

Research Statement | Carlos Algara

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Research Agenda Overview

My research agenda centers on the capacity of citizens to evaluate the ideological representation provided by their political elites (the U.S. Congress, electoral candidates and political parties) and how these evaluations influence the institutional behavior of these elites, notably in the context of the United States Congress. Relatedly, I also investigate questions of how the relationship between citizens' policy preferences and political choices may be conditioned by non-political attitudes, such as white racial resentment. These topics have critical implications for the quality of democratic governance in the United States and the capacity of citizens to fulfill their responsibility as the principals within the republican framework. During my upcoming *APSA Congressional Fellowship* year on Capitol Hill, I will complement these quantitative analysis with qualitative observation, observing first-hand how U.S. Senators balance constituency-based ideological representation and their role in helping secure party-based collective ideological representation. This fellowship provides an opportunity to observe the strategic behavior of legislators and parties as they navigate the legislative process. Through the use of participant observation and elite interviewing, this fellowship will facilitate analysis of a book project assessing the nature of collective ideological representation in Congress.

The U.S. Congress & Citizen Perceptions of Representation

While there is broad consensus among scholars that contemporary American political parties do provide the public with a polarized set of policy, the literature is relatively silent on the implications this collective ideological representation has for citizen political evaluations. Traditionally, scholars tend to evaluate the quality of democratic ideological representation in the United States in dyadic terms. While this focus on dyadic local representation yields important insight into how well members of Congress represent the policy preferences of their constituents, this scholarly treatment ignores the nature of ideological representation provided by American legislative parties.

In my book project, I tackle this blind spot in the representation literature by focusing on how citizens evaluate the ideological representation provided by Congress and how these evaluations shape the political preferences of individual citizens. In the first chapter, currently under review, I explore the ability of citizens to evaluate congressional performance in ideological terms. I develop a theoretical framework positing that citizens are not only aware of the ideological difference between the congressional majority and minority party, but they take into account these difference and their own ideological preferences (in addition to partisanship) to evaluate congressional job performance. Using various policy and perceptual based latent scaling methods placing citizens and every member of Congress in the same ideological space, I find that not only do citizens have coherent ideological preferences, they use these preferences to evaluate their Congress. I find that, independent of partisan preference, citizens closer to the majority party in ideological proximity are more likely to approve of congressional job performance. These findings indicate that citizens possess the capacity to evaluate their collective legislatures in ideological terms and that a key source of citizen discontent with their Congress is rooted in rational dissatisfaction with the ideological nature of public policy. This chapter also highlights methodological strategies that can be used in the evaluation of representational theories placing citizens and elites (parties, legislators) in the same ideological space.

In subsequent chapters of this project, I turn to how perceptions of collective congressional performance influence citizen electoral preferences and individual propensity to participate in the electoral

process. Building off the framework presented in the motivating chapter, I present a *collective accountability* two-stage *negative voting* model positing that citizen approval of Congress motivates the propensity of citizens to engage in the electoral process and translates to electoral gains for the majority party congressional candidates. In the first stage, I turn to how congressional approval shapes citizen participation in the electoral process, the key mechanism driving democratic accountability. Presented at the 2017 APSA dissertation workshop on U.S. Congressional politics and using voter-validated large N survey data, I find that congressional approval takes on a form of *negative voting*, with congressional approval promoting a decline in voter turnout during both midterm and presidential election cycles. This decline in turnout is most pronounced among minority partisans and independents. In the second stage, I find that citizen approval of Congress translates to electoral gains for the majority party congressional candidates. Moreover, these positive assessments of congressional job performance provide increase electoral support for majority party candidates among minority partisans and independents. I confirm this *negative voting* at the aggregate-level using congressional district-level turnout data and a new set of dynamic MRP (multilevel regression with post-stratification) estimates of district congressional approval.

Other chapters will focus on the implications of *collective accountability* for candidate and party committee electoral strategies. Using data on campaign advertisements, I plan to explore the extent to which parties and individual candidates run for Congress by “running with Congress” (Lipinski & Work 2003) is a function of citizen satisfaction with congressional job performance.¹ I also plan to supplement this quantitative analysis with qualitative observations during my fellowship year on Capitol Hill. This fellowship will provide an opportunity to qualitatively observe legislators and parties as they struggle to balance district-centered and partisan centered representation. These observations will provide insight into how congressional actors weigh public perceptions when providing collective representation through the passage of partisan ideological legislative agendas. This book project will further our understanding of how citizens perceive the quality of ideological representation provided by Congress and how these perceptions influence citizen politics and strategic elite positioning.

Electoral Behavior, Racial Resentment, & Congressional Elections _____

In addition to this research on citizen responses to polarized congressional parties, my research pipeline also includes projects relating to citizen electoral behavior and the changing determinants of congressional election outcomes. Past scholarship on congressional election outcomes stresses the importance of *candidate-centered* considerations, such as incumbency and candidate quality, rather than *partisan-centered* factors. While recent work on post-war U.S. House election outcomes are becoming more nationalized and dependent on partisan differences rather than candidate-centered variables, the more candidate-centered and high-information electoral context of the U.S. Senate has escaped similar scholarly attention. In published manuscript at [Electoral Studies](#), I explore how partisan polarization in Congress conditions the role of incumbency and state partisanship on Senate election outcomes using originally collected data on all Senate elections during the direct-election era. Using this unique data-set and supplemental survey data, I find that while greater partisan polarization increases the role of partisanship in determining Senate election outcomes, greater polarization also provides Senators representing states with an electoral preference towards the opposing party an opportunity to cultivate a greater incumbency advantage by carving a distinct personal brand.

Moving forward, I plan to use this unique dataset on Senate elections in a project assessing the changing salience of candidate and partisan-centered variables in U.S. House and Senate elections during the twentieth and twenty-first century. In doing so, I explore whether the nationalization of congressional elections is a twenty-first century phenomenon or has roots during the pre-war period. I

¹Lipinski, Daniel, William T. Bianco, and Ryan Work. 2003. “What Happens When House Members ‘Run With Congress?’ The Electoral Consequences of Institutional Loyalty.” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 28(3): 413-29.

approach this question using a unified model accounting for candidate-centered (incumbency, individual candidate quality) and partisan-centered variables. This project leverages the first dataset containing candidate quality of all major party Senate candidates during the direct-election period. I also plan to extend this inquiry into the nationalization of elections to the gubernatorial domain and have collected preliminary data to that end. I am also involved in a working project (with Christopher Hare) on the specification of voter utility functions in spatial voting models and how these utility functions may change as congressional elections become more partisan-centered.

Another facet of my research pipeline relates to how racial attitudes may distort the ability of citizens in engaging in ideologically-based decisions regarding political choice, particularly in congressional elections. In a paper published at [Electoral Studies](#), I explore the nature of spatial voting across the differing levels of electoral competition (presidency, House, Senate) during the 2016 cycle and how racial resentment may have biased this type of voting. Using Aldrich-McKelvey scaling to place voters and every major-party congressional and presidential candidate in the same ideological policy space, I find that while voters did generally cast votes for candidates closest to their ideological policy preferences, racial resentment distorted ideological voting among liberal voters predisposed to voting Democratic. Moreover, greater racial resentment among conservative voters increased the salience of policy voting across all levels of 2016 electoral competition. The implications of this published work on the ongoing dynamics of the contemporary Republican electoral coalition has been covered through an interview with [The New York Times](#) and [The Pacific Standard](#). In a follow-up manuscript currently under peer-review, I extend this line of inquiry by investigating how partisan and ideological political cross-pressures conditions the effect of racial resentment on electoral choice during the 2016 and 2018 election cycles. This research shows that Donald Trump and Republican Congressional candidates gain from white racial resentment independent of partisan or ideological preferences during an era of unprecedented straight ticket voting. I hope to build on these findings to explore the determinants of racial resentment and how racial resentment may motivate political participation.

Institutional Behavior & Representation

My research agenda also focuses on the second stage of legislative representation by considering the institutional behavior of elected elites, particularly in the relatively understudied context of the U.S. Senate. One such paper, published in [American Politics Research](#) and featured at the [London School of Economics United States Politics & Policy Blog](#), explores the extent to which Senators react to electoral incentives and defect from their party on legislative obstruction preferences. I find evidence that Senators, especially those in the minority, are responsive to electoral incentives and defect from the party line on legislative obstruction. These Senators that respond to electoral incentives are also rewarded with higher electoral support than their co-partisan colleagues that toe the party line.

In addition to assessing individual legislative behavior, I also look at how legislators collaborate together in their institutional context using social network theory and analysis. One such project, presented at the 2018 APSA meeting, uses social network analysis to explore how Senators publicly collaborate on policy issues over time. This project uses a novel dataset of high cost legislative collaboration, as measured by Senator involvement in shared press events, and sheds light on the influence of shared constituency, partisanship, and committee service on strategic policy collaboration from 1980-2002. I plan to continue this inquiry through greater data collection to capture strategic collaboration during the more polarized contemporary Senate. My research interests in social network analysis also extends to the methodological and cross-disciplinary realm. In published interdisciplinary work at [Social Network Analysis & Mining](#) with Dr. George Barnett (UCD Distinguished Communications Professor Emeritus), we assess the properties of network stability and nodal structural equivalence using a “big data” approach to large datasets of global daily website traffic. I plan to continue this collaboration focusing on methodological properties of networks and the implications of these properties on applied social network analysis in political science.