Worth a Try?
The Electoral Consequences of Symbolic Legislation

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Abstract

With the US Congress increasingly gridlocked, fewer bills are becoming legislation. Nevertheless, members continue to engage in what we call "symbolic legislating"--i.e., introducing legislation that has effectively no chance of securing enough votes to become law. Despite its prevalence, little is known about the electoral implications of sponsoring symbolic legislation. It is possible that voters reward their legislator's efforts to move the status quo closer to their position even if it has no chance of becoming law. On the other hand, because symbolic legislation is doomed to fail, it may decrease a legislator's perceived effectiveness and, thus, their political support. Alternatively, it is possible that sponsoring symbolic legislation has no impact, with voters interpreting it merely as a position-taking cue. In this Short Research Article, we test these competing hypotheses using a survey experiment as well as observational data. Our experimental results clearly demonstrate that, assuming shared party and issue position, symbolic legislation is strongly rewarded. Moreover, the effect is even stronger among voters who are most likely to attend to this information in the real world. Finally, we explore whether such a pattern emerges in real-world data on legislators' behavior and find clear evidence that it does.

Recent years have witnessed a sharp increase in gridlock in the US Congress. In the 118th Congress (2023-2024), only 275 bills (1 percent of the legislation introduced) became law, making it the least productive Congress (GovTrack). In comparison, in the 103rd Congress (1993-1994) 473 bills (5 percent of the legislation introduced) became law (GovTrack). Likewise, the number of cloture motions in the 118th Congress soared to 266 compared to 80 in the 103rd Congress (US Senate). As competition for majority status has increased and majorities have become smaller since the 103rd Congress (Lee 2016), it has been more difficult to pass legislation due to governing with small majorities and having strong minority party opposition (Hurley, Brady, Cooper 1977; Mayhew 1966). Furthermore, a lack of majority party cohesion also increases the difficulty of passing legislation (ibid). As polarization continues, internal party disagreements (i.e. far right Republicans or progressive Democrats) make it more difficult to be a cohesive majority party to pass legislation.

Yet, paradoxically, while the number of bills passed into law has dropped, the number of bills introduced has increased. In the 118th Congress, 19,315 bills have been introduced, which is the most since the 95th Congress (1977-1978). This implies that members of Congress are increasingly introducing bills they know are likely to fail. We categorize such bills as *symbolic legislation*–i.e., legislation that is introduced despite having effectively no chance of securing enough votes to become law.

Despite the prevalence of symbolic legislation, scholars have little evidence to answer whether voters are inclined to punish or reward this behavior. On one hand, it is possible that voters who support their member's position reward the effort regardless of whether the positive outcome is achieved (Andrews and Bokemper 2025). Psychologically, people favor action over inaction (Kahneman & Tversky 1982; Ritov & Baron 1990). Therefore, members may introduce bills to

reap rewards from voters for trying to pass a bill the voters support even if the member knows the bill is destined to fail.

On the other hand, voters reward legislative effectiveness (Butler et al. 2023). Introducing symbolic bills that will never survive the legislative process takes time and effort that could, in theory, instead be used shepherding a bill with greater chances for legislative success. In short, focusing on symbolic legislating may prevent them from being seen as an effective legislator. This could cost members support from voters, and also give challengers ammunition to criticize them for not working hard enough to change policy for constituents.

Alternatively, it is possible that symbolic legislating has no effect on voters' support for the legislator. Bill sponsorship is theoretically taken to be a position-taking strategy (Mayhew 1974). If so, these introductions may not be important to voters' support for politicians after accounting for voters' own issue positions. As such, symbolic legislation may be one of many ways for legislators' to signal their positions to voters who share their party and issue stance, yet not be something that voters reward or punish them for on its own.

To discern between these competing hypotheses, we fielded a large survey experiment. We randomized whether an in-party member who shares their views on an issue the respondent cares about recently decided to not introduce a bill or recently decided to introduce a bill on the issue. In both treatments, the respondents were informed the member was confident it would not get enough support from other members of Congress (MCs) to become law. We find that introducing symbolic legislation on an issue the respondent cares about and agrees with their member on strongly increases the member's favorability and the respondent's willingness to re-elect the member. Consequently, our results suggest that there are individual benefits members reap from symbolically legislating on issues their constituents care about. We thus uncover the existence,

and magnitude, of an important citizen-level mechanism that underlies MCs willingness to engage in symbolic legislating.

Would Symbolic Legislation Matter to Voters?

As legislative productivity decreases in Congress, bills have dwindling odds of becoming law, due in part to inter-party polarization, intra-party polarization, and smaller majorities (Hurley, Brady, Cooper 1977; Mayhew 1966). Yet, representatives continue to introduce bills they know will not receive enough support to pass—a behavior we refer to as *symbolic legislating*. However, it is unclear whether introducing symbolic legislation electorally helps politicians due to signaling effort; electorally hurts politicians due to signaling ineffectiveness; or does not affect politicians' electoral chances due to low importance of sponsorship.

Symbolic legislation may lead voters to be more likely to support their representatives because the members are trying to move the status quo towards what the constituent wanted even though they ultimately failed. This is consistent with evidence that people reward politicians for good intentions, not only good outcomes (Andrews and Bokemper 2025). Additionally, this is consistent with the broader psychological bias that people favor action over inaction (Kahneman & Tversky 1982 ; Ritov & Baron 1990). Therefore, voters might appreciate the effort on their behalf, even if the bill fails.

Additionally, symbolic legislating could be seen as a stronger signal of their position and their priority of it than mere policy congruence. Legislators who grandstand, or make strong political statements, particularly on salient issues, have higher vote shares in the next election (Park 2023). Actions like grandstanding may serve a similar purpose as symbolic legislating–i.e., it signals to constituents not only the position a legislator holds, but also the member's commitment to pursuing

it. By prioritizing issues important to their constituents they hold the same position on, it follows that legislators should reap electoral benefits from symbolic legislation among these voters.

On the other hand, symbolic legislation may be politically costly for legislators. For example, such failure can signal legislative ineffectiveness, whereas withholding legislation (due to its impossibility of becoming law) may signal legislative savviness. Similar to how a lack of legislative productivity is viewed negatively in collective evaluations of Congress (Ramirez 2009), voters may consider effectiveness as one metric by which to evaluate individual legislators. Indeed, recent research demonstrates that when voters learn about their representatives' effectiveness, they evaluate more (less) effective legislators more (less) favorably (Butler et al. 2023; Hogan, Kromer, & Wrzenski 2016). Consistent with the existence of an electoral reward from voters, highly effective legislators are also more likely to advertise their legislative effectiveness in newsletters (Box-Steffensmeier and Grant 1999). Moreover, highly effective incumbents have been shown to reap electoral rewards in primaries (Treul, Thomsen, Volden, & Wiseman 2022). Thus, symbolic legislating may be another factor that determines how voters evaluate politicians, particularly those within their preferred party (e.g., Kane 2019).

In addition to voters' rewards, PACs, lobbyists, and interest groups donate more to more effective legislators (Box-Steffensmeier and Grant 1999; Gui 2023; Rocca and Gordon 2010). Incumbents who are ineffective are also more likely to face quality challengers (Treul et al. 2022; Hogan et al. 2016). Consequently, introducing symbolic legislation could cost members outside campaign contributions as well as inspire primary challengers in addition to diminishing voter support. Collectively, this research suggests possible electoral risks for symbolic legislating: a legislator dedicating time and effort into bills that fail may be viewed by their supporters and other

politically relevant actors (i.e. potential challengers and interest groups) as a signal that the legislator is ineffective.

Yet it is also possible that symbolic legislating has *no effect* on voters' support for a given legislator. Factors such as issue congruence (e.g. Ansolabehere & Jones 2010) and ideology (e.g. Canes-Wrone, Brady, & Cogan 2002) may drive voters' political support for a legislator, rendering a decision to withhold–versus submit–a piece of symbolic legislation as practically irrelevant. This is because sponsorship of the bill in the first place can be viewed as a position-taking strategy (Mayhew 1974). Thus, once a legislator's position on an issue is known, there may be, at that point, no additional benefit of being the sponsor of a symbolic bill and advancing it forward. In effect, sponsoring and advancing the bill would merely repeat the same signal that was already gleaned from the legislator's stated position in the first place so it offers no additional information to voters.

Thus, with no additional information gleaned from sponsorship, their evaluation of that legislator should remain essentially unchanged. Consistent with this argument, ideal point estimates yield highly similar results to estimations based on cosponsorship data, which suggests that sponsorship contains equivalent information about ideological positions to roll votes, so voters may use sponsorship simply as a cue of ideology (Alemán, Calvo, Jones, & Kaplan 2009). This argument implies that voters do not increase support for politicians who send an additional signal of their position over and above holding that position. To the extent this is the case, we should expect that a legislator introducing a symbolic piece of legislation, versus withholding it, will have little effect upon how voters' view the legislator because the legislator's position is held constant.

Given the aforementioned possibilities, we aim to test the following two (competing) hypotheses against the null hypothesis:

H1a: *Among an MC's supporters, engaging in symbolic legislating (versus withholding legislation so as to avoid failure) will increase political support for the MC*

H1b: *Among an MC's supporters, engaging in symbolic legislating (versus withholding legislation so as to avoid failure) will decrease political support for the MC*

DATA & METHODS

To test both whether and how citizens respond to symbolic legislating, we fielded a large online experiment via Lucid Theorem in February of 2023. A total of 3,351 U.S. adults participated in the survey experiment, and quotas were included to ensure that the sample would be nationally representative with respect to age, race/ethnicity, gender and geographic region (see Supplemental Appendix for demographic information about the sample).

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. One condition involved a brief vignette featuring a (hypothetical) candidate who withholds a bill to avoid legislative failure. In the alternative condition, however, this candidate introduces legislation despite the fact that "it will not become law because it does not have enough support from other members of Congress."[1] The full text of these two conditions is featured in Table 1, along with the text for each of the outcome measures.

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[1] Recent work has shown that, though artificial, referencing "hypothetical" targets does not substantially alter treatment effects compared to referencing real-world targets (see Brutger et al. 2023).

TABLE 1. Experimental Conditions & Outcome Measures

Experimental Conditions	
	Experimental Conditions
Did Not Introduce Bill to avoid Failure	Imagine a hypothetical member of Congress that represents a district in your home state. This member is in your preferred party, and shares your views on an issue you care about very much. Suppose that this member **recently decided to NOT introduce a bill / legislation on this issue into Congress because they were confident it would not get enough support from other members of Congress to become law.**
Introduced Bill & Failed	Imagine a hypothetical member of Congress that represents a district in your home state. This member is in your preferred party, and shares your views on an issue you care about very much. Suppose that this member **recently introduced a bill / legislation on this issue into Congress, but it will not become law because it does not have enough support from other members of Congress.**
Outcome Measures	
Favorability	How would you rate this member of Congress? ["Very unfavorably"=1; "Very favorably"=7]
Vote Intentionality	If this hypothetical member of Congress were to run for re-election in the next election, how would you vote? ["I would likely vote for this member"=1; "I would likely vote for a member of the other party" / "…third party or write in" / "…not vote"=0]

Notes: This table features text for experimental treatments and outcome measures. For the analyses, the "Favorability" outcome was recoded to range from 0 to 1, while the vote intentionality measure was recoded as a binary (likely vote for the candidate=1, other=0).

Following random assignment to the experimental vignette, respondents answered two questions. The first asked respondents to rate the candidate in terms of overall favorability. This scale ranged from 1 ("Very unfavorably") to 7 ("Very favorably") and was recoded to range from 0 to 1 for interpretative ease. The second outcome measure asked respondents how they would

vote if this member of Congress were running for re-election. Respondents had four options (see Table 1 for details), which were recoded so that intention to vote for the member was coded as 1, while any other response was coded as 0. These two measures—*Favorability* and *Vote Intentionality*—serve as our dependent variables, each representing an aspect of political support more broadly.

Several design features of the experiment are worth highlighting. First, a potential challenge for understanding the effect of symbolic legislating is that it may be heavily dependent upon the particular issue being addressed in an MC's bill. For example, Democrats may respond very differently to symbolic legislating on gun control than would Republicans. To help ensure that a bill would be of interest to each respondent, the experiment avoided discussion of specific issues and instead instructed respondents to think about "an issue [they] care about very much." Second, and relatedly, we asked respondents to think about a member of their preferred party. This choice helps to minimize heterogeneity in the treatment that might potentially arise from different perceptions of the target MC's political party.[2] Finally, for the *Vote Intentionality* measure, rather than forcing respondents to choose between the two parties, we also allowed respondents to indicate that they would vote for an alternative candidate or not vote at all. Had we required respondents to choose between the two parties, it would omit the real-world option to simply abstain from voting, making it more difficult to determine the real-world potential effects of symbolic legislating on MCs' political support.

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[2] As we discuss below, a natural question is how this manipulation would fare among an MC's opponents, people who disagree with the MC's issue position, and people who do not see the issue as important to them. Though all interesting questions, we opted to minimize the number of manipulated conditions so as to maximize statistical power for main effects and moderation analyses. That said, future research should explore the consequences of our manipulation among an MC's opponents.
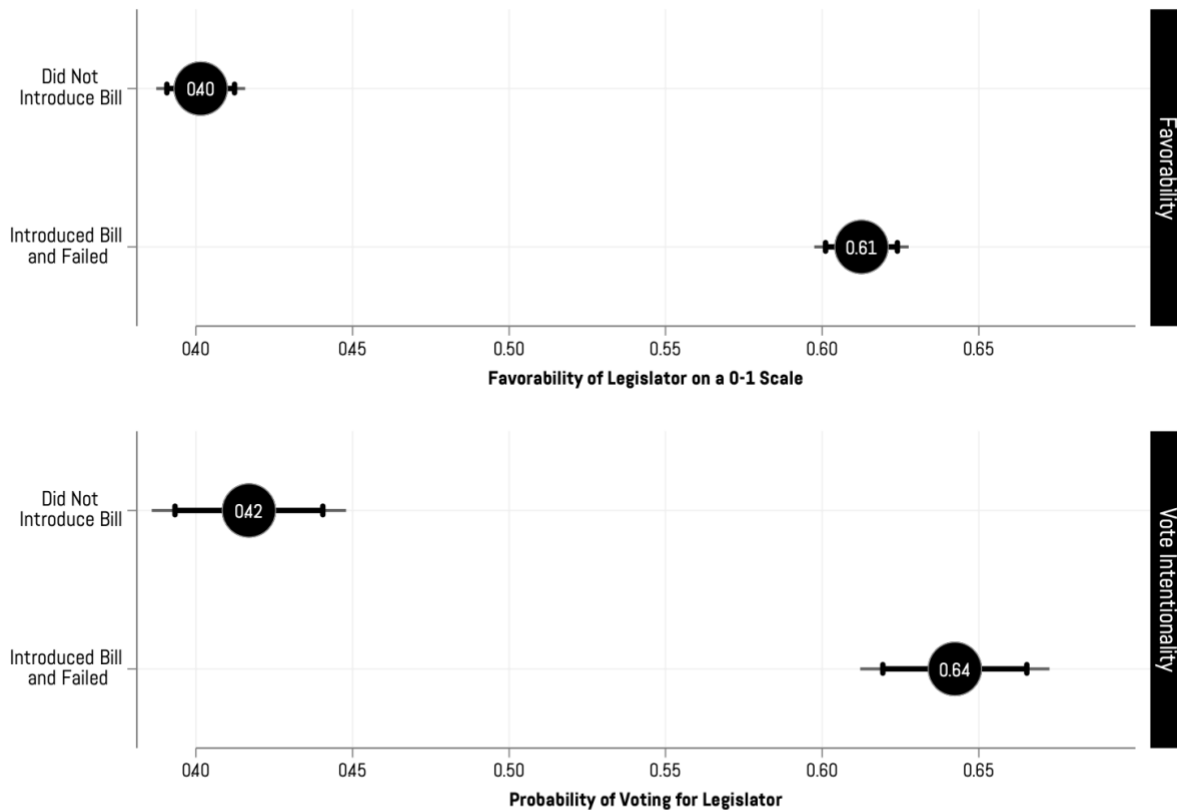
RESULTS

To determine whether an MC's engagement in symbolic legislating (compared to withholding the bill to avoid legislative failure) is consequential for the MC's political support, we regressed the two outcome measures onto the binary treatment assignment variable. The *Favorability* model employs OLS regression, while the *Vote Intentionality* model employs logistic regression.

The main results are featured in Figure 1. Across the two outcomes, the results demonstrate a sizable difference in political support depending on whether or not the MC engaged in symbolic legislating. Beginning with the top panel, the MC who engaged in symbolic legislating is evaluated at .61 on the *Favorability* scale, while the MC who strategically withheld legislation to avoid failure is evaluated at only .40—a difference of 21 percentage points ($p<.001$).

We find a similarly large effect for the *Vote Intentionality* measure (see bottom panel). The probability that respondents would vote for the MC who engaged in symbolic legislating is approximately .64, yet is only .42 for the MC who chose to avoid legislative failure—a difference of 22.5 percentage points ($p<.001$). When combined with the results for the *Favorability* outcome, this result provides strong support for **H1a**, and suggests a clear electoral benefit from engaging in symbolic legislating.

FIGURE 1. Symbolic Legislating Increases MCs' Political Support

Notes: Top panel displays results for Favorability outcome (model is OLS). Bottom panel displays results for Vote Intentionality outcome (model is logistic). Figure plots estimated values of each dependent variable in each experimental condition. Confidence intervals are 99% (thin line) and 95% (thick line). *N*=3,351 in both panels. Data from Lucid Theorem.

It is worth emphasizing that these sizable effects appeared despite respondents being instructed to think of a member of their preferred party, to think of an issue they personally care about "very much," and to assume a shared issue position with the legislator. The important implication is that, even after party and issue congruence are taken into account, symbolic legislating stands to offer clear benefits for legislators among members of their base.

Given the sizable magnitude of these effects, we next sought to explore whether these treatment effect estimates remained similar across both respondents' (1) party identification, and (2) educational attainment.

Beginning with party identification, the experimental design deliberately avoided partisan considerations by omitting any reference to the party of the MC, or to the particular issue involved in the legislation. Nevertheless, it may be the case that Democratic and Republican voters have different views about the use of symbolic legislation, both compared to Independents and compared to one another. This may occur if, for example, partisan groups have different issues in mind when thinking about symbolic legislation, different levels of loyalty to their party's MCs regardless of these MCs' legislative activity, place different amounts of value on policy change (Grossman & Hopkins 2016), and/or if they differentially wish to avoid legislative failure for strategic reasons related to their party's "brand" (Butler and Powell 2014).

To examine whether partisan differences exist, we specified an interaction between the three-category party identification variable (Democrat, Independent, or Republican) and the binary treatment assignment variable. The results are displayed in Figure 2, which plots the treatment effect on the *y*-axis, and each partisan group on the *x*-axis, for each outcome measure.

We continue to find large treatment effects for all three partisan groups, though with some noteworthy heterogeneity. For example, while both Republicans and Democrats exhibit an approximately 22 percentage-point effect on the *Favorability* outcome, Independents exhibit a somewhat smaller effect (18 percentage-points). For the *Vote Intentionality* outcome, Democrats exhibit a weaker effect than both Independents and Republicans (approximately 9 percentage-points), though still substantially greater than zero and statistically significant at $p<.001$. Thus, overall, the results imply that, regardless of party, citizens are willing to electorally reward their preferred MCs for engaging in symbolic legislating.

FIGURE 2. Effects of Symbolic Legislating Among Partisan Groups
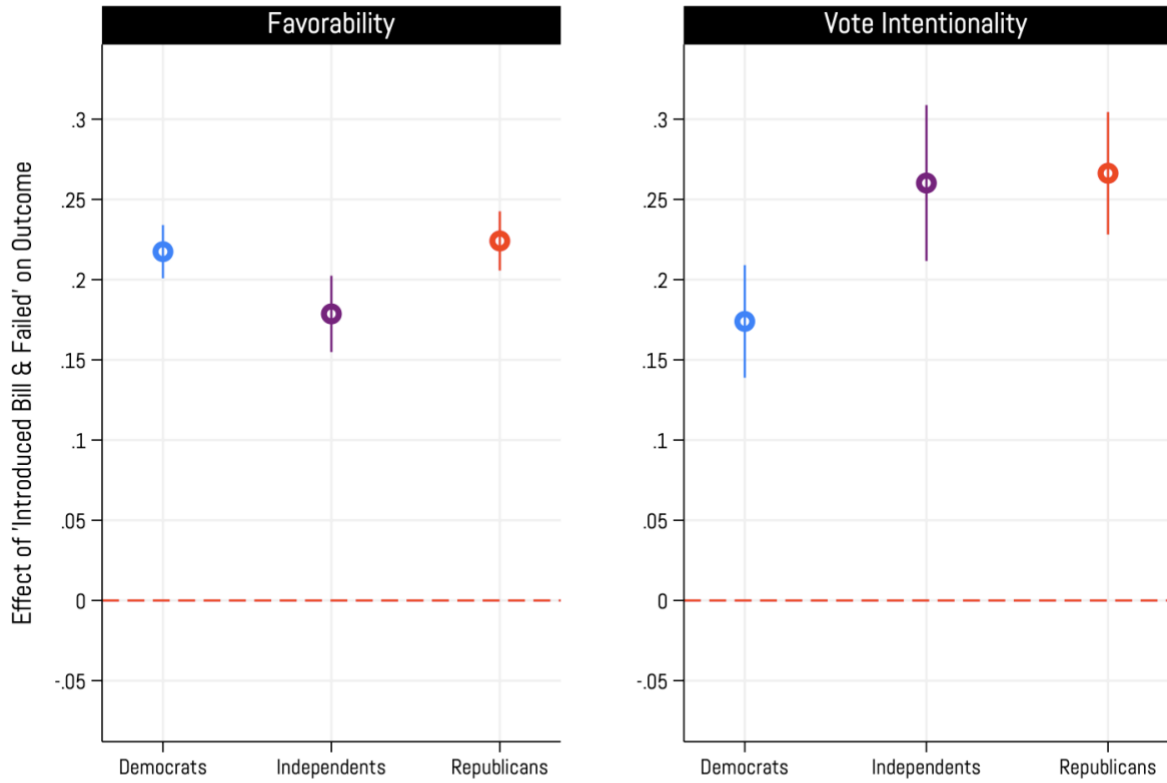
Notes: The *y*-axes display the effect of going from the "did not introduce bill" to "introduce bill and failed" conditions. The dashed, horizontal line indicates an effect of zero. The left panel displays results for *Favorability* outcome (model is OLS), while the right panel displays results for *Vote Intentionality* outcome (model is logistic). Treatment effect estimates are shown for each partisan group (Democrats, Independents and Republicans; "leaners" are coded as partisans). Confidence intervals are 83% to allow for comparisons between partisan groups. *N*=3,351 in both panels. Data from Lucid Theorem.

We next sought to determine the potential effects of symbolic legislating among those who are most likely to be exposed to it in the real-world. In lieu of a measure of political sophistication (which was not included in our survey), we used respondents' level of educational attainment as a proxy for their likelihood of being exposed to information about MCs' legislative activity.

Specifically, insofar as they tend to be more engaged with political and government affairs[3], highly educated respondents would be more likely to be made aware of news regarding an MC's pursuit of, versus withholding of, symbolic legislation.[4] Further, highly educated voters may have a more sophisticated understanding of the legislative process and, thus, view symbolic legislating differently than less educated voters (e.g., they may view it as evidence of higher-quality representation (Mondak et al., 2007)). Given these two considerations, it is useful to explore whether educational attainment moderates the treatment effects we observe.

Figure 3 displays the results of this analysis. Again, the *y*-axis displays the effect of moving from the MC *not* introducing the bill for fear of legislative failure, to the MC introducing the bill knowing the bill will fail to pass (i.e., symbolic legislating). We again see that, regardless of educational attainment and regardless of the outcome measure, the treatment effect is positive and substantial in magnitude. However, the figure also reveals a clear pattern: more educated respondents tend to exhibit stronger effects. For example, while the estimated effect of the treatment on *Favorability* is approximately 15 percentage points for the lowest-educated in the sample, the effect is 26 percentage points among the highest-educated (the interaction term is significant at $p<.001$). And, though the interaction term for the *Vote Intentionality* outcome is smaller in magnitude and not significant at conventional levels ($p=.22$), highly educated respondents exhibit an estimated effect that is approximately 5.5 percentage points larger than the effect among the lowest educated respondents. This result implies an even stronger reason for MCs

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[3] In the ANES 2020 Panel Survey, education was correlated with political knowledge (r= 0.29), interest (r=0.13), and following the media (r= 0.17).

[4] For example, controlling for treatment assignment, we find that highly educated respondents are 25 percentage-points less likely to have selected the "I would likely not vote at all" option for the Vote Intentionality measure compared to the lowest educated respondents ($p<.001$).

FIGURE 3. Effects of Symbolic Legislating Across Educational Attainment
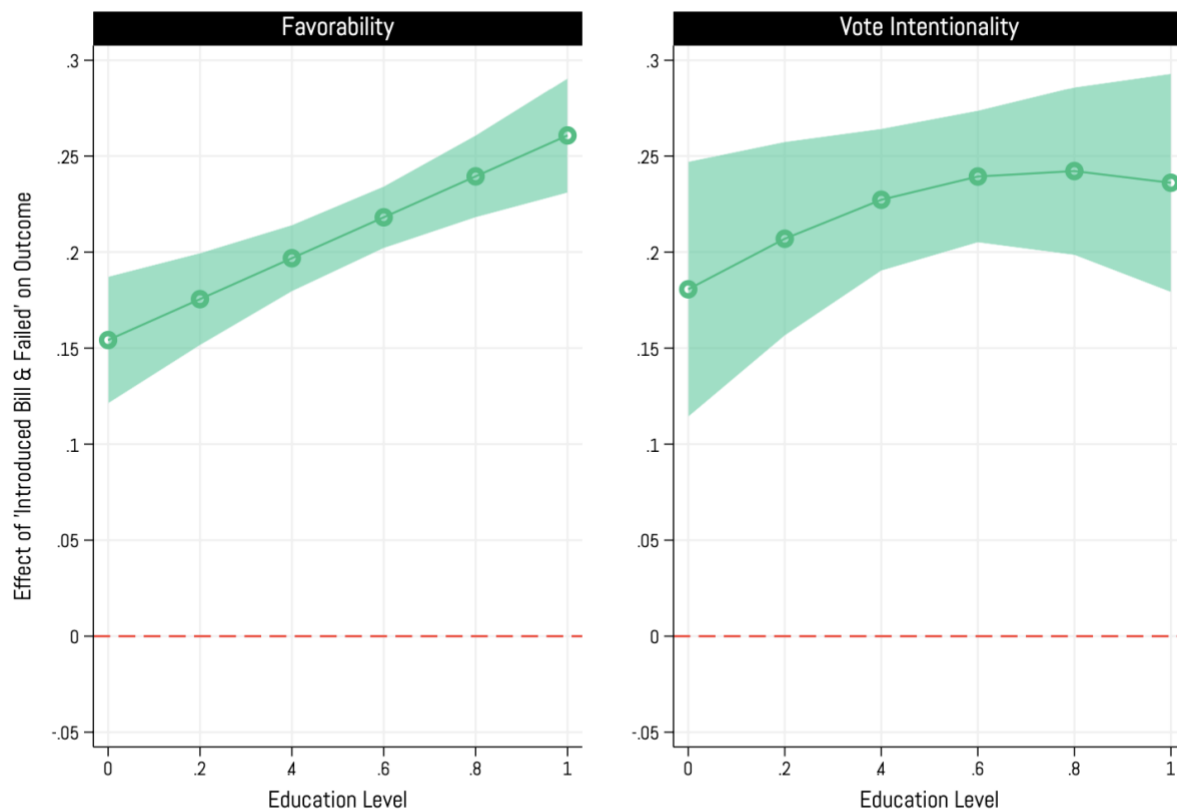
Notes: The *y*-axes display the effect of going from the "did not introduce bill" to "introduce bill and failed" conditions. The dashed, horizontal line indicates an effect of zero. The left panel displays results for *Favorability* outcome (model is OLS), while the right panel displays results for *Vote Intentionality* outcome (model is logistic). Confidence intervals are 95%. *N*=3,351 in both panels. Data from Lucid Theorem.

to engage in symbolic legislating, particularly for voters who support them: the effects of symbolic legislating are strongest among those who are most likely to be made aware of it.

Real-World Evidence for Symbolic Legislating's Effectiveness?

   Having found experimental evidence that MCs reap potentially large benefits for symbolic legislating, particularly among their supporters, our last analysis investigated whether such patterns could be detected in the real world. Specifically, we use data from Ansolabehere and Kuriwaki's (2022) study of issue agreement and legislative accountability and pair each

respondent with a count of their incumbent MC's symbolic bill sponsorship. This dataset uses CCES team modules for elections from 2006 to 2018. Most importantly, the dataset contains measures of voters' perceived issue agreement with their incumbent MC.[5] This allows us to align our observational analysis to the experimental conditions by subsetting on both partisan alignment and perceived issue agreement. Our analysis thus consists of people represented by co-partisan MCs, and who were in the highest tercile of Ansolabehere and Kuriwaki's (2022) measure of perceived issue agreement.

In line with hypothesis **H1A** and the experimental findings, we predict that as an MC sponsors more symbolic legislation, constituent approval of the MC will increase. We measure *Approval* using responses to CCES items that ask respondents to rate their MC on a scale from "Strongly Disapprove" to "Strongly Approve."[6] Our independent variable, *Symbolic Sponsorship,* is a count of bills sponsored by a constituent's MC that were not signed into law.[7, 8] To account for heterogeneity between congressional districts and elections, we group the data by congressional district and year and then fit a multilevel OLS model that varies the intercept by each district-year.[9] Given the experimental results above, and for ease of discussion, we refer to this as the "external validity model."

Figure 4 shows the results of our analysis. The external validity model supports the results of our experiment, as *Symbolic Sponsorship* is associated with an increase in approval (significant at

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[5] Please see Supplemental Appendix for details on the variables we used in our analysis.

[6] Rescaled so that 0 corresponds to "Strongly Disapprove" and 1 corresponds to "Strongly Approve."

[7] These data were obtained from Volden & Wiseman's (2014) Legislative Effectiveness Scores (LES) dataset.

[8] Symbolic Sponsorship ranged from a low of 0 bills introduced to a high of 120. The median MC introduced 13 pieces of symbolic legislation, with a standard deviation of 11.48.

[9] We also fit additional models that include fixed effects for state and year, as well as models that include individual-level, MC-level control variables, as well as a logged version of *Symbolic Sponsorship.* These results are available in the Supplemental Appendix.

p<.001). Practically, this means that when an MC sponsors 10 additional pieces of symbolic legislation, they would expect about a 1 percentage point increase on the *Approval* scale.

Due to the potential for omitted variable bias or reciprocal causality, this analysis alone is, of course, insufficient to establish causation. For instance, legislators that prolifically sponsor bills may engage in other credit-claiming or advertising activities that cause voters to perceive the legislator as more in line with them on the issues. However, when considered in conjunction with our experimental findings, these results offer real-world evidence that MCs stand to reap political rewards from sponsoring symbolic legislation.

FIGURE 4. Symbolic Bill Sponsorship and Legislator Approval (2006 - 2018)
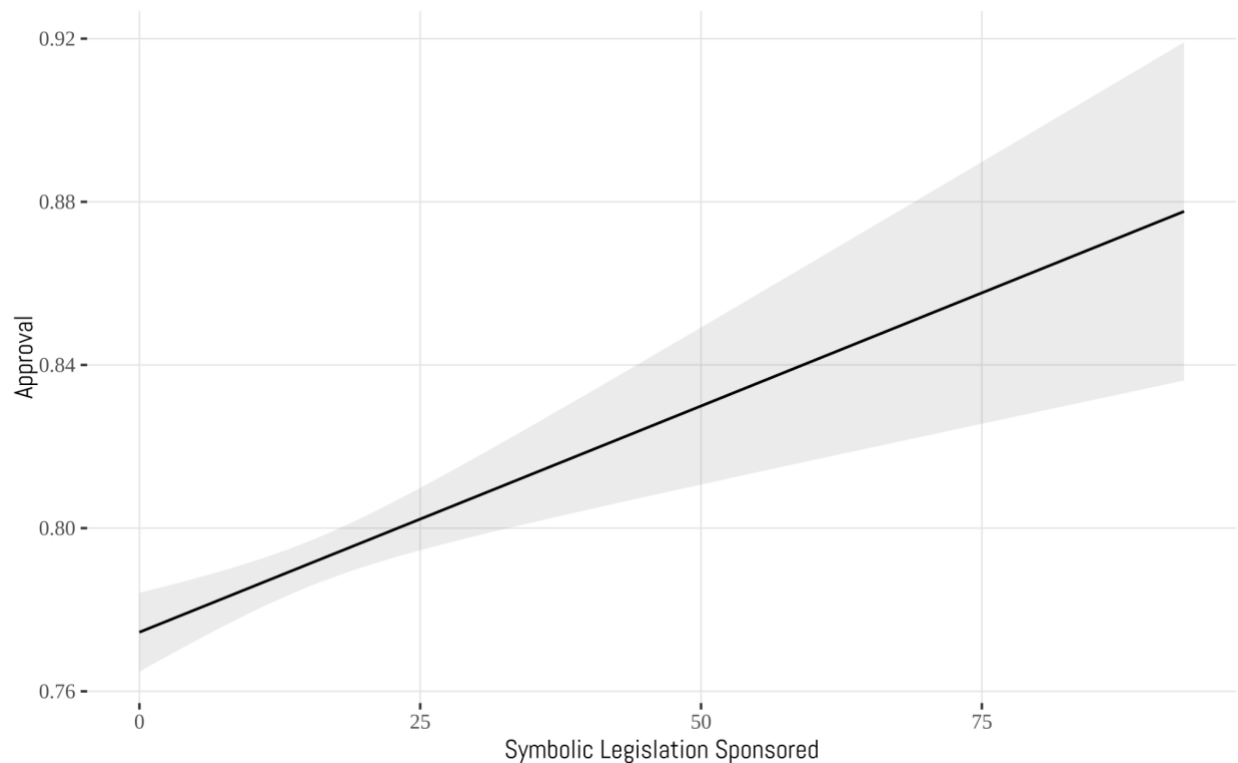
Notes: Graph shows predicted values of legislator approval (0 being lowest, 1 being highest) over the number of symbolic bills the legislator has sponsored. Data is Cooperative Election Study (CES) from 2006-2018. Models are OLS with varying intercepts for district-year and fixed effects for state. Accompanying table and alternative model specifications are available in the Supplemental Appendix. Confidence intervals are 95%. Number of respondents=9,402. Number of district-years=2,969.

DISCUSSION

In this Short Research Article, we find strong evidence–using both experimental and observational data–that there are electoral benefits to symbolic legislating. Further, we find that these rewards are strongest among those most likely to know about symbolic legislation in the real world (i.e., more educated constituents). Thus, particularly on issue positions that a legislator's constituents both agree with and care about, symbolic legislating–despite having no impact on public policy itself and potentially never even receiving floor consideration–might nevertheless prove useful in garnering political support.

Additionally, our results shed some light on why so many members may be introducing legislation despite the legislation having no possibility of becoming law. To this point, in some cases, members even introduce extremely similar bills around the same time. For example, in the 118th Congress multiple Democrats introduced bills to codify medical professionals' right to give abortion care and womens' rights to receive it (e.g., Sheila Jackson Lee's SHIELD Act, Judy Chu's Women's Health Protection Act of 2023, and Kim Schrier's Let Doctors Provide Reproductive Health Care Act).

This dynamic is not unique to the minority party, however. Multiple Republicans in this same Congress introduced bills to revoke visas from protestors who are international students and charged with some offense in the wake of college student protests for Gaza (i.e., Andrew Ogles's Study Abroad Act and Jim Banks's No Visas for Violent Criminals Act). In both these cases, legislators introduced bills on highly salient issues and that are substantively identical, suggesting they perceive some benefit to this over and above supporting their colleague's bill. Extant theory would suggest these could be messaging bills to accentuate party differences (Lee 2016). Our results highlight how being the sponsor has individual electoral benefits for members, not only

collective party benefits. Thus, members may knowingly introduce extremely similar provisions so that they can demonstrate to their constituents they are trying to do something to change the status quo to constituents' desired policy on salient issues. Given the strong negative agenda control the majority party has, this could be a mechanism for members to show their constituents they are trying to make changes popular in the district even if the majority party does not support these changes.

While our study highlights these broad dynamics, future research should examine further nuance. Given that our experiment examined the effect when the MC is a member of their preferred party and agrees with the respondent on an issue that's important to them, it remains unknown the benefits or costs of symbolic legislating on less important issues[10], when the member is not a co-partisan, and/or when the member disagrees with the constituent on the issue. While we were also able to explore several of these possibilities (see the Supplemental Appendix for details), ideally these relationships would be tested with experimental evidence to address difficulties in causal inference[11]. Understanding these heterogeneities can further help scholars understand why, and under what conditions, legislators stand to benefit from symbolic legislating. If, relative to the benefits we identified, the costs are high among outparty constituents or among constituents in disagreement with the MC's position on the issue, it would imply that symbolic legislating would be concentrated among legislators representing a highly partisan district, or among those most concerned about primary re-election. Again, given our findings in this Short Research Article, we believe these represent important areas for future research.

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[10] An additional complication is that partisans may, for political reasons, adjust the importance they assign to various public policy issues (Kane and Anson 2022).

[11] MCs of the outparty disproportionately are in issue disagreement with constituents, which would make it more difficult to disentangle the effects of symbolic legislating from outparty MCs and symbolic legislating on issues constituents disagree with the MC on. MCs likely less frequently legislate on lower salient topics, introducing statistical power issues to analyze the effect of issue salience on rewards for symbolic legislating in observational data.

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Ethics Statement

Our study was approved by one author's university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) in advance of the study being fielded. Consent was obtained from all participants before being permitted to complete the survey. Subjects who completed the study were compensated via Lucid Theorem and all responses remained confidential and anonymized. Subjects were not at risk of any harm during the course of taking the survey and were debriefed at the study's conclusion.

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Demographic Information

Table A1 provides demographic information about the Lucid (2023) sample in relation to national benchmarks (i.e., U.S. Census data).

TABLE A1. Descriptive Statistics, Lucid 2023 Sample

	Lucid Study (N=3,351)	National Benchmarks
Median HH Income	$45k-50k	$67k
Median Age	45	38.1
Female	51.66%	51%
White	71.47%	68%
Black	9.73%	12%
Hispanic	10.53%	12%
Democrat	43.48%	42%
Independent	21.19%	11%
Republican	35.33%	47%
Liberal	27.01%	--
Moderate	43.48%	--
Conservative	29.51%	--

Notes: The Lucid sample was selected to mirror U.S. Census data on Age (18-24; 25-34; 35-44; 45-54; 55-64; 65+), Race (White; Black; Hispanic; Asian; Other), Gender, and Geographic Region (West; Midwest; Northeast; South). Household Income, Age, Gender, and Race/Ethnicity national benchmarks are from most recent US Census data available. Party identification benchmarks are from Gallup (2021 data). Regional benchmarks are from Lucid's targets based upon Census data.

APPENDIX B. REGRESSION MODEL OUTPUT UNDERLYING FIGURE 4

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Determinants of MC Approval: OLS

	Dependent variable:
	MC Approval

Symbolic Sponsorship	0.001***
	(0.0003)
Constant	0.774***
	(0.005)
N Dist-Year	2969
SD(Dist-Year)	0.071
ICC	0.097
N	9402

Note:	*p<0.1,* **p<0.05,* ***p<0.01

APPENDIX C. EXTERNAL VALIDITY ROBUSTNESS

TABLE C1. Variable Definitions & Sources

External Validity: Variable Definitions and Sources		
Variable Name	**Description**	**Source**
Approve	Indicates CES respondent's approval of their sitting MC. Initially a 5-point scale, that we normalized so that 0 indicates the lowest level of approval, and 1 indicates the highest level of approval.	Ansolabehere and Kuriwaki (2022)
Symbolic Sponsorship	The number of bills an MC introduced that were not signed into law.	Volden, Craig and Wiseman's (2014) LES Data
Perceived Issue Agreement	Ansolabehere and Kuriwaki constructed this measure by asking respondents their preference on a roll-call vote, and then asking the respondent how they thought their MC voted. Instances in which respondents' preferences matched belief about how their MC voted was coded as 1, -1 if the preference and belief did not match, and zero if they did not express a preference or belief. Then, they averaged this metric across all roll-call votes the respondent was asked about. These averages where then binned into 3 different levels of issue agreement. We used the highest third.	Ansolabehere and Kuriwaki (2022)
MC Seniority	The number of terms served by an MC (including the current)	Volden, Craig and Wiseman's (2014) LES Data
MC Chair	Dummy variable indicating if an MC chaired a committee. 1 for served as a committee chair, 0 for did not chair. .	Volden, Craig and Wiseman's (2014) LES Data
MC Power	Dummy variable indicating if an MC served on the Appropriations, Ways and Means, or Rules Committee. 1 for served, 0 for did not serve.	Volden, Craig and Wiseman's (2014) LES Data
Education	Respondent's level of education. 0 for lowest, 1 for highest.	Ansolabehere and Kuriwaki (2022)
Age	Respondent's age in decades.	Ansolabehere and Kuriwaki (2022)
News Interest	Respondent's level of interest in the news. 0 for lowest level of interest, 1 for highest level of interest.	Ansolabehere and Kuriwaki (2022)
Gender	Dummy variable 1 for female, 0 for male.	Ansolabehere and Kuriwaki (2022)

TABLE C2. State and Year Fixed Effects Models

	Dependent variable:		
		MC Approval	
	Basic	MC-Level Controls	Full Controls
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Symb Sponsorship	0.001***	0.001***	0.001***
	(0.0003)	(0.0003)	(0.0003)
MC Seniority		-0.002***	-0.002**
		(0.001)	(0.001)
MC Majority		0.001	-0.001
		(0.006)	(0.006)
MC Chair		0.016	0.014
		(0.013)	(0.013)
MC Power Comm		0.017***	0.015**
		(0.006)	(0.006)
Education			0.034***
			(0.008)
News Interest			0.147***
			(0.012)
Age			0.013***
			(0.002)
Gender			-0.007
			(0.005)
Constant	0.787***	0.819***	0.627***
	(0.065)	(0.066)	(0.067)
N Dist-Year	2969	2969	2945
SD(Dist-Year)	0.057	0.056	0.054
ICC	0.063	0.061	0.056
N	9402	9402	9368
Note:		*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

TABLE C3. State and Year Fixed Effects Models (Logged Symbolic Sponsorship)

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	Dependent variable:		
	MC Approval		
	Basic	MC-Level Controls	Full Controls
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Logged Sym. Sponsorship	0.017***	0.017***	0.016***
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
MC Seniority		-0.002**	-0.001**
		(0.001)	(0.001)
MC Majority		0.001	-0.001
		(0.006)	(0.006)
MC Chair		0.015	0.014
		(0.013)	(0.013)
MC Power Comm		0.017***	0.015**
		(0.006)	(0.006)
Education			0.034***
			(0.008)
News Interest			0.147***
			(0.012)
Age			0.013***
			(0.002)
Gender			-0.006
			(0.005)
Constant	0.778***	0.808***	0.617***
	(0.066)	(0.067)	(0.068)
N Dist-Year	2969	2969	2945
SD(Dist-Year)	0.057	0.056	0.054
ICC	0.062	0.06	0.056
N	9402	9402	9368

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

APPENDIX D: EXPLORING EFFECTS AMONG ALL VOTERS

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Sponsoring symbolic legislation carries potential risks for MCs, as voters who do not share their legislator's political preferences or partisanship may dislike efforts to advance policies they do not support. To explore this possibility, we fit additional models using the entire dataset.

Unlike the model discussed in the main text, which focuses on a subset of politically aligned voters, these models include respondents who do not share their legislator's partisanship or policy preferences. We estimated the models using OLS regression with state-level fixed effects and a varying intercept for congressional district years. *Issue Agreement* is an ordinal variable, with responses divided into thirds and binned into low, medium, and high levels of perceived issue agreement. *Partisan Alignment* indicates whether a respondent is the same party as their MC, independent, or of a different party. *Approval* is coded in the same way as the main analysis, with 0 being the lowest and 1 being the highest level of MC approval. *Symbolic Legislation* is a count of symbolic legislation sponsored by the respondent's MC. To test for the differential effects of symbolic legislation sponsorship, we interacted *Symbolic Legislation* with *Partisan Alignment* as well as *Issue Agreement* (Figure D1 below). We also included a set of control variables which are listed in Table C1. Due to collinearity between partisan alignment and perceived issue agreement, we also ran two separate models where we interact symbolic legislation with partisanship and issue agreement separately (omitting the other term and interaction; Figure D2 below).

Figure D1 shows the marginal effects for the full model. The results show symbolic legislation has a positive coefficient when voters have aligned partisanship (left panel) as well as aligned issue agreement (right panel). However, there are null effects among members of the out-party, as well as when issue alignment is not high.

Due to the strong potential for collinearity between partisanship and issue agreement, we also look at models where we include only a single interaction term. These results are displayed in Figure D2. The left panel shows the results of the partisanship interaction, where there is a statistically significant negative coefficient for symbolic legislation amongst out–party voters. The right panel indicates a negative but statistically insignificant coefficient for voters in the lowest third of issue agreement.

While some effects are significant, because we do not have experimental data for when respondents are not politically aligned with their MC we cannot easily infer causality. Additionally, the observational evidence for voters punishing MCs is dependent on the model specification. Nonetheless, these results suggest that there may be hazards associated with

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sponsoring symbolic legislation—hazards that a risk-averse MC in a highly competitive district may be prudent to avoid. At a minimum, these results indicate the need for further research to determine how voters with differing political attitudes respond to symbolic legislation.

FIGURE D1: Determinants of MC Approval: Full Sample and Full Model
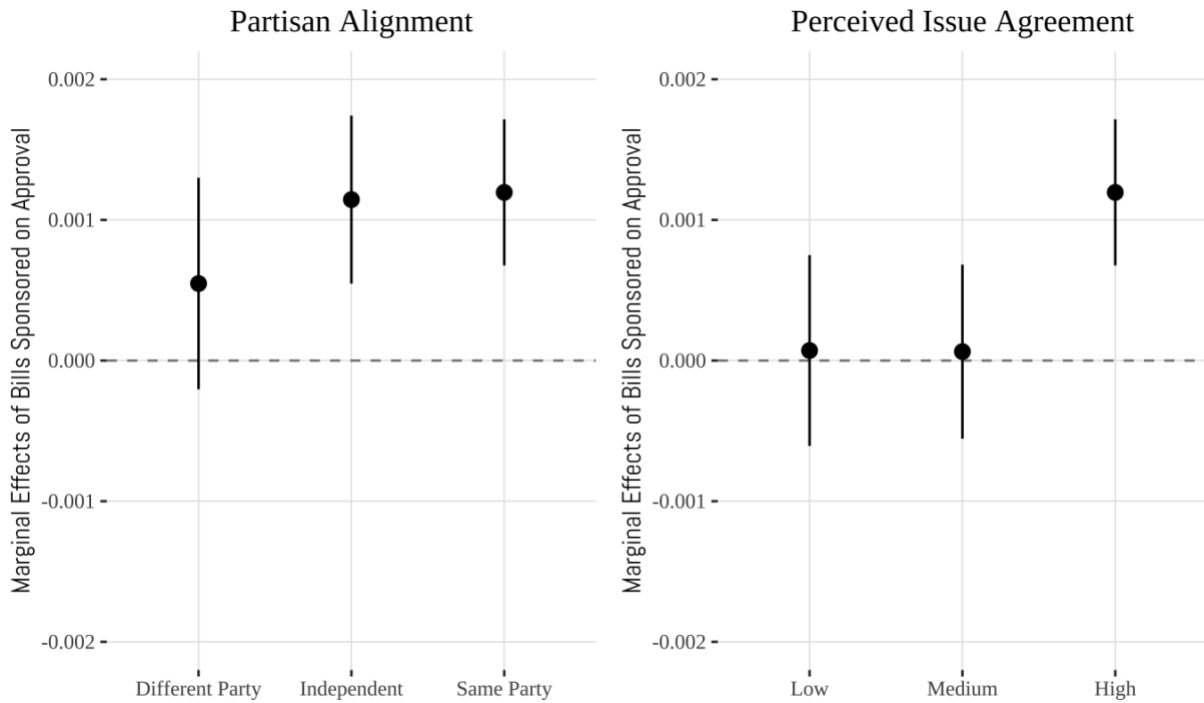
Notes: Graph shows the marginal effects of legislator approval (0 being lowest, 1 being highest). Data is Cooperative Election Study (CES) from 2006-2018. Model is OLS with varying intercepts for district-year and interaction terms for party and issue alignment. Accompanying model located in Table D1, column 3. Confidence intervals are 95%. Number of respondents=43,407. Number of district-years=4805.

FIGURE D2: Determinants of MC Approval: Full Sample with Simple Models
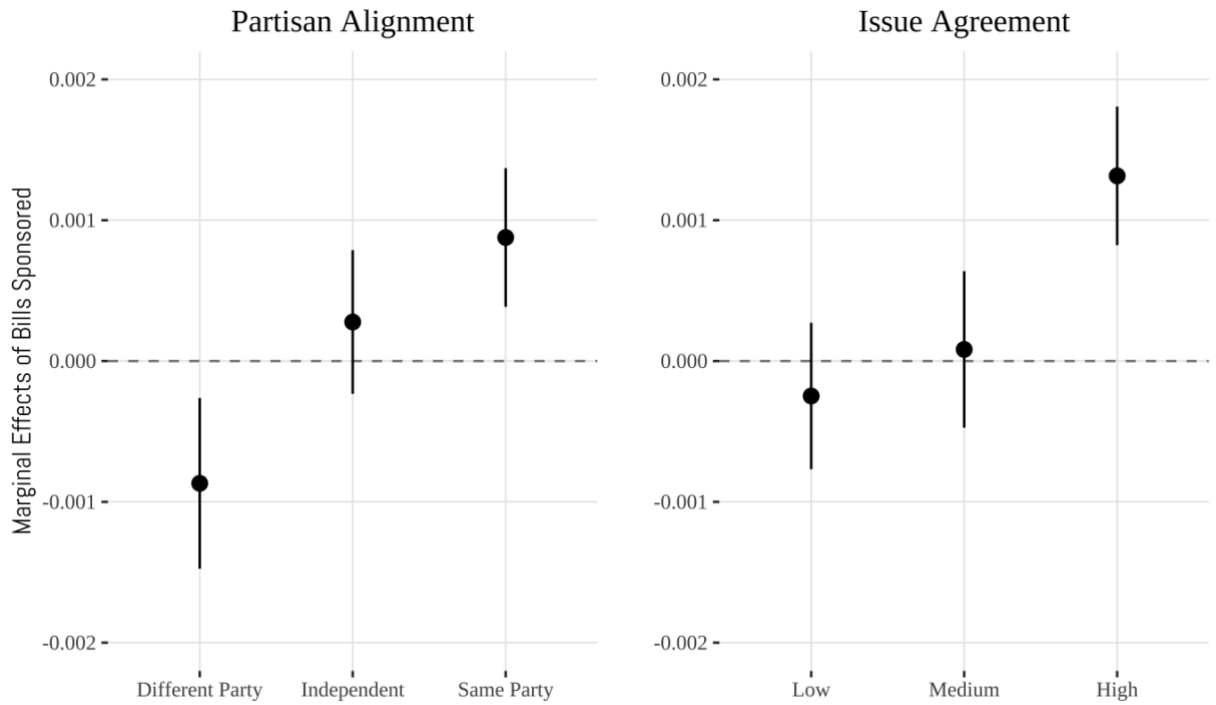
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Notes: Graph shows the marginal effects of legislator approval (0 being lowest, 1 being highest). Data is Cooperative Election Study (CES) from 2006-2018. Models are OLS with varying intercepts for district-year. Each panel represents a separate model. Accompanying model located in Table D1 in columns 1 and 2. Confidence intervals are 95%. Number of respondents=43,407 and 43735. Number of district-years=4808.

TABLE D1: Determinants of MC Approval: Full Sample

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Determinants of Approval

	Dependent variable:		
	MC Approval		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Symb Sponsorship	-0.001***	-0.0002	-0.001*
	(0.0003)	(0.0003)	(0.0003)
Independent	0.187***		0.119***
	(0.007)		(0.006)
Same Party	0.419***		0.285***
	(0.007)		(0.007)
MC Seniority			-0.001
			(0.0004)
MC Majority			0.004
			(0.004)
MC Chair			0.004
			(0.008)
MC Power Comm			0.001
			(0.004)
Education			-0.011**
			(0.005)
News Interest			0.011*
			(0.006)
Age			0.007***
			(0.001)
Gender			0.015***

			(0.003)
Medium Issue Agreement		0.272***	0.209***
		(0.006)	(0.006)
High Issue Agreement		0.427***	0.316***
		(0.006)	(0.006)
Symb Spons X Ind	0.001***		0.001*
	(0.0004)		(0.0003)
Symb Spons X Same Party	0.002***		0.001*
	(0.0004)		(0.0004)
Symb Spons X Med Issue Agreement		0.0003	-0.00001
		(0.0004)	(0.0003)
Symb Spons X High Issue Agreement		0.002***	0.001***
		(0.0003)	(0.0003)
Constant	0.240***	0.216***	0.104***
	(0.035)	(0.035)	(0.035)
N Dist-Year	4808	4808	4752
SD(Dist-Year)	0.048	0.051	0.047
ICC	0.019	0.021	0.018
N	43407	43735	43071

Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01