

Collective Accountability in Congressional Elections: An Analysis of Congressional Approval & Ideological Extremity*

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Spring 2017

Abstract

The conventional wisdom among students of congressional behavior is that the resurgence of elite polarization has facilitated the emergence of responsible American parties. Early scholarship on congressional accountability told of political parties and individual members that insulated themselves from the collective performance of the institution in which they served. Recent work suggests that elite polarization has weakened the ability of individual members to run on their individual accomplishments rather than their party's collective legislative record, with majority members possessing an increasingly important stake in the collective party brand. However recent work is less clear as to the substantive meaning of congressional approval, and how the effect of approval varies across members of Congress. Using voter-level and aggregate-level data, this paper argues that congressional approval indicates satisfaction with the policies and positions espoused by the median legislator of the majority party and that the effect of approval on the electoral fortunes is conditioned by the relative distance between the member and the pivotal majority median legislator. This paper finds support for this argument and contributes to the broad literature on collective accountability by finding that the effect of congressional approval on vote choice and aggregate vote shares are both heterogeneous across members and contingent on a member's relative ideological extremity to the pivotal majority median in Congress.

Key words: congressional accountability, voting behavior, ideological divergence, congressional elections

*Variant of paper for presented at the American Political Science Association Meeting, Philadelphia, PA (September 1-4, 2016).

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