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# Credit Claiming and Accountability for Legislative Effectiveness

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**Abstract:** The growth of the internet and social media means that legislators can claim credit for achievements more easily than ever before. Despite this, constituents show little awareness of how effective their representatives are, and more effective lawmakers do not perform better in general elections. Why can effective legislators not convey their legislative accomplishments via credit claiming? We develop a theoretic framework providing two possible explanations: low credibility or low observability of credit claims. The theory's predictions are tested using new data on credit claiming by members of Congress in social media posts and email newsletters, as well as original survey experiments. Legislators who credit claim more frequently are in fact more effective, and survey respondents believe in and respond positively to credit claiming. Evidence points instead to low penetration of credit claiming in the public awareness, revealing the limitations of credit claiming even in an era of low-cost communication.

**Keywords:** Political accountability, legislative effectiveness, credit claiming, political communication, Congress, principal-agent models

**Word Count:** 8,872

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In his classic work on congressional representation, Mayhew (1974) lists credit claiming as one of three activities (along with advertising and position-taking) that legislators engage in to ensure reelection. As a 2004 update of the original text states, "The political logic of [credit claiming], from the congressman's point of view, is that an actor who believes that a member can make pleasing things happen will no doubt wish to keep him in office so that he can make pleasing things happen in the future" (p. 53). Credit claiming is described as an essential activity that legislators are "relentless" in pursuing. This is because legislators must actively publicize their work in order to reap the benefits of it; in the absence of such signals, most individuals lack the awareness needed to trace policies and their products back to their individual representatives (Arnold 1990; Stein and Bickers 1994). In the past, these credit claiming efforts were constrained by the number of press releases that could be sent and dependent upon the interests of the media (Cook 1988). But the introduction and growth of online communications and social media means that it is easier than ever for legislators to directly reach constituents and claim credit for their accomplishments.

Despite these changes to the information environment, there still appears to be a breakdown in the translation of legislative accomplishments into constituent support. Members of Congress with the best records of advancing agenda items through the legislative process and into law (as measured in Volden and Wiseman 2014) do not perform any better in general elections than less effective members. Legislators who work diligently and pass legislation regularly are re-elected at similar rates to their less effective colleagues (Butler et al. 2021, p. 419). This lack of electoral advantage for policy productivity does not seem to stem from voter indifference, either. When constituents are presented with information about their representative's productivity, they report higher approval of effective legislators and lower approval of ineffective legislators. In some cases, the effect of effectiveness information on approval is nearly as large as the difference in approval of a co-partisan versus out-partisan legislator (Butler et al. 2021, p. 427).

Together, these findings present a puzzle. Politicians are more capable than ever before of

informing constituents about their effectiveness in office via credit claiming. Constituents care about their effectiveness, even after accounting for partisanship. And yet, effective legislators appear incapable of reaping the rewards of their productivity. What explains this disconnect? And what are the resulting implications for holding legislators accountable for their (in)effectiveness?

Drawing on principal-agent theories of political accountability, we develop a model of how credit claiming could, in theory, translate into constituent support. We then study two ways in which accountability could break down in this model. First, we focus on *credibility*. How believable are credit claims? Are credit claims more likely to come from more effective members? Or are they false signals that should be dismissed as cheap talk? Second, we focus on *observability*. Do voters actually observe credit claiming on social media or in email newsletters? In the theoretical section of the paper, we discuss some reasons why these features may or may not characterize credit claiming by modern-day legislators.

The model has multiple empirical implications, which are tested using two distinct sources of evidence. First, we take advantage of new, comprehensive data on credit claiming by members of Congress on social media and in email newsletters spanning 14 years (2009-2022). These allow us to evaluate the credibility of credit claiming in the aggregate: are members who credit claim more frequently actually more effective? We also evaluate whether members who credit claim more frequently have higher levels of constituent approval, as measured using Cooperative Election Study (CES) surveys.

Second, we conduct survey experiments where individuals are randomly shown different message types – including credit claiming for various accomplishments – from a hypothetical legislator. Unlike the analyses examining real communications by members of Congress, these studies allow us to hold constant the observability of credit claiming – participants all observe each message, and are then asked to evaluate the legislator. In the second study, respondents are asked explicitly whether they believe what the legislator says is true or if the legislators is just saying what they think voters want to hear, allowing us to analyze how credible voters find credit

claims.

Our findings point to a clear culprit for the disconnect between the appeal of legislative effectiveness on the survey and the weak impact of effectiveness in actual elections: the limited reach of credit claims. In our experiments, we replicate the results of others showing that credit claiming is associated with higher reported satisfaction and greater perceived effectiveness. More respondents than not report believing credit claims. And our analysis of credit claiming and legislative effectiveness by members of Congress suggests they are right to do so. Across all three messaging platforms, the members who credit claim the most are the most effective ones.

However, we find no evidence that credit claiming is associated with higher approval by constituents on CES surveys. The large data we bring to bear on the question means that our estimates are precise enough to rule out even small approval advantages, and allow us to use more rigorous designs (e.g., within-legislator fixed effect models) that rule out many confounds.

Our theory implies this exact combination – credible credit claims, yet no effect of credit claiming on the behavior of the electorate – is precisely what we would expect were most voters unaware of the credit claiming legislators engage in. In the penultimate section of the paper, we provide evidence that the proportion of constituents who subscribe to an email newsletter or follow their members on social media is quite low, probably somewhere between 1-5%, far too few to generate the electoral rewards frequently implied in experimental studies of credit claiming effects.

Together, these findings point to the limitations of legislator-led communication to successfully convey effectiveness to the mass public. By demonstrating credit claiming's limited abilities to promote accountability, our paper contributes to a growing literature (Butler et al. 2021; Hunt and Miler 2025; Park 2023; Strickler 2024; Treul et al. 2022) studying whether and how legislators can be rewarded for being effective lawmakers. Additionally, our research calls into question work (e.g., Barron and McLaughlin 2024; Gerber, Patashnik, and Tucker 2022; Grimmer, Messing, and Westwood 2012; Grimmer, Westwood, and Messing 2014; Hamel and Bauer 2024;

McLaughlin 2025; McLaughlin and Barron 2025; Russell 2021) assuming that credit claiming is directly rewarded by voters on the basis of results from survey experiments, where individuals are directly exposed to credit claiming and immediately asked about their impressions. Given the paucity of evidence we find for a meaningful impact of credit claiming among the general electorate, future research on communication by political elites should consider other audiences for credit claiming, such as organized interests, the media, or fellow politicians.

# Why Credit Claims May Fail

## Theory

Given that voters appear to care about the effectiveness of lawmakers, why does credit claiming not lead to an electoral advantage? In this paper, we focus on two possible explanations: a lack of credibility and a lack of observability. The latter is fairly straightforward; a credit claim is observable to the extent that it is viewed and received by actual voters in the real world.

The former can be more complex. We define a credit claim as *credible* if if it conveys an accurate portrayal of a legislator's responsibility for meaningful policy- or constituency-oriented work and distinguishes productive from unproductive legislators. There may be a weak, nonexistent, or even negative relationship between what legislators claim credit for and what they actually accomplish. Credit claiming can be specific or vague, deserved or not. Lawmakers may reference particular bills they have sponsored, gathered support for, and shepherded through the legislative process into passage. They may also reference particular earmarks, funding requests for projects by public and nonprofit entities in their districts which, since 2021, are publicly disclosed (Mervis 2023). But legislators can (and often do) claim credit for bills or funds that they have no real role in passing, in extreme cases sometimes claiming credit for accomplishments they voted against (Sullivan 2022). In fact, a characterization dating back over fifty years divides legislators into "workhorses" and "showhorses", suggesting that the politicians who highlight

themselves most frequently might be the least productive (Matthews 1960).

With definitions in hand, we outline a simple model of how more or less effective legislators choose whether or not to claim credit, and whether or not voters receive and accept the credit claim. In Appendix Section A, we offer a formalized version based on canonical principal-agent models (similar to those described in Besley 2006), but for the sake of brevity we describe the key intuition here informally.

The theory assumes voters want legislators who pass laws, bring funding back to their district, and perform other core tasks rather than spend their time in office less productively. The more effective the legislator, the easier these actions are to perform. The core dilemma for voters is incomplete information; they want to reward legislators if and only if they effective, which they do not know *ex ante*.

Motivated by the desire to be rewarded, effective legislators want to distinguish themselves from ineffective legislators, while the latter seek to give the impression they are the former. In the model legislators can send signals about their activities in office to voters, i.e., credit claim. The observability of credit claiming is represented as a probability that voters receive the signal (as opposed to pure noise). The credibility of credit claiming represents the extent to which false or misleading credit claims provoke backlash of some sort. There are several reasons this might be case. Politicians who falsely claim credit for taking some action might be publicly called out on this deception by the individual who is actually responsible, or a political opponent, creating reputational costs that deter deception. The example referenced earlier, where then-President Biden publicly criticized Republican members of Congress for claiming credit for spending they voted against, falls into this category (Sullivan 2022). It might be also be that the media, organized interests, or other parties will highlight misleading claims.[1]

[1] An alternative to focusing on observability or credibility would be to consider the costliness (in terms of time or money) of sending credit claims. For the purposes of this paper, which focuses on credit claiming in the era of social media and online communication, we assume that signals are so cheap to send they are essentially costless. While there may be fixed costs to hiring a communications staff and establishing a web presence, after these costs have been incurred, the marginal costs of claiming credit for one's accomplishments on social media or in an email

Given this setup, we consider three possibilities: credit claiming is observable and credible, credit claiming is observable but not credible, or credit claiming is credible but not observable.

In the case where credit claiming is both observable and credible, the implications are straightforward. More effective legislators will credit claim at higher rates than non-effective legislators, and voters will respond to this credit claiming by approving more highly of the effective legislator, potentially resulting in greater electoral success.[2]

In the case where credit claiming is observable but not credible, there will be no relationship between effectiveness and credit claiming as all types of legislators engage in credit claiming regardless of how productive they actually are. Consequently, voters (rationally) discount credit claiming, and there will be no relationship between credit claiming and constituent approval.

Finally, in the case where credit claiming is credible but not observable, more effective legislators will credit claim at higher rates than non-effective legislators, but there will be no relationship between credit claiming and voter approval. An obvious question is why legislators would claim credit truthfully if voters are not paying attention. One likely reason is that credit claiming might be targeted at an audience other than voters (the media, organized interests, fellow legislators, etc.) who can both observe and verify credit claims. These sophisticated actors – unlike voters – have both the incentive and ability to monitor legislators closely, making misleading claims counterproductive even when voters remain inattentive. For example, legislators may claim credit to highlight their effectiveness to members of their legislative caucus and other Washington insiders in an effort to build support for obtaining a leadership or committee position. Assuming these types of actors are knowledgeable enough so that misleading credit claims are counterproductive, effective politicians will claim credit and do so at higher rates than non-effective politicians,

newsletter are quite low.

[2]The predictions described in this section focus on approval rather than re-election probability to align with the empirical tests that follow. The empirics focus on approval rather than re-election probability because it should be easier to influence a voter's approval of an incumbent than their willingness to vote for them (which is also a function of, for instance, shared versus opposed partisanship). For credit claiming to influence electoral chances, it is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition that it influences approval of the incumbent.

despite voter ignorance and a lack of reward at the ballot box.

The predicted relationships between credit claiming, legislative effectiveness, and voter approval under each possible scenario are summarized in Table 1. The predictions are distinct for each of the three cases, meaning that by examining 1) whether credit claiming is correlated with legislative effectiveness and 2) whether credit claiming is correlated with voter approval can help clarify whether observability, credibility, or both prevent credit claiming from leading to accountability for effectiveness.

TABLE 1: Theoretical Expectations for Credit Claiming Correlations

<table>
<tr><th rowspan="2">Observability</th><th colspan="2">Credibility</th></tr>
<tr><th>Credible</th><th>Non-Credible</th></tr>
<tr><td>High</td><td>Legislative Effectiveness: YES (+)<br>Voter Approval: YES (+)</td><td rowspan="2">Legislative Effectiveness: NO<br>Voter Approval: NO</td></tr>
<tr><td>Low</td><td>Legislative Effectiveness: YES (+)<br>Voter Approval: NO</td></tr>
</table>

*Note:* For each possible combination of observability and credibility, the table displays whether credit claiming should be correlated with (1) legislative effectiveness and (2) voter approval. Direction of the expected correlation shown as a + symbol or - symbol.

## Connecting Theory to Evidence

Our initial expectation is that the credibility of credit claims is low, as research shows that there is substantial potential for legislators to use credit claiming to strategically distort their records (Grimmer, Westwood, and Messing 2014; cf. Gerber, Patashnik, and Tucker 2022). Notably, the frequency with which a representative claims credit does more to shape impressions of effectiveness than the total amount claimed. Moreover, legislators' press releases often do not distinguish between gains from passing their own bills versus accomplishments that come from amendments to or sections of other legislators' bills (Eatough and Preece 2025). Ultimately, there

may be little risk in exaggerating claims, as there is a generally low likelihood that voters can or will verify them. As Mayhew (1974) appropriately noted, "For typical voters Capitol Hill is a distant and mysterious place; few have anything like a working knowledge of its maneuverings. Hence there is no easy way of knowing whether a congressman is staking a credible claim or not" (p. 59-60). This suggests that as legislators increasingly use online newsletters and social media platforms such as Twitter to frame their activities and cultivate their images among potential voters (Cormack 2016; Kaslovsky and Kistner 2025; Russell 2021), assuming credit claims paint a wholly accurate picture of what representatives are doing with their time in office might be unwarranted.

The only study to date examining the relationship between credit claiming and legislative effectiveness comes from Hunt and Miler (2025). The authors analyze email newsletters sent by House members to their constituents between 2009 and 2021, using supervised machine learning to classify messages as credit claiming. Comparing legislators' communication patterns to their Legislative Effectiveness Scores (Volden and Wiseman 2014, 2018), Hunt and Miler find that while more effective legislators do advertise their lawmaking effectiveness more frequently than less effective members, the relationship is quite weak (or in their words, "substantively modest", p. 240). We build on this work by examining social media posts – on Facebook and Twitter – in addition to email newsletters, including U.S. Senators as well as House members, using a similar but different measure of credit claiming, and extending the time period of investigation to more comprehensively investigate the question of how credible credit claiming is in aggregate.

We also contribute to this line of work by explicitly considering the observability of credit claiming. Following Mayhew's footsteps, many have studied credit claiming by legislators, assuming that credit claiming is a key element of the electoral connection that enables constituents to reward lawmakers for effective representation (e.g., Hunt and Miler 2025; Russell 2021; Yiannakis 1982). This assumption has received relatively scant empirical scrutiny, however. As Barron and McLaughlin (2024) put it, "credit claiming for spending projects provides a bridge between

policy outcomes and public opinion, but relatively few studies have empirically examined credit claiming" (p. 108). The studies that do (Barron and McLaughlin 2024; Gerber, Patashnik, and Tucker 2022; Hamel and Bauer 2024; McLaughlin and Barron 2025; McLaughlin 2025) provide mostly experimental evidence, showing that when individuals are presented with a credit claim for distributive (i.e., pork barrel) spending by a hypothetical legislator, they appraise the legislator more highly.[3]

While valuable evidence on how voters react to credit claims when exposed directly, these studies fail to grapple with the question of how readily these messages are *observed* by actual voters in the real world. To affect mass opinion, messages must be received (and accepted) by a significant portion of the public (Zaller 1992). Understanding how credit claiming does or does not contribute to electoral accountability requires considering the relationship between voter opinion and actual rather than hypothetical credit claiming. The sole study which we aware of that evaluates the relationship between credit claiming and voter approval in a real world (i.e., not lab experimental) setting is Grimmer et. al. (2012; 2014). Using original data on credit claiming in senatorial press releases combined with responses to the 2006 CCES, they find marginally significant evidence that Senators who credit claim for in-state spending at higher rates have higher reported constituent approval.

Again, we build on this prior work in several important ways. First, we evaluate the relationship between constituent approval and two separate types of credit claiming: credit claiming for distributive goods (roughly analogous to Grimmer et. al.'s measure of in-state spending), as well as credit claiming for policy work (e.g., sponsoring legislation with no direct tie to a member's district or state). Second, we evaluate credit claiming in email newsletters and social media rather than press releases. These new forms of communication have been the focus of most recent research (e.g., Hunt and Miler 2025; Russell 2021), and the mechanism via which they might reach

[3]Barron and McLaughlin's 2024 findings are a bit more nuanced. Though they do find that survey respondents rate legislators as more effective following exposure to credit claiming for earmark spending, they do not observe a significant effect for overall approval rating of the legislator, contrary to most other studies.

voters differs from press releases. Third, we examine credit claiming by US Representatives in addition to Senators. Fourth, we evaluate the relationship between credit claiming in a much larger sample of both members and years, examining the relationship across 3,814 member-session pairs between 2009 and 2022, giving us a much more highly-powered analysis than what Grimmer et. al. (2012) were capable of over a decade ago.

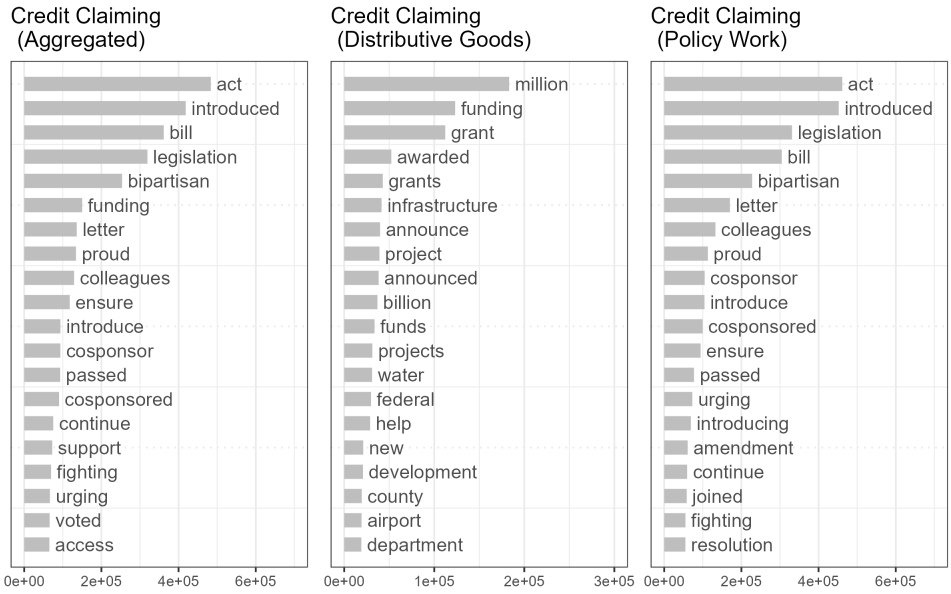
Moreover, we pair our observation evidence with original experimental analyses that focus on the key questions of interest here, credibility and observability. We explicitly ask respondents how credible they find messages by legislators. By randomly showing respondents examples of legislators credit claiming (or offering other common types of messages), this work accomplishes two things that the prior analyses do not. First, it allows us to hold observability fixed (all respondents see the messages) to isolate whether respondents find credit claiming credible or not, something we ask explicitly. Second, the randomization allows us to rule out confounds of various sorts (at the legislator, district, or respondent level) that might affect our observational analysis.

## Evidence from Credit Claiming by Members of Congress

To test these predictions, we turn to a new dataset that uses supervised machine learning to classify different types of messages contained in email newsletters and social media posts by U.S. Senators and Representatives across a 14-year time period (Kistner et al. 2025). Fortunately for our purposes, this data includes classifications of credit claiming (both for both policy work and distributive goods) in tweets, Facebook posts, and email newsletters. Accuracy of these classifications is quite high for supervised classification models, in most cases above 90%. This multimodal dataset captures a large portion of the actual credit claiming behavior members of Congress engage in and voters (potentially) see. We combine this dataset with members' Legislative Effectiveness Scores as described in Volden and Wiseman (2014; 2018) and constituent approval in the

biennial CES surveys to evaluate the predictions displayed in Table 1.

FIGURE 1: Words Associated With Credit Claiming




*Note:* The figure displays the top 20 words most associated with a message being classified as credit claiming for distributive goods, credit claiming for policy work, or the aggregated version of credit claiming. The x-axis shows the likelihood ratio for each word.

To clarify how we define and operationalize credit claiming, Figure 1 displays the words most strongly associated with a message being classified as a credit claim. The left-hand plot shows the words associated with credit claiming in any form, while the middle and right-hand plots show the words associated with credit claiming for distributive goods and policy work, respectively. The language largely matches a common understanding of what these words are. Words associated with credit claiming for distributive covers topics such as dollar values (“million", “billion"), funding (“funding", “grant", “awarded"), and various types of projects (“project", “infrastructure", “water" , “airport"). Words associated with credit claiming for policy work includes language describing legislation (“act", “legislation", “bill"), procedure (“introduce", "cosponsor", “amendment"), and action (“urging", “fighting"). The words associated with the aggregated category closely resemble the policy work words, unsurprising given that 10.9% of messages across

platforms are categorized as credit claims for policy work versus 1.8% of messages classified as credit claiming for distributive goods.

## Is Credit Claiming Associated with Higher Effectiveness?

Having described how credit claiming is measured, we next consider whether credit claiming is a credible signal of effectiveness. Here the focus is on credibility in the aggregate, meaning we consider whether more effective legislators credit claim more frequently. If members credit claim when they achieve legislative goals, members who accomplish more will have more opportunities to credit claim. Alternatively, if credit claiming is cheap talk with little connection to actual accomplishment, ineffective and effective lawmakers may credit claim in roughly equal volumes.

To distinguish between these two possibilities, we estimate a series of regression models where the dependent variable is the number of credit claiming messages by a member of Congress in a single two-year session, and the main independent variable is the member's Legislative Effectiveness Score in that particular session.[4] Both of these variables are logged. This takes into account the right-hand skew of each variable, and allows coefficients to be interpreted as elasticities – in other words, coefficients represent the percent change in in credit claiming associated with a one percent change in legislative effectiveness. Models are estimated separately for each type of communication (newsletters, tweets, and Facebook).

The simplest regressions are bivariate, without additional variables. We also estimate models with control variables and models with member and session fixed effects (i.e., two-way fixed effects models). Control variables come from the Center for Effective Lawmaking. Demographic controls include gender (female), race/ethnicity (African American, Hispanic), and party affil-

[4]In this paper we operationalize effectiveness using the Volden and Wiseman Legislative Effectiveness score, which measures a member's "proven ability to advance [their] agenda items through the legislative process and into law." The measure is based on bill sponsorship. Other forms of effective legislating exist, such as advocating for bill passage or logrolling with other members to include verbiage in legislation, even if that person is not the sponsor. To the extent that this is not captured by a member's Legislative Effectiveness Score, this implies that our estimates will be underestimates of the true correlation between credit claiming and effectiveness construed more broadly.

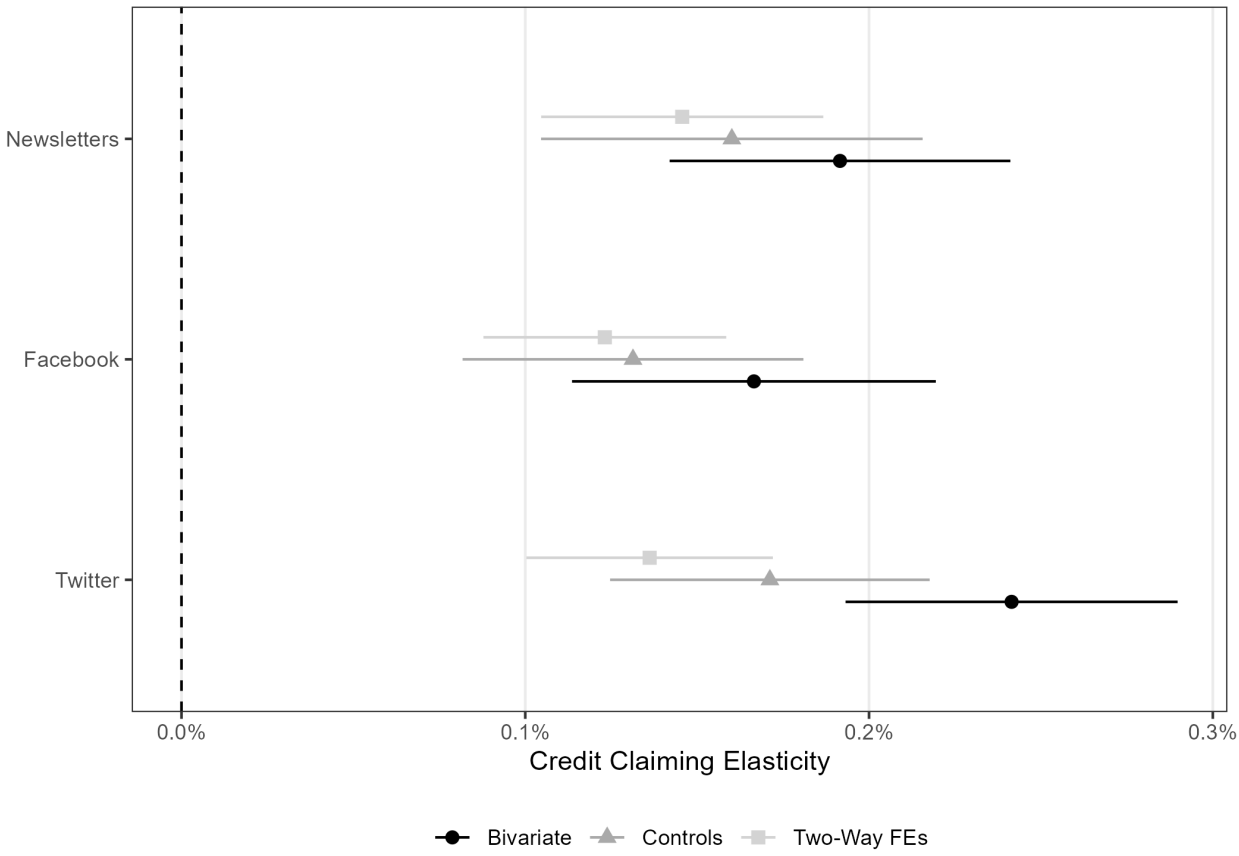
iation (Republican, other party). To account for district characteristics, we control for district partisanship and members' general election vote share, which captures electoral safety. We also include measures of institutional position and power: majority party status, party leadership positions, committee chair positions, and seniority (number of terms served). Finally, we control for member ideology using the first dimension of DW-NOMINATE scores, which ranges from liberal (-1) to conservative (+1).

The main results of this analysis are displayed in Figure 2.[5] Across all three platforms and model specifications, there is a positive and statistically significant relationship between legislative effectiveness and credit claiming frequency. The bivariate models show the strongest elasticities, indicating that a 1% increase in Legislative Effectiveness Score is associated with roughly a 0.17-0.24% increase in credit claiming messages. These estimates are slightly smaller when control variables are included, diminishing further when member and session fixed effects are added. However, even in the most conservative two-way fixed effects specifications, the relationship remains positive and statistically significant at the $p < 0.001$ level across all three platforms. The within-member estimates suggest that a 1% increase in a member's Legislative Effectiveness Score is associated with a 0.12-0.15% increase in their credit claiming activity, with the strongest effect observed for email newsletters (0.146) and the weakest for Facebook (0.123).

In Appendix C, we replicate Figure 2 separately by credit claiming for policy work versus credit claiming for distributive goods. As Figure C.1 shows, more effective lawmakers engage in both types of credit claiming more frequently, although the relationship appears stronger for policy credit claiming (elasticities of 0.13 to 0.25) than distributive credit claiming (elasticities of 0.04 to 0.16). This is likely due to the dependent variable (Legislative Effectiveness Scores) being defined in terms of bill sponsorship. In Appendix D, as an alternative dependent variable we use the total dollar amount of earmarks members obtained. We find a statistically significant positive relationship between earmark amounts and credit claiming for distributive goods, but not for

[5]Table B.1 in Appendix B shows the full set of regression coefficients and model information.

FIGURE 2: More Effective Lawmakers Credit Claim More Frequently




*Note:* Plot displays estimated coefficients from regressing the (logged) number of credit claims on three different online platforms on members' (logged) Legislative Effectiveness Score (Volden and Wiseman 2014, 2018). Estimates from bivariate, control variable, and fixed effects models shown. Coefficients (shown on x-axis) represent the percent change in credit claiming messages associated with a 1% increase in Legislative Effectiveness Score. Solid lines display 95% confidence intervals. Full coefficient estimates including control variables shown in Table B.1 in Appendix B.

policy work.

To summarize, across multiple platforms, 14 years of data, and a variety of model specifications, we find robust evidence that credit claiming is not meaningless cheap talk. While individual messages may be more or less accurate, in aggregate, the members who most frequently boast about getting things done are the ones who get the most done. In this narrow sense, at least, workhorses can also be showhorses.

## Is Credit Claiming Associated with Higher Approval?

We next move to considering whether voters respond to credit claiming by approving more highly of legislators who credit claim more frequently. As discussed above, numerous survey experiments have shown that members of the public react with higher approval when provided credit claiming directly (a finding we replicate in the following section). If a sizable number of constituents observe credit claiming by members of Congress on social media or in newsletters, we would expect credit claiming to be associated with higher approval ratings.

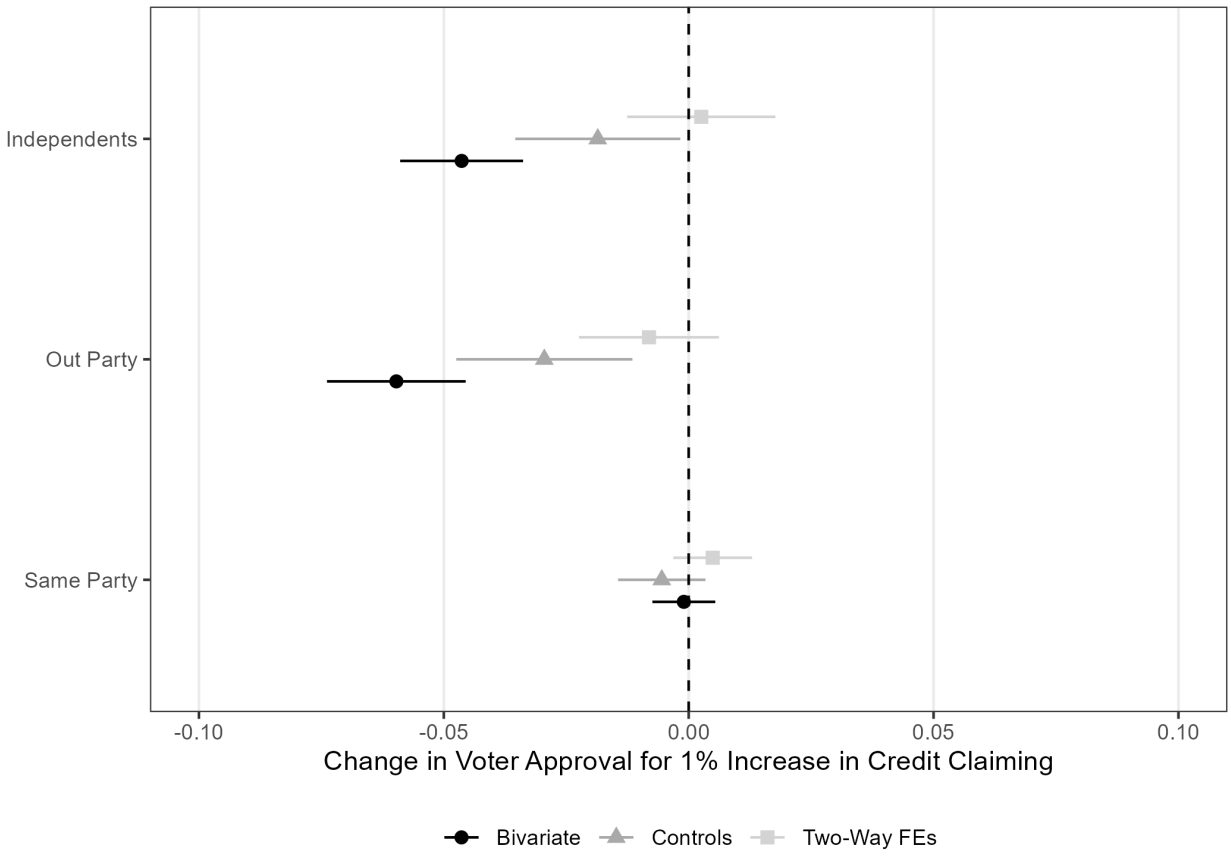
That is not what we find. Figure 3 displays the results of estimating similar regression models to those shown in Figure 2, only in this case, the dependent variable is the members' average approval rating among constituents on the biennial Cooperative Election Study (CES). Here the number of credit claims (again logged) is the main independent variable.[6] We estimate separate models among same party constituents, opposite party constituents, and independents, to account for the possibility that partisan loyalties moderate the effect of credit claiming on approval. All specifications and control variables are the same as described above.[7]

As Figure 3 shows, members who credit claim frequently do not have higher approval ratings than those who credit claim more rarely. In fact, in the bivariate and control variable models, the opposite is true: higher volumes of credit claiming are associated with lower approval ratings. We suspect this apparent negative relationship is driven by some form of selection bias. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the within-member two way fixed effects models do not reveal any significant relationships between credit claiming and approval. These estimates are fairly precise; the 95% confidence intervals rule out associations stronger than 0.018 per 1% increase (for independents). Even a fairly large 10% increase (which, for the average member in our data, would represent an increase of approximately 47 credit claims above the mean of 473) would lead at maximum to an increase of 0.18 on a four point scale.

[6] In these models we sum credit claims across all three platforms.

[7] Once again, a table of full regression coefficient results is shown in Appendix B.

FIGURE 3: Credit Claiming Is Not Associated With Higher Voter Approval




*Note:* Plot displays estimated coefficients from regressing the member's average per-session approval (from CES surveys) on the (logged) number of total credit claims across all three platforms. Estimates from bivariate, control variable, and fixed effects models shown. Coefficients (shown on x-axis) represent the change in average approval rating (on a 4-point scale) associated with a 1% increase in in credit claiming messages. Solid lines display 95% confidence intervals. Full coefficient estimates including control variables shown in Table B.2 in Appendix B.

Once again, in Appendix C we evaluate whether there are different relationships between credit claiming for policy work and approval versus credit claiming for distributive goods and approval. The answer, as displayed in Figure C.2, is a clear yes. Across 8 of the 9 specifications, credit claiming for distributive goods is associated with lower approval. This relationship, an unexpected one, merits further study.[8] While the findings for credit claiming for policy work are mixed, there is more evidence of approval benefits here compared to the aggregated analysis shown in Figure 3. In the two-way fixed effects models, which rule out the most confounds, there is a small but significant positive relationship between credit claiming and approval among independents and outparty voters. The magnitude is quite modest however. A 1% increase in credit claiming for policy work is associated with a 0.02-0.03 increase in approval on a 4 point scale.

Together, the approval analyses paint a clear picture. If some voters do observe and respond positively to credit claiming by members of Congress, it is quite few. The relationship between credit claiming and voter approval is negligible in strength and statistically difficult to discern.

## Evidence from Survey Experiments

Thus far, our results show that while credit claims do send meaningful signals about a legislator's activity, there is still a breakdown in accountability. These findings suggest that the problem is one of observability more than credibility, but do not fully account for the possibility that while credit claims may in fact be credible, constituents may still not perceive them as such. That is, even if constituents are observing credit claims that they *should* believe, it does not mean that they are. Exploring such a possibility is important because if the desire is to reward those who are effective and punish those who are not, then it is important to know which factor – credibility or observability – needs to be increased.

[8] One tentative explanation is that voters might perceive legislators' efforts to bring funding and projects to the district as benefitting special interests at the expense of the broader public.

To gain further understanding, then, we conduct two survey experiments where respondents are shown messages from hypothetical legislators. Both experiments were pre-registered[9] and fielded via Prime Panels.[10] Prime Panels delivers data comparable to that obtained from MTurk, but with the added advantage of offering greater diversity on such characteristics as age, family composition, religiosity, education, and political attitudes (Chandler et al. 2019). The first study was done in August of 2022 and the second in July of 2023.

In each study, we compare the effect of credit claiming messages to other common message types that have been extensively studied in the political science literature (Bernhard, Sewell, and Sulkin 2017; Costa 2021; Mayhew 1974; Russell 2018). Specifically, we compare credit claiming messages to advertising, position-taking, and partisan posturing messages. In the first study, we do not distinguish between credit claiming for constituency work versus credit claiming for policy work, while in the second study we include separate treatments for each.

The treatments in Study 1, which included 1,000 respondents (after respondents who failed attention checks were dropped), consisted of a series of mock posts from Twitter/X.[11]. The posts were attributed to four hypothetical representatives – two Democrats and two Republicans.[12]

For each representative, we designed the posts and accompanying information to vary not just in post content, but also post volume, as previous work (Costa 2021; Grimmer, Messing, and Westwood 2012; Sulkin, Testa, and Usry 2015) suggests that individuals judge legislators on both the quantity and content of their communications. This was conveyed through both the prompt that preceded the post (e.g., "This is one of the many tweets Representative X posted…") and the number of reposts, quotes, and likes the displayed post received. Examples of the treatments

[9] See https://aspredicted.org/9w7h-ftvx.pdf and https://aspredicted.org/u3wz7.pdf

[10] Approval to work with human subjects obtained from [redacted for review]

[11] Full text of the treatments is available in E.1

[12] The question asks about state representatives rather than members of Congress for added realism, as survey respondents' extremely low levels of knowledge about state legislatures should make them even less likely to detect that these individuals and messages are fictitious. The shift should not not be problematic, as research suggests that people hold legislators at both levels to the same standards of accountability (Wolak 2017).

used are displayed in Figure 4. Note that across legislators, we varied the issues referenced in the position-taking posts and whether the partisan posturing was positive or negative in nature.

FIGURE 4: Examples of Experimental Treatments


*Note:* Clockwise from the upper left-hand corner, each panel shows an example of a different type of message: position-taking, partisan posturing, credit claiming, and advertising.

Subjects were randomly assigned to view one post from three of the four legislators, with each post coming from a random draw of all possible posts for that individual legislator. After viewing the post, respondents were asked to use a 5-point scale ranging from "far below average" to "far above average" to rate the legislator on (1) activity on social media; (2) ability to write, pass, and deliver legislation; (3) willingness to serve constituents; and (4) loyalty to the party. The first item is a manipulation check,[13] and the latter three items are combined into an index ($\alpha$=.81). Each is intended to represent an aspect of a legislator's behavior that may be valued by constituents. Subjects were also asked to use a 5-point scale ranging from "extremely dissatisfied" to "extremely satisfied" to rate how they would feel about the legislator's performance if he was

[13]Those in the high volume conditions did reported legislators as significantly ($p$<.001) more active on social media, giving us confidence that treatments worked as intended.

their representative. After viewing and rating three different legislators, subjects then proceeded to other modules of the survey.

## Does Credit Claiming Affect Approval and Perceived Effectiveness?

Results from the main pre-registered analyses are available in E, as we only summarize these findings here. As expected, we generally find that credit claiming gives the legislator a significant ($p$<.05) boost in ratings of the hypothetical legislator's performance when compared to advertising or partisan posturing messages. However, position-taking messages also provided significant advantages over advertising and partisan posturing. This holds even if we analyze the respondents' ratings of legislators' ability to write, pass, and deliver legislation independently and not just as part of an index. Thus, merely talking about the issues may be enough to persuade voters that a legislator is actually working on them, a form of "hyper-credibility" in which voters are willing to give credit even when it is not explicitly claimed.

An alternative explanation is that we did not find greater differences between credit claiming and position-taking messages because the treatments in Study 1 featured claims about general legislative accomplishments, as opposed to the specific benefits those accomplishments may bring. In the absence of these details, these messages may have been viewed as cheap talk that was, in practice, no different than simply taking a position. Moreover, these generic messages may not have been seen as credible. To use the terminology of Arnold (1990), voters may reward or punish incumbents only when actions are traceable, meaning the voter can "plausibly trace an observed effect first back to a governmental action and then back to a representative's individual contribution" (p. 47). With this in mind, we turn to Study 2 for a stricter test of the value of position taking.

Study 2 (N=1,380) followed the same basic procedure as Study 1, but with three basic differences. First, we do not vary volume. Instead, all treatments portray the legislator as an infrequent communicator, giving us a stricter test of the effects of the messages of themselves. Second, we

alter the nature of the four types of messages. We make the credit claiming messages more explicit and divide them into two types: (1) distributive claims ("pork"), where the legislator takes credit for a specific amount of funding, and (2) legislation claims, where the legislator takes credit for a specific bill. We continue to use position-taking and partisan posturing messages, but omit advertising, as our main interest is in seeing if the lack of distinction between credit claiming and position-taking that we found in Study 1 replicates when our treatments are more specific. Table 2 shows the full text of the treatments used.

Lastly, we drop the post-treatment questions about constituency service and party loyalty and instead add a dependent variable to directly assess the credibility of the statements. Adapted from Clifford and Simas (2022), Study 2 includes a measure of sincerity that asks respondents to gauge whether they think the statements made by the legislator are true or if the legislator is just saying what they think voters want to hear.

We stack each subject's three responses, as this allows for within-subject analyses that increase our statistical power. We analyze the full, attentive sample using ordinary least squares. Our key independent variables are three dichotomous indicators of post type. We use the position-taking treatment as the baseline, as this allows for easy and direct comparisons to the two types of credit claims. As pre-registered, we include controls for the subject's partisan and ideological alignment with the legislator. We also include fixed effects for each legislator and random effects for each subject.

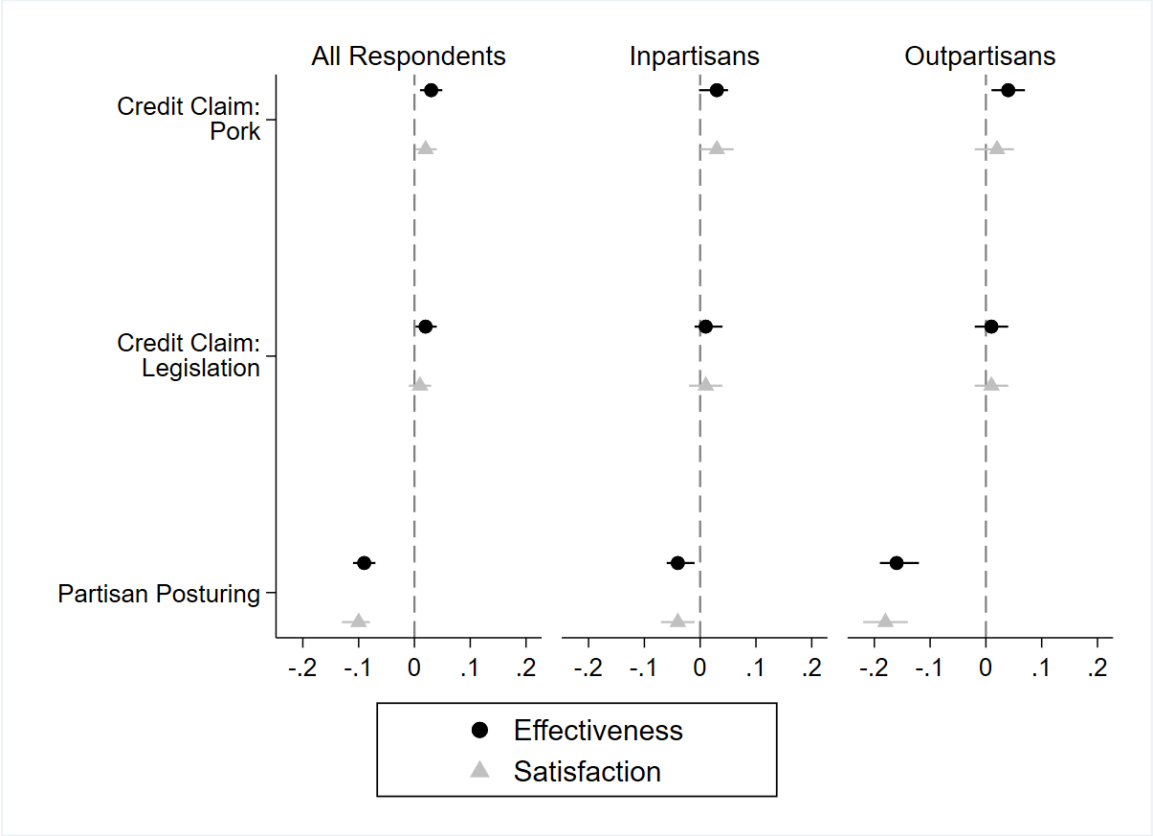
To begin, we examine the effect of credit claiming on perceived effectiveness and satisfaction ratings. Full models are available in Appendix F, while Figure 5 plots the treatment effects. We run two models, one that includes the full sample and one to account for the fact that responses to the treatments – particularly the partisan posturing treatments – may be conditional on shared partisanship.

Consistent with Study 1, we again find that partisan posturing messages are relatively less popular. Though inpartisans do not penalize legislators as much as outpartisans ($p$<.001), they still

TABLE 2: Content Featured in Study 2 Treatments

| | Position-Taking | Credit Claiming: Pork | Credit Claiming: Legislation | Partisan Posturing |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mike Andrews (D) | Our community's daycare needs cannot be ignored. We must put families first. | Celebrating a win for families in our district! I fought to win $360,000 for our local daycare centers. | Celebrating a win for families in our district! The House just voted to pass my Put Families First Bill, which will address daycare needs in our community. | We cannot just stand by and watch Republican policies hurt our families. I vow to keep fighting for the people of my district. |
| Bradley Martin (D) | A strong, modern transportation network is vital to the success of our district. Expanding facilities and upgrading bus and rail crossings must be a priority. | Proud to announce that our district's transportation networks will finally be getting the funding they need. I have secured over $3.8 million in funds that will allow us to expand facilities, upgrade bus and rail crossings, and tackle vital projects. | Proud to announce the introduction of my transportation bill, which will make sure our district gets the attention it needs. When this bill passes, we will finally be able to expand facilities, upgrade bus and rail crossings, and tackle vital projects. | Republicans are attacking rights and trying to take this country backwards. They must be stopped! |
| Dave Cahill (R) | Innovation is key for keeping businesses healthy and ready for the future. We must support and empower small businesses so that they can focus on development, not regulation and red tape. | Happy to bringing our local businesses $9.5 million! These funds will support and extend the extraordinary research and development that is being conducted in our communities. | Today I continued my work as an advocate for small businesses in our district and introduced a bill that emphasized research and development over regulation and red tape. | Democratic leadership has held us back for far too long. I stand with my fellow Republicans in continuing to push this country forward. |
| Garrett Hall (R) | Fires can devastate communities and ruin lives. Our local fire stations must be given the proper resources to improve training, equipment, and overall safety. | Fires can devastate communities and ruin lives. Thanks to my hard work, our local fire departments will be receiving $680,000 to improve training, equipment, and overall safety. | Fires can devastate communities and ruin lives. Thanks to my hard work, my Safer Communities Act—a bill that will help local fire stations in our district improve training, equipment, and overall safety—has been passed! | Americans deserve better than what Biden and the Democrats are giving them. Join me in fighting for your futures! |

FIGURE 5: Effects of Message Types Compared to Position-Taking Effects




*Note:* Results shown are from Study 2. Plots are predicted effects derived from models in Appendix F. Coefficients represent the effect of exposure for the listed message type compared to position taking (the omitted category). Bars represent 95% confidence intervals for the different in effects.

find legislators who send these types of messages to be significantly ($p$s<.02) less effective and less satisfactory than those who take positions or make either type of credit claim. But unlike Study 1, we now find that credit claims are rewarded more than simple policy stances. Legislators who make either kind of credit claim are viewed as significantly ($p$<.04) more effective than legislators making either of the other two types of statements. Claiming credit for pork also significantly ($p$<.04) boosts respondent satisfaction. When we account for shared partisanship, the majority of these effects disappear. But exploratory analyses that look at differences across the two parties offer some insight.

The results presented in Table 3 show that differences in evaluations are due not so much

TABLE 3: Effectiveness and Satisfaction by Message Type and Party

| **Effectiveness** | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Democratic Legislators** | | **Republican Legislators** | |
| **Message Type** | *Democratic Respondents* | *Republican Respondents* | *Democratic Respondents* | *Republican Respondents* |
| **Position-Taking** | .62 (.22) | .49* (.21) | .56* (.24) | .62 (.20) |
| **Credit Claim: Pork** | .66** (.21) | .57** (.22) | .56* (.22) | .62 (.20) |
| **Credit Claim: Legislation** | .65* (.21) | .54** (.21) | .55* (.26) | .60 (.19) |
| **Partisan Posturing** | .58 (.26) | .32 (.26) | .42 (.29) | .61 (.21) |
| **Satisfaction** | | | | |
| | **Democratic Legislators** | | **Republican Legislators** | |
| **Message Type** | *Democratic Respondents* | *Republican Respondents* | *Democratic Respondents* | *Republican Respondents* |
| **Position-Taking** | .67 (.24) | .48* (.26) | .58* (.28) | .66 (.23) |
| **Credit Claim: Pork** | .72** (.24) | .55** (.26) | .57*(.27) | .66 (.25) |
| **Credit Claim: Legislation** | .70* (.26) | .53* (.28) | .59* (.28) | .66 (.23) |
| **Partisan Posturing** | .65 (.27) | .33 (.31) | .40 (.33) | .63 (.26) |

*Note:* Results shown are from Study 2. Entries are group means with standard deviations in parentheses. *=different from partisan posturing $p<.05$, two-tailed test; **=different from partisan posturing and position-taking $p<.05$, two-tailed test.

to in- vs. outpartisanship, but rather to the legislator being a Democrat vs. a Republican. When compared to the other two types of messages, Democratic representatives do receive significant ($p<.05$) effectiveness boosts from Democratic respondents exposed to the pork messages and Republican respondents exposed to either type of credit claim. Pork claims also lead to significant ($p<.02$) increases in satisfaction among respondents from both parties. Though we did not hypothesize such an asymmetry, it is consistent with the idea that Republicans' association with fiscal responsibility leads pork barrel politics to be of greater benefit to Democratic legislators (Sellers 1997; Sidman 2018). Yet whatever the reason for this pattern of results, it still reveals a reward for effectiveness that we failed to find in our observational analyses.

## Do Respondents Perceive Credit Claims as Credible?

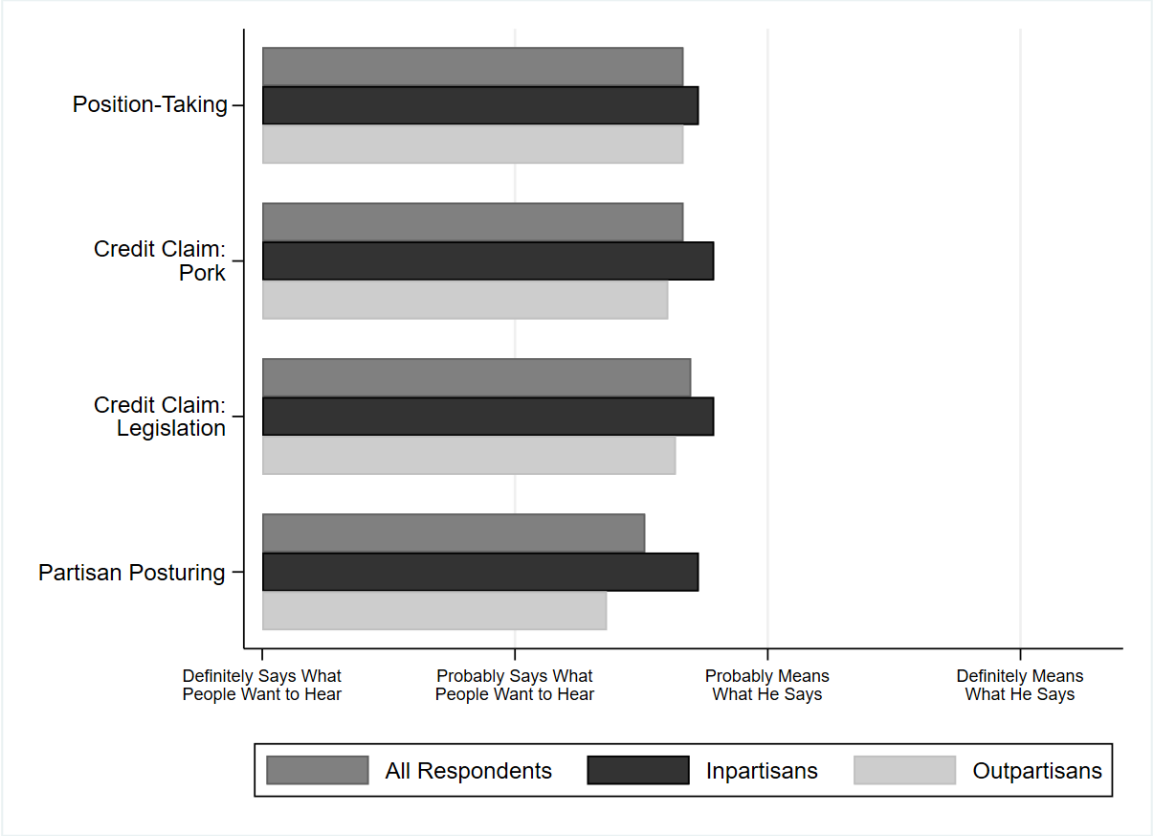
The fact that we only find evidence of accountability for effectiveness when exposure to credit claims was guaranteed by our experimental setup suggests that credit claiming messages are lacking observability. But while we find that credit claiming is objectively credible, it is still possible that individuals do not *perceive* them as such. That is, constituents may in fact be observing credit claims, but not using them to update their evaluations because they do not find them to be believable.

To address this possibility, we directly examine perceptions of the legislators' credibility. Figure 6 plots the predicted values of the credibility question (Does the legislator mean what he says? Or is he just saying what people want to hear?).[14] As the figure shows, perceived credibility is fairly consistent across all message types. Respondents fall somewhere between thinking the legislator is probably sincere and probably just pandering. Indeed, while perceptions of the partisan posturing messages are significantly ($p$<.001) lower, no other differences reach significance at any conventional level.

Though this means that individuals appear to give equal weight to what legislators *say* and what legislators said they actually *do*, this should not be taken as evidence that credit claims are being dismissed as cheap talk. The modal value for both types of credit claiming messages is "probably means what he says," with nearly 60% of respondents in each of these two treatment groups selecting either one of the more trusting responses. And interestingly, even outpartisans, who should be most inclined to be biased against and dismissive of legislators from the opposite party, still display high levels of confidence in the statements made. When we rerun the model with interactions between the treatment types and a dichotomous indicator of whether or not the respondent and the legislator were from the opposite party, only the interaction with the partisan posturing indicator is negative and statistically significant ($p$<.001). Thus, these results suggest that when messages are observed, they are believed by a majority of constituents.

[14] See AppendixF for the full models used to generate these predictions.

FIGURE 6: Predicted Perceived Credibilty by Message Type




*Note:* Results shown are from Study 2. Plots are predicted values derived from models in Appendix F.

Altogether, our experimental findings provide evidence that when credit claims are observed, they are often viewed as credible and typically rewarded as such. This implies that the non-relationship between credit claiming by members of Congress and approval ratings among the constituency should not be attributed to constituents not believing or caring about credit claiming, as we show here (similar to others) that the public responds positively to credit claims when directly exposed to them. Instead, our theory suggests the lack of electoral rewards for legislative effectiveness is more likely due to constituents not receiving those claims in the first place.

## How Many Constituents Do Credit Claims Reach?

Though the results so far are consistent with credit claiming not being widely observed by voters, we have not directly analyzed how visible this messaging is in the real world. In this section, we offer some partial evidence to address the question of credit claiming reach.

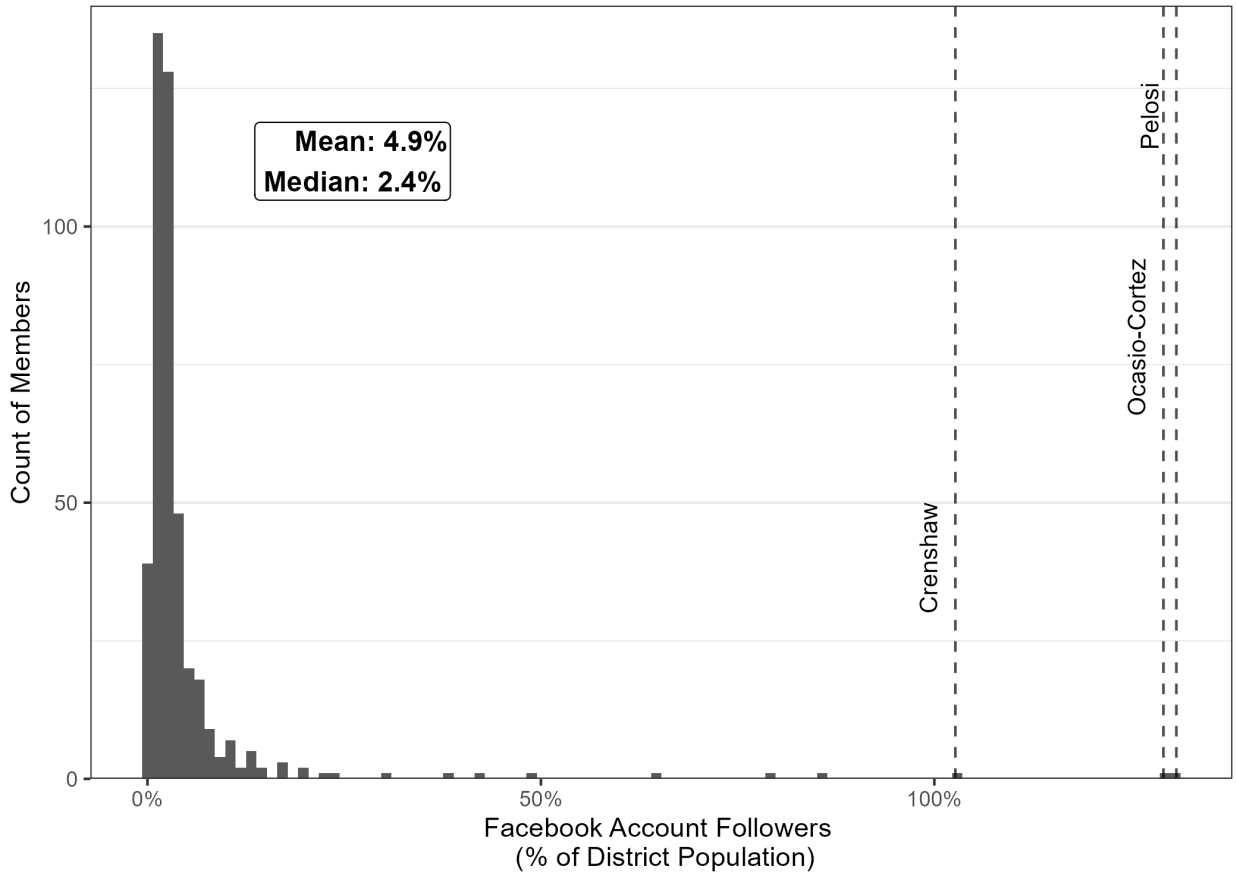
First, there are a few pre-existing data points on how wide-ranging exposure might be to credit claiming on congressional social media and in newsletters. On one recent nationally representative survey 10% of Americans reported following their member of Congress on a social media site (Neely and Bowra 2022). As to the reach of emails, Cormack (2017) finds that 14% of respondents to the 2012 CES claimed to have signed up for emails from their Senators. Given social desirability bias and other forms of misreporting, these survey-based estimates are likely to be upper bounds on the true proportion of constituents exposed to credit claims. Supporting that interpretation, a study (McCabe et al. 2023) that linked administrative data to Twitter survey records found that the average member of the 115th Congress was followed by only 2.4% of in-district Twitter users – itself a small subset of constituents in total. This suggests the proportion of constituents who follow their member of Congress on Twitter might reasonably be 1% or less.

Second, we can use our Facebook data to determine how many followers the typical member of Congress has on social media and how many views their posts receive. We take advantage of the fact that our Facebook post data includes the number of unique views each post had, as well as the number of followers the account had at the time of the post. These data allow us to characterize the reach of Congressional Facebook posts, and (in the case of post views) the number of views credit claiming receives in relation to other types of posts.

To assess how many followers each member has, Figure 7 displays a histogram of follower counts averaged across posts for each member of the 117th U.S. House, the most recent legislative session (2021-2022) for which we have data. Follower counts are expressed as a percent of district population. To be clear, we do not know which followers are constituents versus non-

constituents. This percent should be thought of as an upper bound on the percent of constituents who follow their members on Facebook. In all likelihood the actual percent is much lower in most cases if a substantial number of non-constituents follow the member for any reasons.

FIGURE 7: Facebook Followers as a Percent of District Population, Members of the 117th House



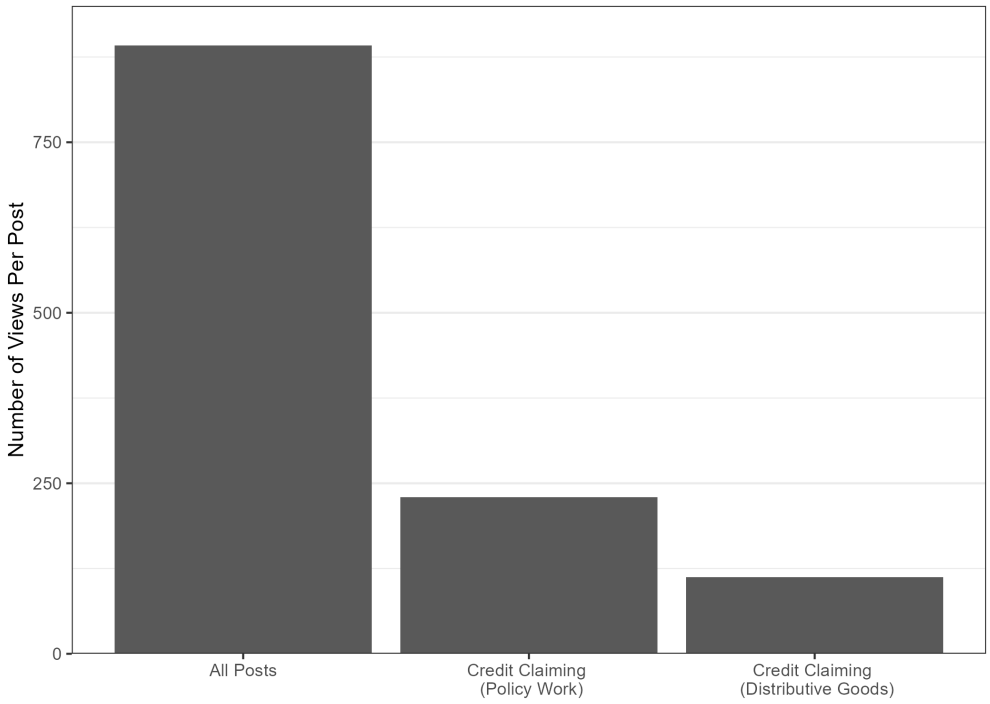

*Note:* The figure displays the distribution of Facebook follower counts, averaged across all posts, for each member of the 117th House. For benchmarking purposes, the x-axis is displayed as percent of the district population, though followers may or may not be constituents. Outlier members, who have more followers than constituents, are noted and labeled on the plot.

As the Figure reveals, even using these upper-bound estimates, the maximum possible percent of constituents who follow their member on Facebook is quite low. The average follower count is below 5% of district population, and the median below 2.5%. While there are a few members (Nancy Pelosi, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and Daniel Crenshaw) with more followers than con-

stituents, for the vast majority of members of Congress, their follower counts are small relative to their constituency size.

We next consider the number of views the typical post and the typical credit claiming post in particular receive. Figure 8 displays the average number of views for all posts by a member (again, focusing specifically on the 117th House), posts that credit claim for policy work, and posts that credit claim for distributive goods.

FIGURE 8: View Per Post, Overall versus Credit Claiming




*Note:* The figure displays the average number of views per Facebook post for all posts by members of the 117th House.

While this distribution is right-skewed, the averages remain quite low. The average views per post for members of Congress during this time period is approximately 892. Posts that credit claim for policy work receive approximately one-quarter of the views of the typical post, with an average of 229 views. Credit claiming for distributive goods receive approximately half the number of views credit claiming for policy work receives, an average of only 112 views. Whether

due to follower demand, follower actions (e.g., shares, comments), Facebook's feed algorithm, or some other reason, credit claiming gets less exposure on social media than other types of messages politicians share.

In short, our findings on the reach of Facebook messaging are consistent with what others have found about the audience for email newsletters and other forms of social media. Survey-based estimates imply approximately 1 in 10 constituents are directly exposed to messaging by members of Congress, but administrative and user data from social media sites suggest the true number is likely below 5%.

# Conclusion

This paper was motivated by a puzzle. Given the tools of modern communication, in theory it should be easy for legislators to share policy and distributive successes voters appear to value. Yet more effective legislators do no better at the ballot box than less effective ones. We develop a theory that considers two potential explanations: voters may not believe credit claiming (low credibility), or voters may not be exposed to credit claiming (low observability). By synthesizing existing work, using new data on congressional credit claiming across multiple platforms, and conducting original survey experiments, we find clear and consistent evidence that low observability is to blame. Credit claiming is in fact a credible signal of effectiveness, and a majority of the public view it as such. But only a tiny minority of constituents actually follow members of Congress on social media or subscribe to a newsletter. This helps to explain why there is essentially no relationship between how much credit claiming members do and their approval rating among constituents.

Of course, credit claiming through the modes of communication studied here is not the only way that constituents may learn about a legislator's accomplishments. For example, we do not study press releases. While we expect that the decline of local media in recent years (Canes-

Wrone and Kistner 2023; Hayes and Lawless 2015, 2017; Peterson 2021) means that newspapers covering credit claiming in press releases are not sufficient to overcome the obstacles we identify here, we acknowledge that a lack of Facebook followers may not doom a legislator to serve in obscurity.

Moreover, the job of a representative involves much more than just writing and passing legislation and thus, voters may be holding their representatives accountable for their performance in other valued areas. But our findings are still important in that they seemingly challenge some of the literature's widely shared views on the power of credit claiming. Researchers have largely followed Mayhew in focusing on credit claiming as part of the electoral connection with constituents, frequently assuming the strategy is efficacious (e.g., Barron and McLaughlin 2024; Hunt and Miler 2025; Grimmer, Messing, and Westwood 2012; Grimmer, Westwood, and Messing 2014; Russell 2021). Hunt and Miler (2025) typify this perspective, writing:

> Although Congress itself may remain mired in legislative gridlock and vitriolic partisan infighting, individual legislators can communicate their own individual efforts to constituents, increase their voters' confidence in their home representative, and perhaps improve confidence in Congress on the whole. (p. 243)

Similarly, in *The Impression of Influence*, Grimmer et. al. (2014) describe *the Representative's Problem*:

> The perquisites of office give incumbents resources to build an incumbency advantage, but incumbents have to use the resources to gain the attention of largely inattentive constituents...rather than rely on constituents to learn on their own about what their legislator does while in office, representatives show they are responsible for spending that occurs in the district. To receive credit for directing funds to the district, legislators use credit claiming statements to create the impression of influence over expenditures among constituents – to cultivate a reputation as effective

> at delivering money to the district. Constituents, in turn, respond to the messages – legislators' messages affect constituents' longterm evaluations of their member of Congress. (p. 25)

Based on their findings, Grimmer and co-authors were sanguine about the ability of legislators to resolve the Representative's Problem. Our findings suggest this optimism was premature. While legislators in the 2000s using press releases may have successfully reached constituents, the shift to social media and opt-in newsletters has not maintained – and may have reduced – this reach. Importantly, their analysis differed from ours in terms of the politicians studied (exclusively U.S. Senators), communication mode (press releases), time period, and the scope of data available. Our analysis, a more comprehensive one, casts doubt on the capacity of recent tools like social media and email newsletters to solve the Representative's Problem in the current era.

Instead, the analyses here suggest a need for future studies of credit claiming to re-orient themselves. Simply put, we do not think the evidence supports the more optimistic view presented in these prior works. Politicians have hard constraints on their ability to capture constituents' attention in practice. Indeed, this paper has broader implications for studies of legislators' capacity to influence public opinion more generally (Broockman and Butler 2017; Butler and Hassell 2018; Rogowski and Stone 2020). Future research on credit claiming specifically should either provide clear reasons to believe credit claiming has a substantive impact on constituent opinion, or expand in scope to consider other target audiences for credit claims beyond voters. Considering how credit claiming might target donors, organized interests, media members, fellow legislators or other politicians is a particularly promising avenue.

For legislators seeking due credit for their work in office or reformers seeking greater accountability for the actions members do (or do not) take, the implications of our findings are clear. Translating effective legislative work into electoral success requires finding new and better ways to communicate with voters than current methods relying on social media or opt-in email lists allows. Whether through media partnerships, algorithmic promotion, or other innovations,

closing the observability gap remains the key challenge for electoral accountability based on legislative effectiveness. The fact that we find credit claims to be both objectively and subjectively credible suggests that investing effort into increasing observability would have significant payoffs. But until then, it seems that we will continue to observe a breakdown in accountability for legislative effectiveness.

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# Supplementary Materials

## Credit Claiming and Accountability for Legislative Effectiveness

## Contents

# A Formal Model

To study how credit claiming shapes accountability, we develop a simple formal model similar to those found in the extensive principal-agent accountability literature described in Besley (2006). In our version of the model, voters decide whether to re-elect or remove an incumbent politician depending on the content of a signal the politician sends (a *credit claim*) about their performance in office (their *effectiveness*). Credit claims can be messages about the bills the legislator has sponsored or passed, the funding they obtain for their district, or any other activity the voter values for which some legislators perform better than others.

The model seeks to identify under what conditions credit claiming contributes to accountability for legislative effectiveness, and to produce empirical implications that let us evaluate whether these conditions are likely to hold in the context of the contemporary US Congress. We focus on two conditions in particular.

First, we focus on whether credit claims are *credible*. In the model, signals are credible if voters can costlessly verify the content.[15] If voters can (without expending much effort) confirm, for example, whether a legislator sponsored a particular bill they claimed to have sponsored, this would represent credible credit claiming. On the other hand, if voters cannot determine whether a legislator was pivotal in a bill's passage or if they were responsible for a particular line item in a budget, the signal is not credible.

Second, we focus on whether credit claims are *easily observable*. In the model signals are easily observable if voters can costlessly observe the content. If voters can follow their representative on social media and automatically receive updates about what their representative is doing in office, we might think that credit claims are easily observable. If, on the other hand, voters do not want to be constantly exposed to political content as they scroll through their chosen social media, they might choose not to observe credit claims, meaning credit claims are not easily observable

[15] Related literature on signaling by interest groups refers to such signals as *verifiable* (Grossman and Helpman 2001).

in our terminology.

## A.1 Setup of the Model

As is typical in principal agent accountability models, there are two time periods: $t \in \{1,2\}$. For each time period, a politician can take some action (sponsor a bill, obtain funding for the district, etc.) that voters desire. Let $a_t \in \{0,1\}$ represent whether or not the politician chooses to take the voter-desired action in that time period.

There are two types of politicians, effective versus ineffective politicians. Denote effectiveness as $e \in \{0,1\}$. The prior probability that a randomly chosen politician is effective can be given as $\pi \in (0,1)$. For effective politicians, taking the action is costless. Ineffective politicians pay a cost (in terms of time, effort, distraction from other goals, etc.) each period they take the action, denoted as $c$. Both types of politicians receive a benefit $b$ from being in office during time period $t$. Thus the period-specific utility function for the ineffective politician while in office can be given as $b - c * a_t$, and the period-specific utility function for an in-office effective politician is simply $b$.

Assume that, since the action is costless for the effective politician, they always take the action. Costs are drawn independently across ineffective politicians from a distribution whose CDF is $G(c)$, with each politician's cost remaining constant across periods.

Voters have the choice to re-elect the politician after the first time period. Voters benefit from the politician taking the action, and want to maximize the probability that $a_2 = 1$. After the politician chooses $a_2$, they receive their second period payoff and the game ends, meaning that ineffective politicians will always choose $a_2 = 0$ (as stated above, effective politicians always choose $a_t = 1$).

Voters observe an imperfect signal of the first period action. This imperfect signal $\tilde{a_1}$ equals $a_1$ (a *credit claim observed*) with probability $p$ and 1 with probability $1 - p$. The probability $p$, which represents observability in our model, can be interpreted as the probability that voters pay

attention to and receive signals about the actions of the legislator while in office. If they do not pay attention, absent any other information they maintain their prior belief that the politician is effective with probability $\pi$.[16]

To recap, the sequence of play is straightforward. Nature randomly selects, with probability $\pi$, a politician. The politician chooses whether or not to take action $a_1$, and obtains their first period payoff. The voter chooses whether or not to re-elect the politician, depending on the signal $\tilde{a_1}$ they receive. The politician chooses their second period action $a_2$, obtains their second period payoff, and the game ends.

## A.2 Equilibrium of Base Model

The equilibrium concept used is a perfect Bayesian equilibrium (PBE), which requires that in every period each type of politician behaves optimally given the re-election rule that the voters put in place. Voters use Bayes rule to update their beliefs.

First consider the simple re-election rule where voters choose to re-elect the incumbent if and only if $\tilde{a_1} = 1$. Given this setup, the decision for the ineffective politician is whether to take the action, incurring a cost but ensuring they are re-elected and guaranteeing second period office-holding benefits (giving them a utility of $2b - c$), or whether to not take the action (giving them an expected utility of $b(2p) = 2bpb$, since they are not re-elected with probability $b$. Choosing to take the action is (weakly) optimal if and only if:

$$p \geq \frac{c}{b}. \tag{A-1}$$

Ex ante, this means that the probability an ineffective politician will take the action in round 1 can be given as $G(pb)$, which is increasing in $p$. Thus more observable signals make it more likely the ineffective politician takes the voter-benefitting action.

[16]We assume voters are aware of if they are paying attention or not, meaning observing $\tilde{a_1}$ is uninformative.

For voters to use this re-election rule, however, it must be optimal, meaning that it maximizes their probability of choosing an effective politician in the second period, given their rationally updated beliefs. Using Bayes rule and the quantities above, the probability that the incumbent is effective given that the voter observes $\tilde{a}_1$ can be given as:

$$Pr(e = 1|\tilde{a}_1 = 1) = \frac{\pi}{\pi + G(pb)(1-\pi)}. \tag{A-2}$$

Assuming that there are at least some ineffective politicians for whom the cost of taking the action is too great to make it worth maximizing re-election probabilities (i.e., $C > \frac{p}{b}$), this means $G\left(\frac{p}{b}\right) < 1$ and $Pr(e = 1|\tilde{a}_1 = 1) > \pi$. Thus voters will choose to retain incumbents if and only if $\tilde{a}_i = 1$.

This means that in the base model, there is a semi-separating equilibrium. All effective politicians perform the voter-beneficial action, and all effective politicians get re-elected. For ineffective politicians, however, their strategy depends on how costly mimicking the effective politician is. If the cost is small relative to officeholding benefit and the probability voters observe the action, they take the voter-beneficial action in the first period (but not the second). If the cost is large, they do not take the action.

## A.3 Implications of The Non-Credible Signals Model

We now modify the base model to allow politicians to choose whether or not to send the signal (i.e., a credit claim) conveying that they took the voter-desired actions in a particular period. These signals could be costly for the politician to send or cheap, and credible to voters or not credible.

For the purposes of this paper, which focuses on credit claiming in the era of social media and online communication, we assume that signals are cheap to send. While there may be fixed costs to, e.g., hiring a communications staff and establishing a web presence, after these costs

have been incurred (which is true for all members of Congress), the marginal costs of claiming credit for one's accomplishments on social media or in an email newsletter are quite low.

Thus the relevant question is whether signals are credible to voters or not credible. Let's begin with assuming they are not credible. In effect, a politician can claim that they helped pass a bill regardless of whether their efforts made a meaningful difference, they can claim they were responsible for a budget line allocating funding to their district regardless of whether they had any impact on budget decisions, and the like. Furthermore, voters, because of the complexities of the process and the difficulty of attributing outcomes to any single politician, cannot tell the difference. Given that sending these signals are costless and voters will not detect or punish liars, all politician types can send signals of effective action taking regardless of whether they took the action or not.

How does this modify the game above? Let us refer to the signal politicians transmit as $\hat{a}_1$ (the *credit claim sent*), while continuing to denote the signal voters receive as $\tilde{a}_1$ (the *credit claim observed*). As before, the transmission of the signal to the voter is imperfect, meaning with probability $1-p$ they observe $\tilde{a}_1 = 1$. In this case (the non-credible case), however, whether the signal reaches the voter or not is meaningless. Regardless of politician type or the action they take, the signal $\hat{a}_1$ they send is 1, meaning with probability $p$ voters observe $\tilde{a}_1 = 1$ as well. Given that the signal is meaningless, the probability a politician is effective given $\hat{a}_1$ now equals:

$$Pr(e = 1|\tilde{a}_1 = 1) = \frac{\pi}{\pi + (1-\pi)} = \pi. \tag{A-3}$$

Thus, after observing a politician send signal $\tilde{a}_1 = 1$, the voter is indifferent between re-electing the incumbent versus voting for a challenger instead. Assume that when indifferent, voters re-elect the incumbent – a reasonable assumption given high incumbent re-election rates in practice. This tie-breaking rule completes the equilibrium characterization. Since voters will re-elect the incumbent regardless of their period 1 action, ineffective politicians have no incentive

to incur the cost of taking the voter-desired action. An ineffective politician who chooses $a_1 = 1$ receives utility $2b - c$, while one who chooses $a_1 = 0$ receives utility $2b$. Since they are re-elected either way (all politicians send $\hat{a}_1 = 1$, and voters cannot distinguish between types), choosing $a_1 = 0$ strictly dominates for all ineffective politicians.

Thus, in equilibrium with non-credible signals: effective politicians choose $a_1 = 1$ and send $\hat{a}_1 = 1$; ineffective politicians choose $a_1 = 0$ and send $\hat{a}_1 = 1$; and voters observe $\tilde{a}_1 = 1$ (either through attention or the default signal), maintain their prior belief $\pi$, and re-elect all incumbents. This represents a complete breakdown of electoral accountability. Ineffective politicians face no electoral penalty for shirking, and voters have no basis for screening out low-quality incumbents. The ability to send non-credible signals eliminates any connection between actual performance and electoral outcomes.

The above is sufficient to generate predictions for the relationship between credit claiming, legislative effectiveness, and voter re-election intentions. In the empirics in the main paper, we operationalize voter re-election intentions using survey-measured approval ratings. For clarity of connection to the empirical analysis, we use the term approval here. Given that, the empirical implications of the model when credit claiming is not credible can be given as follows:

**Implications of the Non-Credible Signals Model**

1. Credit claiming is independent of observed legislative effectiveness
2. Credit claiming is independent of a politician's approval
3. Effective lawmaking is independent of a politician's approval

The first implication follows, almost trivially, because all politicians credit claim.[17] The key

[17] A similar conclusion follows from a slightly relaxed version of the model, however. Allowing $\hat{a}_i$ to be continuous rather than binary, for idiosyncratic reasons (such as how much the politician likes Twitter or how active one's social media intern is), $\hat{a}_i$ might be higher for some politicians and lower than others.

structural elements producing these implications, however, is that signaling is cheap but not credible, meaning it can be done regardless of how effective a politician actually is or what actions they take in office.

## A.4 Implications of The Credible and Observable Signals Model

The alternative is that credit claiming is credible. The most likely reason credit claiming would be credible is if the information is verifiable, meaning voters have some means of determining whether a given credit claim is accurate or not. Politicians who falsely claim credit for taking some action might be publicly called out on this deception by the individual who is actually responsible, or by a political opponent. Interest groups, the media, or other parties may highlight misleading claims.

To incorporate verifiable credit claiming into the model, we modify the setup as follows. Politicians choose both their action $a_1$ and the signal they send $\hat{a}_1$. With probability $p$, voters pay attention and observe both the politician's actual action $a_1$ and their claim $\hat{a}_1$, allowing them to detect any deception. With probability $1 - p$, voters do not pay attention and receive an uninformative default signal.

Crucially, if a politician makes a false claim ($\hat{a}_1 \neq a_1$), the false claim increases the probability that voters pay attention. Specifically, when $\hat{a}_1 = 1$ but $a_1 = 0$, opponents, interest groups, and media bring the false claim to voters' attention, such that voters observe the deception with probability $p_{false} > p$.

Thus in equilibrium, all politicians truthfully report their actions, i.e., $\hat{a}_1 = a_1$, as sending a false signal is weakly dominated for all politician types.

For effective politicians, who always choose $a_1 = 1$, sending $\hat{a}_1 = 1$ (truthful) ensures re-election whenever voters pay attention, while sending $\hat{a}_1 = 0$ would risk voters incorrectly inferring ineffectiveness. Thus effective politicians send $\hat{a}_1 = 1$.

For ineffective politicians who choose $a_1 = 1$, sending $\hat{a}_1 = 1$ (truthful) ensures re-election,

yielding utility $2b - c$. Sending $\hat{a}_1 = 0$ (false) would only reduce re-election probability. Thus ineffective politicians who take the action send $\hat{a}_1 = 1$.

For ineffective politicians who choose $a_1 = 0$, consider two signaling strategies:

- Send $\hat{a}_1 = 0$ (truthful): Voters who pay attention (probability $p$) observe the shirking and do not re-elect. Expected utility is $b + b(1 - p) = b(2 - p)$.
- Send $\hat{a}_1 = 1$ (false): Voters observe the deception with probability $p_{false} > p$ and do not re-elect. Expected utility is $b + b(1 - p_{false}) = b(2 - p_{false})$.

Since $p_{false} > p$, we have $b(2 - p_{false}) < b(2 - p)$. Thus sending a false signal is strictly dominated by truthful reporting.

Given truthful signaling in equilibrium ($\hat{a}_1 = a_1$), the model reduces to the base model. Ineffective politicians face the same tradeoff: take the action and incur cost $c$ to ensure re-election (utility $2b - c$), or shirk and risk detection with probability $p$ (expected utility $b(2 - p)$). They choose to take the action if and only if $c \leq pb$, meaning the probability an ineffective politician takes the action is $G(pb)$, exactly as in the base model.

Thus, with credible and observable signals, the equilibrium features the same semi-separating structure: all effective politicians take the action and get re-elected; ineffective politicians with low costs mimic effective politicians in period 1, while those with high costs shirk and risk replacement. Voters use the observed actions to update their beliefs and re-elect politicians who took the voter-desired action in period 1. This has the following implications:

**Implications of the Credible and Observable Signals Model**

1. Credit claiming is positively correlated with legislative effectiveness
2. Credit claiming increases a politician's approval
3. Effective lawmaking is positively associated with voter approval

## A.5 Implications of The Credible but Unobservable Signals Model

Even if credit-claiming signals are credible, voters may have difficulty receiving them. In the extreme case where $p$ is 0, this would mean that credit claiming of any form is not observed by voters.

Empirically, how would this differ from the case where signals can reach voters but are not credible? As in the Non-Credible Signals Model, both credit claiming and effective lawmaking should be independent (*ceteris paribus*) of a member's re-election probability. Despite this, there are reasons why we might expect signals to be credible regardless of voters' ability to receive and audit the claims.

While our formal model (and empirical analysis) focuses on voter-politician interactions, credit claiming may be disciplined by audiences beyond voters. If interest groups, media, or fellow legislators can observe and verify claims – and impose reputational or other costs on deceivers – then politicians will truthfully report their actions even when voters are inattentive. Under this informal extension of the model, effective politicians will claim credit and do so at higher rates than non-effective politicians, despite voter ignorance and a lack of reward at the ballot box.

This possibility produces the following empirical implications, the combination of which are distinct from both the Non-Credible Signals Model and the Credible and Observable Signals Model.

**Implications of the Credible but Unobservable Signals Model**

1. Credit claiming is positively correlated with legislative effectiveness
2. Credit claiming is independent of a politician's approval
3. Effective lawmaking is independent of voter approval

# B Full Regression Coefficient Tables for the Observational Analyses

TABLE B.1: Credit Claiming and Legislative Effectiveness Regression Table

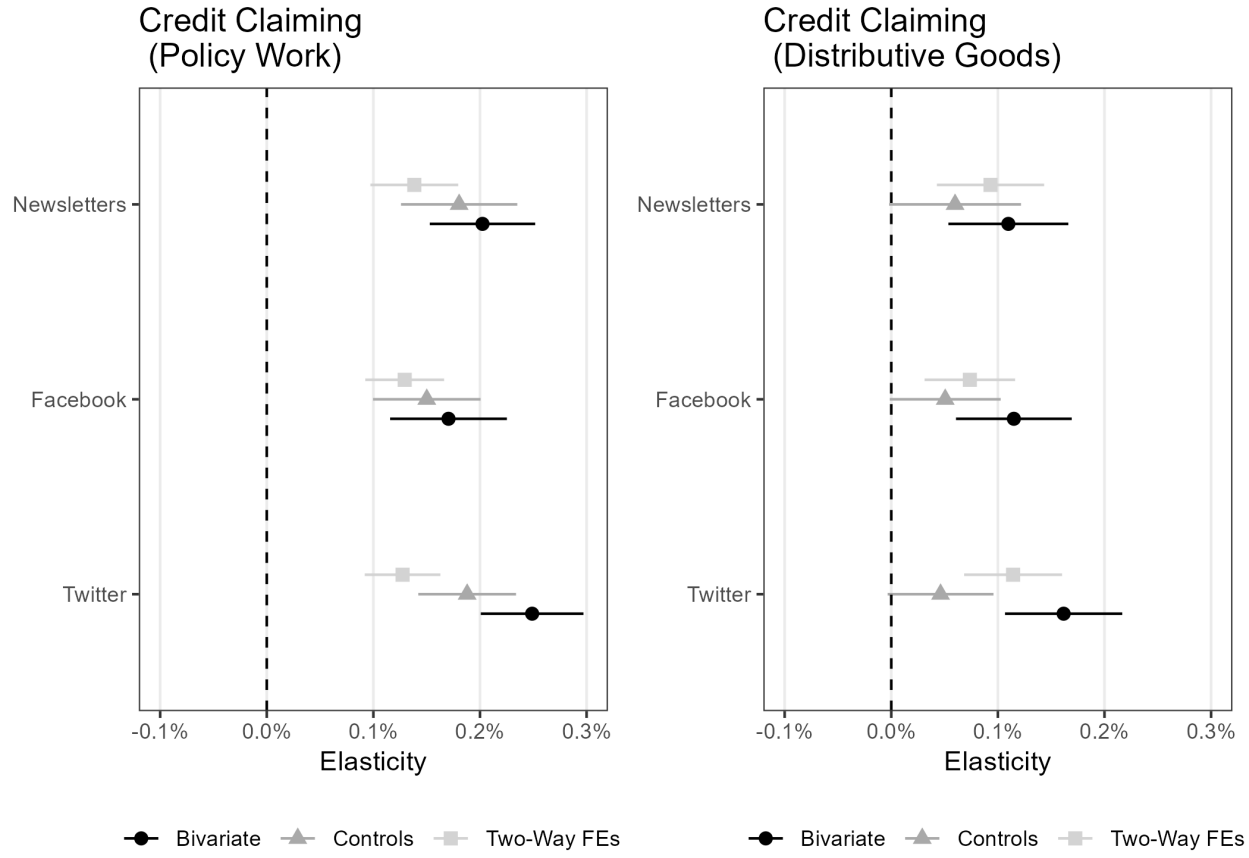
| | DV: log(Credit Claims + 1) | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Twitter | | | Facebook | | | Email Newsletters | | |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | (8) | (9) |
| Log(Effectiveness) | 0.241*** | 0.171*** | 0.136*** | 0.167*** | 0.131*** | 0.123*** | 0.192*** | 0.160*** | 0.146*** |
| | (0.025) | (0.024) | (0.018) | (0.027) | (0.025) | (0.018) | (0.025) | (0.028) | (0.021) |
| Female | | 0.284*** | | | 0.199** | | | 0.201* | |
| | | (0.068) | | | (0.071) | | | (0.087) | |
| African American | | -0.486*** | | | -0.612*** | | | -0.300* | |
| | | (0.121) | | | (0.118) | | | (0.145) | |
| Hispanic | | -0.182 | | | -0.162 | | | -0.157 | |
| | | (0.122) | | | (0.113) | | | (0.155) | |
| District Partisanship | | -0.577 | | | -0.685 | | | -0.843 | |
| | | (0.342) | | | (0.366) | | | (0.434) | |
| Previous Vote Share | | -0.010*** | | | -0.008** | | | -0.001 | |
| | | (0.002) | | | (0.002) | | | (0.003) | |
| Majority Party | | 0.045 | | | 0.022 | | | 0.030 | |
| | | (0.045) | | | (0.047) | | | (0.055) | |
| DW-NOMINATE | | -0.549* | | | -0.515* | | | -0.278 | |
| | | (0.232) | | | (0.242) | | | (0.278) | |
| Party Leader | | 0.272* | | | 0.066 | | | 0.010 | |
| | | (0.108) | | | (0.094) | | | (0.122) | |
| Committee Chair | | 0.052 | | | -0.226* | | | -0.047 | |
| | | (0.097) | | | (0.110) | | | (0.118) | |
| Seniority | | -0.034*** | | | -0.039*** | | | -0.030** | |
| | | (0.008) | | | (0.008) | | | (0.010) | |
| Republican | | -0.746 | | | -0.746 | | | -0.210 | |
| | | (0.400) | | | (0.438) | | | (0.466) | |
| Constant | 5.426*** | | | 5.232*** | | | 5.673*** | | |
| | (0.040) | | | (0.043) | | | (0.040) | | |
| Num.Obs. | 3,172 | 3,074 | 3,172 | 2,978 | 2,890 | 2,978 | 3,279 | 3,193 | 3,279 |
| Session FE | N | Y | Y | N | Y | Y | N | Y | Y |
| Member FE | N | N | Y | N | N | Y | N | N | Y |

TABLE B.2: Credit Claiming and Voter Approval Regression Table

| | DV: CCES Approval (5 Point Scale) | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Same Party | | | Out Party | | | Independent | | |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | (8) | (9) |
| Log(Credit Claims + 1) | -0.001 | -0.005 | 0.005 | -0.060*** | -0.029** | -0.008 | -0.046*** | -0.019* | 0.003 |
| | (0.003) | (0.005) | (0.004) | (0.007) | (0.009) | (0.007) | (0.006) | (0.009) | (0.008) |
| Female | | 0.011 | | | -0.113*** | | | -0.072** | |
| | | (0.016) | | | (0.032) | | | (0.026) | |
| African American | | -0.010 | | | -0.058 | | | 0.050 | |
| | | (0.017) | | | (0.048) | | | (0.039) | |
| Hispanic | | -0.051* | | | 0.108 | | | 0.020 | |
| | | (0.020) | | | (0.057) | | | (0.040) | |
| District Partisanship | | 0.111 | | | -0.676*** | | | -0.082 | |
| | | (0.089) | | | (0.158) | | | (0.124) | |
| General Election Vote Share | | 0.002** | | | 0.011*** | | | 0.007*** | |
| | | (0.001) | | | (0.001) | | | (0.001) | |
| Majority Party | | 0.015 | | | -0.020 | | | -0.019 | |
| | | (0.008) | | | (0.015) | | | (0.015) | |
| Ideology (DW-NOMINATE) | | 0.063 | | | -0.574*** | | | -0.181* | |
| | | (0.055) | | | (0.100) | | | (0.081) | |
| Party Leader | | -0.001 | | | -0.263*** | | | -0.159*** | |
| | | (0.025) | | | (0.044) | | | (0.040) | |
| Committee Chair | | -0.078** | | | -0.204*** | | | -0.193*** | |
| | | (0.025) | | | (0.036) | | | (0.033) | |
| Seniority | | -0.004** | | | -0.008** | | | -0.010*** | |
| | | (0.002) | | | (0.003) | | | (0.003) | |
| Republican | | 0.007 | | | -0.208 | | | 0.173 | |
| | | (0.113) | | | (0.192) | | | (0.149) | |
| Other Party | | | | | | | | 0.048 | |
| | | | | | | | | (0.119) | |
| Constant | 3.295*** | | | 2.612*** | | | 2.998*** | | |
| | (0.017) | | | (0.039) | | | (0.035) | | |
| Num.Obs. | 3745 | 3637 | 3745 | 3745 | 3637 | 3745 | 3754 | 3646 | 3754 |
| Session FE | N | Y | Y | N | Y | Y | N | Y | Y |
| Member FE | N | N | Y | N | N | Y | N | N | Y |

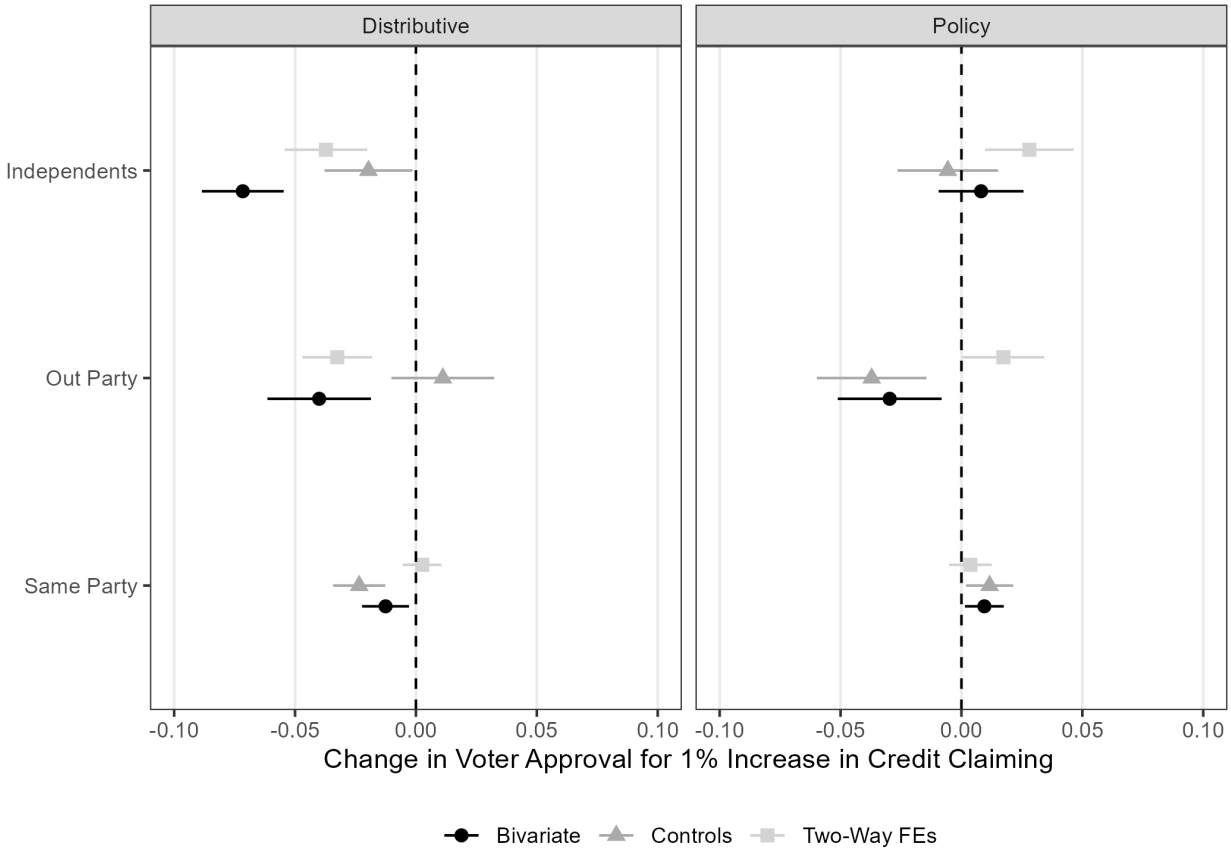
# C Credit Claiming, Policy Work vs. Distributive Goods

FIGURE C.1: Legislative Effectiveness and Credit Claiming for Policy Work vs. Distributive Goods




*Note:* Plot displays estimated coefficients from regressing the member's average per-session approval (from CES surveys) on the (logged) number of total credit claims across all three platforms. Estimates from bivariate, control variable, and fixed effects models shown. Coefficients (shown on x-axis) represent the change in average approval rating (on a 4-point scale) associated with a 1% increase in in credit claiming messages. Solid lines display 95% confidence intervals.

FIGURE C.2: Member Approval by Credit Claiming Type




*Note:* Plot displays estimated coefficients from regressing the (logged) number of policy work credit claims (right) or distributive good credit claims (left) on three different online platforms on members' (logged) Legislative Effectiveness Score (Volden and Wiseman 2014). Estimates from bivariate, control variable, and fixed effects models shown. Coefficients (shown on x-axis) represent the percent change in credit claiming messages associated with a 1% increase in Legislative Effectiveness Score. Solid lines display 95% confidence intervals.

# D Credit Claiming and Earmark Amounts Obtained

In this Appendix section, we consider how strongly correlated the two forms of credit claiming are with an actual measure of distributive goods obtained by the member of Congress: the dollar amount of earmarks obtained. Members of Congress use “earmarks" to provide federal funding to companies, projects, groups and organizations, often in their district. Since the return of earmarks in 2021, the House Appropriations Committee publishes all earmark requests on the committee’s website.

We take this data and merge it with our dataset of member credit claiming, subsetting our data to only members of the 117th House. Thus the analysis below evaluates whether members who more frequently claimed credit for distributive goods in the 117th House obtained more earmarks.

Table D below shows the results of estimating similar regression models as those shown in Table B.1 for this subset. As can be seen in the table, there is a significant relationship between credit claiming for distributive work and the amount of earmarks members obtained; there is no such significant relationship observed with credit claiming for policy work.

| | log(Credit Claims for Policy Work + 1) | | | log(Credit Claims for Distributive Goods + 1) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Newsletters | Tweets | Facebook | Newsletters | Tweets | Facebook |
| log(Earmark Dollar Amount + 1) | 0.067 | 0.103 | 0.074 | 0.152* | 0.222** | 0.225+ |
| | (0.062) | (0.063) | (0.091) | (0.073) | (0.073) | (0.120) |
| Female | 0.260* | 0.113 | -0.026 | 0.056 | -0.024 | -0.058 |
| | (0.114) | (0.115) | (0.169) | (0.132) | (0.132) | (0.168) |
| African American | -0.418** | -0.561*** | -0.232 | -0.309+ | -0.420* | -0.285 |
| | (0.157) | (0.158) | (0.243) | (0.182) | (0.181) | (0.242) |
| Hispanic | -0.024 | -0.224 | -0.450+ | 0.185 | 0.139 | -0.066 |
| | (0.169) | (0.170) | (0.240) | (0.195) | (0.196) | (0.246) |
| District Partisanship | -0.456 | -1.031 | -0.547 | -1.827* | -2.560** | -2.555* |
| | (0.796) | (0.808) | (1.195) | (0.927) | (0.929) | (1.183) |
| General Election Vote Share | -0.014* | -0.010 | -0.011 | -0.010 | -0.004 | 0.003 |
| | (0.007) | (0.007) | (0.011) | (0.008) | (0.009) | (0.010) |
| Majority Party | 0.424 | 1.453 | 0.558 | 2.524* | 3.747*** | 2.493+ |
| | (0.885) | (0.899) | (1.331) | (1.031) | (1.034) | (1.316) |
| Ideology (DW-NOMINATE) | -1.327** | -0.520 | 0.369 | -1.728*** | -0.763 | -1.280+ |
| | (0.439) | (0.441) | (0.642) | (0.513) | (0.508) | (0.660) |
| Party Leader | -0.065 | 0.132 | 0.679* | 0.104 | 0.214 | 0.484 |
| | (0.205) | (0.213) | (0.307) | (0.250) | (0.244) | (0.302) |
| Committee Chair | -0.247 | -0.277 | 0.265 | -0.368 | -0.645* | -0.534 |
| | (0.222) | (0.223) | (0.348) | (0.262) | (0.256) | (0.345) |
| Seniority | -0.063*** | -0.066*** | -0.069** | -0.030+ | -0.019 | -0.027 |
| | (0.013) | (0.013) | (0.022) | (0.016) | (0.015) | (0.022) |
| Constant | 6.005*** | 4.559*** | 5.595** | 1.212 | -0.950 | -0.262 |
| | (1.330) | (1.368) | (1.968) | (1.552) | (1.582) | (2.421) |
| Num.Obs. | 289 | 286 | 264 | 281 | 283 | 251 |

# E Experimental Study 1: Treatments and Analyses

TABLE E.1: Content Featured in Study 1 Treatments

| | Position-Taking | Credit Claiming | Partisan Posturing | Advertising |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mike Andrews (D) | The private healthcare system is costing families way too much. Government needs to step in and fix the system. | Met with leaders of the medical community today. Ready to continue my work to deliver quality healthcare to the people of this states. | Republicans are attacking rights and trying to take this country backwards. They must be stopped! | My weekly newsletter is out! If you would like our newsletter sent directly to you, please subscribe. |
| Bradley Martin (D) | Investments in childcare make our workforce stronger. We need to make affordable childcare a priority. | Had the pleasure of visiting a local daycare that benefits from funding I fought so hard to deliver. | Proud of Biden and my fellow Democrats for getting Americans back to work. | Check out the @dailyjournal's coverage of my latest plans for this great state. |
| Dave Cahill (R) | Attacking the oil and gas industry only hurts consumers. We need energy that hard-working people can afford. | Proudly led a group of lawmakers today who met to discuss how we can keep oil and gas at prices every family can afford. | Americans deserve better than what Biden and the Democrats are giving them. Join me in fighting for your families! | Catch me on @MaxintheMorning tomorrow discussing all the great things happening in this district. |
| Garrett Hall (R) | Tax increases are a threat to our state's industry. We must fight to protect family-owned farms and small businesses. | What are you doing for dinner tonight? We will be eating at one of the many family-owned restaurants I fight to protect from high taxes. | Kudos to Republican leaders all across the U.S. for getting people back to work and our kids back in school. | Check your inbox or your mailbox for my latest updates from the capitol! |

TABLE E.2: Main Analyses of the Ratings Index and Satisfaction

| | Index: Base | Index: Full | Satisfaction: Base | Satisfaction: Full |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| High Volume | 0.03* | 0.04* | 0.02 | 0.03 |
| | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.02) | (0.02) |
| Advertising | 0.04* | 0.03* | 0.03 | 0.03 |
| | (0.02) | (0.01) | (0.02) | (0.02) |
| Credit Claiming | -0.01 | -0.01 | -0.01 | -0.01 |
| | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.02) | (0.02) |
| Partisan Posturing | -0.03 | -.02 | -0.06* | -0.05* |
| | (0.02) | (0.01) | (0.02) | (0.02) |
| Volume X Ad | -0.01 | -0.02 | -0.04 | -0.04 |
| | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.03) | (0.03) |
| Volume X Credit | 0.01 | 0.01 | 0.01 | 0.02 |
| | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.03) | (0.03) |
| Volume X Posturing | 0.01 | 0.01 | 0,01 | 0,00 |
| | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.03) | (0.03) |
| Partisan Alignment | | 0.02* | | 0.04* |
| | | (0.00) | | (0.00) |
| Ideological Alignment | | 0.01* | | 0.03* |
| | | (0.00) | | (0.00) |
| Legislator FEs | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| Respondent REs | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| N | 2,998 | 2,998 | 3,000 | 3,000 |
| | (1,000 clusters) | (1,000 clusters) | (1,000 clusters) | (1,000 clusters) |

*Note:* Position-taking is the omitted baseline. Entries are OLS coefficients. Standard errors clustered by subject are shown below in parentheses. *=$p < 0.05$, two-tailed test.

# F Experimental Study 2: Analyses

TABLE F.1: Analyses of Effectiveness and Satisfaction

| | Effectiveness: Base | Effectiveness: Full | Satisfaction: Base | Satisfaction: Full |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Credit: Pork | 0.03* | 0.03* | 0.02* | 0.02* |
| | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) |
| Credit: Legislation | 0.02* | 0.02* | 0.02 | 0.01 |
| | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) |
| Partisan Posturing | -0.09* | -0.09* | -0.10* | -0.10* |
| | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) |
| Partisan Alignment | | 0.02* | | 0.03* |
| | | (0.00) | | (0.00) |
| Ideological Alignment | | 0.00 | | 0.02* |
| | | (0.00) | | (0.00) |
| Legislator FEs | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| Respondent REs | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| N | 4,096 | 4,096 | 4,100 | 4,100 |
| | (1,380 clusters) | (1,380 clusters) | (1,380 clusters) | (1,380 clusters) |

*Note:* Position-taking is the omitted baseline. Entries are OLS coefficients. Standard errors clustered by subject are shown below in parentheses. *=$p < 0.05$, two-tailed test.

TABLE F.2: Analyses of Effectiveness and Satisfaction by Shared Partisanship

| | Effectiveness | Satisfaction |
|---|---|---|
| Credit: Pork | 0.02 | 0.03 |
| | (0.01) | (0.02) |
| Credit: Legislation | 0.01 | 0.01 |
| | (0.01) | (0.02) |
| Partisan Posturing | -0.04* | -0.04* |
| | (0.01) | (0.02) |
| Opposite Party | -0.08* | -0.09* |
| | (0.02) | (0.02) |
| Pork X Party | 0.01 | -0.01 |
| | (0.02) | (0.02) |
| Legislation X Party | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| | (0.02) | (0.02) |
| Posturing X Party | -0.12* | -0.14* |
| | (0.02) | (0.02) |
| Ideological Alignment | 0.00 | 0.02* |
| | (0.00) | (0.00) |
| Legislator FEs | Y | Y |
| Respondent REs | Y | Y |
| N | 3,511 | 3,515 |
| | (1,183 clusters) | (1,183 clusters) |

*Note:* Position-taking is the omitted baseline. Entries are OLS coefficients. Standard errors clustered by subject are shown below in parentheses. *=$p < 0.05$, two-tailed test.

TABLE F.3: Analyses of Credibility

| | All Respondents | By Shared Partisanship |
|---|---|---|
| Credit: Pork | 0.00 | 0.02 |
| | (0.01) | (0.02) |
| Credit: Legislation | 0.01 | 0.01 |
| | (0.02) | (0.02) |
| Partisan Posturing | -0.05* | -0.01 |
| | (0.01) | (0.02) |
| Opposite Party | | -0.07* |
| | | (0.02) |
| Pork X Party | | -0.03 |
| | | (0.03) |
| Legislation X Party | | -0.02 |
| | | (0.02) |
| Posturing X Party | | -0.09* |
| | | (0.03) |
| Partisan Alignment | 0.02* | |
| | (0.00) | |
| Ideological Alignment | 0.01* | 0.01* |
| | (0.00) | (0.00) |
| Legislator FEs | Y | Y |
| Respondent REs | Y | Y |
| N | 4,095 | 3,510 |
| | (1,380 clusters) | (1,183 clusters) |

*Note:* Position-taking is the omitted baseline. Entries are OLS coefficients. Standard errors clustered by subject are shown below in parentheses. *=$p < 0.05$, two-tailed test.