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Partisan Polarization and Congressional Accountability in House Elections

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Early research led scholars to believe that institutional accountability in Congress is lacking because public evaluations of its collective performance do not affect the reelection of its members. However, a changed partisan environment along with new empirical evidence raises unanswered questions about the effect of congressional performance on incumbents' electoral outcomes over time. Analysis of House reelection races across the last several decades produces important findings: (1) low congressional approval ratings generally reduce the electoral margins of majority party incumbents and increase margins for minority party incumbents; (2) partisan polarization in the House increases the magnitude of this partisan differential, mainly through increased electoral accountability among majority party incumbents; (3) these electoral effects of congressional performance ratings hold largely irrespective of a member's individual party loyalty or seat safety. These findings carry significant implications for partisan theories of legislative organization and help explain salient features of recent Congresses.

For more than half a century, political scientists and political observers alike have been concerned with the lack of governmental accountability in the United States (American Political Science Association [APSA] 1950). Of particular concern has been the lack of institutional accountability on the part of the U.S. Congress (APSA 1950, 7–9). The overwhelming consensus of scholars is that individual members face no electoral consequences for the performance of the collectivity (e.g., Arnold 1990; Committee on the Constitutional System 1985; Fenno 1975, 1978; Fiorina 1980; Jacobson 2004; Mayhew 1974).¹ In his textbook on congressional elections, Jacobson sums up the dominant view that “members are not held individually responsible for their collective performance in governing” and as a result “a crucial form of representation is missing” (2004, 227).

For the most part, critiques of the lack of electoral accountability for congressional performance have focused on one primary culprit: weak congressional parties (e.g., APSA 1950; Committee on the Constitutional System 1985; Fenno 1975, 1978; Fiorina 1980). According

to this view, a lack of unity within congressional parties undermines electoral accountability because it helps to obscure who is to blame for perceived congressional shortcomings.

This conventional wisdom, however, was largely formed during a different congressional era. Partisan polarization has steadily increased since the mid-1970s (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Rohde 1991). This increase in partisan behavior in Congress is consistent with many of the reforms that APSA and others have proposed as necessary for collective accountability (Sinclair 2006, 344). This raises an important question: have increases in partisan polarization in Congress helped produce an increase in accountability such that individual members now face electoral consequences for the performance of the collective Congress?

Although research has yet to directly test whether a changed congressional environment has led to increased electoral accountability for congressional performance, this notion does find some indirect support in the literature. While early studies of member behavior found

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¹Notable exceptions are Dodd (1986) and Cox and McCubbins (1993). Born (1990) suggests that congressional approval influences citizens' affect towards members, but does not investigate electoral effects.

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that most members publicly bashed the institution of Congress (Fenno 1978), recent evidence finds majority party members now trying to promote the public image of Congress rather than denigrate it (Arnold 2004; Lipinski 2004)—suggesting these members believe this image affects their own reelection prospects. Studies of individual voter behavior find that in numerous recent elections Americans do seem to have based their House votes, in part, on their evaluation of overall congressional job performance (Hibbing and Tiritilli 2000; Jones and McDermott 2004; McDermott and Jones 2003). Other research has shown that with an unpopular Congress in 1994, members who publicly promoted the institution suffered aggregate vote loss (Lipinski, Bianco, and Work 2003). To date, however, there has been no longitudinal empirical analysis of how congressional performance evaluations affect individual members' reelection outcomes, and no analysis of the effect that changes in partisan polarization over time have on this relationship.

In this study I draw on existing literature to develop an explicit theory of the circumstances under which individual members of Congress face electoral accountability for their collective performance. I hypothesize that while low levels of partisanship may have minimized the observable impact of congressional performance on incumbents' election outcomes in the past, increased partisan polarization has, in fact, facilitated greater institutional accountability in elections. Using data on House reelection races over the last several decades, I test the interactive effects of partisan polarization and congressional performance evaluations on incumbent vote share in each party. In contrast to previous work, the results allow conclusions to be drawn about the changing effects of congressional job performance on incumbents' actual election outcomes over several decades. The findings carry important implications for several avenues of research, including validation of previously untested assumptions underlying procedural cartel theory (Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005), new empirical justification for the predictions of conditional party government theory (Aldrich 1995; Aldrich and Rohde 2001; Rohde 1991), and an electoral explanation for the well-documented rise in both attack politics (Mann and Ornstein 2006) and legislative gridlock (Sinclair 2006) in recent Congresses.

The Partisan Environment and Congressional Accountability

One of the key characteristics of the House of Representatives of the 1950s through the early 1970s was its

relatively weak partisanship (e.g., Mayhew 1974). Both normative and positive scholarship on Congress cite weak partisanship as a factor explaining the apparent lack of electoral accountability for congressional performance.² In 1950, an APSA-commissioned report, *Toward a More Responsive Two-Party System*, advocated for greater “party cohesion in Congress” as a key to achieving increased electoral accountability. In similar fashion, the Committee on the Constitutional System (1985) declared its belief that “party disunity [leads] to diffused accountability” and recommended reforms designed to increase party cohesion in Congress.

Other prominent scholarly work has drawn a similar connection between the individualistic nature of Congress and a lack of electoral accountability for congressional performance. While not advocating any particular remedy, Richard Fenno's seminal work, *Home Style*, suggests that

It is easy for each congressman to explain to his own supporters why he cannot be blamed for the performance of the collectivity. [It is easy] because the internal diversity and decentralization of the institution provide such a wide variety of collegial villains to flay before one's supporters at home. (1978, 167)

In other words, a lack of cohesive parties facilitates each member's ability to deflect personal blame by making it difficult for constituents to readily determine who is actually responsible for policy actions and outcomes. Using similar logic, Morris Fiorina's essay “The Decline of Collective Responsibility in American Politics” theorizes that with stronger parties, “the subordination of individual officeholders to the party lessens their ability to separate themselves from party actions. Like it or not their performance becomes identified with the performance of the collectivity” (1980, 26–27).

Interestingly, the very feature much of this literature found lacking in Congress was actually just beginning to emerge around the mid-1970s. As conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans became more and more rare in the House, each party became more internally cohesive, with members voting more and more often with their own party and against the opposing party (e.g., Fleisher and Bond 2004; Ladewig 2005; McCarty, Poole,

²Some scholars argue that another important congressional characteristic, particularly in the latter part of this period, was the increasing electoral value of incumbency. These two characteristics are somewhat interrelated in that weak partisanship helped to facilitate a candidate-centered (rather than partisan) electoral process with a strong incumbency advantage (Jacobson 2004).

and Rosenthal 2006; Rohde 1991; Theriault 2005). If the literature cited above is correct, this increase in partisanship should mean there is now a greater likelihood that certain members could be held electorally accountable for the collective performance of Congress. As Barbara Sinclair has suggested, “political parties seem to meet the requirements of responsible parties as defined by [the 1950 APSA report] to a greater extent today than at any time in the past half century” (2006, 344).

In contrast to the literature suggesting that increased cohesion within parties is needed in order for there to be electoral accountability for congressional performance, procedural cartel theory (Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005) hypothesizes, essentially, that there is always a link between the legislative record of Congress and the electoral fortunes of majority party members. Unfortunately, cartel theory has mainly focused on the legislative consequences of this assumption rather than elaborating upon it theoretically or testing it empirically. Theoretically, Cox and McCubbins focus only on the majority party and its “brand,” ignoring other issues such as consideration of the minority party brand as a separate concept. Empirically, while the authors demonstrate that electoral tides exist, they do not test whether congressional performance is actually a component of these tides, nor do they test the extent to which electoral accountability for congressional performance has been a consistent (or even a current) feature of House elections.

Studies at the level of the individual voter that focus largely on the recent, high-partisanship period have offered an individual citizen-level theoretical argument why today’s voter would reward or punish members of the majority party based on retrospective evaluations of congressional performance and have provided evidence of such effects on individual vote choice (during both unified and divided governments) in numerous recent elections (Jones and McDermott 2004; McDermott and Jones 2003).³ However, neither these studies’ theory nor their evidence addresses the role that changes in partisan polarization over time have had on this relationship.

Consistent with the notion in the literature that relatively weak parties have hindered congressional accountability, I hypothesize that at the level of the individual House incumbent, greater partisan polarization leads to greater electoral accountability for congressional performance along party lines. There are two ways in which the

degree of polarization might affect the impact of congressional performance on an incumbent’s election results. The first, and most basic way, is by boosting the extent to which a party label serves as a brand name affecting the electoral fortunes of all members who run under that label (on party brands generally, see Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005). For majority party incumbents, the logic is similar to that suggested by Fiorina (1980). As the party grows more internally cohesive and distinct from the minority party—voting more and more as a unified block that determines outcomes in the House—the public will more readily associate the majority party label with the performance of the institution. As a result, each incumbent running under that party label will find it more difficult to disassociate herself from public perceptions of congressional performance, and these perceptions will have a greater effect on her electoral fortunes. In particular, the more the public approves of Congress’s performance, the higher the proportion of votes majority party incumbents will receive on Election Day, all else being equal. Conversely, low congressional approval ratings will have a negative effect on their electoral vote margins.

On the minority party side, theoretical expectations regarding the effects of party polarization are less clear. The literature says almost nothing about minority party brands, and we cannot assume that the two party brands are reciprocal rather than independent of one another. One hypothesis is that the logic for the minority party will simply be the reverse of that for the majority party. Specifically, as the minority party becomes more cohesive in its opposition to the majority party, the public may more readily associate the minority party label with opposition to what is going on in Congress. In this case, when Congress is unpopular, minority party incumbents would have an even easier time running against Congress simply by presenting themselves as members of the opposition party. The minority party label would also increasingly connote opposition to any positive things that may come out of Congress. Thus, the more the public approves of Congress, the worse minority party incumbents would do at the polls. However, there is also good reason to hypothesize that increased party cohesion might not make much of a difference at all. If Fenno’s (1978) observation that members could successfully run against an unpopular Congress in the 1970s is correct, at least for the minority party, this suggests that partisan polarization may never have been necessary for minority party incumbents to benefit electorally from low congressional approval ratings. In this view, the minority party label alone is a sufficient indicator of opposition to what is going on in Congress, and increases in party polarization

³Because the individual citizen-level argument has been covered extensively in the works cited, I do not dwell on it or its supporting evidence here. It is worth noting, however, that the tendency for voters who approve of Congress to prefer majority party candidates is significant even after controlling for a voter’s partisanship and for evaluations of the president.

are not necessarily expected to add anything more to this impression. As such, increases in partisan polarization may not lead to any increase in the electoral effects of public evaluations of Congress.

While the aggregate level of party polarization is one factor that may affect incumbents' electoral accountability for congressional performance, an incumbent's personal level of loyalty to her party may also play its own conditioning role. Regardless of whether a party in a given Congress is generally cohesive or generally noncohesive, within that party it is almost always possible to distinguish among members who are more loyal to their party and those who are less loyal. If certain members exhibit substantial disloyalty to their party, then their electoral fortunes may depend more on their individual merits and less on what their majority or minority party affiliation would otherwise imply about their responsibility for congressional performance.

It is important to note that it is not necessary for all voters to know their member's voting record in order for an incumbent's party loyalty to play a role in electoral vote returns.⁴ Whether a member does well in an election depends on the *aggregate* opinion of the electorate in the district, not the opinion of every individual voter. Stimson (2004) notes that because "aggregation gain" cancels out random, uninformed views and "opinion leadership" magnifies the views of the informed, in the aggregate the electorate actually behaves quite rationally. All that is required for this hypothesis, then, is that at least some segment of the electorate has a general sense of how supportive their member has been of the majority party in Congress. We know that members of Congress actively try to define themselves to their constituents in relation to what is going on in the rest of Congress (Fenno 1978; Lipinski 2004) and that members' efforts to communicate information about their roll-call votes can be successful (Lipinski 2001). In addition, Gronke, Koch, and Wilson (2003) show that voters are able to accurately estimate their member's support for presidentially supported legislation and use this information in making their electoral decisions. Based on this evidence, it seems reasonable that even if not every voter has an accurate sense of her member's party loyalty, some voters will. In the aggregate, the influence of these voters may be enough to mean that electoral accountability for congressional performance is based, in part, on each incumbent's level of loyalty to her party.

⁴For a similar point, see Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan (2002).

Data and Method

The data for the central analysis in this study cover all incumbent reelection races for the House of Representatives in the 16 national elections from 1976 through 2006—years in which reliable data exist for all of the variables in the model.⁵ A supplemental analysis presented in the appendix estimates a more limited model using available data from the period 1954 through 2006.

The question at the heart of this study is whether or not individual members face electoral accountability for collective congressional performance. There are several potential avenues of electoral accountability that could be considered. For example, poor congressional performance ratings might lead to increases in strategic retirements or in quality challenges to incumbents (Jacobson and Kernell 1983). In this study, however, I have chosen a more direct manifestation of electoral accountability as my dependent variable: *Incumbent vote share*—the percentage of the two-party vote received by each incumbent. Should my hypotheses prove valid for this measure, other, less direct effects would merit attention in future research.⁶

The key independent variable in the analysis is the public's evaluation of congressional job performance: *Congressional approval*.⁷ Survey questions on congressional approval have only been asked irregularly, in a variety of nonstandard forms, and rarely before the mid-1970s. Following the practice of Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht (1997), I use James Stimson's (1999) algorithm to combine the results from different survey questions on Congress's job performance into a single quarterly measure that is comparable over time.⁸ Then, in order to be sure that public evaluations of Congress are driving

⁵Individual cases with missing data on the dependent or independent variables are necessarily excluded. Further information on data limitations is included where appropriate in the text.

⁶The results reported here exclude uncontested incumbents. Reestimating the models with uncontested incumbents coded as receiving 100% of the vote does not alter the substantive findings.

⁷Use of disapproval rather than approval does not affect the substantive results. I also considered using variables measuring the differential in approval for each of the specific party contingents in Congress rather than approval for Congress generally. Unfortunately, party-specific data on congressional approval are not available prior to 1994, severely restricting the ability to conduct the type of longitudinal tests central to this study. Future research may want to analyze effects of these alternative measures at the level of the individual voter, where data availability poses less of a problem.

⁸Raw data were obtained through an electronic search of congressional job performance questions on national surveys using the University of Connecticut's Roper Center for Public Opinion Research iPOLL database. District-level survey data do not exist. Fortunately, several studies have demonstrated the

election outcomes and not the other way around, I use the approval rating from the third quarter prior to each election.

This study's hypotheses propose that the effect of congressional performance on elections may be conditioned by the degree of party polarization on an aggregate level and on an individual level. By party polarization, I mean the degree to which members within a party are cohesive in support of their own party and in opposition to the other party. The most straightforward measure of this concept is based on the traditional party unity score. Party unity scores reflect the percentage of times a member votes with her own party and against the opposing party on party votes (votes on which a majority of Democrats oppose a majority of Republicans). I employ these scores in two ways. First, to capture each party's overall level of partisanship in each Congress, I measure the *Party's average unity* score for the majority party and, separately, for the minority party.⁹ This traditional measure of partisanship is sometimes referred to as the Rice Index. To test the hypothesized conditional effects, I interact each party's average with the congressional approval variable. To avoid multicollinearity problems that often arise with interactions, I use a standard technique of centering all continuous variables that are used in interactions.¹⁰

Second, I use a version of each member's own score to test the conditioning effect of an incumbent's individual party (dis)loyalty. Because the public may not make fine distinctions regarding individual House members' levels of disloyalty, I start with a very simple test: whether electoral accountability for congressional performance is any different among members who vote more often with the opposing party than with their own party. For the sake of expositional convenience, I refer to these members with less than 50% party unity as *Mavericks*. If there is some evidence that mavericks do face a different effect of congressional approval compared to the rest of their party, I will then test whether or not more fine-tuned distinctions among members also matter. For this latter test I

appropriateness of using national measures of other types of national-forces variables—such as presidential approval—in analyses of district-level congressional election outcomes (e.g., Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002; Jacobson 1989). In addition, studies have already demonstrated partisan effects of congressional performance evaluations on voting at the individual voter level (e.g., Jones and McDermott 2004).

⁹These data can be found in Ornstein, Mann, and Malbin (2008, Table 8-4).

¹⁰Specifically, I center the variables for congressional approval, presidential approval, economy, incumbent's disloyalty, and each party's average unity by subtracting the mean value of each variable in the dataset from the actual value for each observation. These simple linear transformations do not affect the substantive results.

create a continuous variable called *Incumbent's disloyalty to party*—measured as 100 minus a member's party unity score—and interact it with congressional approval.

The analysis also controls for other electorally relevant variables at both the national and local levels. On the national level, I measure *Presidential approval* using the average percentage of citizens approving of the president's job performance in Gallup surveys conducted during the third quarter of the election year.¹¹ The state of the national *Economy* is measured as the percentage change in real disposable per capita income over the year ending in the third quarter of the election year.¹² Existing research at both the micro and macro levels has found that larger values of both of these variables boost the electoral fortunes of incumbents from the president's party but decrease the electoral fortunes of incumbents from the opposing party.¹³ I take into account this previously observed differential by interacting each of these variables with a dichotomous variable representing whether or not the incumbent is *In the president's party*.¹⁴

I control for district-level conditions in several ways. First, incumbents are expected to do better in districts that are more favorable to their own party. As a rough measure of *District partisanship*, I calculate the percentage of the two-party vote received by the incumbent party's presidential candidate in the most recent previous presidential election in the district, with each presidential election normalized around its mean.¹⁵ I control for a member's prior electoral performance in the district using the *Previous two-party vote* percentage received by the incumbent in the last congressional election.¹⁶ In case one party

¹¹Calculated from data archived at the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at the University of Connecticut. Other studies using a similar measure include Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan (2002) and Jacobson (1989).

¹²The quarterly data used to calculate these changes are available at <http://www.bea.gov/bea/dn/nipaweb>. Other studies using a similar measure include Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan (2002) and Jacobson (1989). Inclusion of additional controls for the national unemployment rate does not affect the substantive results of the analysis.

¹³In theory, economic performance could be attributed to the congressional majority party rather than to the president's party, and the method used here allows for that possibility (in that the interaction would be insignificant).

¹⁴By itself, this "in presidential party" variable also serves to control for the presence (in the minority party model) or absence (in the majority party model) of divided government.

¹⁵A similar construction is used by Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan (2002).

¹⁶Other studies using this control variable include Jacobson (1996) and Lipinski, Bianco, and Work (2003). An alternative specification of the model that omits this variable produces results that are substantively similar to those presented here.

has an inherent electoral advantage, I include a dummy variable measuring if the incumbent is a *Democrat*. To account for the fact that freshman members are still in the expansionist stage of their careers (Fenno 1978), I include a dummy variable measuring if the incumbent is a *Freshman*. I account for whether or not the incumbent faces an *Experienced challenger* (one who has held elective office)—a standard measure of challenger quality.¹⁷ Campaign spending has also been shown to affect election results. To control for these effects, I use logged versions of inflation-adjusted *Incumbent spending* and *Challenger spending*.¹⁸

The data used in the analysis contain variation both across incumbents (within a given election year) and over time (within specific incumbents). Hierarchical linear modeling, also called multilevel modeling, provides an appropriate method of analysis for this type of data (Hox 2000; Peugh and Enders 2005). Advantages of the hierarchical modeling approach are that it deals with the nested structure of the data (in this case, repeated measures nested within incumbents) and allows the covariance structure of the model to be specified.¹⁹ Measures taken from the same unit across multiple elections are likely to be highly correlated with their values in subsequent elections. A common strategy for dealing with this methodological concern, and the one adopted here, is to specify a first-order autoregressive covariance structure (AR1) for the repeated measures portion of the hierarchical model (Peugh and Enders 2005). This structure has homogeneous variances and correlations that decline exponentially with distance.

Analysis

The main focus of the analysis is on the interactions between congressional approval and two separate aspects of partisan polarization (aggregate and individual). However, before proceeding to these interactive analyses I first examine if there is any baseline evidence that members have actually won or lost vote share due to the collective

¹⁷All candidate quality data are from Gary Jacobson. I also tested whether the effects of congressional approval differ during midterm elections as opposed to nonmidterm elections but found no significant differences.

¹⁸To account for the fact that the Federal Election Commission does not require candidates to report expenditures below \$5,000, I assume (like Jacobson 1990 and Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002) that each spent at least this amount.

¹⁹Results are substantively similar if the analysis is conducted using ordinary least squares regression with a lagged dependent variable and robust standard errors or if redistricting regimes are incorporated into the hierarchical model.

performance of Congress during the past three decades. Conventional scholarly wisdom holds that they have not. More recent research calls this longstanding belief into question but has not directly analyzed the effects of congressional performance evaluations on vote margins. Table 1 presents the parameter estimates of a baseline model of electoral vote share estimated among majority party incumbents and among minority party incumbents.

The results in Table 1 demonstrate that incumbents have indeed faced electoral accountability for congressional performance during the past half century. The positive, significant coefficient for congressional approval in the first data column indicates that majority party incumbents receive a higher share of votes when the public is more approving of Congress and a lower share when the public is less approving of Congress. Among minority party incumbents, in the second data column, the effect is just the opposite. Greater approval of Congress significantly reduces their share of the vote while lower approval increases it.

The specific values of these two coefficients represent the average effect of congressional approval over all 16 elections. For each one-point increase in congressional approval, majority party incumbents gain .441 points of vote share and minority party members lose .110. Given that third-quarter congressional approval has ranged from a high of 46% to a low of 18% in the data—a difference of 28 points—going from the lowest to the highest values of congressional approval would produce a predicted shift of approximately 12.3 points of vote share, on average, for a majority party incumbent and produce an opposite shift of about 3.1 points, on average, for a minority party incumbent. For purposes of comparison, consider the predicted maximum effect of facing an experienced challenger. Volumes of work have been written about the electoral importance of experienced challengers (see Jacobson 2004 for an example and review), and this variable displays a statistically significant effect here as well. Yet facing an experienced challenger decreases a majority party incumbent's vote share by only 1.013 points, and a minority party incumbent's chances by only 1.307 points—considerably lower than the predicted effects of congressional approval.²⁰ Based on this comparison, the average electoral effect of congressional approval over these three decades is clearly substantial.

Of greater interest than the average effects is the question of whether these effects have varied systematically

²⁰When challenger spending is removed from the model, the effect of a quality challenger increases to approximately three points. Even in this case, the effects of congressional approval are of equal (minority party) or greater (majority party) magnitude.

TABLE 1 Effect of Congressional Approval on House Incumbents' Electoral Vote Percentage

	Model 1 (Baseline)		Model 2 (Interactive)	
	Majority Incs.	Minority Incs.	Majority Incs.	Minority Incs.
Congressional approval	.441** (.033)	-.110** (.034)	.395** (.034)	-.110** (.035)
Presidential approval	-.303** (.026)	-.083** (.024)	-.292** (.026)	-.082** (.024)
Pres. appr. × in pres. party	.211** (.019)	.133** (.019)	.160** (.022)	.127** (.022)
Economy	-1.181** (.089)	-.185 (.133)	-.913** (.102)	-.201 (.136)
Economy × in pres. party	1.596** (.161)	1.384** (.174)	1.528** (.161)	1.387** (.174)
In president's party	-.422 (.274)	-.854* (.329)	-.728* (.279)	-.872* (.331)
Democrat	1.121** (.379)	-1.790** (.512)	2.233** (.434)	-1.982** (.571)
Freshman	1.340** (.276)	.995** (.304)	1.383** (.274)	1.041** (.305)
Previous vote % in district	.204** (.016)	.201** (.018)	.208** (.016)	.205** (.019)
District partisanship	3.381** (.189)	2.982** (.236)	3.375** (.189)	2.950** (.237)
Experienced challenger	-1.013** (.267)	-1.307** (.267)	-1.063** (.266)	-1.130** (.268)
ln(incumbent spending)	-.861** (.194)	-1.170** (.220)	-.802** (.194)	-1.213** (.191)
ln(challenger spending)	-2.368** (.078)	-2.282** (.083)	-2.335** (.078)	-2.263** (.084)
Inc.'s disloyalty to party	.072** (.011)	.046** (.012)	.062** (.014)	.037* (.014)
Party's avg. unity (own party)	-.026 (.030)	.105 (.054)	.159** (.047)	.085 (.071)
Cong. appr. × party's avg. unity			.0226** (.0044)	-.0020 (.0036)
Maverick			.065 (1.004)	.745 (.770)
Cong. appr. × maverick			-.153 (.096)	.088 (.055)
Intercept	89.194** (2.843)	93.409** (3.118)	86.502** (2.881)	93.650** (3.186)
Akaike's Information Criterion	15831.755	11927.324	15811.176	11935.307

Note: Table entries are linear multilevel modeling coefficients (standard errors in parentheses). Total number of cases for both models is 2,597 (majority) and 2,015 (minority). *p < .05; **p < .005.

over time as a function of changing levels of aggregate partisan polarization and/or across members as a function of individual disloyalty. Model 2 in Table 1 investigates these questions by adding to the model the interactive

party unity and member disloyalty variables described in the data section.

In testing the conditional effects of aggregate polarization on vote margin, the key variable of interest is the

interaction between congressional approval and the average party unity found in the incumbent's party during each Congress. I begin by focusing on the majority party. Based on the work of Fiorina (1980) and others, I hypothesized that majority party members would face greater accountability for congressional performance as the party became more cohesive. Consistent with this hypothesis, the positive and significant coefficient for this interactive term among majority party incumbents demonstrates that as the majority party has grown more and more cohesive, congressional approval has had a greater positive effect on the electoral margins of its incumbents—with high congressional approval being even more helpful to majority members and low approval being even more harmful.

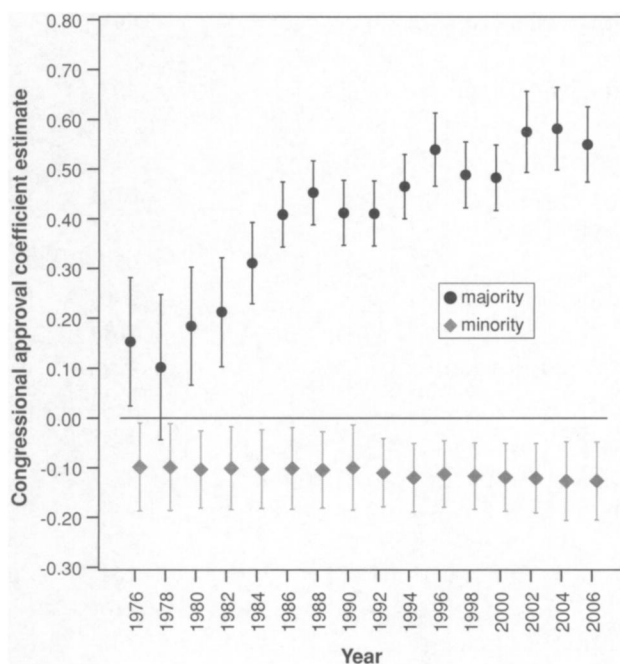
To guard against the possibility that this significant interactive effect might be spurious, I conducted additional tests. Because partisan polarization generally increased over time during this period, a key concern is the possibility that the effect of congressional approval has simply increased due to the passage of time (or some other environmental change correlated with time) rather than as a systematic result of changes in party polarization *per se*. As a first test of this alternative hypothesis, I tried adding to the model a simple (but atheoretical) interaction of congressional approval with time. In support of this study's hypothesis, and contrary to the alternative hypothesis, adding the interaction of congressional approval with time did not diminish the interactive effect of partisan polarization at all.²¹ As a second test, I found partial data for six earlier elections scattered over the period 1954–74. In these data, polarization decreases rather than increases over time. Nevertheless, estimating a (necessarily reduced) model that adds these earlier data to the 1976–2006 data does not diminish—in fact slightly increases—the interactive effect of polarization, again demonstrating that the effect is not merely a spurious, temporal one. Further details on this latter test are located in the appendix.

By plugging in the specific values of majority party unity that existed in each Congress, it is possible to graph how the model's estimated size of the congressional approval coefficient has changed as party unity has changed over time.²² The series of points across the top of Figure 1

²¹ A similar interactive test ruled out the possibility that the polarization effect might be driven by the change from Democratic to Republican majority status in 1995.

²² Note that these coefficient estimates for each election are derived only from the interaction term. Since district-level congressional approval data do not exist, it is not possible to run separate district-level analyses for each election (there is only a single value of congressional approval in each election).

FIGURE 1 Estimated Effect of Party Polarization on Size of Congressional Approval Coefficient (from Table 1, Model 2)



presents these estimates, with lines above and below each point representing the 95% confidence interval (“error bars”) for each estimate. The interaction term suggests that congressional evaluations had only a moderate effect on majority party members during the relatively low party unity period of the mid to late 1970s, an effect rising to three times this size with the increased party cohesion in the late 1980s through early 1990s, and four times this size in the polarized environment since 2000.

For minority party incumbents, the story is a bit different. Given that the literature did not provide clear theoretical expectations, I offered two alternative hypotheses. One hypothesis was that the pattern in the minority party would be the mirror image of that in the majority party—increased party unity leading to a greater negative effect of congressional approval. The other (null) hypothesis was that if minority party members were already able to run against an unpopular Congress in the weak partisan environment of the 1970s—as indirectly suggested by the observations of Fenno (1978)—then party unity may not play much of a role in determining the effect of congressional approval among minority incumbents.

The results for minority incumbents in Model 2, Table 1 appear to support the null hypothesis. Specifically, the coefficient for the interaction with minority

party unity does not reach standard levels of statistical significance.²³ In other words, for minority party incumbents, changes in average party unity over time have not significantly affected the baseline negative relationship between congressional approval and vote margin. This can be seen clearly in Figure 1 by noting that each error bar for the minority party at the bottom of the figure has at least some degree of overlap with every other error bar for the minority party.

Figure 1 also offers some insight on another question arising from the literature. Recent scholarly work on individual voting behavior suggests that poor congressional performance evaluations create problems for the majority party. However, on its face this claim appears to run counter to Fenno's observation that running against Congress is "ubiquitous, cost-free, and foolproof" (1978, 168). Figure 1 offers one possible explanation for why an observer in the 1970s might not have perceived a difference in the effectiveness of this strategy for minority party incumbents versus that for majority party incumbents.²⁴ In 1976, minority party members were indeed able to successfully run against an unpopular Congress. And while majority party members were not in the same strategic situation as minority party members, Figure 1 shows that this party differential was relatively small compared to the clear difference that exists today. For example, in 1976 congressional approval was only about six points below its average in the data (34%). Given this level of congressional approval, a majority party incumbent's vote share would only be expected to be about one point lower than in an average year and a minority incumbent's vote share by about half a point more than average. In the recent partisan environment, a similar six-point drop in approval would still provide about the same benefit for minority incumbents as in 1976 but would produce nearly four times the decrease in vote margin for majority incumbents than in 1976—a clear partisan difference. As the effects of congressional approval have become greater for the majority party, it has become easier to discern the partisan difference in electoral accountability for congressional performance.

It is clear from the analysis so far that on average, running under the majority party label attaches a degree of electoral accountability for congressional performance to an incumbent, and running under the minority party

label allows an incumbent to successfully run against unpopular Congresses. Given these findings, a question that naturally arises is whether or not members who exhibit substantial disloyalty to their party will diverge from the pattern set by the rest of their party. I hypothesized that disloyal members might not fit the typical pattern for their party. As discussed in the methods section, a simple test is whether or not the electoral effects of congressional approval differ when a member is a party maverick, voting more often with the opposing party than with her own.

The key variable in this test is the interaction between congressional approval and maverick status towards the bottom of Table 1, Model 2. If the hypothesis is correct that mavericks differ from the pattern of effects typical to their party, then the coefficient for this interaction should be negative and significant for majority party incumbents (indicating a less positive effect of congressional approval) and positive and significant for minority party incumbents (indicating a less negative effect of congressional approval). However, the results show that neither coefficient reaches standard levels of statistical significance. As a further test, I replaced this interaction term with the interaction between congressional approval and a member's individual party disloyalty score on a 0–100 scale. This alternative interaction produced the same insignificant results.²⁵ While individual incumbents may sometimes attempt to distance themselves from their party in an effort to avoid negative electoral consequences of the association, it appears that even those who vote against their party on a regular basis are still subject to essentially the same party-based accountability for perceived congressional performance as other incumbents in their party.

A final conditioning factor considered here is the role of seat safety. Some have argued that due to factors such as partisan gerrymandering, House incumbents have become more and more safe electorally, and less and less subject to the electoral consequences of national forces (Kaplan 2006). Since congressional performance evaluations are treated here as a national force similar to other national forces such as presidential evaluations, it is possible that the effects found in Table 1 might not be significant among safe members and instead apply mainly to marginal members. To test this possibility, Table 2 reestimates the model from Table 1, Model 2 separately for

²³I also tried interacting congressional approval with majority party unity and with an average of the two parties' scores, but neither of these alternative interactions displayed a significant negative relationship either.

²⁴Certainly there are many other good reasons—such as the lack of quantitative data capturing variation in congressional approval.

²⁵Other measures of party loyalty were also tested, including a member's party unity relative to her party's mean in each Congress, and whether or not a member's party unity was greater than one standard deviation of her party's mean unity in each Congress. These alternative measures produced similar (null) results, and the choice of one over another did not affect any of the substantive relationships in the analysis.

TABLE 2 Effect of Congressional Approval on Incumbent Vote Percentage by Seat Safety

	Majority Party Incumbents		Minority Party Incumbents	
	Safe	Marginal	Safe	Marginal
Congressional approval	.321** (.041)	.556** (.061)	-.106* (.041)	-.164* (.067)
Presidential approval	-.258** (.031)	-.356** (.051)	-.092** (.027)	-.010 (.047)
Pres. appr. × in pres. party	.146** (.027)	.164** (.038)	.115** (.026)	.088* (.044)
Economy	-.663** (.127)	-1.360** (.177)	.136 (.169)	-.457 (.244)
Economy × in pres. party	1.271** (.203)	1.920** (.287)	1.118** (.212)	1.741** (.327)
In president's party	-.854* (.343)	-.536 (.491)	-1.013* (.399)	-.872* (.331)
Democrat	1.743** (.502)	3.376** (.757)	-2.301** (.676)	-.615 (.984)
Freshman	1.702** (.426)	1.507** (.387)	.937 (.521)	1.078* (.427)
Previous vote % in district	.353** (.023)	.203** (.068)	.344** (.025)	.074 (.074)
District partisanship	3.006** (.213)	2.309** (.370)	2.840** (.275)	1.694** (.404)
Experienced challenger	-1.040** (.373)	-.971* (.375)	-2.389** (.366)	-.630 (.400)
ln(incumbent spending)	-1.044** (.211)	.833* (.387)	-1.372** (.234)	-.013 (.453)
ln(challenger spending)	-2.136** (.092)	-3.000** (.147)	-2.002** (.096)	-3.097** (.171)
Inc.'s disloyalty to party	.054** (.016)	.065** (.021)	.024 (.016)	.065** (.022)
Party's avg. unity (own party)	.201** (.056)	.159 (.086)	.002 (.071)	.149 (.103)
Cong. appr. × party's avg. unity	.0262** (.0053)	.0180* (.0080)	-.0007 (.0041)	-.0056 (.0070)
Maverick	-.617 (1.151)	.719 (1.875)	2.033* (.845)	-1.710 (1.271)
Cong. appr. × maverick	-.128 (.109)	-.177 (.191)	.127* (.064)	.026 (.105)
Intercept	77.611** (3.288)	72.657** (6.793)	84.042** (3.533)	94.327** (7.626)
Akaike's Information Criterion	10714.485	5028.518	7333.629	4488.906
Total number of cases	1763	833	1274	738

Note: Table entries are linear multilevel modeling coefficients (standard errors in parentheses). *p < .05; **p < .005.

those incumbents who would traditionally be considered to have safe seats (those receiving more than 60% of the two-party vote in the last election—see Jacobson 2004) and those who would traditionally be considered to hold

more marginal seats (those receiving 60% or below in the last election).

The results demonstrate that the significant effects of congressional approval found in Table 1 are also

significant in Table 2, regardless of how safe a seat is. The coefficients in the top row show that, on average, congressional approval has a significant positive effect among both safe and marginal majority party incumbents, and a significant negative effect among both safe and marginal minority party incumbents.²⁶ The coefficients for the interaction between congressional approval and party unity in the incumbent's party show that, similar to Table 1, this interaction is significantly positive among both safe and marginal majority party incumbents, and insignificant among both safe and marginal minority party incumbents. The coefficients for the interaction with individual party disloyalty, which were not significant in Table 1, are mostly insignificant here as well. The one exception is for safe minority party incumbents, among whom the usual negative effect of congressional approval does appear significantly less negative for mavericks.

While the overall pattern and significance of effects is similar between safe and marginal members, the sizes of the key coefficients in the analysis are not identical across these groups. I conducted Chow tests to determine whether any of these differences between safe and marginal members are statistically significant or not. These tests found that among majority party incumbents, the positive baseline effect of congressional approval is significantly larger among marginal members than among safe members. None of the other main or interactive effects of congressional approval were significantly different for safe members than for marginal members, among either majority party incumbents or among minority party incumbents.²⁷

Discussion

This study is about the relationship between the partisan environment in government and institutional accountability. It is commonly believed that the collective performance of Congress does not affect the reelection of its individual members, and therefore institutional accountability is lacking. Dramatic changes in the partisan environment in Congress and evidence that many members

²⁶This coefficient represents the average effect because the interactive variables are centered around their average values in the data. Removing the polarization interactions produces the same substantive results.

²⁷Even the (significant) coefficient for congressional approval's interaction with mavericks among safe minority incumbents was not significantly different from the (insignificant) coefficient among marginal minority incumbents. This is because confidence intervals indicate that the interactive effect for safe members could be as small as .002 of a point.

themselves are now concerned with institutional reputation raise doubts about this conventional wisdom. Yet the literature has provided neither an explicit theory of how these changes in the partisan environment may have affected institutional accountability nor any systematic empirical evidence. This study presents both a theory of how partisan conditions have affected institutional accountability and empirical evidence in support of that theory.

Three major findings emerge from this study. First, throughout the period covered by this study, low congressional approval ratings have generally reduced the electoral margins of majority party incumbents and increased margins for minority party incumbents. Conversely, higher ratings have been relatively more helpful for majority party incumbents and less helpful for minority party incumbents in elections. Second, partisan polarization has played a significant role in shaping electoral accountability for congressional performance. Specifically, higher polarization has increased the partisan differential in electoral accountability, mainly by increasing the effect of congressional approval on the vote margins of majority party members. Third, these electoral effects of congressional performance ratings hold true largely irrespective of a member's individual party loyalty or seat safety.

These findings carry important implications for the literature on Congress, on political parties, and on representation. The first finding, that majority party members have consistently faced at least some electoral consequence for congressional performance, provides crucial support for the untested assumptions underlying a prominent theory of legislative parties. Cox and McCubbins's "procedural cartel theory" (1993, 2005) is based largely on the premise that majority party members always have an electoral incentive to cooperate in producing a collective legislative record. Yet this is the first study to demonstrate that evaluations of the collective performance of Congress can lead to actual electoral gains or losses by majority party incumbents.

The second finding, that partisan polarization has increased electoral accountability for majority party members, offers a new empirical justification for theories of conditional party government (Aldrich 1995; Aldrich and Rohde 2001; Rohde 1991). Previously, conditional party government theory has sought to explain the relationship between partisan polarization and the degree of centralization of legislative power in the majority party leadership largely in terms of members' rational pursuit of policy goals: as majority party members' policy preferences become more homogeneous, they are more willing to empower their party's leaders in order to achieve

the legislative aims they hold in common. This study's findings suggest that rational pursuit of *reelection* can also explain the correlation between partisan polarization and members' willingness to empower party leaders. As the majority party becomes more unified in opposition to the minority, its members' electoral fortunes are increasingly tied to the performance of Congress. In such situations, majority party members have a greater electoral incentive to enable their leadership to engineer legislative successes, thereby bolstering the legislative performance record of Congress and their own electoral fortunes. In this light, even if members do not have policy as their ultimate goal, we would still expect them to be more willing to empower their leaders for electoral reasons whenever polarization increases. This electoral motivation is similar to that of cartel theory, except that cartel theory has treated electoral motivation as a constant, not a variable. In this one respect—supporting the idea of temporal variability in members' incentives to work together—this study's findings are a bit more closely aligned with conditional party government theory than with cartel theory.²⁸

The finding that party polarization has played an important role also serves to validate previous prescriptive studies on governmental accountability. With greater partisan polarization, the increased threat of vote loss for poor congressional performance would appear to provide a greater incentive for majority party members to cooperate in doing what the public wants Congress to do. To this extent, those who have called for more cohesive parties (e.g., APSA 1950; Committee on the Constitutional System 1985; Fiorina 1980) have been proven correct: increased intraparty unity has indeed made members of Congress more electorally accountable for congressional performance.²⁹

This finding regarding the changed incentives of majority party members over time is consistent with—and indeed helps to explain—an important temporal difference noted in the literature. While Fenno (1975) reports that every member he visited portrayed Congress in a

negative light to constituents, Lipinski (2004) finds that in the 1990s majority party members communicated predominantly positive messages about Congress (see also Arnold 2004). The explanation for this temporal difference appears to be that members of Congress themselves recognize the changed realities described in this study. Majority party members realize that it is no longer an effective strategy to try to publicly posture as opponents of Congress given their party label. If disapproval of Congress hurts majority members' reelection prospects, then it makes more sense for them to try to "talk up" Congress rather than running it down. It remains to be seen, however, whether or not such efforts can actually help to improve public evaluations of Congress.

Finally, the finding that increased partisan polarization may lead to improved collective representation by Congress is a nice parallel to recent studies suggesting that polarization has improved the degree of correspondence between district preferences and individual members' voting (Erikson and Wright 2000; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006).

From a different perspective, however, the results of this study can be interpreted as quite troubling for the quality of our democracy. According to the findings, in the new era of polarized parties the minority party appears to have a greater incentive to *hinder* the performance of Congress than it did in the past. If the minority party can engineer poor performance evaluations of Congress, majority party members would have an increased level of electoral vulnerability now compared to the 1970s. This increased vulnerability for majority party incumbents would consequently increase the possibility that the minority might regain control of the House, along with all of the associated perks therein. In other words, there is an increased incentive for members of the minority party to instigate conflict, create gridlock, and foster a negative public image of Congress in the hopes of attaining majority status.

This finding that partisan polarization has increased the minority party's incentive to delay, disrupt, and discredit Congress is also consistent with existing literature. Recent commentators have drawn a connection between increased partisan polarization and the decline in civil discourse in Congress (e.g., Mann and Ornstein 2006). The minority party's willingness to publicly assail Congress and its leaders for political advantage during the new era of polarization can be seen, for example, both in Republicans' attack on Speaker Jim Wright in the late 1980s and in Democrats' attack on the "culture of corruption" in Congress in 2006. Furthermore, the notion that polarization has increased the minority party's incentives to obstruct is consistent with empirical research

²⁸A recent iteration of cartel theory (Cox and McCubbins 2005) states that the relative mix of positive (but not negative) agenda-setting powers will increase with increasing homogeneity in the majority party. But like conditional party government theory, this is explained as a consequence of policy incentives, not electoral incentives. Here again, this study's results provide evidence of an electoral explanation for the correlation between party unity and more active efforts by the majority party to bolster its legislative performance.

²⁹I do not mean to imply that parties in the United States now meet the standard of party strength set by the APSA report nor that the United States now perfectly fits the responsible party government model.

demonstrating that greater partisan polarization has produced higher levels of legislative gridlock in Congress (Jones 2001; Sinclair 2006).

This second, more negative consequence of increased party unity is one that does not seem to have been anticipated by the APSA (1950) and other proponents of strong parties. Indeed, the Committee on the Constitutional System (1985) claimed that more cohesive parties would actually help to reduce gridlock.

In practice, it appears that partisan polarization entails a trade-off. With polarization we get greater institutional accountability, but we also get more institutional acrimony. Without polarization, accountability is diffused, but cooperation and collegiality are more likely. The finding that party polarization comes with both positive and negative consequences raises several important questions. Is it possible to have increased democratic accountability *without* a corresponding increase in political acrimony? If the two must go hand in hand, has this been a reasonable trade-off, or do the costs to the political system outweigh the benefits? While there is a subjective element to these questions, it is also clear that more research into the systemic effects of party polarization is needed before we can begin to address them.

Appendix

Including Earlier Elections in the Analysis

Extending the analysis in Table 1, Model 2 backward in time is limited by two factors. First, in the 11 elections prior to 1976 there were only six for which any congressional approval data could be found in the quarter prior to the election: 1954, 1958, 1964, 1968, 1970, and 1974. As a result, while this supplemental analysis extends backward to 1954, it can add only these specific six elections to the 16 in the central analysis.³⁰ Second, because the Federal Election Commission began its work in the 1976 cycle, candidate spending data prior to this election are either unavailable or unreliable (Sorauf 1992). Therefore, to allow analysis of these earlier elections, the supplemental analysis necessarily excludes the controls for candidate spending found in Table 1, Model 2. All other data and measures are as described in the text.

The results of the supplemental analysis are presented in Table A1. The main finding is that all of the key significant relationships found in Table 1, Model 2 continue to hold true even after adding new data from six earlier

³⁰There is not enough variation in the aggregate (election level) variables to conduct an analysis of these six elections alone (e.g., only six values of congressional approval).

TABLE A1 Supplemental Analysis Using Available Data from 1954–2006

	Majority Incs.	Minority Incs.
Congressional approval	.329** (.023)	-.137** (.023)
Presidential approval	-.178** (.022)	-.114** (.016)
Pres. appr. × in pres. party	.120** (.019)	.117** (.021)
Economy	-.892** (.065)	-.407** (.097)
Economy × in pres. party	1.539** (.113)	1.838** (.117)
In president's party	-1.979** (.222)	-1.345** (.251)
Democrat	3.012** (.388)	-2.612** (.451)
Freshman	1.223** (.288)	2.318** (.307)
Previous vote % in district	.419** (.016)	.504** (.017)
District partisanship	3.732** (.185)	2.914** (.216)
Experienced challenger	-3.171** (.265)	-2.919** (.260)
ln(incumbent spending)		
ln(challenger spending)		
Inc.'s disloyalty to party	.055** (.013)	.034* (.012)
Party's avg. unity (own party)	.077** (.026)	.035 (.039)
Cong. appr. × party's avg. unity	.0295** (.0026)	-.0066* (.0030)
Maverick	.947 (.813)	1.800* (.688)
Cong. appr. × maverick	-.117 (.080)	.249** (.062)
Intercept	35.849** (1.029)	33.313** (1.101)
Akaike's Information Criterion	22767.378	18350.547

Note: Table entries are linear multilevel modeling coefficients (standard errors in parentheses). Total number of cases is 3,511 (majority) and 2,894 (minority). *p < .05; **p < .005.

elections. Specifically, the baseline effect of congressional approval continues to be significantly positive among majority party incumbents and significantly negative among minority party incumbents; and the interaction between congressional approval and average party unity continues

to be significantly positive for majority party incumbents. (All of these coefficients are also roughly comparable in size to their estimated values in Table 1, Model 2.)

Two coefficients that were not significant in Table 1, Model 2 are significant here. First, the interaction between congressional approval and average party unity is significant among minority party incumbents here, but not in Table 1. However, because the slope is so shallow, there is actually no significant difference across the two models in the point estimate for the effect of congressional approval at any given level of average party unity in the data. Second, the interaction between congressional approval and maverick status is significant among minority incumbents here, but not in Table 1. However, this difference appears to be attributable to the lack of controls for candidate spending: when candidate spending is removed from the analysis in Table 1, the comparable interactive term appears significant there as well.

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