

Against and Alongside the Bully Pulpit: Interbranch Messaging in a Polarized Era

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Abstract

Using public appeals such as the State of the Union addresses, presidents directly speak to the public in order to shape the legislative focus in Congress. Yet scant attention has been given to how partisan lawmakers respond to presidential public appeals. In this article, I use text-as-data methods to analyze a new collection of House members' press releases during the Obama and Trump administrations (2013-2020) to investigate how legislators intermittently buoy and block presidential efforts to rally public support for policy initiatives. I find that the extremists dominate the public discourse, while the moderates tend to keep silent or stay neutral. Furthermore, I find asymmetric communication strategies between presidential co-partisans and out-partisans: presidential co-partisans homogeneously voice their support, while out-partisans vary their opposition based on the president's popularity in their districts. Lastly, there is a partisan asymmetry as well. Republicans are different from Democrats on the content of response and in the way they engage in the president's terms. Collectively, these empirical findings help us understand the partisan polarization within Congress and cast new light on the coalition that the presidents face in the legislative arena.

Keywords: Public Appeals; Interbranch Messaging; State of the Union; Text-as-Data

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Introduction

“President Trump did an excellent job articulating some of the successes that we are experiencing. ... Our economy is soaring, the unemployment rate has hit a 50-year low. ... He has been bold in his efforts to protect our borders and ramp up national security.”

– Rep. Hal Rogers’ (R-KY05) press release (Feb 4th, 2020)

“I respect the Office of the President but I do not in any way respect Donald J. Trump, who, for more than three years, has demeaned the office, and who currently stands impeached.”

– Rep. Bobby Rush’s (D-IL01) press release (Feb 4th, 2020)

“During tonight’s address, we heard the President mention those issues. The time for talk is over. With over 250 bipartisan bills held up in the Senate, now is the time for bipartisan action.”

– Rep. Kendra Horn’s (D-OK05) press release (Feb 4th, 2020)

American presidents often utilize the “bully pulpit” to bypass Congress and directly connect with the general public in pursuit of their legislative objectives. The State of the Union addresses serve as a notable instance of these presidential appeals. On the evening of February 4th, 2020, President Trump delivered a State of the Union address in front of all legislators assembled under one roof. Following Trump’s speech, lawmakers responded in various ways, as evidenced by the quotes provided. Among the staunch conservatives, Representative Hal Rogers (R-KY05) enthusiastically applauded Trump’s address, highlighting key themes such as the economy, immigration, and national security, mirroring the content of Trump’s original speech. In contrast, Representative Bobby Rush (D-IL01), from the opposite end of the political spectrum, chose to boycott Trump’s address. A moderate legislator, Representative Kendra Horn (D-OK05), also offered her response but in a markedly different tone. She called for bipartisanship yet did not echo Trump’s statements. Meanwhile, Representative Anthony Brindisi (D-NY22), a moderate member and the whip of the Blue Dog coalition, did not even respond. Motivated by these examples of congressional reaction to presidential address, this paper will offer a rich assessment of how Members of Congress strategically respond to presidential appeals with their own statements.

The preponderance of literature on elite appeals focuses on the dyadic relationship between politicians and voters. Presidential scholars extensively examine whether presidents

successfully break through the voter indifference and alter public opinion (Kernell 1986; Tulis 1987; Edwards 2003, 2009; Canes-Wrone 2006; Eshbaugh-Soha and Peak 2011; Rottinghaus 2010; Cavari 2013; Franco, Grimmer, and Lim 2018), and congressional scholars document how legislators strategically communicate with their constituencies (Fenno 1978; Yiannakis 1982; Lipinski 2004; Quinn et al. 2010; Grimmer 2013; Grimmer, Westwood, and Messing 2014). However, there exists a noticeable gap in the literature when it comes to interbranch messaging, and this gap is a critical area that warrants further exploration. While we have a comprehensive understanding of presidential appeals and how they may impact mass responses, we lack insights into how these appeals, particularly those made during high-profile events like the State of the Union, are filtered through partisan lawmakers. Congressional responses to the State of the Union address, given its elevated significance in legislation, likely constitute one of the most crucial political conversations in a given year. Therefore, exploring how lawmakers react to the president’s legislative agenda and understanding its role in shaping broader constituent perspectives becomes imperative.

The literature of the modern Congress has investigated the extent of polarization and partisanship among its members (Aldrich 1995; Cox and McCubbins 2005; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006). Congressional scholars argue that many partisan conflicts within its chambers stem from power competition rather than ideological differences (Lee 2009), indicating a tendency for legislators to strictly adhere to party lines. Furthermore, presidential leadership tends to exacerbate disagreement in Congress on issues the president advocates (Lee 2009). Therefore, we might be under the impression that after the president sets the agenda via the State of the Union address, legislators would deliver their responses simply according to the partisan line – co-partisans supporting and out-partisans opposing. However, due to the binary nature of the roll-call votes that previous literature relies on, we are less sure of the intraparty variation between the moderates and the extremists. In this paper, instead of using roll-call votes, I employ a rich collection of text data subjected to machine learning techniques combined with human reading. This approach, leveraging the rich

content and multidimensional nature of text data, allows for nuanced textual analyses that unveil both inter-party differences and intra-party variations in congressional communication in response to the president.

This paper finds that, while moderates wield significant influence in roll-call voting, the voicing of public response to the president is dominated by the extremists. Drawing upon a rich collection of House members’ press releases in response to the State of the Union addresses spanning the Obama and Trump administrations (2013–2020), I measure the *position* of interbranch messaging. The findings indicate that co-partisan legislators are almost uniformly alongside the president, while out-party legislators are against, with notable exceptions for moderates. These marginal representatives, whose own partisanship is at odds with the partisanship of her constituencies, are notably less likely to respond to presidential speeches; and when they do respond, they tend to stay neutral.

Additionally, employing Text-as-Data methods, this paper delves into the *content* of interbranch messaging. Leveraging a semi-supervised Keyword Assisted Topic Model (Eshima, Imai, and Sasaki 2020), I discern agenda issues where different legislators respond differently. Safe-seat legislators respond with explicit attitudes on partisan issues that the president emphasizes in the State of the Union address (e.g., “big government” and “immigration”), rather cross-pressured ones respond with neutral attitudes and focus on bipartisan topics (e.g., “drugs” and “infrastructure”). This suggests, from a substantive standpoint, that the political contestation of public appeals is dominated by the extreme rather than the moderate.

Finally, using the outcome of the keyATM model, this paper further explores the *structure* of interbranch messaging – the extent to which legislators follow the agenda set by the president in State of the Union addresses. I create a measure to calculate the prevalence distance across the topic domain between each legislator and the president. Evidence shows that co-partisan legislators generally mirror the content in president’s original speech, whereas out-party representatives respond in their own terms. A comparison of two presiden-

tial administrations reveals that Republicans are more unified in following Trump’s agenda and disregarding Obama’s.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, I review the existing literature on elite appeals and congressional behavior. Second, I point out that legislator’s strategic response to presidential appeals is influenced by their partisan and electoral concerns. The third section describes the data, and the fourth introduces methods of position labeling and topic measurement. The subsequent three sections present empirical evidence on how House members respond to the State of Union addresses in position, content, and structure. The final section discusses the implications of the findings in an era of political polarization.

Literature Review

Three broad pieces of literature motivate the empirical assessment in this article. One focuses on the public appeals made by the presidents and legislators; another studies the effect of countervailing appeals from the behavioral and experimental perspective; the last one investigates the politics of congressional behavior. In this section, I review each literature and characterize how its insights inform the analyses that follow.

American presidents use the “bully pulpit” to advocate for their policy agenda directly to the public. The bulk of literature in the American presidency, incentivized by Samuel Kernell’s *Going Public* (1986) and Jeffery Tulis’s *The Rhetorical Presidency* (1987), discusses the theories of going public and claims that presidents strategically bypass Congress and communicate directly with the public in order to sway public opinion and achieve their policy goals. The core of this literature focuses on the efficacy of such appeals. Some scholars argue that presidents are effective leaders of public opinion, and “going public” has a short-term effect on shaping public policy preference (Cavari 2013). The majority of evidence, however, suggests that presidential efforts to alter public opinion are either limited in scope (Eshbaugh-Soha and Peak 2011; Rottinghaus 2010), or just fall on deaf ears

(Edwards 2003, 2009; Franco, Grimmer, and Lim 2018; Simon and Ostrom 1989). While public appeals have been studied since the Reagan era, this literature often omits members of Congress as important players during the process of information priming. To my knowledge, how legislators' complimentary or countervailing communications in response to presidential appeals are still unexamined in the public appeals literature.

Presidents hardly hold a monopoly voice in elite-public communication. From Fenno (1978) to Grimmer (2013), congressional scholars have documented how legislators invest time and resources to communicate with their constituencies (see also Grimmer, Westwood, and Messing 2014; Lipinski 2004; Quinn et al. 2010; Yiannakis 1982). Much of the congressional communication literature seeks to explain the different communication strategies employed by individual members of Congress. Previous research rarely examines interbranch messaging between presidents and lawmakers. However, I argue that the exchange of speeches between presidents and legislators matters in shaping public opinion for vibrant and healthy public discourse. With well-defined political objectives, members of Congress are expected to offer corroborating or countervailing speeches concerning presidential public appeals. They play a nontrivial role in shaping public opinions and behaviors, at least in their own districts. Nevertheless, congressional rhetorical response to presidential appeals and their impact on the efficacy of altering public opinion have been understudied in American Politics.

Another literature in public opinion and political psychology suggests that interbranch rhetorical exchanges, especially the countervailing ones, matter considerably for mass opinion formation. There is some experiential work investigating how mass opinion is formed and altered by the competing political messages sent by the president and members of Congress (Lupia 1994; Chong and Druckman 2010). They emphasize that the countervailing and corroborating speeches are most influential under certain conditions, which include that individuals' opinions are internally conflicted (Zaller 1992; Alvarez and Brehm 2002), or members of Congress oppose the policies of a co-partisan president (Kriner and Howell 2013). It is implied that either the public in a swing district (where voters are located

close to the medium of the partisan spectrum) or the public in a “split-ticket” district (where the representative and the president are from different parties) are more vulnerable to a meaningful opinion updating. Furthermore, legislators have greater influence when voters hear surprising messages from legislators in response to the president. For instance, a Republican member of Congress criticizing Trump would have a more considerable effect than a Democrat opposing Trump. However, this behavioral literature, which heavily relies on experimental settings, presupposes that legislators have comments to make. This is a strong presupposition that needs to be tested. Especially, given plenty of experimental work that assumes that the opinion updating is critical and complex for swing voters (Zaller 1992; Alvarez and Brehm 2002), we should first and foremost investigate whether these moderate legislators actually respond to the president. Therefore, my approach is to fully utilize real-life data to provide a comprehensive picture of interbranch messaging over at least the most recent decades.

Lastly, congressional literature has long documented polarization in Congress and how partisanship underlines the behavior of each legislator (Aldrich 1995; Cox and McCubbins 2005; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006). In terms of legislative behavior with respect to the president’s agenda, Frances Lee (2009) argues that in the modern Congress, congressional members and their leaders particularly focus on symbolic voting and do their best to conceal an internal division or the possibility of the fact that there are moderates and hardliners. Therefore, congressional voting behavior appears so partisan cohesive that the internal difference seems to be blurred. However, beyond the roll-call votes, we lack good measures of the intra-party variation of legislators’ preferences and positions with regard to the president-advocating policy issues. This motivates me to study interbranch messaging for the purposes of better understanding the extent to which lawmakers’ communications are different from their roll-call votes.

Legislator's Response to Presidential Appeals

Scholarship on legislative behavior assumes that members of Congress are single-minded seekers of reelection (Mayhew 1974). Follow-up research claims that representatives use their roll-call votes, *per se*, to take the position and advertise their legislative achievements to strengthen their reelection prospects (Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002). Scholars of congressional communication further emphasize that legislators use their speeches and statements for the purposes of boosting their reelection chances (Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2009; Grimmer 2013; Grimmer, Westwood, and Messing 2014). However, very few studies systematically analyze the congressional communication vis-à-vis the presidential appeals, which I argue is a more direct and effective way to brandish their partisanship and to demonstrate their representation for the interests of their home districts.

Interbranch messaging is of great importance to extend our understanding of both legislative behavior and the executive-legislative relationship. First, major presidential appeals are mostly broadcasted under the national spotlight; legislators' responses (e.g., press releases and social media posts) are easier to capture voters' attention, especially compared to their roll-call votes. In addition, many presidential appeals are strictly policy-related (e.g., the State of the Union addresses), thus, what the president says is directly meant to influence the legislator's behavior. Therefore, how members of Congress use their statements to join the public discourse on policy discussions, though largely omitted in the literature, is itself worthy of a full assessment. Lastly, as political elites become more polarized (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006), interbranch messaging is a new topic to measure the partisan polarization in Congress. Traditional literature on political polarization focuses on what members of Congress do (e.g., mostly the roll-call votes), but what members of Congress say can also cast important light on our understanding of political polarization in recent decades.

I argue, in this paper, that members of Congress strategically use interbranch messaging to serve their own electoral and partisan purposes. Members of Congress know their

electoral fortunes are at least somewhat tied to the popularity of a co-partisan president; so, all else equal, co-partisans would like the president to be perceived as popular and competent, giving them an incentive to praise the president. On the other hand, if the president is unpopular in one's district, a legislator might like to distance themselves from the president, which may be an incentive to stay silent (or perhaps even criticize a co-partisan president). A similar (but flipped) story can be told about the other party's members. It is all about electoral concerns, but the particular incentives depend on the president's popularity in one's district (Grimmer 2013; Grimmer, Westwood, and Messing 2014).

Furthermore, I claim that there is an asymmetry in the communication style between the presidential co-partisans and out-partisans. In terms of positions alongside or against the president, there is homogeneity among co-partisans and heterogeneity among opposing partisans. This is where interbranch messaging is distinct from traditional congressional communication because interbranch communication always happens with presidential appeals as a direct target. Since the president is widely seen as the partisan-in-chief (Galvin 2010; Wood 2009), whatever content the president delivers to the public carries a substantial meaning for the party's brand and policy stance. The political fates of co-partisans are always linked (Aldrich 1995; Cox and McCubbins 2005), and members of Congress are well aware that how they respond to a president's priorities affects his party's collective reputation (Lee 2009). Most importantly, when co-partisan legislators criticize their president, they may suffer punishment in fundraising (Fu and Howell 2020). Therefore, presidential co-partisans might uniformly applaud what the president has delivered. In contrast, the out-partisan lawmakers might choose a level of disapproval, according to the level of opposition the president has in their home districts. As a consequence, we might observe that the out-partisan moderates are more likely to stay neutral or keep their mouths shut.

Lastly, there is also a partisan asymmetry of substantive issues emphasized in legislators' response to presidential appeals. Admittedly, Democratic and Republican presidents have a different set of partisan policies they advocate, and they prioritize different issues

in their public appeals. However, partisan lawmakers from the two major parties, I argue, respond to presidential appeals differently. As Grossmann and Hopkins (2016) point out, American party politics in the contemporary era are asymmetric: Republican politicians have increasingly devoted themselves to expressions of ideological commitment, while Democratic politicians propose an array of incremental policy goals to match the diversity of their constituencies. Therefore, in the territory of interbranch messaging, we would expect that Republican response to presidential appeals should be more unified compared to Democrats; Republican legislators rally around the Republican president's ideological advocates and collectively criticize the Democratic president's diverse policy initiatives as the overreaching hand of big government. On the other hand, we might expect to see that when Democrats interact with presidential speeches, they seem to echo with separable and specific policy concerns according to their discrete constituencies. In sum, we would expect that Republicans are different from Democrats on the content of interbranch messaging and in the ways in which legislators engage with the president's rhetoric.

Interbranch Messaging on the State of the Union

Among the presidential efforts of going public, the State of the Union address is an important moment; and it also provides an exceptionally good opportunity to research congressional responses to presidential appeals. Unlike other presidential appeals that are ad hoc in timing, the State of the Union address is a scheduled speech delivered at the beginning of each calendar year in office. It is one of the few events when all three branches of the US government are assembled under one roof. The president not only directly speaks to members of both chambers of Congress and the Supreme Court Justices, but also appeals to the mass public via prime-time media broadcasting. Most importantly, the president uses this "bully pulpit" to propose a legislative agenda and set national priorities (Cohen 1995; Eshbaugh-Soha 2016). Consequently, congressional responses in the aftermath of the

presidential State of the Union addresses stand out as some of the most important weeks for interbranch communication. This public discourse is influential because it focuses on a whole set of legislative agendas that will be shaping the national policy landscape.

In this paper, I will investigate congressional responses to the State of the Union addresses from three aspects. First is the *Position* expressed in a legislator's response. The *Position* means whether the response is supporting, opposing, or neutral. Here, I also investigate whether the representatives speak out. Legislators are not obliged to offer a response to the State of the Union address. As suggested above, lawmakers in safe seats might be more active in positioning their support or opposition toward the president. Still, a moderate in a cross-pressured situation might be less likely to respond to the president. Thus, I also consider the legislators who keep silent.

Second is the *Content* of response. Congressional response to the State of the Union not only can express compliments or condemnations to the president, but also can highlight a legislator's insights on the most important issues that his or her constituents care about. Facing the same speech delivered by the president, Democratic and Republican legislators might echo different issues; safe-seat and marginal representatives would reasonably choose distinct topics to make a point.

Third is the *Structure* of response. State of the Union addresses allow the president to propose a legislative agenda and national priorities, so whether congressional response follows the president's lead in issue priorities also matters. For example, when Trump spends more time stressing immigration policies or tax reform, while briefly mentioning bipartisan issues like infrastructure and drugs, I hypothesize that liberal, moderate, and conservative legislators would put different weights on these issues in their responses. Strong Republicans would mimic in Trump's terms and stress immigration and tax reform policies; at the same time, staunch Democrats might ignore these issues but switch attention to some liberal issues that Trump fails to mention.

Data and Methods

To study how legislators respond to presidential appeals, in this paper, I focus on the president’s State of the Union addresses and House members’ press releases in response to them. I obtained transcripts of each State of the Union address from the American Presidency Project Website.¹ I focus on eight consecutive years of the State of the Union addresses, from 2013 to 2020, that cover the second term of the Obama administration and all four years of the Trump administration.² Also, comparing the responses to one Democratic president and one Republican president offers a great chance to discuss the partisan asymmetry of interbranch messaging.

Presidential appeals, however, are not the singular voice in public discourse. Members of Congress regularly react to presidential addresses with their own speeches or statements. To measure legislators’ response to the State of the Union addresses, I employ a new collection of 1,425 press releases from House members directly respond to State of the Union addresses. I use original press release data (2013–2020) from the congressional statements database on ProPublica. The statements on ProPublica are pulled directly from official House and Senate websites. The original database consists of all press releases from House members and Senators. I then identified the press releases from House members that are directly in response to the State of Union addresses by humanly reading the filtered press releases published within three days after the State of Union address. After collecting the text data, I conducted a data cleaning process that removes titles, introductory paragraphs, guest, and legislator information. For the text-as-data analysis below, the unit of analysis is a press release from a House member in response to the State of the Union address in a given year.

The reason for investigating only House members and their press releases is that House members have a shorter term of two years, compared to Senators, so House members face a

¹<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/presidential-documents-archive-guidebook/annual-messages-congress-the-state-the-union>, accessed in Oct 2020.

²The 2020 State of the Union was delivered on February 4th, so it reflects Trump’s policy priorities and legislative agenda before the COVID-19 swept the US and influenced the domestic policy agenda.

stronger electoral connection with the public. Press releases constitute a valuable medium to measure legislators' strategies of interbranch messaging. First, legislators frequently use press releases to express their opinion on presidential appeals to their constituencies. Scholars stress that press releases directly affect the content of newspaper stories and constituent evaluations (Grimmer 2013). Further, in press releases, legislators not only offer their confirming or countervailing positions toward the president, but also reveal on which issues they agree or disagree with the president.

Admittedly, there are other forms of communication that will not be picked up in press releases. Members of Congress can also Tweet, make television appearances, provide quotes for news articles, and in some cases, even give their own televised addresses directly in response to the State of the Union. However, these other forms of responses are also accompanied by press releases with comparable content. Numerous legislators Tweet a link of their press release in response to the address. The content of Tweets and television interviews are extremely similar to the content of the press release. Therefore, the House members' press releases are arguably the most proper text data to investigate interbranch messaging on the State of the Union.

Measuring Interbranch Messaging on the State of the Union

House members express their positions toward the State of the Union addresses in their press releases. I manually code these press releases to identify their position. Specifically, for each press release, I label its position into either *favor*, *neutral*, or *oppose* with respect to the president. A *favor* press release is one that shows an affirming, applauding, and positive attitude.³ An *oppose* press release is one that expresses a criticizing, denounc-

³As an example of a favoring press release, Rep. Jim Sensenbrenner (R-WI05) commented on Trump's State of the Union address, "In his first year, President Donald Trump has restored a sense of confidence in the American people. By reducing red tape and signing historic tax reform, the Trump Administration has helped unleash the economy and improve the financial outlook of many Americans. Tonight, in his speech, the President outlined a bold and optimistic vision for an even safer and more prosperous America—expanding on economic successes, rebuilding our military, and enacting criminal justice reform. I am also encouraged by the President's call for renewed bipartisanship, as we must come together to continue restoring liberty,

ing, and negative attitude.⁴ A *neutral* press release is one that contains no clear praising or condemning rhetoric, or instead talks specific issue positions that are related to local constituencies, or mentions both sides of the aisle without taking a side.⁵ If a legislator does not have a press release in respond to the presidential speeches listed above, I code it as a *silent* response.

I am interested in how legislators’ partisanship, ideology, and electoral concerns figure into their counter speech against the president. Therefore, after hand coding the positions, I follow conventions in the congressional literature (Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2003; Jacobson 2004) and gather political information of each legislator, including partisanship, ideology, individual information, and their constituents’ characteristics. Specifically, I gather information on president’s two-party vote share in the district that each legislator represents, as an indicator of districts’ partisan makeup.⁶ I also use the first dimension of DW-NOMINATE scores (Lewis et. al. 2020). As individual political information, I use each legislator’s age, gender, and race, whether he or she is a freshman in the House, and their seniority (as measured by the congressional sessions he or she has served).

Since the ideological score is highly correlated with the presidential two-party vote

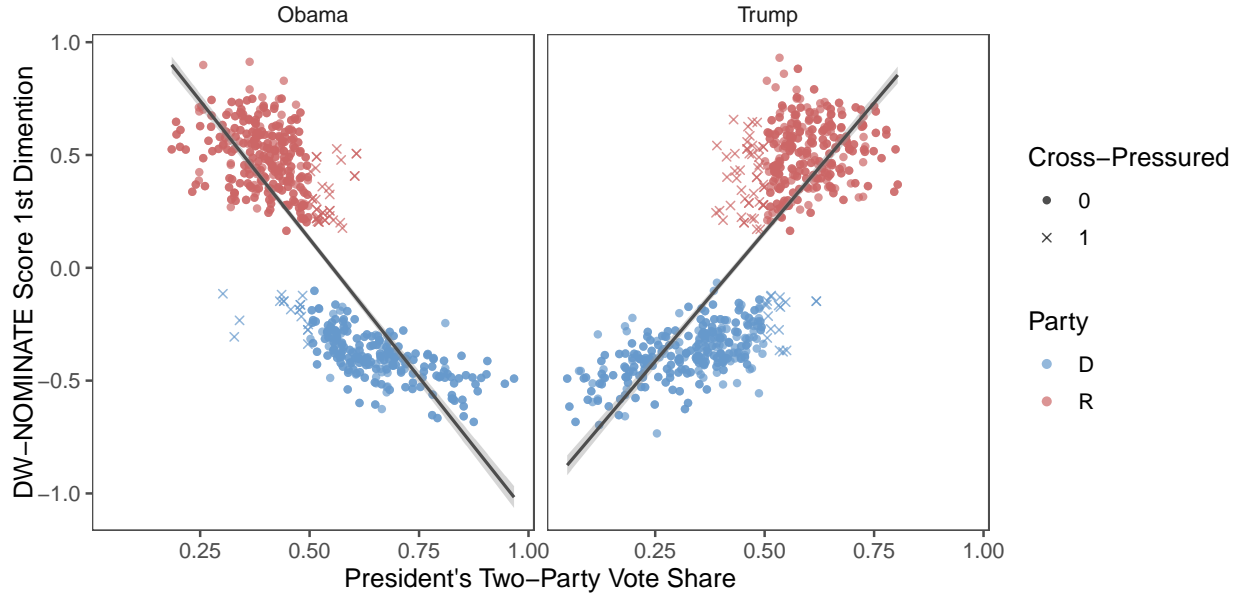
ensuring security, and increasing opportunity for all.”

⁴As an example of opposing press release, Rep. Bobby Rush (D-IL01) offered his harsh criticism toward Trump’s SOTU address in 2018, by saying “This has been the most chaotic, divisive, and incompetent first year of any administration and I will not sit and watch as Trump pretends that he’s off to a successful start. He’s not. Trump does not respect the office, our long standing institutions, traditions, and many of our citizens, who he has repeatedly insulted. We are watching the presidency erode before our eyes and I, for one, refuse to participate in pomp and circumstance that does nothing but normalize his egregious and hateful behavior. This is a presidency that has been built on racism, stupidity, and lies, which has already wasted enough of America’s time and I will not waste any more of mine.” Another great example comes from Rep. Earl Blumenauer (D-OR03) who just had one word in response to Trump’s joint address to Congress in 2017: “Resist.”

⁵As an example of a neutral press release, see Rep. Ed Royce’s (R-CA39) comment, “Tonight’s joint session of Congress marks an important moment for our country. All of us must come together to meet the challenges facing America head on. After eight years of failed foreign policies, we face more threats than ever before. At the same time, I hear every day from Southern Californians who are still trying to get ahead. Many are parents who are struggling with skyrocketing health care costs. Others are workers hurt by a tax code that hampers job creation. There is much to do in the weeks and months ahead. I will continue to listen to your priorities and concerns, and work relentlessly to get results.”

⁶Since the congressional districts in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania were redistricted in 2018, I adjusted the presidential two-party vote share of Pennsylvanian legislators according to the new congressional map. For detailed partisan balance change, please see <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/02/19/upshot/pennsylvania-new-house-districts-gerrymandering.html>.

Figure 1: Relationship of Electoral Connection and Ideology



share, which is demonstrated in Figure 2.1, I will mainly use two-party vote share in the primary analysis. Here, it is worth clarifying two concepts that are related to these measures. The first is moderate: it refers to a legislator who is relatively in the middle of the ideological spectrum. The second is cross-pressured: it indicates a representative whose partisanship is at odds with the partisanship of majority voters in his or her home district (e.g., a Democrat representing a district where the majority of the voters voted for Trump in 2016). Also, those cross-pressured are highlighted with cross signs in Figure 1. Moreover, these cross-pressured are noticeably moderate on ideology. Therefore, in the rest of the paper, I will use these terms (i.e., the moderate, the cross-pressured, and the marginal) interchangeably.

Furthermore, I use text-as-data methods to measure how different members of Congress respond to State of the Union addresses substantively. In particular, after the president sets the agenda in the State of the Union, what agenda issues do legislators follow in the president's lead? To what extent do legislators follow the president's lead? And how do partisanship and electoral connection map on what lawmakers say about the president? I use a two-step research design to gauge legislators' substantive responses to the presidential

appeals. The first step is to label the topics in eight State of the Union addresses. I use an unsupervised topic model—Structural Topic Model with year dummy as covariates—to coarsely analyze texts of all eight years of the State of the Union addresses, and then I validate by humanly reading to make sure that the topics for each paragraph are labeled accurately. Consequently, I came up with 22 topics and keywords associated with each topic (see Appendix Table A.3 for the full list of topics and keywords). These topics include 17 issue topics, such as *Foreign Policy*, *Economy*, *Immigration*, *Healthcare*, *Education*, etc., and 5 non-issue topics, which are *Honorary*, *MAGA (Make America Great Again)*, *Bipartisanship*, *Liberal Values*, and *Legacy and Future*. The keywords for each topic are chosen based on the frequency and exclusivity, which make sure that each keyword represents a topic meaningfully. For example, the keywords associated for the topic of *Foreign Policy* are “nation,” “force,” “security,” “military,” “terrorist,” “isis,” “iran,” “nuclear,” “troop,” “defense,” “terrorism,” and “weapons.” And the keywords for the topic of *Honorary* include “thank,” “hero,” “salute,” “honor,” and “guest.” Obviously, the number of keywords varies across different topics. On average, there are 7 keywords per topic. The minimum number of keywords is 4 (*Drug*) and the maximum is 16 (*Economy*).

The second step is to use these topics and keywords drawn from presidential addresses to semi-supervise a topic model on the legislators’ press release responses. Here, I apply an innovative topic model—Keyword Assisted Topic Models (keyATM) (Eshima, Imai, and Sasaki 2020). The keyATM method bears multiple advantages to investigate legislators’ response toward the State of the Union addresses. First, the keyATM allows me to use the pre-labeled topics to fit the model, thereby avoiding post-hoc interpretation and subjective adjustment of topics. Although unsupervised topic models, such as Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) (Blei, Ng, and Jordan 2003) and Structural Topic Models (STM) (Roberts, Stewart, and Tingley 2017), also perform well in distinguishing different topics in text, there are unavoidably high researcher degrees of freedom in labelling the topics and choosing the topic number (K). Since the topics are humanly coded and validated in the

first step mentioned above, topic interpretation becomes straightforward in the keyATM. Second, the provision of a number of keywords can substantially improve the topic classification performance and the interpretability of the resulting topics. Third, similar to the STM, keyATM is able to incorporate covariates that can influence the prior.

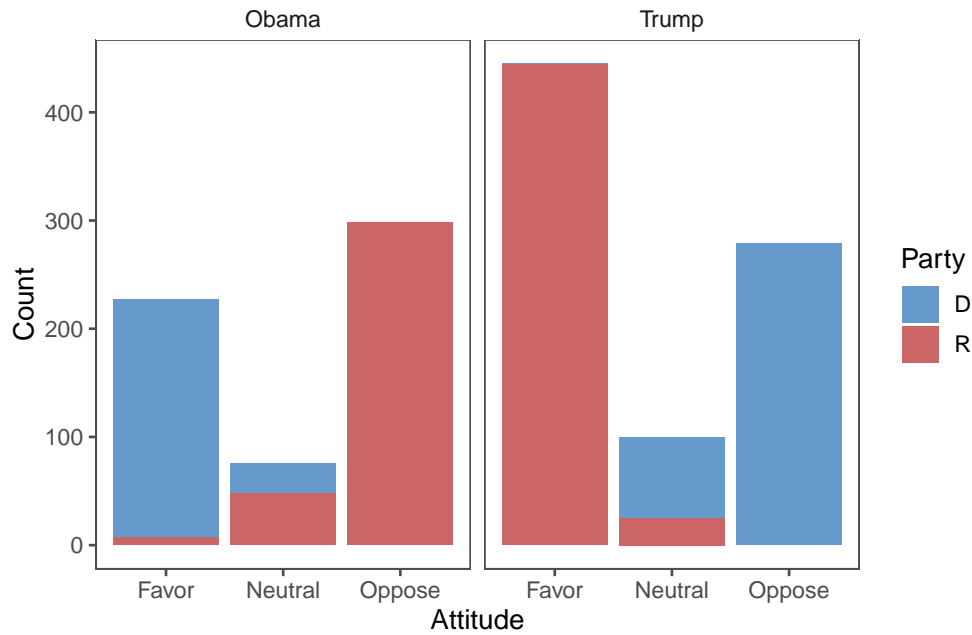
I fit the keyATM to the corpus of all press releases in response to the SOTU addresses throughout eight years. To prepare the text, I follow the standard in the text-as-data literature and conduct the following pre-processing steps on the raw press releases: (i) delete all punctuation; (ii) remove capitalization; (iii) drop stop words, commonly occurring but meaningfully insignificant words, e.g., “statement,” “respond,” “tonight,” etc.; and (iv) reduce words to their stems according to the Porter stemming algorithm. To prepare the keywords, I also remove capitalization, reduce keywords to their stems, and store them in a list object. The input of the model is a document-term matrix (DTM), where each row refers to one press release posted by a legislator in a given year, and columns include the most frequent 3000 unigrams and 500 bigrams. I use a total of $K = 22$ topics. I do not include any additional topics without keywords because these pre-labeled topics—drawn from both the Democratic and Republican administrations—should encompass all possible issues on both sides of the aisle.⁷ Moreover, I only include the year dummies as covariates and specifically exclude partisanship and ideology of legislators as covariates, which prevents politicians’ political information from influencing the prior.

Positions in Congressional Responses

I argue above that the members of Congress use their responses to serve their own partisan and electoral purposes. This section shows that legislators’ responses to presidential State of the Union addresses follow the partisan line. Furthermore, I demonstrate that the marginal representatives generally avoid expressing their opinions. If they say something,

⁷I also attempted to add two no-keyword topics, but I found that these topics did not capture more informative or meaningful issue topics and the prevalence of these two additional topics was close to zero.

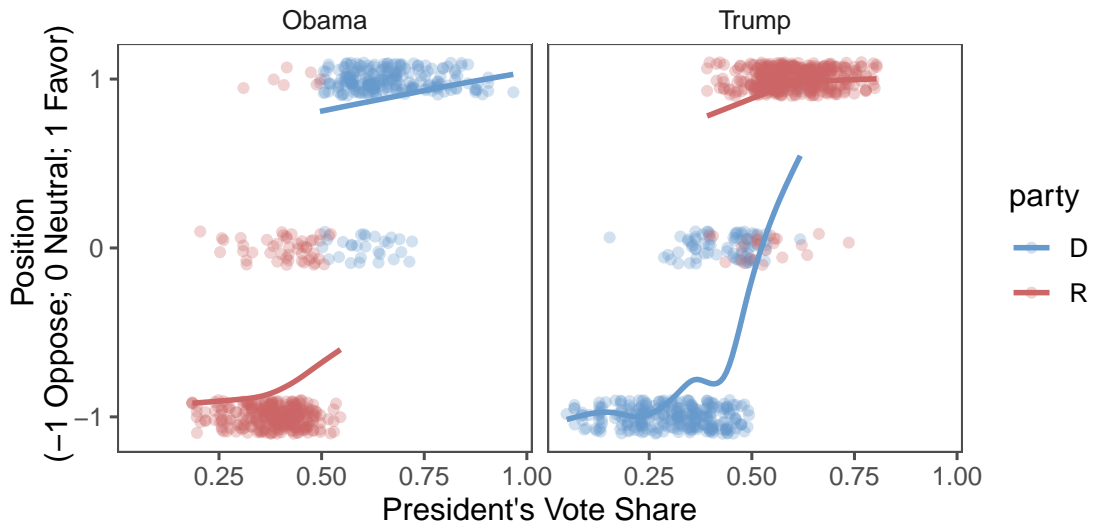
Figure 2: Descriptive Figures of MC’s Positions towards the SOTU Addresses (2013-2020)



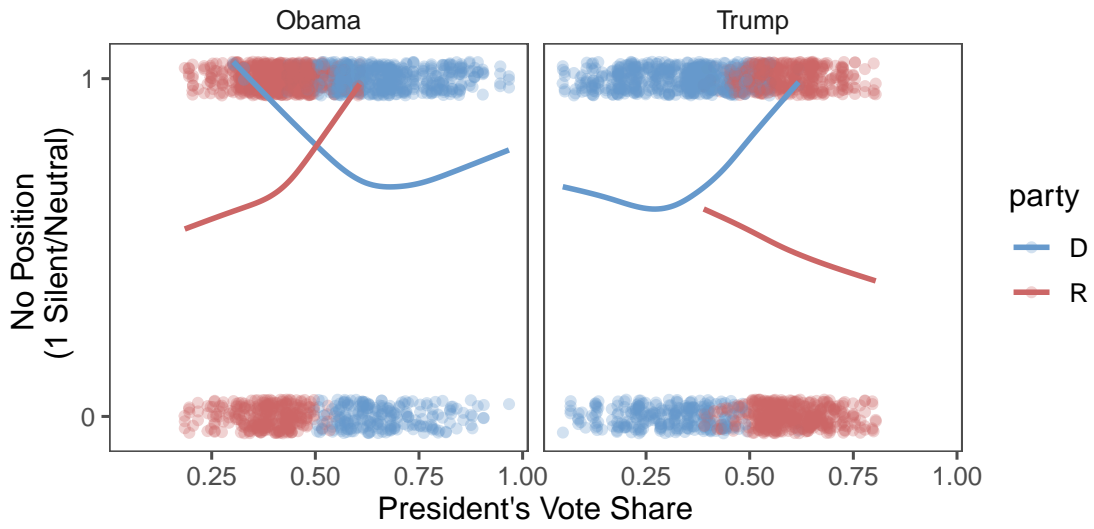
they would be less likely to take a stance; instead, they say something neutral.

Using the hand-coded positions in House members’ press releases and summarizing separately by Presidents Obama and Trump, Figure 2 shows that whether a House member is against or alongside the president in the aftermath of the State of the Union address is primarily decided by his or her partisanship. For both Obama and Trump, over 95% of the affirming messages were sent by their co-partisans. Not a single co-partisan legislator stood against their “partisan-in-chief.” Compared with the explicitly affirming or condemning messages, there were fewer neutral messages. However, most of those neutral messages were sent by the out-partisan representatives. If we compare the two presidents, one interesting difference is that Republicans seem to be more unified along their party line. Although the opposite volumes were similarly loud, Trump clearly enjoyed a substantially greater unity of his co-partisans. Republicans’ affirmations of Trump almost double in count over Democrats’ support for Obama.

Figure 3: House Members' Positions and Electoral Connection



(a) Who is Against or Alongside?



(b) Who Keeps Silent or Stay Neutral?

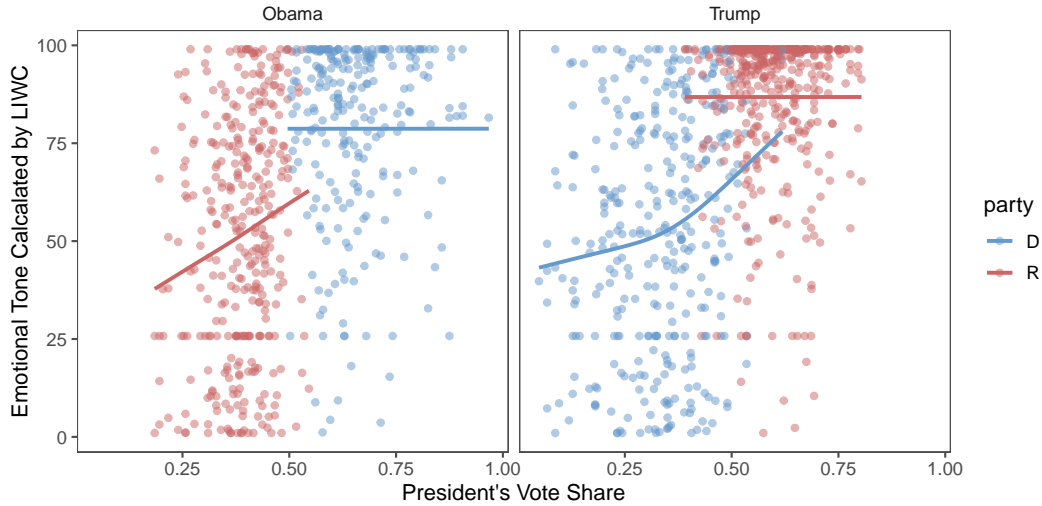
Even if quieter in volume, neutral messages reveal the importance of electoral connection. To measure a representative’s marginality, I follow other legislative scholarship (See Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2020; Carson et al. 2010; Grimmer 2013) and use the share of the two-party vote for the sitting president in each congressional district. Figure 3(a) shows that given a representative publishes a press release, the president’s vote share in their districts largely influences their published attitude toward the State of the Union addresses. Each dot represents one legislator’s press release, and the fit lines are drawn by non-parametric GAM regressions. Evidence shows that the president’s co-partisans almost uniformly rally around the partisan-in-chief. Among the opposite party representatives, those sitting on safe seats (with a small proportion of constituencies in their districts who voted for the president) mostly sent opposing messages. In contrast, those marginal or cross-pressured representatives are more likely to stay neutral. Figure 3(b) shows who is more likely to avoid taking a position on the State of the Union addresses. Evidence reveals that marginal and cross-pressured House members are more likely to keep quiet or stay neutral. In sum, in response to presidential State of the Union addresses, the cross-pressured legislators are more likely to not only mute their volume, but also to attenuate their position.

The Asymmetric Response

The results on positions of the congressional responses are robust to a variety of alternative measure and statistical models. Even more noteworthy, the nuanced results from multiple robustness checks also reveal the asymmetric nature of congressional responses between the president’s co-partisans and out-partisans.

First, I validate the hand-coded positions in congressional press releases by Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (LIWC) (Tausczik and Pennebaker 2010). LIWC is a dictionary-based method to measure the emotional tone in texts. LIWC has an embedded semantic dictionary that identifies both positive and negative emotion dimensions. The *tone* variable aligns the two dimensions into a single summary variable (Cohn, Mehl, and Pennebaker 2004). A

Figure 4: House Members' Emotional Tone and Electoral Connection



high number is associated with a more positive, upbeat style; a low number reveals greater anxiety, sadness, or hostility.

Figure 4 demonstrates the relationship between the emotional tones in House members' press releases and their electoral connection. The non-parametric fit lines firmly suggest a similar trend as shown in the previous section. In terms of the tones embedded in congressional responses, the president's co-partisan legislators uniformly express positive tones. The flat fit lines of co-partisan lawmakers (Democrats under Obama and Republicans under Trump) indicate that the partisanship—being in the same party of the president—is more decisive than the electoral concerns. Although several co-partisan lawmakers may face electoral challenges, they are less likely to take the risk of criticizing the president. On the contrary, the tones of out-partisan legislators appear not only an obviously lower average level but also are highly related to how much support the president has in their home districts. With increased president's two-party vote share in a district, out-partisan representatives are more likely to use positive tones.

Furthermore, I use a regression framework to show a robust relationship between the

electoral consideration and position of congressional response to the presidential appeals. Using an OLS regression model, I demonstrate that cross-pressured legislators are more likely to mute their responses or attenuate their position in response to the State of the Union addresses. I take the benefit of the OLS regressions; I hold covariates constant by controlling the party, gender, race, and seniority of each legislator while fixing years.

I first consider the correlation between electoral concerns and the tones expressed in the press releases. Since the previous section stress that the marginal legislators keep quiet and stay neutral, I measure the electoral concern by creating a dummy variable, *Cross-Pressured*, which equals to one if the partisanship of a legislator is at odd with a partisan preference for president of the majority of their constituencies. I regress the emotional tones expressed in press releases on the interaction of being cross-pressured and being out-party to the president, and I present the coefficients of being cross-pressured by breaking apart by the co-partisan and out-partisan status. As shown in Column (1) of Table 1, a co-partisan representative, even cross-pressured, would use a relatively similar tone as their co-partisans. This is the statistical result for the flat fit line of the co-partisans in Figure 4. On the contrary, the cross-pressured legislators from the opposite party are significantly more positive in tone.

Then, I test the relationship between being cross-pressured and the quietness of response. I separately regress the interaction of being cross-pressured and being out-partisan on sending a neutral statement, keeping silent, and being silent or neutral, while holding the covariate constant. As demonstrated in Column (2)–(3) of Table 1, regardless of the partisanship, the cross-pressured House members are significantly more inclined to keep silent; and if they decide to speak out, they are significantly more likely to be neutral. This effect is even more influential for the out-partisan cross-pressured legislators. If we combine silence and neutrality, Column (4) shows that the co-partisan cross-pressured legislators are 18% more likely to keep silent or neutral, and the out-partisan cross-pressured legislators are 26% more likely to attenuate their response, holding all other covariates constant. Admittedly, we do not see many cross-pressured legislators, on average 30 per congressional session, but

it suffices to say that these in marginal seats, who are more influential in roll-call votes, are less likely to join this public contestation of public appeals. In Appendix Table A2, I have also estimated the same models with the continuous measure of the president's two-party vote share, which yields similar results.

Table 1: Cross-Pressured Legislators and their Response to the SOTU Addresses (2013-2020)

	Dependent Variable			
	Tone	Neutral	Silent	Silent/Neutral
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Co-partisan Cross-Pressured	-1.813 (4.066)	0.140*** (0.050)	0.147*** (0.043)	0.179*** (0.042)
Out-Partisan Cross-Pressured	11.652** (5.470)	0.469*** (0.067)	0.178*** (0.047)	0.258*** (0.046)
Out-Party	-31.043*** (1.428)	0.081*** (0.017)	0.038** (0.017)	0.074*** (0.016)
Party (Republican)	2.391 (1.633)	-0.105*** (0.020)	-0.074*** (0.018)	-0.113*** (0.018)
Gender (Male)	-1.043 (1.817)	-0.017 (0.022)	0.051** (0.021)	0.032 (0.021)
Race (Non-White)	-1.914 (1.980)	-0.104*** (0.024)	0.081*** (0.021)	0.031 (0.021)
Seniority (Sessions Served)	0.028 (0.184)	-0.009*** (0.002)	-0.004** (0.002)	-0.007*** (0.002)
Constant	69.838*** (4.776)	0.226*** (0.058)	0.890*** (0.032)	0.937*** (0.031)
Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	1,420	1,420	3,480	3,480
R ²	0.293	0.104	0.094	0.093

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Issue-by-Issue Content of Interbranch Messaging

The previous sections show that what attitude House members hold toward the State of the Union addresses depends upon their partisanship and whom they represent. Moving beyond against and alongside the president, this section explores how legislators respond to presidential addresses substantively. I argue that the president uses the State of the Union addresses to set the agenda for legislators in the coming year, but legislators across the chamber would strategically pick issues to highlight in their press releases while expressing their complementary or countervailing messages. In specific, the partisan and electoral concerns also influence what issues representatives emphasize in their own statements.

Throughout the eight years of interbranch messaging on the State of the Union, according to my hand-coding, the presidents raised a total of 22 general topics, and House members react to these agenda issues quite differently across the chamber. To systematically analyze how representatives respond to different issues, I use the Keyword Assisted Topic Model to investigate how prevalent each House member discusses across the topics in a given year. Table 2 provides all the 22 topics labeled out of raw texts the State of the Union address and the keyword stems associated with each topic. The keyword stems followed by tick marks are the assigned keyword stem to that topic. As can be seen, the most frequent stems in each topic arguably represent each topic pretty well. Furthermore, Table 2 also shows the average prevalence of each topic mentioned in House members' press releases.

Figure 5 demonstrates the issue prevalence of House members' press releases throughout eight years. The blue and red bars indicate the partisan averages of topic prevalence by Democratic and Republican legislators respectively, and the solid black lines portrait the proportion of each topic that the president mentioned in the State of the Union Addresses. There are several general patterns in the messages between the president and legislators that are worth of a mention. First, in a larger picture, when the president sets the agenda, House members as a whole generally responde on those issues stressed by the president. For example, when President Obama talked about *Economy*, *Wages*, *Education* and *Clean*

Energy in his term, representatives discussed these issues disproportionately more than they did in Trump's years. And when President Trump switched the national attention on *Make America Great Again*, *Immigration*, *Drug*, and *Infrastructure* in his addresses, there is an increase in the prevalence of these topics in House members' press releases. Second, the most obvious distinction between legislators and presidents on the State of the Union comes in the nature of these two types of statements. Most obviously, in the State of the Union addresses, the president often honored national heroes, as Trump spent more than 20% of time in each of his four addresses praising and saluting his invited guests. On the contrary, legislators seemed to be reluctant to respond with the same honorary terms in their statements. Rather, representatives widely used bipartisan rhetoric in press releases. On average, both Democratic and Republican legislators would use, on average, 30% of the bipartisan rhetoric in their press releases. They emphasize their willingness to "work with the president," and "look forward to opportunities to solve national problems." For instance, Rep. Tom Rooney (FL-17) ended his press release in response to the 2018 State of the Union address by say, "I look forward to acting on the bipartisan initiatives we heard tonight and fixing the real problems our constituents face in their everyday lives."

Table 2: Top Words by Topic in MC’s Press Releases

Topics	Stems	%
FOREIGN_POLICY	secur[✓], nation[✓], world, militari[✓], threat, contri, nation.secur	7.3
HONORARY*	honor[✓], democrat, make, word, speak, guest[✓], action	0.5
ECONOMY	job[✓], economi, middl.class[✓], class, creat, middl, econom	9.8
MAGA*	great[✓], vision[✓], strong, economi, deliv, administr, growth	6.2
IMMIGRATION	immigr[✓], border[✓], famili[✓], protect[✓], polici, wall[✓]	5.9
HEALTHCARE	care[✓], health[✓], health.care, cost[✓], afford, act, promis	5.9
EDUCATION	educ[✓], colleg[✓], famili, afford, student[✓], middl, make	2.5
WAGES	wage[✓], minimum.wage, minimum[✓], rais, feder, rais.minimum, equal[✓]	1.1
CLEAN_ENERGY	energi[✓], climat[✓], renew[✓], clean[✓], product, oil[✓], mention	1.0
BIPARTISANSHIP*	work[✓], contri, nation, opportun, issu, forward, bipartisan[✓]	36.3
CITIZENSHIP	gun[✓], elect[✓], violenc[✓], protect, democraci[✓], vote[✓], democrat	1.9
WORKFORCE	workforc[✓], job[✓], labor, creat, train, st, centuri	0.5
TAX	tax[✓], reform[✓], cut[✓], increas, tax.reform[✓], code, relief[✓]	3.4
LAW_ORDER	justic[✓], crime[✓], crimin[✓], taxa, immigr, court, violent[✓]	0.4
LIBERAL_VALUES*	liberti[✓], radic, polit, digniti[✓], war, liber[✓]	0.4
DRUG	drug[✓], prescript[✓], prescript.drug, lower, democrat, opioid[✓], epidem[✓]	2.6
LEGACY_FUTURE*	futur[✓], ahead[✓], gener[✓], made, month, progress[✓], vision	2.4
TECHNOLOGY	innov[✓], cancer, children, research, immigt, act, scienc[✓]	0.5
INFRASTRUCTURE	infrastructur[✓], invest, road[✓], bridg[✓], rebuild[✓], crumbl, transport[✓]	1.4
VETERAN	veteran[✓], militai[✓], men.women, men, women, forward, forward.work	1.2
BIG_GOVERNMENT	govern[✓], polici, hous, fail, washington[✓], spend, regul[✓]	8.2
SOCIAL_SECURITY	save[✓], retir[✓], social, social.secur[✓], medicar, fund, benefit	0.5

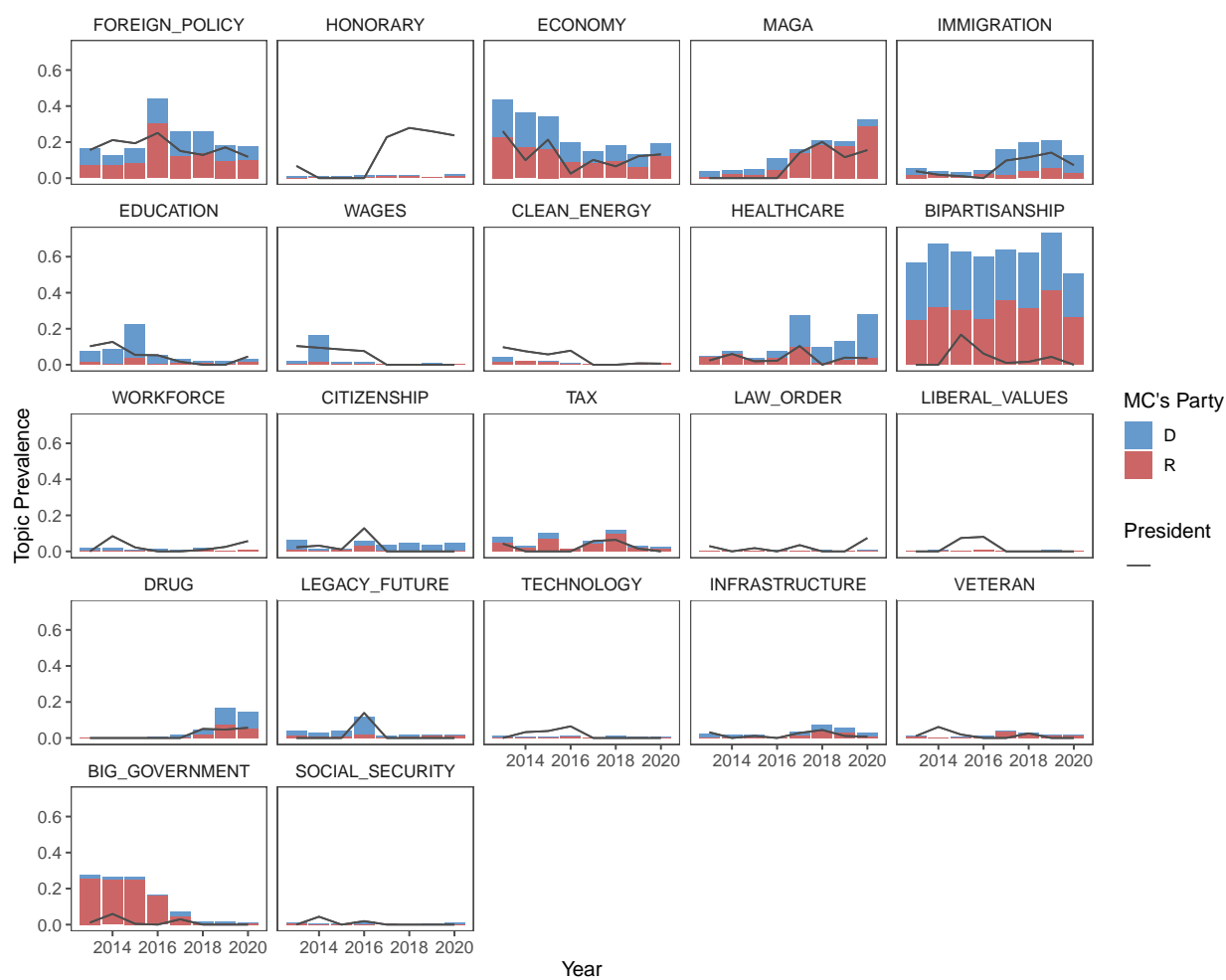
Notes:

* Indicates that the topic is a non-issue topic.

[✓] Indicates that it is the assigned keyword stem to that topic.

The order of topics are arranged by the proportion of that topic mentioned in the SOTU addresses.

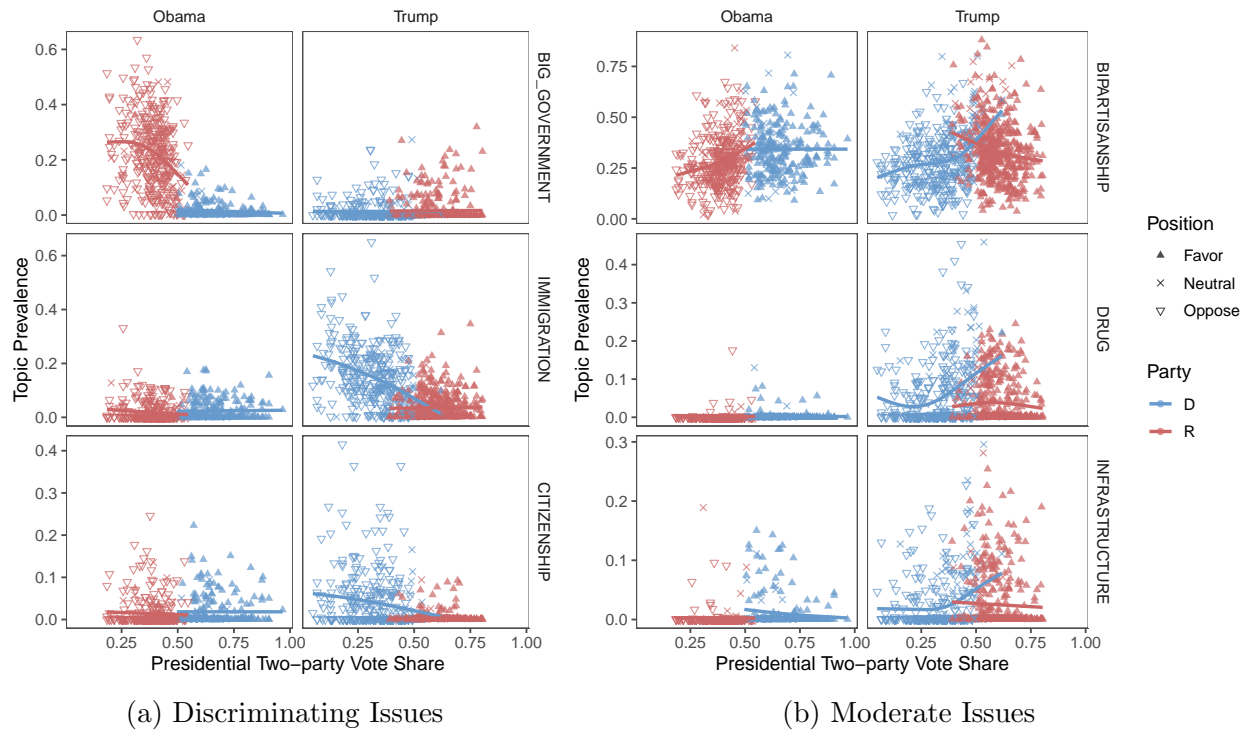
Figure 5: House Members' Response by Topics



Noticeably, when House representatives have their partisanship and their constituencies' partisan makeup in mind, they respond to different issues differently. Specifically, legislators would pick issues they consider important to their voters and express their opinion on those issues in their press releases. Thus, safe-seat legislators and marginal legislators would reasonably echo different types of policy issues. Figure 6 demonstrates how electoral concerns impact the issues that representatives pick to mention in their press releases. Panel (a) in Figure 6 highlights the discriminating issues that safe-seat legislators are more likely to mention. During the Obama administration, Republican criticism focuses on the issue of *(Big) Government*. Whatever Obama advocate in his addresses, Republican legislators would condemn Obama's initiatives as "failed Washington policies" and blame the big government for spending too much. For example, Rep. David Schweikert (AZ-06) responded to Obama's address in 2013 by say, "Unfortunately, it is a policy that will lead to more spending and more debt that American taxpayers cannot afford. Instead of pushing for more government, the president should focus on how we can reduce the size and cost of a federal government that continues to stifle the economic growth we need to ensure our nation's prosperity." Moreover, the smooth fit lines show that safe-seat Republicans would be more likely to criticize Obama on the issue of *(Big) Government*. Similarly, during the Trump administration, safe-seat Democrats were more inclined to condemn Trump's *Immigration* policy. Even more, safe-seat Democrats were also more likely to mention the issue of *Citizenship* that is related to the democratic election and gun violence in their criticism against Trump.

On the contrary, as shown in Panel (b) in Figure 6, cross-pressured representatives instead emphasized a different type of issue. These moderate issues include *Bipartisanship*, *Drug*, and *Infrastructure*. The fit lines demonstrate that marginal legislators who represent the battleground districts were more likely to use bipartisan rhetoric in their press releases and echo the moderate issues like *Drug* and *Infrastructure*. These issues do not convey an extreme ideological taste that would not potentially irritate their moderate voters.

Figure 6: Electoral Concerns Influencing MC's Discussion across Topics



Notes: Blue color and Red color indicate the partisanship of legislators. The shape of each data point reflects the position a press release is taking on the corresponding State of the Union address: solid upward triangles are complementary attitudes, hollow downward triangles are condemning attitudes, and cross signs are neutral. Smooth fit lines are drawn by a generalized additive model (GAM).

Agenda Control and Polarization in the House

Political scientists have widely acknowledged that political elites have become steadily more polarized over the past few decades across a wide range of issues (see Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2006; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006). On the presidential-congressional relations, a bulk of studies find that the most consistent determinant of presidential success in Congress is partisanship—support from the president’s co-partisans is higher than that from the members of opposition (Edwards 1989). However, the preponderance of evidence comes from the analysis on the roll call votes (Bond and Fleisher 1990; Bond, Fleisher, and Wood 2003; Cohen, Bond and Fleisher 2013). This section assesses the structure of interbranch messaging on the State of the Union. Diving into how members of Congress respond to presidential appeals across the issue domains, it demonstrates the extent to which legislators follow the agenda set by the president and whether they trace the content in the president’s original terms or switch attention to other issues. It further casts new light on the topic of polarization in the House and suggests that party cohesion and polarization continued to escalate.

To provide a comprehensive measure of how closely legislators follow the agenda set by the president in the State of the Union addresses, I rely on the topic prevalence result from the keyATM output and introduce a measure for the similarity of topic prevalence across the issue domains between the president and representatives. In specific, the president and each House members have a prevalence vector across the 22 topics in a given year. I then quantify the extent to which legislators follow the presidential agenda by a measure of distance between the prevalence vector of the president and the ones of representatives. There are multiple ways to calculate the distance of vectors; here, I employ the Mahalanobis distance that is weighted by topic proportion in the president’s State of the Union addresses. An individual legislator’s distance of topic prevalence to the president’s is the square root of the mean sum square of prevalence differences that is scaled by the importance of the topic.

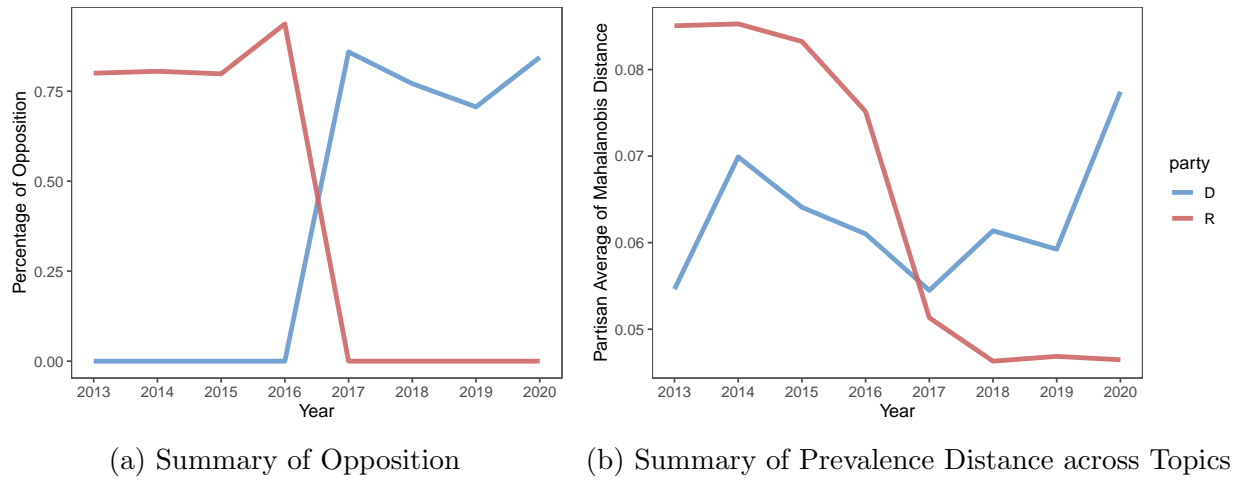
Formally,

$$\text{MC's Mahalanobis Distance} = \sqrt{\frac{1}{22} \sum_{t=1}^{22} \frac{(\text{MC}_t - \text{President}_t)^2}{e^{\text{President}_t}}},$$

where t refers to the topic, MC_t and President_t separately denote the prevalence of topic t mentioned by a member of Congress and the president. Since all topics do not carry the same weights, presidents always emphasize some issues by talking more (e.g. *Foreign Policy*, *Economy*) and briefly mention some other topics (e.g. *Social Security* and *Veteran Issues*), I engage a reweighting by dividing by $e^{\text{President}_t}$. The president's prevalence in some topics in a given year equals 0, so I take the exponential to prevent the denominator from being 0. That being said, the Mahalanobis distance is just the Euclidean distance with some scaling that reveals the president's priority among topics. The smaller the score is, the more closely a legislator follows the agenda.

Figure 7 shows the attitudinal opposition by party over the eight years in Panel (a), and the partisan average of the distance across topic domains, excluding all non-issue topics in Panel (b). The level of opposition summarized by party is the base pattern to compare with. I find that Republican legislators are more unified, compared to Democrats: Republican legislators vehemently oppose Obama and fervently support Trump in their press releases; while, Republican legislators deviate from Obama's agenda, they closely follow Trump's agenda. However, even though Democrats comment on Obama and denounce Trump in their positions, they maintain a cautious distance from Obama and discuss Trump's agenda until they markedly deviated in 2020. This pattern requires some further interpretations. Whatever policies President Obama advocated (e.g., *Clean Energy*, *Technology*, *Workforce* and *Wages*), Republican legislators mostly ignored those issues and criticized Obama's initiatives as the failure of *Big Government*. For example, Rep. Jason Smith (R-MO08) disagreed with Obama's address in 2014 without mentioning any specific issues, rather by saying, "The President believes more government and more executive action are the solutions to every problem facing our country. When I talk to folks back home in Mis-

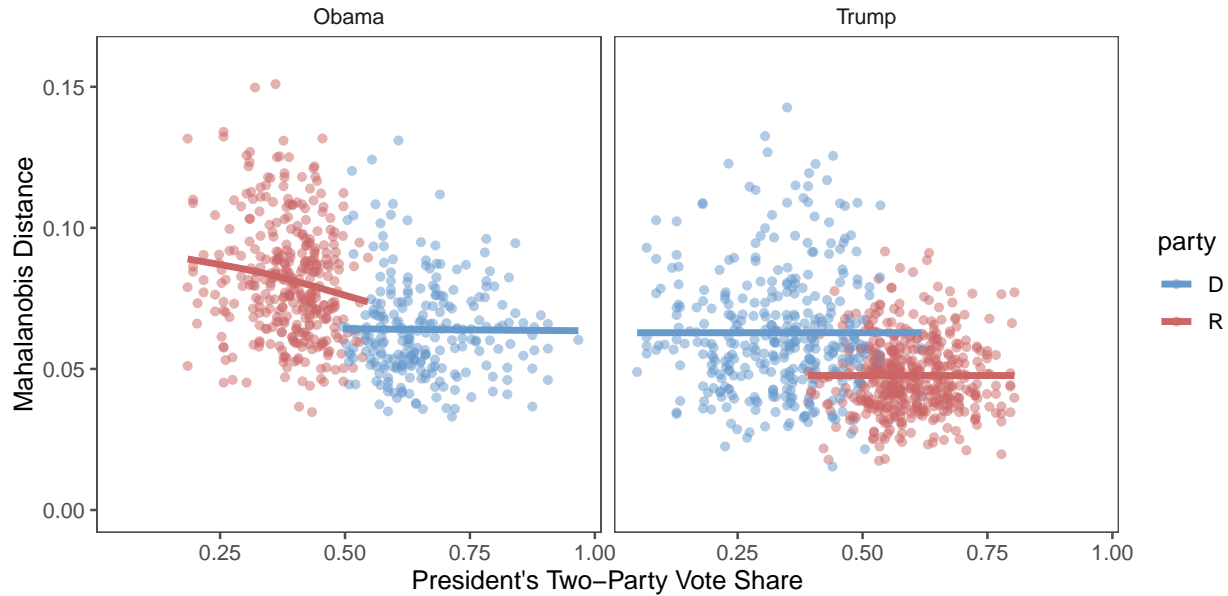
Figure 7: Opposition by Party and Distance of Prevalence across Topic Domains



Notes: 1. The lines demonstrate the partisan average, where blue indicates Democratic party and red refers to Republican party. 2. In Panel (b) Non-issue topics (*Honorary*, *MAGA*, *Bipartisanship*, *Liberal Values*, and *Legacy and Future*) are excluded.

souri, they tell me big government is the problem, not the solution.” When Democrats made countervailing statements against Trump, they also highlighted some Democratic issues that Trump omitted (e.g., *Citizenship* and *Clean Energy*). For instance, Rep. Mike Levin (D-CA49) said in 2019, “The most glaring omission from his address was any serious proposal to combat climate change, which is already having a significant impact on our country, including more intense wildfires and rising sea levels.” Nevertheless, Democratic appeals on multiple liberal issues during the Trump administration pales to Republican unified criticism on big government during the Obama years.

Figure 8: Electoral Connection’s Influence in Agenda Following



Notes: 1. Each dot represents how similarly a legislator talks across the issue agenda in the press release compared to the president’s State of the Union address, with the color of blue and red indicating Democratic and Republican parties. 2. Smooth fit lines are drawn by a generalized additive model (GAM).

More interestingly, representatives’ substantive responses to the State of the Union addresses in two different administrations reveal an escalated polarization trend in the House. To show this, Figure 8 exhibits how electoral connection influences the extent to which legislators follow the agenda set by the president. Each point measures how similarly each legislator talks across the issue agenda in their countervailing statements on the State of the Union addresses, with blue and red colors indicating Democratic and Republican parties. The GAM smooth fit lines sketch out the relations between the district partisan makeup and the level of agenda following by the two-party legislators. The left-hand plot in Figure 8 shows that during Obama’s second term, in addition to a clear partisan difference in agenda following, House members who represent a higher proportion of Democratic voters more closely followed Obama’s agenda. Moreover, the influence of electoral connection in agenda following is observed within both parties. On the contrary, the right-hand plot in Figure 8

demonstrates that during Trump's four years, we find that legislators within the same party do not seem to consider their voters' partisanship; rather, their closeness to the president's agenda is primarily decided by their own partisan label. This suggests that in Trump's years, House members are more polarized in their willingness to follow the agenda.

Discussion

Drawing evidence from House members' press releases in response to the State of the Union Addresses, I conclude with two main empirical findings. First, the moderates are different from the extremists. In the aftermath of presidential appeals, the moderate legislators keep low volume or stay neutral and avoid talking about partisan issues. Second, Republicans are different from Democrats. On the response's content, issues like Big Government and Immigration are discriminating Republicans and Democrats, whereas bipartisanship issues like Drug and Infrastructure are not. In the structure of the response, Democrats' responsiveness is marked by continuity across presidential administrations; Republicans' responsiveness is dramatically different as a function of who occupies the White House.

These findings suggest several important implications for our understanding of public debates about the president's policy agenda and party polarization within Congress. What's at stake in the public discourse over national policies is that congressional members always hold together in their parties and battle with one another in the current hyper-polarized political environment. Congressional scholars have argued that fellow partisans' shared risk has wide-ranging effects on congressional party politics. So it persuades congressional members to rally around the initiatives of their own party's president and the out-party legislators, as a mirror image, to resist policies advocated by an opposing party's president (Lee 2009). Furthermore, due to this party conflict in Congress, the moderate appear relatively cohesive and do their best to tan down the internal division. The evidence on offer in this paper

speaks to the interparty division but also the intraparty variation. For responding to the president's effort of agenda-setting in the State of the Union address, members of Congress do demonstrate a stark partisan difference. More interestingly, the evidence also reveals a great deal of intraparty variation in responding to presidential appeals. The moderate keep silent and do not engage in this political contestation of public appeals; even some speak out, they tend to be neutral.

What's also at stake here is the fight of public contestation over national issues. When the president sets the agenda in his national broadcasted addresses, the influence of presidential leadership, regardless of effective or not (Edwards 2009), should project on the same topic domain. Rather, the evidence I find in this paper suggests that the out-party legislators do not follow the lead; instead, they would use their statements to shift public attention to their own issues of interest that a president does not even mention.

There is still plenty of room to enrich the discussion of interbranch messaging for future research. Although Fu and Howell (2020) offer empirical evidence of the impact on fundraising, the downstream effects of interbranch interaction over public appeals need to be further investigated. Another line of thought is on the correlation between what legislators say and how they vote. We observe multiple cases where the moderate would vote for a president-proposed bill in the end but speak verbally against it. It is worth assessing how legislators would use their speeches to compensate for the political fallout for tough votes.

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Appendix

Table A1: Descriptive Results of MC's Positions towards SOTU Addresses

Year	Favor	Neutral	Oppose	N
2020	101 (55.8%)	15 (8.3%)	65 (35.9%)	181
2019	112 (49.3%)	38 (16.7%)	77 (33.9%)	227
2018	125 (53.9%)	33 (14.2%)	74 (31.9%)	232
2017	106 (58.6%)	14 (7.7%)	61 (33.7%)	181
2016	77 (39.1%)	16 (8.1%)	104 (52.8%)	197
2015	66 (36.1%)	26 (14.2%)	91 (49.7%)	183
2014	65 (35.1%)	29 (15.7%)	91 (49.2%)	185
2013	17 (50%)	5 (14.7%)	12 (35.3%)	34

Table A2: Electoral Connection and Response to the SOTU Addresses (2013-2020)

	Dependent Variable			
	Tone	Neutral	Silent	Silent/Neutral
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
President's Vote Share	5.419 (11.061)	-0.506*** (0.134)	-0.236* (0.121)	-0.380*** (0.118)
Out-Party	-50.742*** (8.138)	-0.691*** (0.099)	-0.174* (0.090)	-0.394*** (0.087)
President's Vote Share × Out-Party	59.944*** (15.507)	1.790*** (0.188)	0.410** (0.172)	1.018*** (0.167)
Party (Republican)	1.675 (1.618)	-0.124*** (0.020)	-0.075*** (0.019)	-0.125*** (0.018)
Gender (Male)	-1.344 (1.795)	-0.026 (0.022)	0.051** (0.021)	0.030 (0.021)
Race (Non-White)	1.015 (2.057)	-0.026 (0.025)	0.096*** (0.023)	0.071*** (0.022)
Seniority (Sessions Served)	0.134 (0.182)	-0.007*** (0.002)	-0.004** (0.002)	-0.007*** (0.002)
Constant	65.128*** (8.591)	0.533*** (0.104)	1.046*** (0.083)	1.177*** (0.081)
Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	1,420	1,420	3,480	3,480
R ²	0.311	0.138	0.089	0.091

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A3: Keywords of 22 Topics in SOTU Addresses (2013-2020)

Topics	Keywords
FOREIGN_POLICY	nation, force, security, military, terrorist, isis, iran, nuclear, troop, defense, terrorism, weapons
HONORARY*	thank, hero, salute, honor, guest
ECONOMY	job, business, worker, wage, trade, middl.class, manufactur, dollar, employment, income, nafta, recession, pipeline, trans.pacific, keystone, dakota
MAGA*	america, great, incredible, vision, success, optimism, victory
IMMIGRATION	protect, citizen, immigration, border, family, criminal, border.security, wall, migration, chain, visa, lottery
HEALTHCARE	health, cost, care, insurance, replace, coverage, obamacare, repeal, insurer
EDUCATION	child, education, college, student, kids, learn, university
WAGES	women, equal, minimum, wage, payment
CLEAN_ENERGY	energy, oil, climate, clean, waste, renewable
BIPARTISANSHIP*	work, bipartisan, ground, common, common.ground, sides, aisle
CITIZENSHIP	vote, community, elect, gun, democracy, violence, citizenship
WORKFORCE	job, worker, employment, equal, payment, workforce
TAX	tax, cut, reform, tax.reform, relief, deduction
LAW_ORDER	justice, criminal, violent, crime, judge, supreme, gorsuch
LIBERAL_VALUES*	justice, values, religious, dignity, liberty, liberal
DRUG	drug, prescript, epidemic, opioid
LEGACY_FUTURE*	future, progress, generation, ahead, legacy
TECHNOLOGY	science, space, innovation, creative
INFRASTRUCTURE	rebuild, infrastructure, road, bridge, rail, pipeline, rural, transportation, repair
VETERAN	military, hero, veteran, brave, va
BIG_GOVERNMENT	government, washington, regulation, drain, swamp, corruption
SOCIAL_SECURITY	saving, retirement, social.security, pension

Notes: * Indicates that the topic is a non-issue topic.

Figure A1: Topics and Priorities in the SOTU addresses (2013-2020)

