheses, aimed at getting more information from the Committess and at dragging them towards a more assertive position. In the meantime, the 'contra' forces had ballooned to about 7000 men, far beyond any weapons interdicting force, and far beyond the initial finding presented by Casey. The situation was not helped by the Administration's decision to carry out one of its largest military exercises – Big Pine – in collaboration with Honduras. The exercise permitted to leave behind extensive military equipment, as well as advisors. Even more controversially, this was conducted behind Congress' and the State Department's back (Leogrande 1998: 319).

The military exercise and the continuing news stories on the contras meant that Democrats in Congress continued to exercise pressure on Boland to speak out against the Administration's covert operation. Sixty-five of the more liberal members of the Democratic Party wrote to Boland to commend his recent efforts but also to ask him to bring the issue of the Administration's covert support to a public vote. Other committees were also exercising pressure. As Arnson (1989: 127) wrote, 'on April 12 the House Western Hemisphere Subcommittee voted to cut off all U.S. support for the contras unless and until the Congress approved funding by joint resolution.'

At this stage, the Administration started a full-court campaign to convince the Committees, and Congress more broadly, to support the program. Behind the scenes, several meetings occurred between members of the Administration and Congressional staffers, especially on the House Intelligence Committee (Drischler and Michel, undated). Speaking to the House Intelligence Committee, Secretary of State George Shultz argued that the covert operation, the 'not-so-secret war,' was an essential component of the Administration's policy; it was the only option to force the Sandinistas to deal with the US (Shultz 1983). But this plead, in itself, showcased the changed objective of the operation, from interdicting the flow of weapons, it was now a matter to bringing Sandinistas to the negotiating table. On the 26th of April, Reagan met with House Committee members but failed to convince them. In the aftermath of the meeting, Boland claimed that beyond issues related to his earlier amendment, broader questions now existed at to what the Administration was doing in Central America (Tyler 1983). Even leading Republicans in the Senate had become restless. Having failed to be convinced by Reagan's direct pleas, Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Barry Goldwater (R-Ariz.) requested more clarity, stating: 'We want the president to tell us in plain language just what it is he wants to do relative to Nicaragua' (Oberdorfer and Tyler 1983). One day later, a public address to a joint session of Congress by the President failed to address many of these concerns, as Reagan still claimed that the aim of the plan was to stop the flow of weapons (Snider 2008: 290).

Based, in part, on this unconvincing effort by the Administration and on pressures from backbenchers, Chairman Boland and the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Clement Zablocki took a more assertive posture. They proposed a bill to curtail the program. The bill aimed at ending the covert program, while providing public funds to support governments in the region in their efforts to stop the flow of weapons. The bill, while unlikely to pass in the Senate, put the Administration on a renewed confrontation path with Congress. Reagan criticized the Committee as irresponsible and – for the first time – called the contras 'freedom fighters' (Kagan 1996: 276). Perhaps sensing the extent of the confrontation, throughout the summer of 1983, both elements within the Administration and more conservative members of Congress (also on the Democratic side) started working towards a negotiation. Within the Administration, Constantine Menges made clear that while the Administration's effort had to be geared towards maintaining the confidence of the Committee, ultimately it was a matter of winning votes. Here, the Administration realized that it needed to win votes on the Democratic side. The strategy included developing one-to-one contacts and rapport between leading Congresspeople and members of the Administration, identifying 'targets' that could eventually be included in more supportive 'clusters,' giving key members special attention, and establish stronger coordination between leading Republicans and other friendly members of Congress and the Administration (Menges 1983). This strategy was reflected in a series of telephone conversations between President Reagan and leading members of Congress. These increased after the

House Intelligence Committee voted, in early May, to cut off funds for covert operations in Central America (Reagan 1983a, Reagan 1983b). The cut-off had happened after a disastrous briefing by Casey to the House Intelligence Committee. Rejecting evidence regarding the size of the program, Casey had continued to defend it as an effort to interdict weapons, raising the ire of both members of Congress and White House officials (Gutman 1988: 197).

Part of this negotiating strategy was also the Administration effort surrounding the establishment of a Commission in Central America. While some consider the Commission as something Congress imposed on the Administration (Kagan 1996: 278), internal documents suggest that the Commission was understood – if not as something to exchange for votes – certainly as something that could build goodwill to obtain Congressional support. Congress was convinced, administration officials wrote, that the Commission was its own 'imaginative idea' and the Administration could derive 'maximum benefit' from this conviction (Anonymous 1983: 1). By the late summer, despite the setback of the House passing the Boland-Zablocki bill, the Administration's position seemed to improve also thanks to a series of high-profile media appearances and individual contacts with leading members of Congress (Hill 1983). Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Goldwater had proposed to await making a decision on the covert program until the Administration had presented a new finding surrounding its nature. This was unprecedented, as it amounted to a vote on a finding; something Congress did not normally have power to approve or reject. The first finding was criticized by the Committees as too broad. A second finding in September was better received (Leogrande 1998: 322-323), seemingly pausing the controversy. In a few months, revelations that the CIA had taken part in the blowing of Nicaraguan harbors would, once again, set Congress and the Executive on a path to confrontation. In turn, the so-called Second Boland amendment, aimed at curtailing any support for the contras would pave the way for Iran-Contra.

By the end of 1983, the covert operation and Congressional reaction to it had moved into a new phase, where our analysis ends. Yet there remain a few interesting loose ends to note. Among them is that the lesson learned by 'Movement Conservatives' – the right of the party – was to push back on Congressional power and exercise even more deference to Republican presidents. In a note to Boland on April 23, 1984, young member of Congress Newt Gingrich sent the following letter, in response to a letter sent by congressional leaders to Nicaragua's leader, Daniel Ortega:

> As you know, there has been a great deal of concern recently about Congressional undermining of U.S. foreign policy. One example that has been cited is the March 20th letter you and nine other members sent Comandante Daniel Ortega. On Tuesday, April 24th, I will be taking a Special Order to discuss this and other examples of Congressional interference in the effective interference of America's foreign policy. Since this has become a matter of public concern, your participation in this Special Order would be helpful in explaining why you sent the letter and why you felt it appropriate to communicate your opposition to U.S. policy (Ginrich 1984).

This letter foreshadowed the remarkable capitulation of Republicans to their own presidents on matters of foreign policy – as seen by the failure of Republicans to rein in executive abuses by George W. Bush and Donald Trump – while also showcasing the expansion of polarization. No longer could Congress work with the Executive, nor even with itself. Further, the debate over Gingrich's specific intervention showed that backbenchers could generate a large amount of press coverage before there was sufficient time to fact-check, contextualize, or even conduct proper journalism on the topic. Congress was now in a new era, where backbenchers routinely disrupt even their own party's leadership on even basic matters as funding the government, selecting a Speaker, or conducting committee hearings.

Quantitative Findings

To analyze our theory, we first collected all speeches in which Nicaragua was mentioned during the years of 1980-1984, giving us 3,694 observations. These were obtained from the Library of Congress, digitised, and lemmatised. We describe a series of analyses of our text. First, we offer descriptions of the texts. Second, we employ sentiment analysis, using a small set of control covariates, to determine associations between relevant committee membership and sentiment regarding the Nicaragua crisis.

Our main finding is that intelligence committee members spoke more positively in their speeches on Nicaragua – but only to a point. After November-December 1982, when news reports began detailing the extent to which the administration had misled on the extent of the operation, members of the intelligence committees began to speak more in line with non-intelligence members of Congress. This to us signifies strong support for our argument.

The first question we ask of this data is who was speaking and how often. As can be seen, we find that members such as Ted Kennedy, Robert J. Lagomarsino, Newt Gingrich and others spoke more often. Notably, there are only a few members of the Senate or House Intelligence Committees found among those that are speaking most often. Beyond knowing who spoke, it is also important to know what committees they belonged to.

[place Figure 1 here]

In Figure 2, we present a bar graph that shows the number of speeches by committee. As can be seen from this graph, we find that most of the speeches made on Nicaragua during this time frame were made by members of Congress that did not belong to either the House or Senate Intelligence Committees, or the Appropriations Committee, or in other words the committees most likely to be clued into ongoing covert operation by the administration. Notably, we find that while the intelligence committee members offered very few speeches, the foreign affairs committee gave a large number. As events going on in Nicaragua would fall within their purview, there were at the same time very few incentives for the administration to let them in on knowledge about the covert operations. This finding fits our theory that the intelligence committee will largely align itself with the Administration until political incentives exist to break with them.

[Place Figure 2 here]

We will next turn to assessing what Members of Congress said, and when they said it. To perform this analysis, we took the sentiment of each of the speeches by matching each word to a dictionary that scores them for whether they have a positive or negative sentiment. We then summed these scores and transformed them so that they range from -1 to 1, with speeches whose scores are approaching negative 1 being more negative and speeches with scores approaching positive 1 being more positive. We then incorporated information about the speaker’s party, if they were on the Senate or House Intelligence committees, the House or Senate Foreign Affairs committees, and the House or Senate Appropriations Committee. We then took this score and run a series of simple linear regressions. The summary statistics for our variables of interest are presented in Table 1, presented below.

[Place Table 1 here]

We begin our statistical analysis by running a linear regression on the sentiment of the speeches across the entire time period under observation. We present the results of this analysis in Table 2 Column 1. We find that there is not a statistically significant effect of either a member being on the Foreign Affairs Committee or the Appropriations Committee on their sentiment. However, we do find a statistically significant and positive effect for members of the Intelligence Committee, even controlling for our party variable, which is also positive and statistically significant. In Figure 3, we present a graph showing the size of the effect for the Intelligence committee relative to members that were not on it. As can be seen there is nearly a point difference in sentiment for members of the Intelligence Committee relative to non-members. This is a rather large effect and suggests that those that were on the Committee were far more positive about Nicaragua, in the rare cases when they did speak, than those that were not.

[Place Table 2 Here]

[Place Figure 3 Here]

Now we turn to analyzing how members of Intelligence and non-Intelligence members of Congress behaved in the weeks following major events that occurred during the period under observation. We expect that when new, negative information about the covert operations became public, that members of the intelligence committee will begin to speak as negatively as their non-intelligence counterparts. However, when the information is not public, we expect them to continue their relatively positive commentary on the issue.

The first moment that we will explore is when the relevant Congressional committees knew that the administration was potentially planning a covert operation in Nicaragua, but before Casey's February 1982 briefing. At this time, we would expect that the intelligence committee will speak relatively positively about the administration's handling of the Nicaragua issue. This model is titled pre-Casey, or the 618 observations in our data before February 1982. The results of this analysis can be found in Table 2, Column 3. As can be seen, the Intelligence Committee coefficient is positive and statistically significant. This suggest that even after the Committee had knowledge of the potential for covert action in Nicaragua, they remained supportive of the administration's actions, with little political incentive to break away from the administration's narrative.

A further graphical analysis of the results of this regression analysis can be found in Figure 4 in the upper left graph. As can be seen, intelligence committee members were far more positive than non-committee members. This is in line with our theory, in that intelligence committee members are being more measured and supportive of the administration, regardless of party, than non-members.

We now turn to assess sentiment in the weeks surrounding the first instance in which Congress chose to pursue a confrontational approach. Casey briefed the Committee concerning ongoing covert operations in Nicaragua in February 1982. In this case, as the information is not public, we do not expect the Committee members to speak negatively of the President's actions. As can be seen in Table 2, Column 2, we find that the Intelligence Committee members' sentiment in their speeches surrounding Nicaragua was more positive than other members of Congress in the 225 observation that fell in the months of February and March of 1982. In fact, the size of the coefficient increases relative to the pre-Casey period, meaning that they increased their support for the administration's actions, or at least spoke positively of these actions in Congressional debate.

Next, we explore the 172 speeches given in the weeks surrounding the revelation of the covert operations in *Newsweek* magazine in November and December of 1982. This is the first time that the information about the operation is both public and negative. To this end, we expect that the Committee members will now have an incentive to speak more negatively of the Administration's policy toward Nicaragua. The results for this analysis can be found in column 4 of Table 2. Interestingly, and in line with our theory we find that the mood of the Intelligence Committees had noticeably soured. While the results are not statistically significant, meaning that we need to be extremely cautious concerning any inference we draw from these results, the sign on the coefficient has now flipped. Meaning that the sentiment of the Committee members, for the first time, is now less positive than other members of Congress.

[Place Table 3 Here]

We further explore the effects of the events that occurred during the upper right panel of Figure 4. To this end, their sentiment went from a predicted value of .65 in the wake of the Casey Briefing to .2 after the *Newsweek* article (data covering period between November and December 1982). Even more telling, we find that the sentiment of the Intelligence Committee became statistically indistinguishable from the non-intelligence committee members. These findings are in line with our theoretical expectations, as at his point it became clear to the Intelligence committee that the administration was violating agreed upon norms and would need to be reined in.

We now check in on Congressional sentiment in 1,272 speeches given in the Summer of 1983. During the Summer of 1983, there were a series of revelations and discoveries by Congress concerning the costs, tactics, and objectives of the covert operations in Nicaragua. In both cases we find that the Intelligence Committee coefficient is not statistically significant, and relatively small. These relationships are further illustrated in Figure 4. In this figure, we show that Intelligence committee sentiment was no different among the Intelligence committee than it was with Congress as a whole, which at this time was fairly negative. Further, in line with our theoretical expectations, it was down from its previous, relatively positive levels. Once again, our theory would anticipate this behaviour, as this was a moment where once again it became clear to members of the Intelligence committee that there was room and political incentives to speak out against the actions taken by the Administration in Nicaragua.

[Place Figure 4 Here]

Tellingly, in our next period we check in on, October to November 1983 (446 speeches), a period of Executive and Congressional negotiation and compromise, we find that the sentiment of the speeches of the members of the Intelligence Committee becomes more positive and becomes distinguishable from the that of non-intelligence committee members, who are much more negative. This also support our theory, as the administration now realigned itself, or committed to, with the norms and expectations laid out by the intelligence committee.

Conclusions

At least on the issue of the ‘contras,’ Congress re-asserted itself in the first Reagan administration, not as a co-equal, cooperative branch of government, but as an adversarial, position-taking branch that sought to claw back some powers abdicated over the course of the Cold War. As a result, the cozy relationship between the intelligence agencies and the intelligence committees was substantially eroded, and a new model of the relationship was installed.

We articulate the reasons why this relationship changed, and the theoretical tweak required to integrate this story with broader literatures on legislative behaviour. Specifically, we argue that rather than intelligence committee members as issue outliers signalling preferences to backbenchers, the current paradigm is one of backbenchers’ partisan position-taking on intelligence community activity, and the committees reacting and following their co-partisans.

These findings have implications for our understanding of how Congress operates in a post-Nicaragua, more partisan, context. In many cases the Reagan administration breached established norms of information sharing with the intelligence committees. At the same time, the new role of Congress as an agent attempting to hold the executive branch to account contributed to the emergence of new power centers in Congress and to undermine the role of committees as an opportunity to make more bipartisan policy changes. Some of this is driven by understood historical events – the Democrats’ ouster of moderate committee chairs in the 1970s, for instance – but our account broadens this conception by showing a specific event in which committee chairs were reluctantly forced into changing institutional norms.

Future research ought to consider this as part of a broader pattern, with Nicaragua 1981-83 as one additional pivot point around which Congress and the intelligence agencies have become more adversarial or more cooperative. Deference has been replaced with confrontation, but along partisan lines. For example, the post-9/11 bipartisan consensus may have undone some of the damage to the relationship from the Contra scandal, but fault lines remain. In 2025, Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard fired several senior intelligence officials and restricted access to classified files to dozens of others (Klepper 2025), in part due to their contributions to threat assessments from Russia during the first Trump term and the Biden presidency.

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Figure 1: Number of Speeches by Member (Starting with members who gave over 37 speeches)

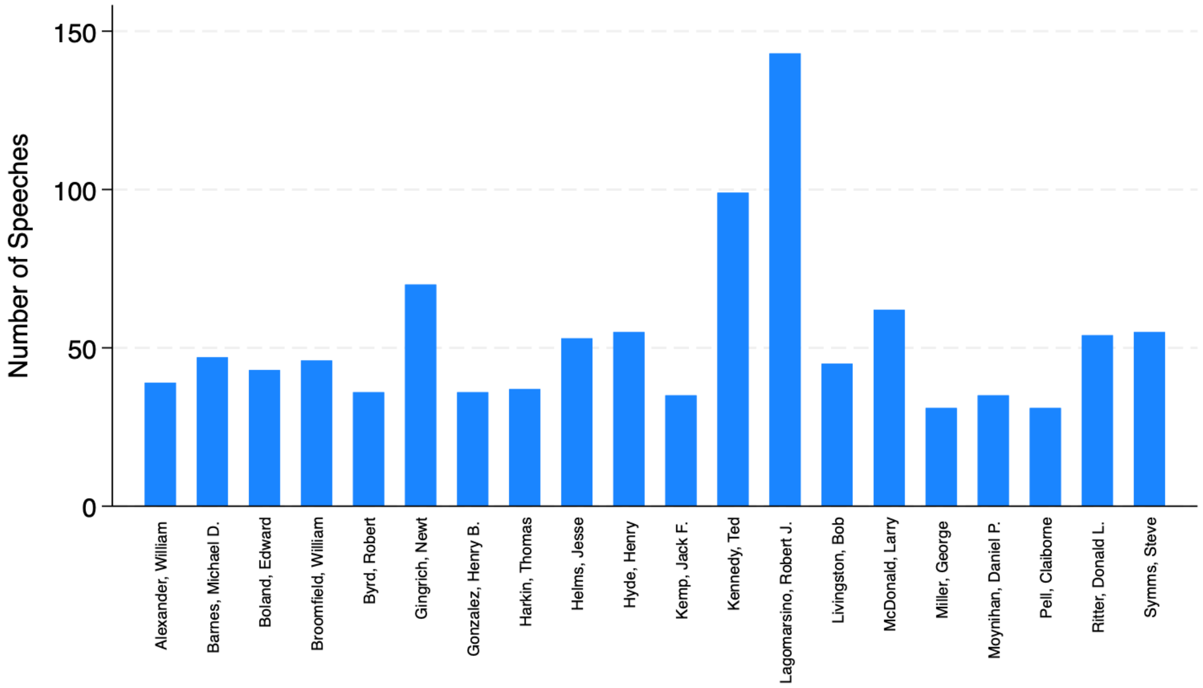

Figure 2: Number of Speeches by Committee

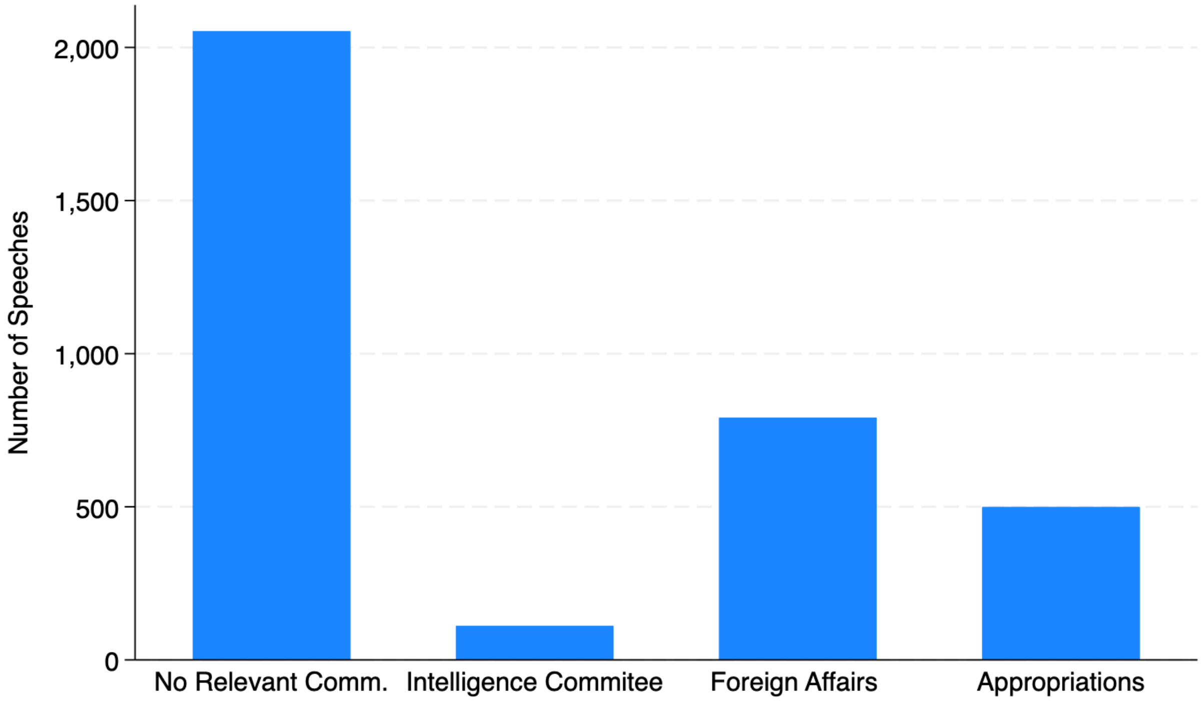

Table 1: Summary Statistics for Dependent and Independent Variables

	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Sentiment	3454	0.274	0.663	-1.945	3.850
Intelligence Committee	3694	0.129	0.335	0	1
Appropriations	3694	0.143	0.350	0	1
Foreign Affairs	3694	0.222	0.416	0	1
GOP	3536	0.473	0.499	0	1

Table 2: Regressions on Congress Member Sentiment

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Full Regression	Casey	Pre-Casey	Newsweek Article
Foreign Affairs Committee	0.016	0.135	0.120	0.121
	(0.028)	(0.133)	(0.088)	(0.136)
Appropriations Committee	0.051	-0.164	-0.075	0.256
	(0.034)	(0.140)	(0.084)	(0.167)
Intelligence Committee	0.093***	0.426**	0.242*	-0.058
	(0.035)	(0.175)	(0.126)	(0.193)
Republican Member	0.044*	0.284***	-0.019	0.172*
	(0.023)	(0.104)	(0.075)	(0.100)
Constant	0.221***	0.152***	0.335***	0.122*
	(0.018)	(0.055)	(0.067)	(0.067)
Observations	3296	204	475	168
R2	.0050978	.0751189	.0244914	.0430234

* p$$0.10 ** p$$.05 **** p$$.01 in a two-tailed test.

Figure 3: Predicted Sentiment Values of all Speeches for Intelligence on Non-Intelligence Committee Members.

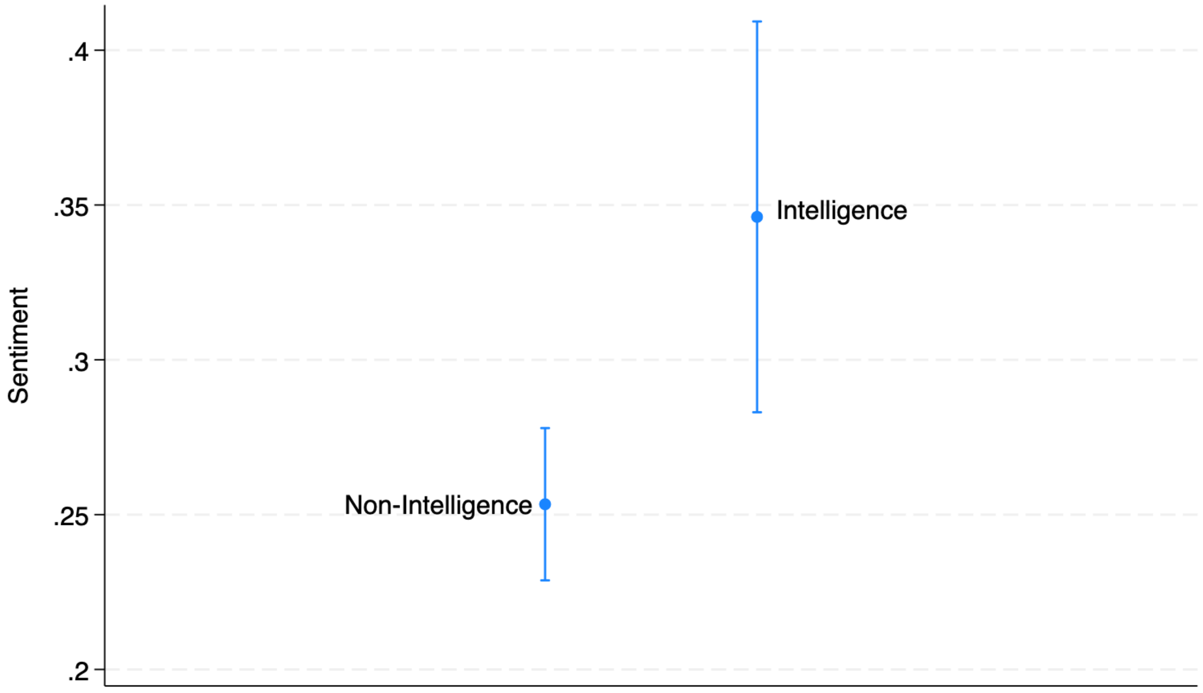

Table 3: Regressions on Congress Member Sentiment

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Spring 1983	Summer 1983	Late Autumn 1983
Intelligence Committee	0.105	-0.009	0.150*
	(0.070)	(0.073)	(0.082)
Appropriations Committee	0.030	0.034	0.144*
	(0.064)	(0.075)	(0.083)
Foreign Affairs Committee	-0.003	0.016	-0.089
	(0.062)	(0.077)	(0.083)
Republican Member	-0.006	0.002	0.038
	(0.048)	(0.054)	(0.063)
Constant	0.216***	0.301***	0.211***
	(0.036)	(0.045)	(0.055)
Observations	1142	1226	439
R^2	.0034321	.0003415	.0285776

* p>0.10 ** p>.05 *** p>.01 in a two-tailed test.

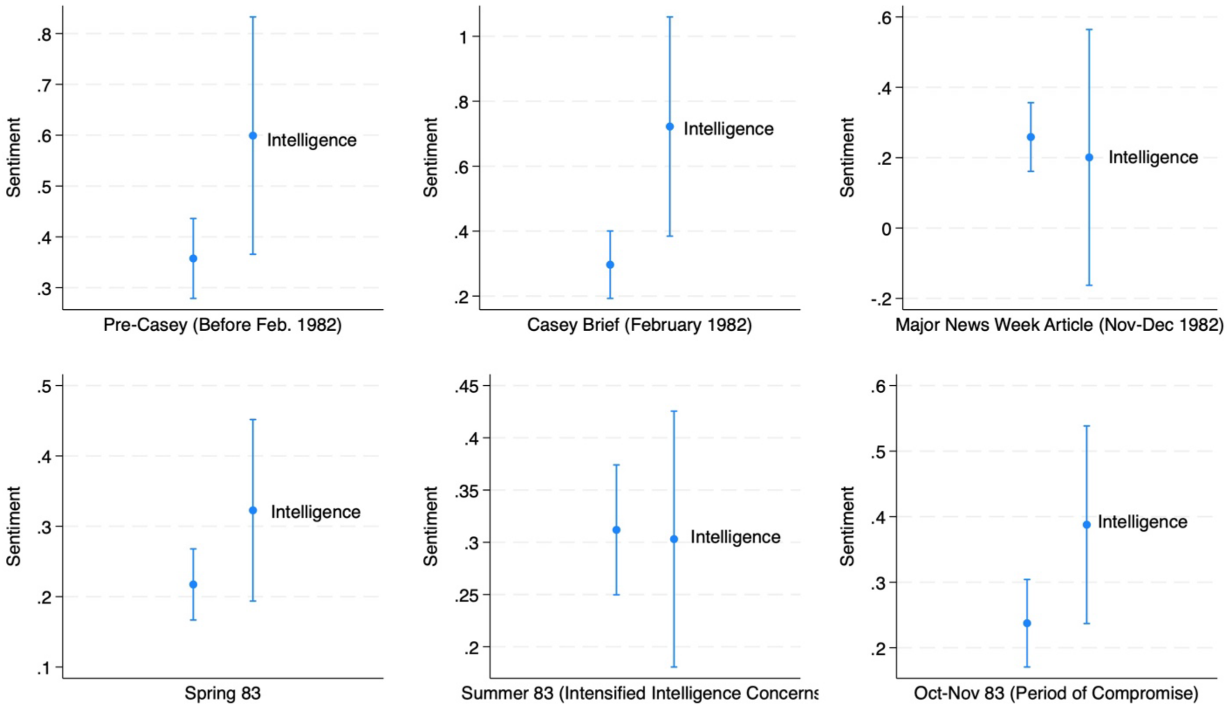

Figure 4: Graphs of Predicted Sentiment of Congress Members Speeches During Various Time Periods