

**Party Polarization, Party Brands, and Responsible Party Government:
The Increasing Role of Congressional Performance in American Politics**

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ABSTRACT

A responsible two-party system requires that parties be judged on the basis of the “acts of all of its agents” in government (APSA 1950). I argue that increased polarization in Congress has brought us closer to that ideal. Citizens’ evaluations of each party’s capacity for governing are no longer simply a function of presidential politics, but now also of congressional politics. More unified party voting in Congress has made it easier for Americans to associate congressional performance with a single party—the majority party. As a result, congressional performance now has a significantly larger effect on public evaluations of the majority party’s brand than it did in the past. Because a party’s brand affects its fortunes across a variety of elections -- including presidential elections and state legislative elections -- congressional performance now plays a significantly larger role in all these elections than it did in the past.

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In Congress, the two parties are on almost daily trial... [P]arty campaign promises are kept or broken, and reputations...are made or lost.

-American Political Science Association 1950

For the authors of the 1950 American Political Science Association report, a key feature of a responsible two-party system is that citizens judge each party on the basis of “the acts of all its agents” in government, including not only the president but also the Congress (APSA 1950, 22). In practice, however, circumstances have hindered achievement of this ideal. From roughly the 1950s through the early 1980s, congressional parties were relatively undisciplined and weakly differentiated from one another on policy. Frequent crosscutting coalitions made it difficult for citizens to parse responsibility for congressional outcomes to one or the other party. Meanwhile, in contrast to the muddle of congressional politics, presidential politics were much more straightforward and intelligible to the average citizen. As a result, citizens’ overall impressions of what each party stood for and how competent it was—the “party brand”—were driven largely by presidential politics, not congressional politics.

Since the early 1980s, however, growing partisan polarization has changed the face of Congress. Congressional parties have become increasingly distinct from one another in their policy positions. This clarification in party policies is strikingly similar to the “party cohesion in Congress” that APSA called for in 1950 (21). The question this study examines is whether this increase in the clarity of congressional politics has made any difference in how citizens evaluate American political parties.

I argue that one of the consequences of partisan polarization in government is that citizens’ evaluations of each party’s capacity for governing are no longer simply a function of presidential politics, but now also of congressional politics. As partisan polarization has risen,

the job performance of Congress has come to play an increasingly important role in American politics. More unified party voting in Congress has made it easier for Americans to associate congressional performance with a single party—the majority party. As a result, congressional performance now has a significantly larger effect on evaluations of the majority party’s brand than it did in the past.

The argument that the performance of a party in control of Congress now affects that party’s overall brand is potentially quite important because the literature shows that a party’s brand reputation affects its electoral fortunes not only in congressional elections, but across a variety of races. In other words, Democratic and Republican candidates running for offices up and down the ballot may now be electorally rewarded or punished for what other members of their party have done in Congress.

Literature

Party brands play an important role in American politics. Political psychologists have found that the brand image a voter has of a party in turn affects the image that the voter has of any political candidate running under that party label—even in the presence of contradictory candidate-specific information (Conover and Feldman 1989; Rahn 1993), and even among the most sophisticated voters (Dancy and Sheagly N.d.). In this sense, a party’s brand image is an “information shortcut” that voters use to assess the representativeness and competence of candidates running for a variety of offices (Popkin 1991). Accordingly, public attitudes towards each party’s brand have been found to have a significant effect—independent from party identification—in American elections, including congressional elections (Abramowitz, Cover, Norpoth 1986; Pope and Woon 2006), presidential elections (Brewer 2008; Matthews and

Prothro 1966; Pope and Woon 2006; Trilling 1976), and state legislative elections (Butler and Powell 2012).

The brand images of parties vary over time in relation to what its officeholders do—particularly, what the party appears to stand for and how its performs in government (Brasher 2009; Brewer 2008; Popkin 1991; Pope and Woon 2009; Stonecash 2012). To date, empirical research in support of this idea has focused mainly on the presidency. For instance, Jacobson shows that President Clinton’s performance in office affected the Democratic Party’s brand during his administration (Jacobson 2009; 2012), President George W. Bush’s performance harmed the Republican Party’s brand during his term (Jacobson 2009; 2012), and President Obama’s performance has affected the Democratic Party’s brand during while he has been in office (Jacobson 2011; 2012). Similarly, Pope and Woon (2006) find effects of presidential popularity of Reagan, Clinton, and both Bushes on their respective parties’ brand reputation.

In theory, a party’s performance in Congress should also affect public attitudes towards its brand reputation. Certainly the authors of the APSA believed this to be the case, judging from their quote reprinted at the beginning of this study. But empirical research has been relatively more pessimistic about the possible role of congressional performance in shaping party brands. In particular, work written in the 1960s and 1970s is fairly unanimous that Americans of that era did not think about Congress in partisan terms. Emblematic of this viewpoint, Stokes and Miller declare that in Americans’ minds, “few judgments of legislative performance are associated with the parties” (1962, 545).¹

¹ See also Fenno 1978; Mayhew 1974. For an alternative perspective on that era’s voters, see Jones 2010a.

Yet an important change has occurred since this earlier work was written. Specifically, the parties in Congress have grown increasingly polarized along policy lines (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006). There are several reasons to suspect that this congressional polarization may have changed the way voters view Congress. First, from a theoretical perspective, the earlier literature explicitly speculates that a lack of party discipline may have been responsible for Americans' inability to conceptualize Congress in partisan terms. For example, the authors of the APSA report bemoan the lack of party cohesion in Congress, noting that a partisan basis for responsibility is hindered whenever "both parties are...confused by internal divisions" (1950, 17). Stokes and Miller attribute their findings to the fact that "the legislative parties speak not as two voices but as a cacophony of blocs and individuals" (1962, 545).

Second, more recent studies of congressional behavior have noted that members of Congress are now acting as if congressional actions affect party reputations. Sinclair reports that members of Congress "have now come to expect their party leaders [in Congress]...to protect and enhance the party's image" (2006, 265). Lee argues that in the Senate, members act "with an eye to how floor votes and debates will affect their party's overall image" (2009, 132). Lipinski finds that in newsletters to constituents, House members from the majority party "try to convince their constituents that their party is effectively running the institution," while members of the minority "send messages to damage the record of the majority [party]" (2004, 100). Cox and McCubbins (2005) highlight the agenda setting powers that majority party members have delegated to party leaders, and argue that the explanation for this arrangement lies with member concern over party brand reputation. However, none of these works demonstrates empirically that legislative performance actually does affect public attitudes regarding the party brand.

Third, existing empirical studies of congressional polarization suggest this phenomenon can have important effects on public opinion regarding the parties. Hetherington (2001) and Pope and Woon (2009) find that greater partisan polarization in Congress has increased both the extent to which citizens perceive differences between the parties and also the number of likes and dislikes they offer about the parties. But neither study looks specifically at how polarization may have increased the effects of public evaluations of congressional performance on political attitudes.

Jones (2010b) explicitly examines the interaction between polarization and congressional performance ratings and their effects in House races. Among other results, the study finds that in the period 1954-2006, greater polarization in Congress increased the positive effect of congressional performance ratings on the vote share received by majority party candidates.² In a general sense, this finding is consistent with a model in which congressional performance affects party brands. Alternatively, however, it could be that citizens are merely voting retrospectively within the domain of Congress, and not drawing larger conclusions about the parties generally. As such, the findings cannot be taken as definitive evidence of a link between congressional performance and party brands.

In sum, while there have not yet been any direct tests, the literature offers a variety of evidence consistent with the notion that as partisan polarization in Congress has increased, citizens are now using information from what goes on in Congress to form their opinions about the parties in general.

² This was true not only for those running as incumbents, but also for those challenging minority party incumbents (Jones 2010b, 335).

Theory

In this study, I define partisan polarization in Congress as the degree to which members of each congressional party express preferences that are similar to their co-partisans and distinct from those expressed by members in the other party. When partisan polarization in Congress is low, more actions of Congress have bipartisan support from members from both parties. In turn, the salient actions of Congress that citizens perceive are more likely to be characterized by support from members of both parties. In this case, congressional actions will not provide a clear signal about what each party stands for, or which party is responsible for legislative outcomes. As a result, citizens will find it difficult to use information from Congress as a basis for updating their evaluations of a party. A poor performance from Congress will not lead citizens to downgrade their evaluations of either party, nor will a good performance from Congress lead citizens to upgrade their evaluations of either party.

As the level of partisan polarization in Congress increases, however, the situation changes. With greater partisan polarization, members of the majority party vote more as a unified team, opposed by the minority party—a pattern that has become very familiar in recent years. The more this pattern becomes a regular occurrence, the more likely citizens are to perceive that the parties are distinct from each other, and that it is primarily the majority party that is responsible for the work product of Congress.³ As a result, with a relatively high level of polarization a citizen who negatively evaluates the job performance of Congress is more likely to

³ Jones and McDermott (2009) find that, on average, a majority of citizens know which party controls Congress, and that the true proportion is significantly higher than typical survey quizzes suggest.

see this as a failing of the majority party. In similar fashion, a citizen who positively evaluates Congress is more likely to give credit to the majority party.⁴

Citizens update their overall impression of a political party based on salient behavior by public officials from that party (Brasher 2009; Brewer 2008; Popkin 1994; Pope and Woon 2009; Stonecash 2012). As polarization makes people increasingly aware of congressional politics and the central role played by the majority party (Hetherington 2001; Pope and Woon 2009), it should also increase the extent to which citizens use congressional job performance to update their impressions of the majority party.⁵ Specifically, *the greater the level of partisan polarization in Congress, the more citizens' ratings of congressional job performance will affect their favorability towards the majority's party brand.*

On the other hand, partisan polarization in Congress will not matter much for the minority party brand. When polarization is low, congressional performance will have little effect on the minority party brand because citizens cannot identify either party as particularly responsible for congressional activity. When polarization is high, congressional performance will have little effect on the minority party brand because citizens identify mainly the majority party, not the minority party, as responsible for congressional activity. Overall, then, *greater levels of partisan polarization in Congress will not increase the extent to which citizens' ratings of congressional job performance affect their favorability towards the minority's party brand.*

⁴ During periods in which each party controls one chamber of Congress (e.g., 1981-1986, 2001-2002) the theory does not produce a clear prediction. See the concluding section for additional discussion.

⁵ I do not argue that congressional politics is now as salient or as influential as presidential politics, only that with greater polarization it matters more what parties do in both branches, not just the White House.

A party's brand image affects the willingness of citizens to vote for candidates from that party (Abramowitz, Cover, Norpoth 1986; Brewer 2008; Butler and Powell 2012; Mathews and Prothro 1966; Pope and Woon 2006; Trilling 1976). When the Democratic brand is particularly poor, Democratic candidates will find themselves at an electoral disadvantage up and down the ballot. When the Republican brand is particularly poor, Republican candidates will be similarly disadvantaged. Given that party brands affect elections, any factor that increasingly affects party brands should also increasingly affect elections. Specifically, if polarization causes an increased effect of congressional performance on a party's brand, it could also lead to an increased effect of congressional performance in elections.

Just as poor presidential performance often harms the electoral prospects for all candidates from the president's party—including both federal races (e.g., Tufte 1975) and local races (e.g., Simon, Ostrom, and Marra 1991)—I argue that poor congressional performance can negatively affect all candidates from the majority party (not just those running for Congress). In both cases, one logical reason is party brands. A candidate running under a given party label is at a greater disadvantage whenever the performance of that party in office leads voters to view that party label in a negative light. While this is not a new idea in reference to presidential performance, it remains an unexplored idea in regard to congressional performance.

Since party brands have been shown to be relevant in both high-salience national races, such as presidential elections (Brewer 2008; Mathews and Prothro 1966; Pope and Woon 2006; Trilling 1976), and in low-salience local races, such as state legislative elections (Butler and Powell 2012), I hypothesize that congressional performance will be relevant in such races, conditional on polarization. Specifically, *the greater the level of partisan polarization in Congress, the more that citizens' ratings of congressional job performance will affect the*

majority party's electoral prospects in presidential elections. And, the greater the level of partisan polarization in Congress, the more that citizens' ratings of congressional job performance will affect the majority party's prospects in state legislative elections.

In sum, this project's argument consists of two sets of hypotheses. First, partisan polarization in Congress increases the degree to which congressional performance affects citizens' favorability towards the majority party's brand. Second, partisan polarization increases the degree to which congressional job performance affects partisan voting across a variety of elections. Each set of hypotheses will be analyzed in turn.

Analyzing Effects on Party Brands

In order to analyze how individuals' evaluations of congressional performance affect their favorability towards each party brand, it is necessary to identify surveys that ask about both of these concepts in the same questionnaire. American National Election Studies (ANES) surveys are the earliest to do so. Beginning in 1980 and continuing through the most recent time series survey in 2008, ANES has asked the standard congressional performance question, "Do you approve or disapprove of the way the U.S. Congress has been handling its job?" In these same surveys, I measure party brand favorability using questions that ask respondents to rate "the Democratic Party" and "the Republican Party" on 0 to 100 point favorability scales.⁶

The central question is how partisan polarization in Congress has or has not changed the effect of congressional performance evaluations on party brand favorability. To measure partisan polarization, I calculate the (bicameral) average percentage of members who support their own party and oppose the other party on party votes during the Congress preceding each ANES

⁶ Because the theory has no clear prediction for years when majority control of Congress is split by chamber, these years are removed from all analyses.

survey.⁷ I center this variable at its mean and interact it with the variable for congressional performance. This formulation means that the baseline effect of the congressional performance variable reflects its impact when polarization is at an average level. As controls, the model includes respondents' presidential performance evaluations, their party identification, and fixed effects for each year (not shown).

[table 1 about here]

In table 1, I regress majority party brand favorability and minority party brand favorability on the independent variables. The results provide strong support for this study's hypotheses regarding party brands. First, the findings show that when citizens update their impressions of each party, they not only take into account their longstanding party identification and their evaluation of recent presidential performance, they also factor in recent congressional performance. The congressional performance variable is statistically significant in both models, but on average its effect is nearly three times as large on the majority brand as on the minority party brand. This differential is consistent with the argument that voters perceive the majority party as primarily responsible for what goes on in Congress.

Second, the results show that partisan polarization in Congress conditions the effect of congressional performance, particularly for the majority party brand. The interaction between polarization and congressional approval is positive and significant in the majority party model, indicating that greater polarization has increased the effect that congressional performance has

⁷ Party votes are votes on which a majority of Democrats oppose a majority of Republicans. The polarization measure used here is highly correlated with McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal's (2006) standard measure of party polarization averaged across chambers ($r = .86$). Results are substantively similar regardless of which measure is used.

on evaluations of the majority party. The interaction term in the minority party model is neither substantively nor statistically significant, indicating that, as expected, greater polarization has not increased the effect that congressional performance has on evaluations of the minority party.

[figure 1 about here]

The substantive meaning of these findings is graphically presented in figure 1, where the vertical scale represents estimated effect of congressional performance (approving versus disapproving) on party favorability, and the horizontal scale represents range of partisan polarization in the data. Solid lines plot the conditional effect for the majority party (black) and for the minority party (grey). Dashed lines represent confidence intervals. The figure shows that at the lowest level of polarization in the data, approving of congressional performance (as opposed to disapproving) increases a person's thermometer rating of the majority party by 4.9 points. But at the highest levels of polarization in the data—those experienced in recent years—the effect of congressional performance has nearly doubled to 9.3 points. In contrast, the effect of congressional performance on ratings of the minority party has hovered at around 2.5 points, without any discernible increase and perhaps a slight decrease. Thus with greater polarization, citizen disapproval of Congress has become disproportionately problematic for the majority party's brand as opposed to the minority party's brand.

To put in perspective the size of the effect of congressional performance on the majority party brand, one can compare it to the effect of presidential performance. First, consider unified government. The model estimates that when the president is from the same party as the congressional majority, approving of the president (as opposed to disapproving) increases a citizen's thermometer rating of the majority party by 20.5 points. So, with high polarization, the effect of congressional performance is almost half as important as presidential performance (9.3

vs. 20.5). Under divided government, the relative impact of congressional performance on the majority party brand is even stronger. When the president is from the opposite party as the majority party, approving of the president decreases a citizen's ratings of the majority party by only 6.5 points. So, with high polarization, the effect of congressional performance is actually larger than the effect of presidential performance (9.3 vs. 6.5).

Overall, these data are consistent the hypothesis that greater clarity of party differences in Congress leads citizens to increasingly use congressional performance as a factor when forming their attitudes towards the majority party. This interpretation of the results has an intuitive appeal because it fits with the theoretic framework in which citizens use actual evidence from the real world (congressional job performance) to inform their general attitudes towards a related group (majority party). Skeptics, however, might wonder about an alternative interpretation of the results in which citizens are perhaps using their favorability towards a party to form their evaluation of congressional job performance. While the alternative causal interpretation of the data is more difficult to defend from a theoretical perspective,⁸ it cannot be ruled out empirically with the cross-sectional survey data used in table 1.

To demonstrate empirically that a causal⁹ arrow runs from congressional performance to party favorability, I conduct a simple test using data from an ANES panel survey of respondents interviewed in the fall of 1993 and again in the fall of 1994. Because time order is important for

⁸ This alternative interpretation is less intuitively appealing because it begs the question of where party favorability comes from. The literature suggests it comes mainly from party identification and presidential performance. But in the data, the correlation between congressional performance and party favorability exists independently of party identification and presidential performance (controlled for in the model).

⁹ I use this term only in the limited, "time-order" sense, as with Granger causality.

demonstrating causality, I test whether a citizen's evaluation of congressional performance in the fall of 1993 affects her favorability towards the congressional majority party in 1994. To ensure that any effect of the predictors are on *future* attitudes (not simply continuations of cross-sectional effects from 1993), the model follows the standard practice of controlling for a citizen's initial favorability towards the majority party. Also, as in table 1, the model controls for party identification and presidential performance.

[table 2 about here]

When this panel model is estimated in table 2, the coefficient for the congressional performance variable is still positive and significant. This result confirms that present evaluations of Congress do affect future favorability towards the majority party.¹⁰ The panel data suggest that the results in table 1 are not an artifact of reverse causality, and are therefore properly interpreted as providing strong support for this study's hypothesis regarding party brands.

Analyzing Implications for Elections

A second set of hypotheses posits that party polarization also increases the effect of congressional performance on the majority party's electoral fortunes across a variety of contests. In this section I conduct two simple analyses looking for evidence of such effects in, respectively, presidential elections and state legislative elections.

¹⁰ Using these same data, an additional test (not shown here) demonstrates that the reverse is not true: present favorability towards the majority party has no significant effect on future evaluations of congressional performance.

Presidential Elections

For the analysis of effects of congressional performance on presidential elections, the dependent variable is a vote for or against the presidential candidate from the party that has a majority of seats in the Congress. Congressional performance and party polarization in Congress are measured as in the previous section.¹¹ The model controls for other common influences on presidential voting, including presidential performance, the economy, and partisanship. Each of these variables is coded such that higher values are expected to lead to a positive response in the dependent variable.¹² Since this recoding is based on whether the party of Congress and the president match, the model necessarily includes a control for this factor as well. Year fixed effects are also included in the model, but not shown in the results.

[table 3 about here]

Table 3 presents the results of the logistic regression. As hypothesized, the interaction between congressional performance and polarization is positive and significant. This finding supports the idea that as polarization in Congress increases, congressional performance has an increasingly larger effect on who Americans vote for in presidential elections. Not surprisingly, the relative size of the coefficients suggests that the effect of congressional performance is always much smaller than the effect of presidential performance. However, this disparity has been shrinking as polarization has increased. With low polarization in Congress, the estimated

¹¹ Split-control Congresses are removed from the analysis.

¹² Since the original variables are thought to boost the legislative fortunes of the president's party and the dependent variable is coded with reference to Congress, both of these controls are multiplied by 1 whenever the president's party is the same as the congressional majority and -1 when it is the opposite party.

coefficient for congressional performance is less than one-tenth as large as for presidential performance. But with high levels of polarization, the coefficient is one-quarter the size of that of presidential performance.

[figure 2 about here]

Figure 2 translates these logistic regression coefficients into specific probabilities. The vertical axis represents the probability of voting for a presidential candidate from the same party as the majority in Congress. The horizontal axis displays the range of congressional polarization in the data. The top line shows the result of approving of the job performance of Congress, while the bottom line shows the result of disapproving (dashed line represent confidence intervals). All other variables are held constant at their mean. The figure shows that with low polarization in Congress, the difference between approving and disapproving of Congress's performance is estimated to be only about 7 points (.52 versus .46), and is not clearly distinguishable from zero. In this sense, earlier works downplaying the importance of Congressional performance were perhaps correct for the time period in which they were written. But with high polarization in Congress, evaluations of Congress have a significant and substantial 18 point effect (.61 versus .42). All else being equal, approvers of Congress are likely (probability > .5) to vote for a presidential candidate from the party that controls Congress, while disapprovers of Congress are unlikely (probability < .5) to vote for that same candidate.

State Legislative Elections

In this section, I test whether partisan polarization in Congress increases the relationship between congressional job performance and the majority party's prospects in state legislative elections. Neither the ANES nor any other survey organization has systematically collected survey data on voting in state legislative elections over an extended time period. Therefore, this

analysis follows the lead of other studies in this area and focuses on partisan seat change in state legislatures (e.g., Simon, Ostrom, and Marra 1991; Rogers 2012). Specifically, I measure the percentage seat gain in each state's lower chamber by the party that holds the majority in Congress.¹³ The data include state-level election results over time from 41 states for which appropriate data were available.¹⁴

I measure the public's evaluation of congressional performance using Stimson's (1999) algorithm to combine the results from different survey questions on this topic into a single, quarterly measure that is comparable over time. To ensure that congressional performance ratings are driving voting outcomes and not the other way around, I use the rating from the third quarter prior to each election. Overall, there are twenty-four election years for which ratings of Congress could be found in the quarter prior to the election. Four of these years are omitted from the analysis because majority control of Congress was divided by chamber, leaving a total of

¹³ While using aggregated data as opposed to individual-level data carries a risk of ecological fallacy, in this case there are also some important advantages. First, using actual election results avoids biases associated with self-reported voting behavior in surveys. Second, using actual election results focuses attention on political outcomes that are more tangible than an individual's vote choice—in this case, actual seat change. Third, while the ANES time-series data on congressional approval only go back to 1980, using aggregate data permits the analysis to extend across a longer time horizon, thereby including an even wider range of data for the key polarization variable.

¹⁴ Specific reasons for removal are: elections held in odd-numbered years (LA, MS, NJ, VA), four-year terms instead of two (AL, LA, MD, MS, ND), states with non-partisan elections (MN, NE), and non-state status for portions of the period of study (AL, HI).

twenty election years between 1954 and 2010.¹⁵ This variable is interacted with the same polarization variable used throughout this study.

In order to guard against the possibility that any observed effects of congressional performance are spurious, the model controls for other factors that have been found to affect state legislative outcomes (e.g., Chubb 1988; Simon, Ostrom, and Marra 1991; Rogers 2012). Presidential performance is measured using the average Gallup approval rating of the president in the third quarter of the election year. The state of the national economy is measured as the percentage change in real per capita disposable income over the year prior to the third quarter of the election year.¹⁶ Just as with the analysis of presidential elections, both variables are recoded so that higher values are expected to increase the dependent variable. Because this recoding is based on whether the party of Congress and the president match, the model necessarily includes a control for this factor as well. As a control for seat exposure, I include a variable measuring the previous seat change in the legislature. Since the data include repeated measures of the same units over time, I employ hierarchical linear modeling (also called multilevel modeling) with a first-order autoregressive covariance structure (Peugh and Enders 2005).¹⁷

[table 4 about here]

¹⁵ Third quarter data are unavailable for 1956, 1960, 1962, 1966, 1972.

¹⁶ Rogers (2012) finds that after controlling for the national economy, variation in economic conditions across states has no effects on legislative seat change.

¹⁷ Data are weighted to account for the fact that there are more seats in some states than in others.

Allowing the intercept to vary across states offered no significant improvement in the model. Results are substantively similar if the analysis is conducted using ordinary least squares regression with a lagged dependent variable and robust standard errors.

Table 4 presents the results. As expected, the interaction between congressional performance and polarization is positive and statistically significant. With higher party polarization in Congress, Congress's performance ratings have an increasingly positive effect on the congressional majority party's fortunes in state legislative elections across the country. In fact, the average effect of congressional performance appears larger than that of presidential performance when it comes to state legislative races. This finding is consistent with other research showing that citizens' attitudes towards their state legislature are more closely associated with their attitudes toward the national legislature than with the president (Cook 1979).

[figure 3 about here]

Figure 3 provides a graphical representation of the results. The vertical axis represents the effect of a one point increase in approval of Congress on the percentage of state legislative seats gained in a state by the party in control of Congress. The horizontal axis represents the range of congressional polarization in the data. The solid, dark line plots the estimated effect of congressional performance at each level of polarization (dashed lines are confidence intervals). The left side of the figure shows that, just as with presidential elections, the effect of congressional performance is insubstantial and statistically insignificant with low levels of polarization typical of the earlier era in American politics. But as party polarization in Congress increases, the impact of congressional performance on state legislative elections grows quite strong. At polarization's peak, a 10-point increase in Congress's job performance rating (about one standard deviation) produces an estimated 4.5 percentage point increase in the share of a state's lower chamber seats held by the party in control of Congress.

Conclusion: A More Responsible Two-Party System

Contemporary observers often bemoan the extreme partisanship that has gripped Congress in recent years. However, rancor and gridlock are not the only byproducts of this phenomenon. The authors of the 1950 APSA report suggested that greater party distinctiveness in the legislative branch would help make elections a referendum on the actions of *all* a party's agents in government, not just a verdict on the president (or a purely candidate-centered affair). More than six decades after that report, this study's findings are a testament to the authors' foresight.

While previous research perceived no significant role for Congress in the formation of attitudes towards parties, this study demonstrates that what goes on inside chambers of Congress affects not only our laws, but also our views of the parties. As parties in Congress have grown more distinct from each other, the performance of Congress has increasingly redounded to the brand favorability of the majority party. When the public likes how Congress is performing under the leadership of the majority party, this can help boost opinions of that party generally. But when the public does not approve of how Congress is performing, can harm opinions of that party.

Second, this study finds an increased role played by congressional performance in American elections. We have known for some time that presidential performance affects electoral outcomes in other races besides just the presidency. Recent research has found that with greater partisan polarization in Congress, congressional performance plays an increased role in House elections. But without any empirical evidence of a connection to party brands, there was little thought to look for effects of congressional performance in elections outside of Congress. This study provides the first evidence that congressional performance can affect elections both

up the ballot and down the ballot. In presidential races and in state legislative races, the pattern is the same as found for House races: with greater polarization, congressional performance ratings have a positive effect on the electoral prospects of candidates from the party that controls of Congress. The consistency of the pattern is impressive given the substantial differences in the types of races analyzed (local and national; executive and legislative; high salience and low salience) and in the types of data used in the analyses (votes and seats; survey data and official results). Thus although the limited tests presented here are not meant to be definitive on this question, the consistency of the results strongly suggests that what is going on is not simply an anomaly or an artifact, but rather a real, substantive effect.

While the findings address some longstanding questions from the APSA report and other work on responsible party government in America, they also raise new questions for future research. Regarding the effects of congressional performance, it is not clear exactly how Congresses with divided party control—such as those elected in 2010 and 2012—can or should be incorporated into the theory. Is each party’s brand affected independently by the performance of the chamber it controls? Does the public focus on the chamber controlled by the party opposing the president? Or does the public simply throw up its hands? In an era when divided chamber control seems more common than ever, these questions take on even greater importance.

Regarding party brands, if these brands are not merely a function of the performance of presidents, as previously thought, but are also affected by the performance of Congress, this raises the question of which *other* actors might shape them. For example, the battle for the Republican Party’s presidential nomination in 2012 featured several, well-publicized, raucous debates in which the candidates often seemed to be trying to outdo each other in proving how

extremely conservative they were. What are the implications if the average voter uses such cues to update her impressions of the party's brand? This study suggests that the actions of these candidates—who are likely more salient than the abstract institution of Congress is—may carry important electoral implications for their fellow party members running in other races around the country.

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Table 1:

Effect of Congressional Performance on Party Brand Favorability

	Majority Party Favorability		Minority Party Favorability	
	Coefficient	(S.E.)	Coefficient	(S.E.)
Party identification	10.62**	(0.18)	8.84**	(0.18)
President performance (same party as DV)	10.23**	(0.31)	9.08**	(0.21)
President performance (opposite party as DV)	-3.26**	(0.20)	-6.29**	(0.31)
Polarization	-0.13	(0.23)	-0.33	(0.24)
Congress performance	3.54**	(0.17)	1.27**	(0.18)
Congress performance X polarization	0.14**	(0.04)	-0.02	(0.04)
Constant	56.51	(1.29)	55.45	(1.30)
Adjusted R-square	35.4%		35.2%	
Number of cases	16613		16644	

Note: Entries are regression coefficients (standard errors in parentheses). Year fixed effects are included in the model but not shown here. *p<.05, **p<.005 (one-tailed tests)

Table 2:

Testing for Causal Direction with Panel Data from 1993-1994

	Majority Party Favorability in 1994	
	Coefficient	(S.E.)
Majority party favorability ₁₉₉₃	0.45**	(0.04)
Party identification compatibility ₁₉₉₃	6.52**	(0.82)
President performance ₁₉₉₃	3.97**	(0.74)
Congress performance₁₉₉₃	1.76**	(0.66)
Constant	28.00	(2.07)
Adjusted R-square	58.0%	
Number of cases	614	

Note: Entries are regression coefficients (standard errors in parentheses).

*p<.05, **p<.005 (one-tailed tests)

Table 3:

Effect of Congressional Performance on Voting for President

	Coefficient	(S.E.)
President performance	1.530**	(0.043)
Economy	0.597**	(0.059)
Congress and president of same party	-0.135	(0.108)
Party identification	1.404**	(0.040)
Polarization	0.006	(0.009)
Congress performance	0.244**	(0.046)
Congress performance X polarization	0.015*	(0.008)
Constant	0.234	(0.078)
Nagelkerke R ²	69.0%	
Number of cases	7609	

Note: Entries are logistic regression coefficients (standard errors in parentheses).

Year fixed effects are included in the model but not shown here.

*p<.05, **p<.005 (one-tailed tests)

Table 4:

Effect of Congressional Performance on Partisan Seat Change in State Legislatures

	Coefficient	(S.E.)
President performance	0.059*	(0.023)
Economy	1.598**	(0.170)
Congress and president of same party	-4.157**	(0.512)
Seat exposure	-0.011	(0.009)
Polarization	-0.039	(0.056)
Congress performance	0.192**	(0.041)
Congress performance X polarization	0.024**	(0.007)
Constant	2.157**	(0.420)
Akaike's Information Criterion	-1882.637	
Number of cases	820	

Note: Entries are linear multilevel modeling coefficients (standard errors in parentheses).

*p<.05, **p<.005 (one-tailed tests)

Figure 1:

Polarization and the Effect of Congressional Performance on Party Brand Favorability

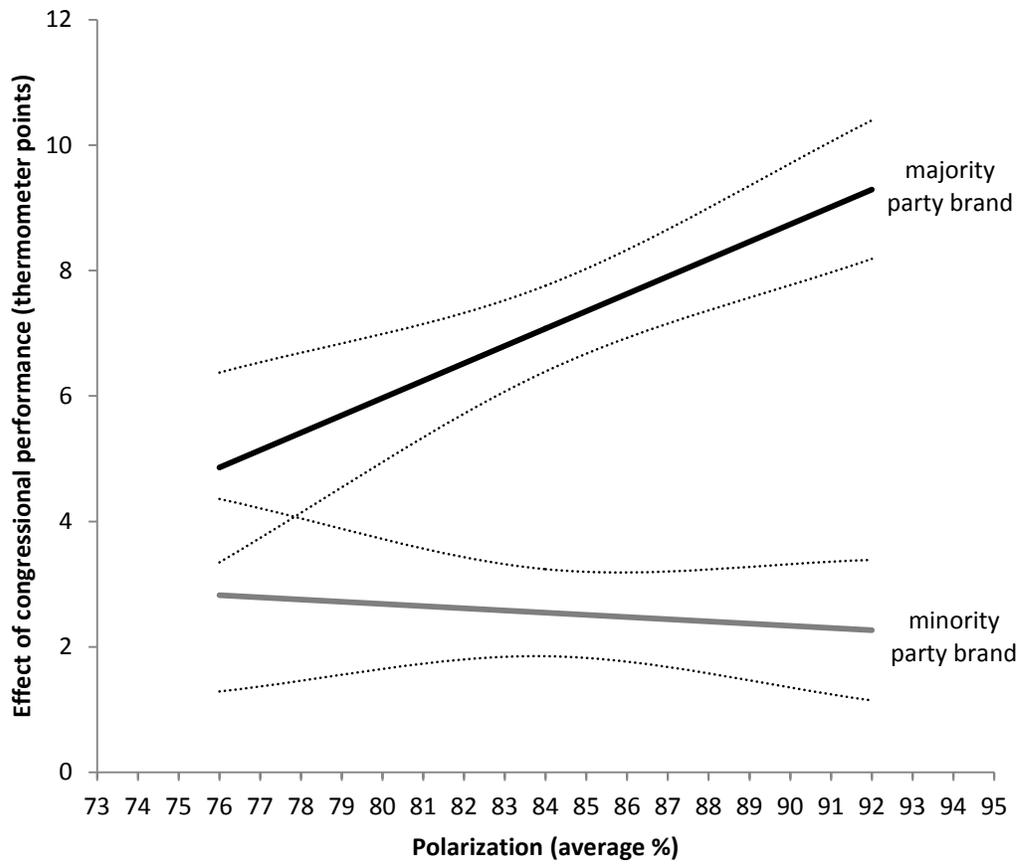


Figure 2:

Polarization and the Effect of Congressional Performance on Voting for President

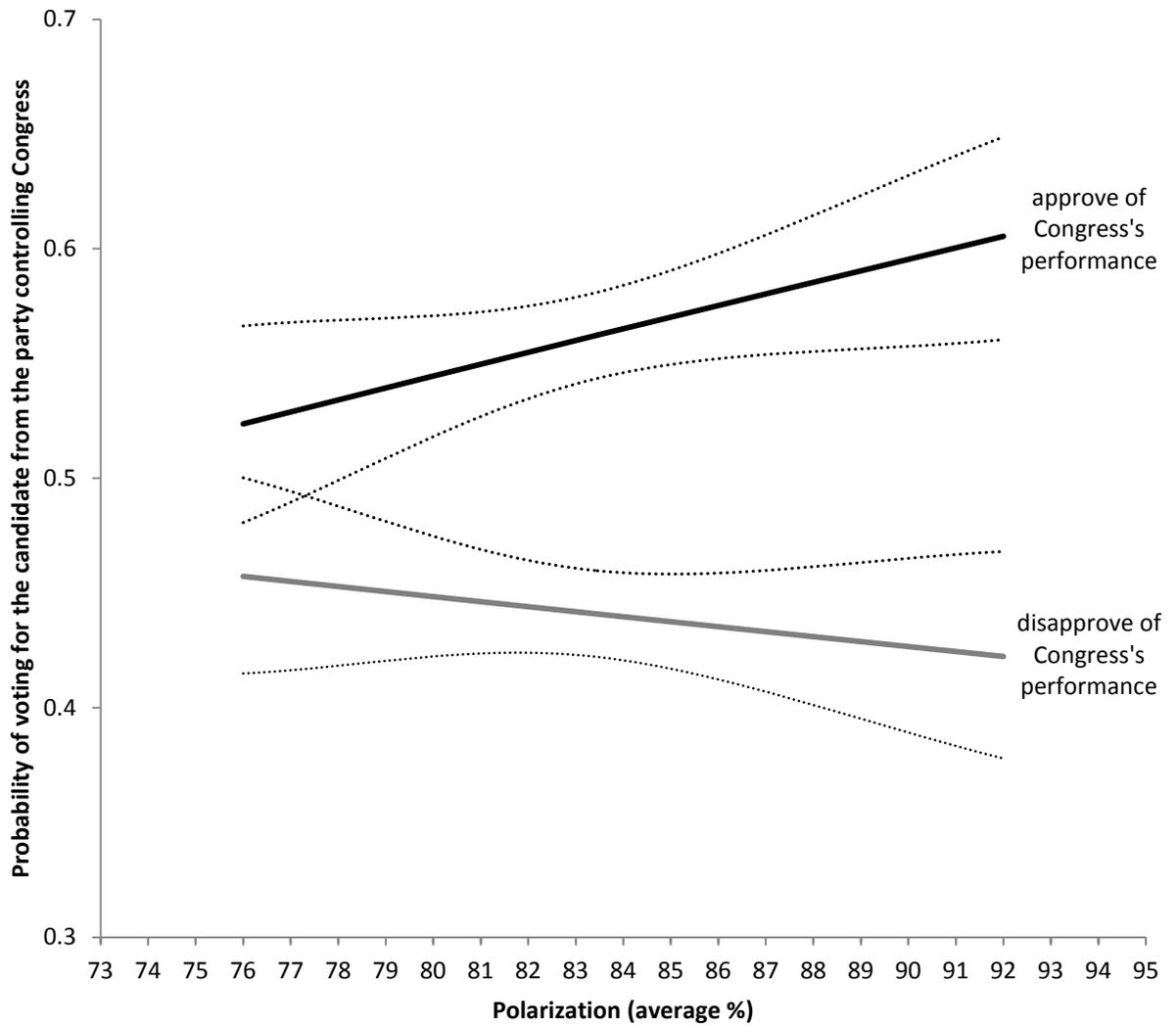
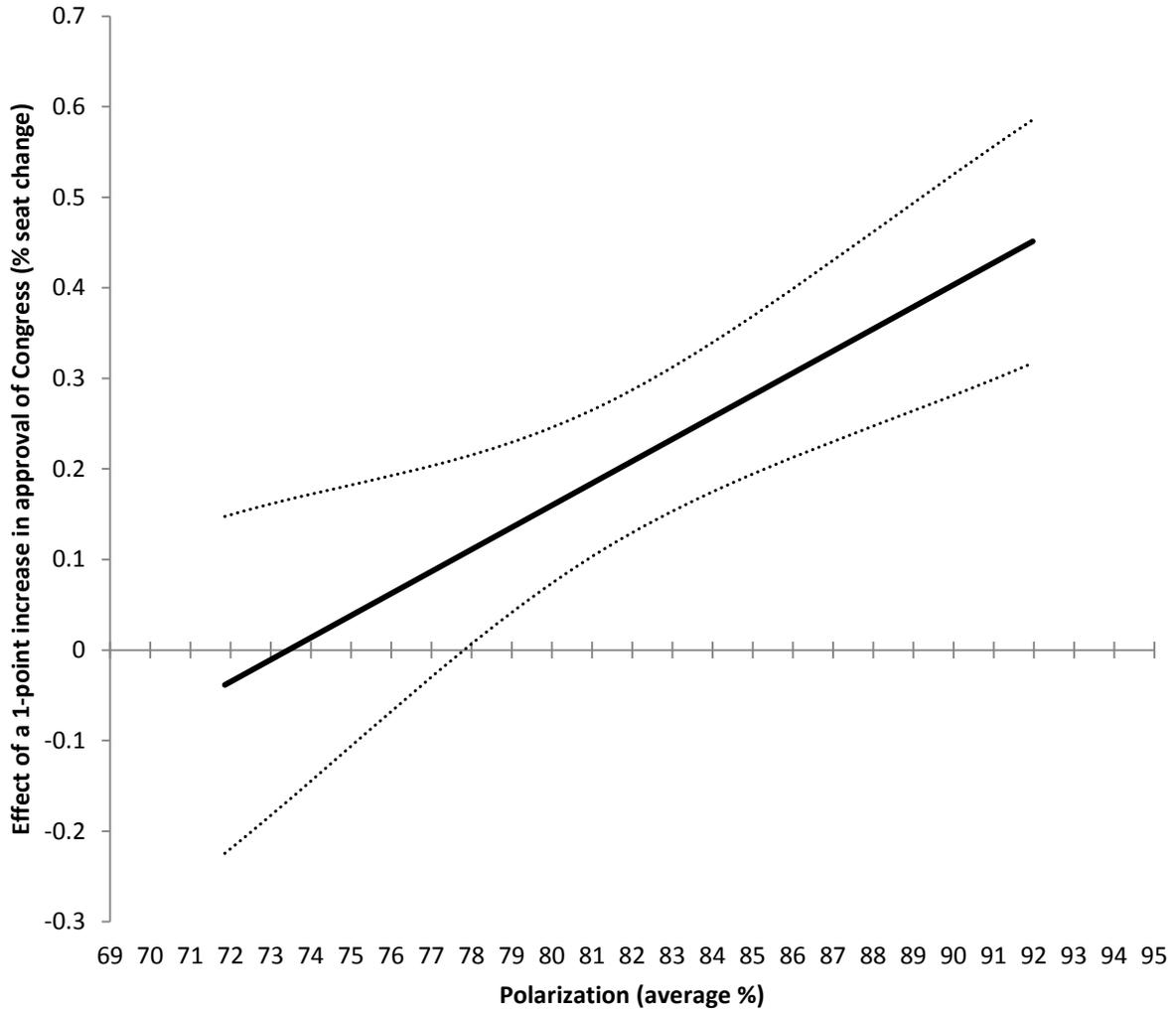


Figure 3:

Polarization and the Effect of Congressional Performance on Partisan Seat Change in State Legislatures



These factors, along with increased party competition for the presidency and control of Congress, have contributed to the heightened level of conflict (Layman et al. 2006; Lee 2015). Some literature contends that increased ideological polarization has occurred equally across both parties, based on such factors as more partisan candidates, increased power of party leaders, greater influence of activists in party affairs, and lack of attentiveness or indifference by uninformed voters (Cox and McCubbins 2005; Layman et al. 2006). These factors, along with increased party competition for the presidency and control of Congress, have contributed to the heightened level of conflict (Layman et al. 2006; Lee 2015). Some literature contends that increased ideological polarization... Nonetheless, the system of party government prevails and flourishes in America: one party is usually in control of government at the Federal, state, or local level and often of both its executive and legislative branches. In modern national states where limited, constitutional government is practiced, there is either similar control by one party or control by a coalition of parties, which is simply an alternative model of party government. In both cases the central idea of party government is represented: control and direction of the government through the agency of political parties. The role of our political parties, then, is to help our team of governments pull together in a dynamic equilibrium by giving them common purposes and shared programs in the public interest. Political parties in the US serve as a mechanism to divide the US population and keep them from challenging the power of the plutarchy. There are two parties by design because the president is elected by plurality. Election by plurality causes any 3rd party to become a spoiler making it nearly impossible for the 3rd party to be successful. For well over 165 years, political parties have played a key role in our representative government. They are the best stage I know for broad economic, political, and social change. It's hard for me to imagine a democracy without them. Distinct, cohesive political parties were critical for any well-functioning democracy. First, distinct parties offer voters clear policy choices at election time. Unified government occurs when the same party controls the executive and the legislature entirely. Since 1969, the U.S. electorate has sent the president a Congress of his own party in only seven of twenty-three congressional elections, and during George W. Bush's first administration, the Republican majority was so narrow that a combination of resignations and defections gave the Democrats control before the next election could be held. A final possible cause for polarization is the increasing sophistication of gerrymandering, or the manipulation of legislative districts in an attempt to favor a particular candidate.