

# Electoral Incentives and Party Polarization in Congress

by

**Matthew Tarpey**

Bachelor of Arts in Political Science, College of Charleston, 2014

Bachelor of Science in Economics, College of Charleston, 2014

Master of Arts in Political Science, University of Pittsburgh, 2017

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
the Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy**

University of Pittsburgh

2020

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH  
DIETRICH SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

This dissertation was presented

by

Matthew Tarpey

It was approved by

Jonathan Woon, Political Science

Kristin Kanthak, Political Science

Chris Bonneau, Political Science

William Minozzi, Political Science, Ohio State University

Dissertation Director: Jonathan Woon, Political Science

Copyright © by Matthew Tarpey  
2020

# Electoral Incentives and Party Polarization in Congress

Matthew Tarpey, PhD

University of Pittsburgh, 2020

This dissertation studies the relationship between elections and party polarization in the Congress. In three related essays, I identify electoral incentives for partisan voting on legislation. The first paper argues that elections create incentives for party-line voting on legislation associated with the president because of the electoral benefits that presidential legislative success affords members of the president's party. Using data on legislative and electoral outcomes, I show that the president successfully enacting their legislative agenda advantages members of the president's party electorally, but the legislative success of the party and individual members of the party are not consistently tied to election outcomes. The second paper argues that primary elections also incentivize adherence to the positions of co-partisan presidents. Using data on primary elections for the House of Representatives for the period 1970 to 2010, I show that greater legislative support of the president improves all indicators of members' performance in primary elections, independent of established determinants of primary election outcomes. The final paper develops a theory to explain why inter-party competition for control of government incentivizes party-line voting on salient legislation. A series of experiments demonstrate that greater cross-party support for legislation improves public perceptions of the quality of the legislation among all groups of voters, and especially among low-information voters with weak partisan ties. Importantly, cross-party support has a secondary, indirect effect of improving perceptions of the proposing party's ability to develop good policy, which creates electoral incentives for members to oppose policies developed by their political competitors.

## Table of Contents

<b>1.0 Introduction</b> . . . . .	1
<b>2.0 Presidential Legislative Success and Electoral Performance</b> . . . . .	6
2.1 Legislative Effectiveness and Electoral Success . . . . .	8
2.2 Presidential Legislative Success and Electoral Performance . . . . .	10
2.3 Data & Methods . . . . .	13
2.3.1 Measuring Legislative Success . . . . .	13
2.3.2 Measuring Party Electoral Performance . . . . .	14
2.3.3 Control Variables . . . . .	16
2.3.4 Estimation . . . . .	19
2.4 Analysis . . . . .	20
2.4.1 Aggregate Reputations . . . . .	20
2.4.2 Congressional Elections . . . . .	27
2.5 Discussion . . . . .	30
<b>3.0 Primary Elections and Presidential Support in Congress</b> . . . . .	32
3.1 Literature & Theory . . . . .	35
3.1.1 Elections and Presidential Support in Congress . . . . .	35
3.1.2 Primary Elections and Presidential Support . . . . .	36
3.2 Data & Methods . . . . .	39
3.3 Analysis . . . . .	43
3.3.1 Challenger Emergence . . . . .	43
3.3.2 Incumbent Performance . . . . .	45
3.3.3 Presidential Support vs. Party Loyalty and Ideological Positions . . . . .	49
3.3.4 Incorporating Strategy in Candidate Emergence . . . . .	53
3.4 Discussion . . . . .	55
<b>4.0 Electoral Incentives for Strategic Opposition</b> . . . . .	58
4.1 Strategic Parties and Party Polarization . . . . .	60

4.2 Electoral Benefits of Strategic Opposition . . . . .	63
4.3 Experimental Design & Data . . . . .	65
4.4 Analysis . . . . .	70
4.5 Discussion . . . . .	77
<b>5.0 Conclusion . . . . .</b>	<b>80</b>
<b>6.0 Bibliography . . . . .</b>	<b>84</b>

## List of Tables

1	Variable Descriptions and Summary Statistics . . . . .	18
2	Presidential and Majority Party Legislative Success and Party Reputations . . . . .	21
3	Majority Party Wins and Party Reputations . . . . .	24
4	Senate Majority Party Success and Party Reputations . . . . .	26
5	Presidential and Majority Party Legislative Success and Congressional Elections . . . . .	29
6	Variable Descriptions and Summary Statistics . . . . .	42
7	Presidential Support and Challenger Emergence . . . . .	44
8	Presidential Support and Incumbent Performance . . . . .	47
9	Incumbent Positioning and Candidate Emergence . . . . .	50
10	Incumbent Positioning and Incumbent Performance . . . . .	51
11	The Conditioning Effect of District Approval . . . . .	54
12	Variable Descriptions and Summary Statistics . . . . .	69
13	Treatment Effects by Party ID (Foreign Policy Issue) . . . . .	74
14	Treatment Effects by Party ID (Finance Issue) . . . . .	74
15	Treatment Effects by Political Sophistication . . . . .	76

## List of Figures

1	Party Brands Over Time . . . . .	16
2	Marginal Effect of Presidential Success on Party Reputations . . . . .	22
3	The Conditioning Effect of District Approval . . . . .	56
4	Finance Issue . . . . .	72
5	Foreign Policy Issue . . . . .	73
6	Cross-Party Support and Issue Reputation . . . . .	75

## 1.0 Introduction

Contemporary congressional politics is characterized by high levels of disagreement and animus between members of the two political parties in Washington, who have become increasingly divided over the last 40 years. Virtually every Congress since the 1970s has been more partisan than the one that preceded it, and conflict between the two parties has extended to almost all areas of public policy (Layman and Carsey, 2002). Even seemingly non-ideological and procedural issues that once enjoyed inter-party consensus now divide members down party lines (Lee, 2009, 2013). However, while there is widespread acknowledgment of party polarization in Congress among students of American politics, there remains considerable disagreement over the underlying causes of polarization among the public's representatives in Washington.

Attempts to understand the causes of party polarization in Congress have focused broadly on either electoral or institutional variables, or some combination of the two (McCarty, 2019; Theriault, 2008). Institutional explanations for party polarization have generally focused on the party leadership in Congress that is thought to create greater polarization on roll call votes by gate-keeping legislation with cross-party support off of the agenda (Harbridge, 2015). Further, the party leadership is thought to widen inter-party divisions by using their control of the agenda to deliberately pursue more partisan policies for the electoral gain of their party (Gelman, 2017a,b). Therefore, institutional reforms and the concession of greater power to party leaders are thought to be responsible for the re-emergence of party polarization in Congress (Theriault, 2008).

Electoral explanations for party polarization have focused on a variety of causes ranging from changes in electoral institutions to changing preferences among the electorate (McCarty, 2019). Electoral explanations for party polarization include, but are not limited to, changes in the distribution of voters' preferences across or within congressional districts (Carson et al., 2007; ?), changing incentives to position closer to the preferences of the primary electorate due to the decreasing competitiveness of general elections (Brady et al., 2007; Nielson and Visalvanich, 2017), changes in incentives for candidate entry among moderates (Thomsen,

2017), and increasing levels of competition between the two parties for control of government (Koger and Lebo, 2017; Lee, 2016).

This dissertation furthers our understanding of the electoral causes of party polarization through three separate but interrelated essays. The essays focus on identifying electoral incentives for partisan voting in Congress and, taken together, help further our understanding of two of the most salient and important aspects of party polarization in Congress. The first is the polarization of presidential support by party (Jacobson, 2003). Specifically, since the mid-1970s, legislative support of the president has diverged significantly by party, and the president's legislative proposals have become increasingly divisive, even though presidents are not pursuing more extreme proposals than in the past (Lee, 2008). The second indicator is the substantial decline in bipartisanship on significant pieces of legislation that are salient to the broad public. For example, laws passed with significant support from both parties has declined nearly 50 percent since the 1970s (Harbridge, 2015, pg. 68).

The first essay studies the role of the president's legislative record in shaping inter-party competition. Prominent theories of congressional politics hypothesize that a party's ability to pass its legislative program into law should affect the aggregate electoral performance of the party through its effect on the party's reputation with the public (Butler and Powell, 2014; Cox and McCubbins, 2005). However, empirical tests of this theory have found no evidence of a systematic relationship between a party's legislative success and the electoral performance of the party (Dancey et al., 2018; Fortunato and Monroe, 2018). Further, studies of the determinants of party reputations have found no systematic relationship between general evaluations of Congress and attitudes towards the two parties (Dancey et al., 2018; Ramirez, 2009). In this paper, I argue voters value representatives who are more legislatively effective but learn about the legislative effectiveness of the party through the president. Voters are expected to learn about the ability of the party to govern via the president because of the low-cost associated with gathering information about the president.

To test my theory, I rely on both direct and indirect indicators of the party's electoral performance that span several decades. In the aggregate-level analysis, I use a variable *Policyhandling* that measures the percentage of respondents who think the Democratic Party is better at handling the most important policy issue facing the country, and the *Macropar-*

*tisanship* series which measures the percentage of respondents who indicate they identify with the Democratic Party out of all identifiers. I also evaluate the effect of presidential legislative success on the actual performance of individual members of the party in congressional elections. To measure the legislative success of the president, I rely on a standard measure of presidential success used in the literature that measures the percentage of bills that the president and the majority of members in the House of Representatives take the same position on, as well as the same measure for the Senate. Using both time-series and pooled cross-sectional analysis, I show that presidential success in the House and the Senate is an important determinant of the public image and electoral success of the president's party. I find no discernible connection between the aggregate legislative success of the party in Congress nor the success of individual members and electoral outcomes.

The results have several important implications for theories of American politics. First, the results provide the first evidence to date of a relationship between legislative success and electoral performance. Electoral accountability for effective governance does exist, but it operates through different avenues than prominent theories have suggested. Second, the effect of presidential evaluations on the party's image and subsequent electoral performance suggest the large impact of presidential approval on electoral outcomes is not due exclusively to the performance indicators, such as economic performance, that have been identified in the literature. Finally, the results vindicate, at least partially, a key argument of strategic party theories and past research on congressional politics. Specifically, the results support the claim that presidential legislative proposals incentivize party-line voting because of the electoral benefits of presidential legislative success for members of the president's party.

The second paper addresses the growing polarization of presidential support by party, and the weakening relationship between presidential approval and support of the president from members of Congress. Past research argues that general elections will lead members of Congress to adjust their support of the president as presidential approval changes to maintain their chances for reelection. However, members have become increasingly consistent in their support of co-partisan presidents and have suffered greater general election losses as a consequence of their support of the president ([Brady et al., 1996](#); [Carson and Hitefield, 2018](#)). This paper argues that members remain loyal to the president to avoid incurring a

primary challenge, which have become increasingly common over the last several decades.

To examine this theory empirically, I build a data set containing information on members of the House of Representatives' level of presidential support—i.e., the percentage of votes that members take the same position as the president—and their performance in primary elections both in terms of the emergence of challengers and incumbent performance against challengers. Using a pooled regression analysis with fixed effects for district partisanship and year, I find that when members are less supportive of a co-partisan president relative to members from similar districts, they are more likely to experience a quality primary challenger and perform worse against the challenger. The results are similar for members of the opposing party but weaker in terms of substantive magnitude and insignificant across different model specifications. The effects are conditioned by the president's popularity in the district such that opposing the president is only risky for incumbents when a more supportive challenger can win in the general election.

The findings have several important implications. First, the results broaden our understanding of how elections incentivize presidential support on public policy and procedural issues. While past research has argued that general elections create incentives for members to distance themselves from unpopular presidents, opposition to the president could undermine members' ability to win reelection in the primary. Secondly, the results add to our understanding of the determinants of challenger emergence and incumbent performance in primary elections. In particular, the results indicate that presidential support is an important determinant of primary election outcomes, and its substantive effect rivals that of other measures of incumbent positioning studied in the literature. The substantive importance of presidential support could be attributable to the fact that support of the president is a more visible indicator of party support than party loyalty in Congress.

The final paper studies the relationship between inter-party competition for institutional control and party polarization. The paper develops a theory of how members' positions on legislation inform voters' beliefs about the proposed policy. The theory argues that when legislators' motivations are private, greater support for legislation can improve voters' perceptions about the quality of legislation because members of Congress possess more policy-relevant information. I argue that this has a secondary effect of informing voters about

the ability of the proposer to develop high-quality policies—an important determinant of electoral performance. This finding suggests that elections create incentives for office-seeking incumbents to oppose policies proposed by their competitors.

I use a set of survey experiments conducted using convenience samples to test these expectations. The experiments present voters with information about actual legislation proposed in Congress. The experiments exploit intra-party division in support of legislation to vary information about cross-party support for the legislation. I then elicited voters' perceptions about the likelihood that the proposed policy would be effective at accomplishing its objectives, and the ability of the proposing party to develop good policies. The results indicate that all groups of voters view policy, as well as the party that proposed the policy, more favorably when there is cross-party support for the legislation. The difference in average support for the legislation between the cross-party support and opposition treatments is largest among independent voters with low levels of information, voters that parties must win over in order to re-gain control of political institutions.

The results of the paper add to our understanding of how electoral competition for control of government shapes incentives for inter-party cooperation. While past research has argued that competition incentivizes members to block or obstruct their competitors' legislation for electoral gain, the results of this analysis suggest that politicians are disincentivized from supporting the policy efforts of their political opponents even when they are *not* pivotal in determining the passage of legislation. Furthermore, the results identify a clear mechanism for the observed relationship between inter-party competition and electoral performance that has thus far been missing from the strategic parties literature ([Koger and Lebo, 2017](#); [Lee, 2016](#)).

## 2.0 Presidential Legislative Success and Electoral Performance

An extensive literature in American politics has studied the extent to which elections incentivize good representation. This literature has focused predominantly on the extent to which parties or individual members' policy positions inform vote-choice and, therefore, the extent to which elections encourage representatives to take positions consistent with their constituents' preferences (Bafumi and Herron, 2010; Fowler et al., 2016; Hill and Tausanovitch, 2015; Pope and Woon, 2009; Tausanovitch and Warshaw, 2013; ?). However, a separate question about the ability of representatives to govern effectively, and the extent to which this is encouraged by the electoral process, remains less understood. This is problematic given that gridlock and the inability of Congress to pass legislation is consistently the public's top complaint about their representatives in government. For example, in a 2013 Gallup Poll, the majority of voters attributed their disapproval of Congress to legislative inaction and gridlock.<sup>1</sup> This omission is also problematic given that legislative accomplishment is an important component of representation, and because prominent theories have identified legislative success as an important determinant of electoral performance (Cox and McCubbins, 2005, 2007).

Theories of the relationship between legislative accomplishment and elections argue that voters will hold the *majority party* in Congress accountable for their ability to pass the legislative program they were voted into office to enact (Butler and Powell, 2014; Cox and McCubbins, 2005).<sup>2</sup> Legislative success for the majority party is thought to improve their electoral performance by improving the valence component of the party's reputation and advantage members electorally independent of the party's ideological positions (Butler and Powell, 2014, pg. 494). However, empirical tests of this argument have found no discernible connection between the legislative effectiveness of the majority party in the House of Representatives and the subsequent electoral success of the party—using various measurements of both legislative success and electoral performance (Dancey et al., 2018; Durr et al., 1997;

---

<sup>1</sup>“Congress and the Public,” *Gallup*, 2013.

<sup>2</sup>This research has focused specifically on the House of Representatives.

Fortunato and Monroe, 2018; Ramirez, 2009).<sup>3</sup> Similarly, analyses of the relationship between the legislative success of individual members and their electoral performance have found little evidence of a systematic relationship (Butler et al., 2019; Sulkin et al., 2015).

This paper argues that voters fail to hold members of Congress accountable for legislative inaction because they are uninformed, rather than apathetic, about their legislative records. This argument is consistent with past research demonstrating that voters possess little information about their representatives in Congress (Dancey and Sheagley, 2013; Lupia, 2016). This paper argues, alternatively, that voters are concerned about the legislative effectiveness of their elected leaders but learn about the party’s legislative effectiveness through the president. I expect voters to learn about the party through the president because it is more efficient than learning about the party through other source cues (Jacobson, 2019; Mondak and McCurley, 1994). The low-cost of learning about the party’s effectiveness from the president is attributable to the visibility of the president to the public in the modern era.

I use two separate data sets to test the aforementioned theory. First, I use a time-series analysis to evaluate the relative effect of legislative success on aggregate measures and beliefs about the two parties. I find that greater legislative success of the president improves the public image of the party and its perceived competence, but that the legislative success rate of the majority party is inconsistently related to its party’s reputation. Next, I use data on individual members’ electoral performance matched with data on the legislative success of their party, their party’s president, as well as their own legislative success. Consistent with the aggregate analysis, I find a positive relationship between the legislative success of the president and the electoral performance of members of the president’s party. The majority party’s legislative success and the success of individual members are inconsistently related to electoral outcomes. The substantive effects of presidential legislative success are moderate to large and complement the role of performance indicators in determining inter-election variation in incumbent performance.

The remainder of this chapter is organized as follows. First, I review the existing literature on the relationship between legislative success and electoral outcomes. I then draw

---

<sup>3</sup>Though see (Koger and Lebo, 2017), who find some positive effects of party agenda control on electoral outcomes.

on the literature on voter decision-making to argue that the president’s record of legislative accomplishment will inform voters’ perceptions of the party’s ability to govern effectively, which I argue will be relevant for the electoral performance of the party. Next, I detail my data sources and methods for testing my expectations. I then present empirical tests of my hypotheses. I conclude by discussing the implications of the findings for research on legislative accomplishment and elections.

## 2.1 Legislative Effectiveness and Electoral Success

While past theories argue that voters should value representatives whose positions are congruent with their preferences or interests, they should also favor competent representatives who can successfully pass policy proposals into law (Hitt et al., 2017). In particular, legislators’ ability to move their legislative proposals through the legislative process to passage is thought to inform voters of about their quality and aid in their efforts to be reelected or advance to higher office (Miquel and Snyder Jr, 2006). This is because voters’ welfare is improved when representatives are able to enact popular campaign promises into law. As such, the extent to which politicians can deliver on campaign promises and govern effectively should be an important determinant of their performance in elections (Harrington, 1993). Prominent theories model the effect of legislative success as an improvement in the non-ideological or “valence” component of an incumbent’s reputation (Butler and Powell, 2014; Cox and McCubbins, 2005). This implies that legislative success will be beneficial to incumbents irrespective of what they are successful at passing. This is, in part, corroborated by research showing a strong preference for legislative action on pressing problems, irrespective of the ideological content of policy proposals (Egan, 2014). As such, there are good reasons to expect a connection between legislative success and electoral performance, and that the effect should be independent of policy positions.

Despite the important role of legislative success in theories and in conventional accounts of politics, only a handful of studies have evaluated the effect of legislative achievement on electoral outcomes. One set of studies evaluates this relationship at the level of in-

dividual representatives. For example, [Miquel and Snyder Jr \(2006\)](#) use state-level data from North Carolina and find a positive association between the *perceived* legislative effectiveness of representatives and their performance in elections. Further, they show that members with greater legislative capabilities are more successful at advancing to higher office as well as higher positions of power within the same legislative chamber. Research on the U.S. Congress, however, has found little or no association between legislative effectiveness and electoral performance. [Sulkin et al. \(2015\)](#), for example, show that legislative action by members only matters on issues constituents view as very important, and only for co-partisan voters. Further, [Butler et al. \(2019\)](#) show that while constituents respond favorably when informed about their representative’s legislative productivity, the public is generally uninformed about their representative’s legislative record and, therefore, their legislative effectiveness has no discernible effect on their electoral performance.

A similar body of research argues that the legislative effectiveness of *political parties* should have important implications for the electoral performance of the party’s membership ([Cox and McCubbins, 2005, 2007](#)). The legislative performance of parties, in particular, is thought to be important since voters often rely on their beliefs about the parties, or the party’s “brand name,” when choosing between candidates and, thus, the electoral performance of co-partisans in Congress are interdependent. Legislative achievement is thought to be relevant to elections as it will inform the party’s public image. [Cox and McCubbins \(2005, 7\)](#) argue, specifically, “The more favorable the majority party’s record of legislative accomplishment, the better its reputation with the public will be.” [Butler and Powell \(2014\)](#) argue that legislative success will be electorally relevant because it makes the party appear more competent, which should translate into electoral success by improving the party’s overall reputation.

Empirical tests of the relationship between the legislative success of the majority party on its public image and subsequent electoral performance, however, have found little evidence that greater legislative success improves the party’s reputation or electoral performance. For example, [Dancey et al. \(2018\)](#) show that the party’s ability to keep unwanted legislation off of the agenda, as well as its ability to pass legislation, are not consistently related to aggregate public evaluations of the two parties. Further, the general ability of Congress to

pass important laws does not improve the majority party’s reputation with the electorate (Dancey et al., 2018, Table 3). Similarly, Fortunato and Monroe (2018) study the effect of various measures of positive and negative agenda control on the electoral performance of individual members of Congress and find little evidence in favor of a collective electoral benefit associated with greater positive or negative agenda control. Finally, Ramirez (2009) finds no systematic relationship between the legislative productivity of Congress and public approval of the institution. Therefore, the literature suggests that there is little electoral accountability for the ability of political parties or individual members of Congress to pass their policy proposals into law.

## 2.2 Presidential Legislative Success and Electoral Performance

Although existing theories provide a plausible mechanism for why legislative success should improve electoral performance, these theories rest on the assumption that voters are informed about the majority party’s legislative record. This assumption is inconsistent with the public opinion literature that shows the electorate is generally uninformed about congressional politics (Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Lupia, 2016). For example, most voters self-report knowing little about their representatives in Congress, and many voters cannot even name their representatives (Stokes and Miller, 1962). Furthermore, most voters are uninformed about parties in Congress, and most cannot identify what party controls Congress.<sup>4</sup> The electorate is also generally unaware of major legislative efforts being pursued by the majority party in Congress (Somin, 2016). Therefore, as Fortunato and Monroe (2018) note, cognitive limitations and voter ignorance could be responsible for the lack of any empirical relationship between the legislative success of the majority party and the party’s public reputation.

Given the relatively low levels of knowledge the public has about Congress, it is not surprising that research has found little connection between the legislative record of the majority party and the party’s electoral performance. Consistent with this finding, an extensive

---

<sup>4</sup>Jamie Fuller, “1 in 4 Americans have no idea which party controls the Senate or the House,” *Washington Post*, June 26, 2014

literature in American politics finds that voters' perceptions of Congress, and objective measures of congressional behavior, are unrelated to party reputations. For example, [Brasher \(2009\)](#) finds that general congressional evaluations correlate *negatively* with voters' perceptions of the majority party's ability to handle specific policy issues. Similarly, [Dancey et al. \(2018\)](#) find no discernible connection between congressional approval and general evaluations of parties and their perceived competence. Further, [Jones \(2010\)](#) finds that general congressional approval is not related to the performance of the party in elections for the House of Representatives nor the Senate. However, [Jones and McDermott \(2004\)](#) do find a modest relationship between congressional approval and vote choice in the House of Representatives under certain conditions.

Scholarship on the determinants of party images has instead found that public perceptions of political parties are driven by the president. Writing on the influence of the president on party images, [Jacobson \(2015\)](#) argues, "People's affective reactions to the president, whatever their source, inevitably color their feelings about the other politicians in his coalition. Every president thus shapes public attitudes toward his party as well as beliefs about who and what it stands for and how well it governs when in office; insofar as the party label represents a brand name, the president bears prime responsibility for the brand's current image and status. Jacobson's assessment is based on an extensive literature linking the president to several different dimensions of party reputations. For example, voters' beliefs about the policy priorities and positions of political parties tend to reflect the priorities and positions of the president ([Jacobson, 2019](#)). Further, the perceived competence of the two parties to handle policy issues also corresponds strongly with presidential approval but not public approval of Congress ([Brasher, 2009](#); [Dancey et al., 2018](#)). As a consequence, general public sentiment towards the two political parties (e.g., macropartisanship) correlates strongly with feelings towards the president and not Congress ([Jacobson, 2016](#); [MacKuen et al., 1989](#)).

The primary reason for the president's influence on the party's reputation and the electoral performance of the party is the efficiency associated with learning about the party through the president ([Mondak and McCurley, 1994](#)). In other words, voters use their evaluation of the president as an information shortcut to learn about the president's party and make decisions about candidates running under the party's label. Learning about the party

through the president is thought to be more efficient because of the visibility of the president to the public. The visibility of the president stems from heightened news coverage of the president and the salience of presidential campaigns. Indeed, past research has shown that voters report being substantially more informed about the president's issue positions and legislative priorities than congressional representatives because of the availability of information about the president (Hill, 1998; Hurley and Hill, 1980). Further, the role of the president as party leader in the modern era renders the president representative of his or her party. Therefore, voters are able to draw accurate inferences about the party from the president.

This paper applies this model of electoral accountability through the president to understand the electoral consequences of legislative effectiveness. I argue that similar to voter knowledge of presidential positions and priorities, voters are significantly more likely to be informed about the legislative record of the president than other representatives in government. Voters are expected to use this information to draw inferences about the ability of the president's party to govern effectively. Thus, the president successfully enacting their legislative agenda should enhance voters' perceptions of the competence of the president's party. This should have a secondary effect of improving the general reputation of the party and improving the performance of members of the party in elections. This gives me the following expectations:

**Hypothesis 1: Greater presidential legislative success will improve the perceived competence of the president's party.**

**Hypothesis 2: Greater presidential legislative success will improve the president's party's general reputation and the performance of members of the president's party in elections.**

## 2.3 Data & Methods

### 2.3.1 Measuring Legislative Success

Past research in American politics has used a number of different measures to quantify legislative success, each of which has its own unique advantages and disadvantages. The various measures differ in (a) what specific outcomes they count as a legislative success and (b) what bills they include when calculating the measure. [Volden and Wiseman \(2014\)](#), for example, develop a measure of “legislative effectiveness” that quantifies how successful members are at moving their bills through the legislature. The sample of bills that are included in the measure is only bills that members sponsored. To measure legislative effectiveness, the score uses indicators of how far the bills they sponsored made it within the legislature, with whether the bill ultimately passed being one of them.

Similar to the legislative effectiveness measurement, the “box score” measures the percentage of a member’s bills that were enacted into law out of all of the member’s bills introduced in a session. Thus, the measure represents in some rough form the extent to which the member delivered on his or her campaign promises. The “box score” was used by *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* to measure the success of the president in passing bills that the president requested to be introduced. The measure differs from the legislative effectiveness measure only insofar as it only includes bills that pass as an instance of success. This measure was intended to be roughly indicative of the extent to which the president was able to fulfill legislative campaign promises. However, the measure is seldom used in the empirical literature because it equates non-passage of bills that eventually pass as a failure. Furthermore, as with the legislative effectiveness score, the measurement assumes that success is only relevant politically for the member if they introduced the bill to the House or the Senate.

The most commonly used measure of legislative success in the literature is the “success rate.” The success rate, in contrast to the previously discussed measures, includes all roll call votes where the position of the relevant representative can be inferred. [Fortunato and Monroe \(2018\)](#) use this measure to calculate the legislative success of the majority party

in the House of Representatives as well as for individual members, which they refer to as “wins”. Further, the legislative success rate has been used extensively in the literature on presidential legislative success (Bond and Fleisher, 1990). The success rate is calculated as the percentage of bills in which the member, or a group of members, vote on the winning side of a bill. The measure has the obvious disadvantage of including all bills and, thus, includes successes or failures on bills that are not associated with the member or group of members. However, past research has relied on this measure because, unlike the other measurements of legislative success, it can be calculated reliably over time (Bond and Fleisher, 1990). Further, this measure is advantageous for my purposes because a measure can be created for individual members, the majority party in Congress, and the president that are directly comparable.

### 2.3.2 Measuring Party Electoral Performance

In order to test my hypotheses, I use both aggregate measures of the party’s reputation from survey data and electoral outcomes of members of the president’s party in the House of Representatives. First, to measure the aggregate reputation of the party, I rely on the *Macropartisanship* series developed by MacKuen et al. (1989) and a version of the *Policyhandling* series created by Cavari (2014, 2017). The *Macropartisanship* measurement is derived from the following question: “In politics, as of today, do you consider yourself a Republican, Democrat, or an Independent?” The measurement captures the percentage of voters who identify with the Democratic Party out of all two-party identifiers. The *Policyhandling* series, on the other hand, measures the percentage of respondents who indicated they thought the Democratic Party was better able to handle the public policy problem that they deemed to be the most important problem facing the country out of all the respondents who indicated that one of the two parties was better.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, the question the variable is derived from asks respondents, “Which political party do you think can do a better job of handling the problem you have just mentioned (as the most important problem facing the country)—the Republican Party or the Democratic Party?” The *Policyhandling* vari-

---

<sup>5</sup>(Cavari, 2014) refers to this variable as “Democratic Advantage”

able correlates at approximately .80 with measures of party competence that use questions that ask respondents about the party's competence across issues.<sup>6</sup> The correlation between *Macropartisanship* and *Policyhandling* is approximately .70.

I chose to use these two time-series measures for several reasons. First, survey researchers began asking the questions that the series are constructed from around the early 1950s and, therefore, a long enough series exists to estimate the effect of legislative accomplishment on party images with a sufficient amount of power. Second, both measures capture unique elements of party images that are relevant to my theory. Specifically, the *Policyhandling* measure captures directly what voters think about the competence of the two parties, and *Macropartisanship* captures *general* evaluations of the parties. The competence measure is valuable because it helps understand the direct effect of legislative success and verify the key mechanism in my theory, and the macropartisanship measure is valuable because it helps us understand the effect of legislative success on the party's electoral prospects. This is important given that the key prediction of the theory is that legislative success makes the party generally appear more favorable and, thus, improves the party's performance in elections.

In addition to the aggregate measures of party electoral success, I include an individual-level measurement of House members' electoral performance.<sup>7</sup> I chose to include measures of electoral outcomes in addition to the two other dependent variables since a) the theory makes clear predictions about electoral outcomes and not just aggregate party reputations and b) electoral outcomes can vary from collective preferences over the two parties because of voter turnout and the distribution of preferences across districts. Consistent with [Fortunato and Monroe \(2018\)](#), I use the percentage of the vote-share received by the majority party's candidate in the district for members of the House of Representatives to measure electoral performance. The data cover elections to the House of Representatives for the period 1960 to 2010.

---

<sup>6</sup>Amnon Cavari provided me with the policy-handling data and the *Macropartisanship* data were downloaded from James Stimson's homepage <http://stimson.web.unc.edu/>

<sup>7</sup>The data were downloaded from Fortunato and Monroe's replication package: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/KTGFRE>.

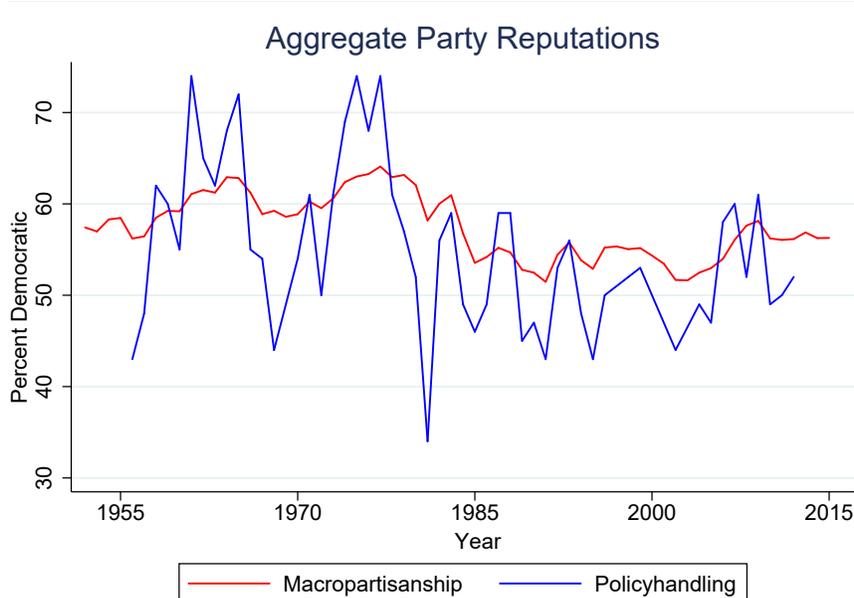


Figure 1: Party Brands Over Time

### 2.3.3 Control Variables

In order to isolate the effect of legislative success, I include several control variables in my analysis for both the aggregate and individual-level data. At the aggregate-level, I include control variables for economic performance and dichotomous indicators for each presidential administration. By including fixed effects for presidential administrations, I am able to rule out the possibility of stable confounders associated with presidential administrations that cause both legislative accomplishment and party electoral performance.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, the presidential dummies should capture any effect of the president’s general positions that might improve legislative success and the party’s reputation. I also collected yearly information on *Presidential Approval* given the influence of presidential popularity on *Macropartisanship*, *Policyhandling*, and *Presidential Success* identified in the literature (Canes-Wrone and De Marchi, 2002; Dancy et al., 2018; MacKuen et al., 1989).

<sup>8</sup>The dichotomous variable for each presidency does not influence the sign of coefficients and only allow me to identify the effect more precisely.

For the individual-level election analysis, I include several different individual-level control variables in addition to unemployment and dichotomous variables for each administration. These variables come from the [Fortunato and Monroe \(2018\)](#) replication data set and are based originally on the analysis presented in [Jacobson and Carson \(2015\)](#). The first is whether the majority party candidate ran against a “quality” challenger or not. A quality challenger is a challenger who has previously held elected office ([Jacobson and Carson, 2015](#)). Further, I include dichotomous variables that indicate whether the district is controlled by an incumbent of the majority party. I also include a measurement of the difference in campaign spending between the majority party and the out-party. Finally, I include a dummy variable for whether the race was contested or not.

Table 1: Variable Descriptions and Summary Statistics

Variable Name	Variable Description	Mean	Range
Macropartisanship	The percentage of respondents that identify with the Democratic Party out of all two-party identifiers.	57.41	[51.47-64.09]
Policyhandling	The percentage of voters who say the Democratic Party is better able to handle the most important problem facing the country out of all voters who believe one of the two parties is better.	55.11	[34-74]
Presidential Success	The percentage of votes where the president and a majority of the House of Representatives or the Senate voted on the same side of a bill.	53.5	[36.5-65]
Presidential Approval	The percentage of the public that approves of the president's performance.	53.91	[28.63-75.57]
Unemployment	The percentage of people who do not have a job out of all people that are either looking or have found employment.	5.88	[2.93-9.70]
Majority Party Success	The percentage of votes where the majority of the majority party and the majority of members in the House of Representatives or Senate voted on the same side on a bill.	.89	[.64-.97]
Member Success	Percentage of votes where a member voted on the same side of a bill as the majority of members in the House of Representatives or Senate.	.89	[.64-.97]
Majority Party Wins	Percentage of votes where the majority of the majority party and the majority of members in the House of Representatives or Senate vote on the same side on a bill for Party Unity votes.	.77	[.39-.94]
Majority Party Incumbent	A dichotomous indicator of whether the incumbent belonged to the majority party in the House.	.52	[0-1]
Minority Party Incumbent	A dichotomous indicator of whether the incumbent belonged to the minority party in the House.	.37	[0-1]
Majority Quality Candidate	A dichotomous indicator of whether the majority party's candidate in the district previously held office.	.58	[0-1]
Minority Quality Candidate	A dichotomous indicator of whether the minority party's candidate has previously held office.	.05	[0-1]
Majority Party Spending Advantage	Majority expenditures minus minority expenditures in the district (standardized).	0	[-3.82-3.65]
Unopposed	A dichotomous indicator of whether the majority party candidate ran unopposed.	.10	[0-1]

### 2.3.4 Estimation

In order to test my hypothesis about the relationship between presidential legislative success and aggregate party electoral success, I use a standard Ordinary Least Squares regression approach. However, since Dickey-Fuller tests revealed—and past research has concluded—that the dependent variable of interest, *Macropartisanship*, is not stationary, I used the first difference of *Macropartisanship* and *Policyhandling*. Further, since proper estimation requires balance in the order of variables, I also calculated the first difference of the key explanatory variables in the model and the control variables, with the exception of the dichotomous indicators. *Unemployment* and *Presidential Success* were interacted with a dummy variable indicating whether or not the president was a Republican, while the *Majority Party Success* variable was interacted with a dummy indicating whether the Democrats or Republicans held control of the House of Representatives. The dummy-interactions are necessary because higher values of *Macropartisanship* and *Policyhandling* indicate greater advantage for Democrats and, therefore, the expected direction of the effect of the key independent variables depend on whether the House and the presidency are controlled by Democrats or Republicans.

For the individual-level data, I estimated mixed-effects models using Maximum Likelihood Estimation. The individual-level election data can be conceptualized as containing two separate levels. The first level contains determinants of members' electoral performance that vary within each congressional election year. These individual-level outcomes are nested within electoral years whose averages are predicted by values of variables that only vary at the election year level and do not vary by individual member within years. The theoretical variables of interest—i.e., *Majority Party Success* and *Presidential Success*—only vary between election years.

## 2.4 Analysis

### 2.4.1 Aggregate Reputations

Table 2 shows the coefficients from OLS regression models with first differenced series of *Macropartisanship*, *Policyhandling*, *Presidential Success*, and *Majority Party Success*.<sup>9</sup> The independent variable series are interacted with party control dummies because partisan gain is in opposite directions on the dependent variable series for the two parties.<sup>10</sup> Looking at the first *Presidential Success* coefficients in Columns 1 & 2, we see that under Democratic presidential administrations, greater legislative success of the president is associated with a positive increase in the perceived competence of the Democratic Party and more voters identifying with the Democratic Party. The effect is significant at standard levels for *Policyhandling* but not for *Macropartisanship*. Looking at the interaction term, we see that the slope difference between the Democratic and Republican parties is also significantly different from zero for both regressions. Linear combination tests also show that the slope for Republican presidents on both outcome measurements is significantly different from zero for both outcomes. Looking at the coefficients for the *Majority Party Success* measure, we see that the signs of the key variables are inconsistent across dependent variables and statistically insignificant. Further, linear combination tests reveal no discernible effect of *Majority Party Success* on *Macropartisanship* or *Policyhandling* for Republicans.

Figure 2 plots the effect of a unit change in *Presidential Success* on *Policyhandling*. The effects of presidential legislative success are moderate to large in terms of substantive magnitude. A standard deviation change in *Presidential Success* leads to approximately a fourth of a standard deviation change in the outcome series for Republicans and approximately half of a standard deviation change for Democrats. Looking again at Table 1, we see that the coefficient size for the *Presidential Success* variable for the *Policyhandling* dependent variable is noticeably larger than for the *Macropartisanship* dependent variable. This is

---

<sup>9</sup>Years where there is a change in party control of institutions are omitted since the correlation between lags from the other party's control and the outcome would distort estimates. However, the results are the substantively similar when these years are included or partitioned out with dummy variables.

<sup>10</sup>Fixed effects for presidential administration were included, which made the results more precise but did not change the substantive results.

Table 2: Presidential and Majority Party Legislative Success and Party Reputations

	<i>Policyhandling</i> $\Delta^d$		<i>Macropartisanship</i> $\Delta^d$	
	$\hat{\beta}$	$\hat{\sigma}$	$\hat{\beta}$	$\hat{\sigma}$
<b><i>Majority Party Legislative Success</i></b>				
Majority Party Success $\Delta^d$	-28.92	(20.96)	4.06	(5.48)
Majority Party Success $\Delta^d$ * Republican House	42.88	(60.87)	-5.13	(15.92)
<b><i>Presidential Legislative Success</i></b>				
Presidential Success $\Delta^d$	1.17*	(0.44)	0.17	(0.11)
Presidential Success $\Delta^d$ * Republican President	-1.41**	(0.50)	-0.27*	(0.13)
Republican President	-19.26*	(8.53)	-1.04	(2.23)
Republican House	12.03**	(3.98)	1.12	(1.04)
<b><i>Controls</i></b>				
Unemployment $\Delta^d$	-2.05	(2.72)	-0.45	(0.71)
Unemployment $\Delta^d$ * Republican President	6.42*	(2.92)	1.15	(0.76)
Constant	-3.44	(4.83)	-0.89	(1.26)
Observations	48		48	
$R^2$	.62		.35	
Breusch-Godfrey	0.45		0.03	

Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

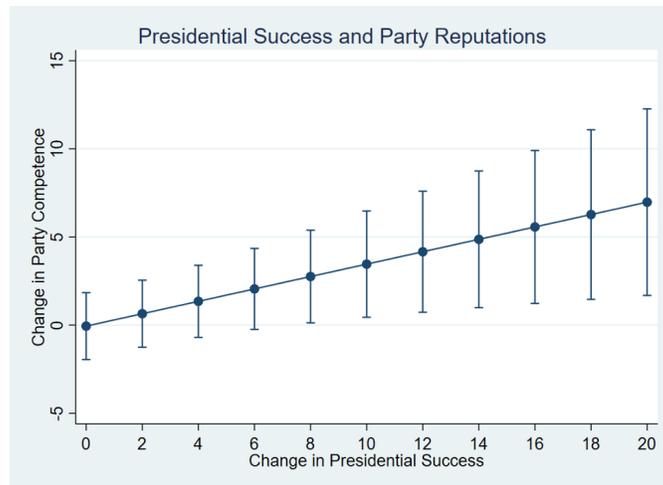


Figure 2: Marginal Effect of Presidential Success on Party Reputations

attributable to the fact that the *Macropartisanship* series varies less in general and actual identification with parties, as opposed to beliefs about them, tends to be less responsive to short-run forces. Thus, while the raw coefficients between the two series are different, the standardized versions of the relevant coefficients are not significantly different.

A potential issue with the analysis presented above is that it provides an unfair comparison between the legislative success of the majority party in Congress and presidential legislative success. This is because the *Presidential Success* measurement only contains information on votes where the president's position can be reasonably inferred. Thus, the presidential legislative accomplishment measurement likely consists of a more *salient* set of laws. Since I do not possess information on all of the laws that the president took a position on—and, thus, I cannot compute measurements with the same laws, I instead re-estimated the above model with a *Majority Party Wins* variable, which measures majority party legislative success on issues where a majority of the two parties voted on different sides of the issue and are likely more salient. Table 3 presents estimates from the regression including the *Majority Party Wins* variable. Looking at the estimates, we see that the coefficients for *Majority Party Wins* are signed incorrectly and insignificant at standard levels of significance. Therefore, the results suggest that the lack of evidence in favor of a relationship between the legislative success of the majority party and their legislative success persists even when analyzed on salient votes.

Table 3: Majority Party Wins and Party Reputations

	<i>Policyhandling</i> $\Delta^d$		<i>Macropartisanship</i> $\Delta^d$	
	$\hat{\beta}$	$\hat{\sigma}$	$\hat{\beta}$	$\hat{\sigma}$
<b><i>Majority Party Legislative Success</i></b>				
Majority Party Wins $\Delta^d$	-2.95	(8.70)	2.46	(2.18)
Majority Party Wins $\Delta^{d*}$ Republican House	4.79	(34.60)	-5.28	(8.65)
<b><i>Presidential Legislative Success</i></b>				
Presidential Success $\Delta^d$	1.20*	(0.45)	0.17	(0.11)
Presidential Success $\Delta^d$ * Republican President	-1.53**	(0.50)	-0.24*	(0.13)
Republican President	-20.30*	(9.45)	-1.26	(2.36)
House Republican	12.26**	(4.13)	1.05	(1.03)
<b><i>Controls</i></b>				
Unemployment $\Delta^d$	-1.89	(2.81)	-0.42	(0.70)
Unemployment $\Delta^d$ * Republican President	6.30*	(3.03)	1.10	(0.76)
Constant	-3.11	(4.96)	-0.81	(1.24)
Observations	48		48	
$R^2$	.59		.36	
Breusch-Godfrey	1.57		0.04	

Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Finally, in order to further explore the relationship between legislative success in Congress and party reputations, I estimated models with *Majority Party Success*, *Majority Party Wins*, and *Presidential Success* calculated for the Senate. While theories of legislative accomplishment and electoral outcomes have focused predominately on the House of Representatives, the legislative success of the majority party in the Senate could matter even more than the House given that Senators are generally more visible than their counterparts in the House and, thus, voters might be more likely to be informed about legislative activity in the Senate than in the House of Representatives. Table 4 presents estimates from the same models I estimated for the House of Representatives for the Senate, including both general *Majority Party Success* and the *Majority Party Wins* for the majority party in the Senate.

Looking at columns 1 and 2, we see that the results for the Senate are similar to the results for the House of Representatives. *Presidential Legislative Success* is consistently signed in the right direction for all specifications—but just short of statistically significant for the *Macropartisanship* outcome. Further, the substantive magnitude of the coefficients for presidential legislative success in the Senate is comparable to the coefficients for the House. While the *Majority Party Success* measurement is signed inconsistently for both the *Policyhandling* and *Macropartisanship* outcomes, the *Majority Party Wins* measurement coefficients are signed in the correct direction. However, the coefficients for the wins measurements are highly insignificant. While the Breusch-Godfrey statistic suggests the models of *Policyhandling* contain significant auto-correlation, bivariate models and models containing only the legislative success measures produce similar findings without significant auto-correlation for the Senate.

Table 4: Senate Majority Party Success and Party Reputations

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	<i>Policyhandling</i> $\Delta^d$	<i>Macropartisanship</i> $\Delta^d$	<i>Policyhandling</i> $\Delta^d$	<i>Macropartisanship</i> $\Delta^d$
<b>Majority Party Legislative Success</b>				
Majority Party Success $\Delta^d$	-2.04 (26.72)	-2.45 (6.13)		
Majority Party Success $\Delta^d$ * Republican Senate	-4.54 (42.60)	1.34 (9.76)		
Majority Party Wins $\Delta^d$			1.23 (13.75)	3.85 (3.08)
Majority Party Wins $\Delta^d$ * Republican Senate			-7.25 (20.48)	-3.50 (4.59)
<b>Presidential Legislative Success</b>				
Presidential Success $\Delta^d$	0.94* (0.42)	0.11 (0.10)	0.93* (0.42)	0.12 (0.09)
Presidential Success $\Delta^d$ * Republican President	-1.26* (0.48)	-0.20 (0.11)	-1.25* (0.48)	-0.21 (0.11)
Republican President	-25.45* (10.42)	-1.65 (2.39)	-26.13* (10.01)	-1.49 (2.24)
House Senate	8.70* (4.11)	0.67 (0.94)	8.72* (4.24)	1.02 (0.95)
<b>Controls</b>				
Unemployment $\Delta^d$	-3.04 (3.00)	-0.63 (0.69)	-3.01 (3.02)	-0.77 (0.68)
Unemployment $\Delta^d$ * Republican President	7.61* (3.26)	1.45 (0.75)	7.50* (3.25)	1.55* (0.73)
3.99	-0.29 (4.90)	3.93 (1.12)	-0.42 (4.73)	Constant (1.06)
Observations	46	46	46	46
$R^2$	.53	.33	.53	.35
Breusch-Godfrey	4.5	.654	4.2	.078

Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

The results from the aggregate analysis of legislative success and party reputations consistently support the main hypothesis of the paper. Specifically, the results support the assertion that greater presidential legislative accomplishment will improve the aggregate reputation of the party with the electorate. Therefore, the results reaffirm the notion that presidential success is a collective good for members of the president’s party in Congress (Lee, 2008). Further, the results replicate previous analyses that show no tangible electoral benefit of legislative accomplishment for the majority party in Congress for both the House and the Senate, at least independent of the president’s success.<sup>11</sup> While *Presidential Success* has a stronger effect on *Policyhandling* than on *Macropartisanship*, this is what theory would predict given the relative stability of partisanship in the short term. Further, the weak substantive effect of *Presidential Success* on *Policyhandling* does not imply that presidential success has a negligible effect on inter-party competition in the short term. This is because, while changes in the party’s competence reputation influence inter-party competition indirectly through their effect on the general favorability of the party, party reputations also have an independent *direct* effect on electoral outcomes. For example, Green and Jennings (2017) show strong substantive effects of general competence on both aggregate vote-share and individual-level vote choice after controlling for macropartisanship.<sup>12</sup>

#### 2.4.2 Congressional Elections

Table 5 displays the effect of the theoretical variables of interest on the two-party vote-share of members of the majority party in the House of Representatives. All of the variables are standardized except for the dichotomous indicators because the scales of the continuous variables differ. Columns 1-3 display the results of mixed-effects models with a combination of the *Presidential Success* and *Majority Party Success* measures in the model and with the measures estimated separately.<sup>13</sup> Looking at the *Presidential Success* coefficient in Column 3—i.e., the full model—we see that the coefficient estimate is negative indicating that, con-

---

<sup>11</sup>Though note that the bi-variate correlations are also insignificant

<sup>12</sup>They use both a latent measure of competence constructed across issue areas and the *Policyhandling* measure—both showing the same effect.

<sup>13</sup>The dummy variables for presidential administrations are omitted for presentation sake. The key substantive findings of the paper generally hold when the dummies are omitted. Although, I am able to estimate the effects more precisely when the dummy variables are included.

sistent with expectations, greater presidential success undermines the electoral performance of the majority party during divided government. Further, the coefficient is significant at standard levels ( $p=.00$ ). The interaction between *Presidential Success* and *Majority Party President* is positive and statistically significant, indicating a positive difference in the effect of presidential success on party reputations between unified and divided government. Further, linear combination tests indicate that the relationship between presidential legislative success and majority party electoral performance is positive and statistically different from zero, indicating a positive effect of presidential legislative success in unified government ( $.09, p=.017$ ). In sum, the effect of *Majority Party Success* on *Majority Party Vote Share* corroborates the findings from the aggregate analysis. Further, the results presented here demonstrate that *Presidential Success* influences actual election outcomes and not just perceptions of the two parties aggregated across the electorate.

Table 5: Presidential and Majority Party Legislative Success and Congressional Elections

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Majority Vote %	Majority Vote %	Majority Vote %
<b>Election Year Level</b>			
<i>Majority Party Legislative Success</i>			
Majority Party Success	-0.08 (0.08)		-0.24** (0.07)
Majority Party President		0.07 (0.19)	0.31 (0.18)
<i>Presidential Legislative Success</i>			
Presidential Success		-0.18** (0.06)	-0.25*** (0.05)
Presidential Success * Majority Party President		0.28* (0.14)	0.36** (0.12)
<b>District Level</b>			
Successes	-0.29*** (0.01)	-0.30*** (0.01)	-0.30*** (0.01)
Majority Spending Difference	0.11*** (0.01)	0.11*** (0.01)	0.11*** (0.01)
Majority Incumbent	0.20*** (0.04)	0.20*** (0.04)	0.20*** (0.04)
Minority Incumbent	-0.57*** (0.05)	-0.57*** (0.05)	-0.57*** (0.05)
Majority Quality Candidate	0.23*** (0.05)	0.23*** (0.05)	0.23*** (0.05)
Minority Quality Candidate	-0.31*** (0.05)	-0.31*** (0.05)	-0.31*** (0.05)
Unopposed	0.80*** (0.03)	0.80*** (0.03)	0.79*** (0.03)
Constant	-0.95* (0.39)	-0.31 (0.17)	-1.21*** (0.31)
Year R.E.	✓	✓	✓
District R.E.	✓	✓	✓
Observations	8780	8780	8780

Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Presidential dummies omitted for presentation sake.

The results of the regressions also generally mirror the findings of the aggregate analysis with regard to the legislative success of the majority party in Congress. Specifically, looking at the coefficient for *Majority Party Success* in Column 1, we see that the effect is insignificant and incorrectly signed. When *Presidential Legislative Success* is included in the model, the substantive magnitude of the negative coefficient increases and becomes statistically significant. Thus, the legislative success of the majority party is signed in the opposite direction from what theory would predict.

## 2.5 Discussion

The key finding from my analysis is that presidential legislative success is durably related to public perceptions of the competence of the president's party and their subsequent legislative performance. Therefore, the results provide strong support for my theoretical expectation that presidential legislative success should enhance the party's reputation. This key substantive finding holds even when controlling for potentially confounding variables like the president's general popularity or the president's party's seat share. This provides the first evidence to date linking legislative accomplishment to election outcomes. Further, the results corroborate the findings of recent research that shows no valence advantage for effective control of the agenda by the majority party in the House of Representatives, contradicting prominent theories of representation and legislative organization. Generally, the results reaffirm the central role of the president in shaping perceptions and evaluations of the parties, as well as the insignificance of members of Congress in defining the party brand.

The findings have at least two other important implications for our understanding of elections and congressional politics. First, the results provide a mechanism through which the legislative process influences inter-party competition for institutional control. While the legislative process is central to prominent theories of inter-party competition (Koger and Lebo, 2017; Lee, 2016) there is surprisingly little evidence linking the legislative outputs to aggregate electoral outcomes or inter-party competition. Instead, most models of aggregate congressional election outcomes point to the role of performance indicators in determining

changes in party control (Tufte, 1975). The results presented here complement these explanations and directly links party electoral performance to the legislative process. Finally, the results support the claim of past research that there is diverging partisan interests in presidential success by party because of its effect on inter-party competition (Lee, 2008).

### 3.0 Primary Elections and Presidential Support in Congress

During the first term of the Trump presidency, Republican members of Congress were faced with a dilemma regarding many of the president's policy proposals and decisions. Sincere positioning on certain issues, even when consistent with the conservative values of the Republican Party, often entailed positioning against or providing vocal criticism of the de facto leader of their party. When Republican members of Congress were unwilling to criticize President Trump's statements or oppose his policy initiatives, political commentators speculated that their hesitance stemmed from a fear that opposition to the president would upset committed partisans in the electorate and encourage potential primary competition.<sup>1</sup> President Trump and his advisors even attempted to capitalize on the president's influence with the primary electorate by warning members that if they opposed the president's policy initiatives, they would face greater competition during the primaries.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, the White House's warnings materialized. Trump's detractors in Congress experienced tough primary challenges, with Congressmen Mark Sanford and Robert Pittenger ultimately losing their reelection bids to pro-Trump candidates in the primary, despite their reputations as strong conservatives.<sup>3</sup>

Presidential support has also played a noticeable role in primary elections during other presidencies, both for members of the president's party and the opposition party. During the Bush presidency, for example, Democrats who were supportive of Bush's policies faced tough primary challenges, as did Bush's opponents in the Republican Party. For example, Mark Pera challenged incumbent Congressman Dan Lipinski (D-IL) in the primaries because of his support of President Bush, calling him a "Bush dog" Democrat who "sits with the Democrats, but he consistently votes with George Bush on the issues."<sup>4</sup> Senator Joe Lieberman (D-CT) was labeled "George Bush's favorite Democrat" by opponent Ned Lamont's

---

<sup>1</sup>"Republican Struggle to Criticize Trump," *NPR*, July 28, 2018, <https://n.pr/2uFc9QJ>, Kyle Dropp and Brenden Nyhan, "Republicans Have One Big Incentive to Stick With Trump", *The Upshot*, Jan 30, 2017.

<sup>2</sup>Chelsea Bailey, "Trump Aide Dan Scavino Calls for 'Defeat' of GOP Rep. Justin Amash," *NBC News*, April 1, 2017.

<sup>3</sup>Kay Steiger, "Trump's biggest Republican critics paid the price in their primaries on Tuesday," *Vox*, Jun 13, 2018.

<sup>4</sup>Sam Youngman, "Democrat Lipinski's primary enemies coming from his left," *The Hill*, October 3, 2007. Dan Mihalopoulos, "Rival says Lipinski too much like GOP," *Chicago Tribune*, February 1, 2008.

campaign that ultimately defeated Senator Lieberman in the primary.<sup>5</sup> Republicans who opposed the administration on key policies, such as Congressman Walter Jones (R-NC), also faced serious primary challenges from pro-administration candidates because of their perceived disloyalty to the president.<sup>6</sup>

Although there is anecdotal evidence linking presidential support to primary election outcomes, there has not yet been any systematic empirical analysis of whether presidential support affects the decision-making of voters or potential challengers in primary elections. Studies of elections and presidential support have focused exclusively on general elections, where policy alignment with the president is an important determinant of voters' evaluation and support of incumbents in Congress (Brady et al., 1996; Gronke et al., 2003). However, in recent years, presidential support has become increasingly unrelated to the president's popularity with the general electorate (Jacobson, 2012). Subsequently, members have seen general election losses tied to greater legislative support of the president in recent elections (Brady et al., 1996; Carson and Hitefield, 2018; ?). Thus, electoral incentives arising from general elections appear to be playing a smaller role in members' decision-making on the president's legislative agenda.

The party polarization of presidential support has been attributed to a combination of changes in members' sincere positions and an increasingly less competitive general election environment. While the polarization of presidential support is undoubtedly due in part to changes in the underlying policy preferences of members of Congress, the polarization of presidential support could also be due to primary elections. There are several reasons to suspect that primary elections might have contributed to the party polarization of presidential support. First, primary elections are low-information environments where voters must rely on cues other than the party label when choosing between candidates. Secondly, past research has shown presidents maintain high popularity among the party base in the electorate irrespective of their performance or policy positions, and vice versa for the opposing party (Donovan et al., 2019; Lebo and Cassino, 2007). Consequently, presidents tend to influence the attitudes of voters from their own party and can even polarize opinion on issues

---

<sup>5</sup>Sam Seder, "Why Ned Lamont is a Democrat," *In These Times*, March 21, 2006.

<sup>6</sup>Josh Kraushaar, "GOP congressman pays price for opposing war," *Politico*, August 22, 2007.

by negatively influencing the opinion of out-party voters (Barber and Pope, 2019; Edwards, 2015; Nicholson, 2012). As such, members who are less supportive of a co-partisan president are viewed less favorably by voters who identify with the party and more favorably by voters of the opposing party (Gronke et al., 2003). Finally, presidential support is the most visible indicator of party loyalty and, therefore, voters are likely to have information about members' support of the president. This paper argues that presidential support will have consequences in primary elections, such that members of the president's party will perform better in primaries, and members of the opposing party will perform worse, as they become more supportive of the president's policy positions.

This chapter combines presidential support scores with primary election outcomes for members of the House of Representatives for the period 1960 to 2010 to evaluate the effects of presidential support on primary elections. The results of regressions of primary election outcomes on presidential support provide several important conclusions. First, members of the president's party who are more supportive of the president are less likely to experience a quality primary challenger and are better able to withstand primary competition when they do face a challenger. Further, the substantive effect of presidential support on primary election outcomes rivals or surpasses that of other measures of incumbent positioning studied in the literature on primary elections (e.g., ideological positions). The findings for the opposing party of the president, however, are less consistent. While members of the opposing party are more likely to experience a serious primary challenger when they are supportive of an out-party president, they do not appear to perform significantly worse on average against challengers. Furthermore, the substantive effects of presidential support are small for members of the opposing party, and the effect is less empirically distinguishable from party loyalty or ideological positions. Finally, the effect of presidential support on the emergence of quality challengers depends on the president's approval in the district, such that anti-administration challengers are less likely to enter in districts where the president's popularity is high. In sum, the results of the paper suggest that primary elections are important in determining the president's ability to pass their legislative programs into law.

## 3.1 Literature & Theory

### 3.1.1 Elections and Presidential Support in Congress

The literature on inter-branch politics argues that elections play an important role in determining incentives for legislative support of the president in Congress. In particular, past studies have identified two theoretical reasons for why general elections affect presidential support. The first, and most commonly cited theory in the literature, argues that general elections shape incentives for alignment with the president because of the direct effect of member's level of presidential support on their electoral performance. Specifically, the theory argues that members of Congress will alter their level of presidential support in response to the president's popularity in their district, such that members will be more likely to support the president's position as his popularity in their district increases. Consistent with this theory, [Gronke et al. \(2003\)](#) show that voters' perceptions of members' levels of support of the president reflect actual levels of presidential support in Congress and that members who are more supportive of the president's positions are viewed more favorably among voters who approve of the president, independent of members' partisan affiliation. Furthermore, [Brady et al. \(1996\)](#) show that this translates to observed electoral outcomes, such that members' levels of support for the president compound partisan coattail effects in elections. Therefore, the desire of members to be reelected seems to aid the president in passing their favored policies when the president's popularity is high ([Canes-Wrone and De Marchi, 2002](#)).

An additional line of research argues that general elections shape incentives for presidential support because of the importance of the president's ability to govern in shaping inter-party electoral competition. More specifically, this literature argues elections shape incentives for presidential support because of the dominant role that the president plays in determining the party's reputation with the public ([Jacobson, 2019](#); [MacKuen et al., 1989](#)). According to this perspective, the importance of presidential success in determining the party's electoral success creates collective interest in the president succeeding for co-partisans and collective interest in the president failing for members of the opposing party. Specifically, members have an incentive to support a co-partisan president because doing so will increase

the likelihood of presidential legislative success and aid in their party gaining greater institutional control (Lee, 2016). Lee (2008) argues, subsequently, that the president's association with legislation should polarize presidential support on roll call votes. Using data on Senate votes on legislation that is given attention by the president, Lee shows that votes become polarized down party lines when the president takes a position on the issue, even on issues that recently enjoyed inter-party consensus. Furthermore, Lee (2013) finds that presidential support on non-ideological issues like raising the debt ceiling and presidential investigations have become divided down party line, which she attributes to members' desire for their party to maintain a favorable reputation. As such, members' concern for the electoral success of their party is thought to be an important determinant of presidential support on legislation in Congress.

### 3.1.2 Primary Elections and Presidential Support

While previous research has studied the role of presidential support in general elections (Brady et al., 1996; Gronke et al., 2003), the importance of presidential support in primary elections has not yet been considered. The literature on primary elections has focused predominately on the role of primary elections in encouraging ideologically extreme voting in Congress by incentivizing candidates to position away from the median voter in their district towards the median voter in the primary electorate, who is thought to favor more ideologically extreme policies (Boatright, 2013; Brady et al., 2007). Other research has evaluated the role of primary elections in encouraging loyalty to the party in Congress, finding that members who vote against the party on divisive roll calls tend to attract primary challengers at higher rates and perform worse against them (Pyeatt, 2015). Olivella et al. (2017) corroborate this finding, showing that heightened primary competition causes greater partisanship at the co-sponsorship phase of the legislative process because electorally vulnerable members attempt to build reputations as party loyalists to improve their performance against potential challengers.

This paper argues that primary elections also affect incentives for another form of behavior: presidential support in Congress. Over the last 30 years, presidential support among

members of the president's party has risen steadily as members of the president's party now take the same position as the president on 80 to 90 percent of bills voted on in Congress (Jacobson, 2015). Similarly, members of the opposing party now vote against the president's positions at historically high levels. Further, votes on presidential initiatives have become increasingly partisan over the last 30 years, even though presidents are not proposing more extreme legislation than in the past (Lee, 2008). The partisan polarization surrounding the president and presidential policy initiatives has been attributed to multiple causes, with changing electoral geography and diverging electoral interests in presidential success being the most important (Jacobson, 2015; Lee, 2016). However, incentives arising from primary elections could also be responsible for this trend if presidential support plays a role in voters' decision-making in primary elections.

For members of the president's party in Congress, presidential support should improve performance in primary elections because of the president's favorability with the party base. Specifically, absent major scandals, presidents tend to maintain unwavering support from voters who identify with or vote for the president's party (Lebo and Cassino, 2007). Further, presidential approval remains steady even when partisans have lost support for their representatives and the party leadership in Congress.<sup>7</sup> Voters who associate with the party even have a more favorable view of the president than the party itself.<sup>8</sup> Further, the president's steadfast support from the party base tends to afford the president significant influence in shaping attitudes towards policies and other politicians among those who identify with the base (Barber and Pope, 2019; Gronke et al., 2003). Therefore, high levels of presidential support should advantage members of the president's party in primary elections by improving their reputation with voters and deterring potential challengers.

With respect to members of the opposition party, we should expect greater presidential support to have negative effects on members' reputations with primary voters, independent of their policy positions. In particular, there is significant evidence that partisanship has causal effects on out-party voters' evaluations of the president beyond what we would expect from

---

<sup>7</sup>Jason Li Miere "Under Trump, Republicans Dislike Their Own Party's Leaders More Than They Did When Barack Obama Became President," *Newsweek*, September 28, 2017.

<sup>8</sup>John Walsh "Poll suggests Trump voters are more loyal to him than they are to the Republican Party," *Business Insider*, November 1, 2018.

voters' policy leanings because of partisanship (Donovan et al., 2019). Partisan attachment can then polarize public opinion on issues championed by the president and evaluations of presidential performance on issues (Nicholson, 2012). For example, Edwards (2015) shows that when the president takes a position on an issue, it can lead a substantial portion of the opposition party to change their position on the issue away from the president's position, with the president's influence often surpassing that of other party leaders in this respect. Voters' disdain for out-party presidents should, then, make support or association with the president an electoral liability in the primary. This was the case in the 2010 primaries when several Republican members of Congress experienced primary challengers for supporting several of Obama's policy initiatives despite having generally conservative voting records.<sup>9</sup>

While I expect the effect of presidential support to be conditioned on the political party of members, I also expect the effect of presidential support to be conditioned on public approval of the president among the district because of strategy in candidate emergence. In other words, potential challengers should be more likely to enter the race when they can win the general election. Therefore, anti-administration candidates should be far less likely to enter in districts where the president is popular because doing so could lead to the party losing the seat. For example, the Bush Administration refused to support a primary challenger of Senator Lincoln Chafee (R-RI) despite Chafee's low level of support for the president compared to other Republican senators because doing so would likely result in the party losing the general election. The theory developed in this section gives me the following expectations about the relationship between presidential support and primary election outcomes:

**Hypothesis 1: Incumbents who are more supportive of co-partisan (out-party) presidents should be less (more) likely to experience a primary challenger.**

**Hypothesis 2: Incumbents who are more supportive of co-partisan (out-party) presidents should receive a higher (lower) percentage of the vote share when competing against a challenger in primary elections.**

**Hypothesis 3: When the president is more popular in the district, challengers against an anti-administration (pro-administration) challenger should be more**

---

<sup>9</sup>David Corn "Confessions of a Tea Party Casualty" *Mother Jones*, August 3, 2010

(less) likely to enter the primary race.

### 3.2 Data & Methods

In order to evaluate the role of presidential support in primary elections, I combined data on members of the House of Representatives' level of presidential support in Congress and their performance in primary elections, measuring both the emergence of challengers and incumbent vote share. The primary election data for the House of Representatives come from a publicly available data set constructed by [Pettigrew et al. \(2014\)](#). The data set contains multiple indicators of primary election performance, as well as candidate-specific information, for both challengers and incumbents for all primary elections for the House of Representatives for the period 1960 to 2010.<sup>10</sup> The data set was reduced to districts where a single incumbent was running for reelection and, hence, does not include districts where two incumbents were running because of the redistricting process. I do, however, include data in my analysis for years where redistricting occurred, but only one incumbent ran for reelection.<sup>11</sup>

Previous research on incumbent performance in primary elections has relied on multiple measures of both challenger emergence and incumbent performance. In this paper, I use these same measurements to analyze the role of presidential support in primary elections. The first measure of electoral performance I use is a dichotomous indicator, *Challenger*, which measures whether the incumbent faced any primary challenger at all.<sup>12</sup> While this measure is problematic insofar as it does not capture whether the challenger was electorally viable, it does capture expectations among prospective candidates about the potential vulnerability of incumbents that a quality challenger measure does not. The second measurement used in the analysis, *Quality Challenger*, is a dichotomous indicator of whether the incumbent faced an experienced challenger. For this measurement, I used a dichotomous indicator

---

<sup>10</sup>Because there was an unusual amount of errors in the 1956-1960 period of the original data set, including many duplicate observations where party was miscoded, I removed these years from my analysis.

<sup>11</sup>The results are stronger for periods in which redistricting did not occur, suggesting that uncertainty regarding the preferences of the general electorate might deter, rather than encourage, challengers.

<sup>12</sup>This measure is used by ([Pyeatt, 2015](#)).

for whether the challenger had previously held public office at any level of government.<sup>13</sup> While voters would not prefer an experienced or “quality” challenger over an incumbent simply because they are experienced, since all incumbents are quality candidates, research suggests the importance of other variables in determining incumbent vote-share depends on the emergence of a quality alternative (Jacobson, 2015). To measure incumbent performance against primary challengers, I used a variable *Incumbent Vote Share* that measures the percentage of the vote incumbents received against the challenger.

To measure presidential support among incumbents in Congress, I rely on a variation of the standard measurement of presidential support used in the literature (Edwards III, 1985). Specifically, I use a *Presidential Support* variable that is constructed using members of Congress’ roll call votes and various sources of information regarding the president’s position on legislation.<sup>14</sup> As such, the measurement does not contain all congressional votes but only votes that the president’s position can be inferred on. The value of *Presidential Support* is calculated by taking the percentage of votes where the member took the same position as the president divided by all of the votes the president took a known position on. While the measure is imperfect insofar as we are interested in voters’ *perceptions* of presidential support, and voters tend to be uninformed about individual member’s positions independent of their partisan affiliation (Dancey and Sheagley, 2013; Lupia, 1994), voters’ subjective perceptions of incumbent presidential support *do* tend to reflect actual levels of presidential support, even when partisanship is controlled for (Gronke et al., 2003). Therefore, the *Presidential Support* measurement is a valid indicator of my central concept.

In addition to *Presidential Support*, I also included several other independent variables that are common in the literature on primary elections for the purpose of statistical control and to evaluate the relative importance of *Presidential Support*. First, I created a *District Partisanship* variable which measures the percentage of the two-party vote share received by the Democratic Party’s presidential candidate in the most recent election. I also include

---

<sup>13</sup>I also used Boatright (2013)’s measure of whether candidates received more than 25% of the vote share in separate regressions. These results were substantively and statistically similar to the results for the regressions using the quality challenger measurement.

<sup>14</sup>The measurement comes from Voteview’s webpage: [https://voteview.com/articles/presidential\\_support\\_scores](https://voteview.com/articles/presidential_support_scores)

fixed effects for a categorical variable of *District Partisanship* and for each election year.<sup>15</sup> Consistent with previous research on this topic, I also use a variable, *Closed Primary*, which indicates whether participation in the primary election was restricted to co-partisan voters, as closed primaries tend to encourage different numbers and types of primary challengers (Gerber and Morton, 1998). Further, I included a dummy variable, *Redistricting*, which measures whether the district had undergone redistricting since baseline levels of primary challenges are potentially higher when an incumbent faces a different electorate. Finally, I used a variable, *Freshman*, which measures whether the incumbent was in their first term and a *Female* dummy to capture the incumbent's gender. Table 6 includes descriptions of each variable and summary statistics of the variable for the sample.

---

<sup>15</sup>Specifically, I use a variable that measures 20 percentiles of the president's vote share.

Table 6: Variable Descriptions and Summary Statistics

Variable Name	Variable Description	Mean	Range
<i>Presidential Support</i>	Percentage of roll call votes where a M.O.C. takes the same position as the president in the year before the primary.	52.95	[0-100]
<i>Challenger</i>	A dichotomous indicator of whether the incumbent experienced a challenger.	.28	[0-1]
<i>Quality Challenger</i>	An indicator of whether the incumbent experienced a challenger who previously held office.	.04	[0-1]
<i>Incumbent Vote Share</i>	The percentage of the vote share candidates received against a challenger.	93.59	[17.85-100]
<i>District Partisanship</i>	The vote share the Democratic Party's presidential candidate received in the previous election.	47.73	[0.25-96.06]
<i>Closed Primary</i>	An indicator of whether the primary only allowed partisans to vote.	.42	[0-1]
<i>Redistricting</i>	An indicator of whether redistricting occurred.	.18	[0-1]
<i>Freshman</i>	An indicator of whether this is the member's first term.	.19	[0-1].
<i>Female</i>	An indicator of whether the member of Congress is a female.	.07	[0-1].
<i>District Presidential Approval</i>	The president's vote return in the previous election for the district.	53.57	[3.9-96.05]
<i>Party Unity</i>	Percentage of party unity votes that the member voted on the same side as the majority of their party.	82.54	[3.95-100]
<i>Nominate 1</i>	The member's position on the first dimension of Nominate.	.33	[0-1]
<i>Nominate 2</i>	The member's position on the second dimension of Nominate.	.34	[0-1]

### 3.3 Analysis

To test my hypotheses regarding the effect of presidential support on primary election outcomes, I estimated a series of pooled cross-sectional regression models. For both the continuous and dichotomous dependent variables, I use basic linear regression analysis. Further, to facilitate interpretation of the results, all of the variables in the analysis are standardized. For all of the models, I included fixed effects for year and district partisanship, which is common in studies of primary elections (Brady et al., 2007; Pyeatt, 2015).<sup>16</sup> I begin by analyzing the effect of presidential support on the emergence of challengers, followed by an analysis of primary vote returns for members who experienced a primary challenge.

#### 3.3.1 Challenger Emergence

The first part of my analysis focuses on the effect of presidential support on the emergence of primary challengers. Table 7 displays the results of regressions of a) whether members experienced a primary challenger and b) whether they experienced a *quality* primary challenger on presidential support and relevant control variables. I include fixed effects for district partisanship and year in each of the regression models<sup>17</sup>. Columns 1 and 2 show the regressions for members of the president's party, and Columns 3 and 4 show the regressions for members of the opposing party. The results in the table are pooled across parties and years because the effect of presidential support on primary outcomes is not statistically distinguishable between parties nor years.

Looking at Columns 1 and 2, we see that the results match theoretical expectations. Members who are more supportive of the positions of a co-partisan president are less likely to experience a primary challenger and less likely to experience a quality challenger. The coefficients for both outcomes are significant at standard levels of analysis. In terms of the substantive impact of presidential support on challenger emergence, we see that presidential support has a slightly greater influence on the likelihood of simply experiencing a challenger

---

<sup>16</sup>The results hold with other fixed effects specifications used in the literature such as state fixed effects, district fixed effects, as well as member fixed effects

<sup>17</sup>The results for the model hold when fixed effects are omitted and when other forms of fixed effects, such as member or state fixed effects, are included in the model.

Table 7: Presidential Support and Challenger Emergence

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	<b>President's Party</b>		<b>Out-Party</b>	
	Challenger	Quality Challenger	Challenger	Quality Challenger
Presidential Support	-0.09** (0.03)	-0.07* (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)	0.08** (0.03)
Redistricting	0.02 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)	0.05 (0.03)	0.04 (0.02)
Closed Primary	-0.03* (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
Freshman	-0.01 (0.02)	0.07*** (0.02)	-0.03* (0.02)	0.05*** (0.01)
Female	-0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
Constant	0.08 (0.08)	0.70*** (0.09)	0.10 (0.11)	0.19* (0.10)
Observations	4611	4611	5060	5060
Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
District Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓

Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

than experiencing a quality challenger. Specifically, a standard deviation change in presidential support reduces the likelihood of a challenger by approximately 5 percent and by about 1 percent for a quality challenger. This is approximately 9 percent of a standard deviation change in the probability of experiencing a primary challenger at all and approximately 7 percent of a standard deviation change in the probability of experiencing a quality challenger.

For members of the opposing party of the president, the effect of *Presidential Support* on challenger emergence is similar. Incumbents who are more supportive of the president's positions are significantly more likely to attract a quality primary challenger. However, while the bivariate correlation between *Challenger* and *Presidential Support* is significant, the result is no longer significant when control variables are added to the model. In terms of the substantive effects, the results are slightly weaker for members of the opposing party when compared to the president's party. Specifically, a standard deviation increase in *Presidential Support* increases the likelihood of experiencing a quality challenger by approximately 2 percent. This is approximately 8% of a standard deviation change in the probability of experiencing a challenger. As such, in addition to encouraging loyalty to the president among co-partisans, the results suggest that primary elections could exacerbate the polarizing effect of presidential leadership on issues by incentivizing members of the opposing party to position against the president.

### **3.3.2 Incumbent Performance**

While the results in the previous section indicate that presidential support shapes the decision-making of candidates, the results do not speak to whether presidential support affects the decision-making of voters. The results only suggest that challengers *anticipate* voters will punish or reward incumbents for their level of presidential support. This section evaluates the effect of presidential support on incumbent performance among incumbents who experienced a primary challenger. I analyze the two-step process, i.e., candidate emergence and incumbent performance, separately because Heckman models suggest that there is no detectable selection effect. Therefore, a standard OLS approach is appropriate. The outcome variable for the analysis, *Incumbent Vote Share*, is the percentage of the vote share

that the incumbent received in the primary election. Again, all variables in the model are standardized. As with candidate emergence, the effects of presidential support on incumbent vote share do not vary systematically by party nor across time and, therefore, I present the results pooled across parties and years.

Table 8: Presidential Support and Incumbent Performance

	(1)	(2)
	<b>President's Party</b>	<b>Opposing Party</b>
	Incumbent Vote-Share	Incumbent Vote-Share
Presidential Support	0.20*** (0.05)	-0.07 (0.06)
Redistricting	-0.04 (0.14)	-0.04 (0.12)
Closed Primary	-0.15* (0.06)	-0.04 (0.06)
Freshman	0.06 (0.08)	0.07 (0.07)
Female	0.23* (0.11)	-0.01 (0.10)
Constant	-1.62*** (0.22)	-1.42*** (0.22)
Observations	1179	1493
Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓
District Fixed Effects	✓	✓

Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Table 8 displays regressions of candidate vote share on levels of presidential support separately for members of the president's party and members of the opposing party. Again, the models include fixed effects for year and district partisanship. Looking at the results for co-partisans of the president in Column 1, we see that the results match theoretical expectations. Members of the president's party who are more supportive of the president's legislative positions perform better against challengers than members who are less supportive. The positive relationship between *Presidential Support* and *Incumbent Vote Share* is significant at the .01 level. In terms of the substantive effect of presidential support, a 10 percent change in presidential support leads to approximately a one percent change in incumbent vote-share. Moreover, a standard deviation change in presidential support corresponds with approximately a fifth of a standard deviation change in incumbent vote share. While modest in magnitude, these substantive results rival the effect of other measures of incumbent positioning on primary election outcomes.

The results for the opposing party of the president are displayed in Column 2. Consistent with theoretical expectations, we see that the sign of the effect for presidential support is negative, indicating that opposition to the president seems to advantage incumbents against primary challengers. However, the effect is not distinguishable from 0 at standard levels of analysis. Further, the substantive magnitude of the effect of *Presidential Support* is relatively weak for members of the out-party. A standard deviation change in presidential support leads to approximately a twentieth of a unit change in incumbent vote share, or approximately a tenth of a standard deviation change. Therefore, the results provide mixed support for Hypothesis 2. Specifically, the results suggest presidential support only matters for the electoral performance of members of the president's party and not out-party members.

The results presented in the last two sections suggest that presidential support shapes members' performance in primary elections to varying degrees by party association with the president. This implies there are incentives for presidential support arising from primary elections. While this does suggest that primaries might be responsible for the polarization in presidential support, it does not directly provide evidence in favor of that conclusion. To directly evaluate this relationship, I estimated dynamic panel models with *Presidential Support* as the dependent variable and past values of *Incumbent Vote Share* and *Presidential*

*Support* as independent variables. The results of these regressions provided some evidence suggesting primary elections affect presidential support. Specifically, the lagged effect of *Incumbent Vote Share* is negative for members of the president’s party, suggesting that a tough primary challenge makes members more supportive of the president in subsequent sessions of Congress. The coefficient had the opposite sign for the opposing party. However, the statistical significance of the results for both the president’s party and the opposing party is inconsistent across model specifications.

### 3.3.3 Presidential Support vs. Party Loyalty and Ideological Positions

The results presented in the previous section generally support the hypothesis that presidential support is an important determinant of challenger emergence and incumbent performance in primary elections. However, while my analysis controls for district-level and incumbent-level co-variables that might be relevant for primary election outcomes, I do not control for other incumbent positions. This is problematic because the relationship between *Presidential Support* and primary election outcomes could be driven by the correlation between *Presidential Support* and other measures of incumbent performance. This section tests for the possibility that the results are confounded by other incumbent positions, focusing in particular on the *Party Unity* variable and the *Nominate 1* and *Nominate 2* measurements. I focus on these variables, in particular, because they have been identified by the literature as important determinants of primary election outcomes ([Brady et al., 2007](#); [Olivella et al., 2017](#); [Pyeatt, 2015](#))

Table 9: Incumbent Positioning and Candidate Emergence

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	<b>President's Party</b>		<b>Out-Party</b>	
	Challenger	Quality Challenger	Challenger	Quality Challenger
Presidential Support	-0.13*** (0.04)	-0.10** (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)	0.05 (0.03)
Party Unity	-0.01 (0.03)	0.07* (0.03)	-0.02 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)
Nominate 1	0.34* (0.15)	-0.50*** (0.15)	0.13 (0.13)	-0.20 (0.11)
Nominate 2	-0.03 (0.07)	-0.04 (0.07)	-0.06 (0.06)	0.05 (0.06)
Redistricting	0.02 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)	0.05 (0.03)	0.04 (0.02)
Closed Primary	-0.03* (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
Freshman	-0.01 (0.02)	0.07*** (0.02)	-0.03* (0.02)	0.05*** (0.01)
Female	-0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
Constant	-0.01 (0.10)	0.91*** (0.10)	0.08 (0.12)	0.22* (0.11)
Observations	4611	4611	5060	5060
Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
District Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓

Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Table 10: Incumbent Positioning and Incumbent Performance

	(1)	(2)
	<b>President's Party</b>	<b>Opposing Party</b>
	Incumbent Vote-Share	Incumbent Vote-Share
Presidential Support	0.21** (0.08)	0.08 (0.07)
Party Unity	-0.01 (0.06)	0.20*** (0.05)
Nominate 1	-0.46 (0.28)	-0.50* (0.23)
Nominate 2	-0.24 (0.14)	-0.30* (0.12)
Redistricting	-0.01 (0.06)	0.00 (0.05)
Closed Primary	-0.08* (0.03)	-0.04 (0.03)
Freshman	0.02 (0.04)	0.02 (0.03)
Female	0.06 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)
Constant	-1.19*** (0.22)	-1.00*** (0.23)
Observations	1179	1493
Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓
District Fixed Effects	✓	✓

Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Table 9 displays the results from the same regressions presented in Table 7 with the *Party Unity* measurement and the *Nominate 1* and *Nominate 2* measures from [Poole and Rosenthal \(2001\)](#). The *Nominate 1* and *Nominate 2* measures were re-coded such that for both parties, higher values represent a more extreme voting record. Looking at Columns 1 and 2, we see that the coefficient estimates for *Presidential Support* are virtually identical to those presented in Table 7. The coefficient estimates for *Party Unity*, *Nominate 1*, and *Nominate 2* are all signed in the opposite direction or indistinguishable from 0. Looking at members of the opposing party of the president, we see that the results are insignificant for all of the variables of interest displayed in the model. While *Presidential Support* is signed correctly, it falls just short of statistical significance. Therefore, the results generally suggest that the relationship between *Presidential Support* and challenger emergence is not confounded by other measures of incumbent positions for the president’s party, but the measures do have some confounding effect for members of the opposing party. Further, looking at the estimates from all four models, we see that *Presidential Support* is substantively more significant than the other measures of incumbent positions in shaping primary election outcomes.

Table 10 displays results for the same set of independent variables with the *Incumbent Vote Share* dependent variable. Columns 1 and 2 display the results for the party of the president. We see that again, the coefficient estimates for *Presidential Support* are consistent with the analysis of incumbent performance presented earlier. Specifically, members of the president’s party perform significantly better against challengers when they are supportive of the president’s positions. The coefficient estimates for *Party Wins*, *Nominate 1*, and *Nominate 2* are all signed in the opposite direction and statistically insignificant. Looking at Column 2, we see that the results for *Presidential Support* do not match expectations when other measurements of incumbent positions are controlled for. While in the previous analysis presented in the paper the effect of *Presidential Support* was insignificant for the president’s party, the results in this portion of the analysis are signed in the opposite direction. Further, while the results for *Nominate 1* and *Nominate 2* are signed in the opposite direction and insignificant, the *Party Unity* measurement is signed correctly and statistically significant. Therefore, while the results for the president’s party hold when controlling for other measurements of incumbent positioning, the analysis presented in this section casts

doubt regarding the existence of a relationship between *Presidential Support* and primary election outcomes for members of the opposing party.

### 3.3.4 Incorporating Strategy in Candidate Emergence

A limitation of the analysis presented in the previous section is that I do not incorporate the possibility of strategy in candidate emergence into the analysis. If challengers are instrumental in deciding whether to enter primary contests, we should only expect them to enter races when they could plausibly defeat the opposing party's candidate in the general election. If defeating the incumbent in the primary put the party's general election prospects at risk, challengers could put their policy goals at risk by entering the race. Therefore, we should expect the effect of *Presidential Support* on primary outcomes to depend on *Presidential Approval* in the district. In other words, we should only expect pro-administration candidates to challenge anti-administration incumbents in districts where the president has a favorable reputation and the challenger can win in the general election. If candidates are strategic in their decision to enter, the slope for *Presidential Support* on *Challenger* should change *negatively* with greater presidential popularity in the district. If voters are strategic in the same way, the effect of *Presidential Support* on *Incumbent Vote Share* should change *positively* with greater popularity. Further, the coefficient on the interaction term should be signed in the same direction for both the president's party and the opposition party. *District Presidential Approval* is measured using the president's vote-share in the district in the previous election. I use this measure since direct measures of presidential approval in the same year are not available for earlier years in the sample.

Table 11: The Conditioning Effect of District Approval

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	<b>President's Party</b>		<b>Out-Party</b>	
	Quality Challenger	Candidate Percent Vote Share	Quality Challenger	Candidate Percent Vote Share
Presidential Support	0.15*** (0.03)	-4.64 (3.21)	0.13*** (0.02)	3.12 (2.44)
District Approval	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.14 (0.08)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.08 (0.07)
District Approval *	-0.00*** (0.00)	0.13* (0.05)	-0.00*** (0.00)	-0.08 (0.05)
Presidential Support Redistricting	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.20 (0.69)	0.01 (0.00)	-0.19 (0.61)
Closed Primary	0.00 (0.00)	-0.85* (0.38)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.21 (0.34)
Freshman	0.01*** (0.00)	0.37 (0.45)	0.01** (0.00)	0.39 (0.41)
Female	0.00 (0.00)	0.75* (0.36)	0.00 (0.00)	0.03 (0.33)
Constant	0.28*** (0.04)	82.09*** (5.44)	0.11** (0.04)	79.71*** (4.87)
Observations	4611	1179	5060	1493
Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
District Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓

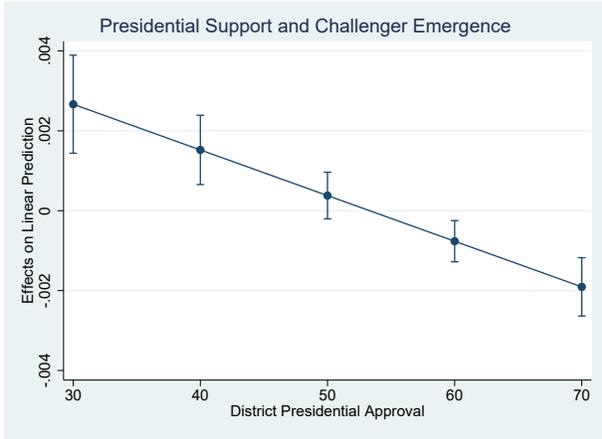
Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

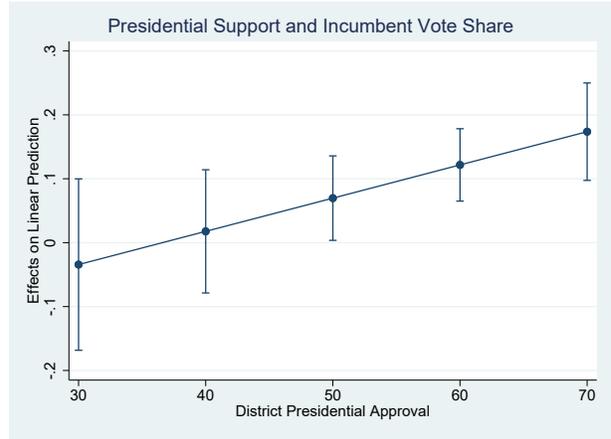
Table 11 displays the effect of *Presidential Support* on *Quality* and *Incumbent Vote Share* conditioned on presidential approval in the district. Looking at Columns 1 and 3, we see that challengers are more likely to emerge against opponents of the president when the president is popular in the district. The coefficient on the interaction term is significant at standard levels for both the president's party and the opposing party and signed in the correct direction, suggesting candidates are strategic in their decision to emerge. However, looking at Columns 2 and 4, we see that the results only match expectations for primary elections of members of the president's party. Figure 3 plots the slope of *Presidential Support* across different levels of *District Presidential Approval* for each of the models. We see that for the president's party (Figure 3a and 3b), anti-administration incumbents are more likely to experience a challenger and perform worse against them as the president's popularity increases in the district. In terms of substantive magnitude, a standard deviation increase in *Presidential Support* decreases the probability of a challenger emerging by about 10% in districts where the president is highly popular and about 5% in districts where the president is moderately popular. For the opposing party of the president, we see that pro-administration incumbents are more likely to experience a challenger when the president is unpopular (Figure 3c). *District Approval*, however, has no discernible effect on vote decision-making (Figure 3d). In districts where the president is unpopular, a standard deviation increase in *Presidential Support* increases the likelihood of a challenger emerging by approximately 5%.

### 3.4 Discussion

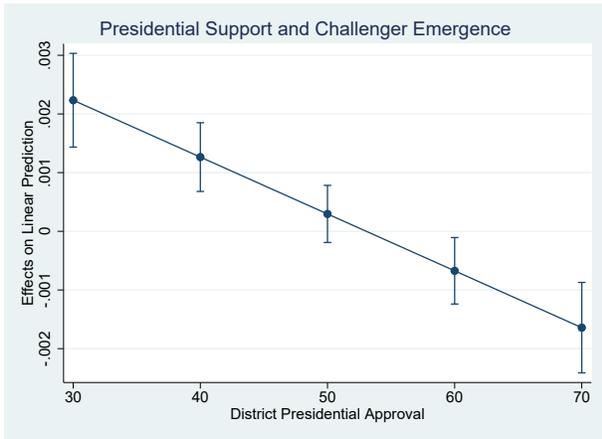
The purpose of this study was to evaluate the role of primary elections in determining electoral incentives for presidential support in Congress. The results from my analysis of the relationship between presidential support on roll call votes and primary election outcomes from 1960 to 2010 provided several important conclusions for our understanding of congressional politics and primary elections. The first is that primary elections create incentives for support of the legislative proposals of co-partisan presidents. Across all models presented in the paper, members of the president's party perform worse in primary elections when



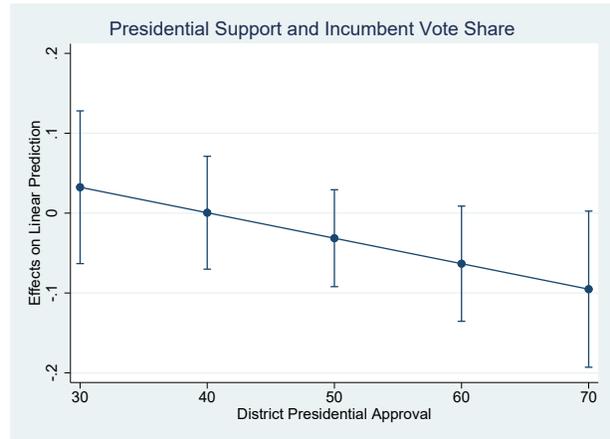
(a) Challenger Emergence (In-Party)



(b) Vote Share (In-Party)



(c) Challenger Emergence (Out-Party)



(d) Vote Share (Out-Party)

Figure 3: The Conditioning Effect of District Approval

they are less supportive of the president on public policy or procedural issues. This finding is important because it suggests that there are electoral incentives for members of the president's party to remain supportive of the president, even when general public approval of the president is low. Hence, the results suggest that steadfast co-partisan support of the president does not necessarily imply members are ignoring electoral considerations in pursuit of policy goals.

With respect to the opposing party of the president, the results of the analysis are less clear. While out-party members who are supportive of the president's agenda are more likely to experience a serious primary challenge, they do not seem to perform any worse against challengers than less supportive members. Therefore, despite anecdotal examples like Senator Joe Lieberman's primary loss or the 2010 primaries, there seems to be little systematic relationship between presidential support and primary election performance for members of the opposing party. Therefore, the results suggest that primary elections mostly incentivize presidential support among members of the president's party and that voters of the opposing party do not react negatively to presidential support as expected by my theory. Thus, the results only provide a partial explanation for the observed party polarization of presidential support.

Finally, the results of the study help further our understanding of challenger emergence and incumbent performance in primary elections. While past research on primary elections has pre-dominantly examined the effect of ideological positions on primary election outcomes, the results presented here suggest that presidential support plays an important role in primary election outcomes. The results from Table 10 suggest that presidential support dominates other measures of candidate positioning in determining primary election outcomes for members of the president's party. While the results contradict past studies of primary elections suggesting that party loyalty drives candidate emergence and vote choice, the results presented here could be driven by the same theoretical mechanism. In other words, voters could simply be more responsive to support of the president because that is a more visible and important indicator of party loyalty. Future research could investigate the precise mechanisms that lead certain positions to affect vote choice in primaries.

## 4.0 Electoral Incentives for Strategic Opposition

Seldom does an issue arise in contemporary American politics without bitter division between the two parties. From government shutdowns to disaster relief, to foreign policy, to procedural issues, the two parties are increasingly at odds with each other. Indeed, conflict and disagreement between the two political parties in government have increased considerably in the last several decades, and the two parties now disagree at levels not seen since the early 20th century (Poole and Rosenthal, 2001). Moreover, the two parties are now opposed to each other on the majority of policy issues considered by Congress, leaving few, if any, policies left to be enacted with bipartisan support (Layman et al., 2006). Indeed, the number of landmark laws passed by Congress with bipartisan support has declined by nearly 50 percent in the last four decades (Harbridge, 2015).

The most common view in the American politics literature attributes party polarization to the ideological polarization of elites in the two parties. Put simply, inter-party polarization is due to changes in the preferences of members of the two parties. The empirical literature has attributed changes in members' preferences to a variety of variables, including changes in electoral geography, primary elections, income inequality, changes in the candidate supply, and changes in the legislative agenda (Brady et al., 2007; Carson et al., 2007; McCarty et al., 2006; Theriault, 2006). However, while these studies differ in their interpretation of the causes of changes in members' policy preferences, they share a common assumption that party conflict is rooted in *sincere* disagreement between members of the two parties on public policy.

A recent line of research on congressional politics has questioned the assumption that party polarization is predominantly caused by changes in members' policy preferences (Koger and Lebo, 2017; Lee, 2016). In particular, this literature points to the spread of party polarization to seemingly non-ideological and procedural issues and the inconsistent positions of the parties on issues across time as evidence that party polarization can't be attributed solely to changes in members' preferences (Lee, 2009). This literature argues that excessive partisanship in members' voting on these issues, as well as other aspects of party polariza-

tion, are attributable to members acting strategically to further the electoral interests of their party. The growth of party polarization, then, is attributable to the heightened levels of competition between the two parties. Consistent with this hypothesis, a growing literature has provided considerable empirical evidence linking heightened inter-party electoral competition for control of government to greater conflict between the parties across time in government (Egar, 2016; Gelman, 2017a; Hinchliffe and Lee, 2016; Lebo et al., 2007).

While there is compelling evidence that inter-party competition is causing greater party polarization in government, the causal mechanism responsible for this relationship remains unclear. In other words, it is unclear why electoral competition for institutional control leads the two parties to disagree more. This is problematic given that dominant theories argue that electoral competition should lead to greater *agreement* between the two parties on policy (?). The extant literature has largely focused on the need for parties to excite their base through messaging to increase subsequent electoral turnout of co-partisan voters (Egar, 2016; Lee, 2016). However, parties cannot regain institutional control simply by exciting voters that have a favorable image of the party, and they must ultimately win over independents with weak partisan ties. Therefore, our understanding of *why* inter-party competition encourages disagreement between the two parties remains incomplete.

I argue that electoral competition could incentivize greater disagreement between the two parties if voters are uncertain about the benefits associated with policies. More specifically, I argue that, because members' positions on legislation will be informative to voters about the quality of the legislation, supporting the legislative proposals of political competitors will signal to voters that they are good policies. I argue that this will have a secondary effect of improving voters' beliefs about the ability of the proposing party to develop good policy. Therefore, there are electoral incentives for members to oppose the policy proposals of their competitors because doing so will undermine public perceptions of the ability of their competitors to develop good policies. To test this theory, I use a set of experiments that manipulate voters' beliefs about support for real legislation passed in Congress. I show that all groups of voters update their beliefs favorably toward policies when informed that both parties in Congress support it. Voters exposed to information about cross-party support for a party's legislation also view that party as more competent to handle policy

issues. Importantly, these effects are most pronounced among voters with weak ties to the two parties, whom parties must win over in order to gain greater institutional control of government.

#### 4.1 Strategic Parties and Party Polarization

Conflict between the two parties in Congress is one of the most studied topics in American politics. A broad consensus in the literature maintains that disagreement between the two parties in government has risen considerably over the last 40 years alongside greater cohesion within them (Layman et al., 2006). The most common interpretation in the literature is that conflict between the two parties is due to changes in the policy preferences of elites of the two parties. Research attributes the growing divide between the two parties to institutional changes in Congress, changes in electoral politics, or some combination of the two (Barber and McCarty, 2015). Rising income inequality, redistricting, changes in the candidate supply, and primary elections are all thought to create greater party conflict by either incentivizing more extreme candidates to run for office or advantaging them over moderates (Brady et al., 2007; Carson et al., 2007; McCarty et al., 2006; Thomsen, 2017). Institutional explanations for party polarization focus on the role of party leaders and congressional procedures in creating greater inter-party division. In contrast to electoral explanations, institutional explanations portray party polarization as a result of moderate policies being kept off of the agenda rather than a decline in support for them (Harbridge and Malhotra, 2011). Empirical tests have found that changes in members' preferences are more important in explaining party polarization than agenda-setting by the party leadership (Canen et al., 2020).

While changes in electoral politics and agenda-setting by party leaders can account for a portion of the increase in party polarization, there are several aspects of party conflict they are unable to account for. First, existing theories are unable to explain the pervasiveness of party polarization. More specifically, they are unable to account for the growth of party conflict on non-ideological and procedural issues (Koger and Lebo, 2017; Lee, 2009). Lee (2009) empirically demonstrates the rise of party polarization on non-ideological and pro-

cedural issues. For example, committees like the House Intelligence Committee, which has been historically non-partisan, have become increasingly divided along party lines in recent years for inherently political reasons.<sup>1</sup> Second, existing theories are also unable to account for the inconsistency in the positions of parties over time that change with the political context. Members of political parties taking positions for political reasons on procedural issues has been noted by popular writings,<sup>2</sup> but Lee (2009) shows this inconsistency exists on substantive issues as well.

Recent work on congressional politics argues that these aspects of party polarization are caused by heightened inter-party competition for control of government (Koger and Lebo, 2017; Lee, 2016). More specifically, the party competition thesis maintains that, because of changes in electoral geography that increased electoral competition between the two parties beginning in the 1970s, parties' desire to hold greater institutional power has become increasingly relevant for American politics. As opposed to the mid-century when the Democratic Party dominated congressional elections, each election now presents an opportunity for one of the two parties to regain control of one of the major institutions of government. Parties are thought to value greater control of government because of the policy advantages of majority status in Congress and control of the presidency. The increase of competition between the two parties, coupled with the benefits of holding institutional power, is argued to have altered the behavior of political parties in two fundamental ways. The first is that parties have invested more resources and attention into winning elections despite the declining competitiveness of congressional elections (Larson, 2004). The most important consequence of increased party competition, however, is the important role that the party's electoral fortunes play in the decision-making of members of the two parties (Lee, 2009).

The collective electoral goals of political parties are thought to be important, in particular, in shaping members' decisions on legislation. More specifically, greater inter-party competition is thought to disincentivize power-seeking parties from supporting the legislative proposals of their political competitors and undermine attempts for bipartisan compromise.

---

<sup>1</sup>See: Jason Zengerle "How Devin Nunes Turned the House Intelligence Committee Inside Out" *New York Times* April 24, 2018

<sup>2</sup>Lee Ferran "This Bipartisan Group of Lawmakers Was Consistent on Syrian Airstrikes" *Inside Hook* April 27, 2018

Thus, greater inter-party competition should lead to greater polarization on roll call votes. Consistent with this expectation, research has found that greater competition for institutional control of Congress and the presidency leads to greater polarization in both chambers of Congress on roll call votes. For example, [Gelman \(2017a\)](#) develops a measure of the probability of the majority party losing control of the Senate and shows that increases in the probability of a change in party control leads to greater party polarization on roll call votes. This pattern has also been demonstrated at the state level, where greater competition for control of government across states, measured using a number of different indicators, corresponds with greater party polarization in the legislature ([Hinchliffe and Lee, 2016](#)). Furthermore, [Lebo et al. \(2007\)](#) use time-series data on Congress and show that greater inter-party competition causes greater partisanship on roll call votes.

Despite extensive empirical evidence linking competition over institutional control to greater polarization between the two parties in Congress, it remains unclear *why* inter-party competition would lead to greater disagreement between the two parties. The literature has identified two potential mechanisms for why greater competition would cause greater disagreement between the parties. The first is that competition leads parties to focus on more divisive issues that they believe will advantage their party in the eyes of voters ([Koger and Lebo, 2017](#)). For example, [Egar \(2016\)](#) shows that minority party members bring bills to the floor that have little chance of passing but that place the opposing party on the wrong side of public opinion. The second explanation noted in the literature is that competition incentivizes members to focus on position-taking over pursuing good policy. Specifically, [Lee \(2016\)](#) argues, “The primary way that parties make an electoral case for themselves vis-a-vis their competitors is by magnifying their differences.” While these studies help explain why party competition causes greater party polarization, they provide an inadequate explanation of the relationship between party competition and party polarization. Specifically, why these studies help explain why electoral competition leads to greater conflict, they only provide an explanation for party competition changing legislative agendas and not votes on the same legislative issues. In the next section, I provide a theory of how greater inter-party competition could incentivize greater disagreement on the same legislative issues.

## 4.2 Electoral Benefits of Strategic Opposition

The literature on aggregate changes in party control of government and aggregate evaluations of the parties (e.g., macropartisanship) find that changes in the aggregate electoral fortunes of the two parties correspond strongly to the perceived competence of the party in power (Abramowitz and Segal, 1986; Green and Jennings, 2017; MacKuen et al., 1989). In other words, empirical studies suggest that a party's ability to deliver good policy outcomes is a key predictor of its ability to maintain power. Parties are consistently rewarded for favorable policy outcomes on the economy, foreign policy, health care, education, and most other policy issues, and poor policy performance is consistently punished by voters in elections (Berry and Howell, 2007; de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw, 2019; Hobolt et al., 2013). As such, public perceptions of the general competence of political parties play an important role in determining their aggregate electoral performance (Green and Jennings, 2017).

Voters' perceptions of policy will undoubtedly be influenced by the extent to which voters view the goals of the policies as consistent with their interest, and legislation that is perceived to be in the narrow interest of party supporters will likely be met by electoral backlash (Jones, 2018). However, the extent to which legislation that pursues preferred goals is perceived favorably or expected to effectively achieve these goals will also play a considerable role in determining a party's electoral fate. For example, the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) damaged the electoral performance of the Democrats in subsequent elections because of negative perceptions of the quality of the law, despite general public agreement about the main goals of the law. Therefore, both the ideological content and the quality of policies passed by the majority party will be important in determining the electoral performance of the party (Jones, 2010).

However, most voters are likely to be uncertain about the consequences of legislation, especially given the relatively inattentive and unsophisticated nature of the electorate (Lupia, 2016). Specifically, voters will likely be uncertain about the benefits associated with proposed policy changes and the extent to which the benefits of a particular policy will justify its costs. For example, voters might be uncertain about the extent to which a health care law

will actually provide affordable care or improve the quality of care provided, whether a tax policy intended to stimulate certain economic activity will do so, whether a crime bill will reduce violence, whether an education bill will improve test scores, whether trade agreements will promote economic growth, and so on.

Voters who are uncertain about policy will look to low-cost sources of information to form beliefs about proposed policies. Specifically, uncertain voters might look to the positions of elite commentators, cues from their social network, policy-relevant information from the media, and so on (Boudreau and MacKenzie, 2014; Coppock et al., 2018; Ryan, 2011). The information source that voters most often rely on, however, is the positions of elites in Washington. More specifically, uncertain voters will look to the positions of their representatives in Washington, and particularly the positions of members of the party that is better aligned with their interests and values. Voters are thought to rely on elite positions because of the advantage that elites in government hold over citizens in terms of the information they have about policy (Gilens and Murakawa, 2002). In particular, members of Congress have access to experts through congressional testimony, large research staffs, lobbyists, and other sources of information, making them considerably more knowledgeable about policy than the average citizen. Further, representatives might have expertise on a certain policy topic or access to colleagues who have expertise (Fong, 2018). Since elites in government are likely to be more informed about proposed policies than voters are, their judgments about the consequences of policies are likely to be more accurate than voters' judgments.

The positions that members of Congress take on legislation, then, should be informative to voters about the consequences associated with proposed policy changes. For example, the literature on public support for war points to elite consensus as an important determinant of support for war among voters (Berinsky, 2007). Disagreement among elites, both within and between parties, tends to reduce support for war among all partisans (Wells and Ryan, 2018). Thus, elite consensus has been identified as a central determinant of public opinion on policy (Zaller et al., 1992). For example, elite consensus about addressing climate change among representatives from both parties increases public support for addressing climate change among all groups of voters (Benegal and Scruggs, 2018). Similarly, Berinsky (2017) shows that inter-party consensus around policy-related information leads to convergence in

beliefs among voters from all parties.

This paper argues that legislators' influence on voters' perceptions of their competitors' legislative proposals creates perverse incentives for partisan voting. Specifically, so long as voters are unaware of their motivations for positioning, members can undermine public support for their competitors' legislation by positioning against it. In particular, voters who observe cross-party opposition to policy should update their expectations about public policy in a negative direction because it signals potential costs associated with the policy. This is electorally beneficial because favorable public beliefs about their competitor's ability to develop good policy will undermine their attempts to gain greater institutional control. This theory generates two hypotheses. First, greater inter-party consensus on legislation is expected to improve public expectations about the policy. Second, this is expected to improve the public's beliefs about the party's ability to develop good policy. In the next section, I outline an experiment for testing these two assumptions.

**Hypothesis 1: A policy will be viewed more favorably by voters when there is greater cross-party support for the policy.**

**Hypothesis 2: A party will be viewed as more competent when there is greater support for their policies (holding the party's policy positions constant).**

### 4.3 Experimental Design & Data

To test the aforementioned theory about the effects of party positions on voters' beliefs about policies and parties, I conducted a set of experiments that manipulated the positions of one of the two parties on real pieces of legislation that were passed by Congress. The experiment began with voters reading a prompt that gave them specific information about a proposed policy and its goals. I then randomly assigned subjects to treatments that varied information about the degree of cross-party support for the policy. This experimental approach allows me to overcome problems associated with the endogeneity of elite positioning to mass preferences associated with observational designs ([Gabel and Scheve, 2007](#)). Further, the experimental approach allows me to identify the effects of elite positions on public opinion

independent of the content of policy.

The experiment was designed to create variation in beliefs about cross-party support for policy without using deception. In order to do this using real legislation, I selected issues where one party was divided internally and then selectively provided information about support or opposition to the policy from party members. For each experiment, I used real legislation that was passed by one of the two chambers in the 145th Congress. When choosing legislation for the experiment, I selected low-salience legislation that voters were unlikely to be informed about but where real division between the two parties on the policy existed. I chose to use low-salience issues for two reasons. The first is that perceptions about policy would likely be pre-treated by elite positions for a significant portion of the sample if I chose a salient issue. In other words, voters' beliefs in both treatment groups would already encompass elite positions on the issue. Second, using a low-salience issue will allow me to clearly identify the effects of elite positioning since voters are likely to be uncertain about the implications of the policy and, therefore, the treatment effect is less likely to be drowned out by other policy information. The first piece of legislation used was a bill designed to lessen financial regulation on small banks, and the second piece of legislation was a bill intended to increase the enforcement of sanctions on Iran.

For both of the experiments, the treatments were embedded in a fact sheet containing information about the 145th Congress in order to make the purpose of the experiment less obvious and reduce experimenter demand. The fact sheet included information about which party controlled each chamber of Congress, the names of the majority leader in the House of Representatives and the Senate, followed by a text describing the bill with the experimental treatment included at the end. The subjects were prompted at the beginning of the survey that they needed to correctly answer several questions related to information presented on the fact sheet in order to receive compensation for their completion of the survey. Therefore, the fact sheet also ensured that respondents received the treatment and spent time considering the information presented. For each issue, there were two experimental conditions: one that mentioned "significant" opposition from the minority party (i.e., the Democrats) and one that mentioned their support for the policy. I did not include a control group in the experiment because there are only two possible values of the independent variable. In other

words, the opposing party either has to support or oppose the policy. Further, I do not have data on what voters perceive the degree of cross-party support to be before the experimental treatment, so it would be unclear how to interpret the treatment conditions relative to the control baseline.

### **Financial Regulation Issue:**

“In the most recent session of Congress, congressional Republicans introduced legislation aimed at reducing federal regulation and oversight of small banks in the United States. The bill passed in the Senate (**with significant support from Democrats/despite significant opposition from Democrats**).”

### **Foreign Policy Issue:**

“In the most recent session of Congress, congressional Republicans introduced legislation aimed at further strengthening the implementation of economic sanctions on Iran. The bill passed in the House (**with significant support from Democrats/despite significant opposition from Democrats**).”

To measure exposure to the treatment, I created a *Cross-Party Support* variable, which took the value 0 if the respondent was exposed to the treatment with significant cross-party opposition and 1 if the respondent was exposed to the treatment indicating cross-party support. After being exposed to the experimental treatment, voters were asked a series of survey questions to measure their beliefs about the policy and the proposing party (i.e., the dependent variables). First, I created a variable, *Policy Effectiveness*, that measured the extent to which voters thought the policy would achieve its objective. I measured this using answers to the following question: “To what extent do you agree that the \_\_\_\_\_ policy passed by the Republicans will achieve its intended objective?” The answers to the question ranged from “Strongly agree” to “Strongly disagree.” The second question asked voters, “To what extent do you agree that the \_\_\_\_\_ policy passed by the Republicans is in the

best interest of the country?” Voters chose an answer on a 7-point scale between “Strongly disagree” and “Strongly agree.” This question was designed to capture voters’ expectations about the benefits associated with the policy. The answers to this question were used to form the variable *Policy Interests*. The final question measured the extent to which voters preferred the particular policy in question. Specifically, I asked voters, “To what extent do you support the \_\_\_\_\_ policy passed by the Republicans?” Voters chose a response on a 7-point scale from “Strongly oppose” to “Strongly support.” Respondents’ answers to this question were used to form the *Policy Support* measure. Finally, I asked voters a question that elicited their belief about the Republican Party’s ability to handle the particular issue. The answers ranged from “Very confident” to “Not confident at all” about the party’s ability. Respondents’ answers to this question were used to create the *Issue Reputation* variable.

Finally, I asked voters two other sets of questions. The first was a series of questions designed to measure voters’ general knowledge about U.S. politics. Specifically, I asked voters what branch of government determines whether laws are constitutional, what political office is held by Lindsay Graham, as well as the amount of support needed to break a filibuster in the U.S. Senate. The number of questions voters answered correctly, ranging from 0 to 3, was used to create the *Political Sophistication* variable. Finally, I asked voters to indicate the political party that they identify with in order to create the *Party ID* variable. The variable was created using the two-pronged partisan identification question that creates a 7-point party i.d. measurement. The variable measures both which party the respondent identifies with and the strength of their identification. The variable ranges from “Strong Republican,” which is coded 0, to “Strong Democrat,” which is coded 7. A list of the variables, including descriptions and summary statistics, is displayed in Table 12.

Table 12: Variable Descriptions and Summary Statistics

Variable Name	Variable Description	Mean	Range
<i>Cross-Party Support</i>	A dichotomous variable that takes the value 0 if the respondent was exposed to information about cross-party opposition and 1 if they were exposed to information about cross-party support .	.5	[0-1]
<i>Policy Effectiveness</i>	An ordinal indicator of the extent to which voters think the described policy will achieve its objectives.	2.875	[0-6]
<i>Policy Interests</i>	An ordinal indicator of the extent to which voters think the described policy will benefit the country.	2.7	[0-6]
<i>Policy Support</i>	An ordinal indicator of the extent to which voters preferred the described policy.	2.6	[0-6]
<i>Political Sophistication</i>	The number of questions the respondent answered correctly about U.S. government and politics	1.32	[0-3]
<i>Party ID</i>	An ordinal indicator of the respondent's partisan identification, with higher values indicating greater identification with the Democratic Party.	4.32	[1-7]
<i>Issue Reputation</i>	An ordinal indicator of the extent to which the respondent perceived the Republican Party as better able to handle either the finance or foreign policy than the Democratic Party.	2.02	[1-4]

The experiments were embedded in a survey implemented using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk platform. Subjects were paid 20 to 50 cents to complete the survey. Almost all of the subjects that took the experiment finished in less than 4 minutes. A pilot of the survey experiment was fielded during March 2018 (n=611) for an earlier version of this paper. The survey was fielded again in September of 2018 (n=1517). The data from both experiments were combined for this analysis. Respondents in the experiment were assigned to one of the two experimental conditions with equal probability.

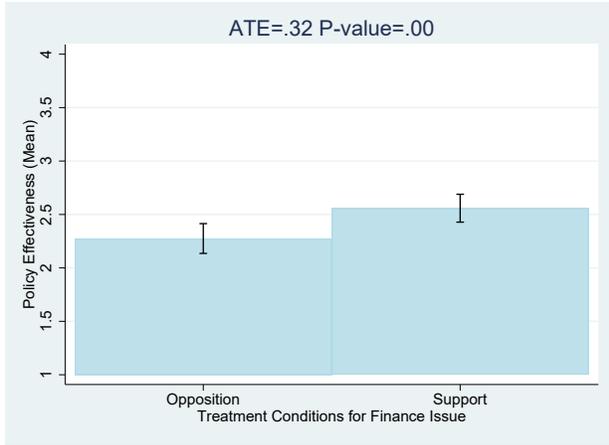
#### 4.4 Analysis

Figures 5 and 6 show the treatment effects on the three dependent variables for the finance and foreign policy issues, respectively. Looking at Figure 4, we see that for each of the dependent variables, voters’ beliefs about policy are improved with cross-party support relative to opposition. For each of the dependent variables, the treatment effect is significant at standard levels of analysis. The average effect of the treatment across the different dependent variables is about a third of a Likert-scale point, which is about a 10th of a standard deviation. The treatment effect varies slightly between the three outcomes, but generally, cross-party support has a similar influence on the three dependent variables. Looking at Figure 5, we see that results for the foreign policy issue differed from the finance issue in two respects. First, while there is a positive effect of cross-party support on all three measures of voters’ beliefs about the policy, the results are slightly weaker in terms of substantive magnitude for the foreign policy issue. Averaged across the three dependent variables, the effect of the treatment is approximately a tenth of a Likert scale point lower for foreign policy issue than the finance issue. This is potentially due to baseline differences in attitudes towards the policy. More specifically, for each of the three dependent variables, voters have more favorable views of the foreign policy than the finance policy. Thus, the weaker treatment effect could be due to a ceiling effect. Also, when each of the dependent variables is analyzed separately, the treatment effects for the foreign policy issue are only marginally significant. Generally, the substantive results of the experiments support the first

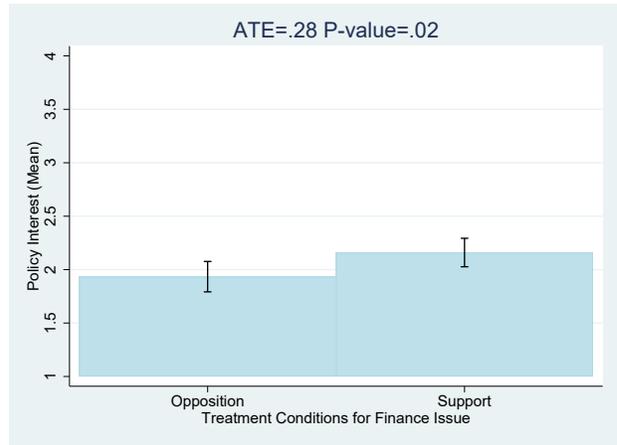
hypothesis of the paper. Namely, they suggest that cross-party support of policy improves public perceptions of the policy.

To further investigate the influence of elite positions on policy perceptions, I analyzed the effect of the treatment conditioned on voters' partisanship. The subgroup analysis by voters' partisan identification is important for several reasons. First, the effect of the policy positions of parties on mass opinion tends to be conditioned by voters' alignment with a particular party, with the party's positions being most informative to voters who are most closely aligned with the party because these voters have similar policy goals as the party (Bisgaard and Slothuus, 2018). In other words, the positions of co-partisan elites are more indicative of whether the policy will be beneficial to voters' welfare. Therefore, it is possible that the average treatment effects are driven entirely by Democrats responding favorably to the cue from elites from their party. Second, it is important to look at differences across groups of voters since my theory is principally concerned with the influence of elite positions on the positions of voters who remain *persuadable* by the two parties, as these are the voters parties must win over to gain greater institutional control. Therefore, whether voters' partisanship conditions the treatment effect is relevant for my theory.

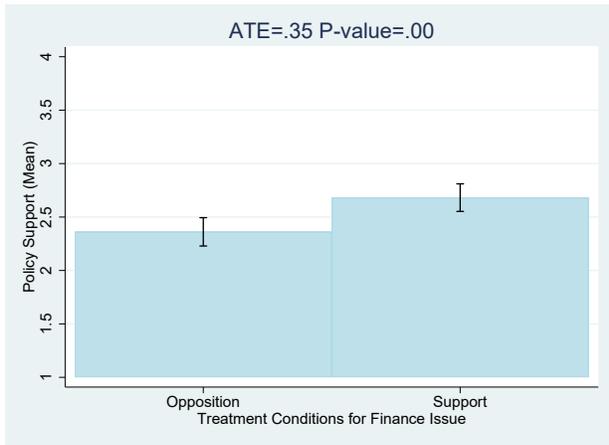
Tables 12 and 13 display the treatment effects by the partisan identification of voters for the foreign policy and finance issues. The *Partisan Identification* variable is a 7-point variable that captures identification with the party and the strength of voters' identification. To simplify the analysis, I used a linear combination of the three dependent variables. Looking at the first two columns for Tables 12 and 13, we see that there is no consistent effect of the treatment for strong and weak Republican voters. Leaning Republicans, however, are consistently more supportive of policy when exposed to information about cross-party support. In Columns 4 to 7, we see that Democrats and Independents both viewed policy significantly more favorably when presented with information about Democratic support for the policy than when presented with information about Democratic opposition. The substantive effects of the treatment vary slightly between the two issues but are generally greatest among voters that do not identify with either party (i.e., pure independents and leaners). The conditional treatment effects are mostly insignificant, but this is due largely to the small sample sizes for each group. When a 3-point party identification measure is used,



(a) Cross-Party Support and Policy Effectiveness

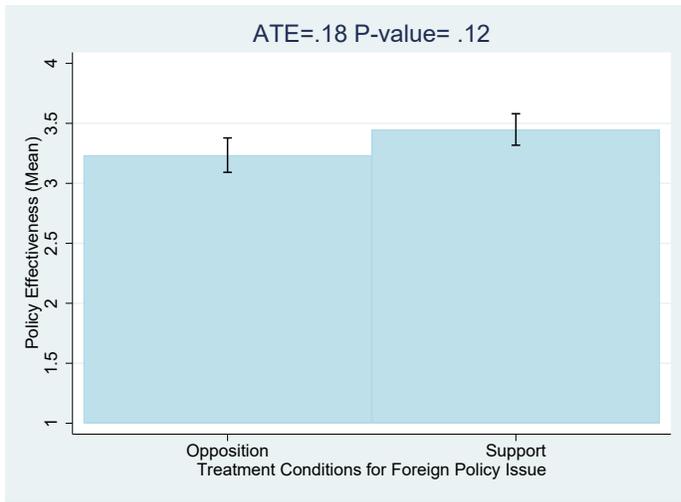


(b) Cross-Party Support and Policy Interests

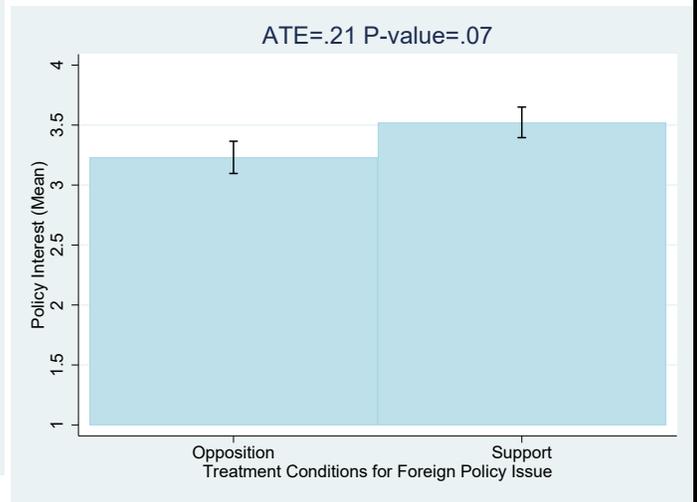


(c) Cross-Party Support and Policy Support

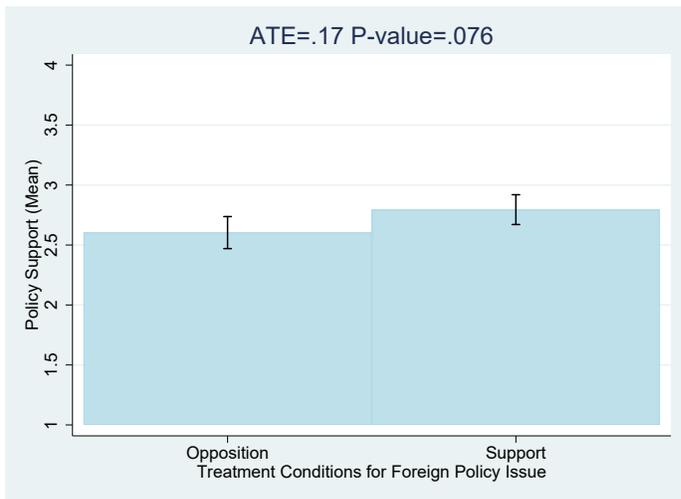
Figure 4: Finance Issue



(a) Cross-Party Support and Policy Effectiveness



(b) Cross-Party Support and Policy Interests



(c) Cross-Party Support and Policy Support

Figure 5: Foreign Policy Issue

the treatment effect is significant for both Democrats and Independents.

Table 13: Treatment Effects by Party ID (Foreign Policy Issue)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
	Strong R	Weak R	Lean R	Independent	Lean D	Weak D	Strong D
Cross-Party Positions	-0.03 (0.13)	-0.24 (0.14)	0.36 (0.28)	0.48* (0.24)	0.46 (0.26)	0.22 (0.22)	0.29 (0.19)
Constant	4.58*** (0.09)	4.04*** (0.10)	3.78*** (0.21)	2.61*** (0.16)	2.18*** (0.20)	2.39*** (0.15)	2.19*** (0.13)
Observations	179	150	59	116	102	123	238

Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Table 14: Treatment Effects by Party ID (Finance Issue)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
	Strong R	Weak R	Lean R	Independent	Lean D	Weak D	Strong D
Cross-Party Positions	-0.13 (0.13)	0.26 (0.13)	0.33 (0.22)	0.24 (0.25)	0.62* (0.25)	0.22 (0.21)	0.44* (0.20)
Constant	3.91*** (0.10)	3.04*** (0.09)	2.94*** (0.15)	1.92*** (0.19)	1.15*** (0.17)	1.52*** (0.14)	1.45*** (0.14)
Observations	171	150	63	125	97	141	240

Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

The second hypothesis of the paper argued that support from members of the opposing party for a party's policy will improve voters' perceptions about the party's ability to handle that policy issue. In order to evaluate this hypothesis empirically, I compared the effect of the treatment on voters' evaluation of how competent the Republicans (i.e., the proposing party) were to handle either the finance or the foreign policy issue. Figure 6 displays difference of means tests for the *Cross-Party Positions* treatment for the *Issue Reputation* dependent variable. Since I only asked the issue reputation question in the initial survey, which had a smaller number of respondents, the sample size for each of the tests is small (n=178 for the finance issue and n=192 for the foreign policy issue). Looking at the graphs, we see

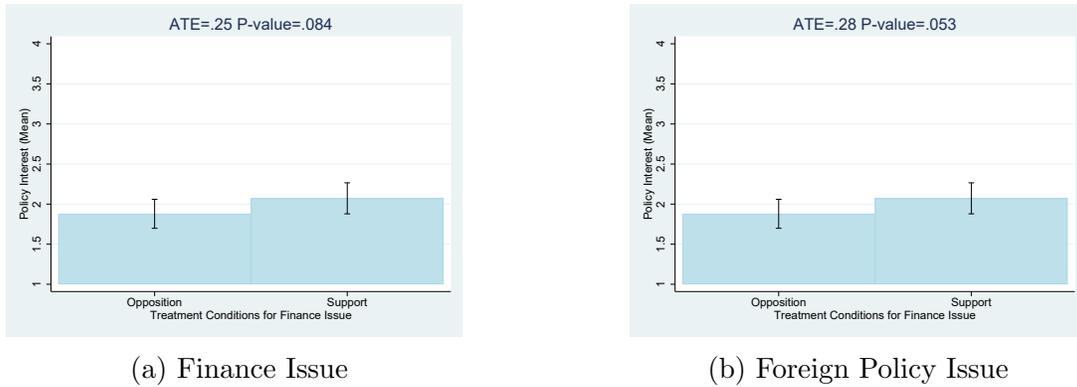


Figure 6: Cross-Party Support and Issue Reputation

that the difference between the two treatment conditions is correctly signed for both issues. Specifically, voters viewed the Republicans as more capable of handling finance or foreign policy when informed about Democratic support for their policy proposals on these issues than when informed about opposition from Democrats. However, given the small sample size, both of the difference of means statistics fall just short of statistical significance for each of the individual issues. However, the treatment effect is significant when pooled across the two issues. Therefore, the results generally support the second hypothesis, suggesting that the negative effect of strategic opposition on attitudes towards policy has a secondary, indirect effect on what voters believe about the two parties.

Finally, I conducted additional analysis to evaluate whether the effect of the treatment varied by voters' level of political sophistication. There are at least two reasons we should expect the effects of the treatment to vary by the amount of information voters have about politics. First, more sophisticated voters might view elite positions as less informative about the quality of policy because they are more aware of political motivations for elites' positions. Second, more sophisticated voters are likely to have more information about policy, rendering elite positions less informative. The measure of voters' political sophistication is an ordinal variable that represents a count of the number of questions about American politics and government that they answered correctly out of three. Table 15 shows regressions with an

Table 15: Treatment Effects by Political Sophistication

	(1)	(2)
	Finance Issue	Foreign Policy Issue
Cross-Party Positions	0.16 (0.16)	0.30 (0.16)
Political Sophistication	-0.16** (0.06)	-0.05 (0.06)
Cross-Party Positions * Political Sophistication	0.12 (0.08)	-0.08 (0.08)
Constant	2.39*** (0.11)	3.12*** (0.11)
Observations	879	877

Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

interaction between *Cross-Party Positions* and *Political Sophistication*. For both the finance and foreign policy issues, the interaction term is highly insignificant and signed incorrectly for the finance issue. The insignificance of the interaction term might be due to low sophisticates' inability to learn from elite positions, as the group with the lowest amount of information (i.e., respondents who answered 0 questions correctly) was least responsive to the treatment. The null effects might also be due to the *Political Sophistication* measure. Most voters scored low on the scale of political sophistication, suggesting that the scale might have been unable to distinguish between people with low and moderate amounts of information.

Generally, the results from the experiment support the basic theory presented in the paper. Voters view policy more negatively when they are informed about opposition from one of the two parties to the policy. Therefore, the results suggest that parties can reduce public support for their competitor's legislation by simply positioning against it. Further, as hypothesized, the treatment maps on to voters' beliefs about the proposing party's ability to handle policy, a critical determinant of their electoral performance. This effect is particularly pronounced among voters with weak commitments to the two parties. This finding is particularly important given that the purpose of party competition must lie in persuading voters with weak party ties that are willing to change their vote. Furthermore, as elites meaningfully moved mass opinion with their positioning in the experiment, the results suggest that elites are able to manipulate opinion, and opposition is not viewed by voters as a purely political maneuver.

## 4.5 Discussion

Due to limitations in the ability of existing theories to account for the degree and nature of party polarization in government, recent research has looked to elections and the desire of parties to hold power as a complementary explanation for party polarization. This line of research has theorized, specifically, that a party's desire to win elections to gain insitutiona; power often drives them to position strategically on legislation. One important component of this sort of behavior is that members often oppose legislation for purely political reasons.

Namely, they oppose legislation or initiatives because it was proposed by the opposing party (Lee, 2009). This paper has sought to provide a simple theoretical reason for why strategic behavior of this sort would be beneficial for members attempting to improve their own party's reputation or damage that of their competitors and, therefore, provide a theoretical mechanism through which competition will lead to greater party polarization. The theory argued that there are strong electoral incentives for parties in pursuit of power to obstruct competitor's legislative proposals, reject efforts for compromise, and even position insincerely on proposed legislation because of the information that their positioning sends to moderate voters about policy.

To test my claim that there exist electoral incentives for strategic opposition, I used a series of survey experiments that manipulated beliefs about elite support for policy. Specifically, whether there was opposition or support from the minority party for the proposed policy. The results from the experiments suggest that voters update their beliefs in a manner that is largely consistent with my theory. Specifically, the results suggest that voters evaluate policy more favorably when there is significant support from both parties for the proposed policy change and worse when one party opposes the legislation. Furthermore, the results suggest that voters of all partisan stripes update their preferences and beliefs about policy negatively when there is significant opposition from one party.

Perhaps most importantly for my theory, the effects of the treatment were most pronounced among voters with weak partisan commitments. This finding is particularly important as winning back or maintaining control of Congress entails gaining advantage with moderate voters, as voters with deeper partisan commitments are unlikely to be persuaded to vote for the opposing party. Therefore, the results help explain how strategic party behavior could be advantageous for parties hoping to gain favor with potentially pivotal voters that are likely not persuaded by partisan grandstanding or messages to the base. Finally, the substantive results of the experiment, while meaningful, were generally small. This suggests that, while parties might be incentivized to position against the legislative proposals of their competitors, they are only incentivized to do so when electoral margins are small. This aids in our understanding of *when* parties are incentivized to act strategically. Specifically, it helps explain why some minority parties, like the Republicans at mid-century, who

were significantly weaker electorally than the Democrats, did not exhibit this sort of behavior. Therefore, the results further our understanding of the relationship between inter-party competition and party polarization.

## 5.0 Conclusion

The three chapters of this dissertation speak to an important puzzle regarding electoral politics and party polarization. Namely, how party polarization persists in Washington, DC despite widespread preferences for moderation and compromise in the general electorate. Past research has argued that the disconnect implies that members of Congress are simply ignoring incentives for bipartisanship arising from general elections ([Barber and McCarty, 2015](#)). This dissertation has sought to identify ways that elections could create incentives for greater partisanship among elites in Washington, even when the general electorate prefers moderation and compromise. I conclude by summarizing my key findings and potential avenues for future research.

The first chapter of the dissertation identifies a mechanism through which voters' demand for greater legislative productivity in Washington could undermine incentives for members to cooperate across party lines to pass legislation. Specifically, I argue that since legislative achievement by the president is an electoral asset for the president's party and, therefore, costly to political opponents, the opposing party has an incentive to obstruct or oppose legislative efforts by the president to better the electoral prospects of their party. Conversely, members of the president's party are incentivized to adhere to the president's positions, leading to greater polarization on legislation championed by the president. Data on legislative success and incumbent performance in elections demonstrated that greater presidential legislative success advantages the president's party by making it appear more competent. Conversely, the legislative success of individual members and the party in Congress are not consistently tied to electoral outcomes.

The results provide several important implications for our understanding of the relationship between legislative effectiveness and elections. First, the results identify a mechanism through which voters' desire for legislative productivity unintentionally incentivizes polarization on the president's agenda. Second, the results provide the first evidence to date of a relationship between legislative accomplishment and incumbent performance in general elections. The fact that legislative success is only relevant for legislation associated with

the president suggests that the null results common in the literature could be due to voter ignorance about legislative accomplishment by other representatives in Washington, rather than apathy about how legislatively effective members are. Finally, the results add to our understanding of why declining confidence in Congress has not had consistent implications for elections.

Future research could explore several questions left unanswered by the current study. First, the current project does not evaluate whether the effects of legislative accomplishment vary by legislation. If voters have competing policy goals, we should expect legislative accomplishment to influence the electoral choices of voters differently based on their preferences. Future research could address this by evaluating whether the effect of legislative success is moderated by incumbent positions. Further, the current project, as well as existing research on this topic, only evaluates the effect of legislative success *rates* on electoral outcomes. However, we might expect voters to hold incumbents accountable for absolute levels of legislative productivity rather than just the rate of legislative success. Future research could address this issue by using counts of legislation rather than ratios. Finally, the current project evaluates the effect of legislative success on all legislation considered by Congress. However, members are likely only able to claim credit, and benefit electorally, for legislation that they championed and advanced through Congress. Future research could dis-aggregate the current analysis by legislative sponsorship.

The second chapter contributes to our understanding of how primary elections are related to party polarization in government. The paper argues that primary elections will cause greater party polarization on issues related to the president because of primary voters demand for greater party loyalty and the visibility of the president. Using data on presidential support and primary election outcomes for the period 1970-2010, I find some support for my theory. Namely, presidential support seems consistently important for members of the president's party but only matters some times for the opposing party. Thus, the results suggest that primary elections could partially be responsible for the growth in party polarization on the president's agenda. However, the study leaves several important questions unanswered. First, it is unclear what specific mechanism is responsible for the relationship between presidential support and electoral performance. Potentially, presidential support could simply

be important because it is a more visible indicator of party loyalty than members rate of voting with the party in Congress. However, it could also be that voters prefer loyalty to the president irrespective of the preferences of the majority of elites in the party. Future research could address this question using an experimental design. Finally, it is unclear whether presidential support is a consistent determinant of primary election outcomes or has just become important recently because of contextual changes in American politics that have nationalized party politics and increased the relevance of the president in party politics. Future research could evaluate this possibility by comparing the effects of presidential support across decades.

The final paper contributes to the literature on party strategy and party polarization. The extant literature on this topic argues that inter-party competition for control of government causes greater inter-party polarization by undermining incentives for cooperation between the two parties. However, while the existing literature has identified a clear connection between party competition and inter-party polarization, it still remains unclear why party competition begets greater party polarization. This paper identified a specific mechanism through which the electoral concerns of the party could lead members to strategically oppose legislation proposed by the opposing party. Specifically, I argued that members are incentivized to oppose legislation proposed by the competing party because their support of the legislation signals positive information about the quality of legislation to voters. This, in turn, signals positive information to voters about the capability of the opposing party, which would entail electoral costs. A series of experiments support this expectation. While the results support the general hypothesis of the paper, the substantive effects of the treatment are small in size. This suggests that while parties can advantage themselves electorally by positioning strategically, there are limitations to the strategy. Parties are only able to tarnish the reputation of the opposing party to a limited degree. This helps explain why competition does not consistently lead parties to behave strategically across time. For example, the Republican minority parties during the mid-century were relatively open to compromise and were less inclined to voting based on partisan considerations. Perhaps the most surprising finding from the experiments is that voters largely interpret opposition to legislation as being motivated by information and not members pursuing political goals. While the findings of

the experiment consistently show effects, it is unclear whether this effect would hold in a more realistic environment where elites can communicate to voters about their opponents' motivations. Further, future research could investigate the consistency of this finding across different information environments. Finally, the experiment relied on low salience issues to evaluate the effect of party positions. Future research could investigate whether the effects presented in this paper hold on more salient issues where elite positions are still informative but voters have crystallized attitudes and more information. On these higher salience issues, elite positions might be less informative to voters because voters are better able to detect elites' political motivations for positioning against legislation proposed by their competitors.

## 6.0 Bibliography

- Abramowitz, A. I. and Segal, J. A. (1986). Determinants of the outcomes of u.s. senate elections. *The Journal of Politics*, 48(2):433–439.
- Bafumi, J. and Herron, M. C. (2010). Leapfrog representation and extremism: A study of american voters and their members in congress. *American Political Science Review*, 104(3):519–542.
- Barber, M. and McCarty, N. (2015). Causes and consequences of polarization. *Political Negotiation: A Handbook*, 37:39–43.
- Barber, M. and Pope, J. C. (2019). Does party trump ideology? disentangling party and ideology in america. *American Political Science Review*, pages 1–17.
- Benegal, S. D. and Scruggs, L. A. (2018). Correcting misinformation about climate change: the impact of partisanship in an experimental setting. *Climatic change*, 148(1-2):61–80.
- Berinsky, A. J. (2007). Assuming the costs of war: Events, elites, and american public support for military conflict. *The Journal of Politics*, 69(4):975–997.
- Berinsky, A. J. (2017). Rumors and health care reform: Experiments in political misinformation. *British Journal of Political Science*, 47(2):241–262.
- Berry, C. R. and Howell, W. G. (2007). Accountability and local elections: Rethinking retrospective voting. *The Journal of Politics*, 69(3):844–858.
- Bisgaard, M. and Slothuus, R. (2018). Partisan elites as culprits? how party cues shape partisan perceptual gaps. *American Journal of Political Science*, 62(2):456–469.
- Boatright, R. G. (2013). *Getting Primaried: The Changing Politics of Congressional Primary Challenges*. University of Michigan Press.

- Bond, J. R. and Fleisher, R. (1990). *The president in the legislative arena*. University of Chicago Press.
- Boudreau, C. and MacKenzie, S. A. (2014). Informing the electorate? how party cues and policy information affect public opinion about initiatives. *American Journal of Political Science*, 58(1):48–62.
- Brady, D. W., Cogan, J. F., Gaines, B. J., and Rivers, D. (1996). The perils of presidential support: How the republicans took the house in the 1994 midterm elections. *Political Behavior*, 18(4):345–367.
- Brady, D. W., Han, H., and Pope, J. C. (2007). Primary elections and candidate ideology: Out of step with the primary electorate? *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 32(1):79–105.
- Brasher, H. (2009). The dynamic character of political party evaluations. *Party Politics*, 15(1):69–92.
- Butler, D. M., Hughes, A. G., Volden, C., and Wiseman, A. E. (2019). Do constituents know (or care) about the lawmaking effectiveness of their representatives? *Center for Effective Lawmaking (CEL) Working paper*.
- Butler, D. M. and Powell, E. N. (2014). Understanding the party brand: experimental evidence on the role of valence. *The Journal of Politics*, 76(2):492–505.
- Canen, N., Kendall, C., and Trebbi, F. (2020). Unbundling polarization. *Econometrica*, 88(3):1197–1233.
- Canes-Wrone, B. and De Marchi, S. (2002). Presidential approval and legislative success. *Journal of Politics*, 64(2):491–509.
- Carpini, M. X. D. and Keeter, S. (1996). *What Americans know about politics and why it matters*. Yale University Press.
- Carson, J. L., Crespin, M. H., Finocchiaro, C. J., and Rohde, D. W. (2007). Redistricting

- and party polarization in the us house of representatives. *American Politics Research*, 35(6):878–904.
- Carson, J. L. and Hitefield, A. A. (2018). Donald trump, nationalization, and the 2018 midterm elections. In *The Forum*, volume 16, pages 495–513. De Gruyter.
- Cavari, A. (2014). The interplay of macropartisanship and macrohandling, and the 2012 electoral success of the democratic party. *The 2012 Presidential Election: Forecasts, Outcomes, and Consequences*, pages 83–102.
- Cavari, A. (2017). *The Party Politics of Presidential Rhetoric*. Cambridge University Press.
- Coppock, A., Ekins, E., Kirby, D., et al. (2018). The long-lasting effects of newspaper op-eds on public opinion. *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, 13(1):59–87.
- Cox, G. W. and McCubbins, M. D. (2005). *Setting the agenda: Responsible party government in the US House of Representatives*. Cambridge University Press.
- Cox, G. W. and McCubbins, M. D. (2007). *Legislative leviathan: Party government in the House*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dancey, L. and Sheagley, G. (2013). Heuristics behaving badly: Party cues and voter knowledge. *American Journal of Political Science*, 57(2):312–325.
- Dancey, L., Tarpey, M., and Woon, J. (2018). The macro-dynamics of partisan advantage. *Political Research Quarterly*, page 1065912918793231.
- de Benedictis-Kessner, J. and Warshaw, C. (2019). Accountability for the economy at all levels of government in united states elections.
- Donovan, K., Kellstedt, P. M., Key, E. M., and Lebo, M. J. (2019). Motivated reasoning, public opinion, and presidential approval. *Political Behavior*, pages 1–21.
- Durr, R. H., Gilmour, J. B., and Wolbrecht, C. (1997). Explaining congressional approval. *American Journal of Political Science*, pages 175–207.

- Edwards, G. (2015). Presidential influence on partisans' opinions.
- Edwards III, G. C. (1985). Measuring presidential success in congress: Alternative approaches. *The Journal of Politics*, 47(2):667–685.
- Egan, P. J. (2014). do something politics and double-peaked policy preferences. *The Journal of Politics*, 76(2):333–349.
- Egar, W. T. (2016). Tarnishing opponents, polarizing congress: The house minority party and the construction of the roll-call record. *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 41(4):935–964.
- Fong, C. (2018). Expertise, networks, and interpersonal influence in congress. *The Journal of Politics*.
- Fortunato, D. and Monroe, N. W. (2018). Agenda control and electoral success in the us house. *British Journal of Political Science*, pages 1–11.
- Fowler, A., Hall, A. B., et al. (2016). The elusive quest for convergence. *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, 11(1):131–149.
- Gabel, M. and Scheve, K. (2007). Estimating the effect of elite communications on public opinion using instrumental variables. *American Journal of Political Science*, 51(4):1013–1028.
- Gelman, J. (2017a). In pursuit of power: Competition for majority status and senate partisanship. *Party Politics*, page 1354068817749779.
- Gelman, J. (2017b). Rewarding dysfunction: Interest groups and intended legislative failure. *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 42(4):661–692.
- Gerber, E. R. and Morton, R. B. (1998). Primary election systems and representation. *Journal of Law, Economics, & Organization*, pages 304–324.
- Gilens, M. and Murakawa, N. (2002). Elite cues and political decision-making. *Research in micropolitics*, 6:15–49.

- Green, J. and Jennings, W. (2017). *The politics of competence: Parties, public opinion and voters*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gronke, P., Koch, J., and Wilson, J. M. (2003). Follow the leader? presidential approval, presidential support, and representatives' electoral fortunes. *The Journal of Politics*, 65(3):785–808.
- Harbridge, L. (2015). *Is bipartisanship dead?: Policy agreement and agenda-setting in the House of Representatives*. Cambridge University Press.
- Harbridge, L. and Malhotra, N. (2011). Electoral incentives and partisan conflict in congress: Evidence from survey experiments. *American Journal of Political Science*, 55(3):494–510.
- Harrington, J. E. (1993). The impact of reelection pressures on the fulfillment of campaign promises. *Games and Economic Behavior*, 5:71–97.
- Hill, K. Q. (1998). The policy agendas of the president and the mass public: A research validation and extension. *American Journal of Political Science*, 42(4):1328–1334.
- Hill, S. J. and Tausanovitch, C. (2015). A disconnect in representation? comparison of trends in congressional and public polarization. *The Journal of Politics*, 77(4):1058–1075.
- Hinchliffe, K. L. and Lee, F. E. (2016). Party competition and conflict in state legislatures. *State Politics & Policy Quarterly*, 16(2):172–197.
- Hitt, M. P., Volden, C., and Wiseman, A. E. (2017). Spatial models of legislative effectiveness. *American Journal of Political Science*, 61(3):575–590.
- Hobolt, S., Tilley, J., and Banducci, S. (2013). Clarity of responsibility: How government cohesion conditions performance voting. *European journal of political research*, 52(2):164–187.
- Hurley, P. A. and Hill, K. Q. (1980). The prospects for issue-voting in contemporary congressional elections: An assessment of citizen awareness and representation. *American Politics Quarterly*, 8(4):425–448.

- Jacobson, G. C. (2003). Partisan polarization in presidential support: The electoral connection. In *Congress & the Presidency: A Journal of Capital Studies*, volume 30, pages 1–36. Taylor & Francis.
- Jacobson, G. C. (2012). The president's effect on partisan attitudes. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 42(4):683–718.
- Jacobson, G. C. (2015). How presidents shape their party's reputation and prospects: New evidence. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 45(1):1–28.
- Jacobson, G. C. (2016). The coevolution of affect toward presidents and their parties. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 46(2):306–334.
- Jacobson, G. C. (2019). *Presidents and Parties in the Public Mind*. University of Chicago Press.
- Jacobson, G. C. and Carson, J. L. (2015). *The politics of congressional elections*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Jones, D. (2010). Party brands and partisan tides. *Working Paper*.
- Jones, D. R. (2018). Does landmark legislation affect partisan electoral fortunes? tax reform and the 2018 midterm elections. *American Political Science Association Meeting*.
- Jones, D. R. and McDermott, M. L. (2004). The responsible party government model in house and senate elections. *American Journal of Political Science*, 48(1):1–12.
- Koger, G. and Lebo, M. J. (2017). *Strategic Party Government: Why Winning Trumps Ideology*. University of Chicago Press.
- Larson, B. A. (2004). Incumbent contributions to the congressional campaign committees, 1990–2000. *Political Research Quarterly*, 57(1):155–161.
- Layman, G. C. and Carsey, T. M. (2002). Party polarization and "conflict extension" in the american electorate. *American Journal of Political Science*, pages 786–802.

- Layman, G. C., Carsey, T. M., and Horowitz, J. M. (2006). Party polarization in american politics: Characteristics, causes, and consequences. *Annu. Rev. Polit. Sci.*, 9:83–110.
- Lebo, M. J. and Cassino, D. (2007). The aggregated consequences of motivated reasoning and the dynamics of partisan presidential approval. *Political Psychology*, 28(6):719–746.
- Lebo, M. J., McGlynn, A. J., and Koger, G. (2007). Strategic party government: Party influence in congress, 1789-2000. *American Journal of Political Science*, 51(3):464–481.
- Lee, F. E. (2008). Dividers, not uniters: Presidential leadership and senate partisanship, 1981-2004. *The Journal of Politics*, 70(4):914–928.
- Lee, F. E. (2009). *Beyond ideology: Politics, principles, and partisanship in the US Senate*. University of Chicago Press.
- Lee, F. E. (2013). Presidents and party teams: The politics of debt limits and executive oversight, 2001-2013. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 43(4):775–791.
- Lee, F. E. (2016). *Insecure majorities: Congress and the perpetual campaign*. University of Chicago Press.
- Lupia, A. (1994). Shortcuts versus encyclopedias: Information and voting behavior in california insurance reform elections. *American Political Science Review*, 88(1):63–76.
- Lupia, A. (2016). *Uninformed: Why people know so little about politics and what we can do about it*. Oxford University Press.
- MacKuen, M. B., Erikson, R. S., and Stimson, J. A. (1989). Macropartisanship. *American Political Science Review*, 83(4):1125–1142.
- McCarty, N. (2019). *Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know*®. Oxford University Press.
- McCarty, N., Poole, K. T., and Rosenthal, H. (2006). *Polarized America: The dance of ideology and unequal riches*. MIT Press.

- Miquel, G. P. I. and Snyder Jr, J. M. (2006). Legislative effectiveness and legislative careers. *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 31(3):347–381.
- Mondak, J. J. and McCurley, C. (1994). Cognitive efficiency and the congressional vote: The psychology of coattail voting. *Political Research Quarterly*, 47(1):151–175.
- Nicholson, S. P. (2012). Polarizing cues. *American Journal of Political Science*, 56(1):52–66.
- Nielson, L. and Visalvanich, N. (2017). Primaries and candidates: Examining the influence of primary electorates on candidate ideology. *Political Science Research and Methods*, 5(2):397–408.
- Olivella, S., Kanthak, K., and Crisp, B. F. (2017). and keep your enemies closer: Building reputations for facing electoral challenges. *Electoral Studies*, 46:75–86.
- Pettigrew, S., Owen, K., and Wanless, E. (2014). Us house primary election results (1956–2010). doi: 10.7910/dvn/26448. *Harvard Dataverse, Version, 3*.
- Poole, K. T. and Rosenthal, H. (2001). D-nominate after 10 years: A comparative update to congress: A political-economic history of roll-call voting. *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, pages 5–29.
- Pope, J. C. and Woon, J. (2009). Measuring changes in american party reputations, 19392004. *Political Research Quarterly*, 62(4):653–661.
- Pyeatt, N. (2015). Party unity, ideology, and polarization in primary elections for the house of representatives: 1956–2012. *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 40(4):651–676.
- Ramirez, M. D. (2009). The dynamics of partisan conflict on congressional approval. *American Journal of Political Science*, 53(3):681–694.
- Ryan, J. B. (2011). Social networks as a shortcut to correct voting. *American Journal of Political Science*, 55(4):753–766.

- Somin, I. (2016). *Democracy and political ignorance: Why smaller government is smarter*. Stanford University Press.
- Stokes, D. E. and Miller, W. E. (1962). Party government and the saliency of congress. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 26(4):531–546.
- Sulkin, T., Testa, P., and Usry, K. (2015). What gets rewarded? legislative activity and constituency approval. *Political Research Quarterly*, 68(4):690–702.
- Tausanovitch, C. and Warshaw, C. (2013). Measuring constituent policy preferences in congress, state legislatures, and cities. *The Journal of Politics*, 75(2):330–342.
- Theriault, S. M. (2006). Party polarization in the us congress: Member replacement and member adaptation. *Party Politics*, 12(4):483–503.
- Theriault, S. M. (2008). *Party Polarization in Congress*. Cambridge University Press.
- Thomsen, D. M. (2017). *Opting out of congress: Partisan polarization and the decline of moderate candidates*. Cambridge University Press.
- Tufte, E. R. (1975). Determinants of the outcomes of midterm congressional elections. *American Political Science Review*, 69(3):812–826.
- Volden, C. and Wiseman, A. E. (2014). *Legislative effectiveness in the United States Congress: The lawmakers*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wells, M. S. and Ryan, T. J. (2018). Following the party in time of war? the implications of elite consensus. *International Interactions*, 44(5):919–935.
- Zaller, J. R. et al. (1992). *The nature and origins of mass opinion*. Cambridge University Press.