

The Partisanship of Bipartisanship: How Representatives Use Bipartisan Assertions to Cultivate Support

Forthcoming at Political Behavior

Sean J. Westwood *

Abstract

How do representatives reconcile public expectations of bipartisan lawmaking with the lack of compromise in recent congresses? Representatives—constrained by the actual content of legislation—position partisan legislation to increase public support. Because constituents reward this behavior, representatives reap the rewards associated with bipartisanship through rhetoric alone, providing little incentive to engage in actual substantive compromise. With 434,266 floor speeches I show that bipartisanship is evoked uniformly across the ideological spectrum and that there is no relationship between a legislator’s propensity for bipartisan rhetoric and her propensity for bipartisan action. Instead marginal legislators who need to secure support from opposition voters are most likely to make bipartisan appeals. With experiments I show that bipartisan appeals increase support and decrease perceived ideological extremity even for overtly partisan legislation with trivial opposition support. Bipartisan assertions influence public opinion far more than actual evidence of opposition support.¹

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¹Replication data and scripts are available at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/2>

While the electorate claims to strongly support moderate, bipartisan lawmaking (Pew 2012, 2007), it elects increasingly ideologically polarized representatives (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2006; Levendusky 2009; Theriault 2008; Fiorina and Levendusky 2006). How can partisan legislators garner and maintain support for partisan legislation when there is broad public desire for bipartisanship (Pew 2012, 2007) and evidence showing overly partisan representatives pay an electoral cost (Koger and Lebo 2017)? In this paper I show that representatives generate an impression of bipartisanship with rhetoric and that constituents are responsive to claims of bipartisanship even when minority party support is minimal.

With a new collection of 434,266 floor speeches made between 1994 and 2018, I show that legislators do not constrain bipartisan claims to bills with meaningful support from both parties. Indeed, matching floor discussion with final floor votes from the 24 years in my data shows that most bipartisan posturing happens for bills that gain *trivial minority support*. Representatives, especially marginal representatives worried about swing voters, cultivate impressions of moderate policy-making by classifying a large percentage of their votes and actions as bipartisan. Consequently, these representatives are able to give voters the impression they are bipartisan while simultaneously voting to advance their party's agenda.

Representatives focus attention on bipartisanship because it functions as “an electoral strategy that broaden[s] their appeal to voters outside of their party” (Trubowitz and Mellow 2005, p. 433). I show that representatives, aware of the electoral appeal of bipartisanship, maximize possible returns by tailoring the information they disseminate to voters to present their actions as broadly bipartisan regardless of actual bipartisan agreement or support. Although the term “bipartisan” has strong positive associations, it lacks a clear definition. Representatives exploit this definitional ambiguity to present their work as bipartisan, knowing that a majority of constituents view the concept positively and associate it with a normatively good aspect of democratic governance.

With a series of experiments, I show how bipartisan assertions effectively change constituent attitudes toward legislation, increasing support and decreasing perceived ideological extremity. Broad coalitions of representatives and ideologically moderate legislation are both factual indi-

cations of bipartisanship. However, voters require neither when evaluating claims of bipartisan action. Indeed, I show that constituents are responsive to assertions that legislation is bipartisan even when the legislation is overtly partisan in purpose. Thus, members of Congress can cultivate impressions of moderate policy-making with minimal effort and without defining or justifying what bipartisanship actually means. In a second study I demonstrate that when evaluating passed legislation, constituents are far more responsive to the label “bipartisan” than to the actual number of votes pulled from across the aisle. Adding a single representative from the opposition to a legislative coalition and declaring bipartisan action creates a larger increase in public support than does buying and assembling a large coalition (with only a marginal gain in public support achieved from a 100 member-strong minority contingent compared to the gain from a single defector).

These surprising findings suggest that because past research focuses on the details of legislative compromises (Harbridge and Malhotra 2011; Harbridge, Malhotra and Harrison 2014; Harbridge 2014), it reflects how constituents respond when presented with detailed accounts of congressional action. However, the reality of sound-bite news coverage (Hallin 1992) and the decline of in-depth congressional reporting on news television—the largest source of news on Congress for most Americans (Mann and Ornstein 1994; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1998; Lichter and Amundson 1994)—makes evaluations of Congressional action with incomplete and superficial coverage increasingly likely. This paper proceeds in two parts. First I characterize how legislators use broad conceptions of bipartisanship when communicating about their actions and records. Second, I show how legislator assertions of bipartisanship change constituent opinions.

Characterizing the Process of Legislating

Representatives make claims to cultivate support from constituents and to influence constituent perceptions (Lipinski 2009; Sellers 2009; Mayhew 1974; Grimmer 2013). They regularly claim credit for expenditures to cultivate a personal vote (Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina 1987; Lazarus and Reilly 2009; Levitt and Snyder Jr 1997). And they assert responsibility for policy decisions and

legislative action to claim credit for legislation (Lipinski 2009; Sellers 2009; Mayhew 1974). In this paper I show that representatives also make claims about the legislative processes underpinning legislative outcomes to increase public support. I show that representatives characterize the legitimacy, bipartisanship, and merit of legislation by selectively presenting information on the process of lawmaking.

This works because of how voters evaluate legislators. First, voters are constrained by their minimal knowledge of Congress and congressional action, which makes it difficult for even the most informed voter to follow legislation as it advances through Congress. For example, constituents know little about the complexities of federal spending (Bickers and Stein 1996), and therefore allocate credit to legislators for outlays for which a legislator had no direct responsibility (Grimmer, Westwood and Messing 2014). Constituents know just as little about policy positions and legislation (Converse 1964; Carpini 1997; Mummolo, Peterson and Westwood 2019), and, as a result, constituents—often erroneously—project their own positions on to their representatives (Wilson and Gronke 2000; Conover and Feldman 1989; McAllister and Studlar 1991) and assume that their representatives adopt party-consistent positions (Dancey and Sheagley 2013). Recent work shows that the most politically knowledgeable are actually the most likely to *incorrectly identify* a senator's position when she deviates from her party's position (Dancey and Sheagley 2013). Constituent knowledge of the processes of forming legislation is just as meager and, as a consequence, just as open to misinformation and misconceptions as their knowledge of other aspects of governance.

Second, legislators strive to, and often do, influence the information constituents have about the process of lawmaking through official communication. Because information about the legislative process is scarce, voters rely on the media, which in turn often depend on elected officials for reporting (Grimmer 2013; Arnold 2004), or rely on elected officials themselves (Grimmer 2013; Grimmer, Westwood and Messing 2014). Legislators recognize and use this opportunity to craft a reputation in their district (Mayhew 1974; Fenno 1978) based on looking appealing to as many voters as possible.

How Do Voters Think About Bipartisanship?

Why are voters responsive to bipartisan rhetoric? Although there is agreement that bipartisanship is a positively valenced term, there is no single definition of bipartisanship in politics. The literature generally defines bipartisanship as floor votes where members of both parties vote together (Adler and Wilkerson 2013) or legislation with co-sponsors from both parties (Harbridge and Malhotra 2011; Harbridge 2014). Legislators, however, define bipartisanship much more broadly and do so for strategic partisan gains.² Given the number of stages in the legislative process and the varying number of legislators involved in each stage, it is hard for constituents to keep track of the size and importance of opposition support (i.e., the support of seven opposition legislators on a committee could be large, but during a floor vote, support from the same number of opposition legislators would be small). Because of this vagueness, political actors have the opportunity to define the term and use it to their advantage.

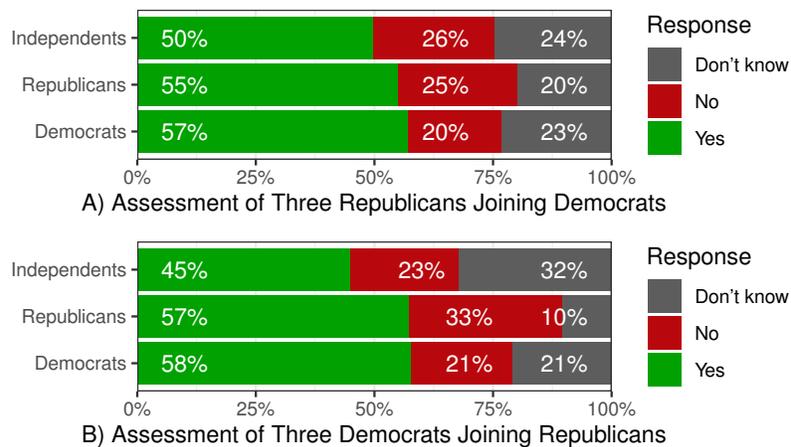
Those who want public support for legislation might call a bill bipartisan if it gains a single vote across the aisle. For example, Press Secretary Robert Gibbs called the Affordable Care Act bipartisan “by definition” (Gibbs 2009) because of a single vote from Representative Anh “Joseph” Cao (R-LA, 2nd). Even those at the ideological extremes of Congress attempt to use bipartisanship to legitimate their priorities and frame required participation of the political opposition on congressional committees as bipartisanship. After adjourning a hearing and cutting off the microphone of a Democratic committee member, Chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee Darrell Issa (R-CA, 49th) told reporters that his work investigating Louis Lerner was bipartisan because a “bipartisan committee” comprised of member of both parties was conducting the investigation. Political scientists might find these assertions absurd, but as I show with experimental evidence in the second half of this manuscript, constituents are responsive to these

²For example, bipartisanship might be a strategy of representational self-presentation by endangered legislators, where legislators reassure their constituents that they are “overcoming partisanship” to “forge compromises.” In another form bipartisanship functions as a messaging strategy where legislators point to efforts to work with the other side while also maintaining a general perspective that the leaders of the other party hate America too much to work with us en masse.

interpretations of legislative action.

These examples rely on lack of understanding of what the term actually means among the general public. To demonstrate this point, I surveyed 1,055 respondents drawn by Survey Sampling International (SSI). To test the limits of constituent understanding of congressional bipartisanship, I randomly assigned participants to view a single statement on congressional action. The statement indicated a trivial level of support from the political opposition (three representatives) on a piece of legislation. Participants were told they would answer a question about a scenario regarding the House of Representatives and were then shown one of the following: “Thinking about the following scenario, would you say it describes bipartisanship or not?: Three [Republicans/Democrats] join [Democrats/Republicans] to pass legislation.” Figure 1 shows that in both scenarios (Democrats joining Republicans and Republicans joining Democrats), a majority of participants indicated that the scenario described bipartisanship. Importantly, the results were nearly the same when Republicans and Democrats evaluate co-partisan legislators who joined the opposition and opposition legislators who joined co-partisans. Fewer than 33% of Republicans and Democrats indicated that neither scenario described bipartisanship.

Figure 1: What is Bipartisanship?

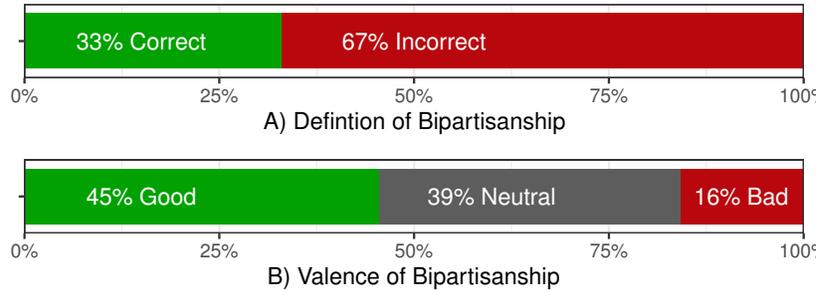


Participants also defined bipartisanship in an open response question³ and then placed biparti-

³Responses that indicated that bipartisanship is 1) political and 2) a political outcome/process were marked as

sanship on a bipolar “Good” to “Bad” scale.

Figure 2: Constituent (Mis)understanding of Bipartisanship



The top of Figure 2 shows that two thirds of respondents cannot define bipartisanship. Those that did were most likely to report that bipartisanship meant both parties working together for the good of the country. Nevertheless, the bottom of the same figure shows that only 16% of respondents view bipartisanship as bad, with nearly a majority (45%) indicating that bipartisanship is good. Constituents do not have a solid understanding of the term bipartisanship, but do seem to like it.

The Strategic Use of Bipartisan Rhetoric by Representatives

Having established that most voters do not see bipartisanship as Congress and political science defines it, I next move on to show that the concept is widely used in the rhetoric of representatives. To do this I use the full set of congressional floor speeches⁴ made between 1992 and 2018 (434,266 speeches) to measure invocations of bipartisanship.⁵ Floor speeches are both a means to connect with voters (Hill and Hurley 2002) and a way to express policy positions (Zaller and Chiu 1996). Representatives use floor speeches to put their opinions on “the record” (Mayhew

correct. Example responses are included in the Supporting Materials. Participants were also told not to consult outside resources.

⁴Floor speeches were downloaded from the Library of Congress. I started in 1992 because of limits to digital access prior to this point.

⁵I focused on the House because it is a more discursive chamber and because it considers a greater number of votes. When analysis was extended to Senate data, the same patterns emerged.

1974), to define their preferences, and to present their assessments of the opposition publicly. The media, in turn, cover what representatives say on the floor (Maltzman and Sigelman 1996).⁶ Floor speeches require effort to prepare and to execute, which makes it unlikely that legislators would dedicate the time and resources required for a floor speech if they did not expect a return. Indeed, representatives regularly fill floor speeches with rhetoric designed to gain attention and coverage from the media to further their political agendas (Grimmer, King and Superti 2014) and ultimately secure reelection (Mayhew 1974).

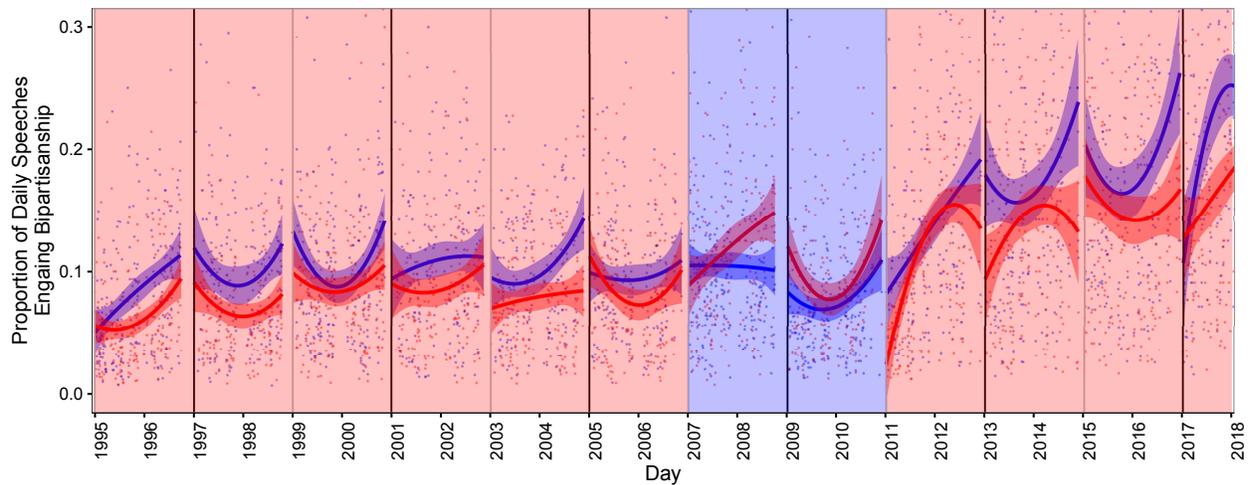
Unlike other concepts where a variety of terms and phrases are used to express a single concept, “bipartianship” is a precise idea that is rarely expressed with other phraseology. There are other phrases related to bipartisanship, such as “working across the aisle,” but I find that these phrases generally co-occur with the explicit use of “bipartisan” or “bipartisanship.” Furthermore, a comprehensive analysis of how representatives discuss bipartisanship by Pew Research shows that officials use the term in 99% of communication that engages the concept (see: <http://www.people-press.org/2017/02/23/partisan-language-in-congressional-outreach/>). Therefore, I used a simple script to search each floor speech for the occurrence of the term “bipartisan.” Whenever a match occurred, the entire speech and the sentence containing the term were extracted. Because most floor speeches are long and discussion of bipartisanship is usually limited to a single sentence, the unit of analyses in this paper is the sentence using the term.

Bipartisanship Rhetoric and the House

Members of Congress frequently invoke bipartisanship, with 33,051 (7.6%) of the 434,266 speeches made on the floor of the House during the 104th-115th Congresses referencing the concept. Figure 3 shows that the overall amount of bipartisan discussion has increased. The analyses that follow do not establish a causal relationship between bipartisan discussion and legislator traits and behaviors, but they do show that bipartisanship is broadly referenced by members of Congress, and use of term varies in systematic ways.

⁶The importance of media coverage of floor speeches is clear from the dramatic uptick in floor speeches after the start of C-SPAN coverage (Garay 1984).

Figure 3: Discussion of Bipartisanship in the US House of Representatives By Party (1995-2018)



This figure shows that upon losing the House the minority party increases bipartisan rhetoric. Despite increasing gridlock in the period studied, the proportion of speeches engaging bipartisanship has nearly doubled. The lines are LOESS curves fit to each Congress, and the shaded areas surrounding the curves are 95% confidence intervals. The background color corresponds to the party in control of the House, the black vertical lines to presidential elections, and the gray vertical lines to mid-term elections.

Figure 3 shows that immediately after a party loses control of the House, discussion of bipartisanship by members of the minority party increases. Bipartisan discussion is also related to the election cycle. When partisans need to appeal to broad groups of voters—presidential elections—bipartisan talk increases. However, when partisans need support from their base—midterm elections—bipartisan discussion decreases. Finally, despite increasing gridlock and partisanship, the proportion of speeches invoking bipartisanship has nearly doubled during this period.

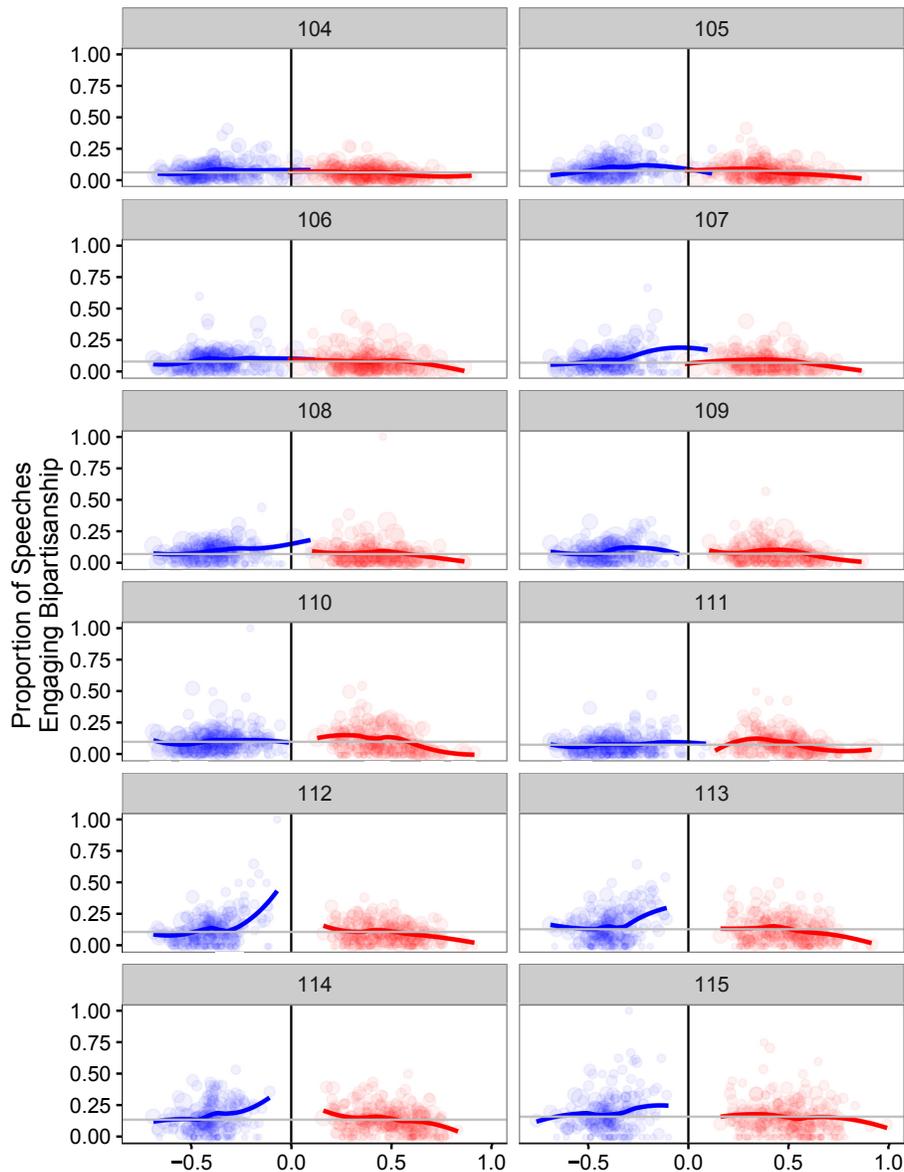
If talk of bipartisanship is related to bipartisan intent, we would expect that more moderate legislators—those most likely to cross party lines—should discuss bipartisanship more often. If, however, bipartisanship is used strategically to frame debates and legislation, no such relationship should exist. Figure 4 shows that it doesn't; there is no consistent relationship between discussion of bipartisanship and DW-Nominate scores (Poole and Rosenthal 1997). There are five

Congresses where moderate Democratic representatives engage in bipartisan talk more than the average Democrats, but this trend is short-lived and is not mirrored in Republican behavior. Representatives across the ideological spectrum use bipartisan claims; those at the partisan extremes utilize bipartisanship in their representational strategies at nearly the same levels as moderates.

Although bipartisan discussion is unrelated to ideology, it is systematically related to representative traits. Refusing to deviate from party positions hurts marginal representatives in general elections (Koger and Lebo 2012; Carson, Koger, Lebo and Young 2010), so it is electorally advantageous for marginal representatives to position as bipartisan even if the evidence to support such claims is not ideal. Figure 5 shows that representatives with the largest incentives to work with the opposition party—party leaders and marginal representatives—discuss bipartisanship more often than other representatives. Party leaders invoke bipartisanship during floor debate 2.59% more often than rank and file members (95% confidence interval [0.23, 4.95]). Marginality, measured with the share of the two-party vote obtained by the most recent co-partisan presidential candidate, also increases discussion of bipartisanship. Marginal representatives discuss bipartisanship 4.48% more than aligned representatives (95% confidence interval [2.35, 6.60]). Just as these lawmakers are more likely to make floor speeches (Hill and Hurley 2002; Maltzman and Sigelman 1996), they are more likely to reference bipartisanship in the speeches they make.

Discussion of bipartisanship is a strategy for those in leadership and for those who are marginal, but does this engagement relate to actual bipartisan behavior and legislator effectiveness? Figure 6 shows that measures of bipartisan behavior (co-sponsorship) is not related to discussion of bipartisanship. Estimates in this figure come from bivariate OLS regression models with each predictor as a continuous variable (e.g, the plot shows the change in bipartisan discussion for cosponsoring one bill). The number of bills co-sponsored with members of the political opposition has no relationship with bipartisan discussion ($b=-0.04$, 95% confidence interval [-0.26, 0.19]). This is additional evidence that bipartisan discussion is a tactical move, not an indication of eventual bipartisan action. Using the congressional effectiveness measure developed by Volden, Wiseman and Wittmer (2013) (top of Figure 6), I show that more effective legislators are no more likely to make appeals

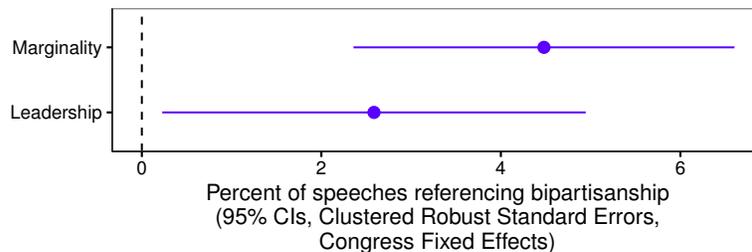
Figure 4: Discussion of Bipartisanship is Uniform Across Ideology



This figure shows that bipartisan discussion is not related to a representative's placement on the ideological spectrum. The lines are LOESS curves, and the shaded areas surrounding the curves are 95% confidence intervals. The gray horizontal line is the mean level of bipartisan discussion for all Congresses.

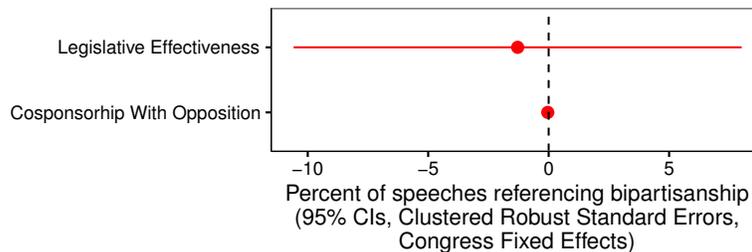
to bipartisanship ($b=-1.29$, 95% confidence interval $[-10.59, 8.01]$) than less effective legislators.

Figure 5: Summarizing the Systematic Differences in Bipartisan Discussion



This plot shows that marginality and leadership increases the percent of floor speeches that invoke bipartisanship. The points are OLS estimates and the bars are 95% CIs.

Figure 6: The Minimal Relationship Between Bipartisan Discussion and Effectiveness and Bipartisan Behavior



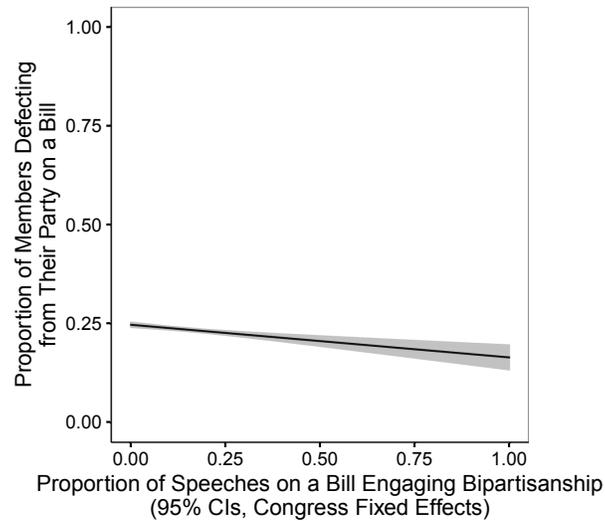
Legislators who are effective and who cosponsor with the opposition talk about bipartisanship at the same level as those who are ineffective and who do not cosponsor across the aisle. The points are OLS estimates and the bars are 95% CIs.

Bipartisan Rhetoric and Bipartisan Votes

Finally, I show that bipartisan talk is often just a rhetorical strategy as it is not related to the actual amount of cross-aisle support a bill garners. I find that there isn't a relationship between the size of the coalition supporting a bill and the propensity to discuss it as bipartisan. Nearly half of all discussion of bipartisanship in the House references specific legislation that is eventually put to a vote. Where possible, I match discussion of bipartisanship to each bill debated in the House. Then I determine how many members of the minority party voted in support of each bill in the

final vote. Combining these data, Figure 7 shows that the largest amount of bipartisan talk focuses on bills that advance with a lower number of defectors. This is in the inverse of what we would expect if rhetoric was predictive of action.

Figure 7: The Minimal Relationship Between Discussion of Bill Bipartisanship and Minority “Yea” Votes



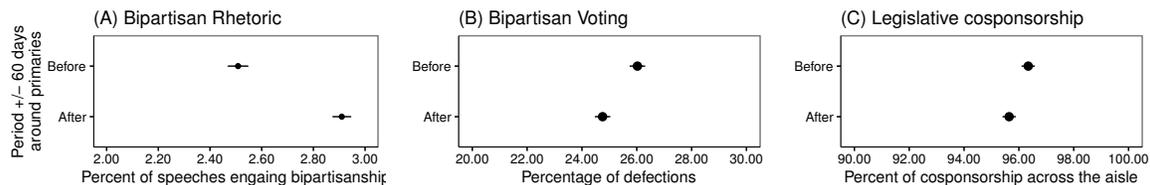
This figure shows that bipartisan rhetoric has the inverse of the expected relationship with bipartisan votes—as rhetoric increases and defections decrease. Plot includes 95% CIs with Congress fixed effects.

When Rhetoric Diverges from Action

It is possible that members engage in a steady hum of bipartisanship and that members only claim bipartisanship when they are legitimately acting in a bipartisan way. To address this possibility I explore the behavior of representatives in the 60 days before and after their primary elections. In the period before a primary—especially open primaries (Casas 2019)—members have an incentive to appeal to the ideological base of the party and to avoid compromise with the opposition that might make them seem less ideologically pure. By comparison after a primary incumbents have an incentive to position as more moderate for the general election (Burden 2004; Koger and

Lebo 2017). Using data from the 104th-114th Congress I show that measures of bipartisan action decrease after primaries (defecting on floor votes and cosponsoring legislation with a member of the opposition), but members are significantly more likely to discuss bipartisanship on the floor. All facets in this figure show regression estimates from models that include Congress and legislator fixed effects. Figure 8A shows that bipartisan rhetoric increases by a small but significant amount after a primary ($b=.4$, 95% CI [0.45, 0.35]). In comparison, 8B shows that defections in floor votes decrease after primaries ($b=-1.27$, 95% CI [-1.67, -0.87]) and 8C shows that cosponsorship across the aisle also decreases after primaries ($b=-0.69$, 95% CI [-1.04, -0.35,]).

Figure 8: Behavior and Rhetoric Diverge after Primaries



This figure shows bipartisan rhetoric is not a function of voting or cosponsorship, and that rhetoric increases when a representative needs to appeal to a broad general electorate.

Experimental Evidence: Strategic Bipartisanship and Constituent Attitudes

The first section of this paper shows that representatives make bipartisan assertions on legislation that is explicitly partisan (gains few or no votes from the minority party). With two experiments I show how and why constituents are responsive to legislator appeals to bipartisanship. Specifically, I show how assertions of bipartisanship alter opinions toward legislation. Framing legislation as bipartisan causes constituents to perceive legislation as more moderate and increases public support for the legislation. Thus, representatives who describe legislation as bipartisan can successfully change constituent attitudes.

Study 1: Asserted Bipartisanship Increases Support

Representatives classify a large percentage of their votes and actions as bipartisan in order to appear bipartisan to voters in official communication (floor speeches, press releases, etc.). Even those on the extreme right and left position their work and the legislation they support as bipartisan. Ted Cruz (R-TX) was among the more conservative members of the 113th Senate, with an estimated ideal point of 1.45 (Jackman N.d.). Among all senators Cruz was 69th in writing bills that attract at least one Democratic co-sponsor and was 42nd in joining legislation written by a Democrat as a co-sponsor (GovTrack.com 2014). Yet, in the first 11 months of 2014, 18.4% of Cruz's official press releases characterized his opinions and actions as bipartisan, which was more than twice the average rate of 7%. He goes so far as to blame the government shutdown of 2013 on Senate Democrats who refused to accept a "bipartisan bill" from the House that did not contain funding for the Affordable Care Act (Cruz 2013). Democrats also engage in this kind of behavior. For example, in the same Congress the liberal senator Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) -1.03 (Jackman N.d.) was ranked 55th for writing legislation attracting a Republican co-sponsor and ranked 94th in joining legislation written by a Republican as a co-sponsor (GovTrack.com 2014), yet he touted bipartisanship in 8% of his press releases.

Moreover, members of Congress craft statements to position legislation as bipartisan to gain support **and** to appear more ideologically centrist even when the legislation is overtly partisan. One reason officials position partisan legislation as bipartisan, as I show with this study, is that the strategic use of the term causes constituents to perceive legislation as more moderate. Constituents, with little information on the legislative history for most bills, use assertions of bipartisanship to formulate assessments of the ideological extremity of legislation. Exploiting this ignorance, Republican Representative Todd Tiahrt (R-KA, 4th), for example, told the floor that "[he looks] forward to continuing our bipartisan work to pass the rest of the Contract With America" (Tiahrt 1995).

To demonstrate the effects of claims of bipartisanship on constituent support and ideological

perceptions, I construct a simple 2 X 2 experiment (see Table 1). A sample (N=1,206) of adults recruited from Survey Sampling International (SSI) read a contrived floor speech from the leader of the opposing party.⁷

Table 1: Study 1 Treatments

		Bipartisanship	
		Overtly partisan plan + called bipartisan	Overtly partisan plan + not called bipartisan
Partisan detail	Not overtly partisan plan + called bipartisan	Not overtly partisan plan + called bipartisan	Not overtly partisan plan + not called bipartisan

The speech, on infrastructure legislation⁸, randomly included information that detailed an overtly partisan plan (reducing entitlement spending to increase infrastructure spending from Republicans, or increasing the gas tax to increase infrastructure spending from Democrats) or offered no specific details. Participants were also randomly assigned to read a speech that included a bipartisan assertion (a single mention of the word bipartisan) or a speech with no mention of bipartisanship (see Table 2 for the complete treatment text). After reading the floor speech, participants indicated their level of support for the legislation on a 7-point Oppose to Support scale. The dependent variable is support for the policy.

Both legislation with overtly partisan purposes (cutting entitlements or increasing gas taxes) and legislation from opposing partisans without an overtly partisan component gain significant support when characterized as bipartisan.⁹ Results (see Figure 9) show that overtly partisan legislation that is portrayed as bipartisan gets more support than the same policy presented with no mention of bipartisanship (mean difference=.35, 95% confidence interval [.13, .57]). Support for legislation that is not presented as explicitly partisan is also significantly higher in the bipartisan

⁷Following Harbridge and Malhotra (2011), leaners were treated as partisans. Independents and non-partisans with no partisan leanings were randomly assigned to read a speech from the Democrat or from the Republican.

⁸Infrastructure projects were selected, as highway spending is not a common source of public partisan disagreement, thus mitigating concerns of pre-treatment effects.

⁹A pretest showed that an overwhelming majority correctly identified the partisan treatments as partisan and correctly associated the treatment with the intended party.

Table 2: Study 1 Stimuli



A statement from [Democratic/Republican] Representative [Nancy Pelosi (CA)/John Boehner (OH)]

“Our country faces a potential infrastructure crisis if we do not act quickly to establish a new approach to maintaining our bridges and roads.

We have worked hard to create a [bipartisan/] bill—the Highway Progress Act—to fund bridge replacement and highway repaving projects [by slightly increasing the gas tax/by cutting unnecessary spending from entitlements/].

We have to manage our roads responsibly and this bill does just that.

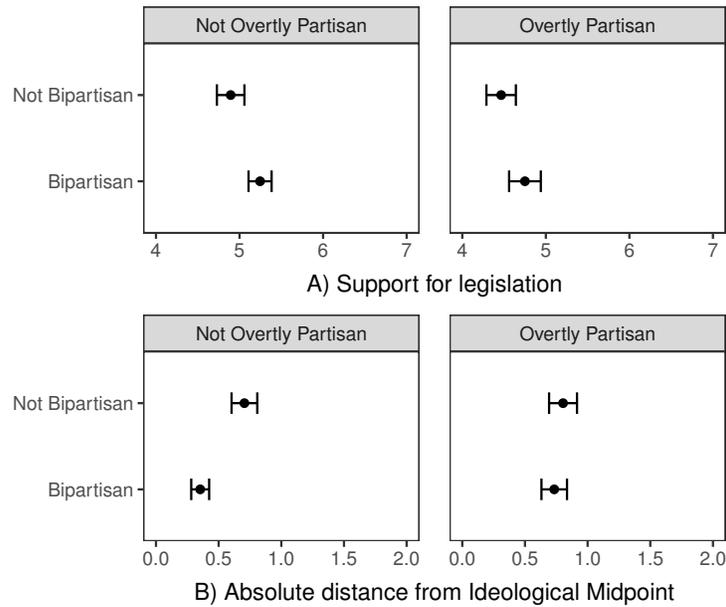
This [bipartisan/] bill is an example of what we can accomplish when we [compromise and focus on finding common ground/when we stick to our principles.]”

treatment than the treatment without mention of bipartisanship (mean difference=.28, 95% confidence interval [.03, .54]).

Participants also placed the legislation on a 7-point Liberal to Conservative scale. A distance variable was constructed by taking the absolute value of the difference between the reported ideological assessment of the legislation and the scale midpoint (4). Voters perceive legislation Representatives position as bipartisan as significantly more moderate than identical legislation that is not positioned as bipartisan (mean difference=-0.35, 95% confidence interval [-0.48, -0.23]). The proportion of participants placing the legislation at the ideological midpoint in the bipartisan condition increases by 18.39% compared to the not-bipartisan condition. When the legislation is overtly partisan, this difference is no longer detectable (mean difference=-.07, 95% confidence interval of the difference [-0.22, 0.08], though given the strength of the treatments, this is not surprising. Liberals should view cutting entitlements as conservative and conservatives should view increasing taxes as liberal. These results are consistent for both Democrats and Republicans and for both liberals and conservatives responding to the bipartisan treatment (see Appendix Tables 3 and 4).

This study shows that constituents interpret bipartisan frames positively when evaluating legis-

Figure 9: Strategic Use of Bipartisanship Increases Support



Bipartisan framing in communication increase public support and lowers perceived ideological extremity of legislation, even for overtly partisan bills. The points are means and the bars are 95% confidence intervals.

lation. For constituents, these interpretations are rational: bipartisanship is commonly understood as an indication of collaboration and compromise. Legislators successfully change perceptions of legislation by merely associating it with the label bipartisan. Most Americans, unaware of the details and nuances of the legislative process are poorly positioned to check this behavior.

Study 2: Gains from Asserted Bipartisanship Trump Returns from Coalition-Building

The second experiment shows that legislation does not actually require meaningful support from the political opposition to get a bipartisan bump from constituents and that there is a minimal return for building large coalitions above the minimum that constituents will accept as “bipartisan.” Politicians who work to buy support for legislation with a minimal winning coalition (e.g. Riker 1962; Banks 2000; Snyder 1991) can, I show, reap nearly the same return from peeling one repre-

sentative from the opposition as they do from peeling 100 representatives. Constituents respond to the assertion of bipartisanship and perceived implications of the concept more than they do actual support from the opposition. Indeed, legislators are able to gain support for legislation where only a *single* member of the opposition votes with the majority.

Table 3: Study 2 Treatments

Treatment Arms		
Bipartisan + random(1-100) Democrat votes	Important + random(1-100) Democrat votes	Partisan + 0 Democrat votes

I use a dose-response experiment with three treatment arms administered to a sample of 1,324 participants drawn from SSI to test the effects of bipartisan rhetoric (see Table 3). In this design a random number of Democratic representatives are reported to vote for a piece of legislation, with this number drawn from a uniform distribution ranging between 1 and 100. In the first treatment 40% of respondents were randomly assigned to read a news article indicating that legislation had passed the House, that Republicans call the legislation bipartisan, and that a random number of Democrats actually voted in support of the legislation. A possible concern is that the term bipartisan merely conveys positive valance. To address this concern, a second treatment arm (40% of respondents) contained text from Republicans calling the legislation “important” instead of “bipartisan.” Again, a random number of Democrats between 1 and 100 were reported to support the bill. To get a baseline measure of support and ideological placement for partisan legislation, I randomly assigned 20% of respondents to read a treatment where no Democrats supported a Republican bill.¹⁰ In this condition Republicans made no attempt to present the bill as bipartisan. This design facilitates several important comparisons. First, I can measure the increase in support for a bill when moving from the partisan to the bipartisan treatment. Second, I can compare this increase in support to the increase in support when a single Democrat peels away from her party to support a Republican policy and when a massive Democratic coalition supports the bill. Finally,

¹⁰Participants were randomly assigned to each of the three treatment arms.

I can compare the effects of labeling a bill with a generic positive term to the effects of asserting bipartisanship.

Table 4: Study 2 Stimuli



New Budget for the Department of the Interior Passes House

By Josh Anderson

This morning the House passed a new budget for the Department of the Interior. The budget bill specifies funding for the department for the coming fiscal year.

A senior Republican described the bill as, “a truly [bipartisan/important/Republican] piece of legislation. This bill is progress, and it’s an example of what we can accomplish when we [focus on finding common ground/focus/stick to our principles].”

Describing the legislation to reporters, Press Secretary Samantha Bannen said, “the bill cuts unnecessary federal oversight from lands programs and lays groundwork for new jobs across America.”

In the House vote [rand(1,100)/ rand(1,100)/ no] Democrat[s] joined Republicans to support the budget.

With over 70,000 employees, the United States Department of the Interior is responsible for managing federal land and natural resources, as well as administering programs relating to indigenous groups including Native Americans.

The Senate must still vote before the legislation is sent to the president.

The treatments (see Table 4 for full stimuli) are delivered in a single paragraph (from a total of six) that varies the presentation of the bill, ostensibly from a Republican spokesperson. The article does not announce a bipartisan or partisan bill: it merely reports that legislation has passed the House and includes a quote from a Republican spokesperson asserting bipartisanship or importance. The news article, by reporting the actual number of Democrats voting for the legislation, contextualizes the Republican framing with a quantitative indicator of Democratic support of the legislation.¹¹ The treatment also positions the bill as conservative: cutting government oversight

¹¹To minimize pre-treatment effects, I use a relatively obscure agency in the federal bureaucracy.

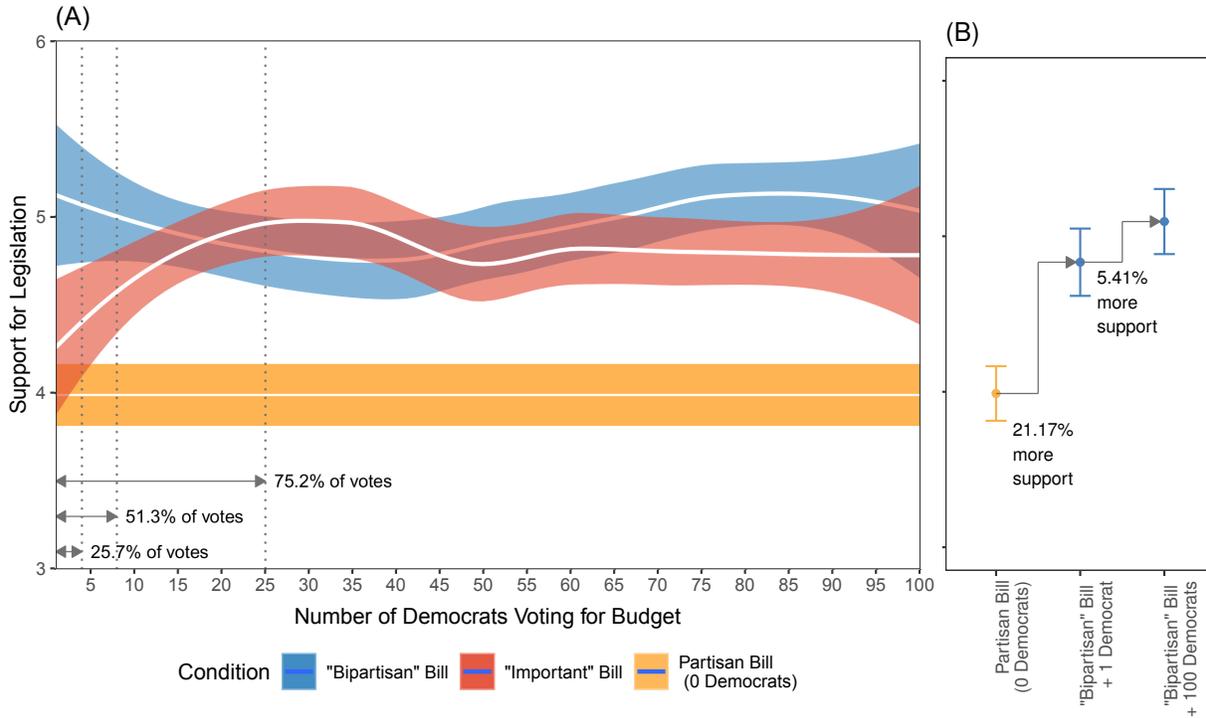
on federally managed lands.

Figure 10 shows the effects of the three treatment arms and the randomly assigned number of Democratic representatives voting for the legislation on support for the legislation (LOESS curves and 95% confidence intervals for the bipartisan and important arms; the mean from the partisan condition and its 95% confidence interval is also plotted). Presenting a bill as bipartisan even when only a single Democrat voted for the bill increases public support by 21.17% from the partisan treatment (mean=3.98, 95% confidence interval [3.81, 4.16]) to the bipartisan treatment with 1 Democratic supporter (mean=4.83, 95% confidence interval [4.61, 5.05]). This is larger than the increase in public support when the bill is reported to garner the support of 100 Democrats (mean=5.09, 95% confidence interval [4.88, 5.30])—an increase in support of 5.41% above the return from peeling a single Democrat. Put another way, each Democratic vote above 1 increases support by only .003 units on the Oppose-Support scale. Constituents are far more responsive to the assertion of bipartisanship than actual bipartisan votes. This is true even when they view clear quantitative evidence that Democratic support was minimal.

Asserting that legislation is bipartisan has a clear advantage over stressing the importance of legislation. Constituents, when the number of Democrats actually supporting a bill is small, are more responsive to implied compromise than claims of importance. When 8 or fewer Democrats vote to support legislation, assertions of bipartisanship deliver a significant support bonus over assertions of importance, with the two assertions equalizing as the number of Democratic supporters increases.

The majority of congressional votes gain large support from both parties, with a mean of 99.3 Democrats voting “yea” on passage votes in the 114th Congress. However, contested legislation in the 114th Congress is often only supported by a small number of Democrats. The vertical dotted lines in Figure 10 (A) show the percent of contested votes by number of Democrats crossing the aisle. Slightly over 51.3% of contested votes gain the support of 8 or fewer Democrats, meaning that bipartisan claims of the type explored here offer meaningful returns for the *majority* of contested legislation in the US House.

Figure 10: Asserted Bipartisanship, Actual Bipartisanship and Public Support



(A) Shows that bipartisan assertions increase support compared to partisan bills and that bipartisan assertions are significantly more effective than claims of importance. The lines are LOESS curves with 95% confidence intervals. (B) Shows the increase in support from the partisan condition to the bipartisan condition with 1 Democratic vote and from the bipartisan condition with 1 Democratic vote and the same treatment with 100 Democratic votes. The points are values from an OLS regression model, and the bars are 95% confidence intervals.

Replicating results from Study 1, constituents consistently perceive legislation presented as bipartisan as more ideologically neutral than legislation presented as partisan. Figure 11 (A) shows LOESS curves, with the mean from the partisan condition and its 95% confidence interval. A Republican spokesperson calling a bill bipartisan—even with only one Democratic vote of support—moves ideological perceptions of a bill from clearly conservative in the partisan treatment (mean=5.44, 95% confidence interval [5.30, 5.58]) to near the midpoint in the bipartisan condition (mean=4.56, 95% confidence interval [4.39, 4.72]). This represents a decrease in conservativeness of 16.24%. Picking up an additional 99 Democratic votes moves perceived ideological percep-

tions of the bill even closer to the ideological midpoint, but the return for adding 99 Democratic is smaller (mean=4.16, 95% confidence interval [4.00, 4.32]) than adding a single Democrat—an additional shift of only 8.73%. Put another way, each Democratic vote above 1 decreases perceived conservativeness by .004 units on the Liberal-Conservative scale.¹²

Presenting a bill as bipartisan does more to change ideological perceptions than assertions of importance. If a bill pulls 8 or fewer Democrats across the aisle, a claim of bipartisanship is more effective at changing ideological perceptions than importance. The two assertions equalize as the number of Democratic supporters increases, but remain significantly different from the partisan condition.

I again contextualize the usefulness of bipartisan assertions by showing the percent of contested votes by number of Democrats crossing the aisle (the vertical dotted lines in Figure 11 B). Calling legislation bipartisan is advantageous for the *majority* of contested bills in the U.S. House when it comes to how ideologically extreme voters view the legislation.

Attention to the Treatments

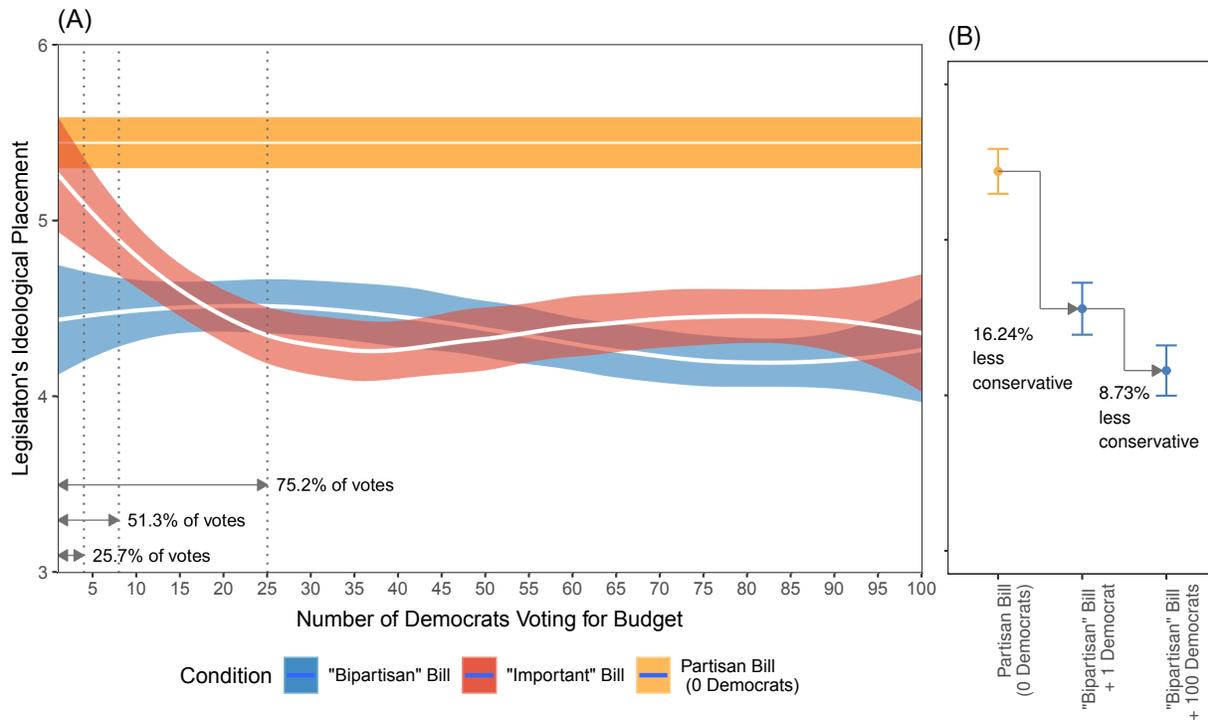
One concern is that participants were inattentive to the treatment and did not pay attention to the number of Democrats voting with Republicans. After reporting support for the legislation and indicating placement on the ideological spectrum, participants were asked to allocate responsibility for the bill between Democrats and Republicans using a tool that forced the amount of responsibility to sum to 100%. Figure 12 shows that the percent of responsibility allocated to the Democratic party (y-axis) increases as the percent of Democrats reported to vote for the legislation increases.¹³ Reported responsibility increases at approximately the same rate for both the bipartisan and important treatments.

Surprisingly, even when no Democrats were reported to vote for the bill (the partisan treat-

¹²As with Study 1, these results are consistent for ideological and partisan groups, though in magnitude Democrats are less supportive of the policy than Republicans (see Appendix Tables 6 and 7).

¹³In the experiment the number of Democrats was limited to 100, which is just over 50% of the 188 Democrats currently in the House of Representatives.

Figure 11: Asserted Bipartisanship, Actual Bipartisanship and Ideological Perceptions

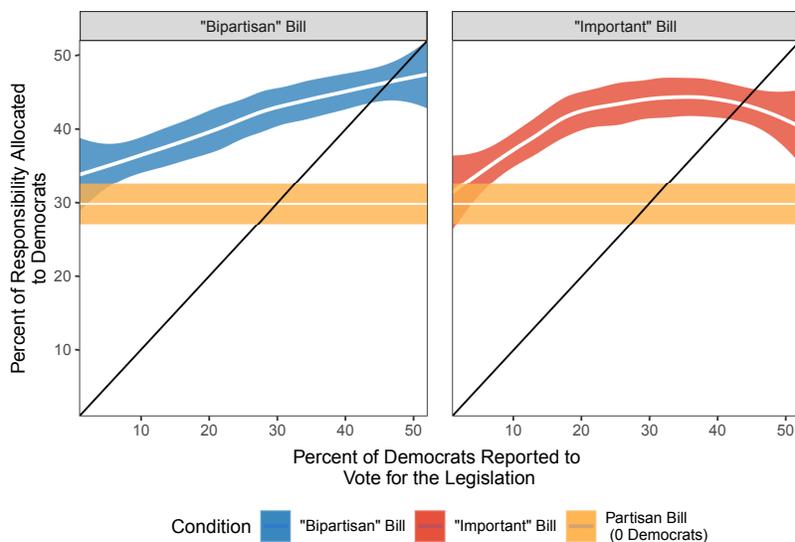


(A) Shows that bipartisan assertions decrease perceived conservativeness compared to partisan bills and that bipartisan assertions reduce perceived conservativeness compared to claims of importance. The lines are LOESS curves with 95% confidence intervals. (B) Shows the decrease in perceived ideological extremity from the partisan condition to the bipartisan condition with 1 Democratic vote and from the bipartisan condition with 1 democratic vote and the same treatment with 100 Democratic votes. The points are means from an OLS regression model and the bars are 95% confidence intervals.

ment), participants allocated nearly 30% of responsibility to Democrats. To probe this finding, I conducted an additional study. A sample from Mechanical Turk (n=116) read the partisan treatment, and after answering the responsibility question, those giving more than 0% of responsibility to Democrats (68.97% of participants) were asked an additional open-ended question: “You allocated X% of the responsibility for this bill to Democrats. In a few sentences please explain why you feel the Democrats were this responsible.”¹⁴ Two human readers classified the responses,

¹⁴The supporting materials provide additional information on this study.

Figure 12: Perceived Democratic Responsibility by Proportion of Democratic Votes



This figure shows the percentage of responsibility allocated to Democrats by the percent percent of Democrats reported to vote for the legislation. The lines are LOESS curves with 95% confidence intervals.

identifying two clear reasons. First, 30% of participants indicated that Democrats are responsible because—despite not voting for the bill—they are part of Congress: “Because they are still apart(sic) of the decision process. and must have had some influence on the bill ...” and “They showed up.” A second group—33% of participants—indicated that Democrats are responsible for the bill because they failed to *stop* the Republicans from pushing the bill through the House: “The Democrats, being in the minority, likely did not oppose the bill strongly enough, and did not push enough for what they would have wanted in the bill...” and “Apparently they did NOT campaign actively to defeat the budget passing—that alone is worth some credit!”

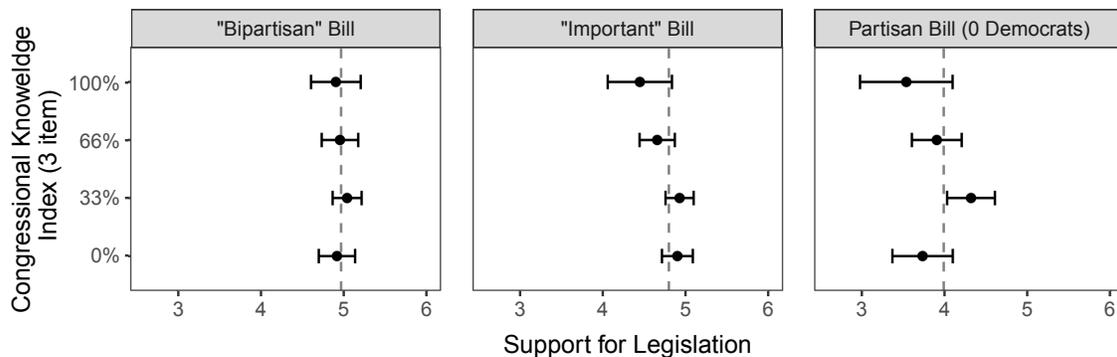
Participants allocate large levels of responsibility to Democrats even when Democrats uniformly oppose legislation because constituents view Democrats as a part of the system that produces legislation and because passage of a Republican bill indicates that Democrats failed to block the Republican measure.

Tricking the Politically Uninformed?

Another concern is that assertions of bipartisanship are only effective because they influence the opinions of the politically uninformed. To test for a political innocence effect, the full sample of 1,202 participants from study 2 answered a congressional knowledge battery before completing the experiment. The battery contained three knowledge questions taken directly from a United States citizenship study guide maintained by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services 2013: 1) “The House of Representatives has how many voting members,” 2) “We elect a U.S. Representative for how many years” and 3) “How many Representatives can you vote for in the 2016 election?” Each question was open response. The three items were coded for correctness and combined into a single congressional knowledge index.

Figure 13 shows the mean level of support in each of the three treatment arms (pooling over the number of randomly assigned Democratic votes). Those with the most knowledge responded no differently from those with the lowest knowledge in all three treatment arms. A lack of understanding of how Congress works does not explain why assertions of bipartisanship are effective.

Figure 13: Response to treatment arms by Congressional knowledge



Congressional knowledge is entirely unrelated to how the public responds to potentially misleading bipartisan rhetoric. The points are means and the bars are 95% confidence intervals. The dotted vertical line is the cell mean.

Discussion

Voters support increasingly ideologically extreme politicians but also expect bipartisan governance (see Pew 2012, 2007). Faced with this dilemma, representatives push for legislation—which is sometimes overtly partisan—and position it as bipartisan, using minimal support from across the aisle to justify these claims. This allows representatives to cultivate specific public impressions of the status and history of legislation. Consistent with impressionistic models of constituent decision-making (see Grimmer, Westwood and Messing 2014), I show that representatives position legislation as bipartisan and that constituents respond to these characterizations. These results are coldly rational: through bipartisan assertions, representatives can obtain the advantages of appearing moderate without the risks associated with actual cross-aisle compromise. They are also in line with classic work on cultivating a personal vote, which shows that members are often more concerned with looking appealing to voters than the particulars of policy Bickers and Stein (1996); Fenno (1978); Grimmer, Westwood and Messing (2014). Increasing bipartisan perceptions while simultaneously avoiding bipartisan action (votes and co-sponsorship) gives these representatives the maximum advantage at a minimal cost. This work shows that bipartisan positioning is a strategy observable in official acts of representation on the floor of the House and in reports by the media. Bipartisan rhetoric is both common for representatives across the ideological spectrum and disconnected from actual bipartisan behavior (crossing party lines in votes or co-sponsoring legislation with a member of the opposition). Bipartisan assertions are related to the power of a member's political party and the marginality of the member. Both the amount of bipartisan discussion and the way it is discussed varies by the majority/minority status of a representative's party. Marginal representatives are also more likely to discuss bipartisanship, as these members must maneuver to gain support from independents and opposition party members while also maintaining support from within their own party.

I experimentally show that bipartisan assertions are not simply cheap talk. Constituents positively evaluate bipartisanship even if they cannot explain exactly what it means. However, con-

stituents are not merely reacting to a positive term, as they are more responsive to assertions of bipartisanship than to appeals made with other positively valenced terms (Study 2). Voters understand bipartisanship as a signal of legislative quality (Krehbiel 1992) and compromise (Trubowitz and Mellow 2005) even when actual vote counts don't show evidence of compromise or broad support. Indeed, representatives can actually gain more from assertions of bipartisanship than from obtaining actual support from the political opposition. Documenting or detailing actual compromises reduces public support among strong partisans (Morris and Witting 2001; Harbridge and Malhotra 2011; Harbridge, Malhotra and Harrison 2014; Harbridge 2014), but falsely asserting bipartisanship does not lead to a penalty in the eyes of voters. In this way, representatives have more to fear from detailed summaries of legislative policy than from masquerading as champions of compromise.

Implications of this research are clear. The current partisan atmosphere in Congress and in America in general turns the concept of agreement into a tool for political gain. For constituents, this introduces uncertainty, which limits democratic accountability. Broad and often unjustified claims of bipartisanship make it difficult for constituents to understand and correctly evaluate the behaviors, intentions, and actual positions of Congress. Simply put, it is hard for constituents to assess whether something called bipartisan is actually bipartisan.

Most citizens are generally inattentive to the processes of governance and respond to bipartisanship because they “seem to expect Congress, magically, to mold sometimes bitterly divided public opinion into coherent and effective policy without debate, disagreement or compromise” (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995, p xii). Representatives tell voters that they are passing bipartisan legislation, thus setting expectations of efficacy and compromise that simply do not materialize in their voting behavior. Although constituents are responsive to the strategic use of the term “bipartisanship,” the fact that legislators claim it and then fail to deliver unifying legislation may explain increasingly negative evaluations of Congress and increasing affective polarization (Westwood, Peterson and Lelkes 2019).

Ironically, representatives' strategic references to bipartisanship likely disincentivize political

compromise. Because elected officials use even minimal opposition support to claim bipartisan legitimacy, pulling legislators from across the aisle in small numbers has out-sized effects. This is one explanation for the obstructionist behavior of the Republican party during the Obama administration. Exceptions to uniform opposition to the administration—even by a small number of legislators—give meaningful political power to the administration.

There are several avenues for extending this research. First, the observational text analysis establishes many relationships—some tested experimentally in this paper—but future research should explore the direct causal relationship between representative traits and bipartisan discussion. Interviews and case studies with members of Congress would also lend additional support and clarification to the evidence presented in this paper. This paper implies that parties should claim bipartisanship broadly and that both parties should claim the other party is behaving in a partisan manner. Future research should explore how these competing claims spread in the media and how they are processed by voters. Finally, future work should explore the relationship between bipartisan discussion and constituent evaluations over time to measure the decay of the effects of bipartisan rhetoric.

These results show that concept of bipartisanship is now another source of partisan division. When it comes to evaluating assertions of bipartisan compromise, voters trust the information they receive from political actors. Voters may not be “fools,” (see Key and Cummings 1966) but they are—at least when it comes to evaluating claims of bipartisan compromise—easy to fool.

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