

# Which Buck Stops Here? Accountability for Policy Positions and Policy Outcomes in Congress

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*What do constituents hold their representatives accountable for? Previous work outlines two distinct but often conflated theories of accountability: democratic theory suggests that voters respond to the policy positions representatives take; retrospective voting theories suggest that they respond to the outcomes of these policies. Using new survey data, this article demonstrates that perceived congruence with their senators' policy positions influences voters' decisions much more than do perceptions of peace and prosperity. This finding holds when correcting for endogeneity using instrumental variables analysis, when considering members of the majority and minority parties separately, and when looking at specific policy areas. Replicating previous studies of retrospective voting suggests that they overstated the importance of policy outcomes for congressional elections due to omitted variable bias. The buck that stops with Members of Congress is for the positions they take, not for the policy outcomes they preside over.*

The extent to which elites represent the wishes of the public is a central indicator of how well democracy is functioning (Dahl 1971). So too is the number of citizens who engage with politics and the way in which they do so (Lijphart 1997). These indicators are assumed to be fundamentally linked: the more extensive mass participation is, the more responsive governments become. Why is this? One reason is that governments have to know what the public wants if they are to respond (Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes 1999). A rich body of work studies how—and which—citizens communicate their preferences to politicians (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995), whether elected officials listen to those who make their voices heard (Campbell 2003; Griffin and Newman 2005; Martin 2003), and whether government action is generally more congruent with the wishes of the politically active than the inactive (Bartels 2005; Gilens 2005).

Even if constituents convey their preferences loudly and clearly, however, they may be ignored by their representatives in government (Converse and Pierce 1986, 501–503). The real guarantor of responsiveness lies in the threat of electoral reprisal: representatives do what the people want for fear of losing their job (Arnold 1990; Bianco 1994; Mayhew 1974).

Indeed, this notion of electoral accountability is at the heart of most definitions of democracy itself (Schmitter and Karl 1991). But what exactly are incumbents held accountable for? Previous work in political science suggests two theories: the first that legislators are held accountable for the policy positions they take, the second that they are held accountable for the policy outcomes they preside over.<sup>1</sup>

## Accountability for Policy Positions

Members of Congress (MCs) certainly seem to think about their electoral futures in terms of the policy votes they cast. One House member that Fenno interviewed was able to rattle off a list of issues that he had to take the “right” position on:

If I voted against restrictive [gun control] legislation, I'd better not come home... [And] this is a very heavily Catholic district. A vote against aid to parochial schools might defeat me. That and gun control together would do it, and either one separately might... Anyone who advocated busing would be ridden out of my district on a rail... Prayer in the schools is another one. If I get on the wrong side of any one big emotional issue, I'll lose a whale of a lot of votes. (Quoted in Fenno 1978, 146)

<sup>1</sup>An online appendix with supplementary material for this article is available at <http://journals.cambridge.org/jop>. Data necessary to reproduce the statistical results are publicly available at <http://web.mit.edu/polisci/portl/cces/commoncontent.html>.

In a similar vein, one of the Representatives that Kingdon interviewed claimed that “a congressman can only afford two or three votes like that in a session. You get a string of them, then watch out” (1989, 42). Members of Congress believe that their electoral fortunes depend significantly on the positions they take: those who take the right ones stay in office, those who deviate from their constituents’ preferences are kicked out.

Existing political science research suggests that politicians do well to watch out for the positions they take. Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan (2002) show that when representatives are “out of step” with their constituents’ policy preferences, they end up “out of office.” Using survey data, Hutchings (2003) shows that voters incorporate available information about the policy positions their representatives take into their evaluations of incumbents. And macro models of American politics such as Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson (1995) show that the public mood moves dynamically in response to the policy proposals incumbents make and the policy positions they espouse in office. In short, the idea that representatives are held accountable for the policy *positions* they take is central to our understanding of the public’s role in U.S. politics.

## Accountability for Policy Outcomes

But political scientists often refer to democratic accountability in a second, different, sense. According to theories of retrospective voting, politicians are held accountable for the *outcomes* policies produce, not for the policy positions themselves (Berry and Howell 2007; Fiorina 1981; Key 1966; Nadeau and Lewis-Beck 2001). Specifically, voters are hypothesized to respond to peace and prosperity (or the lack thereof), not to the policy means used to achieve these ends. Tufte (1975)’s “referendum model” of congressional voting remains the keystone in the literature: there, he predicted the share of the national vote received by House candidates of the president’s party in midterm elections from 1938 to 1970 by measuring economic growth and the president’s job approval rating. Around the same time, Kramer (1971) showed that economic conditions helped explain short-term fluctuations away from long-standing party loyalties in congressional elections.

These studies paved the way for a slew of statistical models that predict the outcome of House and Senate elections primarily on the basis of economic outcomes

(Abramowitz, Cover, and Norpoth 1986; Abramowitz and Segal 1986; Atesoglu and Congleton 1982; Goodman and Kramer 1975; Hibbs 1982; Jones and Cuzan 2006; Klarner 2008; Klarner and Buchanan 2006; Lewis-Beck and Rice 1984, 1992; Lockerbie 2008; Marra and Ostrom 1989; Newman and Ostrom 2002; Simon, Ostrom, and Marra 1991; Waterman 1990). In short, the verdict from 40 years of election forecasting is clear: when the economy booms, so do incumbents’ fortunes; when it busts, the bums are kicked out (Oppenheimer, Stimson, and Waterman 1986; Jacobson and Kernell 1982).

Policy outcomes in realms other than the economy may also play a role in the retrospective voter’s decision calculus. Most obviously, scholars have pointed to the success (or otherwise) of foreign policy as another factor incumbents will be judged on. In particular, the perceived success or failure of wars that the United States is waging abroad impacts voter evaluations of the president and his allies in Congress (Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida 1989; Fiorina 1981; Gelpi, Reifler, and Feaver 2007; Kriner and Shen 2007; Mueller 1970). One *Annual Review of Political Science* article sums up theories of accountability for policy outcomes as predicting that “the citizen votes for the government if the economy is doing all right; otherwise the vote is against” (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000, 183). To that we should add that if the citizen believes any wars being waged are successful, they also vote for the incumbent; otherwise the vote is likely to be against.

## Distinguishing Alternative Theories of Accountability

Political scientists thus use “democratic accountability” to refer to voters’ responses to both policy positions *and* policy outcomes. This conflation appears in theoretical as well as empirical work. Pitkin, for example, describes accountability theorists as seeking a “certain kind of behavior on the part of the representative. The point of holding him to account after he acts is to make him act in a certain way—look after his constituents, or do what they want” (1967, 57). Are representatives held accountable for their record of “looking after” their constituents or for “doing what they want”? A moment’s thought should show that these need not be the same things at all: constituents may want to be looked after with economic growth but not want the free trade deals necessary to achieve it; may want tax cuts even

though they also want to be looked after by a well-funded military and strong social services.

These two different theories have drastically different consequences for our understanding, and normative judgments, of voters, their representatives, and the policies that Congress produces—insights which conflating the two theories misses.

First, the two theories paint two different conceptions of the way voters engage in politics. Theories of accountability for policy outcomes portray a hands-off voter, largely ambivalent about policy means and attuned instead to the achieved ends that directly impact their everyday lives (Fiorina 1981). In contrast, theories of accountability for policy positions portray a much more involved voter, with substantive policy preferences, knowledge of their legislator's positions, and the capacity to link these and vote accordingly (Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes 1999). The electorate's low knowledge of, and interest in, politics has been widely researched but an appropriate yardstick against which to measure voters is elusive (see Converse 2000 for a summary review). Clearly, these two theories of accountability suggest very different standards against which we should judge the electorate's democratic capacities. Without distinguishing between them, however, we are left with no clear guide to what voters need to know or do to hold their representatives accountable.

Second, the two theories lead us to different conclusions about the control representatives have over their own electoral fortunes. Particularly in the American context of separated powers and federalism, control over policy outcomes rests with a wide range of actors. An individual legislator has only limited control over the policy outcomes that occur on their watch, beyond supporting policies they hope will pass and lead to positive outcomes. In contrast, incumbent legislators have almost complete control over the policy positions they take. The theory of accountability for policy outcomes suggests that "good" representatives who work hard for their constituents could nonetheless be thrown out of office if peace and prosperity aren't produced. Accountability for policy positions, on the other hand, suggests that legislators can shape their electoral futures through the votes they choose to cast. Distinguishing between these two theories of accountability leads us to different expectations about how incumbents can and should act to secure re-election.

Finally, if policymakers are "single minded seekers of reelection" (Mayhew 1974, 5), then the difference between these theories has significant ramifications for the policymaking process. If all constituents want are

positive outcomes, then legislators are free to experiment with solutions to pressing problems regardless of their ideological persuasion. On the other hand, if constituents are more sensitive to the policy positions their politicians espouse than to the outcomes of those policies, then we would expect to see a government more focused on means than ends, more focused on position taking than on problem solving (Mayhew 1974). Again, conflating these two types of accountability and simply expecting responsiveness to voters' demands without asking what these demands are *for* leaves us with a less clear set of expectations about government policymaking.

Of course, whether constituents hold incumbents most accountable for their policy positions or the policy outcomes is an empirical question. And although previous researchers, as indicated above, have explored each theory in isolation, as far as I know there are no studies that directly examine the *relative* effects of positions and outcomes on votes. This article provides that test, examining whether incumbents are held more accountable for the policy positions they take or the policy outcomes they preside over. I begin by outlining the new survey data used to do so.

## Measuring Representation with New Survey Data

Accountability for policy positions is best understood as a feature of constituents' response to the substantive representation they have received. Accurately measuring this has, however, proven elusive, due to difficulties in matching the public's policy preferences to legislators' actions. Public opinion as recorded by generic survey questions can not be easily mapped on to specific up-or-down roll-call votes in Congress. If measures of constituency preferences and representatives' positions do not concern the same substantive items, or are not measured using the same response options, then any resulting estimate of congruence between the two will be inaccurate (Achen 1978; Erikson 1978; Jewell 1983; Weissberg 1979).

One solution is to ask Members of Congress the same survey questions we ask their constituents (Converse and Pierce 1986; Miller and Stokes 1963). The cost and difficulty of this strategy, however, means that it is rarely replicated. Another solution—and the approach that I take—was suggested over 25 years ago. Stone notes that "it surely is unlikely that legislators will have the opportunity to vote on issues as formulated in most mass surveys.

The remedy might be to change the kinds of survey questions asked to simulate exactly the issue as it confronts the legislator” (1979, 625). We cannot change congressional bills to mirror survey questions, but we can alter the survey items we use in ways that reflect the choices MCs face.

This article uses new survey data specifically designed to solve this problem. The Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), an Internet survey conducted in two waves shortly before and after the Congressional midterm elections in November 2006, included a battery of items to measure respondents’ perceptions of policy positions and policy outcomes. The survey sampled 18,000 voters living in states where an incumbent senator was running for reelection from Polimetrix’s “PollingPoint” panel of online users who had opted to take surveys on a variety of subjects. CCES respondents were asked about their positions on a string of roll-call votes MCs had recently taken—and how they thought their senators had voted on the same issues. The bills were all recent votes in Congress that various interest groups and political news outlets considered “key” votes: (1) a ban on late-term, “partial-birth” abortions; (2) the provision of federal funding for embryonic stem cell research; (3) proposals to begin withdrawing troops from Iraq; (4) reforms to immigration policy that would have created a guest-worker program and a path to citizenship; (5) an increase in the federal minimum wage; (6) extending the 2003 capital gains tax cuts; and (7) the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA).

The bills were described to CCES respondents using the language and arguments MCs themselves used during congressional debate on the bill and in the media in the days before and after the vote. Each bill was briefly described, then the proponents’ and opponents’ main arguments for and against it were outlined (without assigning partisan or ideological labels to either side). After being given those descriptions, respondents were asked whether they would have voted for or against the bill if they were faced with the same decision, and then how they thought each of their senators (identified by name) had voted on the bill. Respondents’ own preferences can thus be matched with MCs’ actual behavior on the exact same issues—and both can be compared with the perceptions that constituents have of their MCs’ voting record.

## Measures, Methods, and Models

Since the outcome of interest here is support for the incumbent legislator—and previous research suggests

that voters first decide whether to support the incumbent, before beginning to choose among alternatives (Alvarez and Nagler 1998)—I code a dichotomous dependent variable which takes on a value of +1 if the respondent reports voting for the incumbent senator, 0 if not.

The key independent variables come from the CCES’ new survey questions. **Perceived congruence on policy positions** measures the proportion of roll-call votes on which respondents believe their senator took the same position as they would have taken. For each of the roll-call questions, I code a dummy measuring perceived agreement (+1) and perceived disagreement (0). I then calculate the mean of each of these dummies, resulting in a score of 1 if the respondent perceived agreement on all and 0 if they perceived disagreement on all. In constructing the scale, survey questions on which the respondent either (1) had no position of their own or (2) had no perception of the position their senator had taken are omitted.

Respondents’ perceptions of policy outcomes are measured through two survey items. First, **evaluation of economic outcomes** is measured from responses to the standard question:

Would you say that over the past year the nation’s economy has gotten worse, stayed about the same, or gotten better?

Much better; Better; About same; Worse; Much worse; Not sure

I include responses to this question as an unordered factor variable, with “Much worse” serving as the excluded category. Second, **evaluation of Iraq outcome** is measured from responses to:

Do you think it was a mistake to invade Iraq?

Yes; No; Don’t know

“Yes” responses (thinking that the invasion was a mistake) are here taken to be a negative evaluation of the policy outcome; “no” responses (thinking that the invasion was *not* a mistake) are taken to be a positive evaluation of the policy outcome. Responses to this question are also coded as an unordered factor variable, with “A mistake” as the excluded category. The key substantive assumption I make here is that respondents who think the invasion was a mistake are negatively evaluating the outcomes of that policy, and vice versa. Although the question wording does not precisely ask about retrospective evaluations of the war, I assume that beliefs about whether the invasion was “a mistake” or not are

primarily a function of evaluations of the policy's outcome.<sup>2</sup>

I control for a number of other potentially confounding variables. **Party congruence** is coded as a factor with several levels: "Same party" if the respondent believes the senator to be of the same party as them; "Other party" if the respondent believes the senator to be of the opposite party to them (this level serves as the excluded category); "Independent" if the respondent does not have a party affiliation; and "Don't know" if the respondent does not know their senator's party affiliation. **Perceived GOP senator** is coded as +1 if the respondent believes their senator to be a Republican, 0 otherwise. Including this variable is intended to capture the possibility that the 2006 midterms were primarily a referendum on the governing Republican party. I also include a measure of the respondent's self-identified **ideology**, coded as a factor with "very liberal" as the base, and "liberal," "moderate," "conservative," and "very conservative" as response options. This is interacted with the respondent's perceptions of the incumbent's party, to capture the extent to which voters based their decision on an ideological congruence with the incumbent's party.

Several other control variables measure the demographic characteristics of respondents. Individuals may differ in their sensitivity to economic outcomes and willingness to reelect the incumbent, all else equal, depending on their own employment status. I include dummies for an **unemployed** respondent and for a **retired** respondent. Griffin and Flavin (2007) demonstrate that expectations of, and information about, representatives' records vary significantly across racial groups. The model includes a measure of the respondent's self-identified race, coded as an unordered factor with **White** as the reference category and **Black**, **Hispanic**, and **Other race** as the other levels. To test whether other under-represented social groups similarly orient themselves towards incumbent representatives in different ways, I include a dummy variable of the respondent's gender that takes on a value of +1 if the respondent is **female**, 0 if male. Finally, I include a measure of the highest level of education the respondent received, coded as an unordered factor with those who didn't complete high school as the excluded category, and **high school, some**

**college, college,** and **postcollege** education as the other levels. This variable serves as a measure of how politically engaged and sophisticated respondents are (see Rudolph 2003 for a similar approach).

## Endogeneity and Instrumental Variables Analysis

The immediate problem that I address here is that the relationship between vote choice and perceptions of congruence on policy positions could be endogenous. Previous research on voters' perceptions of their incumbent's voting record strongly suggest this is the case. Wilson and Gronke (2000), building on work by Alvarez and Gronke (1996), demonstrate two strong sources of bias in perceptions of representation: constituents are more likely to recall the policy positions taken by incumbents they already like (and are thus already likely to vote for), and more likely to assume those positions were congruent with their own. To correct for this endogeneity, I employ instrumental variables (IV) analysis.<sup>3</sup>

As an instrument for perceived policy congruence, I construct a scale of **actual congruence on policy positions** in the same way as for the scale of perceived congruence, this time substituting the senator's *actual* votes on each of the bills for the respondent's perceptions of them. The first column of Table 1 presents the results from the first-stage OLS regression that uses this instrument to predict the endogenous variable of perceived congruence.

The main point to take home from the first-stage regression results in the first column of Table 1 concerns the strength of the instrument. As the  $R^2$  of 0.63 and coefficient of .65 ( $SE = .01$ ) show, actual congruence on roll-call votes does an excellent job of predicting perceived congruence on roll call votes,

<sup>2</sup>Previous studies of accountability for policy outcomes make the same assumption. Fiorina (1981)'s groundbreaking work on retrospective voting, for example, tested the theory by using responses to whether "we did the right thing in getting into the fighting in Korea or should we have stayed out?" to predict vote choice for Congress in 1952 and, substituting Vietnam for Korea, to predict approval ratings of President Johnson in 1964 and 1968.

<sup>3</sup>As in standard models of congressional voting in the literature, the other variables in the analysis—in particular, assessments of policy outcomes—are assumed here to be exogenous. Previous research on retrospective voting argues that policy outcomes are more accessible to, and directly experienced by, voters than knowledge of policy positions, reducing the extent to which projection is a problem (Anderson, 2007, 277–78). There is significant evidence suggesting that retrospective evaluations of the economy can be "contaminated" by prior attitudes towards the incumbent *president* (for example, Evans and Pickup 2010; Wilcox and Wlezien 1993). To the best of my knowledge however, there is no evidence showing that attitudes towards *individual legislators* influence evaluations of the national economy. Subsetting the analyses in this study by the respondent's party ID (to see if Democrats and Republicans behaved differently given Republicans held the White House) did not reveal any substantial differences from the full sample results.

TABLE 1 Instrumental Variables Estimates

	First stage: Perceived congruence on policy	Second stage: Vote for incumbent senator
Intercept	0.12 (0.02)	-2.21 (0.16)
Policy positions congruence		
Actual	0.65 (0.01)	
Perceived		4.47 (0.11)
Evaluation of economic outcomes <sup>a</sup>		
Worse	0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.06)
Stayed same	0.01 (0.01)	-0.05 (0.06)
Better	0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.07)
Much better	-0.02 (0.01)	0.07 (0.07)
Don't know	0.02 (0.02)	-0.17 (0.15)
Evaluation of Iraq outcome <sup>b</sup>		
Not a mistake	0.20 (0.01)	-0.07 (0.05)
Don't know	0.05 (0.01)	-0.18 (0.06)
Party Congruence <sup>c</sup>		
Same	0.02 (0.01)	0.72 (0.06)
Independent	0.10 (0.01)	0.37 (0.04)
Don't know	0.11 (0.01)	0.08 (0.07)
Female	0.02 (0.00)	-0.56 (0.13)
Race <sup>d</sup>		
Black	0.03 (0.01)	-0.40 (0.11)
Hispanic	0.03 (0.01)	0.03 (0.11)
Other	-0.01 (0.01)	0.44 (0.17)
Retired	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.03)
Unemployed	0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.06)
Education <sup>e</sup>		
High school	0.00 (0.01)	0.09 (0.05)
Some college	-0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.08)
College	0.00 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.04)
Post-college	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.17 (0.09)
Ideology <sup>f</sup>		
Liberal	0.03 (0.01)	0.09 (0.12)
Moderate	0.03 (0.01)	-0.24 (0.10)
Conservative	-0.13 (0.01)	-0.46 (0.12)
Very conservative	-0.17 (0.01)	-0.62 (0.14)
GOP senator	-0.19 (0.02)	-0.92 (0.20)
Ideology × GOP senator		
Liberal	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.07 (0.10)
Moderate	0.05 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.10)
Conservative	0.37 (0.02)	-0.04 (0.10)
Very conservative	0.43 (0.02)	-0.07 (0.11)
Policy congruence error term		-1.95 (0.12)
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.63	
Log-likelihood		-3825 (32 dfs)
N	17,949	17,949

<sup>a</sup>Reference category: Much worse  
<sup>b</sup>Reference category: A mistake  
<sup>c</sup>Reference category: Other party  
<sup>d</sup>Reference category: White  
<sup>e</sup>Reference category: No high school degree  
<sup>f</sup>Reference category: Very liberal

First column presents the results from first stage regression that the proportion of policy positions with *actual* congruence to predict the proportion of policy position with *perceived* congruence using OLS. Second column shows the coefficients and standard errors from a 2SCML probit model predicting vote for or against the incumbent senator that includes the policy congruence error term from the first stage regression.

with a t-statistic of 79.38. One criteria for a valid instrument—that it be a good predictor of the endogenous variable—is clearly met here. The assumption that the only causal path by which the instrument can affect the dependent variable is through the endogenous variable cannot be easily tested. However, the exogeneity of the actual roll-call scale to the vote choice function seems clear conceptually: actual congruence between a given voter and their senator cannot plausibly affect that voter's choice of candidate in an election except through the voter's *perceptions* of congruence.<sup>4</sup>

IV analysis usually proceeds by substituting the new instrumental variable for the problematic causal variable in an OLS regression, and interpreting the resulting estimates as usual. Since the dependent variable in this study is of a dichotomous vote choice, OLS assumptions are clearly violated, and the use of the usual two-stage least squares (2SLS) estimator is not appropriate. Instead, I use what Rivers and Vuong (1988) call two-stage conditional maximum likelihood (2SCML). The second stage uses a probit model predicting the dichotomous vote choice variable, including the residuals—not the fitted values as in other IV methods—from the first stage regression as a predictor. The Rivers-Vuong approach produces unbiased standard errors and allows for likelihood-ratio tests akin to a Wald test for exogeneity (Alvarez and Glasgow 1999).

Since the parameters from probit regressions are difficult to interpret directly, I use the second-stage estimates to simulate predicted probabilities of voting for the incumbent senator as described in King, Tomz, and Wittenberg (2000). Independent variables are set to either their mode (for categorical variables) or mean (for continuous variables); as Alvarez and Glasgow (1999) do, I set the roll-call error term to its mean value. When assessing the effects of one of the evaluations on vote choice—of policy positions or policy outcomes—I set the other evaluations to a neutral point. For evaluations of Iraq, this is to a “don't know” response. For evaluations of the economy, this is to perceiving things to have “stayed about the same.”

<sup>4</sup>We might expect that a senator who is “out of step” would attract a more serious challenger at election time, or prompt more negative media coverage, and that constituents would be more likely to disapprove of the incumbent when offered a serious alternative or negative media attention about her. If this were the case, actual policy congruence could affect approval ratings without necessarily affecting perceptions of policy congruence. This, however, is not a problem here, since the challenger's entry or media coverage would presumably be a function of the senator being out of step with their *entire state*, not with any specific constituent within that state.

## Policy Positions and Policy Outcomes

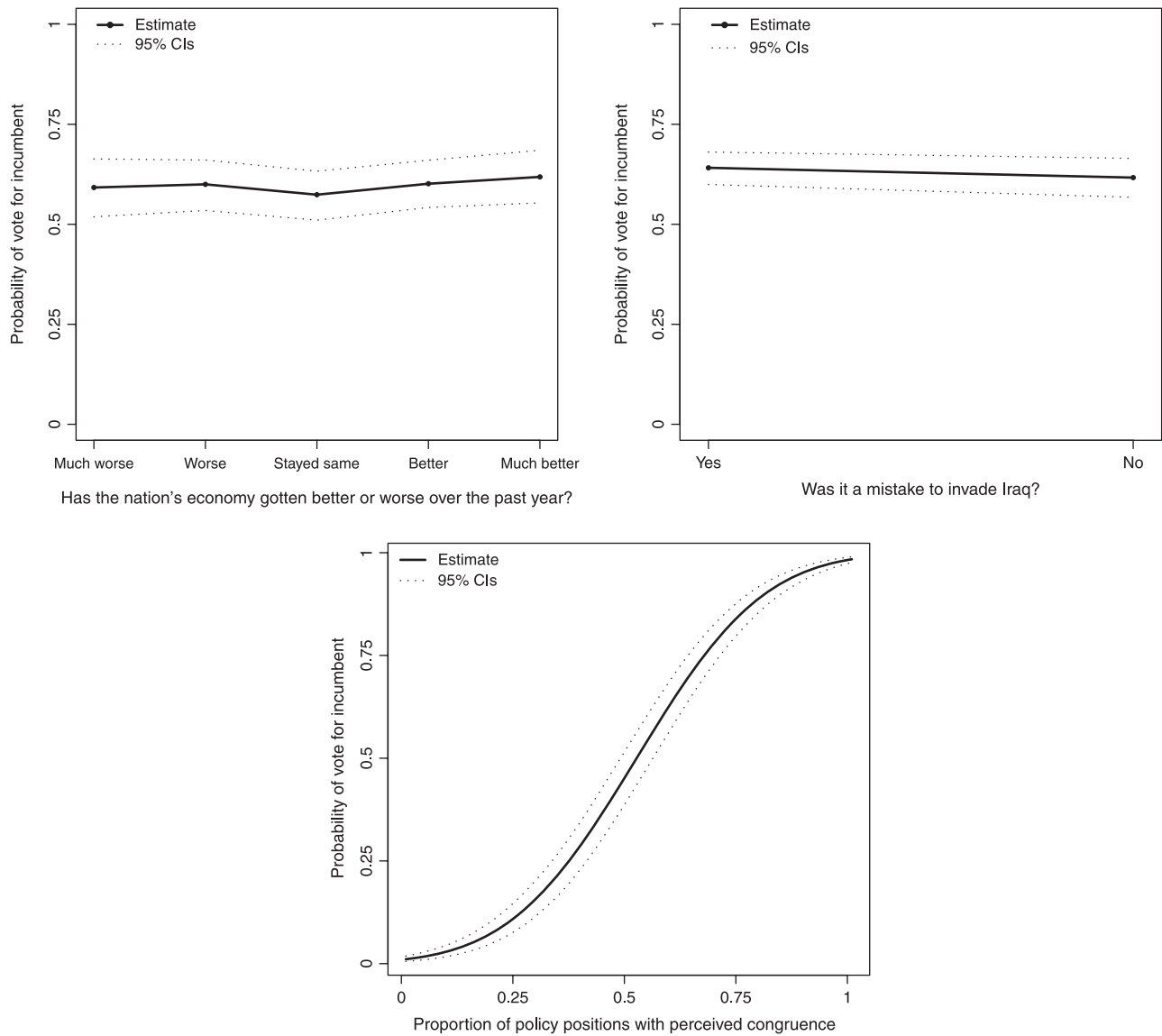
Figure 1 presents the results of these simulations. Holding all else equal, I show the differences in the predicted probability of voting for the incumbent senator across different values of the independent variables of interest. The first plot shows the predicted probabilities across all values of the retrospective evaluations of the economy. As can be seen, there are some small differences in the probabilities of voting for the incumbent associated with different evaluations of the economy. Those who believe it has stayed the same over the past year are slightly less likely to vote for the incumbent than those who perceive a change in either direction. However, the changes are slight, and when we take into account the 95% confidence intervals surrounding the line, the relationship between these evaluations and vote choice appears almost nonexistent.

The second plot repeats this exercise for retrospective evaluations of the Iraq war. Here, the results are again fairly trivial. If anything, there is a slight *negative* slope to the line, indicating that those who believed it was a mistake to invade Iraq are actually *more* likely to vote for the incumbent than those who do not. This is, of course, directly opposite to what theories of accountability for policy outcomes would expect. However, again, the difference is small, and the main conclusion is the lack of any significant relationship.

What about congruence on policy positions? In marked contrast to the first two graphs, the relationship here is extremely strong. The probability of voting for the incumbent increases dramatically as the proportion of positions on which they are believed to hold congruent positions increases. For example, the predicted probability that a constituent who perceives agreement with their senator on one-fourth of the policy positions will vote for the incumbent is just 12%. In contrast, the predicted probability for those who perceive agreement on three-fourths of the positions is 86%.<sup>5</sup> Senators perceived as taking the opposite position to their constituents on every issue are extremely unlikely to receive their vote, while those who are seen as in agreement on every position are almost guaranteed it.

<sup>5</sup>These .25 and .75 values are chosen to provide an intuitive comparison; others can easily be made using Figure 1. For example, simulating a shift from one SD (.39) below the mean of .56 to one SD above the mean produces an estimated shift in the probability of supporting the incumbent from 5% to 97%. Simulating a shift from the minimum value (0) to the maximum value (1) produces an estimated shift from 1% to 98%.

**FIGURE 1 Predicting Vote for or Against the Incumbent Senator, with Retrospective Evaluations of the Economy, Iraq, and Congruence on Policy Positions**



*Note:* Simulated probabilities holding all other variables at their mean or mode from the second-stage 2SCML coefficients presented in Table 1.

In this initial test of the two theories of accountability, the empirical evidence is clear. Rather than responding to the outcomes of policy decisions that their senators have taken, constituents weigh the policies themselves much more heavily.

### **Extending the Model to Include Party Accountability**

The analyses in Figure 1 average the effect across all senators. But one key difference between senators is the ease with which voters can link them to the policy

outcomes produced by the government in D.C. (Arnold 1990). In particular, voters may distinguish between the governing and minority parties when assigning responsibility for policy outcomes (Gomez and Wilson 2003; Key 1966; Kramer 1971; Rudolph 2003). We might expect retrospective evaluations of policy outcomes to influence voters' support for senators who are members of the governing party, but for those evaluations to carry little weight when it comes to determining support of minority party senators.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>The timing of the survey doesn't allow us to distinguish between the majority party in Congress or the party of the incumbent president in this sense, since the two were equivalent in 2006.



In order to test this hypothesis, I reestimated the models shown in Table 1, this time interacting the respondent's retrospective evaluations of Iraq and the economy, and their perceptions of policy congruence, with their perceptions of the incumbent's party.<sup>7</sup> In doing so, I exclude the 692 respondents who were not sure what the party of their senator was. Including them in the analysis with a separate dummy variable and interaction term does not change the results in the slightest; I exclude them here for the sake of brevity and simplicity in interpreting the models. The results for this model with interaction terms for party affiliation are shown in Table 2; Figure 2 presents the simulated probabilities.

The simulated effect of policy congruence, shown in the lower plot, does not vary significantly by party. Democratic and Republican incumbents are held accountable for the policy positions they take to the same extent, with the interaction term between policy positions and senator's party as shown in Table 2 failing to reach standard levels of statistical significance ( $\beta = .19$ ,  $SE = .12$ ).

Voters distinguish between senators from different parties only when it comes to policy *outcomes*. The most striking example here is in the second plot, which displays the effect of evaluations of the war in Iraq. For voters who believe the incumbent is a Democrat, a shift from believing the war was a mistake to believing the war was not a mistake has a negative effect on the vote choice (an estimated decrease in probability of support from 69% to 55%). In contrast, for those represented by a Republican, the same shift in evaluation leads to an increase in likely support for the incumbent (from a 47% to 65% probability of voting for the incumbent).

When it comes to retrospective evaluations of the economy, the picture is less clear-cut, but again suggests that voters distinguish between the parties when assigning blame and reward for policy outcomes. For those with Democratic senators, the state of the economy has essentially no impact on their vote choice. For voters evaluating Republican incumbents, the effects are more supportive of the retrospective voting hypothesis. All else equal, *positive* evaluations of the economy increase the probability of a vote for the

incumbent. *Negative* evaluations of the economy, however, seem to have little impact on vote choice, even when we look just at Republican incumbents. The probability of a voter who perceives the economy to have gotten "much worse" supporting the incumbent is about the same as that of someone who believes it has stayed the same (53% and 57% respectively). When it comes to incumbent Republicans, voters reward them for positive economic outcomes, but don't punish them for negative ones to the same extent.

These findings reinforce Anderson (2007)'s claim that "contingency dilemmas" cast doubt on how universally retrospective voting theory can be applied. In this case, the data provide strong evidence that accountability for economic and military outcomes is contingent on the senator running for reelection being of the same party as the governing majority (see Gomez and Wilson 2003 for similar results). For incumbents representing the opposition party, the effect actually runs in the opposite direction if at all—*positive* retrospective evaluations lead to a *lower* probability of support. But before making any broad claims about the importance of policy outcomes among voters represented by majority party senators, I examine more closely the relative magnitude of these effects. Holding all other variables at their mean or mode as before, I calculate the difference in the predicted probability of voting for an incumbent between:

- a voter who perceives congruence with their senator on one-fourth of the roll-call votes and one who perceives congruence on three-fourths of the votes;
- a voter who believes the economy has gotten worse and one who believes it has gotten better;
- a voter who believes it was a mistake to invade Iraq and one who believes it was not.

Figure 3 shows the first differences in predicted probabilities by party affiliation. The first differences demonstrate that, for incumbents from both parties, although there is a nontrivial effect associated with retrospective evaluations of policy outcomes, accountability for policy positions is again the theory with more predictive power. The difference in the probability of supporting the incumbent when perceiving congruence on one-fourth or three-fourths of the policy positions is 65% for Republican incumbents, 66% for Democratic incumbents. In contrast, the effect of changing evaluations of the economy is only 25% for Republican incumbents and -9% for Democratic incumbents. The effect of changing

<sup>7</sup>Another way of estimating this type of effect is to interact policy positions/outcomes with the voter's perception of the incumbent's party and with their own partisan ID. Estimating the model in this way does not indicate any interaction effects that change the substantive interpretation of these results. That is, the effect of policy positions is always significantly stronger than the effect of policy outcomes for every combination of the voter's party ID and their senator's party affiliation. The online appendix presents the coefficients from this model for interested readers.

**TABLE 2 Predicting Vote for or Against Incumbent, Interacting Party Affiliation with Perceptions of Policy Outcomes and Policy Positions**

	Vote for incumbent senator	
	Full model	Limited model
Intercept	-1.28 (0.22)	1.26 (0.15)
Policy positions congruence	3.98 (0.18)	
Policy positions × GOP senator	-0.19 (0.12)	
Evaluation of economic outcomes <sup>a</sup>		
Worse	-0.04 (0.09)	0.04 (0.07)
Stayed same	-0.21 (0.09)	-0.27 (0.07)
Better	-0.26 (0.10)	-0.68 (0.08)
Much better	-0.24 (0.11)	-0.95 (0.09)
Don't know	-0.43 (0.21)	-0.30 (0.18)
Evaluation of economy × GOP senator		
Worse	0.16 (0.13)	0.14 (0.11)
Stayed same	0.38 (0.13)	0.68 (0.11)
Better	0.68 (0.15)	1.69 (0.12)
Much better	0.95 (0.19)	2.35 (0.15)
Don't know	0.50 (0.32)	0.51 (0.27)
Evaluation of Iraq outcome <sup>b</sup>		
Not a mistake	-0.39 (0.07)	-1.08 (0.05)
Don't know	-0.54 (0.09)	-0.82 (0.07)
Evaluation of Iraq × GOP senator		
Not a mistake	0.88 (0.14)	2.44 (0.08)
Don't know	0.50 (0.32)	1.89 (0.11)
GOP senator	-1.78 (0.26)	-3.72 (0.19)
Party Congruence <sup>c</sup>		
Same	0.53 (0.06)	0.94 (0.05)
Independent	0.27 (0.04)	0.39 (0.04)
Female	0.01 (0.04)	0.08 (0.03)
Race <sup>d</sup>		
Black	0.09 (0.06)	0.16 (0.06)
Hispanic	0.11 (0.06)	0.16 (0.05)
Other	-0.06 (0.08)	-0.11 (0.07)
Retired	0.02 (0.04)	0.05 (0.04)
Unemployed	-0.15 (0.10)	-0.04 (0.09)
Education <sup>e</sup>		
High school	-0.08 (0.11)	-0.05 (0.09)
Some college	-0.04 (0.11)	-0.03 (0.09)
College	-0.04 (0.11)	0.01 (0.09)
Post-college	-0.09 (0.11)	-0.01 (0.10)
Ideology <sup>f</sup>		
Liberal	-0.14 (0.15)	0.07 (0.12)
Moderate	-0.46 (0.14)	-0.38 (0.11)
Conservative	-0.70 (0.15)	-1.10 (0.12)
Very conservative	-1.03 (0.18)	-1.64 (0.14)
Ideology × GOP senator:		
Liberal	0.49 (0.24)	0.29 (0.19)
Moderate	0.91 (0.22)	1.07 (0.18)
Conservative	1.50 (0.24)	2.47 (0.19)
Very conservative	2.22 (0.29)	3.43 (0.24)
Policy congruence error term	-1.61 (0.18)	
Log-likelihood	-3167 (39 dfs)	-4324 (36 dfs)
N	17,257	17,257

<sup>a</sup>Reference category: Much worse

<sup>b</sup>Reference category: A mistake

<sup>c</sup>Reference category: Different party

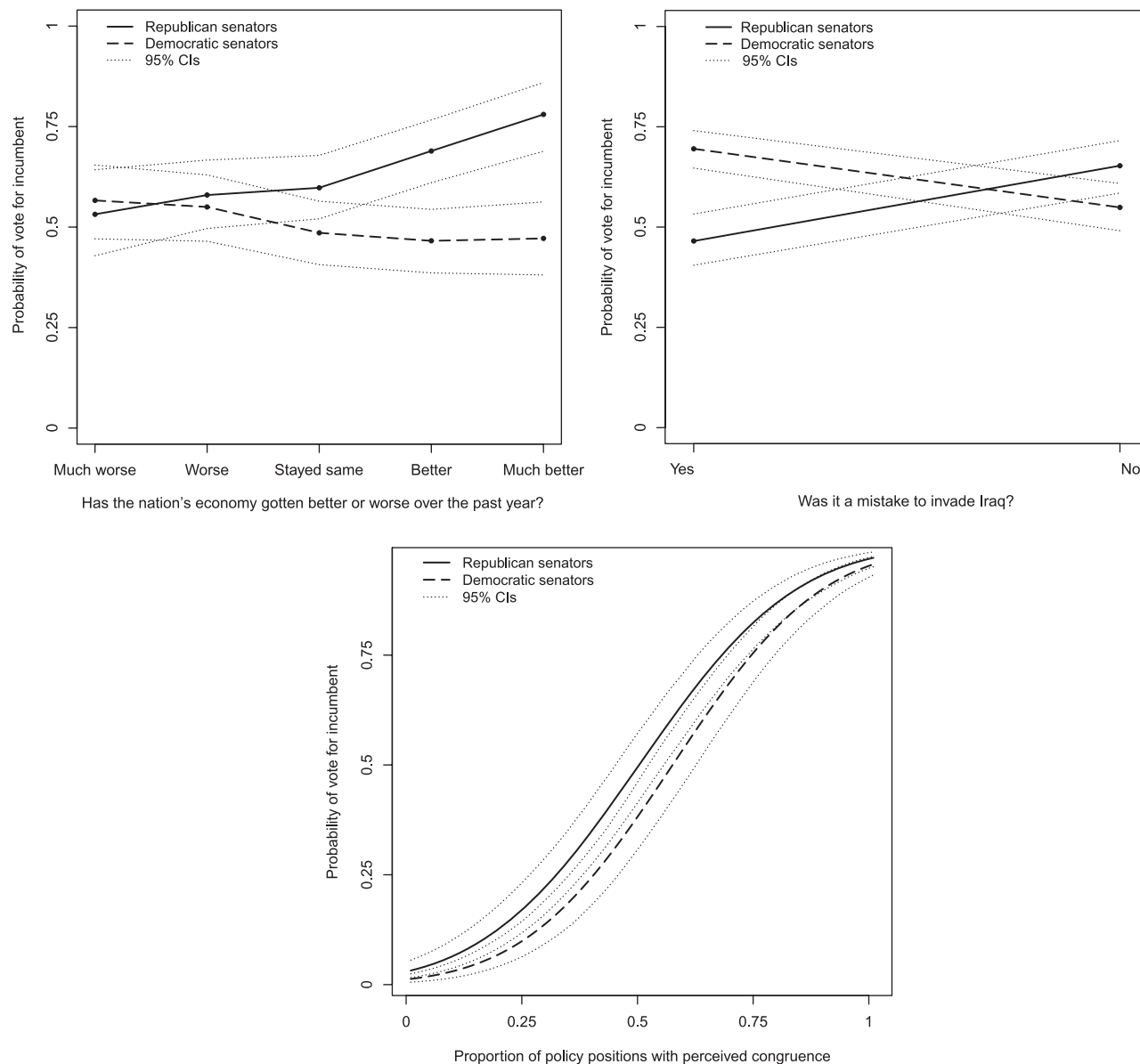
<sup>d</sup>Reference category: White

<sup>e</sup>Reference category: No high school degree

<sup>f</sup>Reference category: Very liberal

First column shows full 2SCML probit model with all predictors, second column shows limited model that excludes policy congruence variables.

**FIGURE 2 Predicting Vote for or Against the Incumbent Senator, with Retrospective Evaluations of the Economy, Iraq, and Congruence on Policy Positions, by Perceived Party Affiliation**



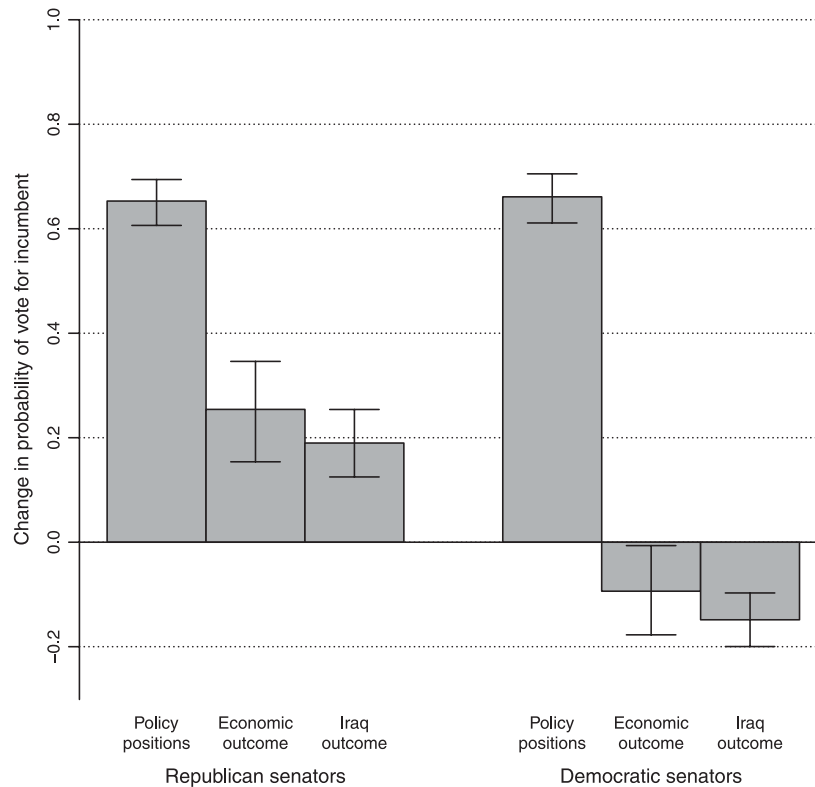
Note: Solid line shows probability of vote for Republican incumbents, dashed line for Democratic incumbents. Simulated probabilities holding all other variables at their mean or mode from the second-stage 2SCML coefficients presented in Table 2.

evaluations of Iraq is 19% for Republican senators and -15% for Democratic senators. It is true that whether a senator is held accountable for policy outcomes depends on the party they are affiliated with. At the same time, it is also true that voters evaluate senators from *either* party much more in terms of the policy positions they take.

Jacobson (2007, 1) argues that—compared to previous elections held during wartime—assessments of the war in Iraq were “extraordinarily central” to individuals’ vote decisions in the 2006 congressional

elections. The point of this article is *not* that retrospective evaluations have no effect on vote choice. Clearly, those who believed the war was a mistake behaved in different ways to those who felt it had not been a mistake. But the difference in the magnitude of this effect compared to that of policy positions is striking and consistent across parties. Even when we look just at voters who believe their senator is a Republican—the one group of voters clearly presented with the chance to vote for or against an incumbent who was also a member of the governing party—the effect of perceived

**FIGURE 3 First Differences in Probability of Voting for the Incumbent Senator, Given Changes in Key Independent Variables**



Note: Policy positions changed from 0.25 congruence to 0.75 congruence; evaluations of the economy changed from “Worse” to “Better”; evaluations of the war in Iraq changed from “A mistake” to “Not a mistake.” All other independent variables held at their mean or mode. 95% confidence intervals shown. Simulations based on the second-stage 2SCML coefficients presented in Table 2.

policy positions dominates the effect of perceived policy outcomes.

### Extending the Model to Include Specific Policy Areas

Collapsing all of the different policy areas into this one policy congruence scale may be masking substantial heterogeneity in voters’ decision calculuses. For example, the effect of perceived economic outcomes may appear much stronger if we were to compare it to the effect of perceived congruence on *economic* policy rather than to the effect of agreement averaged across all types of issue areas. Perhaps if we were to compare the effect of positions and outcomes on similar policy areas, we would be less likely to reject the theory of accountability for policy outcomes.

To test this possibility, I reran similar analyses to those in the previous section, this time including

measures of congruence on each roll-call vote individually rather than the scale of votes. Each policy was coded as +1 if the respondent believed the senator took the same position that they would have done on that issue; -1 if they believe the senator took the opposite position; and 0 if they either held no position themselves or did not know how their senator voted. For each of the roll calls, I first create an instrumental variable in exactly the same way as in the first column of Table 1, using the actual congruence on that roll call as an instrument. I then fit a regression model that predicts vote choice for or against the incumbent using the same independent variables as in Table 2, but this time substituting perceived congruence on each roll-call vote and the error term from the first-stage model for the aggregated scales of agreement. Again, each policy position and policy outcome is interacted with the party of the incumbent senator. The full results of this second-stage analysis are presented in Table B in the online appendix.

Two of the roll-call votes the CCES asked about concern economic policy—the vote to increase the minimum wage and the vote to cut taxes on capital gains—and thus make for good contrasts with the effect of evaluations of economic outcomes. When it comes to comparing perceived outcomes in Iraq with policy positions, the vote on the Levin amendment to begin withdrawing troops from the region provides another good contrast.

Figure 4 presents the predicted probabilities of voting for the incumbent by perceived agreement on the policy position and by evaluation of policy outcomes on the same plot. This allows for close comparison of the size of the simulated effects, even though it can make the *x*-axis harder to interpret than in previous plots. For each graph, the upper *x*-axis measures retrospective evaluations of the policy outcome; the lower *x*-axis measures perceptions of congruence with the senator on the policy position. Thus, as we move from left to right on each axis, we can imagine policy disagreement shifting to policy agreement, and negative evaluations of policy outcomes shifting to positive evaluations. The upper row of plots represents the simulated electoral support for Republican incumbents; the lower row for Democratic incumbents. Moving along the rows, the graphs in Figure 4 show changes in the predicted probabilities of voting for the incumbent by (a) opinions on whether the Iraq war was a mistake and perceptions of agreement with the incumbent's position on troop withdrawal; (b) evaluations of the nation's economy and perceptions of agreement with the incumbent's position on the minimum wage increase; and (c) evaluations of the nation's economy and perceptions of agreement with the incumbent's position on capital gains tax cuts. In each case, the dashed line represents the change in predicted probability of voting for the incumbent senator associated with changes in retrospective evaluations of policy outcomes. The solid lines represent the change in predicted probabilities associated with a change in their perceived policy positions.

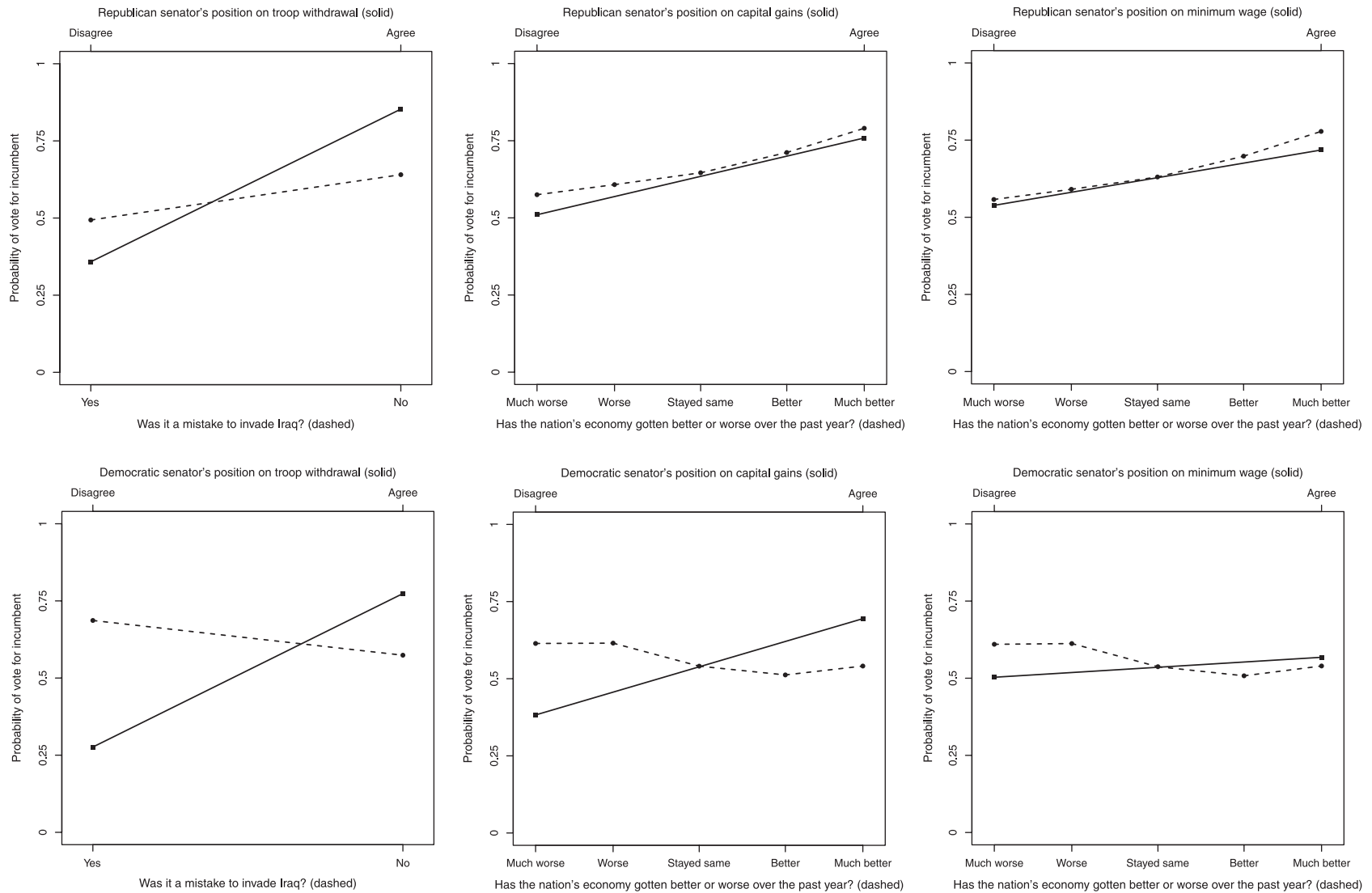
The predicted probabilities presented in Figure 4 bear close examination. I begin by looking at the relative effects of policy positions on withdrawing troops from Iraq and of evaluations of outcomes of the war, for Republican incumbents (in the upper left plot) and Democratic incumbents (lower left plot). For both Republican and Democratic incumbents, changes in perceptions of the senator's policy position are much more consequential than changing perceptions of the war itself. For voters judging Republican incumbents, shifting from a perception of disagreement to agreement on troop policy is

estimated to increase the probability of supporting them at the ballot box by 49%. A shift in perceptions of the policy outcome is estimated to change the probability of electoral support by just 15%. We see a similar conclusion for Democratic incumbents, where the effect of a more positive policy outcome is 11%, compared to the effect of a congruent policy position of about 50%. In short, the positions incumbents took on Iraq policy carried much more weight with constituents than the outcome of the war did.

The results in Figure 4 are less consistent across parties when it comes to specific economic policies. When evaluating Republican incumbents, constituents appear equally swayed by their perceptions of the economy and by their perceptions of the incumbent's policy position on capital gains taxes (upper middle plot) and on the minimum wage (upper right plot). For voters represented by Republicans, shifting from disagreement to agreement on either policy has essentially the same impact as the shift from perceiving the economy to have gotten "much worse" to "much better" (an average 20% increase in probability of voting for them). For voters represented by Democrats, however, the incumbent's positions on capital gains taxes have a much greater impact than do the economic outcomes (as shown in the lower middle plot). Senators who took a position on capital gains congruent with that of the voter were much more likely to be supported (69% probability) than those who did not (38% probability). This pattern is not, however, found in the lower-right plot, which shows that the incumbent's position on the minimum wage had little effect on vote choice (perceptions of economic outcomes, again, do not matter much either).

These analyses suggest both the magnitude and limitations of the importance of policy positions relative to policy outcomes for voters' decision making. On the one hand, for five of the six cases studied here, the positions that incumbents take on a single policy area have dramatic effects on their electoral fortunes. On the other, Figure 4 does suggest that, for economic policy, and when considering Republican incumbents, voters in 2006 weighed the positions they took about as much as they did the outcomes of policies. The upper right plots in Figure 4 suggest that, in these cases, both policy positions *and* individual policy outcomes weigh heavily on voters minds when choosing whether to reelect their representatives. Based on this limited number of policy areas, it is hard to speculate about which issues produce the greatest differences in the impact

FIGURE 4 Predicting Vote for or Against the Incumbent Senator with Evaluations of Policy Outcomes and Incumbent's Positions on Similar Issues



Note: First row shows the results for incumbent Republicans, second row for incumbent Democrats. Simulations holding all other variables at mean or mode from second-stage 2SCML coefficients presented in Table B in the Online Appendix. In each case, solid lines show the simulated effect of moving from disagreement to agreement with the senator on the policy position. Dashed lines show the simulated effect of moving from negative to positive evaluations of the policy outcomes.

of positions and outcomes: future work would do well to investigate further the conditions that lead voters to emphasize positions so much more than outcomes of these policies.

## Retrospective Voting Models and Omitted Variable Bias

The evidence outlined in the previous sections provides a consistent and robust picture of democratic accountability in the United States: Members of Congress are held accountable for the policy positions they take to a much greater extent than the policy outcomes they preside over. But how can we reconcile this conclusion with the extensive literature on forecasting congressional elections that predicts incumbent losses when the economy or foreign affairs sour? Although they differ in model specification, most forecasting attempts follow classic models like Kramer (1971) and include measures of the economy, the underlying partisanship of the electorate, and the success (or lack of) of military missions. None, however, incorporate a measure of how well incumbents have represented their constituents' policy views.

What difference does this omission make? I reran the regression model shown in the first column of Table 2 predicting vote choice for the incumbent, with interactions for party affiliation, this time omitting the measure of congruence on policy positions. This model, in the second column of Table 2, replicates in basic terms the regressions that previous researchers have used to predict congressional elections. To assess the differences in the models' substantive predictions, I again simulated the first differences in the probability of voting for the incumbent senator. For both models, and for members of both parties, I simulated the change in electoral support associated with a shift from (1) thinking the economy had gotten "much worse" to "much better" and (2) thinking the war in Iraq was "a mistake" to thinking it was not a mistake.

Figure 5 presents these first differences. The left plot shows the first differences estimated from the "limited" model that replicates standard retrospective voting models and does not include any measure of policy positions, for Republican and Democratic incumbents. Consistent with previous work, the model shows a large effect of policy outcomes on votes: when constituents perceived the economy or Iraq war to be doing well, they rewarded Republicans and punished Democrats. Based solely on this "limited" model, we

might well conclude that the theory of accountability for policy outcomes is correct.

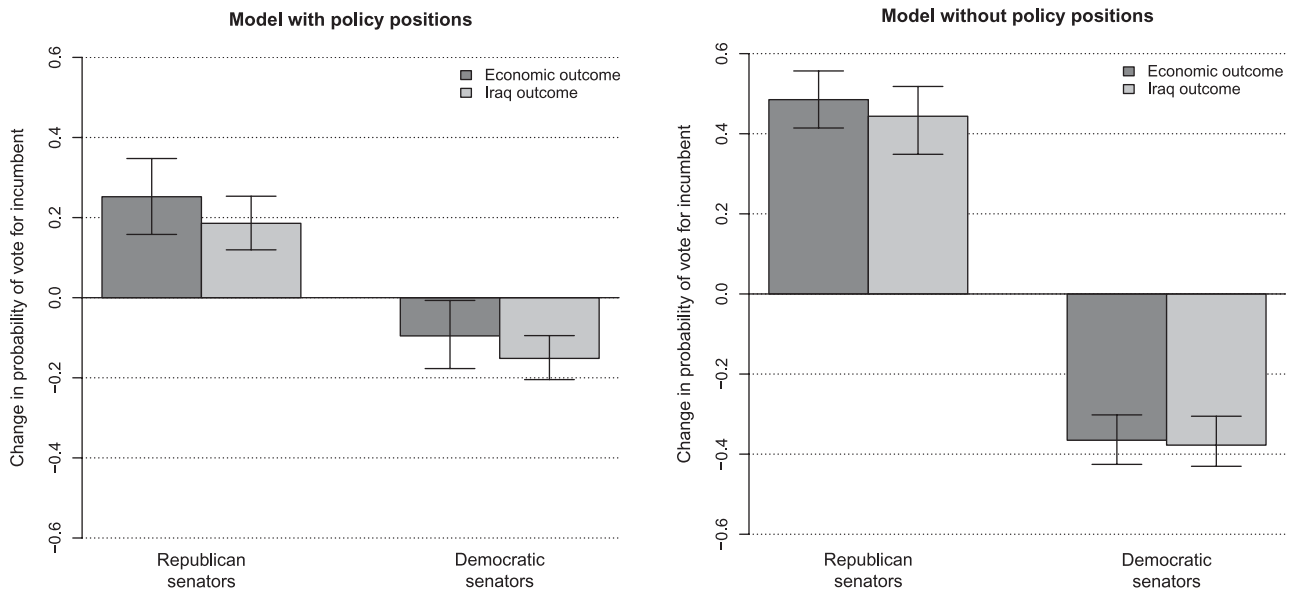
The right-hand plot, however, shows that such a conclusion would be premature. Once we include a measure of policy positions in the model, the estimated impact of policy outcomes is greatly reduced. In each case, the model that omits policy positions overstates the impact of policy outcomes by a factor of two or three. The first difference for Republican incumbents regarding economic outcomes in the restricted model is .49 [.41, .56]; in the model that also includes policy positions it is .25 [.15, .35]. The first difference for Republican incumbents regarding Iraq outcomes in the limited model is .44 [.35, .52]; in the model that also includes policy positions it is .19 [.12, .25]. The same pattern holds for Democratic incumbents.

Evaluations of the economy and the war are the most important predictors of vote choice in the restricted model, but not in the full model, suggesting that previous conclusions about the importance of retrospective voting rest on a model specification that omits a critical independent variable. To confirm that omitting this variable does cause bias in the retrospective voting model's estimates, the omitted variable and the spurious predictor need to be correlated. Preliminary analysis of the data shows that this condition is also met. For those represented by Republicans, the better they believe the economy to have gotten, the more likely they are to believe they have been well-represented on policy positions. For those represented by Democrats, the better they believe the economy to have gotten, the less likely they are to believe they have been well-represented.

*Why* this correlation exists is a question beyond the scope of this article, and a challenge for future scholars to explore. One possibility can be quickly dismissed: the correlation is not all in the voter's head. It is not the case that voters who believe the economy to have improved and who are represented by Republicans (or vice versa) misperceive policy congruence to a greater extent. When we examine *actual* policy congruence, same pattern appears: those represented by Republicans and who believe the economy has improved are in fact more likely to have been well-represented.

Congruence on policy positions—a measure that has not been readily available before due to the small *N* of most surveys and previous limitations in measuring policy representation—is by far the best predictor of election outcomes. These results suggest that retrospective voting theories were based on a model of electoral choice that omitted a key variable. Of course, the lack of over-time data on policy congruence makes it hard to directly

**FIGURE 5 First Differences in Probability of Vote for the Incumbent Senator, Given Shifts in Perceptions of Economic and Iraq Outcomes, from Two Separate Regression Models**



*Note:* Perceptions of economy shifted from “much worse” to “much better”. Perceptions of Iraq shifted from “A mistake” to “Not a mistake”. Left plot presents results from a “restricted” model that does not include congruence on policy positions as a predictor, shown in the second column of Table 2. Right plot represents the results from the “full” model that includes policy positions, shown in the first column of Table 2.

compare these results with previous research. However, the results in Figure 5 provide strong evidence that ignoring the impact of policy positions when assessing democratic accountability misses an important part of the process.

## Concluding Thoughts

Where does this leave our understanding of democratic accountability? First and foremost, the evidence here demonstrates that voters most strongly respond to the policy representation they have received from the incumbent and not the outcomes of those policies. When casting a vote for or against an incumbent, constituents heavily weigh the positions senators have taken. And they do so to a much greater extent than they hold them accountable for policy outcomes.

This conclusion is not merely an artifact of voters differentiating between legislators from different parties. Positive evaluations of peace and prosperity in 2006 did help Republicans, while negative evaluations helped Democratic incumbents. Data from more than one election, including periods of Democratic and Republican control of Congress, would need to be analyzed to show that the important distinction is between majority and minority parties rather

than between the Democratic and Republican parties per se. Regardless, the evidence is clear: the effect of policy outcomes is dwarfed by the effect of policy positions no matter the incumbent is party. The importance of policy positions compared to policy outcomes for voter choice is not a result of the collapsed scale of agreement on positions used in much of this article either. When we consider the effect of positions and outcomes in comparable issue areas, similar conclusions are reached.

Why, then, have theories of accountability for policy outcomes dominated the literature? The final section began to provide an explanation by showing that models of accountability that omit a measure of agreement on policy positions might incorrectly suggest that economic or military outcomes guide election outcomes. When we include a measure of congruence on policy positions as a predictor of the incumbent’s vote share, the importance of policy outcomes fades. The lack of appropriate data prior to the CCES, with its large sample size and new survey items, appears to have led to omitted variable bias.

The benefits of using these new data and measures should also be accompanied with caution, however. First, the results presented here are based on a snapshot of the electorate from a unique survey conducted in one year: data from more years are needed to replicate these results. A second concern is that opt-in surveys such as



the CCES have often been thought to overrepresent highly educated, knowledgeable voters. The substantive consequences to this type of bias could be significant for a conclusion that policy positions matter more than policy outcomes, if less-educated voters were more likely to use policy outcomes as a voting heuristic than well-educated voters. This possibility is, however, not borne out in the data. Running separate versions of the 2SCML model in Table 1 on respondents by the highest level of education they received reveals no substantive differences in the relative effects of positions and outcomes on vote choice.<sup>8</sup>

One final concern is whether we should even expect legislators to be held accountable for policy outcomes in the first place. Surely, responsibility for national policy outcomes might be expected to rest with the executive branch? In reality, however, national policymaking is a power shared between executives and legislators. Existing data suggest that ordinary Americans understand this—and that many place the responsibility for outcomes with *Congress*. The 1998 ANES asked respondents to name the actor most responsible for national economic outcomes, giving the closed options of Congress, the President, “working people,” and “business people.” 30.5% of respondents named Congress, compared to 21.5% who named the President (Rudolph 2003).<sup>9</sup>

These results indicate that voters care about more than just peace and prosperity. The means used to achieve these ends matter, too. They also suggest that one of the responses to concerns about voters’ policy comprehension and knowledge—that a lack of sophistication doesn’t matter as long as voters base their decisions on easily observable policy outcomes in their everyday lives—cannot direct the focus of political behavior research away from the political

capacity of electorates. The attractiveness of retrospective voting theories lies in part because they do not require voters to be policy experts (Fiorina 1981). But the data clearly show that constituents base their decisions not on the economic and military outcomes that they see in the country, but on the policy record they believe their representatives to have accrued. And although perceptions of policy do closely track reality (if they didn’t, the instrumental variable strategy used here would not work), there is still room for error in what voters believe has been done in their names. In short, more work needs to be done on understanding when and why constituents misperceive their representatives’ records, since these perceptions are what drive the outcome of elections.

All of this may actually come as a relief to elected officials, especially in the U.S. Congress, where responsibility for policy outcomes is divided up by a multitude of politicians, bureaucrats, and independent stakeholders. There is little that one senator can do to affect the state of the national economy—and if that is all that her constituents base their vote decision on, reelection becomes something she has little control over. On the other hand, and especially given weak party institutions and power bases independent of congressional leaders, senators are largely free to choose their own policy positions. The results here suggest that incumbents have significant autonomy to determine their own electoral fortunes, and that they are not bound by forces of the economy and foreign crises that they have little control over. And although there may be tough policy votes where it is impossible to appease all constituents, at least the decision of *who* to aggravate is in the hands of the incumbent.

The distinction between a view of legislators as mandated delegates and as independent trustees has dominated the literature on democratic representation, often with little empirical investigation into what voters want or how their behavior can shape the roles representatives adopt. Pitkin, for example, argues that “the represented have no will on most issues, and the duty of the representative is to do what is best for them, not what they latently want” (1967, 163). The evidence presented here turns that idea on its head, at least insofar as the representative wants to stay in office. Voters do have positions on these issues—and they use them to reward and punish incumbents. As Mayhew concluded, “the electoral payment is for positions rather than for effects” (1974, 132). Representatives who routinely do what is best rather than what is wanted—no matter the economic or military outcomes that ensue—run the risk of being replaced by someone new.

<sup>8</sup>These analyses are available from the author. As an example, the first difference for a shift in policy congruence from 25% to 75%, holding all else equal, is .70 [.63, .76] for those with only a high school degree and .76 [.72, .79] for those who graduated from college. The equivalent first differences for shifts in evaluations of the economy from “worse” to “better” are .07 [−.01, .14] and .01 [−.07, .07] respectively; and for shifts in evaluations of Iraq from being a mistake to not being a mistake the first differences are −.08 [−.15, −.01] and −.03 [−.10, .04], respectively. There is some evidence that the *accuracy* of perceptions varies with education: looking just at those who graduated high school, the coefficient for actual policy congruence in the first stage regression is .56 (.01). For those who graduated college, it is .68 (.01). Better educated respondents perceive the incumbent’s record somewhat more clearly. However, across all levels of education, actual policy congruence remains a consistently strong predictor of perceptions.

<sup>9</sup>The other categories were named by 16.1% and 31.8% of the respondents, respectively.

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