The Partisan & Ideological Determinants of Citizen Congressional Approval

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Abstract

Do citizens weigh the ideological nature of collective representation provided by Congress when assessing the job performance of their national legislature? Conventional congressional approval models posit that approval is largely a function of partisan preferences or valence considerations, such as the state of the economy or assessments of presidential job performance. As a consequence, individual citizens do not weigh the collective ideological representation they receive from Congress when evaluating collective approval. However, recent aggregate-level work suggests that congressional approval rises when Congress responds to the ideological preferences of the mass public (Ramirez 2012). I fill this disconnect between recent aggregate-level work and standing citizen-level models of approval by presenting a model which argues that citizens weigh the ideological representation provided by their Congress. Given that the contemporary Congress provides citizens with two contrasting options of collective ideological representation, I argue that congressional approval exhibits a distinct ideological and partisan component. Using cross-sectional and panel survey data which allows for scaling citizens and the congressional parties in the same ideological space, I find support for these two distinct components of approval. Specifically, I find that majority co-partisans and citizens closer in ideological proximity to the governing majority are more likely to approve of Congress. I also find that these two components are most salient with politically sophisticated citizens. These findings have implications for the capacity of citizens to assess the collective representation of the chief policy-making institution of their national government.

Key words: Congressional approval, ideological scaling, proximity, citizen political behavior

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