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Better Left Unsaid: The Connection Between Members of Congress, Presidents, and Political Ambiguity

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BETTER LEFT UNSAID: THE CONNECTION BETWEEN MEMBERS OF CONGRESS, PRESIDENTS, AND POLITICAL AMBIGUITY

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By

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Under the mentorship of Dr. Joshua Kennedy

During the course of an election cycle, candidates often deliver vague statements regarding their positions on policies. Furthermore, incumbent candidates typically have a record of obscure actions unknown to the voter. Presently, existing literature maintains ambiguity in terms of an interaction between the candidate and the constituent. According to this literature, candidates use ambiguity to exploit voter uncertainty on policy issues. However, I argue that congressional members, motivated by re-election, will act similarly to candidates by utilizing ambiguity. In this research, I propose that it is the president's popularity that triggers a congressional member's ambiguity. Using a method of linear regression, I measure the rate of congressional ambiguity from 1996 to 2016 to find some support for this theory.

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<u>Introduction</u>

In 2015, Republican Senators Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio sparred over immigration during a GOP presidential debate. Rubio accused Cruz of supporting the legalization of undocumented immigrants. Cruz fervently denied these charges. Instead, he stated: "I have never supported legalization, and I do not intend to support legalization" (Sarlin 2015). Some in the news noted that it was "the furthest that Cruz [had] gone in outlining whether he would allow more than 11 million undocumented immigrants to continue living in the U.S. through an earned pathway to citizenship or legalization" (Sakuma 2015).

Rubio's accusation was in reference to statements Cruz made in 2013. That year, members of Congress (MCs) were bitterly divided over immigration reform. The Gang of Eight bill represented a bipartisan effort that offered, among other things, a 13-year pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants (Sarlin 2015). Cruz opted for "common-sense immigration reform" and proposed three additional amendments be added to the bill. Cruz's primary amendment called for removing the pathway to citizenship component, but it also offered a route to work permits and green cards for undocumented immigrants (Sarlin 2015).

Before the Senate Judiciary Committee, Cruz stated:

> *If the objective is to pass common sense immigration reform that secures the borders, that improves legal immigration, and that allows those who are here illegally to come in out of the shadows, then we should look for areas of bipartisan agreement and compromise to come together…* (Saletan 2015)

Although "out of shadows" alludes to the legalization of undocumented immigrants, Cruz never explicitly stated that he was in favor of legalization. Following his speech, numerous articles reported on Cruz's "careful words in 2013" that allowed him to "avoid being locked down as in favor of legalization" (Kim 2015).

With the intention of bettering their political images, maintaining their voting bases, or to avoid being held accountable, politicians may purposely choose to be unforthcoming on their political positions through their remarks or actions. Vague statements, avoiding roll-call votes, burying bills, and quiet lobbying are practices routinely utilized by MCs and presidents (Page 1976). Therefore, political ambiguity has become a common practice in all facets of government.

Congress and the presidency differ with respect to the number of terms they can serve in their position. While MCs are not limited by the number of terms in office they can pursue, presidents are constitutionally prohibited from pursuing more than two consecutive terms in office. Thus, serving in Congress does not necessitate a short-term endeavor. It often becomes a career. In 2014, the Senate published an extensive profile on the 113th Congress. The average length of service for a member of the House was 9.1 years or 4.6 terms (Manning 2014). Meanwhile, a member of the Senate, on average, invested 10.2 years or 1.7 terms of service (Manning 2014). Therefore, maintaining a positive image is crucial for any MC seeking re-election, and MCs would prefer not to detract or destabilize their political image.

Richard F. Fenno Jr.'s research on congressional behavior concluded that voters are typically supportive of their MC but disapprove of Congress as a collective whole (Fenno 1978). If Fenno's assessment is to be believed, Congress's popularity is irrelevant

to individual MCs who seek re-election. The focus of each MC is centered on his or her perception among the constituency. Therefore, to maintain and collect more votes, they are incentivized to preserve a positive image in relation to their constituents.

However, unlike Congress, the presidency is confined to a single person, and the president's popularity is a direct reflection of public opinion. Thus, MCs will consistently monitor the president's popularity to gather insight on the general public's mood. Given that the underlying goal of MCs is to preserve their seats, it may be in their best interest to be ambiguous on certain issues during the course of a presidency. By doing so, an MC adjusts to the voter's opinions and enjoys a favorable perception among constituents.

To what extent is the rate of political ambiguity demonstrated by MCs dependent upon the president's popularity? I argue that, in an effort to preserve their political images, MCs will demonstrate political ambiguity as the president's popularity declines. The extent of ambiguity will be contingent upon partisanship. Republicans may be more ambiguous under a Republican president, and Democrats may be more ambiguous under a Democratic president.

Nevertheless, by choosing to remain ambiguous, lawmakers avoid remarks and positions that are negatively associated with the presidency. Essentially, they distance themselves from a potential political firestorm. Furthermore, they reduce the likelihood that these positions and remarks will be used against them during an upcoming election cycle. Therefore, I believe that exercising political ambiguity gives sitting MCs greater flexibility to conduct their affairs without immediate fear of reprisal by their constituents.

To my knowledge, the argument I make is the first of its kind. Much of the research surrounding political ambiguity focuses on candidate and voter behavior during an election cycle. Scholars have identified voter uncertainty on policy issues and the candidate's exploitation of that uncertainty as cause for political ambiguity. This research, by contrast, represents a departure from current research on political ambiguity. First, this research examines in-office behavior rather than candidate behavior. Second, I consider the president's popularity as an alternative explanation for the political ambiguity demonstrated by sitting MCs.

Therefore, I anticipate this research adding a new dimension to the current study of ambiguity. While scholars have studied the ambiguity exemplified by candidates, they have failed to consider the ambiguity demonstrated by MCs as a potential and new area of study. Thus, the results of this research may offer congressional scholars a new course of study on the behavior of sitting MCs.

This research investigates the relationship between these new variables, briefly discusses the payoffs to being ambiguous, and seeks to add dimension to existing literature. I begin with a discussion of factors related to my theory. Then, I outline the methodology for this research, which is predominantly quantitative. Finally, I conclude with an overview of the results from this research and a series of future considerations on the topic of political ambiguity.

Literature Review

At present, there is no research that connects the president's popularity to congressional behavior as a possible explanation for political ambiguity. For this reason, I

explain the dynamics of the president's popularity with emphasis on his or her perception in public and the reaction by Congress. While the president's approval ratings may constitute as the trigger for congressional member ambiguity, internal ambition may prove to be an extension of that trigger. Because ambition propels elections and it establishes voting patterns, it is reviewed. Finally, since current research on ambiguity is modeled after candidate behavior and I assume ambitious MCs act similarly to candidates, I discuss current theories of political ambiguity among candidates.

Presidential Popularity

Throughout the campaign process, a presidential candidate outlines an agenda. When elected, a president must have legislative support to fulfill that agenda. Research suggests that this agenda is supported by MCs when his or her popularity is relatively high (Bond and Fleisher 1984; Barrett and Eshbaugh-Soha 2007). This is especially true for areas of domestic policy and support in the House (Edwards 1976). Because of electoral security concerns, Senate and House members are generally responsive to the president's popularity among their constituents (Edwards 1976). In fact, members with greater electoral vulnerability are often more likely to be responsive to their constituents as opposed to members that are electorally assured (Cohen, Bond, Fleisher, and Hamman 2000).

Any decline in the president's popularity is a result of the public's assessment on his or her performance along "social, economic, and international" fronts (Ostrom and Simon 1985, 354). Furthermore, scholars have noted the connection between a decline in

public expectations of the president and a decline in the president's popularity based on his or her job performance (Sigelman and Knight 1983). The two are interrelated. Thus, taken together, much of the president's popularity among the public requires the support of Congress, and if the president is to maintain support, he or she must be able to persuade MCs to complete his or her agenda (Ostrom and Simon 1985).

Although the president's popularity is a national-level indicator of public approval, many studies have argued that there is a weak or mixed relationship between congressional support and presidential popularity (Borrelli and Simmons 1993). Bond and Fleisher (1980) found that public approval of the president may not influence Congress to legislate on his or her proposals. Therefore, the ability of the president to pass his or her agenda and gain public approval may largely depend on the party in control of Congress (Bond and Fleisher 1980; Bond, Fleisher, and Wood 2003). Furthermore, MCs from districts with high presidential electoral performance are likely to be more responsive to presidential popularity (Borrelli and Simmons 1993).

Still, some research has denied the relationship between the number of congressional votes the president receives and the president's popularity (Bond and Fleisher 1984). Instead, it is public opinion that indirectly affects support for the president's agenda in Congress (Bond and Fleisher 1984). Bond and Fleisher, in quoting Tufte (1975, 826), reiterated that midterm congressional elections are a referendum where "voters reward or punish the President" (Bond and Fleisher 1984, 304). But, because voters have specific information on the president's support in Congress, "it is unlikely that members of the President's party can avoid punishment at the polls by lowering their support for an unpopular President, or that members of the opposition

party can benefit greatly by increasing their support for a popular President" (Bond and Fleisher 1984, 305). In concluding, they suggested that the president's popularity determines his or her success in Congress by influencing the number of members who win seats in Congress (Bond and Fleisher 1984; Lockerbie, Borrelli, and Hedger 1998). These members translate into votes that are useful in passing the president's agenda, and they could result in the preservation or achievement of legislative control.

If the president's popularity is related to the fulfillment of his or her agenda and that agenda relies on legislative support, the president is cornered when Congress is unwilling to work with him or her. So, if elections are an area of particular concern for MCs and voting records are public, it should be expected that Congress would offer its support to the president's agenda, particularly members of the president's party.

However, Congress is rewarded by the public with higher levels of approval when conflicts with the president result in legislative vetoes (Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht 1997). MCs also enjoy increased public approval when two conditions are *jointly* met. First, the majority in Congress and the president must share the same party. Second, Congress, the majority ideally sharing the president's vision, must support the president's agenda (Patterson and Caldeira 1990). Achieving a federal government under single-party control has become exceedingly rare. Since 1980, there have only been five instances of united government, and a united government does not guarantee that congressional-presidential relations will be tension-free (Struyk 2017).

Furthermore, research has long determined that legislators are rewarded when they vote along their constituents' preferences (Jones 2011; Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002). However, the preferences of constituents may not always align with the

president's agenda. What a Democratic city of the North regards as important may be entirely different than that of a Democratic city of the South. Thus, why should Congress be concerned with passing legislation related to the president's agenda if it does not align with the values of its constituents? The answer may be partially explained by the degree of political ambition a politician possesses.

Political Ambition

MCs may defect from the president's agenda due to the degree of political ambition politicians hold. The field of politics has been compared to a career ladder that lawmakers climb beginning at the local level to the national level (Fox and Lawless 2005). For some MCs, serving on Capitol Hill is only a stepping stone. The office of the presidency or cabinet positions represent the highest step of national politics, and sitting MCs with ambition are still far from that point. For other ambitious MCs, who are expendable, simply maintaining their seat is enough. Thus, ambitious MCs, who desire to climb or remain on the ladder, that are concerned with an unpopular president might be willing to risk ambiguity to save face.

Joseph Schlesinger, a pioneer of research on political ambition, divided ambition into three categories. Discrete ambition is when lawmakers are forthcoming about the set number of terms they wish to seek in a single office, and they admit they will retire at the end of that term (Herrick and Moore 1993). Static ambition occurs when a politician intends to make a career out of a particular office (Herrick and Moore 1993). Finally,

progressive ambition is one where a politician intends to attain higher levels of office or to climb the ladder of politics (Herrick and Moore 1993).

Herrick and Moore (1993) propose there is a fourth type of ambition distinct from Schlesinger's ambitions. Intrainstitutional ambition involves a politician intentionally seeking a leadership position, like Speaker of the House, within the institution they serve (Herrick and Moore 1993). Evidence has shown that there are ambitious members of the House that enter office with the intention of obtaining a leadership position within the House in the future (Herrick and Moore 1993).

Politicians with an interest in pursing a career in politics are ambitious. Congressional scholars have found evidence suggesting that sitting MC's policy stances are influenced by their desire to pursue further terms (Hibbing 1986; Maestas 2003). Furthermore, research on state legislators has concluded that progressive ambition often compels them to closely monitor the preferences and opinions of their constituents (Maestas 2003).

Recall that progressive ambition is for politicians with aims to achieve higher offices. At the national level, discounting that Congress is nearly the top of the ladder, there are a limited number of seats in leadership positions within Congress. The House and Senate are composed of committees and subcommittees and majority and minority leadership positions. These seats are not available every election cycle, and there is no guarantee that certain contenders, with intrainstitutional ambition, are predisposed to win the position.

Therefore, it would be wise for politicians at the national level, as with any level, to maintain static ambition to hold their seats if lawmaking is their career, and if they have a leadership position in mind, to continue to take actions that place them closer to that goal. For MCs, expressing ambiguity, at a point when public support for the president is low, may be the difference between salvaging their career and essentially terminating it.

Theory of Political Ambiguity Among Candidates

If MCs appear before the media and their constituencies, it is difficult to comprehend why they would choose to be vague or to avoid touting a position while in office. Voting records are easily accessible, and the media reports on and broadcasts legislative activity. Politicians are employees of their constituency. If they cannot complete the simplest of tasks, like adequately representing the interests of their constituency, an employee would expect to face reprimand or dismissal by an employer. Therefore, fear of dismissal should encourage lawmakers to be clear about every policy.

However, this entire assumption depends on an actively-informed voting population, but scholars have discovered that voters are often ill-informed (Abbe, Goodliffe, Herrnson, and Patterson 2003). Furthermore, most lack a "consistent set of personal beliefs against which they can judge candidates' positions" upon (Abbe, Goodliffe, Herrnson, and Patterson 2003, 420).

Some researchers have suggested that ambiguity may be advantageous to the candidate (Tomz and Van Houweling 2009; Karp and Garland 2007). Because a

candidate may be uncertain about his or her voter's preferences, he or she has no incentive to vocalize a clear position (Glazer 1990; Milita, Ryan, and Simas 2014).

Glazer (1990) posits two reasons for candidate ambiguity. First, voter turnout for elections may be so random that the candidate may not be aware of the median voter preference when he or she announces a position (Glazer 1990). Second, the conditions may change between the present and Election Day in such a manner to influence voter preference at the ballot box (Glazer 1990). Glazer (1990) argued that "a deteriorating economy, foreign crises, [and] financial panics can…alter the preferences of voters" (238). Hence, voter preference is highly unpredictable.

For some voters, ambiguity is a plus factor in elections, and as such, they may be willing to risk voting for the ambiguous candidate. Evidence also suggests that when voters are less confident in their personal positions on legislative issues, they select the ambiguous candidate (Tomz and Van Houweling 2009). In this case, voters perceive ambiguity as being correlated to flexibility, which aligns with the nature of politics. No two days are alike on Capitol Hill and possessing flexibility would be an asset.

Lastly, Tomz and Van Houweling (2009) determined that voters may overlook the ambiguity of their party's candidate based on the belief that the candidate will choose a position that aligns with their preferences in due time. In this scenario, party loyalty ultimately dictates a candidate's actions.

If demonstrating ambiguity is beneficial, why would candidates announce their position on anything? Under the emphasis allocation theory, candidates emphasize issues where voters have agreement (Page 1976). For example, voters are united in their desire

for a thriving economy, but candidates may be vague on how they plan to pursue policies that benefit the economy. Often, ambiguous stances are based upon controversial or divisive issues, like military spending (Page 1976). Therefore, when candidates allocate emphasis, they emphasize shared goals and demonstrate ambiguity on the specifics of those goals. In his research, Page (1976) concluded that the optimum allocation of emphasis would include attention to a "range of issues with nods to some specificity" (730). Therefore, when politicians make targeted campaign appeals, political ambiguity should be utilized on issues in which consensus is nonexistent (Hersh and Schaffner 2013).

In my paper, I will address the nature of congressional ambiguity. I assume that MCs actively mimic the behavior of a candidate due to the volatility of their career choice. In other words, they must pursue policies that are certain to benefit their images and constituencies. If the consensus among scholars regarding the political knowledge of most voters and the potential voter indifference to ambiguity hold, MCs should look to ambiguity as a safety net. Using theories behind ambition, MCs will be acutely aware of the president's popularity as a national-level indicator of public approval and should choose ambiguity when the president's popularity declines. The fear would be that the defeat of an unpopular president, the ultimate spokesperson of the party, results in legislative losses among the allying party within Congress.

Theory

Ambiguity is characterized by a deliberate refusal or hesitation to take clear stances on political issues. A segment of the research that I have outlined above concludes that ambiguity allows a candidate to capitalize on a disillusioned constituency. If the candidate fails to strike first, his or her opponent may seize the opportunity, and, as a result, potentially win the voter.

Literature on political ambiguity has consistently focused on candidates as the primary source of ambiguity (Karp and Garland 2007; Militia, Ryan, and Simas 2014; Hersh and Schaffner 2013; Tomz and Van Houweling 2009; Glazer 1990). Furthermore, previous research has explained ambiguity in terms of a rational choice between candidates seeking an edge in a close election or the candidate's exploitation of voter uncertainty on policy issues (Glazer 1990; Tomz and Van Houweling 2009). Therefore, scholars have failed to consider the ambiguity demonstrated by MCs as a potentially new area of study. As such, I have discussed the factors that I believe influence or better explain the original theory I propose.

To what extent is the rate of ambiguity demonstrated by MCs dependent upon the president's popularity? In this paper, I argue that there is a distinct relationship between the president's popularity among the public and the ambiguity demonstrated by MCs.

The president's popularity is significant to my theory. The extent to which the president is popular among the public dictates the support he or she can be expected to receive in Congress. If the president's popularity is low among the public, the likelihood of defection along the president's agenda and distancing from the president increases.

Using this same logic, members of the president's party would be especially incentivized to alienate themselves from the president if they seek re-election in the future.

I suggested that ambition may be responsible for an MC's decision to defect from the president's agenda when his or her popularity is low. It also serves as an explanation as to why MCs may be ambiguous. Ambitious MCs see the president's popularity as an indicator of public approval and, by extension, approval of the president's agenda. These MCs, particularly members that share the president's party, therefore, ought to be concerned when the president's popularity declines because opponents could tie the MC to the president's unpopular actions and behavior in future elections. Thus, ambiguity is a rational alternative when courting voters because it does not alienate the member's current base or offend the potential voter.

Because the president is the leading spokesperson of his or her party, when he or she experiences defeat in the legislative arena, the media is likely to report on the president's failure and MCs that share the same party (Lebo and O'Geen 2011). A series of legislative defeats may result in lower assessments of the president's performance among the public (Ostrom and Simon 1985). As a result, the president's popularity will subsequently decline. The assumed fear among MCs, especially those of the president's party, is that the president's declining popularity among citizens will translate into disdain for individual MCs. The interaction between a shared ideology and ambiguity results in the formation of my hypothesis:

> *H1: If the president's popularity declines, then congressional members of*
> *his or her party are more likely to demonstrate ambiguity than*
> *congressional members of the opposing party.*

The likelihood that the MC utilizes ambiguity is ultimately conditioned on whether they are ambitious. An unambitious MC would care little for his or her constituency's preferences. By contrast, ambitious MCs would be more responsive to their constituencies' preferences for maintenance of their seats or furthering of their political careers.

Because MCs do not have term limits, if these members are interested in policymaking as a career, they must think in advance and make decisions that benefit their political images. If an MC's constituency has a negative opinion regarding the president, to avoid future punishment at the ballot box, I believe the ambitious MC will show ambiguity. Ambiguity, after all, cannot hurt candidates.

By distancing themselves from negativity, they prevent their political opponents from gaining the upper hand in upcoming elections, and they potentially maximize support among their constituency. I expect to find that a decrease in the president's popularity, reflecting the opinion of citizens, should trigger ambitious politicians to show ambiguity in an attempt to salvage their image and maximize constituency support.

Survey data on the president's approval in each state is not recorded. If this were the case, an MC would be more inclined to rely on this data when making the decision to utilize ambiguity. However, because this is not the case, the president's approval at the national level is the closest measurement MCs have in understanding the general mood of the public. Given that the MC is unaware of his or her constituent's actual opinions of the president and his agenda, ambiguity should be the rational choice because the national sentiment may be reflective of local sentiment.

While much of the research on political ambiguity explores its practice used by candidates, I believe that ambitious MCs that seek re-election in the future will act much like a candidate. Candidates have an incentive to win the seat by demonstrating ambiguity on salient issues during an election cycle. Sitting MCs, however, have a motive to maintain their seats by being ambiguous with regard to their support for legislation under a president with low approval ratings. When the president's popularity is low, his or her agenda and actions are not supported among citizens. Supporting an unpopular agenda becomes a gamble for the MC when he or she is unaware of their constituent's opinions.

Research Design

This quantitative study explores the relationship between the president's popularity and the political ambiguity demonstrated by members of Congress using a method of OLS regression.

The dependent variable is the rate of *political ambiguity* demonstrated by MCs (The dependent variable is denoted as Presidential Approval * Same Party in the Appendix.). To represent the dependent variable, I gather data from VoteView (Lewis, et al. 2017). This variable is measured by a statistic that predicts the MC's position on legislation. Thus, it predicts the expected vote to be cast by the MC based upon his or her ideology and voting record. If the statistic in VoteView hovers around 50, signaling that the MC's position is a tossup, then the congressional member will have demonstrated political ambiguity. Each statistic from VoteView will be ranked based upon its distance

from 50 or the point of complete ambiguity. For instance, a value of 0 in my dataset signifies that the MC has met total ambiguity, while a value of 50 in my dataset signifies that the MC has demonstrated no ambiguity.

The main independent variable in this research is represented by the president's popularity. Data on *presidential popularity* is gathered from Gallup polling and will be measured by a percent out of 100 (Gallup 2018).

There are four control variables. The *political party* of politicians must be controlled for due to its potential influence on the rate of ambiguity. For example, there may be a Republican president and a Democratic Congress which could hinder the progression of policy. Data for this control variable is collected from VoteView. Second, the presence or absence of *divided government* should be controlled for due to its effect on the rate of ambiguity. Data for this control variable is gathered from VoteView. MCs under a *united government* should be less prone to ambiguity given the presence of a shared majority party. Finally, *midterm* and *presidential election* years should be controlled for due to their nature. MCs are likely to use ambiguity during election years to maximize their support.

Although data on the House and Senate are separated in this research, I do not control for the congressional chamber. Observations in the House exceeded the storage capacity of Excel, and therefore, I could not append Senate data onto the same file. Thus, I separated House and Senate data into separate files to ensure the data could be accurately measured.

To capture a sample from Democratic and Republican presidencies, data from Gallup polling and VoteView were collected on Congresses for a period of twenty years, between 1996 to 2016. All MCs within the twenty-year time frame are included in the research. The units of analysis in this research are individual MCs and all legislation from 1996 to 2016.

Analysis

I hypothesized that the rate of ambiguity among MCs that share the president's party would increase as the president's popularity declined.

The House sample included over 4.5 million observations. Results from Table 1 (See appendix.) reveal that there is some support for my hypothesis (.133***). As the president's popularity declines, members of the House in the president's party exercise more ambiguity on legislation.

The presence of divided government makes House members less ambiguous (-.781***). Although statistically significant, midterm years (-.123***) exerted more negative influence on the dependent variable than presidential election years (.261***) in the House. Midterms see less ambiguity than presidential elections in the House.

The Senate sample included over half a million observations. Results from Table 2 (See appendix.) indicate that the Senate offers some support for my hypothesis (.024***). As the president's popularity declines, senators in the president's party exercise more ambiguity on legislation.

Like the House, the presence of divided government results in senators being less ambiguous (-.895***). Finally, senators are more likely to avoid ambiguity during presidential election years (-1.09***) than midterm election years (-.089). Results from the Senate on midterm election years reveal no statistical significance.

Because research using multiplicative interactions is often flawed, I use Clarify to examine dependent variable values from the House and Senate based on varying levels of the president's popularity (Brambor, Clark, and Golder 2006).

The president's popularity in the House dataset averaged at 49.9. The mean for the predicted level of ambiguity among House members that shared the president's party was 41.3. At one standard deviation above the president's popularity, this value decreases to 40.9. At one standard deviation below the president's popularity, this value increases to 41.6.

The mean for the predicted level of ambiguity among House members that do not share the president's party was 42.6. At one standard deviation above the president's popularity, this value decreases to 40.9. At one standard deviation below the president's popularity, this value increases to 44.3.

The president's popularity in the Senate dataset averaged at 51.5. The mean for the predicted level of ambiguity among members of the Senate that shared the president's popularity was 41.5. At one standard deviation above the president's popularity, this value becomes 41.2. At one standard deviation below the president's popularity, this value becomes 41.8.

The mean for the predicted level of ambiguity among senators that do not share the president's popularity was 40.5. At one standard deviation above the president's popularity, this value decreases to 40.0. At one standard deviation below the president's popularity, this value increases to 41.1.

I theorized that the president's popularity accounted for the ambiguity among MCs. Given that the presidency is a central focus of media attention, it seemed plausible that any decrease in his or her popularity at the national level reflected negatively on MCs from the same party. However, results indicate that there is some support for this theory. There are two reasons this theory failed to yield stronger results.

First, the president's popularity is not a *stable* measurement. One week, the president may experience a surge in approval. Another week, the president may say or do something that warrants the disapproval of the public. It would be irrational for an MC to respond to the president's popularity in this context. Therefore, a consistently low approval rating is missing in this research.

Second, the president's popularity at the national level is not a *reliable* measurement. It is what the average citizen thinks. However, it may not be what the MC's constituent thinks. Therefore, an independent variable originating closer to home is missing from this research. For instance, the presidential election results in each state would be a reliable measurement because an MC knows precisely what his or her constituent is thinking. Furthermore, congressional election results could serve as a precursor for ambiguity, especially if the victory margin is narrow.

Although the results yielded from this study were unexpected, they have generated new approaches to my hypothesis. Because the president's popularity at the national level is a broad measurement, future research on ambiguity should arise from measurements closer to home. Results from presidential and congressional elections at the state level represent a *reliable* and *stable* source of popularity. As such, a new approach should consider the president's victory or loss in each state as a cause for ambiguity in the congressional member. Furthermore, another approach should consider each congressional member's victory margin as a precursor for ambiguity.

Once a reliable and stable independent variable is established, the topic of ambiguity should be further evaluated. In the following section, I suggest alternative measurements of ambiguity and other avenues of study for political ambiguity.

Conclusion

The primary objective for the theory of congressional member ambiguity is to determine a stronger cause of ambiguity in Congress. I have offered two different approaches that could yield stronger results and prove to be a better independent variable. Given that ambiguity among congressional members represents a new area of study, I present nine ways future scholars can continue research on congressional member ambiguity.

First, are women less likely to be ambiguous than men in Congress? Research has discovered that women are more likely to be viewed as honest and trustworthy among their constituents, and ambiguity represents a deliberate attempt to be deceitful

(Schneider and Bos 2014). Thus, women, in keeping with their reputation of honesty and trustworthiness, should be less likely to demonstrate ambiguity in Congress.

Second, is the practice of ambiguity more evident among incumbents or freshman members of Congress? Scholarship on the incumbent advantage suggests that incumbents are more likely to win elections over their challengers (Carson, Engstrom, and Roberts 2007). Freshmen lack this advantage, and as a result, they may be more willing to be ambiguous to appease their bases in preparation for the next election. They are electorally vulnerable, and ambiguity provides a sense of security. In contrast, incumbents are more electorally secure. They may practice less ambiguity because they are more familiar with their constituency, or they may feel more empowered to pursue their own preferences without fear of reprisal by their electorate.

Still, incumbents may be more ambiguous because they are certain to elude punishment by the voter. The incumbency advantage, under the right set of circumstances, guarantees an easy win for the incumbent. A freshman member of Congress may feel pressured to announce a position for every legislation to appease their electorate in preparation for the next election.

Third, are members of the House or Senate more likely to be ambiguous? Members in the House have a specific constituency and a similar set of preferences. Therefore, they are more likely to accurately reflect their constituency's preferences in Congress. By contrast, members in the Senate have a broader constituency to appeal to. As a result, he or she must meet a range of preferences to ensure victory in an upcoming election. Furthermore, Senate races are often more competitive with their "longer terms,

greater visibility, and more serious opponents" than House races (Nice 1984, 101). Thus, senators are more invested in their careers.

Additionally, the dynamics of each term and the chamber are worth consideration. Members of the House serve two-year terms. Members of the Senate enjoy six-year terms. Thus, members of the House should refrain from overplaying ambiguity, but six-year terms afford senators a leeway to practice ambiguity. Still, actions and members of the Senate are more publicized than the House. Therefore, House members may be more ambiguous than Senate members.

Fourth, what types of legislation are more likely to be regarded with ambiguity? Fifth, are salient issues more likely to be met with ambiguity? These questions are dependent upon the political party and ideology of the congressional member and the party in control of the chamber. Furthermore, it is possible that these two questions overlap.

Sixth, has the emergence of polarization increased the need for ambiguity? This question depends on the likelihood that the electorate is polarized and demands loyalty to the party. Scholarship on a polarized electorate remains hotly debated (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2008; Abramowitz and Saunders 2008). Regardless, bipartisan action may be met with reprisal by the voter and provide an advantage to challengers in a primary election.

Seventh, are congressional members capitalizing on the timing of ambiguity within their term? Astute members of Congress should avoid taking clear positions closer to elections when salient issues emerge and are highlighted by the media. Definitive

actions are likely to be negatively scrutinized by the electorate, media, and challenger. Still, members of Congress may take clearer positions closer to elections to boost their reputation among the constituency. This ensures positive scrutiny by the electorate, neutral media attention, and a less threatening challenger.

Eighth, are ambiguous members bringing more money to their states or districts because they are forcing party leaders to make concessions to strike a better deal? In times of narrow majorities in Congress, ambiguous members may be at a unique advantage. They are fair game to both parties who vie for their support. As a result, their votes may be bought by party leaders. The final legislation may grant the ambiguous member's electorate greater benefits that the initial legislation could not.

Finally, the ninth question is an extension of the eighth question. Research has shown women are more effective at returning federal money to their districts (Anzia and Berry 2011). Thus, do ambiguous women have a greater advantage than their male counterparts when party leaders attempt to buy their votes?

The questions I presented above are intended to advance the topic of ambiguity in Congress. They may also enhance theories on candidate ambiguity at the local, state, and national levels. Still, the study of ambiguity as an aspect of congressional behavior deserves further exploration. This research examined the rate of ambiguity among members of Congress that shared the president's party based on the president's approval ratings. Finding some support for this theory, it is important to note that there are likely stronger independent variables. These variables would offer greater support for my theory.

Appendix

Table 1. HOUSE AMBIGUITY

Pres. Appr.	-.147***
	(.001)
Same Party * Pres. Appr.	.113***
	(.001)
Same Party	-6.10***
	(.054)
Divided Gov't	-.781***
	(.014)
Midterm Year	-.123***
	(.016)
Pres. Election Year	.261***
	(.014)
R^2	.0127
Observations	4,565,673

*** $p > |t| = 0.000$, high statistical significance at the 95% confidence interval.

Table 2. SENATE AMBIGUITY

Pres. Appr.	-.052***
	(.002)
Same Party * Pres. Appr.	.024***
	(.003)
Same Party	-.241
	(.175)
Divided Gov't	-.895***
	(.041)
Midterm Year	-.089
	(.046)
Pres. Election Year	-1.09***
	(.047)
R²	.0051
Observations	528,140

*** p>|t|=0.000, high statistical significance at the 95% confidence interval

Table 3. HOUSE DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Variables	n	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Pres. Appr. * Same Party	6,001,525	23.6	26.2	0	87.1
Pres. Approval	6,001,525	50.0	11.2	28	87.1
Divided Government	6,001,525	.706	.455	0	1
Pres. Election Yr.	6,001,525	.257	.437	0	1
Midterm Yr.	6,001,525	.200	.400	0	1
Same Party	6,001,525	.470	.499	0	1
Ambiguity	4,565,673	42.2	12.5	0	50

Table 4. SENATE DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Variables	n	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Pres. Appr. * Same Party	647,744	25.9	26.8	0	87.1
Pres. Approval	647,744	51.5	11.2	28	87.1
Divided Government	647,744	.692	.462	0	1
Pres. Election Yr.	647,744	.222	.416	0	1
Midterm Yr.	647,744	.231	.421	0	1
Same Party	647,744	.506	.500	0	1
Ambiguity	528,140	41.1	13.3	0	50

Variation in observations between ambiguity and the remaining variables are explained by VoteView's setup. In VoteView, values under ambiguity represent the likelihood a member of Congress will vote for or against legislation. For some legislation, these values were missing.

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