

**Electoral Incentives and Partisan Conflict in Congress:  
Evidence from Survey Experiments**

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## **Abstract**

Does partisan conflict damage citizens' perceptions of Congress? If so, why has polarization increased in Congress since the 1970s? To address these questions, we unpack the "electoral connection" by exploring the mass public's attitudes towards partisan conflict via two survey experiments in which we manipulated characteristics of individual members and Congress. We find that party conflict reduces confidence in Congress among citizens across the partisan spectrum. However, there exists heterogeneity by strength of party identification with respect to evaluations of individual members. Independents and weak partisans are more supportive of members that espouse a bipartisan image, whereas strong partisans are less supportive. People with strong attachments to a political party disavow conflict in the aggregate but approve of individual members behaving in a partisan manner. This pattern helps us understand why members in safely partisan districts engage in partisan conflict even though partisanship damages the collective reputation of the institution.



The rise in partisan polarization since the 1970s has been one of the most extensively studied topics in congressional scholarship in recent years (e.g., Aldrich, Berger, and Rohde 2002; Han and Brady 2007; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Poole and Rosenthal 1997; Theriault 2008). Most of the literature on polarization in Congress has focused on the behavior of legislators themselves within the framework of the institution, hoping to identify both the causes and consequences of the increasing partisan divide (e.g., Brady and Schwartz 1995; Cox and Katz 2002; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Roberts and Smith 2003; Stonecash, Brewer, and Mariani 2002). Less research has focused on citizens' attitudes towards party conflict and whether increasing polarization is consistent with members' electoral incentives. In this article, we seek to unpack the "the electoral connection" via an examination of the mass public's attitudes towards partisan conflict in Congress. To do so, we conducted two original survey experiments as part of the 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) in which we manipulated characteristics of individual members and Congress, and then measured people's attitudes towards individual members and the institution as a whole.

We build on previous research that has used aggregate and individual-level data to show that that partisan conflict has decreased Americans' confidence in and approval of Congress as an institution. In a recent paper published in this journal, Ramirez (2009) found that increases in the proportion of party-line votes decreases aggregate measures of congressional approval. Similarly, analyses of individual-level survey data demonstrate that Americans' perceptions of acrimony and bickering between political parties have fostered negative attitudes towards Congress (Durr, Martin, and Wolbrecht 1997; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995; Kimball and Patterson 1997). While these findings demonstrate an important consequence of increased party conflict, they do raise an important question: Why would members of Congress behave in a

partisan manner if it adversely affects how they are viewed by the public? Via individual-level, experimental data, we address this issue. We show that individual members—particularly those from safe districts—do not have electoral incentives to act in a bipartisan manner and contribute to the collective good of overall congressional approval.

Our findings also build on previous explorations of public attitudes towards Congress. Early work by Fenno (1978) observed that people are generally favorable towards their own member of Congress, but are much less positive in their evaluations of members of Congress more generally. Actions such as casework and position-taking can assist members in building a personal vote and increasing support among their constituents (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1984; Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987). Our results add additional texture to Fenno’s paradox. Although the public generally rebukes Congress in the aggregate for partisan bickering, some citizens reward individual members for eschewing bipartisan cooperation.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the first section, we provide a theoretical basis for our hypotheses concerning how different segments of the public respond to partisan activity in Congress. Additionally, we present some empirical regularities on district preferences and the degree of partisan behavior to motivate the analyses. We then present the designs of the two experimental studies, the results, and their implications for the study of polarization and party conflict in Congress.

### **Partisan Conflict and the Electoral Connection**

Following Ramirez (2009), we use the term “partisan conflict” loosely to refer to any outcome or scenario where Democrats and Republicans do not appear to be working together to

achieve common goals.<sup>1</sup> This includes party-line voting on roll calls, partisan composition of cosponsorship coalitions, acrimonious floor speeches and rhetoric, and the use of procedural tactics against the opposing party. For instance, studies of partisan polarization in Congress consider partisan homogeneity in roll-call voting as a sign of conflict and a lack of bipartisan cooperation. In conceptualizing party conflict, we purposely adopt a broad definition since citizens may have differing interpretations and reactions to various forms of congressional behavior.

Beginning with Mayhew's (1974) central premise that members of Congress are "single-minded reelection seekers," we argue that the electoral incentives of members influence the level of party conflict in Congress.<sup>2</sup> We hypothesize that voters who are Independents and weak partisans prefer that their member engage in bipartisan activities whereas strong partisans prefer partisan behavior as a result of their greater likelihood of agreement with, and attachment to, their political party. Accordingly, members of Congress have incentives to exhibit a certain mix of bipartisan and partisan behavior depending on the composition of their districts.

Legislative behavior may also hinge on whether a member is likely to face a competitive primary election challenge from within their own party (Brady, Han, and Pope 2007) or a strong general election challenge from the opposing party (Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002). Previous research has found that the electoral stage at which members expect an electoral challenger affects legislative behavior and coalition formation (Crisp, Kanthak, and Leijonhufvud 2004; Kanthak and Crisp 2005). The logic is that members who represent

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<sup>1</sup> Ramirez (2009) specifically operationalizes partisan conflict as the percentage of roll call votes in which 75% of Democrats vote against 75% of Republicans.

<sup>2</sup> Although the survey experiments in this paper focus on the observable aspects of legislative behavior, it is important to note that in the real world legislative behavior may reflect both preferences and strategies. That is, when a member of Congress chooses a certain mix of partisan and bipartisan behaviors that reflect the preferences of the district median, this may reflect the member's own preferences (in which case the voters were able to select a member whose own positions reflect the median voter) or it may reflect a strategic choice by the member.

competitive districts (i.e., those that the opposing party has a chance of winning), and where the challenge is likely to come in a general election, will have the incentive to work across the aisle and engage in bipartisan collaboration. In contrast, members who represent districts that are safely Democratic (or Republican), and thus where the challenge is likely to come in a primary election, are more likely to engage in partisan behavior in an attempt to shore up support from strong partisans, who make up a larger portion of the primary electorate (Geer 1988; Grofman 1993; Norrander 1989). Further, even in the general election, the median voter in these districts is more likely to be a strong partisan, thereby incentivizing partisan legislative behavior.

Aggregate-level data show that members from competitive (general election) districts are less likely to engage in partisan conflict and more likely behave in a manner that might be classified as bipartisan. These behaviors include: (1) voting with opposing partisans on roll calls with greater frequency; and (2) joining cosponsorship coalitions with members of the opposing party. With respect to roll call voting, Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan (2002) analyze congressional elections from 1956-1996 and find that, when controlling for district preferences (measured by the normal presidential vote) and a range of other factors, members with more extreme voting records (i.e., more liberal or conservative than the district median voter) are less likely to be reelected as compared to their colleagues whose voting behavior better represents their districts. In every election year between 1956 and 1996, roll call extremity has a negative effect on members' general election vote share, even when controlling for factors such as challenger quality and spending. Substantively, a 25-point shift in a member's Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) score away from the median voter (an approximately one standard deviation shift) decreases a member's vote share by 1 to 3 percentage points (Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002, 133). They find that this pattern is true across types of districts. For

members in both marginal and safe seats, the extremity of a member's ADA score relative to their district's preferences adversely affects the probability of reelection. Since competitive districts have more moderate median voters, members who represent these districts will have more moderate voting records than members of more liberal (or conservative) districts where the median voter pulls the member toward the ideological poles.

We find similar results using bill cosponsorship coalitions—members from more centrist districts are more likely to engage in bipartisan cosponsorship. In some ways, cosponsorship is an even better metric than roll call votes in assessing strategic decision making on the part of congresspersons because bill cosponsorship is in the purview of individual members and is less likely to be subject to agenda control (Cox and McCubbins 2005; Kessler and Krehbiel 1996; Krehbiel 1995). In Figure 1, we plot district<sup>3</sup> preferences (proxied by the normal presidential vote<sup>4</sup> in the district) against the percentage of the member's cosponsorships that are bipartisan for the 103<sup>rd</sup>-109<sup>th</sup> Congresses. Lower values of the normal vote indicate districts that are more competitive for the incumbent party. A member is coded as engaging in a bipartisan cosponsorship if he or she cosponsors a bill on which at least 20% of the bill's cosponsors are from the party opposite the party of the bill's original sponsor. All other cosponsorships are considered partisan cosponsorships. As is clear from the figure, members from moderate districts (i.e. normal votes near 50% or less) are more likely to cosponsor legislation with members of the

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<sup>3</sup> Cosponsorship data from Fowler (2006a; 2006b). All districts (where data are available) are included. This includes districts that were redistricted. Ideally, instances where a district boundary was redrawn would be omitted. However, our data only includes an indicator for whether a district is in a state that was redistricted, meaning that removing these cases leaves minimal observations in the 103<sup>rd</sup> (1992), and 108<sup>th</sup> (2002) Congresses. As a result, redistricted cases are a source of measurement error.

<sup>4</sup> Following Canes-Wrone et al. (2002) and Levendusky et al. (2008), we operationalize the normal presidential vote as the mean two-party presidential vote in the previous two elections by the party of the incumbent representative. For instance, if the member is a Republican we use the mean Republican presidential vote in the last two presidential elections and if the member is a Democrat we use the mean Democratic presidential vote in the last two presidential elections. Hence, higher values of this variable indicate more extreme districts whereas lower values represent more moderate, competitive districts.

opposite party.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

This relationship is robust to the inclusion of several member-level control variables (majority party status, gender, age, tenure, leadership position) and Congress-level controls—divided government, majority seat share, and presidential election years.<sup>5</sup> As shown in the first two columns of Table 1, there exists an inverse relationship between the normal vote and bipartisan cosponsorship activity, either estimating an OLS model or a quasi-binomial model<sup>6</sup> to predict the frequency of bipartisan cosponsorship. Moving from a competitive district where the normal presidential vote is 50% to moderately safe district where the normal vote is 60% corresponds to a 6.1 unit decrease in the percent of bills cosponsored by the member that are bipartisan. Moving from a competitive district (with a normal vote of 50%) to an extremely safe district where the normal vote is 80% corresponds to an 18.3 unit decline in bipartisan cosponsorship activity. Looking at a few examples from California illustrates this pattern. The normal presidential vote in Representative Jim Costa’s (CA-20, Dem) Fresno district is 51% Democratic and in the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress 59% of the bills that he cosponsored were bipartisan. In contrast, the normal presidential vote is 87% Democratic in the nearby Berkeley and Oakland areas and only 24% of the bills that Representative Barbara Lee (CA-9, Dem) cosponsored were bipartisan.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

District preferences not only explain between-member variation in bipartisan activity but

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<sup>5</sup> Data from the Congressional Bills Project (Adler and Wilkerson 2008), the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (1997), and Volden and Wiseman (2009).

<sup>6</sup> The quasi-binomial model examines the number of successes that occur in a specific number of trials. Applied to the question at hand, “successes” are bipartisan cosponsorship coalitions and the number of trials is the number of bills that a member cosponsors. A quasi-binomial, rather than a binomial, model is used to allow for over-dispersion in the dependent variable.

also within-member variation across time. In the third and fourth columns of Table 1, we include fixed effects for members.<sup>7</sup> In both the OLS and quasi-binomial models, even when controlling for member fixed effects and Congress-level variables, the normal presidential vote exerts a significant negative effect on bipartisan cooperation. That is, when a member's district becomes more partisan, the member's bipartisan cooperation declines. Indeed, there have been some notable cases of members becoming more frequent bipartisan cosponsors as their district becomes more moderate. Consider the example of Steve Chabot (OH-1), a Republican who represented southwestern Ohio from 1995 to 2008. Between the 104<sup>th</sup> and 107<sup>th</sup> Congresses<sup>8</sup> the normal Republican presidential vote in this district declined from 57% to 47%. Over this period, the percent of his cosponsorship coalitions that were bipartisan increased from 41% to 55%.

These empirical patterns suggest that there may be a differential desire for bipartisanship within the public. Whereas voters who are strong partisans may not want their co-partisan representative to compromise his or her beliefs in order to reach agreement with the other party, people less attached to or aligned with a political party may believe that compromise and collaboration is the basis of effective government. Hence, underlying district preferences should lead some members to engage in behavior contributing to party conflict and others to engage in bipartisan behavior. The experiments presented in this paper explore the individual-level dynamics that underlie this electoral connection.

### **Experimental Studies**

To empirically evaluate whether partisan polarization affects mass perceptions of Congress as an institution and support for individual members, we conducted two survey

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<sup>7</sup> Due to the inclusion of member fixed effects, time-invariant variables drop out of the model specifications.

<sup>8</sup> The 108<sup>th</sup> and 109<sup>th</sup> Congresses are omitted from this illustration because of redistricting.

experiments over the Internet as part of the 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) administered by YouGov/Polimetrix. The CCES pre-election wave was conducted during October 2008 and the post-election wave was conducted two weeks following Election Day (November 4, 2008). In addition to common content questions administered to 32,800 respondents, 1,000 respondents participated in our experimental module.<sup>9</sup> All experiments were conducted in the pre-election wave.

The CCES uses YouGov/Polimetrix's matched random sample methodology (Ansolabehere 2008). This procedure uses matching to select representative samples from non-randomly selected pools of respondents. After a target sample, or random sample from the target population, is drawn, each member of the target sample is matched to an individual in the pool of opt-in survey respondents. Matching is based on demographics, voter, and consumer characteristics. The matched cases are then weighted using propensity scores. The resulting sample is a nationally representative panel of U.S. adults. Differences between this method and random digit dialing methods administered during the 2008 election were slight (Ansolabehere 2008). As shown in Appendix 1, distributions of gender, age, race, education, and partisanship were generally similar to those in the 2008 American National Election Study, which was administered face-to-face to a probability sample. All of the experiments presented actual data to respondents and required no deception, thereby enhancing the ecological validity of the findings. Randomization was successful. As shown in Appendix 2, experimental conditions were balanced on observables.

### **Study 1: Evaluations of Congress**

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<sup>9</sup> Respondents participated in both experiments, thereby creating a 2x2 design. Using Transue et al.'s (2009) procedures, we find no spillover effects between the different experiments.

## *Design*

To examine how perceptions of party conflict affects opinions of Congress as an institution, we conducted a survey experiment in which we manipulated the extent to which Congress was portrayed as being a place where members of opposite parties cooperated and worked together. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the first condition, respondents were provided the following information:

In a recent session of the United States House, about 30% of legislation that was introduced had bipartisan support – that is, it had support from significant numbers of both Democrats and Republicans.

In the second condition, respondents were shown the following blurb:

In a recent session of the United States House, about 80% of legislation that became law had bipartisan support – that is, it had support from significant numbers of both Democrats and Republicans.

The information in both blurbs is accurate. Note that we are able to manipulate the level of party conflict and still remain truthful by distinguishing between bill introductions and bill passage.

Although this distinction may be substantively meaningful to some respondents, we believe that is unlikely, especially since respondents saw only one of the two blurbs. More important, although that technical distinction might affect their view of specific pieces of legislation, it should not affect how they view the institution as a whole. Hence, our manipulation is able to present respondents with two different levels of party conflict while holding other features of Congress constant.

## *Measures*

After the blurb about the extent of partisan conflict was presented, respondents were

asked: “Based on this information, how much confidence do you have in the U.S. Congress?”<sup>10</sup> with the following five response options: “a great deal,” “a lot,” “a moderate amount,” “a little,” and “none.” The main independent variable was a dummy indicating whether respondents were assigned to the condition presenting Congress as bipartisan, with the partisan presentation as the baseline.

### **Methods**

In order to estimate the overall treatment effect, we estimated the following regression model via ordinary least squares:<sup>11</sup>

$$C_i = \alpha + \beta_1 B_i + \beta_2 SR_i + \beta_3 WR_i + \beta_4 WD_i + \beta_5 SD_i + \gamma \mathbf{x}_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where  $i$  indexes respondent,  $C_i$  represents confidence in Congress,  $B_i$  represents the bipartisan treatment dummy,  $SR_i$ ,  $WR_i$ ,  $WD_i$ , and  $SD_i$  are dummy variables representing strong Republicans, weak Republicans, weak Democrats, and strong Democrats, respectively (with Independents as the omitted group)<sup>12</sup>,  $\mathbf{x}_i$  represents a vector of demographic controls, and  $\varepsilon_i$  represents stochastic error. The coefficient estimate of  $\beta_1$  represents the treatment effect of the bipartisan information.

To assess the moderating effect of partisanship, we estimated the following model:

$$C_i = \alpha + \beta_1 B_i + \beta_2 SR_i + \beta_3 WR_i + \beta_4 WD_i + \beta_5 SD_i + \beta_6 (SR_i \times B_i) + \beta_7 (WR_i \times B_i) + \beta_8 (WD_i \times B_i) + \beta_9 (SD_i \times B_i) + \gamma \mathbf{x}_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (2)$$

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<sup>10</sup> The question wording of “confidence in Congress” was adapted from an item used in Harris surveys. The polychoric correlation between confidence in Congress and approval of Congress (which was asked as part of the common content questionnaire) is  $r = .70$ .

<sup>11</sup> For simplicity of interpretation, we estimated all regressions via ordinary least squares. However, we re-estimated all models using ordered logistic regression and the results were statistically and substantively similar (see Online Appendix).

<sup>12</sup> We used the standard question used by the ANES to assess partisanship: “Generally speaking, do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?” We considered the follow-up question which assessed whether individuals were “strong” or “not strong” Republicans and Democrats to separate strong and weak partisans. We treated those who did not answer “Republican” or “Democrat” as Independents.

$\beta_1$  represents the treatment effect among Independents. The interpretation of the interaction terms is as follows.  $\beta_1 + \beta_6$  represents the treatment effect among strong Republicans whereas  $\beta_6$  represents the *difference* in the treatment effect between strong Republicans and Independents.

We included control variables for age, gender, race, and education. Although the treatment was randomly assigned and we can obtain an unbiased estimate of the causal effect in the absence of these controls, we included them to increase the efficiency of the estimates. Additionally, they provide baselines with which to assess the substantive significance of the treatment effects. All variables were coded to lie between zero and one, meaning that we can interpret a one-unit change in an independent variable (i.e., going from the lowest value to the highest value) as inducing a  $100\beta$  percentage-point change in the dependent variable.<sup>13</sup>

## **Results**

When the legislative activity of Congress is framed as being characterized by partisan conflict, people have less confidence in the legislative branch as an institution. As illustrated in Figure 2, confidence in Congress is higher among *all* partisan groups in the “bipartisan” condition compared to the “partisan” condition. Regression results confirm this pattern. As shown in the first column of Table 2, the treatment information showing that 80% of passed legislation has bipartisan support significantly increases confidence in Congress as compared to information showing a much lower rate of bipartisanship on introduced legislation ( $\beta_1 = .032$ ,  $p = .016$ , two-tailed). We can use the estimates of the effects of party identification on the dependent variable to put this treatment effect into context. Given that the survey was conducted when Democrats controlled both chambers, it is unsurprising that Democrats have more

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<sup>13</sup> Age was coded to lie between 0 (youngest person in dataset) and 1 (oldest person in dataset). For gender and race, males and non-whites were the excluded categories, respectively. Education was linearly coded to lie on a four-point scale between 0 (less than a high school education) and 1 (college graduates).

confidence in Congress than Republicans. Strong Republicans' level of confidence was .10 units less than Independents, and strong Democrats' level of confidence was .16 units more than Independents. The effect of the bipartisan framing is about 12% of the effect of party identification. This is quite large given that party identification is considered to be one of the most important explanatory variables in the study of political behavior (Campbell et al. 1960).

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

This treatment effect was not moderated by partisanship. As shown in the second column of Table 2, none of the interaction terms between partisanship and the treatment dummy are statistically significant at conventional levels. Moreover, we fail to reject the null hypothesis that  $\beta_6$ ,  $\beta_7$ ,  $\beta_8$ , and  $\beta_9$  are jointly equal to zero ( $p = .50$ ). Also, none of the coefficients associated with the interaction term are significantly different from one another, meaning that the treatment effects were constant across partisan subgroups. We also estimated a model pooling Republican and Democratic respondents and including dummy variables for “strong partisans,” “weak partisans,” and interactions between these two dummies and the “bipartisan” treatment. As shown in the third column of Table 2, we find that there are no significant differences between Independents, weak partisans, and strong partisans with respect to the treatment effect. Hence, Americans of all partisan leanings are more confident in Congress when informed that it has engaged in more bipartisan activity.

This study suggests that partisan conflict lowers the standing of Congress in the public's eyes. This is true not only for Independents, but for Americans across the partisan spectrum. Thus, when evaluating bipartisan cooperation in the abstract, the public is generally supportive of members of Congress working with members of the opposite party. These experimental

findings are consistent with previous observational (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995) and aggregate-level (Ramirez 2009) studies showing that partisan conflict decreases congressional approval. However, it is important to note that the public votes for individual members, not for a party or for Congress as a whole. Although the public may not prefer high levels of partisanship in Congress, individual citizens have no vote over aggregate Congressional behavior as the electoral pressures fall on individual members rather than on the institution as a whole. Therefore, in the second experimental study, we assess whether mass preferences for bipartisanship in the abstract apply to specific applications, such as the behavior of individual members.

## **Study 2: Approval of Members**

### ***Design***

In Study 2, we explored how partisan conflict affects the public's view of members of Congress. There are a number of ways we could portray members as engaging in partisan or bipartisan behavior, including presenting their voting records and their cosponsorship coalitions. As the most direct test of partisan behavior, we decided to examine roll call voting behavior, which may be more intuitively understandable than cosponsorship coalitions, which requires respondents to have some knowledge of legislative procedure. Our interest in this experimental design is not to capture the actual information that members communicate to voters in campaigns, but rather to quantify the more qualitative information that members deliver. For example, former Senator Gordon Smith (R-OR), a moderate from a Democratic-leaning state, said in a 2008 campaign advertisement, "I'm Gordon Smith and I approve working across party lines" (Smith 2008). The narrator of the ad mentioned Smith's bipartisan work with Democrats

such as Senator Barack Obama and Governor Ted Kulongoski on environmental legislation.

We asked respondents to evaluate a member of Congress based on his voting behavior. Democrats were asked to evaluate Bud Cramer (D-AL), Republicans were asked to evaluate Steve LaTourette (R-OH), and Independents were randomly assigned to one of the two members.<sup>14</sup> We did not present respondents with their actual member of Congress because most legislators' voting behaviors do not vary dramatically from year to year, requiring deceptive information (that a clearly conservative/liberal member was moderate, or vice versa) that would decrease the ecological validity of the findings. Both Cramer and LaTourette were unique among their parties in actually having a dramatic change in their voting records in the two-year period before the administration of the survey.

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In one condition, we assigned respondents to view the member's voting history in 2007, which almost always toed the party line:

Some members of Congress work with members of their own party almost all of the time. Other members work with members of both parties.<sup>15</sup> On key issues identified by the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) [American Conservative Union (ACU)] in 2007, Representative Bud Cramer (AL-5) [Steve LaTourette (OH-14)] almost always voted the Democratic [Republican] position.

In the second condition, respondents viewed the member's 2006 record, which was more bipartisan:

Some members of Congress work with members of their own party almost all of the time. Other members work with members of both parties. On key issues identified by the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) [American Conservative Union (ACU)] in 2006, Representative Bud Cramer (AL-5) [Steve LaTourette (OH-14)] took the Democratic [Republican] position on about half the votes and the Republican [Democratic] position on about half the votes.

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<sup>14</sup> We based this assignment upon the first question used by the ANES to assess partisanship: "Generally speaking, do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?" We treated those who did not answer "Republican" or "Democrat" as Independents.

<sup>15</sup> Which one of the first two sentences of the paragraph came first was randomized.

The first sentence of the blurb is intended to focus the respondent's attention on the member's level of intraparty collaboration. Hence, we communicate various aspects of partisan conflict that citizens might find distasteful: ideological extremity, lack of accommodation and cooperation, and incivility.

Comparing approval ratings between conditions allows us to assess whether citizens had more favorable opinions of members who engage in partisan activity, contributing to congressional polarization. By simply changing the year of the voting record—which should be immaterial to respondents—we are simultaneously able to manipulate bipartisan legislative behavior, hold the member constant, and remain truthful to respondents.

### *Measures*

After the blurb about voting behavior was presented, respondents were asked: “Based on this information, do you approve or disapprove of the job Representative Cramer [LaTourette] is doing in Congress?” with the following five response options: “strongly approve,” “somewhat approve,” “neither approve nor disapprove,” “somewhat disapprove,” and “strongly disapprove.” This five-point measure served as the principal dependent variable of interest. The main independent variable was a dummy indicating whether respondents were assigned to the condition showing bipartisan voting behavior, with the party line voting blurb as the baseline.

Although we are ultimately interested in how perceptions of bipartisanship affect voting decisions, asking respondents about their vote intentions for a member that would never appear on their ballot may have been confusing. Consequently, we use job approval as the dependent variable of interest. Nonetheless, our findings do speak to vote choice as approval strongly predicts voting intentions. Among respondents who reported voting for the incumbent House member, 51% strongly approved of the member's job performance and an additional 40%

approved somewhat. In contrast, among respondents who reported voting for the challenger, only 14% strongly approved of the incumbent and 27% somewhat approved ( $\chi^2(3) = 207.6$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

### **Methods**

In order to estimate the overall treatment effect, we estimated the following regression model:

$$A_i = \alpha + \beta_1 B_i + \beta_2 SP_i + \beta_3 WP_i + \gamma \mathbf{x}_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (3)$$

where  $i$  indexes respondent,  $A_i$  represents approval of the member,  $B_i$  represents the bipartisanship treatment dummy,  $SP_i$ , and  $WP_i$ , represent strong and weak partisans, respectively (with Independents as the omitted group),  $\mathbf{x}_i$  represents a vector of demographic controls, and  $\varepsilon_i$  represents stochastic error. Since respondents are evaluating co-partisans, we have no *a priori* expectation that Democrats or Republicans will approve of the member more (or less). This is in contrast to Study 1, where Democratic control of Congress suggested that Democratic respondents would have more confidence in Congress than Republican respondents. As a result, we pool Democratic and Republican respondents together. Nonetheless, we also analyzed the data separately for Democrats and Republicans, as described below.

To assess the moderating effect of strength of partisanship, we estimated the following model:

$$A_i = \alpha + \beta_1 B_i + \beta_2 SP_i + \beta_3 WP_i + \beta_4 (SP_i \times B_i) + \beta_5 (WP_i \times B_i) + \gamma \mathbf{x}_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (4)$$

$\beta_1$  represents the treatment effect among Independents. Similar to equation (2),  $\beta_1 + \beta_4$  represents the treatment effect among strong partisans whereas  $\beta_4$  represents the *difference* in the treatment effect between strong partisans and Independents. Again, because we do not expect baseline differences between Democrats and Republicans in their approval of co-partisans, we examine

the moderating effect of strength of partisanship rather than both the strength and direction of partisanship (as we did in Study 1).

### ***Results***

Overall, Americans were not more favorable to members who exhibited a less polarized voting record, but there was significant heterogeneity by strength of partisanship. As illustrated in Figure 3, strong identifiers negatively respond to the member when told that he is engaging in bipartisan behavior whereas weak identifiers and Independents are positively disposed to bipartisanship, which nets to an overall null effect. Returning to the statistical models in equations (3) and (4), we first show the results pooling Democrats, Republicans, and Independents (and accordingly evaluations of both Cramer and LaTourette) together. The first column of Table 3 presents coefficient estimates from equation (3). The bipartisan information relative to the partisan information did not significantly increase approval of the member. However, the effects vary significantly by partisan attachment. Whereas Independents and weak partisans were supportive of bipartisan behavior, strong Democrats and Republicans actually approved of the members *less* when told they voted with the opposing party. The second column of Table 3 presents coefficient estimates from equation (4). Among Independents, the treatment effect is positive and statistically significant ( $\beta_1 = .108, p < .001$ ), indicating that Independents in the bipartisan treatment condition approved of the member nearly .11 units more than Independents in the partisan condition. Compared to Independents, the treatment effect was significantly weaker among strong partisans ( $\beta_4 = -.183, p < .001$ ). Moreover, strong partisans approved of the member significantly *less* when told he voted with members of the opposite party ( $\beta_2 + \beta_4 = -.075, p < .001$ ).

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Finally, weak Democrats and Republicans were also positively disposed to bipartisanship and behaved much more like Independents than strong partisans. The interaction term between the treatment dummy and the weak partisan dummy ( $\beta_5$ ) was statistically insignificant, meaning that weak partisans and Independents were statistically indistinguishable with respect to their response to the treatment information. Analyzing the treatment effect within the subgroup, weak partisans were more approving of the member when he was portrayed as bipartisan ( $\beta_3 + \beta_5 = .117, p < .001$ ). Despite their partisan affiliations, weak partisans have preferences for bipartisanship that are more similar to Independents than to strong partisans, as the treatment effect was significantly different between strong and weak partisans ( $\beta_4 - \beta_5 = -.192, p < .001$ ). We also replicated our analyses examining the Cramer and LaTourette blurbs separately. As shown in columns (3)-(6) of Table 3, the estimates are similar to the pooled results. Hence, whereas strong partisans were actually negatively affected by bipartisan legislative behavior, this effect was offset by approval of bipartisanship among Independents and weak partisans.

### **Discussion**

What are the implications of these findings for our understanding of polarization in Congress? First, they may help explain why bipartisan voting and cosponsorship behavior is most prevalent among members from marginal districts (where the median voter is most likely a moderate in his strength of partisanship) and less prevalent among members from safe districts (where the median voter is most likely a stronger partisan). Second, strong partisans may support abstract conceptions of bipartisanship, but not when specifically applied to the voting behavior of a co-partisan member of Congress. This is similar to the commonly-found pattern in the

literature on political tolerance (e.g., McClosky 1964; Prothro and Grigg 1960), which finds that Americans support civil liberties as abstract principles, but not when applied in specific circumstances or when applied to unpopular groups such as communists and atheists. Finally, these results add additional texture to Fenno's paradox. One potential source of the aggregate disparity in people's perception of Congress and their congressperson is the willingness of strong identifiers to tolerate (and even desire) members' partisan behavior but their displeasure with acrimony and party conflict in Congress at large.

Hence, this study addresses the question raised by previous studies (Ramirez 2009) that voters are less approving of Congress when it engages in partisan conflict. Although citizens (including strong partisans) approve of Congress more as a whole when it effuses an image of bipartisanship, individual members—particularly those from safe districts characterized by primary election competition—are *individually* incentivized to behave in a partisan matter, thereby harming the *collective* image of the institution. Since the public votes for members of Congress, rather than for parties as in parliamentary systems, the incentives for partisanship by individual members may trump the collective incentives for bipartisanship. While Cox and McCubbins (1993) observed that parties in legislatures can wield selective benefits to solve collective action problems and compel members to behave in the interest of the party brand, no similar institution exists for Congress as a whole to protect its reputation.

In addition to addressing an important problem, our studies also raise additional questions that can be explored by subsequent research. For instance, how do voters respond to polarization on other forms of legislative behavior such as the formation of bill cosponsorship coalitions? Due to agenda-setting power, members have less flexibility in demonstrating bipartisanship on roll call votes. Can bipartisan cosponsorship by members offset the perception of increased

rancor and partisanship on roll call voting? An experiment in which members' activities in both of these areas is manipulated can help address these questions. In addition to exploring the impact of bipartisanship on evaluations of Congress and individual members, future studies can also include evaluations of specific pieces of legislation, examining those with bipartisan versus partisan support. Subsequent research can vary both the substantive content of legislation and its bipartisan nature to see how much the policy substance of a bill matters in voters' minds, compared to the cue of bipartisan support. Examining public opinion related to Congress and its actions can potentially shed light on important theoretical debates, particularly those which posit the presence of an electoral connection.

Beyond the specific topic of inquiry in this paper, our results speak to a number of important questions in the broader study of Congress and electoral accountability. First, the findings contribute to the literature on the effects of redistricting, suggesting that changing the identity of the median voter can dramatically alter the legislative behavior of members from bipartisan to partisan (or vice versa). Second, this research contributes to the literature on the partisan pull of primary elections. Our findings suggest that the presence of primary elections and a second, more partisan, constituency creates two median voters, likely with very different preferences for partisan conflict, who members must seek to appease. Lastly, our results suggest that confidence in political institutions may be lower in single-member district electoral systems when citizen preferences over who is representing their districts conflicts with preferences for legislative behavior in the institution at large.

**Appendix 1: Comparison of Sample with 2008 ANES**

	<u>2008 CCES</u>	<u>2008 ANES</u>
<u>Gender</u>		
Female	50.8%	54.9%
Male	49.2	45.1
<u>Age</u>		
18-24	5.7	11.3
25-34	13.0	18.5
35-44	17.4	16.0
45-54	26.5	21.7
55-64	20.2	15.6
65+	17.2	17.0
<u>Race</u>		
White	76.4	79.4
Black	9.8	12.1
Other	13.8	8.5
<u>Education</u>		
High School and Below	64.0	65.1
Associates Degree	6.8	9.6
Bachelors Degree	20.4	16.6
Graduate Degree	8.8	8.8
<u>Party Identification</u>		
Republican	28.5	25.7
Democrat	35.5	34.0
Independent/Other	36.0	40.3
N	1000	2322

## Appendix 2: Randomization Checks

	Study 1		Study 2	
	Control	Bipartisan	Control	Bipartisan
<u>Gender</u>				
Female	50.9%	50.7%	51.6%	49.9%
Male	49.1	49.3	48.4	50.1
	$\chi^2(1) = .01, p=.94$		$\chi^2(1) = .30, p=.58$	
<u>Race</u>				
Nonwhite	22.5	24.7	25.5	21.5
White	77.5	75.3	74.5	78.5
	$\chi^2(1) = .66, p=.42$		$\chi^2(1) = 2.24, p=.13$	
<u>Education</u>				
Less HS	3.7	4.9	5.6	2.9
High School	39.0	36.3	36.7	38.6
Some College	21.9	22.3	21.3	23.0
Associates	7.8	5.8	6.1	7.5
Bachelors	19.4	21.4	20.9	19.8
Post-Graduate	8.3	9.3	9.4	8.1
	$\chi^2(5) = 3.54, p=.62$		$\chi^2(5) = 5.91, p=.32$	
<u>Party Identification</u>				
Strong Democrat	22.5	29.1	27.8	23.8
Weak Democrat	9.1	10.1	8.8	10.4
Leans Democrat	12.8	11.1	11.9	11.9
Independent	15.3	11.8	12.3	14.8
Leans Republican	10.7	10.5	9.4	11.9
Weak Republican	8.7	7.6	7.3	9.0
Strong Republican	21.0	19.8	22.5	18.2
	$\chi^2(6) = 7.87, p=.25$		$\chi^2(6) = 8.02, p=.24$	
<u>Age</u>				
	49.2	49.7	49.1	49.9
	$p=.61$		$p=.42$	
N	485	515	521	479

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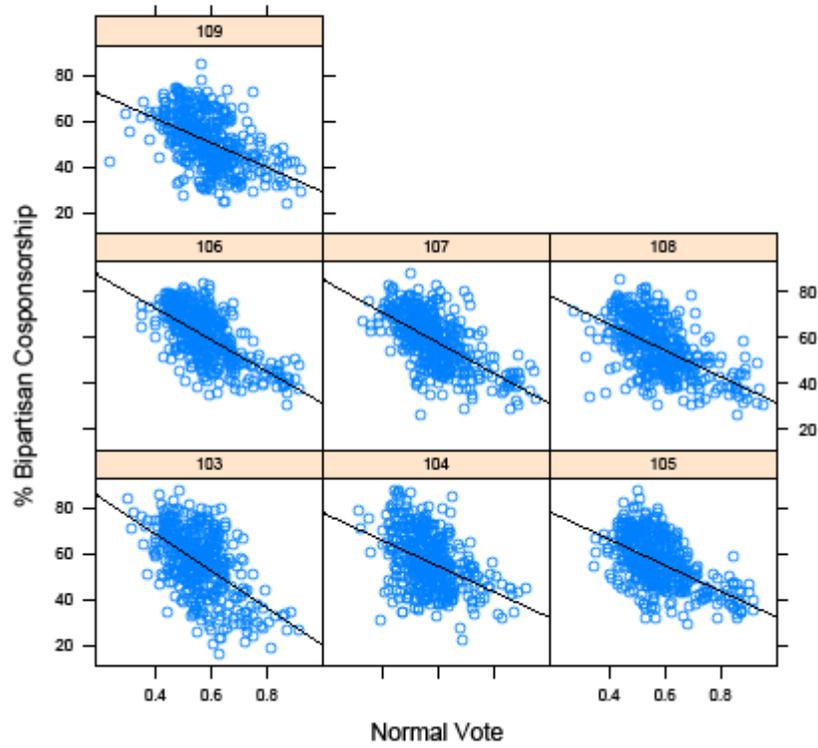
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**Figure 1: Regression of Bipartisanship on Normal Vote**

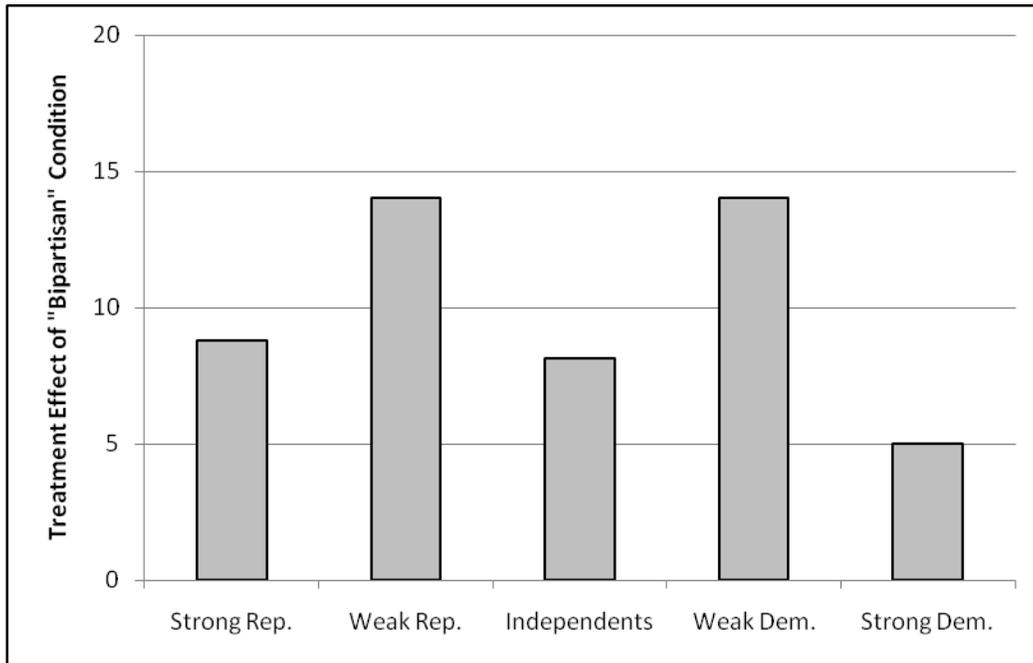


**Table 1: Regressions Predicting Percent of Cosponsored Bills that are Bipartisan by Member (93<sup>rd</sup>-109<sup>th</sup> Congresses)**

	<u>OLS</u>	<u>Quasi-Binomial</u>	<u>OLS</u>	<u>Quasi-Binomial</u>
Normal Presidential Vote	-.61 <sup>***</sup> (.02)	-.02 <sup>***</sup> (.001)	-.18 <sup>***</sup> (.03)	-.006 <sup>***</sup> (.001)
Majority Party Member	.26 (.38)	.07 <sup>***</sup> (.02)	-3.30 <sup>***</sup> (.37)	-.13 <sup>***</sup> (.02)
Female	-3.44 <sup>***</sup> (.56)	-.14 <sup>***</sup> (.02)	—	—
Age	.01 (.02)	.00 (.001)	—	—
Tenure	.24 <sup>***</sup> (.05)	.01 <sup>**</sup> (.002)	—	—
House Leadership	-12.40 <sup>***</sup> (1.72)	-.54 <sup>***</sup> (.08)	-2.05 (1.86)	-.12 (.08)
Divided Government	3.86 <sup>***</sup> (.47)	.19 <sup>***</sup> (.02)	3.13 <sup>***</sup> (.33)	.17 <sup>***</sup> (.01)
Majority Seat Share	.01 (.09)	.00 (.003)	-.13 <sup>+</sup> (.07)	-.002 (.003)
Presidential Election Year	2.45 <sup>**</sup> (.78)	.12 <sup>***</sup> (.03)	2.58 <sup>***</sup> (.47)	.13 <sup>***</sup> (.02)
Constant	87.00 <sup>***</sup> (5.36)	1.43 <sup>***</sup> (.21)	88.60 <sup>***</sup> (7.42)	1.30 <sup>*</sup> (.60)
Member FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
R <sup>2</sup>	.34		.83	

\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$  (two-tailed)

**Figure 2: Impact of Bipartisanship on Confidence in Congress by Partisanship (Study One)**



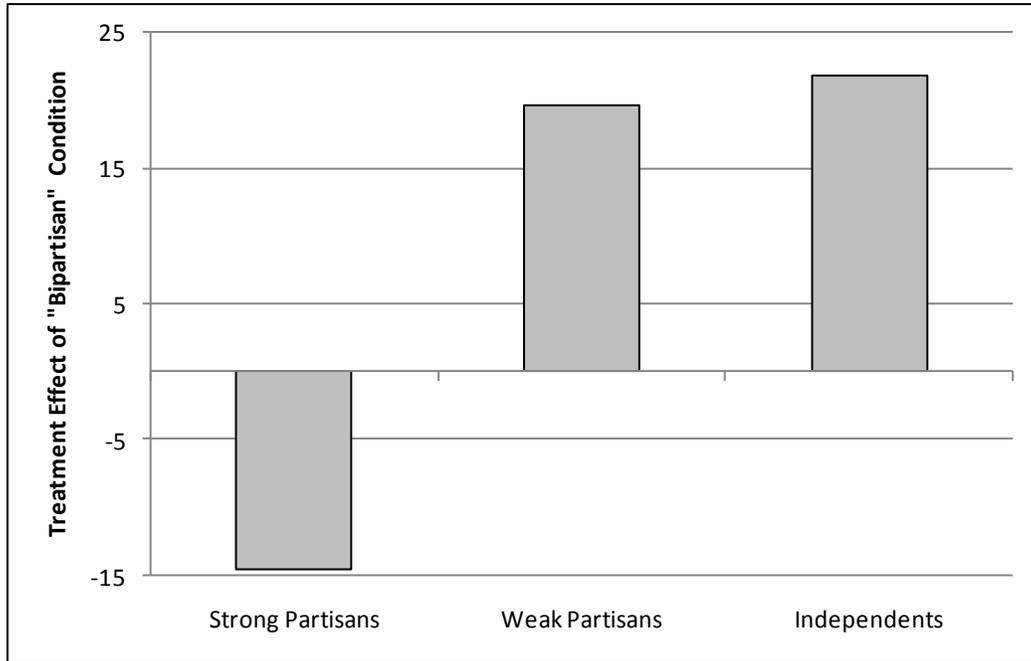
Note: Y-axis represents difference in percentage of respondents having at least “a moderate amount” of confidence in Congress between “bipartisan” condition and “partisan” condition.

**Table 2: OLS Regressions Predicting Confidence in Congress (Study One)**

$\beta_1$ : Bipartisan Version	.03* (.01)	.01 (.02)	.01 (.02)
$\beta_2$ : Strong Republican	-.10*** (.02)	-.10*** (.03)	—
$\beta_3$ : Weak Republican	-.02 (.03)	-.01 (.04)	—
$\beta_4$ : Weak Democrat	.09*** (.02)	.07+ (.04)	—
$\beta_5$ : Strong Democrat	.16*** (.02)	.13*** (.02)	—
$\beta_6$ : Bipartisan Version x Strong Republican	—	.02 (.04)	—
$\beta_7$ : Bipartisan Version x Weak Republican	—	.05 (.05)	—
$\beta_8$ : Bipartisan Version x Weak Democrat	—	.05 (.05)	—
$\beta_9$ : Bipartisan Version x Strong Democrat	—	.05 (.03)	—
Strong Partisans	—	—	.02 (.02)
Weak Partisans	—	—	.02 (.03)
Bipartisan Version x Strong Partisans	—	—	.05 (.03)
Bipartisan Version x Weak Partisans	—	—	.06 (.04)
$\gamma_1$ : Age	-.09* (.05)	-.09* (.05)	-.11** (.04)
$\gamma_2$ : Male	-.06*** (.01)	-.07*** (.01)	-.08*** (.01)
$\gamma_3$ : White	-.01 (.02)	-.01 (.02)	-.04* (.02)
$\gamma_4$ : Education	.01 (.02)	.01 (.02)	.03 (.02)
Constant	.38*** (.02)	.39*** (.03)	.43*** (.03)
N	987	987	987
R <sup>2</sup>	.20	.20	.07

\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$  (two-tailed)

**Figure 3: Impact of Bipartisanship on Approval of Members by Partisanship (Study Two)**



Note: Y-axis represents difference in percentage of respondents either “somewhat” or “strongly” approving of Cramer [LaTourette] between “bipartisan” condition and “partisan” condition.

**Table 3: OLS Regressions Predicting Approval of Members of Congress (Study Two)**

	All Respondents		Democrats		Republicans	
$\beta_1$ : Bipartisan Version	.02 (.01)	.11*** (.02)	.04* (.02)	.13*** (.03)	.00 (.02)	.08* (.03)
$\beta_2$ : Strong Partisans	.08*** (.02)	.17*** (.02)	.08*** (.02)	.17*** (.03)	.07** (.02)	.17*** (.03)
$\beta_3$ : Weak Partisans	.01 (.02)	.00 (.03)	.02 (.03)	.04 (.04)	-.01 (.03)	-.04 (.04)
$\beta_6$ : Bipartisan Version x Strong Partisans	—	-.18*** (.03)	—	-.17*** (.04)	—	-.20*** (.04)
$\beta_7$ : Bipartisan Version x Weak Partisans	—	.01 (.04)	—	-.05 (.05)	—	.08 (.06)
$\gamma_1$ : Age	-.03 (.04)	-.04 (.03)	-.05 (.04)	-.05 (.04)	.01 (.05)	.00 (.05)
$\gamma_2$ : Male	-.02 (.01)	-.01 (.01)	-.01 (.02)	-.01 (.02)	-.03 (.02)	-.02 (.02)
$\gamma_3$ : White	.01 (.02)	.01 (.02)	.02 (.02)	.02 (.02)	-.02 (.03)	-.01 (.03)
$\gamma_4$ : Education	.00 (.02)	-.01 (.02)	.00 (.03)	-.01 (.03)	.00 (.04)	.00 (.04)
Constant	.52*** (.02)	.49*** (.03)	.50*** (.03)	.47*** (.03)	.56*** (.04)	.52*** (.04)
N	965	965	528	528	437	437
R <sup>2</sup>	.04	.08	.05	.08	.03	.10

\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$  (two-tailed)

## Online Appendix

**Table A1: Ordered Logistic Regressions Predicting Confidence in Congress (Study One)**

$\beta_1$ : Bipartisan Version	.28* (.12)	.00 (.20)	.01 (.19)
$\beta_2$ : Strong Republican	-.82*** (.16)	-.91*** (.22)	—
$\beta_3$ : Weak Republican	.14 (.24)	-.13 (.34)	—
$\beta_4$ : Weak Democrat	.84*** (.23)	.52 (.34)	—
$\beta_5$ : Strong Democrat	1.50*** (.17)	1.26*** (.22)	—
$\beta_6$ : Bipartisan Version x Strong Republican	—	.21 (.33)	—
$\beta_7$ : Bipartisan Version x Weak Republican	—	.54 (.47)	—
$\beta_8$ : Bipartisan Version x Weak Democrat	—	.62 (.45)	—
$\beta_9$ : Bipartisan Version x Strong Democrat	—	.53 (.31)	—
Strong Partisans	—	—	.16 (.18)
Weak Partisans	—	—	.16 (.25)
Bipartisan Version x Strong Partisans	—	—	.42 (.26)
Bipartisan Version x Weak Partisans	—	—	.57 (.34)
$\gamma_1$ : Age	-.72* (.31)	-.72* (.31)	-.86** (.31)
$\gamma_2$ : Male	-.60*** (.12)	-.61*** (.12)	-.69*** (.12)
$\gamma_3$ : White	.02 (.15)	.02 (.15)	-.29 (.15)
$\gamma_4$ : Education	.02 (.21)	.02 (.21)	.26 (.20)
N	987	987	987
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.09	.09	.03

\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$  (two-tailed). Cutpoints available from authors upon request.

**Table A2: Ordered Logistic Regressions Predicting Approval of Members of Congress (Study Two)**

	All Respondents		Democrats		Republicans	
$\beta_1$ : Bipartisan Version	.24 (.13)	1.11 <sup>***</sup> (.22)	.42 <sup>*</sup> (.18)	1.34 <sup>***</sup> (.30)	.03 (.19)	.83 <sup>*</sup> (.33)
$\beta_2$ : Strong Partisans	.68 <sup>***</sup> (.15)	1.66 <sup>***</sup> (.21)	.69 <sup>**</sup> (.20)	1.64 <sup>***</sup> (.30)	.67 <sup>**</sup> (.22)	1.67 <sup>***</sup> (.31)
$\beta_3$ : Weak Partisans	-.01 (.19)	-.08 (.27)	.05 (.26)	.25 (.39)	-.08 (.28)	-.38 (.38)
$\beta_6$ : Bipartisan Version x Strong Partisans	—	-1.81 <sup>***</sup> (.29)	—	-1.71 <sup>***</sup> (.40)	—	-1.96 <sup>***</sup> (.44)
$\beta_7$ : Bipartisan Version x Weak Partisans	—	.09 (.37)	—	-.50 (.52)	—	.75 (.55)
$\gamma_1$ : Age	-.23 (.33)	-.34 (.33)	-.48 (.45)	-.60 (.46)	.15 (.49)	.10 (.49)
$\gamma_2$ : Male	-.13 (.13)	-.11 (.13)	-.11 (.18)	-.06 (.18)	-.20 (.19)	-.20 (.19)
$\gamma_3$ : White	.07 (.16)	.07 (.16)	.24 (.20)	.25 (.20)	-.27 (.26)	-.23 (.26)
$\gamma_4$ : Education	.04 (.22)	-.03 (.22)	.17 (.30)	.02 (.30)	-.04 (.34)	-.05 (.34)
N	965	965	528	528	437	437
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.02	.04	.02	.04	.02	.15

\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; + $p < .10$  (two-tailed). Cupoints available from authors upon request.