



## **Do Constituents Know (or Care) about the Lawmaking Effectiveness of their Representatives?**

**Daniel M. Butler, Adam G. Hughes, Craig Volden, Alan E. Wiseman<sup>^</sup>**

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Substantial evidence exists that members of the U.S. Congress vary in their lawmaking effectiveness. Less known, however, is whether constituents have the knowledge and inclination to hold their representatives accountable, based on their effectiveness. We conducted three separate survey experiments to explore such accountability, informing some constituents about lawmakers' effectiveness and comparing their responses to those with the baseline level of information. Across experiments, we find that citizens, municipal officials, and voters demonstrate little knowledge of the lawmaking effectiveness of their elected officials. When presented with objective and credible information about lawmaking effectiveness, however, these groups express greater approval of more effective lawmakers. Effects were strongest among ideological moderates, but were even pronounced among partisans, who approved of effective representatives of the opposing party and disapproved of ineffective representatives from their own party. In contrast, the new information we provided had little effect on the subset of municipal officials who already had extensive prior contact with their representatives.

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## **Do Constituents Know (or Care) about the Lawmaking Effectiveness of their Representatives?**

The quality of representation offered by elected officials varies dramatically. For example, Volden and Wiseman (2014) illustrate that lawmakers in the U.S. Congress differ substantially from one another in their ability to advance policy proposals effectively on behalf of their constituents and others. Voters who are poorly represented on this front have the recourse of voting ineffective lawmakers out of office, but there is little evidence that they do so. Does such a lack of accountability arise because voters do not know how effective their lawmakers are, or do they simply not care about that aspect of representation, instead focusing on partisanship, ideology, or other characteristics and behavior?

Political scientists have long been concerned about issues of accountability. Regarding the U.S. Congress, much of this concern in the post-World War II period centered on the extent and possibility of responsible party government (e.g., APSA 1950). In such an idealized, party-oriented system, accountability could be attained as parties fight to maintain their brand names for electoral purposes (e.g., Snyder and Ting 2002). Yet, members of Congress often cultivate sources of support for reelection independent of parties (e.g., Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987); and party members often diverge significantly from one another on important issues.

At the level of individual representatives, voters may be interested in holding their representative accountable on criteria ranging from ideological alignment with the district to a variety of valence characteristics (e.g., Stokes 1963). However, research into the general phenomenon of voter accountability has yielded mixed evidence. On the one hand, members of Congress who deviate ideologically from the preferred positions of their districts often suffer declines in their vote share and their odds of reelection (e.g., Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002; Dancey and Sheagley 2016; Joesten and Stone 2014). On the other hand, members of

Congress seeking credit for federal spending in the district may gain the impression of influence even when they played no significant role (e.g., Grimmer, Westwood, and Messing 2014).

There is also little evidence that a member of Congress's legislative effectiveness affects his or her electoral success. While Padro i Miquel and Snyder (2006) find evidence that legislative effectiveness is related to electoral success among North Carolina state legislators, this relationship does not hold for members of Congress. Indeed, over the past four decades, the average reelection vote share for a member of the U.S. House of Representatives with a Legislative Effectiveness Score (LES) above her party's median is 70.3%, compared to a 69.6% vote share for those below their party median in effectiveness.<sup>1</sup> Alternatively, if we divide members of the House of Representatives into three groups, highly effective, average in effectiveness, or ineffective (relative to the average lawmaker in the member's same party with the same years of seniority and a similar committee or subcommittee chair position),<sup>2</sup> we find that ineffective lawmakers subsequently returned to Congress with a 69.5% vote share, compared to 68.9% for average lawmakers, and 68.0% for highly effective lawmakers. Clearly, effectiveness in lawmaking is not rewarded; nor do voters seem to hold ineffective lawmakers accountable for their poor performances.

Such patterns could arise due to voters not knowing how effective their lawmakers are, or not caring about effectiveness in lawmaking. Prior research has extensively explored what

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<sup>1</sup> Legislative Effectiveness Scores are constructed by Volden and Wiseman (2014, Chapter 2), combining fifteen indicators of the bills sponsored by members of the U.S. House of Representatives, the importance of those proposals, and how far those bills move through the lawmaking process. Data are available at [www.thelawmakers.org](http://www.thelawmakers.org).

<sup>2</sup> Specifically, for each Congress from 1973-2014 (93<sup>rd</sup> to 113<sup>th</sup> Congresses), the Center for Effective Lawmaking regressed the LES on a member's party status (majority or minority), years of seniority, and separate indicators for whether the lawmaker was a committee chair or subcommittee chair. Lawmakers were then classified into these three categories based on whether they scored below 50% of their predicted LES (ineffective), above 150% of their predicted value (highly effective) or in between (average); see [www.thelawmakers.org/find-representatives#](http://www.thelawmakers.org/find-representatives#/). These three bins are used extensively in the research and analysis reported below.

knowledge voters have about their representatives (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, Dancey and Sheagley 2013, Lupia 2015) and how that knowledge affects vote choice (e.g., Joesten and Stone 2014, Shor and Rogowski 2016). Much less research, however, has explored the role of lawmaking effectiveness (as a valence consideration) in constituents' decision making. The work that does exist on this front has focused more on political parties than on individuals.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, we explore whether constituents have knowledge of legislators' lawmaking effectiveness and whether providing this information affects constituents' attitudes about their elected representatives. We focus on constituent knowledge because a lack of information is the most obvious obstacle to constituents rewarding legislators for their lawmaking effectiveness. If constituents do not have the motivation or opportunity to gain credible information about lawmaking effectiveness, they cannot employ that information as they make choices about candidates. To engage with these questions, we carried out surveys on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and in the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). We find that most constituents are unable to discriminate between highly effective and ineffective lawmakers. Instead, most Americans regard their representatives as being of average lawmaking effectiveness. Although there is a positive correlation between the respondent's *perception* of legislative effectiveness and approval of their representative, there is no relationship between a representative's *actual* lawmaking effectiveness and constituent evaluations. Simply stated, Americans appear to have little pre-existing knowledge about legislative effectiveness.

We find, however, that individuals change their evaluations in response to credible information about legislators' lawmaking effectiveness. More specifically, in the survey

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, work on how party valence investments make candidates more attractive to voters (Wiseman 2006), on party cartels as mechanisms of voter accountability (e.g., Cox and McCubbins 2005; Lebo, McGlynn, and Koger 2007), on partisan conflict influencing congressional approval (Ramirez 2009), and on voters holding accountable party members who are perceived responsible for budgeting failures (Butler and Powell 2014).

experiments we provide people with information about their own representative's legislative effectiveness, based on the ineffective, average, or highly effective categories described above. When presented with this information, constituents become more likely to approve of the effective lawmakers, and less likely to approve of ineffective lawmakers. Partisanship does not appear to moderate the effect of information provision on attitude formation; rather, we find that partisans are willing to punish ineffective representatives who are copartisans, and also willing to reward highly effective representatives from the other party. In contrast, ideology seems to play an important intervening role, with ideological moderates being much more responsive to evidence of lawmaking effectiveness than are extremists. Moreover, the size of this effect is nearly as large as the typical partisan boost for legislators from the same party as the constituent.

We further probe the role of information in constituent evaluations by exploring how representatives' lawmaking effectiveness impacts the attitudes and behavior of elected city officials who live in their district, as examined in the 2016 American Municipal Officials Survey (AMOS). We find that the evaluations of city officials who had interacted with their representative on a policy issue in the previous four years were not influenced by new information about their representative's lawmaking effectiveness. In contrast, city officials with limited direct interactions with their representative were responsive to the information about their lawmaking effectiveness; they rewarded effective legislators and punished ineffective legislators.

Our results highlight both the obstacles and promise of how information can improve accountability for legislative (in)effectiveness. The primary obstacle we reveal is that most Americans do not have much information about representatives' lawmaking effectiveness. Lacking needed objective information, constituents could not reasonably be expected to evaluate their elected officials based on their (in)effectiveness. That said, our findings point to how

constituents *do* employ credible information about representatives' lawmaking effectiveness when it is presented to them; and the information is incorporated into their evaluations in a manner analogous to a valence dimension (e.g., Stokes 1963). Hence, even though constituents might not naturally possess information about lawmaking effectiveness, giving them credible information about these matters might ultimately provide politicians with greater incentives to become more effective lawmakers.

### **Legislative Effectiveness and Constituent Approval**

Existing evidence suggests that individuals' expectations of legislative outcomes are central to legislator evaluations (Grant and Rudolf 2004), and that many voters prioritize parochial interests over national policies (Doherty 2015). Existing research, however, has not examined how legislators' successes at moving their bills through the legislative process relate to voters' evaluations of their performances. We explore this relationship by utilizing Volden and Wiseman's (2014) Legislative Effectiveness Scores.

In trying to assess whether there is a relationship between a lawmaker's LES and her constituents' evaluations of her performance, it is worth noting that in many cases, constituents might not have credible information about who is an effective lawmaker.<sup>4</sup> Lupia (2015), for example, points to how people often neglect political information because they lack the motivation or incentives to obtain it. Moreover, those who are most likely to seek out political

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<sup>4</sup> It is also possible that any constituent disregard for effective lawmaking could be influenced by additional considerations. Perhaps constituents only want effective lawmakers who share their ideological preferences, or only those who shepherd the most significant policy changes through to law. And some voters may in fact prefer lower effectiveness in lawmaking, if such activities detract from constituent service or other valuable elements of representation for time-constrained members of Congress. Future work exploring such possibilities in detail would be welcome.

information are the very people whose opinions and views are least likely to be swayed by it (Mummolo and Peterson 2016).

Even if voters are interested in acquiring political information, in many cases legislators themselves are likely to be the main source of information about their relative effectiveness. Hence, constituents may discount whatever information they are exposed to, because they know that legislators have incentives to present biased perspectives on their activities (Mayhew 1974). As Fenno (1978, 137) writes, “to the extent possible – even if it requires a bit of imagination – members will picture themselves as effective users of inside power” when meeting with constituents. As a result, even if legislators inform their constituents about their legislative activities, it is not clear that individuals will incorporate that information in any meaningful way into their evaluations of their representatives. These considerations – voter ignorance, the lack of updating based on new information, and voters discounting the information legislators present – collectively motivate our first hypothesis:

***Uninformed about Effectiveness Hypothesis:*** *There is no relationship between actual lawmaker effectiveness and Americans’ attitudes about their representatives’ lawmaking effectiveness.*

If constituents are uninformed (or unpersuaded by biased information), it is plausible that credible sources could provide information that may influence their views. Even if Americans are not likely to reject information, per se, they are relatively unlikely to pay the costs necessary to become informed. If, however, new information is conveyed in an accessible manner and with sufficient source credibility (Lupia 2015), constituents may respond to that information. Even though representatives’ electoral motivations might contribute to voters discounting whatever information legislators present to them about their performance in office, other actors

might be able to provide credible information about such matters. In the current context, we expect that, in response to information from independent and non-partisan researchers, constituents will support legislators who are described as “highly effective” while providing less support to ineffective lawmakers. This logic motivates the following hypothesis:

***Credible Information Affects Support Hypothesis:*** *When constituents receive credible and easy-to-understand information about effectiveness, they become more (less) supportive of more (less) effective lawmakers.*

Independent of the credibility of the information that is provided, partisanship is also likely to influence constituents’ evaluations of their representative by serving as a perceptual lens (i.e., Lodge and Taber 2013) that attenuates (or exacerbates) the effects of information provision (e.g., Sulkin, Testa, and Usry 2015). More specifically, information that casts a copartisan in a negative light is less likely to be accepted or applied by strong partisans, while negative information about a representative from the other party might be deemed to be especially persuasive (Anderson and Harbridge 2014). These considerations motivate the following hypothesis:

***Copartisanship Moderates Informational Effects Hypothesis:*** *When constituents hear that their copartisan representative is more effective (or an opposition partisan is ineffective), they will be more likely to accept the information and change their evaluations. When they hear that a copartisan representative is less effective (or opposition partisan is more effective), they will be less likely to accept the information and change their evaluations.*

While partisanship may shape the responsiveness of constituents to information about lawmaking effectiveness, ideological preferences may also influence constituents’ responses to congressional behavior (e.g., Harbridge and Malhotra 2011). Extreme conservatives may not approve of the work of effective liberal lawmakers, or may even



dislike them further for successfully advancing abhorrent liberal policies. Extreme liberal constituents may likewise despise effective conservative lawmakers. Ideological sorting and polarization are indeed strong forces in American politics today (e.g., Mason 2015). In contrast, ideological moderates may be more open to policies coming from anywhere across the political spectrum and may be open to, and appreciative of, the lawmakers who work to advance new policies to address the country's greatest public policy problems. Moderates may be less concerned about representatives' policy positions (e.g., Adams et al. 2017) and more interested in problem solving. It is such moderate constituents who are likely to be pivotal in close elections and open to evidence about effective lawmaking.

***Ideological Moderation Enhances Informational Effects Hypothesis: The effect of credible information about lawmaking effectiveness will be greatest among ideologically moderate constituents and more limited among extremists.***

Finally, although partisanship and ideology are expected to impact a constituent's evaluation of his or her representative, informational effects may be attenuated by prior experiences with the representative. More specifically, we expect that constituents who have had personal experience working with legislators in the past would be in a better position to draw on their own experiences to form opinions about the representative's lawmaking effectiveness, rather than relying solely on external cues. Hence, these constituents will likely be less affected by new information, even if it is credible, in contrast to those constituents who have more limited (or no) experience with their elected officials. In this sense, one's own experience represents a high level of pre-existing, credible information to that individual. While there are other ways to acquire this knowledge, we focus on prior, personal interactions, because such experiences are

easy to measure and they transparently capture the concept of the acquisition of deep prior knowledge. These considerations motivate our final hypothesis:

***Experience Moderates Informational Effects Hypothesis:** Constituents who have personal experience with their representative are less affected by new information about the representative's lawmaking effectiveness.*

### **What Does the Public Know about the Lawmaking Effectiveness of their Representatives?**

We begin our analysis by testing the *Uninformed about Effectiveness Hypothesis*. To collect data to test this hypothesis (and other hypotheses), we recruited a sample of respondents from Amazon's Mechanical Turk in December 2015. Respondents were paid \$0.50 for completing a survey that took an average of about four minutes. Because we use representatives' Legislative Effectiveness Scores from the previous (113<sup>th</sup>) Congress, which adjourned in January 2015, we dropped the 156 respondents whose representatives in the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress were no longer in office at the time of the survey. Hence, our analysis sample includes 1,035 respondents.

Like most MTurk samples, our sample skews (ideologically) to the left, as 69% of the respondents identify themselves as Democrats (including leaners) and 31% self-identify as Republicans. Similarly, 55% of the respondents self-identify as being liberal, while 24% self-identify as being conservative. The respondents are also relatively young, with a mean age of 34 (age ranging from 18 to 74). The modal income of the sample is \$20,000-40,000 (median: \$40,000-60,000) and the modal education level is a Bachelor's degree (median: Associate's).

While MTurk convenience samples often provide treatment effect estimates comparable to those from national samples (Coppock N.d.; Coppock et al. N.d.), we replicate the same experiment with a national sample in order to explore the generalizability of any information

effects across both different samples and different political contexts. This second study was part of the 2016 CCES (Ansolabehere and Rivers 2013), and took place just before the 2016 election. We present the results from both sets of samples below. For both samples, we asked the subjects questions about their own perceptions of their representative’s lawmaking effectiveness. To facilitate this analysis, we identified who a subject’s U.S. House Representative was by asking for zipcode information at the beginning of the survey, which was then mapped onto the appropriate House district.<sup>5</sup> After identifying the appropriate Representative, subjects were asked the following question:

How effective do you think [REPRESENTATIVE] is, in terms of passing laws?  
Highly effective  
About Average in effectiveness  
Not at all effective

The language about “effectiveness” has a clear normative element to it. One could instead imagine selecting more neutral terms, such as “productivity” or “passing more laws.” Yet, accountability discussions are most likely to play out in electoral campaigns, during which clearly normative labels are used repeatedly. Our approach therefore mimics the nature of actual public discussions than would a more value-neutral approach.

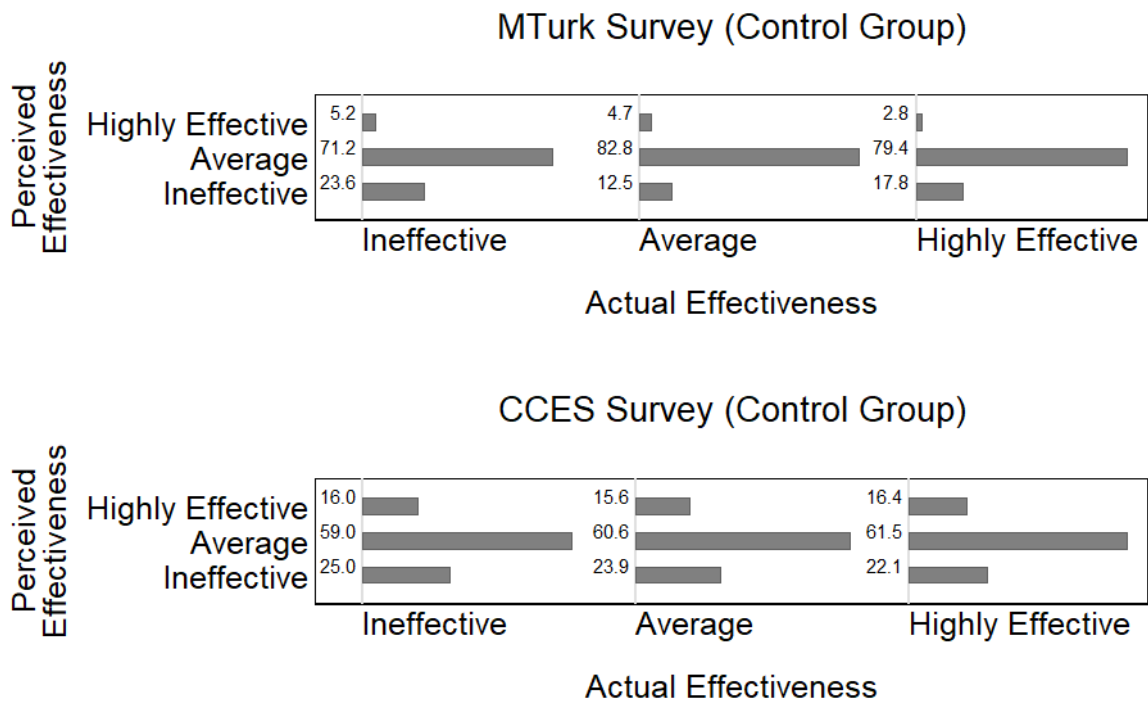
Figure 1 presents the analysis from respondents in the control group, who did not receive any information in the survey about their representative’s lawmaking effectiveness. (The other respondents, in the treatment group, received information as part of the survey experiment to test the other hypotheses, as discussed below.) The figure shows that constituents do not correctly

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<sup>5</sup> For the subset of zipcodes that encompass multiple congressional districts, we randomly selected one district among the possible options in the MTurk survey. We encouraged respondents to leave a comment if they believed their district was incorrectly assigned; one person did so and was excluded from the analysis. The CCES uses addresses to link respondents to congressional districts in order to avoid this issue.

identify their representatives' lawmaking effectiveness. Rather, most respondents thought that their representative was average in lawmaking effectiveness, regardless of her actual effectiveness. Taken together, the results provide strong support for the *Uninformed about Effectiveness Hypothesis*, as there is *no* clear relationship between a respondent's perception of his representative's lawmaking effectiveness and the legislator's actual effectiveness.

**Figure 1:**  
**Knowledge about Lawmaker Effectiveness (Control Group)**



Even though voters may not possess the correct information about their representatives' lawmaking effectiveness, it appears that they act on their own perceptions of that effectiveness. More specifically, for both the MTurk and CCES samples, we asked subjects the following question to assess the scope of job approval that they held for their representative:

Please indicate whether you approve or disapprove of the job that [REPRESENTATIVE] is doing.

- Strongly approve
- Approve
- Disapprove
- Strongly disapprove

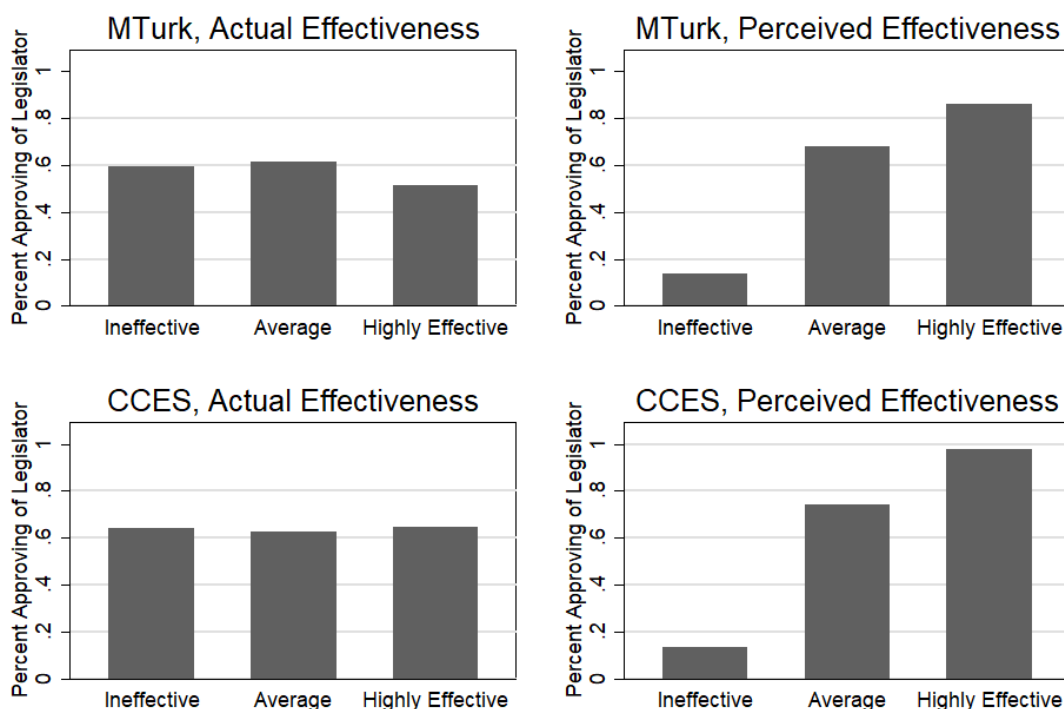
We chose to focus on job approval as a question that is relevant to all three types of respondents we surveyed for this project (citizens, voters, and municipal officials). Moreover, job approval is often cited as a key determinant of constituents' vote choices, which would be of obvious interest to elected representatives.<sup>6</sup> We recoded responses from this question into a dichotomous variable that takes a value of "1" if a respondent chose either "Strongly approve" or "Approve", or 0 for either "Disapprove" or "Strongly disapprove." We chose to employ a binary form of approval because it facilitates a clear distinction between approval or disapproval; and from a practical perspective, it likewise makes it easier to interpret the results of our analyses by rendering the treatment effect in percentage point changes.

The relationship between a representative's lawmaking effectiveness and job approval is presented in Figure 2. Here we characterize both the lawmaker's *actual* effectiveness based on her Legislative Effectiveness Score and her *perceived* lawmaking effectiveness (as perceived by the survey respondent).

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<sup>6</sup> We also analyzed constituents' vote intentions in the sample of voters, yielding results similar to those for job approval reported below. These results regarding vote intentions are presented in the Appendix.

Figure 2: Control Group Approval of Lawmaker



For both the MTurk and the CCES samples, we find that a representative’s job approval is strongly (positively) related to her constituents’ reported perceptions of effectiveness.<sup>7</sup> Specifically, there is a 70-80 percentage point gap in approval between those who perceive their representative as “Highly effective” and those who perceive their representative as “Not at all effective.” However, because this perceived lawmaking effectiveness is not related to representatives’ actual lawmaking effectiveness (see Figure 1), there is no statistically significant relationship between actual lawmaking effectiveness and a representative’s job approval for these respondents. It is worth noting that the analyses used throughout this paper are based on the categories of legislative effectiveness relative to expectations, as discussed above. The

<sup>7</sup> These relationships are statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ ) based on t-tests. That said, there is no clear causal direction to the relationship established here. It may be that favorably perceived representatives are assumed to be more effective, rather than vice versa.

findings of approval being unrelated to such characterizations of lawmaking effectiveness extend even further. In additional analyses, we find no relationship between approval of the representative and whether he or she had a higher raw Legislative Effectiveness Score, served in the majority party, or chaired a committee or subcommittee, all of which are strongly related to effective lawmaking.<sup>8</sup>

Figures 1 and 2 suggest that constituents do not have correct information about the lawmaking effectiveness of their legislators. If constituents do not have such information, we would not expect them to incorporate it into their evaluations of their representatives. As a result, legislators likely have limited (electoral) incentives to invest effort to become effective lawmakers. Informing voters about a legislator's actual lawmaking effectiveness, then, is likely a minimum necessary condition for providing politicians with the electoral incentives to induce them to invest in lawmaking effectiveness.<sup>9</sup>

### **Are Americans' Opinions about their Representatives Responsive to New Information?**

Providing credible information about legislators' lawmaking effectiveness to constituents will only increase legislators' incentives to invest in lawmaking effectiveness if constituents use that information to update their evaluations of their representative. To explore whether this dynamic might hold, and to test the *Credible Information Affects Support Hypothesis*, we conducted the following survey experiment on the MTurk and CCES samples. Before a subject was asked about approval of his or her representative, we randomized whether the respondent received information about the representative's *actual* level of lawmaking effectiveness (based

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<sup>8</sup> More senior lawmakers did receive higher approval from constituents in the control group, perhaps based on having built up a greater personal vote and name recognition over time.

<sup>9</sup> Non-electoral possibilities for lawmakers being held accountable include greater lobbying and campaign contributions accruing to effective lawmakers, or better committee or subcommittee assignments being given to effective party members. Future research exploring both of these mechanisms of accountability would be welcome.

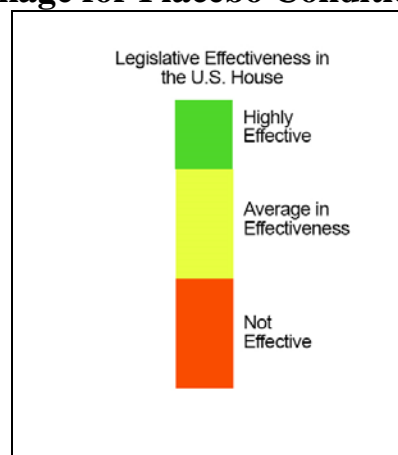
on the representative's Legislative Effectiveness Score).<sup>10</sup> More specifically, all subjects were exposed to the following information, where the \$-sign represents the inclusion of lawmaker-specific information and where the text in brackets was varied across treatment conditions:

As you may know, your representative, *\$Representative*, is a *\$Party*, who has served for *\$Years* years in Congress.

[CONTROL/PLACEBO/TREATMENT TEXT AND FIGURES]

For the experiment, a quarter of the sample received no information whatsoever about effectiveness. Another quarter of the sample was assigned to a placebo condition that discussed legislative effectiveness but did not give subjects any information about their own representative's lawmaking effectiveness. Instead, these respondents were given the following additional prompt: "Members of Congress differ in how *effective* they are at moving their proposed bills into law"; and they were presented with the image shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3: Image for Placebo Condition in Survey Experiment**



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<sup>10</sup> One concern about survey experiments is that subjects may be responding in a manner that they believe comports with researchers' expectations. In our case, subjects may believe that if we tell them that their legislator is effective (ineffective), we want them to say good (bad) things about the legislator. Recent scholarship, however, demonstrates that subjects are generally not very responsive to these kinds of demand effects (de Quidt, Haushofer, and Roth 2018; Mummolo and Peterson N.d.). Further, in our final study we find that subjects who have had personal experiences with their legislators do not respond to the treatment, consistent with subjects relying on their own views rather than perceptions of researcher expectations.



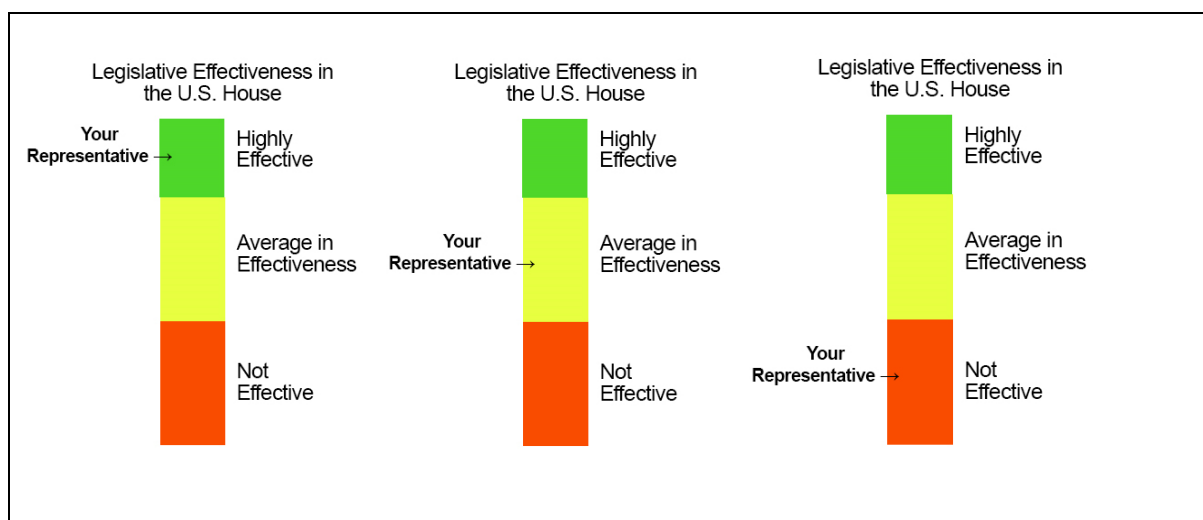
Because we found no differences in relevant responses between subjects assigned to the placebo and the pure control conditions, we combined these two conditions in our analyses, using them together as the baseline control group against which we assess how information about representatives' lawmaking effectiveness influences approval. To facilitate these comparisons, the remaining half of the subjects was presented with the following prompt:<sup>11</sup>

Members of Congress differ in how *effective* they are at moving their proposed bills into law.

A team of **independent** and **non-partisan** researchers recently found that your representative, *\$Representative*, is *\$Effectiveness* compared to others in Congress.

In addition to the prompt, subjects were also presented with one of the images in Figure 4 that illustrated the representative's actual relative lawmaking effectiveness. For example, if the subject's representative was of average effectiveness, the subject was shown the middle image.

**Figure 4: Images for the Informed (Treatment) Condition**



<sup>11</sup> Across a variety of personal and political factors, the control and treatment groups are well balanced, with no statistically significant differences in such considerations as age, education, race, gender, ideology, and partisanship.

The information treatments were designed with the intention of maximizing their credibility. First, we emphasized that the data came from a “team of **independent** and **non-partisan** researchers.”<sup>12</sup> Second, we employed bar charts when presenting the data because individuals often perceive bar charts to be more scientific than text alone (Tal and Wansink 2016). Taken together, these choices were made to increase the credibility of the information beyond what might be inferred by subjects if it had been provided by a more biased or less sophisticated source (Lupia 2015).

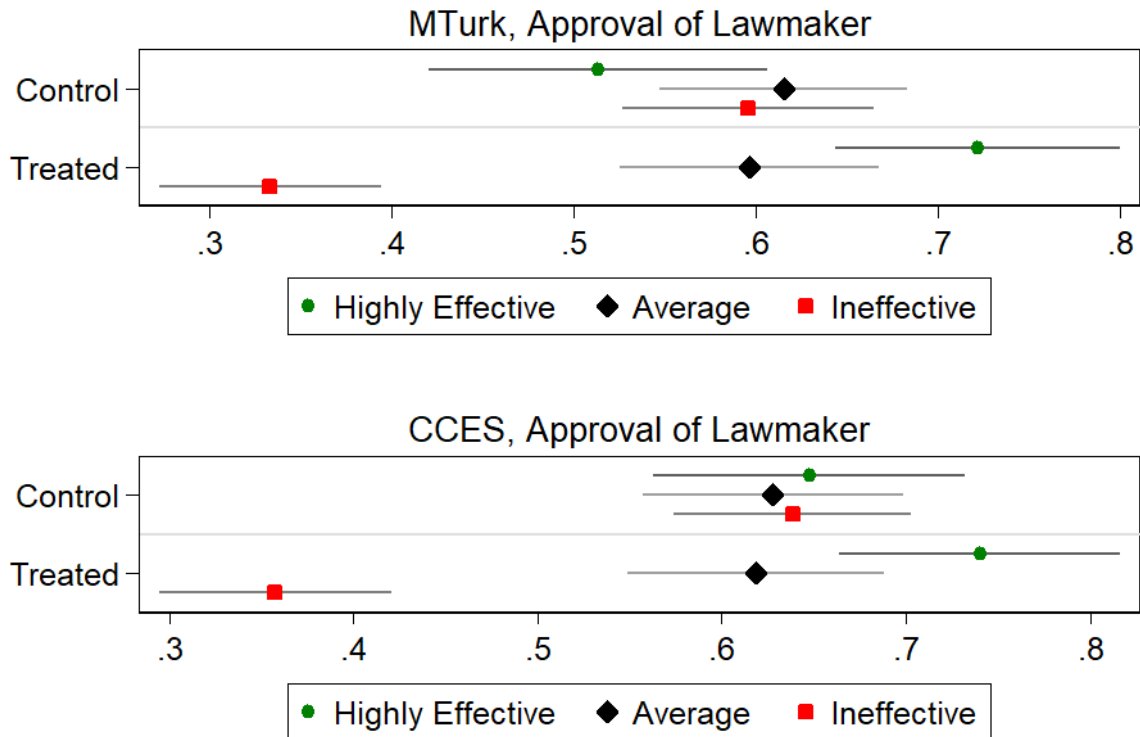
Figure 5 depicts the relationship between actual effectiveness and approval by whether or not the respondent was provided information in the experiment. The figures show the predicted probability (along with 95% confidence intervals) produced by logit models with the dichotomous approval measure as the dependent variable. Each model was run separately for each subset of lawmaker type (highly effective, average, ineffective); and each included as the sole independent variable whether the treatment information was provided.<sup>13</sup> The top half of each panel shows the level of approval among those subjects who were not provided information about their representative’s lawmaking effectiveness, and the bottom half of each panel shows the level of approval among those subjects who received the information treatment.

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<sup>12</sup> Future work exploring variants on the effects based on source credibility, substituting “experts” or “scientists” for “researchers” and relying on other terms than “independent” and “non-partisan,” may be of value.

<sup>13</sup> Given the balance between the treatment and control groups, these straightforward analyses are well-justified and offer easy interpretability. The CCES also provides a series of weights for observations to make the sample more representative of the American public as a whole. Rerunning all analyses in the paper using these weights produces substantively similar results.

Figure 5: Informational Effects on Approval of Lawmaker



The results suggest that a representative’s actual lawmaking effectiveness did not predict approval among respondents who received no information about their representative’s relative effectiveness, consistent with Figure 2 above. In contrast, there was a strong relationship between actual lawmaking effectiveness and job approval among those subjects who received the information treatment (in the bottom half of each panel).

Moreover, by comparing the levels of approval across the treatment and control groups, we see that the information affected subjects’ approval levels in expected ways. First, it is clear that the approval levels for representatives who were revealed to be “average” in effectiveness do not differ between treatment and control groups ( $p = 0.71$  and  $p = 0.85$  in the MTurk and CCES

samples, respectively).<sup>14</sup> Such a finding is unsurprising, given that the vast majority of control group subjects already thought that their legislator was average in terms of lawmaking effectiveness (see Figure 1). Hence, when subjects learned that their representatives were, indeed, average, they had no reason to update their opinions; and we would expect their views of their representatives to be stable in the absence of new information.

In contrast, information provision does have a notable effect on approval for representatives who are either “highly” effective or “not” effective. When subjects learn about the effectiveness of these categories of representatives, they are being provided information that differs from most of their priors, which causes them to revise their views. More specifically, when a constituent learns that his or her representative is “highly” effective, the constituent appears to be 10 (CCES,  $p = 0.11$ ) to 20 (MTurk,  $p < 0.01$ ) percentage points more likely to approve of the representative. The effect of information for ineffective legislators is even larger in magnitude, consistent with research on individuals’ heightened attention to negative information (Boydston et al. 2019; Soroka 2014). Constituents who learn that their representatives are ineffective are about 25 percentage points less likely to approve of the job they are doing ( $p < 0.01$  in both studies). Consistent with the *Credible Information Affects Support Hypothesis*, voters who learned about their representatives’ actual lawmaking effectiveness expressed greater support for the effective lawmakers, and less support for relatively ineffective lawmakers. Indeed, across treated subjects, an approval gap of nearly forty percentage points emerged between ineffective and highly effective lawmakers.

As shown in the Appendix, a sizable gap also emerges in the percent of subjects who say that they intend to vote for the lawmaker for reelection (with voters much more likely to support

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<sup>14</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the p-values reported throughout the paper are based on two-tailed tests (thus providing conservative tests of significance in the cases where the direction of the effect is hypothesized).

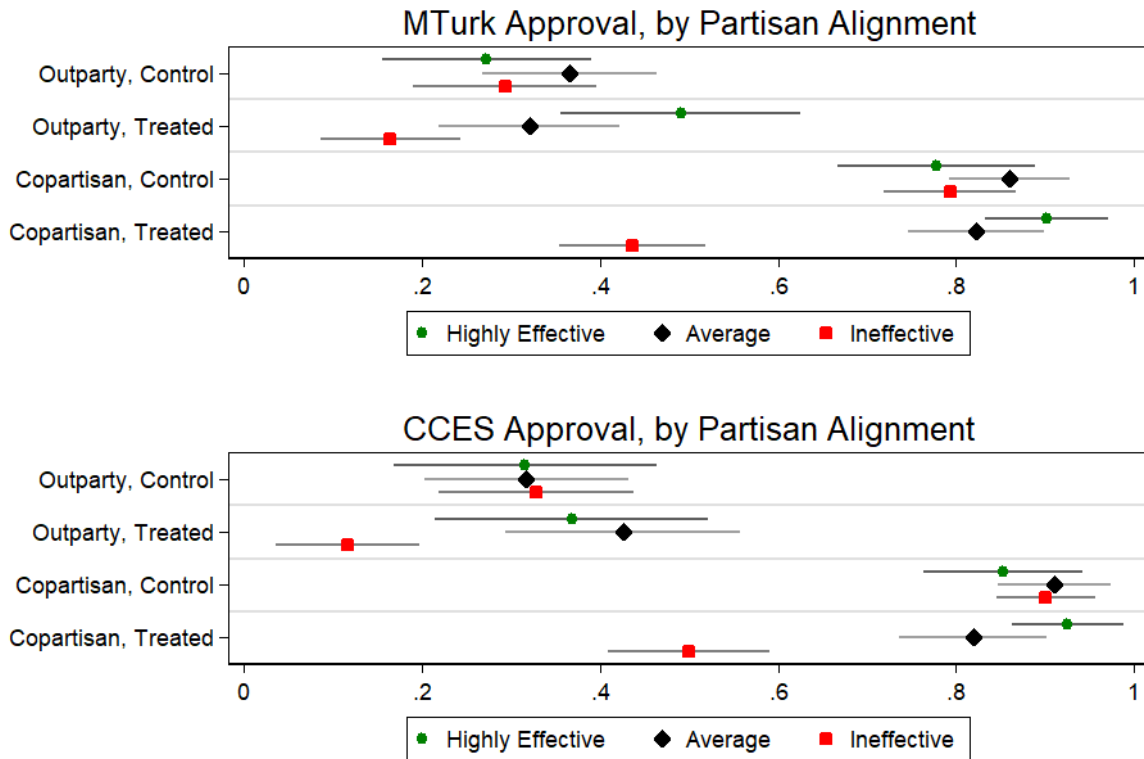
effective over ineffective representatives). That gap is 30 percentage points in the MTurk study and 15 percentage points in the CCES.

### ***Does Partisanship Moderate the Effect of Information?***

As suggested above, even if constituents on the whole are responsive to new and credible information about the lawmaking effectiveness of their representatives, there are reasons to expect that these effects might be influenced by partisanship. More specifically, and as articulated in the *Copartisanship Moderates Informational Effects Hypothesis*, a constituent may be more likely to respond to favorable information about a representative of the same party affiliation. (Likewise, constituents may be less responsive to negative information about a same-party representative than one of the opposing party.)

Exploring this hypothesis, Figure 6 presents the relationships between job approval and information provision, broken down by whether the respondent and his or her representative are copartisans. For these analyses, we only included the subjects who self-identified as being either Republicans or Democrats (including those who “lean” towards one of the two parties). Those subjects who self-identified as being Independents or members of Other parties were excluded from the analysis. Taken together, the results suggest that partisanship does appear to moderate the effect of information provision on representatives’ job approval, but not in the manner predicted by the *Copartisanship Moderates Informational Effects Hypothesis*.

Figure 6: Treatment Effects on Approval, by Partisanship



As seen in both panels of Figure 6, when copartisans learn that their representative is ineffective, they are about 40 percentage points less likely to approve of their job performance ( $p < 0.01$ ). Similarly, constituents from the other party are somewhat more likely to approve of a legislator if they learn that the legislator is effective ( $p = 0.02$  for the MTurk sample, but  $p = 0.63$  for the CCES sample). Contrary to expectations, partisans are not turning a blind eye to the information that does not comport with their partisan worldview. In most cases, copartisans respond to the new information and incorporate it into their views about their representatives.

One might interpret Figure 6 to mean that copartisans are not meaningfully rewarding effective lawmakers. Such a conclusion is likely wrong, however, as the results in Figure 6 follow from a ceiling effect on the expected magnitude of copartisans' attitude change. Simply stated, given that 80-90 percent of copartisans in the no information condition already approve of

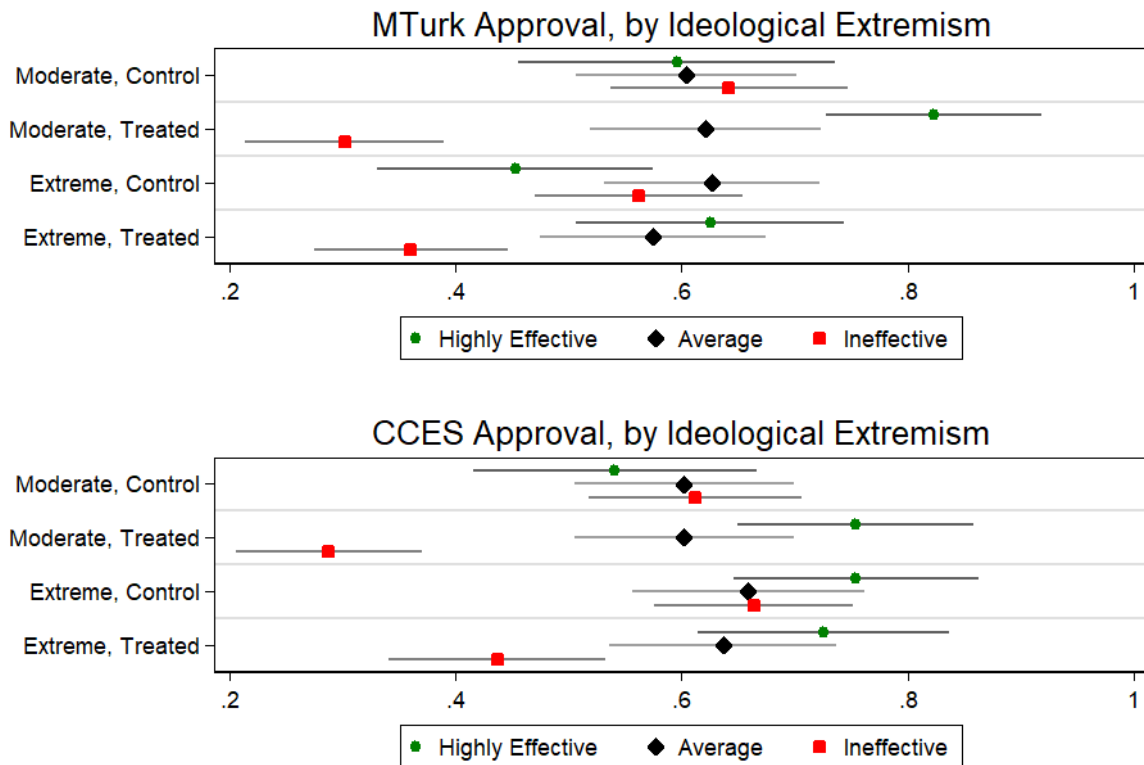
their representative, any positive information about their copartisan representative might produce a limited systematic shift in constituents' attitudes because there is very little (potential) room for improvement. Putting this point aside, the results presented in Figure 6 lend further evidence to the claim that providing constituents with credible information about their representatives' lawmaking effectiveness produces meaningful attitude shifts. Indeed, the standard 50-60 percentage-point approval gap between having a representative that shares a voter's party affiliation and one who differs is substantially narrowed by evidence of lawmaking effectiveness. Specifically, upon giving the information treatment, we find no statistically significant difference in approval between an ineffective representative of one's own party and a highly effective lawmaker in the opposing party.

### ***Does Ideological Extremism Limit the Effect of Information?***

The change in views arising from the provision of lawmaking effectiveness information may be more limited for ideologically extreme voters. Instead, it may be moderates who are more likely to cross party lines to abandon an ineffective lawmaker and support a highly effective lawmaker, regardless of partisan considerations, as articulated in the *Ideological Moderation Enhances Informational Effects Hypothesis*.

Figure 7 presents the relationships between job approval and information provision, now broken down by whether the respondent is ideologically extreme or moderate. To bin respondents into these two groups, we rely on self-reported ideology on a seven-point scale. Those reporting that they are Very Liberal, Liberal, Conservative, or Very Conservative are characterized as ideologically extreme, whereas those self-identified as Somewhat Liberal, Middle of the Road, or Somewhat Conservative are here characterized as moderate. In line with expectations, the results show a greater informational effect among moderates.

Figure 7: Treatment Effects on Approval, by Ideological Extremism



Whereas none of the control groups show a statistically significant approval gap between ineffective and highly effective representatives, a 30 percentage-point gap opens up for respondents who are extremists. In contrast, and in support of the *Ideological Moderation Enhances Informational Effects Hypothesis*, for ideological moderates, provision of credible information about lawmaking effectiveness leads to more than a fifty-percentage-point gap in approval between ineffective and highly effect lawmakers. In close electoral competitions where moderates play a pivotal role, such an approval gap could be consequential.

### Does Experience Moderate the Effect of Information?

We have thus far demonstrated that presenting credible information about representatives' lawmaking effectiveness changes constituents' approval of their representatives.



If this effect is driven by the fact that the information is new, then we would expect that those constituents with greater prior experience with their representatives would be less influenced by the information they received in the treatment. We test this conjecture with a survey experiment on a subject pool that, in many cases, has had substantive and meaningful experiences with their representatives: municipal officials.<sup>15</sup>

Our survey of municipal officials (embedded in the overall 2016 AMOS) was conducted online (via Qualtrics) in May and June of 2016. Officials invited to take part in the study were drawn from a list that was purchased from an organization that collects the contact information of local elected officials who serve in cities with populations greater than 10,000 people. The company uses webcrawler software to identify when information changes on the contact pages of each city's website; and a team of research assistants updates the contact list of officials accordingly.<sup>16</sup> The final sample includes 1,432 municipal officials (most commonly city council members), with a mean of eight years of experience in local government. Respondents were 34% Democrats, 36% Republicans, with the rest being undeclared (consistent with nonpartisan elections in many cities).

Given that local officials are more likely to have experiences with members of Congress as a result of their position (in contrast to average constituents), analysis of this sample is very helpful in trying to assess the moderating effect of past experiences and knowledge on information provision. To assess the scope of subjects' prior experiences, we asked municipal

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<sup>15</sup> Although citizens and voters in our MTurk and CCES surveys vary in their political knowledge and the degree to which they have corresponded with their representatives, such differences do not statistically affect the informational patterns noted above. We therefore here explore whether more substantial experience affects the influence of providing effectiveness information.

<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, this approach has a high error rate. Based on Qualtrics' email tracking, 18,567 (67%) of the email invitations were delivered to an active email address. In addition, we looked up a sample of 832 officials in the list and found that only 44% of the email addresses were accurate. Taking into account these deficiencies in the list, the survey in total had a response rate of over 10 percent.

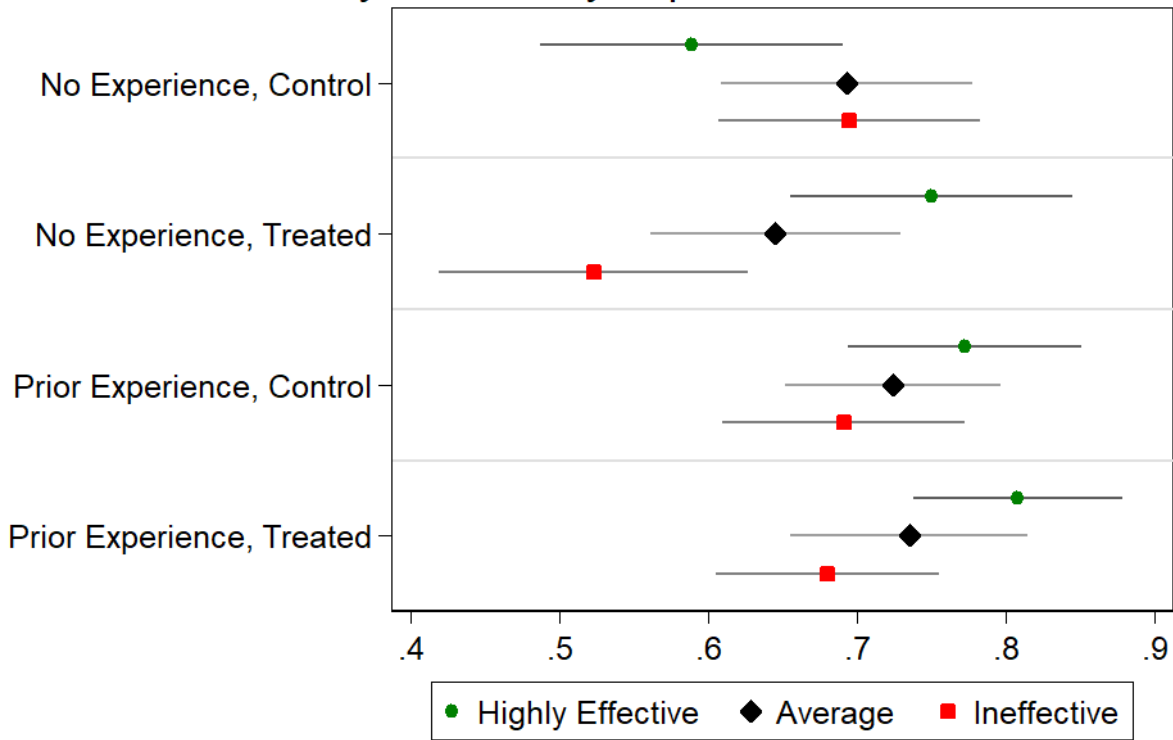
officials whether they had contacted their member of Congress about proposed bills at any point during the previous four years; and approximately 53% of the sample had contacted their representative about a policy issue in this capacity. If the *Experience Moderates Informational Effects Hypothesis* is correct, the local officials who interacted their representatives should be less affected by the information provided to them in the treatment than other municipal officials.

The control, treatment, and approval questions from the MTurk and CCES surveys were again used on the AMOS sample. Figure 8 presents the relationships between information provision and a representative's job approval, broken down by whether a local official had contacted his or her representative about a policy issue in the previous four years.<sup>17</sup> The results in the bottom half of the figure clearly demonstrate that the municipal officials who had previous experience contacting their representatives about a policy issue were not affected by the information provision treatment. In the control group, for officials who previously contacted the lawmaker about policy issues, there is a gap of about ten percentage points in approval between highly effective and ineffective representatives. This is consistent with their experiences detecting the representative's actual lawmaking effectiveness to an extent. Those approval levels are not substantially influenced by the new information being provided.

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<sup>17</sup> The relevant question asked: "Thinking back over the past four years, please indicate whether you have contacted [REPRESENTATIVE]'s office regarding ... proposed bills or policy." In the Appendix, we report the basic results for the AMOS sample, for approval of the representative in the sample overall and conditional on moderating factors.

Figure 8: AMOS Treatment Effects on Approval, by Prior Policy Experience



In contrast, information provision appears to have had a substantial effect on the local officials who lacked previous experiences with their representatives. Consistent with the results from our MTurk and CCES surveys, the officials who learned that their representatives were effective lawmakers were more likely to approve of them ( $p = 0.03$ ), while those who learned that their representatives were ineffective lawmakers were less likely to approve of them ( $p = 0.01$ ). In this case, the information treatment opens up about a 20 percentage-point approval gap between highly effective and ineffective lawmakers.<sup>18</sup> These results again highlight the importance of information access and provision. When individuals have personal experience

<sup>18</sup> Beyond the approval measure, we find similar results to those reported here on such items as whether the municipal official was willing to work with the lawmaker on a grant to the city or whether the official believes the lawmaker advances city interests in Congress.

with political elites (e.g., representatives), they appear to draw on that experience (and information) to form opinions about them (and they likewise support effective lawmakers, but offer less support to ineffective lawmakers). When such information and experiences are not present, though, providing constituents with this information causes them to alter their attitudes, so that they resemble the ordered approval patterns of more experienced constituents.

### **Conclusions and Future Directions**

Americans hold strong partisan views, with much higher approval ratings of copartisans than of representatives of an opposing party. Such affinity is built up over decades of parties working hard to establish their brands and win over their voters. In contrast, there is little evidence that constituents base their approval or voting behavior on how well their representatives do their jobs as effective lawmakers. In this paper, we establish that such a disconnect comes from lack of information rather than a lack of interest or concern about effective lawmaking.

The size of the effect of such information provision is large. We find about a 60 percentage-point gap in constituent approval between copartisan and out-partisan representatives. In some cases, nearly as large of a gap opens up in respondents' approval between ineffective and highly effective lawmakers. Among ideologically moderate constituents, that gap is 50 percentage points. It is about 40 percentage points among all responding citizens and voters, including among those represented by a copartisan. And it is 30 percentage points among ideologically extreme voters and among those represented by a member of the opposing political party.

In contrast, those who are not given credible information about the lawmaking effectiveness of their representatives display no difference in their approval of effective and

ineffective lawmakers. The informational treatment effects were smaller, although still significant, among municipal officials. One limit on the treatment effects, however, was found among municipal officials who had prior policy experiences with their representatives. These personal experiences seemed to already provide officials with information (and accurate information based on the observed patterns) about how to assess their representatives. On the whole, whether based on close personal experience or on the receipt of new and credible information, constituents seem to place a high value on lawmaking effectiveness in forming their views of whether or not they approve of their representative in Congress.

While the findings reported here appear to be strong and robust across different settings and samples, they do raise a variety of questions and concerns to be addressed in future research. First, how are the treatment effect sizes influenced by the extent to which subjects value lawmaking effectiveness over other qualities that they consider when evaluating their representatives? Some constituents are primarily concerned with the ideological voting patterns of their representatives, others with the ability of the lawmaker to bring pork back to the district, and still others with the provision of constituent services (e.g., Lapinski et al. 2016). Moreover, many constituents are interested in specific issues, rather than an overall sense of their representative's efficacy. Future work, exploring effectiveness in issues of greatest interest to specific constituents, and in contrast to other elements of effective representation, would be welcome.

Second, we worked hard to offer credible information from a trustworthy source. Yet many informational sources are questioned and diminished in current political discussions. Additional work isolating the possible influence of effectiveness information when it is provided by different sources may be enlightening. Can representatives or their opponents offer credible

information along these lines during electoral campaigns, with any notable effect? Or will such claims be dismissed outright? How would those effects differ when offered by newspaper editorial boards, non-partisan good governance organizations, or politically aligned interest groups?

Finally, although additional survey experiments can help identify these relative effect sizes, field experiments may be needed to establish the external validity of the results explored here, and to extend this work in impactful future directions. Electoral campaigns feature repeated messaging, rather than a single treatment, and feature a fairly high-stakes activity – voting – rather than self-reported approval and vote intentions. As objective information on the lawmaking effectiveness of members of Congress becomes increasingly available, interest in exploring the role of information provision in electoral campaigns regarding this important aspect of representation will surely grow.

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Supplemental Appendix – To Be Made Available Online

**Impact of Treatment on Vote Intention**

This appendix shows the results of alternative specifications to those presented in the body of the paper. First, throughout the manuscript, we focused mainly on constituents’ approval of the job their representative was doing, in order to be comparable across multiple types of constituents, from voters to municipal officials. Many alternative means of assessing representatives are available, and here we note the results for one of particular interest in the MTurk and CCES samples: vote intention. Put simply, do the same conditions that result in higher approval ratings also account for a higher likelihood of voting to reelect a representative? To answer this question, we incorporated the following question in both surveys:

- Would you vote for [REPRESENTATIVE] in 2016?
- Yes, definitely
- Yes, probably
- No, probably not
- No, definitely not

To make the responses comparable to how we analyzed approval, we then combined the Yes answers together and the No answers together to form a single dichotomous vote intention variable.

Figure A1: Informational Effects on Vote Intention

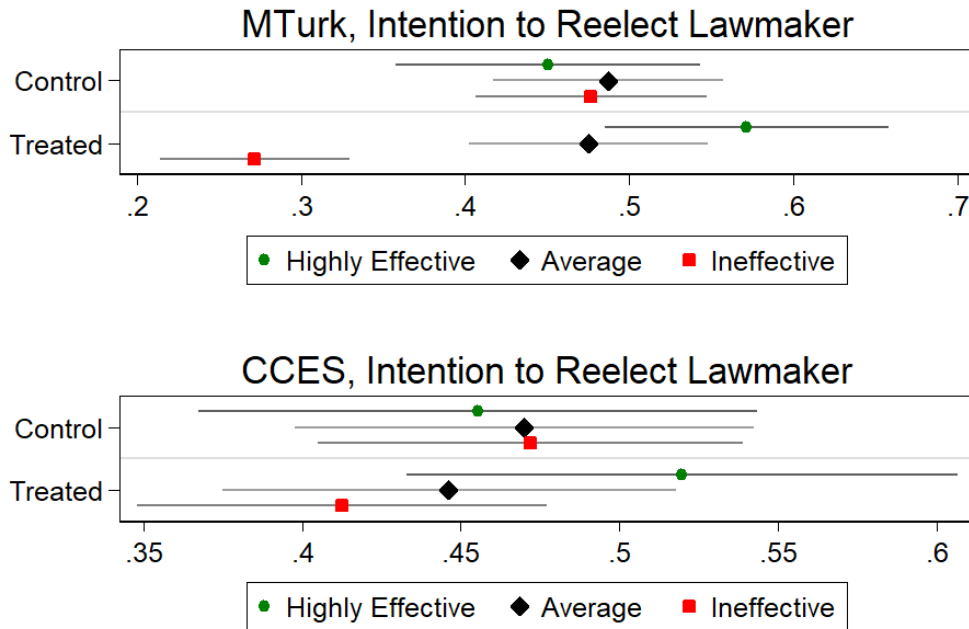


Figure A1 then mimics Figure 5 from the body of the paper. The top set of results in each panel shows that the Control group exhibits no systematic vote intention based on the lawmaking effectiveness of their representatives. This is consistent with the *Uninformed about Effectiveness Hypothesis* and with other evidence in the paper that voters have little knowledge about their representatives' effectiveness as lawmakers.

In contrast, the Treatment results demonstrate that constituents weigh credible information about effectiveness in their vote intentions, consistent with the *Credible Information Affects Support Hypothesis*. For the MTurk sample, a thirty percentage-point gap opens up between the vote intentions of constituents with ineffective lawmakers as their representatives and those represented by highly effective lawmakers. Perhaps because it is during the election season in which voters receive extensive information about the candidates, the gap is not as large in the CCES, but still sizable and statistically significant at just over ten percentage points.

Figure A2: Treatment Effects on Vote Intention, by Partisanship

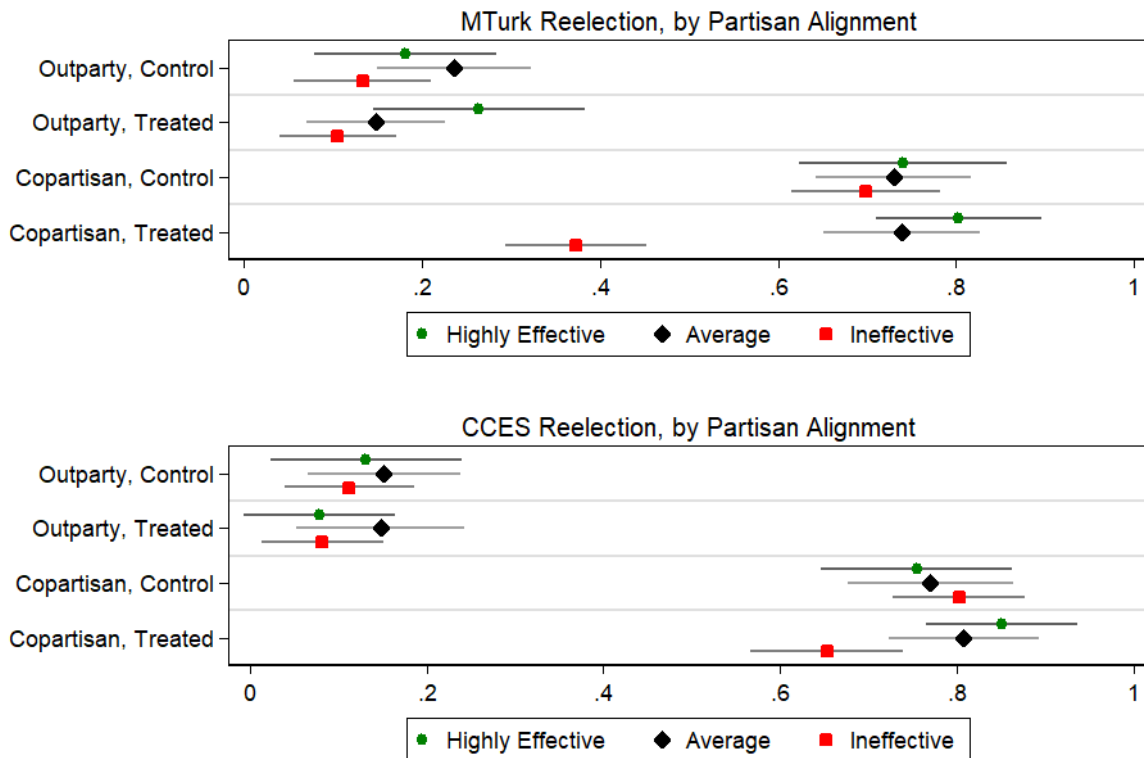


Figure A2 shows these vote intention results now further subdivided by whether the constituent and representative were copartisans or not. Consistent with the findings from Figure 6 on the drop in approval for ineffective copartisan representatives, there is a sizable decline in vote intention for this group when exposed to credible information. In the MTurk study, the treatment results in a 32 percentage-point drop in vote intention for ineffective copartisans ( $p < 0.01$ ), with a 15 percentage-point drop found in the CCES survey ( $p = 0.01$ ). In contrast to the results in the main body of the paper, however, the enhanced approval of effective outparty representatives does not seem to translate systematically into substantial increases in vote

intention, as shown in Figure A2. Although there is a positive result in the MTurk survey, it is slightly negative in the CCES study, perhaps indicating resistance to voting for effective lawmakers from the opposing party, consistent with the hypothesis advanced in the paper.

Figure A3: Treatment Effects on Vote Intention, by Ideological Extremism

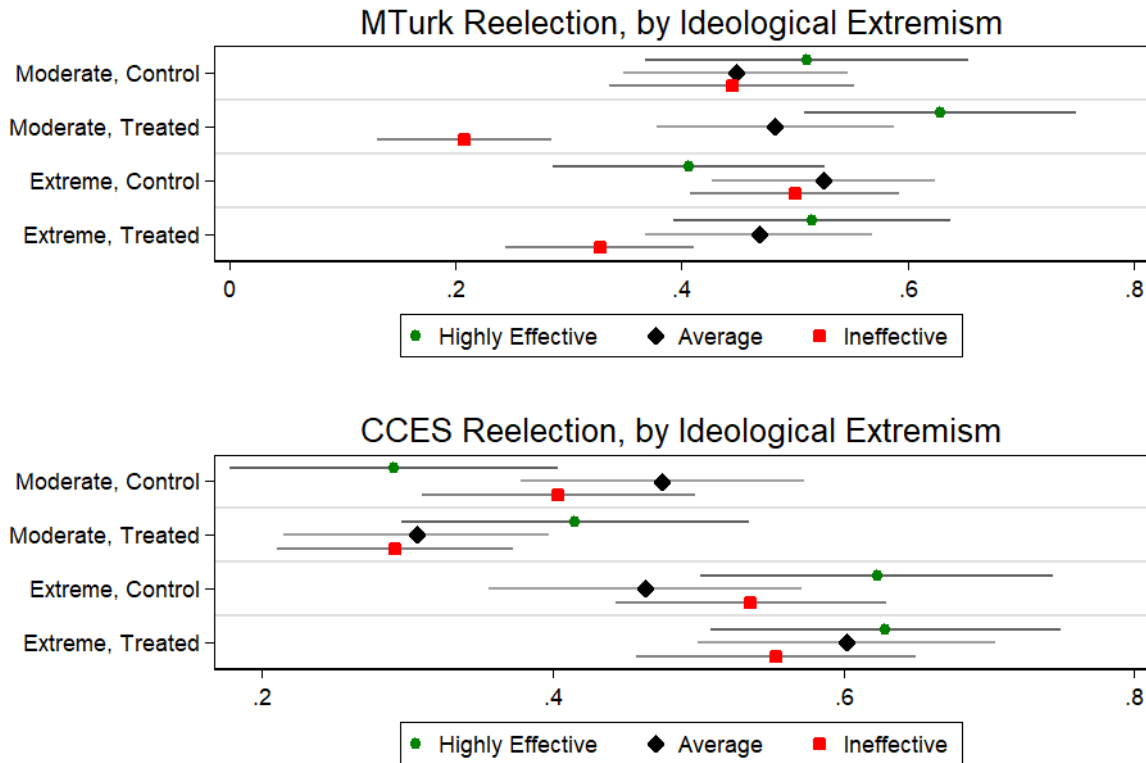


Figure A3 shows the vote intention findings now subdivided by whether the constituent was ideologically moderate or extreme. Consistent with the findings from Figure 7, the treatment produces a larger gap between ineffective and highly effective lawmakers when judged by ideological moderates than when determined by extremists. Specifically, in the MTurk sample, a gap of over forty percentage points emerges for moderates given the informational treatment, compared to about a twenty percentage-point gap among extremists. In the CCES sample, there is no statistically significant treatment effect among extremists. For moderates, the provision of effectiveness information is associated with about a twelve percentage-point rise in vote intention for effective lawmakers ( $p = 0.07$ , one-tailed) and an eleven percentage-point drop in the intention to vote for ineffective lawmakers ( $p = 0.04$ , one-tailed). In total, these results offer further support for the *Ideological Moderation Enhances Informational Effects Hypothesis*.

*Impact of Treatment in American Municipal Officials Survey*

For the AMOS survey, in the main body of the manuscript we focused our attention on the *Experience Moderates Informational Effects Hypothesis*. Here we show the results from that study for the main treatment effects and for those conditional on partisanship and on ideology.

Figure A4: Informational Effects on Approval, AMOS Sample

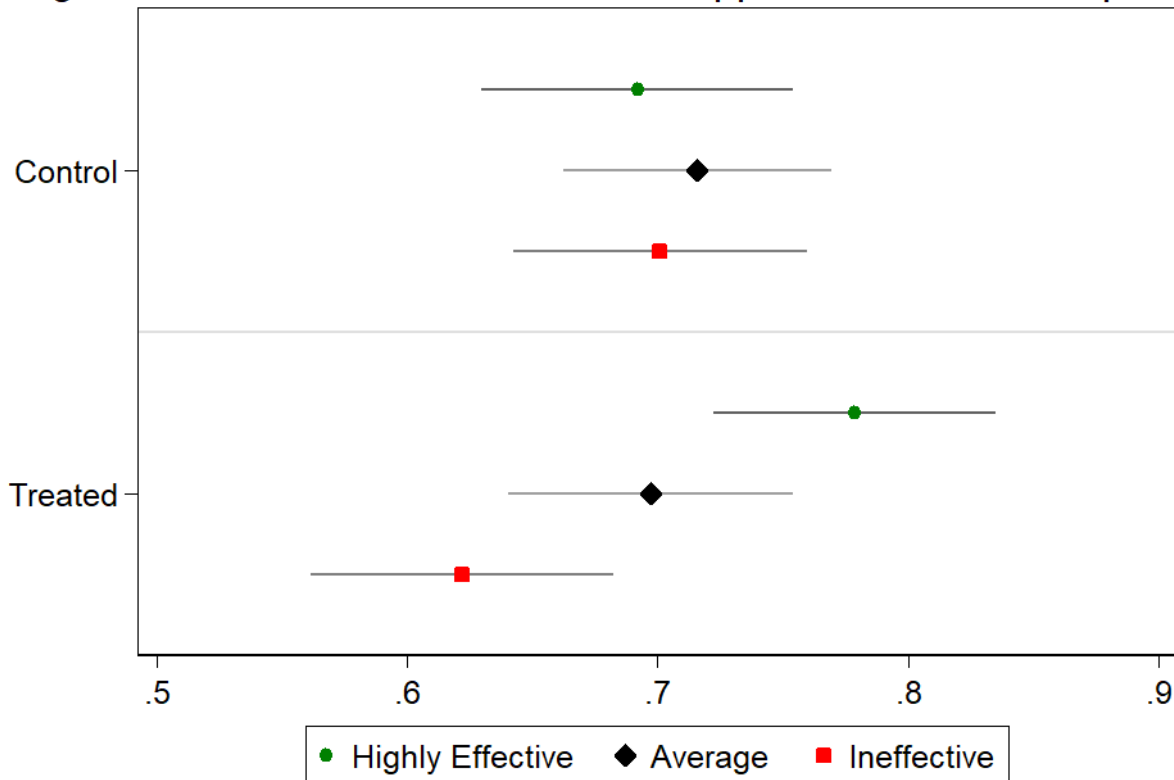


Figure A4 mimics Figure 5 from the paper, which showed a systematic pattern of approval linked to representatives' lawmaking effectiveness only in the treatment condition. The same pattern emerges here. For the AMOS sample as a whole, approval of ineffective lawmakers declines by eight percentage points upon receiving credible information ( $p = 0.07$ ), whereas approval of effective lawmakers increases by nine percentage points ( $p = 0.04$ ). As discussed around Figure 8 in the paper, these overall effects are comprised of no statistically significant patterns for municipal officials with prior policymaking experiences with their representatives and substantial and statistically significant effects for those without such interactions.

Figure A5: Treatment Effects on Approval, by Partisanship (AMOS Sample)

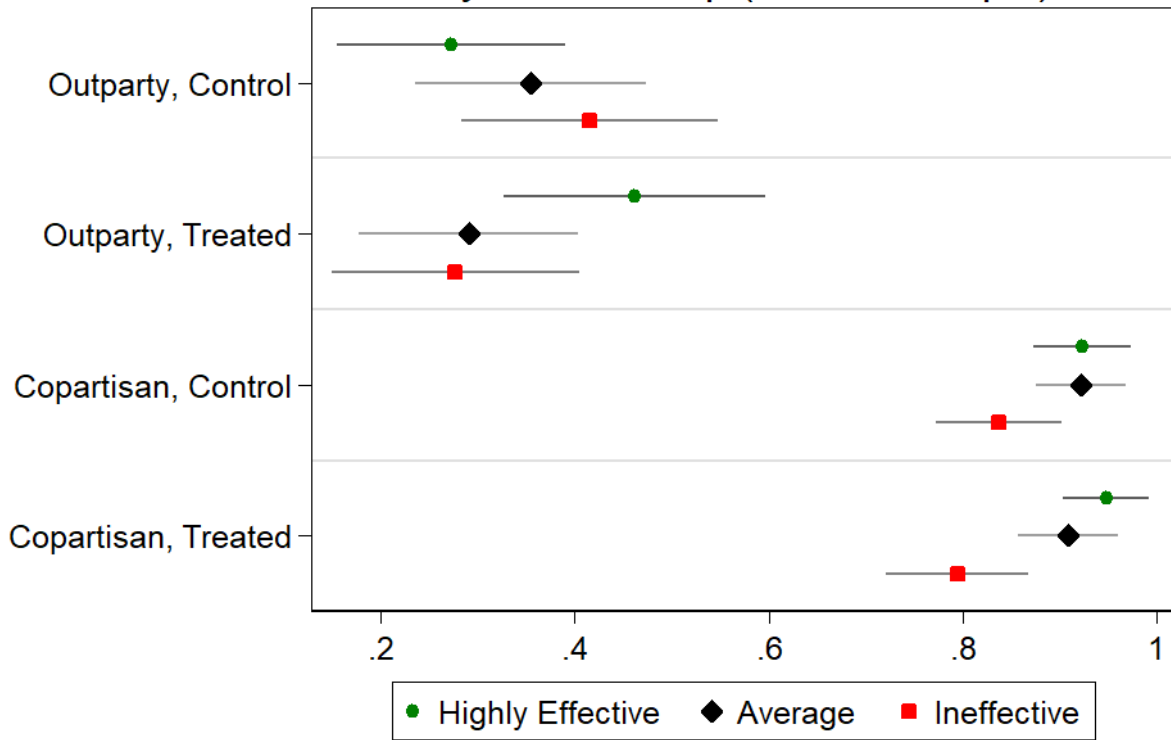


Figure A5 shows these results on the subdivisions of copartisan and outparty municipal officials relative to their representatives in Congress. Once again, the patterns of greater approval of more effective lawmakers emerges for informed respondents, although dampened somewhat by the smaller sample sizes due to a substantial number of nonpartisan officials among respondents and due to the combining of officials with and without prior policymaking experiences with the lawmakers, which was so important in Figure 8.

Finally, Figure A6 shows these results on the subdivisions of moderate and ideologically extreme municipal officials. Consistent with the *Ideological Moderation Enhances Informational Effects Hypothesis*, the informational treatment did not have a statistically significant effect on ideologically extreme municipal officials, while it did have an effect for moderates. For that subset, information about the representative being ineffective was associated with an 11 percentage-point decline in approval ( $p = 0.04$ ); information about the representative being highly effective was associated with a 16 percentage-point increase ( $p < 0.01$ ).

Figure A6: Treatment Effects on Approval, by Ideological Extremism (AMOS Sample)

