

Partisan Appeals to Bipartisanship

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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. Some suggest the key to members of Congress building public support for legislation is appealing to bipartisanship — signaling to the public that legislation was crafted through compromise and is liked by members on both sides of the aisle. Given the hyper-partisan era that presently exists, however, these bipartisan appeals are unlikely to occur in a vacuum. The minority party has incentives to engage in counter framing to undermine support for legislation. We demonstrate that the benefits awarded to members by engaging in bipartisan appeals are overstated. By engaging in counter messaging, members in the minority party can undermine the legislative accomplishments of their opponents, as well as approval for the legislature. Minority-party members, however, must be careful in how they counter message: partisan, rather than neutral, messages actually increase support for the legislature's majority party while decreasing support for the minority party.

Keywords: bipartisanship, Congress, polarization, public opinion.

Word Count 8,197

On November 15, 2021, President Joe Biden signed the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, or as it is more commonly known, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill, into law.¹ Congressional Democrats and President Biden, alike, emphasized this bipartisan rhetoric throughout all stages of this bill’s legislative process. 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 reference bipartisan negotiations or the presence of bipartisan support, as such cues make constituents — especially out-partisans — more likely to support a bill (Westwood 2020). Given this, the Democrats’ continued reference to the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill, rather than the law’s formal title, is unsurprising.

But just as the majority seeks to garner public support for legislation, the minority party also has incentives to undermine this support (Mayhew 1974). Studies that show the efficacy of bipartisan rhetoric, however, rarely account for counter frames from opponents. As only 13 Republicans voted for the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill, there was no shortage of Republican opposition to the Democrats’ bipartisan frame. While Democrats sought to bolster public support for this bill by referencing bipartisanship, Republicans sought to undermine this support by counter messaging with competing, negative rhetoric. As election margins have decreased, the importance of messaging for bolstering support among constituents for reelection 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.

Such counter frames can affect public opinion (Chong and Druckman 2007). Most relevant for our purposes, constituents are more likely to follow partisanship than any rele-

¹P.L. 117-48.

vant substantive or contextual information when competing parties introduce counter frames (Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus 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 Slothuus 2013). This paper demonstrates that bipartisan rhetoric, when presented in conjunction with a competing frame from the minority party, 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. We 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. Using congressional floor speeches, we find that minority-party speeches do include negative sentiment and partisan cues in opposition to the majority party’s bipartisan claims. 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 the presence of counter messages, whether neutral or partisan in nature, significantly decrease support for legislation among voters as well as their approval of the legislative body as a whole.

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 minority party’s counter messaging, or lack thereof. As soon as the minority party introduces an opposing message, we find that bipartisan messaging loses its power of persuasion. To this end, members in the minority party who oppose a bill face a consistent incentive to counter message these bipartisan appeals. Minority-party members, however, must be careful not to be overtly partisan in their counter messaging, as such a strategy can

hurt the public’s perception of both the minority party and the legislative body, as a whole. By assessing the effect of the minority party’s counter message, we demonstrate that appeals to bipartisanship are less effective in building support than previously thought.

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 use cues they believe will be popular with their relevant audience. The public has long desired for members of Congress and the president to compromise and reach across the aisle when crafting legislation.² In a 2005 poll, 71% of respondents said President Bush should work to compromise with Democrats instead of pushing through his agenda.³ 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.⁴ 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.⁵

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). But how does one define a bill as bipartisan? The literature does not paint a clear picture. Some use the bipartisan label if a bill is cosponsored by members of both parties (Harbridge and Malhotra 2011; Harbridge, Malhotra and Harrison 2014). Others use the term if members

²“Broad Support for Political Compromise,” *Pew Research Center*, 2007. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2007/01/22/broad-support-for-political-compromise-in-washington/>.

³“National Poll,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 2005. <http://www.trbas.com/media/media/acrobat/2006-01/21312324.pdf>.

⁴“President Obama, the Economy, and Foreign Affairs,” *CBS News*, July 13, 2009. https://www.cbsnews.com/htdocs/pdf/poll_Obama_071309.pdf.

⁵Alec 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/>.

of both parties form a winning coalition to pass the legislation (Adler and Wilkerson 2013). As a matter of public opinion, these distinctions matter little as 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 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 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 (Westwood 2020). Furthermore, neither the number of mentions of bipartisanship nor the number of members from the other party joining a winning coalition affect support (Westwood 2020). Knowing that the majority still uses bipartisan cues even when facing a large opposing coalition, along with the incentives of members in the minority party to make counter messages, it is reasonable to expect that bipartisan messaging rarely appears in a vacuum.

Consider a situation in which Republican and Democratic members both support *and oppose* a given bill. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill, for example, passed the House of Representatives with a vote of 228–206. The coalition voting for the bill was comprised of 215 Democrats and 13 Republicans, and those voting in opposition to the bill were six Democrats and 200 Republicans. As mentioned previously, existing research demonstrates that the size of the bipartisan coalition does not matter for the purposes of this argument, as members frequently appeal to bipartisanship regardless of the number of minority members joining the winning coalition. Prior to even receiving a vote in the House, Democratic members urged their colleagues to support this “bipartisan” bill. Despite the fact that this bill did garner bipartisan support, the presence of a bipartisan majority does not preclude the

losing coalition from claiming the victory was partisan. Representative Bob Gibbs (R-Ohio), for example, criticized the bill as “nothing more than the Green New Deal in disguise.” He went on to state that the “House Democrats’ my-way-or-the-highway bill is bloated Big Government at its worst.” 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 and Slothuus 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. In this paper, 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 to evaluate members’ real messaging strategies, we demonstrate first that members of Congress do, in fact, make partisan counter arguments to bipartisan appeals. We then field a survey in which we vary the counter message respondents receive, uncovering that bipartisan messaging loses its persuasion when coupled with a relevant opposing message. In addition, we find that among minority-party respondents, partisan counter messaging is the most effective response to a bipartisan message for diminishing support for legislation. Our results, therefore, carry broad implications for minority-party members’ decision to counter message as well as the content of their counter message.

Invocations of Bipartisanship in Congressional Speeches

In order to demonstrate that members of Congress do 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 respond to 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, and thus an increased focus on legislative messaging (Lee 2016).

Floor speeches serve as a useful tool for capturing members' rhetoric as it is a mechanism by which members appeal to voters, explaining their Washington activity (Fenno 1978) and conveying a policy position (Mayhew 1974). In members of Congress' calculus of how best to spend their limited time in DC, engaging in floor speeches is undoubtedly a costly endeavor. Preparing speeches takes staff time and resources, in addition to the time a member must spend waiting her turn on the House floor. The members that do choose to engage in this type of communication, therefore, expect to receive some sort of benefit (Westwood 2020). Grimmer, Westwood and Messing (2014) demonstrate that members do, in fact, use this messaging tool to communicate with constituents, expecting that floor speeches will gain media attention, furthering their electoral goal. Floor speeches, therefore, are perfectly situated to aid in the effort of seeking to understand how members appeal to bipartisan claims for the purposes of winning public support, as well as how these claims are rebutted.

To assess how minority-party members counter message, we isolate days in the Congressional Record in which majority-party members discuss legislation using bipartisan rhetoric. We then measure the extent to which speeches from minority-party members express a negative or positive opinion. This allows us to determine whether the minority party generally mirrors this positive sentiment or if they express any discontent in the face of bipartisan rhetoric from the majority party. If the minority party engages in counter messaging, as we expect they will, we should see no correlation between the minority party's opinion senti-

ment and the presence of bipartisan cues in majority speeches. Additionally, we measure the extent to which minority-party members respond to the majority party’s bipartisan rhetoric in neutral terms, or whether they invoke partisan references. The presence of partisan cues would suggest that minority-party members rely on partisanship to persuade voters, even in the presence of the majority party’s bipartisan appeals. In the next section we describe these measures in more detail, as well as discuss the trends observed in congressional speeches.

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 advocates for legislation and the minority party counter messages 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.

As noted above, to evaluate minority-party counter messaging, we rely on two separate measures to assess both the extent of counter messaging (opinion sentiment) as well as the nature of how minority-party members counter message (partisan sentiment). To capture this first measure of opinion sentiment, we conduct sentiment analysis of all speeches given by the minority party in a single day using a lexicon developed by Rheault et al. (2016). Rheault et al. use a supervised machine-learning method to capture emotional sentiment in parliamentary text from the United Kingdom. It is important to note while this lexicon was not developed using congressional floor speeches and while there are procedural differences between the two legislative bodies, the measure is more domain relevant than a general

sentiment lexicon.⁶ Words in the Rheault et al. lexicon that are scored as the most positive are “congratulate,” “delighted,” “high-quality,” “tribute,” and “commend.” A variety of words reach the minimum value for the negative side of the lexicon, ranging from “unfair” to “wrong” to “careless.” Conceptually, all words at the poles of the lexicon would still be considered positive and negative in both the Parliament of the United Kingdom as well as the United States Congress. Using this lexicon and scoring method, we calculate an opinion score for each speech given in the House of Representatives between 1993 and 2016. These scores are calculated by taking the sum of words’ polarity scores that are positive and negative in each speech. We then take the average sentiment of all minority party floor speeches in a single day, giving us a measure of minority-party sentiment. If minority-party members do counter message the minority party’s bipartisan references, there should be no correlation between the minority party’s opinion sentiment and the proportion of majority-party speeches that invoke bipartisanship. A lack of correlation would suggest that there are instances in which minority-party members do support legislation that the majority deems bipartisan (e.g., unanimously supported legislation), yet there are also instances in which the minority party expresses strong disapproval (a negative sentiment) for legislation the majority touts as bipartisan.

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 likely that a Republican member of Congress invoked this term. On the contrary, the phrase “mass shooting” receives a score of -60.4, suggesting it is highly

⁶We do, however, find similar results in this section using the Bing lexicon, developed by Hu and Liu (2004) using consumer reviews.

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 this 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 and not in 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 re-scale values such that a more positive score indicates use of majority-party phrases, and a lower, negative score indicates the use of minority-party phrases. As with opinion sentiment, a lack of correlation between the minority party’s partisan sentiment and the proportion of majority-party speeches invoking bipartisanship would suggest that at times the majority party uses neutral language to refer to these bills, but at other times they do appeal to partisan cues to persuade co-partisan voters.

Analysis of Congressional Speeches

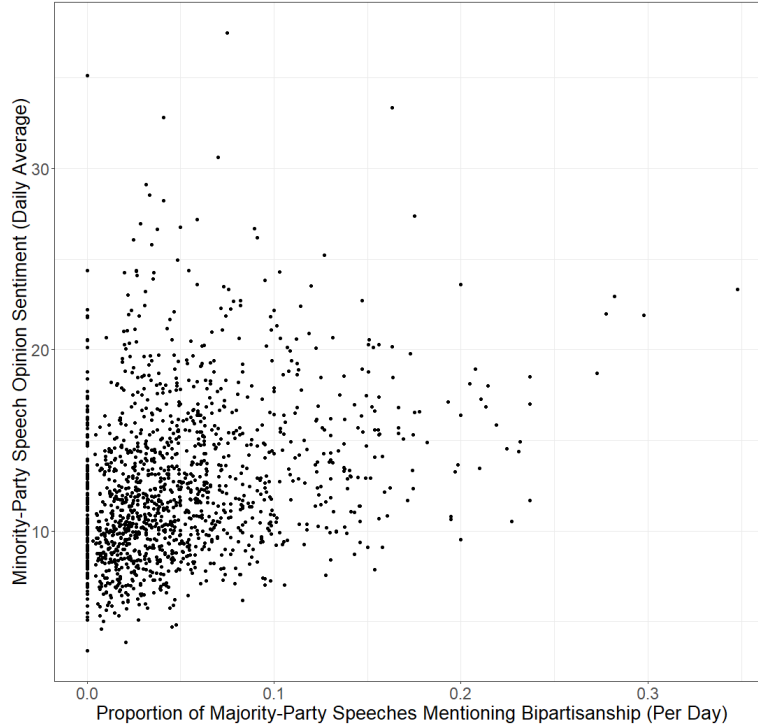
In order to assess the extent that negative opinion and partisan sentiment from minority-party members exists alongside bipartisan messaging from the majority, we compare the correlation between both the daily average of minority-party opinion sentiment and partisan sentiment with the proportion of majority-party 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 a strong 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. The same goes for minority-party partisan sentiment; if counter messaging does not occur, we would expect a strong positive association with minority-party members leaning less into minority-party partisan phrases as the proportion of bipartisan references increases from the majority-party. 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 and no relationship between majority-party bipartisan messaging and minority-party partisan messaging, suggesting that the minority party does counter message bipartisan claims.

Figure 1 shows the proportion of majority-party speeches mentioning bipartisanship per day on the x-axis, and the daily average opinion sentiment in minority-party speeches on the y-axis.⁷ Positive numbers for opinion sentiment indicate more positive speeches, on average per day, and negative numbers indicate more negative speeches, on average per day. As is evident, there is significant variation in the proportion of speeches mentioning bipartisanship, with a range from 0 to 0.347 and mean value of 0.039. 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, there is also significant variation. The average minority-party speech’s opinion sentiment on a given day has a median score of 11.736 and mean score of 12.559, with values ranging from 3.402 to 37.472. With this parliamentary lexicon scoring words such as “thank” as indicative of a positive sentiment, it is unsurprising that the minority party will have generally positive sentiment

⁷We restrict our analysis to only days with speeches above the 1st quartile for the majority (32) and minority (25) to avoid the influence of a single speech on a day’s average. Our analysis produces the same results with all days included, which can be found in Appendix A.

Figure 1: Bipartisan Messaging v. Opinion Sentiment



Note: This figure shows the weak correlation ($\text{corr.} = 0.295$) between minority-party speech opinion sentiment (daily average) and proportion of majority-party speeches mentioning bipartisanship (per day).

scores as nearly all members speaking on the House floor will thank the preceding member who yielded them time to speak. It is important to note, however, that these scores are still far below the average majority-party opinion sentiment, supporting our expectations and providing conceptual validity to the measure.

Most important for our analysis, though, we find a weak correlation ($\text{corr.} = 0.295$) between bipartisan messaging and opinion sentiment.⁸ We argue the weak 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 from the minority. For example, on January 13th, 2015, as the House of Representatives debated the Regulatory Accountability Act of 2015 (H.R. 185), members of the Republican majority touted this bill as a bipartisan effort, while Democrats

⁸For comparison, we find a correlation of 0.462 between majority-party opinion sentiment and majority-party bipartisan mentions.

were extremely critical of this piece of legislation.⁹ Though the bill did ultimately receive eight Democratic votes, establishing it as having bipartisan support, many Democrats expressed their strong opposition during debate. Representative Grijalva (D-Ariz.) was one of many Democrats decrying what he calls a Republican bill: “This is not about making government more efficient. It is about making it impossible for many government agencies to do their jobs on behalf of the American people. In the name of regulatory reform, Republicans are intentionally cutting off the people who oversee our lands and waters at their knees.” This example demonstrates that though the majority party can reasonably appeal to bipartisan efforts and outcomes, members in the minority party still often express strong, negative opinions.

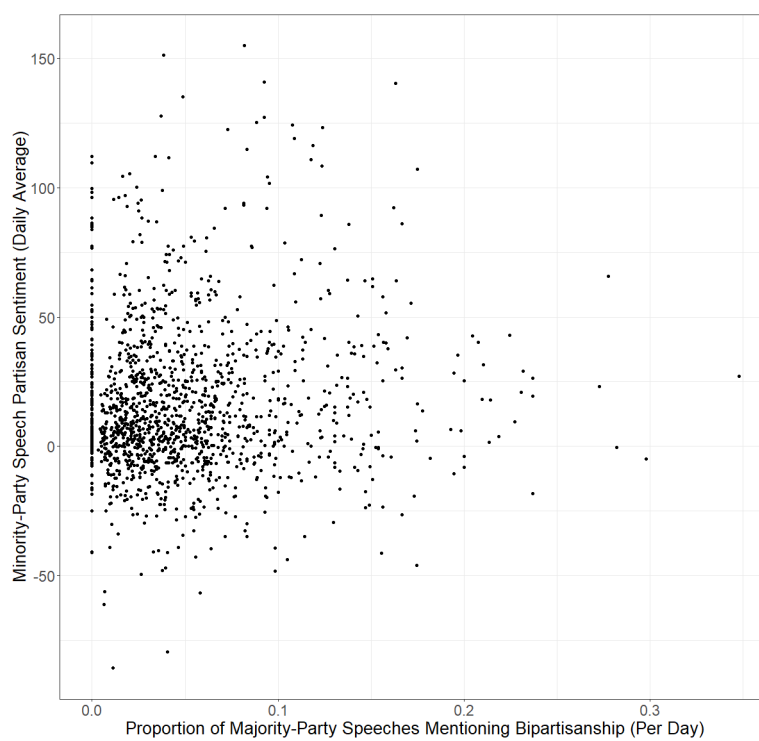
Turning now to minority-party partisan sentiment, Figure 2 plots the proportion of majority-party speeches mentioning bipartisanship per day on the x-axis, and the daily average partisan sentiment of minority-party speeches on the y-axis. As explained previously, partisan sentiment is re-oriented so more positive numbers represent speech that is predictive of a speaker from the majority party while negative numbers represent speech that is predictive of a speaker from the minority party.

As is evident from Figure 2, there is no relationship between bipartisan messaging and minority-party partisan sentiment ($\text{corr} = 0.081$).¹⁰ 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 September 9th, 2013, where the majority party mentioned bipartisanship in over 15% of speeches, the minority did little to lean into partisan messaging. In fact, on this day, when debating the Global Investment in American Jobs Act of 2013 (H.R. 2052), the minority party adopted majority-party rhetoric (average

⁹For example, in his floor speech, Representative Fitzpatrick (R-PA) highlighted the fact that many pieces of this bill passed through the House nearly unanimously and had a substantial number of bipartisan cosponsors.

¹⁰For comparison, the correlation between majority-party partisan sentiment and bipartisan messaging is 0.158

Figure 2: Bipartisan Messaging vs. Partisan Sentiment



Note: This figure shows the lack of correlation ($\text{corr.} = 0.081$) between minority-party speech partisan sentiment (daily average) and proportion of majority-party speeches mentioning bipartisanship (per day).

minority-party partisan sentiment = 140.5). This is unsurprising as the entirety of the minority party supported this bill, along with a majority of the majority party. November 17th, 2015 also saw high levels of majority-party bipartisan appeals (15%), yet with the minority party leaning much more into partisan rhetoric (average minority-party partisan sentiment = -23.5). On this date, the House was debating a rule to proceed to debate on H.R. 1737, the Reforming CFPB Indirect Auto Financing Guidance Act of 2015. This bill wound up receiving broad bipartisan support, with 88 Democratic members joining the majority to pass this bill, yet 96 Democrats voted against its final passage. On this date, we saw several Democrats lamenting the closed-rule under which this bill would ultimately be debated. Representative Van Hollen (D-Md.) expressed his strong disapproval in extremely partisan terms:

Mr. Speaker, I thank the ranking member of the Rules Committee, who began the discussion here by pointing out that here we go again. We say there is new leadership in town on the Republican side, but it is the same old closed process: closed rule, limit democracy, don't allow a full debate, and don't allow the people's House to decide on important questions for the country. When you have a closed rule, you are starting to close down democracy; you are limiting the ability of this House to make decisions on behalf of all the American people.

Representative Van Hollen's remarks, along with several of his colleagues', demonstrate that while the majority party might repeatedly invoke claims of bipartisanship on a bill that received bipartisan support, we still see members in the minority party referring to the same bill as partisan in nature.

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 legislation that is presented as

bipartisan (Westwood 2020). Research on the effectiveness of bipartisan messaging, however, has not yet considered how counter-messaging — in both 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. It is, therefore, necessary to evaluate the effect of bipartisan rhetoric in the face of this counter messaging. In the following sections, we assess the effect of this partisan counter messaging on the persuasiveness of bipartisan messaging.

Theoretical Expectations

Having demonstrated in our analysis of floor speeches that members finding themselves in the losing coalition of a bipartisan bill do, in fact, counter message, we seek now to uncover the effect of such counter messages on voters' support for legislation, approval of the legislature, and affective feelings towards legislators in each party.

We focus first on the implications of counter messaging on the support for legislation. Studies of framing consider primarily the effect of messaging in a vacuum, causing these studies to potentially overestimate the effect in experimental settings (e.g., Sniderman and Theriault 2004). As we have demonstrated, bipartisan appeals do not appear uncontested and these counter frames should have significant implications on public opinion (Chong and Druckman 2007). In competitive framing environments, such as messaging on legislation, frames tend to cancel each other out (Chong and Druckman 2007; Druckman et al. 2010). Further, Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus (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 inclusion of a counter message. We argue that when presented with minimal policy information — which is how most legislation is communicated to the public — counter messaging bipartisan appeals will

decrease support for legislation, regardless of the strength of the counter message. This theoretical expectation leads us to our first two hypotheses:

H1a: When presented in conjunction with a bipartisan majority party message, a neutral counter message, as compared to no counter message, should decrease support for legislation among both co- and out-partisans.

H1b: When presented in conjunction with a bipartisan majority party message, a partisan counter message, as compared to no counter message, should decrease support for legislation among both co- and out-partisans.

In the same vein, we also consider the effect of counter messaging on support for a legislature. As discussed previously, voters show a strong preference for bipartisan activity (Westwood 2020). As with support for legislation, we expect the inclusion of a counter message should decrease feelings towards the legislature as a whole. This leads to our second set of hypotheses:

H2a: When presented in conjunction with a bipartisan majority party message, a neutral counter message, as compared to no counter message, should decrease approval of the legislature among both co- and out-partisans.

H2b: When presented in conjunction with a bipartisan majority party message, a partisan counter message, as compared to no counter message, should decrease approval of the legislature among both co- and out-partisans.

A remaining question from our theory is which minority party message is more effective for diminishing support of legislation and approval of the legislature when coupled with a bipartisan message: neutral opposition or partisan opposition? 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 voters 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 Slothuus 2013). 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 prefer bipartisan collaboration (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 second set of hypotheses:

H3a: When presented in conjunction with a bipartisan majority party message, a partisan counter message, as compared to a neutral counter message, should decrease support for legislation and approval of the legislature for minority party co-partisan respondents.

H3b: When presented in conjunction with a bipartisan majority party message, a partisan counter message, as compared to a neutral counter message, should increase support for legislation and approval of the legislature for minority party co-partisan respondents.

To this point, we have considered measures of support for both legislation and legislatures. It is substantively important, however, to consider whether declining support and approval are distributed equally among legislators in each party. In other words, how does the nature of each counter message affect respondents' feelings towards legislators in each party? When it comes to legislative gridlock, negative messaging and blaming the opposition has significant effects: respondents decrease their support of both the majority and minority party (Doherty and Harbridge-Yong 2020). Given voters' proclivity to support bipartisan activity, we expect to find similar effects for counter messaging decreasing support regardless of party.

H4a: When presented in conjunction with a bipartisan majority party message, a neutral counter message, as compared to no counter message, should decrease feelings towards both majority and minority party legislators.

H4b: When presented in conjunction with a bipartisan majority party message, a partisan counter message, as compared to no counter message, should decrease feelings towards both majority and minority party legislators.

Overview of Survey Design

To test our hypotheses, we fielded a survey through Qualtrics with 2,455 respondents, weighted by Census benchmarks. Survey responses were collected from March 15, 2022 through April 1, 2022. In this design, we presented respondents with a description of a hypothetical bill and fictitious responses from state legislators about the bill. We vary the style of the counter message (neutral, partisan, or none) while holding constant the majority party’s bipartisan message. There are, therefore, three possible message combinations with which respondents can be presented: 1) bipartisan x neutral, 2) bipartisan x partisan, and 3) bipartisan x none.

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.¹¹ 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:

¹¹This was a lower-salience issue 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. To mitigate any concerns, we compare levels of support between Democrats and Republicans across all conditions. Democrats have a mean level of support of 4.96 and Republicans have a mean level of support of 4.74. While the mean levels of support are statistically different from one another, we do not think this represent significant issue polarization one would expect if infrastructure were a clear partisan issue. We also run all analyses separated by party, varying which party holds the majority, and find consistent support for our results throughout. These additional analyses can be found in Appendix D.

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 took a crucial step forward in the funding and improvement of our state’s vital infrastructure. We worked tirelessly to draft this bipartisan 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.”¹²

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. We also asked about their overall approval of the state legislature on a seven-point, approval-disapprove scale, as well as feeling thermometer towards members in the state legislature of each party.¹³

Analysis

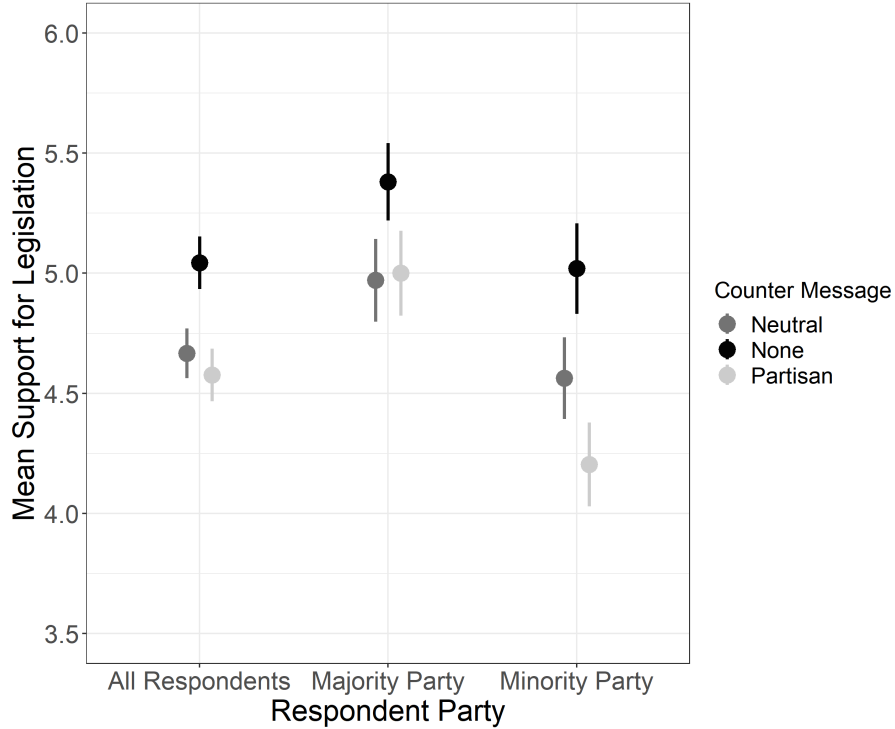
To test our first hypothesis, we utilize a one-sided difference-of-means test to evaluate the effect of counter messages on support for legislation, approval of the legislature, and feelings towards legislators from both parties.

For our first set of hypotheses, we assess the how counter messaging, both neutral or partisan, affects support for “bipartisan” legislation. As discussed in **H1a** and **H1b**, we expect both counter messages to decrease support for legislation. Figure 3 displays the mean levels of support for legislation with a partisan counter message, a neutral counter message, and no counter message. Consistent with our expectations, we find counter messaging significantly decreases support for legislation regardless of the type of counter message. When compared with the condition where there is no counter message, partisan counter messaging decreases support for legislation among all respondents by 0.466 (p-value < 0.001). We also see a

¹²When respondents were presented a vignette featuring a Republican majority, the state depicted was Arizona (see Appendix B).

¹³See Appendix C for full question wording.

Figure 3: Effect of Minority-Party Counter Messages on Support for Legislation



Note: Support for legislation is scaled from strongly oppose (1) to strongly support (7). The inclusion of neutral and partisan counter messages decreases support among all respondents, majority-party respondents, and minority-party respondents. Points represent means and whiskers represent 95% confidence intervals. See Figure 1 in Appendix D for analysis separated by majority party in the legislature.

decrease in support of legislation among respondents in the majority party (diff = -0.388, p-value < 0.001) as well as the minority party (diff = -0.82, p-value < 0.001). We find similar effects when comparing a neutral counter message with no counter message: support for legislation decreases by 0.377 (p-value < 0.001) among all respondents. We also see decreases in support for legislation among both majority party respondents (diff = -0.41, p-value < 0.001) as well as minority party respondents (diff = -0.457, p-value < 0.001).

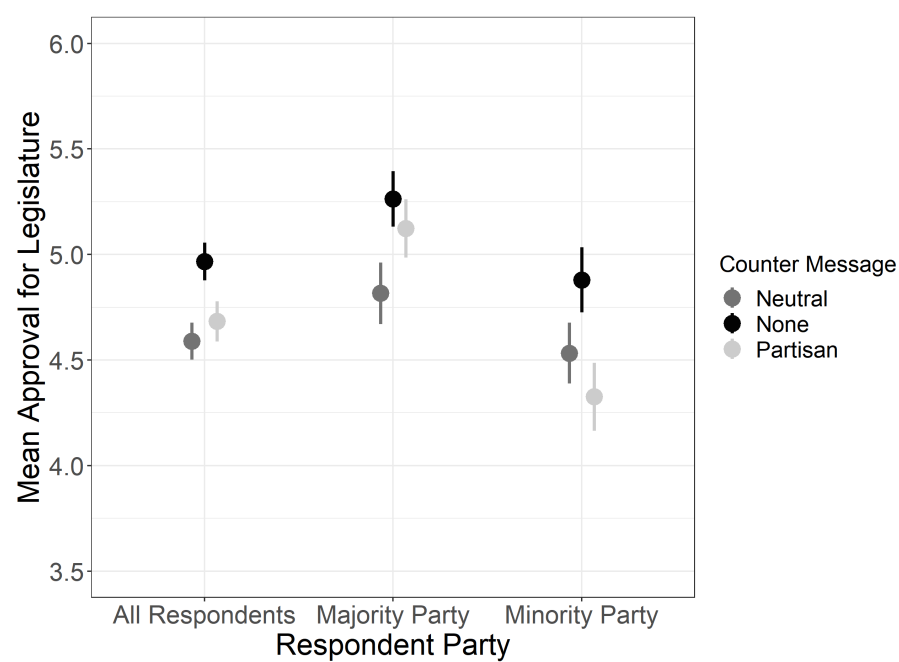
Our results here demonstrate that minority party counter messages can significantly decrease support for legislation regardless of the nature of the counter message and across respondents from both parties. To contextualize the substantive significance of our results in this section, prior analysis by Westwood (2020) with a similar experimental design found bipartisan messaging increased support for legislation among minority party respondents

by 0.35. Given we find a reduction with similar, if not greater magnitude, our results demonstrate any gains in support for legislation made by using majority party bipartisan messaging can be mitigated by minority-party counter messaging.

We turn next to assess the extent to which minority-party counter messaging affects respondents' approval of the state legislature. As with support for legislation, we expect counter messaging, both partisan and neutral, to decrease respondents' approval of the legislature. Figure 4 displays the results for partisan counter messaging and neutral counter messaging compared with no counter message. As expected, partisan counter messaging decreases support for the state legislature among all respondents (diff = 0.283, p-value < 0.001). For partisan counter messaging, however, this effect is primarily concentrated in minority-party respondents (diff = 0.553, p-value < 0.001); we do not find a statistically significant decrease in approval for the state legislature among majority party respondents (diff = 0.14, p-value = 0.076) when compared with a frame that does not contain a counter message. Turning to the neutral counter message, we find consistently that a neutral counter message decreases respondents' approval of the state legislature when compared with no counter message. Our results are substantively similar across all respondents (diff = 0.377, p-value < 0.001), majority-party respondents (diff = 0.447, p-value < 0.001) and minority-party respondents (diff = 0.347, p-value < 0.001).

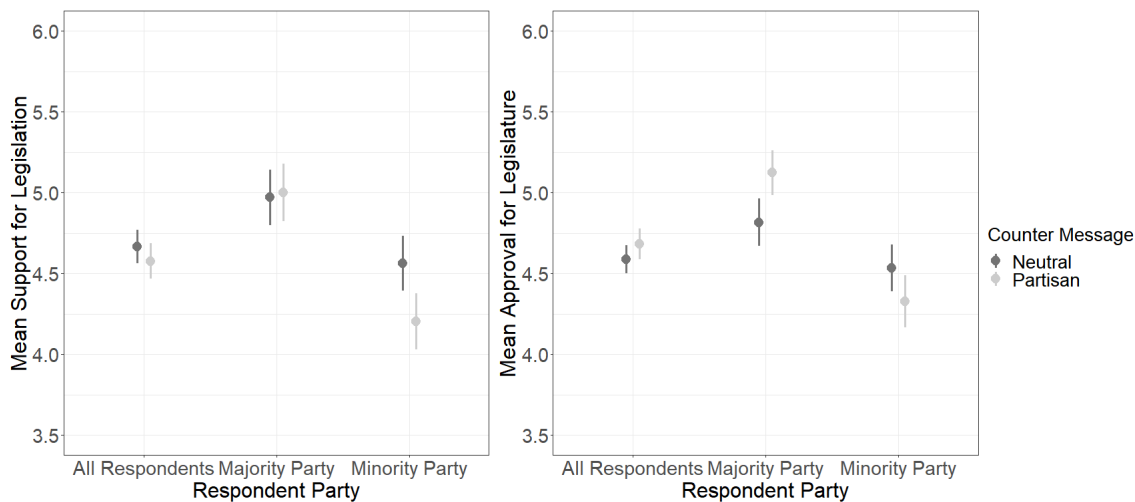
Thus far, our analyses have demonstrated both negative opinion messaging and partisan counter messaging exists alongside bipartisan messaging. Further, both types of counter messages diminish the effectiveness of bipartisan messaging in garnering support for legislation and well as increasing approval of the legislative body as a whole. We now consider whether party cues are important for reducing support for legislation. To evaluate our next set of hypotheses, we employ a difference-in-means test to evaluate the effect of a partisan counter frame compared to a neutral counter frame in support for legislation (Figure 5, left panel) as well as approval for the legislature (Figure 5, right panel).

Figure 4: Effect of Minority-Party Counter Messages on Approval of the State Legislature



Note: Approval of the state legislature scaled from strongly disapprove (1) to strongly approve (7). The inclusion of a neutral counter message decreases approval among all respondents, majority-party respondents, and minority-party respondents. The inclusion of a partisan counter message decreases approval among all respondents and minority-party respondents. Points represent means and whiskers represent 95% confidence intervals. See Figure 2 in Appendix D for analysis separated by majority party in the legislature.

Figure 5: Effect of Minority-Party Counter Messages on Support for Legislation and Approval of the State Legislature

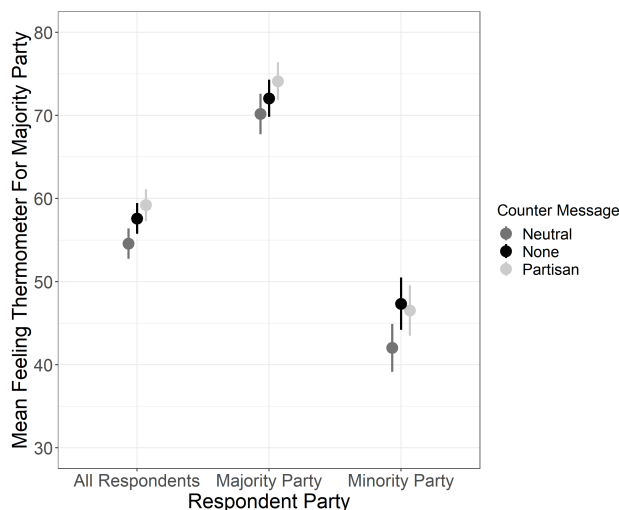


Note: The graph in the left panel captures respondents' support for legislation and the graph in the right panel captures respondents' approval of the state legislature. Support for legislation is scaled from strongly oppose (1) to strongly support (7). The inclusion of a partisan counter message, when compared with a neutral counter message, decreases support for legislation among minority-party respondents. Approval of the state legislature is scaled from strongly disapprove (1) to strongly approve (7). The inclusion of a partisan counter message, when compared with a neutral counter message, increases approval of the legislature among majority-party respondents and decreases approval of the legislature among minority-party respondents. Points represent means and whiskers represent 95% confidence intervals. See Figure 1 and Figure 2 in Appendix D for analysis separated by majority party in the legislature.

Consistent with our expectations, we find that partisan counter framing decreases support for legislation among minority-party respondents (diff = -0.359, p-value < 0.01). There are, however, not statistically significant differences among majority-party respondents (diff = 0.030, p-value = 0.407). This provides partial support for our hypothesis that partisan counter messaging will have a polarizing effect when compared with neutral counter messaging. When it comes to approval for the state legislature, however, we do find it has the expected polarizing effect: partisan counter messaging increases majority-party respondents' approval of the legislature (diff = 0.307, p-value < 0.01) while decreasing minority-party respondents' approval of the legislature (diff = -0.206, p-value < 0.05).

Finally, we consider the affective implications of counter messaging and assess the extent to which legislators from each party stand to gain or lose depending on the minority party's messaging strategy. Figure 6 displays respondents' feeling-thermometer rating for legisla-

Figure 6: Effect of Minority-Party Counter Messages on Feeling Thermometer For Majority-Party Legislators



Note: Feeling thermometer toward majority-party legislators is scaled from cold (0) to warm (100). The inclusion of a neutral counter message decreases feelings towards majority-party legislators among all respondents and minority-party respondents. The inclusion of a partisan counter message does not exert a statistically significant effect on feelings towards majority-party legislators. Points represent means and whiskers represent 95% confidence intervals. See Figure 3 in Appendix D for analysis separated by majority party in the legislature.

tors in the majority party. Consistent with our hypothesis, we find that neutral counter messaging, in particular, has negative effects on respondents. Among all respondents, a neutral counter message decreases support towards majority-party legislators by -3.027 (p-value < 0.05) when compared with no counter message. We find a similar effect among minority-party respondents (diff = -5.315, p-value < 0.01) but not a statistically significant decline among majority-party respondents (diff = -1.885, p-value = 0.278). When comparing support towards majority-party legislators with a partisan counter frame and no counter frame, our results run counter to our expectations. Across all respondents (diff = 1.605, p-value = 0.251), majority-party respondents (diff = 2.07, p-value = 0.217), and minority-party respondents (diff = -0.821, p-value = 0.702), we do not find statistically significant differences in feelings towards majority-party legislators. It should be noted that across all three groups, a neutral counter messaging produces significantly lower feelings towards majority-party legislators when compared with a partisan counter message.

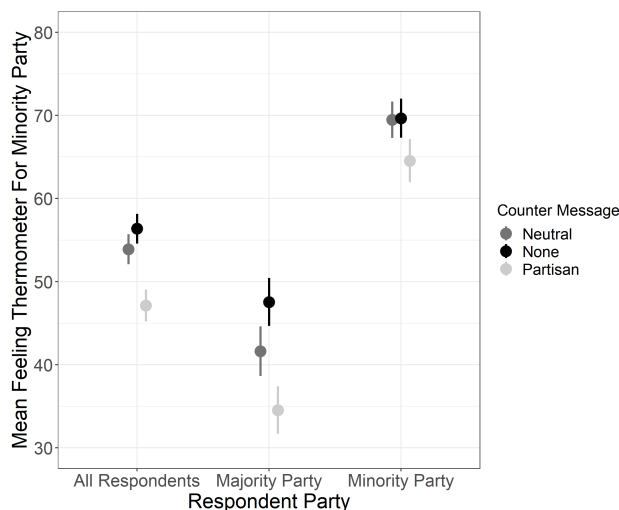
Turning to feelings toward minority-party legislators (Figure 7), we also find the type of counter message has important implications. When compared with no counter message, partisan counter messaging significantly decreases feelings towards minority-party legislators. This difference is found among all respondents (diff = -9.251, p-value < 0.001), majority-party respondents (diff = -13.009, p-value < 0.001) and minority-party respondents (diff = -5.119, p-value < 0.01). When comparing neutral counter messaging with no counter messaging, all respondents (diff = -2.471, p-value = 0.066) and majority-party respondents (diff = -5.917, p-value < 0.01) see a decline in feelings towards legislators in the minority party. There is no difference among minority-party respondents (diff = -0.181, p-value = 0.951). Again, it is important to note there are significant differences when comparing support for minority-party legislators between the neutral counter message and the partisan counter message; we observe a decline among all respondents (diff = -6.780, p-value < 0.001), majority-party respondents (diff = -7.091, p-value < 0.01), and minority-party respondents (diff = -4.937, p-value < 0.01).

In conjunction with our results demonstrating feelings changes towards majority party legislators, there are clear implications for the type of counter message minority-party members choose to use. If members seek to undermine the legislative accomplishments of their opponents, it is important that they avoid invoking partisan language. Neutral counter messaging is more effective at decreasing support for those in the majority, as well avoiding a back-fire effect among fellow minority-party respondents.

Discussion

Both politicians and the public advocate for bipartisan legislative outcomes. It is no surprise, then, that 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

Figure 7: Effect of Minority-Party Counter Messages on Feeling Thermometer For Minority-Party Legislators



Note: Feeling thermometer toward minority-party legislators is scaled from cold (0) to warm (100). The inclusion of a neutral counter message decreases feelings towards minority-party legislators among all respondents and majority-party respondents. The inclusion of a partisan counter message decreases feelings towards majority-party legislators among all respondents, majority-party respondents, and minority-party respondents. Points represent means and whiskers represent 95% confidence intervals. See Figure 4 in Appendix D for analysis separated by majority party in the legislature.

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 widespread bipartisan effort, free — or nearly free — from 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, championed by both sides.

For members in the minority, however, our results paint a more pessimistic picture. Members do face an incentive to counter message and refuse to engage in compromise, as

we find that counter messages are successful in decreasing support for both legislation and legislative bodies. Minority-party members should take caution, however, when employing these counter messages, as an overtly partisan counter message can hurt voters' support for their own party.

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.

These findings add to the growing body of literature that seeks to explain the public's general disapproval of Congress. The minority's incentive to discredit the majority's claims of bipartisanship, along with the media's amplification of this negative rhetoric, is yet another reason why the public perceives Congress as a partisan institution, incapable of compromise.

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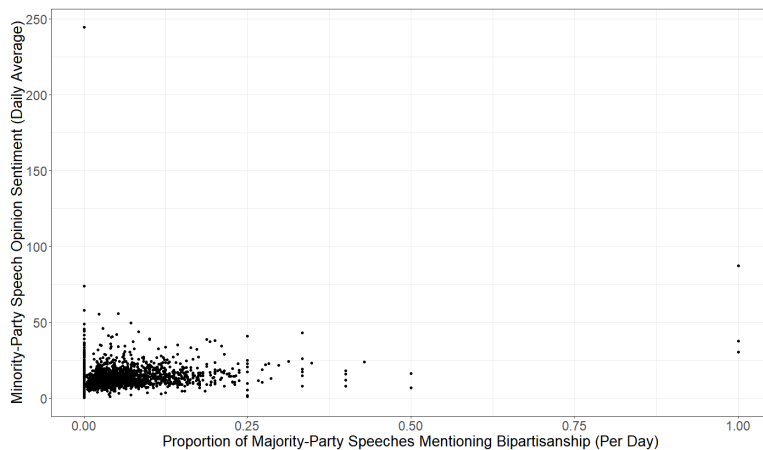
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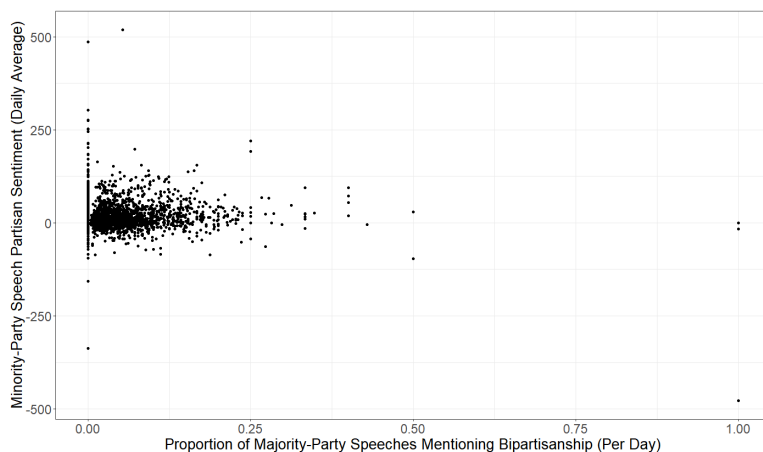
Appendix A Speech Analysis with All Speeches

Figure 1: Bipartisan Messaging v. Opinion Sentiment All Speech Days



Note: This figure shows the weak correlation ($\text{corr.} = 0.176$) between minority-party speech opinion sentiment (daily average) and proportion of majority-party speeches mentioning bipartisanship (per day) using all speech days.

Figure 2: Bipartisan Messaging vs. Partisan Sentiment All Speech Days



Note: This figure shows the lack of correlation ($\text{corr.} = -0.073$) between minority-party speech partisan sentiment (daily average) and proportion of majority-party speeches mentioning bipartisanship (per day) using all speech days.

Appendix B Survey Vignette Wording

Democratic Majority Condition

Please read an excerpt from a recent news story carefully. Then, let us know what you think.

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 took a crucial step forward in the funding and improvement of our state’s vital infrastructure. We worked tirelessly to draft this bipartisan 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.”

Republican Majority Condition

Please read an excerpt from a recent news story carefully. Then, let us know what you think.

Last month, the Arizona 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 Republican praised the bill as, “an important, bipartisan piece of legislation. A bipartisan majority took a crucial step forward in the funding and improvement of our state’s vital infrastructure. We worked tirelessly to draft this bipartisan bill, and I am proud to see it signed into law today.”

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

Appendix C Survey Question Wording

[pid] Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a DEMOCRAT, a REPUBLICAN, an INDEPENDENT, or what?

Democrat (1)

Republican (2)

Independent (3)

No preference (4)

Other party (specify) (5)

[dpid] Would you call yourself a STRONG Democrat or a NOT VERY STRONG Democrat?

Strong (1)

Not very strong (2)

[rpid] Would you call yourself a STRONG Republican or a NOT VERY STRONG Republican?

Strong (1)

Not very strong (2)

[lean] Do you think of yourself as CLOSER to the Republican Party or the Democratic Party? Closer to Republican (1)

Closer to Democratic (2)

Neither (3)

[support.leg] To what extent do you support or oppose the legislation mentioned in the news article?

Strongly oppose (1)

Oppose (2)

Somewhat oppose (3)

Neutral (4)

Somewhat support (5)

Support (6)

Strong support (7)

[leg.approval] Do you approve or disapprove of the way the [Colorado/Arizona] state legislature is handling its job?

Strongly disapprove (1)

Disapprove (2)

Somewhat disapprove (3)

Neither approve nor disapprove (4)

Somewhat approve (5)

Approve (6)

Strongly approve (7)

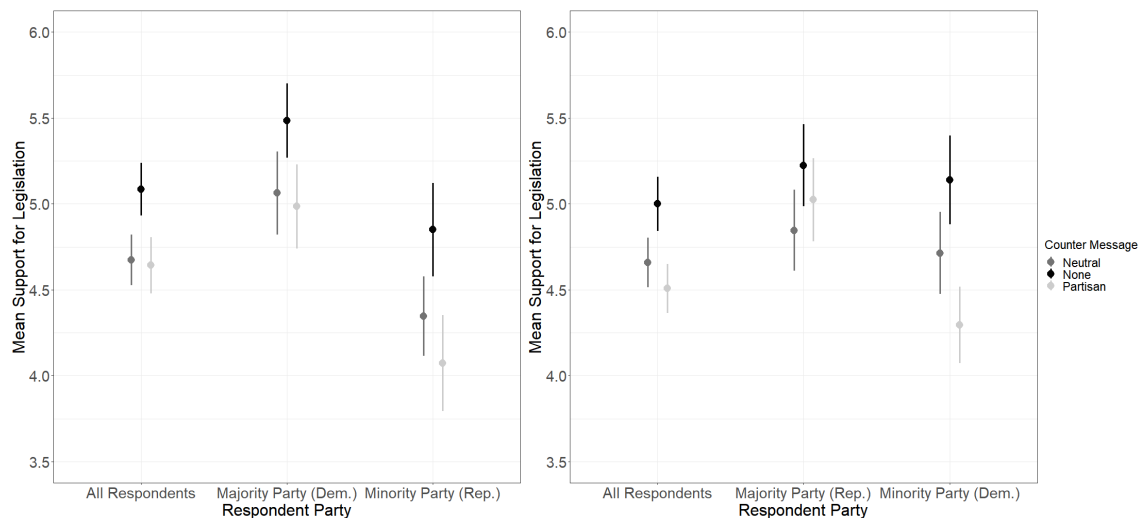
[feeling.thermom] Below, please indicate how you feel toward each group on a thermometer scale – in terms of how good of a job they have done in the [Colorado/Arizona] state legislature. Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you think they are doing a good job. Ratings between 0 degrees and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel the group is doing a very good job. You would rate the group at the 50-degree mark if you don't feel that they are doing a particularly good nor bad job. How would you rate each of the following? Remember: 0 means not a good job, 100 means a very good job.

Democrats in the [Colorado/Arizona] state legislature feeling thermometer

Republicans in the [Colorado/Arizona] state legislature feeling thermometer

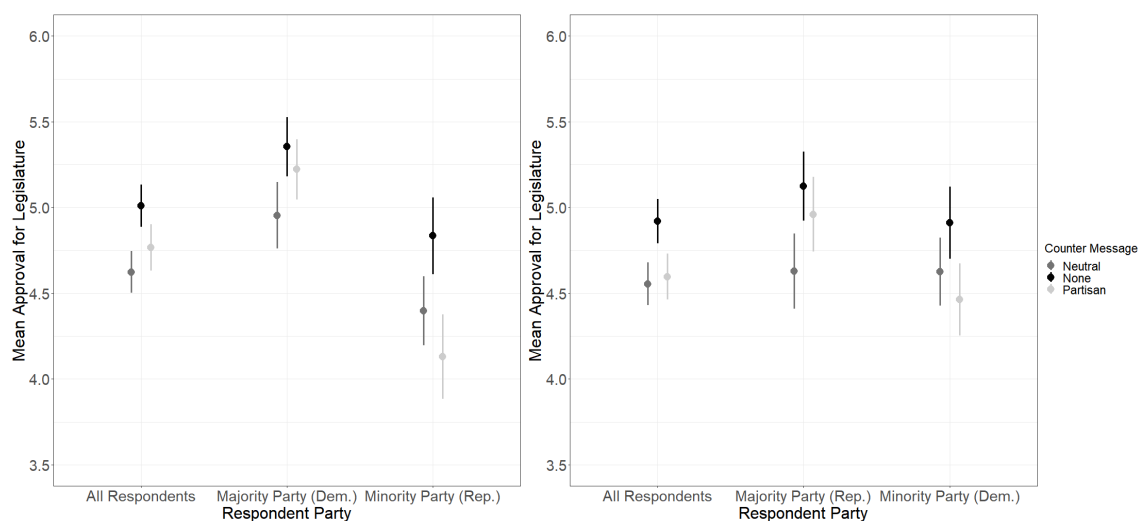
Appendix D Hypothesis Tests by Majority Party

Figure 1: Effect of Minority-Party Counter Messages on Support for Legislation



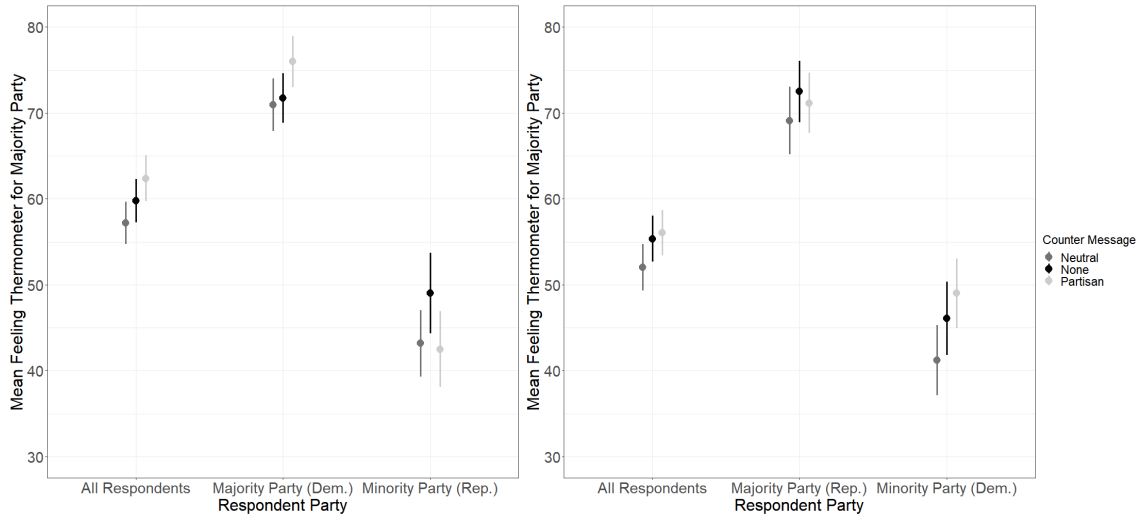
Note: The graph in the left panel captures respondents' support for legislation when the treatment condition has Democrats in the majority party while the graph in the right panel captures respondents' support for legislation when the treatment condition has Republicans in the majority party. Support for legislation is scaled from strongly oppose (1) to strongly support (7).

Figure 2: Effect of Minority-Party Counter Messages on Approval of the State Legislature



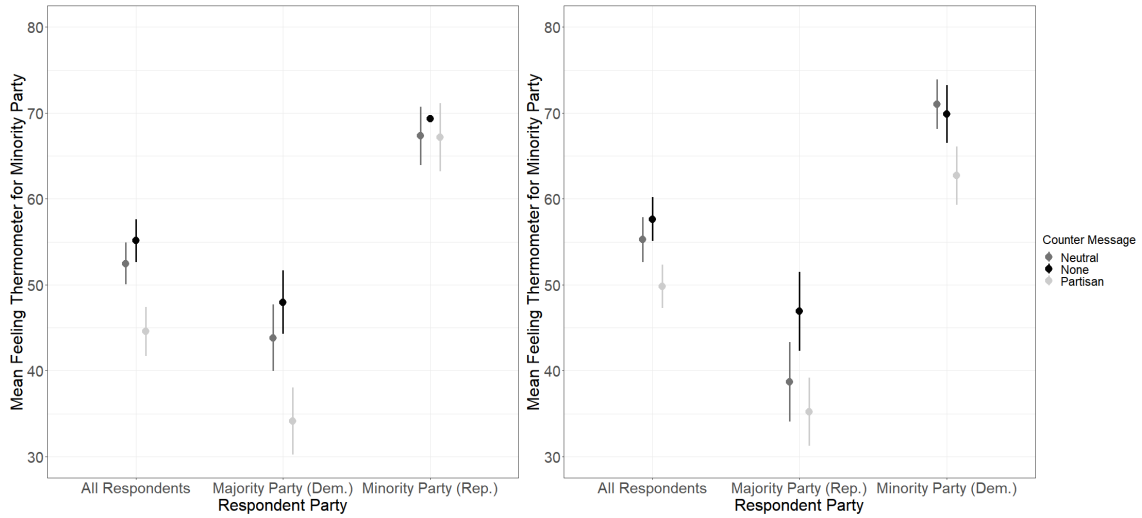
Note: The graph in the left panel captures respondents' support for legislation when the treatment condition has Democrats in the majority party while the graph in the right panel captures respondents' support for legislation when the treatment condition has Republicans in the majority party. Support for legislation is scaled from strongly oppose (1) to strongly support (7).

Figure 3: Effect of Minority-Party Counter Messages on Feeling Thermometer For Majority-Party Legislators



Note: The graph in the left panel captures respondents' support for legislation when the treatment condition has Democrats in the majority party while the graph in the right panel captures respondents' support for legislation when the treatment condition has Republicans in the majority party. Feeling thermometer toward majority-party legislators is scaled from cold (0) to warm (100).

Figure 4: Effect of Minority-Party Counter Messages on Feeling Thermometer For Minority-Party Legislators



Note: The graph in the left panel captures respondents' support for legislation when the treatment condition has Democrats in the majority party while the graph in the right panel captures respondents' support for legislation when the treatment condition has Republicans in the majority party. Feeling thermometer toward minority-party legislators is scaled from cold (0) to warm (100).