

The Macro Dynamics of Partisan Advantage

Logan Dancey
Assistant Professor
Department of Government
238 Church St.
Wesleyan University
Middletown, CT 06459
ldancey@wesleyan.edu
Phone: 860.685.3416
Fax: 860.685.3002

Matthew Tarpey
PhD Candidate
Department of Political Science
University of Pittsburgh
4600 Wesley W. Posvar Hall
Pittsburgh, PA 15260
matttarpey@pitt.edu
Phone: 412.960.0588
Fax: 412.648.7277

Jonathan Woon
Professor
Department of Political Science
University of Pittsburgh
4600 Wesley W. Posvar Hall
Pittsburgh, PA 15260
woon@pitt.edu
Phone: 412.648.7266
Fax: 412.648.7277

Acknowledgements: The replication dataset for this article can be found on the Harvard Dataverse: Dancey, Logan; Tarpey, Matthew; Woon, Jonathan, 2018, “Replication Data for: The Macro Dynamics of Partisan Advantage”, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/XZ9REE>, Harvard Dataverse, V1. A previous version of the paper was presented at the 2013 Midwest Political Science Association Conference. We are grateful to Jeremy Pope for his contributions to the earliest stages of this project, and we thank Ben Melusky and Fanghui Zhao for their research assistance.

Abstract

How do party reputations change over time? We construct a measure of the common movement in the parties' perceived policy handling abilities for the period 1980 to 2016 and investigate its relationship with the public's evaluation of Congress and the president. In contrast to key claims made in theories of congressional parties, we find an inconsistent relationship between evaluations of Congress and party reputations and find no evidence that successful agenda control enhances the majority party's reputation. Instead, our analysis shows a strong relationship between party reputations and presidential approval, reaffirming the central role the president plays in shaping party reputations.

Keywords: Political parties; public opinion; party reputations; agenda control; aggregate opinion; time series

Recent history demonstrates how dramatically parties' reputations change alongside their legislative and electoral fortunes. In 2006, the public seemed to have lost complete faith in the Republican Party's ability to govern. Survey after survey showed that the public believed the Democratic Party could do a better job handling almost every major political issue: the war in Iraq, the economy, taxes, federal spending, ethics, immigration, Social Security, health care, and even gas prices. The Democratic Party's reputational advantage contributed to substantial electoral gains in the midterm elections, resulting in the Democrats retaking control of Congress. But just four years later—even after capturing the presidency and gaining additional seats in 2008—highly divisive legislative accomplishments gave way to a reversal of fortune. This time, Democrats suffered heavy losses and Republicans recaptured the House of Representatives in the 2010 midterms. By February 2013, the tides turned again: the Republican Party now found itself unpopular with the public and struggling to dictate the agenda of a chamber it controlled, with the Republican majority in the House finding itself on the losing side of high-profile votes on changes in the tax code, hurricane relief, and the Violence Against Women Act.

We might expect legislative success and party reputations to be tied to one another, but there is a surprising lack of empirical support for the relationship between the two concepts. Few studies have examined the link between legislative performance and the parties' fortunes (e.g., Koger and Lebo 2017), despite the important linkage between parties' brand names and their ability to carry out their legislative agenda in prominent theories of political parties (e.g., Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005). In this paper, we fill this void by exploring a key element of the two parties' reputations—their perceived handling of public policy—and examine the extent to which Congress influences the public's view of it.

Relying on a dataset of quarterly evaluations of the two parties' perceived handling of issues from 1980 to 2016, our analysis shows that policy reputations are not reliably tied to congressional evaluations. In addition, we find no evidence to support the assumption that a party's lack of success at controlling the agenda in the House has negative repercussions for its reputation. Instead, the public looks predominantly to the president to form judgments about the relative standing of the two parties. The results raise important questions about how to square the weak relationship between party reputations and congressional evaluations with its presumed theoretical role in motivating the value of House agenda control (Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005) and with recent evidence that congressional approval is related to party evaluations at the individual level (Jones 2015). Additionally, the results provide further evidence of the executive as a focal point for citizens' evaluation of political parties.

Institutions, Information, and Party Reputations

In the broadest sense, a party's reputation is simply what the public believes about it, and scholars of political behavior and institutions alike agree that reputations play an important role in the representative process. What the public believes about the parties is important because stereotypes about parties provide informational shortcuts for voters when they are not fully informed about individual candidates (Conover and Feldman 1989; Koch 2001; Lodge and Hamill 1986; Rahn 1993). As a consequence, there are incentives for politicians to form party organizations and create other institutional arrangements that facilitate the creation and maintenance of their parties' brands (Aldrich 1995; Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005; Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991). It is therefore surprising that there is little evidence about how public

opinion and perceptions of parties change over time despite the central role that political parties play in a representative democracy (Schattschneider 1942).

Beliefs about parties vary along many dimensions, including their overall quality, competence, ideological positions, issue priorities, and other characteristics. The majority of the literature on party reputations and cues emphasizes that information about parties is useful for making inferences about individual candidates' ideological or policy positions (Conover and Feldman 1989; Snyder and Ting 2002; Woon and Pope 2008), but while ideological content is an important component of party reputations, it is not the entire story. In this paper, we focus specifically on the parties' performance reputations: their competence, ability to govern, and the effectiveness with which their advocated policies produce desirable outcomes.

How and why do reputations change over time? Our framework for understanding changes in the parties' reputations is simple. We argue that citizens are largely uninformed about politics, but when they do pay attention, they incorporate their evaluations of policy-making activity, policy choices, and outcomes into their evaluations of the parties. For the most part, we abstract away from the micro-level details of how citizens make their judgments, what kind of information they have, how they evaluate positions, their preferences, and so on. Indeed, the stream of information available to voters is wide and also potentially complicated. Citizens cannot pay attention to it all, and different people will attend to different kinds of information. Voters utilize various sources of information about policy-making activity: congressional debate and hearings, the passage of legislation, filibusters and obstruction, executive-legislative bargaining, and presidential influence through administrative policy-making. It also includes information about policy outcomes including the extent of economic growth, unemployment, income inequality, and the crime rate.

Despite the complexity of this information, we also argue that citizens recognize, at least to some extent, the institutional context of political information and the partisan control of those institutions. For example, they are likely aware that President Obama pushed for major health care reform and that Democratic majorities in the House and Senate passed the Affordable Care Act against vehement Republican opposition. Cognizance of institutional context and knowledge of partisan control are both necessary conditions for voters to update their beliefs about parties based on broad evaluations of performance. To the extent that one or both conditions are not met, the linkage between policy-making activity and reputations will be weak or non-existent. Therefore, our theoretical framework parallels partisan theories in placing policy-making activity and outcomes at the core of establishing the parties' reputations.

Assigning Responsibility

If acquiring information is costly, we might expect that people will use the information most readily available to them without actively searching for more. A simple heuristic they could rely on would therefore be to hold a single institution accountable for good and bad policy outcomes. Intuition and conventional wisdom suggest that the president clearly stands out as the most visible member of his party and is widely regarded as its national leader. The president is therefore an easily identifiable source of citizens' evaluations of his party's performance. This claim is consistent with much of the literature on traditional retrospective voting in which the president's party is held accountable for economic outcomes (Key 1966; Kramer 1971; Norpoth 2001; Tufte 1975) and previous findings that presidential approval is largely shaped by evaluations of the economy (MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1992).

The most parsimonious account of the information citizens use to derive their relative evaluations of the parties is one that focuses exclusively on the president. Specifically, when the president is a Democrat, evaluations of relative party performance should increasingly favor the Democrats when there are increases in positive outcomes and presidential evaluations, while the opposite relationship should hold if the president is a Republican. Empirical work shows that the president has a profound effect on evaluations of his party. For example, Jacobson argues that “insofar as the party label represents a brand name, the president bears prime responsibility for the brand’s current image and status” (2012, 684), and he finds that evaluations of the president are associated with the public’s summary evaluations of the president’s party along with evaluations of other actors within the party (such as congressional leaders), and perceptions of which party is best able to handle certain issues,

If the public’s limited attention is occupied primarily by the president, congressional performance may not be relevant in determining voters’ evaluation of the parties, and we would not expect to see any relationship between congressional approval and evaluations of party performance. Indeed, early survey research suggested that “few judgments of legislative performance are associated with the parties” (Stokes and Miller 1962). More recently, analyzing variation in perceptions of parties’ ability to handle discrete issues, Brasher (2009) finds that increases in presidential approval are associated with more favorable evaluations of the president’s party’s ability to handle those issues. However, she does not find that higher levels of congressional approval redound to the benefit of the majority party, observing a negative relationship between approval and the majority party’s relative advantage on several issues.

Prominent theoretical work, however, expects that congressional parties play a role in shaping party reputations. Cox and McCubbins (2005) argue that tighter control of the legislative

agenda will produce more policy successes for the majority party, and, ultimately, a better party brand name. Speaking of the majority party's agenda powers, Cox and McCubbins (2005, 7) argue, "The better the majority party's control of such powers is, the more able it will be to fashion a favorable record of legislative accomplishments, although certainly other factors enter into this as well (such as the party of the president). The more favorable the majority party's record of legislative accomplishment, the better its reputation with the public will be." Put simply, Cox and McCubbins (1993, 2005) view the majority party's ability to control the agenda as a means to influence its collective reputation—and subsequent electoral fate—through the passage of favorable legislation. As the above quotation makes clear, however, Cox and McCubbins do not view the actions of congressional parties as the only factor shaping parties' reputations.

Several studies provide evidence seemingly consistent with Cox and McCubbins' argument. Jones and McDermott (2009) show a positive relationship between congressional approval and support for the congressional majority party during elections, and Jones (2010) shows this relationship is getting stronger over time. In addition, Woon and Pope (2008) find that aggregate party positions affect congressional election outcomes, although party reputations benefit challengers rather than incumbents. These studies indicate a link between congressional activity and the overall party brand. Furthermore, both Woon and Pope (2008) and Jones and McDermott (2009) provide evidence that the aggregate ideological positioning of congressional parties shape citizens' evaluations of Congress. Koger and Lebo (2017), meanwhile, show that party wins in Congress are associated with future electoral success while more unified congressional parties tend to suffer electorally. Previous research, therefore, suggests that the public bases some of its evaluations of the two parties on what happens inside Congress.

In the most direct test of the link between evaluations of Congress and the two parties, Jones (2015) finds an individual-level relationship between congressional approval and evaluations of the parties on American National Election Study feeling thermometer scales, with the link between congressional approval and support for the majority party strongest in more polarized years. ANES panel data from 1993-1994 also suggests that the relationship runs from congressional approval to party evaluations and not vice versa (Jones 2015). Finally, although there is no test of the aggregate link between congressional approval and the measures of party reputations similar to the one used here, Jones does find a relationship between congressional approval and changes in state legislative seat shares. Jones concludes that the results, “upend conventional scholarly wisdom that citizens’ evaluations of Congress do not affect their attitudes toward and support for the parties overall” (2015, 796).

Although the evidence suggests that a link exists between congressional evaluations and support for the majority party, other research qualifies these findings. Adler and Wilkerson (2013) find the majority party suffers when congressional approval declines during unified government, but both the majority and minority party are held accountable for low approval ratings during divided government. The larger political context may thus affect voters’ willingness or ability to equate congressional performance with party evaluations.

Another key part of Cox and McCubbins’ argument—the link between the enactment of significant legislation and evaluations of Congress—has not fared as well in empirical tests. Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht (1997) find a negative relationship between the passage of significant legislation and congressional approval, although an analysis covering a longer time period finds no statistically significant relationship (Ramirez 2009). Shedding light on why aggregate evaluations of Congress may not change in response to the passage of significant

legislation, Jones (2013) finds that passage of healthcare reform in 2010 polarized individuals' evaluations of Congress. Supporters of healthcare reform increased their support of Congress while opponents of healthcare reform evaluated Congress less favorably after passage, with opinions canceling out so that there was no aggregate shift in congressional support.

From an informational perspective, there is also reason to expect that the link between majority party agenda control and party reputations is relatively weak. Given low levels of knowledge about specific political facts (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Lupia 2015), the general public is almost certainly ignorant of variation in traditional measures of agenda control such as party roll rates. Of course, Cox and McCubbins (2005, 8) argue that the link between agenda control and party reputations runs through the "majority party's record of legislative accomplishment." Even knowledge of levels of legislative accomplishment, however, may push the bounds of public knowledge. Although the proportion varies across time and context, a sizeable percentage of Americans are frequently unable to name the party in control of the House or Senate (Jones and McDermott 2011). In 2011, for example, only 38% of respondents to a Pew Research Poll said that Republicans had a majority in the House of Representatives a mere six months after Republicans won big in the 2010 elections.¹

In sum, while we are not the first to consider the relationship between congressional performance and evaluations of the parties, to our knowledge there have been no direct tests of the link between majority party agenda control and party reputations or between aggregate congressional approval and summary evaluations of the parties. In the sections that follow, we explore these relationships by utilizing our measure of party reputations across time.

Data and Methods

To measure aggregate performance expectations, we compiled an extensive dataset of survey marginals for questions that asked voters about the parties' relative issue handling abilities for the period beginning in the first quarter of 1980 and ending in the second quarter of 2016. Our sources include the Roper Center for Public Opinion's iPoll Databank, National Journal's Polltrack, and Gallup's online archive. The database contains a total of 3,995 observations grouped into 457 distinct series, where we define a series to be unique to a survey organization and issue. We coded 45 separate issues covering a wide range of topics such as economic prosperity, war, foreign affairs, taxes, crime, social security, civil rights, and education. The typical question is worded as follows: "Which political party, the Democrats or the Republicans, would do a better job handling...the economy?" For each observation, we calculated the percentage of respondents favoring the Democrats out of all respondents favoring either the Democrats or Republicans. Since our analysis involves estimating the importance of different institutions, our survey marginal database only includes questions that refer generically to the parties. That is, we are careful to exclude questions that mention specific individuals (e.g. presidents), groups within the party (e.g. party leaders or candidates), or Congress.

Using Stimson's (1991) "dyad ratios algorithm," we construct a quarterly time series measure of these aggregate expectations, which we refer to as *Democratic Advantage*. Stimson's method is designed to combine public opinion time series that occur at irregular intervals but overlap, and it has been used by many researchers to measure concepts such as policy mood (MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1992; Stimson 1991), congressional approval (Box-Steffensmeier and Tomlinson 2000; Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht 1997; Jones and McDermott 2009), and trust in government (Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn 2000; Keele 2007). The method is

analogous to factor analysis and is essentially an averaging process that measures the shared variance of the component series. Overall, our composite measure of relative party reputations accounts for 57% of the variance in the underlying series. Although this measure combines data from seemingly disparate issues such as national defense and foreign policy, the factor analytic nature of the method means that we have extracted the common movement in expectations across these different issues. Our approach of combining series into a single measure is distinct from Brasher (2009) and Pope and Woon (2009), who look at the dynamics of parties' perceived handling of individual issue domains over time, while it is consistent with the concept of "macro-competence" that Green and Jennings (2017) develop for multiple countries.

In our view, our policy handling measure is conceptually closer to the idea of party *reputations* than existing aggregate measures of party identification in the electorate, namely macropartisanship (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002). Although we would expect party identification and perceptions of party performance to be related at the individual and aggregate level, they are distinct concepts. Indeed, Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen (2012, xiii) use the term "ambivalent partisanship" to describe cases when "long-standing identifications are contradicted by short-term evaluations of the parties' capacities to govern and deliver benefits to the public." Our measure captures more of these short-term fluctuations than it does long-term identification. We expect that if either concept is likely to change as a result of majority party agenda control and legislative success, it will be evaluations of the parties as opposed to identification with them. As such, we focus our analyses on our measure of party reputations.

Our measure is similar to Green and Jennings' (2017) "macro-competence" measure developed for multiple countries. Cavari (2014) develops a similar series that he calls "macrohandling," which is based on the parties' perceived ability to handle whichever issue a

respondent deems the “most important problem” facing the country. Both Cavari (2014) and Green and Jennings (2017) find that their series Granger cause macropartisanship (MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1989), with Green and Jennings (2017) finding some reciprocal relationship between macropartisanship and macro-competence. In addition, in the U.S. case, Green and Jennings (2017) find that macro-competence evaluations are predictive of parties’ electoral support in the aggregate.

Consistent with these previous findings, bivariate Granger causality tests indicate that *Democratic Advantage* and macro-partisanship “Granger cause” one another ($p < 0.01$). In other words, an increase in a party’s policy handling reputation in one quarter is associated with an increase in the share of the electorate identifying with that party in the next quarter and vice versa. Such a finding is consistent with the idea that perceptions of the parties’ performance can lead to changes in party identification while party identification also shapes perceptions of the two parties’ performance (see Green and Jennings 2017, 91). The observed relationship between policy handling expectations and macro-partisanship documented both here and in the existing literature thus suggests that these expectations are politically consequential. Our focus here, however, is on testing the hypothesized relationship between majority party agenda control, legislative accomplishments, and party reputations.

Figure 1 plots *Democratic Advantage* from the first quarter of 1980 through the second quarter of 2016. As indicated by the graph, the parties’ relative policy handling reputations strikingly swing along with their electoral fortunes, which provides face validity for the measure. The mean of the series is 53.2 with a standard deviation of 3.3. The low point in the series (45.8) comes in the first quarter of 1981, coinciding with the start of Ronald Reagan’s presidency, while the high point (62.7) comes in the first quarter of 2009, coinciding with start of Barack

Obama's. In addition, in the five quarters in which a presidential election was held and a Republican won, the average Democratic Advantage score is 51.9 compared with 57.2 in the four quarters corresponding to elections in which a Democrat won.

[Figure 1 about here]

Four series serve as our key independent variables. Consistent with our theoretical framework, we mostly abstract away from the precise details of the information the public uses to evaluate policy-making activity and rely on summary measures of presidential and congressional approval. For *Presidential Approval*, we use a standard measure drawn from the Gallup Poll. To summarize the public's evaluation of the Congress we use an updated series of the Jones and McDermott (2009) congressional approval series. The measure combines over 1,000 congressional approval questions from 1974 through 2016, and the series are also combined using Stimson's (1991) dyad ratios algorithm. Although *Congressional Approval* is no doubt multidimensional, we use it here as a rough measure of how the public evaluates the majority party's record and their legislative accomplishments.

As an alternative to the broad summary measure of congressional evaluations, we also use a more specific measure of how well the majority party in the House is able to control the agenda. According to Cox and McCubbins (2005), the majority party has a strong incentive to block issues that divide the party from coming to the floor for a vote. That is, negative agenda control allows the majority party to avoid being "rolled" (being on the losing side of a vote that passes), as rolls are severely detrimental to its reputation. If so, it follows that the frequency with which the majority party is rolled indicates that the party has less control over the agenda, and we would expect that when the majority party is rolled more frequently, the more its reputation should suffer. To more directly test this expectation, we measure the number of *Majority Party*

Rolls on high-profile roll call votes. We construct our measure from CQ Weekly's yearly list of "Key votes." In selecting key votes, CQ Weekly judges whether the vote is "a matter of major controversy, a matter of presidential or political power, or a matter of potentially great impact on the nation and lives of Americans."² The number of key votes in a given quarter ranges from 12 in the third quarter of 1983 to multiple quarters having only one key vote, with an average of 3.83 per quarter. We define rolls here as any time the majority party is on the losing side of a vote.

The *Presidential Approval* and *Congressional Approval* series are interacted with different institutional control variables because our framework posits that summary evaluations of each institution are credited to the party that controls it. Namely, the model has an interaction term for a Republican president, which is coded 1 if the president is a Republican and 0 if not. There are also two dummy variables in the model indicating which party holds control of Congress: Republican Congress is coded 1 if Republicans control Congress and 0 if not, while Divided Congress is coded 1 if party control of the House and Senate are split and 0 if there is unified control. The baseline category is Democratic control.

Finally, we include a measure of *Policy Mood* (Stimson 1991) to control for changes in the public's policy preferences. Higher values of the series indicate more liberal policy attitudes, which we would naturally expect to lead to greater support for the Democratic Party's policies. Including *Policy Mood* helps to differentiate the effect of performance on partisan advantage independent of advantage related to shared policy preferences between the public and the parties.

We fractionally difference each series before modeling the relationship between *Democratic Advantage* and our three primary independent variables. To perform the fractional differencing, we follow the approach detailed in Grant and Lebo (2016).³ In order to estimate the

dynamic model, we also include dummy variables that indicate periods where the partisan control of Congress and the presidency changed. The dummy variables are then interacted with the lagged variables measuring the performance of each institution. This allows us to separate out periods where lagged approval represents approval of a past regime. We omit these estimates from our tables for clarity of presentation.

Empirical Analysis

Table 1 shows the coefficients from an OLS regression model using the fractionally differenced *Democratic Advantage*, *Presidential Approval*, *Congressional Approval*, and *Policy Mood* series. Looking first at the presidential approval coefficients, we find that *Presidential Approval* during a Democratic administration is associated with an improvement in the relative standing of the Democratic Party. The interaction between the fractionally differenced presidential approval series and a Republican administration is negative and statistically significant and a linear combination shows that the relationship between *Presidential Approval* and *Democratic Advantage* during a Republican administration is negative and statistically significant ($-0.13, p < 0.01$). In sum, *Presidential Approval* is a consistent predictor of the relative standing of the two parties regardless of the party of the president.

[Table 1 about here]

The relationship between *Congressional Approval* and *Democratic Advantage*, however, does not match the expectations from theories that see a central role for Congress in shaping party reputations. The coefficient for *Congressional Approval* indicates that as a Democratic Congress becomes more popular, the Democratic Party's policy handling decreases slightly, although the coefficient is close to zero and far from conventional levels of statistical

significance. The effect of Congressional Approval on party reputations is correctly signed when the Republicans control Congress, with improved evaluations of a Republican Congress associated with decreases in *Democratic Advantage*. However, this effect is also not statistically distinguishable from zero. Thus, we find no evidence that evaluations of Congress are reliably related to aggregate party reputations.⁴

Agenda Control and Reputations

The analysis in the previous section indicates congressional approval has no significant relationship with our measure of perceived party competence. To more directly test Cox and McCubbins' (1993, 2005) proposition that agenda control helps the majority party shape its reputation, we test the effect of both negative and positive agenda control on party reputations. First, we evaluate the influence of negative agenda control on party reputations by looking at the effect of *Majority Party Rolls* on *Democratic Advantage*.⁵ Second, we evaluate the effect of positive agenda control in terms of legislative accomplishments, measured as landmark enactments as well as “party wins” (Koger and Lebo 2017).

The results in Table 2 show that there is no statistically significant relationship between the number of times the majority party is rolled and their policy handling reputation with the public.⁶ The coefficient for *Majority Party Rolls* is signed in the wrong direction when the Democrats are in control of the Congress, with more rolls associated with an increase in *Democratic Advantage*. The interactions between *Majority Party Rolls* and Republican control of the House are also statistically insignificant and again in the wrong direction, with greater negative agenda control damaging the party's reputation. Therefore, our analysis provides no

support for the theory that successful negative agenda control provides reputational benefits for the majority party.

[Table 2 about here]

In order to investigate the influence of positive agenda control on the reputation of the majority party, we use two types of measures of legislative accomplishment. The first is the number of landmark laws passed in a given quarter based on the list compiled and regularly updated by Mayhew (1991).⁷ This measure is a subjective assessment of the number of laws passed by Congress that are considered particularly significant and has been employed elsewhere as a measure of legislative accomplishment (Ramirez 2009). The second type of variable we use to measure positive agenda control is the percentage of party wins on legislative votes for the majority party (motions that pass with a majority of the party in support), which we compute separately for the House and the Senate (Koger and Lebo 2017). The *House Party Wins* and *Senate Party Wins* variables are interacted with partisan control of the respective institution.

[Table 3 about here]

The results from all three models with the legislative accomplishment measures are displayed in Table 3. Column 1 shows that there is no significant relationship between the number of landmark laws enacted by Congress and the reputation of the majority party. The parameter estimate for the effect of landmark legislation is signed correctly for Democratic Control of Congress, although it is not statistically significant. The results for the effect of party wins on party reputations in columns 2 and 3 also do not meet expectations. The coefficients suggest an insignificant and incorrectly signed effect of *House Party Wins* (column 2) as well as *Senate Party Wins* (column 3) on *Democratic Advantage*.

Conclusion

The most consistent finding from our analysis is the distinctive effect of presidential performance on partisan advantage. As the president becomes more popular, the relative evaluations of his party's ability to handle public policy consistently improve. Although the president is but one actor in a governing system of shared powers, our results reaffirm the role of the executive as a focal point for citizens' evaluations of the political system and its component parts. Congress, on the other hand, is not a consistent source of citizens' relative evaluations of the parties' issue handling reputations.

The results here call into question crucial assumptions of party theories regarding the link between majority party agenda control and party evaluations (Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005). The lack of a relationship has two implications. First, the central importance of the president in shaping party reputations suggests that congressional majorities may not be able to shape their reputations independently of the president. Instead, it may be that their interactions with the president affect relative party reputations. Second, the absence of reputational incentives for preventing rolls does not entirely negate the majority party's incentives for preventing rolls altogether. It may be that the majority party leadership seeks to avoid being rolled purely out of policy motivations rather than electoral considerations.

Our findings do not directly challenge the research linking congressional approval or activity directly to congressional election outcomes (Adler and Wilkerson 2013; Jones 2010; Jones and McDermott 2009; Koger and Lebo 2017).⁸ The public may still look to the institution to make evaluations about the individuals operating within that institution or even the majority party more broadly, and the evidence is mounting that evaluations of Congress may be particularly salient in a more polarized and nationalized political climate (Jones 2010). It is still

possible for evaluations of Congress to influence how individuals evaluate the two parties (Jones 2015), perhaps during periods where congressional performance is particularly salient, such as a government shutdown or debt ceiling standoff. Investigating such questions in future work would require a closer examination of daily or weekly fluctuations in public opinion. The evidence presented here, however, suggests that the president is the primary mover of evaluations of the two parties (Jacobson 2012, 2015) and congressional approval and majority party agenda control in House play a much more muted role in shaping aggregate evaluations of the two parties.

References

- Adler, E. Scott, and John D. Wilkerson. 2013. *Congress and the Politics of Problem Solving*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Aldrich, John H. 1995. *Why Parties?: The Origin and Transformation of Political Parties in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Box-Steffensmeier, Janet M., and Andrew R. Tomlinson. 2000. "Fractional Integration Methods in Political Science." *Electoral Studies* 19 (1): 63–76.
- Brasher, Holly. 2009. "The Dynamic Character of Political Party Evaluations." *Party Politics* 15 (1): 69–92.
- Cavari, Amnon. 2014. "The Interplay of Macropartisanship and Macrohandling, and the 2012 Electoral Success of the Democratic Party." In *The 2012 Presidential Election: Forecasts, Outcomes, and Consequences*, edited by Amnon Cavari, Richard Powell, and Kenneth Mayer, 83–102. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Chanley, Virginia A., Thomas J. Rudolph, and Wendy M. Rahn. 2000. "The Origins and Consequences of Public Trust in Government: A Time Series Analysis." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 64 (3): 239–56.
- Conover, Pamela Johnston, and Stanley Feldman. 1989. "Candidate Perception in an Ambiguous World: Campaigns, Cues, and Inference Processes." *American Journal of Political Science* 33 (4): 912–40.
- Cox, Gary W., and Mathew D. McCubbins. 1993. *Legislative Leviathan: Party Government in the House*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Cox, Gary W., and Mathew D. McCubbins. 2005. *Setting the Agenda: Responsible Party Government in the US House of Representatives*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Delli Carpini, Michael X., and Scott Keeter. 1996. *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Durr, Robert H., John B. Gilmour, and Christina Wolbrecht. 1997. "Explaining Congressional Approval." *American Journal of Political Science* 41 (1): 175-207.
- Erikson, Robert S., Michael B. MacKuen, and James A. Stimson. 2002. *The Macro Polity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Grant, Taylor, and Matthew J. Lebo. 2016. "Error Correction Methods with Political Time Series." *Political Analysis* 24 (1): 3-30.
- Green, Jane, and Will Jennings. 2017. *The Politics of Competence: Parties, Public Opinion and Voters*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Jacobson, Gary. 2012. "The President's Effect on Partisan Attitudes." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 42 (4): 683-99.
- Jacobson, Gary. 2015. "How Presidents Shape Their Party's Reputation and Prospects: New Evidence." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 45 (1): 1-28.
- Jones, David R. 2010. "Partisan Polarization and Congressional Accountability in House Elections." *American Journal of Political Science* 54 (2): 323-37.
- Jones, David R. 2013. "Do Major Policy Enactments Affect Public Evaluations of Congress? The Case of Health Care Reform." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 38 (2): 185-204.

- Jones, David R. 2015. "Partisan Polarization and the Effect of Congressional Performance Evaluations on Party Brands and American Elections." *Political Research Quarterly* 68 (4): 185–204.
- Jones, David R, and Monika L McDermott. 2009. *Americans, Congress, and Democratic Responsiveness*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Jones, David R, and Monika L McDermott. 2011. "The Salience of the Democratic Congress and the 2010 Elections." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 44 (2): 297–301.
- Keele, Luke. 2007. "Social Capital and the Dynamics of Trust in Government." *American Journal of Political Science* 51 (2): 241–54.
- Key, Valdimer Orlando. 1966. *The Responsible Electorate*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Kiewiet, D Roderick, and Mathew D McCubbins. 1991. *The Logic of Delegation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Koch, Jeffrey W. 2001. "When Parties and Candidates Collide: Citizen Perception of House Candidates' Positions on Abortion." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 65 (1): 1–21.
- Koger, Gregory, and Matthew J. Lebo. 2017. *Strategic Party Government: Why Winning Trumps Ideology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kramer, Gerald H. 1971. "Short-Term Fluctuations in US Voting Behavior, 1896–1964." *American Political Science Review* 65 (1): 131–43.
- Lavine, Howard G, Christopher D Johnston, and Marco R Steenbergen. 2012. *The Ambivalent Partisan: How Critical Loyalty Promotes Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Lebo, Matthew J, and Janet M Box-Steffensmeier. 2008. "Dynamic Conditional Correlations in Political Science." *American Journal of Political Science* 52 (3): 688–704.
- Lodge, Milton, and Ruth Hamill. 1986. "A Partisan Schema for Political Information Processing." *American Political Science Review* 80 (2): 505–19.
- Lupia, Arthur. 2015. *Uninformed: Why People Know so Little about Politics and What We Can Do about It*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- MacKuen, Michael B, Robert S Erikson, and James A. Stimson. 1989. "Macropartisanship." *American Political Science Review* 83 (4): 1125–42.
- MacKuen, Michael B, Robert S Erikson, and James A. Stimson. 1992. "Peasants or Bankers? The American Electorate and the US Economy." *American Political Science Review* 86 (03): 597–611.
- Mayhew, David R. 1991. *Divided We Govern*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Norpoth, Helmut. 2001. "Divided Government and Economic Voting". *The Journal of Politics* 63 (2): 414–35.
- Pope, Jeremy, and Jonathan Woon. 2009. "Measuring Changes in American Party Reputations, 1939–2004." *Political Research Quarterly* 62 (4): 653–61.
- Rahn, Wendy M. 1993. "The Role of Partisan Stereotypes in Information Processing about Political Candidates." *American Journal of Political Science* 37 (2): 472–96.
- Ramirez, Mark D. 2009. "The Dynamics of Partisan Conflict on Congressional Approval." *American Journal of Political Science* 53 (3): 681–94.
- Schattschneider, Elmer Eric. 1942. *Party Government*. New York: Rinehart.
- Snyder Jr, James M, and Michael M Ting. 2002. "An Informational Rationale for Political Parties." *American Journal of Political Science* 46 (1): 90–110.

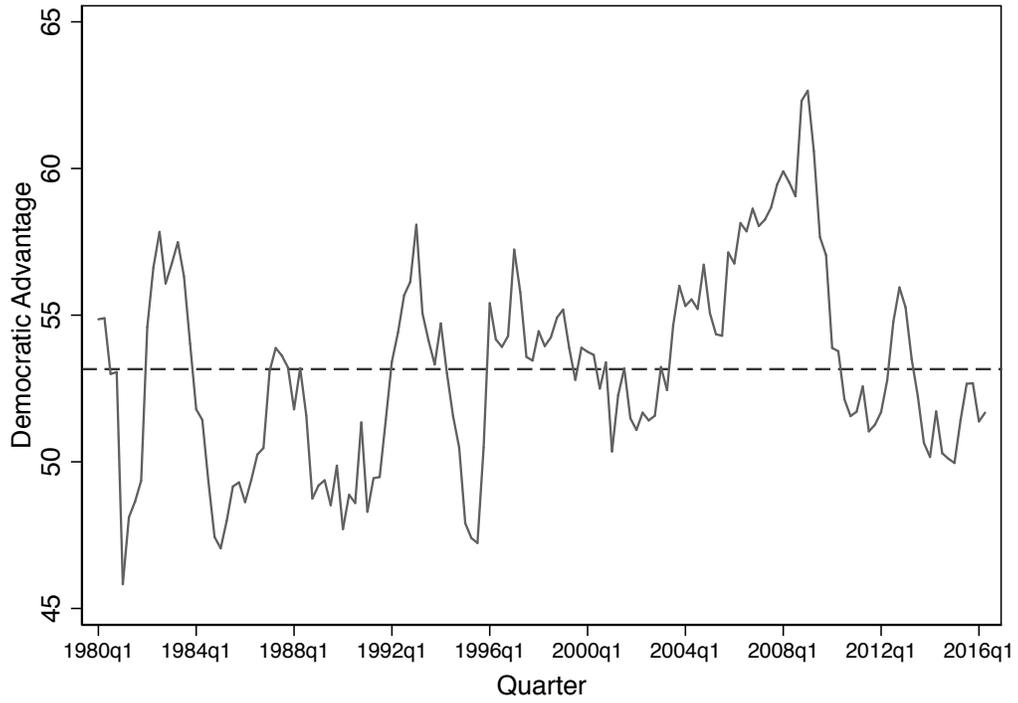
Stimson, James A. 1991. *Public Opinion in America: Moods, Cycles, and Swings*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press

Stokes, Donald E., and Warren Miller. 1962. "Party Government and the Saliency of Congress." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 26 (4): 531–46.

Tufte, Edward R. 1975. "Determinants of the Outcomes of Midterm Congressional Elections." *American Political Science Review* 69 (3): 812–26.

Woon, Jonathan, and Jeremy C Pope. 2008. "Made in Congress? Testing the Electoral Implications of Party Ideological Brand Names." *The Journal of Politics* 70 (3): 823–36.

Figure 1. Party Reputations Over Time



Note: The dashed horizontal line shows the mean of the series.

Table 1. OLS Model with Fractionally Differenced Series

	Democratic Advantage
Divided Government	0.64* (0.31)
Policy Mood Δ^d	-0.03 (0.07)
Democratic Performance	
Presidential Approval Δ^d	0.14** (0.05)
Congressional Approval Δ^d	-0.00 (0.06)
Republican Performance	
GOP President	0.28 (0.24)
GOP President x Presidential Approval Δ^d	-0.28** (0.05)
GOP Congress	0.29 (0.29)
GOP Congress x Congressional Approval Δ^d	-0.18 (0.15)
Divided Congress	
Divided Congress	0.09 (0.29)
Divided Congress x Congressional Approval Δ^d	-0.01 (0.09)
Constant	-0.77* (0.32)
R^2	0.43
Breusch-Godfrey	0.12
Observations	145

Standard errors in parentheses

Δ^d indicates fractionally differenced series

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

Table 2. Negative Agenda Control and Democratic Advantage

	Democratic Advantage
Divided Government	0.42 (0.30)
Policy Mood Δ^d	-0.003 (0.07)
Democratic Performance	
Presidential Approval Δ^d	0.18** (0.05)
Majority Rolls	0.35 (0.19)
Republican Performance	
GOP President	0.37 (0.26)
GOP President x Presidential Approval Δ^d	-0.32** (0.05)
GOP House	0.58 (0.35)
GOP House x Majority Rolls	-0.44 (0.26)
Divided Congress	
Divided Congress	0.12 (0.37)
Divided Congress x Majority Rolls	-0.28 (0.26)
Constant	-0.92* (0.36)
R^2	0.42
Breusch-Godfrey	0.062
Observations	145

Standard errors in parentheses

Δ^d indicates fractionally differenced series

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

Table 3. Positive Agenda Control and Democratic Advantage

	Mayhew Laws	House Wins	Senate Wins
Divided Government	0.45 (0.30)	0.52 (0.30)	0.30 (0.32)
Policy Mood Δ^d	0.02 (0.07)	0.02 (0.07)	-0.00 (0.07)
Democratic Performance			
Presidential Approval Δ^d	0.15** (0.04)	0.14** (0.05)	0.17** (0.05)
Legislative Accomplishments	0.11 (0.14)	-1.61 (2.15)	-1.11 (1.19)
Republican Performance			
GOP President	0.32 (0.24)	0.34 (0.26)	0.23 (0.25)
GOP President x Presidential Approval Δ^d	-0.29** (0.05)	-0.30** (0.05)	-0.31** (0.05)
GOP Control	0.31 (0.39)	-3.64 (2.08)	-0.50 (1.03)
GOP Control x Leg. Accomp.	0.02 (0.18)	4.72 (2.46)	0.96 (1.46)
Divided Congress			
Divided Congress	0.58 (0.40)	1.81 (2.06)	-0.32 (1.01)
Divided Congress x Leg. Accomp.	-0.33 (0.21)	-2.57 (2.44)	0.46 (1.45)
Constant	-0.83* (0.39)	0.68 (1.84)	0.31 (0.95)
R^2	0.42	0.43	0.40
Breusch-Godfrey	0.111	0.013	0.001
Observations	145	145	145

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

Δ^d indicates fractionally differenced series

Endnotes

¹ Pew Research Center. “Well Known: Clinton and Gadhafi. Little Known: Who Controls Congress,” March 31 2011. <http://www.people-press.org/2011/03/31/well-known-clinton-and-gadhafi-little-known-who-controls-congress/>

² “Attributes of a Key Vote” *CQ Weekly*, January 21, 2013, p. 149.

³ The fractional differencing is done using the arfima command in Stata 14. There is disagreement in the literature regarding the advantages and disadvantages of fractional differencing and other approaches to modeling time series relationships. To check the robustness of our results, we also estimate a more traditional auto-distributed lag (ADL) model. The results are presented in the Online Appendix, and we find the ADL results are consistent with the results from the fractional difference model. We also estimate a Vector Autoregression model in the appendix and find the results are consistent with the findings in Table 1.

⁴ The results are similar if we restrict the analysis to the period following the GOP takeover of Congress in 1994 (i.e., starting in the first quarter of 1995). Linear combinations show that the coefficient for congressional approval when Republicans are in control of Congress post-1994 is -0.19 , $p = 0.19$, while for Democrats the coefficient is -0.003 , $p = 0.99$.

⁵ See the Online Appendix for a graph of *Majority Party Rolls* over time.

⁶ For this analysis, we fractionally differenced *Policy Mood*, *Democratic Advantage*, and *Presidential Approval* to ensure these series are stationary. We did not fractionally difference the count measures of party rolls or significant legislation. In addition, we did not fractionally difference the party wins series because the fractional difference models failed to converge for those series. We also estimated the effect of all variables without controls and in a traditional ADL framework and the results are qualitatively similar.

⁷ Obtained from David Mayhew's website: <http://campuspress.yale.edu/davidmayhew/datasets-divided-we-govern/>.

⁸ Nor does our analysis challenge the importance of congressional activity in shaping the *ideological* reputations of the parties (e.g., Woon and Pope 2008). Our focus has been on the performance or policy-handling aspects of reputations, and it would be promising in future research to explore the interaction between ideology and performance, both theoretically and empirically.