Collective Accountability in Congressional Elections: Conditions of Accountability & Implications for Legislative Incentives[*]

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Dissertation Abstract

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> *"Popular government in a nation of more than 150 million people requires political parties which provide the electorate with a proper range of choice between alternatives of action."* -American Political Science Association (1950)

Traditionally, students of congressional politics have posited that the American party system failed to facilitate responsible party government. Scholars argued that this lack of *responsible party government*, the notion that the majority and minority parties offered distinct legislative agendas, made it difficult for voters to assess which party to punish or reward for policies passed by Congress. This observation motivated the writing of the prominent American Political Science Association (1950) report, *Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System*, advocating for a party-system with sufficient party loyalty, a necessary condition for responsible party government and ensuing collective accountability. If voters are satisfied with the governing performance of the congressional majority party, they return the party to power by voting for the majority party candidate running their district. If dissatisfied, they fire the majority and hire the opposition by voting for the minority party candidate,

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an exercise of *collective accountability*. It is increasingly clear that the congressional parties have undergone pronounced changes, with an increased distinction between the majority and minority, renewing scholarly interest over whether voters are able to hold individual candidates accountable for their party's collective performance. However, scholars remain divided as to whether voters hold meaningful, policy-based assessments, of congressional job performance if they are able to translate these assessments into holding individual candidates accountable for collective party behavior on Capitol Hill.

This dissertation weighs into this divide by investigating how citizens make assessments about congressional job performance, how they use these collective assessments to hold candidates collective accountable for their party's performance in Congress, and what incentives this accountability provides the majority and minority party. The first chapter investigates a theory positing that citizen approval of congressional job performance is primarily a function of ideological proximity to the congressional majority and partisan preference. Contrary to standing models of congressional approval arguing that citizen evaluations of Congress is primarily a function of economic evaluations or presidential job performance, I find evidence that citizens evaluate congressional job performance in ideological and partisan terms, with majority party co-partisans and citizens closest to the majority in ideological proximity being the most likely to approve of congressional job performance. Moreover, these findings are the most salient amongst voters with high levels of political sophistication and interest. This chapter suggests that citizens possess the capacity to not only develop ideological preferences, but are aware of their preferences relative to the positions of the congressional majority and minority parties. In turn, they use their ideological proximity to the parties, particularly the majority, to inform their perceptions of congressional job performance. This chapter uses perceptual-based and policy rollcall-based scaling methods to place citizens and the entire U.S. Congress in the same ideological space using various sources of survey data, including panel data.

The second chapter investigates whether, and under what conditions, are voters able

to hold individual candidates accountable for perceptions of collective congressional job performance. I argue that the majority party is held accountable for evaluations of congressional job performance and that they can gain electoral support among minority partisans and voters closest to the minority party in ideological proximity when they approve of Congress. Moreover, I argue that collective accountability is more pronounced in races with non-incumbent candidates given the ability of incumbents to skirt collective accountability. I find evidence for these arguments and confirm previous work that shows that collective accountability is conditioned by majority party legislative cohesiveness, with congressional approval becoming a salient predictor of congressional vote choice only when the majority party reaches a baseline threshold of legislative cohesiveness.

The third chapter builds on the evidence presented in the first, that voters do hold individual candidates accountable for the collective performance of their congressional party. I use the third chapter to explore how collective accountability varies across members of Congress. Using the extensive literature on legislative organization, I present a theory positing that congressional approval signals voter approval of the policies and positions espoused by the median member of the majority party. Influential partisan theories argue that the majority median is the pivotal member of the chamber, with the majority median effectively being able to set the agenda for the entire chamber. Given that congressional approval signals approval with the majority median, I argue that collective accountability is conditioned by a member's ideological proximity to the majority median, both in absolute distance and directional distance. I find evidence in this chapter that collective accountability is conditioned by a member's proximity to the majority median, with members closest to the majority median being the main beneficiaries of congressional approval. I also find evidence that the direction of this distance matters, with minority party extremists suffering the greatest loss in electoral support from congressional approval. I confirm this variation in collective accountability using aggregate vote shares in House elections.

Lastly, the fourth and final chapter investigates how the institutional framework of the

U.S. Congress influences citizens perceptions of it and the majority and minority party tasked with governing within it. Procedurally, the U.S. Congress is designed as a legislative institution with high transaction costs. Unsurprisingly, the inability of Congress to overcome these costs and pass policies that are consistent with the ideological preferences of the mass public is cited as one of the chief sources of low job approval assessments by voters. Yet, when Congress does act, recent aggregate-level work suggests that low approval may be exacerbated if Congress passes policies incompatible with the ideological preferences of the mass public (Ramirez 2012). While lack of ideological responsiveness and high transaction costs are identified as key determinants of congressional approval, no citizen-level model assesses to what extent these considerations shape evaluations of congressional job performance as an institution and the congressional parties. Using original survey data from the *Cooperative Congressional Election Study* measuring citizen preferences of legislative transaction costs and chamber-specific partisan and institutional approval evaluations, I evaluate a model positing that preference for high transaction costs should increase institutional approval of Congress but should decrease approval for the majority party responsible for delivering on its campaign promises.

Taken together, each of these dissertation chapters seek to further our understanding of what determines collective assessments of the U.S. Congress and how these assessments leads to collective accountability manifesting itself in congressional elections. The findings presented in this dissertation have implications for collective incentives of congressional parties and the behavior of individual members of Congress.