

The Collective “Congress” on the Ballot? A Voter & Aggregate Level Analysis of Collective Responsibility in Congressional Elections*

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May 2017

Abstract

The traditional view among scholars is that voters do not weigh congressional job performance in their congressional voting decisions. Recent work challenges this notion and provides evidence that congressional job approval matters at the ballot box. However, scholars are divided as to which party benefits from positive job approval ratings. Moreover, the literature is unclear regarding the conditions under which voters hold individual candidates accountable for the collective performance of Congress. Analyzing individual and aggregate level data, this study produces several key findings: (1) assessments of congressional job performance are directly tied to the electoral standing of the majority party; (2) positive approval ratings raise the level of support for majority party candidates among minority partisans and those closest to the minority in ideological proximity; (3) majority party incumbents gain more from congressional approval than non-incumbents and suffer less of a loss from congressional disapproval; (4) the impact of congressional approval on majority party fortunes is conditioned by how cohesive the majority party is. These findings provide a clearer narrative of how collective accountability works in congressional elections and the incentives for majority and minority party behavior in the contemporary Congress.

Key words: collective accountability, voter behavior, congressional elections

*A draft of this paper was presented at the 2016 Midwest Political Science Association Annual Meeting in Chicago, IL (April 7-10, 2016).

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