The Partisanship of Bipartisanship: How Representatives Use Bipartisan Assertions to Cultivate Support

Kinara Gasper, Logan Dick, and Davin Shi

Abstract

In this paper, Westwood asks key questions about voter behavior, bipartisan rhetoric, and the discrepancy between bipartisan speech and bipartisan action. He performs multiple experiments showing how bipartisan appeals induce support for a piece of legislation among American voters, even when only a few members of the opposition party support the bill in question. After examining the claims of Westwood's paper, we identified a few areas where he could have strengthened his argument, namely how he determines how voters define bipartisanship. Additionally, several of the figures in Westwood's paper can be edited for additional clarity. In this replication paper, we review Westwood's exploration of public support for bipartisan legislation and outline how to strengthen the findings outlined in the original paper.

Introduction

Westwood's paper explores the question of how representatives reconcile public expectations of bipartisan lawmaking with a lack of compromise in recent congresses. It examines the relationship between a legislator's propensity for bipartisan rhetoric and their propensity for bipartisan action, and takes a look at the impact of bipartisan assertions (compared to actual bipartisan support for a piece of legislation, as mentioned above) on public opinion.

While Westwood measures numerous quantities of interest in the paper, he emphasizes public support, which he measures on a discrete, seven-point Oppose to Support scale. The unit of analysis for this quantity of interest is each voter, since the study asks respondents for their

opinions on particular pieces of legislation. Westwood finds that propensity for bipartisan rhetoric affects public support far more than propensity for bipartisan action. These findings could have strong implications for legislative action. Lawmakers do not have much of an incentive to sponsor bipartisan legislation, when bipartisan rhetoric seems to suffice.

Westwood assumes that voters support pieces of legislation on the same discrete, seven-point Oppose to Support Scale mentioned above. He measures bipartisanship in two ways: whether a bill actually attracts support from a broad coalition, and whether representatives invoke the label "bipartisanship." In doing so, he analyzes 434,266 floor speeches.

Although Westwood backs up the claims in his paper with substantive experimental evidence, throughout this replication paper, we argue that multiple problems exist with the methodology used in the original paper, making the conclusions he draws unreliable.

Literature Review

As Westwood explores in his paper, surveys of the national electorate conducted during this century have indicated that the American people tend to support bipartisan lawmaking (Pew 2007). However, in the past two decades, the same national electorate has elected increasingly ideologically polarized representatives (McCarty 2006). In other words, the American people, who as a whole want to see bipartisan legislation enacted, elect representatives who do not want to enact bipartisan legislation. In response, Westwood argues that representatives do not need to enact bipartisan legislation to garner the approval of their constituents; instead, they just need to engage in bipartisan rhetoric, regardless of actual support for the legislation in question from the opposition party. Indeed, very few researchers have explored this dilemma, as levels of legislative gridlock have only increased exponentially in the past few decades. Only three

decades ago, a sizable portion of the House Democratic Caucus identified as conservatives (and a sizable portion of the House Republican Caucus identified as moderates and liberals).

In April 2022, *The New York Times* referred to the confirmation of Ketanji Brown Jackson by the Senate as an associate justice of the Supreme Court, as 'bipartisan,' even though only three Republicans – Susan Collins, Lisa Murkowski, and Mitt Romney – joined the 50 Democrats in supporting her nomination (Hulse 2022). The Biden administration has touted numerous other initiatives as 'bipartisan,' though few of them have garnered majority support from the House Republican Caucus. Despite a trend toward polarization, bipartisan rhetoric seems to have increased in value; Westwood seeks to examine its impact on public support.

Replication

Westwood begins his paper by attempting to answer the question, "How do voters think about bipartisanship?" Given his broader goal of examining the ways that members of Congress use bipartisan rhetoric to garner public support for themselves and their proposed bills, this question is an important one to answer. Westwood attempts to answer this question in two ways.

Figure 1 (see below), which we could not replicate ourselves given the electronic supplementary material provided, attempts to quantify whether Americans believe a certain scenario should be classified as bipartisan. To produce this figure, Westwood asked 1,055 respondents, "Thinking about the following scenario, would you say it describes bipartisanship or not?: Three [Republicans/Democrats] join [Democrats/Republicans] to pass legislation." Westwood split the respondents into two groups to answer the two different questions. The below figure plots how the respondents, grouped by party affiliation, viewed each scenario.

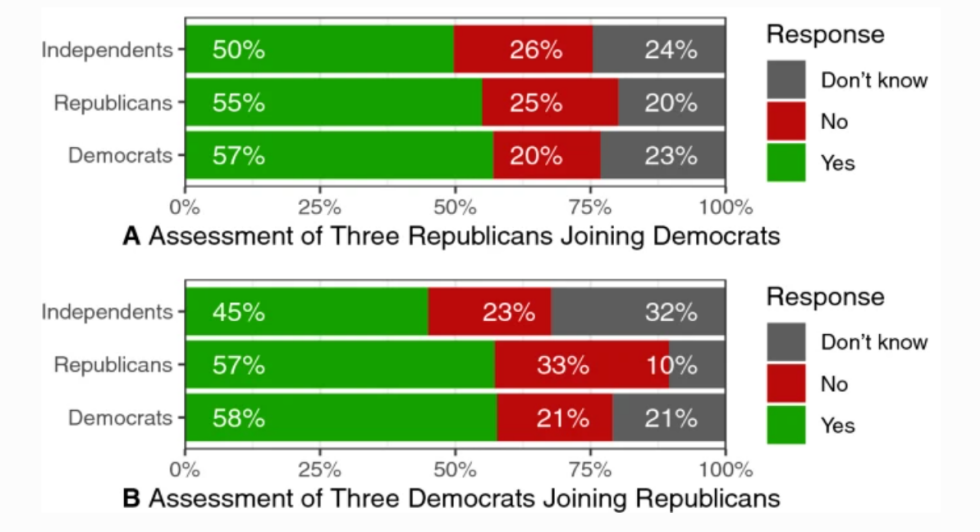


Figure 1

Westwood also asked these 1,055 respondents to define bipartisanship in an open-response question and classify bipartisanship as "good," "neutral," or "bad." He then graded the open-response questions as correct if they indicated that "bipartisanship is (1) political and (2) a political outcome/process," in order to produce Figure 2 as seen below.

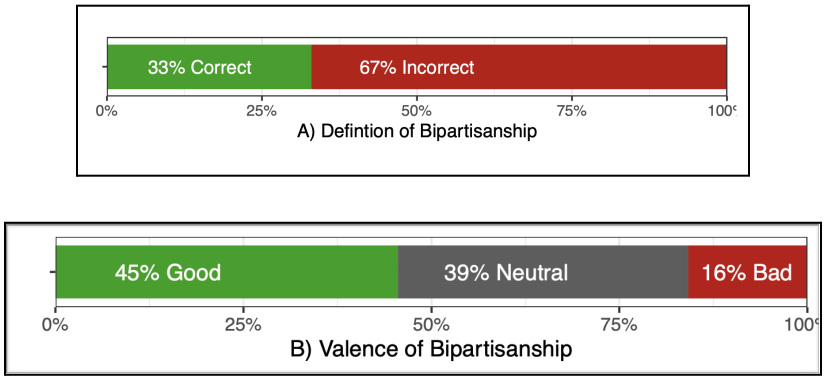


Figure 2

Westwood concludes from Figure 1 that Americans, regardless of political affiliation, have similar assessments of the aforementioned scenarios. From Figure 2, we notice that 67% of respondents did not define bipartisanship correctly; however, 84% of respondents still viewed bipartisanship as "good" or "neutral." Thus, the majority of Americans do not have a strong

understanding of bipartisanship, though they like the idea of it. In the Discussion section, we outline our critiques of this survey design and the conclusions Westwood draws from this data.

Following from the above figures, Westwood demonstrates that many representatives use bipartisan rhetoric, in an analysis of 434,266 congressional floor speeches from 1992 to 2018.

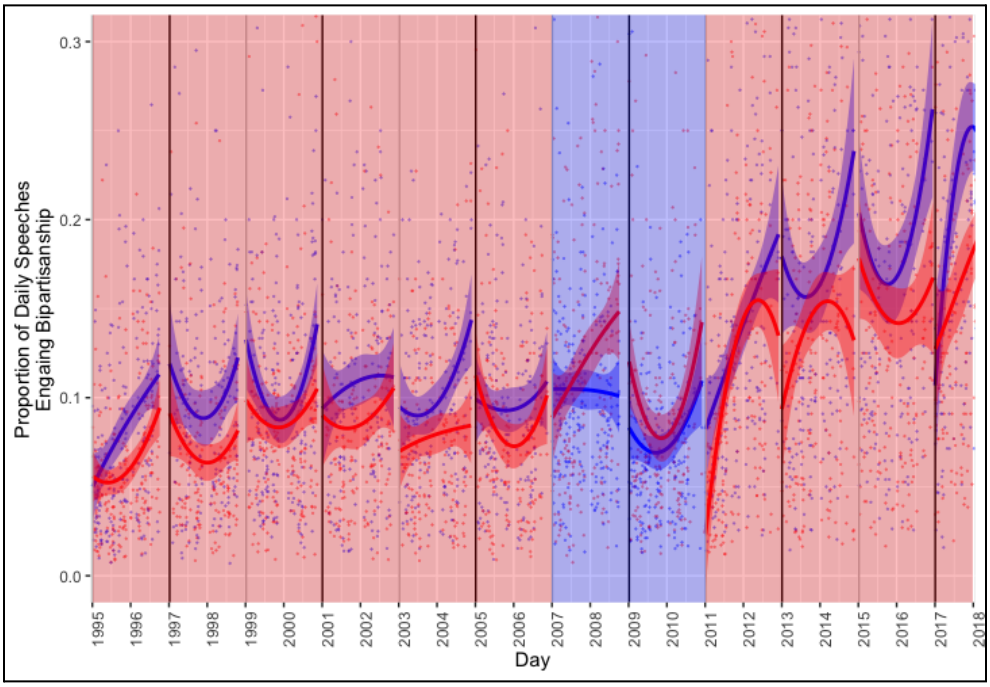


Figure 3

It is clear from Figure 3 that even representatives of minority parties that have lost control of the House of Representatives (i.e., 2006, 2010) continue to mention bipartisanship in floor speeches. The figure depicts LOESS (Locally Estimated Scatterplot Smoothing) curves with the shaded portions representing the 95% confidence intervals, the background color representing the party in control, the black lines representing presidential elections, and the gray lines representing midterm elections. Overall, discussions of bipartisanship in the House of Representatives depend on the majority party and the election cycle. It is clear from Figure 3 that there has been a recent increase in bipartisan rhetoric. Following this analysis, Westwood looks at the relationship between DW-NOMINATE Scores describing political ideology and the

proportion of speeches with bipartisanship rhetoric in Figure 4 (see below), which we could not replicate ourselves given the electronic supplementary material provided.

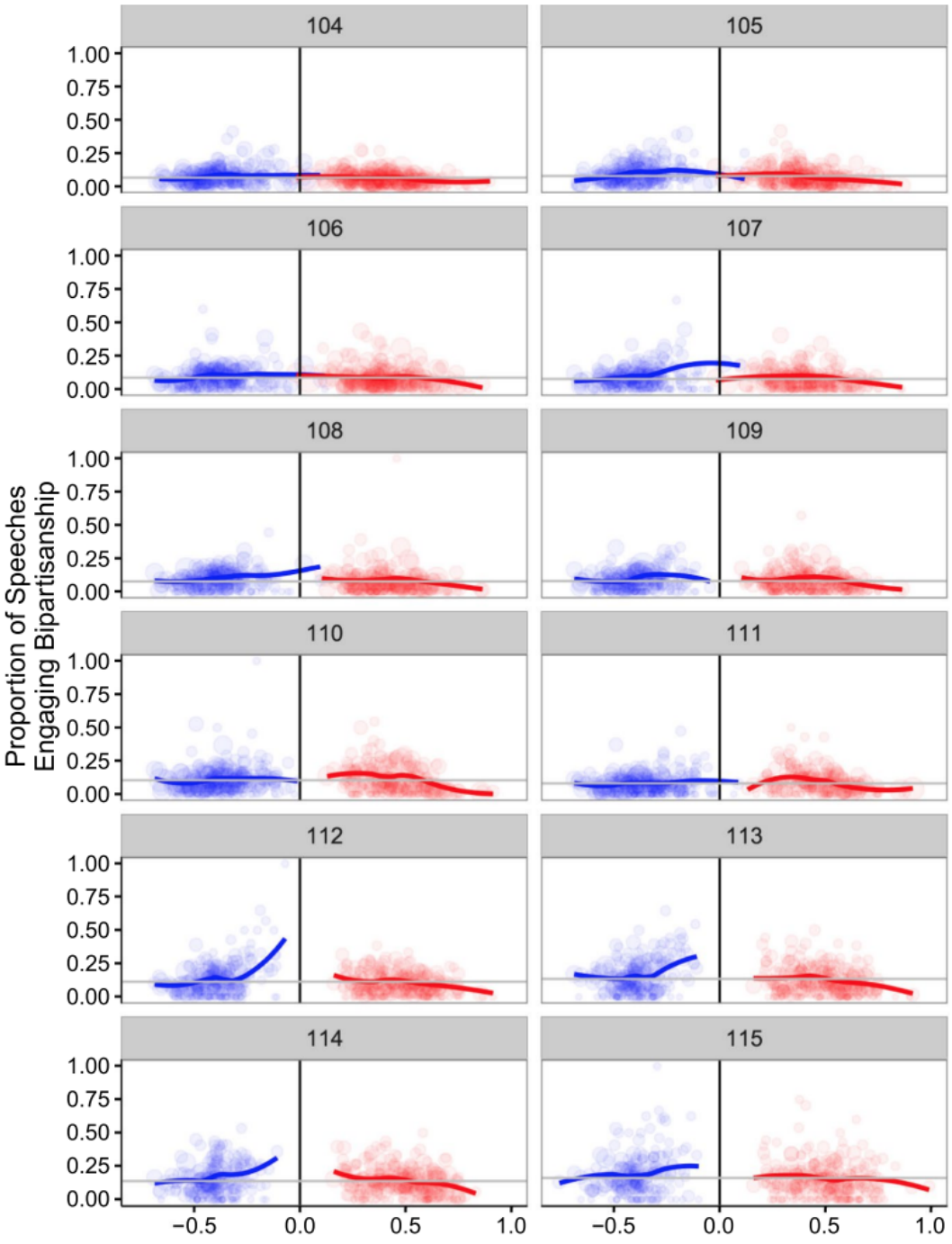


Figure 4

Figure 4 depicts the relationship between DW-NOMINATE Scores and the proportion of speeches featuring bipartisan rhetoric. We notice that for most congresses, DW-NOMINATE scores seem to have no effect on the proportion of speeches featuring bipartisan rhetoric. The figure depicts LOESS curves with the surroundings representing the 95% confidence intervals.

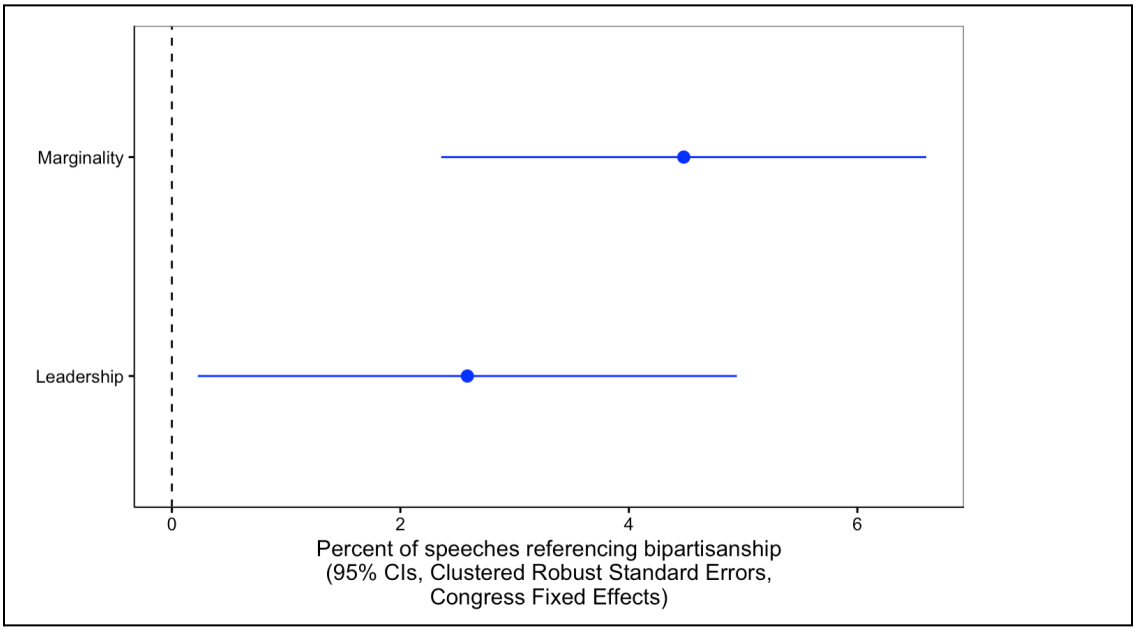


Figure 5

Figure 5, as evidenced from the x-axis label, depicts the percent increase of speeches referencing bipartisanship by two groups, party leaders and marginal representatives (who represent a swing district), in comparison to the average rank-and-file legislator. While the effect is stronger for marginal representatives, with a mean increase of 4.48%, it still exists for party leaders, who reference bipartisanship 2.59% more than the normal rank-and-file representative. The blue lines represent the 95% confidence intervals for these measures; they overlap.

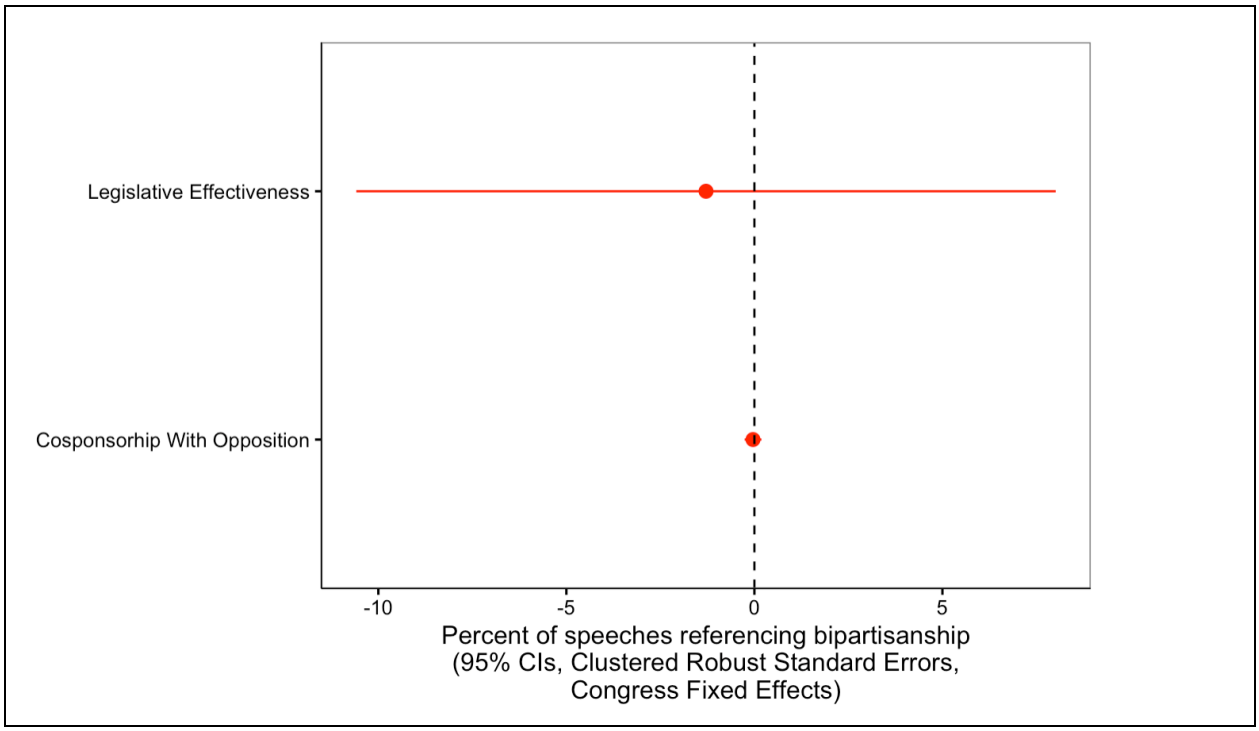


Figure 6

Figure 6 examines the relationship between references to bipartisanship and actual bipartisan behavior. Via bivariate OLS regression models, Westwood finds no relationship between references to bipartisanship and bipartisan behavior (i.e., cosponsorship with opposition). In other words, the percent of speeches referencing bipartisanship actually has no impact on whether a legislator sponsors a bill with a representative from the opposing party. The point estimates come from the OLS regression models mentioned above, while the horizontal bars depict the 95% confidence intervals corresponding to the models (tiny for cosponsorship).

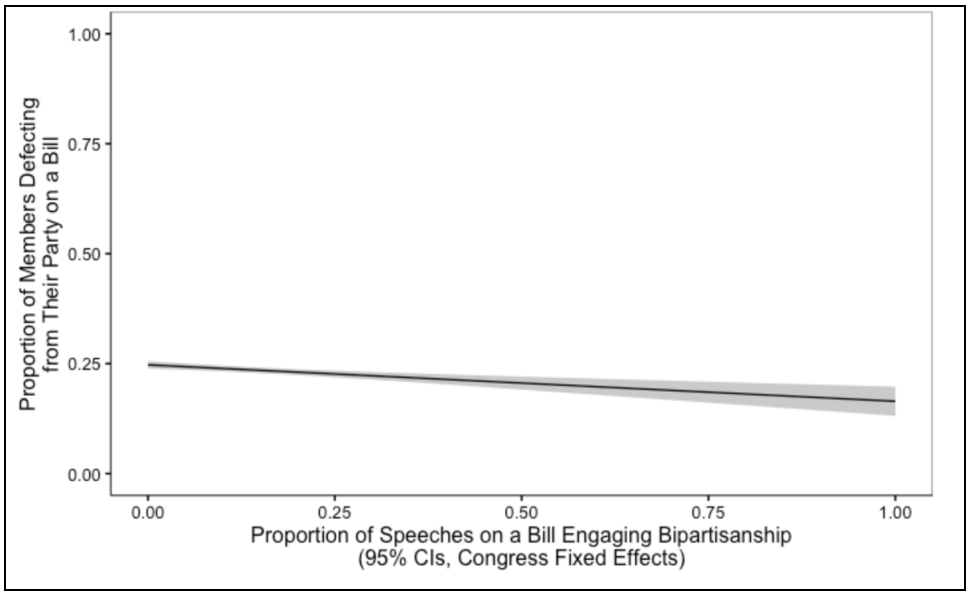


Figure 7

This figure examines the relationship between the proportion of members defecting from their party on a bill and the proportion of speeches on a bill referencing bipartisanship. Westwood therefore only uses bills that come to a vote in the House of Representatives when plotting this data, finding an inverse relationship between these two factors, though the effect is essentially negligible. This provides evidence in support of his argument that engaging in bipartisan rhetoric does not increase the likelihood that a bill garners bipartisan support.

Figure 8 (see below), which could not replicate ourselves given the electronic supplementary material provided, depicts the divergence of behavior and rhetoric after primaries.

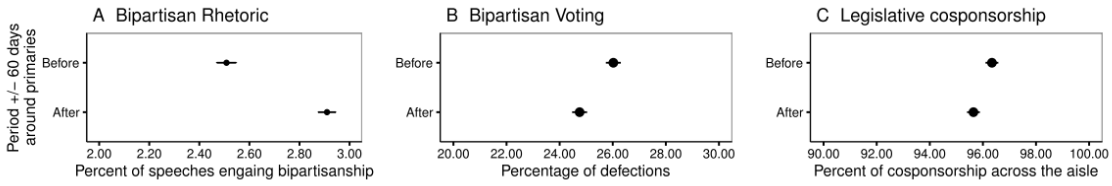


Figure 8

From this figure, we understand that bipartisan rhetoric does not align with bipartisan voting or legislative cosponsorship. When bipartisan rhetoric increases, representatives usually want to grab the attention of a wider attention, which occurs often after a primary. Westwood uses data from the 104th to the 111th congresses to demonstrate how bipartisan action decreases after primaries, though representatives still want to *discuss* bipartisanship. Bipartisan rhetoric increases after the primary, while bipartisan voting and legislative cosponsorship decrease.

Westwood then discusses two studies he conducted for the purposes of his power to "show how and why constituents are responsive to legislator appeals to bipartisanship."

Study 1

Westwood used a 2x2 experiment with a sample size of 1,206 adults to show the effect of bipartisan rhetoric on constituent support for representatives. Westwood asked participants to read a floor speech from a leader of the opposing party and a speech with a bipartisan assertion. The individuals then had to rank their level of support for the legislation on a seven-point Oppose to Support scale. He displays the results from this study in Figure 9.

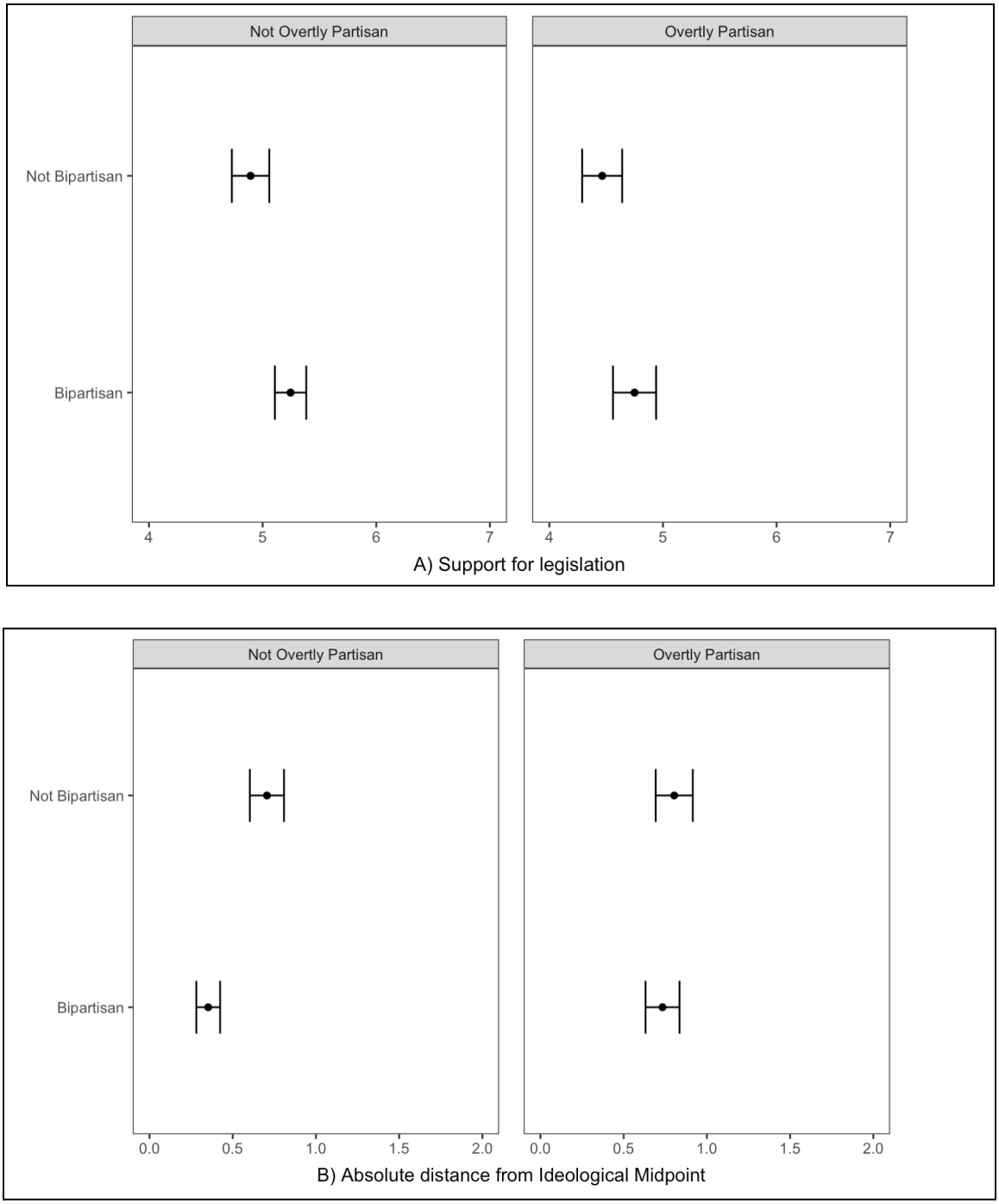


Figure 9

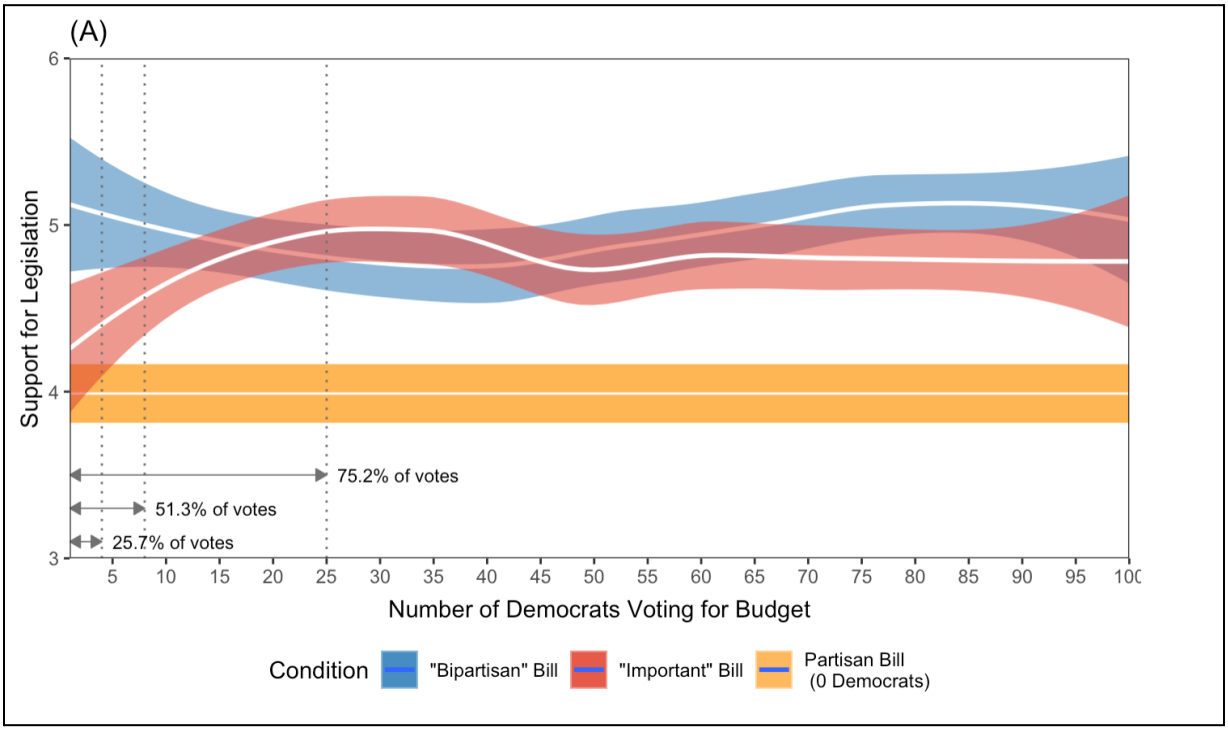
For Figure 9, Westwood conducted a survey of 1,206 adults, as explained above, having them read a speech about a bill (both partisan and bipartisan ones). Some of the speeches included an overtly partisan statement. Then, he asked them to rate their support for the bill on a

discrete, seven-point Oppose to Support scale, as well as the partisanship of the bill. The figure indicates that support goes up slightly for all types of bills when *characterized* as bipartisan, though bipartisan rhetoric only reduces the perceived partisanship of the bill if it is not overtly partisan. From this study, it is possible to conclude that constituents understand bipartisan rhetoric more positively when trying to evaluate legislation. According to Westwood, constituents see bipartisan rhetoric as "an indication of collaboration and compromise."

Study 2

Westwood then ran a second study, using a dose-response experiment with three treatments and a sample size of 1,324 people to understand the effects of bipartisan rhetoric on public support for legislation. He assigned 40% of the respondents a news article stating that a specific piece of "legislation had passed the House, that Republicans called it bipartisan, and that a random number of Democrats, varying uniformly from 1 to 100, voted in support of the legislation. He assigned another 40% of the respondents a similar news article, except Republicans called the bill important rather than bipartisan. He assigned the remaining 20% of respondents a news article which stated that no Democrats supported the bill. Then, Westwood asked the respondents for their support of the bill on a discrete, seven-point Oppose to Support scale. Westwood concluded from the second study that pieces of legislation do not necessarily need support from opposition legislators in order to garner bipartisan support from the public.

Figure 10 highlights the effects of the three treatment arms described above on support for legislation, as a function of the number of Democratic representatives voting for the budget.



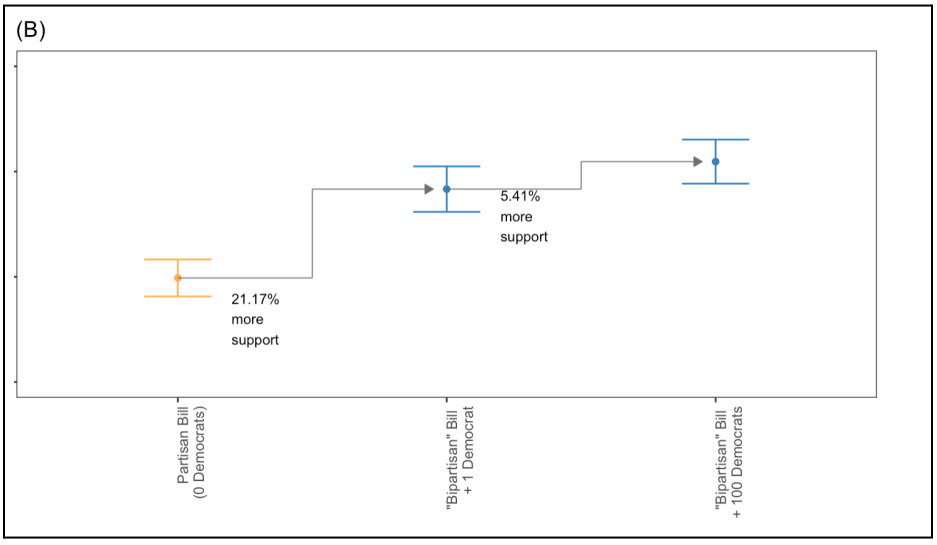
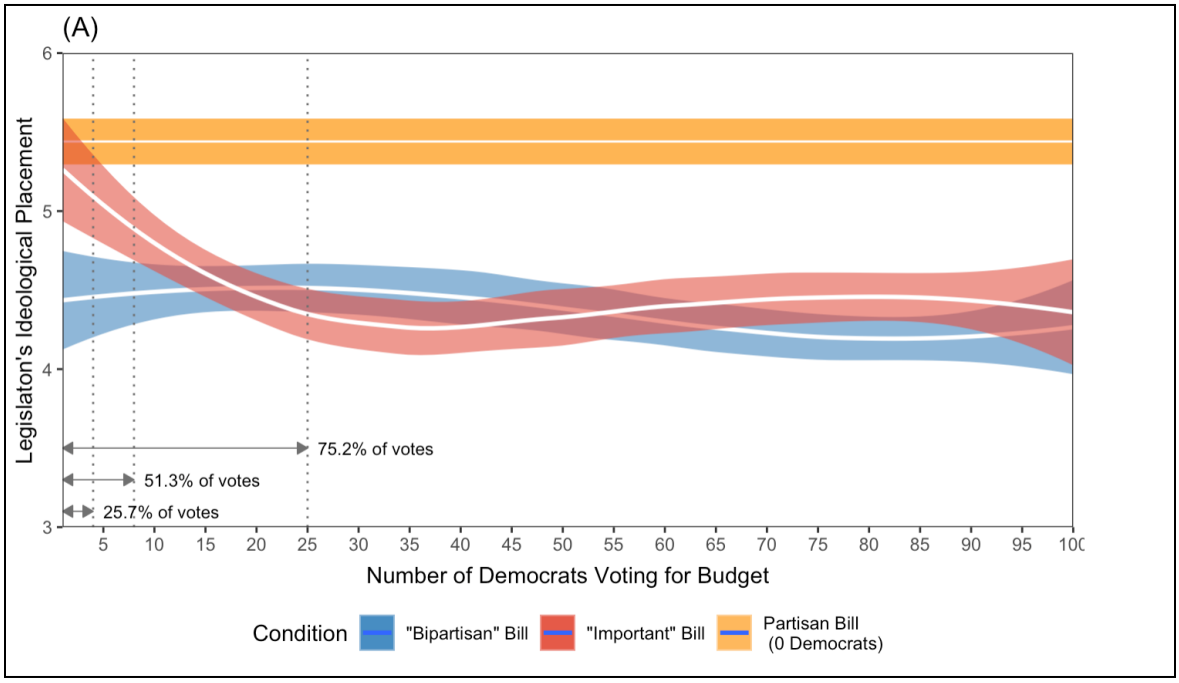


Figure 10

Figure 10 shows the effects of bipartisan rhetoric on public support for legislation. The dotted lines represent the actual percentage of Democrats voting "yea" in contested votes in the

114th Congress. The bars represent 95% confidence intervals. This figure shows a fairly complicated relationship, but in general, while calling the bill important increases support for it, calling the bill bipartisan has an even greater effect on public support. The bottom row shows the increase in public support for a bill *called* bipartisan that one Democrat supports and a bill *called* bipartisan that 100 Democrats support, compared to the control, the partisan bill described above.



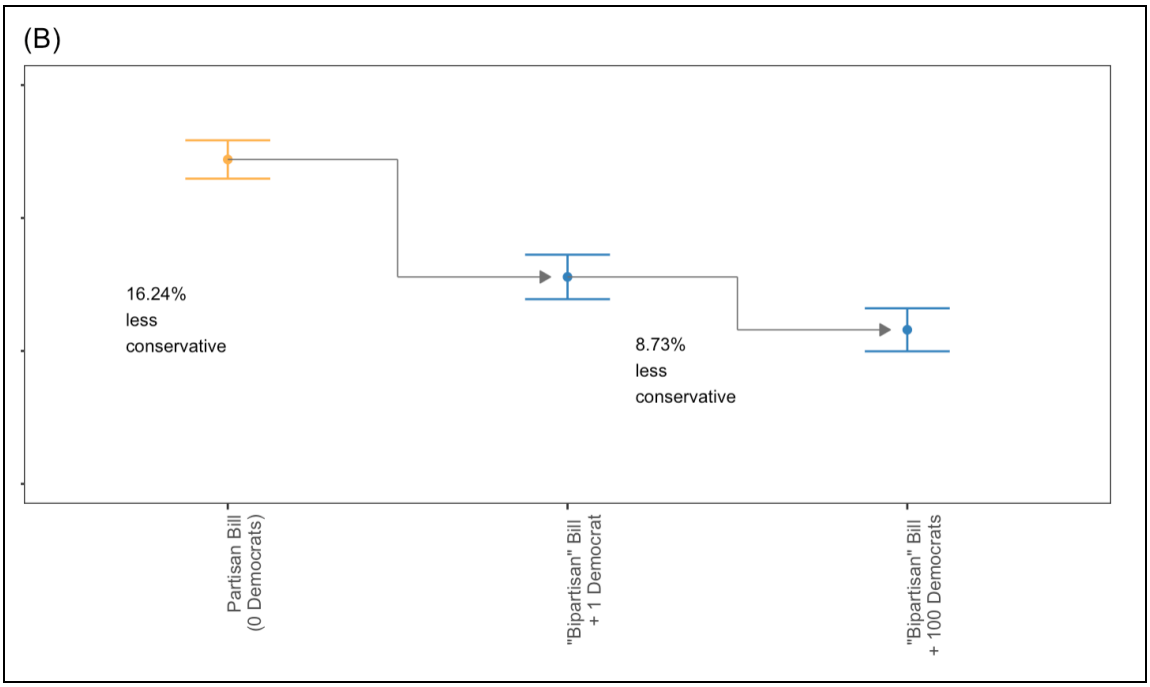


Figure 11

Figure 11 relies on the same data as Figure 10, but it depicts participant perceptions of the partisanship of a bill (measured on a 7-point liberal-conservative scale). These graphs show that *both* calling a bill bipartisan and calling it important decrease the perceived partisanship of the bill, and that the first Democrat voting for a Republican bill has more of an effect on perceptions of partisanship than 99 more Democrats voting for the Republican bill, combined.

We have a number of concerns about the treatments used in the study. For one, if participants did not pay close attention to the treatment, they may not have remembered the number of Democrats voting with Republicans. Figure 12 (see below), which we could not replicate ourselves given the electronic supplementary material provided, depicts how the percent of responsibility allocated to the Democratic Party increases as the number of Democrats voting in favor of a piece of legislation increases (for both 'bipartisan' and 'important' bills).

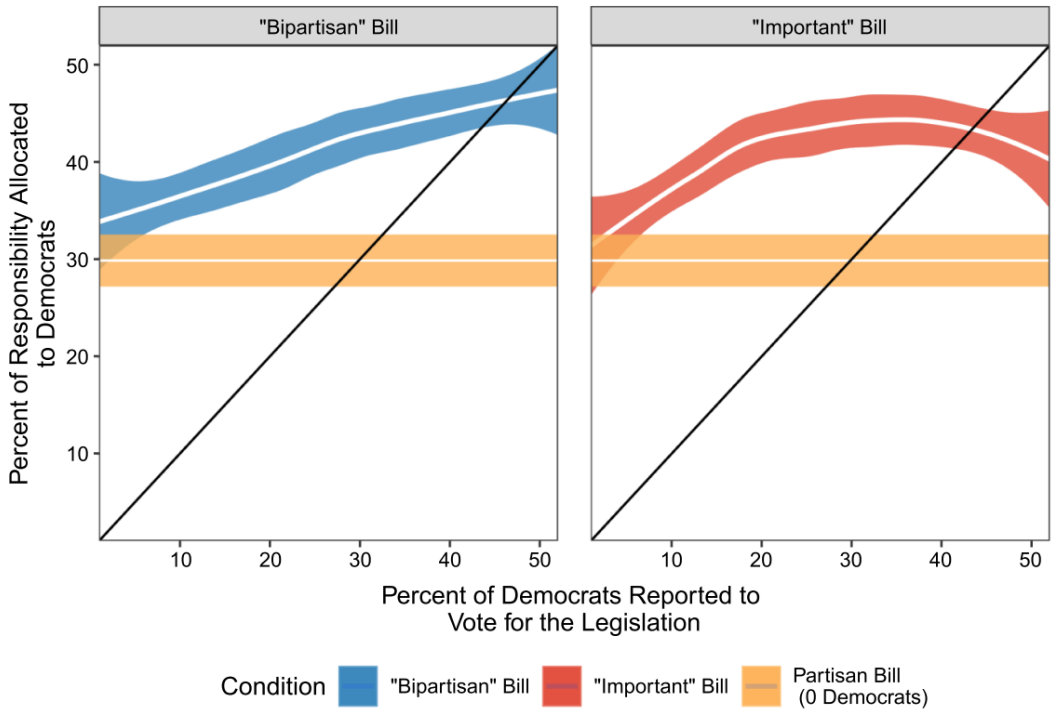


Figure 12

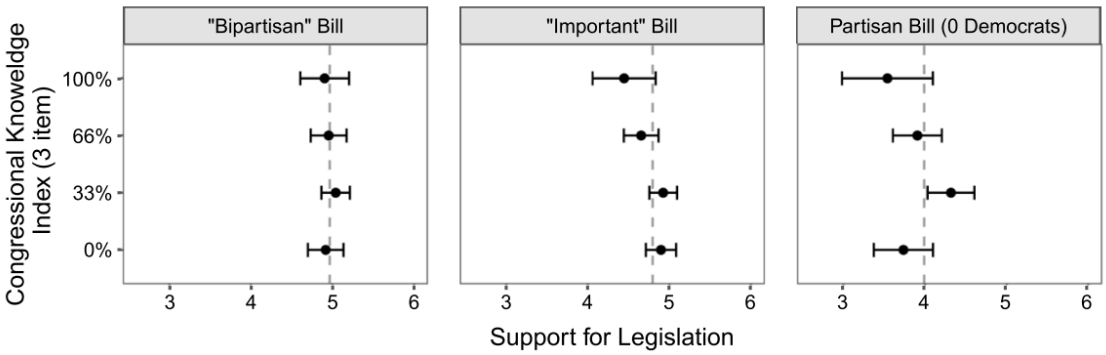


Figure 13

Figure 13 depicts the mean level of support for legislation in each treatment arm.

Discussion

We contend that Westwood's survey design leads him to collect weak data and draw weak conclusions in the section in which he attempts to determine how American voters think about bipartisanship. In Figure 1, Westwood asks respondents, "Thinking about the following scenario, would you say it describes bipartisanship or not? Three [Republicans/Democrats] join [Democrats/Republicans] to pass legislation." He then uses the similarity of his data across respondents of different political ideologies and across respondents who received each version of the question (i.e. Republicans joined Democrats or Democrats joined Republicans), to conclude that voters do not think differently about bipartisanship based on their political affiliation.

Westwood cannot accurately make this conclusion from the data. For one, the survey question is an ambiguous question that could be a strong source of confusion to respondents, thereby biasing the data. Westwood does not specify whether the politicians are federal, state, or local ones, and, if assumed to be federal, whether they are in the House of Representatives or the Senate. He gives no information about the legislation in question and gives no detail about what "join" means. He compounds this confusing question with a severely limited set of answers, depriving respondents of any opportunity to rate how strongly bipartisan it is for three politicians to join the opposing party. Also, Westwood only asks this question with three legislators, which further limits respondents' ability to communicate what is bipartisanship and what is not. These issues, combined with the limited scale provided to respondents, produces a snapshot that does not allow Westwood to make any strong claims about what voters believe about different amounts of legislators or how strongly they believe an act is bipartisan. In order to arrive at the conclusions he made, Westwood could have provided more detail in his survey question, used a

more elaborate scale to measure respondent opinions, and varied the question asked to encompass more or fewer legislators joining the opposing party (i.e., not just three).

His analysis for **Figures 10 and 11** is also weak. Westwood says this about Figure 10b:

> Presenting a bill as bipartisan even when only a single Democrat voted for the bill increases public support by 21.17% from the partisan treatment (mean = 3.98, 95% confidence interval [3.81, 4.16]) to the bipartisan treatment with 1 Democratic supporter (mean = 4.83, 95% confidence interval [4.61, 5.05]). This is larger than the increase in public support when the bill is reported to garner the support of 100 Democrats (mean = 5.09, 95% confidence interval [4.88, 5.30])—an increase in support of 5.41% above the return from peeling a single Democrat. (Westwood 2022)

It seems like these numbers do not match the ones in Figure 10a. The mean for one Democratic supporter and claims of bipartisanship is over 5, while the mean for 100 Democratic supporters and claims of bipartisanship seems to decrease slightly to approximately 5. Both of these means do not match the mean that he mentions in the quotation above.

Furthermore, Westwood does not adequately analyze the relationship between the "bipartisan" treatment group and the "important" treatment group for Figures 10 and 11. In each case, he simply states that using bipartisan rhetoric is more effective when eight or fewer Democrats support the bill and that the effect diminishes as the number of Democrats increases. While the curves in the figures cross paths at similar points, there is no analysis of this behavior. Further experimentation with the data is needed to understand this behavior. Perhaps there is a threshold for which a bill gets enough opposition support for voters to regard it as bipartisan, but not enough for it to be guaranteed to pass, resulting in the label "important" increasing a bill's support more than the label "bipartisan". Regardless of the true explanation, this relationship appears to be an important one to analyze given Westwood's main argument that partisans invoke the label "bipartisan" to increase support for themselves and their legislation.

Finally, Westwood's plots and figures are often confusing, and at times wrong. Often, his

axes are not labeled clearly, forcing the reader to parse through several paragraphs before they can begin to understand what the plotted data means. For example, the x-axis ranges from 4 to 7 in both Figure 9a and Figure 9b, but the axes are actually representing different metrics for each of these sub-figures. Westwood does not label these axes, leading to confusing data as a result. In addition, Figures 10, 11, and 12 seem to incorrectly depict the partisan treatment group, which assumes that 0 democrats support the bill. We should not see any data for any point on the x-axis greater than 0, since that corresponds to pieces of legislation with bipartisan support. These issues require a relatively simple fix--labeling axes clearly and not plotting phantom data.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined the argument S. J. Westwood makes in "The Partisanship of Bipartisanship: How Representatives Use Bipartisan Assertions to Cultivate Support," placing it in context of the literature at large and noting a few areas of improvement in terms of his research design. In particular, the survey he uses to explore how voters think about bipartisanship does not seem sufficient for the conclusions that he draws in his paper. He could fix this using more detailed and more varied survey questions to have better data. His analysis of Figures 10 and 11 is weak, as he does not analyze or attempt to explain most of the relationship he arrives at. He also cites numerical data that appears to conflict with the figures he shows. Finally, several of Westwood's figures, such as Figures 9, 10, and 11, are confusing and not displayed intuitively. The x-axis for Figure 9, for example, ranges from 4 to 7 without an obvious explanation for what these numbers mean. Westwood could address this issue by labeling his axes more clearly.

Electronic Supplementary Material

You may find the data required to replicate the tables in the original paper at this link.

References

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