Abstract

We argue that politicians systematically discount the opinions of constituents with whom they disagree and that this “disagreement discounting” is a contributing factor to ideological incongruence. A pair of survey experiments where state and local politicians are the subjects of interest show that public officials rationalize this behavior by assuming that constituents with opposing views are less informed about the issue. This finding applies both to well-established issues that divide the parties as well as to non-partisan ones. Further, it cannot be explained by politicians’ desires to favor the opinions of either co-partisans or likely voters. A third survey experiment using a sample of voters shows that the bias is exacerbated by an activity central to representative governance—taking and explaining one’s policy positions. This suggests that the job of being a representative exacerbates this bias.

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Elections, with the attendant threat of loss of office, give politicians incentives to be responsive to public opinion (Adams, Merrill, and Grofman, 2005; Downs, 1957; Erikson 1990; Mayhew, 1974; although see Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina, 1987; Grimmer, Messing, and Westwood, 2012). Consistent with these incentives, there is evidence that politicians update their positions based on public opinion polls and election results. When politicians learn that their voters have more conservative preferences, they vote more conservatively (Butler and Nickerson 2011; Kousser, Lewis, and Masket 2007).

Despite these patterns, evidence also shows that politicians fail to fully adapt their voting records to match their constituents’ preferences (e.g., Adams, Burnell, Grofman, and Merrill, 2010; Burden, 2001, 2004; Butler 2009; Fiorina 1999, 2004, 2011; Gilens and Page 2014). Even when representing the same or a similar district, politicians take distinctly polarized positions, with Democrats taking more liberal positions than their Republican counterparts (e.g., Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart, 2001; Burden, 2004; Lee, Moretti, and Butler, 2004; Poole, 2007). Politicians from both parties are also ideologically extreme relative to the voters in their district (Bafumi and Herron, 2010).

A recent field experiment conducted in New Mexico (Butler and Nickerson 2011) further highlights the puzzle presented by these seemingly contradictory findings. In that study, Butler and Nickerson provided randomly selected legislators in New Mexico with public opinion polls of their district’s preferences on a pending bill that would affect the budget. Among the legislators who represented districts that were against making any changes that would affect the budget, the legislators who received information about public opinion were more likely to vote against the proposed bill (a one-time tax rebate) than those who did not. However the effect of the information treatment in the New
Mexico study was asymmetric with respect to party. Figure 1 shows the percent of legislators that voted for the bill by their partisanship and the randomly assigned information treatment. The information treatment had no detectable effect on Democrats, who almost universally supported the measure, including those who represented districts where support for budgetary action was low. Among Republicans, however, the effect was substantial. Republicans who learned about the low level of support in their district were much more likely to shift their positions on this issue and vote against the proposal. What can explain such patterns of partial policy responsiveness?

(Figure 1 about here)

Most explanations for ideological incongruence focus on either electoral or legislative institutions (Adams, Merrill, and Grofman, 2005; Fiorina, 1999; Grofman 2004). These broad lines of research assume that politicians learn about and evaluate constituents’ preferences in an unbiased manner but then institutions incentivize politicians to take actions that are incongruent with constituents’ preferences. In the New Mexico case, Democratic leaders may have simply used their power to get members to vote for this bill (Butler and Powell 2014).

In this paper, we propose an alternative explanation for incongruence. Specifically, we test whether politicians discount the preferences of those with whom they disagree. This alternative explanation, which we refer to as disagreement discounting, is rooted in

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1 All of the Democrats but one—who received information that support in his district was low—voted in favor of the tax rebate.
what occurs when elected officials learn constituent opinion.\textsuperscript{2} As we discuss below, this behavior is consistent with motivated reasoning but could also result from other explanations. More important for understanding representation, the existence of this bias provides an overlooked explanation for under representation that is independent of any institutional incentives. This may also explain why politicians are responsive to constituents’ preferences (in some cases), but still fail to converge to the views of the median voter.

Applied to the New Mexico case, Democrats may not have moved because they were committed to passing the proposal aimed at helping low- and middle-income families and simply discounted any contradictory information they received. For Republicans, on the other hand, the tax-rebate proposal was a cross-cutting issue. While Republicans have a reputation for championing lower taxes (the spending proposal was for a one-time tax rebate), they also have a reputation for balanced budgets and the proposed rebate threatened to exceed projected revenues (see discussion in Butler and Nickerson 2011). Because the issue was cross-cutting, they may simply have been more open to changing positions.\textsuperscript{3}

\textsuperscript{2} This explanation builds on the finding that politicians are more extreme when they run for office (Grober and Palfrey 2014; Thomsen 2014). Incongruence follows when politicians are extreme when they run for office and then fail to update their positions because they discount the opposition view.

\textsuperscript{3} While the New Mexico experiment has the advantage of showing what moves legislators’ roll-call votes, it cannot differentiate between this and other possible explanations (such as asymmetric party pressure) because disagreement discounting depends on legislators’ attitudes and opinions.
To evaluate whether disagreement discounting is a general phenomenon that biases the views of elected officials, we conducted survey experiments on both state legislators and elected municipal officials in the U.S. In the experiments, elected officials are asked to evaluate a letter, the content of which has been randomized along several dimensions. The results confirm that politicians rationalize that constituents with opposing views are less informed about the issue. This finding applies both to well-established issues that divide the parties as well as to non-partisan ones. Further, it cannot be explained by politicians’ desires to favor the opinions of either co-partisans or likely voters. In a follow up study on a sample of U.S. adults, we explore whether representatives’ jobs lead them to be more biased in their assessment of constituent opinion. Our final experiment shows that the act of having to explain one’s positions, a key responsibility for elected officials, leads to more disagreement discounting.

**Disagreement Discounting**

Miller and Stokes’ (1963) classic model of representation suggests that politicians’ perceptions of constituency attitudes may contribute to the observed patterns of partial convergence. In their model, Miller and Stokes (1963) suggest that representative’s own attitudes and views may mediate the effect of constituents’ attitudes on roll call votes by shaping what politicians think of constituents’ preferences. We build on this model and argue that politicians are systematically more likely to discount and dismiss the views of constituents.

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4 Our aim is not to identify whether disagreement discounting explains the pattern of asymmetric responsiveness in New Mexico, but whether this is a general phenomenon among politicians.
constituents who hold positions they disagree with. We refer to the phenomenon as disagreement discounting.

The literatures on representation suggest that disagreement discounting could manifest itself in at least two ways (see also discussion in Butler 2014). First, elected officials might rationalize that these constituents care less about the issue. Constituents’ level of interest is important because politicians have incentives to be more responsive to voters who care deeply about issues (Converse, 1964; Dahl 1967; Fenno 1978: 142; Krosnick, 1990). As one legislator put it, “There isn’t one voter in 20,000 who knows my voting record, except on that one thing that affects him.” (Fenno, 1978: 142). Consistent with these incentives, legislators prioritize the opinions of constituents who feel strongly about an issue (Wlezien, 2004).

Kingdon (1981), in his study of what influences how members of Congress vote, highlights constituents’ intensities as a major factor determining how responsive politicians are to public opinion:

“When the congressman feels strongly [about an issue] and his constituents do not, he will prefer his own feeling, since his constituents, while having an opinion contrary to his, do not feel particularly strongly about the matter. When the congressman does not feel very strongly about the matter but his constituents do, he is likely to go along with them.” (Kingdon, 1981: 38)

Because legislators are more responsive to constituents with intense preferences, politicians will be less responsive to constituents whom they think do not feel strongly about the issue.

Second, public officials may assume that the constituents with whom they disagree understand less about the issue. Voters’ knowledge matters because voters recognize that their own expertise varies across policy domains and this level of
confidence affects their willingness to make voting decisions about candidates (Gerber, Huber, Doherty, and Dowling 2011). Consequently, politicians may expect less retribution when they deviate from the preferred policies of voters who are less confident about their own position on the issue. Politicians may also believe they can more easily change these voters’ position. Explaining votes to constituents is an important part of legislative activity (Fenno, 1978). This ability to provide an explanation also enables politicians to lead opinion on the issue (Gabel and Scheve, 2007). Thus, elected officials may believe that uninformed constituents are more likely to adopt the official’s position when they learn more about the issue. We test whether elected officials are using either, or possibly even both, rationalizations.

While the literature on representation suggests ways in which disagreement discounting might manifest itself, work in political psychology has identified why disagreement discounting might occur. For example, disagreement discounting may arise because of goal-oriented motivated reasoning (e.g., Kunda 1990). As Lodge and Taber (2013) explain in their description of this form of motivated reasoning,

“Citizens are prone to accept those facts and arguments they agree with and discount or actively counterargue those that challenge their preconvictions, where agreement or disagreement is marked by feelings that are automatically triggered in the earliest stages of thinking about the issues.” (149).

Relatedly, discounting may also arise in part because of group dynamics that lead individuals to vilify other groups. Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012) have shown that such motivations can be particular powerful in today’s current political environment. Individuals may assume that people who disagree with them are guided by selfish
motives (Doherty 2014), and this may lead them to denigrate the position of those individuals.

Further, previous work suggests that any such bias may easily become self-reinforcing because individuals tend to seek out information that confirms their views (Druckman, Fein, and Leeper 2012; see also Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Gaines and Kuklinski 2011). The increasingly polarized nature of the news market means that people who seek information that confirms their pre-existing views have a much easier time finding such information (Nie, Miller, Golde, Butler, and Winneng 2010).

While the existence and influence of motivated reasoning and other cognitive biases have been well-established among voters, we know very little about their application to politicians, especially in their assessments of information relevant to their elected positions. On one hand, the election process may minimize the degree to which politicians engage in disagreement discounting. After all, re-election minded politicians have incentives accurately assess and cater to the preferences of the median voter. Dismissing opposing preferences prevents elected officials from knowing what the median voter in their district wants, which would have negative electoral consequences. Further, the election process might lead to the selection of higher quality individuals who are less susceptible to the psychological biases that are common among voters. According to this argument, even if politicians engage in disagreement discounting, the ones who exhibit this bias the most should be more likely to lose. As a result, the politicians who win and serve in office for longer may be less likely to engage in disagreement discounting.
On the other hand, politicians may be more likely to discount disagreement than the general populace. First, incumbents’ assessment of their electoral success is likely prone to survivorship bias. They may attribute their success to the positions they took on issues during the campaign, without necessarily considering those who did similar things but failed to win. In other words, they select cases based on the dependent variable, winning, and become victims of their perceived electoral mandate, whether it exists or not (see Kingdon 1967). Information that counters that narrative, then, is perhaps more easily dismissed.

Second, the mere act of taking a position and regularly justifying that position to constituents may cause politicians to be more likely to engage in disagreement discounting. Regularly articulating a position may reinforce its superiority in politicians’ minds, causing them to more automatically dismiss any opposing view as a way of avoiding cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957). As such, it may be cognitively easier to dismiss opinions that counter those positions.

**Testing for Disagreement Discounting Among Politicians**

We conducted a pair of survey experiments with state legislators and elected municipal officials as the subjects of interest to test whether policymakers engage in disagreement discounting. We also ran a similar experiment on a sample of citizens to assess whether politicians are more susceptible to this bias as a result of having to justify their positions to constituents.

In these experiments, the respondents read a letter that was putatively sent to a public official. The respondents then evaluated whether the writer was informed and cared about the issue. We test if public officials gave less favorable evaluations to the
writers with whom they disagree. To measure the effect of opinion disagreement on public officials’ attitudes towards constituents’ positions, we randomized the letter writer’s position on the issue (see Harden 2013 for a similar approach to studying elites’ attitudes).

**Study 1: State Legislators on Taxes versus Spending Cuts**

The first experiment was part of a survey that was emailed in March 2012 to the roughly 7,000 state legislators in the United States. In administering the survey, some of the longer questions, including the experiment presented here, were presented to a randomly selected subset of legislators in order to minimize the time burden placed on respondents. *Thus although the overall response rate for the survey was about 15 percent (a total of over 1,000 responses), only about half of those respondents were included in this experiment.* In anticipation that legislative staff might take the survey, the first question in the survey asked respondents whether they were a state legislator or a staff member. We present the results using the self-identified state legislator sub-sample. Additional details about the survey are presented in the Supplementary Appendix.

The legislators who participated in this experiment read the vignette in Box 1. This vignette was the first of several vignettes that the legislators read in the survey. Because the subsequent vignettes were part of other research projects, we informed respondents in this first vignette that each of the scenarios they would read referred to a

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5 A response rate of 15 percent is actually higher than recent Internet surveys that have been shown to help produce representative samples (Fisher and Herrick 2013).
different legislator so as to reduce the possibility that they would use information from one vignette to inform their response to another. Respondents then read an email that was putatively sent by a constituent to another legislator, asking the legislator to advocate for the writer’s position (which was randomized) on the issue of raising taxes in order to maintain the current programs in the state.\textsuperscript{6}

(Box 1 about here)

We chose the issue of taxes versus spending because it is an important, established issue in state legislatures (Carey, Niemi, and Powell 2000). The question measuring legislators’ opinion on this issue was administered at the end of the survey (after distracter questions on orthogonal topics), with the question wording taken from Carey, Niemi, and Powell (2000).\textsuperscript{7}

For the analysis, we determined whether the letter writer shared or opposed the legislator’s position. For example, if the legislator agreed that taxes should be cut (either somewhat or strongly) and the writer in the vignette asked the legislator to support

\textsuperscript{6} The vignette also varied the name of the letter writer as a way to signal race. Tables A7 and A8 of the Supplementary Appendix show the results looking at how the treatment effect varied with race. Significantly the disagreement discounting bias did not vary significantly with race. Legislators and city officials exhibited this bias towards both minorities and white writers. A full analysis of legislators’ response to the race manipulation is analyzed elsewhere (Butler 2014).

\textsuperscript{7} Legislators were asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement “We should cut taxes even if it means deep cuts in government programs.” Legislators were given five response choices: Agree Strongly, Agree Somewhat, Neither Agree Nor Disagree, Disagree Somewhat, or Disagree Strongly.
legislation to cut taxes, then the legislator was coded as having received the *shared position* treatment. If the email writer opposed tax cuts (either somewhat or strongly) and the legislator supported them (or vice-versa) the legislator was coded as having received the *opposed position* treatment.

We measured legislators’ reactions to the writer’s opinion by having them indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statements after having read the email:

- This letter was likely a form letter sent by an interest group
- The writer likely holds this position strongly
- The writer likely understands the complexities of this issue

If elected officials rationalize that constituents who agree with them also feel more strongly about the issue, they should be more likely to agree with the statement that the writer likely holds the position strongly. In addition to directly asking elected officials whether the writer likely holds their position strongly, we asked them to rate whether the letter was likely a form letter. Surveys show that the two most common reasons that citizens contact their U.S. Senator or Representative are that they care deeply about the issue and/or that they were asked to do so by an organization that they trust (Goldschmidt and Ochreiter, 2008). Public officials may be more likely to discount form letters by rationalizing that the constituent only sent the letter because they were asked to do so (not

8 Those who indicated that they neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement that “We should cut taxes even if it means deep cuts in government programs,” were excluded from the analysis because we cannot randomize whether the letter writer agreed or disagreed with them. Only about 10 percent of the legislators (60 in number) chose this response.
because they personally felt strongly about the issue). Consequently, if elected officials rationalize that constituents who agree with them also feel more strongly about the issue, they might be less likely to agree with the statement that *the letter was likely a form letter*. Similarly, if elected officials rationalize that constituents who agree with them are better informed about the issue, they should be more likely to agree with the statement that *the writer likely understands the complexities of the issue*. Understanding the complexities of an issue means that the constituent likely has done more to investigate the issue. The reverse is also true. Constituents who understand less about an issue have probably put less research into the issue.

*Results*

Figure 2, which presents the difference in how many respondents in the shared and opposed position conditions agreed with each statement, shows that legislators exhibited a confirmatory bias in their reaction to the arguments presented in the vignette (Table A4 in the Supplementary Appendix presents these results in table form). Legislators who agreed with the position taken in the letter were thirteen percentage points more likely to agree that the letter writer understood the complexities of the issue (p < 0.01, two-tailed). These legislators were also nine percentage points less likely to think that the letter was a form letter (p = 0.03, two-tailed). While they were also seven percentage points more likely to agree that the letter writer felt strongly about her position, this difference was not statistically significant (p = 0.12, two-tailed).

(Figure 2 about here)

Because legislators are more responsive to constituents who feel strongly about an issue and understand the issue, legislators who learn that their constituents’ preferences
differ from their own may not necessarily switch their positions. Significantly, legislators may have full information about their constituents’ preferences, but still act in a biased manner because they engage in disagreement discounting by putting more weight on the opinions of those with whom they agree.⁹

**Study 2: Partisanship and Discounting Constituents’ Opinions**

We designed a second study to test the robustness of this result in two ways. First, we test whether this result only holds on strongly partisan issues (e.g., taxes versus spending cuts), or if it also holds on less partisan issues. Second, we test whether the bias disappears when officials have information about the letter writer’s partisanship and past turnout behavior. One possible explanation for the results of the first experiment is that public officials actually care about a writer’s propensity to turn out and support them as opposed to the writer’s position. For example, legislators may discount the opinion of a writer with an opposing position because they infer, based on the writer's position, that she identifies with the opposing party and would therefore be unlikely to vote for them.

The second experiment was embedded in the 2012 American Municipal Official Survey. The survey was administered online with an email invitation that was sent to municipal officials from cities of all sizes across the United States and had a response rate of 20 percent. The Supplementary Appendix provides more details about the survey.

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⁹ Table A11 in the Supplementary Appendix shows the results hold when using either probit or OLS regression models and including control variables.
Box 2 displays the text of the vignette for the second experiment. We introduced the vignette by noting that each official would be asked about a number of scenarios. We tried to increase the realism of the vignette by using a screen shot of an actual email (see Figure 3). In the second experiment, we also randomized both the position the letter writer took on the issue and the issue they wrote about. Some officials were randomly selected to receive an email about efforts to consolidate 911 services with neighboring areas, while others received an email about providing school vouchers to parents. We chose these two issues because they differ in the degree to which they are established partisan issues.

(Box 2 about here)

(Figure 3 about here)

The consolidation of 911 services is a non-partisan issue. Among the policymakers taking this survey, there was no partisan disagreement about this issue:10 87 percent of Republicans and 84 percent of Democrats indicated support for efforts to consolidate 911 services to save funds.11 In contrast, the same officials exhibited a strong

10 Municipal officials were asked whether they agreed with the following statement: “Do you support efforts to consolidate 911 services with neighboring areas to save municipal funds?”

11 It is also the case that public officials are unlikely to use this information to draw conclusions about the writer’s partisanship. We asked this follow up question to about 300 officials who were presented with the vignette where the writer took a stance on the 911 issue: “What is the writer’s partisanship? (Give us your best guess).” Table A3 in the Supplementary Appendix presents the results based on whether the writer supported or opposed consolidation. The distribution of answers is nearly identical across treatments and the small differences that exist are statistically insignificant. The city officials were not using the writer’s
partisan divide over the issue of school vouchers. While 71 percent of Republicans thought parents should receive school vouchers, only 26 percent of Democrats felt similarly.

Among officials who were assigned to the school vouchers treatment, we also randomized whether the vignette provided information about the partisan affiliation of the letter writer. If the municipal official was randomly assigned to the partisanship treatment, the vignette ended with information from the voter file that indicated the party registration of the email writer and their recent turnout behavior. The party registration was always presented so that it matched the partisanship of the municipal official taking the survey (i.e., Republican officials learned that the writer was a registered Republican and Democratic officials that the writer was a registered Democrat).

If the results from the first experiment are being driven by elected officials making inferences about the writer’s partisanship or their likelihood that the voter would turn out, then the bias should be present when they are exposed to the vouchers treatment without the partisan information, but it should go away in the vouchers treatment when

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position to make inferences about the writer’s partisanship. We did not ask this question about the school vouchers issue.

12 Officials were asked whether they agreed with the following statement: “Do you support providing parents with vouchers to send their children to any participating school: public, private, or religious?”

13 We chose to convey the information about partisanship this way because this type of information is available to legislators from the voter file.
this information is provided because they no longer need to use the letter writer’s position to infer this information.

In summary, municipal officials were randomly assigned to one of three main issue treatments: (A) the consolidation of 911 services, (B) school vouchers with no additional information provided, and (C) school vouchers with partisanship and turnout information provided. Within each of these groups, we randomized whether the officials received a letter that supported their position or opposed it, for a total of six possible treatments.

For the analysis, we compare across these treatments respondents’ answers to the question of whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statements (see Box 2):

- This letter was likely a form letter sent by an interest group
- The writer likely understands the complexities of this issue
- The writer likely holds this position strongly
- The writer likely based his opinions on facts

The first three statements follow the question wording used in the first study (see Box 1). The last statement was added to provide another measure of respondents’ perceptions about constituents’ level of information on the issue.

*Results by the Type of Issue (New versus Established)*

The results of the second experiment show that policymakers are equally likely to engage in disagreement discounting on both established issues and new issues. Figure 4 presents the results for each statement across all three issue treatments, and provides further evidence of disagreement discounting. Across the different issue conditions, the elected

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14 Table A5 in the Supplementary Appendix presents these results in table form.
officials who read the email from a constituent who shared their position were more likely to agree that the letter writer “understood the complexities of the facts” and were also more likely to think that the writer “based his opinions on facts” (with effects ranging from ten to eighteen percentage points).

(Figure 4 about here)

At the same time, the evidence for the intensity bias is weaker in this study. In the first experiment, legislators were about nine percentage points less likely to think that a writer they agreed with had sent a form letter and seven percentage points more likely to think that the writer felt strongly about the issue (see Figure 2). In the second study, these differences are smaller in magnitude and generally fail to achieve statistical significance.\(^{15}\)

**Are Officials Responding to Expectations of Writer’s Likely Support?**

An alternative explanation for the biases we have observed thus far is that public officials primarily care about how likely a citizen is to turn out and support them. They may simply be using the writer’s position on the issue to infer some of this information, believing that individuals who share their issue positions are co-partisans who likely support them. This explanation seems unlikely given that politicians exhibit bias on non-partisan issues (i.e., 911 consolidation efforts), but it may be that public officials think that people who side with them are generally co-partisans.

\(^{15}\) Given that the officials were close to being evenly split on their ratings about the writer’s intensity, the lack of results is not the consequence of a floor or ceiling effect.
Figure 4 helps evaluate this possibility by presenting the results when the public officials were told that the writer shared their partisanship (see Box 2). In particular, the “Vouchers – Party” treatment results are based on a vignette that also included putative information on the writer from the voter file. If the bias is driven by elected officials using the writer’s position to infer his partisanship and likely support, then the bias should disappear when information about the writer’s partisanship is provided. The results, however, show that the bias is just as strong when this information is provided. In fact, there is, if anything, more bias. The legislators assigned to this treatment condition were thirteen percentage points more likely to think that the writer who shared their position felt strongly about the issue. Bias does not arise from public officials using the letter writer’s position to make inferences about her partisanship or likelihood of turning out to vote. Public officials simply discount views that oppose their own. (Tables A12-A14 of the Supplementary Appendix show that these results are robust to controlling for whether the official is republican, female, a mayor (or equivalent), white, has an income over $100K, and has a college degree.)\footnote{Tables A9 and A10 of the Supplementary Appendix test whether the effect of the shared position treatment varies with the officials’ partisanship. None of the interaction terms achieve statistical significance. Further, the results do not point in a consistent direction. In seven of the fifteen cases the coefficient shows the bias is larger among Republicans but then in an equal number of cases the coefficient goes in the other direction.}
Study 3: Defending One’s Position and Disagreement Discounting

Now that we have established that disagreement discounting is prevalent among a broad sample of elected officials and across several types of issues, we turn to examining whether a central part of representatives’ jobs contribute to this bias. As discussed earlier, politicians may engage in disagreement discounting, at least in part, because they have to publicly justify their positions to constituents (Fenno 1978). Regularly articulating a position may reinforce its superiority in politicians’ minds, causing them to more automatically dismiss any opposing view as a way of avoiding cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957). To test whether this Position-Justifying mechanism is at work, we administered a similar survey experiment from Study 1 to a sample of U.S. adults, with the added experimental manipulation that simulates the act of defending one’s position on an issue. We find that those who were tasked with defending their position were more likely to discount opinions that countered that position.

The survey experiment was administered online in December 2014. We recruited a sample of U.S. adults using Amazon Mechanical Turk. The survey was divided into three parts, each a separate page in the survey. The first part measured respondents’ positions on several issues by displaying five statements (in random order) and asking

17 Because the experiment required respondents to spend three minutes typing, we used a panel that would be amenable to completing such tasks. Subjects recruited through Mechanical Turk use the service specifically to find small tasks that they can complete online. Moreover, Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz (2012) find that respondents recruited through Mechanical Turk are similar on several variables to subjects interviewed in the ANES and much more representative of the general population than subjects used in traditional experimental laboratories.
respondents to indicate their level of agreement with each statement on a 5-point Likert scale. One of the statements was used as an “attention check” to filter out respondents who were not carefully reading each statement. Only 3.6% failed the attention check. The other four statements measured respondents’ position on

1. taxes and government spending (Statement: “We should cut taxes even if it means deep cuts in government programs”); 
2. privacy and national security (Statement: “Law enforcement agencies should have greater discretion to monitor domestic communications to prevent future terrorist attacks”); 
3. civil unions (Statement: “States should recognize civil unions between same-sex couples”); and 
4. television consumption (Statement: “Americans watch too much television.”).

The first statement bears directly on the issue that is the focus of the email used in the experiment at the end of the survey. This is also the same statement used in Study 1 to measure state legislators’ position on taxes. As with that first study, we determined whether the email writer shared or opposed the respondent’s position. Those in the

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18 The verification check read as follows: “To ensure you are paying attention, always select Strongly Agree for this statement.” Those who failed to follow the instruction were not allowed to continue taking the survey.
former situation were coded as having received the *shared position* treatment while those in the latter were coded as having received the *opposed position* treatment.\(^{19}\)

The second part of the survey consisted of a writing task that was experimentally manipulated such that respondents were randomly assigned to one of three treatment conditions. In the first condition, *Defend Tax Position*, respondents were asked to write for three minutes explaining the position they took on taxes and government spending on the previous page. As part of the instructions, respondents were shown the position they took on the statement and the text of the statement.\(^{20}\) The purpose of this condition is to examine whether the act of defending one’s position on an issue leads to disagreement discounting on that same issue. The writing task, then, serves as a simulation that places non-elites in a scenario that is common for elected officials.

The second condition, *Defend Privacy Position*, was identical to the first except that respondents were asked to defend their position on the statement about privacy and national security. The purpose of this treatment condition is to determine whether disagreement discounting arises simply from the act of defending one’s political positions or whether it only occurs within the issue domain that has been defended. In other words,

\(^{19}\) Those who indicated that they neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement that “We should cut taxes even if it means deep cuts in government programs,” were excluded from the analysis because we cannot randomize whether the letter writer agreed or disagreed with them. About 23 percent of the respondents (473 in number) chose this response.

\(^{20}\) The instructions read as follows: “In the box below, please spend the next 3 minutes explaining why you [Strongly Disagree / Disagree / Neither Agree nor Disagree / Agree / Strongly Agree] with the statement that “We should cut taxes even if it means deep cuts in government programs.”
will subjects assigned to this condition engage in disagreement discounting when evaluating a letter on taxes at the same level as those assigned to the *defend tax position* condition?

The final condition, *Favorite TV Show*, was used as a control. For this treatment condition, respondents were asked to “spend the next 3 minutes writing about your favorite television show.” This created a baseline across all three conditions so that all respondents spent similar amounts of time writing between indicating their policy positions and evaluating an email related to one of them. With the writing task in the control condition, we wanted to minimize priming any political considerations. At the same time, we wanted the task to not seem out of place with the rest of the survey. To achieve this, we described the survey to potential respondents as being about “U.S. adults' opinions on television, political communications, and public policy.” This is also why we included the statement on television consumption in the first part of the survey.

In each condition, respondents were informed that in order to go on to the final page of the survey, they had to spend 3 minutes on the writing task and write at least 150 characters, which is about 35 words or 3 to 5 sentences. A 3-minute timer was provided on the page, and respondents were not given the link to the last page of the survey until the 3 minutes had expired.

After completing the writing task, respondents went to the third and final page of the survey which contained a survey experiment similar to the ones from the previous two studies. On this final page, respondents were shown an email from a constituent to a state legislator and asked to rate it. The text of the letter, which expressed the email writer’s position on taxes and spending, and the question below the email were identical
to what we used in Study 1 (see Box 1). To increase the realism of the treatment, we showed respondents an image of an email as in Study 2 (see Figure 3).

Above the image of the email, respondents were given the following instructions: “For the final questions, I want you to imagine that you are a state legislator who received the following email. Please read and rate the email.” As in the other studies, the position advocated by the writer in the email was randomized—in this case, between support for cutting taxes even if it resulted in cuts to programs or opposition to cutting taxes to preserve programs. Thus, respondents either saw a letter that shared their position on taxes (the shared position treatment condition) or opposed it (the opposed position treatment condition).

As in Study 1, we measured respondents’ reactions to the writer’s opinion by having them indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statements (presented in random order) after having read the email:

- The writer likely understands the complexities of this issue.
- The writer likely holds this position strongly.
- This letter was likely a form letter sent by an interest group.

For the analysis, we compare what percentage of respondents in the shared position and opposed position conditions agreed with each statement. To examine whether defending one’s position is a mechanism explaining the results from Studies 1 and 2, we then compare the difference between the shared and opposed position conditions across the three writing-task treatments from the previous part of the survey (i.e., defend tax position, defend privacy position, and favorite TV show). If defending one’s position on an issue leads to more bias, then respondents assigned to the defend tax position condition should exhibit a higher level of disagreement discounting than respondents.
assigned to the other conditions. In other words, the differences for those in the *defend tax position* should be larger than for those in the other conditions. If the bias is simply a result of having to defend one’s positions generally, then differences in the *defend tax position* and *defend privacy position* conditions should be similar in size and larger than the difference from the *favorite TV show* condition. And finally, if *position-justifying* does not increase bias, then the differences should not vary across the three writing-task treatments.

*Results*

The results from Study 3 provide evidence that having to justify one’s position exacerbates disagreement discounting in, and only in, the policy-domain that one is asked to defend. In Figure 5, we present the differences between the *shared* and *opposed position* conditions within each writing task condition (along with the associated 95% confidence interval).\(^{21}\)

(Figure 5 about here)

We begin with respondents’ evaluation of whether “the writer likely understands the complexity of this issue” (see the top statement presented in Figure 5). Across all three writing conditions, respondents who read an email that shared their position on taxes were much more likely to agree that the writer understood the complexities of the issue. Among respondents in the *defend privacy position* and *favorite TV show* writing conditions, the difference between the evaluations of those who shared the writer’s

\(^{21}\) Table A6 in the Supplementary Appendix presents these results in table form.
position and those who opposed it were equal to 20% points ($p < 0.01$, two-sided) and 21% points ($p < 0.01$, two-sided), respectively. However, as predicted by the position-justifying mechanism, those assigned to spend three minutes explaining their position on the issue discussed in the vignette (i.e., the *defend tax position* condition) were even more likely to engage in disagreement discounting than those assigned to the other two writing tasks. Among those in the *defend tax position* writing condition, there was a 36 percentage point difference between those who shared the writer’s position compared to those who disagreed with the position, an effect that is 15 percentage points larger than what is observed in the other conditions. This 15 percentage point difference, which represents the difference-in-differences, is also statistically significant at the 0.01 level. In other words, the act of defending one’s position on a particular issue affects individuals’ evaluations of others’ position only on that same issue. The evaluations of those assigned to defend their position on a different political issue (in this case, privacy and national security) were practically identical to those assigned to the control writing condition.

A similar pattern, though somewhat attenuated, emerges in respondents’ evaluation of whether “the writer likely holds this position strongly” (see the middle statement presented in Figure 5). Although respondents in all three writing conditions were more likely to agree that the writer held their position strongly when they shared the writer’s position, the difference between the evaluations of those in the shared position and opposed position conditions is only significant, both statistically and substantively, among respondents who were in the *defend tax position* writing condition (diff. = 10% points; $p < 0.01$, two-sided). As with the previous statement, the evaluations of those in the *defend privacy position* condition (diff. = 1.5% points; $p = 0.70$, two-sided) were
nearly identical to those in the favorite TV show condition (diff. = 2.2% points; \( p = 0.51 \), two-sided). The difference-in-differences, comparing the difference from the defend tax position condition to the other two conditions pooled together, approaches statistical significance (diff-in-diff = 8; \( p = 0.053 \), two-sided).

Turning now to the final statement concerning whether “This letter was likely a form letter sent by an interest group,” we find very small differences between the evaluations of those who shared and those who opposed the writer’s position. In each writing condition, those who shared the writer’s position on taxes were less likely to believe that the email was a form letter, but the differences are both substantively and statistically insignificant across all three writing conditions, ranging from 2.5% points (\( p = 0.58 \), two-sided) for those in the defend privacy position condition to 3.9% points (\( p = 0.36 \), two-sided) for those in the defend tax position condition.

The results from the third study provide substantial evidence that representatives may be particularly susceptible to exhibiting disagreement discounting because of the nature of their job. Elected officials are expected to defend their position to their constituents on a regular basis as part of being a representative (Fenno 1978). However the very act of having to defend one’s position on an issue makes individuals more likely to discount the preferences of those who disagree with their position on that issue.

**Conclusion**

We have argued that an important and overlooked explanation for policy incongruence between voters and their elected officials is that policymakers engage in disagreement discounting, meaning they put less weight on the preferences of constituents with whom they disagree. A series of novel survey experiments in which state legislators and elected
municipal officials are the subjects of interest finds that policymakers rationalize this decision by concluding that these constituents do not know as much about the issue.\(^{22}\)

These results speak to important debates about constituency control over elected officials. One on-going debate is the degree to which elected officials adapt their voting records to changes in constituents’ preferences. While legislators sometimes adapt to mid-term changes in constituents’ preferences (Kousser, Lewis, and Masket, 2007), they do not do so fully (e.g., the asymmetric updating found in Butler and Nickerson, 2011, as discussed in the introduction). Disagreement discounting causes elected officials to put more weight on the opinions of constituents with whom they agree, leading legislators to be slow in adapting their issue stances. This lethargy in position updating explains why ideological change in legislatures occurs primarily through the replacement of members rather than the ideological adaptation of sitting members (Lee, Morretti, and Butler, 2004; Poole, 2007; Theriault, 2006).

Because ideological change is most likely to be achieved through selection mechanisms, the quality of representation depends on the ability of voters to punish politicians who are out-of-step with their preferences. If voters do not monitor public officials and punish them when they fail to represent their preferences, increased ideological congruence is unlikely to be achieved.

\(^{22}\) There are other ways that public officials might rationalize ignoring constituents’ opinions. We focused on the role of issue salience and issue information because the literature on representation suggests that these are the important considerations that politicians take into account when reaching decisions. Future work might consider other biases.
The results also provide insights into representation and polarization. Although polarization has been blamed on various electoral and legislative institutions, subsequent analyses tend to show that these institutions have little or no effect on polarization (e.g. McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2009). Institutions alone do not explain the level of polarization because polarization persists, at least in part, from how legislators process constituents’ opinions. Legislators from opposing parties come to different conclusions about the same messages from constituents because each side discounts the opinions of constituents with whom they disagree. Because legislators are not updating their views, compromise is unlikely to be reached and polarization is likely to persist for the foreseeable future.

Another significant contribution of this analysis is the proposition and finding that disagreement discounting is exacerbated by an activity central to representative governance—taking and explaining one’s policy positions to others. Through a survey experiment of U.S. adults, we find that requiring subjects to explain their position on an issue made them much more likely to discount opinions that opposed their position. This evidence suggests that an activity that elected officials regularly engage in (Fenno 1978; Grimmer 2013) also has negative repercussions for policymakers’ responsiveness to constituents’ preferences. At the same time, this finding presents one positive aspect from candidates’ being ambiguous about their policy positions (Tomz and Van Houwelling 2009)—it could make them less susceptible to engage in disagreement discounting, even if their private policy preference were incongruent with constituents’.

Future work should consider other mechanisms that could also lead to disagreement discounting. For example, policymakers, like non-elites, are likely
susceptible to the Dunning-Krueger effect (Krueger and Dunning 1999). Officials who overestimate their ability to assess constituents’ preferences may be more likely to discount preferences they oppose. Future surveys of elected officials could employ the battery developed by Krueger and Dunning (1999) along with survey experiments similar to the ones we use in this analysis to examine the correlation between these two phenomenon.

These findings also address a broader question for future work to consider: what other institutions and common political practices exacerbate biases in elected officials’ perceptions and decision-making? Here, we identify one common practice, but others are likely at play (e.g., Kingdon 1967). At the same time, other institutions may help reduce biases. Identifying how different institutions affect these biases is important for reformers and policymakers who seek to improve democratic responsiveness.
References


Adams, James, Thomas Brunell, Bernard Grofman, and Samuel Merrill, III. 2010. “Why candidate divergence should be expected to be just as great (or even greater) in competitive districts as in noncompetitive ones.” *Public Choice* 145(3-4): 417-433.


Box 1. Text of State Legislator Survey Experiment

We'll start with 5 scenarios involving 5 different legislators. Tell us how you think each legislator would act

Scenario #: A legislator receives the following email:

"Dear Representative $\{$m://LastName\},

Please \[oppo\text{se/supp}\text{ort}\] legislation that tries to cut taxes. The economy is not doing well and we cannot afford to \[get in debt/tax citizens\] if we want the state to recover. We \[nee\text{d/do not need many of]\ the programs that the state pays for and therefore \[ca\text{nnot/can}\] change how we tax in this state.

Sincerely,
\[James Smith/Javier Rodriguez/LaShawn Washington\]"

How likely are the following statements to apply to this message? (Answer options: Likely, Unlikely)

- This was a form letter from an interest group
- The writer understands the complexities of this issue
- The writer holds this position strongly
Box 2. Text of Municipal Official Survey Experiment

We are trying to learn about how municipal officials make decisions by giving you a number of scenarios and asking how you would act in each instance. We have intentionally kept these scenarios short, and focused on key elements in order to not take up much of your time.

Scenario #: A municipal official received the following email.

“Dear [reddedacted].

[I have lived in the community for about 10 years and am writing to ask that you support efforts to consolidate 911 services with the neighboring areas. The quality of services will remain high and the long-term savings outweigh the start-up costs. / I have lived in the community for about 10 years and am writing to ask that you oppose efforts to consolidate 911 services with the neighboring areas. The quality of services will suffer and the start-up costs outweigh any long-term savings. / I have lived in the community for about 10 years and am writing to ask that you oppose any attempt to move to a school vouchers system. Vouchers would hurt the quality of education in our schools system. / I have lived in the community for about 10 years and am writing to ask that you support any attempt to move to a school vouchers system. Vouchers would improve the quality of education in our schools system.]

Thank you for your consideration,

Best regards,

[Jamal Washington / Jose Lopez / Dustin Snyder]

[The voter file provided the following information about [Jamal Washington / Jose Lopez / Dustin Snyder]:
Party Registration: [Same Party]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2008 Primary</th>
<th>2008 General</th>
<th>2010 Primary</th>
<th>2010 General</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voted:</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

] How likely are the following statements to apply to this message? (Answer options: Likely, Unlikely)
   This letter was likely a form letter sent by an interest group
   The writer likely understands the complexities of this issue
   The writer likely holds this position strongly
   The writer likely based his opinions on facts
Figure 1. Results by Partisanship from Butler and Nickerson (2011)

Notes: Data come from Butler and Nickerson (2011).
Figure 2. The Effect of Opinion Agreement on Letter Ratings among State Legislators

"The writer likely understands the complexities of this issue."

"The writer likely holds this position strongly."

"This letter was likely a form letter sent by an interest group."

Notes: Figure 2 shows the differences between the proportion of respondents in the shared and opposed position conditions who agreed with each statement (and the associated 95 percent confidence interval). The comparisons are based on a sample of 497 to 502 legislators (the number of observations varies because of missing outcomes for a few individuals).
Figure 3. Image in Second Survey Experiment

Dear Mayor Henderson,

I have lived in the community for about 10 years and am writing to ask that you support any attempt to move to a school vouchers system. Vouchers would improve the quality of education in our schools system.

Thank you for your consideration,

Best regards,
Dustin Snyder

Notes: This image is an example of the screen shots that were used to increase the realism of Study 2 (see Box 2).
Figure 4. Disagreement Discounting Among City Officials

Notes: The figure shows the differences between the proportion of respondents in the shared and opposed position conditions who agreed with each statement (and the associated 95 percent confidence interval). The results are given for each of the three issue treatments used in the experiment on city officials.
Figure 5. The Effect of Opinion Agreement on Letter Ratings among U.S. Adults

Notes: Shows the differences between the shared and opposed positions, along with the associated 95 percent confidence interval, within each writing task treatment condition for each statement. The comparisons are based on a sample of 494-562 U.S. adults (the number of observations varies because of variation in the number of individuals randomly assigned to each treatment condition).