Partisan Social Identity, Electoral Accountability, and Congressional Representation
Ryan Strickler
Southern Political Science Association Annual Meeting
January 9th, 2016
Mass partisan polarization is a driving force in 21st century American politics. Far removed from heterogeneous parties and “candidate centered” elections of the 60’s and 70’s, many pundits and scholars argue that the schism between Democrats and Republicans in the electorate is larger than it has been since the early 20th century (Bafumi and Shapiro 2009; Abramowitz 2010; Dionne 2013). And, echoing past historical eras, pundits and scholars today also suggest that polarization negatively effects the quality and responsiveness of the nation’s representative government. As George Washington once said that partisanship “agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms” and “kindles the animosity of one part against another,” today’s commentators claim that polarization drives government gridlock and dysfunction, disillusionment with politics, and even the erosion of familial and friend relations (“Washington’s Farewell Address” 2008 [1796]).

Others, however, argue that there is a normative benefit to mass partisan polarization, as it creates greater possibilities for electoral accountability and substantive representation. Levendusky, for example, argues that polarized parties produces greater opinion “constraint” in the electorate, allowing the citizenry to better bring their views to bear in the voting booth (2009). As a result, “strong,” polarized parties can create “responsible party government,” where parties in power can respond to the citizenry (or at least those that vote for them) (see also APSA 1950; Key 1964). This connection between partisanship, representation, and accountability, though, assumes that polarization is primarily an ideological phenomenon; in other words, polarization means the electorate is becoming more homogenous and distinct in opinion on political issues of the day. If, instead, parties are primarily polarizing as social groups, independently from ideology (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Mason 2015), mass partisan polarization may not be creating these salutary benefits of citizen “constraint.” In this case,
Democrats and Republicans in the electorate increasingly seek to support their “team” regardless of the ideology or platform of who is running.

Thus, the basic question motivating this study is, “does partisan polarization, based on social identity, disrupt electoral accountability and Congressional representation?” The study finds that, in certain ways but not others, it does. Using 2008 ANES survey data and focusing on the House of Representatives in the 110th Congress, this initial study shows that the salience of one’s party as part of his or her social identity has a consistent, significant impact on one’s likelihood of approving of, and voting for, one’s Congressman. Moreover, for partisans with an out-party Congressional incumbent, high social identity salience means that respondents are less likely to assess their out-party representative based on his or her ideological platform, and more likely to simply disapprove of their representative regardless of ideological proximity. However, this is not the case with regard to the vote decision; even for those whose partisan social identity salience is high, ideological proximity still matters in the vote choice for both in-party and out-party incumbents. In sum, social identity polarization disrupts, but does not completely dismantle, the accountability relationship hypothesized by “responsible party government” theory.

The paper begins by discussing representation in a theoretical light, and then surveying the research on representation, electoral accountability, and partisan polarization. After drawing the distinction between “ideological” and “social identity” bases for partisanship, the paper then develops its theoretical framework and draws out three hypotheses. The next section discusses the data and measures used. Following that are results, and the final section offers a discussion of the import of the results.
Congressional Representation and Polarization

Since the founding era in the US, the concepts of representation and democracy have been virtually synonymous. American independence was forged from a rejection of the British policy of “taxation without representation,” and the founders felt that elected Congressmen “should have an immediate dependence on, and intimate sympathy with, the people” (Madison 1788 [2008]). Despite its importance, though, this concept is effuse and multi-faceted.

“Representation” can mean, for example, “authoritative” representation (simply claiming to act on behalf of constituents), “descriptive” representation (being similar to constituents in key ways), “symbolic” representation (being a “symbol” constituents support or believe in), or “substantive” representation (acting on behalf of the needs or desires of constituents) (Pitkin 1967). The latter has been a primary focus in Congressional scholarship; here, “representation” implies “that there be the expression of the wishes of the represented, and that the government respond to these wishes unless there are good reasons to the contrary,” (Pitkin 1967, 232-3). For Pitkin, the representative can, and must, balance between directly expressing her constituents’ preferences or wishes and using considered judgement to do “what is best” for constituents, as well as balance between acting on behalf of the local interests she represents and acting on behalf of a broader, national interest. In their seminal paper, Miller and Stokes similarly conceptualize substantive policy representation in Congress as a balance between a Burkean “trustee” model (see also Fenno 1977), an “instructed delegate” model, and a national or “responsible party” model. Akin to Pitkin’s ideal representative, they also find that Congressmen adopt all three models at times, depending on the issue at hand (1963).

---

1 While the focus of “substantive representation” in this study is on policy and ideology, there are other ways in which a member of Congress can substantively represent “the wishes of the represented” – for example, through spending and earmark decisions (Grimmer, Westwood, and Messing 2015), constituency service (Parker and Goodman 2013), or societal “problem solving” (Adler and Wilkerson 2012).
Many have argued that greater substantive representation in Congress, through a “responsible party model,” is normatively desirable; the 1950 American Political Science Association Report “Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System,” for example, argues that strong, ideologically distinct parties are necessary for “democratic, responsible, and effective” governance (APSA 1950). Given the fact that Congressional ideological party polarization is currently at its highest level in the past century (McCarthy, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Theriault 2008), the call in this report for polarized, “responsible” parties may have been realized. However, polarization may not have the salutary effects for collective representation that the APSA report assumes. Fiorina (2011; 2012), for example, argues that the elite polarization of the modern era has created a fundamental disconnect between the citizenry and its elected officials. Driven to the dominance of party organizations by donors, elite activists, and interest groups, on a variety of issues, he shows that the public is on average much more centrist, more ambivalent, and less invested than the political class.

Elite polarization has, moreover, fostered representational inequality across income lines. Gilens and Page (2014; see also Gilens 2005), for example, uses a data set of nearly 1,800 survey items on public policy, matched with the actual direction (or lack thereof) of federal policy change, to demonstrate economic biases in “policy representation.” Where opinions differ across class, policy change reflects the interest of the wealthy to the exclusion of poor or middle income preferences. These biases in collective representation through policymaking have been on the rise since the 70’s, but Ellis shows that there are particularly pronounced today as a result of elite partisan polarization. Polarization has weakened the link between citizen and legislator for all, but the effect is particularly pronounced for poor Americans (2014). While Gilens is finding misrepresentation in national level policymaking (or Miller and Stoke’s “responsible party”
representation), though, Ellis instead examines “instructor-delegate” misrepresentation by looking at the ideological congruence between ANES survey respondents and their representatives. Thus, polarization drives biases in representation at both the “local” and the “collective” level.

**Electoral Accountability**

Key to possibility of substantive policy representation in Congress, at the national or district level, is the extent to which constituents hold Congressmen accountable through elections. If voters do not respond to a mismatch in opinion/ideology at the district level (by voting incumbents out of office) or the national level (by voting writ large against the majority party), the extent to which Congress represents Pitkin’s “wishes of the represented” can be called into question. A long line of public opinion literature has tackled the question of whether citizens have the competence or rationality necessary to perform this task. Many scholars are pessimistic in this regard (Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964; Delli Carpini 2005; Lodge and Taber 2013); Miller and Stokes (1963), in fact, argue that Congressmen will work to represent constituent views *despite* the fact that constituents rarely know salient details about incumbent or challenger party platforms. Others, though, have found that citizens can, in fact, assess candidates based on issue proximity (Franklin and Jackson 1983) or retrospective accounting of policy outcomes (Fiorina 1981). Still others find that voters can effectively use heuristics to hold elected leaders accountable “as if” informed (Lupia 1994; Basinger and Lavine 2005), and still others find that, given incentive to do so, the public can seek out needed information and make considered judgements (Prior and Lupia 2008; List et al. 2012).

---

2 Indeed, Pitkin explicitly discusses this “accountability view” of representation as a necessary, but not sufficient, component of the complete concept of representation (1967, 55-9).
Also, in considering accountability at the collective level, Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002) suggests that the public in aggregate dynamically responds to changing political conditions, even if individual voters are largely ill-informed or irrational. Many argue that the conditions for this aggregate, national-level accountability, moreover, are made stronger through elite polarization; polarized parties provide clearer policy cues to voters, which lead to more consistent attitudes (Levendusky 2009) and greater ideological accountability through party voting (Bafumi and Shapiro 2009). Examining election data from 1976 to 2007, Jones, moreover, shows that the collective performance of Congress becomes more relevant to an individual’s vote decision as parties polarize (2010).

While Jones suggests that voters can hold representatives accountable at the aggregate, national level, Jacobson argues that the accountability relationship is, theoretically and empirically, the strongest at the district level (2009). Ansolabehere and Jones (2010) provide evidence that accountability works at this level as well; using a 2005-6 survey that measures respondents’ opinions and perception of their representative’s voting record on a common scale, they find that most in the public both have policy opinions and accurate perceptions of how their representative voted on those issues. Then, using an instrumental variable to parse out endogeneity, they show that congruence between a respondent’s opinion and his/her representative’s voting behavior has a stronger influence on supporting the representative than even congruence in party identification. Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan (2002) finds a similar result over time; consistently from 1956 to 1996, voting with the ideological extreme of one’s party has had a negative impact on incumbents’ vote shares. Carson et al. (2010) critique the results of Canes-Wrone et al., showing observational and experimental evidence that constituents punish excessive party voting, not ideological voting. Both works, however, point to the same
conclusion; congressmen that deviate from constituent opinion are held accountable through elections.

**Accountability and Mass (Social Identity) Polarization**

This finding of “clearer cues” and the possibility of greater electoral accountability through elite polarization (Jones 2010; Levendusky 2009; Carson 2010), though, does not square with the “disconnect” in substantive Congressional representation found by Fiorina and others (Fiorina 2012; Gilens and Page 2014; Bafumi and Herron 2010). In other words, if voters have a greater ability to hold Congressmen accountable for moving away from their ideological preferences, why do they not do so? A key component in answering this question is the nature of mass partisanship, and whether the electorate is polarizing the same way that elites are. If they are, ideological extremity in Congress accurately represents ideological extremity in the electorate, and polarized voters can respond rationally to the “clearer cues” offered by elites. Some public opinion scholars argue that this is indeed the case (Abramowitz 2010; Abramowitz and Saunders 2008). Others, however, argue that while the public may be better “sorted” by party based on their views, it is no more ideologically polarized than when *The American Voter* was written in 1960 (Fiorina 2011; Levendusky 2009; Hill and Tausanovitch 2015).

Looking at mass polarization as purely an ideological construct, though, is incomplete. It ignores a dominant line of public opinion research dating back to *The American Voter*, which posits that mass partisan is better thought of as a long-term, psychological attachment. The public identifies, votes for, and takes action for the Democratic or Republican party based more on group affiliation and attachment than a dynamic, rational assessment of platforms and positions (Campbell et al. 1960; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Mason 2015). It also
ignores a long-standing finding in social psychology on the primacy of affect in generating attitudes and producing behavior (Zajonc 1984; 1980).

Building on this insight, Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012) show that both sides of the debate on mass polarization are, in a way, correct; polarization has increased in the public in the past 30 years, but it is a rise of affective, not ideological, partisanship. Here, they show that partisans are more prone to dislike and stereotype out-party members as well to not to approve of interparty marriage for their children. They draw on social identity theory (Tajfel et al. 1971; Turner and Hogg 1987) to explain this growth in dislike and aversion, suggesting that an increasingly negative environment for political communication has increased the salience of one’s preferred party as a group identity and exacerbated social distance between parties, producing these affective responses. In a following paper, Iyengar and Westwood (2014) show experimental evidence suggesting that, today, the salience of party as a social identity creates implicit and explicit bias and aversion to out-party members that is even stronger than aversion to racial out-groups. Moreover, in line with predictions from social identity theory, social identity polarization is a driver of anger towards one’s out-party and activism on behalf of one’s in-party (Mason 2015; Huddy, Mason, and AarøE 2015).

A common theme in the work on “social identity” polarization is that social distance can develop independently from ideological distance. This does not mean that ideology and social identity are unrelated; it is true that partisan identity can be an “unmoved mover” that influences issue opinion for partisans (Carsey and Layman 2006). Mason also finds that one of the drivers of social polarization is the ideological sorting of the parties, as consistency in attitudes between elites and the public increases the salience of partisan identity (2015). However, Mason and others in this literature show that ideological extremity of opinion, once sorting is accounted for,
is unrelated to the social distance between parties one feels. The result is, as Mason describes, “an electorate that may agree on many things, but nonetheless cannot get along,” (2015, 129).

**Theory**

“Social identity” partisan polarization, contrasted with ideological polarization, poses questions for electoral accountability and substantive representation. If the public is increasingly polarizing along ideological lines, partisan supporters will share the same outlook as the Congressional incumbents and challengers they vote for. While non-partisans may be misrepresented (Fiorina 2012), partisan citizens will have their views reflected through Congressional activity, and elite polarization (at least for this subset of citizens) approximates Pitkin’s “wishes of the represented”. However, if the current era of mass partisan polarization is largely a social identity phenomenon, the accountability relationship between not only independents but the partisan citizenry and their representatives is weak. Elite ideological polarization in this case does not necessarily reflect the policy views of the partisan public, but instead only represents what Pitkin would call “symbolic representation.” In other words, it is representation through group identity and emotion, not substance.

At the individual level, for the partisan citizen, one’s level of partisan social identification influences the accountability relationship that is key to substantive representation. Those for whom partisanship as a social identity is salient should support an in-party incumbent and oppose an out-party incumbent, regardless of how “close” the incumbent is to him or her ideologically. If one’s “social” partisan identification is lower, however, the ideological proximity between citizen and representative should play a key role in support for the representative. Thus, as the hypotheses below suggest, I expect both “social identity” partisan
identification and ideological congruence to matter for electoral accountability, but as the salience of partisanship as a social identity increases, ideological proximity will matter less:

- H1: A lower level of proximity in ideology between citizen and representative results in lower levels of support, and a lower likelihood of voting for, that representative

- H2: Higher levels of “social identity” partisan identification will result in higher levels of support, and a higher likelihood of voting for, in-party representatives. The opposite is true for out-party representatives

- H3: As “social identity” partisan identification increases, the effect of ideological proximity on support/voting for one’s representative decreases

**Operationalization and Measurement**

Data primarily comes from the ANES Time Series Cumulative File. For this initial analysis, the 2008 data from this file is used (N = 2322); as all of the variables are measured for multiple years, future analysis will look at multiple waves of the ANES.

This study focuses only a subset of constituents, looking at the dyadic relationship between citizen and district incumbent. It thus confines analysis to respondents with one Democratic or Republican incumbent in their district. It further confines the analysis to self-identified partisans, examining the impact of “social identity” in-party identification on this dyadic relationship. By doing this, it ignores nonpartisans; this is perhaps a key omission, given the rise in independent identification in recent years (Abrams and Fiorina 2012) as well as the fact that independent “leaners” may behave in a partisan manner (Keith et al. 1992). It also ignores questions of collective representation, as well as other types of representation (such as “descriptive” or “discursive” representation, etc). The study thus only gets at a piece of the representation puzzle. However, given the focus and debate on the rise of mass polarization and
its effect on the American political landscape, both in academic literature (Fiorina 2011; Abramowitz 2010; Iyengar and Westwood 2014; Huddy, Mason, and AarøE 2015) and popular discourse (Bishop 2008; Pew Research Center 2014), it is a piece of the puzzle worth studying.

Thus, analysis focuses on two groups of ANES respondents – self-identified partisans (Democrats and Republicans combined) represented by an in-party incumbent in the 110th Congress (N = 710) and self-identified partisans represented by an out-party incumbent in the 110th Congress (N = 409). This study looks at two dependent variables. First, approval is a binary indicator of whether or not the respondent approves of the incumbent in his or her district. Second, vote is a binary indicator indicating whether or not the respondent voted for the incumbent (as opposed to another candidate or not voting) in the 2008 election. The general statistical models that are tested here are as follows:

\[
\text{approval} = \text{social identity} + \text{proximity} + \text{social identity} \times \text{proximity}
\]

\[
\text{vote} = \text{social identity} + \text{proximity} + \text{social identity} \times \text{proximity}
\]

**Proximity** - The covariates of interest are proximity and social identity. Drawing from the work of Achen (1978) and Ellis (2014; 2013), proximity is a dyadic measure of the spatial distance in ideology between a respondent and his or her incumbent. Incumbent ideology is measured through 110th Congress DW-NOMINATE first dimension scores; each respondent is matched with the DW-NOMINATE score for his or her representative. DW-NOMINATE scores range from -1 to 1, with higher scores indicating a more conservative representative.

Respondent ideology is operationalized through self-placement on a 7-point liberal to conservative scale. Admittedly, using self-assessments of ideology is problematic, as (like with partisanship) respondents may be attracted to the symbolism or “social identity” aspects of ideological labels (Ellis and Stimson 2012). Certainly, future iterations of this study will
operationalize respondent ideology using issue-based questions as well. However, as an initial analysis, this will suffice; Ellis (2013) uses both self-placement and opinion on “key vote” issues to operationalize respondent ideology and finds statistically and substantively similar results.

The 7-point respondent ideology scale is rescaled from -1 to 1 to match the DW-NOMINATE scale\(^3\); proximity, then, is just the distance in incumbent and respondent ideology on these common scales. The possible range is thus from 0 (complete congruence) to 2 (complete antipathy). Figure One gives an idea of how close respondents are to their representative on this scale; as one can see, the bulk of respondents are between 0 and 0.5, but with a substantial tail extending to 2.

(Figure One Here)

**Social Identity** – Drawing from the literature on social and affective polarization, respondent partisan social identity is operationalized in three separate ways. First, *feeling thermometer* is a measure of the difference in how favorably the respondent feels towards the two major parties (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012). Respondents are asked to rate both the Democratic and Republican party on a scale from 0 (very unfavorable) to 100 (very favorable). This feeling thermometer measure, then, is the absolute value in the difference of respondent feeling towards the Democrat and Republican parties. As Figure Two indicates, respondents are fairly evenly spread across the possible range of 0 (same favorability towards both parties) to 100 (completely favorability for one party and unfavorability for another)

(Figure Two here)

Second, *strong* is simply a binary measure of whether or not the respondent identifies him or herself as a “strong” partisan. This is perhaps an intuitive measure of a Democrat or Republican’s strength of partisanship as a social identity; in the sample, 52% of the partisan

---

\(^3\) Those that responded “Don’t Know” to this question were placed with moderates at 0 on this scale.
respondents consider themselves to be a “strong” Democrat or Republican. Finally, anger is a measure of felt emotion towards the 2008 Democratic and Republican presidential candidates. While this measure focuses on candidates, not partisanship per se, it is a useful proxy for anger towards the major parties (as Presidential candidates are the party’s standard bearers). There is also precedent for using this measure as a proxy in the literature (Mason 2015; Huddy, Mason, and AarøE 2015), and it is an especially valuable measure as out-group anger is a particular strong indicator of social identity salience (Mackie, Devos, and Smith 2000). Anger is a binary measure, coded 1 if the partisan respondent felt anger toward the out-party candidate but not the in-party candidate. In the sample, 39% of respondents were coded 1 on this variable.

Results – Approval Analysis

First, how does ideological proximity and “social identity” partisanship relate to incumbent approval? Tables One and Two provide some insight to this question; for both the in-party and out-party group of respondents, logistical regressions were run using (separately) each of the three operationalizations of “social identity” partisanship. The tables report the coefficients for our covariates of interests, and they also indicate levels of statistical significance. Illustrated by the table, ideological proximity has a consistent impact on the likelihood of incumbent approval. As respondents’ ideology gets further away from the ideology of the incumbent, they are less like to approve of him or her. This is particularly true for those with out-party incumbents; while the coefficient for proximity is in the hypothesized direction for all in-party and out-party models, in each out-party model proximity is also statistically significant.

Respondents’ partisan social identity, though, has a mixed effect on the likelihood of incumbent approval. For in-party incumbents, social identity does not have a significant impact, but for out-party incumbents, it does. For the “out-party” models, all coefficients are in the
hypothesized negative direction; the greater the social identity salience of party, the less likely one is to approve of an out-party incumbent. Two of the three models, moreover, are statistically significant. Finally, the interaction between proximity and social identity, while being insignificant in-party respondents, is in the correct hypothesized direction for out-party respondents. Further, the feeling thermometer model is statistically significant, and the anger model is near significance at p=0.108. Thus, there is at least some evidence that, as one’s social identity salience goes up, the impact of ideological distance on approval goes down. As Table A1 in the Appendix indicates, these results for the “out-party” models hold up with demographic controls are included⁴.

(Tables One and Two)

To assess the substantive impact of the feeling thermometer measure on proximity and incumbent approval, Figures Three and Four present graphs of the predicted probability of approving of an incumbent across a range of proximity values. The graphs on the left show the predicted probabilities when one’s feeling thermometer score is set to the sample’s mean value, and the graphs on the right show the probabilities for when the score is set to one standard deviation above this value. Figure Three presents these predicted probabilities for in-party respondents, and Figure Four presents them for out-party respondents. Looking at Figure Three, one sees a consistent, yet weak relationship between ideological proximity and approval for respondents with in-party incumbents, regardless of one’s difference in feeling toward the parties. Figure Four, though, suggest that for partisans with an out-party incumbent, this relationship hinges on social identity salience. When partisan identity salience is high,

⁴ Controls are not used for the regression results reported in Tables One and Two. This is because, theoretically, the argument here is not a causal one. The goal is to assess the relationship of ideological proximity and social identity salience to incumbent approval; the analysis is less focused on whether race, gender, age, or anything else is antecedently driving this relationship (although that is an important question for future research).
respondents’ are not more likely to approve of an out-party incumbent when there is a closer ideological match.

(Figures Three and Four)

Figures Five and Six, focusing on the anger indicator of social identity salience, tell a similar story. Figure Six indicates that if one is not angry towards the out-party, his or her approval is much more likely to respond to the dyadic ideological distance between him/her and the incumbent. However, if one does express anger towards the out-party, the out-party Congressional incumbent is not likely to be supported regardless of ideological proximity. Figure Five shows that this effect is not found with in-party incumbents; even when one displays anger towards the out-party, respondents’ assessment of their incumbent will still hinges on their ideological proximity.

(Figure Five and Six)

Results - Voting Analysis

So far, the analysis suggests that “social identity” partisan polarization problematizes the accountability relationship between the partisan citizen and his or her out-party (but not in-party) representative. As the social identity indicators used here increase, one is likely to not approve of an out-party incumbent regardless of how close they are in political ideology. The second set of analyses, though, investigates whether this finding translates to the vote decision. Past research is divided on this question. While “retrospective” accountability is a staple of voting behavior theory (Fiorina 1981; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002), Green, Palmquist, and Schickler (2002) show that partisans are likely to vote for their in-party candidate even if they disapprove of or dislike him/her.

---

5 Here, respondents that voted for a candidate outside of the district they were interviewed in were excluded in the analysis. This results in an in-party subgroup of 685, and an out-party subgroup of 390
The results for the voting analysis tell a slightly different story than the incumbent approval analysis. Tables Three and Four show that, in line with Fiorina (1981) and others, there is evidence of ideologically accountability in the voting booth for partisans with both out-party and in-party incumbents. All models are in the correct hypothesized direction, and for both “out-party” and “in-party” sets of models, two out of the three models are statistically significant to the p<0.05 level. There is also evidence that partisan social identity salience, in and above a Downsian assessment of ideological congruence, matters in the voting booth. Looking at social identity variables, both sets of analyses have all the coefficients in the correct directions, with two out of three being at least marginally significant. In sum, being ideologically distant from the incumbent and having party as part of one’s social identity both have separate, independent effects on voting decisions. The interaction relationship found in the out-party approval analysis above, though, is not present here. The lack of a consistent, significant interaction relationship in Table Three and Four suggest that, even for those whose partisan social identity is salient, respondents still take ideological proximity into consideration when voting.

*(Tables three and four)*

Figure Seven, looking solely at social identity operationalized as anger, gives an idea of the effect of both proximity and social identity on vote choice. When respondents do not express anger towards the out-party, the probably of breaking from their party’s candidate is responsive to his or her ideological proximity. In fact, when proximity = 1, the respondent is more likely to not vote for the in-party incumbent as he/she is to do so. The figure suggests that the probability for voting for an in-party incumbent is larger if anger is expressed towards the out-party; however, even in this case, the probability is still responsive to ideological proximity.

*(Figure Seven)*
Figure Eight, which examines the effect of anger and proximity on vote choice for out-party respondents, tells a similar story. One is most likely to vote for an out-party incumbent when he or she does not express anger towards the out-party and is ideologically proximate to the incumbent. Absent either one of these conditions, respondents are not likely to vote for an out-party incumbent. However, even when anger towards the out-party is present, the probability of incumbent voting still hinges on ideological proximity. The hypothesized interaction between social identity and ideological proximity, present in the approval analysis, does not hold up with vote choice.

(Figure Eight)

Discussion and Conclusion

The basic question motivating this study is, “does partisan polarization, based on social identity, disrupt electoral accountability and Congressional representation?” The results here provide some evidence that it does. For partisans considering their out-party Congressman, the likelihood of approval is negatively related to the salience of party to their social identity. In addition, the relationship between incumbent approval and ideological proximity hinges on partisan social identity; as these social identity indicators become more prominent, one is less likely to assess ideological congruence with his or her representative, and one is more likely simply not approve of an out-party incumbent. Further, partisan social identity salience impacts voting decisions for those with both in-party and out-party incumbents, above and beyond assessments of ideological congruence.

More heartening for “responsible party government” theory, though, are the findings from this study suggesting that a “rational” assessment of ideological congruence still matters. For partisans with both in-party and out-party incumbents, ideological proximity has a fairly
consistent impact on whether a respondent approves of or votes for their Congressman. Moreover, while for those with out-party incumbents partisan social identity mitigates the impact of ideological proximity on approval, the same effect is not found on the vote choice for out-party incumbents. In other words, even for whom party is an important part of their identity, they will still consider ideology when voting for an in-party or out-party incumbent (although the effect of ideology is weaker than that of social identity).

More theoretical and empirical work needs to be done to answer why partisan identity is more disruptive to the accountability relationship with regard to approving of, rather than voting for, one’s incumbent. A place to start may be with Green et al. (2002), who show evidence suggesting that partisans will deviate from their party at times with their voting decision while still holding onto their affiliation as a long-term, psychological attachment. In addition, the evidence here suggests that partisan social is more disruptive to the out-party, rather than the in-party, relationship; more theoretical and empirical work needs to be done to tease out why. A place to start with this, though, would be the work of Iyengar (Iyengar and Westwood 2014; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012). His research suggests that social polarization is primarily driven by an increase in out-party animus, not an increase in enthusiasm for one’s in party. This is primarily caused by the increase in negative campaigning in the United States over time, which makes negative out-party affect one of the most salient aspects of the political landscape for the casual political observer. These insights could explain why citizens are able to account for ideology in approving of in-party incumbents, but are less willing to do so for out-party incumbents. More, though, need to be explored in this regard.

The more pessimistic normative implications of this study - that the recent increase in “social polarization” means we have more trouble holding our Congressmen accountable in
important ways – seem bleak. However, it does not necessarily support the typically cynical view in public opinion literature that the citizenry is too uneducated or irrational for the demands of democracy (Campbell et al. 1960; Delli Carpini 2005; Lodge and Taber 2013). First, as discussed earlier, even for those whose partisan social identity salience is high, ideology still matters in the voting decisions for incumbents. Second, as mentioned earlier, there are many other ways of “representing” ones constituents than through ideological proximity, ways that are not explored here. Finally, if it is indeed true that the accountability relationship between citizen and representative is disrupted, the study does not speak to where the onus lies. It may be that citizens are irreducibly irrational, and human cognition is irreducibly social, but it also may be true that political elites manipulate social identity for electoral gain. Thus, given a different political and media landscape, citizens may well be able to respond to ideological assessments of out-party candidates as well.

Of course, many aspects of this analysis could use some work. I will highlight three here:

- First, constructing an ideological proximity measure using respondents’ self-reported ideology is problematic. While analysis of dyadic representation using both self-reported ideology and ideology scores constructed through issue questions has found similar results (Ellis 2013), theoretically it has issues, as people can be attached to the symbolism as opposed to the substance of being “liberal” or “conservative” (Ellis and Stimson 2012). This is particularly true for recent years, as the symbolism of party and ideology are very much intertwined (Bafumi and Shapiro 2009). As such, future iterations of this project will also incorporate an “issue based” measure of respondent ideology;

- Second, by focusing on a narrow sliver of the citizenry (self-identified partisans in a district with a running partisan incumbent), the accountability relationships remained
unexamined for important groups. For example, does partisan social identity matter in the same way for independent “leaners”? With the public increasingly not affiliating with either party, do independents solely draw on ideology in assessing their representatives, or do they draw on other sources of social identity (say, racial or class identity)? Further research will be needed to answer these questions and others;

- Finally, the claims that can be made from one dataset in one year are limited. Luckily, all of the variables used in this analysis are asked for multiple years, and the analysis can be repeated for different iterations of the ANES. One could thus assess the effect of social polarization on out-party approval/voting across time and see whether it holds up in less “polarized” eras. In addition, a similar analysis could be done using other data sources, such as the CCES.

Despite these limitations, the initial results presented here are intriguing, and they speak to important findings in political psychology and democratic theory. Social identity theory has increasingly been leveraged in studies of public opinion to explain partisan attitudinal biases, anger, and activism against “the other side” (Iyengar and Westwood 2014; Mason 2015; Huddy, Mason, and AarøE 2015). This study attempts to further extend the social identity perspective to questions of democratic representation. “Substantive representation,” as conceptualized by by Pitkin and responsible party government theorists, hinges on electoral accountability; the public, in other words, needs to approve of incumbents that “express the wishes of the represented,” and vote out incumbents that do not. The study here suggests that, in the current era of “social identity” partisanship, they often will not.
Works Cited


http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp.


### Tables and Figures

**Table One: In-Party Incumbent Approval**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>“Feeling Thermometer” Model</th>
<th>“Strong” Model</th>
<th>“Anger” Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ideological Proximity</td>
<td>-1.733***</td>
<td>-0.819</td>
<td>-0.881*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Identity</td>
<td>-0.002</td>
<td>0.576</td>
<td>0.433</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological Proximity</td>
<td>0.020</td>
<td>-0.026</td>
<td>-0.245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Social Identity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>691 (19 obs. deleted due to missing values)</td>
<td>703 (7 obs. deleted)</td>
<td>703 (7 obs. deleted)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Models: Logistic Regression, weights and design effect incorporated; *p < 0.1, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01

**Table Two: Out-Party Incumbent Approval**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>“Feeling Thermometer” Model</th>
<th>“Strong” Model</th>
<th>“Anger” Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ideological Proximity</td>
<td>-1.752***</td>
<td>-1.050**</td>
<td>-0.963**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Identity</td>
<td>-0.036***</td>
<td>-0.631</td>
<td>-1.397**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological Proximity</td>
<td>0.028***</td>
<td>0.660</td>
<td>1.157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Social Identity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>400 (9 obs. deleted due to missing values)</td>
<td>406 (3 obs. deleted)</td>
<td>406 (3 obs. deleted)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Models: Logistic Regression, weights and design effect incorporated; *p < 0.1, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01

**Table Three – Vote Intention for In-Party Incumbent**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>“Feeling Thermometer” Model</th>
<th>“Strong” Model</th>
<th>“Anger” Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ideological Proximity</td>
<td>-0.799</td>
<td>-1.491**</td>
<td>-1.656***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Identity</td>
<td>0.018**</td>
<td>0.668*</td>
<td>0.530**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological Proximity</td>
<td>-0.016</td>
<td>0.217</td>
<td>0.259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Social Identity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>672 (13 obs. deleted due to missing values)</td>
<td>685 (no obs. deleted)</td>
<td>685 (no obs. deleted)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Models: Logistic Regression, weights and design effect incorporated; *p < 0.1, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01

**Table Four – Vote Intention for Out-Party Incumbent**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>“Feeling Thermometer” Model</th>
<th>“Strong” Model</th>
<th>“Anger” Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ideological Proximity</td>
<td>-1.558***</td>
<td>-1.658**</td>
<td>-0.936*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Identity</td>
<td>-0.032***</td>
<td>-1.171*</td>
<td>-1.110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological Proximity</td>
<td>0.015</td>
<td>0.880</td>
<td>-0.120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Social Identity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>384 (6 obs. deleted due to missing values)</td>
<td>390 (no obs. deleted)</td>
<td>390 (no obs. deleted)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Model: Logistic Regression, weights and design effect incorporated; *p < 0.1, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01
Figure Three – Probability of In-Party Incumbent Approval by Ideological Proximity and Feeling Thermometer

Figure Four – Probability of In-Party Incumbent Approval by Ideological Proximity and Feeling Thermometer
Figure Five

Predicted Probability of Incumbent Approval
In-Party Respondents

Figure Six

Predicted Probability of Approval
Out-Party Respondents
Figure Seven

Predicted Probability of Incumbent Voting
In-Party Respondents

Figure Eight

Predicted Probability of Incumbent Voting
Out-Party Respondents
## Appendix

### Table A1: Out-Party Incumbent Approval, with Control Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>“Feeling Thermometer” Model</th>
<th>“Anger” Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ideological Congruence</td>
<td>-1.880***</td>
<td>-1.043**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling Thermometer</td>
<td>-0.037***</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-1.530**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling Thermometer * Proximity</td>
<td>0.029**</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger * Proximity</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1.145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>-0.158</td>
<td>-0.018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>-0.058</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>0.373</td>
<td>0.488</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.009</td>
<td>0.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>-0.038</td>
<td>-0.082</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>330 (79 obs. deleted due to missingness)</td>
<td>334 (75 obs. deleted due to missingness)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Model: Logistic Regression; *p < 0.1, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01