

Partisan Appeals to Bipartisanship

Colin Case & Emily Cottle

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Abstract

How do members of Congress build public support for legislation? Many argue it is through the framing of the legislative process or carefully curated explanations that appeal to their constituents' preferences. Others have claimed, in particular, that when members appeal to bipartisanship — signaling to the public that the legislation at hand was crafted through compromise and is liked by members on both sides of the aisle — members are successful in building support for a given bill. Given the hyper-partisan era that presently exists, however, these bipartisan appeals are unlikely to occur in a vacuum. Members in the minority consistently engage in partisan counter framing in attempts to undermine legislation. In this paper we demonstrate that the benefits awarded to members by engaging in bipartisan appeals are marginal at best. Members of Congress who engage in partisan counter framing can successfully reinforce the support of their own base while undermining their opponent's legislative accomplishments. While bipartisan legislating is something citizens generally desire from Congress, partisan counter messaging eliminates those benefits and reinforces polarization.

On March 28th, 2012, the House of Representatives debated Speaker of the House Paul Ryan’s Path to Prosperity, Ryan’s budget plan for the 2013 fiscal year. This plan featured widespread policy changes, including a repeal of Obamacare, reductions in government spending, and a variation of a white paper written jointly by Ryan and Senator Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) that would offer premium support for private Medicare plans. On the floor, the Republican majority advocated strongly for Ryan’s bill, citing its bipartisan origins. Representative Tim Griffin (R-Ark.) appealed to his colleagues saying, “Our reforms are not partisan. In fact they are based on a bipartisan proposal by Chairman Ryan and Senator Ron Wyden, a Democrat of Oregon.”

Despite Republicans asserting the “bipartisan” nature of the Path to Prosperity, Democrats pushed back. Representative Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.) came out in strong opposition, saying “I rise in strong opposition to the Republican budget. Once again, the Republicans move a slash and burn budget that would turn Medicare into a private voucher system.” Representative Carolyn Maloney (D-N.Y.) was equally critical, calling the legislation “a rising tide of selective tax cuts that would lift all yachts, but leave most dinghies.” And Representative Ed Markey (D-Mass.) also criticized the “bipartisan” Medicare provision while drawing comparisons to the ongoing March Madness basketball tournament stating, “For our nation’s seniors and the middle class, the real March madness is happening right here on the House floor with the Republican budget.”

As legislators seek to build their reputation by claiming credit for their legislative victories and blaming the opposition for legislative failures (Mayhew 1974; Fenno 1978), each side is equally invested in crafting a message and telling a procedural story that will help shape public opinion in its favor (Evans 2001; Evans and Oleszek 2002). Recent research demonstrates that when seeking to build support for legislation, members of Congress appeal to bipartisan negotiations, or the presence of bipartisan support, as this verbal cue makes constituents, especially out-partisans, more likely to support a given piece of legisla-

tion (Westwood 2020). Given this, Ryan’s inclusion of a Democratic-supported provision, as well as Griffin’s clear bipartisan label for the legislation, should be expected.

But just as the majority seeks to garner public support for legislative accomplishments, the minority party also faces an incentive to undermine support for legislation (Mayhew 1974). As election margins have decreased, the importance of messaging for bolstering support among constituents for re-election purposes has increased significantly (Lee 2016). It is, therefore, reasonable to expect minority-party members will seek to undermine positive, bipartisan frames of legislation and provide an opposing counter message. When competing frames are introduced, constituents are more likely to be persuaded by partisanship than by any relevant substantive or contextual information (Druckman, Peterson and Slothuuss 2013). When cued by the presence of a partisan label, constituents side consistently with similarly aligned elites. Furthermore, knowing that polarized frames mitigate the importance of substantive information — such as the size of a winning, bipartisan coalition — raises suspicions about the positive effect of using a bipartisan cue to garner support (Druckman, Peterson and Slothuuss 2013). What we seek to demonstrate in this paper is that bipartisan rhetoric, when presented in conjunction with a competing partisan frame, loses its power of persuasion.

We suggest that existing literature fails to sufficiently assess the extent to which bipartisan framing can garner support for legislation when the complete information environment is considered. Using congressional floor speeches, we assess whether minority-party speeches include negative sentiment and partisan cues in opposition to majority-party bipartisan claims. We are able to demonstrate that while there are instances of widespread bipartisan support in both legislating and messaging, bipartisan frames do not always exist in a vacuum. Rather, they are often delivered in conjunction with partisan counter messages from the minority-party. To measure a more accurate effect of elite frames on public opinion, therefore, we field a survey in which respondents are presented not only with a positive, bipartisan message, but with opposing counter messages as well. We find that in the presence counter

messages, whether neutral or partisan in nature, bipartisan messaging has no effect of support for legislation. Partisan counter messages, in particular, are most effective for reducing support for legislation among minority-party voters. Our findings suggest that although members of Congress invoke themes of bipartisanship when seeking to increase support for legislation, the effectiveness of this strategy is conditional on the unanimity of a given bill and the absence of any opposing messages; as soon as an opposing message is introduced, we find that bipartisan messaging loses its power of persuasion.

Bipartisan Messaging and Partisan Counter Messaging

When members proactively message on congressional activity (Curry and Lee 2020) and when they respond to inquiries from constituents (Grose, Malhotra and Houweling 2015), they appeal to cues they believe will be popular with their relevant audience. The public has long desired for Members of Congress and the presidency to compromise when crafting legislation and to reach across the aisle.¹ In a 2005 poll, 71% of respondents said President Bush should work to compromise with Democrats instead of pushing through his agenda.² After Democrats' successful 2008 election in which they won the House of Representatives, Senate, and presidency, a 2009 poll showed 60% of respondents said Democrats in Congress should pass bipartisan legislation as opposed to what they think is right for the country.³ Even recently, as politics have become even more contentious, a 2019 poll found 65% of voters say it is very important to have elected officials who are willing to compromise.⁴

¹“Broad Support for Political Compromise,” *Pew Research Center*, 2007. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2007/01/22/broad-support-for-political-compromise-in-washington/>.

²“National Poll,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 2005. <http://www.trbas.com/media/media/acrobat/2006-01/21312324.pdf>.

³“President Obama, the Economy, and Foreign Affairs,” *CBS News*, July 13, 2009. https://www.cbsnews.com/htdocs/pdf/poll_Obama_071309.pdf.

⁴Alec Tyson, “Partisans say respect and compromise are important in politics — particularly from their opponents,” *Pew Research Center*, June 19, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/19/partisans-say-respect-and-compromise-are-important-in-politics-particularly-from-their-opponents/>.

Members of Congress are rarely neutral when discussing legislative successes and failures; rather, they seek to persuade the public to adopt the position they hold (Grose, Malhotra and Houweling 2015). Given the positive view voters have of bipartisanship, it is no surprise many members appeal to such cues when explaining their legislative activity (Westwood 2020). Political-science literature tends to call legislation bipartisan if a bill is cosponsored by members of both parties (Harbridge and Malhotra 2011; Harbridge, Malhotra and Harrison 2014) or if members of both parties form a winning coalition to pass the legislation (Adler and Wilkerson 2013). The clarity of what constitutes bipartisan legislation, however, has grown less clear.

Recent Congresses have seen a decline in what many scholars and onlookers call “regular order” (Sinclair 2016; Curry and Lee 2020). This term refers to the process by which legislation traditionally navigates the legislative process: being drafted and developed in committee as a result of numerous hearings and markups, subjected to a variety of amendments on the floor, and passed to the other chamber for further scrutiny. These non-traditional legislative processes often lead, however, to the passage of legislation that is still highly bipartisan, as “irregular order” gives leadership the ability to circumvent legislative roadblocks and reach compromises without being accused of giving too much (Curry 2015; Curry and Lee 2020).

Despite a desire for bipartisan lawmaking, and perhaps as a function of this recent trend for congressional leadership to negotiate legislative compromises behind closed doors, the public awareness of what constitutes bipartisanship is low. Westwood (2020) finds that only 33% of survey respondents can correctly define “bipartisanship.” It is important to note that while that respondents can accurately identify the presence of bipartisan coalitions when presented with hypothetical roll-call voting results Harbridge, Malhotra and Harrison (2014), the public generally lacks political information (Carpini and Keeter 1997) and it is unlikely voters are aware of exact roll call vote outcomes. Rather they form an opinion based on the information the media and politicians disseminate about a bill or policy (Arnold 2004; Grimmer 2013; Grimmer, Westwood and Messing 2014). As Westwood (2020) demonstrates,

so long as the messaging surrounding a bill uses bipartisan rhetoric, the true size of the winning coalition has no effect on the public’s view of the legislation as bipartisan. Furthermore, Westwood finds that there is not a positive relationship between mentions of bipartisanship and number of members from the other party joining a winning coalition.

Consider a situation in which Republican and Democratic members both support *and oppose* a given bill. The Enhanced Background Checks Act of 2021 (H.R. 1446), for example, passed the House of Representatives with a vote of 219–210. The coalition voting for the bill was comprised of 217 Democrats and 2 Republicans, and those voting in opposition to the bill were 2 Democrats and 208 Republicans. As mentioned previously, we suggest that the size of the bipartisan coalitions does not matter for the purposes of this paper, as members frequently appeal to bipartisanship regardless of the number of minority members joining the winning coalition. During floor debate on H.R. 1446, Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.) praised Rep. Jim Clyburn (D-S.C.) for introducing this “bipartisan bill.”⁵ The presence of a bipartisan majority, however, does not preclude the losing coalition from claiming the victory was partisan. In his press release explaining his opposition to H.R. 1446, Rep. Rob Wittman (R-Va.) suggested that “the Majority chose to legislate based on ideology rather than evidence,” implying that this bill was written to advantage the Democratic majority.⁶ It is apparent, then, that members on the losing side of a bipartisan victory, do, in fact, make partisan counter frames.

The complexity of the legislative process, coupled with an uninformed and inattentive electorate, creates the perfect opportunity for members of Congress to invoke bipartisan messages, even when legislation is not overwhelmingly bipartisan. With the contentious political environment that exists today with close election margins, we argue it is unlikely for claims of bipartisanship to go unanswered by the minority party, unless a bill receives unanimous support. Given voters follow the frames of politicians from their party (Druckman, Peterson

⁵“Chairman Nadler Floor Statement in Support of H.R. 1446, the Enhanced Background Checks Act of 2021,” <https://nadler.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=394563>.

⁶“Wittman Votes Against H.R. 8 and H.R. 1446,” <https://wittman.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=3534>.

and Slothuuss 2013), we argue the current state of the literature on bipartisan messaging is incomplete, as it fails to address the scenario presented above, in which bipartisan messaging is countered with a competing, partisan message. We ask two central questions: first, does counter messaging exist alongside bipartisan messaging and, second, does counter messaging render bipartisan messaging ineffective?

Using speech data from the Congressional Record, we will first demonstrate that members of Congress do, in fact, make partisan counter arguments to bipartisan appeals. We, then, field a survey in which we manipulate the counter message respondents receive, uncovering that bipartisan messaging loses its persuasion when coupled with a relevant opposing message. In addition, we also find partisan counter messaging to be the most effective for diminishing support among minority party respondents.

Invocations of Bipartisanship in Congressional Speeches

In order to more completely answer whether Members of Congress counter message appeals to bipartisanship, we turn to data from the Congressional Record, collected by Gentzkow, Shapiro and Taddy (2019). We rely on all floor speeches made in the House of Representatives from the 103rd Congress to the 114th Congress to assess whether or not members of Congress counter message bipartisan appeals. We focus on this time period due to the increase in electoral competition resulting in higher levels of uncertainty with regards to the House majority (Lee 2016).

Methods

To capture the extent of bipartisan messaging in House floor speeches, we look at the proportion of majority-party speeches in a single day that mention bipartisanship. For the purpose of our analysis, we make the assumption that the majority party in the House of Representatives is advocating for legislation and the minority party is tasked with counter messaging

on legislation. Understanding that the majority party — and the Speaker, in particular — holds the agenda-setting power in the House of Representatives (Cox and McCubbins 2002), and knowing that the Speaker will rarely allow legislation to reach the floor unless it has the support from a majority of the majority (i.e. the Hastert Rule), this assumption is a bit crude, yet theoretically reasonable.⁷

To measure minority-party counter messaging, we rely on two separate measures to assess both the extent of counter messaging as well as the nature of how minority party members counter message. Our first measure is the average opinion sentiment of floor speeches given in a single day by minority-party members. To capture this, we conduct sentiment analysis of all speeches given by the minority party in a single day using the Bing Opinion Lexicon. The Bing Lexicon was developed by Hu and Liu (2004) using online reviews of product features.⁸ The lexicon of positive and negative words was developed by identifying sentences expressing an opinion, using natural language processing to identify adjectives or opinion-based words (used to express opinion), identifying the semantic orientation of each word using WordNet, and finally determining an overall opinion orientation of a sentence (Hu and Liu 2004). From this process, the opinion words are identified as having either a positive or negative orientation. Positive words are scored as 1 and negative words are scored as -1. Using this lexicon and scoring method, we calculate an overall score for each speech given in the House of Representatives between 1993 and 2016. Overall sentiment scores are calculated by taking the sum of words that are positive and negative in the speech. We then take the average sentiment of all floor speeches given by the minority-party in a single day, giving us a measure of minority-party sentiment.

⁷We intend to improve this analysis making it more precise by reducing our unit of analysis to a specific bill, rather than day, which will then allow us to divide speeches based on those voting for a bill and those voting against it, removing the need for this Hastert-Rule-based assumption.

⁸It is important to note this lexicon of words is not domain specific to Congress. There are a number of words in the vocabulary that do not necessarily represent negative opinions of legislation, as we will discuss below. In future iterations of this paper, we intend to refining this lexicon further to better reflect congressional speeches.

Our second measure is the average partisanship of floor speeches given in a single day by minority-party members. To measure partisanship, we rely on partisan phrasing scores calculated by Gentzkow, Shapiro and Taddy (2019). Two-word phrases are scored using a machine-learning model to determine the extent to which the existence of these phrases in a speech alone predicts the partisanship of the speaker, with more negative scores predicting a Democratic speaker and higher, positive scores predicting a Republican speaker. For example, in the 114th Congress, the phrase “human trafficking” receives a score of 84.2, suggesting it is highly predictive of a Republican member of Congress using this phrase. On the contrary, the phrase “mass shooting” receives a score of -60.4, suggesting it is highly predictive of the speaker being a Democrat. Other phrases, such as “pro-growth tax” (4.1) and “wealthiest American” (-4.2) are still somewhat predictive of the speaker’s partisanship, but to a much lesser extent than “human trafficking” or “mass shooting.”

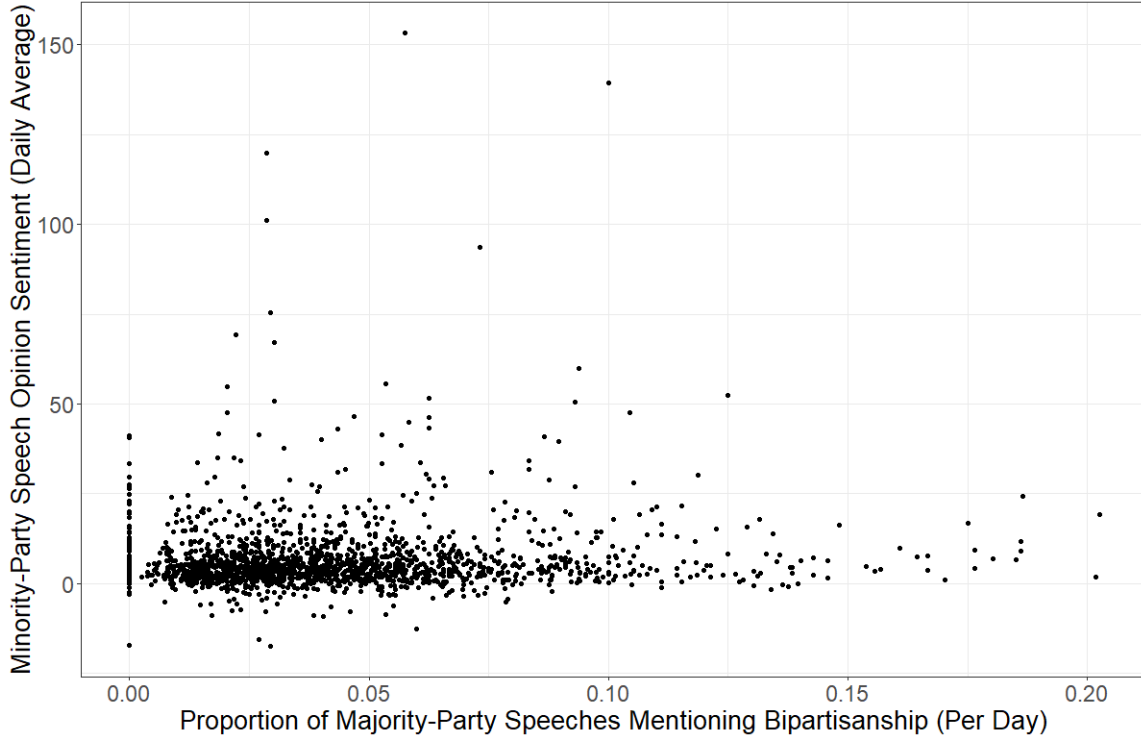
To create a measure of partisanship for each floor speech, we rely on a lexicon of words for each Congress of the thousand most predictive phrases. By employing a separate lexicon developed for each Congress by Gentzkow, Shapiro and Taddy (2019), we are able to allow phrases to vary over time that would be more partisan in one time period over another. For example, in the 114th Congress, the phrase “care act” is highly predictive of a Democratic speaker, but this phrase does not appear in any lexicon prior to 2008. This allows the measure to capture phrases that are partisan at the time they are spoken. Using this partisan lexicon, we score a speech’s partisanship by summing the scores from the words that exist in a particular speech, and taking the average of all speeches given by minority-party members in a day. To make this partisan sentiment score easily interpretable across Congresses, we assign values such that a more positive score indicates a congruence with the minority party, and a lower, negative score indicates that the partisan sentiment is opposed to that of the minority.

Analysis of Congressional Speeches

In order to assess the extent that negative opinion and partisan sentiment exists alongside bipartisan messaging, we compare the correlation between both the daily average of minority-party opinion sentiment and partisan sentiment with the proportion of majority-party speeches mentioning bipartisanship. It is important to note we are making no causal claims about this relationship — we are merely demonstrating both types of messaging (majority-party bipartisan messaging and minority-party counter messaging) occur concurrently. If it were the case that minority-party members do not counter message bipartisan claims, we would expect to see a positive correlation between the proportion of speeches mentioning bipartisanship and the opinion sentiment of minority-party speeches. If there were no opposing minority-party messages, the positivity of minority-party speeches should increase as the proportion of bipartisan speeches increases. Minority-party partisan sentiment, however, would be negatively correlated with proportion of majority-party bipartisan speeches if there were no counter messages. However, we do not find evidence to suggest that the minority remains silent in the face of bipartisan messaging. Rather, we find no relationship between majority-party bipartisan messaging and minority-party opinion sentiment. We also find no relationship between majority-party bipartisan messaging and minority-party partisan messaging.

Figure 1 presents a scatter plot of the proportion of majority-party speeches mentioning bipartisanship per day on the x-axis, and the daily average of minority-party speech opinion sentiment on the y-axis. Positive numbers for opinion sentiment indicate more positive average speeches and negative numbers indicate more negative average speeches. As is evident, there is significant variation in the proportion of speeches mentioning bipartisanship, with a range from 0 to 0.203 (May 2nd, 2001) and mean value of 0.0403. For the majority of days Congress is in session in our data, a majority-party member of Congress is making a reference to bipartisanship. As for minority-party opinion sentiment, the majority of days have an average value between 2.0 and 8.0. Each of these scores can be interpreted as

Figure 1: Bipartisan Messaging v. Opinion Sentiment



average difference between positive and negative words spoken by the minority party in a given day, suggesting the extent to which an average speech is expressing either negative or positive sentiment. June 12th, 2014 holds the highest average opinion sentiment (153.3) while December 19th, 1998, is the day marked by the lowest average opinion sentiment (-17.5).

It is important to note, however, that it is somewhat theoretically concerning that most days' average minority-party speech sentiment is positive. We believe this is due to using a lexicon that is not domain specific resulting in a handful of words being scored as positive that do not actually express positive opinion in this context. For example, "thank" is one of the most widely used positive words in our speech data. As it is extremely common in parliamentary parlance for the speaker to "thank the gentlelady" who yielded time to the speaker, this word should not be attributed to the speaker as necessarily having a positive affinity toward a given piece of legislation. We still believe, however, that there is value in the relative scores, as many of most utilized negative words conceptually express opposition

Table 1: Most Frequently Appearing Negative Words in Congressional Speeches

Word	Count in Speeches
issue	38385
problem	25198
debt	22265
issues	19799
problems	16229
hard	16055
lost	13615
opposition	13440
critical	13218
wrong	13103
objection	10704
unfortunately	10403
concerned	9943
risk	9843
bad	9754
difficult	9675
oppose	9560
concerns	9456
crisis	8998
emergency	8745

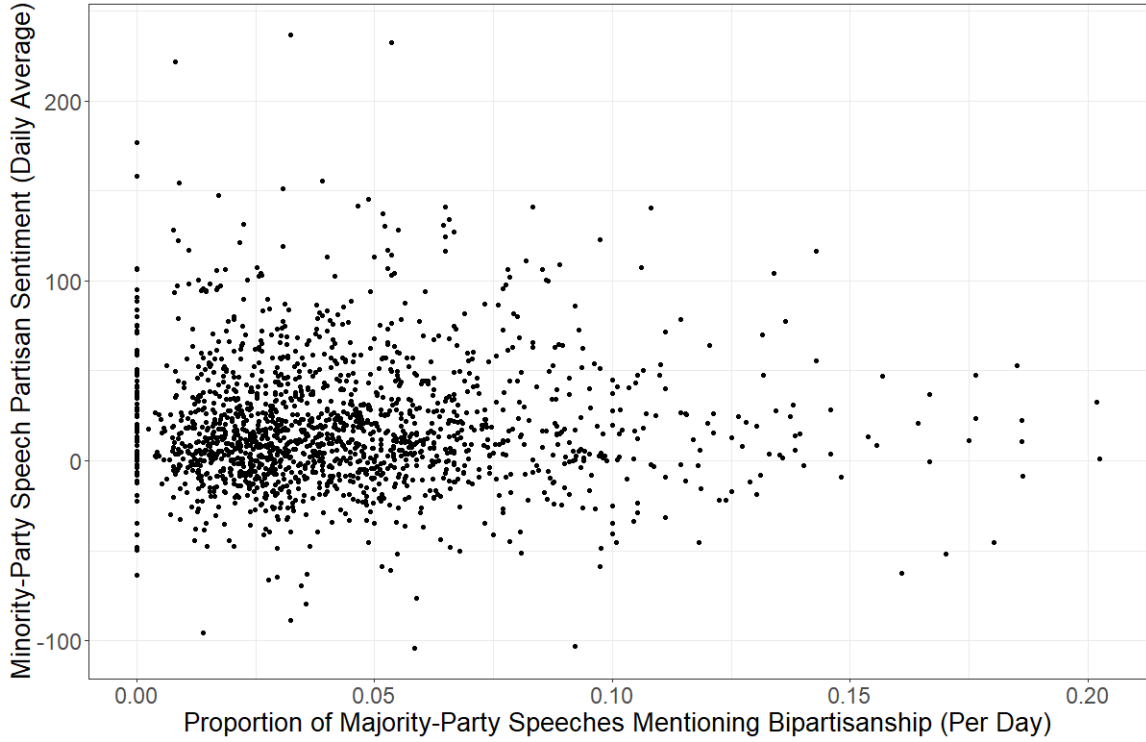
to legislation (see Table 1). So, for example, though a score of 1 may not in and of itself represent a negative opinion sentiment (as it holds a positive value), it still is informative as it represents a more negative sentiment than a score of 10.⁹

Most important for our analysis, though, we find no correlation ($\text{corr.} = 0.0365$) between the bipartisan messaging and opinion sentiment. We argue the lack of a relationship suggests bipartisan messages do not exist in a vacuum. Days with high bipartisan messaging from the majority party appear concurrently with both positive opinion sentiment and relatively negative opinion sentiment.

Turning now to minority-party partisan sentiment, Figure 2 plots the proportion of majority-party speeches mentioning bipartisanship per day on the x-axis, and the daily average of minority-party speeches’ partisan sentiment on the y-axis. As explained previ-

⁹To improve this measure in the future, we are considering developing a lexicon that is domain specific to congressional speeches.

Figure 2: Bipartisan Messaging vs. Partisan Sentiment



ously, partisan sentiment is re-oriented so more positive numbers represent speech that is predictive of a speaker from the minority party while negative numbers represent speech that is predictive of a speaker from the majority party. Conceptually, then, we should expect the daily average for the minority party to be positive, which is what we find: the mean average partisan score is 12.9 and only 27.7% of days feature an average score below 0.

As is evident from Figure 2, there is no relationship between bipartisan messaging and partisan sentiment ($\text{corr} = -0.01$). As with opinion sentiment, this suggests while there are days with a large number of majority-party members appealing to bipartisanship, there is significant variation in the extent to which the minority party leans into partisan rhetoric. In certain instances, such as May 2nd, 2001, where the majority party mentioned bipartisanship in over 20% of speeches, the minority did little to lean into partisan messaging (average minority-party partisan sentiment = 1.2). March 25th, 2004, also saw high levels of majority-

party bipartisan appeals (14%), however with the minority-party leaning much more into partisan rhetoric (average minority-party partisan sentiment = 116.2)

This analysis suggests there is significant variation in minority-party framing. In certain instances, when the majority-party leans into bipartisan appeals, the minority-party reflects similar levels of positive sentiment and refrains from highly partisan speech. In instances such as this, the existing literature on the effects of bipartisan appeals is clear: voters prefer politicians who work together (see footnotes 1 through 4), and support legislation more that is presented as bipartisan (Westwood 2020). However, current research on the effectiveness of bipartisan messaging has not yet considered how counter-messaging — both in expressing opposition to legislation and leaning into partisan cues — diminishes this effect. As is evident in our analysis of congressional speeches, members in the minority party do counter message in the presence of bipartisan rhetoric, so it is necessary to evaluate the effect of bipartisan rhetoric in the face of this counter messaging. In the following sections, we assess the effect of partisan counter messaging on the the effectiveness of bipartisan messaging.

Theoretical Expectations for the Effect of Counter Messaging

Having demonstrated that members finding themselves in the losing coalition of a bipartisan bill do, in fact, counter message, we now seek to uncover the effect of such counter messages have on voters' support for legislation.

We first seek to replicate a scenario in which the minority party's counter message is negative in sentiment, but not particularly partisan. Druckman, Peterson and Slothuuss (2013) find that when respondents are presented with two frames lacking partisan identification, the strength of each argument determines a respondent's propensity to support one stance over the other. We suggest, therefore, that voters' support for a given piece of legislation will depend on the manner in which the relevant legislation is explained. Because voters

support bipartisan activity, we suggest that when presented with minimal policy information — which is how most legislation is communicated to the public — they will support the frame that appeals to this positive, bipartisan activity. This theoretical expectation leads us to our first hypothesis.

H1: When presented in conjunction with a *neutral* counter message, bipartisan majority messaging, as compared to partisan majority messaging, increases support for legislation among both co- and out-partisans.

However, as our analysis demonstrated above shows, members who invoke counter messaging also engage in partisan messaging. By invoking partisan cues, as well as the speaker being a member of a political party, members communicate information about the party’s stance on the legislation. Such cues in elite rhetoric should have significant implications for citizens’ attitudes (Zaller 1992). Because citizens are not well versed when it comes to political matters, they draw many of their opinions about public policy and opinion from political elites of their own party (Lenz 2013). Moreover, in times of heightened partisanship, those who identify with a party are especially motivated to follow leaders’ cues (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015). This reasoning extends to the effect of competing frames: when citizens are aware of the partisanship of competing frames, they follow their preferred party regardless of the strength of the frame (Druckman, Peterson and Slothuuss 2013). As such, we expect that citizens support for legislation will be driven by their partisan predispositions rather than desire for bipartisanship. Our second hypothesis is as follows:

H2: When presented in conjunction with a *partisan* counter message, bipartisan majority messaging, as compared to partisan majority messaging, will have no effect on support for legislation.

A remaining question from our theory is which minority party message is more effective for diminishing support when coupled with a bipartisan message: neutral opposition or partisan opposition? As with our previous hypothesis, we expect the inclusion of partisan

cues will be important for citizens’ opinion formation. For those who do identify with the minority party, learning about a party’s stance should decrease support for that legislation. For those identifying with the majority party, however, it is less clear what the implication of learning the opposition party’s stance is; citizens are already aware of their party’s stance due to bipartisan messaging. Work by Harbridge, Malhotra and Harrison (2014) provides some insight. Despite the fact citizens clamor for bipartisanship from their legislators (see footnotes 1 through 4), the desire for bipartisanship is conditional on their own party not giving up to much to the opposition (Harbridge, Malhotra and Harrison 2014). This leads to our final hypothesis:

H3a: In the face of a bipartisan majority message, minority-party partisan messaging decreases support for legislation for minority party co-partisan respondents, as compared to a neutral oppositional message.

H3b: We expect minority-party partisan messaging to increase support for legislation for majority party co-partisan respondents, as compared to a neutral oppositional message.

Evaluating these three hypotheses together, we expect that our data will illustrate that bipartisan messaging is only effective when countered with a neutral message. In the presence of a partisan counter message, however, we expect partisan predispositions to trump any desire for compromise and bipartisanship. In the next section we outline the survey and experiment we employ to test these three hypotheses.

Overview of Survey Design

To test our hypotheses, we field a survey through Qualtrics with 2,710 respondents, weighted by Census benchmarks. Survey responses were collected from August 9, 2021 through August 26, 2021. In this design, we present respondents with a description of a hypothetical bill and two fictitious responses from state legislators about the bill. We vary the style of the majority’s message (bipartisan or partisan) and the style of the opposing, counter message

(neutral or partisan). There are, therefore, four possible message combinations with which respondents can be presented: 1) bipartisan x neutral, 2) bipartisan x partisan, 3) partisan x neutral, and 4) partisan x partisan.

To avoid confounding our findings by selecting an issue with widely known partisan stances, we utilize a hypothetical bill on a low-salience issue: infrastructure.¹⁰ Additionally, to ensure that our findings are consistent across either party serving in the majority, we present this hypothetical bill at the state level to allow for variation in the chamber’s majority. We vary the state referenced in accordance with the randomly assigned majority party. The vignette with which respondents were presented is as follows:

Last month, the Colorado state legislature passed a bill appropriating \$750 million for the improvement of bridges and dams throughout their state. This bill passed the state senate 20-10 before being signed into law by the governor.

A senior Democrat praised the bill as, “an important[, bipartisan/] piece of legislation. [A bipartisan majority/Democrats in this legislative body] took a crucial step forward in the funding and improvement of our state’s vital infrastructure. We worked tirelessly to draft this [bipartisan/Democratic-supported] bill, and I am proud to see it signed into law today.”

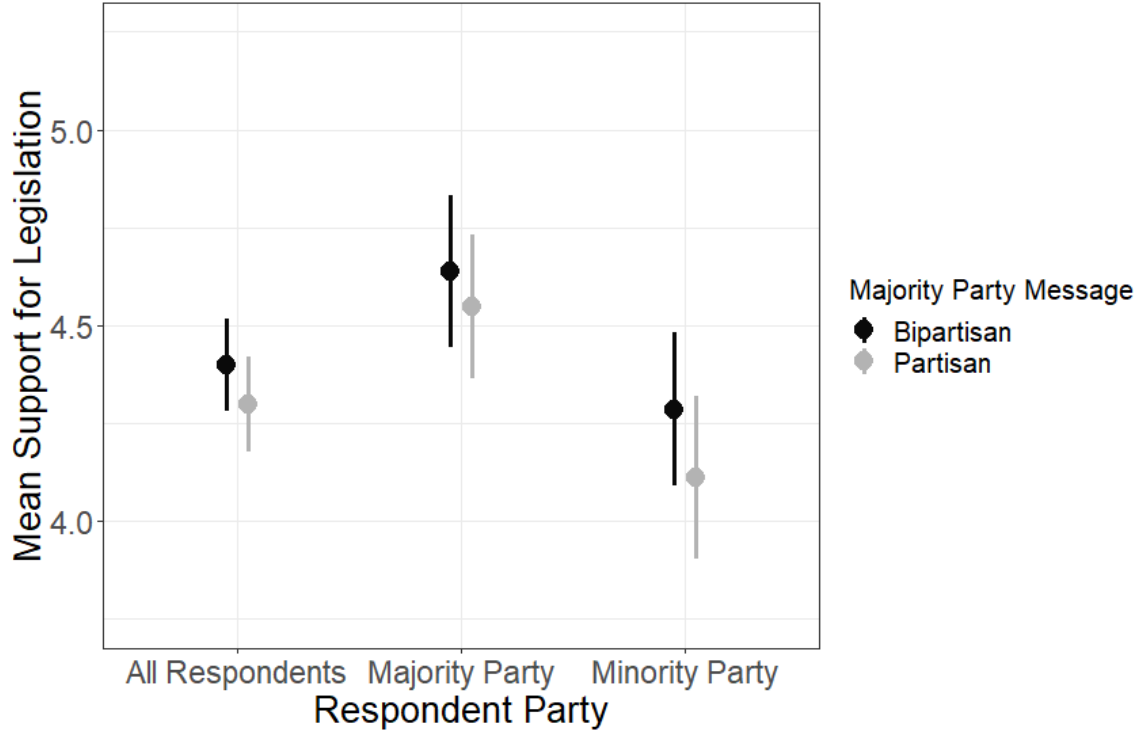
A senior [Republican/senator] responded: “This afternoon, [Democrats in/] our state senate took steps to pass legislation to allocate our scarce budgetary resources toward funding unnecessary infrastructure projects. [The Republican Party/I] did not support this [partisan/] bill.”¹¹

We randomly assign respondents using block randomization by partisan identification to ensure an equal number of Democrats, Republicans and Independents receive each vignette. Partisan identification is measured using the standard partisan identification scale with leaners included as partisans. After presenting respondents with these two frames, we ask them to indicate their level of support for this fictitious bill on a seven-point, oppose-support scale. This level of support is the dependent variable with which we assess the effectiveness of bipartisan frames.

¹⁰This issue was a lot lower salience before President Biden proposed his infrastructure plan in the summer of 2021, yet we do think that a hypothetical bill on bridge and dam funding is still an issue on which voters will not have strong priors and for which there is general bipartisan support.

¹¹When respondents were presented a vignette featuring a Republican majority, the state depicted was Arizona.

Figure 3: Effect of Bipartisan Messaging with a Neutral Counter Message



Analysis

To test our first hypothesis, we utilize a one sided difference-of-means test to evaluate the effect of bipartisan rhetoric as compared to partisan messaging when coupled with a neutral, non-partisan counter frame. The difference in means between our first (bipartisan x neutral) and third (partisan x neutral) vignette combinations are depicted in Figure 3

Contrary to our original hypothesis, we *do not* find statistically significant evidence that bipartisan messaging increases support for legislation when presented with a neutral counter frame. This result holds for all respondents (diff. = 0.10, $t = p\text{-value} = 0.12$), respondents who identify as members of the majority party (diff. = 0.09, $p\text{-value} = 0.26$) and respondents who identify as members of the minority party (diff. = 0.18, $p\text{-value} = 0.11$). It is important to note all three effects are in the intended direction and are approaching statistical significance. The effect, however, size is still small by comparison. Westwood (2020) runs a similar experiment on the effect of bipartisan messaging on increasing support for legislation

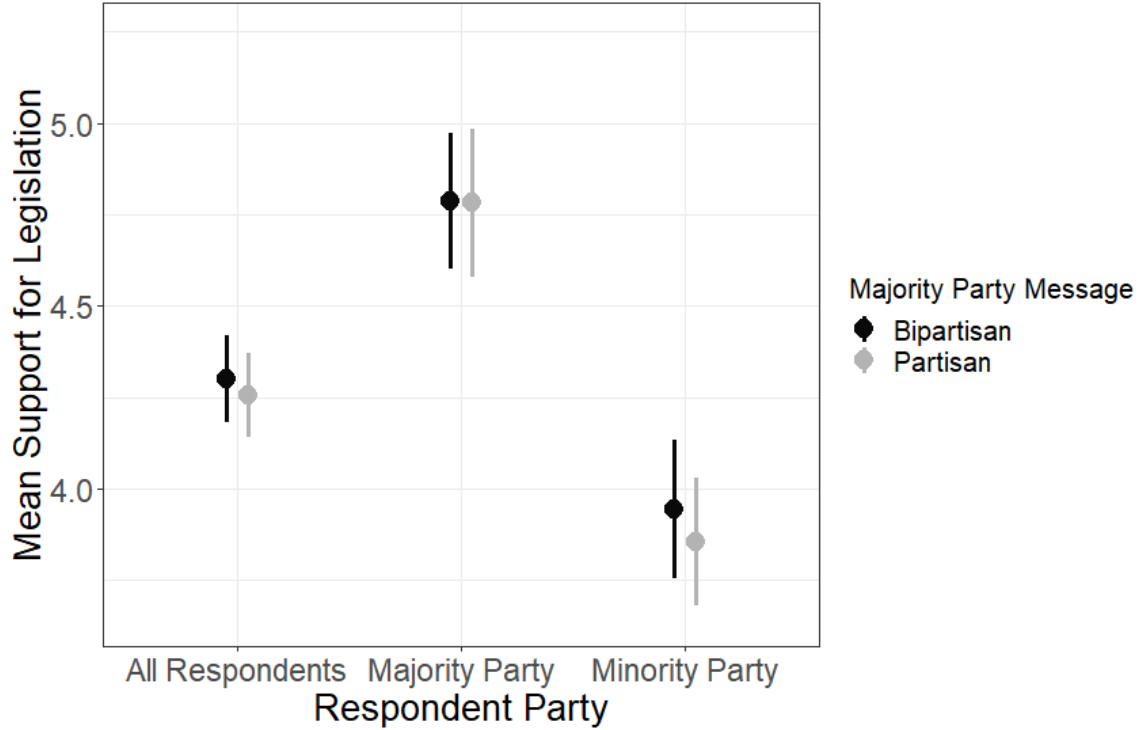
passed by the opposing party and uncovers a difference in means in the range of 0.28 and 0.35.

To further provide context to our result, we conduct a *post hoc* power analysis to determine the minimum effect size we could have expected to uncover with our sample. For the power test, we use a significance level of 0.05, standard power level of 0.8, and the sample size for each of our comparisons (663 for all respondents, 259 for the party-specific test). In our comparison of all respondents, our analysis would detect an effect size of 0.14. For the party-specific analysis, our analysis can detect an effect size of 0.22, both lower than prior findings. In sum, although we cannot conclusively say bipartisan messaging is not effective in the presence of a neutral counter message, our results seem to suggest the effectiveness is diminished when compared with prior research. We plan on further investigating this to provide conclusive evidence of this result.

Moving to our second hypothesis, we will, again, utilize a one-sided difference-of-means test to assess the effectiveness of bipartisan messaging when coupled with a *partisan* counter message. Figure 4 shows the difference in levels of support between vignette combinations two (bipartisan x partisan) and four (partisan x partisan).

Similar to our results in the previous section, we do not find evidence that bipartisan messaging increases support for legislation when presented with a partisan counter frame. For all respondents, there is a slight increase in support for legislation, but the difference is substantively small and not statistically significant (diff. = 0.04, p-value = 0.30). We find a similar trend among respondents who identify with the majority party (diff. = 0.01, p-value = 0.49) and respondents who identify with the minority party (diff. = 0.08, p-value = 0.25). Our analysis here is able to detect the same effect sizes as the previous section (0.14 for all respondents and 0.22 for the party specific analysis). While we are not able to conclude that bipartisan messaging has no effect when presented with a partisan frame, our results do appear to suggest the effect is minimal. We plan on assessing this claim more explicitly in future iterations of this paper.

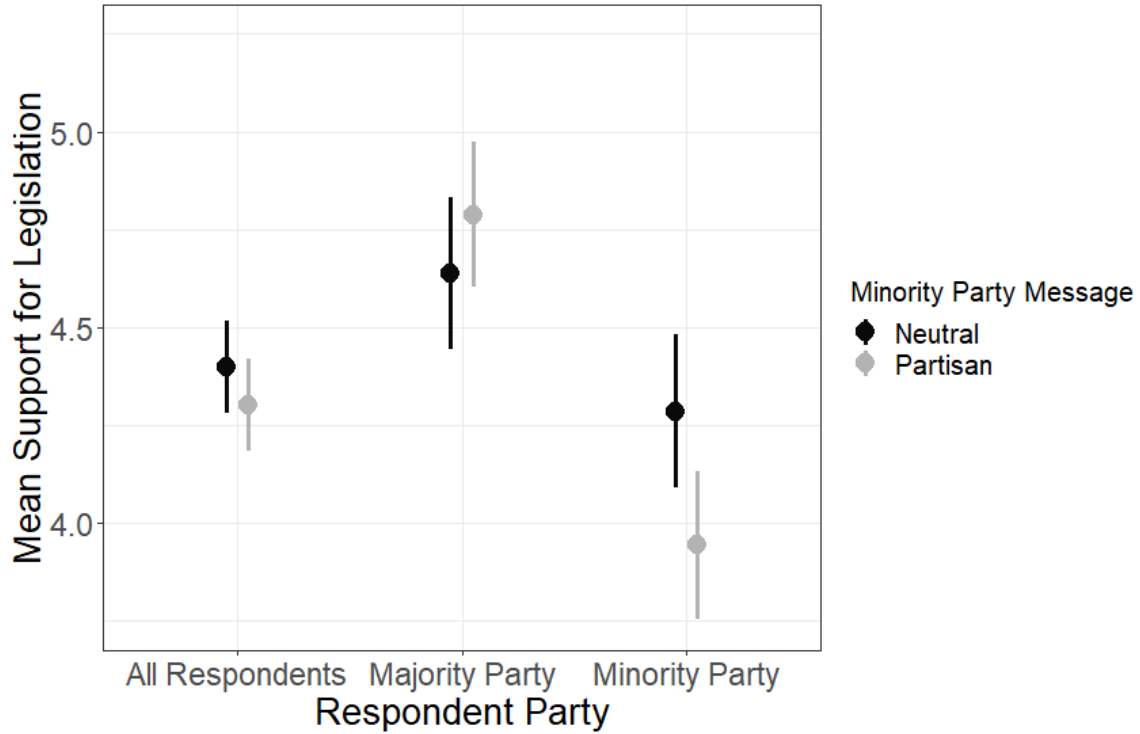
Figure 4: Effect of Bipartisan Messaging with a Partisan Counter Message



Thus far, our analysis has demonstrated both negative opinion messaging and partisan counter messaging exists along side bipartisan messaging. Further, both types of counter messages appear to diminish the effectiveness of bipartisan messaging. We now consider whether party cues are important for reducing support for legislation. To evaluate our final set of hypotheses, we employ a difference-in-means test to evaluate the effect of a partisan counter frame, when holding the bipartisan majority message constant. Figure 5 displays the differences in means between vignettes one (bipartisan x neutral) and two (bipartisan x partisan).

The results in Figure 3 does provide support for hypothesis 3a, but does not provide statistically significant support for hypothesis 3b. For minority-party respondents, as expected, we observe that the partisan counter message both substantively and statistically significantly decreases support for legislation (diff. = 0.35, p-value = 0.01). With the inclusion of a partisan message, minority party members are more often following partisan cues. For

Figure 5: Effect of Counter Messaging with Bipartisan Majority Messaging



majority-party respondents, while a partisan counter message does produce a higher mean level of support among when compared with a neutral counter message, the difference is not statistically significant (diff. = 0.15, p-value = 0.14).

Discussion

Politicians and the public both advocate for bipartisan legislative outcomes. It is no surprise, in the absence of counter messaging, bipartisan messaging increases support for legislation (Westwood 2020). As we have demonstrated, however, bipartisan claims are not always left unopposed; minority party members often engage in both negative and partisan counter messaging. When coupled with this counter messaging, bipartisan rhetoric produces little to no increase in support among the mass public for legislation. Partisan counter messaging, in particular, significantly decreases support among the mass public when compared with neutral counter messaging.

Our results provide a more holistic understanding of bipartisan messaging. If Members of Congress seek to garner public support for legislation and champion their legislative accomplishments, it is important that their efforts are a truly bipartisan effort free of opposition. To this extent, our work possesses important implications members of Congress should consider when employing their messaging strategy. For those in the majority, especially those in closely contested districts, there is a real incentive to produce bipartisan legislation with near-unanimous support that is championed by both sides. For members in the minority, our results paint a somewhat more pessimistic picture: members do face an incentive to counter message and refuse to engage in compromise, especially those in safe districts.

To this extent, our work offers a number of possible extensions for evaluating member behavior, including developing a more complete measure of oppositional language, determining how a member's opposition to bipartisan legislation varies by district characteristics, and understanding better the extent to which counter frames render bipartisan messaging ineffective.

We do not purport to suggest that members of Congress should avoid engaging in bipartisan activity, but we do demonstrate that participating in such cross-partisan legislating might not garner the electoral benefits a member thinks it might.

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