

Bipartisanship and Public Opinion

OVERVIEW

The U.S. is facing historic levels of party polarization, along with some of the lowest approval ratings for Congress in decades. Yet existing research overlooks how the public responds to legislative gridlock—one of the most discussed consequences of partisan conflict. IPR political scientist **Laurel Harbridge-Yong** fills in the gap with recent research. She and D.J. Flynn of the IE School of Global and Public Affairs and a former IPR graduate research assistant find that while Americans generally prefer Congress to compromise instead of miring itself in gridlock, their commitment to avoiding gridlock hinges on the issue and which party is seen as winning.

FINDINGS

Citizens approve of how Congress is handling policymaking when partisan conflict produces a win for their own party. This holds true for both consensus issues—where the parties disagree over the means but agree on the end goals—and more controversial issues. On the consensus issue of energy policy and the more controversial issue of gun ownership, partisans were most approving, on average, of how Congress handled the issue when their party won in the negotiation.

Citizens, however, disapprove when partisan conflict prevents Congress from acting on an important national issue. Compared with a win



IPR political scientist **Laurel Harbridge-Yong** studies elections, institutions, and policy in the U.S. Congress, as well as bipartisan cooperation.

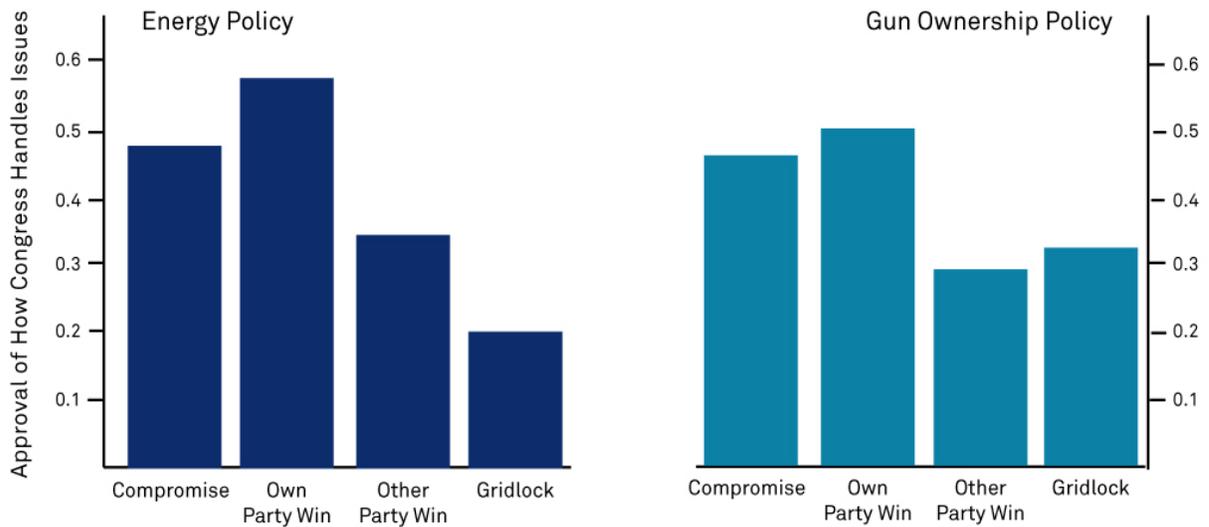
by the opposing party, approval of how Congress is handling energy policy drops by 15 percentage points following gridlock. Both strong and weak partisans—whether Democrats or Republicans—preferred Congress take action. For gun ownership, survey respondents again disliked legislative inaction versus compromise or their own party winning, though they did not show a preference for legislative action by the opposing party over gridlock.

Approval on specific issues affects citizens' overall confidence in Congress, but gridlock decreases their appraisal of it. This suggests gridlock can reduce citizens' confidence in Congress, even without considering how Congress addresses a certain policy.

On consensus issues, citizens prefer gridlock due to ideological differences more than gridlock due to partisan strategy. Approval of Congress' handling of energy policy dropped by 6.6 percentage points when gridlock was attributed to the parties refusing to grant the opposing side a legislative victory versus when it was attributed to the parties having conflicting principles. However, citizens reacted similarly to ideological and partisan gridlock over gun ownership, suggesting they might expect partisan fighting on issues lacking consensus on the end goals.

POLICY TAKEAWAYS

- Partisan behavior in Congress reduces public confidence in the legislative branch.
- Those with strong ties to a political party are more likely to approve of legislators' partisan behavior than citizens with weaker ties.
- Citizens generally prefer compromise to gridlock. On issues where the parties agree on the end goals, citizens prefer a win for opposing party over gridlock.



In two surveys, one focused on an energy policy and another focused on gun ownership laws, respondents preferred either a win by their own party or compromise over gridlock.

METHODOLOGY

Harbridge-Yong and Flynn conducted two survey experiments, each with almost 700 respondents, on Amazon's Mechanical Turk. One survey examined public opinion on Congress' response to energy policy, based on several conditions, including compromise, a win by the respondent's own party, a win by the opposing party, or gridlock. They repeated this in the second survey, focusing instead on the more controversial issue of gun ownership. Robustness checks, which show that the effects are similar across demographic groups, indicate that the findings are likely to generalize beyond the sample population.

REFERENCES

Flynn, D.J., and L. Harbridge-Yong. 2016. How partisan conflict in Congress affects public opinion: Strategies, outcomes, and issue differences. *American Politics Research* 44(5): 875-902.

FACTS AND FIGURES

- Citizens were more positive about how Congress handled issues when learning that, despite party differences, the negotiation led to a compromise than when learning that partisan conflict resulted in gridlock.
- On energy policy (a consensus issue), respondents' approval increased by 10 percentage points when they read that partisan conflict resulted in a victory for their own party relative to a compromise.
- On consensus issues, partisans view Congress 15 percentage points more favorably when a debate results in a win for the other party than when the debate ends in gridlock.