

Predicting Partnerships: Congressional Issue Alignment and Legislative Collaboration*

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Abstract

Congress is a collaborative institution. But how do members form these collaborative relationships? While existing literature points to social ties and common traits as links by which members establish working relationships, we suggest that a key connection is yet overlooked: policy-level agreement. In this project, we uncover the extent to which expressed issue-level positions translate to legislative collaboration. Specifically, we determine how positions members take during their campaigns predict their likelihood of working with other members who hold similar positions on a given issue. We find that a member who holds a specific position similar to the stance of one of her colleagues is more likely to cosponsor legislation on that topic with her similarly aligned colleague, even across party lines. This project provides a policy-level explanation for how members identify legislative collaborators and explains partnerships that otherwise might remain surprising – particularly those that bridge the ideological divide.

Keywords: Bipartisanship, Collaboration, Campaigns, Text-as-Data

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On April 28th, 2023, four members of the U.S. House of Representatives joined forces to introduce a piece of legislation that would prohibit members of Congress and their immediate families from purchasing and selling individual stocks. This bill was relatively straightforward in its content and structure, addressing an issue that had recently gained public attention through a variety of investigative reports.¹ The fact that a bill on this subject was introduced was not altogether surprising. What was unexpected, however, was the team of members who joined together to write and sponsor this piece of legislation. While Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.) and Matt Gaetz (R-Fla.) disagree on the vast majority of issues and frequently find themselves on opposing sides of debates and votes, they discovered that they see eye-to-eye when it comes to limiting the ability of members of Congress to benefit financially from information obtained while in office. Along with Representatives Brian Fitzpatrick (R-Pa.) and Raja Krishnamoorth (D-Ill.), Reps. Ocasio-Cortez and Gaetz collaborated as coauthors to introduce H.R. 3003, the “Bipartisan Restoring Faith in Government Act.” When asked about his decision to work with a colleague whom many might paint as a diametrically opposed to him, Rep. Gaetz responded that, “AOC is wrong a lot,” and “she’d probably say the same thing about me.” But he went on to add that, “she’s not corrupt. And I will work with anyone and everyone to ensure that Congress is not so compromised.”²

While collaboration in Congress has received much attention in the scholarly literature as of late (e.g. Craig 2023; Curry and Roberts 2023, 2025; Ommundsen N.d.), to most onlookers, the type of collaboration we observe here — between Representatives Ocasio-Cortez and Gaetz — still remains surprising. How did two staunch ideologues representing distant poles of the ideological spectrum come together to form this productive relationship? And why did a partnership emerge on this particular policy issue, despite the many others on which they disagree? We argue that their ability to find common ground on a particular

¹E.g., Kelly, Kate, Adam Playford, and Alicia Parlapiano, “Stock Trades Reported by Nearly a Fifth of Congress Show Possible Conflicts.” *The New York Times*, September 12, 2022.

²Jesse Watters Primetime, “Matt Gaetz: I’m teaming up with AOC to prevent congressional insider trading.” *FOX News*, May 2, 2023.

policy area — despite there being many on which they disagree — is neither shocking nor rare.

Among the 9,430 bipartisan bills introduced into the 116th, 117th, and 118th Congresses, over half of these bipartisan bills (5,102) featured at least one ideologically extreme co-author.³ Moreover, nearly 10% (841) of bipartisan bills include at least one co-author from both parties that is ideologically extreme. The partnership between Representatives Gaetz and Ocasio-Cortez, therefore, is representative of a broader pattern of legislative collaboration between members who do not see eye-to-eye on most issues. While perhaps unexpected, this type of partnership is far from uncommon in Congress.

Scholarly literature points to shared traits and experiences as sources of relationship formation in Congress. Members from the same state (Craig 2023), those entering Congress in the same cohort, those with similar ideological dispositions (Bratton and Rouse 2011), those who have had the same staff work for them at different points in time (Ommundsen N.d.), those who have traveled together abroad (Curry and Roberts 2023), and even those who attended the same university (Battaglini, Sciabolazza and Patacchini 2020; Cohen and Malloy 2014) tend to be disposed to collaborate as legislative partners. These explanations largely identify the characteristics of legislators or experiences that make a particular pair of lawmakers more likely to work together in general. In other words, a pair of members holding some feature or experience in common should lend to a general collaborative relationship. While important, this perspective fails to address two important questions: why do legislative partnerships emerge between members who lack the shared traits, experiences, or broad ideological alignment typically associated with collaboration, and why do members who are generally disposed to collaborate work together on some policy issues but not others?

Existing research, therefore, does not explain why Representatives Ocasio-Cortez and Gaetz would have found each other as collaborators. They neither hold any features in common, nor do they have broad ideological alignment. We seek to add to this understanding

³Defined as a sponsor or original cosponsor having a DW-NOMINATE score with an absolute value greater than 0.5, a criteria which 30% of members meet.

of legislative collaboration by suggesting that trait- or experience-based commonalities do not fully explain the formation of these working relationships or the policy areas in which they emerge. We suggest that members can — and do — identify legislative collaborators on an issue-by-issue basis, and successfully find common ground on particular policy proposals despite the fact that they may have little in common and disagree on a whole host of other issues. In this manner, policy-level agreement provides a basis for collaboration among otherwise unlikely partners while also explaining why members who have pre-existing relationships work together on some issues but not others. Others have acknowledged that agreement on policy is critical for collaboration (e.g., Craig 2023), yet this issue-based link has remained empirically untested.

In this paper, we add to the scholarly literature on collaboration in Congress by conceptualizing legislative collaboration as an issue-specific, rather than exclusively member-level, phenomenon and identifying a new avenue through which potential collaborators can be identified. We argue that members of Congress identify legislative partners based on common policy goals, even when they lack the broader traits, experiences, or ideological alignment typically associated with collaborative relationships. At the same time, these policy-level commonalities explain why members who are otherwise inclined to work together collaborate on some issues but not others. We refer to this policy-level commonality as “expressed issue agreement,” or the extent to which two members publicly articulate similar positions within the same issue area. To measure expressed issue agreement, we rely on policy commitments articulated by members of the U.S. House of Representatives on their campaign websites from 2018 to 2022. Using these statements, we employ text embeddings to calculate the semantic similarity between the policy positions expressed by every possible pair of members within the same issue area. With these member-to-member, dyadic measures of policy-level similarity, we then uncover the extent to which agreement on an issue translates to legislative collaboration on that issue.

To determine whether similar policy goals translates to legislative collaboration, we estimate a series of random- and fixed-effects models relating the similarity of a pair of members’ policy statements to their likelihood of collaborating within the same policy area. Our primary specifications include member-dyad fixed effects, allowing us to compare collaboration across issues within the same pair of legislators, while holding constant all stable characteristics of that relationship. This design evaluates whether members are more likely to collaborate on the particular issues where they express greater policy agreement. While scholars often look to similar voting records as a proxy for congressional relationships, we argue — in line with recent work (e.g., Curry and Roberts 2023) — that original cosponsorship provides a more direct indicator of legislative partnership. Because House rules permit only one formal sponsor on a piece of legislation, original cosponsorship serves as a signal of co-authorship and collaboration prior to a bill’s introduction. We use original cosponsorship, therefore, as our primary outcome to evaluate whether expressed issue agreement translates into legislative action.

Our results provide strong evidence that expressed issue agreement predicts legislative collaboration. Holding constant all stable characteristics of a pair of members through member-dyad fixed effects, as well as differences across policy areas and years, members are significantly more likely to collaborate on issues where their publicly expressed policy goals are more similar. This relationship is especially pronounced among bipartisan pairs: the association between expressed issue agreement and original cosponsorship is significantly stronger for members from opposing parties than for members of the same party. Additionally, we evaluate the public’s preferences about this collaboration through a survey experiment. We find that voters are more concerned about the policy outcome of a collaboration than the identity of their representative’s collaborator, further explaining why members might seek out unexpected partnerships when the policy is in line with their goals.

Together, these findings demonstrate that legislative collaboration is not simply a product of broad ideological similarity or enduring member-level relationships. Policy-level agreement

helps explain why the same pair of legislators collaborates on some issues but not others and how members who might otherwise appear unlikely to work together can nevertheless identify opportunities for legislative partnerships.

Identifying Potential Collaborators

Recent scholarship has endeavored to quantify what congressional insiders have long known to be true: productive, working relationships are essential for a functioning Congress. Legislators who approach the lawmaking process from a collaborative lens — particularly, those who take a bipartisan approach — are far more productive than those who attempt to go at it alone, or who remain insular to their own party (Harbridge-Yong, Volden and Wiseman 2023). Accordingly, the vast majority of legislation that successfully navigates the legislative process does so with the initial backing of a team of legislators, rather than a sole advocate (Ommundsen N.d.). Knowing that lawmaking is a collaborative effort, a strategic member of Congress who is serious about achieving a policy goal will seek out at least one partner as they strive toward lawmaking success. Scholars have sought to uncover, then, how these teams of lawmakers identify each other and what potential sources of interpersonal connections might exist that lend to legislative collaborations.

Social ties are a critical avenue by which member-to-member connections are formed. This is not a new phenomenon, as scholars in the mid-twentieth century pointed toward the congressional boardinghouse as a crucial source of personal connections for lawmakers in the early Congresses. Legislators in the early- to mid-1800s who lived in close proximity to one another had more similar voting patterns than legislators who lacked this shared experience (Young 1966). Scholars also determined, observing the same early Congresses, that common traits can influence voting records. Bogue and Marlaire (1975) found that lawmakers who hailed from the same home state were even more likely to vote in a similar manner than those who lived together in boardinghouses. It is clear, then, that social connections and shared

traits have long been an influential source in lawmakers' decision making. What scholarship has capitalized on more recently is a variety of new data sources by which to identify the root of these interpersonal relationships, as well as a handful of new metrics by which the effect of these relationships can be measured.

While the congressional boardinghouse is a relic of the 19th century, the notion of common experiences or traits inspiring congressional action is very much alive and well. Recent work has re-affirmed the influence a common trait, like a shared state delegation, can have on collaborative efforts (Craig 2023). Further, shared experiences gained by traveling abroad on official congressional trips (Curry and Roberts 2023) or attending the same undergraduate institution (Battaglini, Sciabolazza and Patacchini 2020; Cohen and Malloy 2014), for example, also contribute to the establishment of connections between members of Congress. Scholars have demonstrated that these common experiences spur legislative partnerships, which can be observed through co-signing Dear Colleague letters (Craig 2023) and co-authoring legislation (Curry and Roberts 2023, 2025).⁴

While scholars have demonstrated that social ties and shared traits are a convenient foundation upon which relationships can be established, we suggest that these connections are neither necessary for relationship formation, nor do they provide a complete understanding of how members of Congress go about identifying collaborators. Personal connections are certainly useful in narrowing the pool of potential collaborators to whom a member might turn, yet not every social tie will result in legislative collaboration. This leaves unanswered the question of why some social ties prompt collaboration and others do not. Further, we suggest that pre-existing social ties are not necessary in establishing a connection. We contend, therefore, that there exists an additional, yet empirically overlooked, factor that is a precondition to congressional collaboration. This factor, put simply, is policy-level agreement.

⁴As will be discussed in greater detail in subsequent sections, co-authors are determined to be any sponsor or original cosponsor of a piece of legislation.

As lawmakers consider which of their colleagues they might turn to as they identify legislative partners, they certainly will rely on their social connections and colleagues with shared traits as a familiar starting point. What we argue, however, is that narrowing the pool of potential collaborators in this way is not sufficient to establishing a partnership. A necessary step in forming a relationship as legislative collaborators, rather, is identifying a partner with whom a member agrees on a policy level. This policy-aligned partner might be found in a subset of colleagues with social connections or shared traits, yet might still be found in a broader pool of members of Congress with whom a member has no personal characteristics or experiences in common. While Representatives Elise Stefanik (R-N.Y.) and Katherine Clark (D-N.Y.), for example, both have degrees from Harvard University and represent portions of the same state, we would not expect these ideologically distant members to identify each other as potential collaborators simply because of these commonalities, nor would we expect them to constrain their pool of potential collaborators to their fellow Harvard graduates or New Yorkers. Ultimately, we contend that the critical link that is necessary to any legislative relationship is agreement on a particular piece of legislation.

Previous work evaluating collaboration typically operationalizes member-level agreement through the absolute difference in DW-NOMINATE scores for a pair of members (e.g. Curry and Roberts 2023). Employing the absolute difference in DW-NOMINATE scores to identify similarly aligned members presumes a certain degree of ideological homogeneity across a given member’s issue positions. There is strong evidence, however, of heterogeneity in members’ positions across issues, both during campaigns (Case and Porter 2026) and in legislative behavior (Yoshinaka and Grose 2011). Representatives Ocasio-Cortez and Gaetz certainly do not have similar overall ideological dispositions, yet they found a particular issue on which they agreed: banning members of Congress from trading stock. Observing similarities at the issue level allows for a more granular identification of agreement in a set of members, rather than expecting members to hold similar positions across an entire platform of issues. Members might rely on shared experiences or identities to spur conversation and

learn something about their peers' issue positions, yet ultimately, issue agreement is critical in establishing an observable legislative relationship.

In the absence of being able to quantify the private conversations members have with one another, we rely on a source of expressed issue statements to identify sets of members of Congress with similar issue-level positions. As we explain in greater detail in the sections that follow, we use issue-level statements found on members' campaign websites to determine how aligned a given pair of members is on any particular issue. We do not suggest that members consult each others' campaign websites to learn which of their colleagues think like them on a given topic, yet we argue that campaign websites serve as a valuable source of publicly expressed statements that constrain members' behavior.

Members use campaign websites to signal to both voters and donors how they might behave and what issues they will advocate for if elected to Congress (Druckman, Kifer and Parkin 2009; Herrnson 2015). While members might not have their future colleagues in mind when making issue-level statements on their campaign websites, these statements do serve as a constraint of their future behavior in the sense that it is a publicly expressed statement (Sulkin 2009, 2011; Case, Ommundsen and Porter N.d.). Members of the voting and donating publics can hold members accountable if they deviate substantially from their previously expressed policy preferences. We can, therefore, interpret the issue statements a member publishes on her campaign website as an accurate and binding representation of her policy preferences. It is from these observable issue-level positions that we suggest we can best identify a member's pool of potential legislative collaborators. Members who express similar issue-level goals should be the most likely to form a relationship for the purposes of enacting that policy. While shared experiences and traits can be helpful in building social connections, it is this issue-level agreement — which we observe via campaign websites — that ought to spark the greatest amount of legislative collaboration.

Observing Legislative Partnerships

Having established the necessity of issue-level agreement in fostering legislative partnerships, we observe the presence of these relationships through early-stage legislative collaboration. While some scholars have looked to similar voting records as an indication that members may be closely aligned (e.g., Young 1966; Bogue and Marlaire 1975), others have attempted to identify member-level partnerships through co-signed Dear Colleague letters (Craig 2023). We follow a handful of recent works, however, that identify legislator partnerships through joint participation in the drafting and introduction of legislation in Congress (e.g. Curry and Roberts 2023, 2025; Porter, Harden and Dobson 2025; Ommundsen N.d.; Case, Ommundsen and Porter N.d.).

While similar voting patterns can signal a certain level of agreement between two members, we contend that voting records do not display the presence or absence of a relationship between two members. Members' votes are constrained by the list of bills leadership schedules for a vote, and members' choices are confined to voting for a bill, opposing it, or abstaining. These limiting factors do not allow for a careful observation of congressional relationships; similar voting records, rather, simply depict similar choices by two individuals in a constrained environment. Members co-signing Dear Colleague letters, on the other hand, would signify an active partnership between two or more members. Yet the focus of many of these letters, however, is not legislative. While many Dear Colleague letters are circulated with the hopes of building support for legislation, as discussed by Craig (2023), nearly half of these co-signed letters do not have an express legislative purpose. Members distribute Dear Colleague letters to invite colleagues and staff to briefings and events, to request members' support on a future letter, or to seek support on some policy request. Because we are primarily interested in how legislative partnerships are formed, observing sets of co-signers on the full scope of Dear Colleague letters does not allow us to identify these legislative relationships. We argue, then, that the most appropriate method by which to observe legislative collaborations is through original cosponsorship.

As is explained in greater detail in the sections that follow, we consider members to have formed a legislative relationship when they serve as part of a sponsorship/original cosponsorship team. As both the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate allow just one member to be listed as a sponsor of a given bill, members who worked closely with the sponsor during the drafting stage denote their co-authorship in the form of original cosponsorship. This signal of co-authorship not only denotes an active, working relationship between a team of members, but as the product of this relationship is a piece of legislation, we are able to observe how agreement on a particular issue translates to legislative collaboration on that precise issue in Congress.

We expect that members who express similar issue-level stances on their campaign websites will be most likely to collaborate as original cosponsors. Representatives Gaetz and Ocasio-Cortez’s collaboration is evidence of the fact that collaborators need not agree on all policies, just the one on which they are co-authoring. While we do not expect issue-level agreement to replace shared-trait explanations of partnership formation, we contend that policy agreement adds to the existing story and explains cases in which members collaborate yet do not have experiences or qualities in common.

H1 Expressed Issue Agreement: A pair of members who express similar stances on an issue will be more likely to collaborate on that issue than a pair of members who do not share similar issue positions.

While we hold that common member-level features are not necessary for establishing partnerships, we do expect the effect of issue-level agreement to vary based on features of the potential collaborators. As two members from the same party are more likely to have preexisting social ties and be more closely aligned when it comes to overall measures of ideology, we expect that our measure of expressed issue alignment will have a more pronounced effect on pairs of members from opposing parties.

As is explained below, our analyses focus on the U.S. House of Representatives. While the contemporary U.S. Senate operates under a variety of super-majoritarian procedures

requiring greater levels of bipartisan agreement, the House of Representatives remains a majoritarian institution. In nearly all cases, House leaders can operate without the consent of the minority, meaning there is not the same procedural need for bipartisanship. Observing bipartisan collaboration in the House, then, ought to be perceived as a harder test than if it were to be observed in the Senate, where bipartisan agreement is often necessary for legislative progress. Out-partisans in the House, such as Representatives Ocasio-Cortez and Gaetz, likely do not see eye-to-eye on the vast majority of policies, and do not have a structural reason to collaborate. Yet they do collaborate. We explain this unexpected partnership by their identification of issue-specific common ground, and expect that this pattern of agreement on a particular policy area explains other bipartisan collaborations.

H2 Bipartisan Collaborators: The effect of expressed issue similarity on legislative collaboration will be greater for bipartisan pairs of members than partisan pairs of members.

A final dimension on which we expect issue-level agreement to vary is on a member's seniority. In particular, we expect these effects to be most pronounced when at least one member in a partnership is serving in her first term. While we argue that issue-level agreement is the necessary link for establishing relationships, we again do not purport to claim that social ties are irrelevant in making these connections. As social ties are formed over time as members expand their opportunities to make connections, first-term members will lack many of the connections that their colleagues who have spent more years in Congress have been able to develop. We anticipate that in the absence of opportunities to form these social ties, issue-level agreement will be even more critical to finding legislative collaborators. First-term members, therefore, will be particularly reliant on policy alignment when identifying potential collaborators.

H3 Freshmen Effect: The effect of expressed issue similarity on legislative collaboration will be greater for pairs of members in which at least one member

is a freshman than pairs of members in which both are returning members of Congress.

Data and Measurement

To test our hypotheses, we rely on a dataset of expressed issue commitments from members of the U.S. House of Representatives during their most recent campaign, spanning from 2018 to 2022. With these data, we are able to measure the relative similarity of two members’ issue-level commitments, which we term “expressed issue agreement.” Using these dyadic data reflecting the level of similarity between two members’ stances on a given issue, we then rely on bill-level data to examine whether issue-level agreement translates into realized legislative collaboration. Each of our data sources and measurement strategies are described in detail below.

Measuring Expressed Issue Agreement

An inherent challenge in evaluating whether members’ agreement predicts their legislative collaboration is measuring the degree to which two legislators agree on a particular issue. Rather than relying on a generic measure of ideological agreement across all issues (such as DW-NOMINATE), we evaluate similarity at the level of a particular policy area. When it comes to our application, this issue-level variation is critical because it suggests that two members might agree on healthcare policy but disagree on immigration policy. As a result, we capture issue-specific expressed agreement between members on particular policy areas, as stated on their campaign websites.

We rely on CampaignView — collected by Porter, Case and Treul (2025) across the 2018, 2020, and 2022 congressional elections — to compile a dataset of issue-specific statements made on congressional campaign websites. Campaign websites are a particularly valuable source of expressed positions because they provide detailed statements across a wide range

of issues prior to the start of a Congress. We do not suggest that members of Congress or their staffs actively consult each other’s campaign websites when identifying potential collaborators. Rather, we argue that campaign websites provide a record of candidates’ publicly expressed issue positions before they enter the upcoming Congress. Other sources of member communication could be used to measure expressed agreement, including e-newsletters, speeches, press releases, and social media posts. We focus, however, on campaign websites for two reasons.

First, campaign website statements are observed before members have the opportunity to collaborate legislatively in the Congress to which they are elected. Porter, Case and Treul (2025) collect these issue statements during the week leading up to a member’s primary election, ensuring that the rhetoric we analyze precedes the legislative activity on which we focus later. This temporal aspect is critical because it ensures that our measure of expressed agreement is not shaped by subsequent collaboration or by statements about legislation members are already working on together in the subsequent Congress, which other data sources of expressed statements likely capture. Our goal, moreover, is not to recover the “true” underlying policy agreement between two members. Instead, we seek to capture the extent to which members’ publicly expressed commitments signal agreement between legislators, and therefore potential areas of future collaboration. To the extent that campaign rhetoric reflects genuine policy priorities, greater similarity in these statements should be associated with later legislative collaboration once members enter office.

Second, campaign websites provide a broader and more systematic presentation of candidates’ policy positions than many other forms of political communication. Communications produced during the legislative session likely respond to the issues dominating the political agenda at a particular moment, rather than revealing the fuller set of issues members prioritize and the positions they hold on them. Campaign websites, by contrast, typically include structured issue pages that allow candidates to articulate positions across multiple policy areas at once. Although these statements are still shaped by the electoral context

and by issue salience in a given campaign year (Sachleben and Treul 2026), that salience is tied to the election rather than to the legislative calendar and leaders’ agendas. As a result, campaign websites provide a more systematic representation of the policy positions that candidates bring into office.

Given our goal of measuring expressed agreement within specific policy areas, we begin by identifying which portions of candidates’ campaign website text discuss each policy area, according to categories defined by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). We do so at the paragraph level, using paragraphs drawn from CampaignView “platform points” as the text unit for classification. This choice is important because CampaignView’s researcher-assigned labels operate at the document level and capture only the general topic of a platform point. Platform points, however, often contain multiple paragraphs that address different policy areas, making a single label too broad and failing to capture the variation in policies discussed.⁵ Additionally, several CampaignView policy labels lack specificity, as a handful correspond to multiple CRS bill categories. We, therefore, construct our own paragraph-level policy labels, allowing us to (1) recover narrower policy areas, reflecting the more precise CRS policy codes; (2) measure issue-specific agreement using the text that is most directly relevant to a given topic; and (3) assign multiple policy labels to a single paragraph, when necessary, acknowledging that many paragraphs discuss a variety of policy areas rather than a single topic.⁶ To assign these labels, we rely on a supervised machine learning pipeline to classify whether each paragraph on a campaign website discusses any of the 32 policy topic codes the Congressional Research Service uses to classify bills. To create our training data, a graduate research assistant used a CRS-provided codebook to label a sample of 7,750 campaign paragraphs across all 32 policy areas for which the CRS has categories.⁷ While

⁵In our subsequent classification, we find that 34% of CampaignView platform points address more than one policy topic.

⁶14% of paragraphs address multiple policy topics, justifying our choice of allowing multiple policy areas to be assigned per paragraph while also defining a narrow text unit.

⁷<https://www.congress.gov/help/field-values/policy-area>

we label all 32 categories, we drop policy areas from our data that appeared in fewer than 1% of campaign statement paragraphs.⁸

For the remaining policy areas, we train a separate supervised classifier for each category to identify whether a paragraph discusses that issue. Full details on labeling, the model training process, and models used for the classifier can be found in Appendix A. After training the models, we use a held-out dataset of 750 statements to validate the out-of-sample performance of our classifiers. A full overview of our validation can be found in Appendix A.3. In total, eleven of our policy areas had F1 Scores of greater than 0.8 and all twenty-one exhibited performance above 0.7, suggesting strong performance.⁹ This validation performance is on par or better than other multi-policy area classifications (e.g., Case and Porter 2026). Across the 21 policy areas included in our analysis, members discuss an average of 10.1 issues, or 48.1% of the possible categories, with an inter-quartile range of seven to 13. Nearly all members discuss multiple policy areas: more than 93% discuss at least five, and 16% discuss 15 or more. Healthcare and economics are the most commonly discussed policy areas (>75% of members discuss) while housing, families, and trade and finance are discussed much less frequently (<20% of members). In Appendix A.4, we present descriptive statistics on the issues discussed by members of Congress.

Having identified which policy topic(s) are discussed within a given paragraph, we now use these issue statements to measure the degree of expressed agreement between pairs of members within a given policy area. In other words, we identify which members make similar statements on a particular issue. Importantly, we calculate agreement scores only for pairs of members who both discuss a particular issue during the campaign. Members who do not

⁸These policy areas include Animals; Arts, Culture, Religion; Congress; Emergency Management; Finance and Financial Sector; Law; Native Americans; Public Lands and Natural Resources; Social Sciences and History; Sports and Recreation; and Water Resources Development.

⁹The F1 score is the balance of precision and recall, summarizing how well a classifier balances false positives and false negatives, with higher values indicating better performance. Scores have a minimum of 0 and a maximum of 1.

discuss a given topic, therefore, do not receive a score indicating their level of agreement with other members on that particular issue.¹⁰

We operationalize expressed agreement as the similarity in meaning between two members’ statements for a given policy area. It is important to note that this approach is agnostic to ideological placement within an issue area. Our goal is not to scale members from liberal to conservative, moderate to extreme, or along any other single ideological dimension. Rather, our goal is to capture the extent to which two members articulate similar policy commitments and “agree” on those commitments within an issue area. This is advantageous because it allows us to identify common ground across a diverse set of policy positions, including issue areas that do not map cleanly onto a typical left-right scale. This also allows us to explicitly identify members who take similar positions on an issue, rather than just occupying the same position on a left-right scale.

Previous work measuring text agreement often relies on cosine similarity computed from representations (e.g., document feature representations) that are heavily dependent on word overlap. While useful and straightforward, these approaches can struggle to capture semantic similarity when two politicians express comparable policy commitments using different words, phrases, or rhetorical styles.¹¹ To overcome these measurement hurdles, we rely on text embeddings generated by OpenAI’s text-embedding-3-large model through the OpenAI API, whose training includes contrastive learning tasks (Neelakantan et al. 2022).¹² In con-

¹⁰This means that our subsequent analyses are limited to cosponsorship among members who discuss a given issue during the campaign. This makes for a more difficult empirical test of our theory. Previous work shows that campaign discussion of policy topics is itself predictive of future legislative activity (Sulkin 2009, 2011). Our analysis, therefore, focuses on the subset of members already predisposed to engage with an issue and evaluates whether similarity in their expressed positions structures whether and how they build coalitions in Congress, rather than treating the choice not to discuss an issue as an expression of relative disagreement.

¹¹More recent work improves on this by using cross-encoders to estimate semantic similarity directly, particularly for short political texts (Lin 2025). Cross-encoders jointly process two texts and can provide precise similarity estimates. However, most commonly used cross-encoder implementations remain constrained by transformer input-length limits (typically 256-512 tokens), and longer sequences are truncated once they exceed the model’s maximum input window.

¹²While models such as OpenAI’s text-embedding-3-large model exhibit state-of-the-art performance, they do have the limitation of eventual “digital decay.” We can only generate the embeddings through the API, and while the output is consistent across time, our access to the model depends on OpenAI continuing to

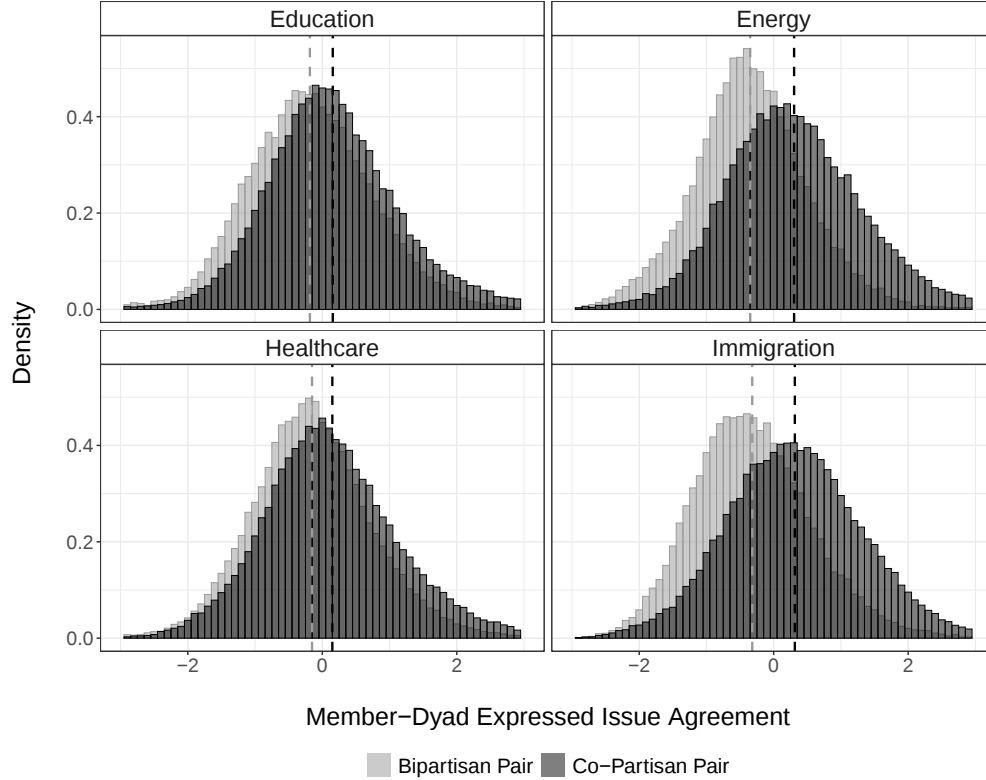
trastive embedding models, document embeddings are encoded into a shared vector space such that semantically related documents are located closer together, and documents that are less semantically similar are located farther apart. More specifically, the model encodes each text input independently into a dense numerical vector, allowing texts to be compared using cosine similarity. This approach is especially useful for our purposes because it allows us to compare campaign statements based on semantic meaning rather than simple word overlap, while also making it computationally feasible to represent each paragraph once and reuse its embeddings across many comparisons.

To construct our measure of expressed issue agreement, we first take a weighted average of the paragraph embeddings for each member within a given policy area for a given election. Paragraph embeddings are weighted by word count. This produces a single embedding for each member-Congress-policy area combination discussed. We do not construct an embedding for policy areas that a member does not discuss. The resulting embedding reflects the overall semantic content of a candidate’s issue text within that policy area. Using these overall issue embeddings, we take the cosine similarity between members who both discuss the same policy topic in the same election year. This subsequent measure captures to which members’ overall rhetoric on a policy area is semantically similar, and thus captures overall expressed agreement on an issue area. We then operationalize this variable to have a mean of zero and standard deviation of one within a policy area to aid with interpretation across policy domains.

Our central argument is that expressed issue agreement between two members of Congress can deviate from the broader ideological similarity between members. Because our measure is designed to capture agreement within particular policy areas, we expect it to be related to members’ overall ideological dispositions, but only weakly so. For example, two members who are ideologically distant overall might still express similar policy positions on a particular issue. Consistent with our argument, the correlation between expressed issue agreement and

maintain access to the API. We found OpenAI’s text-embedding-3-large model greatly outperformed open-source contrastive transformer models, such as Nomic, so we chose OpenAI despite digital decay concerns.

Figure 1: Distribution of Member-Dyad Overall Similarity Scores



Note: Figure plots the distribution of member-dyad overall issue similarity separately for bipartisan and co-partisan pairs across four policy areas: education, energy, healthcare, and immigration. Histograms are scaled to density within each panel, with a mean similarity score of zero and a standard deviation of one. Vertical dashed lines indicate the mean similarity for bipartisan and co-partisan pairs. See Appendix B for the distribution of overall similarity scores across all 21 issue areas.

the absolute distance between two members' DW-NOMINATE scores is only -0.247 . This correlation indicates that pairs of members who have more distinct DW-NOMINATE scores tend to have lower expressed agreement, but this relationship between these variables is relatively weak.

Figure 1 provides a broader view of how these overall similarity scores are distributed across member-dyads for four issue areas: education, energy, healthcare, and immigration. A higher value on corresponds to an instance in which two members have high levels of agreement on a particular issue, whereas a negative score represents dissimilar issue-level statements. We see that, on average, co-partisan pairs of members have higher expressed agreement than bipartisan pairs. There remain many cases, however, where issue agreement

is high for a subset of bipartisan pairs. We also see that, in general, there is a greater spread between bipartisan pairs than co-partisan pairs. This spread among the four issues is greatest among energy and immigration but substantially smaller for education and healthcare. This trend is further demonstrated in the distribution of all 21 issue areas, which can be found in Appendix B. With this measure of expressed issue agreement, we now turn to evaluating whether members who make similar issue-level statements do, in fact, identify one another as viable collaborators and take steps to implement their policy goals through legislative action.

Measuring Legislative Issue Collaboration

To determine whether expressed agreement on an issue is associated with actual legislative collaboration in Congress in that same policy area, we measure legislative collaboration through bill sponsorship and original cosponsorship. While only one member can be listed as the sponsor of an introduced piece of legislation, members frequently sign on to a bill as an original cosponsor to indicate their participation in the bill’s development. It is commonly held that members who are original cosponsors are actively involved in a bill’s creation, and are seen as close collaborators or even “equal partners” in the legislative process (Curry and Roberts 2023). Therefore, when two members appear together in a bill’s sponsorship/original cosponsorship coalition, this provides a direct indicator of legislative collaboration on that bill between a pair (or team) of members.

We collect bill cosponsorship data through the Congress.gov API for all bills introduced in the House of Representatives in the 116th, 117th, and 118th Congresses.¹³ We follow previous work (e.g. Curry and Roberts 2023, 2025; Porter, Harden and Dobson 2025; Case, Ommundsen and Porter N.d.) and define original cosponsors for a piece of legislation as either the sponsor who introduced the legislation or the cosponsors who joined the bill on the day it was introduced. In addition to cosponsorship data, we collect the policy-area

¹³We limit our analyses to House bills and drop all simple, joint, and concurrent resolutions.

classification assigned to each bill by the Congressional Research Service. This allows us to connect our measure of expressed policy agreement to meaningful legislative collaboration within the same issue area.

Related to our measure of expressed agreement, with these data we construct a measure of legislative collaboration for each pair of members within each issue area. This variable equals 1 if the two members were part of the sponsorship/original cosponsorship coalition on at least one bill in that issue area during the relevant Congress, and 0 otherwise. We focus on a binary indicator rather than a count of legislative ties for both theoretical and empirical reasons. Substantively, our interest is in whether a collaborative tie emerges at all within an issue domain, not how many times a particularly active pair introduces legislation together. Empirically, original cosponsorship occurs in a minority of member-issue pairs. There are far fewer original cosponsors on legislation than general cosponsors, and collaboration between a particular pair of members is even less common within an individual policy area. As a result, most member-issue observations involve no original cosponsorship together. The binary indicator, therefore, provides a direct measure of legislative collaboration on an issue area with enough meaningful variation, without placing more weight on a small number of dyads that are especially active in an issue area.

Modeling Legislative Collaboration

To evaluate whether expressed agreement on an issue is associated with greater legislative collaboration in Congress on that issue, we utilize two complementary modeling approaches. A distinctive feature of our data is that for each member-dyad, we observe repeated potential collaboration ties (as observed via joint original cosponsorship) across the set of policy areas both members discuss during their campaigns. In other words, the same two members can be connected in multiple issue areas within a single Congress. We leverage this structure using both fixed- and random-effects models. Together, these approaches allow us to evaluate

whether expressed issue agreement predicts legislative collaboration both across member-dyads and across policy areas within the same member-dyad. For each set of analyses, we estimate separate models for the 116th, 117th, and 118th Congresses, reflecting the fact that the chamber’s membership changes across Congresses, resulting in many dyads appearing in some Congresses and not others.

Our primary independent variable of interest is expressed issue agreement. This measure varies across policy areas within the same member-dyad, allowing us to evaluate whether greater agreement on a particular issue is associated with collaboration on that same issue. In addition to estimating this overall relationship, we are interested in whether the relationship between expressed agreement and collaboration differs across particular types of member pairings. Specifically, we examine whether expressed agreement is more or less strongly associated with collaboration among bipartisan dyads and among dyads that include a freshman member.

Our first modeling approach uses member-dyad fixed effects that rely exclusively on variation across policy areas within the same pair of members. This approach holds constant all observed and unobserved characteristics of a member-dyad that remain stable within a Congress, allowing us to evaluate whether the same pair of legislators is more likely to collaborate on issues where they express greater agreement than on issues where their expressed positions are less similar. Because characteristics such as whether members belong to opposing parties or whether a dyad includes a freshman member do not vary across policy areas within a Congress, their direct effects are absorbed by the member-dyad fixed effects. We are still able, however, to estimate whether the relationship between expressed issue agreement and collaboration differs across these types of member pairings by interacting each characteristic with our measure of expressed issue agreement. We also include policy-area fixed effects and cluster standard errors at the member-dyad level across all fixed-effect models to account for repeated observations of the same pair of legislators across policy areas.

Our second approach uses random-effects models that retain variation across member-dyads. This approach allows us to account directly for observable characteristics that make some pairs of legislators more or less likely to collaborate in general, regardless of the particular policy area. Specifically, we account for whether members are from the same state, whether they serve on a committee together, whether they entered Congress in the same cohort, whether they belong to opposing parties, whether at least one member is a freshman, and the ideological distance between the two members (measured using DW-NOMINATE). Including these characteristics also allows us to benchmark the substantive relationship between expressed issue agreement and legislative collaboration against established predictors of collaborative relationships. Additionally, we include a random intercept for each member-dyad, which captures persistent, unobserved differences across pairs of members in their general propensity to collaborate. Finally, the model also includes policy-area fixed effects to account for differences in the overall propensity for collaboration across issue areas.

Finally, we estimate an additional model to show that our results are robust to explicitly accounting for the network structure of legislative collaboration in Appendix C. Specifically, we estimate a repeated-observation additive and multiplicative effects (AME) model that accounts for broader dependence in legislative relationships across dyads and the fact that members' collaborative ties are embedded within a larger congressional network. Because estimating the AME model with our data structure is computationally intensive, we use this approach as a targeted robustness test rather than estimating the full set of models across all three Congresses. We estimate the model for the 116th Congress and find substantively similar results to those presented in the main text. Appendix C provides full details on the modeling approach and results.¹⁴

¹⁴At the time of writing, appendix models are still running and will be included in future versions.

Results

We begin by evaluating whether expressed issue agreement is associated with a greater likelihood of legislative collaboration. Table 1 presents results from our fixed- and random-effects models separately for the 116th, 117th, and 118th Congresses. Across both modeling approaches and all three Congresses, we find consistent support for our first hypothesis: expressed issue agreement is positively and significantly associated with legislative collaboration in each model. In other words, pairs of members who express more similar stances on the same issue are more likely to collaborate on that issue than members who do not express similar views. Consistent with previous work on legislative collaboration, our random-effects models also show that members are significantly more likely to collaborate when they serve on the same committee or represent the same state, while greater ideological distance and belonging to opposing parties are associated with significantly lower levels of collaboration across all three Congresses.

Previous work has demonstrated that common experiences and institutional ties can provide an important foundation for legislative relationships (e.g., Craig 2023; Curry and Roberts 2023, 2025). Knowing that shared committee membership provides members with repeated opportunities to interact and work together on policy and is predictive of legislative partnerships, we use it as a benchmark for evaluating the substantive magnitude of our measure of expressed issue agreement. The coefficient for expressed issue agreement is substantively meaningful relative to this established predictor of legislative collaboration. In our random-effects models, the coefficient associated with a one-standard-deviation increase in expressed issue agreement is approximately 71% of the size of the coefficient for shared committee membership in the 116th Congress, 51% in the 117th Congress, and 84% in the 118th Congress. Thus, while serving together on the same committee is more strongly associated with collaboration across all three Congresses, expressed agreement on a particular issue exhibits a somewhat similar effect to a clear institutional factor affecting collaboration.

Table 1: Expressed Issue Agreement & Legislative Collaboration

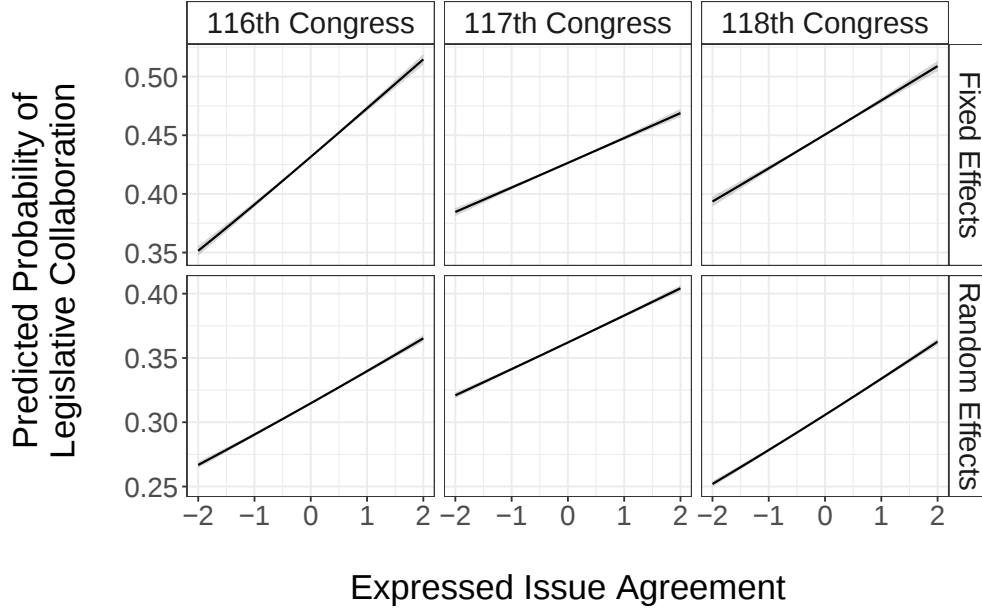
	Dependent variable: Legislative Collaboration					
	116 th Congress		117 th Congress		118 th Congress	
Expressed Issue Agreement	0.31*** (0.01)	0.21*** (0.01)	0.23*** (0.01)	0.20*** (0.01)	0.22*** (0.01)	0.26*** (0.01)
Bipartisan Dyad		-1.49*** (0.04)		-1.94*** (0.04)		-1.52*** (0.04)
Freshman Dyad		-0.47*** (0.02)		-0.96*** (0.02)		-0.44*** (0.02)
Ideological Distance		-2.72*** (0.05)		-2.54*** (0.05)		-3.13*** (0.05)
Shared Committee		0.30*** (0.02)		0.39*** (0.02)		0.30*** (0.02)
Same Cohort		0.03 (0.02)		-0.12*** (0.02)		0.02 (0.03)
Same State		1.05*** (0.03)		0.97*** (0.03)		1.06*** (0.03)
Constant		-0.34*** (0.06)		-0.51*** (0.05)		0.31*** (0.05)
Observations	252,273	390,934	357,996	460,299	259,640	420,631
Member-Dyad FEs	✓		✓		✓	
Member-Dyad REs		✓		✓		✓
Policy Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: Coefficients are logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Dyad-level characteristics are absorbed by the member-dyad fixed effects and are therefore estimated only in the random-effects models. Standard errors for fixed-effects models are clustered by member-dyad.

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

To further provide substantive context of these results, Figure 2 plots the predicted probability of legislative collaboration across levels of expressed issue agreement for each Congress and modeling approach. We hold all other model components at their observed values and vary expressed issue agreement from two standard deviations below to two standard deviations above the mean. Across the fixed-effects models, moving from the mean level of expressed issue agreement to one standard deviation above the mean is associated with a 4.1 percentage-point increase in the predicted probability of collaboration in the 116th Congress, a 2.1 percentage-point increase in the 117th Congress, and a 2.9 percentage-point increase in the 118th Congress. Relative to the predicted probability of collaboration at the mean

Figure 2: Predicted Probability of Legislative Collaboration by Expressed Issue Agreement



Note: Figure plots the predicted probability of legislative collaboration across levels of expressed issue agreement for the 116th (left column), 117th (middle column), and 118th Congresses (right column). Predictions are shown separately for member-dyad fixed-effects (top row) and random-effects models (bottom row). Predicted probabilities are calculated using observed values for all other model components while varying expressed issue agreement from -2 to 2 standard deviations. Shaded regions indicate 95% confidence intervals. Full model results can be found in Table 1.

level of agreement, these changes represent increases of 9.6%, 5.0%, and 6.5%, respectively. We observe similar substantive changes in the random-effects models, where a one-standard-deviation increase in expressed issue agreement is associated with increases in the predicted probability of collaboration of 2.5, 2.1, and 2.8 percentage points, or relative increases of 7.9%, 5.8%, and 9.2%, across the three Congresses. These results demonstrate across both modeling approaches, moving from an average level of expressed issue agreement to one standard deviation above the mean is associated with a substantively meaningful increase in the probability of legislative collaboration.

Next, we evaluate whether the relationship between expressed issue agreement and legislative collaboration differs between co-partisan and bipartisan dyads. Table 2 presents results from our fixed- and random-effects models separately for the 116th, 117th, and 118th Congresses. Across the fixed-effects models, we find consistent support for our second hypothesis: the relationship between expressed issue agreement and legislative collaboration is signifi-

cantly stronger among bipartisan dyads than co-partisan dyads in all three Congresses. The random-effects models provide similar, although somewhat less consistent, evidence. The interaction between expressed issue agreement and bipartisan status is positive and significant in the 116th and 118th Congresses, but is small and not statistically significant in the 117th Congress.

The inconsistent results from the 117th Congress can perhaps be explained by the events that unfolded on January 6th, 2021, at the start of the 117th Congress. As Curry and Roberts (2025) find, several bipartisan relationships were damaged by many Republican members' decision to object to the certification of the 2020 presidential election results. Accordingly, when a bipartisan collaboration might otherwise have been expected due to expressed issue agreement, the events that marked the beginning of the 117th Congress might explain some of the discrepancies in relationship formation in this particular Congress.

Taken together, these results provide evidence that expressed issue agreement generally exhibits a stronger relationship with legislative collaboration among members from opposing parties, although this pattern does not emerge across every model specification.

To provide substantive context for this interaction, Figure 3 plots the change in the predicted probability of legislative collaboration associated with a one-standard-deviation increase in expressed issue agreement for co-partisan and bipartisan dyads (0 to 1). Consistent with the interaction results, the fixed-effects models show a larger increase in the probability of collaboration among bipartisan dyads in each Congress. Moreover, the interaction effect is substantively meaningful, as increases in expressed issue agreement are associated with noticeably larger increases in the probability of legislative collaboration among bipartisan dyads than among partisan dyads.

This difference is most pronounced in the 116th and 118th Congresses. In the 116th Congress, a one-standard-deviation increase in expressed issue agreement is associated with a 5.6 percentage-point increase in the probability of collaboration among bipartisan dyads compared to a 3.7 percentage-point increase among co-partisan dyads. Relative to the pre-

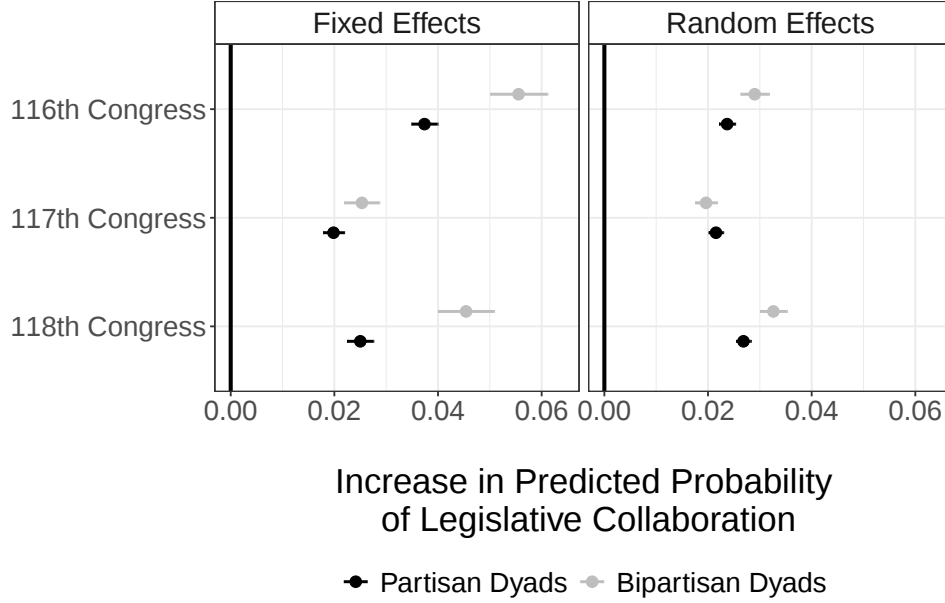
Table 2: Expressed Issue Agreement, Bipartisanship, & Legislative Collaboration

	Dependent variable: Legislative Collaboration					
	116 th Congress		117 th Congress		118 th Congress	
Expressed Issue Agreement	0.28*** (0.01)	0.20*** (0.01)	0.21*** (0.01)	0.21*** (0.01)	0.19*** (0.01)	0.24*** (0.01)
Bipartisan Dyad		-1.49*** (0.04)		-1.94*** (0.04)		-1.52*** (0.04)
Agreement x Bipartisan	0.13*** (0.02)	0.05*** (0.01)	0.06*** (0.02)	-0.02 (0.01)	0.16*** (0.02)	0.05*** (0.01)
Freshman Dyad		-0.47*** (0.02)		-0.96*** (0.02)		-0.44*** (0.02)
Ideological Distance		-2.71*** (0.05)		-2.55*** (0.05)		-3.12*** (0.05)
Shared Committee		0.30*** (0.02)		0.39*** (0.02)		0.30*** (0.02)
Same Cohort		0.04 (0.02)		-0.12*** (0.02)		0.02 (0.03)
Same State		1.05*** (0.03)		0.97*** (0.03)		1.06*** (0.03)
Constant		-0.34*** (0.06)		-0.51*** (0.05)		0.31*** (0.05)
Observations	252,273	390,934	357,996	460,299	259,640	420,631
Member-Dyad FEs	✓		✓		✓	
Member-Dyad REs		✓		✓		✓
Policy Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: Coefficients are logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Dyad-level characteristics are absorbed by the member-dyad fixed effects and are therefore estimated only in the random-effects models. Standard errors for fixed-effects models are clustered by member-dyad. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

dicted probability of collaboration at the mean level of agreement, these correspond to increases of 12.8% and 8.6%, respectively. Similarly, in the 118th Congress, the corresponding increase is 4.5 percentage points among bipartisan dyads compared to 2.5 percentage points among partisan dyads, representing relative increases of 10.1% and 5.5%, respectively. The random-effects models show a similar, though more modest, pattern in the 116th and 118th Congresses, while the estimated changes for partisan and bipartisan dyads are nearly identical in the 117th Congress. Taken together, these results provide further evidence that

Figure 3: Change in Predicted Probability of Legislative Collaboration by Bipartisan Status



Note: Figure plots the change in the predicted probability of legislative collaboration associated with a one-standard-deviation increase in expressed issue agreement for partisan and bipartisan dyads (0 to 1). Results are shown for the 116th, 117th, and 118th Congresses using member-dyad fixed-effects models (left panel) and random-effects models (right panel). We calculate co-partisan and bipartisan effects from the same observed-value baseline within each model. Horizontal lines indicate 95% confidence intervals.

expressed issue agreement is particularly consequential for collaboration across party lines, although the strength of this relationship varies across Congresses and modeling approaches.

Finally, we evaluate whether the relationship between expressed issue agreement and legislative collaboration is stronger among dyads that include at least one member in her first term. Table 3 provides inconsistent support for our third hypothesis. In the fixed-effects models, the interaction between expressed issue agreement and freshman status is negative and significant in the 116th and 117th Congresses and statistically insignificant in the 118th Congress. The random-effects models produce a different pattern, with a positive and significant interaction in the 116th and 118th Congresses but a negative and significant interaction in the 117th Congress. Taken together, these results do not provide evidence that expressed issue agreement is more strongly associated with collaboration among dyads that include freshman members.

Table 3: Expressed Issue Agreement, Freshman Status, & Legislative Collaboration

	Dependent variable: Legislative Collaboration					
	116 th Congress		117 th Congress		118 th Congress	
Expressed Issue Agreement	0.32*** (0.01)	0.20*** (0.01)	0.25*** (0.01)	0.21*** (0.01)	0.22*** (0.01)	0.24*** (0.01)
Freshman Dyad		-0.47*** (0.02)		-0.96*** (0.02)		-0.44*** (0.02)
Agreement $\times$ Freshman	-0.04** (0.02)	0.03** (0.01)	-0.13*** (0.03)	-0.04*** (0.01)	0.00 (0.02)	0.05*** (0.01)
Bipartisan Dyad		-1.49*** (0.04)		-1.94*** (0.04)		-1.52*** (0.04)
Ideological Distance		-2.72*** (0.05)		-2.54*** (0.05)		-3.13*** (0.05)
Shared Committee		0.30*** (0.02)		0.39*** (0.02)		0.30*** (0.02)
Same Cohort		0.03 (0.02)		-0.12*** (0.02)		0.02 (0.03)
Same State		1.05*** (0.03)		0.97*** (0.03)		1.06*** (0.03)
Constant		-0.34*** (0.06)		-0.51*** (0.05)		0.31*** (0.05)
Observations	252,273	390,934	357,996	460,299	259,640	420,631
Member-Dyad FEs	✓		✓		✓	
Member-Dyad REs		✓		✓		✓
Policy Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: Entries are logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Dyad-level characteristics are absorbed by the member-dyad fixed effects and are therefore estimated only in the random-effects models. Standard errors for fixed-effects models are clustered by member-dyad. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

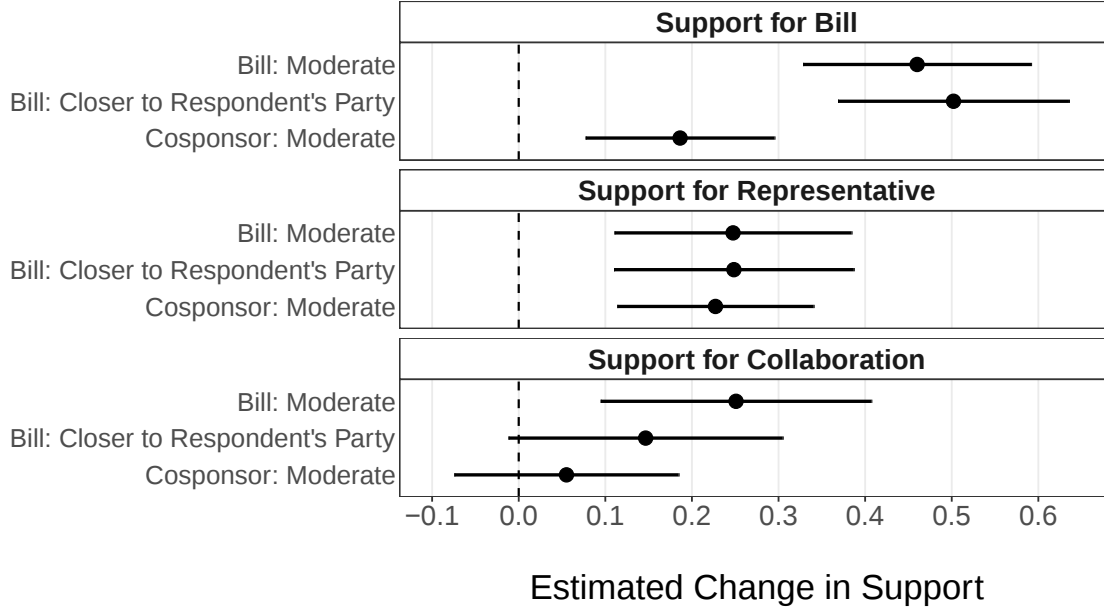
In general, our results demonstrate that expressed issue agreement helps explain when and with whom members of Congress collaborate. Members are more likely to form legislative partnerships on issues where they express similar policy goals, and this relationship is particularly pronounced among bipartisan pairs. These results help explain how members who otherwise appear unlikely to work together — including members who are ideologically distant and disagree across many other policy areas — can nevertheless identify opportunities for legislative collaboration.

Public Preferences toward Bipartisan Collaboration

While we establish that issue agreement generates opportunities for productive lawmaking, identifying common ground does not necessarily mean forming legislative partnerships is without political cost for members of Congress. Members seeking to advance a particular policy goal may have reason to work with any colleague who shares that goal, even when that member occupies a distant position on the broader ideological spectrum. Yet, voters may not evaluate these partnerships in the same manner. A member who identifies an ideologically distant out-partisan as a useful legislative partner may subsequently face political costs for choosing to work with that member, even when the resulting legislation remains ideologically closer to the respondent’s own party than to the opposing party. Alternatively, voters may care less about the ideological disposition of the member with whom their representative collaborates than about where the resulting legislation falls relative to their own party.

To evaluate how voters respond to these bipartisan legislative partnerships, we fielded a survey experiment in which respondents were presented with a hypothetical bipartisan bill introduced in the U.S. Congress. In each vignette, the sponsor of the bill was always a member of the respondent’s own party who collaborated with a member of the opposing party as an original cosponsor. Respondents were randomly assigned to independently varying characteristics of both the out-party cosponsor and the resulting legislation. First, we varied the ideological position of the out-party cosponsor, who was described as either moderate or as holding the ideological position associated with her party (liberal for Democratic cosponsors and conservative for Republican cosponsors). Second, we varied the ideological position of the resulting legislation. The bill was described as either moderate, somewhat liberal, or somewhat conservative. Depending on the respondent’s party, these latter two conditions represented a bill that was ideologically closer to either the respondent’s own party or the opposing party. This design lets us separate voters’ responses to who a representative chooses to work with from their responses to where the resulting legislation falls ideologically relative to their own party.

Figure 4: Voter Evaluations of Bipartisan Legislative Collaboration



Note: Points report OLS coefficient estimates with 95% confidence intervals. Estimates for bill position compare a moderate bill and a bill ideologically closer to the respondent's party with a bill ideologically closer to the opposing party. The cosponsor estimate compares a moderate out-party cosponsor with an ideologically extreme out-party cosponsor. Outcomes range from 1 (strongly oppose) to 5 (strongly support). All models account for the party of the sponsoring representative.

Following the vignette, respondents answered several questions about the legislative partnership on a five-point scale ranging from strongly oppose to strongly support. We focus on three outcomes: respondents' support for the bill itself, their support for the co-partisan representative who sponsored the bill, and their support for the representative's decision to work with the out-party cosponsor. Figure 4 presents the results from our survey experiment. We estimate separate OLS models for each outcome, with respondents' evaluations measured on the five-point scale ranging from strongly oppose to strongly support. In each model, we include indicators for the bill's ideological position, the out-party cosponsor, and the sponsoring representative's party.

We first consider respondents' evaluations of the bill itself. Relative to a bill that is ideologically closer to the opposing party, respondents are substantially more supportive of both a moderate bill and a bill that is ideologically closer to their own party. A moderate bill increases support by 0.46 points on the five-point scale, while a bill closer to the respondent's

party increases support by 0.50 points. The ideological position of the out-party cosponsor also affects evaluations of the legislation, but the effect is considerably smaller. Respondents are 0.19 points more supportive of the bill when the out-party cosponsor is moderate rather than ideologically extreme. Thus, while voters do respond to the ideological position of the member with whom their representative collaborates, their evaluations of the legislation itself are more strongly shaped by whether the resulting policy is ideologically closer to their own party or the opposing party.

We observe a somewhat different pattern when respondents evaluate the co-partisan representative who sponsored the legislation. Respondents are approximately 0.25 points more supportive of the sponsoring representative when the resulting bill is either moderate or ideologically closer to their own party, relative to when it is closer to the opposing party. At the same time, working with a moderate rather than ideologically extreme out-party cosponsor increases support for the sponsoring representative by 0.23 points. These results suggest that the identity of a member's legislative partner can carry some political consequences for evaluations of the member herself. Yet these consequences appear much more limited when respondents are asked directly about the decision to collaborate. While respondents are 0.25 points more supportive of the decision to work across party lines when the resulting bill is moderate rather than ideologically closer to the opposing party, whether the cosponsor is moderate or ideologically extreme has only a small and statistically insignificant effect on approval of the decision to collaborate.

Taken together, these results suggest that voters are attentive to whom their representatives work with, but appear considerably more concerned with what those partnerships ultimately produce, rather than the identity of the collaborator. In particular, members may face relatively limited political costs for working with ideologically distant out-partisans so long as those collaborations do not result in policy outcomes that move closer to the opposing party. These results provide additional context for the patterns we observe in Congress. Members may therefore have greater latitude to form partnerships across the ideological

spectrum when they identify common ground on a particular issue, or when the issue does not map neatly onto a standard left-right spectrum. These survey results help explain why the types of bipartisan collaborations we observe in the previous section can emerge even among otherwise unlikely legislative partners.

Conclusion

Interpersonal relationships are crucial for congressional action and legislative success. While most scholars point to common traits or shared experiences as the spark that ignites a relationship between two members of Congress, we demonstrate that there exists another key factor that both explains and motivates legislative relationships: policy-level agreement.

With data on members' expressed policy statements, as found on their campaign websites, we create a new measure of policy-level similarity for every possible combination of two members in a given Congress. Using text embeddings, we calculate the level of similarity between two members across 21 policy areas. This measure of similarity allows us to employ a variety of models to evaluate the effect of issue-level similarity on the propensity of a pair of members to collaborate as original cosponsors on a piece of legislation in that particular policy area. We find support for our theory, suggesting that issue-level agreement adds to the explanation of why a pair of members would collaborate. In general, we find that expressed issue agreement is a positive and statistically significant predictor of legislative collaboration. In other words, pairs of members who express similar policy-level statements are more likely to establish a partnership for the purposes of legislating on that topic.

Additionally, we find support for our expectation that the effect of issue agreement varies based on the partisan composition of the partnership. We find that the effect of expressing a similar policy preference is stronger in predicting bipartisan collaborations than co-partisan collaborations. This suggests that while members of the opposing party likely do not see eye-to-eye on the vast majority of issues facing Congress, they can and do come together to

form partnerships for the purpose of co-authoring legislation on a particular issue when they find common ground.

We do not find evidence to suggest that the effect of issue agreement varies based on the freshman status of a pair of members. We anticipated that while members in their first term will have had fewer opportunities to build social connections on Capitol Hill they might be more likely to rely on expressed issue statements to identify potential collaborators. We do not, yet, find evidence of this trend, suggesting that members in their first term face higher hurdles to find collaborators.

Lastly, the results of our survey experiment demonstrate that the public is attentive to their members' legislative partnerships, yet not in such a way that discourages cross-party collaborations. While the public might have some preferences about the colleagues their representatives work with, we find that the public has stronger preferences about the policy outcome produced by this partnership than by the collaboration itself. These survey results build on our descriptive data to explain why unexpected bipartisan collaborations continue to persist.

While common experiences, including travel, or shared traits, such as a common home-state or congressional cohort, do shed light on how many congressional relationships are formed, we add to this story to suggest that these factors are not necessary, nor are they sufficient in explaining why a pair of members might collaborate. If a set of members is going to co-author a piece of legislation, this necessarily presumes that these members agree on the policy content of the bill they plan to introduce. We demonstrate that all else equal, members who express similar issue-level preferences are more likely to collaborate as legislative partners. This result sheds light on how and why members identify their collaborators, and even explains many otherwise unexpected bipartisan partnerships.

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Predicting Partnerships: Congressional Issue Alignment and Legislative Collaboration

Colin R. Case Emily Cottle Ommundsen

Supporting Information

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A Supervised Machine Learning Pipeline

A.1 Hand Labeling Process

To train our supervised classifiers, we first constructed a hand-labeled set of campaign website paragraphs using the Congressional Research Service’s policy area framework. A graduate research assistant labeled 7,750 campaign paragraphs using the CRS policy area codebook provided at <https://www.congress.gov/help/field-values/policy-area>. These labels covered all 32 policy areas used by CRS.

Applying the CRS framework to campaign text required judgment in some cases, as the descriptions in the CRS codebook do not always map cleanly onto how candidates discuss policy on their websites, or are not specific enough to make a determination. When the appropriate policy area was not clear from the codebook alone, we identified substantively similar legislation on Congress.gov and used the policy area assigned to that legislation to resolve the ambiguity. This procedure allowed us to align our labeling decisions with how the CRS framework is applied in practice. It also ensured that our labeled categories correspond with legislation, which is our ultimate goal with this classification.

Although we labeled paragraphs across the full set of 32 CRS policy areas, not all categories appeared frequently enough in campaign text to support downstream classification. After hand labeling, we therefore dropped policy areas that appeared in fewer than 1% of campaign statement paragraphs.¹ We retained the remaining policy areas for the supervised machine learning pipeline.

A.2 Supervised Machine Learning Classification

We next used the hand-labeled paragraphs to train a supervised machine learning classifier for each of the twenty-one CRS policy areas. For every policy area, we estimated a separate binary classifier in which the outcome indicated whether a paragraph belonged to that topic. This approach allowed a paragraph to be evaluated independently for each policy area rather than a single multiclass assignment.

Before model fitting, we pre-processed paragraph text by converting all characters to lowercase, removing punctuation, and removing English stop words. We then transformed the text into a term frequency–inverse document frequency (tf-idf) matrix, which served as the feature input for all supervised models.

We split our labeled data into 7,000 observations for model training and 750 observations for held-out validation after the training process. Using the training data, we fit and tuned a common set of classifiers for each policy area. Specifically, for every topic, we estimated support vector machine, decision tree, random forest, gradient boosting, lasso logistic regression, ridge logistic regression, and XGBoost models. We selected hyperparameters through five-fold cross-validation on the training data. Table 4 reports the full set of tuning parameters considered in the grid search.

After selecting the best-performing specification for each model, we re-fit the tuned classifier on the full training set and generated predictions for the training data, the held-out test

¹Animals, Arts, Congress, Emergency, Finance, Law, Native Americans, Public Lands, Social Studies and History, Sports, and Water.

Table 4: Model Tuning Parameters

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

set, and the full set of unlabeled campaign paragraphs. We also constructed a stacking classifier for each policy area. The stacking model used the tuned base classifiers as component learners and a logistic regression model as the final estimator. This procedure allowed us to compare the performance of individual algorithms to an ensemble approach that combines information across models.

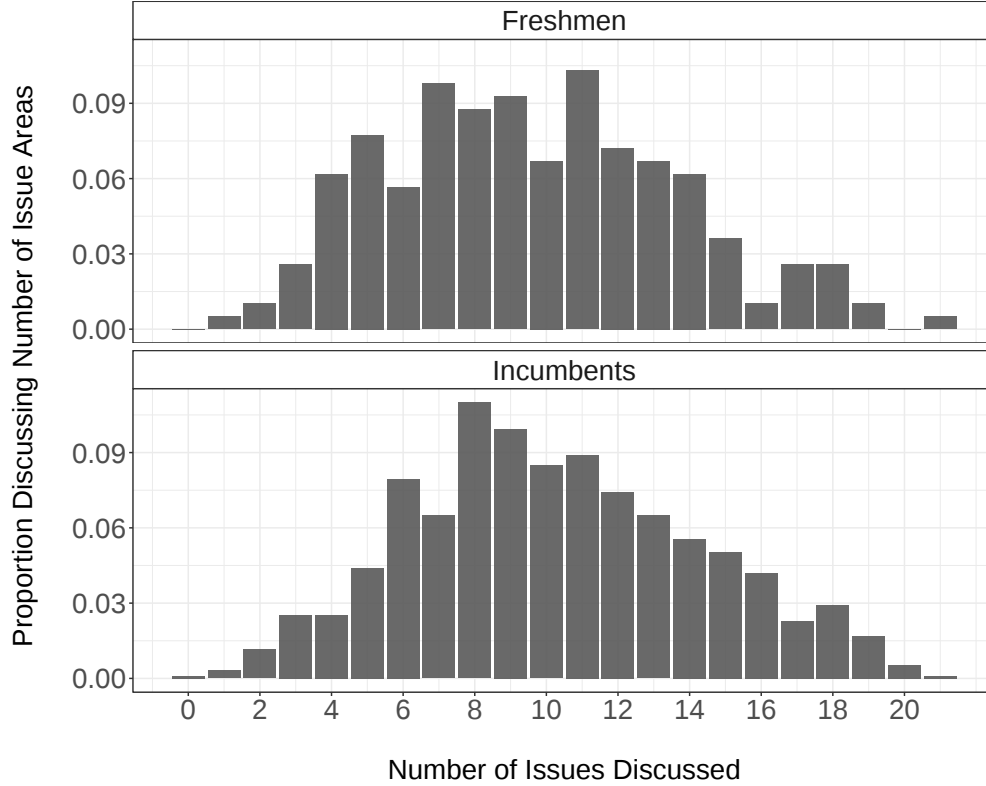
A.3 Validation

We validate our supervised classification approach using the held-out test set, which was not used at any stage of model tuning (Park and Montgomery 2025). For each retained policy area, we compared the out-of-sample performance of all candidate classifiers and selected the final model based on its held-out F1 score. Validation results indicate that the classifiers perform well overall on unseen campaign text. Across the 21 retained policy areas, held-out accuracy averages 0.985 and ranges from 0.961 to 0.997, while F1 scores average 0.814 and range from 0.714 to 0.961. No single model dominated across all policy areas. Ridge logistic regression produced the best held-out performance for seven policy areas, stacking for six, support vector machines for three, XGBoost for two, and gradient boosting, lasso, and random forest for one policy area each. We report policy-specific held-out accuracy, precision, recall, and F1 scores for the selected model in Table 5.

Table 5: Held-Out Validation Performance for Final Policy Area Classifiers

Policy Area	Final Model	Accuracy	Precision	Recall	F1 Score
Agriculture and Food	SVM	0.989	0.857	0.667	0.750
Armed Forces & National Security	Ridge	0.983	0.889	0.903	0.896
Civil Rights & Liberties	Ridge	0.961	0.821	0.867	0.843
Commerce	SVM	0.989	1.000	0.579	0.733
Crime & Law Enforcement	Ridge	0.975	0.781	0.676	0.725
Economics & Public Finance	Ridge	0.975	0.702	0.868	0.776
Education	Ridge	0.980	0.875	0.933	0.903
Energy	SVM	0.989	0.875	0.875	0.875
Environmental Protection	XGBoost	0.987	0.826	0.760	0.792
Families	Stacking	0.993	0.875	0.636	0.737
Foreign Trade	Gradient Boosting	0.995	1.000	0.556	0.714
Government Operations and Politics	Stacking	0.989	0.813	0.722	0.765
Health	Stacking	0.963	0.916	0.858	0.886
Housing & Community Development	Stacking	0.997	1.000	0.818	0.900
Immigration	Stacking	0.995	1.000	0.925	0.961
International Affairs	Lasso	0.981	0.815	0.710	0.759
Labor & Employment	Random Forest	0.973	0.718	0.757	0.737
Science, Technology, Communications	XGBoost	0.995	1.000	0.667	0.800
Social Welfare	Ridge	0.991	0.889	0.762	0.821
Taxation	Ridge	0.992	0.810	0.895	0.850
Transportation & Public Works	Stacking	0.993	1.000	0.783	0.878

Figure 5: Number of Issue Areas Discussed by Incumbency Status



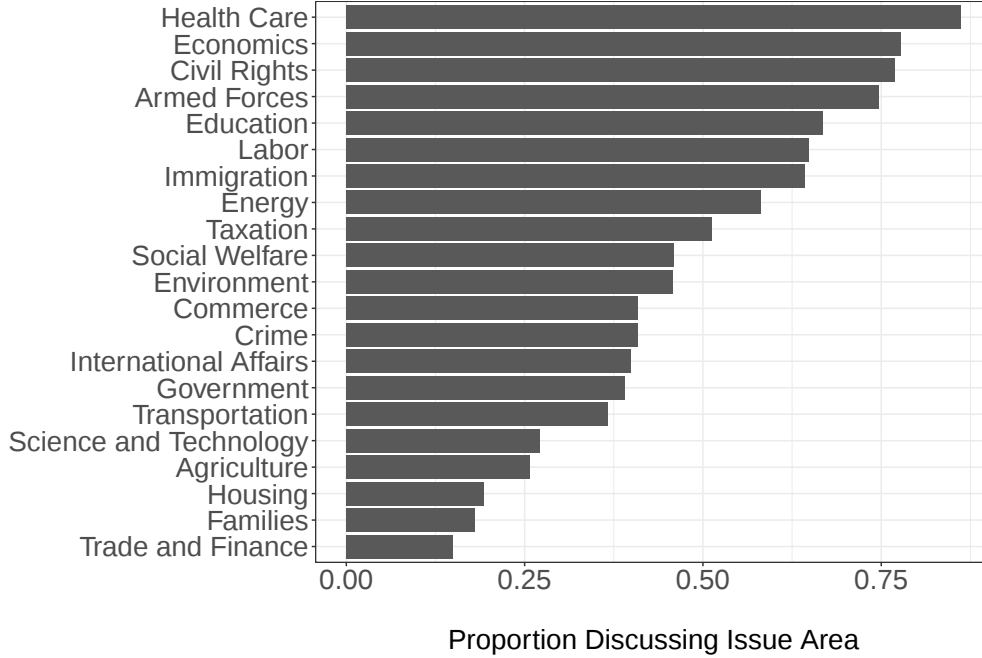
Note: Figure plots the proportion of incoming freshmen members (top facet) and incumbent members (bottom facet) by the number of issue areas they discuss on their campaign websites, ranging from 0 to 21. Members without a website or without an issue page are excluded.

A.4 Policy Discussion Descriptive Statistics

Overall, members vary considerably in the breadth of policy discussion on their campaign websites. Across the 21 policy areas included in our analysis, members discuss an average of 10.1 issues, or 48.1% of the possible categories, with an inter-quartile range of seven to 13. Nearly all members discuss multiple policy areas: more than 93% discuss at least five, and 16% discuss 15 or more. Figure 5 shows the distribution of the number of policy areas discussed, separately for freshmen and returning incumbents. The two groups look quite similar. Freshmen discuss an average of 9.62 policy areas, compared with 10.3 policy areas for returning members, suggesting that incoming legislators enter office with broadly comparable levels of issue breadth in their campaign communications, regardless of whether it was their first campaign or not.

Beyond the number of policy areas a candidate mentions, candidates also vary substantially in which policy areas they choose to discuss. Figure 6 plots the proportion of incoming members discussing each of the 21 retained CRS policy areas, excluding those without issue pages on their campaign websites. Some policy areas appear on a large majority of websites; Health Care (86%), Economics and Public Finance (78%), Civil Rights and Liberties (77%), and Armed Forces and National Security (75%) are each discussed by more than 70% of incoming members. Other topics are much less common; fewer than 30% of members discuss

Figure 6: Proportion of Incoming Members Discussing Each Policy Category

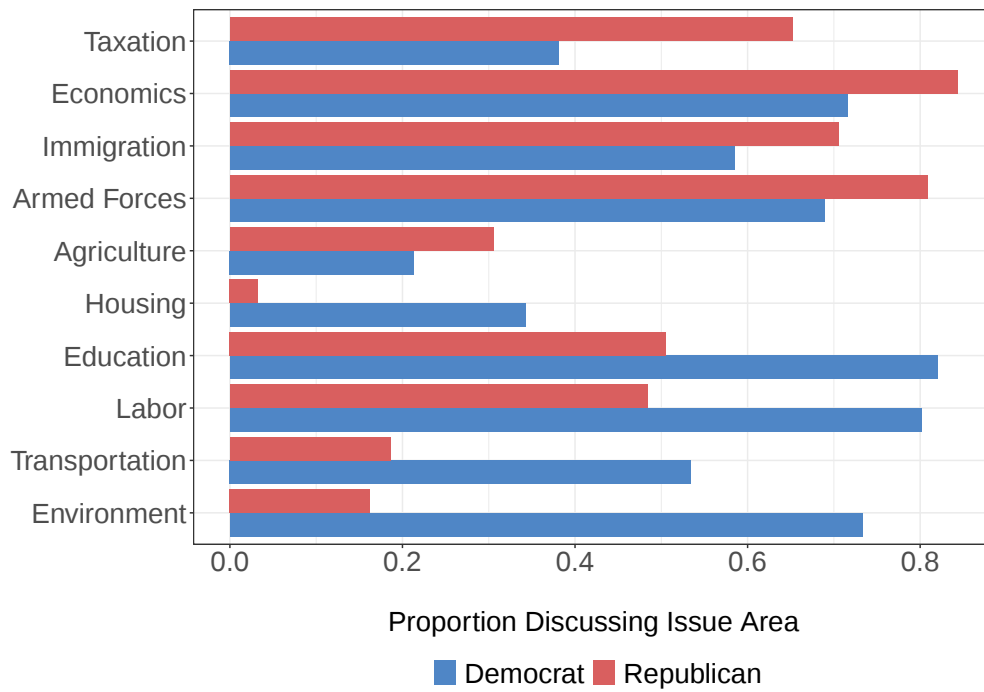


Note: Figure plots the proportion of incoming members with campaign website issue pages who discuss each of the 21 retained CRS policy areas.

Science and Technology (27%), Agriculture and Food (26%), Housing (19%), Families (18%), and Trade and Finance (15%). This uneven distribution reinforces the value of our issue-specific measurement: opportunities for expressed agreement are not equally likely across policy areas because members are not equally likely to articulate positions on every issue.

Discussion of policy areas is also strongly structured by party. Figure 7 plots the five issues with the largest Democratic advantage and the five with the largest Republican advantage in the share of candidates discussing the issue. Consistent with prior research on party-issue ownership in campaigns (e.g., Sachleben and Treul 2026), Republicans are more likely than Democrats to discuss Taxation (difference = 0.27), Economics and Public Finance (0.13), Immigration (0.12), Armed Forces and National Security (0.12), and Agriculture and Food (0.09). Democrats, by contrast, are substantially more likely to discuss Environmental Protection (difference = 0.57), Transportation and Public Works (0.35), Labor and Employment (0.32), Education (0.31), and Housing and Community Development (0.31). These patterns are broadly consistent with the issue emphases identified in CampaignView and in recent work on party-issue ownership in congressional campaigns. More importantly for our purposes, they show that expressed agreement is conditioned not only by how similarly two members talk about an issue, but also by whether members of each party choose to discuss that issue at all.

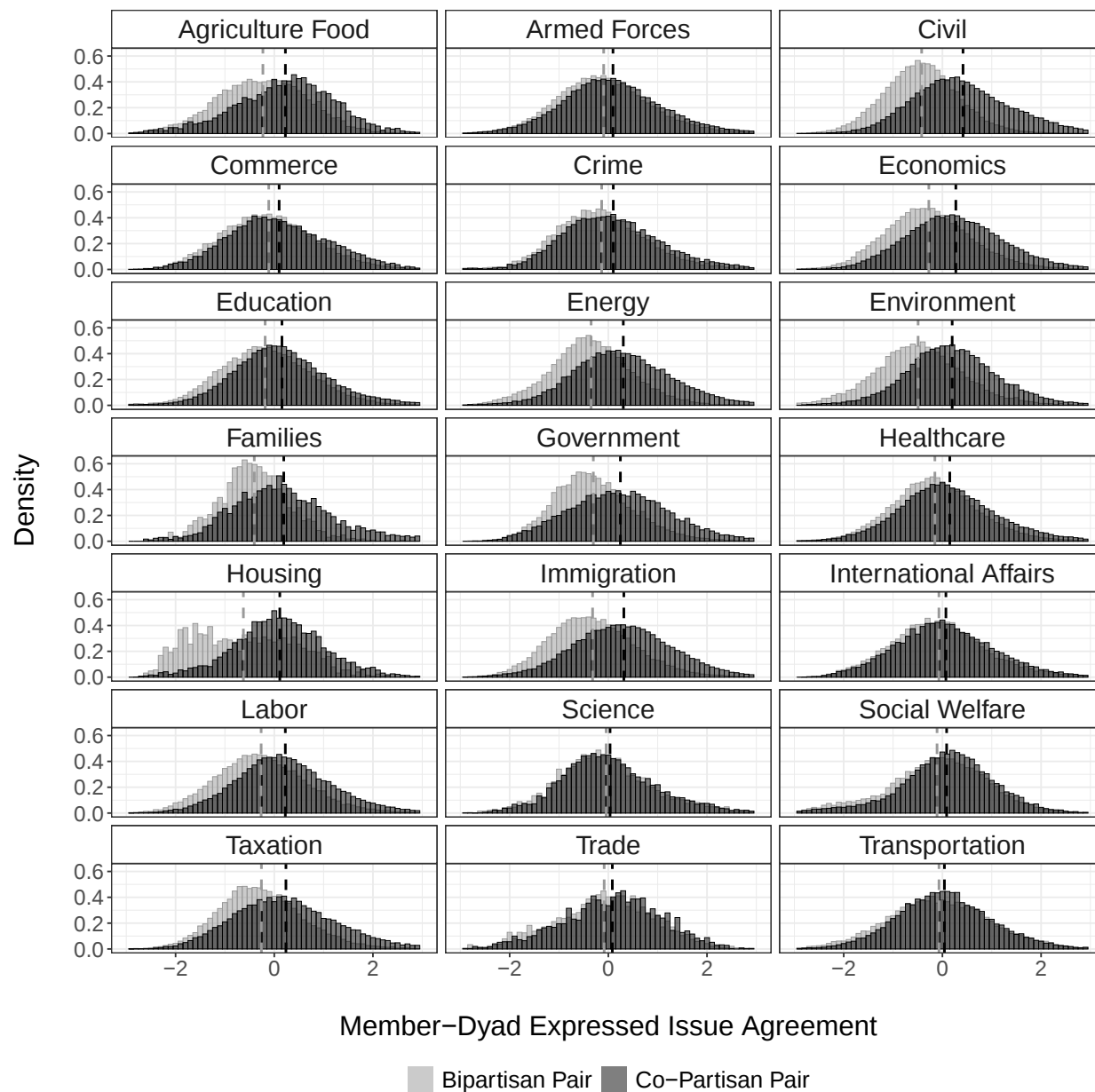
Figure 7: Proportion of Incoming Members Discussing Policy Areas, by Party



Note: Figure plots the five policy areas with the largest Democratic advantage and the five with the largest Republican advantage in the proportion of incoming members discussing the issue on their campaign websites.

B Similarity Measurement Distribution by Policy Area

Figure 8: Distribution of Member-Dyad Overall Similarity Scores



Note: Figure plots the distribution of member-dyad similarity separately for bipartisan and partisan pairs. Histograms are scaled to density within each panel, with a mean similarity score of zero and a standard deviation of one. Vertical dashed lines indicate the mean similarity for bipartisan and partisan pairs, respectively.

C Alternative Specification: Network Models

As an additional test of the relationship between expressed issue agreement and legislative collaboration, we estimate a repeated-observation additive and multiplicative effects (AME) network model. The fixed- and random-effects models presented in the main text account for repeated observations of the same member-dyad across policy areas. However, they do not explicitly model the broader network structure in which these collaborative relationships are embedded. This includes the fact that members share potential collaborators, some legislators are generally more likely to participate in collaborative relationships than others, and pairs of members may be connected as part of broader patterns of cooperation within Congress. The AME model provides a complementary approach that allows us to account explicitly for these forms of network dependence while continuing to evaluate whether greater expressed agreement on a particular issue is associated with collaboration on that same issue.

The AME model accounts for dependence in legislative collaboration through both additive and multiplicative components. The additive component captures persistent differences across legislators in their general propensity to participate in collaborative relationships. In substantive terms, this accounts for the possibility that some members are generally more legislatively active or more likely to form original cosponsorship ties across policy areas. The multiplicative component captures residual patterns of dependence in the broader congressional network that are not explained by the observed covariates or these member-specific tendencies. This component allows the model to account for underlying patterns of clustering and repeated cooperation among legislators that may make particular collaborative relationships more likely to emerge.

As in our primary analyses, the unit of analysis is the member-dyad within a policy area. The dependent variable indicates whether the two members share an original cosponsorship tie in that policy area. For each member-dyad, we therefore observe repeated potential collaboration ties across the set of policy areas discussed by both members during their campaigns. Because estimation of the repeated-observation AME model is substantially more computationally intensive than our primary specifications, we only estimate the model for the 116th Congress. Our primary independent variable remains expressed issue agreement. Across the three models, we replicate the control variables used in the random-effects models in the body of the paper.

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