

The Power to Polarize

The President as a Cue in Congressional Rhetoric

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Abstract

The president occupies a unique position as the head of the executive branch and the de-facto leader of one of the two congressional parties. He is both powerful and partisan, serving as a potent cue lawmakers can strategically reference to polarize opinion. Given the polarizing power of out-party cues relative to the persuasive power of in-party cues, as well as rising negative partisanship, I theorize that out-partisans will more frequently invoke the president in public statements. However, this pattern will be conditioned by constituency partisanship and time. I provide evidence for this theory leveraging a within-legislator panel and text data from over 2 million floor speeches given by 3,000 lawmakers between 1953–2016. I further support the behavioral micro-foundations of the theory through a survey experiment. This research has implications for understanding blame-game politics and the separation of powers, especially during periods of polarization and nationalization.

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In the summer of 2012, President Obama unilaterally implemented the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA), which allowed some undocumented immigrants to remain in the U.S. without risk of deportation. Following this action, Republican Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC) gave a speech on the Senate floor, criticizing the Democratic president. He said, “At the end of the day, the only time President Obama has talked about immigration reform was when rallies were going to be held. And here, at the late hour of the election, he tries to do something with a dream act modified in a unilateral fashion” (Congressional Record, September 21, 2012, S6570). Given broader Republican opposition to both immigration reform and President Obama, perhaps this attack from Graham is unsurprising. Yet, five years earlier when George W. Bush—a Republican—was president, Graham took a different approach to immigration policy. He worked with the president to draft the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2007 (a bill on which the 2012 DREAM Act was based) and delivered five floor speeches in support of it. Yet in his speeches, Graham never mentioned the Republican president despite Bush’s public involvement with the bill. In fact, across all floor speeches Graham gave between 2003 and 2016, he referenced the out-party president 43 percent more often than his co-partisan Commander in Chief. Anecdotally at least, this pattern has persisted through the Trump and Biden presidencies—not just for Senator Graham, but for members of both congressional parties who frequently name-check the other party’s president. To what extent are these anecdotes representative, and more broadly, what is the president’s symbolic role in congressional communication?

Members of Congress are motivated by personal electoral goals ([Mayhew 1974](#)) as well as party-wide goals of capturing (or holding) chamber majorities and the White House (e.g., [Smith 2007](#); [Sundquist 1988](#)). In these efforts, lawmakers rely on both their personal image as well as the reputation of their party, which is strengthened through collective action and popular policy ([Cox and McCubbins 2007](#)). Despite these efforts, however, “[n]o member of Congress is as important as the president in defining the collective images of

the parties” (Lee 2009, 77). The president is one of the most visible and powerful actors in American politics who “focuses the eyes and draws out the attachments of people” (Skowronek 1998, 20). Even if formally weak (Neustadt 1991), the president occupies a unique position as the head of an independent branch of government and de-facto leader of one of the two congressional parties (Lebo and O’Geen 2011). Although a deep literature explores the implications of this relationship for presidential success in congressional *voting* behavior (Bond and Fleisher 1990; Cohen 2019; Lebo and O’Geen 2011; Lee 2009), much less attention has been paid to the president’s role in legislative communications strategies, an area of growing importance for the two congressional parties (Lee 2016). Indeed, research on congressional communication often focuses on partisan and divisive rhetoric broadly (Ash, Morelli and Van Weelden 2017; Ballard et al. 2021; Gentzkow, Shapiro and Taddy 2019; Russell 2018, 2020; Wang and Tucker 2020) rather than the president specifically (but see Green 2015, 90-92). Yet the president is an especially potent partisan symbol (Jacobson 2019). To reference him “is to cue a set of meaningful associations with the national parties, the social groups that support them, and the positions they take” (Hopkins 2018, 2). In focusing on party references broadly, rather than the president specifically, we likely miss an important way legislators both leverage and contribute to affective polarization and nationalization for political gain.

I argue that the president is likely to feature prominently in congressional communications, but asymmetrically so, with out-partisans more likely to reference him than co-partisans. Given voter attention to the president (Jacobson 2019) and his polarizing role in American politics (e.g., Cameron 2002), lawmakers from both parties may find it strategically advantageous to reference him given that “[p]arty communications aimed at a public audience are simplistic” and “are exercises in clear ‘us versus them’ line drawing” (Lee 2016). Partisan identity is a key driver of emotional and political behavior (Huddy, Mason and Aarøe 2015), but out-group anger is more powerful than in-group favoritism in the current political environment (Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018; Abramowitz and Web-

ster 2016). References to political leaders, rather than parties broadly, are key engines of opinion polarization (Nicholson 2012) and belief constraint (Goren, Federico and Kittilson 2009). Perhaps counter-intuitively, out-party cues polarize whereas in-party leader cues fail to persuade (Nicholson 2012). People tend to view in-groups as heterogeneous and out-groups as homogeneous; learning an in-group leader's position, then, may not cause someone to change their beliefs (but see Lenz 2012; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000), whereas learning an out-group leader's position may cause one to adopt the opposite position (for a review, see Boldry, Gaertner and Quinn 2007). Even if in-partisans communicate positive messages to associate their president with good times (Wang and Tucker 2020), out-partisans should be more likely to specifically invoke the president as a symbol of everything they, and their constituents, stand against. However, I theorize that this relationship will be conditional on constituency partisanship and time. Lawmakers in both parties who represent homogeneously co-partisan constituencies should be more likely to deploy presidential references given the increasing link between the president, partisan brands (Hopkins and Noel 2022), and voting behavior (Jacobson 2015). Temporally, presidential references should only function in this way during periods of high polarization—when the president has clear partisan valence (Cameron 2002; Skinner 2008)—and nationalization—when presidential politics takes precedence over state or local issues (Carson, Sievert and Williamson 2020; Hopkins 2018).

To test this theory, I turn to a corpus of over 2.2 million floor speeches given by 3,000 members of Congress between 1953 and 2016 (Gentzkow, Shapiro and Taddy 2018). I measure the frequency with which lawmakers invoke the sitting president in each two-year Congress and find support for my hypotheses. Leveraging the panel structure of the data, I show that individual lawmakers reference the president more frequently when in the out-party. However, legislators in both parties are sensitive to constituency support for the president, increasing the number of references they make as presidential support becomes more one-sided. I also provide evidence of the theorized temporal effects: this

asymmetric pattern of out-party references is much stronger for post-Ford presidencies. To further probe the behavioral micro-foundations of the theory, I present results from a survey experiment demonstrating that when out-party lawmakers invoke the president, they can increase their own approval, ratings of issue importance, and the importance of principles over compromise among out-party respondents.

These findings contribute to the literature on separation of powers and blame-game politics (Christenson and Kriner 2017; Groeling 2010; Groseclose and McCarty 2001; Kriner and Schickler 2016; Lee 2009; Noble 2021; Reeves and Rogowski 2021) by highlighting the understudied role of the president as an important and polarizing cue in modern congressional rhetoric. This article also has implications for understanding legislators' self-presentation (Bernhard and Sulkin 2018; Fenno 1978; Grimmer 2013b) and congressional representation under conditions of nationalized and polarized politics (Jacobson 2015; Hopkins 2018; Pierson and Schickler 2020). While these references advantage out-partisans, normatively, they may exacerbate conflict and narrow the scope for compromise. Ultimately, some of what we categorize as polarization and nationalization may reflect, at least in part, a preoccupation with the *president*—not simply differences in salience between national and local politics.

Party Conflict Not Power Conflict

Both the president (Light 1999) and members of Congress (Mayhew 1974; Fenno 1973) are motivated by electoral and policy goals. And while each represents an independent branch of government, neither can succeed without the other. The president needs members of Congress to support and pass his agenda (Neustadt 1991). Lawmakers need the president to sign their bills (e.g., Cameron 2000). While executive-legislative conflict was at the heart of Madisonian separation of powers, it was not long after the first Congress that conflict came to be channeled through the parties rather than the powers (Levin-

son and Pildes 2006). This pathology of the American political system encourages co-partisans to “rally around the initiatives of their own party’s president, and, as a mirror image, the other party to resist initiatives championed by an opposing party’s president” (Lee 2009, 3). The president is the head of an independent branch of government and the de-facto leader of one of the two political parties. Voters, who typically pay little attention to politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997; Krupnikov and Ryan 2022), do hold opinions, increasingly strong, polarized opinions (e.g., Donovan et al. 2019), about the president. Given their greater knowledge of the president relative to members of Congress, voters tend to translate affect toward the president onto his fellow co-partisans (Jacobson 2019) and use his policies and success as a heuristic in voting for (or against) co-partisan lawmakers (Gronke, Koch and Wilson 2003; Lebo and O’Geen 2011). Out-partisans have symmetric incentives to oppose the president and his partisan team (Bond and Fleisher 1990; Cohen 2019; Lee 2009). For an out-partisan, supporting the president and his policies would send a signal that “the president is a wise and prudent leader. That would only strengthen him and his party for the next election” (Sundquist 1988, 630). More than withhold support, out-partisans weaponize congressional power during divided government to weaken the president, conducting investigations (Kriner and Schickler 2016) and forcing the president to issue unpopular vetoes (Groseclose and McCarty 2001).

The partisanship and polarization we see in lawmakers’ institutional choices carries over to their rhetorical strategies. Presidential co-partisans, for example, tend to use more positive language in their press releases as the public may associate this positive attitude with presidential performance (Malecha and Reagan 2011; Wang and Tucker 2020). Out-partisans tend to use more negative and polarizing language, at least on social media (Ballard et al. 2021; Russell 2020). However this research often defines polarizing rhetoric broadly, focusing on the use of party labels rather than the president specifically (but see Green 2015). However, the president is likely to play a powerful, and I argue, asymmetric role, in congressional rhetoric, especially as congressional communications take on

greater weight relative to policy (Lee 2016).

Behavioral research highlights the importance of out-party polarization relative to in-party persuasion (Goren, Federico and Kittilson 2009) and the role of party leader cues as drivers of this process (Nicholson 2012). Indeed, Nicholson (2012) argues that in-party leader cues fail to persuade other in-partisans whereas out-party cues polarize out-partisans. The theoretical mechanism is due to the fact that people tend to view in-groups as holding a diverse set of views whereas out-groups are homogeneous. Thus, learning information about one's own in-group (with which one may agree or disagree) is not so informative, whereas information about an out-group (for example, the president's support for a policy or political candidate) may lead someone to revise their view away from the out-party (see e.g., Arceneaux and Kolodny 2009). The literature on polarizing cues fits with an increasing focus on negative partisanship and affective polarization among the electorate (e.g., Abramowitz and Webster 2016). Since the 1980s, Americans have come to dislike members of the other party, yet they have not necessarily increased positive sentiment toward their own party. Iyengar and Krupenkin (2018, 211) argue that "animosity toward the opposing party has intensified, it has taken on a new role as the prime motivator in partisans' political lives." Presidential references are likely to be attractive to the media as well, given a focus on political conflict and the presidency (Groeling 2010). If out-party cues polarize but in-party cues fail to persuade (Nicholson 2012), then lawmakers should be more likely to invoke the president in public statements when they are in the out-party.

Asymmetric Reference Hypothesis: A lawmaker will invoke the president more often when in the presidential out-party.

Even if between-party differences play a key role in explaining partisans' rhetorical strategies vis-à-vis the president, intra-party differences likely exist as well. Individual lawmakers have incentives to appeal to their distinct constituencies to shape opinion (e.g., Lenz 2012), respond to existing opinion (e.g., Miller and Stokes 1963), or satisfy demands

for a certain type of representational style (Grimmer 2013b; Fenno 1978; Rogowski and Stone 2020). Lawmakers may be able to prime constituents to evaluate them in terms of their support for, or opposition to, the president. For example, Hopkins and Noel (2022) find that lawmakers who were more supportive of President Trump were seen as more conservative, despite more moderate voting records than other less supportive lawmakers. Legislators who represent homogeneously partisan constituencies should be more eager to take advantage of this strategy given the increasing correlation between partisanship, presidential approval (Donovan et al. 2019), and voting behavior in congressional elections (Jacobson 2015). By contrast, in more heterogeneous constituencies, lawmakers may avoid presidential references at risk of appearing “out of step” (Canes-Wrone and de Marchi 2002) or excessively partisan (Carson et al. 2010).

Constituency Partisanship Hypothesis: As presidential support within a constituency increases, in-partisans will increase (and out-partisans will decrease) the number of presidential references they make.

If, per my theory, the president is invoked as a partisan cue, then time should play a moderating role. Presidential references may only serve as clear signals of partisan identity in periods of high polarization and nationalization, specifically the post-1970 era (Hopkins 2018; Pierson and Schickler 2020; Sinclair 2006). Although presidents have long been standard bearers for their parties, in the current political context, they have taken on a greater role in defining what their parties stand for (e.g., Jacobson 2019, Chapter 9). As American politics has nationalized, sectional divisions that cut across parties have been replaced by a focus on national issues and presidential politics (Carson, Sievert and Williamson 2020; Hopkins 2018; Pierson and Schickler 2020). Chhibber and Kollman (2004) argue, “As the presidential office becomes more significant and powerful...it, in turn, may lead to greater incentives for politicians across the country to link themselves to presidents or presidential candidates.” Not only has the president become more central, but the parties presidents represent have become more polarized. As conserva-

tive Southern Democrats were replaced by conservative Southern Republicans, the party coalitions changed—each becoming more internally homogeneous (Sinclair 2006). As the parties’ constituencies changed, the elected officials who remained had little reason to advocate for old positions that used to split the parties, especially civil rights (Schickler 2016). Cross-cutting cleavages faded, replaced by two parties that took clear stands on opposite sides of each new issue. Although polarization and nationalization are distinct, I think about these two forces operating simultaneously (Pierson and Schickler 2020, 48) to divide the parties—both in government and the electorate—and magnify the importance of the presidency.

Nationalization and Polarization Hypothesis: As nationalization and polarization increase, the asymmetry between out-party and in-party presidential references will increase.

Looking for Presidential References in Legislative Debate

I test these three hypotheses using evidence from floor speeches given in the House and Senate between 1953 and 2016. Speaking on the floor is a highly visible (Proksch and Slapin 2012) and core representative activity (Pitkin 1967), providing lawmakers an opportunity to connect with their constituents (Hill and Hurley 2002), take positions on salient issues (Mayhew 1974), and raise one’s profile (Bernhard and Sulkin 2018). The decision to deliver a speech is strategic—it not only requires that the member put themselves on the record, but it also entails a considerable expenditure of resources to craft and deliver (Hall 1998; Maltzman and Sigelman 1996; Sellers 2009). Members also have flexibility in choosing what to discuss on the floor—or whether they’ll discuss anything at all (Witko et al. 2021), making the floor an excellent venue in which to study polarizing messaging and presidential references. Congressional leadership does solicit participation in themed messaging events (Harris 2005; Green 2015; Sellers 2009) but “parties are less interested in who delivers their messages than in what members are saying” (Rocca 2007,

500), at least during one minute speeches. Thus, a member's own individual goals play a key role in determining whether or not they participate in these themed events (Harris 2005; Green 2015).

Although few constituents are closely watching C-SPAN to see what their representatives are saying in the chamber, the media cover what is said on the floor (Maltzman and Sigelman 1996), especially if a speech is emotionally charged or negative (Dietrich, Schultz and Tracey N.d.), which is likely to be the case for out-party references to the president. Beyond media coverage, members promote clips from their speeches on their websites and social media platforms, and the content of such speeches are well correlated with other forms of legislator self-presentation such as press releases (Grimmer 2013b). For these reasons, floor speeches provide a useful means of investigating the use of presidential references over time, something we are not able to do using press releases or social media data.

The data for my analysis come from the Congressional record as digitized by Gentzkow, Shapiro and Taddy (2018), which includes the text of every speech given by every member of the House and Senate while Congress is in session.¹ Per my theory, out-partisans reference the president as a salient cue, and as such, I focus on lawmakers' direct and explicit references to the president in their floor speeches as my key quantity of interest. To construct my dependent variable, I search the text for every speech in which a member of the House or Senate directly references the president by last name (e.g., "Bush" or "Obama") or uses the bigram "the president."² This choice of keywords also captures references to a president's signature policy, such as the "Bush Tax Cuts" or "Obamacare." I argue that these policy references are of theoretical interest as lawmakers use these nicknames to shape constituent opinion (see also Hopkins 2018). For example, as Republicans

¹Although members may amend their remarks after the fact in the "extension of remarks," I include only the text of speeches given in person on the floor to focus on lawmakers' theoretically observed actions.

²Before searching, I remove addresses to the presiding officer (i.e., "Mister President" or "Madame President") at the beginning of each speech in the Senate as well as references to the President Pro Tempore. Nonetheless, the bigram "the president" will occasionally turn up false positives. I manually inspected a random sample of 215 speeches and found only 6 such instances (2%).

attempted to repeal the Affordable Care Act (ACA) in 2017, one-third of Americans said they did not know that the ACA and Obamacare were, in fact, the same policy, and they did not realize certain health care benefits would be eliminated were “Obamacare” repealed (Dropp and Nyhan 2017). If a speech includes either of these search terms, it is coded as 1 and 0 otherwise. This definition of presidential references is conservative given that lawmakers may reference the president multiple times in a single speech.

In the analysis that follows, I specify the dependent variable as the number of presidential-referencing speeches member i gives in Congress t . Aggregating to the Congress level allows me to better capture the quantity of interest—the overall focus on the president in a member’s speaking profile, which may vary at lower levels of aggregation given the availability of floor time as well as the legislative and electoral calendars. I drop all non-substantive speeches—approximated here by removing those with fewer than 60 words—from both the numerator and the denominator. In my empirical models, I use this count as my dependent variable controlling for the total number of speeches a lawmaker gives in each two-year Congress. However, in this section, I describe the data in terms of the percentage of presidential referencing speeches a member gives to facilitate interpretation as the raw count of such speeches (without accounting for the underlying total) can be misleading.

In Figure 1, I visually summarize patterns in presidential references by party and chamber. Time, in terms of two-year Congresses, is on the x -axis. On the y -axis, I plot the percentage of speeches which reference the president given by the average member of each party. I also include vertical dashed lines preceding each Congress in which a new president takes office. Consistent with the Asymmetric Reference and Polarization and Nationalization Hypotheses, differences between the out-party and in-party appear in the late 1970s and early 1980s.³ Prior to Carer’s presidency, the difference between

³Although this asymmetry also begins around the time C-SPAN was introduced, it begins in the 1977-1978 Congress in the House, the Congress before the introduction of C-SPAN. In the Senate, C-SPAN was not introduced until 1986. The partisan asymmetry begins before the introduction of C-SPAN in the Senate and is depressed for several Congresses immediately following its introduction. While C-SPAN may play

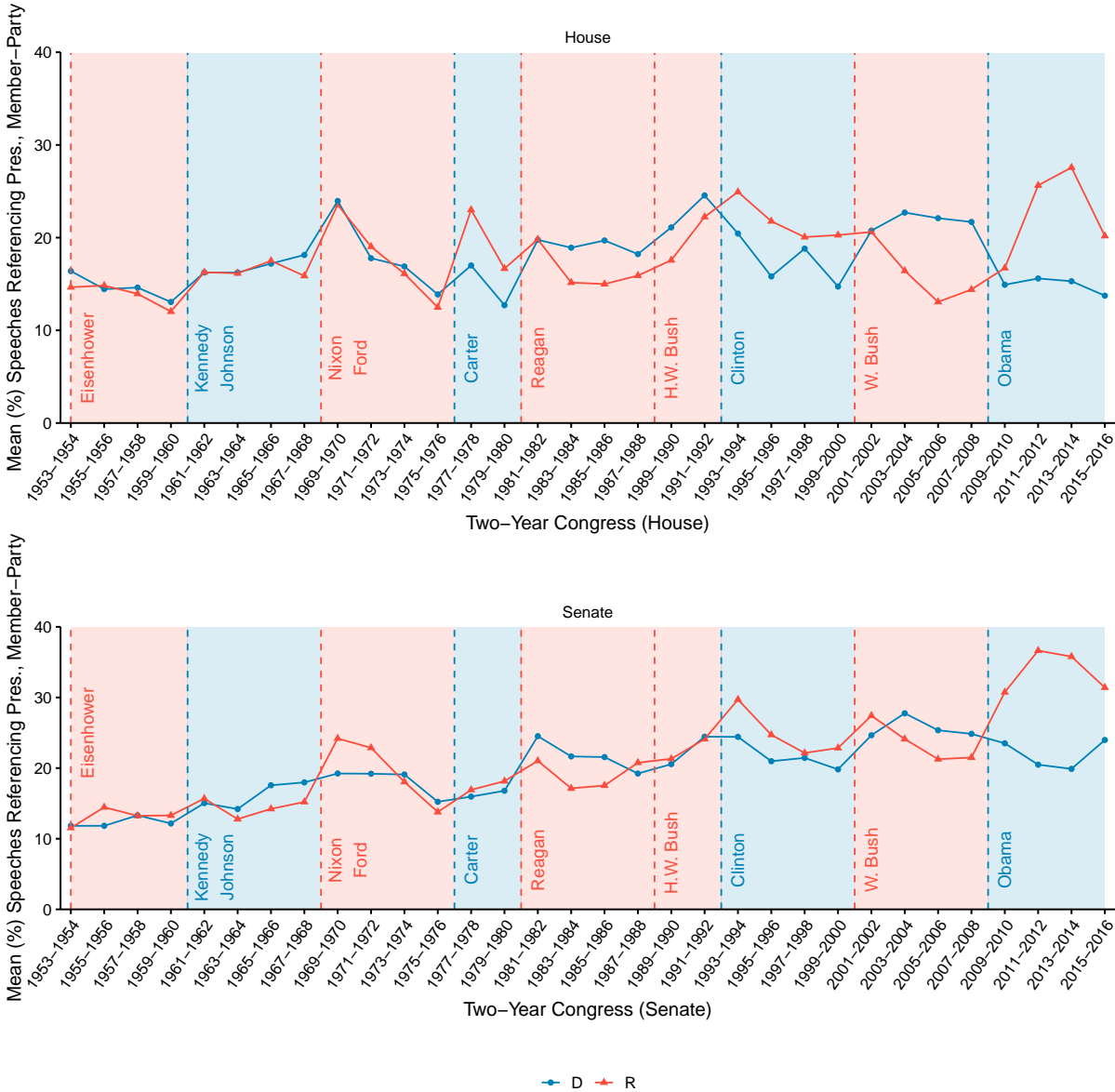


Figure 1: Time series of the average percentage of speeches referencing the president by member-party, 1953-2016. Consistent with the Asymmetric Reference and Polarization and Nationalization Hypotheses, the average presidential out-partisan generally gives more presidential-referencing speeches than the average in-partisan, but only post-1980. This pattern is more pronounced in the House than in the Senate.

the average in-partisan and out-partisan is negligible—with the exception of the Johnson and Nixon presidencies in the Senate. There, in-partisans actually reference the presi-

a role in this process, it does not appear to be the only causal mechanism.

dent more often. Beginning with the Carter and Regan presidencies, out-partisans almost always reference the president more frequently than his co-partisans.

Figure 1, while helpful for visualizing the average over-time variation, masks a large degree of variation at the individual level. In Table 1, I list the 20 members of the 113th (2013-2014) House and Senate with the highest percentage of presidential reference speeches and the 20 members with the lowest. Barack Obama, a Democrat, was president during this period, and consistent with the Asymmetric Reference Hypothesis, eighteen of the twenty top referencing members are Republicans. Many of these lawmakers, such as Jim Jordan, Mo Brooks, and Ted Cruz have national profiles and are informally considered quite partisan. Meanwhile, the majority of least frequent referencers are Democrats—many of whom have moderate reputations or are not well known.

Measuring Party, Constituency, and Temporal Influence

Figure 1 and Table 1 provide suggestive support for the Asymmetric Reference Hypothesis: that a lawmaker will invoke the president more often when in the out-party. To test this hypothesis more formally, I construct a binary indicator of whether a lawmaker is a presidential out-partisan in each two-year Congress. The variable *Out-party* takes on a value of 1 when a member is a presidential out-partisan and 0 otherwise.⁴

To test the Constituency Partisanship Hypothesis, that lawmakers will increasingly reference the president when their constituency is more homogeneously co-partisan, I leverage the president's two-party vote share in the constituency in the previous presidential election. As Grimmer (2013a, 632) notes, this measure is useful given that "it is highly correlated with a voter's partisan identification...and it avoids the endogeneity of a senator's past election results." To facilitate comparisons between coefficients, I construct *Presidential Vote Margin* by subtracting 50 from the president's previous vote share and

⁴I exclude all independents from the analysis. Further, if a member switches parties during a session, I code them as being a member of the party they switch into for the entire duration of the session.

Table 1: Members of the 113th (2013-2014) House and Senate with the highest and lowest percentage of speeches referencing Obama.

Name	House					Senate				
	Party	Number		Percent		Party	Number		Percent	
		Pres. References	Total Speeches	Pres. References	Percent		Pres. References	Total Speeches	Pres. References	Percent
Joe Wilson	R	99	130	76.2	R	8	12	66.7		
Luis Guterrez	D	26	35	74.3	R	200	307	65.1		
Tom Rice	R	20	27	74.1	R	128	197	65.0		
Tim Griffin	R	27	38	71.1	R	63	97	64.9		
Mo Brooks	R	32	50	64.0	R	60	99	60.6		
Louie Gohmert	R	134	210	63.8	R	116	213	54.5		
Andy Harris	R	31	50	62.0	R	122	226	54.0		
Jim Bridenstine	R	20	33	60.6	D	1	2	50		
Jim Jordan	R	6	10	60	R	204	408	50		
Roger Williams	R	31	52	59.6	R	79	163	48.5		
:	:	:	:	:	:	:	:	:		
Vern Buchanan	R	0	6	0	R	2	23	8.7		
Bruce Braley	D	0	6	0	D	22	261	8.4		
David Loebsack	D	0	14	0	D	11	162	6.8		
Timothy Walz	D	0	20	0	R	8	118	6.8		
Chellie Pingree	D	0	21	0	D	2	30	6.7		
Gary Peters	D	0	8	0	D	7	106	6.6		
Gregg Harper	R	0	13	0	D	4	66	6.1		
William Owens	D	0	6	0	R	1	33	3.3		
Steve Southerland	R	0	17	0	R	0	7	0		
William Keating	D	0	19	0	D	0	11	0		

scaling the variable so that a one-unit increase in this variable represents a one standard deviation increase in the president's vote margin.

To test the Nationalization and Polarization Hypothesis, that partisan differences in presidential references appear only during periods of increasing polarization and nationalization, I follow [Kriner and Schickler \(2016\)](#) and create a binary variable *1981-2016* which takes on a value of 1 for each Congress beginning with the 97th (1981-1983) and 0 for each Congress before.

In addition, I account for several institutional and individual-level covariates that could be correlated with a member's propensity to reference the president and their party. These variables include whether a member is in the *Majority* party and/or a member of *Leadership*—defined as the Speaker of the House, floor leaders, whips, and conference chairs (see [Heitshusen 2019](#)). I also control for lawmakers' *Previous Vote Margin* in their last election, the *Number of Congresses* a lawmaker has served, and for Senators, whether they are *In-Cycle*, that is, up for reelection at the end of a Congress. I also include member fixed effects to account for other possible confounders such as a legislator's ideology, race, sex, or innate speaking preferences.

Estimation Strategy

The data is structured as a time-series, cross-sectional panel, which allows for the estimation of within-member change over time as a lawmaker moves from the presidential in-party to the out-party and as constituency-level partisanship and polarization changes, holding members fixed. To isolate within-member change and account for the count dependent variable, I estimate negative binomial fixed-effects models. I cluster standard errors at the member level to account for the expected correlation across observations. As the House and Senate vary along a number of dimensions, including both the size of the body and speechmaking rules, I estimate a separate model for each chamber. I also estimate three different models for each chamber—one with no interactions to test the Asym-

metric Reference Hypothesis, one with an interaction between *Out-party* and *Presidential Vote Margin* to test the Constituency Partisanship Hypothesis, and one with an interaction between *Out-party* and *1981-2016* to test the Polarization and Nationalization Hypothesis. The coefficients produced by the model should be interpreted as average within-member changes associated with each covariate on a member's decision to deliver a speech that references the president.

Results

In Table 2, I present results from six models testing the three primary hypotheses in the House and Senate. First, I turn to the unconditional models reported in columns 1 and 4 in which I find support for the Asymmetric Reference Hypothesis. In the House (column 1), the coefficient on *Out-party* is 0.15, or approximately 6 additional speeches that reference the president in a two-year Congress. Although this increase may seem small, House members give approximately 72 speeches per Congress on average, meaning this is about an 8% increase overall. In the Senate, the coefficient is 0.06, which also translates to approximately a six speech increase on average. This increase represents a small percentage of overall speeches, but as I argue below, is still meaningful. Both of these differences are statistically significant.

In columns 2 and 4, I present evidence in favor of the Constituency Partisanship Hypothesis—the expectation that lawmakers will reference the president more often when representing more co-partisan constituencies. When the president's vote margin is 0 (that is, he received 50% of the vote in the previous election) in a House district or state, out-party lawmakers in both the House and Senate reference the president more often than in-partisans. However, the interaction term between out-party status and presidential vote margin is negative and statistically significant, indicating that out-partisans are responsive to changing constituency support for the president when speaking. The un-

Table 2: The effect of out-party status, constituency partisanship, and time on the number of speeches lawmakers give which reference the president.

	House			Senate		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Out-Party	0.15*** (0.02)	0.15*** (0.02)	0.04* (0.02)	0.06** (0.02)	0.05* (0.02)	-0.07* (0.03)
1981-2016	0.24*** (0.03)	0.24*** (0.03)	0.12*** (0.04)	0.10 (0.06)	0.12* (0.06)	-0.01 (0.06)
Pres. Vote Margin	-0.01 (0.01)	0.04* (0.02)	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)	0.03 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.01)
Out-Party × Pres. Vote Margin		-0.10*** (0.03)			-0.09** (0.03)	
Out-Party × 1981-2016			0.22*** (0.03)			0.22*** (0.04)
Previous Vote Margin	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.00 (0.02)
Majority Party	0.04* (0.02)	0.05* (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	-0.10*** (0.02)	-0.10*** (0.02)	-0.10*** (0.02)
Leadership	0.09 (0.11)	0.08 (0.11)	0.08 (0.11)	-0.04 (0.07)	-0.04 (0.07)	-0.05 (0.08)
Term	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.03* (0.01)	0.03* (0.02)	0.03* (0.01)
In-Cycle (Senate)				0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)
Total Speeches	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)
No. Lawmakers	2,515	2,515	2,515	435	435	435
Lawmaker Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	15,029	15,029	15,029	2,656	2,656	2,656

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Note: Coefficients are from a negative binomial model with fixed effects for lawmakers. The dependent variable in all models is the number of speeches in which a lawmaker references the president in a two-year Congress. Standard errors are clustered at the lawmaker level.

interacted *Presidential Vote Margin* coefficient is positive and statistically significant in the House, indicating that in-partisans also increase presidential references when their constituencies become more co-partisan. However, this pattern does not seem to hold in the Senate.

Given the difficulty of both interpreting negative binomial coefficients and interaction terms, I plot the marginal effect of out-party status in Figure 2. In the right panel, I plot the president's previous vote margin in House districts on the x -axis in terms of standardized units, and the expected number of presidential-referencing speeches given by the average out-partisan on the y -axis. The line depicts the average difference in the number of president-referencing speeches given by an out-partisan as compared to an in-partisan at each level of past presidential vote margin. The slope is negative, however, the predictions themselves are positive and statistically significant until the district's past presidential vote margin is about one standard deviation above 0. This plot indicates that lawmakers reference the president more often when in the out-party, although decreasingly so as the president's margin increases. When the president's past vote margin is one standard deviation above 0, House out-partisans and in-partisans reference the president at statistically similar rates. In the right panel, I depict the same relationship for the Senate, which is similar but with a steeper slope, indicating that out-party Senators are more responsive to constituency support for the president. This pattern makes sense given that Senators represent larger and more heterogeneous constituencies overall.

Finally, I provide support for the Polarization and Nationalization hypothesis in columns 3 and 6. Here, I interact out-party status with an indicator for the post-1980 period. I visualize this relationship in Figure 3. Consistent with the patterns in Figure 1, out-partisans in the House reference the president just as often as House in-partisans in the pre-Reagan period, whereas out-party senators of that period reference the president less often than in-partisans. However, this relationship changes significantly in the post-1980 period. Out-partisans in both the House and Senate reference the president more often than in-

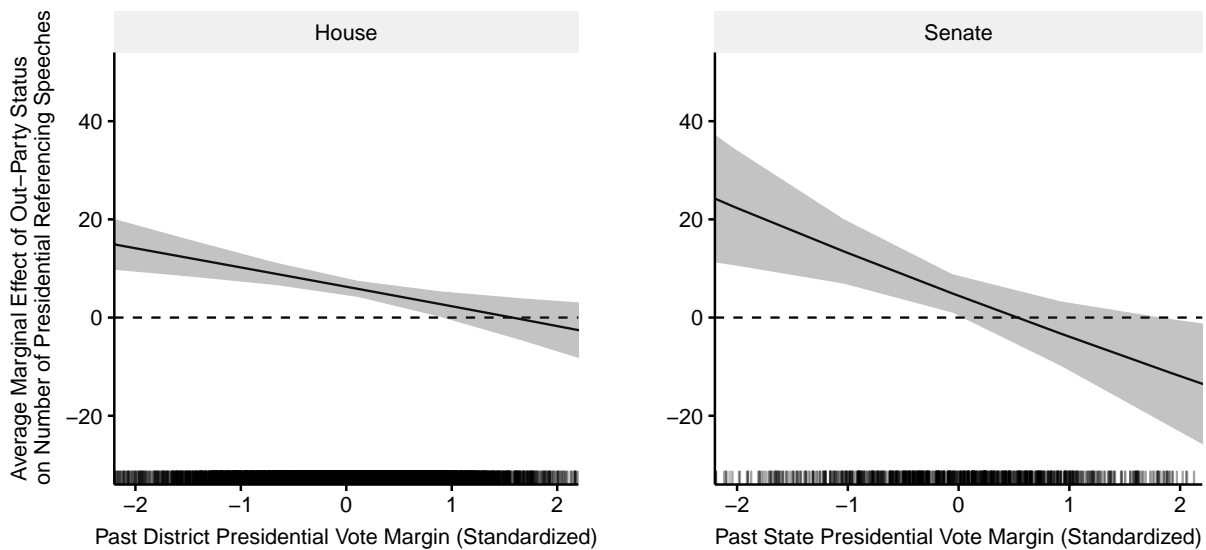


Figure 2: The marginal effect of being a presidential out-partisan on the number of president-referencing speeches given at varying levels of constituency support for the president (in terms of standardized vote margin). In both the House and the Senate, out-partisans give fewer referencing speeches when the president’s past vote margin increases. At higher values of presidential vote margin, the differences between the two groups are not statistically distinguishable from one another. The rug illustrates the observed levels of presidential vote margin.

partisans, giving 8 and 14 more referencing speeches respectively.

These results support the three primary hypotheses. Lawmakers reference the president more often when in the out-party, however, the rate at which they do is negatively related to constituency support for the president. Further, the asymmetry between the parties appears to hold only for the more polarized and nationalized post-1980 period. Overall, the change in the number of speeches given by House members is substantively meaningful—an increase of roughly 10-20% of total speeches depending on the model specification. For the Senate, these changes are more modest, representing a 1-5% increase of total speeches depending on the model. In both chambers, however, these coefficients are similar in size to the effect of being in the majority party, which should serve as a good comparison given its importance in driving other out-party behavior with respect

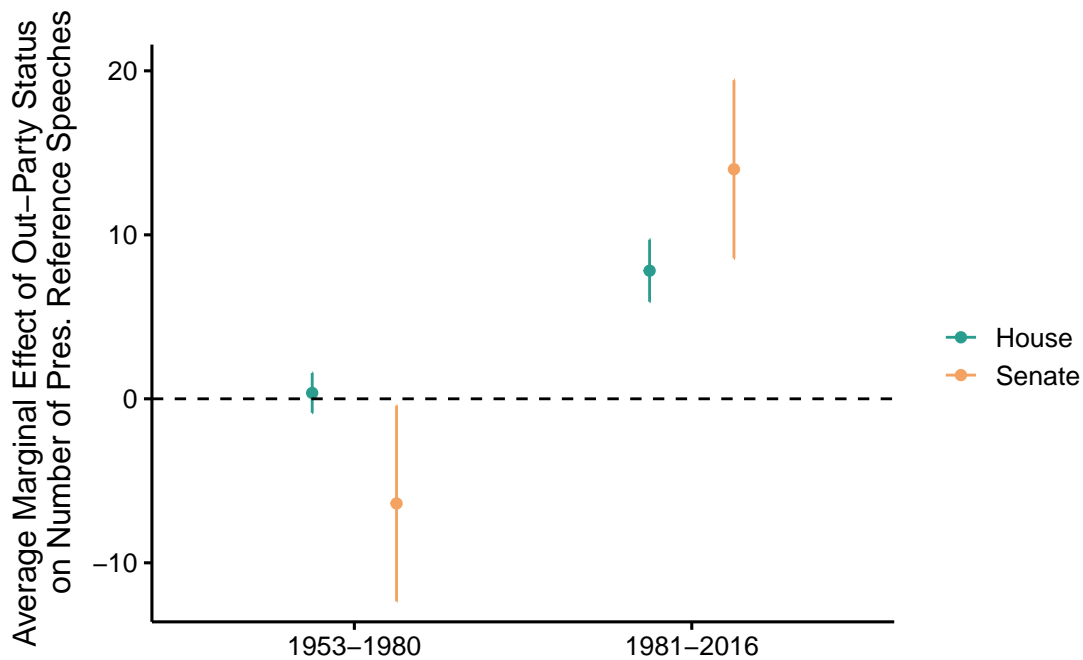


Figure 3: The marginal effect of being a presidential out-partisan on the number of president-referencing speeches given before and after 1980. Before Reagan’s presidency, lawmakers reference the president just as often when in the in-party or out-party whereas in the Senate, lawmakers reference the president less often when in the out-party. However, this relationship changes in the polarized post-1980 period, with both House members and senators referencing the president more often when in the out-party.

to the president (e.g., [Kriner and Schickler 2016](#)). Further, a focus on the average within-member change may mask a larger collective impact of such speeches. At the level of collective representation ([Grimmer 2013a](#); [Weissberg 1978](#)), voters may see the floor as place consumed by presidential politics. If voters see Congress as a venue for partisan fights rather than bipartisan policies that can solve national challenges, gridlock and negative partisanship should only increase. Worryingly, as fewer cross-pressured members return to Congress with each election, those speaking on the floor represent increasingly homogeneous constituencies ([Jacobson 2015](#)) and have incentives to increase—not decrease—presidential references.

Do Presidential References Polarize Out-Partisans?

So far, I have provided evidence that lawmakers reference the president more often when in the out-party. It is not clear, though, how constituents react to lawmakers who reference the president frequently in their communications. Given existing evidence about the polarizing power of out-party references, especially out-party leader cues (Nicholson 2012), I expect presidential references to have an asymmetric effect on public opinion. When an out-party senator references the president, I expect that out-party receivers will increase their support for the senator, increase the importance they place on the policy referenced, and be more likely to oppose political compromise. As affective polarization is driven by out-party animus rather than in-party favoritism (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018), I do *not* expect comparable effects among presidential in-partisans when receiving a presidential cue from an in-party lawmaker.

Experimental Design

To test these hypotheses, I conducted two waves of a survey experiment using a Lucid convenience sample in the summer of 2021. In total, these surveys were administered to 2,271 individuals who first answered basic demographic questions as well as a series of unrelated questions about politics. When they reached the experiment, they were asked to read a short excerpt from a hypothetical Senate floor speech about one of four issues: infrastructure, veterans' benefits, prescription drug pricing, or immigration. These issues differed in terms of salience and level of partisan polarization, ensuring that the results cannot simply be explained by the choice of one specific policy. To increase the external validity of the experiment, each speech was modeled after a real Senate floor speech about each policy. In addition to randomizing the issue, respondents were randomized into one of four experimental conditions based on the Senator's party vis-à-vis the president (in-party, out-party) and whether they explicitly referenced the president in their speech. As

Table 3: Experimental conditions vary by the party of the Senator and whether the speech references the president.

Relationship to President	References President	
	Yes	No
In-Party Senator (D)	In-Party Reference: Supports bill	In-Party No Reference: Supports bill
Out-Party Senator (R)	Out-Party Reference: Opposes bill	Out-Party No Reference: Opposes bill

President Biden, a Democrat, was in office in 2021, the in-party senator is a Democrat and the out-party Senator is a Republican. Out-partisans always oppose the policy in question while in-partisans always support the policy. This choice allows me to recover the effect of the presidential reference holding the within-party policy position fixed and keeping positions realistic. I present these four conditions visually in Table 3.

In the *In-Party Reference* condition, respondents read: “Suppose a Democratic senator from a state like yours gives the following floor speech about [infrastructure, veterans benefits, immigration, drug policy].” Then, respondents saw the hypothetical floor speech about that policy. For example, in the infrastructure condition, the Democratic senator says: “Today, I rise to voice my support for President Biden’s infrastructure bill.” He briefly justifies his support for the bill and then concludes by saying, “President Biden’s bill will make us competitive for business—in my state, across the nation, and around the world. For that reason, I support President Biden’s proposal.” The *In-Party No Reference* condition is almost identical except that references to the president are replaced with support for “this” bill. The *Out-Party Reference* and *Out-Party No Reference* conditions are qualitatively similar except the Republican senator is opposed to the bill in question. The full vignette wording across all four infrastructure conditions is presented in Table 4. The language used in the other three policy speeches is presented in the supplemental appendix.

Before assignment to treatment, I ask respondents “Do you approve or disapprove of the way President Biden is handling his job?” Respondents who answered “strongly ap-

Table 4: Experimental vignette wording and differences across all four infrastructure conditions.

Treatment	Speech
In-Party Reference	Suppose a <i>Democratic</i> senator from a state like yours gives the following floor speech about infrastructure: “Today, I rise to voice <i>my support for President Biden’s</i> infrastructure bill. What we choose to invest now is not only for today, but for tomorrow. We need to enact a long-term program to make sure our roads, bridges, railroads and airports are modernized. President Biden’s bill will make us competitive for business—in my state, across the nation, and around the world. I <i>support President Biden’s</i> proposal.”
In-Party No Reference	Suppose a <i>Democratic</i> senator from a state like yours gives the following floor speech about infrastructure: “Today, I rise to voice <i>my support for this</i> infrastructure bill. What we choose to invest now is not only for today, but for tomorrow. We need to enact a long-term program to make sure our roads, bridges, railroads and airports are modernized. This bill will make us competitive for business—in my state, across the nation, and around the world. I <i>support this</i> proposal.”
Out-Party Reference	Suppose a <i>Republican</i> senator from a state like yours gives the following floor speech about infrastructure: “Today, I rise to voice <i>my opposition to President Biden’s</i> infrastructure bill. What we choose to invest now is not only for today, but for tomorrow. We need to enact a long-term program to make sure our roads, bridges, railroads and airports are modernized. President Biden’s bill will <i>not</i> make us competitive for business—in my state, across the nation, and around the world. I <i>oppose President Biden’s</i> proposal.”
Out-Party No Reference	Suppose a <i>Republican</i> senator from a state like yours gives the following floor speech about infrastructure: “Today, I rise to voice <i>my opposition to this</i> infrastructure bill. What we choose to invest now is not only for today, but for tomorrow. We need to enact a long-term program to make sure our roads, bridges, railroads and airports are modernized. this bill will <i>not</i> make us competitive for business—in my state, across the nation, and around the world. I <i>oppose this</i> proposal.”

Note: Differences between referential and non-referential conditions are in bold. Differences between in-party and out-party conditions are italicized.

prove” or “somewhat approve” are coded as 1, and respondents who answered “strongly disapprove” or “somewhat disapprove” are coded as 0. After reading their assigned speech, I asked respondents: “Do you approve or disapprove of the way this Senator

is handling his job?" Respondents answered on a four-point scale ranging from strongly approve (4) to strongly disapprove (1). I also asked "How important is this issue to you?" Respondents answered on a four-point scale ranging from "very important" (4) to "not at all important" (1).⁵

To measure whether respondents reacted as hypothesized, I use ordinary least squares to regress the likert scale ratings of senator approval and policy importance on an interaction between 1) whether the senator references the president in the speech, 2) an indicator for whether the senator is a presidential in-partisan (here, a Democrat), and 3) whether the respondent approves of President Biden. To increase power, I pool all four policy areas and include an indicator for each (i.e., infrastructure, veteran's benefits, drug pricing, and immigration) in the model. I also account for the survey wave to adjust for differences due to timing and question wording. I drop respondents who fail the pre-treatment attention check or those who did not answer one of the questions in the model. Ultimately, I have 1,286 respondents across four policy conditions.

The main quantities of interest are the change in approval and change in importance for respondents when the senator references the president compared to when he does not, holding senator party and respondent approval of Biden fixed. To estimate these quantities, I calculate the marginal effect of the presidential reference, which I present visually in Figure 4. In the left-panel, I plot the marginal effect of the presidential referencing speech on senator approval. I plot the effect among Biden disapprovers in orange and Biden approvers in green. When the referencing lawmaker is an out-partisan (here, a Republican), out-partisan respondents (here, other Republicans) increase their approval of that senator by 0.20 points on average. This difference is statistically significant. There is no evidence that presidential in-partisans (here, Democrats) decrease or increase their support for that out-party lawmaker. When the presidential in-party senator (here, a Democrat) references

⁵In the first wave of the survey, the question wording differed slightly, asking more specifically about the policy in question. On infrastructure, I asked: "How much of a priority, if any, do you personally think improving the country's roads and bridges should be this year?" Responses ranged from "top priority" (4) to "not a priority at all" (1).

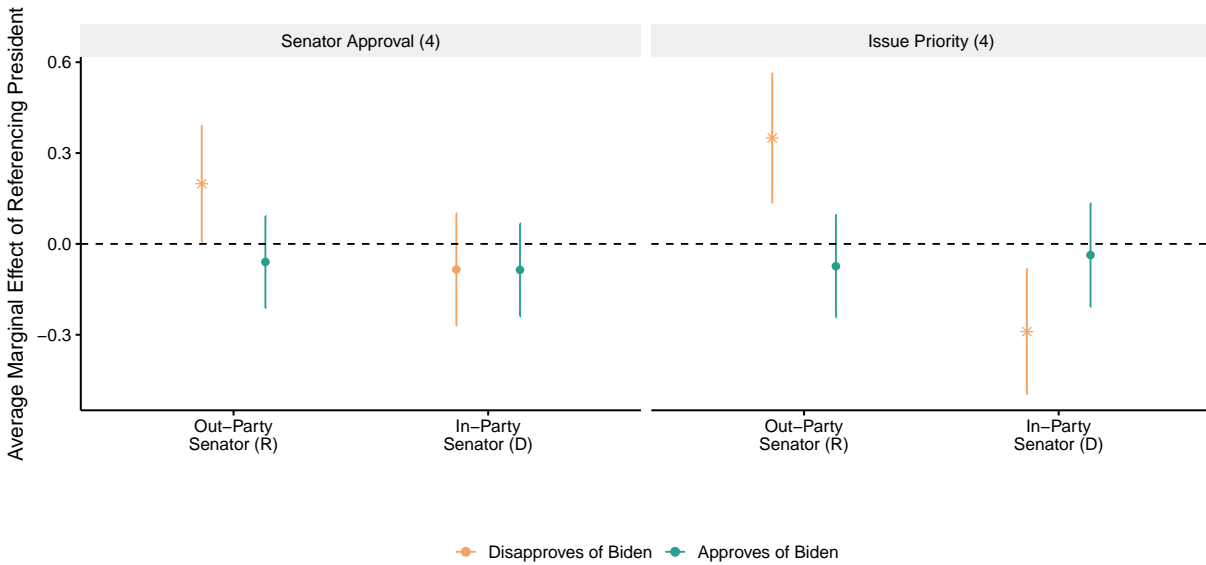


Figure 4: Marginal effect of presidential references by senator party and respondent approval of the president. When a presidential out-partisan (Republican) references the president in his speech, other out-partisans (Republicans) increase approval of that senator and increase their ratings of issue importance. There is no evidence of comparable effects among in-partisans (Democrats) when an in-party (Democratic) senator references the president.

the president, there is no evidence of change among respondents of either party.

A similar pattern can be seen in the right-panel of Figure 4. When an out-party senator references the president in a policy speech, out-party respondents increase the importance of that issue by 0.35 points on average. However, when an in-party lawmaker references the president in a policy speech, out-partisans decrease the importance they place on that issue by 0.29 points. There is no evidence of opinion change among presidential in-party respondents.

In addition to these two questions, I also asked respondents about their perceptions of the senator's ideology, the importance of principles versus compromise, and, in the first wave only, how satisfied respondents were with the way democracy was working. Consistent with the results presented in the main text, the out-party reference speech caused out-party respondents to perceive the senator as more conservative and say that princi-

ples were more important than compromise. The results for satisfaction with democracy were negative, but substantively small and did not approach statistical significance. I present these results graphically in the supplemental appendix.

These experimental results support the underlying behavioral theory motivating the observational analyses of this paper. Lawmakers in the presidential out-party are able to invoke the president to polarize opinion among their co-partisans—increasing their own approval, the importance placed on a particular issue, and the value of principles over compromise. Consistent with [Nicholson \(2012\)](#), in-party cues did not generate any such effects among presidential co-partisans. As such, it seems sensible that out-partisans would increase their attention to the president when taking public positions.

Conclusion

The president occupies a unique place in government as the head of the executive branch and as a de-facto leader of one of the two congressional parties. In these roles, the president is a salient and polarizing symbol, which, I show, lawmakers strategically leverage in their communications strategies. Specifically, I argue that out-party lawmakers should be more likely to reference the president in public-facing communications given the power of out-party leader cues to polarize opinion and enforce belief constraint. I argue that incentives to reference the president should be increasing alongside constituency partisanship, but these effects should be limited to the post-1980 period of increasing polarization and nationalization. Analyzing House and Senate floor speeches given between 1953 and 2016, I find support for this theory. I provide further evidence of the behavioral micro-foundations of this theory using a series of survey experiments in which respondents read hypothetical floor speeches that vary in terms of whether the lawmaker references the president. I find that when an out-party senator references the president in a policy speech, other out-party respondents increase support for that lawmaker, the

importance they place on that issue, and their emphasis on principles relative to compromise.

This research contributes to our understanding of blame game politics and the separation of powers. Whereas past research has focused primarily on institutional mechanisms of roll call voting (Lee 2009), committee investigations (Kriner and Schickler 2016), and veto bargaining (Groseclose and McCarty 2001) as a means for the out-party to damage the executive, I identify an alternative mechanism in communication strategies. These findings are important given the increasing relevance of communication strategies in an era of competitive majorities (Lee 2016). These findings also contribute to the literature on partisan congressional rhetoric (Ballard et al. 2021; Russell 2018) and polarization, but I focus specifically on the president as a source of party conflict and partisan signaling. Although this literature has documented a pattern of polarization and negativity in out-party messaging, my research suggests that some of this sentiment may be related specifically to invocations of the president himself rather than the congressional parties. Finally, these findings have implications for theories of representational style in Congress (Bernhard and Sulkin 2018; Grimmer 2013b; Fenno 1978; Rogowski and Stone 2020)—how lawmakers use language to shape constituent opinion about the quality of their work.

In this paper, I focus primarily on the logic of out-party references to the president, however, it is not as though in-partisans *never* talk about the president. One potential explanation may simply be that lawmakers cannot avoid the subject. The president is a powerful actor and legislators rely on the president and the executive branch more broadly for implementation of policy. As such, even in-partisans must make occasional references to the president in the course of legislative debate. Alternatively, even if in-party presidential references do not increase co-partisan approval ratings or expressed issue importance, presidential references may provide other benefits to in-partisans not examined here. For example, Fu and Howell (2020) find that Republican legislators who invoked President Trump in their Tweets often saw subsequent increases in donations.

Future research should investigate these, and other, possibilities. Additionally, this paper assumes that the sentiment of presidential references are positive for in-partisans and negative for out-partisans. However, it might be the case that the tone of presidential references varies with other systematic factors like presidential approval. Another promising direction of future research would be to map speeches to bills and investigate whether bills that drew presidential references saw more polarized voting patterns, above and beyond the polarizing power of presidential position-taking identified in [Lee \(2009\)](#).

Normatively, polarization and nationalization combine to create conditions in which the president becomes a powerful, but polarizing, symbol. In response, lawmakers increase their attention to the president when in the out-party. While this strategy may advantage out-partisans and make issues easier for voters to understand, it also raises the stakes of lawmaking and narrows the scope for compromise. As members of Congress frame policymaking around the president, lawmaking becomes a high-stakes showdown over affective and identity-based issues. Logrolling or compromise become increasingly difficult as constituents on both sides want to ensure the presidential team either wins or loses. Although we have previously understood nationalization as a process by which voters prioritize national politics at the expense of state and local issues, these results suggest that some of the pathologies of nationalization stem from a preoccupation with the president at the mass and elite level.

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Additional Experimental Information

Below, I present the three additional policies in the hypothetical floor speeches used in the experiment. I present just the In-Party Reference condition, however, the other conditions follow these templates as well as those of the infrastructure speech presented in the main text.

- **Veteran’s Benefits:** Today, I rise to voice my support for President Biden’s bill regarding veterans benefits. Just as we invest in and train our men and women during their military service, we must make the same investments when they return to our communities, hang up their uniforms, and embark on the next phase of their lives. It is our duty to ensure that when veterans return home, they have the education and training and access to jobs they need to fulfill their potential. President Biden’s bill ensures that those who put their lives on the line for us will have a lifetime of their own upon returning home. For that reason, I support President Biden’s proposal.
- **Immigration:** Today, I rise to voice my support for President Biden’s immigration proposal. People from all walks of life—business leaders, religious leaders, our agricultural community, and our civic leaders, regardless of political party—agree our immigration system is broken. Now we have run out of excuses to sit on our hands. President Biden’s bill is carefully crafted and balanced. It creates certainty for businesses and current U.S. citizens already here today. For that reason, I support President Biden’s immigration proposal.
- **Drug Pricing:** Today, I rise to voice my support for President Biden’s legislation regarding the cost of prescription drugs. I continue to hear from people across my state and the nation about the burdensome cost of prescription drugs. There are heartbreaking stories about huge price tags that are stretching families budgets to a breaking point. Our country must do better. President Biden’s proposal would lead to lower drug prices. For that reason, I support President Biden’s bill.

Next, I present a plot similar to that in the main text for the remaining policy dependent variables I did not present.

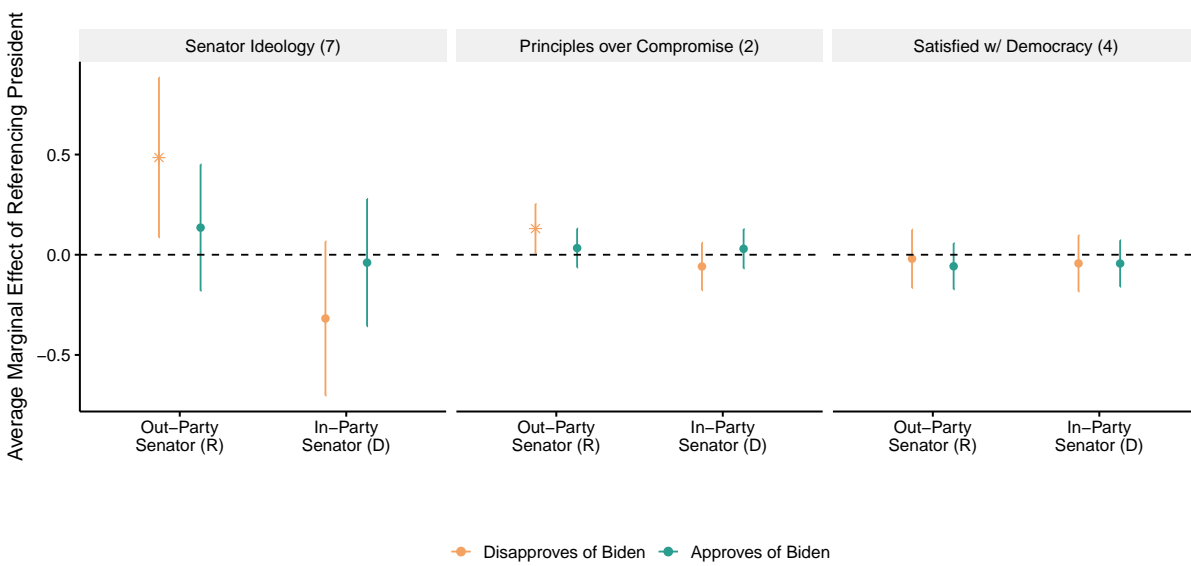


Figure 5: When the out-party senator references the president, out-party respondents believe the senator is more conservative and they value principles over compromise. They are no more or less satisfied with democracy.