Presidential Negative Partisanship

Going Public for Electoral Gain, Not Policy Success

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Abstract

Presidents are national policy leaders. Yet, they increasingly use negative rhetoric to attack the opposition rather than forge legislative compromise, contrary to theories of going public. Why? I argue presidents who perceive low prospects for policy success eschew out-party persuasion. Instead, they go public as negative partisans to rally their base and electorally advantage their party. I collect all presidential speeches delivered between 1933–2024 and use transformer methods to measure how often, and how negatively, presidents reference the out-party. Consistent with the argument, they do so increasingly when the congressional environment is unfavorable: when majorities are tenuous, government is divided, and elections approach. I provide additional support with a quantitative case study of Democrats' 2009 filibuster-proof Senate majority. I also show this rhetoric has behavioral consequences: presidential negative partisanship decreases co-partisan approval of the opposition. This research raises concerns about presidential representation and the president's durable role as negative partisan-in-chief.

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In February 2024, a bipartisan group of senators released the text of a border security bill. Republicans had demanded the legislation as a pre-condition for voting on military aid to Ukraine, and in exchange, Democrats were willing to approve this conservative policy. Yet, *Republicans* torpedoed the bill. Former President Trump voiced opposition, Senate Minority Leader McConnell called it weak, and one House Republican said he refused to give Democrats a win in a presidential election year. Facing obstruction, Biden hit back. He blamed the opposition for inaction and promised "the American people are going to know that the only reason the border is not secure is Donald Trump and his MAGA Republican friends" (Biden 2024). This rhetorical stance continued into a "confrontational" State of the Union Address, with the president "repeatedly calling out Republicans and sparring live on TV" (Wilkie 2024). In Congress, strategic disagreement and message politics are well-understood, theoretically motivated behaviors (Gilmour 1995; Lee 2016; Noble 2024). In the presidency, where bargaining (Neustadt 1990) and national policy addresses (Kernell 1997) are core strategies, they are anathema.

Presidents are motivated by legacy, which requires that they enact major policy in office (Howell and Moe 2016, 2020; Neustadt 1990). Yet, the partisan and ideological alignment between the branches conditions presidents' legislative policy success (Bond and Fleisher 1990).[1] These factors are "largely beyond the president's control, especially in the short run" (Edwards 2003, 14), but presidents must act. Often, that means "going public," delivering policy speeches in an attempt to raise the salience of issues and pressure lawmakers to act (Canes-Wrone 2006; Kernell 1997). Although these efforts routinely fail, presidents keep trying, which raises the question of "why presidents persist" (Edwards 2003, 242)? Indeed, if presidents are motivated by policy, this behavior poses a puzzle. But, "Presidents use their unique position as head of the executive branch to serve electoral and other goals" as well (Lowande 2024, 18). The primacy of these two motivations—policy and electoral politics—varies based on political context (Light 1999),

[1]Presidents can achieve some goals unilaterally, but there are limits relative to legislation (e.g., Reeves and Rogowski 2022; Thrower 2017).

and, I argue, shape both *how* presidents go public and the behavioral attitudes they target. It seems unlikely that Biden's immigration rhetoric, delivered during an election year while facing divided government, was designed to persuade the opposition to support his agenda. More likely, the president intended to damage Republicans' reputation by affecting co-partisans' attitudes about the opposition party. The question then, is not *why* do presidents still go public, but rather, *how* does going public change as the political environment and presidents' goals change? This question is important for presidential leadership (Neustadt 1990; Kernell 1997), representation (Dearborn 2021; Kriner and Reeves 2015; Wood 2009), and public attitudes toward the parties (Jacobson 2019).

I argue that when presidents perceive low prospects for legislative success, they go public as negative partisans—eschewing policy goals today to electorally advantage their party tomorrow. Presidents are strategic actors who anticipate the odds of legislative success. When they expect to win (e.g., when their party controls Congress), the president can go public as a policy leader (Kernell 1997), ingratiating themselves with opponents or rising above party politics (Coleman and Manna 2007). This rhetoric may invite bipartisan support, expand their coalition, and play into norms of presidential nonpartisanship—enhancing their legacy (Arnold 1990; Howell and Moe 2020; Wood 2009). However, if presidents expect to lose (e.g., when their opponents control Congress), there is little they can do to change their policy prospects (Edwards 2003). Presidents, then, will shift from short-term policy to longer-term electoral goals (Light 1999)—re-election for themselves and their congressional allies. This new focus will require a different rhetorical approach. Rather than avoid party politics (Coleman and Manna 2007; Hinckley 1990; Rhodes 2014), presidents will go public as negative partisans—referencing and attacking the opposition. Although antithetical to lawmaking, this style of message politics accentuates party differences (Lee 2016), shifts blame (Hood 2010), and mobilizes voters through anger at the out-party (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018). If presidents behave per this theory, we should see more negative partisan appeals

when presidents anticipate legislative resistance: when congressional majorities are "insecure" (Lee 2016), when government is divided, and as elections approach. Behaviorally, this rhetoric should decrease co-partisans' evaluations of the out-party.

To test these hypotheses, I measure how often, and how negatively, presidents evoke the out-party in public speeches. I collect a corpus of all public statements given by presidents between 1933–2024. First, I identify and count all opposition-party references. Then, I use a pre-trained BERT model to code the sentiment of each paragraph. Consistent with my theory, presidents reference the out-party more often during periods of increased congressional competition, divided government, and as elections approach. This rhetoric is also more negative during periods of competition and divided government. I provide further support with a quantitative case study of Democrats' filibuster-proof Senate majority in 2009–2010. When Democrats unexpectedly lose their 60th seat, President Obama references Republicans more, and more negatively, consistent with the theory. Finally, I provide behavioral evidence with panel survey data from 2012–2017. More presidential negative partisanship lowers co-partisans' approval of the opposition party.

These results contribute to our understanding of going public (Canes-Wrone 2006; Kernell 1997; Tulis 1987) and message politics (Evans 2001; Lee 2016; Noble 2024), highlighting an alternative explanation for presidential appeals in a polarized era. This research provides an institutional logic for negative presidential appeals, as opposed to those grounded in personality (Milkis 1993; Skinner 2008) or party coalitions (Grossman and Hopkins 2016; Jarvis 2004). This work also has implications for presidential representation (Dearborn 2021; Kriner and Reeves 2015; Wood 2009), highlighting the goal-oriented nature of presidential self-presentation. Although this strategy may advantage presidents, it raises normative concerns. Given today's close elections and divided government, we should worry about the baleful effects of elite negative partisanship (Bøggild and Jensen 2024; Skytte 2021, 2022) promoted by the most salient political actor in American politics.

The Offensive President

Like legislators, presidents are motivated by electoral and policy goals (Light 1999). Unlike legislators, "fixated on the short term" (Howell and Moe 2020, 161), presidents take a longer view. They are also motivated by historical legacy, and this "overriding concern...drives them to seek durable policy solutions to pressing national problems" (Howell and Moe 2020, 163; see also Howell and Moe 2016; Neustadt 1990). *Seek* is the key word. Whether presidents actually enact these durable policies depends on lawmakers—whose goals, preferences, and constituencies may differ from the president's. These differences are likely smaller, and thus presidents are legislatively advantaged, when the their party controls Congress and when legislators' ideological preferences are more aligned with their own (Bond and Fleisher 1990). When these conditions are not met, presidents are limited in what they can achieve. These factors are generally fixed until the next election, so presidents must try other strategies in the intervening time.

One such strategy is going public, appealing directly to Americans to raise the salience of issues, change public opinion, and implicity threaten lawmakers' electoral safety (Canes-Wrone 2006; Kernell 1997; Tulis 1987). Lawmakers care about constituency preferences (Arnold 1990), so by affecting public attitudes, presidents can indirectly shape congressional voting. In these theories, the goal is explicitly policy-motivated, and the audience is implicitly national in scope.[2] Taking this set of assumptions for granted, the literature on going public investigates which issues presidents promote and whether public attitudes change in response (Canes-Wrone 2006; Cohen 1995; Edwards 2003; Kernell 1997; Rottinghaus 2010). In general, they do not. As the presidency has polarized (Cameron 2002), out-partisans are unlikely to be persuaded by the president's appeals (Cavari 2017), and "For most members of Congress, following...the opinion of those constituents who regularly vote for them now means supporting a president of their own party *and* op-

[2]These are reasonable assumptions as presidents are chosen in national contests, can claim a national constituency, and promote this view of the presidency themselves.

posing a president of the other" (Sinclair 2006, 242-3, emphasis original). These results present a puzzle: why do presidents speak so often if this strategy lacks efficacy?

I argue that one resolution to this puzzle lies in revisiting the underlying assumptions. Why do presidents go public in the first place? I theorize that while presidents sometimes go public to achieve policy goals, they may also go public to serve electoral aims—distinct from policy considerations. When presidents believe they are advantaged in Congress, focusing on policy and legacy makes sense. Presidents are "held accountable...for embodying national values and national identities, pursuing the public interest, and addressing national problems" (Howell and Moe 2020, 163), which should motivate them to swing for the fences when success seems likely. That means soliciting bipartisan support to legitimate their policies (Azari 2014; Westwood 2021; but see Case and Ommundsen 2024) and promoting a non-partisan image, playing into the public's normative conceptions of the presidency (Wood 2009). These efforts may fail, but presidents are already likely to get what they want, for example, when their party controls Congress (Barrett and Eshbaugh-Soha 2007; Bond and Fleisher 1990). If they can manage to peel off a bit of cross-party support, all the better. Orthogonal to policy substance, presidents should go public above party politics when legislatively advantaged. That means avoiding references to the opposition, or praising the out-party, in an effort to appeal to disaffected or moderate voters (Coleman and Manna 2007; Rhodes 2014) and out-party lawmakers.

What happens when presidents are not advantaged? They still go public. And some argue that this behavior represents a strategic error: presidents "underestimate their opponents and eschew necessary compromises in the mistaken belief that they can move the public" (Edwards 2003, 248-9). Instead, I argue that this behavior is strategic, and evidence of this strategy can be seen in *how* presidents go public during these periods. "For presidents to get things done, they have to be reelected, see that someone like them succeeds them, and give their co-partisans coattails to ride" (Lowande 2024, 32)—and these motivations are especially salient when presidents lack political capital (Light 1999). Pres-

idents cannot change public opinion or the composition of Congress in the short run, but they can conceivably do so over the long-term (cf. Noble 2023). No actor is "as important as the president in defining the collective images of the parties" (Lee 2009, 77). Avoiding party politics, or worse, praising the opposition, ratifies the existing power structure disadvantaging the president (Sundquist 1988). Presidents focused on electoral, rather than policy, goals should act like negative partisans: blaming the opposition for gridlock (Hood 2010) and magnifying differences between the parties (Lee 2016). Voters are increasingly mobilizing by negative partisanship (Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018), dislike of the opposition rather than love of their own party (Abramowitz and Webster 2016), which should motivate presidents to go on the attack rather than play the role of happy warrior. Taken together, electorally-motivated presidents will go public, not to change policy attitudes, but to displace blame, highlight partisan differences, and mobilize co-partisans.

I expect presidents to behave as negative partisans (more, and more negative, out-party references) when they perceive lower prospects of legislative success. Below, I discuss three specific hypotheses when presidents should have these perceptions, and thus, engage in negative partisan rhetoric.

Competition for congressional majorities. In the mid-twentieth century, Democrats dominated Congress. The party held huge majorities and were not afraid of losing power (Sinclair 2006). However, these huge majorities were not ideologically homogeneous. Southern Democrats served as a swing constituency, willing to work with economically liberal Democrats and racially conservative Republicans. Given these durable majorities, Democratic presidents viewed their party as dominant while Republicans believed they were a persistent minority (Galvin 2009). Broad acceptance of this situation, ironically, promoted cross-party cooperation. Congressional Republicans were willing to work with Democrats, believing bipartisanship was the only way to exercise policy influence (Lee 2016). Lower competition, then, led to less congressional polarization, giving presidents

opportunities to go public in the traditional sense and work across the aisle (Bond and Fleisher 1990; Rhodes 2014).

Conditions changed in the 1970s and 1980s. Southern voters elected conservative Republicans to replace Southern Democrats, resulting in a more sorted and polarized Congress (Sinclair 2006). Republican victories in the 1980 Senate elections, and the 1994 House elections, led to "a politics of destruction, concerned less with legislation than with investigation and obstruction" (Hemmer 2022, 8; see also Kriner and Schickler 2016). Renewed competition changed congressional incentives. Rather than work together, minority parties see the majority in sight and engage in messaging—withholding legislative support and drawing clear contrasts between the parties—to win back control (Lee 2016). "The 1994 elections destabilized the political environment" and forced Clinton and his successors to acknowledge Democrats were no longer the natural majority (Galvin 2009, 255). Now, going public is more likely to polarize the parties than it is to bring them together (Lee 2009). These intra- and inter-branch conflicts are not without precedent however. Truman faced a similarly hostile Congress in 1940s before this long period of Democratic dominance (Galvin 2009; Lee 2016). Given that competitive congressional environments limit the prospects for lawmaking, I expect presidents to act more like negative partisans during these periods.

Divided government. Few factors affect presidents' legislative prospects more than party control of Congress (Levinson and Pildes 2006). Co-partisans across branches naturally share ideological and programmatic goals (Bond and Fleisher 1990), and presidential party lawmakers have an electoral incentive to ensure the president succeeds (Lebo and O'Geen 2011). Out-partisans have symmetric incentives to damage the president—irrespective of their ideological preferences (Christenson and Kriner 2017; Groseclose and McCarty 2001; Lee 2009; Kriner and Schickler 2016). By blocking the president's agenda, they can make the case for their party's president. Therefore, I expect presidents to act more like

negative partisans when government is divided.

Electoral timing. As elections approach, presidents have less time to pass policy (Light 1999). Out-partisans should be especially resistant to presidential policymaking, as they want to avoid giving opposite party presidents "a win" right before an election, when politics are more salient. In their role as party leaders, presidents must also turn attention toward promoting their record and helping their co-partisans secure reelection. Partisan affect (Huddy, Mason and Aarøe 2015; Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018), negativity (Fridkin and Kenney 2019), and anger (Phoenix 2019; Valentino et al. 2011; Webster 2020) are key to turning out one's base. Therefore, presidents should act more like negative partisans when midterms or their own re-election approaches.

Identifying Negative Partisanship in Presidential Rhetoric

To test these hypotheses, I collected a corpus that includes the text of all presidential speeches delivered between March 4, 1933 (Franklin D. Roosevelt's first day in office) and March 29, 2024 (near the end of Joe Biden's first term). I collected the text and associated metadata from the American Presidency Project (APP) website (Woolley and Peters N.d.), a total of 27,663 speeches.[3] These data include many types of presidential rhetoric from major national addresses, to minor statements, political rallies, exchanges with the press, and more. If a document contains multiple speakers (e.g., a joint appearance) or stage directions, I make every effort to automatically remove this text. This corpus extends the literature's focus on a small number of major televised addresses, which can bias our understanding of presidents' agendas (Russell and Eissler 2022).

To determine when presidents invoke the opposition party, I focus on three specific types of references. First, I look for presidents' explicit use of party labels (i.e., "demo-

[3]See Appendix A.1 for more on data collection and inclusion criteria.

Table 1: Presidential Party References per 1,000 Words, 1933-2024

President	Institutional Variation	*Out-Party References* President	Leader	Party	All	Total Speeches	Words (1000s)
F. Roosevelt	0	0.02	0.04	0.23	0.29	737	978
Truman	1	0.10	0.03	2.60	2.73	938	1,482
Eisenhower	1	0.03	0.01	0.08	0.11	898	1,313
Kennedy	0	0.17	0.00	0.32	0.49	742	826
Johnson	0	0.18	0.06	0.29	0.52	1,605	2,080
Nixon	0	0.18	0.03	0.23	0.43	1,030	1,548
Ford	0	0.09	0.02	0.40	0.51	1,223	1,576
Carter	0	0.17	0.07	0.43	0.67	1,429	2,607
Reagan	0	0.06	0.04	0.40	0.50	2,747	3,552
H. Bush	0	0.06	0.04	0.45	0.55	1,822	2,537
Clinton	1	0.08	0.05	0.35	0.48	4,708	8,653
W. Bush	1	0.03	0.02	0.36	0.41	3,836	6,344
Obama	1	0.05	0.05	0.56	0.66	3,005	5,151
Trump	1	0.50	0.17	1.05	1.71	1,623	3,653
Biden	1	0.35	0.06	0.81	1.22	1,320	2,300

Note: Institutional Variation is an indicator for whether a president experienced both unified and divided government, a proxy for congressional competition.

crat" or "republican").[4] Next, I look for presidents' references to their two most recent out-party predecessors by last name (e.g., "Obama" or "Trump").[5] Finally, I look for references to the surnames of opposition leaders in the House and Senate. Whenever a Republican president references the Democratic Party, one of the two most recent Democratic presidents, or a Democratic congressional leader, the instance is coded as an out-party reference (and vice-versa for a Democratic president). To put these references on a meaningful scale, and to account for presidents' differential propensities to go public, I transform my dependent variable to the number of out-party references per 1,000 words.

In Table 1, I provide descriptive statistics illustrating presidents' use of opposition references. In the second column, I indicate whether the president experienced institu-

[4]A naive search for party labels will turn up false positives, such as "democratic principles" or "republican government." I create a custom dictionary of relevant unigrams and bigrams after removing likely false positives. See Appendix A.2.

[5]I avoid the use of more distant predecessors as, over time, they can become exemplary, non-partisan symbols (Cavari, Yoel and Lowenkamp 2021). This search also includes references to signature policies like Obamacare.

tional variation—both unified and divided government—during their tenure. This measure proxies the degree to which the congressional majority is in play in presidents' and lawmakers' minds. Next, I present several types of out-party references made per 1,000 words. For example, President Trump referenced Bill Clinton and Barack Obama at a rate of 0.50 times per 1,000 words, Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer 0.17 times, and the Democratic Party 1.05 times for a total of 1.71 out-party references per 1,000 words. For context, President Trump spoke about 2,500 words a day. Thus, for every day he held office, President Trump referenced Democrats over four times on average. Compare that with Johnson, who referenced Republicans less than a third as often when Congress was less competitive. Table 1 makes clear that presidents deploy out-party references at differential rates. Eisenhower used the fewest at 0.11 per 1,000 words, whereas President Truman used the most at 2.73 per 1,000 words. Presidents are also much more likely to talk about parties broadly, rather than specific individuals. However, Trump and Biden both represent a deviation from this pattern—increasingly invoking their predecessors and congressional leaders. Overall, there is a positive correlation between institutional variation and the use of opposition references: 0.43. As anticipated, presidents in more uncertain and competitive congressional environments use more opposition references.

What is not clear from these simple counts is whether these references are partisan attacks or bipartisan entreaties. Are presidents appealing to the opposition for support or are they going negative, attacking the out-party and blaming them for obstruction and inaction? Answering this question is difficult for two reasons. First, measuring sentiment in political rhetoric can be fraught given the common use of negation, irony, and sarcasm as well as political valence and semantic polarization. A second challenge is that the quantity of interest is sentiment *about the opposition*, not sentiment of the speech overall. Politicians engaged in partisan messaging frequently make contrasting statements—putting their party in a positive, and the opposition in a negative, light (Lee 2016). Paragraph-level sentiment may misclassify negative opposition references as neutral, or even posi-

tive, when aggregating over both in-party and out-party references in the same statement.

To address these challenges, I take a two step approach to code the positive-vs-negative sentiment of each speech paragraph. First, I use OpenAI's `GPT-4o-mini` model to isolate the contextually-relevant portions of each speech paragraph. Through iterative refinement, I developed a few-shot prompt to instruct the GPT model to extract only the contextually relevant portions of text that would allow me to better measure out-party sentiment without including in-party contrasts or unrelated asides (see Appendix A.3).[6] For example, consider the following statement made by President Clinton:

> "**But the Republicans in Congress have proposed a budget that will undermine the dignity and independence of our senior citizens.** Here's how: Medicaid's the way our country helps families pay for nursing homes, home care, or other long-term care for elderly or disabled persons. Some people would have you think that Medicaid just helps poor children. Well, it does do that, and that is very important. Almost one in four American children are poor enough to need help from Medicaid."

Notice how the bolded piece of text (extracted by the GPT model) explicitly criticizes congressional Republicans for their efforts to cut the budget. After this attack, Clinton goes on to describe the benefits of Medicaid, especially for poor children. The valence of this aside is more positive than negative and is somewhat disconnected from his specific criticism of Republicans. The GPT step attempts to extract only the relevant portion of the paragraph, which results in substantial improvements when calculating sentiment.[7] The sentiment score (computed as I describe below) for the entire paragraph is 0.27 while the sentiment of the bolded snippet is much lower, 0.08, better reflecting Clinton's negative attitude toward the Republican party.

To produce sentiment scores, I use a pre-trained BERT model, fine-tuned for sentiment classification (specifically the `twitter-roberta-base-sentiment` model). Unlike

[6] I validated the output on a small sample of statements and found no instance in which the model created text that did not appear in the original statement.

[7] In the few instances where the model failed to extract text, I manually extract the relevant context.

dictionary-based sentiment classification methods (e.g., VADER, AFINN) or static embeddings (e.g., word2vec, GloVe), BERT and other transformer-based methods are sensitive to the context in which a token (e.g., word) appears. Unlike a dictionary (and like static embedding methods), the BERT model assigns each token a dense vector, where tokens more similar to one another have more similar vectors. If a dictionary did not contain the word "wonderful," it would not contribute to a paragraph's sentiment score. The advantage of an embedding model is that it has learned that "wonderful" is similar to other positive words like "amazing" and "awesome," which are all positively valenced, and thus, it accounts for any valenced word without the need of a pre-built word dictionary. Unlike static embeddings, however, the BERT embeddings for individual tokens change depending on the context. For example, a static embedding would represent "taxes" using the same vector, whether it was preceded by the word "high" (negative valence) or "low" (positive valence). Indeed, a naive model may even interpret the word "high" as more positive than "low." BERT will represent the token "taxes" differently depending on which of these two adjectives precedes it (as well as other words that precede and succeed it). These contextual relationships allow BERT to better understand the sentiment of a sentence and provide a more nuanced label. Ultimately, each text snippet is assigned a score on a scale from 0 (most negative) to 1 (most positive) based on a weighted average of its negative, neutral, and positive scores as predicted by the pre-trained model.[8] To facilitate comparisons between speeches that do and do not reference the opposition in a standard regression framework, I use the same model to code the sentiment of all words in paragraphs that do not contain a partisan reference and only the extracted snippet in paragraphs that reference the opposition.

To what extent is this classifier effective? To highlight face validity, I present five out-party-referencing paragraphs and their associated scores in Table 2 from more positive to more negative. I present the entire paragraph and bold the contextually relevant portion

[8]These scores are computed on the text snippets, including placeholders for party references, which biases the scores slightly upwards on average as political words often have negative valence in these models.

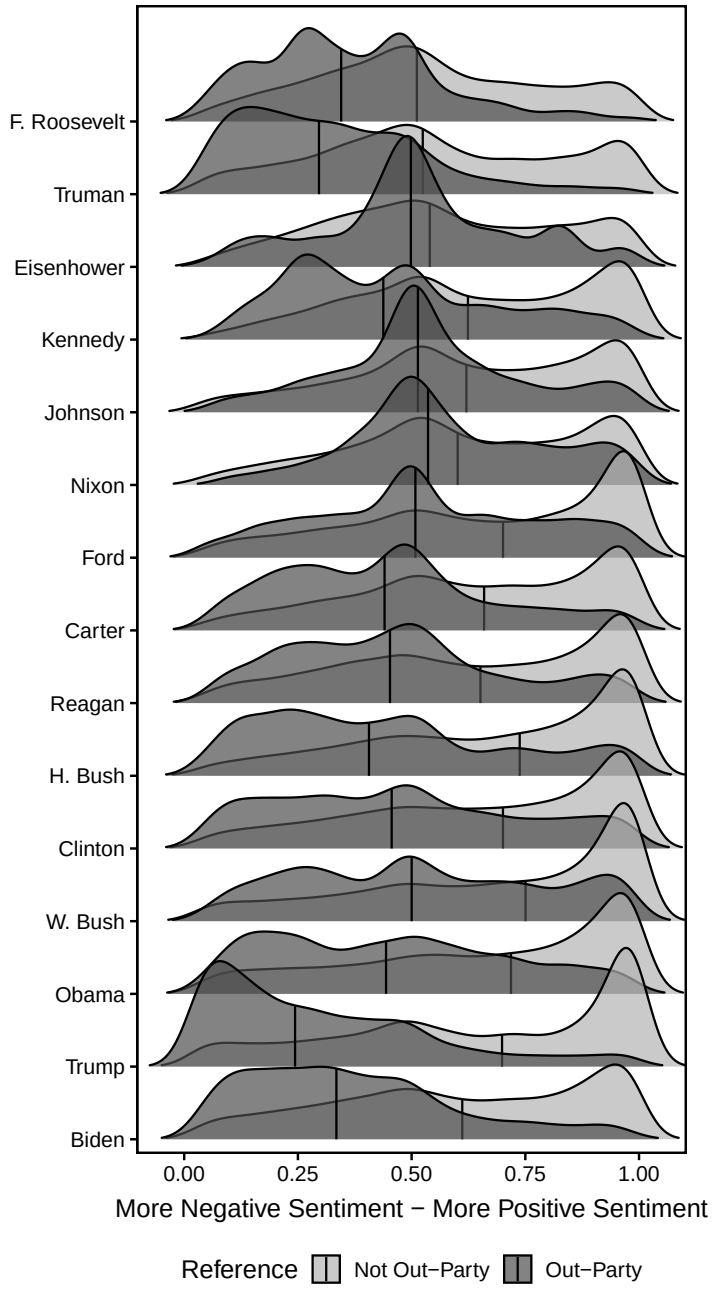
extracted by the GPT model. First, the advantages of this GPT procedure are clear. Although imperfect and stochastic, it tends to perform well at isolating the relevant portions of the text. This advantage is particularly clear in some of the more negatively-scored paragraphs. In the fourth paragraph from W. Bush, the GPT model extracts the criticism of the Democrats while removing other positive references like the president's evocation of small business owners and his support for the Republican candidate. The BERT sentiment model also provides a fairly low sentiment score as it understands the negative valence of raising taxes despite the lack of negative words in the sentence. Similarly, in the long Trump paragraph, the model extracts the specific Democratic criticism while ignoring the tangent about Michael Jackson as well as positive contrasts with the Republican party. This two step approach also correctly ascribes positive valence to the first two references and neutral valence to the third. Ultimately, these examples demonstrate face validity of this approach.

To assess performance quantitatively, I hand-coded a small set of randomly sampled out-party referencing paragraphs and compared them to the machine generated labels (see Appendix A.4).[9] The accuracy score is 0.66. Given that I structured my validation as choosing between three categories (positive, negative, and neutral), a random guess would be accurate 33% of the time while guessing the most prevalent category (negative references) would be accurate 44% of the time. Thus, this approach yields a substantial improvement over baseline. Using the entire paragraph rather than the GPT-extracted snippet also produces a lower, but still improved, accuracy of 0.60. With that in mind, I proceed to descriptive statistics.

I visualize the sentiment of presidential speech over time in Figure 1. Each row represents the distribution of sentiment across paragraphs for each president, with out-party referencing paragraphs in dark gray and all other paragraphs in light gray. First, as ex-

[9] I assigned my out-party reference sentiment label by reading the entire paragraph, not just the GPT-extracted portion. This method provides a more robust coding of the sentiment that incorporates both GPT error and BERT labeling error.

Figure 1: Sentiment of Presidential Speech Paragraphs



Note: Density plot of presidential paragraph sentiment. Sentiment of paragraphs that (do not) contain out-party references are in dark (light) gray. Vertical lines are the distribution medians. Although out-party references are consistently more negative, these paragraphs are more negative for presidents in more competitive congressional environments. They have become increasingly negative over time, even while other presidential rhetoric has become more positive.

Table 2: Sentiment of Paragraph Excerpts Referencing the Out-Party

President	Text	Sentiment
Clinton	That is the challenge of the 21st century. That is why I've asked the Congress to pass this antiterrorism legislation. And before he gets here, **I thank Senator Dole for committing to pass that bill and put it on my desk by the end of the month. It was a good and noble thing and a great gesture.** I thank him for that.	0.99
Obama	Now, to their credit, **one vision has been presented and championed by Republicans in the House of Representatives and embraced by several of their party's Presidential candidates. It's a plan that aims to reduce our deficit by $4 trillion over the next 10 years, and one that addresses the challenge of Medicare and Medicaid in the years after that.**	0.81
Biden	By the way, you've got a—**you've got a Republican leader in the United States Senate.** I was able to work out something with Intel. They're going to provide for over 7,000 jobs in this State, out of Columbus, making computer chips.	0.47
W. Bush	If you're a small-business owner who wants to pass on your life's work to your children and grandchildren, **the Democrats want to raise your taxes**. If you're a small-business owner, you better vote for Mike Sodrel to make sure your taxes stay low.	0.29
Trump	You've seen that, right? I had not heard that. You hear "late-term abortion." You never heard that. But the governor of Virginia, the one that thinks he's Michael Jackson—the one whose wife stopped him, whose wife from trying to imitate Michael Jackson moonwalking. Now one thing we know, he's not gonna be Michael. There's no, there's nobody, there's nobody that can moonwalk like Michael. See. He got very lucky. That would have been the end if he would've done that. But **the Democrats champion Planned Parenthood, an organization founded on racism that continues to target the Black community.** In the Republican party, we believe in protecting all Black lives, including the unborn. We believe that every child, of every race, born and unborn, is made in the holy image of God. Republicans believe that all human life is sacred.	0.13

Note: Excerpts from more positive and negative paragraphs referencing the out-party. Text is presented in its original form for readability, but sentiment is computed on uncased text. Italicized portions indicate the OpenAI-extracted contextually relevant portions on which sentiment is computed.

pected, paragraphs containing opposition references are more negative than those not containing opposition references. Truman is, again, an outlier, but his negativity is rivaled by more recent polarized, presidents—especially Biden and Trump. The mid-twentieth century, when massive Democratic congressional majorities were the norm, stands out as a period of relative positivity toward the opposition. This trend toward out-party nega-

tivity is not a product of presidents getting more negative over time. Indeed, presidents are getting more negative toward the out-party even as their other rhetoric becomes more positive. These descriptives comport with my expectations regarding presidential negative partisanship, and I test my hypotheses more formally in the following section.

Empirical Strategy

The summary statistics and figures in the previous section provide descriptive evidence of presidential negative partisanship when presidents prioritize electioneering over legislating. To test the argument formally, I conduct a series of correlational analyses using ordinary least squares regression. To get additional leverage on this question, I also present evidence from a quantitative case study focusing on changes in President Obama's rhetoric when Democrats gained, and then lost, a filibuster-proof Senate majority in the 111th (2009-2010) Congress.

First, I focus on how often presidents invoke the out-party. To do so, I define my dependent variable as the number of out-party (i.e., party, past predecessor, and congressional leader) references per 1,000 words at the speech level. To test the congressional majorities hypothesis, I follow Lee's (2016) periodization of intense *Majority Competition*. This variable takes on a value of 1 for the 80th–84th Congresses (1947–1956) and the 97th Congress and beyond (1981–2024), and 0 otherwise. To test the divided government hypothesis, I create a variable, *Divided Government*, that takes on a value of 1 any time government is not fully unified, and 0 otherwise. Finally, to test the electoral timing hypothesis, I code a *Major Election* period as 1 every day between Labor Day and Election Day of a midterm or presidential re-election year, and 0 otherwise. The coefficients on all of these variables should be positive if presidents reference the out-party as I expect.

Second, I investigate the correlation between opposition references, the aforementioned independent variables, and the sentiment of those references. Here, the depen-

dent variable is a paragraph-level measure of sentiment as previously described where more positive (negative) values indicate more positive (negative) sentiment. I interact each of the independent variables with the total number of references per 1,000 words at the paragraph level and include all constitutive terms. To account for correlation across speeches, I cluster standard errors at the speech-level. Here, the marginal effect of an additional out-party reference, conditional on each independent variable, should be negative. That is, during periods of majority competition, divided government, and major elections, additional opposition references should be associated with more negative presidential rhetoric.

My models include a series of controls: the president's approval rating in the most recent Gallup survey,[10] whether a major war was occurring,[11] whether it is one of the president's first 100 days in office,[12] the president's term, and month fixed effects to account for seasonality. Models that include the *Majority Competition* variable include the president's party. Otherwise, I include president fixed effects, allowing me to examine within-presidency changes in references and sentiment as a function of the relevant independent variables.

Results

In Table 3, I test my core hypotheses. Column 1 presents the most basic test of the argument. The first row, Majority Competition, considers whether presidents operating in more competitive (and thus, less legislative) congressional contexts act more like negative partisans. The positive and statistically significant coefficient indicates that they do. On average, presidents in these competitive contexts reference the opposition about 0.17

[10] As Gallup polling did not begin until the 1940s, some Roosevelt observations are dropped.

[11] These dates come from Howell and Rogowski (2013). Although they do not include an end-date for the post–9/11 wars, I count the "end" of these conflicts after President Bush delivers his "Mission Accomplished" speech in May of 2003 and the wars became more divisive.

[12] Truman, Johnson, and Ford are not assigned a first 100 days as they were un-elected.

times more per 1,000 words, or once per every 6,000 words. Similarly, presidents with divided government (as compared to fully unified government) make about 0.07 additional opposition references per 1,000 words. Finally, during election season, presidents deliver over half an additional reference per 1,000 words. Substantively, these effect sizes probably understate the degree to which presidents target the out-party. A single reference would suggest that, at the very least, an entire paragraph is allocated to out-party discussion. Together, all three of these coefficients are consistent with the theory of presidential negative partisanship: presidents facing legislative constraints increasingly reference the opposition party.

In column 2, I add president fixed effects. Here, we can see that the divided government and major elections coefficients continue to be positive and statistically significant *within* presidencies. For example, an individual president who experiences both unified and divided government is expected to invoke the opposition an additional 0.21 times per 1,000 words in divided government as compared to unified government. Given concerns about references to opposition presidents and leaders erroneously capturing incorrect references (e.g., Hillary rather than Bill Clinton), in column 3, I re-run the model in column 2 using only references to the opposition party (not presidents or leaders). Finally, in column 4, I re-rerun the model in column 2 excluding Truman, a clear outlier. The results hold in both of these alternative specifications. Without over-interpreting a control variable, I note that presidential approval is consistently negative and statistically significant. That presidents invoke the opposition at lower rates when they are popular is consistent with research about presidents' legislative success and high approval ratings (Barrett and Eshbaugh-Soha 2007; Canes-Wrone and de Marchi 2002). Across all five specifications, I show that presidents increasingly invoke the out-party when congressional competition increases, when government is divided, and when major elections approach.

However, my theory is not only about volume, but also, valence. It could be the case, for example, that presidents reference the opposition more positively during divided gov-

Table 3: Presidential Out-Party References During Congressional Competition, Divided Government, Elections

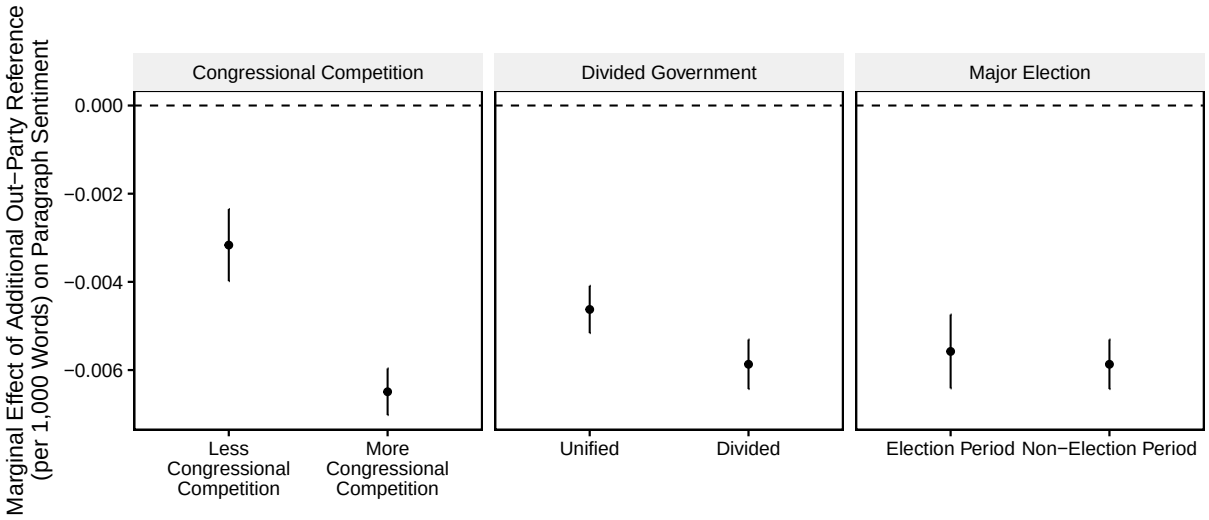
DV: Out-Party References per 1,000 Words	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Majority Competition (80–84th, 97–118th)	0.174*** (0.024)			
Divided Government	0.072*** (0.022)	0.207*** (0.028)	0.174*** (0.021)	0.121*** (0.028)
Major Election Season	0.531*** (0.038)	0.562*** (0.038)	0.547*** (0.029)	0.540*** (0.037)
Republican	−0.145*** (0.020)			
Presidential Approval	−0.014*** (0.001)	−0.007*** (0.001)	−0.007*** (0.001)	−0.004*** (0.001)
Major War	0.113*** (0.032)	0.015 (0.041)	−0.010 (0.031)	−0.035 (0.044)
First 100 Days	0.048 (0.053)	0.060 (0.054)	−0.011 (0.041)	−0.006 (0.052)
Term	−0.147*** (0.020)	−0.045+ (0.025)	−0.015 (0.019)	0.000 (0.025)
Fixed Effects				
President		✓	✓	✓
Month	✓	✓	✓	✓
Num.Obs.	26,954	26,954	26,954	26,028
R2 Adj.	0.036	0.054	0.065	0.044
R2 Within Adj.	0.023	0.012	0.019	0.009

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Note: Coefficients are from ordinary least squares models where the dependent variable is the number of references to the presidential out-party per 1,000 words in a presidential speech. Models 1 and 2 are fit on the entire corpus using the dependent variable as described in the previous sections. In model 3, the dependent variable is a subset of the original, focusing only on references to the opposition party (not leaders or past presidents). Model 4 excludes Truman, with the original dependent variable.

ernment in an effort to produce compromise legislation. Alternatively, as I argue, they may attack the opposition to mobilize their party at the expense of legislative gain. I run a series of similar models interacting the number of references with the key independent variables from Table 3. These are presented in Table B.1. Here, I focus on the marginal effect of an additional out-party reference (per 1,000 words) as I vary key independent

Figure 2: Marginal Effects of Out-Party References on the Sentiment of Presidential Speech Paragraphs



Note: Presidential references to the opposition are more negative for presidents in competitive congressional environments and during divided government. More negative (positive) values indicate more negative (positive) sentiment. Marginal effects in the left panel do not include president fixed effects and are produced from the model in column 1, Table B1. Marginal effects in the middle and right panel use president fixed effects and are produced from the model in column 2, Table B1.

variables.

In the left-most panel, I present the marginal effect of the additional reference on sentiment for presidents serving in more and less competitive congressional environments. When a president experiences less competition, an additional opposition reference is associated with rhetoric that is -0.003 points more negative. Presidents who experience more competition, and thus more difficult legislative environments, do not seem to reach out to the opposition. Each additional reference is associated with an 0.004 decrease in sentiment—more than a doubling of negative sentiment. In the second panel, I conduct a similar exercise for divided versus unified government (with fixed effects, meaning variation comes from presidents who experience institutional variation, within-presidency). Opposition references are associated with more negativity at the paragraph-level, irrespective of institutional control, but references are associated with even more negativity during divided government. Again, presidents do not seem to be engaging in outreach

when the legislative going gets tough. Finally, references are associated with no more or less negativity during or outside of major election periods, in contrast to the major elections hypothesis. Ultimately, increasing negativity at elections comes from additional references, but they are no more negative on average. Substantive effect size is difficult to interpret, but a 0.003 change in sentiment is equivalent to an increase in positive sentiment resulting from a 3 point approval gain. In today's polarized political environment with stable approval ratings, three points is realistic but large. Thus, these effect sizes are generally substantive but not massive.

To summarize: presidents evoke the out-party more often when legislating is difficult. They reference the out-party more, and more negatively, when congressional majorities are more tenuous, and when government is divided. Presidential references to the opposition become no more negative during major elections, but they do increase and are fairly negative at baseline. Further, these plots demonstrate that *in no instance* is referencing the opposition party associated with *more positive* presidential rhetoric. It appears that the primary way presidents appeal to the opposition is by *not* talking about them, not by speaking about them more favorably (cf. Noble 2024). Taken together, these results provide support for the argument that presidents act like negative partisans when legislating becomes difficult and when electoral considerations take center stage.

A Quantitative Case Study: Obama's 2009 Senate Super-Majority

To this point, I have focused on slow-moving and regularly occurring environmental variables to test the relationship between legislative and electoral constraints and presidential negative partisanship. However, the argument is broadly about presidential prospects for legislating and whether strategic disagreement from the out-party (Gilmour 1995) leads presidents to focus on negative partisanship and messaging over legislating. Here, I provide additional evidence in favor of the theory through a case study analyzing how President Obama's rhetoric changed in response to unexpectedly gaining, then

losing, a filibuster-proof Senate super-majority in the 111th (2009-2010) Congress. In line with my argument, I find that Obama references Republicans more, and more negatively, after the brief period in which Democrats controlled 60 Senate seats. These results are consistent with the idea that presidents engage in negative partisanship, rather than bipartisan outreach, when legislatively constrained.

The Context

In 2008, when Barack Obama won the presidential election, Democrats retained control of both chambers of Congress—increasing their margins to 257 House seats and 58 effective seats in the Senate (56 Democrats and 2 Independents caucusing with Democrats). However, the contest between Al Franken (D) and Norm Coleman (R) for Minnesota's seat was too close to call. Although Franken led, Coleman challenged the result, leading to a lengthy court battle. During this period, Arlen Specter (R-PA) unexpectedly switched parties on April 28, 2009. Franken was then declared the victor on June 30, 2009, officially giving Democrats their 60-seat super-majority, allowing them to unilaterally overcome any Republican filibuster.

During the 2009 session, President Obama and Democrats focused on developing and passing what would become the Affordable Care Act. Although the president was not naive, recognizing that the opposition had strategic incentives to oppose the package, he did engage in good faith negotiation with the few key Republicans—despite his super-majority. As summer wore on, however, the president saw that these effort were failing, writing in his memoir that, [Senator Max Baucus's] optimism that he could produce a bipartisan bill began to look delusional." (Obama 2020). Further complications followed. On August 25, 2009, Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA) passed away. A new democratic senator was appointed to take his place, and a special election was scheduled for January 19, 2010. During this brief period of Democratic control, the party passed the Affordable Care Act through the House and Senate with no Republican support. As lawmakers returned

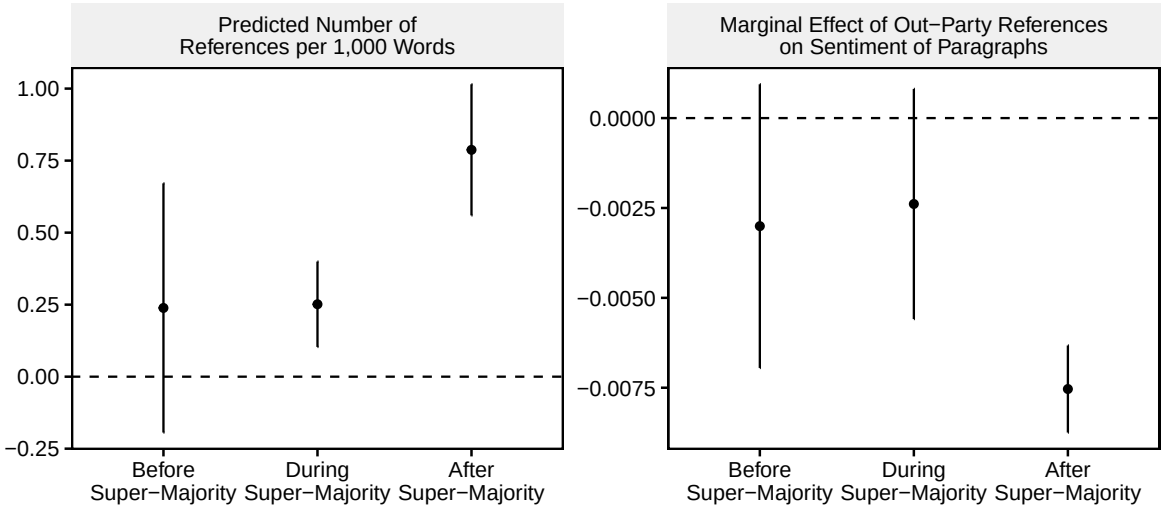
from Christmas break, they needed to reconcile the two versions of the bill by passing the same legislation through both chambers. Ultimately, this effort would be stymied by Scott Brown's (R-MA) unexpected victory in the special election. With only 59 Senators, Democrats could no longer unilaterally overcome a Republican filibuster.

The president could have given up, tried to restart the process with more Republican input (however unlikely), or tried other procedural tactics to pass the legislation without Republican support. The president chose the latter, using the reconciliation process to pass the bill through the Senate with a simple majority. As this process played out, the president attacked Republicans rather than trying to engage them in good faith. He held two televised events in which he took questions from Republicans about the bill and listened to their proposals. Although these events may have had the veneer of bipartisanship, in his memoir, the president noted, "it was clear throughout both sessions that nothing I said was going to have the slightest impact on Republican behavior...What mattered was how the two events served to reinvigorate House Democrats, reminding them that we were on the right side of the healthcare issue" (Obama 2020, 463)—that is, mobilization. Rather than work with the opposition, the president tried to rally co-partisans through these public events. He also spent his time talking to hesitant Democratic lawmakers, arguing that "a 'no' vote was more likely to turn off Democrats than it was to win over Republicans and independents" (Obama 2020, 465). Ultimately, the challenge of legislating only encouraged the president to work harder to marshal his own side rather than reach out to the opposition—in contrast to his more bipartisan efforts when his party held 60 seats.

Obama Attacks Republicans After Losing the 60th Seat

My theory of presidential negative partisanship would suggest that the loss of the 60th seat, combined with the recalcitrance of Republicans, would prompt President Obama to act more like a negative partisan after January 20, 2010, than during the period in which

Figure 3: Effects of Out-Party References on the Number and Sentiment of Obama Opposition References, 111th Congress



Note: President Obama's references to Republicans increased, and were more negative, after losing the 60-seat Senate majority. The predicted number of references were generated from the model Table B2, column 1; the sentiment marginal effects are produced by the model in column 2.

he controlled 60 seats. To test this, I run similar models to those in the previous section focused specifically on the 111th Congress. I create a trichotomous indicator for whether the date is before July 1, 2009 (the first day after Franken was declared the winner), after January 19, 2010 (the date Scott Brown won the special election), or in between, when Democrats effectively held a filibuster proof majority. To support my hypotheses, the president should reference Republicans more, and more negatively, outside of the brief filibuster-proof window between July 1, 2009 and January 19, 2010.

I provide evidence of these effects in Figure 3 (models are in Table B2). In the left panel, I present the predicted number of out-party references per 1,000 words at three key periods: before the 60-seat super-majority, during, and after. Both before and during that period, President Obama made about 0.25 references to the out-party per 1,000 words. However, after losing the 60th seat, the president tripled the number of references made per 1,000 words. As shown in the right panel, these references were not polite entreaties

for cooperation. The sentiment associated with each additional reference per 1,000 words was also about three times more negative during this period. Consistent with the underlying argument, President Obama was *less* likely to talk about Republicans when he had more legislative influence. After losing this influence, Obama was more likely to reference Republicans and did so in an increasingly negative manner, consistent with the idea of presidential negative partisanship and at odds with the idea of bipartisan consensus-building.

Presidential Negative Appeals Shape Co-Partisan Attitudes

I have shown that presidents go public as negative partisans when they perceive lower odds of legislative success. But do these appeals shape public attitudes toward the opposition as implied by my theory? Building on literature showing the polarizing power of out-party cues (e.g., Nicholson 2012; Noble 2024), I hypothesize that presidential negative partisanship decreases presidential co-partisans' approval of the out-party.

To test this hypothesis, I leverage monthly survey data from The American Panel Survey (TAPS), fielded by the Weidenbaum Center on the Economy, Government, and Public Policy at Washington University in St. Louis.[13] For each month between January 2012 and October 2017,[14] respondents were asked "Do you approve or disapprove of the way the following are doing their jobs?" Democrats in Washington and Republicans in Washington are among the groups respondents were asked to evaluate on a four point scale from "Strongly Approve" (4) to "Strongly Disapprove" (1). I used respondents' entry wave party identification (Democrat or Republican, including leaners) to determine which evaluation would serve as their approval of the out-party.[15] Thus, for Democrats (Republicans), their monthly four-point rating of Republicans (Democrats) in Washing-

[13]For more detail see `https://wc.wustl.edu/american-panel-survey`.

[14]Data for some months in 2017 are not available.

[15]Respondents were regularly asked with which party they identified. I use only the entry wave response to avoid post-treatment bias.

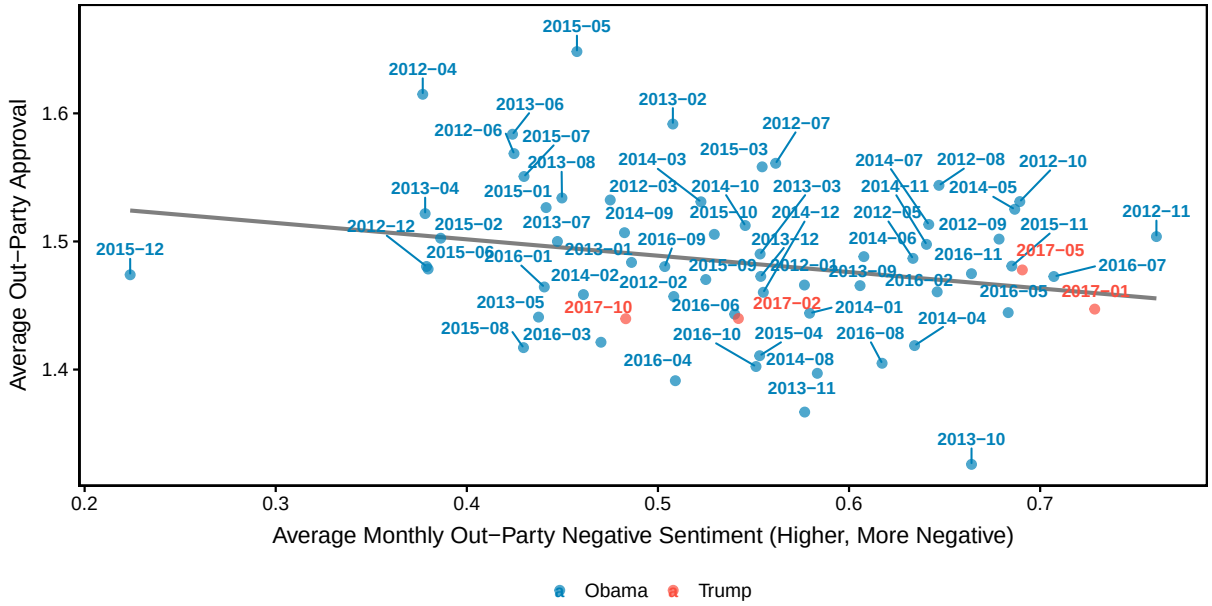
ton serves as the dependent variable in this analysis. The average rating is 1.48 with a standard deviation of 0.67.

My independent variable is the average sentiment of all presidential speech-paragraphs that reference the out-party at least once in a given month. As surveys are fielded early in the month and respondents may not have been treated with contemporaneous rhetoric, I lag this variable by a single month. Thus, party evaluations in e.g., February 2012 are empirically driven by presidential negative partisanship from January 2012. To facilitate interpretation, I reverse code this variable such that higher values are indicative of more negative sentiment. I expect the relationship between this independent variable and my dependent variable to be negative for presidential co-partisans: more negative sentiment should correlate with lower out-party approval ratings.

Before turning to my empirical results, in Figure 4, I plot the bivariate relationship between negative out-party sentiment on the x-axis and average out-party approval among the presidents' co-partisan on the y-axis. These two variables are negatively correlated as anticipated (-0.22). This plot also reveals that presidential negative partisanship is not colinear with time.

Given the panel nature of my data, I include respondent fixed effects, allowing me to assess within-subject change in out-party approval as presidential negative partisanship varies. I also control for lagged sentiment of all other paragraphs and whether it is the September, October, or November of an election year (2012, 2014, 2016). I cluster standard errors at the respondent level and the month-year level, given the level of treatment assignment. I model this relationship using ordinary least squares, regressing out-party approval on the interaction between presidential co-partisanship and lagged presidential negative partisanship as well as the constitutive terms. I present marginal effects in Table 5 (the model can be found in Appendix C.1). On the left, I find that when presidents evoke the opposition using more negative language, co-partisan voters reduce their approval of that party. This result points toward the efficacy of presidential negative partisanship.

Figure 4: Effects of Presidential Negative Partisanship on Out-Party Approval

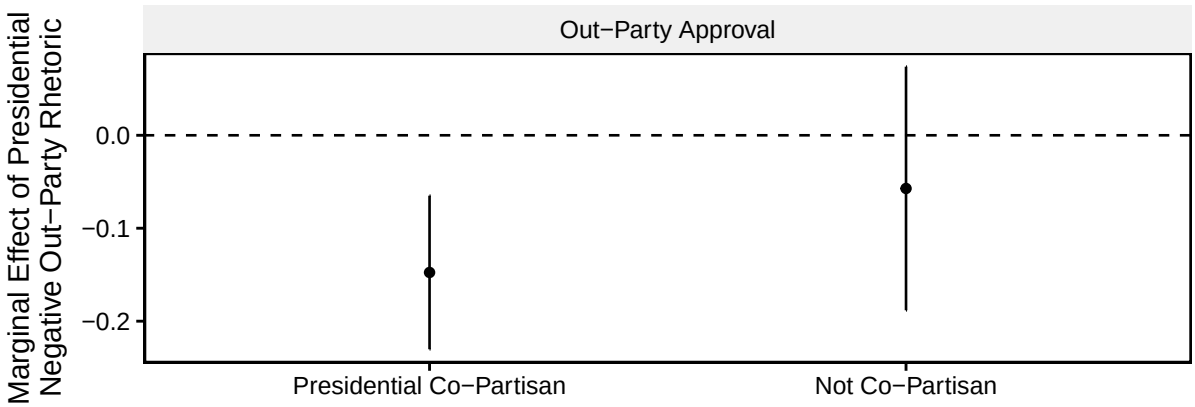


Note: Presidential negative partisanship is negatively correlated with out-party approval (-0.23). The x-axis is the average of all paragraphs referencing the opposition party in the prior month, where higher values indicate more negative sentiment. The y-axis is the average opposite-party approval rating presidential co-partisans provided to the question "Do you approve or disapprove of the way the [Democrats/Republicans in Washington] are doing their jobs?" on a 1-4 scale.

Although presidents are theoretically targeting co-partisans with this rhetoric, I have also argued that it would be detrimental to cross-party cooperation. Here, the coefficient is indeed negative, but it is not statistically significant.

Although this result is consistent with the behavioral microfoundations of my theory, it comes with limitations. First, this survey was fielded almost entirely during the Obama administration. That means we cannot draw conclusions about presidential negative partisanship during other eras of this study. Additionally, there are four months from the Trump administration, but in general, this limits the generalizabiltiy to both parties. Granted, there is no theoretical reason to suspect this relationship would not hold symmetrically for Republicans given more data (Nicholson 2012). Second, the panel nature of the data and lagged dependent variable allow for the assessment of within-subject

Figure 5: Marginal Effect of Presidential Negative Partisanship on Out-Party Approval



Note: President's negative out-party references are associated with lower approval of the out-party among co-partisans. Marginal effects are produced by the model in column 1 of Table C1.

change over time. However, scholars should consider experimental approaches to gauge this relationship in a causal way.

Overall, this result provides behavioral justification for the observational patterns in presidential negative partisanship. When presidents evoke the out-party negatively, they shape co-partisan attitudes toward the opposition—an outcome that should help presidents electorally, even if not in the legislative arena.

Conclusion

In this paper, I argue that when presidents believe they are unlikely to succeed in the legislative arena, they go public as negative partisans to pursue electoral goals. Presidents want to secure their historical legacy, which is driven by their policy achievements (Howell and Moe 2020). However, if Congress is an unwilling governing partner, presidents must work toward electing a new Congress. They do so through blame game rhetoric and message politics, mobilizing voters through the use of negative partisan appeals. First, I collect a corpus of presidential rhetoric from 1993–2024 and show that presidents are

more likely to reference the opposition more, and more negatively, when congressional competition is higher and when government is divided. I provide further support for this argument by showing that when Democrats lose their filibuster-proof Senate majority in 2010, President Obama references Republicans more, and more negatively—consistent with the theory. Finally, I show that this rhetoric has a behavioral impact on voters. Using panel survey data from 2012–2017, I show that when presidents use more negative partisan rhetoric, co-partisan voters decrease their approval of the opposition party.

This research contributes to our understanding of message politics and institutional negative partisanship (Groseclose and McCarty 2001; Lee 2016; Noble 2024), highlighting how congressional context conditions how presidents go public (Kernell 1997). These results also help resolve a puzzle of presidential leadership (Edwards 2003): although presidential speeches rarely change public policy attitudes, president still go public to shape attitudes toward the parties. This is not a criticism of extant literature. Like theories of congressional behavior developed during the "Textbook Congress" era, traditional theories of going public also came to prominence during an unusual ebb in polarization and congressional competition, when presidents were viewed as national leaders (Dearborn 2021) and had more policy influence.

Although this study has considered the macro-factors that contribute to presidential negative partisanship, future work could consider more dynamic measures of the legislative process. Although my case study of the 111th Congress is a first step, subsequent studies could attempt to match the topics of presidential speeches with bills moving through Congress or the level of disagreement in congressional speech. We might expect presidential negative partisanship to increase when the bills presidents champion face long odds of success or when polarization in congressional rhetoric increases. Second, I have provided some evidence of the behavioral consequences of presidential negative partisanship, but there are clear limits to their generalizability and causality. Future work could adopt an experimental framework to causally identify the behavioral effects

of presidential negative partisanship.

Even as presidents promise unity, they seem unable to resit negative partisan rhetoric. I show that presidential negative partisanship is not a personal failing of our leaders, but rather, a strategic and goal-oriented response to the institutional context. This shift advantages the president's party in the electoral arena but comes at the cost of the reputation of the office and officeholder. When presidents act like negative partisans, they surely reinforce their role as a party leader (Jacobson 2019), contribute to the focus on politics over policy, and contribute to mass polarization and political disaffection.

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Supplementary Information

Presidential Negative Partisanship

Contents

A Construction of the Corpus and Measures

A.1 Corpus Construction

To create my corpus of presidential speeches, I scrape documents on the American Presidency Project Website, hosted by UC Santa Barbara (Woolley and Peters N.d.) at `https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/`. The collection of this corpus proceeded in waves. In the first wave, I collected all speeches tagged as `Spoken Addresses and Remarks` and `Miscellaneous Remarks`. In subsequent collection waves, these categories had been combined into a single `Spoken Addresses and Remarks` category, which I collected. In addition to adding new documents, the authors of the project may update the site, recategorize documents, and change attributes. As such, the data I collected may include or exclude documents that the webhosts changed after my initial collection efforts.

In the final corpus, I exclude speeches given before the president's first day in office, those given during their lame duck period or after, and eulogies. For presidents who die in office, I exclude speeches given on their final day in office which may have been prepared but not delivered.

A.2 Dependent Variable Keywords

To identify party references, I identify all speeches that contain at least one of the following keywords: `democrat`, `democrats`, or `republicans`. These words are preceded and followed by a regex word boundary character, `\b`, to avoid false positives. I also search for all of the following keywords preceded by the word `democratic` or `republican`: `party`, `ticket`, `congress`, `president`, `administration`, `leadership`, `leader`, `platform`, `governor`, `candidate`, `convention`, `senator`, `victory`, `congressman`, `senate`, `majority`, `house`, `member`, `committee`, `congressmen`, `nominee`, `side`, `caucus`, `congressional`, `controlled`, `delegation`, `issue`, `fundraiser`, `opposition`, `program`, `primary`, `votes`, `team`, `chair`, `congresses`, `chairman`, `speaker`, `national`, `and`, and `or`. These words are not followed by a regex word boundary character to capture plurals and possessives.

To identify references to predecessors, I search for references to the last names of the two presidents of the opposite party serving before the sitting president. To identify references to congressional leaders, I search for the last name of any individual who served as the Speaker of the House, minority floor leader, or Senate majority or minority leader during the Congress in which a speech was delivered.[1] The names of these individuals

[1] In the 79th and 80th Congresses, the Republican floor leader was Wallace H. White Jr. Here, I manually screen each speech that references "White" to ensure I don't capture false positives like White House.

come from Heitshusen (2019) through 2019 and were updated by the author thereafter.

A.3 GPT Method to Extract References

To instruct the GPT model to extract the relevant text, I progrmatically called the OpenAI API `GPT-4o-mini` model and fed it the below instructions. To focus the model on the references, I replaced each out-party reference in the text with a unique placeholder that begins with 'zzoutref_', ensuring it would not be confused for any other piece of text. After the model extracted relevant portions, they were returned as a column of a data frame. The named entities were not replaced before conducting sentiment analysis. This biases sentiment up on average.

> Given the following text from political speeches, extract the parts that are directly relevant to or describe the entity represented by 'zzoutref' (with trailing text and numbers you can ignore e.g., zzoutref_pres10). The entity described by 'zzoutref' is always the opposition political party or a member of the opposition party. You can use this information to inform your judgment of what should or should not be included.
>
> Note that the extracted text will be used to perform sentiment analysis with the goal of predicting the speaker's stance toward 'zzoutref'. It is crucial to extract all parts of the text directly relevant to 'zzoutref' and the surrounding context to accurately assess the speaker's view. However, balance is key: include enough context to determine stance without including irrelevant content that might skew the sentiment analysis. It is also very important to note that many statements may compare and contrast 'zzoutref' with the speaker or another group. The pieces relevant to our understanding of the stance toward 'zzoutref' should be captured, but be very careful not to include the parts of the statement where the speaker is speaking about themselves or another group, even if it means breaking the sentence when you return extracted text.
>
> Follow these guidelines strictly:
>
> 1. **High Relevance (Always Include):**
>
>   - Text that directly mentions 'zzoutref'. You must **always** include the 'zzoutref' reference in your extracted text.

- Text that clearly refers to the same entity using pronouns (they, them) or descriptive phrases (these people, the opposition) immediately before or after a mention of 'zzoutref'.
- If a reference to 'zzoutref' spans multiple sentences, include all relevant text that forms part of that reference.

2. **Medium Relevance (Include if directly connected):**

   - Text that provides important context about the actions, characteristics, or impact of 'zzoutref', even if 'zzoutref' is not directly mentioned.
   - Text that describes party or partisan politics as these may be relevant to our understanding of how 'zzoutref' should be thought of (perhaps in a positive, bipartisan manner or a negative partisan manner).
   - Text that describes ongoing debates or lawmaking if it is relevant to our understanding of 'zzoutref' either negatively (e.g., opposition, obstruction, delay) or positively (e.g., bipartisanship, compromise, cooperation).
   - Only include these if they are clearly about the same topic and do not represent deviations from 'zzoutref'.
   - Comparative statements that describe 'zzoutref' in relation to others, but **do not** include parts that are referring to the speaker or others.

3. **Low Relevance (Do Not Include):**

   - Sentences that introduce new topics or subjects not directly related to 'zzoutref'.
   - Personal anecdotes or tangential information that doesn't directly characterize or impact 'zzoutref'.

4. **General Instructions:**

   - If there are multiple 'zzoutref' mentions, consider them as referring to the same entity or group.
   - Maintain the original wording and order of the extracted text. **Do not** create any new content. Only maintain subsets of the original content. Include the trailing numbers when you return the 'zzoutref' reference (e.g., return 'zzoutref_13' **not** 'zzoutref') as it is important for internal tracking.

- Return the extracted text as a single, continuous string without any additional commentary or modifications.
- If in doubt about the relevance of a sentence, err on the side of exclusion.

Before returning the results, carefully analyze each sentence:

1. Identify the main subject of each sentence.
2. Determine if and how it relates to 'zzoutref'.
3. Assess its importance for understanding the speaker's stance toward 'zzoutref'.
4. If it's a comparative statement, include only the part that is directly relevant to 'zzoutref'.
5. You may need to break up sentences and return fragments depending on the context and nature of the text. You may also need to merge sentences or phrases that are not naturally connected if the intervening text is not relevant to 'zzoutref'.
6. Decide whether to include it based on the relevance guidelines above.

Remember, no matter what, you must **always** include the 'zzoutref' reference in your extracted text. Ignore any parts of the text that are not directly related to 'zzoutref' or crucial for understanding the speaker's stance toward 'zzoutref'.

Below are some examples with commentary to inform your decision-making:

Original Text 1: "I'd like to add a comment about a very important matter as well. It's ironic that on a day when we are making an announcement like this, I again have the responsibility to set the record straight because of false allegations made by the zzoutref_pres10 nominee for President, Governor Reagan."

You should extract: "It's ironic that on a day when we are making an announcement like this, I again have the responsibility to set the record straight because of false allegations made by the zzoutref_pres10 nominee for President, Governor Reagan."

Comments: The point about "adding a comment" is not relevant to the reference and should be excluded.

Original Text 2: "I want every American, every Member of Congress, every State official, everybody who works for a mayor or a city government to join me in putting this strategy to work. This is a national strategy, not a Federal strategy. I don't want it to become partisan in any way, shape, or form. This should unite us in America: people in the private sector, people in Government, people at the local level, people at the national level, zzinref and zzoutref_rep145, people who are inside this institution, and people who are beyond its walls. We have a common interest in saving our country. And all of us have a personal responsibility to pursue. This drug strategy we announce today is our attempt to be your partner and pursue our personal responsibility. And together, together we can do it."

You should extract: "I don't want it to become partisan in any way, shape, or form. This should unite us in America: people in the private sector, people in Government, people at the local level, people at the national level, zzinref and zzoutref_rep145, people who are inside this institution, and people who are beyond its walls. We have a common interest in saving our country. And together, together we can do it."

Comment: Here, some of the text preceding the reference is relevant to understanding the fact that the speaker wants zzoutref to work with them for the common good. Note too that some of the later text is excluded but the last point about working together is included because it helps us understand the context of what 'zzoutref_rep145' should do.

Original Text 3: "The zzoutref_rep14 Party should work with the zzinref Party to get rid of this. It is a bad precedent. We're spending more and more money on interest on the debt. It we don't balance the budget next year, we'll spend more on interest than we do on defense. This year, the budget would be in balance but for the interest we pay on the debt run up in the 12 years before I took office. And we've taken the deficit from $290 billion to $160 billion a year, and we ought to go all the way until we get the job done. America should invest in the future, not squander the present. And we should all be for that."

You should extract: "The zzoutref_rep14 Party should work with the zzinref Party to get rid of this. It is a bad precedent. We're spending more and more money on interest on the debt. It we don't balance the budget next year, we'll spend more on interest than we do on defense. This year, the budget would be in balance but for the interest we pay on the debt run up in the 12 years before I took office. And we've taken the deficit from $290 billion to $160 billion a year, and we ought to go all the way until we get the job done. America should invest in the future, not squander the present. And we should all be for that."

Comment: This is a tricky one! Here the entire paragraph is relevant for understanding why the speaker wants zzoutref_rep14 to work with them.

Original Text 4: "The zzoutref_lead1 talk tough, the liberal zzoutref_pres2, about crime. But let me tell you something: The other day I had a visit in the Oval Office from eight individuals, grassroots family men, all coming up there. They said, 'We are for you for President,' and they represented the Fraternal Order of Police of Little Rock, Arkansas. I was proud to have their support."

You should extract: "The zzoutref_lead1 talk tough, the liberal zzoutref_pres2, about crime."

Comments: This one is straightforward. After the speaker references zzoutref_lead1 and zzoutref_pres2, they move on to other irrelevant anecdotes.

Original Text 5: "Mr. Chairman, Commander Burdine, the zzoutref_dem4 Senator from Maine, distinguished guests, my fellow veterans and friends:"

You should extract: "the zzoutref_dem4 Senator from Maine"

Comments: This is a list of individuals so the additional information in the paragraph is not connected to the 'zzoutref_dem4'. Note that here you need to break up the sentence to return the relevant context.

Original Text 6: "At the end of the war the zzoutref_pres2 said we couldn't provide

60 million jobs. But we did it. We now have over 62 million people employed in this great country."

You should extract: "At the end of the war the zzoutref_pres2 said we couldn't provide 60 million jobs."

Comments: The speaker says this and then begins talking about their own achievements. The rest should not be included because it would make the sentiment positive when the reference to 'zzoutref_pres2' is negative.

Original Text 7: "When it comes to detaining terrorists, what's the zzoutref_dem26 answer?"

You should extract: "what's the zzoutref_dem26 answer"

Comments: This one is tricky! Here, the reference to terrorists is topical but not relevant to the 'zzoutref_dem26' reference. The relevant part is their answer, but that doesn't necessarily depend on the topic. The speaker could have just as easily have said "When it comes to lowering the debt," and so because it is a generic lead-in, it should not be captured.

Original Text 8: "This work has nothing to do with partisan politics—nothing at all. A great many of you are zzoutref_rep117, a good many are Democrats; quite a number do not belong regularly to one party or the other. We are not the least bit interested in the partisan side of this picture."

You should extract: "This work has nothing to do with partisan politics—nothing at all. A great many of you are zzoutref_rep117, a good many are Democrats; quite a number do not belong regularly to one party or the other."

Comments: Although the first sentence is not a direct reference to 'zzoutref_rep117', the speaker mentioning partisan politics is relevant to our understanding of how they think about 'zzoutref_rep117'.

Text: {text}

Extracted relevant text:

A.4 Sentiment Accuracy

To assess accuracy, I randomly sampled 230 paragraphs that referenced the opposition party. I coded statements as negative, neutral, or positive blind to their machine-labeled score. I then trichotomized the machine-labled, continuous measure into terciles where those below 0.33 were coded as negative, at or above 0.66 as positive, and in between as neutral. Below are the confusion matrices for the GPT-extracted paragraphs (accuracy of 0.66) and full paragraphs (accuracy of 0.60). Both accuracy scores well exceed the 0.33 accuracy of a random guess and defaulting to negative, 0.44.

Table A1: Confusion Matrices for GPT-Extracted Paragraphs (Top) and Full Text (Bottom)

	Machine Labeled		
Hand-Coded	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Negative	66	23	12
Neutral	11	37	9
Positive	3	21	48

	Machine Labeled		
Hand-Coded	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Negative	59	24	18
Neutral	16	27	14
Positive	3	16	53

B Additional Empirical Results

B.1 Regression Results for Sentiment Analysis

In Table B1, I present regression results for a series of models examining paragraph-level sentiment. Column 1 is the baseline, interacting the number of out-party references per 1,000 words with the variables from Table 3, column 1 in the main text. The interaction terms show that an increase in presidents referencing the opposition is associated with more negative sentiment for presidents who experienced congressional competition and who served during divided government. Although speech is more negative during major elections, references themselves do not become more negative. These results generally hold across the remaining specifications.

In column 2, I use the fixed effects specification similar to Table 3, column 2. In column 3, I replicate the results in column 2 using sentiment computed on the entire paragraph rather than the GPT-extracted snippet. The results are quite similar. In column 4, I re-specify references as only references to the opposition party (not leaders or presidents). Here, major elections is positive and statistically significant. The instability of the coefficient on major elections likely reflects the fact that during elections, presidents often evoke opposition *voters* in a positive light but elected officials negatively.

Table B1: Regression Results for Sentiment Models

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Out-Party Ref. per 1,000 Words	−0.002***	−0.005***	−0.004***	
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	
Party Refs. Only				−0.006***
				(0.000)
Majority Competition (80–84th, 97–118th)	0.009***			
	(0.002)			
Out-Party Ref. x Majority Competition	−0.003***			
	(0.000)			
Divided Government	0.004+	0.006*	0.005*	0.005+
	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Out-Party Ref. x Divided Government	−0.001*	−0.001***	−0.001**	
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	
Major Election Season	−0.022***	−0.022***	−0.021***	−0.023***
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Out-Party Ref. x Major Election	0.000	0.000	0.000	
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	
Party Refs. Only x Divided Government				−0.001*
				(0.000)
Party Refs. Only x Major Elections				0.001**
				(0.001)
Republican	0.017***			
	(0.002)			
Presidential Approval	0.001***	0.001***	0.001***	0.001***
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Major War	−0.028***	−0.016***	−0.016***	−0.015***
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
First 100 Days	0.009+	0.007	0.007	0.006
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Term	0.002	0.010***	0.011***	0.011***
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Fixed Effects				
President		✓	✓	✓
Month	✓	✓	✓	✓
Num.Obs.	734,918	734,918	734,918	734,918
R2 Adj.	0.018	0.030	0.028	0.029
R2 Within Adj.	0.015	0.011	0.009	0.011

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Notes: Coefficients are from ordinary least squares models. The dependent variable is a measure of paragraph-level sentiment where more positive (negative) values are associated with more positive (negative) rhetoric. Standard errors are clustered at the speech-level.

B.2 Regression Results for Obama Case Study

In Table B2, I present results for the relationship between President Obama's filibuster-proof Senate super-majority and the number and sentiment of references to Republicans.

Table B2: Obama's Filibuster Proof Majority and Number, Sentiment of Opposition References

	DV: Party References	DV: Sentiment
	(1)	(2)
After Super-Majority	0.536***	−0.048**
	(0.146)	(0.018)
Before Super-Majority	−0.013	0.050
	(0.225)	(0.031)
Out-Party Ref. per 1,000 Words		−0.002
		(0.002)
Out-Party Ref. x After Super-Majority		−0.005**
		(0.002)
Out-Party Ref. x Before Super-Majority		−0.001
		(0.003)
Major Election Season	0.443**	−0.077***
	(0.141)	(0.013)
Presidential Approval	−0.004	−0.007**
	(0.017)	(0.002)
First 100 Days	0.051	0.011
	(0.159)	(0.021)
Intercept	0.449	1.004***
	(0.927)	(0.117)
Num.Obs.	968	26,077
R2 Adj.	0.075	0.018

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Note: Coefficients are from ordinary least squares models. In column 1, the dependent variable is the number of references to Republicans per 1,000 words in a presidential speech. The dependent variable in column 2 is a standardized measure of paragraph-level sentiment where more positive (negative) values are associated with more positive (negative) rhetoric. In this model, standard errors are clustered at the speech-level.

C Behavioral Results

In Table C1, column 1, I provide regression results used to produce the marginal effects in Figure 5. In column 2, I provide an alternative specification without an interaction in which I subset only to presidential co-partisans.

Table C1: Relationship Between Presidential Negative Partisanship and Out-Party Approval

	All Respondents	Co-Partisans
	(1)	(2)
Lagged Out-Party Sentiment (Reverse Coded)	−0.057	−0.131**
	(0.067)	(0.042)
Presidential Co-partisan	0.078*	
	(0.035)	
Lagged Sentiment x Presidential Co-Partisan	−0.090+	
	(0.048)	
Lagged Non-Reference Sentiment	0.185	0.198
	(0.149)	(0.168)
Election Season	0.018	0.019
	(0.013)	(0.013)
Respondent Fixed Effects	✓	✓
Num.Obs.	29,675	16,187
R2 Adj.	0.617	0.628
R2 Within Adj.	0.002	0.002

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Note: Coefficients are from ordinary least squares models where the dependent variable is a respondent's approval of the opposition party on a 4-point scale. Standard errors are clustered at the respondent and month-year level.

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