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# Issue Accountability in U.S. House Elections

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**Abstract** This paper analyzes the positions Members of Congress take on important aspects of public policy, voters' preferences on those issues, and individual-level voting behavior in congressional elections. Minimal evidence of issue accountability is found, and its form is different from that reported in previous research. The central implication is that representatives appear to have a good deal of discretion to take positions—at least with respect to voters—without paying an electoral penalty. The “electoral blind spot” (Bawn et al. *Perspect Polit* 10(3):571–597, 2012) in congressional elections may be substantial.

**Keywords** Congressional elections · Voting behavior · Policy issues · Electoral accountability

## Introduction

In a two-party system where party discipline is strictly enforced, legislative roll call votes are either unanimous, with all members of both parties on the same side, or party-line votes, with all members of one party in opposition to all members of the other party. In the United States, while the party system has been moving in this direction for some time, there remain important ideological and policy divisions within the major parties (Poole and Rosenthal 1997; McCarty et al. 2006). As a

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result, when Members of Congress (MCs) seek reelection, voters have the opportunity to vote on the basis of the positions their MCs have taken along with those of their respective parties.

Whether the specific issue positions of candidates are related to voting behavior, and if they are, how they matter, are important for several reasons. Issue accountability is one way voters may exert control over their elected officials and foster democratic responsiveness. Through elections constituents may vote against incumbents or parties that have taken positions in opposition to their preferences. And, if voters behave this way, then there is an incentive for elected officials to anticipate the electoral effects of their positions and adjust them accordingly (e.g., Arnold 1990). Related, in light of the fact that voters appear to hold more moderate preferences than those of activists, party elites, and elected officials, issue accountability may serve as a centripetal counterbalance to the centrifugal forces in the contemporary political world (McCloskey et al. 1960; Bawn et al. 2012; Stone 2017). While the simple prediction of convergence to the median voter (Downs 1957) is not evident in contemporary American electoral politics, issue accountability may nevertheless serve to keep the parties and their candidates more moderate than they otherwise would be.

Previous research typically reports a relationship between aspects of representatives' voting records and their reelection fortunes (e.g., Brady et al. 1996; Canes-Wrone et al. 2002; Bovitz and Carson 2006; Carson et al. 2010; Hall 2015). I build on that research and analyze issue accountability at the level of individual voters where much less research has been conducted. As explained below, an individual-level analysis provides important leverage for assessing competing explanations. Specifically, I focus on two types of issue accountability and test for their presence with respect to important roll call votes during the first term of the Obama administration: passage of the Affordable Care Act, "cap and trade" for pollution control, "Dodd-Frank" financial reform, the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy with respect to sexual orientation and service in the military, and support for the Children's Health Insurance Program. This article not only provides new empirical evidence regarding issue accountability, but also finds that its form appears different from that reported in other research (e.g., Ansolabehere and Jones 2010; Jones 2011). Instead of voters simply punishing incumbents based on policy disagreement, when issue accountability is evident, it appears to be conditional on whether voters' preferences are more likely to be consistent with the opposition party's candidate and whether the incumbent takes the position typical of her party. Further, the results provide evidence for issue accountability only with respect to the Affordable Care Act. A central implication is that only the highest profile, attention getting issues may become the subject of issue accountability, leaving representatives a fair amount of discretion—at least with respect to voters—about how they vote on important aspects of public policy. The "electoral blind spot" (Bawn et al. 2012) in congressional elections may be substantial.

## Background

Interviews with Members of Congress consistently reveal that they believe their roll call voting records matter for their reelection chances, especially votes on high profile, salient issues (Miller and Stokes 1963; Kingdon 1973; Mayhew 1974; Fenno 1978; Arnold 1990; Miller 2010). Election-level quantitative analyses corroborate this view, typically finding that representatives with more ideologically extreme voting records and those who support their parties at higher rates do worse on Election Day (Erikson 1971; Ansolabehere et al. 2001; Canes-Wrone et al. 2002; Burden 2004; Carson et al. 2010; Canes-Wrone et al. 2011; Bonica 2014; Hall 2015). There is less evidence regarding the effects of specific roll call votes, but what exists suggests that they may matter, too (Jacobson 1996; Bovitz and Carson 2006; Brady et al. 2011; Nyhan et al. 2012).

The election-level results are consistent with a variety of individual-level relationships. All involve voters and the information they receive and rely on when casting ballots. One is based on Ansolabehere and Jones (2010) and Jones (2011). These studies suggest that in response to information about a representative's position, a voter may become more likely (if the voter agrees with the incumbent's position) or less likely (if the voter disagrees with the incumbent's position) to vote for them. Consider Table 1, which identifies four types of voters based on their own preferences (liberal or conservative) with respect to a particular policy and their representative's roll call position on the issue (also liberal or conservative).

If voters make choices based on simple agreement or disagreement (*voter-MC preference congruence*), then we would expect correspondence (i.e., agreement) between voters and MCs to be associated with higher levels of voting for the incumbents than lack of correspondence (i.e., disagreement). Among liberal voters, the probability of voting for the incumbent ( $p_{inc}$ ) will be higher when the incumbent takes a liberal position ( $V_{lib}, MC_{lib}$ ) than when the incumbent takes a conservative position ( $V_{lib}, MC_{con}$ ).

$$\begin{aligned} p_{inc}(V_{lib}, MC_{lib}) &> p_{inc}(V_{lib}, MC_{con}), \\ p_{inc}(V_{lib}, MC_{lib}) - p_{inc}(V_{lib}, MC_{con}) &> 0 \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

Among conservative voters, the probability of voting for the incumbent will be higher when the incumbent takes a conservative position ( $V_{con}, MC_{con}$ ) than when the incumbent takes a liberal position ( $V_{con}, MC_{lib}$ ).

$$\begin{aligned} p_{inc}(V_{con}, MC_{con}) &> p_{inc}(V_{con}, MC_{lib}), \\ p_{inc}(V_{con}, MC_{con}) - p_{inc}(V_{con}, MC_{lib}) &> 0 \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

Agreement and disagreement can also be compared across voters for MCs who take liberal and conservative positions. If an incumbent takes a liberal position, then voters who prefer the liberal policy alternative ( $V_{lib}, MC_{lib}$ ) will have a higher probability of voting for the incumbent than voters who prefer the conservative policy alternative ( $V_{con}, MC_{lib}$ ).

**Table 1** Voter—representative correspondence

Voter policy preference	Roll call vote—Member of Congress (MC)	
	Liberal	Conservative
Liberal	$(V_{lib}, MC_{lib})$	$(V_{lib}, MC_{con})$
Conservative	$(V_{con}, MC_{lib})$	$(V_{con}, MC_{con})$

$$\begin{aligned} p_{inc}(V_{lib}, MC_{lib}) &> p_{inc}(V_{con}, MC_{lib}), \\ p_{inc}(V_{lib}, MC_{lib}) - p_{inc}(V_{con}, MC_{lib}) &> 0 \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

If the incumbent takes a conservative position, then voters who prefer the conservative policy alternative  $(V_{con}, MC_{con})$  will have a higher probability of voting for the incumbent than voters who prefer the liberal policy alternative  $(V_{con}, MC_{lib})$ .

$$\begin{aligned} p_{inc}(V_{con}, MC_{con}) &> p_{inc}(V_{lib}, MC_{con}), \\ p_{inc}(V_{con}, MC_{con}) - p_{inc}(V_{lib}, MC_{con}) &> 0 \end{aligned} \quad (4)$$

Thus the voter-MC preference congruence model makes four predictions regarding the probability of voting for an incumbent.

A second model suggests that voting based on simple agreement or disagreement may miss an important element of the choice context. To anticipate the analysis below, consider how things might work for Democratic MCs. One form of voter-MC disagreement occurs when a voter prefers the liberal policy alternative and the Democratic incumbent casts a conservative vote  $(V_{lib}, MC_{con})$ . This voter may not be pleased with the incumbent, but in the American two party system, she does not have a viable alternative choice (at least in a general election) because the Republican party and its candidates are typically conservative. In contrast, consider voter-MC disagreement when a voter with a conservative preference is represented by a Democrat who casts a liberal vote on the issue  $(V_{con}, MC_{lib})$ . This voter has a more viable alternative to the Democratic incumbent in the Republican candidate. Thus, for Democratic incumbents, the effects of disagreement in Eqs. (1) and (4) above may be less than the effects of disagreement in (2) and (3). Specifically, when the incumbent is a Democrat, the effect of an MC taking a conservative rather than the liberal position may be smaller for liberal voters compared to conservative voters. That is, the magnitude of the effect in (1) may be less than the magnitude in (2).

$$\begin{aligned} p_{inc}(V_{con}, MC_{con}) - p_{inc}(V_{con}, MC_{lib}) &> p_{inc}(V_{lib}, MC_{lib}) - p_{inc}(V_{lib}, MC_{con}), \\ p_{inc}(V_{con}, MC_{con}) - p_{inc}(V_{con}, MC_{lib}) - [p_{inc}(V_{lib}, MC_{lib}) - p_{inc}(V_{lib}, MC_{con})] &> 0 \end{aligned} \quad (5)$$

Likewise, when a Democratic incumbent takes a conservative position on an issue, the effect of voters preferring the liberal instead of the conservative position may be smaller than when a Democratic incumbent takes a liberal position; the magnitude of the effect in (4) may be smaller than the effect in (3).

$$\begin{aligned}
 & p_{\text{inc}}(V_{\text{lib}}, MC_{\text{lib}}) - p_{\text{inc}}(V_{\text{con}}, MC_{\text{lib}}) > p_{\text{inc}}(V_{\text{con}}, MC_{\text{con}}) - p_{\text{inc}}(V_{\text{lib}}, MC_{\text{con}}), \\
 & p_{\text{inc}}(V_{\text{lib}}, MC_{\text{lib}}) - p_{\text{inc}}(V_{\text{con}}, MC_{\text{lib}}) - [p_{\text{inc}}(V_{\text{con}}, MC_{\text{con}}) - p_{\text{inc}}(V_{\text{lib}}, MC_{\text{con}})] > 0
 \end{aligned}
 \tag{6}$$

In other words, voters may conditionally punish incumbents who take positions with which they disagree (*voter-MC conditional preference congruence*).<sup>1</sup> The effect of disagreement is conditional on whether voters' preferences are more likely to be consistent with the opposition party's candidate and whether the incumbent takes the position typical of her party. It is important to note that the two models are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Equations (1) through (6) may all be true. However, the conditional model allows for the possibility that liberal voters who disagree with Democratic incumbents may not punish them at all. That is,  $p_{\text{inc}}(V_{\text{lib}}, MC_{\text{lib}}) - p_{\text{inc}}(V_{\text{lib}}, MC_{\text{con}}) = 0$ , and,  $p_{\text{inc}}(V_{\text{con}}, MC_{\text{con}}) - p_{\text{inc}}(V_{\text{lib}}, MC_{\text{con}}) = 0$ .<sup>2,3</sup>

If either or both the *voter-MC preference congruence* and the *voter-MC preference conditional congruence* models are accurate with respect to how voters cast ballots, then a key condition for electoral accountability is that voters be provided adequate information about their MCs' positions. This suggests that issue accountability will vary across issues and over time. When an issue receives more attention, and therefore becomes more salient, it may become subject to issue accountability (Bovitz and Carson 2006; Canes-Wrone et al. 2011). Lack of congruence between representatives' positions and voter preferences on issues that stay below the "radar" would not be expected to be related to voting behavior. What it takes to clear the attention and salience hurdles for a policy to become the basis of issue accountability becomes an important question.

Empirically, election-level analyses are limited with respect to their ability to differentiate among the two types of issue accountability because both are consistent, for example, with a finding that an incumbent's position on a particular roll call vote is associated with a lower vote share. Further, one or both of the mechanisms could be operating even if there is no observed relationship between a roll call vote and election outcomes. For instance, if an incumbent's position leads some voters to become more likely to support her and others to become less likely to do so, then the effects may cancel out in the aggregate producing no net electoral

<sup>1</sup> For Republican incumbents the same logic applies to produce different predictions. Rather than liberal voters potentially being less responsive, under Republican incumbents it is conservative voters. And voter-MC disagreement may matter more when Republican incumbents take conservative positions than when they cast liberal roll call votes. This implies an additional set of comparisons. For voters with liberal preferences, the effect of an MC taking the conservative position instead of the liberal position will be greater for Republican incumbents than Democratic incumbents. For voters with conservative preferences, the effect of an MC taking the liberal position instead of the conservative position will be greater for Democratic incumbents. As explained below (and shown in Table 2), these propositions are not testable with the data analyzed in this paper because on the roll call votes considered there is only variation in the positions taken by MCs for one party or the other.

<sup>2</sup> For Republican incumbents,  $p_{\text{inc}}(V_{\text{con}}, MC_{\text{con}}) - p_{\text{inc}}(V_{\text{con}}, MC_{\text{lib}}) = 0$ , and  $p_{\text{inc}}(V_{\text{lib}}, MC_{\text{lib}}) - p_{\text{inc}}(V_{\text{con}}, MC_{\text{lib}}) = 0$ .

<sup>3</sup> Later I consider the possibility that liberal voters who disagree with Democratic incumbents and conservative voters who disagree with Republican incumbents may respond through abstention rather than voting for the other party's candidate.

**Table 2** Party voting on key roll call votes

Roll call vote	Democratic MC's		Republican MC's	
	In favor	Opposed	In favor	Opposed
Affordable Care Act	219	34	0	178
Cap and trade	211	44	8	168
Dodd-Frank financial reform	234	19	3	173
Repeal of “don’t ask, don’t tell”	229	26	5	168
Children’s Health Insurance Program	250	2	40	133

effect. But the correct conclusion would not be that voters impose no constraining influence on incumbents, and therefore that representatives have discretion in the positions they take. Instead, the correct inference would be that voters do respond to the positions incumbents take and do hold them electorally accountable.

## Research Design and Data

To assess the nature of issue accountability in congressional elections, it is necessary to observe the ballot choices of voters in all four cells of Table 1. Because on most significant issues there is variation in voters’ policy preferences and variation in the positions adopted by representatives, this condition initially appears easy to meet. But, as discussed above the predictions from the various theories are different for Republican and Democratic incumbents. Roll call votes on significant public policy issues where all (or nearly all) Democrats are unified and vote against all (or nearly all) Republicans, are therefore not useful for the present purposes. As a result, roll call votes like the one to pass President Obama’s economic stimulus package in early 2009 (the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act) where Democrats voted 246-7 in favor and all 176 Republicans opposed it are not used in this study.

The empirical analysis below focuses on five significant roll call votes in Barack Obama’s first presidential term. The selection was guided by the theoretical considerations that identify policy significance and salience as important characteristics of roll call votes that might make them the basis of issue accountability. In Obama’s first term, Congress voted on the Affordable Care Act (the ACA), one of the most significant changes in public policy in decades, and one that is generally believed to be a contributing cause of the Republican takeover of Congress in the 2010 elections (Sack 2010a, b; Brady et al. 2011; Jacobson 2011; Nyhan et al. 2012). Given its salience and significance, if issue accountability occurs, then some form of it should be evident with respect to the ACA. While Republicans were unified in opposition to the ACA, for voters represented by Democrats, all four types represented in Table 1 are evident because 34 Democrats voted against the ACA (and 219 voted for it).

There were three other high profile votes that produced within party divisions for the Democrats and for which the necessary survey data is available: a cap and trade

bill to limit pollution and respond to climate change (the “American Clean Energy and Security Act”), an amendment to the Department of Defense budget authorization that would allow gays to openly serve in the military by eliminating the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, and the “Dodd-Frank” financial reform law intended to regulate the behavior of financial institutions that contributed to the Great Recession. As shown in Table 2, on all of these measures, there were more than trivial numbers of Democrats on both sides of the roll call votes and near or actual unified roll call voting among Republicans in opposition.<sup>4</sup> There was one key vote that produced division within the Republican party (against a near-unified Democratic party): the roll call vote to reauthorize the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP). I analyze issue accountability with respect to this vote for Republican incumbents seeking reelection, too.<sup>5</sup>

To measure voters’ preferences on these issues, I rely on the common content from the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Survey (Ansolabehere 2012). The CCES included a battery of questions that began with the following prompt: “Congress considered many important bills over the past 2 years. For each of the following tell us whether you support or oppose the legislation in principle.” Then, respondents were provided with short descriptions of the roll calls and their answers were recorded.

Matching respondents’ answers to their incumbents’ votes enables me to identify the four types of voters in Table 1 for each policy. There is also a fifth category, which includes all voters who do not express a preference on a roll call vote and voters whose representatives did not vote on the measure. This category includes only a small number of respondents, constituting between two and four percent of CCES voters for each issue. In the analyses that follow I create a set of dummy variables to indicate each of the five groups.<sup>6</sup>

The post-election wave of the CCES survey included about 33,000 voters from all 435 House districts. There were nearly 18,000 voters in districts with Democrats seeking reelection in contested elections and about 12,000 voters in districts with Republican incumbents seeking reelection.<sup>7</sup> All the models on which estimated effects are based include controls for race, ethnicity, gender, family income, party

<sup>4</sup> It is possible that Democratic opposition to these measures could have been based on beliefs that the measures were insufficiently liberal, in which case equating opposition to the measures with a conservative preferences would obviously be problematic. But, when the relationship between opposition and district-level presidential vote is analyzed, it is apparent that opposition to the measures is more likely in Democratic districts where the district-level presidential vote was more Republican, strongly suggesting that Democratic incumbents who voted against the measures did so because they believed the proposed policies were too liberal, not insufficiently so.

<sup>5</sup> All of roll call votes considered in the empirical analysis were classified as “key votes” by *Congressional Quarterly* or the *National Journal* or both.

<sup>6</sup> Treating respondents in the fifth category as missing does not alter the patterns of statistical results or substantive findings.

<sup>7</sup> The analysis is based on major party, self-reported voters. Incumbents seeking reelection in uncontested elections are not included in the analysis. If the analysis is limited to the respondents for whom the CCES was able to validate as having voted, the patterns of results are the same.



identification, ideological identification, and general policy preferences.<sup>8</sup> The CCES sample weight is used for model estimation and computation of vote probabilities. Standard errors are estimated taking into account the “clustering,” and therefore non-independence, of voters within congressional districts.<sup>9</sup>

## Results

As mentioned above, for each policy/roll call vote there are five mutually exclusive categories defined by voters’ preferences and MCs’ positions. Testing the issue accountability hypotheses requires that each of the five types be allowed to differ from the other four, which I do by employing a set of dummy variables. Table 3 in the Appendix reports the logit parameter estimates of voting for Democratic incumbents and the four panels of Fig. 1 report the estimated probabilities of voting for the Democratic incumbents across the different voter-MC configurations for the four issues.<sup>10</sup>

The top left panel of Fig. 1 shows the parameter estimates as they relate to the Affordable Care Act. How do the empirical estimates fit with the theoretical possibilities elaborated earlier? Recall that the *voter-MC preference congruence* model focuses on preference agreement and disagreement between voters and incumbents and predicts that disagreement lowers support for the incumbent.

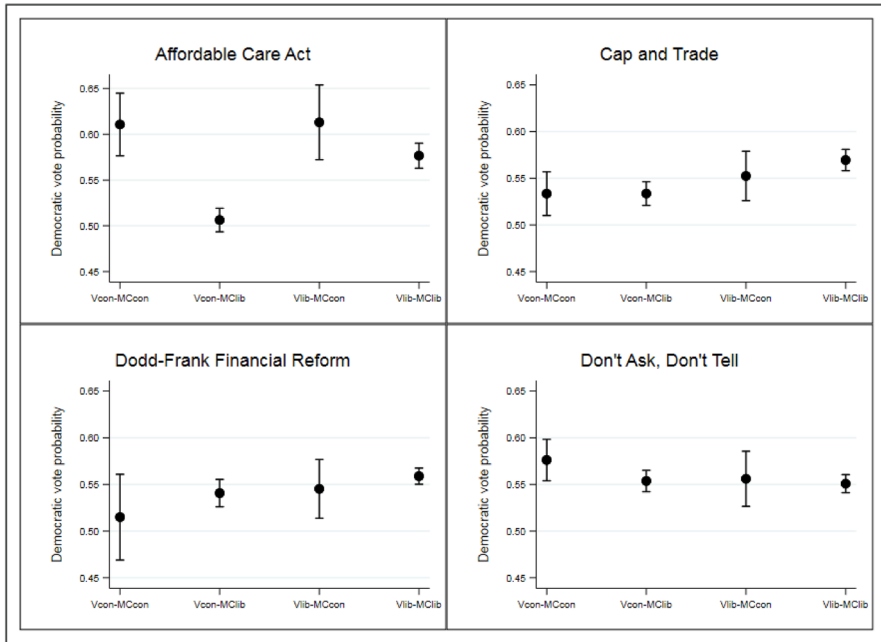
$$p_{\text{inc}}(V_{\text{lib}}, MC_{\text{lib}}) - p_{\text{inc}}(V_{\text{lib}}, MC_{\text{con}}) > 0 \quad (7)$$

$$p_{\text{inc}}(V_{\text{con}}, MC_{\text{con}}) - p_{\text{inc}}(V_{\text{con}}, MC_{\text{lib}}) > 0 \quad (8)$$

<sup>8</sup> Party identification is coded  $-1$  (strong identifier of challenger’s party),  $-0.5$  (weak or leaning identifier of challenger’s party),  $+0.5$  (weak or leaning identifier of incumbent’s party), or  $+1$  (strong identifier of incumbent’s party). Pure independents and other non-identifiers are coded 0. Ideology is also coded on a  $-1/+1$  scale and is the average of two questions, one asking respondents to place themselves on a 7 point ideology scale and one asking them a 5 point version. General policy preferences are measured with 13 policy questions, all coded to range from  $-1$  (most liberal response) to  $+1$  (most conservative response) and then averaged (alpha reliability coefficient = .91). To facilitate interpretation, when analyzing voting for Democratic incumbents, ideological identification and general policy preferences are scaled so higher values indicate more liberal preferences. When analyzing voting for Republican incumbents, they are scaled so higher values indicate more conservative preferences. To preserve cases and avoid listwise deletion of missing data, respondents with missing data on the ideology and policy questions (before averaging) were assigned to the median values of those variables.

<sup>9</sup> In preliminary analyses, several district-level covariates were included (presidential vote and challenger quality), but there were no substantively or statistically significant relationships between them and vote choice. As a result, in the model results reported in Tables 3 and 4 in the Appendix only individual-level control variables are included. In addition, re-estimating the models without the sampling weights produces the same patterns of results.

<sup>10</sup> Specifically, the estimated probabilities are the average estimated effects for the survey respondents. Sometimes effects are estimated for a hypothetical individual with average (or median or modal) values for the independent variables. In the present case, though, this would produce exaggerated effects because that sort of voter (one whose partisanship and ideology is very near the middle of the scale) typically has a probability of voting Democratic (Republican) near .50, which is exactly the place on the logit curve where logit changes produce the largest probability changes.



**Fig. 1** Voter—MC Correspondence on Issues and Voting for Democratic Incumbents. Based on logit parameter estimates of voting for Democratic incumbents reported in Table 3 in Appendix. See text for model description and coding of variables. Dots indicate point estimates and bars show 95% confidence intervals

$$p_{\text{inc}}(V_{\text{lib}}, MC_{\text{lib}}) - p_{\text{inc}}(V_{\text{con}}, MC_{\text{lib}}) > 0 \quad (9)$$

$$p_{\text{inc}}(V_{\text{con}}, MC_{\text{con}}) - p_{\text{inc}}(V_{\text{lib}}, MC_{\text{con}}) > 0 \quad (10)$$

However, only (8) and (9) are supported in the data ( $p < .01$  for both tests). The prediction that a conservative MC vote lowers support among liberal voters (7) is not supported (the estimated effect has the wrong sign, though  $p > .05$ ). Nor is the prediction that among incumbents who opposed the ACA, voters who supported the ACA would be less likely to vote for them than voters who agreed with their MC and also opposed the ACA (Eq. 10).

In contrast, the empirical results are consistent with the *voter-MC conditional preference congruence* model. Both of its predictions are supported in the data. First, equation five predicts that voters supporting the ACA (liberal voters) would be less responsive to the positions taken by Democratic incumbents than voters opposed to the ACA (conservative voters). That is the difference in (8) is greater than the difference in (7). In terms of the logit coefficients, this estimated difference in the differences is 2.15 ( $p < .01$ ).<sup>11</sup> Second, Eq. 6 predicts that the effect of

<sup>11</sup> Based on the parameter estimates reported in Table 3 in the Appendix, the estimated effect of voter-MC agreement versus disagreement among conservative voters is 1.60 (8). The estimated effect of voter-MC agreement versus disagreement among liberal voters is  $-.55$  (7). Thus the estimated difference in the two effects is 2.15.

voters' ACA preferences will be greater among Democratic incumbents who supported the ACA (liberal MCs) compared to the effect among Democratic incumbents who opposed the ACA (conservative MCs); the difference in (9) is greater than the difference in (10). This result is also evident in the data with an estimated difference in the two effects of 1.11 ( $p < .01$ ).<sup>12</sup>

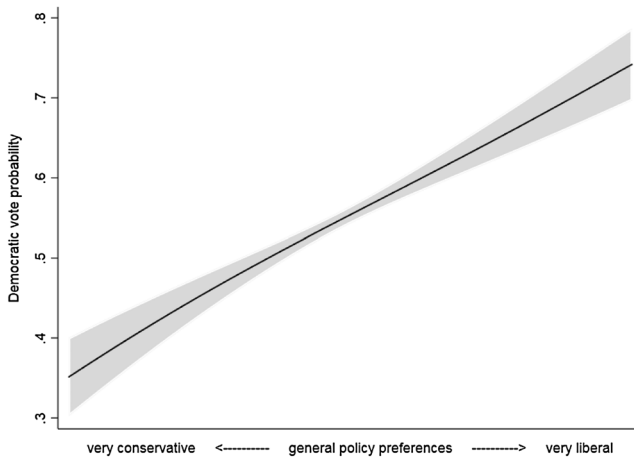
The results for the other three issues that divided Democratic MCs are also shown in Fig. 1. While there are some differences between groups that reach conventional levels of statistical significance ( $p < .05$  or  $p < .01$ , see Table 3 in Appendix), the most notable results are the modest, if any, differences across the categories of agreement and disagreement between voters and incumbents. For none of the remaining three issues do the estimated effects approach those evident for the ACA. In fact none of the differences across the groups exceeds four percentage points, and the predictions from neither model of issue accountability receive support.<sup>13</sup>

Turning to Republican incumbents seeking reelection, recall that forty took the liberal position and voted to reauthorize the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) while the rest voted against it. Table 4 in the Appendix reports the logit parameter estimates of voting for Republican incumbents. The results are largely consistent with those for Democratic incumbents (other than the ACA), though if anything the estimated differences in vote probabilities (not shown) across the various configurations voter-MC positions are smaller in magnitude and less statistically significant. Neither the set of hypotheses from the simple agreement/disagreement model nor the two hypotheses from the conditional model are supported in the results. There is little apparent relationship between voters' and incumbents' positions and vote choice, which suggests lack of issue accountability with respect to CHIP.

Despite the finding that for four of the five issues considered there does not appear to be issue accountability, the voting models for Democratic and Republican incumbents both suggest very strong relationships between *general* issue preferences and vote choice that are on par with the substantial effects of party identification. Both variables are coded on a  $-1/+1$  scale, and in the model for Democratic incumbents the estimated effects of general policy preferences and party identification are 2.04 ( $p < .01$ ) and 2.13 ( $p < .01$ ), respectively. The corresponding estimates in the model for Republican incumbents are 2.34 ( $p < .01$ )

<sup>12</sup> Among Democratic incumbents who voted for the ACA, the difference in the logit parameter estimates for voters who agreed and disagreed with the incumbent is 1.08 (9). The estimated difference among incumbents who voted against the ACA — .03 (10), producing a difference in the estimated effects of 1.11.

<sup>13</sup> Among Democratic MCs, those who cast a liberal roll call vote on one measure were more likely to cast liberal votes on the others measures. Among voters, those who expressed a liberal preference on one issue were more likely hold liberal preferences on the other issues. Multicollinearity among voter preferences is less of a concern due to the large number of voters in the sample ( $N = 17,988$ ), but there are considerably fewer Democratic incumbents ( $N = 232$ ). To investigate this issue further, I re-estimated the voting model four times, each time including only one of the issues and excluding the other three. None of the sets of model estimates provides consistent support for the *voter-MC preference congruence* model by finding support for Eqs. (1) through (4). And the ACA issue remains the one where support for the *voter-MC conditional preference congruence* is strongest. The estimated difference in differences for Eqs. (5) and (6) are largest in magnitude for the ACA and the only ones for which both reach conventional levels of statistical significance ( $p < .05$ ).

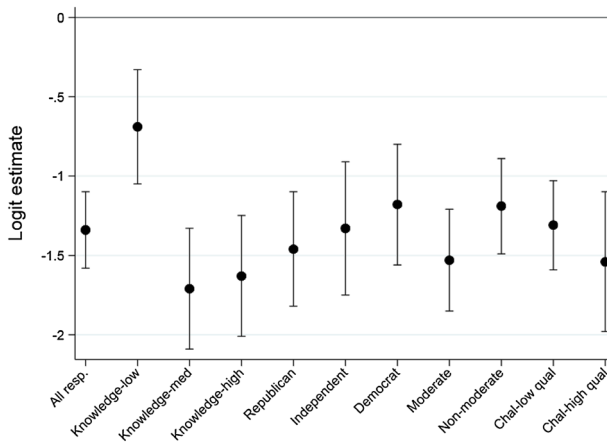


**Fig. 2** General Policy Preferences and Voting for Democratic Incumbents. 95% confidence interval is in gray. See text and Table 3 in Appendix for model description and logit parameter estimates

and 2.33 ( $p < .01$ ). To provide a sense of the substantive magnitude, Fig. 2 displays the relationship between general policy preferences and voting for Democratic incumbents. The figure shows that as policy preferences shift from the very conservative end of the scale to the very liberal end, the probability of voting for the Democratic incumbent increases by about 40 percentage points.<sup>14</sup> Thus while it appears that voters did not rely on their preferences with respect to the specific issues analyzed here (except the ACA), it is not the case that voters' general issue preferences are unrelated to their ballot choices. Further, voters' preferences on the specific issues analyzed here are all associated with the measure of general policy preferences. Across each of the five specific issues analyzed, the average score on the general policy scale for those with a liberal preference is  $+.40$ . The average score on the general policy scale for those with conservative preferences on each of the five policies is  $-.48$ , for an average difference that approaches half the general policy preference scale. As a result, even though it does not appear that voters' decisions were guided by their specific policy preferences on cap and trade, financial reform, "don't ask, don't tell," and CHIP, the strong connection between general policy preferences and ballot decisions means that those with liberal preferences on those issues were nevertheless more likely to vote Democratic and those with conservative preferences were more likely to vote Republican.

Finally, returning to the policy for which issue accountability is evident, I consider whether there is heterogeneity in the electoral penalty for incumbents who voted for the ACA from voters opposed to it. Heterogeneity might exist with respect voters' general levels of political knowledge (Zaller 1992; Carpini and Keeter 1996). It might vary by partisanship, as there is some empirical evidence showing that voters of the opposing party (in this case Republicans) are more responsive to

<sup>14</sup> The estimated effect for Republican incumbents is somewhat higher, approaching 50 points.



**Fig. 3** Estimated Heterogeneity in the Electoral Penalty for Voting in Support of the ACA (by Voters Opposed to the ACA). Notes: Each entry in the figure is based on a separate logit model of voting for Democratic incumbents. The labels indicate for which type of respondents the model was estimated. The dots indicate the logit coefficient for the dummy variable identifying voters opposed to the ACA who had MCs that voted for it. 95% confidence intervals are shown in capped lines. The first entry on the left is from a model estimated for all respondents. The second is for those who scored “low” on a scale of political knowledge, etc. See text for details

MCs positions (Stone 2017). Other research shows that self-identified ideological moderates are less responsive than those who identify as liberals or conservatives (Adams et al. 2017). And, finally the effect may be more pronounced in elections where Democrats faced quality challengers, as opposed to inexperienced ones (Jacobson and Kernell 1983).

To investigate all of these possibilities I re-estimated the Democratic vote choice model 11 times, each time for a different subgroup of voters. Given the finding shown in Fig. 1 that voters opposed to the ACA who had Democratic MCs that supported it ( $V_{con}$ ,  $MC_{lib}$ ) were the substantively and statistically distinct type, I used a dummy variable to identify this group in the model. Consequently the logit coefficient for this variable indicates how much different this group is from the others. The coefficient should be negative—indicating lower support—and the question at hand is whether the magnitude (the electoral penalty) varies across different types of voters.

Figure 3 shows the results of the heterogeneity tests. The first entry at the left reports the logit coefficient (and the 95% confidence interval) when the model is estimated for all voters. The logit parameter estimate associated with a voter opposing the ACA when the incumbent voted for it is  $-1.4$  ( $p < .01$ ). When the model is estimated separately for different subgroups of voters defined by their levels of political knowledge, it is evident that electoral penalty imposed by the least informed ( $-.7$ ) is notably smaller than that of the other two knowledge groups for whom the estimated effects are  $-1.6$  and  $-1.7$ .<sup>15</sup> In contrast, across all the other

<sup>15</sup> Political knowledge is measured in terciles based on a scale with ten items like party control of the House and Senate, placing president Obama and the Democratic party on the liberal side of an ideological scale, and placing the Republican party on the conservative side of the scale.

groups, while there is some variation in the point estimates of the electoral penalty, the differences are not substantively large, and none appears statistically distinct from the estimated penalty when all respondents are included in a single model. With the exception of the least knowledgeable voters, then, the electoral penalty imposed on Democrats who supported the ACA by voters who opposed it appears rather uniform.

## Discussion

The vigilance with which Members of Congress monitor their constituencies and the electoral concerns they have about the impact roll call votes have on their reelection chances appear at least partially vindicated by the analysis reported in this paper. Roll call positions on the ACA mattered for individuals' ballot choices. Yet, the atypical character of voting with respect to the ACA becomes evident when one considers that on four other major policy conflicts, issue accountability was not apparent.

What, then, explains the lack of any apparent issue accountability with respect to the other four issues? It is possible that voters were sufficiently informed about the issues but did not care enough about them to align their preferences with their ballot choices. It is also possible, and perhaps more probable, that although the issues carried policy significance and were identified as "key votes" by congressional observers, they did not receive enough attention from the media and campaigns to become salient. In comparison, writing about the ACA 2 weeks before election day, Sack (2010b) observed that "the continuing debate over health care has remained prominent in numerous races for the House and Senate."<sup>16</sup> Either way, incumbents cast important roll call votes without any apparent electoral consequence. This suggests the possibility of ample discretion for representatives when casting votes.

Two additional considerations are important in this regard. First, the positions incumbents take on issues are not random, and therefore the question of whether selection effects bias the reported estimates should be considered. For example, as mentioned earlier, Democrats who cast liberal votes on the issues were more likely to represent districts where the party balance strongly favored the Democratic party. Democratic incumbents who cast conservative votes were more likely to represent competitive districts. Including individual-level and district-level covariates may help mitigate the problem and control for differences, and the inclusion of a range of additional variables does not alter the pattern of results reported in this paper. Also, in an election-level analysis of the electoral effects of the ACA, Nyhan et al. (2012) find similar estimated effects when comparing conventional OLS estimates to those based on a method (genetic matching) designed to address selection issues (Diamond and Sekhon 2013). Nevertheless it is important to keep in mind the observational nature of the data used here. Future research could employ survey

<sup>16</sup> Further, in "Congressional races, a centerpiece of the Republican strategy has been to use Democratic 'yes' votes on the law to tar incumbents as advocates of expansive government and lockstep followers of their party's leadership" (Sack 2010b).

experiments where the positions incumbents adopt (and the media attention given to issues) are randomized, which would provide important additional empirical evidence regarding the nature of issue accountability.

A second consideration has to do with voter turnout. The mostly null effects with regard to vote choice are consistent with a theory that identifies voter-MC disagreement as a cause of electoral abstention. In presidential election years abstention due to disagreement with MC positions is probably less likely because potential abstainers might nevertheless be drawn to the polls to cast ballots at the top of the ticket. But, in midterm years it is more plausible, especially for people with liberal policy preferences who are represented by Democratic incumbents who cast conservative votes and people with conservative policy preferences who are represented by Republican incumbents who take liberal positions. There is some research on this topic (Adams et al. 2006; Dennis and Gershtenson 2004), and the most recent individual-level evidence suggests that the ideological distance between citizens and candidates is unrelated to turnout decisions (Rogowski 2014). Although beyond the bounds of an extensive investigation here, using self-reported and validated turnout measures in the CCES, I examined the relationships among the various types defined by citizen preferences and MC votes (Table 1) and found no substantively sizable turnout effects.

Thus the lack of apparent issue accountability, except with respect to the ACA appears real. This leads to an important question about whether the results for the ACA or for the other four issues are more typical in general. In combination with findings from previous research, there is a plausible argument to be made that Members of Congress are not much constrained by voters in the positions they take on particular issues. Consider the Bovitz and Carson (2006) analysis of the relationship between specific roll call votes and election outcomes for incumbents. Bovitz and Carson (2006) focuses only on “key votes” as identified by *Congressional Quarterly* and reports that across both parties, on a bit less than 20% of those votes (128 of 726) there was a statistically significant relationship ( $p \leq .10$ ).<sup>17</sup> However, several methodological considerations required that the relationship between roll call votes and election outcomes be tested one vote at a time, including that “legislative voting behavior across roll calls tends to be highly correlated” (Bovitz and Carson 2006, p. 300). A key consequence is that the apparent level of issue accountability could have been inflated. Suppose there was accountability with respect to roll call X but not roll call Z. If the votes were highly correlated, then when the relationship between issue Z and election outcomes is estimated, a statistically significant relationship may very well be observed because of the association between voting on Z and voting on X.

Another important study in this area is Canes-Wrone et al. (2011). A key finding in Canes-Wrone et al. (2011) is that on the two issues examined, crime and the environment, the empirical rule appears to be *not* to observe a relationship between roll call voting and election outcomes. For neither Democratic nor Republican incumbents was there much of a discernable relationship between roll call voting on the environment and election outcomes. The same was true for Republican

<sup>17</sup> For 11% (78 of the 726),  $p \leq .05$ .

incumbents with respect to the issue of crime. The only exceptions to the apparent rule were for Democrats in just 3 years (1994, 1996, and 1998) at the peak of the issue's salience.

Members of Congress do appear to have a substantial amount of discretion in the positions they take on issues regarding major public policy. The notion that there is a nontrivial “electoral blind spot” where voters “do not enforce their preferences” (Bawn et al. 2012, p. 577) appears validated by the analysis in this paper and is consistent with work like that of Bovitz and Carson (2006) and Canes-Wrone et al. (2011). However, there are at least two caveats to this conclusion. First, while there may be blind spots with respect to the specific positions incumbents take on issues, the accumulation of specific positions and roll call votes produces an “ideological location,” and previous research has shown that incumbents with more extreme ideological positions (on the liberal side for Democrats and the conservative side for Republicans) appear to suffer an electoral penalty (e.g., Erikson 1971; Canes-Wrone et al. 2002; Burden 2004). As a consequence there may be substantial discretion for incumbents when positions and roll call votes are considered individually, but there may be tradeoffs and limits. Using discretion on one issue may very well leave less flexibility to use it on another. For instance, distinguishing between positions on specific roll calls and a “string of votes,” Kingdon observes that “even if each of them [roll call votes] singly would create no great electoral problem, the string of them taken together would” (Kingdon 1973, pp. 41–2).

On the other side of the limits of the electoral blind spot, there is some empirical evidence suggesting that its size may be growing. Ansolabehere et al. (2001) found that over time (from 1952 to 1996) the significance of candidates' ideological locations for election outcomes declined. And, Bonica's (2014) replication reports that in more recent elections (2002–2010) candidates' positions matter even less. From the 1980s to the 2000s, the effect declined by more than 50%, and may have been reduced even further in more recent elections (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2016). Indeed, it is possible that there is a process of nationalization in congressional politics and elections that is diminishing the significance of a variety of candidate characteristics on congressional elections (Jacobson 2015, but see Stone 2017).

A second caveat has to do with the distinction between perceptions and reality. While the emphasis here has been on the connections between voters' preferences and their incumbents' actual positions, Ansolabehere and Jones (2010) and Jones (2011) find a strong relationship between voters' levels of perceived agreement with their MCs on key issues and their ballot choices. Those studies show that when a voter perceives her incumbent to have taken a position on a roll call vote that matches her preference on the policy, she is more likely to vote for the incumbent. This is an important aspect of issue accountability, but the normative (and political) implications hinge on whether incumbents' actual positions matter. The question is complicated because incumbents' actual votes are related to voters' perceptions of their votes, and it is this connection that Ansolabehere and Jones (2010) and Jones (2011) leverage to identify the causal effects in their voting models. Additional research that pays attention to the distinction between perceived and actual positions of elected officials is clearly warranted.



Finally, the substantial effects of partisanship and general policy preferences should not be overlooked. While voters may not have been responding to the specific positions adopted by their representatives, they do appear responsive to the parties and their overall ideological locations. This suggests that some accountability is taking place even if Members of Congress do have discretion on particular issues and roll call votes. It is also worth noting that before the growth in party polarization and the apparent nationalization of congressional elections, this conclusion was typically not drawn (e.g., Mann and Wolfinger 1980).

In conclusion this paper has provided new empirical evidence on the nature of issue accountability in congressional elections. Issue accountability was evident with respect to one policy, and its form was different from that reported in previous research. On the other four significant policy issues there was no apparent relationship between the roll call votes of Members of Congress, their constituents' preferences on the issues, and voters' ballot choices. The general implication is that the constraining force of voters on the discretion incumbents have in the positions they take is quite limited. On particular roll call votes Members of Congress appear relatively free to take the position they want without much negative repercussions, at least in so far as their voters are concerned.

## Appendix

See Tables 3 and 4.

**Table 3** Logit parameter estimates of voting for Democratic incumbents

Variable	Parameter estimate	Robust Standard error
Policy—Affordable Care Act		
V <sub>con</sub> , MC <sub>con</sub>	.52	.31
V <sub>con</sub> , MC <sub>lib</sub>	−1.08**	.13
V <sub>lib</sub> , MC <sub>con</sub>	.55	.33
V <sub>lib</sub> , MC <sub>lib</sub> (baseline)		
Missing	−.12	.35
Policy—cap and trade		
V <sub>con</sub> , MC <sub>con</sub>	−.61*	.24
V <sub>con</sub> , MC <sub>lib</sub>	−.61**	.13
V <sub>lib</sub> , MC <sub>con</sub>	−.29	.26
V <sub>lib</sub> , MC <sub>lib</sub> (baseline)		
Missing	−.05	.24
Policy—Dodd-Frank financial reform		
V <sub>con</sub> , MC <sub>con</sub>	−.76	.41
V <sub>con</sub> , MC <sub>lib</sub>	−.32*	.14
V <sub>lib</sub> , MC <sub>con</sub>	−.24	.30
V <sub>lib</sub> , MC <sub>lib</sub> (baseline)		
Missing	.17	.28
Policy—don't ask don't tell		
V <sub>con</sub> , MC <sub>con</sub>	.47	.25
V <sub>con</sub> , MC <sub>lib</sub>	.05	.13
V <sub>lib</sub> , MC <sub>con</sub>	.10	.31
Missing	−.15	.27
Party identification	2.04**	.10
Ideology	1.28**	.16
Policy preferences	2.13**	.17
African American	1.02**	.23
Latino	.28	.21
Other race	−.34	.21
Female	−.26*	.11
Family income	−.02	.02
Constant	1.17**	.20
Number of respondents: 17,998		
Number of congressional districts: 232		
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> : .72		

See text and Table 1 for coding of voter (V) and Member of Congress (MC) congruence

\*p < .05; \*\*p < .01

**Table 4** Logit parameter estimates of voting for Republican incumbents

Variable	Parameter estimate	Robust Standard error
Policy—Children's Health Insurance Program		
V <sub>con</sub> , MC <sub>con</sub> (baseline)		
V <sub>con</sub> , MC <sub>lib</sub>	−.20	.36
V <sub>lib</sub> , MC <sub>con</sub>	−.33	.17
V <sub>lib</sub> , MC <sub>lib</sub>	−.11	.26
Missing	−.47	.35
Party identification	2.34**	.11
Ideology	1.03**	.22
Policy preferences	2.33**	.19
African American	−1.31**	.34
Latino	−.19	.29
Other race	.17	.22
Female	.16	.14
Family income	.01	.02
Constant	.98**	.27
See text and Fig. 1 for coding of voter (V) and Member of Congress (MC) congruence	Number of respondents: 11,519	
	Number of congressional districts: 133	
	Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> : .66	

\*p &lt; .05; \*\*p &lt; .01

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