Comparing the Impact of Joe Biden and Donald Trump on Popular Attitudes Toward Their Parties

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Abstract

This paper extends the analysis of how presidents influence popular beliefs and feelings about their parties to include Donald Trump's full term and the first 20 months of Joe Biden's presidency. The results from examination of hundreds of surveys confirm that both presidents, like their predecessors, have strongly influenced evaluations of their parties generally and of their congressional wings specifically. For the most part, Trump's impact has been greater than Biden's, whose influence generally matches that of earlier presidents. Trump also stands out as having a larger and more consistent impact on opinions of the opposition, which for other presidents tend to be weak to nonexistent. And he is exceptional in continuing to influence his party's reputation and standing after leaving office. The COVID-19 crisis provided a new test of the president's influence on party reputations for competence in a specific policy domain, with results indicating that on this issue, too, party reputations strongly affected by evaluations of the president's success in managing it. Again, the Trump effect was the larger of the two. Reactions to Trump also had an unusually strong impact on his party's midterm electoral fortunes. So far, Biden's prospective electoral impact appears to be somewhat smaller—a good thing for Democrats given Biden's currently dismal approval ratings.

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Every post-war president has, to varying degrees, shaped his party's popular standing, reputation for competence, presumed policy commitments, appeal as an object of personal identification, and electoral performance (Jacobson 2019a). No previous president had been as influential on most of these dimensions as Donald Trump (Jacobson 2018, 2021a) and, uniquely for an ex-president, Trump's impact on how people regard his party has scarcely waned in the 20 months since he left the White House. His successor, Joe Biden, has now been in office long enough to measure the effect he is having on his party's popularity, reputation, and electoral prospects, and to compare his influence to that of Trump and his immediate predecessors. In this paper, I examine how evaluations of Biden's performance are currently shaping affective evaluations of the Democratic Party in general and of its congressional wing in particular, comparing his influence to that of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama as well as Trump. I also examine the usually much more modest effects these presidents have had on opinions of the opposition party. I then compare Trump's continuing influence on affect towards his party to Joe Biden's influence in a common set of surveys taken during 2021-2022 and use the case of the COVID-19 pandemic to demonstrate how evaluations of both presidents' perceived performances in a specific policy domain affect their parties' reputation for competence in that domain. Finally, I consider how presidents influence their party's electoral fortunes and what Biden's public standing portends for his party's prospects for 2022.

Background

The central claim motivating the analyses reported in this paper is that modern presidents have a pervasive influence on their parties' image, reputation, popular standing, and electoral fates. The relationship is of course reciprocal: opinions of parties and presidents co-evolve over the course of presidential careers. Initially, the influence runs from party to president; existing partisan biases and party images shape opinions of future presidents when they arrive on the national stage and continue to govern popular reactions to them throughout their time in office. But even as future presidents pursue and win the their party's nomination, and to an increasing degree during their years in the White House, their rhetoric, actions, and successes or failures prompt people to update their beliefs about and attitudes toward the president's party:

> The president's words and actions articulate and define his party's current principles and objectives. Judgments about the president's competence in managing domestic and foreign affairs inform assessments of the party's competence in such matters. The components of a president's supporting coalition, and the interests he favors while governing, help to define the party's constituent social base and thus appeal as an object of individual identification. People's affective reactions to the president, whatever their source, inevitably color their feelings about the other politicians in his coalition. Every president thus shapes public attitudes toward his party as well as beliefs about who and what it stands for and how well it governs when in office. Insofar as the

> party label represents a brand name, the president bears prime responsibility for the brand's current image and status (Jacobson 2019a, 2).

Analyses of data from postwar presidencies from Truman's through Obama's, grounded theoretically in the constructivist approach to understanding how people respond to surveys (for details see Jacobson 2019a, 7-9), provided ample evidence for these claims. The Trump and early Biden presidencies offer the opportunity to test several of them with fresh data and under unprecedented circumstances. I begin with analysis of the president's influence on how people feel about his party.

Party Affect

During every administration for which we have sufficient data, the larger the share of people who think well of the president's performance, the higher the popular standing of his party in general and of its congressional wing more specifically. The patterns for Trump and Biden are no exceptions. The basic relationship is depicted in Figures 1 (Trump) and 2 (Biden) for all respondents and for partisan subgroups. The figures plot the proportion of respondents with (very or somewhat) favorable opinions of the president's party against his approval ratings (percent approving of his job performance) in the same surveys (see Table 1 for data sources).

The figures show that the incidence of favorable opinions of both presidents' parties has varied directly and linearly with opinions of his job performance. This holds for partisan subgroups observed separately, affirming that the relationship for the population as a whole is not an artifact that might be introduced by variations in the distribution of partisans across the different surveys. The concentration of partisans in the lower right and upper left corners is a reminder that of just how polarized opinions of the presidents and their parties have been during these two administrations. The data are somewhat noisy because of substantial House effects; for example, the average favorability ratings of the Republican Party during the Trump administration from the five survey organizations that supplied at least ten surveys in this set ranges from 30 percent to 41 percent. Thus regression estimates of the parameters of these relationships, listed in Table 1, are calculated with survey sponsor fixed effects. The equations also control for favorability toward the rival party in order to account for the respondent's more general bias, if any, for or against political parties; the substantive results are not sensitive to this choice.

According to these results, aggregate evaluations of both presidents have had significant and quite precisely estimated impact on aggregate evaluations of their parties, and the effects are notably larger for Trump than for Biden both among all respondents and among partisan subgroups. Trump's estimated influence is also larger than that of Clinton, G.W. Bush, and Obama. Figure 3 displays the comparable regression coefficients graphically (with error bars indicating the 95 percent confidence interval) for all

Figure 1. Approval of Trump's Job Performance and Favorable Opinions of the Republican Party

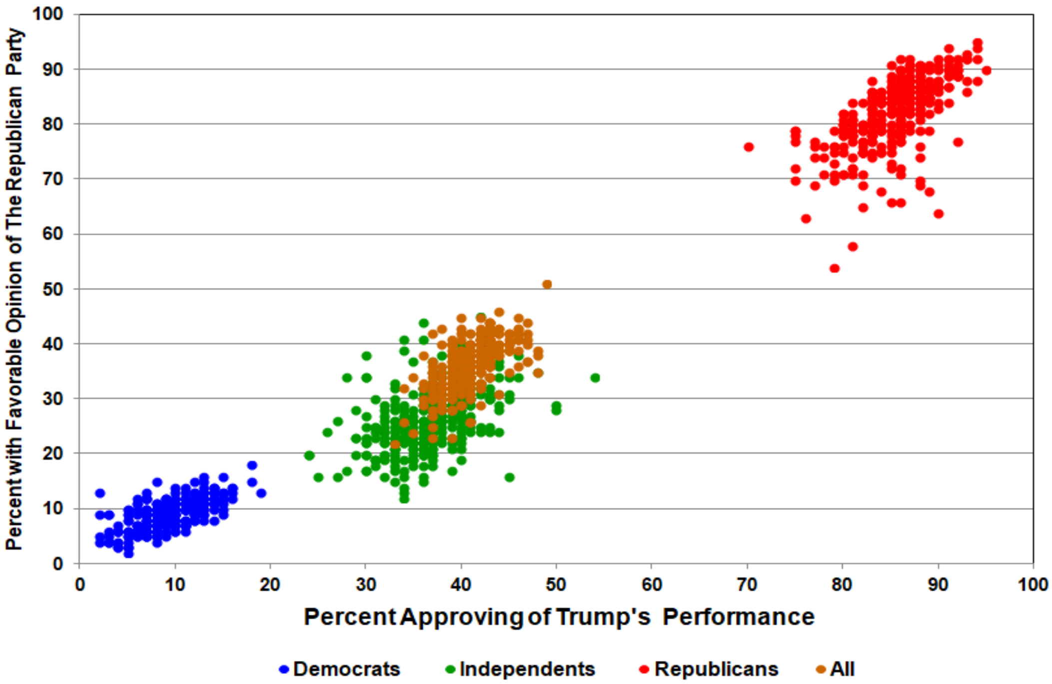


Figure 2. Approval of Biden's Job Performance and Favorable Opinions of the Democratic Party

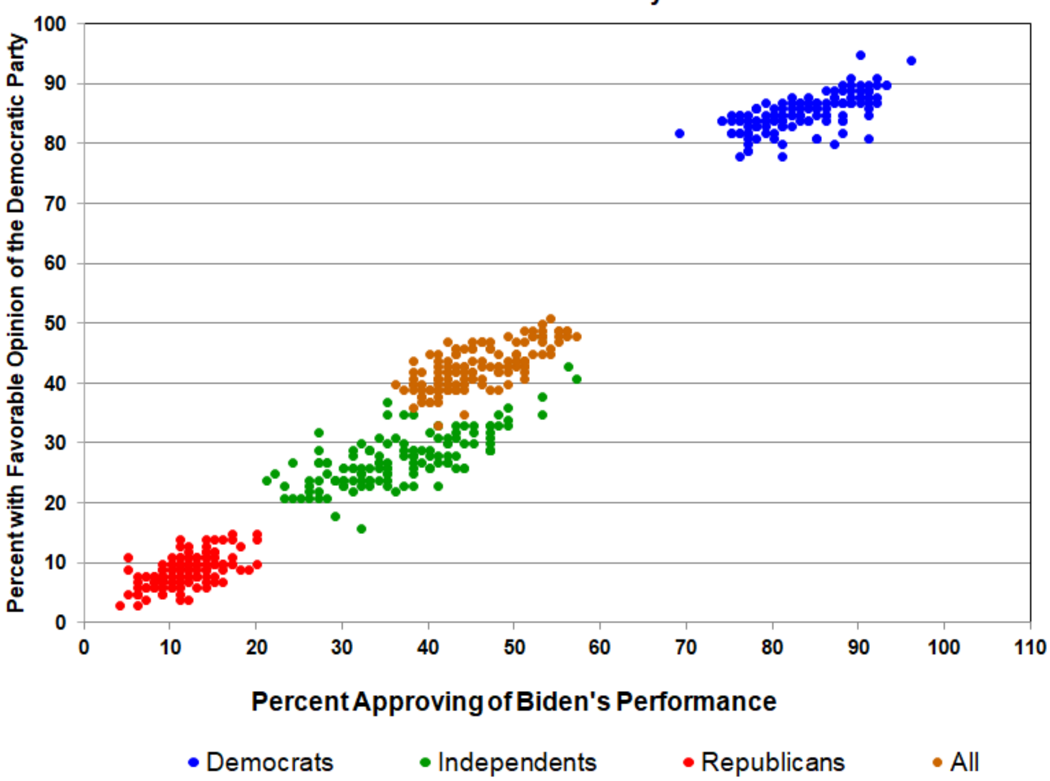


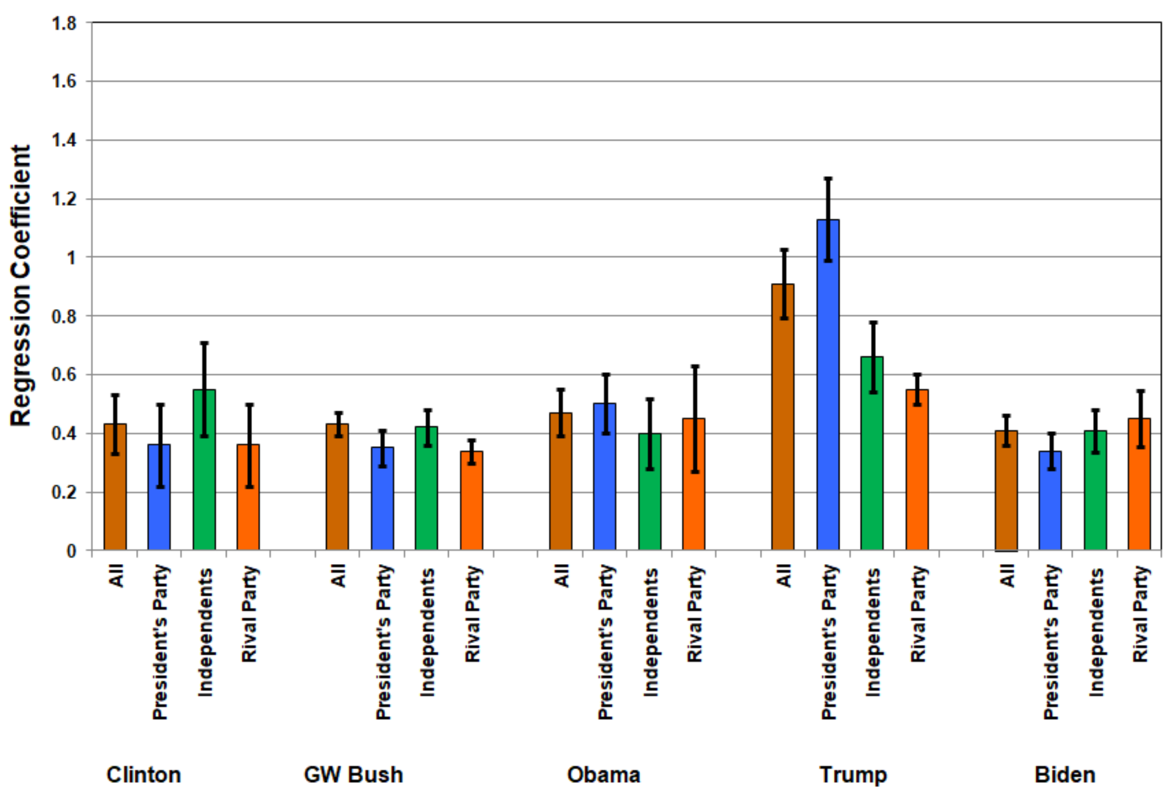
Table 1. The Effect of Presidential Approval on Favorability Toward the President's Party

	Constant	S.E.	Presidential Approval	S.E	Other Party Favorability	S.E	Adjusted R^2	N
Trump								
All	-23.9***	2.6	.91***	.05	.55***	.05	.77	320
Pres. Partisans	-15.0*	6.3	1.13***	.07	.09	.11	.55	315
Independents	-9.9***	2.4	.66***	.05	.45***	.05	.54	315
Rival Partisans	5.1*	2.3	.55***	.03	-.01	.03	.58	316
Biden								
All	12.8***	2.7	.41***	.03	.31***	.06	.84	139
Pres. Partisans	59.6***	2.8	.34***	.03	-.21***	.06	.62	137
Independents	9.5**	2.8	.41***	.04	.12	.08	.58	136
Rival Partisans	-4.7	4.1	.45***	.05	.11*	.05	.51	137

Source: Data are from polls conducted by or for Bloomberg, CBS News, CNN, Echelon Insights, *Economist*/YouGov, Fox News, Gallup, Navigator Research, Monmouth University, Morning Consult, Pew, Quinnipiac University, and Suffolk University, reported at *FiveThirtyEight* and the polls' websites.

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***P<.001.

Figure 3 Effect of Presidential Approval on General Party Favorability



five presidents.[1] Among all respondents and among the president's partisans, the estimated effect of presidential approval on party favorability is more than twice as large for Trump as for any of the other presidents. The results for Biden, in contrast, closely match those for the other presidents. For them, a 10 point difference in presidential approval predicts about a 4 point difference in favorable opinions of the president's party. For Trump the difference is about 9 points. The Trump impact is especially large for Republican respondents; although Trump was scarcely an orthodox Republican, in aggregate, what Republicans thought of him had a pronounced effect on how they viewed their party.

A similar pattern of relationships holds when the focus shifts to aggregate opinions of the president's party's congressional wing or its leaders (Figures 4 and 5).[2] The president's standing with the pubic and with partisan subgroups strongly affects how favorably people view the president's congressional allies. Again the, slopes are visibly steeper for Trump than for Biden, especially for Republican respondents, and remain so when the coefficients are estimated, as before, with survey sponsor fixed effects and including favorability toward the rival party as a control (Table 2). And again, in comparison with previous presidents as well as Biden, Trump's impact on the public generally as well as on his own partisans is greater than that of the other presidents (Figure 6). The coefficients are larger for favorability toward the congressional parties than toward the parties generally (Figures 3 and 6 use the same vertical scale to facilitate comparison). The president's partisans view of their congressional parties was particular responsive to their opinions of the president's performance for G.W. Bush, Obama, and Trump, although not for Biden.

Impact on the Rival Party

Evaluations of presidential performance have a strong and consistent influence on aggregate opinions of the president' party. The relationship is also very tight at the individual level, with high levels of congruence between presidential approval and party favorability, and more so for Trump and Biden than for the previous presidents. The first column of Table 3 presents the evidence. Notice that congruence is higher for Biden than for Trump even though the regression slope is steeper for Trump than for Biden, a likely explanation for the better linear fits evident in comparisons between Figures 1 and 2 (correlations for all respondents of .62 for Trump, .72 for Biden, for the data points in these figures).

[1] Equations for the three earlier presidents for all figures in this paper can be found in Jacobson (2020, Appendix A).
[2] The questions ask for approval or favorability ratings of "parties in Congress" and "party leaders in Congress" so the equations are estimated with question and survey sponsor fixed effects. See Table 2 for data sources.

Figure 4. Approval of Trump and Favorable Opinion of the Republicans in Congress

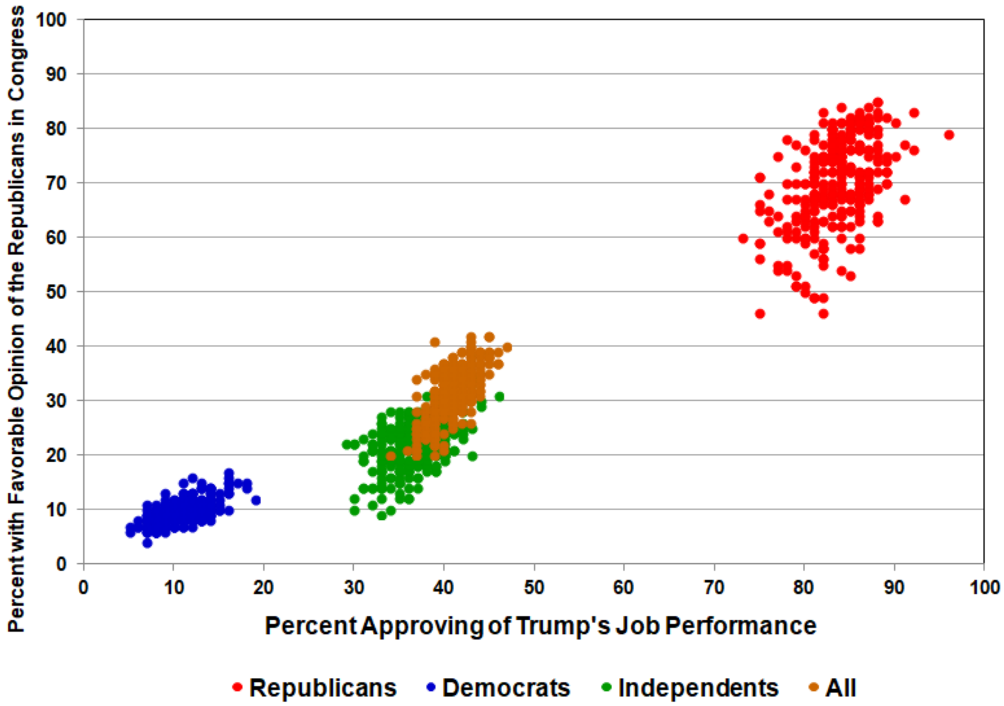


Figure 5. Approval of Biden and Favorable Opinion of the Democrats in Congress

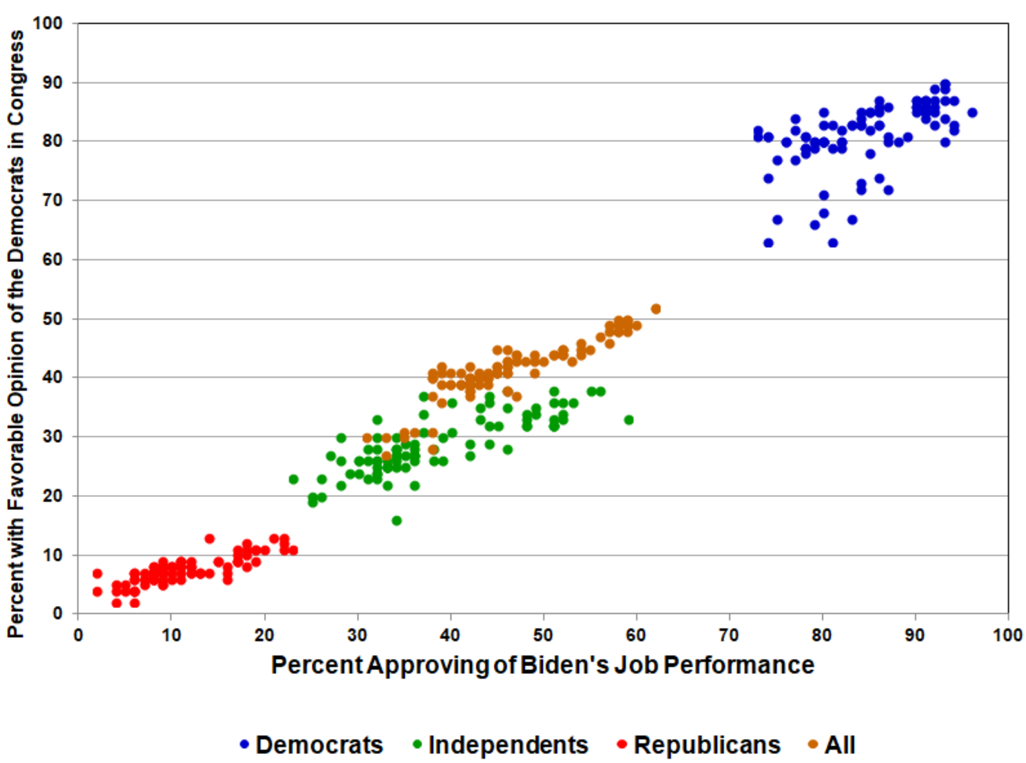


Table 2. The Effect of Presidential Approval on Favorability Toward the President's Party or Its Leaders in Congress

	Constant	S.E.	Presidential Approval	S.E	Other Party Favorability	S.E	Adjusted R^2	N
Trump								
All	-32.9***	3.1	.98***	.07	.65***	.05	.78	339
Pres. Partisans	-54.5***	8.6	1.48***	.10	-.04	.13	.66	336
Independents	-13.5***	2.2	.62***	.05	.53***	.05	.59	335
Rival Partisans	-2.2	1.7	.62***	.04	.07***	.02	.53	336
Biden								
All	11.1**	3.6	.59***	.03	.09	.08	.87	91
Pres. Partisans	31.5***	4.6	.54***	.06	.43**	.16	.76	91
Independents	10.4***	2.9	.54***	.04	-.09	.12	.69	90
Rival Partisans	2.5	2.9	.35***	.03	.02	.04	.71	91

Data are from polls conducted by or for ABC News , CBS News, CNN, Echelon Insights, *Economist*/YouGov, Fox News, Gallup, Navigator Research, George Washington University, Marist College, Morning Consult, NBC News/*Wall Street Journal*, Pew Research Center, and Quinnipiac University, reported at FiveThirtyEight and the polls' websites. Estimated with survey and question wording fixed effects.

**p<.01; ***p<.001.

Figure 6 The Effect of Presidential Approval on Favorable Opinions of the President's Party or Party Leaders in Congress (Regression Coefficients)

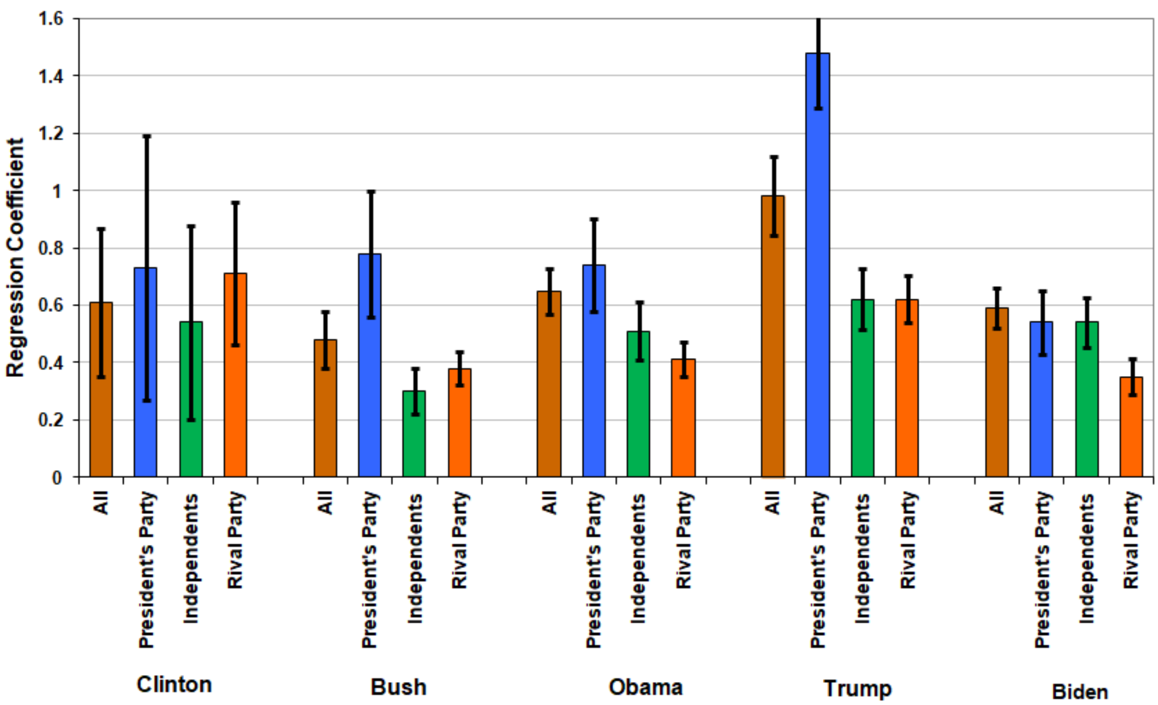


Table 3. Congruence of Opinions of the President's Performance and Opinions of the Parties

	President's Party	Rival Party	Number of Polls
Bill Clinton	78.6	68.8	70
George W. Bush	81.9	70.3	113
Barack Obama	83.1	70.4	111
Donald Trump	84.2	76.6	163
Joe Biden	87.6	73.2	81

Note: Opinions are congruent when a respondent approves of the president's performance and has a favorable [unfavorable] opinion of the president's party [rival party] or disapproves of the president's performance and has an unfavorable [favorable] opinion of the president's party [rival party].
Sources: Clinton, Bush and Obama: ABC News/*New York Times*, CBS News/*Washington Post*, CNN, Gallup, Pew, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Time Magazine* polls; Trump and Biden: *Economist*/YouGov polls.

The table's second column displays the congruence between presidential approval and favorable opinions of the opposition party, which is always lower than for the president's party but greater for Trump than for any of the other presidents. Presidents do influence attitudes toward the opposition party, but not consistently across presidencies and always to a lesser extent than they influence opinions of their own parties. Approval or disapproval of the president's job performance does not automatically affect how people regard the opposition; the affective and cognitive linkages are weaker (Jacobson 2019a). They can disapprove of a president's performance without thinking better of his opposition or approve of it without thinking worse; the actual relationship depends on the political context (Jacobson 2019a, 41-55). It varies across presidencies, as is evident in Figures 7 and 8, which display the coefficients from regressing favorability ratings of the opposition party on presidential approval, again with survey sponsor fixed effects and favorability ratings of the president's party controlled (equations not shown). Presidential approval ratings tend to have a negative impact of feelings about the rival party generally (Figure 7) but it is usually small and often indistinguishable from zero. Opinions of Clinton and Trump have the most consistent (negative) presidential effects on rival party favorability, and it may not be coincidental that these were the two presidents impeached by the opposition; presumably, a party that impeaches a president is less likely to find favor among those who approve of his performance.

Regarding opinions of the rival party in Congress (Figure 8), presidential approval had no significant effect in any configuration for Clinton, G.W. Bush, and Obama (Figure 8). The Clinton results contradict the impeachment hypothesis but not definitively, as we have only a limited number of surveys from his administration (22, 14 during or after his impeachment). For Trump, the impact on opinions of

Figure 7 The Effect of Presidential Approval on Favorable Opinions of the Rival Party (Regression Coefficients)

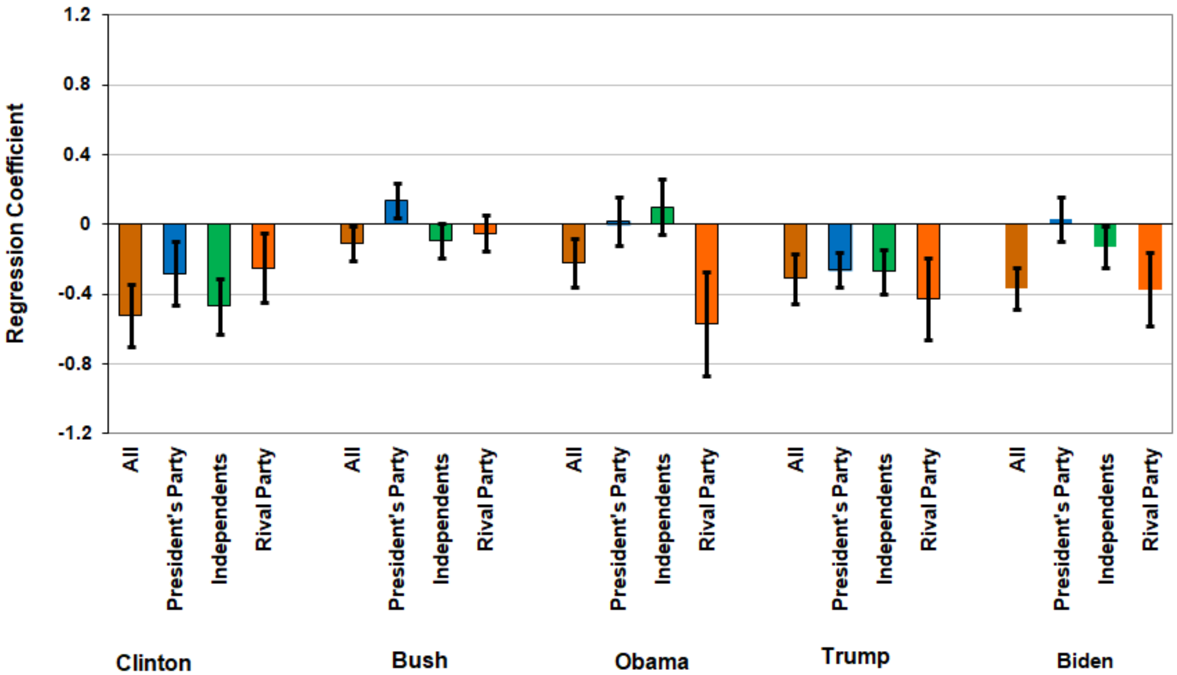
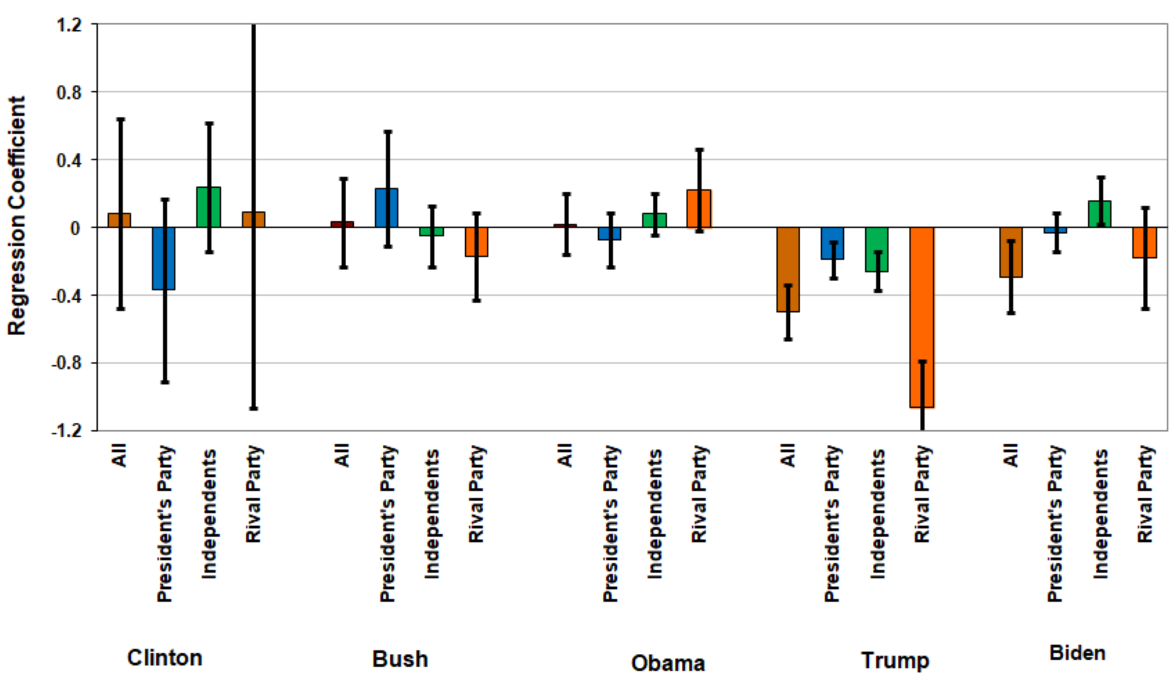


Figure 8 The Effect of Presidential Approval on Favorable Opinions of the Rival Party or Party Leaders in Congress (Regression Coefficients)

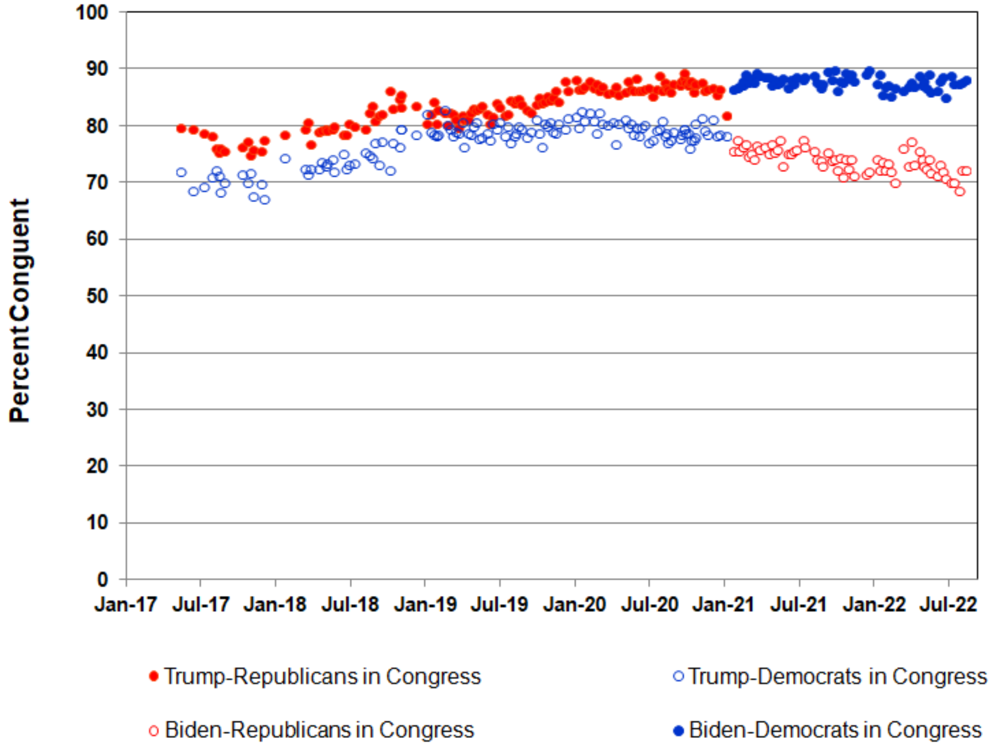


of the rival congressional party was negative and significant for all partisan categories; for Biden, the only (small) significant effect is for the entire population. The most striking coefficient is for Democrats under Trump. Few Democrats approved of his performance—about 11 percent in these surveys, ranging from 5 to 19 percent—but the existing variations strongly affected the distribution of their feelings about their own congressional party, which averaged 77 percent favorable but ranged from 64 percent to 86 percent. This shows up at the individual level as well; in the *Economist*/YouGov polls, for example, 37 percent of the Democrats who thought Trump was doing a good job (10 percent in these surveys) expressed an unfavorable opinion of their own party compared to 21 percent who disapproved of his performance.

Congruence Over Time

Some additional data from the Trump and Biden administrations show how evaluations of the president's performance have been related to opinions of both congressional parties at the individual level across the two presidencies. The Morning Consult poll regularly asks about presidential approval and favorability toward the congressional parties and reports cross-tabulations that make it possible to calculate the extent of congruence between party favorability and presidential approval in each survey. Figure 9 displays the proportion of congruent opinions—approval [disapproval] and favorable [unfavorable] opinions of the president's party in Congress, the inverse for the opposition party—for the two administrations. Congruence grew over Trump's presidency regarding both congressional parties, plateauing at about 87 percent for the Republicans and 80 percent for the Democrats during his final year in office. Since Biden took over, congruence between evaluations of his performance and opinions of congressional Democrats has remained very high, averaging 88 percent, while congruence of opinions of congressional Republicans has fallen off, averaging 74 percent. In these surveys, what individuals think of the president is closely linked to what they think of his congressional party but not so closely linked to opinions of the congressional opposition. These relationships can vary over time, and they have been particularly strong for the president's congressional party since the last year of the Trump presidency. Again in this data set, we observe that opinions of Trump's performance are more strongly related than Biden's to opinions of the opposition party in Congress. Analysis of data from the *Economist*/YouGov surveys (focusing on general party favorability) indicates that the looser link between opinion of the president and the rival party derives largely from respondents who disapprove of the president's performance but still hold a negative view of his opponents.

Figure 9 Congruence of Presidential Approval with Opinions of the Congressional Parties



Trump and Biden Together

In the data examined so far, Trump's approval ratings stand out as having an unusually large effect on assessments of his own party and also a more consistently negative effect on assessments of the opposition party than has been the case for other presidents. Some data produced since Biden's inauguration allow a direct comparison of Trump and Biden's comparative influence on opinions of their parties as well as presenting an unusual opportunity to asses an ex-president influence on his party's public standing. For this this analysis, the dependent variable is as before, the percentage of survey respondents expressing (very or somewhat) favorable opinions of the president's party, but the percentage of respondents with (very or somewhat) favorable opinions of Trump or Biden replaces the percentage approving of the president's job performance, which of course was not asked about Trump, no longer in office office. This substitution should make little appreciable difference, for individual job performance and favorability ratings are highly congruent with each other.[3] I dispense with the graphic depiction of these relationships because they basically replicate the patterns observed in the earlier charts.

[3] In the *Economist*/YouGov data for Trump (N=258,234), 94 percent of respondents give consistent answers to the job performance and favorability questions—approve and favorable or disapprove and unfavorable. For Biden, consistency is 93 percent (N=96,711); in the Morning Consult surveys, for Biden, it is about 95 percent.

The regression equations in Table 3 include favorability ratings of both leaders as well as of the rival party. The coefficients show that during this period, opinions of Biden and Trump have influenced opinions of their own parties, generally and in Congress, to an equal extent, though with some differences among partisan subgroups. Their influence on opinions of the rival party is again smaller and, with a couple of exceptions, indistinguishable from zero. Republican respondents comprise the exceptions; they are significantly more likely to offer favorable opinions of their own party if they hold unfavorable opinions of Biden. In addition to confirming earlier findings, these results reveal something unique about Trump. Normally, a former president's impact on his party's popular standing fades once he has left

Table 3. Favorability Toward the Parties as a Function of Favorability Toward Trump and Biden, 2021-2022

			Favorability Rating for:							
	Constant	S.E.	Trump	S.E.	Biden	S.E.	Rival Party	S.E	Adjusted R^2	N
Party Generally										
Republican Party										
All	9.8	5.7	.49***	.11	-.43***	.06	.63***	.12	.76	131
Democrats	-1.3	5.3	.77***	.06	.11	.05	-.05	.08	.70	131
Independents	16.8***	3.6	.27***	.07	-.03	.06	.03	.09	.30	131
Republicans	63.9***	8.8	.21*	.10	-.41***	.11	.32*	.15	.11	131
Democratic Party										
All	14.4***	3.7	-.04	.08	.43***	.03	.28***	.05	.86	131
Democrats	50.4***	3.9	-.11	.10	.43***	.04	-.07	.10	.61	131
Independents	14.3***	3.8	-.06	.08	.42***	.04	.03	.09	.47	131
Republicans	8.2	6.3	-.16**	.06	.45***	.06	.12*	.05	.46	131
In Congress										
Republican Party										
All	19.0**	6.4	.57***	.10	-.05	.09	-.08	.15	.65	71
Democrats	-14.1**	4.8	.80***	.09	.09	.05	.11	.09	.58	71
Independents	7.0	4.4	.43***	.10	.02	.07	.06	.13	.19	71
Republicans	58.8***	10.4	.28*	.12	-.32*	.13	-.25	.23	.53	71
Democratic Party										
All	20.5***	5.0	-.06	.10	.55***	.03	-.05	.10	.89	71
Democrats	45.2***	4.4	-.35*	.17	.46***	.05	.21	.17	.67	71
Independents	13.2***	3.8	-.07	.10	.43***	.04	.05	.11	.71	71
Republicans	12.4	6.5	-.04	.07	.41***	.05	-.07	.06	,66	71

Note: Equations are estimated with survey sponsor fixed effects.
Sources: Echelon Insights, Morning Consult, Navigator Research, and *Economist*/YouGov polls accessed through FiveThirtyEight and the polls' websites.
*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001.

office as the focus shift to his replacement (if of the same party) or his party's future presidential aspirants (Jacobson 2019, 19-31). This has not yet happened with Trump, and for an obvious reason. Trump has never conceded defeat and persists in peddling the malicious and thoroughly debunked fiction that the election was stolen from him and that he, not Biden, the legitimate winner. Despite the total absence of supporting evidence, more than 70 percent of Republicans and an even larger share of Trump's voters subscribe to his big lie, with little erosion of belief over the 20 months since he left office.[4] Most Republicans want him to run again in 2024 and say they would vote for him if he does. Trump has been actively involved in Republican primaries, endorsing and campaigning for candidates who repeat his big lie, and regularly drops hints about another run for the White House in 2024. His actions have preserved his status as the dominant face and exemplar of the Republican Party and thus the principal touchstone for popular attitudes toward it.

Presidents and Party Competence: The Coronavirus Case

Evaluations of the presidents performance influences not only how people feel about his party but also how competent they think it is, compared to the other party, in dealing with national issues and problems. During every administration from Harry S. Truman's through Barack Obama's, for example, the public's belief about which party would better handle the nation's most important problem, however specified, was a linear function of the president's approval level.[5] Assessments of the president's handling of specific policy domains, including the economy, health care, education, foreign policy, and terrorism, also had a direct and significant affect on popular beliefs about which party was better at managing the domain (Jacobson 2019a, 76-95).

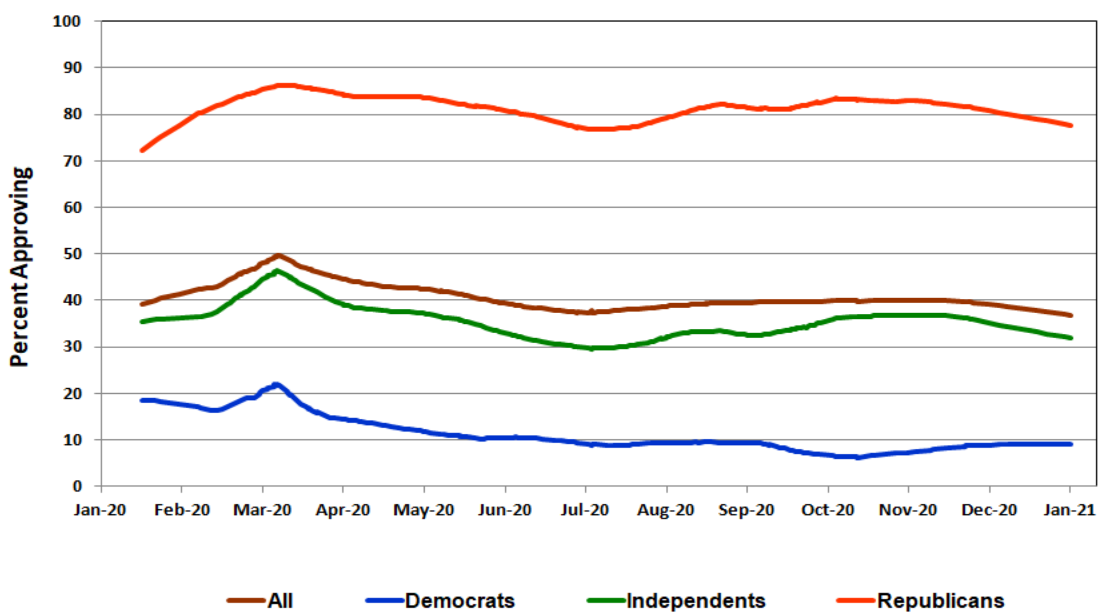
In early 2020, the arrival of the highly contagious and potentially deadly COVID-19 virus created a critical new area demanding government action. The threat posed by the disease called for a coherent, focused, and collaborative response from both elected leaders and the public. It gave Trump the defining challenge of his presidency and a chance to expand his appeal beyond his MAGA base. Uniting the nation against a common threat is basic to the president's job description. Trump claimed the mantle of "wartime president" after his March 13 declaration of a national emergency but could summon neither the will nor capacity lead a coherent, unifying response to the crisis. Instead, he chose to minimize the threat, asserting repeatedly, and as late as August 2020, that the virus would just vanish (Blake and Rieger

[4] In the *Economist*/YouGov surveys taking in 2022 (through July), 73 percent of Republicans (N=15,632) and 76 percent of Trump voters (N=15,491) have said Biden was not the legitimate winner.
[5] For all of these presidents taken together, a 10-point difference in presidential approval translated in to a 6.5 point difference in the president's party's net advantage on this question (Jacobson 2019, 67). The question has not been asked often enough during the Trump and Biden administrations to extend this analysis.

2020). It did not, and by the end of his term, the United States led the world in total cases and deaths and was close to the worst on both scores among developed countries on a per capita basis. However, it also led the world in developing the effective vaccines for the disease that became widely available in early 2021.

Trump's wasted opportunity is suggested by the brief rally he enjoyed after his declaration of a national emergency, when his overall approval ratings among Democrats and Independents reached the highest point of his presidency (Jacobson 2021a, Figure 2). This echoed the rally in approval of his handling of the pandemic, depicted in the lowess-smoothed trends in Figure 10. Approval rose to over 20 percent among Democrats and into net positive territory among all respondents.[6] The incipient rally fizzled, however, in the face of Trump's erratic and ineffective leadership and the surge in COVID-19 cases and deaths. Trump's handling of the crisis eventually eroded his support and, arguably, cost him the election (Parker et al, 2020).

Figure 10 Opinions of Trump's Handling of the COVID-19 Crisis

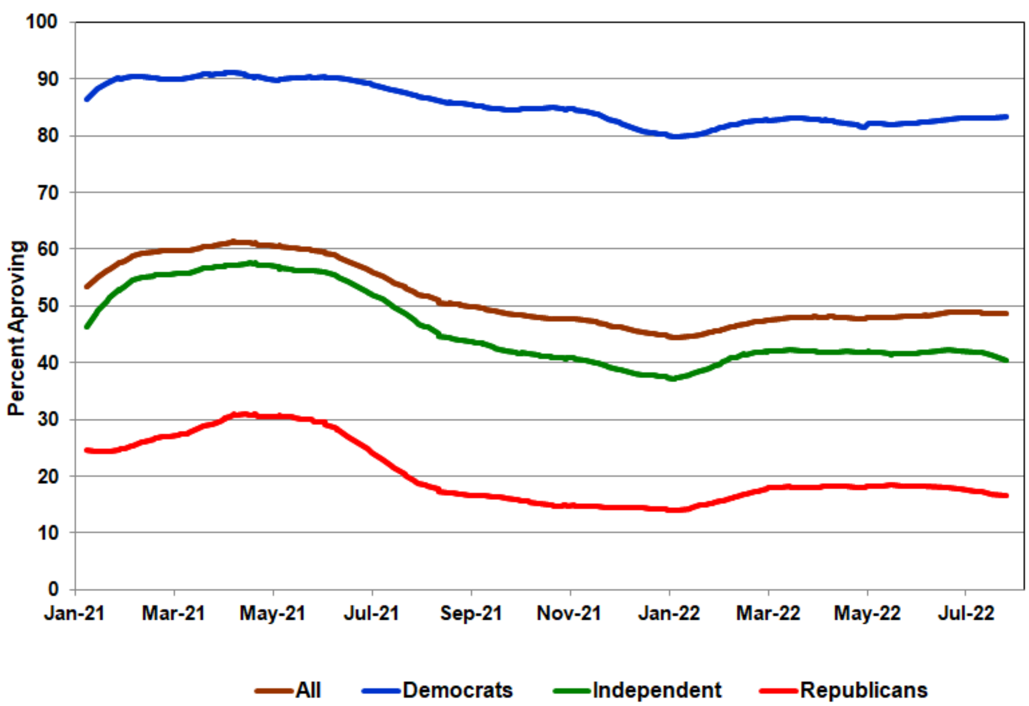


Joe Biden, inheriting both the pandemic and the payoff from the crash investment in vaccine development, got high marks during the first half of 2021 for his handling of the crisis. In the first five

[6] Figure 10 displays the smoothed results from 260 surveys provided by 25 polling organizations and accessed through FiveThirtyEight and the organizations' websites.

months following his inauguration, vaccination spread rapidly and deaths declined steeply, dropping from a weekly average of more than 3,300 at the time of his inauguration to less than 300 by the end of June 2021. Thereafter, cases and deaths rose and fell with the ensuing waves of more transmissible if less deadly variants of the disease. Average weekly deaths rose to over 2,000 in September, dropped to under 900 in November, rose again to over 2,600 in February 2022, then headed sharply down to the 300-400 range by the middle of the year.[7] Meanwhile, the vaccines largely responsible for the disease's diminished toll became yet another focus of partisan division. By July of 2022, according to the *Economist*/YouGov survey, 81 percent of Democrats reported being fully vaccinated, with only 6 percent saying they would never get jabbed; among Republicans, the respective figures were 53 percent and 31 percent. Biden's executive order that government workers and employees in firms with more than 100 workers be vaccinated or tested weekly for COVID-19, later vacated by the Supreme Court, was approved by 85 percent of Democrats but only 24 percent of Republicans,[8] and opposition to vaccine mandates became orthodoxy among Republican politicians and the conservative commentariat.

Figure 11 Approval of Biden's Handling of the COVID-19 Crisis



[7] "New reported cases by day," *Washington Post*, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/national/coronavirus-us-cases-deaths/?itid=hp_pandemic.
[8] *Economist*/YouGov poll, July 16-19,, 2022, at https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/k4maehoie4/econTabReport.pdf.

Biden's approval ratings on the handling the pandemic varied with the ebb and flow of cases and deaths (Figure 11). They were highest during the first half of 2021, exceeding 60 percent; even 30 percent of Republicans approved, by far the highest rating they've ever given Biden in any issue domain. As cases rose again later in the year and unhappiness with continuing restrictions grew, approval declined, especially among Republicans and independents, bottoming out with the peak in cases and deaths recorded in early in 2022. Approval then rose again modestly as the death rate fell steeply over the next several months and restrictions aimed at preventing the spread of the disease were eased.

COVID-19 posed a new and multifaceted challenge to policy making and was thus not automatically subject to partisan "issue ownership" (Egan 2013, Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen 2003), although as a matter of health and welfare it fell into domains where Democrats are usually preferred (Jacobson 2019, 84-87). It thus provides fresh if decidedly unwelcome opportunity to assess the effect of evaluations of the president's performance on party reputations for competence in managing an issue domain. Evidence is provide by the Morning Consult Poll, which since March 2020 has regularly asked samples of registered voters to rate the handing of the pandemic by the president and the two congressional parties as excellent, good, just fair, or poor. The relationships between aggregate assessments of Trump, Biden, and their congressional parties from these surveys are mapped in Figures 12 and 13, with regression estimates (with opinions of the other congressional party's performance controlled) reported in Table 4.

The now-familiar patterns reappear in this new domain. Assessments of both presidents' handling of the pandemic have a strong and direct impact on assessments of their congressional party's handling of it. Again, the slopes are steeper for Trump than for Biden. Opinions of Trump's performance also fall into a narrower range, consistent with patterns in the previous figures. The strength of these relationships is not surprising, for it is unlikely that many respondents have enough specific knowledge about what the congressional parties are doing to judge their performance separately from that of the president or the government more generally.

The Morning Consult surveys have also occasionally asked another question that goes directly to the president's effect on the comparative reputations of the congressional parties for handling the issue: "Who do you trust more to handle the issue, Democrats in Congress or Republican in Congress?" Figure 14 plots the net advantage/disadvantage of the president's party on this question against net evaluations of the president's performance (excellent or good minus only fair or poor) since March 2020. The Republicans' net disadvantage on the question widened with the increasingly negative reviews of Trump's performance. The Democrats enjoyed a 20-point advantage on it as Biden took over in January with his very positive initial ratings on the issue. As evaluations of Biden's performance declined, so did

Figure 12 Rating of Trump's and Congressional Republicans' Handling of the COVID-19 Pandemic

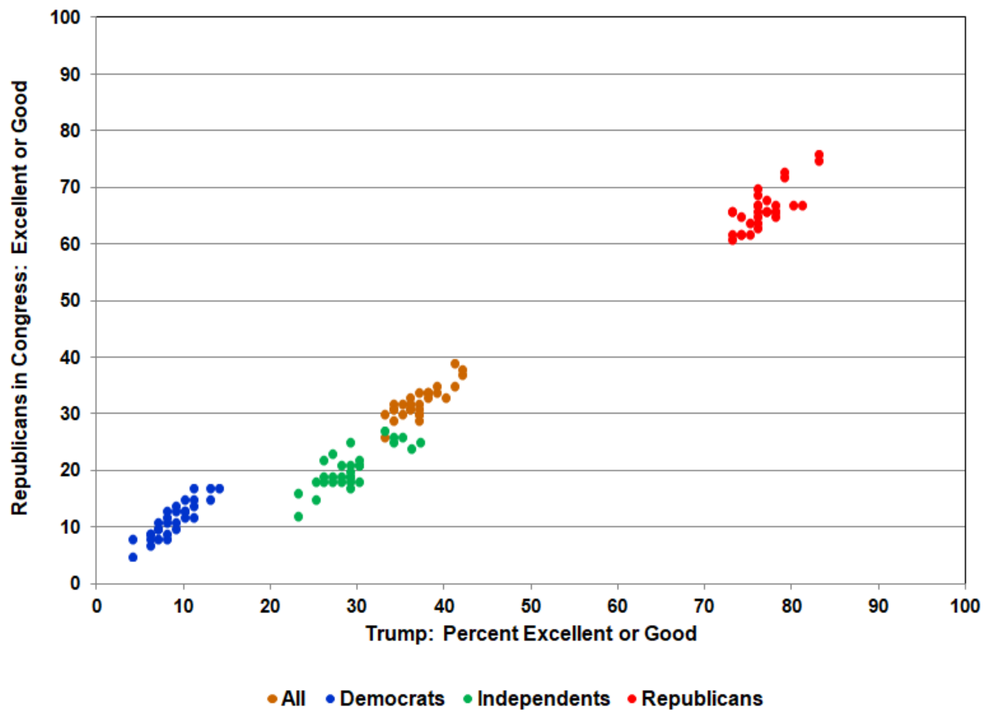


Figure 13 Rating of Biden's and Congressional Democrats' Handling of the COVID-19 Pandemic

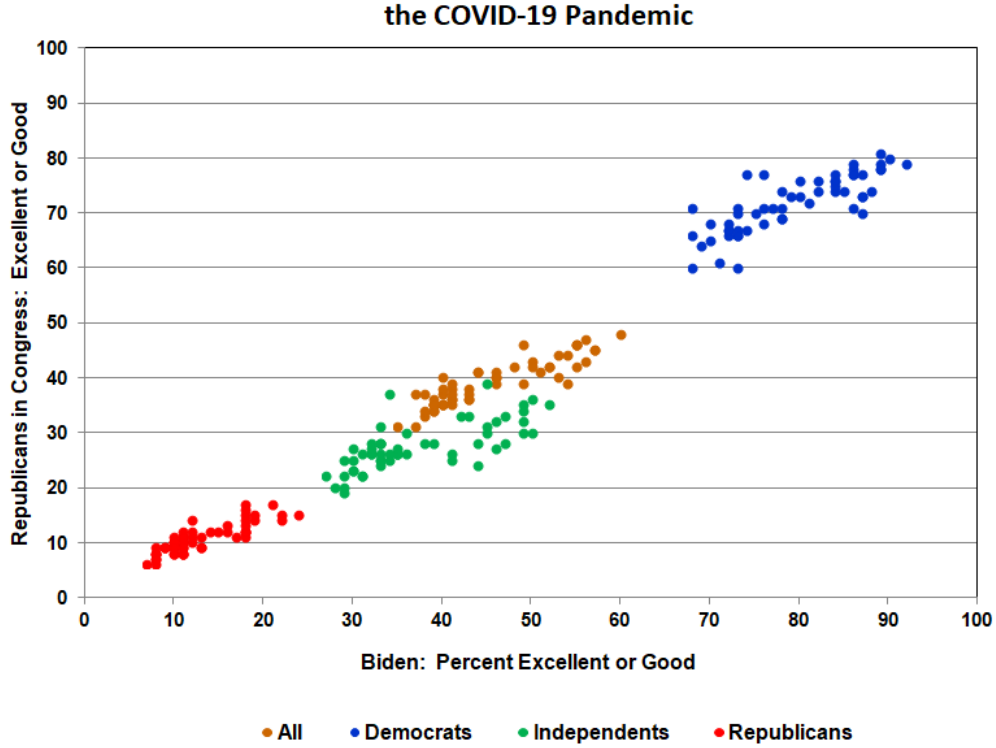


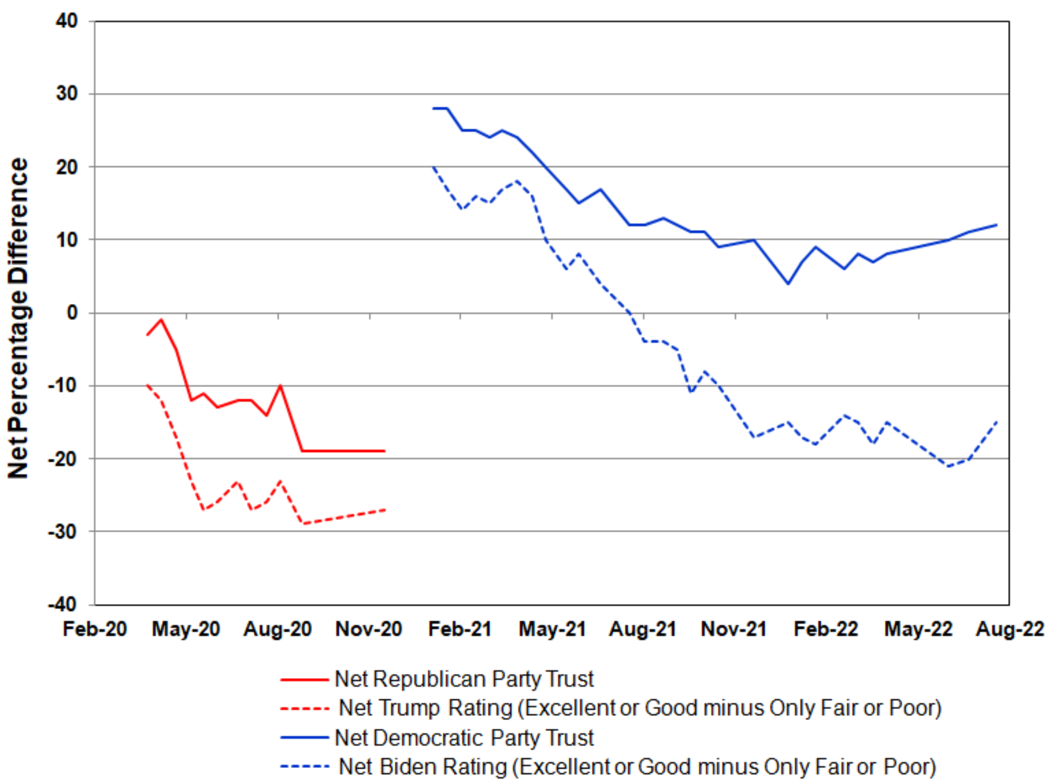
Table 4. Impact of Opinions on the President's Handling of COVID-19 Pandemic on Opinions of his Congressional Party's Handling of It

	Constant	S.E.	President Excellent/Good	S.E	Other Party Excellent/Good	S.E	Adjusted R^2	N
Trump								
All	-10.2	6.2	.92***	.11	.24	.12	.70	30
Democrats	-6.8	5.0	1.14***	.11	.13	.07	.80	30
Independents	-21.3***	4.0	.82***	.08	.74***	.13	82	30
Republicans	-14.9	13.0	1.04***	.17	.11	.17	.56	30
Biden								
All	3.3	2.5	.55***	.03	.40***	.08	.87	56
Democrats	23.8***	4.8	.63***	.06	-.11	.16	.65	56
Independents	4.8	2.5	.38***	.05	.52***	.13	.62	56
Republicans	-1.3	1.8	.52***	.04	.10**	.04	.76	56

Source: Morning Consult Polls

**p<.01; ***p<\.001

Figure 14 Presidential Ratings and Congressional Party Advantage in Trust to Deal with the Coronavirus Pandemic



congressional Democrats' reputational advantage, but not as steeply, and it remained in positive territory even as opinions of Biden's performance became decisively negative.

The relationships between the assessments of the presidents' performance and relative party competence for all respondents and partisan subgroups across these surveys are displayed in Figure 15. The relationships are clearly very strong. Biden's performance has drawn better marks than Trumps (e.g., his data points tend to be further to the right on the horizontal axis), and the Democrats have a modest advantage at comparable presidential ratings (their data points tend to be higher on the vertical axis). Again, Trump's impact is generally than greater than Biden's, as the regression coefficients in Table 5 attest. This is true for all voters, Democrats, and independents although not Republicans. For both presidents, rival partisans have been the most responsive to assessments of the president's performance in making comparative judgments of congressional party competence.

Figure 15 Net Rating of President's Handling of COVID-19 and Net Opinion on Which Congressional Party Handles it Better

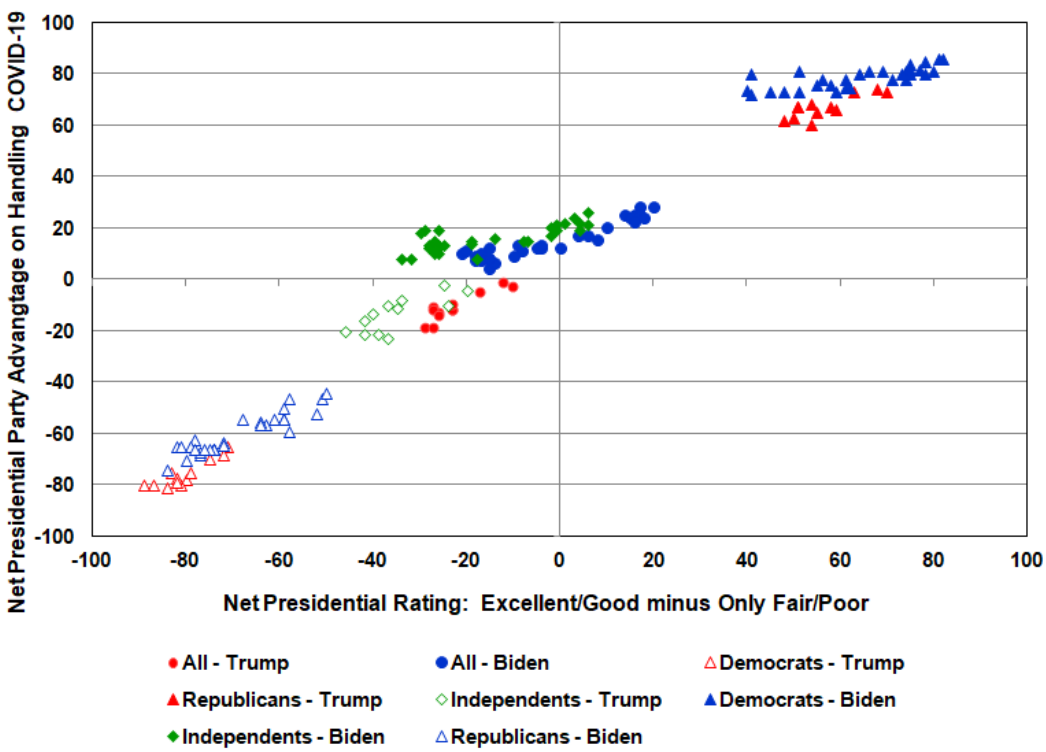


Table 5. The Impact of Net Opinions on the President's Handling of COVID-19 on Net Opinions about Which Congressional Party Is Better Trusted to Handle It

	Constant	S,E.	Net Evaluations of President's Handling of COVID=19	S.E.	Adjusted R^2	N
Trump – Rep. Net						
All	7.5*	2.7	.82***	.12	.81	12
Democrats	-5.9	10.6	.87***	.13	.79	12
Independents	10.4	6.1	.68**	.17	.57	12
Republicans	38.0***	6.5	.51***	.11	.64	12
Biden – Dem. Net						
All	15.8***	0.5	.48***	.03	.87	30
Democrats	63.7***	2.5	.23***	.04	.56	30
Independents	20.0***	0.9	.27***	.04	.58	30
Republicans	-10.3*	3.9	.72***	.06	.85	30

Source: Morning Consult polls.

*p<; **p<.01; ***p<.001.

The COVID-19 case provides a powerful illustration of how presidents shape party reputations for competence in a policy domain. Assessments of the president's handling of the pandemic of course affect his own as well as his party's reputation. For both Trump and Biden, approval or disapproval of handling the pandemic is closely if not perfectly linked to their overall approval ratings. Trump initially got higher marks for his performance on COVID-19 than overall but the opposite was true after June 2020 until both ratings converged at the end of his term (Figure 16). The subset of surveys where the cross-sectional relationship can be ascertained, indicated by the blue dots, shows the increasing consistency between the ratings after April, which from then on averaged about 92 percent.

The pattern for Biden is somewhat different. Both ratings move together, the COVID-19 rating with somewhat greater volatility but always higher. The two ratings are also a bit less consistent for Biden and their consistency has fallen off in recent months, down to an average of 87 percent for May through July 2022. The relative positive number Biden receives for the handling the pandemic has thus not kept his overall approval ratings from dipping below 40 percent, an ominous development for Democrats going into the 2022 midterm elections, for the most tangible influence presidents have on their party's public standing registers during election season.

Trump, Biden, and Midterm Elections

The president's impact on his party's image and public standing is most consequential when voters go to the polls (Jacobson 2019, ch. 8). Presidents—and presidential candidates—have always influenced their parties' down-ballot fortunes, but the extent to which they shape electoral outcomes reached new extremes in the three elections with Trump on the ballot or in office. In 2020, Trump's contest with Biden inspired the highest turnout in a century and the most nationalized, president-centered

Figure 16 Approval of Trump's Handling of COVID-19 and his Job Overall

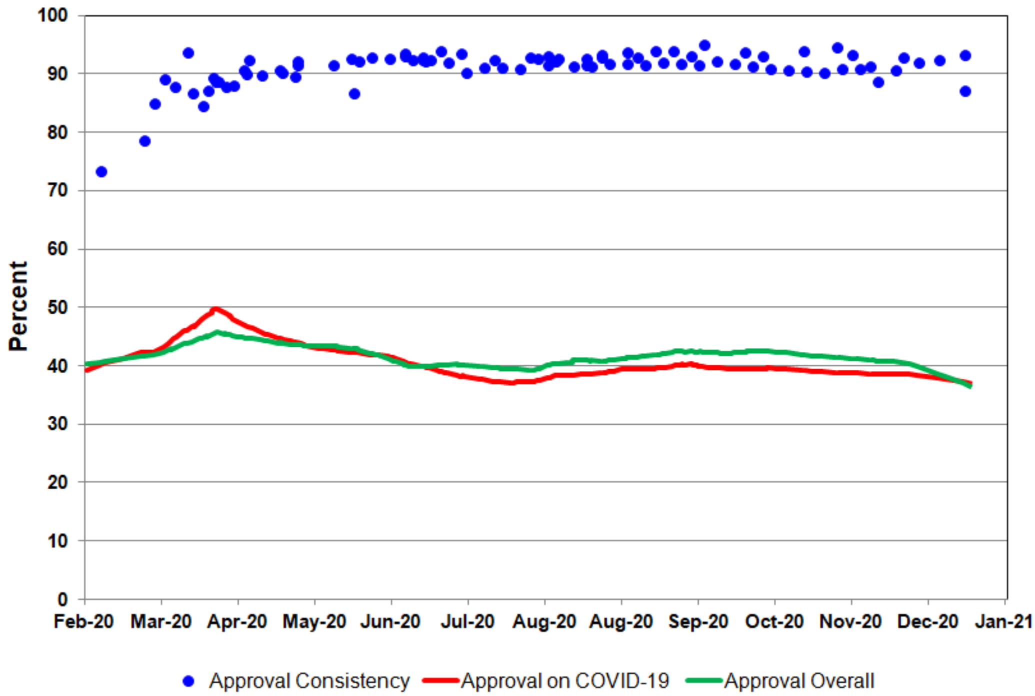
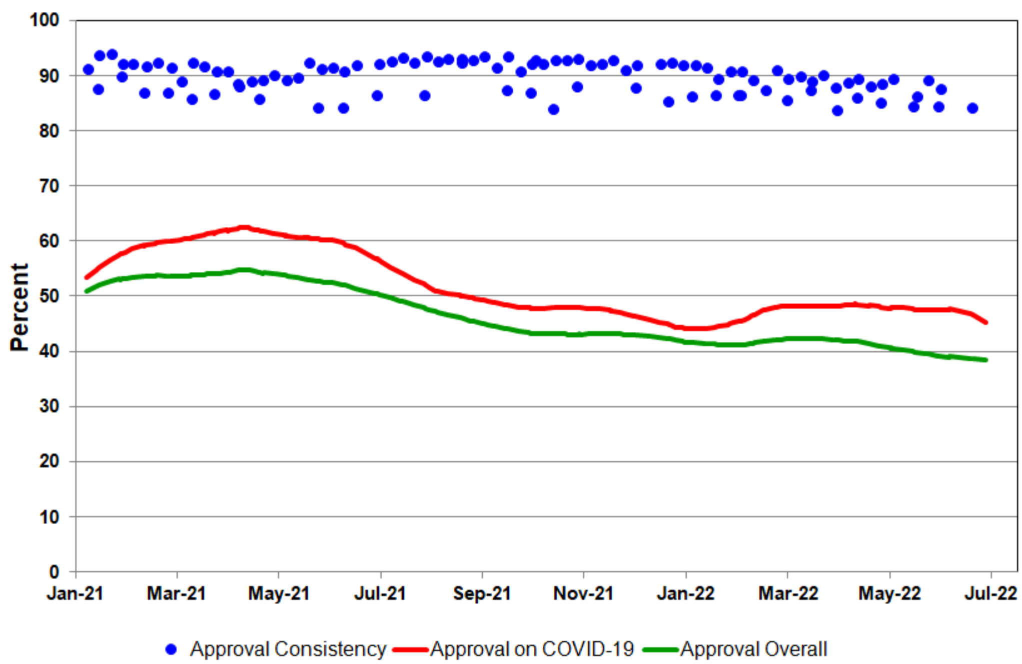


Figure 17 Approval of Biden's Handling of COVID-19 and his Job Overall



federal elections in history, with the highest levels of party loyalty and lowest levels of ticket splitting yet observed. As a result, both the House and Senate election outcomes, with only a handful of exceptions, matched the presidential results across districts and states. A record 96 percent of House races and a near-record 97 percent Senate races went to the party winning the most presidential votes locally. The district-level correlation between the major-party vote for president and representative reached .987, while the correlation between state-level vote for president and senator hit .950, both all time highs (Jacobson 2021c).

Presidents also shape their party's prospects when they are not on the ballot. An extensive literature confirms that, in aggregate, the electorate routinely treats midterm elections as a referendum on the current administration. In typical referendum models,[9] the president's current approval ratings and economic conditions are the prime movers, although the number of House seats held by the president's party also matters (the more seats it holds, the more it has to lose). Table 6 reports estimates from a standard model based on data from the 19 post-war midterms which regresses midterm House seat swings to or (in 17 of the 19 elections) away from the president's party on the percentage approving of the president's performance in the Gallup Poll closest to the election, the change in real disposable income per capita over the election year, and the deficit or surplus of House seats currently held by the president's party compared with its average in the eight previous elections (its level of "exposure"). The model has been quite accurate in predicting outcome (Jacobson 2019b). Applied to 2018, with Trump's approval at 40 percent and real income growth at 2.1 percent, this model predicted that Republicans would end up with 41 fewer House seats than they held after the 2016 election—improbably, the precise outcome in 2018 (Jacobson 2019b).[10]

Table 6. A Referendum Model of Midterm Congressional Elections, 1946-2018.

	Coefficient	Standard Error
Presidential Approval	1.51***	0.30
Real Income Change	3.34*	1.47
Exposure	-.51**	0.17
Constant	-99.34***	14.62
Adjusted R^2	.65	
Number of Elections	19	

*p<.05; **p<.01;*** p<.001.

[9]Pioneered by Tufte (1975); for recent examples, see Jacobson and Carson (2020).
[10] Improbable because the standard error of the estimate for the model is +/- 13 seats.

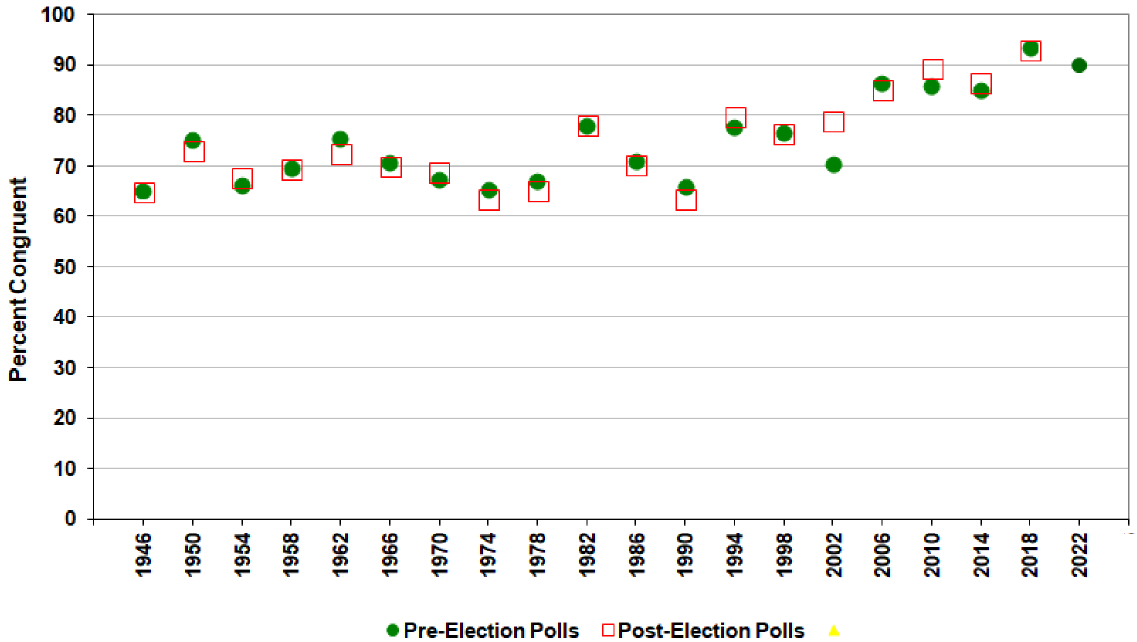
If this model is as accurate in 2022 and conditions remain as they are now (August 2022), Democrats stand to lose more close to 40 seats. Their exposure is limited (9 seats above their eight-election average) because they lost seats despite winning the presidency in 2020. But Biden's approval numbers, despite a recent uptick, are underwater, brought low first by the chaotic U.S. departure from Afghanistan in August 2021, later by soaring price inflation, which is playing havoc with real disposable income. This economic measure has fluctuated wildly with the massive spending to offset the economic consequences of the pandemic and more recent inflationary pressures,[11] but it is unlikely to show positive growth over 2022. Biden's most recent Gallup approval rating (August 2022) is 44 percent, up from 38 percent in July; assuming no growth in real income, the model currently predicts that Democrats will lose 37 seats in the House. If in the unlikely event Biden's approval rating increased to 50 percent and real income actually grew by a couple of percentage points over the election year, they would still be expected to lose 22 seats and hence their majority (their margin is currently 7 seats). The greater likelihood is negative real income growth and thus greater predicted Democratic losses.

Generic Polls

An alternative measure of the relationship between presidential approval and midterm voting is provided by pre-election polls that ask the approval question along with which party's candidate the respondent would vote for if the House election were being held the day survey was taken. The responses to this generic vote question in 2022 surveys present a somewhat less bleak picture for congressional Democrats, offering them at least faint hope that Biden's low ratings will not be as damaging as the referendum model predicts. Historically, the association between presidential approval and vote choice at the individual level has varied, but it has become notably closer in recent midterms, reaching a new high in 2018. The evidence is in Figure 18, which displays the average level of congruence between presidential approval and House voting intentions (for the president's party's candidate if approving, for the other party's if disapproving) in midterm election since 1946. The green dots are averages of the pre-election generic polls, the red squares are averages in post election surveys that ask people how they voted. The pre-election polls predict voting behavior reported after the election quite accurately.[12] The congruence levels for Trump are striking, 93 percent in both pre- and post-election polls. Pre-election congruence has so far been lower Biden, 90 percent, but still exceeds congruence for presidents before Trump.

[11] See the very weird graph of its recent monthly fluctuations at https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/A229RX0.
[12] The pre- and post-election averages are correlated at .96; only the 2002 election was noticeably off the mark. This is an updated version of Figure 3 in Jacobson (2019, 20).

Figure 18 Congruence between Presidential Approval and the House Vote in Midterm Election Polls, 1946-2022



Figures 19 and 20 offer another perspective on the generic poll data for 2018 and 2022, plotting the percentage of respondents expressing a preference who support the president's party's candidates in generic pre-election polls against percentage approving of the president's performance among both all respondents and partisan subgroups. These plots diverge noticeably from those mapping opinions of the president's party or its competence on presidential approval: Voting intentions appear much more polarized along party lines and much less responsive to assessments of the president's performance. Partisanship clearly dominates. Very few partisans opt for the rival party's candidate no matter what they think of the president; the average party loyalty rate in generic polls for 2018 was 95.6 percent among Republican respondents, 96.8 percent among Democrats; the respective figures for 2022 to date are 96.3 percent and 96.0 percent. Yet even for partisans, the aggregate relationship between approval and voting intentions is positive and statistically significant (Table 7). The coefficients are again steeper for Trump than for Biden and are steepest in both midterms for independents, whose preferences are of course not anchored by partisanship. Trump also stands out in comparison to G.W. Bush and Obama when the coefficients are compared across administrations (Figure 21).

Figure 19 Approval of Trump and the Generic House Vote in 2018

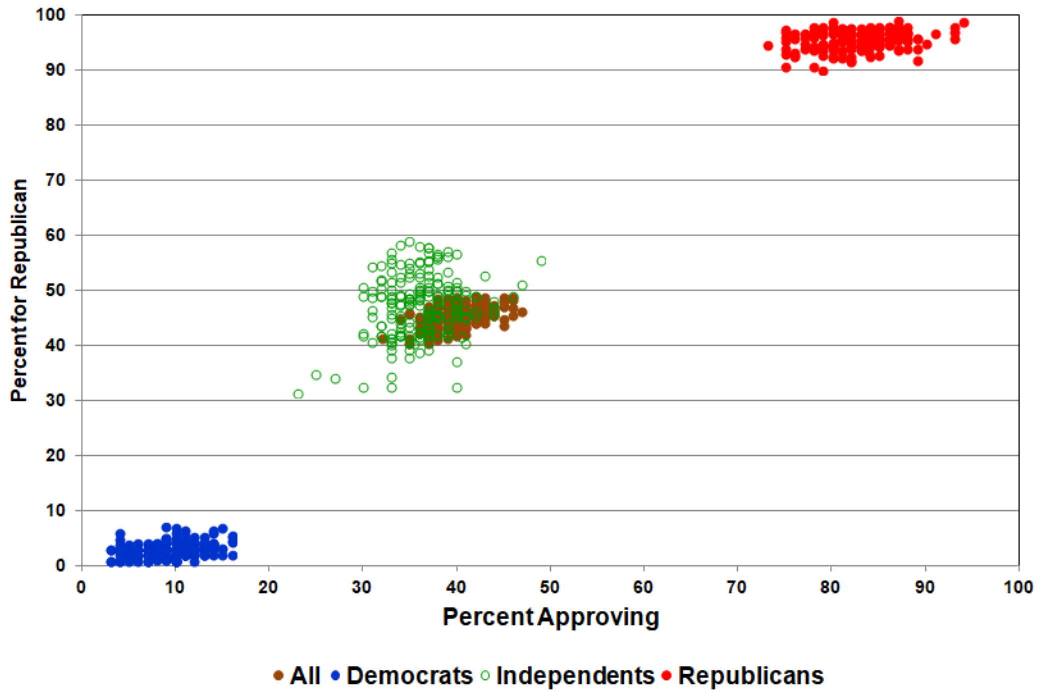


Figure 20 Approval of Biden and the Generic House Vote in 2022

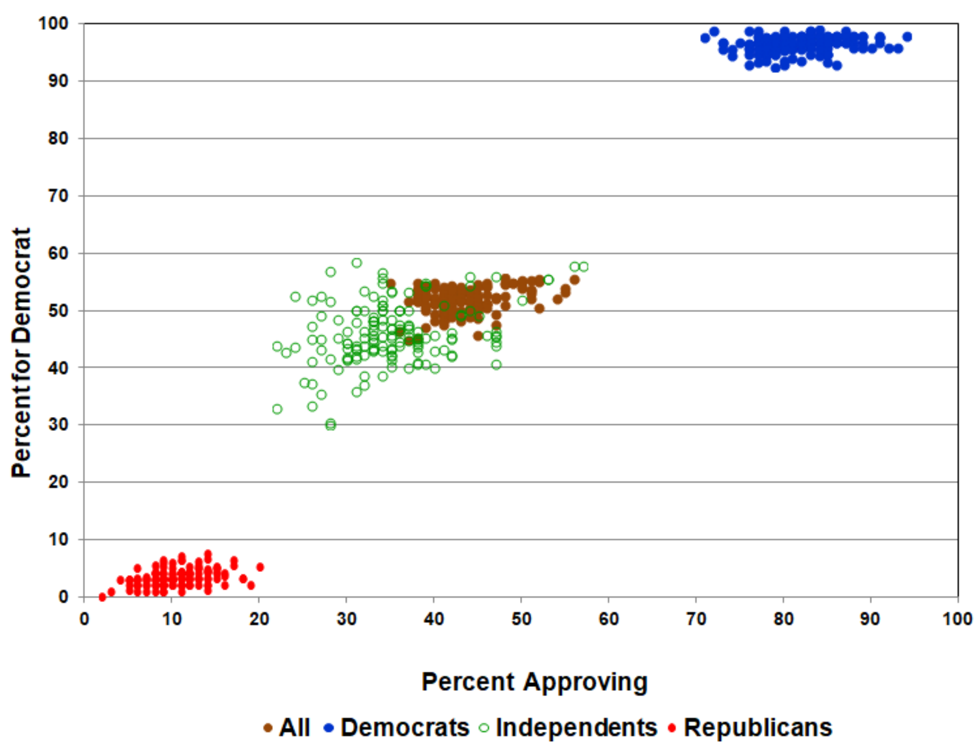


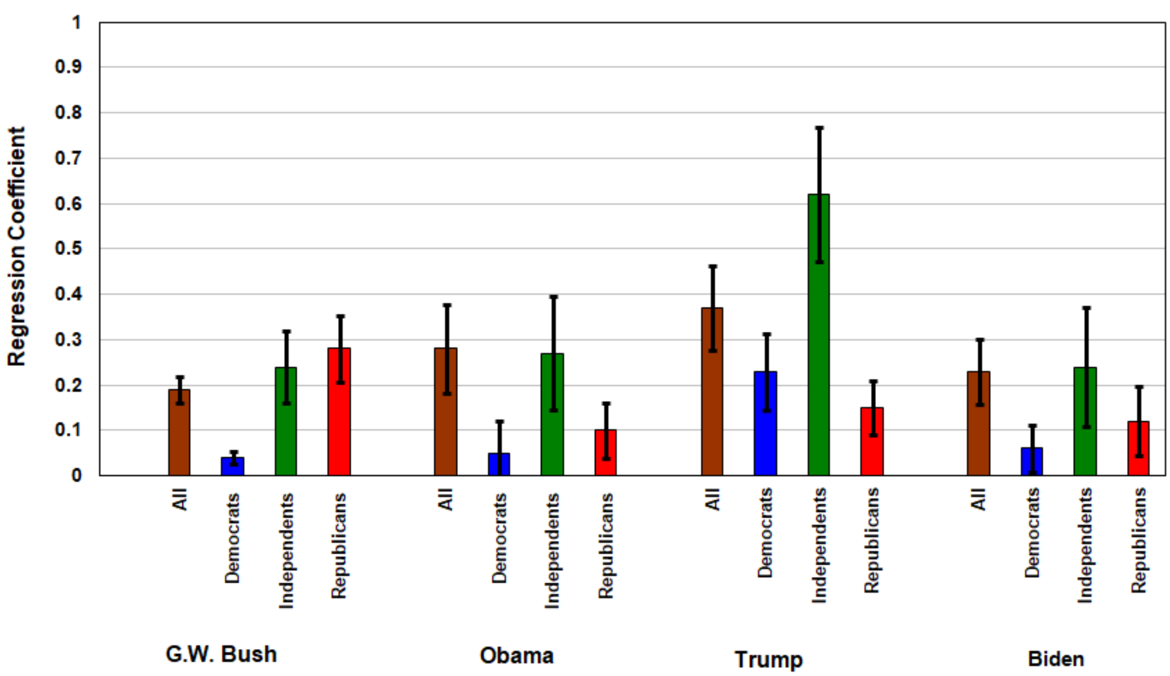
Table 7 Generic Vote for President's Party's Candidate as a Function of Presidential Approval in Midterm Elections

	Constant	S.E.	Coefficient	S.E.	Adjusted R^2	N
Trump	30.8***	1.8	.37***	.05	.43	216
Democrats	1.0*	0.4	.23***	.04	.19	199
Independents	25.0***	2.7	.62***	.07	.64	196
Republicans	83.0***	2.5	.15***	.03	.28	199
Biden	42.0***	1.6	.23***	.04	.52	162
Democrats	91.3***	2.1	.06*	.03	.08	156
Independents	38.1***	2.3	.23***	.06	.26	156
Republicans	2.1***	0.4	.13***	.04	.21	156

Note: The dependent variable is the percentage of respondents choosing the president's party of those expressing a preference; the independent variable is the proportion of approving of the president's job performance; estimated with survey sponsor fixed effects.
Sources: ABC News/*Washington Post*, CBS News, CNN, Democracy Corps, Echelon Insights, *Economist*/YouGov, Fox News, Gallup, Georgetown University, Grinnell College, George Washington University, IDB/TIPP, Ipsos, Kaiser, Marist College, Monmouth University, Morning Consult, Pew Research Center, Quinnipiac University, Suffolk University, USC Dornsife, and *Yahoo*/YouGov polls..

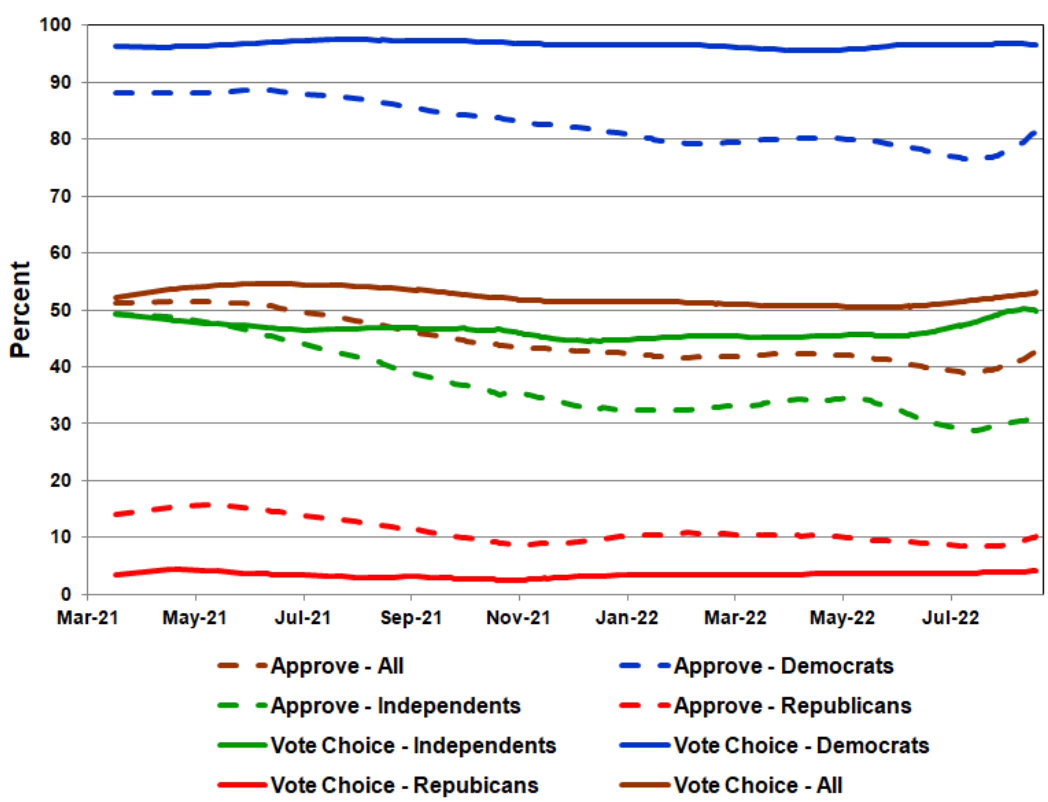
*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001.

Figure 21 Generic Midterm Vote for the President's Party's House Candidate as a Function of Presidential Approval



Variations in opinions of Biden's performance have their smallest effect on Democrats, which is clearly to the party's advantage considering how their ratings of him have fallen since the beginning of his presidency. This in apparent from Figure 22, which depicts the lowess-smoothed trends in approval ratings (dashed lines) and generic House vote intentions (solid lines) among all respondents and partisan subgroups over this period. Biden's approval ratings have fallen much more steeply than the Democrats' share of the generic vote, especially among Democratic identifiers. Republicans never planned to vote for Democratic candidates in appreciable numbers, so the decline in their approval of Biden has had only a slight effect on the aggregate balance of preferences. Support for Democratic candidates declined most among Independents—at least until a notable uptick in July 2022—but the decline was not nearly as steep as the drop in their approval of Biden's performance. Independents comprise a somewhat problematic category for analyses of surveys from multipl*e* sources because their frequency and ideological leanings are subject to substantial house effects, a problem reflected in the noisiness of the data for independents in Figures 19 and 20 (the data underlying the smoothed trends in Figure 22 are also quite noisy). On the whole, though, these data show Democrats in a rather stronger position than the referendum model projects, attracting on average more than 50 percent of the generic House vote among respondents expressing a preference.

Figure 22 Biden's Approval Level and Midterm Vote Intentions



Republicans understandably want the midterm to be a straightforward referendum on Biden and the economy along the lines of the standard model, but a couple of things are now working to complicate matters for them. The extreme levels of partisan loyalty in recent elections makes turnout critically important. The Democrats' gains in 2018 were largely the product of a huge surge in participation by their partisans, inspired by intense antipathy toward Trump, which more than offset the enthusiasm of Trump's own supporters in an election that featured the highest midterm turnout in more than a century (Jacobson 2019c).[13] Democrats who may have been discouraged from voting in 2022 by economic malaise and disappointment with Biden were offered fresh motivation when the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, ending the half-century of constitutional protections for abortion rights.[14] Democratic identifiers are overwhelmingly pro-choice and opposed to the Court's decision.[15] With abortion rights now under threat by Republican legislatures in half the states, the incentive to be heard at the polls on the issue may prevail over conditions discouraging voting. Reaction to the unpopular decision is arguably responsible for the uptick in support for Democratic candidates, particularly among independents, in the midsummer generic polls observable in Figure 22 (Silver 2022).

The other complication for Republicans is of course Trump. Insofar as the election is about him—his big lie, his attempts to block ratification of Biden's victory, his prospective candidacy in 2024—it not only takes attention away from Biden and the economy, but it also threatens to turn the election into a another referendum on Trump. This would not help the Republican cause; although Trump remains very popular among Republican voters, he is very unpopular among the rest of the electorate. For example, in the *Economist*/YouGov polls taken so far in 2022, 81 percent of Republicans express favorable opinions of Trump, with 55 percent opting for "very favorable." But 73 percent of all other voters express unfavorable opinions of him, 64 percent, very unfavorable. In the electorate as a whole, 40 percent hold favorable opinions of Trump (25 percent, very favorable), while 54 percent hold unfavorable opinions (45 percent, very unfavorable). Trump's ability to mobilize his MAGA supporters in 2018 was only exceeded by his ability to mobilize his Democratic opponents, and they dislike Trump now almost as much as they disliked him then (84 percent viewed him very unfavorably in 2018, 80 percent, in 2020).

Trump has kept himself in the public eye by promoting the big lie at every opportunity, railing against Republicans who refuse to subscribe it, and intervening in Republican primaries with endorsements and campaign money for big lie proponents. The work of House select committee investigating the January 6 Capitol invasion has also kept him at the center of media attention. The

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[13] The vote for Republican candidates nationally in 2018 was 10.9 million votes higher than it had been in 2014, an increase of 27 percent, but the total for Democratic candidates was 25.1 million votes higher, an increase of 71 percent. See Jacobson (2019c).

[14] *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, No. 19-1392, 597 U.S. ___ (2022)

[15] In the July 16-19 *Economist*/YouGov poll, for example, 81 percent of Democrats favored allowing abortion in all or most cases, and 80 percent disapprove of the Courts decision.

committee has highlighted his role in mobilizing the mob and his complicity in plots to nullify the election and prevent the peaceful transfer of power to Biden. Nothing the committee has exposed so far has shaken Trump's core supporters, but its revelations may remind people who flocked to the polls in 2020 to vote Trump out that they still need to take a stand against his malevolent influence by showing up at the polls and voting against his Republican apologists. A focus on Trump and the insurrection sharpens the dilemma for Republican candidates in competitive states and districts who want to keep Trump's base loyal and energized without alienating the larger pool of voters who reject the big lie and remain appalled by the Capitol insurrection.

Whether countervailing issues such abortion or Trump's attempted coup offset the fundamentals in 2022 remains to be determined. Expert analysts are currently divided on the question but generally skeptical (Rakich and Lodhi 2022, Walter 2022). The present gap between presidential approval and his party's generic vote share is large by historical standards, and the usual pattern has been for the two to converge to at least some degree as the election approaches. If Democrats do manage to separate their electoral fates from their president far enough to avoid major House losses, it will represent a notable departure from recent patterns.

The Senate is a somewhat different story. The current 50-50 tie could be broken in either direction. If the Republicans do not win control, the fault will be Trump's. Several of the Republican candidates in hotly contested states who won their nominations with Trump's support by endorsing the stolen election lie may be too extreme or incompetent to take advantage of Biden's unpopularity and the shaky economy. Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell implicitly acknowledged the problem in mid-August, saying there was "a greater likelihood the House flips than the Senate" because "Senate races are just different, they're statewide, candidate quality has a lot to do with the outcome" (Wang and Alfaro 2022). It would not be the first time that Trump delivered the Senate to the Democrats (Jacobson 2021b).

Conclusion

This paper extends the analysis of how presidents influence popular beliefs and opinions about their parties to include Trump's full term and the first 20 months of Biden's presidency. The results confirm that both presidents, like their predecessors, have strongly influenced evaluations of their parties generally and of their congressional wings specifically. For the most part, Trump's impact has been greater than Biden's, whose influence generally matches that of earlier presidents. Trump also stands out as having a larger and more consistently significant impact on opinions of the opposition, which for other presidents tend to be weak to nonexistent. And he is exceptional in continuing to influence his party's reputation and standing after leaving office. The COVID-19 crisis provided a new test of the president's influence on party reputations for competence in a specific policy domain, with results indicating that on this issue, too, party reputations strongly affected by evaluations of the president's success in managing it. Again, the Trump effect was the larger of the two. Reactions to Trump also had an unusually strong impact on his party's midterm electoral fortunes. So far, Biden's prospective electoral impact appears to be somewhat smaller—a good thing for Democrats given Biden's currently dismal approval ratings.

Trump's extraordinary influence on how people view the parties is another manifestation of his unrivaled capacity to provoke and polarize the American public. Among other things, the figures in this paper underline how powerfully partisanship now drives political opinions, a reminder that a president's most significant legacy for the parties ultimately lies in his impact on long-term partisan identities (Jacobson 2019a, Ch. 7). This process can only be detected and measured in retrospect, and a major question for future research is how the political turbulence and disruption initiated by Trump's election in 2016, the dislocations brought on by the COVID-9 pandemic, and the assault on American democracy following Biden's victory in 2020 have affected partisan identities and party demographics going forward.

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