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 performance of the 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, an exercise of *collective accountability*. It is increasingly clear that the congressional parties have undergone pronounced

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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 are able to translate assessments of collective congressional job performance into holding individual candidates accountable for collective party behavior on Capitol Hill.

This dissertation weighs into this divide by investigating how voters 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 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 second 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 second 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.

The third chapter evaluates an incentive for minority party obstruction for electoral gain in the context of the U.S. Senate and proposes a new member-specific measure of obstruction preference.[1] The theory in this chapter posits that while the majority party has a strong incentive to pass their agenda and the minority has a strong incentive to obstruct; Senators are constrained by the political preferences of their state with respect to their obstruction preference. We find evidence that minority party Senators do not gain electorally from obstruction but majority party Senators, those representing states that favor the minority party, do. We also find evidence that minority and majority party Senators anticipate a cost to obstruction and moderate their obstruction preferences as their election nears, providing evidence that minority party Senators are constrained in their ability to obstruct.

Taken together, each of these dissertation chapters seek to further our understanding of how collective accountability manifests itself congressional elections and how this accountability shapes the collective incentives of congressional parties and the behavior of individual members of Congress.

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[1]This paper is co-authored with Joe Zamadics, PhD Candidate, Department of Political Science, University of Colorado.