Passing the Buck in Congress: The Extent and Effectiveness of Blaming Others for Inaction

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ABSTRACT

The health of a democracy relies on citizens holding elected officials accountable when they fail to implement policies that serve the public. However, the separation of powers embedded in the American political system can make it difficult for citizens to determine who to blame when policy solutions are not reached. Strategic politicians may take advantage of this by blaming the opposing party or those in other institutions when popular policies are not enacted. The researchers leverage three survey experiments to examine how people respond when legislators "pass the buck." They also consider the extent to which responses to blaming rhetoric are conditioned by partisan affinity and whether the blaming legislator's party controls both chambers of Congress. Their findings suggest that blaming may be an appealing rhetorical strategy for legislators as backlash for deflecting blame is confined to out-partisans. However, their evidence also suggests that blaming rhetoric may exacerbate public dissatisfaction with parties and legislative institutions.

American political institutions were set up to pit ambition against ambition (Madison 1787). By separating powers between institutions and specifying means for those within these institutions to check the actions of other institutions, the Framers intended to slow down the policy making process and preclude political tyranny. Thus, although many models of democracy posit that elected officials should respond to public demands, American institutions were also designed to ensure that politicians are subject to restrictions imposed by other (presumably ambitious) officials.

Recently, scholars have argued that these institutional arrangements—including the bicameral legislature (an arrangement Madison defended in Federalist 51 as a way to further ensure that the legislature did not become too powerful)—in concert with the stark partisan polarization that has emerged over the past several decades in the United States (McCarty et al. 2006; Theriault 2008) cripple legislative action (Mann and Ornstein 2012; Binder 2014). Put simply, partisan representatives are often unwilling to engage in the negotiations necessary to reach policy compromises that address problems the public wants government to address (Mansbridge and Martin 2013). This makes it extremely difficult for legislation to clear all of the hurdles necessary to become law and impedes elected officials' ability to translate public demands into policy in accordance with common models of democratic responsiveness (Weissberg 1978; Stimson et al. 1995). This gridlock is further amplified in situations of divided government where, for example, unabashedly conservative legislation passed by a Republican-controlled House is unlikely to garner sufficient support to pass a Senate controlled by Democrats.

The resulting policy gridlock in Congress is at the forefront of concerns by scholars and the public. In fact, in June of 2016, just 13% of Americans rated the job Congress was doing as excellent or good, and almost half of those who said it was doing a poor job cited congressional inaction as the top reason for their view (Newport and Saad 2016). Judgments about who is to blame for this inaction are likely to be consequential. A large body of research finds that voters' perceptions of who is to blame for phenomena ranging from a flagging economy to recovery efforts following a natural disaster are closely tied to their evaluations of politicians and choices on Election Day (Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2001; Rudolph and Grant 2002; Rudolph 2003, 2006; Malhotra and Kuo 2008; Gomez and Wilson 2008;

Hobolt et al. 2013). To the extent that a particular chamber or party is viewed as responsible for inaction, we may expect their evaluations to suffer.

That said, the explanations elected officials offer for their behavior can be consequential for how the public evaluates them (McGraw et al. 1993; McGraw et al. 1995; Grose et al. 2015). This work shows that legislators can use rhetoric to shape public responses to their *actions*. Here, we posit that they may also be able to use rhetoric to shape responses to *inaction*. Whether or not a member (or their group) is actually responsible for inaction, a member may seek to shift attention and blame to others in the political process. The separation of powers system may foster a situation where passing the buck is a particularly effective avenue for avoiding blame and, ultimately, electoral punishment.[1] Strategic politicians may take advantage of the fact that institutional arrangements make it difficult for many citizens to determine who is to blame when policy solutions are not reached. They may leverage this confusion by blaming the opposing party or those in other institutions when gridlock occurs, dodging blame and, perhaps, further sullying the reputations of these other actors and their institutions. As we document later in this paper, this type of language is common among members of Congress in recent years. Yet we know little about the consequences of this rhetoric for evaluations of the member passing the buck, or on the institutions or parties they blame.

Beyond the possibility that the separation of powers structure may undermine citizens' ability to sensibly mete out blame for gridlock and allow legislators an opening to pass the buck, the partisan polarization that has made the legislative process so challenging in recent years is not confined to legislators. The citizenry increasingly views politics through a partisan lens (Mason 2015; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Greene 2004). Moreover, legislators serve increasingly homogeneous constituencies (Levendusky 2005) and are often more concerned about primary challenges from within their party than appealing to a broader electorate (Brady et al. 2007). Thus, blaming may be a low-cost proposition for

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[1] This obstacle to electoral accountability may be further compounded by the fact that many Americans are misinformed about how the legislative process works and the depth of partisan policy divisions. For example, a 2010 survey by Pew Research found that only 26 percent of Americans knew that 60 votes are needed to overcome a filibuster ("Senate Legislative Process a Mystery to Many" 2010).

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partisan legislators who expect that the co-partisans who largely control their electoral fate will be eager to accept the proposition that blame for inaction lies elsewhere.

In this paper, we theorize about how blaming others for inaction might affect evaluations of various political actors and institutions. After motivating our focus on efforts to pass the buck with a content analysis of members' constituent communication, we assess how the public responds to legislators' explanations for policy inaction by leveraging three survey experiments. Our goal is to understand how passing the buck shapes responses to individual legislators, and to the institutional and partisan targets of the blame. Our findings make three contributions to our understanding of the intersection between gridlock, blaming rhetoric, and public support for Congress.

First, our content analysis shows that blaming rhetoric is quite common in legislators' communications with their constituents, appearing in approximately 10 percent of the newsletters we have collected. In this analysis we also find that when legislators engage in blaming, as our theory would suggest, they typically blame either the opposing part or the opposing chamber. Blaming rhetoric that targets members of one's own party is rare.

Second, our findings indicate that from the perspective of the individual legislator "passing the buck" is likely to be an attractive strategy: backlash for deflecting blame is confined to out-partisans—a group unlikely to support them in any case—who respond negatively to legislators from the opposing party who blame their preferred party for inaction. Moreover, in the second study, we fail to find evidence of increased backlash when a legislator whose party controls both chambers of Congress passes the buck. In the third experiment, we find that legislators who blame members of their own party are not even punished by their co-partisans for casting blame on other co-partisans.

Finally, we find suggestive evidence that, although blaming is relatively costless for the blamer, this rhetoric may undermine the reputations of the institutions and parties that are blamed. For example, when a legislator blames Democrats for inaction, evaluations of Democrats in Congress may fall. In the second experiment, we find that to the extent that the effects of blaming rhetoric depend on whether the blaming legislator's party controls both chambers of Congress, this conditionality is rooted in partisan

considerations. This said, overall, our evidence regarding the effects of blame on the blamed is mixed and inconsistent across our three studies. Further research is needed on this front.

Taken together, our findings show that a rhetorical technique that many legislators use to explain the legislative inaction that flows from an increasingly polarized political environment is likely to be strategically appealing: legislators who simply blame others for policy inaction face little backlash from voters and may even end up improving their relative standing by degrading the reputation of others. This finding helps to explain how gridlock persists in the face of growing public frustrations with "do nothing" Congresses. Unfortunately, blaming rhetoric may fuel partisan animosity and undermine party and institutional reputations. These findings raise an important normative concern. Do legislators' efforts to protect themselves from the consequences of inaction further erode support for the institutions they serve?

Electoral Incentives in a Polarized Legislature

Rising polarization in Congress (McCarty et al. 2006; Theriault 2008), especially when combined with divided government or a lack of a filibuster-proof majority in the Senate, may preclude legislative productivity (Binder 2014; Mann and Ornstein 2012). From the perspective of an individual legislator, this state of affairs is problematic. On one hand, in an era of stark party polarization, cooperating with the opposing party may be unappealing to legislators serving increasingly homogeneous, partisan constituents (Levendusky 2009). On the other hand, although legislators can and do take credit for legislative efforts that do not ultimately yield new policy (e.g., by introducing legislation; Jenkins and Carson (2011)), they have clear incentives to accumulate policy achievements that they can advertise to constituents in order to enhance their reelection prospects (Mayhew 1974).

Additionally, a growing body of work suggests that legislative inaction can be harmful to party and institutional approval (Arnold 1990; Adler and Wilkerson 2013), and that institutional approval can, in turn, affect legislators' electoral prospects (Jones 2010; Jones and McDermott 2010; Wawro 2000). Gridlock can lead to unfavorable evaluations of Congress, not only compared to legislative victories by one's own party, but also compared to victories by the opposing party on consensus issues (Flynn and

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Harbridge 2016). Members' actions and words suggest that they recognize this. Members highlight legislative accomplishments in the communication with constituents (Lipinski 2004) and indicate in surveys that they believe that voters will judge them on the basis of institutional performance (Adler and Wilkerson 2013). Introducing legislation that is dead on arrival (Gelman 2016) or adopting positions that are incompatible with the preferences of key legislative actors may ultimately exacerbate public frustrations with a "do nothing" Congress (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002), undermining incumbent legislators' electoral prospects.

Taken together, this evidence suggests that members, and the majority party in particular, have reason to be concerned that legislative inaction may harm evaluations of their institution, their party's reputation, and ultimately their ability to win reelection. However, members and their partisan or institutional groups may not always be held accountable for inaction. The "triangle model of responsibility" suggests that people are held responsible only when they are perceived as having control over the event (Schlenker et al. 1994). Thus, legislators may be able to avoid penalties for legislative inaction if they are able to convince voters that they do not have the power to overcome inaction and, instead, other actors must act. If so, we may expect to find that, in addition to their more traditional efforts to communicate position-taking (Mayhew 1974), legislators may attempt to insulate themselves from the penalties associated with inaction by communicating that they do not have control over the event in question (inaction).

Much of the existing work that examines the importance of legislative productivity omits this consideration. If individual legislators, parties, or even legislators in a particular chamber of Congress are able to place the blame for inaction on the other chamber or party—regardless of whether such blame is warranted—there may be minimal reputational and electoral costs for inaction (and perhaps even some benefits) for the individual or group passing the buck. However, there may be negative effects on the evaluations of the groups they target, as well as Congress writ large.

Recent communications from members of Congress suggest that many politicians believe that shifting blame to other actors or groups is an effective approach to explaining legislative inaction. Indeed,

at the end of the 113th Congress (2013-2014), the House Republican website featured an entire webpage devoted to the twitter hashtag #StuckInTheSenate (House Republicans 2014a), suggesting that the House was trying to produce a record of success but was being stymied by the Senate. By late-summer, GOP members were giving poster presentations of how many bills were #StuckInTheSenate in speeches on the House floor (House Republicans 2014b) and lamenting Senate inaction on social media (e.g., Blackburn 2014; McKinley 2014). Individual members take a similar tactic in their communication with constituents. For example, in an email from November of 2015, Senator Harry Reid sent a newsletter to constituents saying that, "House Republicans had ample opportunity to consider the comprehensive immigration reform bill passed by the Senate in 2013… But they dug in their heels and refused to so much as bring it up for a vote." The year before, Senator Roger Wicker (R-MS) complained that Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid had not brought the National Defense Authorization Act before the Senate for consideration. All of these statements fit the presumption that productivity matters to legislators; they want to take credit for action and shift the blame for inaction. However, these examples also highlight the focus on partisan and institutional out-groups in the targeting of blame.

To assess the frequency of blame for inaction, and which groups are targeted, we examined a corpus of electronic constituent newsletters sent by legislators in the House and Senate since late 2013.[2] More details on this data and our content analysis is included in Appendix A. Looking at these newsletters systematically[3] indicates that claims about inaction are common, with approximately 10% of all member newsletters referencing inaction. Moreover, inaction was nearly always discussed in a negative light (88.9% negative tone), consistent with our expectation that legislators recognize that voters may be frustrated with inaction, and may thus have incentives to blame others. In keeping with this argument, we found that where inaction was discussed, the newsletter author nearly always blamed someone for inaction (92.1% of the inaction related newsletters blamed one or more groups, compared to

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[2] We began collecting newsletters on October 31, 2013. For those newsletters analyzed here, data collection ended on October 10, 2016.

[3] The sample of 4,138 newsletters discussed here includes some newsletters pulled at random, while others were chosen at various date ranges with multiple newsletters in that date range selected.

7.9% where blame was no specified or was placed on the Washington/the "system"). Figure 1 shows how often each group was blamed by the legislators. In general, the most common object of blame was the Senate, with 48.9% of newsletters including blame of the Senate alone or in combination. Congress as a whole, the House, Republicans, Democrats, and the President received blame much less often.

[Figure 1 about here]

Separating the patterns of blame by party and chamber as they relate to the author of the newsletter shows that party is a core predictor of blame (see Figure 2(a)). Whereas only 3% of newsletters show members blaming their own party for inaction, nearly 35% show members blaming the opposing party for inaction. Likewise, blame of the president is also colored by partisanship, with blame from members of the opposing party occurring much more frequently than blame by member of his own party. Members are much less loyal to their chamber than they are to their party. Blame of one's own chamber occurs at a similar frequency to blame of the other chamber. Separating these patterns further by combinations of party and chamber in relation to the author again highlights legislators' loyalty to their party. As shown in Figure 2(b), legislators are very unlikely to blame their party, regardless of whether that party is in their own chamber or the other chamber. Moreover, when they blame only one group, legislators blame the opposing party much more often than they blame their own party (who they essentially never blame). By contrast, legislators frequently blame the opposing party in their own chamber, as well as the opposing party in the other chamber. When they blame only one group, blame of the other chamber is more common than blame of their own chamber, but both happen fairly frequently.

[Figure 2 about here]

These patterns suggest that members frequently blame others for inaction. While we cannot adjudicate whether "passing the buck" is warranted in these cases, or whether legislators might have known that extremely conservative legislation in the House would not pass in the Democrat controlled Senate, the patterns suggest that legislators are quick to place the blame on the opposing party, and on both chambers. The general lack of information about policymaking among the public, combined with the separation of powers system that places two chambers, two branches of government, and multiple veto

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players from different parties as potential obstacles to legislation, may make this form of communication appealing to legislators. But what effect does passing the buck have on the public? Moreover, are there limits to how much legislators can pass the buck as institutions change from divided to unified party control? For example, do citizens respond less favorably to attempts to deflect blame when a legislator's party controls both chambers of Congress?

How Do Voters Respond When Legislators "Pass the Buck"?

From the perspective of a strategic legislator, rhetoric focused on passing the buck for inaction may accomplish two goals. It may insulate the legislator from penalties associated with inaction, and it may also denigrate the standing of the opposing party or chamber. The survey experiments we describe below allow us to assess the extent to which blaming rhetoric achieves these two ends.

First, we assess how *engaging in blaming* affects evaluations of the individual doing the blaming. Presumably, strategic legislators who engage in this type of blaming expect this strategy to yield electoral rewards. Existing work suggests that the justifications elites offer for their behavior, as well as contextual factors (e.g., the apparent preferences of their constituents), can shape how citizens evaluate them (Sigelman et al. 1992; McGraw et al. 1993; McGraw et al. 1995). For example, justifications based on purported moral convictions appear to be quite effective at mitigating the negative consequences of unpopular actions or outcomes (McGraw 1998).

However, not all justifications are effective. Indeed, some evidence suggests that "passing the buck" has the potential to backfire. For example, McGraw finds that officials who justify controversial decisions by attempting to diffuse responsibility are penalized—perhaps because they appear to be making excuses in an attempt to dodge responsibility (McGraw 1990, 1991). These penalties manifest regardless of whether the official attempts to diffuse responsibility horizontally (by casting the outcome as the product of a group, rather than individual, decision-making process) or vertically (e.g., "ultimately it's up to the governor to decide whether to sign the bill"). Thus, voters appear to be willing to accept some explanations for unsatisfactory outcomes, but are inclined to dismiss or punish other explanations.

Our design allows us to assess the consequences of a particular type of explanation—blaming actors of an opposing party or in another institution. Given existing work, we expect people to be inclined to punish a legislator for engaging in this type of blaming, at least under certain conditions. We posit that partisanship may be one factor that affects whether blaming produces a backlash.

It is well documented that social identities lead people to view members of their own group favorably, while disparaging out-group members (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Brewer 1979). Partisanship is potent social identity (Green et al. 2002; Klar 2014). Its influence extends to many aspects of political evaluations, including affective orientations toward members of the opposing party (Iyengar et al. 2012), discrimination against opposing partisans (Iyengar and Westwood 2015), and views of legislators who do or do not compromise (Harbridge et al. 2014; Paris 2017). Partisanship is also a factor in attributions of blame, with partisan cues altering perceptions of responsibility and intentions (Rudolph 2006; Malhotra and Kuo 2008; Doherty 2015). Given that sorting out exactly whom is definitively to blame for policy inaction is typically impossible for the average citizen, when presented with blame accusation partisans may resolve this ambiguity by falling back on their group biases (Taber and Lodge 2006; Doherty and Wolak 2012). Put simply, partisan preferences may play a core role in determining how individuals respond when a legislator attempts to pass the buck.

There are two (non-exclusive) ways this may manifest in terms of how an individual evaluates a legislator who engages in blaming. One possibility is that people will broadly respond unfavorably to out-partisans who engage in blaming, but that backlash is modest or non-existent when a legislator is from one's preferred party. Another possibility is that these responses will be primarily tied to the partisanship (if any) of the target of blame. For example, people may evaluate a legislator who blames their preferred party for inaction particularly unfavorably, but be indifferent (or even respond favorably) when a legislator blames the opposing party.

The second dynamic we examine pertains to how being the *target of blame* affects evaluations of the group being blamed, with a focus on party and institutional reputations. Generally speaking, party brands include both a positional component and a valence component (Stokes 1963). Since a record of

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legislative accomplishments may contribute to the valance component of the party brand (Butler and Powell 2014), we may expect party reputations to suffer when they are blamed for inaction. Blame for inaction may produce a similar negative effect on institutional reputations (Adler and Wilkerson 2013).

While both party and institutional reputations may benefit from legislative success and suffer from inaction, and thus suffer from being blamed for inaction, there may be important differences in how people respond to blame of these two types of groups. The primacy of party in people's own social identities suggests that citizens may have much stronger views of the parties – either positive or negative – than of different chambers of Congress. These differences may manifest in a reluctance to believe that one's favored party is to blame for inaction and a greater willingness to believe when the opposing party is blamed. People may be much less inclined to hold onto pre-existing beliefs that one chamber is more to blame than another. The lack of strongly held views about chambers may also produce spillover between chamber and institutional reputations. If people do not hold strong or distinct views of the House or Senate separately from Congress, blame of one chamber may have deleterious effects for all institutions.

Unified versus Divided Government

Although party polarization has created substantial hurdles in the legislative process, when one party controls both chambers of Congress, policy-making should be less onerous. Indeed, party polarization may facilitate this process under conditions of unified government: a homogenous party with policy priorities that are sharply at odds with those of the opposing party might be expected to find a relatively easy path to legislative victories (Binder 2014). Put simply, there is reason to expect members of the majority party in Congress to face fewer obstacles to enacting their preferred policies under conditions of unified government. As such, unified government may limit some of the complexities of the separation of powers system and lead the public to be more skeptical of efforts to pass the buck.

In order for unified party control of Congress to affect public responses to blaming rhetoric, people have to not only be aware of the partisan balance of power in Congress,[4] but also view those who

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[4] Public opinion surveys indicate that this is a relatively difficult task. In American National Election Studies since 1980, in the average year this knowledge was measured, 55 percent of respondents

hold the levers of power as primarily responsible for policy-making successes and failures. From an institutional perspective this may seem tautological—it is less reasonable for those who have power to blame those who do not for shortcomings in the policy-making process. In the aggregate, this appears to hold. As polarization has increased, the electoral fate of *majority* party members of congress is tied to the reputation of the institution (Jones 2010). By contrast, low congressional approval ratings help *minority* party members. However, party polarization in Congress has also been accompanied by intensifying partisan divisions among the citizenry, a rise in negative partisanship, and divergent narratives about the legislative process. For instance, Donald Trump blamed congressional Democrats for the GOP's inability to repeal the Affordable Care Act in the spring and summer of 2017 (Pramuk 2017). By contrast, the Democratic narrative was one of Republican secrecy, a refusal to work with Democrats, and a GOP legislative strategy that required only a simple majority and, thus only Republican votes (King 2017). When these narratives are combined with negative polarization among the public, they may reinforce partisan divisions, and overwhelm either new information about blame for inaction or the institutional roles that may affect responsibility. Partisan citizens may be disinclined to view co-partisan legislators as responsible for policy failures, even in situations where their party holds a majority of seats in both chambers of Congress, as well as the presidency. That is, perhaps partisan considerations swamp those tied to institutional control in responses to legislators' efforts to deflect blame.

Patterns of responses to national surveys offer some support for this expectation. For example, an April 2017 Quinnipiac University survey asked respondents who they would blame if Congress failed to pass a new budget, leading to a government shutdown: Republicans in Congress, Democrats in Congress, or President Trump.[5] It is difficult to dispute the claim that Republicans were positioned to exercise far more control over this process than Democrats. Nonetheless, 73 percent of Republicans said they would

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identified the majority party in the House, 51 percent identified the majority party in the Senate, and 42 percent correctly identified both. Although there is a fair amount of variation of time, even in 2016, when the Republicans had held the House since the 2010 elections and won control of the Senate in 2014, only 53 percent of ANES respondents correctly identified Republicans as holding majorities in both chambers.
[5] https://poll.qu.edu/images/polling/us/us04202017_Ummk29xq.pdf/

blame Democrats in Congress for a shutdown. In contrast, Democratic respondents overwhelmingly said Republicans in Congress (64 percent) or President Trump (23 percent). A bare majority of respondents who identified as Independent said either Republicans in Congress (36 percent) or President Trump (16) would be to blame, though 31 percent said they would blame Democrats (another 18 percent said they were unsure or did not respond).

We posit that when people are aware that one party controls both chambers of unified party control of Congress, this should reduce the ambiguities inherent in assessing who is to blame for inaction. As such, unified control may affect both the backlash on the legislator passing the buck, and the impact of blame on the party or institution being targeted. If institutional arrangements and the accompanying control of the legislative process matter for legislators' ability to pass the buck, we would expect unified government to increase the backlash at the "blamer" and attenuate any reputational consequences for the targeted institution or party. This should be particularly pronounced when the author blames the (relatively powerless) opposing party under unified government. Alternatively, if partisan identities dominate, responses may not be conditioned by the balance of power in Congress. Instead, we would expect that responses to both the blamer and the blamed to be predominantly driven by whether the actor is a co-partisan or an opposing partisan of the respondent.[6]

Experimental Designs and Analysis

Our analysis focuses on three survey experiments. The first focuses on blame for inaction in general. In the second design we vary whether the communication occurred during divided or unified government, allowing us to assess whether responses to blaming depend on whether the legislator doing

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[6] As we note the subsequent analysis, however, there is a nuanced connection between divided versus unified government and what blame of particular groups implies for their partisan identities. In divided government, blame of the opposing chamber by a member of the majority party in other chamber may be inferred as blame of the opposing party. By contrast, in unified government, blame of the opposing chamber by a member of the majority party in the other chamber may be inferred as blame of the legislator's own party.

the blaming is in a position where observers might be expected to find attempts to pass the buck less credible. Finally, in the third experiment we consider a type of blaming that, though fairly rare in the pool of legislator communications we gathered, appears to be more common since the 2016 election: intra-party blaming.

Study 1: Inaction on the Permanent Tax Freedom Act

The first survey experiment was fielded on February 8, 2016. Participants were recruited using Amazon's Mechanical Turk interface and were paid $0.50 to complete the survey. In our analysis we exclude 175 of the 2,104 respondents who agreed to participate in the survey and answered at least one question, but did not report a party preference.[7] We exclude an additional 106 respondents who did not provide responses to all of the questions we use in our analysis. This yields a sample of 1,823 respondents. We present summary statistics reporting the characteristics of this sample in column (1) of Table B1 of the Appendix. Although the characteristics of our respondents are not representative of the national public, they are substantially more diverse than undergraduate student subject pools (Buhrmester et al. 2011; Paolacci et al. 2010; Berinsky et al. 2012).

The survey experiment presented respondents with "a copy of a newsletter a member of Congress sent to their constituents." The text of the newsletter was adapted from a Republican communication posted to the House Republican website.[8] The text focused on the Permanent Internet Tax Freedom Act—a (real) bill that would make permanent a federal ban on state and local taxation of internet access. This legislation provides a useful foundation for our study because the matter at hand is not clearly ideological—a claim that is supported by the fact that we do not find a significant relationship between respondents' ideology or party identification and post-treatment support for the bill. This allows us to

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[7] Because we anticipated only using individuals who reported some degree of partisan preference in our analysis, in our pre-treatment battery of questions we extended the standard ANES branching approach to measuring party identification. We asked respondents who indicated that they did not think of themselves as members of either party and reported not feeling "closer" to either party (i.e., not "leaning") which party they preferred "if they had to choose." The sample we use in our analysis includes 51 respondents who were willing to report a party preference "if they had to choose."

[8] The text of that original communication can be accessed at: http://www.gop.gov/keeping-the-internet-free-stuck/. The wording of the experiment and dependent variables is available in the appendix.

manipulate the partisanship of the individual advocating for the bill in a way that would not be credible with more ideological legislation.

Another advantage of using this particular legislation in our vignette is that few of our respondents had heard of the bill before. Post-treatment we asked respondents: "Before reading the newsletter, had you heard of the Permanent Internet Tax Freedom Act?" Only 16 percent of respondents indicated that they had heard of the bill—comparable to the share (14 percent) who voiced a preference regarding whether the (fictional) Public Affairs Act of 1975 should be repealed. Thus, we can vary characteristics of the process around this bill without presenting information that is at odds with respondents' knowledge about the bill. Specifically, we can credibly vary which party and chamber are presented as having taken up or interfered with the progress of the bill. We also note that, overall, when asked post-treatment to rate their support for the bill on a 7-point scale, 70 percent of respondents said that based on what they knew they supported the bill, with 40 percent saying they supported it strongly. Only 17 percent reported opposing the legislation. Thus, this legislation serves as a suitable case where we might expect citizens to be frustrated by inaction.

The text of the stimulus described the legislation (in favorable terms) and indicated that it had recently been taken up in Congress but we did not indicate the partisan makeup of Congress in any way. We manipulated three characteristics of the story. The primary manipulation we focus on was tied to variation in whether the author of the newsletter blamed another group for inaction on the legislation. Respondents were assigned (with equal probability) to one of five "blame conditions": 1) no blaming, 2) blaming the other chamber, 3) a partisan author blaming the other chamber, 4) a partisan author blaming members of the opposing party in the opposing chamber, or 5) a partisan author blaming members of the opposing party within their chamber. The second dimension manipulated the partisanship of the author in the conditions where partisanship was mentioned (blame conditions 3, 4, and 5 as just described). We conceptualize and operationalize this treatment in terms of whether the author of the newsletter shared the respondent's own party affiliation or was from the opposing party (as noted above, we exclude strictly "pure" independents from our analysis). Finally, the third dimension manipulated whether the legislation

was taken up in the House or the Senate. The full text of the vignette is presented in Appendix C.

Effects of Blaming on the <u>Blamer</u>

After reading the newsletter, respondents used feeling thermometers to rate the author of the newsletter, as well as several other groups (discussed below). In each case, ratings were captured using a horizontal slider that recorded responses on a scale from 0 ("very cold or unfavorable feeling") to 100 ("very warm or favorable feeling"). In column (1) of Table 1 we report the results of an OLS regression model predicting evaluations of the author of the newsletter with a vector of indicators for the blame treatments (the control "no blame" condition serves as the excluded category). We also include an indicator for those assigned to a condition where the legislator was serving in the Senate. We do not have a priori expectations regarding the effects of this dimension of the experimental design. Instead, we include this indicator as a nuisance term to account for the possibility that people are, say, more favorably disposed to Senators.

The results show some evidence that people are inclined to punish legislators who "pass the buck." However, these backlash effects appear to be confined to situations where the legislator explicitly blames members of the opposing party. The coefficient on *Blame Opposing Chamber (No Party Mentioned)*—where a legislator whose party affiliation was not mentioned blamed the opposing chamber—is small and well short of conventional thresholds of statistical significance. Thus, we cannot reject the null hypothesis that respondents treated with this type of blaming did not evaluate the author of the newsletter differently than those in the condition where no blaming occurred. Likewise, the findings in column (1) indicate that attaching a partisan label to the author but not to the target of the blame (*Blame Opposing Chamber [Partisan Author]*) did not induce respondents to evaluate a legislator who blamed the other chamber (as a whole) for inaction on the bill significantly less favorably than a legislator who did not engage in blaming.

[Table 1 about here]

In contrast, the coefficients on the indicators for the treatments where the legislator explicitly blamed the opposing political party for inaction on the bill are each negative and statistically significant

(p<.05). Compared to the control condition, a partisan blaming members of the opposing party within their own chamber (*Blame Opposing Party [Intra-Chamber]*) was evaluated approximately 7.5 units less favorably. Similarly, blaming members of the opposing party in the opposing chamber (*Blame Opposing Party [Inter-Chamber]*) resulted in an approximately 5.2 point penalty for the author relative to the control.[9]

Next, we consider whether the effects of partisan blaming we identified in column (1) are contingent on whether the respondent shared the author's party affiliation. Because partisanship was not mentioned in all conditions, we adopt an analytical approach where we expand each of the blaming treatments that had a partisan component into two indicators: one for respondents assigned to a condition where the author shared their party affiliation, one for those assigned to a condition where the author was from the opposing party. We report estimates from a model using these expanded treatment indicators in column (2) of Table 1.

The findings suggest that the statistically significant effects found in the pooled analysis presented in column (1) are entirely attributable to people's responses to legislators from the opposing party engaging in blaming. Individuals presented with an "out-partisan" legislator who blamed the opposing chamber for inaction on the bill (*Out-Partisan Blame Opposing Chamber*) evaluated the author of the newsletter approximately 6.7 points less favorably than those assigned to the control (no blame) condition. This effect may be attributable to a general tendency to dislike members of the opposing party. We note that the coefficient on *Co-Partisan Blame Opposing Chamber* falls short of conventional levels of statistical significance (p=.073) and is indistinguishable from the coefficient on *Blame Opposing Chamber (No Party Mentioned;* p>.10) suggesting that information indicating that the author was a member of the respondent's *preferred* party did not significantly enhance evaluations of that individual— perhaps because most respondents were inclined to support the legislation and, thus, assumed the bill was

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[9] The effects of the *Intra-Chamber Partisan Blame* and *Inter-Chamber Partisan Blame* treatments are each statistically distinguishable from the effects of the *Blame Opposing Chamber (Partisan Author)* treatment (p < .05).

supported by their preferred party absent an explicit party cue.

More strikingly, when presented with a legislator from the opposing party who *explicitly blames the respondent's party* for inaction on the legislation, participants responded in a particularly negative fashion. Respondents assigned to either the condition where an out-party legislator blamed the opposing party (i.e., the respondent's preferred party) within their chamber (*Out-Partisan Blame Opposing Party [Intra-Chamber]*) or the opposing party in the other chamber (*Out-Partisan Blame Opposing Party [Inter-Chamber]*) evaluated the author significantly and substantially less favorably. Relative to the control condition, those assigned to the *Out-Partisan Blame Opposing Party (Intra-Chamber)* condition evaluated the author an approximately 16.5 units less favorably; those assigned to the *Out-Partisan Blame Opposing Party (Inter-Chamber)* condition evaluated the author approximately 12.5 units less favorably. Each of these estimated effects is also substantially and significantly ($p < .01$) larger than the effect of *Out-Partisan Blame Opposing Chamber*. In other words, people evaluated an out-partisan "blamer" much less favorably when that legislator blamed members of the respondent's preferred party for inaction on the legislation rather than generically blaming the opposing chamber for the inaction.

Finally, in column (3) we further assess the mechanism underlying the pattern of partisan differences we observe in column (2). Specifically, we add interactions between the strength of respondents' partisan preferences and the treatment where the partisanship of the speaker was mentioned. The strength of partisanship measure ranges from 0 (those who chose a party "if they had to choose") to 3 (strong identifiers). The results offer clear support for the notion that the strength of respondents' attachments to political parties accounts for the pattern of effects we observe in column (2). Five of the six strength of partisanship interactions are statistically significant ($p<.05$), and the signs on the coefficients each indicate that strong partisans responded particularly favorably to blaming by co-partisans and particularly unfavorably to blaming by a legislator from the opposing party.

Taken together, the findings presented in Table 1 point to a pattern where people are not inherently inclined to punish legislators for blaming others for lack of action on legislation. Instead, clear negative responses to blaming emerge only when an out-partisan blames one's preferred party for

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inaction.

Effects of Blaming on the <u>Blamed</u>

Next, in Table 2, we assess how the blame treatments affected evaluations of each chamber of Congress, as well as evaluations of party groups within Congress. We consider five outcome measures. The first three are tied to institutional evaluations. They are ratings of: 1) Congressional institutions (mean of ratings of: Congress, the House, the Senate), 2) the Author's Chamber, and 3) the Opposing Chamber. The remaining two evaluations are indices of ratings of party groups within Congress: 4) the respondent's preferred party and 5) the respondent's "out party." For example, the Rating of Own Party Index for a Democratic respondent is the average of ratings of three groups: 1) Democrats in Congress, 2) Democrats in the House, and 3) Democrats in the Senate. We constructed an analogous index for ratings of Republicans. In each case, the scales are highly reliable, yielding Cronbach alphas of over 0.95.

[Table 2 about here]

We specify five indicators tied to the blame treatments that largely correspond to those used in the model reported in column (2) of Table 1. However, we collapse the conditions where a legislator specifically blamed the opposing party into two indicators: Blame Respondent's Preferred Party and Blame Respondent's Out-Party.[10] As with the analysis in Table 1, we include an indicator for authors serving in the Senate as a nuisance term.

Three patterns of effects emerge in Table 2. First, the coefficients on the *Blame Respondent's Preferred Party* are negative and statistically significant in columns (1)-(3). This suggests that exposure to rhetoric blaming their preferred party leads partisans to view Congressional institutions less favorably. Second, in column (3) we find that when a legislator blames the opposing chamber for inaction, the reputation of the targeted chamber suffers. The magnitude of this effect is not sensitive to the partisanship

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[10] We collapse these because, in additional analysis (available upon request) we find that the partisan dimension of treatments where the legislator blamed the opposing party appears to dominate chamber dimension. In other words, the effects of, say, blaming the respondent's party in the author's *own* chamber and blaming the respondent's party in the *opposing* chamber are statistically indistinguishable from one another across outcomes (p > .05).

of the legislator.[11]

Finally, in columns (4) and (5) we see that partisan blaming can affect party reputations. In column (4) we find that when an out-partisan blames the respondent's preferred party, they evaluate their own party approximately 6.3 units less favorably. Conversely, when a co-partisan blamed the opposing party, respondents evaluated their own party approximately 3.9 units more favorably. The estimates in column (5) point indicate that when a co-partisan blames the opposing party, respondents evaluate that party approximately 3.1 units less favorably. Notably, although the results we report in Table 1 indicate that blaming one's preferred party can sharply degrade evaluations of the specific legislator engaged in the blaming, the coefficient on *Blame Respondent's Preferred Party* in column (5) is not significant (p =.149) and positive.

Study 2: Inaction on Opioid Abuse—The Conditioning Effects of Unified Government

Our second and third experiments were fielded from June 22 through June 24 in 2017. Participants were recruited through the Mechanical Turk interface and randomly assigned to participate in one of the two experiments. A total of 3,095 participants continued beyond the first page of the survey. Of these, 1,853 were assigned to participate in the experiment described in this section. We exclude 146 respondents who did not report any party preference, and 146 who did not provide usable responses to all items used in our analysis. The remaining 1,242 respondents were assigned to the experiment discussed in the next section. We present summary statistics tied to this sample in column (2) of Table B1 of the Appendix.

The purpose of the second experiment is to assess whether the public responds differently to blaming rhetoric under conditions of unified government. In particular, we examine whether legislators from the majority party can expect greater backlash when they attempt to deflect blame under conditions

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[11] The coefficient *Co-partisan Blame Opposing Chamber* falls short of conventional thresholds of statistical significance (p = .069), however, the coefficients on the three *Blame Opposing Chamber* treatments are indistinguishable from one another (p > .10 for all comparisons).

of unified government. We also assess whether the effects of blaming rhetoric on the targets of blame are contingent on whether one party control both chambers.

As with the first experiment, the second study presented participants with a newsletter purportedly sent by a legislator to their constituents. The instructions leading into the stimulus indicated that the newsletter was sent several years ago. The newsletter focused on the legislator's support for and efforts to enact legislation to address opioid and drug abuse by "limiting the initial supply of opioid prescriptions for acute pain to seven days." The description of the bill and the rationale for pursuing it was based on legislation sponsored by John McCain (R-AZ) and Kristin Gillibrand (D-NY).[12] As with the policy described in the first experiment, we chose this legislation because we expected it to be both popular and ideologically ambiguous. These expectations are supported by the fact that 80 percent of respondents supported the bill. Support was not significantly related to respondents' reported ideology and only weakly related to respondent's party affiliation.

We randomly varied the author's party affiliation and chamber, as well as whether the author of the newsletter cast blame for inaction on the bill. After describing and advocating for the legislation, the author either blamed the opposing chamber, the opposing party, or did not engage in any blaming.

The legislator was always described as a member of the majority party within their chamber, but we randomly varied whether the legislator's party enjoyed unified government. We signaled unified or divided government in two ways. First, the instructions indicated party control of each chamber: "Note that this newsletter was written at a time when [Republicans/Democrats] held a majority of seats in the [AUTHOR'S CHAMBER] and [Republicans/Democrats][also] held a majority in the [OPPOSING CHAMBER]." The newsletter also included a sidebar indicating "Party Control in Congress" presenting color coded (red/blue) and clearly labelled icons of the Capitol for each chamber. These manipulations were designed to make party control salient.

Effects of blaming on the *blamer*

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[12] https://www.mccain.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2017/4/senators-mccain-gillibrand-introduce-bill-to-combat-opioid-addiction-abuse

As with the first experiment, our outcomes are derived from feeling thermometers where respondents rated various targets using a slider that captured responses on a scale from 0 to 100. We begin by examining how the experimental treatments affected feeling thermometer ratings of the legislator who authored the newsletter. In column (1) of Table 3 we predict ratings of the author with indicators for the blaming treatments, broken out by partisan affinity. For example, we include an indicator for *Out-partisan Blame Opposing Party* for those assigned to a condition where a legislator whose party affiliation was at odds with their own blamed the opposing party (i.e., blamed the respondent's party). We use a separate indicator (*Co-Partisan Blame Opposing Party*) for those assigned to a condition where a co-partisan legislator blamed the opposing party (i.e., blamed the respondent's "out party"). We do the same for the inter-chamber blaming treatment, specifying one indicator for inter-chamber blaming from a co-partisan and a separate indicator for similar blaming from an out-partisan.

[Table 3 about here]

The model also includes an indicator set to 1 if the author of the newsletter was described as affiliated with the respondents' preferred party (*Author from Preferred Party*) and an indicator for conditions where the author's party controlled both chambers of Congress (*Unified Government*). As with the first experiment, although we do not have theoretical reason to expect the chamber the author was presented as serving in to affect these evaluations we included an indicator for this treatment dimension as a nuisance term (*Author in Senate*).

The findings presented in column (1) of Table 3 are consistent with the findings from the first experiment. We only see evidence of backlash for passing the buck when a legislator singles out the respondent's preferred party for blame. Specifically, respondents evaluated the legislator 4.4 units less favorably when an out-party legislator blamed the respondent's preferred party for inaction on the bill. The estimated effects of the other blame indicators each fall short of conventional thresholds of statistical significance and are, in fact, positively signed.

In column (2) we test the proposition that a legislator can expect greater backlash for blaming others when their party enjoys unified control of Congress. We test this by adding interactions between

each blame treatment and the indicator for *Unified Government*. If legislators who engage in blaming in spite of the fact that their party controls both chambers are penalized by voters, we would expect the coefficients on these interactions to be negative. The results offer little support for this expectation. Not only do the coefficients on each of the four interactions fall short of statistical significance, three of the four are positively signed.

The strongest evidence that unified government moderates the effects of blaming on evaluations of the legislator engaged in blaming is the marginally significant ($p = .061$) positive coefficient on the *Out-partisan Blame Opposing Chamber x Unified* interaction. The linear combination of this coefficient and the coefficient on the *Out-partisan Blame Opposing Chamber* component is positive and statistically significant ($p < .05$). Thus, under divided government, respondents did not evaluate an out-partisan who blamed the opposing chamber for inaction differently than a legislator who did not engage in blaming. However, under unified government this type of blame yielded evaluations that were 5.3 units more favorable. This finding can be understood through the lens of partisanship: an out-partisan blaming the opposing chamber under unified government is effectively blaming their own party—and the respondent's out-party. Partisans may simply feel more favorably to an out-partisan willing to cast blame on their own party. This said, this finding should be interpreted with caution as the findings from our third experiment do not corroborate this.

Effects of blaming on the <u>blamed</u>

In Table 4 we turn to the question of how the blaming treatments affected institutional and party reputations. We adopt the same modeling strategy as in Table 3, replacing feeling thermometer ratings of the author with institutional and party ratings that largely mirror those used in Table 2 above.[13] In the odd numbered columns we estimate the direct effects of the treatments; in the even numbered columns we interact the blame treatments with the indicator for unified government.

[Table 4 about here]

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[13] The exceptions are tied to the fact that here we rely on single measures of ratings of each party.

The estimated direct effects of the blaming treatments reported in the odd numbered columns are modest and, with the exception of the treatment where respondents were presented with a co-partisan who blamed the opposing chamber, fall short of conventional thresholds of statistical significance. The coefficient on the *Co-partisan Blame Opposing Chamber* indicator in column (5) indicates that this combination of blaming rhetoric and partisan affinity degraded evaluations of chamber targeted by the legislator by 5.4 units.

The results reported in the even numbered columns of Table 4 offer some mixed support for our expectation that passing the buck would be less credible and, thus, less likely to affect partisan and institutional reputations, under conditions of unified government. In terms of consequences for institutional evaluations, the coefficient on *Co-Partisan Blame Opposing Party* is negative, statistically significant, and substantial in columns (2), (4), and (6). Thus, when a co-partisan blames the opposing party under conditions of divided government, people evaluate Congressional institutions less favorably. However, under unified government, when a respondent's party controls both chambers of Congress, they appear less inclined to view co-partisan blame of the opposing party as indicative of poorly functioning institutions. Indeed the linear combination of the *Co-Partisan Blame Opposing Party* coefficient and the coefficient on the associated interaction term is positive across these models, though short of conventional thresholds of statistical significance in all cases ($p > .05$).

The findings in column (4) also suggest that when an out-partisan blames the opposing chamber under divided government, evaluations of the author's chamber suffer—perhaps because this type of blame effectively amounts to blaming the respondent's preferred party. This effect is attenuated under unified government, when inter-chamber blame by an out-partisan entails intra-party blaming. We find an analogous pattern in column (6). When a co-partisan blames the opposing chamber, that chamber's reputation suffers under divided government (when it is controlled by the opposition party), but not under unified government ($p = 0.277$ for the linear combination of component term and interaction term).

Turning to the conditional effects of blaming on party reputations, in column (8) we find that respondents evaluated their own party marginally less favorably ($p = .103$) when an out-partisan blames

the opposing chamber under divided government—i.e., when that chamber is controlled by the respondent's party. However, this effect is reversed under unified government: respondents evaluated their preferred party 8.1 units (p < .01) more favorably when exposed to an out-partisan blaming the opposing party under unified government. This pattern may suggest that partisan in-fighting under unified government bolsters partisans' assessments of their own party when they are in the minority. The estimates in column (10) suggest a similar pattern. Out-partisan blaming of the opposing chamber (i.e., a chamber controlled by the respondent's preferred party) leads respondents to evaluate the out-party marginally less favorably (p < .119); an effect that is reversed under unified government. In other words, when an out-partisan blames a chamber controlled by their own party, respondents evaluated that "self-critiquing" party approximately 8.0 units more favorably (p < .01).

Study 3: Inaction on Opioid Abuse—Responses to Intra-party Blame

In the third experiment we examine the effects of intra-*party* blaming: how do people respond when a legislator blames others from within their own party for inaction? The findings above show that people evaluate a legislator from the opposing party less favorably when that legislator blames their preferred party for inaction. Here we are able to assess whether people are broadly averse to rhetoric that targets members of their preferred party or if their aversion is confined to situations where an *out-partisan* blames their preferred party. As discussed in the previous section, 1,242 individuals were assigned to this experiment. Of these, we exclude 98 who did not report a party preference, as well as 119 who did not provide usable responses to all items used in our analysis. We summarize the characteristics of these participants in column (3) of Table B1 of the Appendix.

The policy proposal the legislator advocated for in the newsletter vignette was broadly similar to that used in Study 2. A key exception was that the newsletter was described as having been sent "last week" (and minor revisions to the text of the newsletter were made to refer to contemporary statistics on opioid abuse and otherwise signal the currency of the communication). Additionally, the design leverages contemporary conditions, identifying the legislator as a Republican across all conditions, though the

legislator's chamber was randomly varied. Party control of Congress was not mentioned. As with the experiment describe above, the primary manipulation pertains to blaming rhetoric. In this design the Republican legislator could either not cast blame for inaction on the legislation, or blame: 1) Democrats, 2) fellow Republicans within their chamber, or 3) the opposing chamber.

In Table 5 we assess the effects of blaming on ratings of the author. In column (1) we estimate the direct effects of the treatments; in column (2) we examine whether the effects of the blaming treatments were moderated by co-partisanship (here captured with an indicator for Republican respondents).[14] As with the findings reported above, our estimates suggest that legislators can only expect to face backlash when their blaming targets out-partisans—and this backlash is confined to out-partisans in the public. In column (1) the effect of partisan blaming is negative and statistically significant. However, in column (2) we find that this estimate is the product of a substantial (11.6 unit) penalty from Democrats for this type of blaming—an effect that is attenuated almost exactly to zero among Republican respondents.

[Table 5 about here]

Finally, in Table 6 we examine the effects of the blame treatments on institutional and party reputations. Broadly, we find only scattered evidence that the blame treatments affected these outcomes. None of the direct effects (odd numbered columns) reach conventional thresholds of statistical significance. The interaction between the *Blame Fellow Republicans* treatment and respondents' party identification yields a p-value less than 0.05 in columns (2) and (6). However, the estimated effect of the treatment does not reach conventional thresholds of statistical significance among either Democratic or Republican respondents. Given the number of tests reported in these models and the fact that these patterns do not conform to any a priori theoretical expectation, we are disinclined to treat these two interaction coefficients as particularly meaningful.

[Table 6 about here]

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[14] Note that partisan affinity is not randomly assigned in this experiment.

Discussion

With high levels of polarization in contemporary American politics, the risk of gridlock is high. Yet, many theories of parties and the institution of Congress emphasize that party brands and institutional reputations may suffer from legislative inaction. This article examined the consequences of one strategy that legislators can take in the face of conflict and inaction – passing the buck. We report findings from three survey experiments where we manipulated whether a legislator used blaming rhetoric, as well as who they targeted. We find consistent evidence that passing the buck can drive backlash against individuals who pass the buck for inaction. However, this backlash was largely confined to situations where an out-partisan cast blame on legislators from the respondent's preferred party. This finding adds to a growing body of literature that points to differences in how people evaluate co-partisans and opposing partisans even when they engage in similar behavior (Paris 2014; Harbridge and Malhotra 2011; Harbridge et al. 2014; Doherty 2015; Smith and Park 2013). This finding also raises normative concerns in that partisan legislators appear to have little to lose by blaming the opposing party for inaction. This strategy only appears to alienate people who support the opposing party—voters who are unlikely to support the blamer in any case. Unfortunately, this behavior may foster increased partisan animosity and polarization by further alienating out-partisans from the blamer's party.

The findings from Study 2 (Table 3) show that individuals' inclination to punish out-partisan legislators who blame their preferred party for inaction is not conditioned by the partisan balance of power in Congress. For example, our evidence does not suggest that partisans respond particularly unfavorably to legislators who blame their preferred party when their party is in the minority in both legislative chambers. In Study 3 (Table 5) we find that backlash appears to be confined to situations where an out-partisan blames one's preferred party: Republicans did not unfavorably evaluate a Republican legislator blaming fellow Republicans for inaction.

Our evidence regarding how passing the buck affects evaluations of the target of the blame are decidedly less consistent across studies. In Study 1 we found fairly straightforward evidence that blaming

rhetoric can undermine the reputations of targeted institutions and parties. These findings suggest that a strategy of passing the buck for inaction may help elected officials dampen the negative consequences of gridlock. That is, if they can shift the blame for gridlock to another chamber or party, their own institutional or partisan reputation may fare favorably in comparison to the negative reactions to the opposing chamber or party. However, the evidence we found in Study 2 was far less consistent. We found suggestive, but scattered, evidence that individuals discount attempts to deflect blame when the blaming legislator's party controls both chambers of Congress. In Study 3 we found virtually no evidence that passing the buck affects groups singled out for blame.

Overall, the evidence from our experiments speaks to questions about the accountability of elected officials. We have typically believed that electorally oriented members (Mayhew 1974) should seek to avoid actions (or inactions) that hurt them electorally. These actions may not only include acts like position taking that are tied to the particular legislator, but also actions that may cast their party or institution in an unfavorable light (Jones 2010). To the extent that inaction hurts institutional and party reputations (Adler and Wilkerson 2013; Cox and McCubbins 2005), we may expect legislators in that chamber or party to bear the negative consequences of gridlock. However, this view of accountability only holds if the public recognizes who is responsible for inaction. If legislators are able to engage in a strategy of passing the buck, placing blame for inaction on the other chamber or party (regardless of the truth of this message), democratic accountability may be limited.

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Figure 1: Blame for inaction[15]
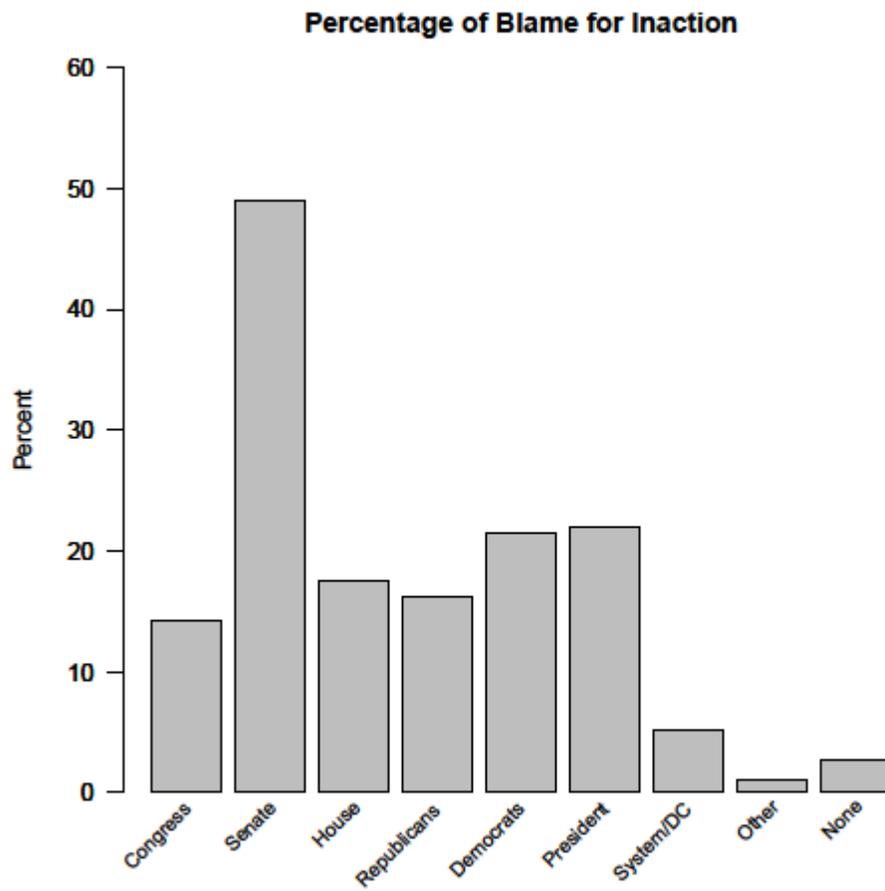
Percentage of Blame for Inaction

Figure 2: Blame for inaction by party and chamber

(a) Blame for Inaction

Percent

Own Party, Other Party, Own Chamber, Other Chamber, President (co-partisan), President (opposing)

(b) Combinations of Blame

Percent

Own Party/Own Chamber, Other Party/Own Chamber, Own Party/Other Chamber, Other Party/Other Chamber, Own Party Only, Other Party Only, Own Chamber Only, Other Chamber Only
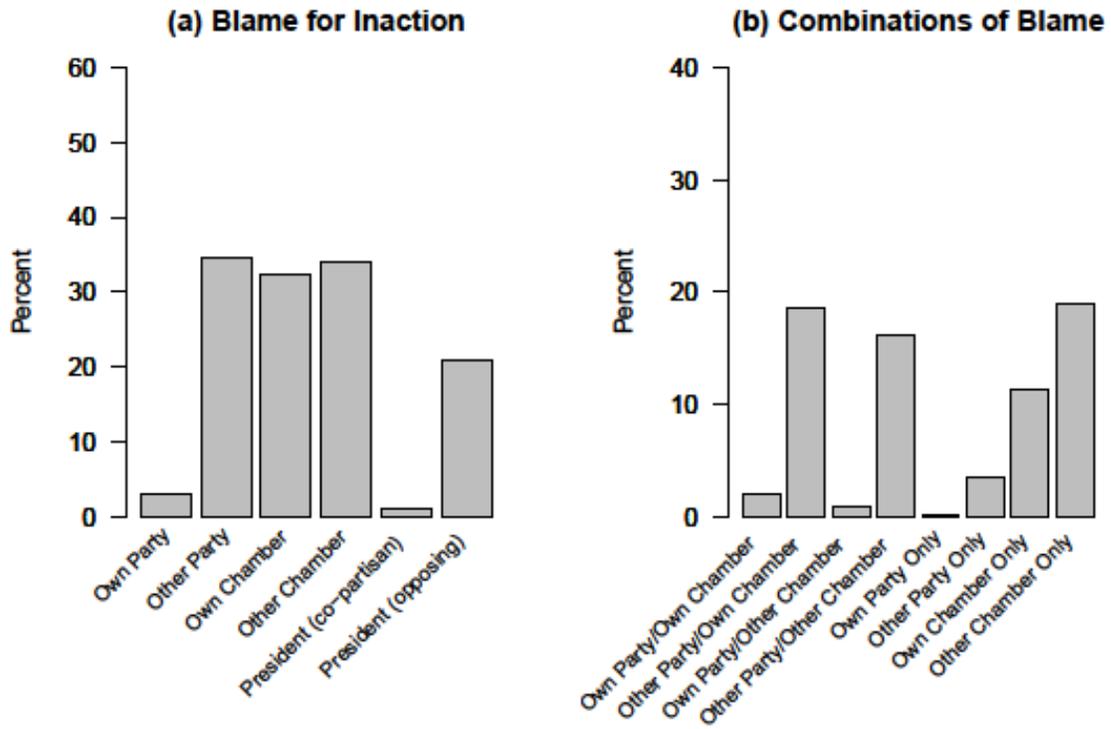
Table 1. Study 1: Effects of Blame on the Blamer

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Ratings of Actor (0-100)		
Blame Opposing Chamber (No Party Mentioned)	0.573 [1.467]	0.579 [1.469]	0.598 [1.470]
Blame Opposing Chamber (Partisan Author)	-1.958 [1.518]		
Blame Opposing Party (Intra-Chamber)	-7.462 [1.686]**		
Blame Opposing Party (Inter-Chamber)	-5.233 [1.666]**		
Co-Partisan Blame Opposing Chamber		3.195 [1.781]	-4.809 [4.193]
Out-Partisan Blame Opposing Chamber		-6.709 [1.830]**	2.899 [4.320]
Co-Partisan Blame Opposing Party (Intra-Chamber)		2.064 [1.884]	0.170 [4.959]
Out-Partisan Blame Opposing Party (Intra-Chamber)		-16.463 [2.091]**	-6.239 [5.686]
Co-Partisan Blame Opposing Party (Inter-Chamber)		1.338 [1.900]	-7.461 [4.420]
Out-Partisan Blame Opposing Party (Inter-Chamber)		-12.482 [2.151]**	-2.363 [4.953]
Strength of PID (0-3)			0.814 [0.891]
Strength of PID x Co-Partisan Blame Opposing Chamber			3.901 [1.727]*
Strength of PID x Out-Partisan Blame Opposing Chamber			-4.700 [1.955]*
Strength of PID x Co-Partisan Blame Opposing Party (Intra-Chamber)			0.782 [2.143]
Strength of PID x Out-Partisan Blame Opposing Party (Intra-Chamber)			-5.151 [2.549]*
Strength of PID x Co-Partisan Blame Opposing Party (Inter-Chamber)			4.324 [1.963]*
Strength of PID x Out-Partisan Blame Opposing Party (Inter-Chamber)			-5.089 [2.291]*
Author in Senate	0.680 [1.009]	0.949 [0.976]	0.901 [0.968]
Constant	74.086 [1.171]**	73.951 [1.165]**	72.329 [2.141]**
Observations	1823	1823	1823
R-squared	0.020	0.085	0.099

*Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients. Robust standard errors in brackets. * p < .05; ** p < .01*

Table 2. Study 1: Effects of Blame on Institutional and Party Reputations

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Rating of Institutions Index (0-100)	Rating of Author's Chamber (0-100)	Rating of Opposing Chamber (0-100)	Rating of Respondent's Party Index (0-100)	Rating of Out Party Index (0-100)
Blame Opposing Chamber (No Party Mentioned)	-2.516	1.167	-7.064	-2.569	-1.911
	[1.426]	[1.645]	[1.533]**	[1.554]	[1.475]
Co-partisan Blame Opposing Chamber	-0.231	2.588	-3.848	1.600	-0.823
	[1.871]	[2.116]	[2.118]	[2.031]	[1.973]
Out-partisan Blame Opposing Chamber	-1.846	-1.102	-4.936	-3.749	3.000
	[1.723]	[1.924]	[1.853]**	[1.891]*	[1.860]
Blame Respondent's Preferred Party	-3.334	-4.278	-3.895	-6.329	2.368
	[1.558]*	[1.686]*	[1.626]*	[1.625]**	[1.639]
Blame Respondent's Out-Party	-1.725	-1.925	-2.307	3.929	-3.106
	[1.536]	[1.652]	[1.630]	[1.593]*	[1.520]*
Author in Senate	0.783	2.752	0.280	0.466	0.386
	[0.964]	[1.072]*	[1.026]	[1.040]	[0.987]
Constant	38.354	38.626	39.191	57.672	25.544
	[1.126]**	[1.252]**	[1.207]**	[1.189]**	[1.188]**
Observations	1823	1823	1823	1823	1823
R-squared	0.004	0.012	0.012	0.024	0.010

*Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients. Robust standard errors in brackets. * p < .05; ** p < .01*

Table 3. Study 2: Effects of Blame on the Blamer

	(1)	(2)
	Rating of Author (0-100)	
Out-partisan Blame Opposing Party	-4.403	-5.332
	[2.067]*	[2.878]
Out-partisan Blame Opposing Party x Unified		1.871
		[3.734]
Co-Partisan Blame Opposing Party	1.317	0.375
	[1.870]	[2.533]
Co-Partisan Blame Opposing Party x Unified		1.764
		[3.265]
Out-partisan Blame Opposing Chamber	2.194	-0.973
	[1.915]	[2.584]
Out-partisan Blame Opposing Chamber x Unified		6.323
		[3.370]
Co-partisan Blame Opposing Chamber	2.006	2.563
	[1.838]	[2.429]
Co-partisan Blame Opposing Chamber x Unified		-1.228
		[3.185]
Unified Government	0.590	-0.714
	[1.119]	[1.824]
Author in Senate	-0.043	-0.010
	[1.118]	[1.119]
Author from Preferred Party	7.216	7.290
	[1.819]**	[1.821]**
Constant	58.984	59.594
	[1.525]**	[1.690]**
Observations	1561	1561
R-squared	0.046	0.049

*Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients. Robust standard errors in brackets. * p < .05; ** p < .01*

Table 4. Study 2: Effects of Blame on Institutional and Party Reputations

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
	Rating of Institutions Index (0-100)		Rating of Author's Chamber (0-100)		Rating of Opposing Chamber (0-100)		Rating of Respondent's Party (0-100)		Rating of Opposing Party (0-100)	
Out-partisan Blame Opposing Party	-0.107	-1.521	0.791	-0.633	-0.551	-1.098	-1.259	-2.011	-1.292	-1.915
	[2.064]	[2.777]	[2.196]	[3.021]	[2.137]	[2.915]	[2.034]	[2.905]	[2.036]	[2.899]
Out-partisan Blame Opposing Party x Unified		3.031		3.045		1.392		1.666		1.475
		[3.705]		[3.946]		[3.831]		[3.682]		[3.659]
Co-Partisan Blame Opposing Party	-2.209	-8.773	-1.214	-6.912	-2.530	-10.273	0.691	-3.064	-2.960	-4.111
	[1.913]	[2.421]**	[2.088]	[2.754]*	[2.022]	[2.574]**	[2.005]	[2.596]	[1.905]	[2.552]
Co-Partisan Blame Opposing Party x Unified		12.449		10.795		14.709		7.113		2.117
		[3.254]**		[3.600]**		[3.426]**		[3.386]*		[3.270]
Out-partisan Blame Opposing Chamber	-0.138	-2.541	0.137	-4.306	0.012	0.058	1.991	-4.176	1.976	-4.067
	[1.840]	[2.361]	[2.002]	[2.579]	[1.989]	[2.649]	[1.944]	[2.559]	[1.940]	[2.549]
Out-partisan Blame Opposing Chamber x Unified		4.945		8.969		0.100		12.312		12.093
		[3.194]		[3.479]*		[3.487]		[3.403]**		[3.374]**
Co-partisan Blame Opposing Chamber	-2.308	-3.782	0.486	0.091	-5.447	-8.123	-0.261	1.882	-2.296	-4.117
	[1.915]	[2.426]	[2.104]	[2.729]	[2.055]**	[2.668]**	[2.064]	[2.698]	[1.964]	[2.639]
Co-partisan Blame Opposing Chamber x Unified		2.659		0.492		5.091		-4.521		3.425
		[3.312]		[3.656]		[3.576]		[3.518]		[3.406]
Unified Government	-1.225	-4.972	-1.701	-5.401	-1.083	-4.675	-1.868	-4.382	-1.169	-4.176
	[1.121]	[1.864]**	[1.223]	[2.004]**	[1.195]	[1.960]*	[1.171]	[1.942]*	[1.142]	[1.897]*
Author in Senate	0.097	0.129	1.981	2.034	-1.228	-1.215	-1.396	-1.328	-1.767	-1.679
	[1.124]	[1.120]	[1.225]	[1.221]	[1.196]	[1.191]	[1.172]	[1.167]	[1.141]	[1.138]
Author from Preferred Party	4.424	4.641	5.353	5.566	3.326	3.535	3.176	3.320	-31.753	-31.582
	[1.871]*	[1.870]*	[2.010]**	[2.009]**	[1.964]	[1.963]	[1.949]	[1.945]	[1.895]**	[1.895]**
Constant	41.309	43.090	40.215	41.964	42.345	44.061	60.104	61.276	59.948	61.347
	[1.496]**	[1.619]**	[1.633]**	[1.804]**	[1.580]**	[1.723]**	[1.571]**	[1.769]**	[1.561]**	[1.758]**
Observations	1561	1561	1561	1561	1561	1561	1561	1561	1561	1561
R-squared	0.006	0.016	0.013	0.022	0.006	0.019	0.008	0.022	0.363	0.368

*Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients. Robust standard errors in brackets. * p < .05; ** p < .01*

Table 5. Study 3: Effects of Blame on the Blamer

	(1)	(2)
	Rating of Author (0-100)	
Blame Democrats	-7.393	-11.618
	[2.048]**	[2.645]**
Blame Democrats x Republican		11.640
		[4.090]**
Blame Fellow Republicans	2.646	2.536
	[1.980]	[2.518]
Blame Fellow Republicans x Republican		-0.292
		[4.055]
Blame Opposing Chamber	1.792	0.569
	[2.102]	[2.732]
Blame Opposing Chamber x Republican		2.712
		[4.223]
Author in Senate	-1.246	-1.514
	[1.447]	[1.435]
R is Republican	10.026	6.384
	[1.470]**	[2.943]*
Constant	60.274	61.906
	[1.665]**	[1.962]**
Observations	1025	1025
R-squared	0.071	0.081

Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients. Robust standard errors in brackets. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Table 6. Study 3: Effects of Blame on Institutional and Party Reputations

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
	Rating of Institutions Index (0-100)		Rating of Author's Chamber (0-100)		Rating of Opposing Chamber (0-100)		Rating of Respondent's Party (0-100)		Rating of Opposing Party (0-100)	
Blame Democrats	-2.770	-3.808	-3.326	-3.963	-2.311	-3.554	-0.077	0.176	-0.086	0.249
	[2.015]	[2.606]	[2.098]	[2.715]	[2.095]	[2.696]	[2.132]	[2.629]	[2.017]	[2.630]
Blame Democrats x Republican		2.253		1.189		2.695		-0.538		-1.091
		[4.099]		[4.272]		[4.265]		[4.483]		[4.093]
Blame Fellow Republicans	-0.527	-3.691	-0.538	-3.359	-0.606	-4.248	1.080	2.410	3.860	2.407
	[2.018]	[2.596]	[2.140]	[2.773]	[2.094]	[2.663]	[2.082]	[2.566]	[2.021]	[2.565]
Blame Fellow Republicans x Republican		8.347		7.464		9.578		-3.613		4.039
		[4.113]*		[4.344]		[4.291]*		[4.361]		[4.170]
Blame Opposing Chamber	-1.192	-3.035	-1.252	-3.000	-1.576	-3.968	1.248	1.124	0.870	1.256
	[2.136]	[2.688]	[2.274]	[2.899]	[2.228]	[2.806]	[2.212]	[2.705]	[2.152]	[2.706]
Blame Opposing Chamber x Republican		4.661		4.529		6.156		0.658		-1.332
		[4.464]		[4.682]		[4.636]		[4.689]		[4.523]
Author in Senate	-1.672	-1.706	-0.694	-0.710	-3.263	-3.311	-1.965	-1.979	-0.887	-0.831
	[1.411]	[1.410]	[1.496]	[1.497]	[1.485]*	[1.483]*	[1.515]	[1.515]	[1.471]	[1.474]
R is Republican	16.138	12.383	16.908	13.702	15.962	11.460	-0.392	0.572	-35.127	-35.623
	[1.469]**	[3.073]**	[1.542]**	[3.212]**	[1.545]**	[3.143]**	[1.602]	[3.177]	[1.524]**	[2.908]**
Constant	35.553	37.119	35.288	36.619	36.261	38.142	60.685	60.294	59.541	59.719
	[1.788]**	[2.123]**	[1.893]**	[2.244]**	[1.829]**	[2.153]**	[1.775]**	[2.038]**	[1.690]**	[2.030]**
Observations	1025	1025	1025	1025	1025	1025	1025	1025	1025	1025
R-squared	0.109	0.113	0.107	0.110	0.099	0.104	0.002	0.004	0.349	0.350

*Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients. Robust standard errors in brackets. * p < .05; ** p < .01*

Appendix

Appendix A: Content analysis of legislators' constituent e-newsletters

To assess the frequency of blame for inaction, and which groups are targeted, we examined a corpus of electronic constituent newsletters sent by legislators in the House and Senate since late 2013.[16] Our coding of inaction in the newsletters focused first on whether there was mention of policy inaction. From our corpus of 20,606 newsletters, we began by identifying possible newsletters using key words related to inaction.[17] These key words are shown in Table A1.[18] We then read each potential hit and assessed whether it referenced inaction. While this may or may not mean the newsletter mentioned a specific piece of legislation, we only included instances where legislation passing through Congress would be the likely route for addressing the issue. This omitted comments such as "Obama failed to address ISIS." However, we coded relatively expansively to include calls for action or the hope that a chamber would act on a bill.[19] Among the newsletters that we excluded were instances where the key words were used in ways that did not pertain to the legislative process (e.g., long *waits* for healthcare at the VA), where a member complained that their amendment or provision was blocked but the bill itself was moving forward in the legislative process, and references to past inaction that were discussed in

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[16] We began collecting newsletters on October 31, 2013. For those newsletters analyzed here, data collection ended on October 10, 2016. We used text analysis tools (e.g., R quanteda package) to identify communications that potentially referenced policy inaction, and then used manual content analysis to assess if the author mentioned inaction and, if so, who they blamed.

[17] Further investigation of our data indicates that we were unsubscribed from some newsletters when members changed email servers, and that we failed to sign up for some newsletters where members had address requirements. We are working to fill in our missing newsletters with ones from Lindsay Cormack's DCInbox data.

[18] We also coded a random sample of 300 newsletters that were *not* classified as referencing inaction using these search terms. Among this sample, which was all coded independently by 2-3 coders, only 3 newsletters discussed policy inaction, yielding an error rate of 1/100.

[19] In future work, we plan to separate out this form of vague inaction from stronger claims of gridlock. Of those included as references to inaction, 17% are vague references to inaction. Removing these vague references to inaction (e.g., the bill awaits action in the Senate) does not change the overall insights presented here, but it does slightly reduce the percent blaming a chamber in isolation.

contrast to action now (e.g., passing this budget bill prevents the risk of another government shutdown).[20]

We estimate that approximately 10% of all member newsletters reference inaction.

Among those newsletters that did mention inaction, the second step was to assess whether the author blamed a particular group for inaction. The options for blame included: Congress, the Senate, the House, Republicans, Democrats, the President, the system/DC/politics, other, or not specified.[21] Research assistants could select multiple groups (e.g., the House and Republicans to indicate House Republicans). We also coded whether a specific individual was blamed (e.g., Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid) in an open-ended text box.

Table A1: Full sample of inaction related newsletter search terms[22]

do.nothing	shut.downs	shut.down
doing.nothing	Waits	Waiting
waited	Wait	Thwarts
thwarting	Thwarted	Thwart
stuck	Standstill	Standoffs
standoff	Stalls	Stallings
stalling	Stalled	Stall
shutdowns	Shutdown	Sabotaging
sabotaged	Sabotage	Refusing
refuses	Refused	Refuse
refusals	Refusal	Obstructs
obstructive	Obstructions	Obstruction
obstructing	Obstructed	Obstruct
intransigent	Intransigence	Inactivity
inactive	Inactions	Inaction
gridlocked	Gridlock	Filibusters
filibustering	Filibustered	Filibuster
failures	Failure	Fails
failings	Failing	Failed
fail	Dysfunctions	Dysfunctional
dysfunction	Derails	Derailments
derailment	Derailing	Derailed

[20] Inter-coder reliability checks with either two or three coders per newsletter on a sample of 299 newsletters yielded an 81% agreement rate on whether there was inaction. In subsequent content analysis, research assistants could flag newsletters where they were uncertain and these were coded by a second coder.

[21] Inter-coder reliability checks with 2 or 3 coders per newsletter yielded agreement rates of 86% (Congress), 91% (Senate), 89% (Senate), 89% (Republicans), 98% (Democrats), 98% (President), and 98% (system/DC/politics).

[22] Terms with a . in them stand for any character (space, hyphen, etc.). Where "block" was followed by any word starting with "grant" it was not counted.

derail	Delays	Delaying
delayed	Delay	blocks
blocking	Blocked	bickering
bicker		

Appendix B: Sample Demographics

Table B1. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3
Age (in years)	36.560	36.666	36.722
	[11.7916]	[12.7282]	[12.706]
Female	0.484	0.520	0.540
	[.4999]	[.4998]	[.4987]
White	0.772	0.773	0.775
	[.4194]	[.4193]	[.418]
Black	0.065	0.076	0.068
	[.2461]	[.2655]	[.2524]
Hispanic	0.050	0.042	0.054
	[.2178]	[.2013]	[.2255]
Other race / Skipped	0.113	0.109	0.103
	[.3167]	[.3116]	[.3046]
Education (1=No HS; 6=post-grad)	4.144	4.211	4.279
	[1.2731]	[1.268]	[1.2579]
Income (1=<$10k; 14=$150k+; 15=refused)	7.652	7.805	7.934
	[3.536]	[3.5264]	[3.6033]
Income Refused	0.021	0.021	0.025
	[.1447]	[.1439]	[.1573]
R is Democrat	0.663	0.642	0.643
	[.4727]	[.4796]	[.4794]
Observations	1823	1561	1025

Cell entries are means. Standard deviations in brackets.

Appendix C: Experimental Stimuli and Questions

Stimulus for Study 1 (TREATMENTS IN BRACKETS)

Below is a copy of a newsletter a member of Congress sent to their constituents. After you read the newsletter we will ask you some questions.

We have deleted the official's name because we want you to answer our questions based on what you read here, rather than on anything else you might know about them.

Keeping the Internet Free

For countless Americans, access to the internet means access to a world of opportunity. Whether it's online courses and student resources; job applications and career information; online answers and directions — the internet is increasingly essential. Unfortunately, many state and local governments are pursuing an "internet tax" — using it as an opportunity to make money on a resource that we all use every day. This approach is the opposite of what a 21st-century government should promote.

Recently, [the House / Democrats in the House / Republicans in the House / the U.S. Senate / Democrats in the U.S. Senate / Republicans in the U.S. Senate] took up [H.R. / S.] 3086, the Permanent Internet Tax Freedom Act, to prohibit state and local governments from taxing internet access. Whether it's for the classroom or a career—or both—Americans need access to the internet. For many Americans, the internet is a gateway to opportunity — and [the House / Democrats in the House / Republicans in the House / the U.S. Senate / Democrats in the U.S. Senate / Republicans in the U.S. Senate] [understand/s] that. This bill protects Americans from unnecessary taxes that debilitate their opportunities — and ensures that all Americans have access to the resources they need.

However, this bill has not yet been enacted [CONTROL / because [the Senate / Democrats in the House / Republicans in the House / the House / Democrats in the U.S. Senate / Republicans in the U.S. Senate] [refuse/s] to take action. [H.R. / S.] 3086 has been sitting gathering dust with dozens of other bills. Yet while [the House / Democrats in the House / Republicans in the House / the U.S. Senate / Democrats in the U.S. Senate / Republicans in the U.S. Senate] [is / are] working to ensure internet freedom, [the Senate / Democrats in the House / Republicans in the House / the House / Democrats in the U.S. Senate / Republicans in the U.S. Senate] [is/are] not doing anything.

It's time for [the Senate / Democrats in the House / Republicans in the House / the House / Democrats in the U.S. Senate / Republicans in the U.S. Senate] to work with us to help Americans. We're not the only ones tired of seeing stalled solutions— the American people are tired of it, too.]

Please join me in supporting the Permanent Internet Tax Freedom Act.
[Representative / Senator] [NAME DELETED]

Stimulus for Study 2 (TREATMENTS IN BRACKETS)

Next, we'd like to ask you to read a brief newsletter a [Democrat / Republican] serving in the United States [Senate / House of Representatives] sent to their constituents several years ago. We have deleted the official's name because we want you to answer our questions based on what you read here, rather than on anything else you might know about them.

Note that this newsletter was written at a time when [Democrat / Republican]s held a majority of seats in the [Senate / House of Representatives] and [Democrats [also] / Republican [also]] held a majority in the [House of Representatives / Senate].

A troubling number of Americans are addicted to prescription opioids. We know that people who are addicted to prescription opioids are far more likely to become addicted to heroin than those who have never taken these pills. Across the country, heroin and opioid overdoses have reached an unacceptable level.

One of the main causes for the alarming increase in drug overdoses in the United States is the over-prescription of highly addictive opioids. Opioids are often prescribed to those being treated for short term acute pain like a broken bone or wisdom tooth extraction. The lion's share of opioid prescriptions are written by doctors in the United States and many of those pills are finding their way to into our schools and communities.

Recently, the [Senate / House of Representatives] took up a bill that would combat opioid addiction and abuse by limiting the initial supply of opioid prescriptions for acute pain to seven days. This legislation, amending the Controlled Substance Act, is modeled after laws in several states, including Arizona and New York. However, it has not yet been enacted[because [Democrats are / Republicans are / the House is / the Senate is] effectively blocking this critical legislation. We are working to protect our communities, but [Democrats are / Republicans are / the House is / the Senate is] not cooperating with us to find effective solutions to the opioid epidemic.]

We have a long way to go to end the problem of drugs in our communities, but this legislation is an important step forward in preventing people from getting hooked on these deadly drugs. I am proud to support this urgent fight against the over-prescription of opioids[, and call on [Democrats / Republicans / the House / the Senate] to help us pass this bill.]

Party Control in Congress

[Senate / House of Representatives]

[Democrat / Republican]s

[House of Representatives / Senate]

[Republican / Democrat]s

Stimulus for Study 3 (TREATMENTS IN BRACKETS)
Next, we'd like to ask you to read a brief newsletter a Republican serving in the United States [Senate / House of Representatives] sent to their constituents several weeks ago.

We have deleted the official's name because we want you to answer our questions based on what you read here, rather than on anything else you might know about them.

According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, over 2 million Americans are addicted to prescription opioids. People who are addicted to prescription opioids are 40 times more likely to become addicted to heroin. Across the country, heroin and opioid overdoses have skyrocketed in recent years.

One of the main causes for the alarming increase in drug overdoses in the United States is the over-prescription of highly addictive opioids. Opioids are often prescribed to those being treated for short term acute pain like a broken bone or wisdom tooth extraction. Shockingly, over 80 percent of opioid prescriptions are written by doctors in the United States and many of those pills are finding their way to into our schools and communities.

Recently, the [Senate / House of Representatives] took up a bill that would combat opioid addiction and abuse by limiting the initial supply of opioid prescriptions for acute pain to seven days. This legislation, amending the Controlled Substance Act, is modeled after laws in several states, including Arizona and New York. However, it has not yet been enacted[because [Democrats are / a small minority of my fellow Republicans in the [Senate / House] are / the House is / the Senate is] effectively blocking this critical legislation. We are working to protect our communities, but [Democrats are / a small minority of my fellow Republicans in the [Senate / House] are / the House is / the Senate is] not cooperating with us to find effective solutions to the opioid epidemic.]

We have a long way to go to end the problem of drugs in our communities, but this legislation is an important step forward in preventing people from getting hooked on these deadly drugs. I am proud to support this urgent fight against the over-prescription of opioids[, and call on [Democrats / my fellow Republicans / the House / the Senate] to help us pass this bill.]

Dependent variable measures (across studies)

On these pages we would like to get your feelings about some political groups and some of our political leaders. We'd like you to rate each person or group using something we call the feeling thermometer.

Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the person or group. Ratings between 0 degrees and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favorable toward the person or group and that you don't care too much for that person or group. You would rate the person or group at the 50 degree mark if you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward the person or group.

- How would you rate: The [Senator/Representative] who wrote the newsletter you read
- How would you rate: The U.S. Congress
- How would you rate: The U.S. Senate
- How would you rate: The House of Representatives
- How would you rate: Democrats in Congress
- How would you rate: Republicans in Congress
- How would you rate: Democrats in the Senate *(Study 1 only)*
- How would you rate: Democrats in the House *(Study 1 only)*
- How would you rate: Republicans in the Senate *(Study 1 only)*
- How would you rate: Republicans in the House *(Study 1 only)*