

The Procedural & Policy Origins of Voter Assessments of Congressional Job Performance*

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April 2017

Abstract

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. In this paper, I specify a model arguing that congressional approval is a function of citizen procedural preferences and perceptions of spatial ideological representations. Specifically, I argue that voters with a preference for high transaction costs and close in ideological proximity to the policies passed by Congress are predisposed to approving of Congressional job performance and, by extension, the congressional majority party. Using data from an original Cooperative Congressional Elections Study (CCES) module, I specify an innovative measure of citizen preferences of the transaction costs relating to congressional procedure and evaluate the model in the context of collective and party-specific job approval. Results of this model have implications for literature isolating the policy component of congressional approval and how procedural preferences relating to transaction costs shape assessments of institutional job performance.

Key words: congressional approval, legislative transaction costs, policy congruence

*Preliminary abstract for submission to the 2018 Midwest Political Science Association Annual Meeting in Chicago, IL (April 5-8, 2018).

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