

# Bipartisan Campaign Messages are Credible Policymaking Signals\*

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December 5, 2025

## Abstract

Bipartisan cooperation is essential to congressional productivity and democratic legitimacy, yet bipartisan campaign rhetoric is widely dismissed as an electioneering tactic that offers voters unreliable information about future governance. This skepticism calls into question the informational role of campaigns and, in turn, the quality of democratic representation. We challenge this view, arguing that bipartisan campaign appeals function as issue-specific signals that credibly forecast cross-party collaboration. Drawing on issue-level statements from U.S. House candidates (N=43,465; 2018–2022), we document that bipartisan messaging is common across candidates, but deployed selectively within campaigns. Linking these commitments to all legislation introduced in the 116th–118th Congresses, we show that candidates who emphasize bipartisan cooperation on particular issues subsequently engage in meaningful cross-party policymaking in those domains, which translates to legislative success. We demonstrate that candidates' issue-specific bipartisan commitments structure the selective cross-party cooperation that persists in a polarized era.

**Keywords:** Bipartisanship, Representation, Campaigns, Text-as-Data

**Word Count:** 9,980

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\* Authors are listed alphabetically. We thank Jim Curry, Jeff Harden, Laurel Harbridge-Yong, Jaclyn Kaslovsky, Justin Kirkland, Tracy Osborn, Ellie Powell, and Chris Warshaw for their feedback. We are also appreciative of the seminar participants from Georgetown's McCourt School of Public Policy, the University of Notre Dame, and the University of Iowa, as well as attendees at the 2024 Center for Effective Lawmaking Conference, the 2025 Women in Legislative Studies Conference, and the 2025 Indiana University Center on American Politics Conference, for their valuable comments and suggestions. The Center for Effective Lawmaking provided funding for elements of this project.

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Bipartisan cooperation is both frequent and consequential in the United States Congress. Although congressional dysfunction dominates media and scholarly attention, cross-party collaboration remains a pervasive approach to lawmaking (Curry and Lee 2020). This cooperation drives policymaking success: bipartisan bills advance through the legislative process at higher rates, and most enacted laws secure cross-party support (e.g., Mayhew 1991; Harbridge-Yong, Volden and Wiseman 2023; Craig 2023). Bipartisan initiatives also tend to generate greater public approval than partisan efforts, reinforcing confidence in Congress as an institution (e.g., Curry 2019; Wolak 2020; Hetherington and Rudolph 2015). Cross-party cooperation thus serves as a cornerstone of congressional productivity and democratic legitimacy.

Given these stakes, bipartisan rhetoric should be a prominent feature of electoral campaigns. Bipartisan campaign appeals signal how candidates intend to advance their policy agendas, conveying a willingness to build the cross-party coalitions often necessary for legislative success. These appeals also set expectations for future representation, giving voters who value bipartisanship a standard for assessing politicians' subsequent performance in office. When such electoral rhetoric corresponds with legislative behavior, campaigns fulfill their informational role by offering credible signals of candidates' intentions to work across party lines.

Yet bipartisan campaign messages are widely regarded as unreliable signals for governing intentions. Existing research suggests that bipartisan campaign rhetoric is uncommon, even among legislators known for working across the aisle (Gutmann and Thompson 2014; Anderson, Butler and Harbridge-Yong 2020). When bipartisan messaging does occur, research finds no consistent link to bipartisan legislative action (e.g., Westwood 2022; Dobson, Volden and Wiseman 2025). Such findings reinforce the conclusion that bipartisan messaging is "cheap talk," aimed at expanding electoral appeal rather than conveying governing intentions (Trubowitz and Mellow 2005). This gap between messaging and legislating carries significant implications. Without reliable campaign signals, voters cannot select representatives aligned with their preferences or sanction incumbents who fail to deliver on promised cooperation. The result is a weakened link between electoral choice and legislative behavior, thereby undermining the quality of democratic representation.

We challenge this prevailing view by asserting that bipartisan campaign messages serve as credible, *issue-specific* signals of legislators' governing intentions. Existing literature conceptualizes bipartisan lawmaking predominantly as a stable orientation toward cross-party collaboration (e.g., Harbridge 2015; Lugar and Montgomery 2015; Curry and Roberts 2025). We argue, by contrast, that bipartisan campaign commitments are issue-specific. Legislators may engage in bipartisan policymaking efforts on some issues but not others, and these patterns trace back to campaigns where candidates indicate the policy domains in which they intend to pursue inter-party collaboration. We test this theory by examining whether legislators' issue-specific bipartisan campaign commitments predict cross-party cooperation on those same policy domains once in office.

To evaluate whether bipartisan campaign commitments credibly signal governing intentions, we analyze issue-level messaging from candidates' policy platforms in U.S. House elections (2018–2022; N = 43,465). Using a supervised machine learning pipeline, we identify the prevalence of bipartisan messages on each issue within candidates' policy platforms. We then compare each legislator's issue-specific campaign commitments with her cross-party engagement on relevant legislation in the 116th–118th Congresses (2019–2024; N = 23,647), operationalizing bipartisan engagement through bill sponsorship and cosponsorship patterns.

Our descriptive analyses provide support for the expectation that bipartisan campaign messaging is both prevalent and issue-specific. Nearly half of all incumbents incorporate bipartisan appeals into their campaign platforms, and candidates across a range of electoral contexts employ such appeals—not only those seeking to broaden their electoral appeal. At the same time, candidates are selective, with most confining their bipartisan appeals to one or two policy platform areas. These appeals, however, are not limited to specific policy domains; they span a broad range of issues, including contentious areas such as healthcare and environmental policy. This targeted, uneven application of bipartisan rhetoric suggests that candidates treat such appeals as strategic, issue-specific signals rather than a general commitment to cross-party collaboration.

Using regression-based analyses, we examine (1) whether politicians follow through on their issue-specific bipartisan commitments, and (2) whether these commitments reflect substantive

participation in crafting bipartisan legislation rather than “cheap talk,” or low-cost legislative engagement with their peers across the aisle. Our models include member–Congress and policy area fixed effects, enabling comparisons that capture within-member, cross-issue variation in bipartisan engagement. We find that bipartisan campaign appeals are associated with increased cross-party collaboration in those specific policy areas. Importantly, this relationship is driven by substantive bipartisan engagement—sponsoring and originally cosponsoring legislation, reflecting a genuine collaboration across party lines—rather than lower-cost forms of bipartisan engagement. Finally, we show that this issue-specific collaboration produces results: politicians who engage in substantive bipartisan collaboration achieve greater legislative success in those policy areas.

These findings deepen our understanding of the link between campaign rhetoric and legislative behavior. Bipartisan appeals—often dismissed as either absent from campaigns or as electioneering tactics—are credible signals of legislative intent. Candidates who pledge to work across the aisle on issues tend to follow through in office, engaging in collaboration that results in legislative success. This suggests that politicians view bipartisanship instrumentally, as a strategic tool for achieving policy goals rather than a general disposition toward lawmaking. These findings challenge normative critiques that argue campaigns obscure rather than illuminate governing behavior. In the case of bipartisanship, campaign appeals provide voters meaningful cues about future governance.

Our framework also reconciles an apparent tension in the literature: polarization dominates contemporary lawmaking, yet meaningful bipartisan cooperation persists. We show that legislators cooperate selectively on issues where cross-party incentives align—consistent with Levendusky’s (2023) observation that “it may not be possible to bridge the gap on every issue, but there are cases where compromise and coming together is possible, and finding those pathways is worthwhile” (p. 154). Rather than implying broad depolarization is necessary for a productive legislature, our findings identify the issue-defined pathways through which cross-party cooperation remains viable. Representative democracy can function amid polarization—not through sweeping consensus, but through the targeted commitments candidates make and keep, where compromise serves to further their policymaking goals.

## The Promise and Practice of Bipartisan Lawmaking

Democratic governance depends on electoral competition, which produces responsive politicians through a chain of accountability that links citizens' preferences to policy outcomes. Traditional promissory representation relies on three mechanisms: candidates expressing their policymaking intentions during campaigns, elected officials fulfilling those promises, and voters punishing deviations (Pitkin 1967; Mansbridge 2003). When this accountability chain functions effectively, campaign promises serve as credible signals of future governance. Conversely, a gap between campaigning and lawmaking weakens the quality of democratic representation.

Within this accountability framework, the link between campaign commitments and legislative behavior is typically examined through issue-specific promises and their fulfillment. For example, when a candidate promises to cut taxes or expand healthcare access, they signal a legislative agenda that shapes voters' expectations about their governing priorities. Previous research finds evidence for this dynamic, showing that candidates adopt clear issue positions despite incentives for ambiguity (Sides 2006; Mila, Ryan and Simas 2014), voters form expectations around promise-bound issues (Bonilla 2022), and congressional candidates translate campaign promises into legislative actions (Sulkin 2009, 2011). Policy-based commitments, however, represent only one dimension of the linkage between electoral communication and governing behavior.

Beyond establishing policy positions, campaign messages also convey a candidate's approach to lawmaking, including their tendency toward bipartisanship—defined here as cooperation between members of opposing parties to enact public policy. While policy positioning indicates *what* issues a candidate supports, bipartisan messaging outlines *how* they plan to achieve those policy goals. Whether legislators follow through on their bipartisan campaign commitments has direct salience for voters, as voters attach significant weight to how their representatives engage across party lines. Public opinion research generally shows that Americans prefer bipartisan cooperation in both legislative processes and policy outcomes (e.g., Harbridge and Malhotra 2011; Noel 2016; Bauer, Harbridge-Yong and Krupnikov 2017; Curry 2019; Anderson, Butler and Harbridge-Yong 2020; Wolak 2020; Hopkins, Lendway and Sigler 2025).

Bipartisan legislative action is also consequential due to the institutional realities of American lawmaking. Structural features of the U.S. system rarely afford either party both the margins and the internal cohesion needed to govern unilaterally (Krehbiel 1998; Mayhew 1991). As a result, legislation most often passes into law with broad cross-party support, even in today's polarized politics (Curry and Lee 2020), making bipartisan coalition-building essential to legislative success. Consistent with these structural dynamics, Americans are twice as likely to favor politicians who engage in cross-party compromise that enables legislative progress, rather than those whose ideological rigidity yields limited policy gains (Gallup 2025).

Although bipartisanship is valued by voters and vital for policymaking, existing research suggests that politicians rarely signal genuine bipartisan intentions during campaigns. As Gutmann and Thompson (2014) argue, even legislators predisposed to cross-party collaboration are unlikely to emphasize compromise on the campaign trail because “a successful campaign strategy requires the opposite of a compromising mindset. It favors candidates who stand firmly on their principles and condemn their opponents' positions at every turn” (p. 160). Bipartisan campaign messaging, in this view, is a liability as it blurs distinctions between candidates and undermines the partisan mobilization that drives electoral success (Snyder Jr and Ting 2002; Lee 2016). Moreover, while the general public expresses broad support for bipartisanship, primary electorates, donors, and activists may—under certain conditions—be less favorable toward compromise, discouraging risk-averse politicians from making bipartisan appeals (Anderson, Butler and Harbridge-Yong 2020; Hopkins, Lendway and Sigler 2025).

When politicians do express bipartisan intentions, however, the prevailing view in the literature is that these signals fail to translate into bipartisan governance. Existing studies show no clear link between bipartisan rhetoric and legislative action (Westwood 2022; Dobson, Volden and Wiseman 2025). This lack of follow-through from campaigns to governance aligns with research that describes bipartisan messaging as an electioneering or posturing tactic. In this view, bipartisan rhetoric is used to project a moderate or independent image when electoral success depends on appealing to out-partisans, especially in two-party competitive districts (e.g., Trubowitz and Mellow 2005;

Rhodes and Albert 2017). Formal models of campaign messaging similarly show how electoral insecurity can induce politicians to engage in cheap talk, overstating their governing intentions to secure votes (Woon and Kanthak 2019; Kim, Lin and Schnakenberg 2024).

These dynamics carry significant consequences for the quality of democratic representation. When politicians campaign as partisans yet govern collaboratively, the tone of their campaign rhetoric fails to reflect the character of their subsequent legislative behavior. Conversely, when politicians make bipartisan campaign promises but fail to deliver, they misrepresent their governing intentions to voters. In either case—whether bipartisanship is concealed or falsely advertised—the link between electoral choice and governance is weakened. If campaign rhetoric does not reliably signal legislative behavior, voters cannot use elections to select representatives whose governing approach aligns with their preferences. This undermines both democratic accountability and the informational function of elections.

### **Bipartisanship as an Issue-Specific Commitment**

We contend that existing work fails to capture a connection between bipartisan appeals and legislative behavior because it overlooks a conceptual divide between bipartisanship as a stable lawmaking orientation and bipartisanship as a campaign commitment. Bipartisanship is typically conceived as a “legislative style,” characterizing the extent to which a legislator engages with members of the opposing party. Under this conceptualization, some legislators are inherently more disposed to cross-party collaboration than others. This baseline tendency is thought to arise from legislator characteristics (e.g., Crosson and Kaslovsky 2025; Porter, Harden and Dobson 2025), district pressures (e.g., Harbridge and Malhotra 2011; Porter, Kakenmaster and Francis 2025), and institutional environments (e.g., Harbridge 2015; Case and Ommundsen 2024; Victor 2025).

Yet campaign appeals to bipartisanship may operate quite differently, reflecting a targeted commitment rather than a cooperative disposition. We argue that politicians signal their bipartisan intentions selectively within campaigns, on an issue-by-issue basis. This reflects an instrumental orientation toward bipartisanship, with politicians treating cross-party appeals as meaningful signals of their collaborative approach to achieving specific policy goals. Understood this way, bipartisan

appeals function not as indicators for a candidate's future legislative style but as issue-specific commitments to collaborative policymaking. From this perspective, the relevant question is not whether politicians are broadly bipartisan in office, but whether they follow through on the specific bipartisan commitments they make.

This issue-specific framework for conceptualizing bipartisanship reflects the practical constraints legislators face in the policymaking process. Substantive bipartisan engagement is costly, requiring negotiation, strategic coordination, and sustained relationship-building with members of the opposing party—and lawmakers have limited time and resources to devote to these efforts (Curry and Roberts 2023; Fong and Florez 2024; Victor 2025; Ommundsen 2025*a*). At the same time, politicians are strongly motivated to pursue bipartisanship because such cooperation is often the most viable path to legislative success (Curry and Lee 2020). Empirical research finds that bipartisan legislators are especially effective lawmakers, shepherding more consequential legislation to passage (Harbridge-Yong, Volden and Wiseman 2023).

These constraints imply that bipartisan campaign appeals reflect purposeful decisions about where to allocate scarce collaborative capital. This expectation is consistent with Craig (2023), who shows that policy alignment fosters bipartisanship, as shared objectives make cooperation mutually advantageous for advancing policy. Accordingly, we anticipate that politicians selectively employ appeals to bipartisanship, directing them toward a finite set of policy areas where they intend to pursue cross-party collaboration. Multiple factors likely shape which issues attract these appeals. Politicians may emphasize bipartisanship on topics that are personally important to them, issues that their constituents prioritize, or their party's "must-pass" legislative priorities. Despite the varied motivations underlying these choices, the observable implication for our theoretical framework remains the same: politicians deploy bipartisan campaign appeals to signal their governing intent.

**H1 Follow-through Hypothesis:** Politicians exhibit greater bipartisan legislative engagement on issues where they employed bipartisan campaign appeals.

A null finding would be consistent with several alternative interpretations regarding the relationship between bipartisan campaign commitments and legislative behavior. First, bipartisan campaign



appeals may forecast a general legislative disposition—the tendency to be bipartisan across all issues—rather than issue-specific commitments. Second, politicians may conceal their bipartisan intentions during campaigns yet still govern collaboratively once in office. Third, politicians may fail to follow through on their bipartisan promises, employing them as electioneering tactics to attract voters rather than commitments to future collaboration. Conversely, greater bipartisan engagement on issues where politicians pledged cross-party collaboration suggests that these campaign appeals convey meaningful information about legislators’ collaborative intentions.

Cross-party cooperation, however, can take multiple forms, ranging from substantive, serious collaboration to low-cost position-taking. Substantive bipartisan engagement involves meaningful participation in crafting legislation within cross-party coalitions (Curry and Roberts 2023). Such “workhorse” activities include developing bill content, negotiating compromises, and coordinating with stakeholders to prepare legislation for introduction. Yet bipartisan engagement can also occur after substantive drafting and negotiations are complete, serving primarily as an endorsement of the legislation (Koger 2003) or as a means for position-taking (Mayhew 1974; Kessler and Krehbiel 1996). This “show horse” approach to bipartisanship aligns with the superficial forms of follow-through emphasized in existing scholarship (Trubowitz and Mellow 2005). Politicians fear being held accountable for their campaign promises, even when voters do not punish them for failing to deliver (Arnold 1990; Sulkin 2005). This concern may lead them to do just enough to claim they kept their word, rather than engage in the costly, hard work of substantive collaboration.

We contend that if politicians treat bipartisan campaign appeals as genuine, issue-specific commitments made instrumentally to advance legislative goals, they should engage in workhorse forms of collaboration. Substantive bipartisan labor is the form of cross-party engagement that meaningfully propels legislation toward passage (Curry and Roberts 2023). This is also the form of representation voters value most, as they prioritize substantive cooperation over symbolic gestures (Butler et al. 2023; Strickler 2024). Accordingly, we expect legislators to demonstrate greater substantive bipartisan involvement on issues where they make bipartisan appeals.

H2 Substantive Engagement Hypothesis: Politicians exhibit greater substantive bipartisan legislative engagement on issues where they employ bipartisan campaign appeals.

Evidence that bipartisan appeals predict substantive collaboration but not low-cost, position-taking forms of bipartisan engagement would further support this expectation. Such a pattern would indicate that legislators are investing their finite time and energy where it matters most rather than satisfying their bipartisan commitments through superficial gestures. It would also be consistent with the logic that these modes of engagement are not jointly producible: a legislator cannot simultaneously embody both a workhorse and a show horse role on the same piece of legislation.

Within our theoretical framework, bipartisan appeals indicate the policy areas where lawmakers are most motivated to achieve policy outcomes. Substantive bipartisan engagement should, therefore, correspond to more frequent legislative success in relevant policy domains. Conversely, if bipartisan appeals are mere rhetoric—or if substantive collaboration fails to translate into tangible outcomes—we would observe no relationship between issue-specific bipartisan engagement and legislative success. A null finding would suggest that either politicians' bipartisan appeals are not instrumental in nature or collaboration is insufficient to overcome other institutional barriers to passage.

H3 Policymaking Success Hypothesis: Politicians will achieve greater legislative success on issues where they exhibit substantive bipartisan engagement.

In the sections that follow, we detail our strategy for measuring bipartisan behavior. We then evaluate (1) whether politicians make good on their bipartisan promises once in office; (2) if these promises translate into the substantive cross-party collaboration necessary for policymaking; and (3) if such collaboration ultimately contributes to legislative success. We conclude by considering the broader implications of issue-level bipartisanship for electoral accountability, democratic responsiveness, and the quality of representation in an era of partisan polarization.

## **Identifying & Measuring Bipartisan Behavior**

As outlined above, we conceptualize bipartisanship not as an overarching disposition but as a targeted approach to campaigning and, by extension, to lawmaking. To evaluate this theoretical

framework, we first identify bipartisan rhetoric on an issue-by-issue basis during campaigns and then link this issue-specific messaging to legislators' behavior within Congress.

## **Bipartisan Messaging in Campaigns**

To measure candidates' issue-specific bipartisan campaign messaging, we analyze the content of policy platforms collected from campaign websites. These sites offer unmediated content that conveys candidates' policy messages across a broad, representative set of campaigns in each electoral cycle (Druckman, Kifer and Parkin 2009). Candidates strategically tailor the issue-specific content of their websites (e.g., Porter, Treul and McDonald 2023; Case 2025; Case and Porter 2025), highlighting that these venues function as windows into campaign strategy rather than static repositories or mere echoes of party positions. Moreover, issue positions expressed on websites generally align with priorities communicated in other venues, including speeches, debates, and advertisements (Xenos and Foot 2005; Sulkin, Moriarty and Hefner 2007). Finally, unlike social media, campaign websites do not impose a length limit, allowing candidates to present their issue agendas with both breadth and depth.

We analyze a corpus of campaign platforms compiled by Porter, Case and Treul (2025), covering candidates for the U.S. House of Representatives in the 2018, 2020, and 2022 elections. The dataset includes 75% of all major-party contenders who appeared on the ballot in primaries during these cycles ( $N = 4,507$ ).<sup>1</sup> Each document in the corpus is a platform point ( $N = 43,465$ ), defined as a policy statement that typically focuses on a single major issue area, with multiple points forming a candidate's campaign platform. Each document is assigned a validated topical category (e.g., Immigration, Healthcare, or Education), which allows us to identify bipartisan appeals at the issue level. The full list of thirteen topic codes is available in Appendix A.<sup>2</sup> Campaign platform topic codes correspond to policy codes assigned to all legislation by the Congressional Research Service, discussed in greater detail below, enabling us to connect candidates' issue-specific appeals to their relevant legislative behavior, facilitating our analysis of bipartisan follow-through.

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<sup>1</sup>Platforms were collected immediately before each candidate's primary election. These texts reflect overall campaign messaging, as campaign websites tend to remain stable across stages (Porter, Treul and McDonald 2023).

<sup>2</sup>For additional details on assignment and validation procedures, see Porter, Case and Treul (2025).

Table 1: Example Campaign Platform Points Classified as Bipartisan

Candidate	Statement Text
Jimmy Panetta (D-CA, 2020)	<p>Policy Topic: <i>Energy &amp; Environment</i></p> <p>“In Congress, Jimmy is fighting to protect the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, as well as the California Coastal and other National Monuments from downsizing or elimination. <b>Jimmy is working with both sides of the aisle to promote environmental stewardship</b> and fight for policies that protect the Central Coast.”</p>
Mike Bost (R-IL, 2022)	<p>Policy Topic: <i>Social Welfare</i></p> <p>“Those counting on Social Security and Medicare should not have to worry about the promises that were made to them are kept...<b>Congress must work together to prevent the financial collapse of these programs by promoting bipartisan efforts</b> to address systemic problems and ensure its longevity for current and future generations.”</p>
Joe Neguse (D-CO, 2022)	<p>Policy Topic: <i>Civil Rights &amp; Liberties</i></p> <p>“The right to vote is at the very foundation of our democracy, yet it is under attack like never before. To protect voting rights and ensure voting remains accessible to all, Joe supports the John Lewis Voting Rights Act, and H.R. 1...In the House, <b>Joe successfully secured a bipartisan amendment to H.R.1 that would enact nationwide pre-registration for 16- and 17-year-olds</b>, and he continues to fight for reforms...”</p>
Levii Shocklee (D-TX, 2018)	<p>Policy Topic: <i>Healthcare</i></p> <p>Quality, affordable health care is a right and should be available for ALL Americans. <b>I intend to work, in a bipartisan fashion, to ensure that the citizens of the 6th district are heard regarding Health Care.</b> I will work to ensure that the cost of health care is reduced for individuals and families struggling with high premiums...</p>

*Note:* Policy topics were pre-assigned by Porter, Case and Treul (2025). Texts were intentionally selected to demonstrate variation in bipartisan messaging across parties, policy areas, and communication styles. Randomly selected documents for face validation are presented in Appendix Table C.1.

We classify platform points as bipartisan using a supervised machine learning pipeline. To train and test our classifiers, we manually labeled a random sample of 4,300 documents, coding each for the presence of bipartisan messaging. Coders were instructed to evaluate the overall quality of texts as bipartisan, rather than to code based on the presence of specific words or phrases. Appendix B provides hand-labeling instructions and inter-coder reliability assessments. From this sample, we used 3,900 documents to train seven machine learning models. Across all models, XGBoost

achieved the best performance, with an F1 score of 0.89 on our held-out sample of 400 hand-coded documents. Additional details on model tuning and performance, as well as text preprocessing, are available in Appendix B. In Table 1, we present example platform points highlighting a wide range of bipartisan rhetorical appeals used by incumbent and non-incumbent candidates.

Robust validation is crucial for assessing the performance of text-to-measure pipelines (Grimmer and Stewart 2013; Park and Montgomery 2025). To that end, Appendix C details several validation exercises. First, we establish face validity by showing six randomly chosen campaign platform documents alongside their model-generated classifications (Appendix Table C.1). To further demonstrate face validity, we identify the 30 word features with the highest weights in our classification model (Appendix Table C.2). The presence of relevant words such as “bipartisan,” “together,” and “aisle” suggests that our classifier effectively captures the intended construct. Lastly, we evaluate predictive validity by comparing the use of bipartisan rhetoric among incumbents in the Congressional Problem Solvers Caucus—an expressly bipartisan caucus—with those outside the caucus (Appendix Section C.1). Our findings indicate that caucus membership is a strong predictor of both a higher likelihood of bipartisan campaign messaging and a larger share of platform content focused on bipartisan themes ( $p < 0.001$ ).

## **Bipartisan Follow-Through in Congress**

Having constructed a measure of bipartisan campaign rhetoric, we now seek to determine whether politicians fulfill their issue-specific campaign commitments by adopting an agenda-based view of promise-keeping. To do so, we measure the degree to which legislators engage in bipartisanship on issues they highlighted with bipartisan appeals during their campaigns. We operationalize this form of follow-through using bill sponsorship and cosponsorship, defined as the introduction of a bill by a legislator and its formal endorsement by a colleague, respectively. Sponsorship and cosponsorship are voluntary forms of legislative participation that reveal the policy priorities members aim to promote, independent of most party and agenda-setting pressures (Highton and Rocca 2005; Sulkin 2009; Finocchiaro and MacKenzie 2024).<sup>3</sup> Lawmakers cannot

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<sup>3</sup>Roll-call voting provides an alternative measure of bipartisan follow-through (see Westwood 2022). Such behavior, however, is constrained entirely by agenda setting and party discipline, as most bills never receive a roll-call vote and

meaningfully engage on every potential issue due to limited time and resources, making sponsorship and cosponsorship decisions necessarily selective. Importantly, bills with cross-party cosponsorships are more likely to advance through the legislative process (Harbridge-Yong, Volden and Wiseman 2023), prompting members to seek or offer cross-party support to increase a bill's chances of becoming law (Curry and Roberts 2023; Craig 2023). These dynamics emphasize sponsorship and cosponsorship as central indicators of both policy commitment and bipartisan cooperation.

Yet not all sponsorship and cosponsorship behaviors signal equal commitment to bipartisan lawmaking. Among these actions, bill introduction is particularly significant, as it credibly signals a legislator's substantive commitment to advancing specific policy priorities (Schiller 1995). Although legislation is drafted primarily through collaborative efforts, congressional rules limit bills to a single sponsor. Original cosponsorship, however, offers a signal of who else participated in the initial work of drafting legislation. Members who cosponsor a bill on the day it is introduced—known as original cosponsors—are recognized as committed partners in the bill's development, often perceived as co-equal coauthors of the bill. Such cosponsorships are rarely withdrawn, demonstrating a non-trivial commitment to the co-signed legislation (Bernhard and Sulkin 2013). According to Curry and Roberts (2023), bills with bipartisan original cosponsorships are “seen as a serious and bipartisan legislative effort by actors on the Hill, in part because it is a signal that legislators on both sides of the aisle collaborated to produce it” (p. 342). Following existing work (e.g., Curry and Roberts 2023, 2025; Porter, Harden and Dobson 2025), we use bill sponsorship and original cosponsorship to measure substantive cross-party collaboration.

While each bill has only one sponsor and typically a handful of original cosponsors, non-original cosponsors are numerous and can join at any stage during the legislative process, prior to a bill receiving a vote. Existing work finds that non-original cosponsorships reflect “bandwagoning” behavior, with members signing on after observing colleagues' reactions and evaluating the bill's chances for progress in the chamber (Kessler and Krehbiel 1996; Wilson and Young 1997). Other work characterizes these actions as position-taking rather than as indicators of substantive collab-

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those that do may not reflect a legislator's own priorities (Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005). These selection effects obscure legislators' proactive pursuit of issue-specific bipartisan commitments.

oration (Koger 2003; Curry and Roberts 2023). For these reasons, we consider a non-original cosponsorship to be a weaker, less costly indicator of bipartisan legislative engagement.

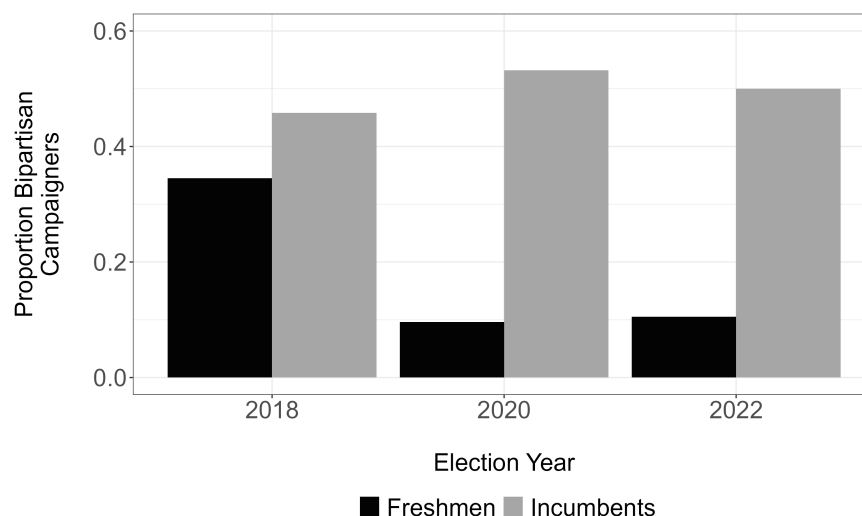
We use the Congress.gov API to compile data on all bill sponsorship and cosponsorship activity in the 116th, 117th, and 118th Congresses. Our dataset consists of two relational structures: bill–sponsor pairings and bill–cosponsor pairings. We also gather information on the timing of cosponsorship to differentiate between original and non-original cosponsors. Finally, we link each bill to its policy code, assigned by legislative analysts at the Congressional Research Service (CRS), which reflects its primary subject matter. These codes are harmonized with the campaign platform topic codes discussed above, enabling us to directly connect issue-specific campaign appeals with relevant legislative activity. In Appendix A, we provide greater detail on the correspondence between campaign platform topic codes and legislative policy codes.

## **Do Candidates Engage in Issue-Specific Bipartisan Campaign Messaging?**

Before evaluating whether bipartisan campaign commitments translate into issue-specific legislative behavior, we must first establish that candidates communicate such commitments at all. Existing research has yet to take a comprehensive census of bipartisan commitments in campaigns. Instead, extant work assessing bipartisan rhetoric typically relies on selective samples of candidates (Gutmann and Thompson 2014), politicians’ self-reported messaging intentions (Anderson, Butler and Harbridge-Yong 2020), legislative communication (Westwood 2022), and secondary characterizations of candidates’ bipartisanship (Dobson, Volden and Wiseman 2025), leaving unresolved the basic question of how common bipartisan messaging is in congressional campaigns. Moreover, to our knowledge, no literature examines whether candidates vary their bipartisan appeals across policy domains. If candidates adopt bipartisan language uniformly, our theoretical framework for bipartisanship as an issue-specific signal would lack empirical grounding. In our analyses that follow, however, we demonstrate that candidates do, in fact, employ bipartisan rhetoric and they vary their use across policy topics.

The first component of our descriptive analysis establishes that bipartisan messaging is a common feature of congressional campaigns, even under conditions where existing literature

Figure 1: Prevalence of Bipartisan Campaign Messaging by Incumbency Status and Election Year



*Note:* Units include all general election winners in U.S. House elections from 2018 to 2022. Bipartisan campaigners are defined as candidates with at least one platform point containing bipartisan appeals. Freshmen are newly elected members of the House, and incumbents are those entering their second or later term.

suggests it should be relatively rare. The second component evaluates whether candidates deploy bipartisan appeals selectively across policy areas. We find that although most candidates emphasize bipartisanship in only one or two domains, bipartisan appeals nonetheless span the full range of issues present in our data, including those commonly regarded as highly partisan.

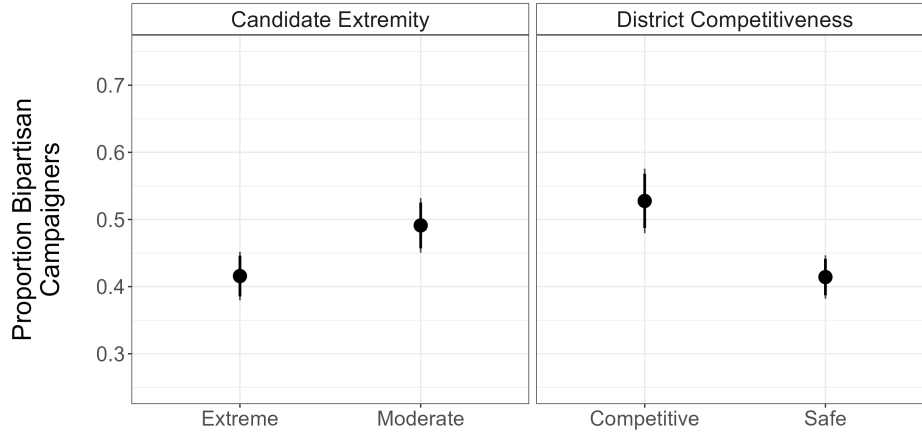
### Bipartisan Messaging Across Candidates

We begin by assessing the overall tendency of candidates elected to the U.S. House of Representatives to employ bipartisan messaging in their campaign platforms. We define a candidate as a bipartisan campaigner in a given election cycle if any of their platform points are identified by our machine-learning classifier as containing bipartisan rhetoric. Using this approach, we find that bipartisan messaging is a relatively common campaign strategy. Figure 1 displays the proportion of elected members employing bipartisan messages by incumbency status and year. About 45% of candidates between 2018 and 2022 employed such messaging, with the rate reaching 50% among incumbents seeking reelection. Although the share of freshmen who employ bipartisan messaging is lower (21%), the broader pattern is clear: bipartisan campaigning is a prevalent strategy.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>In Appendix Table D.1, we assess potential predictors for bipartisan campaigner status for all major-party, primary election candidates who ran between 2018 and 2022.



Figure 2: Prevalence of Bipartisan Campaign Messaging by Candidate Ideology and District Competitiveness



*Note:* Units include all general election winners in U.S. House elections from 2018 to 2022. Bipartisan campaigners are defined as candidates with at least one platform point containing bipartisan appeals. Extreme (moderate) candidates fall above (below) their party’s mean CFScore. Competitive districts have an average two-party presidential margin of victory over the previous three presidential elections of less than 15 percentage points. Vertical bounds indicate 90% and 95% confidence intervals.

Next, we examine whether the prevalence of bipartisan messaging varies systematically across candidates. Existing work highlights two groups as especially likely to adopt bipartisan appeals: ideological moderates and candidates in competitive districts (Trubowitz and Mellow 2005; Rhodes and Albert 2017). Moderates may emphasize bipartisanship to reinforce their ideological brand, signaling to voters that their centrist positions reflect a commitment to cross-party cooperation.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, candidates in competitive districts may stress bipartisanship to signal cross-party openness and broaden their electoral base in closely contested races. If legislators communicate bipartisan intentions only under these specific conditions, such appeals are unlikely to reflect genuine, issue-specific commitments and, instead, likely function as electioneering tactics.

Figure 2 plots the average proportion of bipartisan campaigners across the 2018-2022 elections, broken down by candidate extremity (extreme versus moderate) in the left panel and district competitiveness (competitive versus safe) in the right panel. We consider candidates to be extreme (moderate) if their CFScore, as calculated by Bonica (2024), is larger (smaller) in magnitude than their party mean.<sup>6</sup> We consider a district to be competitive if its average two-party presidential

<sup>5</sup>Alternatively, candidates may employ bipartisan messages to demonstrate issue-specific moderation rather than general moderate tendencies. We address this possibility in Appendix Section D.1 and find it unsupported.

<sup>6</sup>Altering the cutoff to stricter definitions of ideological extremity (e.g., a third of a standard deviation more extreme

margin of victory over the previous three presidential elections is less than 15 percentage points.<sup>7</sup>

We find that moderates are somewhat more likely to adopt bipartisan appeals into their campaign platforms than extreme candidates (49.1% versus 41.6%), and candidates running in competitive districts are more likely to do so than those in safe districts (52.8% versus 41.4%). Although t-tests indicate that these differences are statistically significant, magnitudes of difference are substantively modest. What is evident is that bipartisan appeals are prevalent even among ideologically extreme candidates and candidates running in safe districts. Taken together, these patterns suggest that bipartisan messaging is not confined to particular candidate types or districts, but is instead broadly adopted into congressional campaigns.

### **Bipartisan Messaging Across Issues**

Our second series of analyses begins with an assessment of heterogeneity in the adoption of bipartisan messaging across issues within candidates' campaign platforms. If candidates employ bipartisan appeals uniformly across all issues, such patterns would suggest that these appeals signal a broad legislative style rather than issue-specific intentions. If candidates use bipartisan appeals on only a subset of issues within their platforms, this would indicate a targeted signaling of collaborative intent. To analyze this selectivity, we focus again on bipartisan campaigners—candidates elected to the U.S. House who employ bipartisan messaging on at least one issue.

Figure 3 reports the proportion of bipartisan campaigners by the number of issue areas in which they employ bipartisan appeals.<sup>8</sup> Results are shown separately for freshmen (left panel) and incumbents (right panel). Per Figure 3, most candidates use bipartisan messaging selectively rather than uniformly across their platforms. Among all bipartisan campaigners, 50% employ such appeals on a single issue, and another 21% do so on two issues. Only 13% of candidates extend bipartisan appeals to more than half of their platform. This pattern appears across candidate types, though the distribution of incumbents shifts modestly to the right. Overall, these findings indicate that bipartisan campaigning functions as a targeted rhetorical tactic rather than an overarching messaging

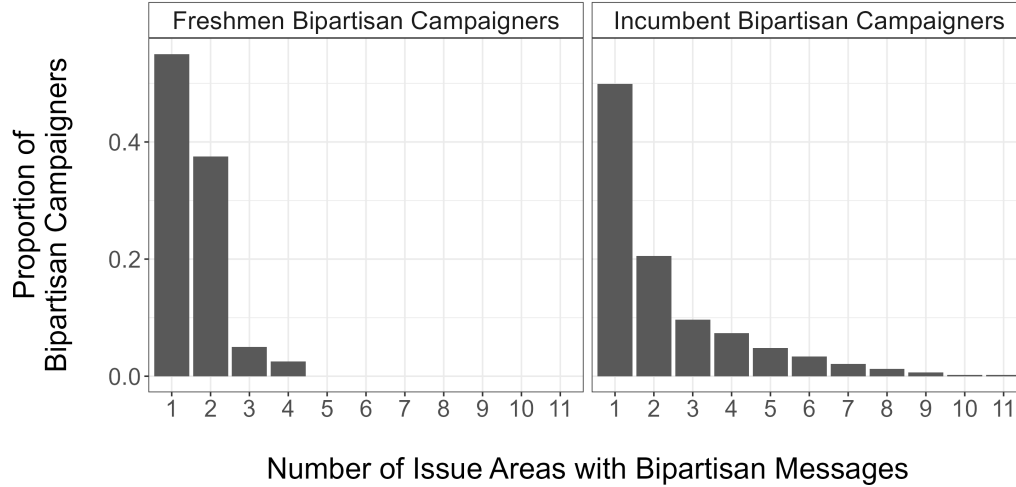
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than their party's mean) produces substantively similar results.

<sup>7</sup>Altering cutoffs (e.g., to 10-percentage-point) produces substantively identical results.

<sup>8</sup>Appendix Figure D.1 presents analogous results using the proportion of each candidate's total issue areas that include bipartisan messaging, accounting for variation in platform breadth. The substantive conclusions are unchanged.

Figure 3: Number of Issue Areas with Bipartisan Messages by Candidate Type



*Note:* Histograms display the distribution of the number of issue areas in which candidates employ bipartisan messages. Bipartisan campaigners are defined as candidates with at least one platform point containing bipartisan appeals. Freshmen are newly elected members of the House, and incumbents are those entering their second or later term.

strategy. While some candidates employ bipartisan appeals broadly, they are the clear minority.

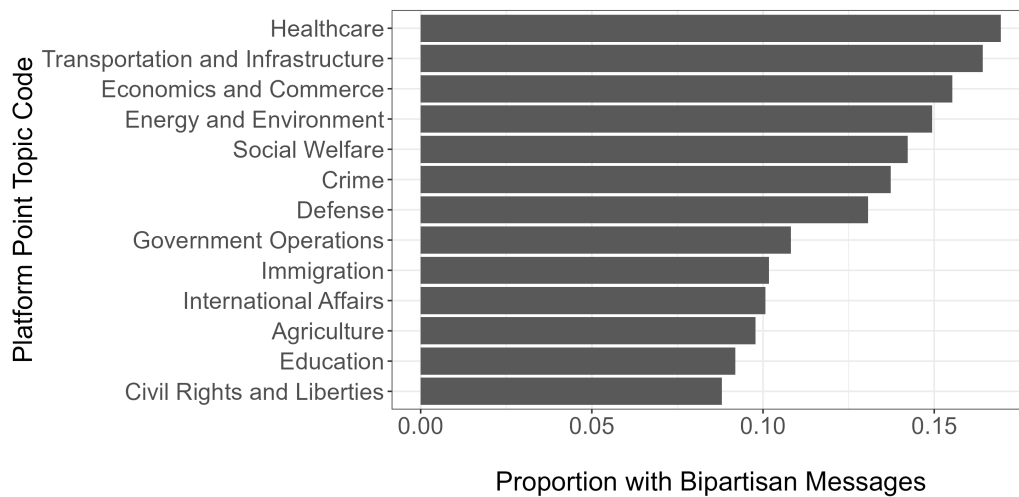
Given this selectivity, it is important to consider which issues candidates choose to highlight with bipartisan messaging. One possibility is that candidates reserve bipartisan messaging for a select set of issues, such as distributive or consensus issues, while avoiding such appeals on divisive partisan topics. In that case, bipartisan appeals would convey little about legislative behavior on contentious issues where cross-party collaboration is most consequential. To evaluate this possibility, we examine the prevalence of bipartisan messaging across the thirteen issue domains in our data. For each candidate–issue–year observation, we classify an issue as bipartisan if at least one relevant platform point contains bipartisan messaging.<sup>9</sup> We then calculate, for each issue, the proportion of candidates who employ bipartisan messaging among those who address that issue.<sup>10</sup>

Figure 4 presents the prevalence of bipartisan rhetoric within each issue area, with issue areas ordered from the highest to the lowest rate of bipartisan messaging. As expected, issue areas that more often see bipartisan engagement within Congress, such as distributive topics like

<sup>9</sup>Although candidates’ platforms may include multiple platform points, several often address the same issue area. If any of these points include bipartisan rhetoric, we code the issue as bipartisan.

<sup>10</sup>Candidates demonstrate considerable selectivity in which issues they emphasize: on average, they address only seven of the thirteen available issue categories per election cycle. See Porter, Case and Treul (2025) for more details.

Figure 4: Bipartisan Messaging in Campaign Platforms by Issue Area



*Note:* Proportions are calculated among candidates who addressed a given issue area; the numerator is the number whose platform point(s) on that issue included bipartisan messaging.

*Transportation and Infrastructure*, display relatively high rates of bipartisan messaging in campaign platforms (16.4%). Yet several contentious policy areas show similarly high levels. Issue areas like *Healthcare* (16.9%), *Energy and Environment* (14.9%), and *Crime* (13.7%) all exhibit substantial bipartisan messaging among candidates who discuss these topics. Some especially partisan issues, such as *Civil Rights and Liberties*, show lower rates of bipartisan appeals, yet nearly 9% of candidates who address this topic still deploy such appeals on this issue.

The analyses above show that elected officials are willing to communicate bipartisan intentions, even in contexts where prior work suggests such messaging should be uncommon. When candidates make bipartisan appeals, they are selective, targeting only a few issue areas rather than their entire platforms. Importantly, this selectivity does not mean that bipartisan messaging clusters within a minority of policy areas; such appeals appear across the full range of issue domains, including contentious issues typically perceived as partisan. The selective nature of these appeals raises an important question for democratic representation and accountability: when candidates make issue-specific bipartisan commitments during campaigns, do they follow through with bipartisan legislative action on those same issues once in office?

## Do Legislators Follow-Through on Bipartisan Campaign Commitments?

We now investigate whether legislators' issue-specific bipartisan campaign appeals translate into subsequent legislative action. If campaign messaging reflects genuine intentions, bipartisan cooperation should occur on issues where legislators emphasize such commitments during campaigns. We approach this inquiry in two parts. First, we analyze overall patterns, assessing whether legislators who make bipartisan appeals on certain issues later sponsor and cosponsor bipartisan bills on those topics. Second, we assess whether issue-specific bipartisan commitments lead to substantive, "workhorse" cross-party collaboration or weaker "show horse" bipartisan engagement. We focus on U.S. House members during the 116th, 117th, and 118th Congresses. Units of analysis are member-Congress-issue combinations, yielding thirteen observations per member-Congress.<sup>11</sup>

### Issue-Specific Follow-Through on Bipartisan Commitments

To assess patterns of legislative activity, we analyze the sponsorship and cosponsorship of bipartisan bills, which we term bipartisan bill engagement. We define a bipartisan bill as a piece of legislation that includes at least one Democrat and one Republican as a sponsor and/or original cosponsor.<sup>12</sup> Because these collaborators serve as substantive partners in drafting legislation (Curry and Roberts 2023), this definition establishes that the bill's authorship embodies bipartisan intent. We operationalize bipartisan bill engagement as the proportion of a member's issue-specific bill sponsorships and/or cosponsorships that are on bipartisan bills. This measure captures how members allocate their legislative efforts between bipartisan and partisan legislation within each policy domain, accounting for member-specific variation in volume of engagement. We use fractional logit regressions, appropriate for proportional outcomes bounded between 0 and 1.<sup>13</sup>

Our key explanatory variable is a three-level factor capturing issue attention and messaging in the previous election, with categories indicating whether candidates: (1) campaigned on the issue

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<sup>11</sup>For example, Elise Stefanik (R-NY)—116th Congress—*Immigration*.

<sup>12</sup>Defining bipartisan bills as those including at least one Democrat and one Republican as a sponsor and/or *any* cosponsor produces substantively identical results.

<sup>13</sup>Linear regressions produce substantively identical results (Appendix Tables E.1–E.2). Negative binomial regressions using count outcomes also produce similar results (Appendix Tables F.1–F.2), though these cannot account for within-member variation in legislative effort across domains.

*with* bipartisan messaging, (2) campaigned on the issue *without* bipartisan messaging, or (3) *did not* campaign on the issue. This distinction is consequential because politicians seek to fulfill campaign promises (Sulkin 2009, 2011), which may induce cross-party collaboration on all issues within their campaign platforms, not only those framed in explicitly bipartisan terms. Our aim is to determine whether issue-specific bipartisan messaging generates even greater cross-party engagement beyond this tendency. Distinguishing among these types of campaign signals allows us to determine whether bipartisan messaging carries predictive power independent of issue attention.

We include a fixed effect for each member-Congress observation in our models to account for static member-level traits, time-varying member-level traits, and time-varying Congress-level traits. Put differently, these member-Congress fixed effects control for unobserved traits related to institutional dynamics (e.g., majority-party status, committee membership) and individual characteristics (e.g., ideological moderation, legislative effectiveness) that may be static or vary across time. Importantly, these fixed effects also capture each member's general disposition towards bipartisan cooperation in an individual Congress. Thus, if bipartisanship reflects a general legislative disposition rather than an issue-specific commitment, bipartisan campaigning on a particular policy platform should show no discernible association with subsequent bill engagement. We also include policy-area fixed effects to account for aggregate variation in bipartisan collaboration across issues, as some topics naturally attract more cross-party engagement.

Table 2 presents model results, which support our follow-through hypothesis (H1). Compared to issues on which candidates employ bipartisan appeals, issues without such appeals—or without any campaign platform attention—exhibit significantly lower levels of bipartisan engagement, as reflected by negative coefficients. To interpret these results, Figure 5 displays the predicted marginal effects of campaign messaging on bipartisan bill engagement, holding member-Congress and policy-area fixed effects at their observed mean values. This plot reveals how the proportion of bipartisan bill engagement changes relative to the reference category (bipartisan messaging). Predicted values reflect within-member-Congress comparisons across issues based on messaging behavior, while accounting for aggregate differences in bipartisan engagement across domains.

Table 2: Bipartisan Legislative Follow-Through

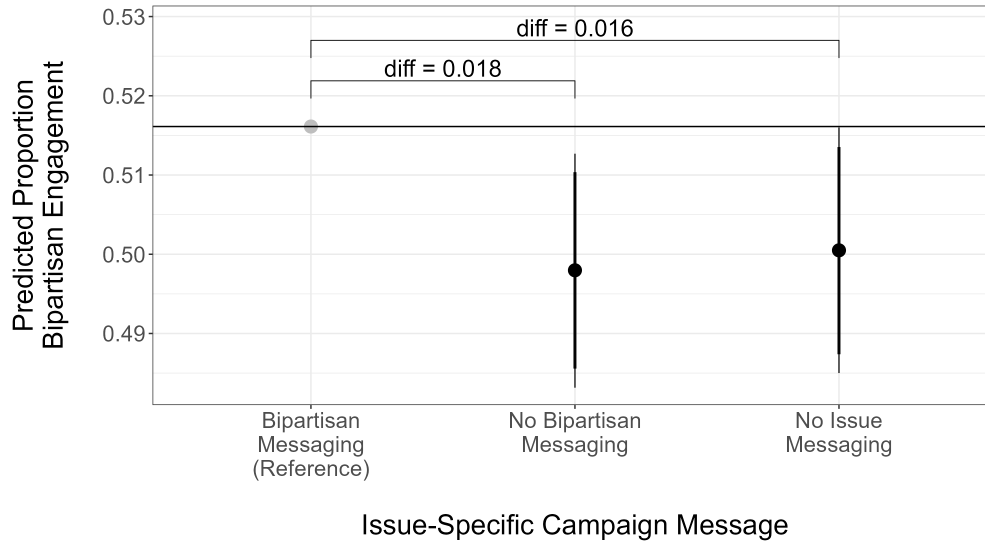
Issue-Specific Campaign Message:	Dependent Variable: Proportion of Bipartisan Bill Engagement
No Bipartisan Messaging vs. Campaigned on the Issue with Bipartisan Messaging	−0.073** (0.030)
No Issue Messaging vs. Campaigned on the Issue with Bipartisan Messaging	−0.063** (0.032)
Observations	14,846
Member-Congress Fixed Effects	✓
Policy Area Fixed Effects	✓

*Note:* Model specification is a fractional logit. Linear specification is available in Appendix Table E.1. Unit of analysis is defined at the member-Congress-issue level. Bipartisan bill engagement measures the proportion of issue-specific bills sponsored or cosponsored by a legislator that include at least one Democrat and one Republican among the original cosponsorship coalition. Clustered standard errors by member. \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

We find that, on average, legislators allocate 1.8 percentage points more of their sponsorship and cosponsorship activity to bipartisan bills for issues they campaigned on with bipartisan messaging compared to issues they addressed in their campaign platforms without such messaging. Similarly, they allocate 1.6 percentage points more engagement to bipartisan bills for issues they campaigned on with bipartisan messaging compared to issues they did not address in their campaign platforms.

Holding overall legislative activity constant, members dedicate a greater share of their legislative engagement to bipartisan bills for issues they campaigned with bipartisan appeals. Although these effects meet conventional significance thresholds, they are substantively modest. This likely reflects the constraints of a highly polarized legislative environment in which even small movements toward cross-party cooperation can represent meaningful change. Additionally, these results aggregate across all forms of bipartisan engagement. Because we expect bipartisan messaging to primarily encourage workhorse collaboration, aggregate measurement may obscure these effects. We disaggregate bipartisan engagement in the following analyses to test whether campaign messaging differentially affects distinct types of engagement.

Figure 5: Predicted Bipartisan Engagement by Campaign Messaging Behavior



*Note:* Predicted values reflect within-member-Congress comparisons across issues based on messaging behavior, holding member-Congress and policy-area fixed effects at their observed mean values. Bipartisan bill engagement measures the proportion of issue-specific bills sponsored or cosponsored by a legislator that include at least one Democrat and one Republican among the original cosponsorship coalition. Vertical bounds indicate 90% and 95% confidence intervals.

## Substantive Follow-Through on Bipartisan Commitments

We now analyze follow-through on bipartisan campaign commitments with attention to heterogeneity in bipartisan bill engagement, distinguishing substantive, workhorse collaboration from lower-cost, show horse cooperation. We define substantive bipartisan bill engagement as the sponsorship or original cosponsorship of a bill alongside at least one member of the opposing party. This stricter definition captures whether a legislator belongs to the bipartisan coalition responsible for bill authorship and introduction. Low-cost, show horse bipartisan bill engagement constitutes non-original cosponsorship on bipartisan bills.<sup>14</sup>

Table 3 presents model results, which support our substantive engagement hypothesis (H2). The reference category remains issues that a legislator adopted into her campaign platform with bipartisan messaging. The outcome in the left column is workhorse bipartisan bill engagement, and the outcome in the right column is show horse bipartisan bill engagement. Consistent with H2,

<sup>14</sup>We again define bipartisan bills as those including at least one Democrat and one Republican as a sponsor and/or original cosponsor



Table 3: Bipartisan Legislative Follow-Through by Type of Bipartisan Engagement

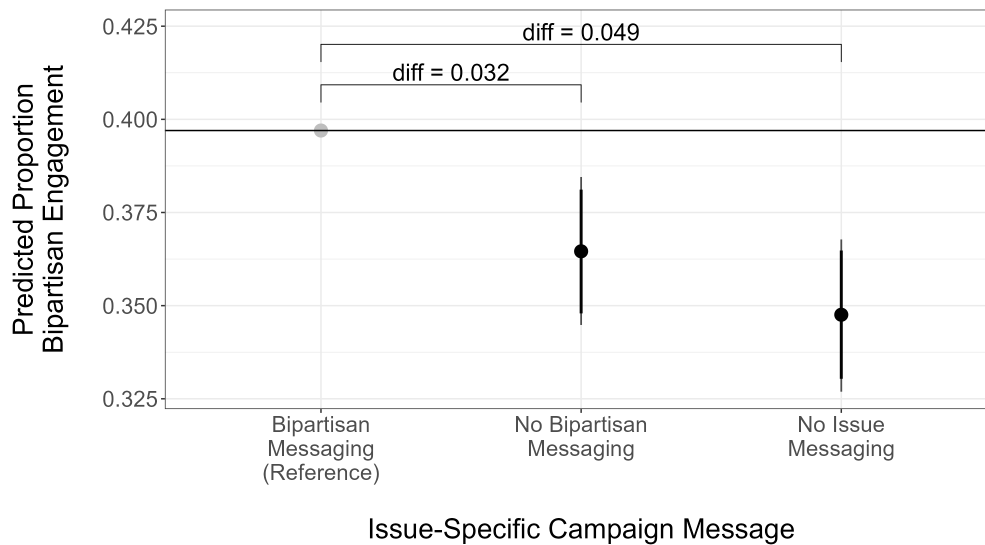
Issue-Specific Campaign Message:	Dependent variable: Proportion of Bipartisan Bill Engagement	
	Sponsor/Orig. Cosponsor	Non-Original Cosponsor
No Bipartisan Messaging vs. Campaigned with Bipartisan Messaging	−0.139*** (0.044)	−0.030 (0.036)
No Issue Messaging vs. Campaigned with Bipartisan Messaging	−0.212*** (0.046)	−0.060 (0.039)
Observations	14,846	14,846
Member-Congress Fixed Effects	✓	✓
Policy Area Fixed Effects	✓	✓

*Note:* Model specification is a fractional logit. Linear specification is available in Appendix Table E.2. Unit of analysis is defined at the member-Congress-issue level. Clustered standard errors by member. \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

the results demonstrate that legislators engage in less bipartisan bill sponsorship and/or original cosponsorship for issues they campaigned on without bipartisan messaging and for issues they did not campaign on, relative to issues they campaigned on with bipartisan messaging. In other words, when a member uses bipartisan rhetoric on the campaign trail with respect to a specific policy platform, she is more likely to pursue a meaningfully bipartisan legislative agenda on that particular issue, as compared to issues she does not adopt into her platform or issues with which she does not use bipartisan rhetoric while campaigning.

In contrast, show horse bipartisan engagement shows no significant differences across campaign messaging categories. These divergent patterns suggest bipartisan campaign rhetoric specifically motivates costly forms of cross-party collaboration—drafting and introducing legislation—while routine cosponsorship behavior remains stable regardless of campaign messaging. This aligns with our expectation that issue-specific bipartisan appeals serve as credible commitments to engage in the more demanding forms of cross-party collaboration that are necessary to advance bills through the legislative process (Curry and Roberts 2023). It also aligns with the reality that bill engagement is not jointly producible: a legislator cannot simultaneously embody both a workhorse and a show horse role on the same piece of legislation.

Figure 6: Predicted Substantive Bipartisan Engagement by Campaign Messaging Behavior



*Note:* Predicted values reflect within-member-Congress comparisons across issues based on messaging behavior, holding member-Congress and policy-area fixed effects at their observed mean values. Substantive bipartisan bill engagement measures the proportion of issue-specific bills sponsored and/or originally cosponsored by a legislator that include at least one Democrat and one Republican among the original cosponsorship coalition. Vertical bounds indicate 90% and 95% confidence intervals.

To interpret these results, Figure 6 displays the predicted marginal effects of campaign messaging on substantive bipartisan bill engagement, holding member-Congress and policy-area fixed effects at their mean values. This plot reveals how the proportion of bipartisan bill engagement changes relative to the reference category (bipartisan messaging). We find that, on average, legislators allocate 3.2 percentage points more of their sponsorship and original cosponsorship activity to bipartisan bills on issues with which they employed bipartisan messaging than to those they campaigned on without such messaging. Similarly, legislators allocate 4.9 percentage points more of their substantive legislative effort to bipartisan bills on issues with which they employed bipartisan messaging compared to those they did not address in their campaign platforms.

These effect sizes are substantively meaningful, particularly amid contemporary polarization. To contextualize the magnitude of these effects, we benchmark them against majority-minority status and legislator ideology—widely considered among the strongest predictors of bipartisan engagement. Bipartisanship aids all legislators in advancing bills (Curry and Lee 2020; Harbridge-Yong, Volden and Wiseman 2023), but is especially crucial for minority-party members who depend

on majority cooperation to move any legislation forward. Bipartisanship is, therefore, essential to the success of minority-party legislators. Ideological moderates may also engage more readily across party lines due to greater policy overlap with the opposition (The Lugar Center 2025). Consistent with these expectations, minority party members and ideological moderates in our data dedicate a significantly greater share of their aggregate legislative activity to bipartisan bills.

Drawing from the model presented in Table 3 (left column), the estimated effect of bipartisan messaging versus no bipartisan messaging is equivalent to 82% of the majority-minority difference in bipartisan engagement. In other words, the boost in substantive engagement from campaigning on an issue with bipartisan appeals approaches the difference between being in the minority versus being in the majority party. The effect size also equals 68% of the effect of a half-standard deviation decrease in ideological extremity, meaning that bipartisan campaign messaging rivals that of being a substantially more moderate legislator. The effect of bipartisan messaging versus no issue messaging is even larger, equaling 126% and 104% of these benchmarks, respectively.

These findings reveal that bipartisan campaign messaging meaningfully predicts subsequent legislative behavior for substantive collaboration rather than low-cost engagement. This targeted increase in costly collaboration suggests campaign rhetoric functions as a credible signal of legislative priorities in pursuit of policymaking success, rather than mere position-taking. The absence of effects for non-original cosponsorship indicates that bipartisan appeals do not reflect a general propensity for cross-party engagement. Instead, legislators strategically invest collaborative efforts in issues where they publicly committed to bipartisan problem-solving, while maintaining stable patterns of routine cosponsorship across their portfolios.

### **Bipartisan Messages as Prospective Campaign Commitments**

Our analyses thus far yield three key findings: (1) congressional candidates employ bipartisan campaign appeals selectively; (2) these appeals serve as credible indicators of bipartisan legislative engagement on the same issues; and (3) bipartisan appeals predict increases in substantive, workhorse forms of bipartisan collaboration. Taken together, these results show that when candidates communicate issue-specific bipartisan messages during campaigns, those messages function

as selective and credible commitments to bipartisan legislating on those issues once in office.

These broad conclusions, however, rest on the assumption that campaign messages signal politicians' intended bipartisan behavior in the subsequent Congress. For incumbents, several alternative pathways could account for the observed association between campaign messaging and post-election action. Incumbents who emphasize bipartisanship on the campaign trail may be engaging in retrospective credit-claiming for prior legislative achievements, with subsequent bipartisan activity reflecting path dependence rather than campaign-induced commitments. Moreover, members frequently draw on established working relationships when assembling cross-party coalitions (Curry and Roberts 2023; Craig 2023; Victor 2025), so their bipartisan actions may arise from preexisting partnerships and norms of reciprocity (Kirkland 2011) rather than from the signals conveyed during their campaigns.

To isolate the effect of campaign messaging on legislative behavior, we exploit the unique position of first-term legislators. Freshman members cannot invoke prior legislative accomplishments, eliminating retrospective credit-claiming as a potential confounder. Furthermore, the kinds of cross-party networks that facilitate bipartisan collaboration develop through repeated interactions over multiple congressional sessions—social capital that freshman legislators have not yet accumulated (Ommundsen 2025*b*). This institutional constraint renders the bipartisan campaign appeals of freshman lawmakers analytically valuable: such messages constitute *ex ante* commitments to bipartisan cooperation, unconditioned by established legislative records or pre-existing cross-party relationships. If retrospective credit-claiming or established networks drive our main results, we should observe null effects among freshmen. Conversely, if bipartisan messaging signals prospective commitments, the freshman subsample should yield effects comparable to those in Table 3.

Accordingly, we estimate the same models shown in the left column of Table 3, focusing on substantive bipartisan bill engagement among first-term legislators.<sup>15</sup> Table 4 presents model results. The reference category remains issues campaigned on with bipartisan messaging. Compared to issues on which candidates employed bipartisan appeals, issues without such appeals—or

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<sup>15</sup>Several individuals elected in the 116th, 117th, and 118th Congresses had previously served in the House before the election of interest. Removing these members yields identical results.

Table 4: Bipartisan Legislative Follow-Through of First-Term Legislators

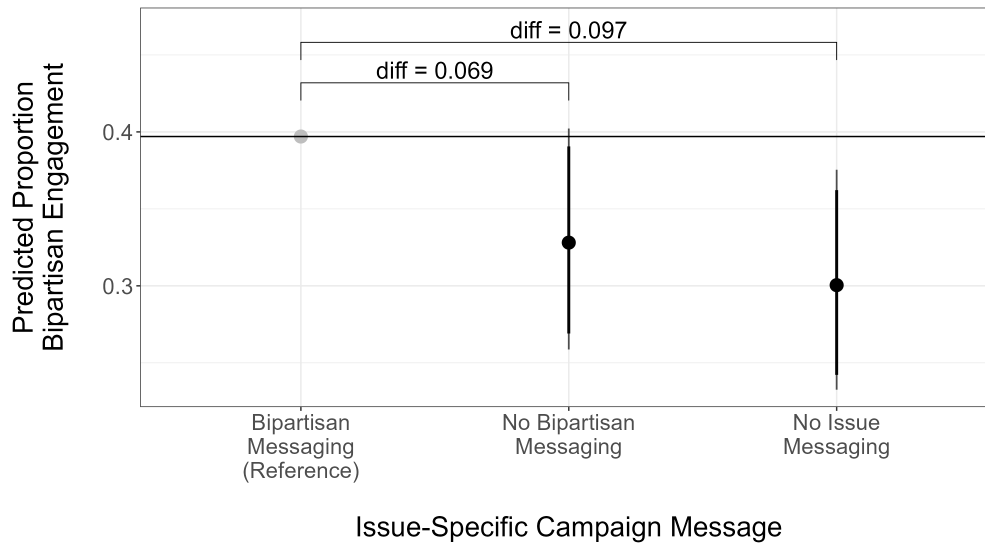
Issue-Specific Campaign Message:	Dependent Variable: Proportion of Bipartisan Bill Engagement
No Bipartisan Messaging vs. Campaigned on the Issue with Bipartisan Messaging	−0.303* (0.167)
No Issue Messaging vs. Campaigned on the Issue with Bipartisan Messaging	−0.433** (0.174)
Observations	2,496
Member-Congress Fixed Effects	✓
Policy Area Fixed Effects	✓

*Note:* Model specification is a fractional logit. Linear specification is available in Appendix Table E.3. Unit of analysis is defined at the member-Congress-issue level. Substantive bill engagement measures sponsorship and/or original cosponsorship for legislation including at least one Democrat and one Republican among original cosponsors. Clustered standard errors by member. \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

without any campaign platform attention—exhibit significantly lower levels of bipartisan substantive engagement, as reflected in negative coefficients. These findings are consistent with our prior results, which include all legislators and are presented in Table 3.

To interpret these results, Figure 7 displays the predicted marginal effects of campaign messaging on substantive bipartisan bill engagement, holding member-Congress and policy-area fixed effects at their mean values. This plot reveals how the proportion of bipartisan bill engagement for first-term lawmakers changes relative to the reference category (bipartisan messaging). We find that, on average, first-term legislators allocate 6.9 percentage points more of their sponsorship and original cosponsorship activity to bipartisan bills on issues where they employed bipartisan messaging compared to issues they adopted into their platforms without such messaging. Similarly, first-term legislators allocate 9.7 percentage points more of their substantive legislative engagement to bipartisan bills on issues where they adopted bipartisan messaging compared to those issues they did not adopt into their platforms. These findings highlight that even among legislators without prior cross-party relationships or legislative histories, bipartisan campaign commitments translate to substantively meaningful increases in bipartisan lawmaking. These results support our view that bipartisan campaign appeals serve as credible prospective commitments.

Figure 7: Predicted Substantive Bipartisan Engagement of First-Term Legislators



*Note:* Substantive bipartisan bill engagement measures a legislator’s issue-specific bill sponsorship and original cosponsorships on bipartisan legislation, out of all issue-specific bill engagement. We classify a bill as bipartisan if it includes at least one Democrat and one Republican as a sponsor and/or original cosponsor. Vertical bounds indicate 90% and 95% confidence intervals.

## Does Substantive Bipartisan Collaboration Lead to Legislative Success?

Our theoretical framework argues that politicians treat bipartisan campaign appeals as genuine, issue-specific commitments made instrumentally to advance legislative goals. This strategic orientation reflects the reality that bipartisan coalition-building is often necessary to advance legislation. Indeed, existing work demonstrates that bipartisan cooperation is predictive of lawmaking success (e.g., Curry and Roberts 2023; Craig 2023; Harbridge-Yong, Volden and Wiseman 2023). These studies, however, focus on bipartisanship as a stable orientation towards lawmaking, rather than an issue-specific commitment. If bipartisan appeals reflect instrumental calculations about achieving meaningful legislative success, the payoff should be observable at the issue level.<sup>16</sup>

To evaluate this component of our theory, we examine the relationship between substantive legislative engagement and policymaking success. The key explanatory variable is the proportion

<sup>16</sup>The meaningfulness of legislative success can be assessed along two dimensions. The first concerns how far a bill advances through the lawmaking process. We focus on the most consequential outcomes—bill passage and enactment—though other work examines earlier stages of legislative progress (Dobson, Volden and Wiseman 2025). A second dimension concerns the substantive weight of the policies being proposed. As we show in Appendix Table G.1, legislators tend to engage in substantive bipartisan collaboration on issues that are important to their districts. This distinction matters because it helps ensure that the bipartisan activity we observe is not merely performative follow-through, but reflects genuine efforts to advance policies that matter.

Table 5: Legislative Success and Substantive Bipartisan Engagement

	Dependent variable: Proportion of a Legislator's Bill Engagement	
	Passed House	Becomes Law
Proportion of Bipartisan Bill Engagement	1.527*** (0.081)	2.220*** (0.126)
Observations	16,705	15,938
Member-Congress Fixed Effects	✓	✓
Policy Area Fixed Effects	✓	✓

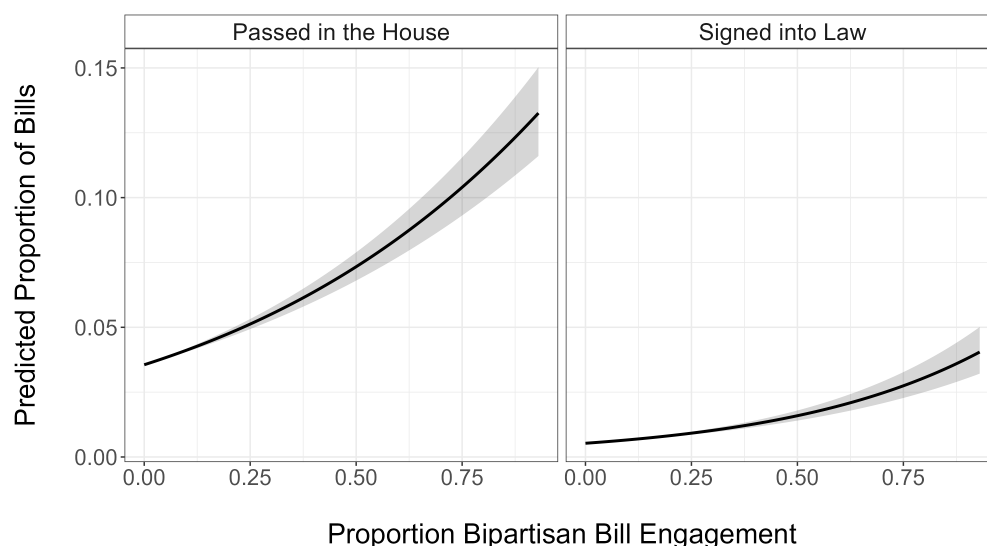
*Note:* Unit of analysis is defined at the member-Congress-issue level. Differences in observation counts across columns reflect the exclusion of cases with no variation in the dependent variable. Clustered standard errors by member. \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

of a legislator's issue-specific, substantive bill engagement that is bipartisan. As above, we define this measure as the share of issue-specific bills in which a legislator serves as a sponsor and/or an original cosponsor alongside at least one opposing-party member. The outcome variables measure, for each issue, is the proportion of a legislator's sponsored or originally cosponsored bills that (1) passed the House or (2) became law. Consistent with our previous analyses, we estimate the relationship between substantive bipartisan engagement and legislative outcomes using fractional logit models that include member–Congress and policy-area fixed effects.

Table 5 presents the model estimates, which are consistent with our policymaking success hypothesis (H3). Increases in a legislator's issue-specific substantive bipartisan bill engagement are associated with higher proportions of their initiatives passing the House (left column) and being signed into law (right column). In other words, as the proportion of a legislator's bill engagement becomes more bipartisan—that is, as they substantively engage with more bills in a cross-party manner—they experience greater policymaking success.

To interpret these results, Figure 8 displays the change in the predicted proportion of a legislator's issue-specific bills that pass the House (left panel) and become law (right panel) as a function of the proportion of issue-specific bipartisan bill engagement. Predicted values are generated holding member-Congress and policy-area fixed effects at their mean values. Both panels show a clear

Figure 8: Predicted Effects of Substantive Bipartisan Engagement on Bill Passage and Enactment



*Note:* Predicted values reflect within-member-Congress comparisons across issues based on messaging behavior, holding member-Congress and policy-area fixed effects at their observed mean values. Substantive bipartisan bill engagement measures the proportion of issue-specific bills sponsored and/or originally cosponsored by a legislator that include at least one Democrat and one Republican among the original cosponsorship coalition. Vertical bounds indicate 90% and 95% confidence intervals.

upward trajectory: as legislators devote a larger share of their issue-specific engagement to bipartisan collaboration, the likelihood that their bills advance through the legislative process increases. These patterns are consistent with the idea that engaging substantively with members of the opposing party facilitates coalition formation, increases legislative viability, and ultimately improves the prospects of bill passage and enactment. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that strategic, issue-level bipartisan engagement materially enhances legislators' prospects for policymaking success, aligning with our theoretical expectations.

## Conclusion

Do candidates invoke bipartisan commitments during campaigns and do these messages translate into cooperation once in office? This paper provides evidence that such commitments function as credible signals of future legislative behavior, deepening our understanding of electoral accountability and representation in contemporary American politics. We introduce a novel theoretical perspective on bipartisanship, viewing it as an issue-driven commitment rather than a general approach to lawmaking. This conceptualization has broad implications for how we understand



candidate strategy in elections and the nuances of legislative follow-through. To test our theory, we connect virtually all available campaign platforms for U.S. House elections from 2018 to 2022 with legislative actions taken in the 116th, 117th, and 118th Congresses. This effort involved the supervised machine learning classification of 43,465 campaign statements and the collection of comprehensive data on legislative activity related to 28,648 introduced bills. Our approach fills a critical gap in the literature by providing the first large-scale empirical test of whether candidates' own bipartisan campaign messages predict legislative collaboration.

Our findings demonstrate that bipartisan campaigning is common among candidates but employed selectively within campaigns. About half of incumbents include bipartisan appeals in their platforms, but—consistent with our expectation about bipartisanship serving as a targeted messaging strategy—candidates typically focus these appeals on a subset of issue areas. These findings add to an expanding body of research highlighting important nuances in how congressional candidates position themselves during campaigns (e.g., Case 2025; Case and Porter 2025; Bailey and Reese 2025). Future research should explore the complex calculations underlying these patterns including how candidates decide which issues should feature bipartisan framing, why certain issue areas tend to attract more cross-party appeals, and how electoral contexts influence these strategic decisions. The issue-specific and nuanced nature of bipartisan messaging offers valuable opportunities for scholars to analyze the micro-level strategic choices that determine when and how candidates call for cross-party cooperation during campaigns.

We find that legislators who make bipartisan appeals in specific issue domains during campaigns later engage in cross-party collaboration within those same areas. Disaggregating across types of collaboration, we demonstrate that issue-specific campaign messaging predicts issue-relevant substantive bipartisan action—bill sponsorship and original cosponsorship with colleagues across the aisle—rather than more symbolic, non-original cosponsorship. This “workhorse” pattern of collaboration persists even among first-term legislators who cannot claim credit for past bipartisan work or rely on established cross-party relationships, increasing confidence in the observed relationship between campaign promises and legislative outcomes. These findings underscore the importance

of examining various forms of cross-party engagement, as patterns of follow-through vary across substantive and symbolic bipartisan legislating and may yield different electoral rewards.

Our findings address key questions about representation and democratic accountability in American politics. There are two established perspectives on the link between bipartisan campaigning and governance: one argues that politicians avoid discussing compromise during elections, making their campaign messages unreliable indicators of future behavior; the other considers bipartisan appeals to be cheap talk aimed at influencing specific voters yet lacking tangible follow-through. We find support for neither conception. Our analyses, instead, show a clear link between campaign promises and legislative action: politicians who pledge bipartisan cooperation on certain issues follow through by delivering meaningful collaboration in those areas. These patterns suggest that voters exposed to bipartisan campaign appeals can reasonably expect follow-through, strengthening the credibility of electoral promises as indicators of future governing behavior.

These findings carry significant implications for democratic theory and representative government. By demonstrating that campaign appeals function as credible signals of future legislative behavior, this research affirms a core assumption underlying electoral accountability: voters can use campaign information to make informed predictions about governing outcomes. This link is particularly consequential amid heightened polarization, where scholars have questioned whether electoral incentives align with collaborative lawmaking. Our evidence challenges pessimistic accounts that bipartisan campaign rhetoric is purely strategic positioning divorced from governing intent; we suggest instead that elections can effectively structure legislative behavior, particularly on cross-party cooperation. We show that polarization has not severed the electoral connection—campaign commitments continue to constrain legislative behavior, enabling democratic responsiveness even within a deeply divided Congress. Understanding these dynamics is essential for assessing the health of American democracy, as the capacity of elections to generate predictable and responsive governance remains fundamental to democratic legitimacy and citizen trust in representative institutions. Even in a polarized era, voters retain the capacity to foster bipartisan governance by rewarding candidates who adopt such appeals on the campaign trail, creating durable incentives for selective cooperation.

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# Bipartisan Campaign Messages are Credible Policymaking Signals

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*Supporting Information*

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## A Topical Coding Correspondence & Descriptives

Major Policy Topic	Corresponding CRS Policy Area
Agriculture	Agriculture and Food
Civil Rights, Liberties, and Minority Issues	Civil Rights and Liberties, Minority Issues; Native Americans (Note: statements about abortion may fall under the "Health" MPT)
Crime	Crime and Law Enforcement (Note: statements about terrorism may fall under the "International Affairs" MPT)
Defense	Armed Forces and National Security (Note: statements about alliances and international affairs may fall under the "International Affairs" MPT)
Economics and Commerce	Economics and Public Finance; Commerce; Finance and Financial Sector; Taxation; Foreign Trade and International Finance (Note: statements about the national budget may fall under the "Government Operations" MPT; statements about international trade may fall under the "International Affairs" MPT)
Education	Education
Energy and Environment	Energy; Environmental Protection; Public Lands and Natural Resources
Government Operations	Congress; Government Operations and Politics
Immigration	Immigration
Healthcare	Health
International Affairs	International Affairs (Note: statements about trade may fall under the "Economics and Commerce" MPT)
Social Welfare	Housing and Community Development; Social Welfare
Transportation and Infrastructure	Transportation and Public Works; Water Resources Development (Note: statements about water quality and environmental issues may appear under the "Energy and Environment" MPT)

## B Supervised Machine Learning Model Setup

### B.1 Instructions for Coders

Three undergraduate research assistants (RAs) and one principal investigator (PI) hand-labeled campaign messages for the presence or absence of bipartisan messaging. The following instructions were given to each of the coders:

Code as “1” if the statement advocates for bipartisanship or working across the aisle and “0” if not. If there is any mention of bipartisanship (even just one), code as 1. The following includes (but is not limited to) what qualifies as bipartisan messaging:

- Expressed commitment and willingness to work with the other party.
- Discussion of previous work or legislation that was bipartisan or worked across party lines
- Openness to engage with the other party
- Highlighting the need to come together to solve collective problems

## B.2 Inter-coder Reliability Metrics

The RAs and PI labeled an initial practice set of 100 statements to ensure consistency across coders. After the initial practice set, 4,300 documents were randomly selected for hand-labeling. The undergraduate RAs labeled 1,000 documents each, and the PI labeled 2,000 documents. Within the hand-labeled set, 250 platform points were labeled by all four coders to assess inter-coder reliability. Table B.1 displays the percent agreement between each of the four coders, and Table B.2 displays the pair-wise Cohen’s Kappa. Across both tables, there is an extremely high level of reliability between coders. The RA and PI classification coding also track closely.

Table B.1: Hand-Labeled Percent Agreement

	PI	RA1	RA2	RA3
PI	–			
RA1	<b>98.8%</b>	–		
RA2	<b>98.8%</b>	98.4%	–	
RA3	<b>97.6%</b>	97.2%	97.2%	–

Table B.2: Cohen’s Kappa

	PI	RA1	RA2	RA3
RA1	<b>0.851</b>	–		
RA2	<b>0.863</b>	0.792	–	
RA3	<b>0.757</b>	0.682	0.705	–

## B.3 Text Pre-Processing

We take the steps outlined below to pre-processing text from our corpus of platform points drawn from Porter, Case and Treul (2025):

- All text to lowercase
- String pattern ‘medicare for all’ to ‘medicareforall’
- String pattern ‘medicare-for-all’ to ‘medicareforall’
- String pattern ‘pro choice’ to ‘prochoice’

- String pattern ‘pro-choice’ to ‘prochoice’
- String pattern ‘pro-life’ to ‘prolife’
- String pattern ‘de-escalation’ to ‘deescalation’
- String pattern ‘dodd-frank’ to ‘doddfrank’
- String pattern ‘k-12’ to ‘ktwelve’
- String pattern ‘k12’ to ‘ktwelve’
- String pattern ‘pre-k’ to ‘prek’
- String pattern ‘4-year’ to ‘four year’
- String pattern ‘4 year’ to ‘four year’
- String pattern ‘2-year’ to ‘two year’
- String pattern ‘2 year’ to ‘two year’
- String pattern ‘non-violent’ to ‘nonviolent’
- String pattern ‘2nd amendment’ to ‘second amendment’
- String pattern ‘2a’ to ‘second amendment’
- String pattern ‘non-profit’ to ‘nonprofit’
- String pattern ‘non-discrimination’ to ‘nondiscrimination’
- Replace all ‘-’ with ‘ ’
- Remove all non-alphabetic characters
- Remove extraneous UTC code
- Trim white space

After preprocessing, we transformed the text into a term frequency–inverse document frequency (tf-idf) matrix, which weights words by their relative distinctiveness across documents. This tf-idf representation served as the feature input for our supervised learning models.

## B.4 Model Parameter Selection

Of the 4,300 documents coded, we reserved 400 as a held-out test set to evaluate model performance, discussed in greater detail below. Before training our final models, we carried out a grid search to identify the set of hyperparameters that maximized performance under five-fold cross-validation on our 3,900 training documents. Grid search is a standard hyperparameter optimization procedure that systematically explores the parameter space to identify specifications that maximize out-of-sample performance. Table B.3 reports the full range of algorithms and parameter values we considered, with the selected values in bold.

## B.5 Alternative Model Performance

We trained seven supervised classifiers—support vector machine, decision tree, random forest, gradient boosting, lasso, ridge, and XGBoost—on our hand-coded training data. This allows us to select the model that best captures the features of the data that are predictive of bipartisan messaging.

Table A4 reports out-of-sample performance across accuracy, precision, recall, and F1. Because our task involves identifying relatively rare instances of bipartisan rhetoric, the F1 score—which balances precision and recall—is especially informative. While several models perform well on accuracy alone, XGBoost attains the highest F1 (0.885) alongside strong accuracy (0.985) and recall (0.852), justifying its use as the primary classifier in the main analysis.

Table B.3: Model Tuning Parameters

Model	Tuning Parameter	Values
Support Vector Machine	Regularization	0.1, <b>1</b> , 10, 100
	Gamma	<b>1</b> , 0.1, 0.01, 0.001
	Kernel	<b>linear</b> , rbf
Decision Tree	Max Depth	None, 10, <b>20</b> , 30
	Min Samples Split	2, 5, 10, 20
	Min Samples Leaf	1, <b>2</b> , 4, 8
Random Forest	# Estimators	50, 100, 200, 300
	Max Depth	None, <b>10</b> , 20, 30
	Min Samples Split	2, 5, 10, <b>20</b>
Gradient Boosting	# Estimators	50, 100, <b>200</b>
	Learning Rate	0.01, 0.1, 0.2
	Max Depth	3, 5, <b>7</b>
Lasso Regression	Regularization	0.01, 0.1, 1, 10, <b>100</b>
Ridge Regression	Regularization	0.01, 0.1, 1, <b>10</b> , 100
XGBoost	# Estimators	<b>50</b> , 100, 200
	Learning Rate	0.01, <b>0.1</b> , 0.2
	Max Depth	3, 5, <b>7</b>
	Scale Position Weight	1, 2, <b>5</b>

Table B.4: Out-of-Sample Model Accuracy Statistics

Model	Accuracy	Precision	Recall	F1 Score
SVM	0.965	0.933	0.519	0.667
Decision Tree	0.960	0.677	0.778	0.724
Random Forest	0.945	0.692	0.333	0.450
Gradient Boost	0.983	0.917	0.815	0.863
Lasso	0.978	0.909	0.741	0.816
Ridge	0.965	0.810	0.630	0.708
<b>XGBoost</b>	<b>0.985</b>	<b>0.920</b>	<b>0.852</b>	<b>0.885</b>

## C Bipartisan Messaging Measurement Validation

Table C.1: Random Selection of Classified Platform Documents

Candidate Name	Classification	Statement Text
Levii Shocklee	1	Quality, affordable health care is a right and should be available for ALL Americans. I intend to work, in a bipartisan fashion, to ensure that the citizens of the 6th district are heard regarding Health Care. I will work to ensure that the cost of health care is reduced for individuals and families struggling with high premiums as well as making sure that no one loses their insurance coverage.
Sanford Bishop	1	Tax relief is vital to encouraging economic growth. Congressman Bishop believes that tax relief is a bi-partisan issue and has routinely crossed the aisle to do what is best for American families. For example, he strongly supported the extension of the 2001 and 2003 tax cuts, which lowered tax rates across the board for all Americans and propelled the economic growth we experienced through most of the last decade.
Stephen Fanelli	1	A secure and safe border is one of the first duties of government in order to protect against disease, terrorism, and illegal incursion. While the Democrats promote open borders, I will sponsor legislation to secure our southern border immediately as well as reach across the aisle to find areas of agreement on improving the legal immigration process.
Justin Livingston	0	If you live in the Second District, the federal government, which owns over 50% of the land in the district, is your neighbor and it's often a pretty bad one. The U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management need a priority shift to allow more fuel reduction to prevent forest fires and employ loggers and millworkers throughout the Second District.
Joanne Wright	0	I believe life begins with a heartbeat. I believe we need to do more to educate women and provide birth control to women who do not want to get pregnant. I will fight against third trimester abortions. I believe partial birth abortions should be banned for the babies and the sake of the parents. Baby parts profiteering.
Jeremy Massengale	0	I believe that all of our natural rights including the one upheld in the 2nd amendment have been slowly eroded away. Wendell Phillips once said, "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty; power is ever stealing from the many to the few." I believe we cannot give one inch when it comes to gun control. Every citizen has the right to defend his or herself. We must be ever vigilant with all of our rights.

Table C.2: XGBoost 30 Most Heavily Weighted Features (Words)

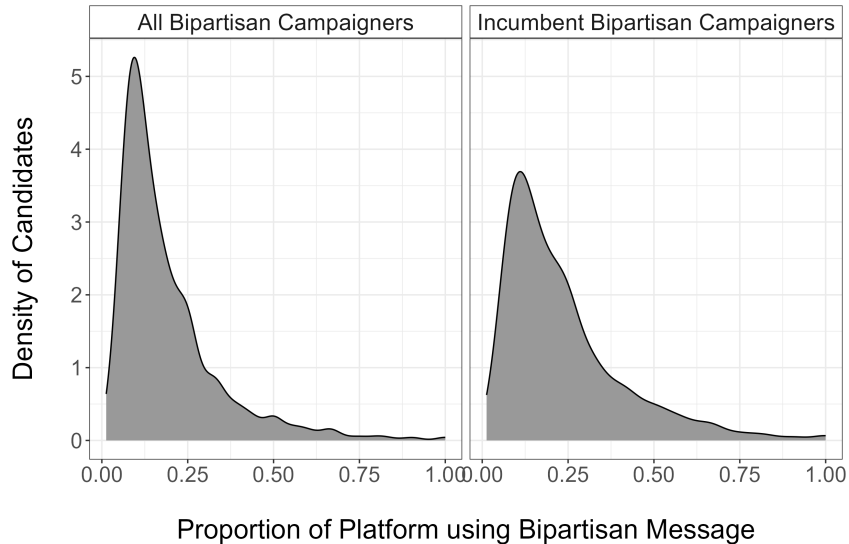
Words
bipartisan, together, age, aisle, colleagues, sides, parties, start, flag, lines, party, partisan, promised, sure, victims, introduced, voted, day, republicans, market, leave, light, save, republican, joined, positions, congressional, driving, understand, critical

### C.1 Predictive Validity in Bipartisan Messaging

The Problem Solvers Caucus aims to bring together Members of Congress through a shared commitment to bipartisanship. We expect that caucus members should, on average, engage in more bipartisan campaigning than their non-caucus counterparts. Consistent with this expectation, we find that 61.1% of caucus members engage in bipartisan campaigning, compared to only 42.7% of incumbents not in the caucus (diff = 18.6%; p-value < 0.001). Additionally, caucus members allocate a larger portion of their campaign platforms to bipartisan rhetoric than non-caucus incumbents (diff = 8.1%; p-value < 0.001). These results suggest that our supervised machine learning pipeline captures bipartisan messaging in theoretically expected ways.

## D Additional Descriptive Analyses

Figure D.1: Proportion of Issue Areas with Bipartisan Messages, By Candidate Type



*Note:* Density plots display the proportion of issue areas discussed using bipartisan messages, among bipartisan campaigners. The left plot includes all ballot-eligible, major-party bipartisan campaigners; the right plot includes members of Congress identified as bipartisan campaigners.

Table D.1: Predictors for Bipartisan Campaign Messaging in Primary Elections, 2018–2022

	Dependent variable: Bipartisan Campaigner	
Competitive District	0.326*** (0.101)	0.337*** (0.107)
Incumbent MC	1.549*** (0.204)	1.476*** (0.205)
State Legislator	0.093 (0.230)	0.074 (0.232)
Amateur Politician	0.040 (0.187)	0.190 (0.188)
Pre-Primary Fundraising (Logged)	0.068*** (0.013)	0.094*** (0.024)
Female	0.043 (0.100)	−0.013 (0.105)
Republican	−1.101*** (0.100)	−1.022*** (0.115)
Contested Primary Election	−0.168 (0.105)	−0.252** (0.107)
Non-Partisan Primary	0.039 (0.124)	0.117 (0.130)
Ideological Extremity: WEB Score	−1.125*** (0.106)	
Ideological Extremity: CFScore		−0.429*** (0.126)
Constant	−1.095*** (0.265)	−1.841*** (0.381)
Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓
Observations	4,507	3,880

*Note:* Observations differ across models due to disparities in coverage across measures of ideological extremity. Clustered standard errors by candidate and congressional race. \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

## D.1 Issue-Specific Moderation & Bipartisan Messaging

We evaluate whether our measurement captures bipartisanship as a distinct construct or functions as a proxy for ideological moderation. It may be that bipartisan appeals function chiefly as proxy indicators of *issue-specific moderation*, consistent with research documenting issue-by-issue variation in ideological positioning (e.g., Broockman 2016; Case and Porter 2025). To address this concern, we correlate measures for candidates’ issue-specific moderation, developed by Case and Porter (2025), with our dichotomous classification of bipartisan messaging.<sup>1</sup> These candidate po-

<sup>1</sup>The issue areas in Case and Porter (2025) do not perfectly align with our classification; we include all nominally aligned categories to maximize the breadth of this validation exercise.



sitioning indexes, or CPIs, capture the left–right positioning of incumbents and challengers across various issue areas using text from campaign websites.<sup>2</sup> Strong negative correlations would suggest that bipartisan issue messaging is associated with issue-specific moderation. The correlations are presented in Table D.2, however, indicate only weakly negative associations. The largest correlations are for *Guns* (-0.095) and *Healthcare* (-0.086), which are relatively small, with all other correlations approaching zero. These findings suggest that issue-level bipartisan appeals are not proxies for issue-specific or aggregate ideological moderation, but instead reflect a distinct dimension of candidate rhetoric.

Table D.2: Issue-Specific Bipartisan Messaging and Moderate Issue Positioning

Campaign Platform Policy Topic (CPI Policy Topic)	Correlation
Civil Rights and Liberties (Abortion)	-0.055
Education (Education)	-0.004
Energy and Environment (Energy)	-0.004
Guns (Guns)	-0.095
Healthcare (Healthcare)	-0.086
Immigration (Immigration)	-0.035

*Note:* Topical categories do not align perfectly; we link them based on their closest substantive match. Correlation calculations include all candidates who addressed a given issue in their campaign platform for a given year.

## E Replication of Main Analysis Using OLS

Table E.1: Bipartisan Legislative Follow-Through (OLS)

Issue-Specific Campaign Message:	Dependent Variable: Proportion of Bipartisan Bill Activity
No Bipartisan Messaging vs. Campaigned on the Issue with Bipartisan Messaging	-0.016** (0.007)
No Issue Messaging vs. Campaigned on the Issue with Bipartisan Messaging	-0.014** (0.07)
Observations	14,846
Member-Congress Fixed Effects	✓
Policy Area Fixed Effects	✓

*Note:* Model is an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. Unit of analysis is defined at the member-Congress-issue level. Bipartisan bill activity measures the proportion of bills sponsored or cosponsored by legislation that includes at least one Democrat and one Republican among its original cosponsorship coalition. Clustered standard errors by member. \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

<sup>2</sup>Because CPIs and our measure derive from the same underlying data, correlations are likely upwardly biased.

Table E.2: Bipartisan Legislative Follow-Through by Type of Bipartisan Engagement (OLS)

Issue-Specific Campaign Message:	Dependent variable: Proportion of Bipartisan Bill Activity	
	Substantive	Symbolic
No Bipartisan Messaging vs. Campaigned with Bipartisan Messaging	−0.030*** (0.009)	−0.006 (0.008)
No Issue Messaging vs. Campaigned with Bipartisan Messaging	−0.046*** (0.010)	−0.013 (0.008)
Observations	14,846	14,846
Member-Congress Fixed Effects	✓	✓
Policy Area Fixed Effects	✓	✓

*Note:* Model is an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. Units of analysis are defined at the member-Congress-issue level. Substantive bipartisan bill engagements measure levels of bill sponsorship/original cosponsorship for legislation including at least one Democrat and one Republican among its original cosponsorship coalition. Symbolic bipartisan bill engagements measure levels of bill non-original cosponsorship for legislation including at least one Democrat and one Republican among its original cosponsorship coalition. Clustered standard errors by member. \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

## F Replication of Main Analysis Using Count of Bipartisan Bills

Table F.1: Bipartisan Legislative Follow-Through (Count)

Issue-Specific Campaign Message:	Dependent Variable: Count of Bipartisan Bill Activity
No Bipartisan Messaging vs. Campaigned on the Issue with Bipartisan Messaging	−0.010 (0.023)
No Issue Messaging vs. Campaigned on the Issue with Bipartisan Messaging	−0.213** (0.025)
Observations	14,846
Member-Congress Fixed Effects	✓
Policy Area Fixed Effects	✓

*Note:* Model is a negative binomial model. Units of analysis are defined at the member-Congress-issue level. Bipartisan bill activity measures the count of bills sponsored or cosponsored by legislation that includes at least one Democrat and one Republican among its original cosponsorship coalition. Clustered standard errors by member. \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

Table F.2: Bipartisan Legislative Follow-Through by Type of Bipartisan Engagement (Count)

Issue-Specific Campaign Message:	Dependent variable: Count of Bipartisan Bill Activity	
	Substantive	Symbolic
No Bipartisan Messaging vs. Campaigned with Bipartisan Messaging	−0.070* (0.037)	−0.017 (0.020)
No Issue Messaging vs. Campaigned with Bipartisan Messaging	−0.373*** (0.040)	−0.137 (0.022)
Observations	14,846	14,846
Member-Congress Fixed Effects	✓	✓
Policy Area Fixed Effects	✓	✓

*Note:* Model is a negative binomial model. Units of analysis are defined at the member-Congress-issue level. Substantive bipartisan bill engagements measure levels of bill sponsorship/original cosponsorship for legislation including at least one Democrat and one Republican among its original cosponsorship coalition. Symbolic bipartisan bill engagements measure levels of bill non-original cosponsorship for legislation including at least one Democrat and one Republican among its original cosponsorship coalition. Clustered standard errors by member. \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

## G Salient Constituencies and Bipartisan Engagement

We note that bipartisan bill engagement is not distributed randomly across the policy agenda. Instead, it tends to occur on issues that matter to a legislator's constituents. To offer suggestive evidence, we predict the proportion of bipartisan bill activity in a policy area as a function of the proportion of a district belonging to a constituency with a substantive interest in that area. We focus on four policy areas and salient constituencies: agriculture and the proportion of agricultural workers; defense and the proportion of veterans; education and the proportion of enrolled college students; and social welfare and the proportion of residents aged 65 and above. These constituency proportions are calculated using totals taken from the 5-year American Community Survey (ACS) Census sample. While this analysis is intentionally narrow, Table G.1 shows a statistically significant bivariate relationship between bipartisan behavior on an issue and the share of a district's population belonging to the corresponding salient group.

Table G.1: Salient Constituencies and Bipartisan Bill Engagement Across Policy Areas

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Proportion of Substantive Agriculture	Bipartisan Defense	Bill Engagement Education	Social Welfare
Proportion Salient Population in District	4.928*** (1.321)	3.646** (1.690)	7.597** (3.075)	2.383* (1.344)
Constant	-1.216*** (0.217)	0.403*** (0.097)	-1.398*** (0.176)	-1.306*** (0.221)
Observations	1,302	1,302	1,302	1,302

Note: Model specification is a fractional logit. \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01.

## References

- Broockman, David E. 2016. “Approaches to studying policy representation.” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 41(1):181–215.
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