



Center for Effective Lawmaking

Bipartisan Political Brands

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Abstract

Can efforts to cultivate a bipartisan brand yield measurable reputational benefits, or are such signals dismissed by engaged partisans as cheap talk? To address these questions, we [1] provide a descriptive analysis using newly collected membership data on a bipartisan faction in the U.S. House of Representatives and [2] conduct a pre-registered experiment with a novel sample of 2,326 verified elected officials and politically engaged Americans. We find that the bipartisan Problem Solvers Caucus represents a more centrist, more bipartisan, and more effective group of lawmakers when compared to their unaffiliated peers in the House, and bipartisan brands *can* shift perceptions of ideology despite high levels of partisan polarization – but not all lawmakers are impacted equally by their affiliation with the group.¹

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¹ Our pre-analysis plan ([AsPredicted #155754](#)) was registered on December 12, 2023 just before our recruitment email was distributed, on December 18, 2023. The authors used Claude for minor copy editing suggestions and occasional troubleshooting in R.

On September 18, 2025, a group of Republican and Democratic lawmakers gathered on the steps of the U.S. Capitol to sing “God Bless America” in the wake of yet another episode of political violence in the country (Elkind 2025). The event, according to a leading Democrat in the group, was “sponsored by the Problem Solvers Caucus” to promote bipartisanship (Problem Solvers Caucus 2025a). His remarks were followed by his Republican co-chair’s plea to lower political temperatures, while an anonymous staffer dutifully stood nearby holding a very large “Problem Solvers Caucus”-branded sign. This highly orchestrated gathering, which was covered by Fox News as “lawmakers from the Problem Solvers Caucus [...] breaking out in song,” was just one of many public-facing efforts to capture the nation’s political attention in recent years (Elkind 2025). The impression one gets from reviewing these events is that entrepreneurial lawmakers were making a wager that many Americans were wary of divisive partisan conflict – and organized to build a niche political reputation as lawmakers committed to working across partisan divisions in an era of deep polarization.

In fact, the Problem Solvers Caucus (PSC) worked outside of traditional power structures in the U.S. House to design a new institution that strongly resembled a new political party transcending the boundaries of the two-party system. The group established leadership positions, a quasi-committee structure of issue-specific working

groups, and a careful “‘Noah’s ark’-style initiation” in which “each member would join with a member in the opposite party” to maintain careful bipartisan balance (Ferris 2023). As the co-chairs would later explain on *The Weekly Show with Jon Stewart*, affiliation required strong oaths of bipartisan unity:

For the Caucus to endorse a bill, 75% of the overall group and at least 50% of the members of each party need to say yes. Now if 75% of the group say yes, the 25% that do not -- if it comes to the floor -- they still have to support it, because it’s been endorsed by the group (The Weekly Show with Jon Stewart 2025).

Stewart, who seemed surprised by the binding nature of their internal rules, concluded the conversation by referring to the Problem Solvers Caucus as “the bipartisan group in Congress trying to get a few things done before Elon moves us all to the Mars or wherever the hell we’re going” (The Weekly Show with Jon Stewart 2025). Observing these elected officials can lead one to believe that they have forged something surprising: an attention-grabbing, bipartisan alliance not seen in decades of policymaking in Washington, D.C.

Other observers, however, received the news of a bipartisan legislative compact with no small dose of skepticism. To critics, the Problem Solvers’ attempt at structured bipartisanship was viewed as quixotic, at best. One senior staffer described the group as “roadkill in the legislative process” (Stein 2018). Journalists described the Problem Solvers Caucus as “a huge talking point for moderate politicians eager to tout their bipartisan credentials [...] even though the group didn’t have a lot of tangible policy wins to point to” (Nilsen 2018).² As the late Rep. Raúl M. Grijalva (Democrat, AZ-07)

² According to members of the group, former Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi simply referred to the group as the “Problem *Causers*” Caucus” (C-SPAN 2026).

saw it, “Their track record is nonexistent,” suggesting a misleading or false brand that served as “more of a political cover operation than real legislative operation” (Stein 2018).

Can lawmakers forge new bipartisan institutions that meaningfully carve out influence in a highly centralized legislature? Can interparty factions credibly signal a commitment to bipartisanship in a deeply polarized political climate? The emergence of the Problem Solvers Caucus (PSC) raises significant empirical questions, and answering these questions can help us better understand two-party systems straining from the pressure of intense, internal divisions. Scholars have conducted both theoretical and empirical work on party brands for decades (Grynaviski 2010; Lupu 2013), and researchers have more recently focused on the emergence of *intrapartisan* branding strategies adopted in the House (Bloch Rubin 2017; Clarke 2020). In this article, we take meaningful steps to comprehend the role of this new *interparty* institution. More specifically, we evaluate the credibility of a bipartisan brand in U.S. politics.

The paper proceeds in the following steps. First, we review the literature on political branding and ideological factions in American legislatures. As we consider the potential for a bipartisan brand, we also introduce the Problem Solvers Caucus with a descriptive analysis of observational data on the interparty faction. The remainder of the paper details a national experiment conducted with thousands of verified political elites and highly engaged citizens. To isolate the causal impact of a bipartisan brand, we randomly provide (or withhold) information about two lawmakers’ (real) affiliation

within the PSC brand. Our findings suggest that mere affiliation with a bipartisan faction can change perceptions of ideological positions – but that these effects are not applied evenly to all members of the group.

Are Bipartisan Political Brands Possible?

For decades, scholars have considered if and how parties manage to wield power in the halls of Congress. Central to much of this work is the idea of a party brand: an electorally valuable public good shared by all co-partisans that must be preserved by delegating valuable legislative authority to leadership offices capable of blocking harmful proposals (Jenkins and Stewart 2013). These theories of House organization argue that the majority party consolidates gatekeeping power precisely to manipulate and protect its collective legislative record, differentiating the party from its competitor and shielding members from electorally damaging roll call votes (Cox and McCubbins 2005, 2007). Party brands are valuable to members particularly because they provide clear signals in a complex informational environment: they allow citizens to compress discrete bits of political information into a manageable cognitive structure (Lodge and Hamill 1986; Rahn 1993) and implicitly promise a standard of quality that voters can reward or punish (Grynaviski 2010; Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991; Lupia and McCubbins 1998).

More generally, theories of effective branding hold that brands are revelatory mechanisms that categorize a product by defining and differentiating it from competing alternatives (Jones and Bonevac 2013). In political science, specifically, Bayesian learning

models of party reputation clarify what makes for an effective political brand (Grynaviski 2010; Lupu 2013). In learning about an association of lawmakers, individuals observe political behavior over time and update their beliefs about a group's ideological position, weighing new signals against an increasingly settled assessment of prior observations. Two key implications follow from this perspective. First, brands communicate a central tendency of observed political behavior – leading some lawmakers (i.e., those on the tails of the party's ideological distribution) to fit uneasily within the broad, party reputation. Second, those positions are estimated with uncertainty that shrinks only as observed behavior grows more frequent and more consistent. Effective brands thus demand high-frequency, low-variance position-taking built upon an identifiably distinctive underlying political identity (or “product”).

Building on this research, recent work has tied the emergence of intraparty factions to an attempt to create complementary faction brands (or party sub-brands): a political identity that allows lawmakers to credibly signal their partisan *type* to niche markets of donors, activists, and politically engaged citizens (Clarke 2020).³ Qualitative and historical studies document the emergence of an extraordinary range of faction institutional features that makes faction brands more likely to succeed, such as membership dues, whip systems, membership caps, political action committees, and ostensibly binding voting rules that guard against free-riders (Bloch Rubin 2017; Baer 2017; Green 2019; Blum 2020). More recently, experiments have isolated the effects of

³ While some consider factions as “extended party networks” based on clusters of information-sharing involving voters, journalists, donors, and lawmakers (Koger, Masket, and Noel 2009, 2010), our focus on factions is restricted to groups officially organized *within* the House of Representatives.

faction affiliation on perceptions of candidate ideology.⁴ We build upon this work by evaluating a new, formal, *bipartisan* faction in the United States: the Problem Solvers Caucus.

The Problem Solvers Caucus

The Problem Solvers Caucus formally organized in 2017 as an ideologically centrist, bipartisan, and inter-party caucus within the House of Representatives. The group grew out of the efforts of No Labels (Harbridge 2015; Neely 2019; Rickert and Smith 2020), a 501(c)(4) dedicated to bipartisanship. Early on, the group primarily consisted of informal bipartisan meetings across the two chambers of Congress (Harbridge 2015; Rickert and Smith 2020), with the stated goal of advancing “common-sense solutions to key issues” and “debate, exchange ideas, and find common ground” (Problem Solvers Caucus 2026a). Early press releases from the caucus hailed a commitment to cultivating trust across partisan division; by collaborating across party lines, the group promised to construct a “coalition of governing” that would “prevent obstructionism” (Office of Representative Josh Gottheimer 2017).⁵

The Problem Solvers have also made some extraordinary institutional design choices in forming their organization. Their working group infrastructure creates issue-specific leadership opportunities for their members on politically salient topics of

⁴ In one such study (Clarke 2023), mere affiliation with a hard-right Republican faction (the House Freedom Caucus) moved perceived ideology roughly four points on a 100-point scale, while membership in a moderate Democratic group (the Blue Dog Coalition) moved perceptions roughly six points toward the center.

⁵ While the PSC’s stated intent is to advance legislative solutions and prevent obstructionism, our open-ended results suggest that at least some subnational political elites view them as obstructionists. For example, one respondent in the treatment condition notably described the caucus as “obstructionist assholes who solve no problems whatsoever.”

the day (e.g., gerrymandering, immigration), while professional staff catalog their accomplishments and distribute newsletters to potential supporters. In many ways, the group feels like the counterfactual centrist party that we might observe were it not for the electoral rules that preserve the two-party system in the U.S. In other ways, the PSC is as or even more demanding of its members than the major two political parties; the group binds its members to support PSC-endorsed legislation, while ensuring that the support threshold for formal endorsement is both quite high (75%) and necessarily bipartisan (50% of both parties).⁶

The Problem Solvers are not the first group of lawmakers to attempt a bipartisan coalition in the U.S. Congress. In the early 1900s, a nascent coalition of Insurgent Republicans and Democrats shook the foundations of political power in the House under Speaker Cannon (Bloch Rubin 2013). More recently, the centrist Blue Dog coalition and Republican Main Street Partnership quietly considered, but ultimately did not pursue, a merger in the 2000s (Clarke, Volden and Wiseman 2024). The Senate has, from time to time, seen the rise of fleeting, bipartisan coalitions such as the ‘Gang of Fourteen’ under President George W. Bush, and two separate ‘Gang[s] of Eight’ in 2011 and 2013 on policy-specific areas (Flanagan 2021). However, the PSC arguably represents the most serious attempt at institutional cooperation between the two major

⁶ In addition, all members seeking caucus membership are required to join with a lawmaker of the opposing party (Neely 2019), making it incredibly unique but also potentially challenging as polarization deepens. Moreover, while the caucus is indeed split roughly equal between Democrats and Republicans, it is unclear how often this particular rule is honored. For example, as of June 2026, records show that Ryan Mackenzie (Republican, PA-07) joined the caucus but it seems that he did not enter with a Democratic colleague.

parties since the “conservative coalition” engaged in pre-floor coalitional screening and negative-agenda control throughout the mid-20th century (Jenkins and Monroe 2014).

Reasons to Expect a Strong Bipartisan Brand

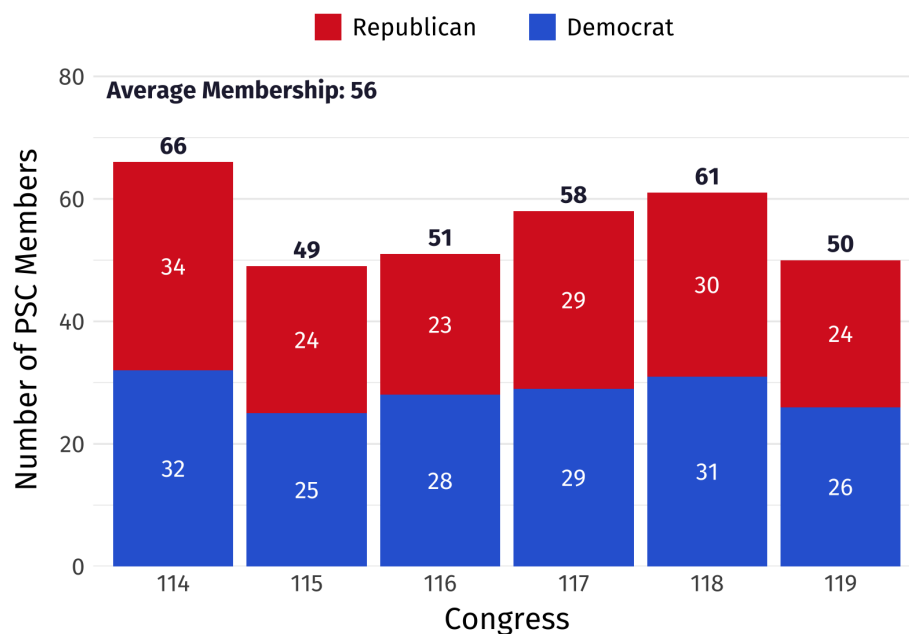
There are several reasons to be optimistic about the success of the Problem Solvers’ branding campaign. The Bayesian logic of political branding suggests that a credible bipartisan signal requires both high-frequency and low-variance messaging. At a minimum, the PSC appears committed to advertising their collective identity whenever possible. Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick (PA-01) illustrates this point clearly, as he says, “Every single time I talk about my time in Congress or about my campaign, I bring up the Problem Solvers. One hundred percent of the time” (Stein 2018).

According to the *Washington Post*, Fitzpatrick alone “has mentioned the Problem Solvers Caucus dozens of times in candidate debates, as well as many more times in interviews and campaign ads” (Stein 2018). The group has at least twice been featured at pep-rally style “Problem Solvers Conventions” hosted by outside groups, as a part of a years-long strategy to build a following at scale (No Labels 2019), and even critics concede the ubiquity of the group’s outreach efforts. One political opponent complained that Fitzpatrick “talks so often about the Problem Solvers Caucus that voters are often confused about which party he belongs to,” while another described former Rep. Tom Reed’s (NY-23) habit of discussing the Problem Solvers Caucus as his “number one talking point – like it’s obsessive, all the time; all the time” (Stein 2018).

The PSC membership records indicate that the group clearly has the numbers to engage in a high-frequency messaging campaign. Figure 1, below, shows membership

trends over time, using a new, hand-coded dataset of Problem Solvers rosters that we collected from a wide range of sources (e.g., archived PSC press releases, historical snapshot of legislator websites, Legistorm directory data).⁷ Over the last 12 years, PSC rosters have averaged around 56 members. The overall trends in the figure below suggest a numerically strong organization in an era of razor-thin majorities. In fact, the PSC has always held at least 10% of the seats held by the majority party in the U.S. House of Representatives, and their roster has always exceeded the seat margin between the two major parties.

Figure 1. Problem Solvers Caucus Membership (114th-119th Congresses)



Beyond the frequent efforts of PSC-affiliates to advertise their organization, the caucus's internal rules appear designed to minimize messaging variance among

⁷ As of July 2026, caucus membership declined to 43 members but retained near parity along party lines (Problem Solvers Caucus 2026b). Additionally, in Figure 1, the counts include any legislator that affiliated at any point in a two-year period of time, including a small number of lawmakers that left the PSC early or joined late in the Congress.

members. By establishing supermajoritarian, bipartisan thresholds for binding dissenting members to endorsed proposals, the PSC aims to cultivate a coherent bloc in floor voting behavior. In choosing public positions, the group attempts to leverage highly salient political moments, such as government shutdowns and highly competitive fights over the Speakership, and speak with a single voice (Baer 2023). The group's dedicated staff and regular press release operations (including a biennial report of endorsed legislation) further contributes to consistent communications from PSC-affiliates (Problem Solvers Caucus 2026a).⁸ Taken together, the group's efforts to generate sustained media coverage on selective, pre-cleared issues seems consistent with an orchestrated and disciplined branding campaign.

The PSC efforts to communicate their bipartisan bona fides are made far easier by the fact that they do actually seem to be more centrist and more bipartisan than many other lawmakers. Figure 2, for example, shows that the Problem Solvers consistently occupy a more centrist position on a left-right scale, as measured by DW-NOMINATE scores (1st dimension).⁹ Newly developed measures of bipartisanship further suggest that the PSC is more likely to collaborate across party lines than other members. Figure 3 plots PSC rates of attracting and offering co-sponsorships in the House, using the *biparty* package and corresponding data developed by Dobson and Lollis (2026). Across both measures of attracting and offering co-sponsorships, the

⁸ Internal rules against campaigning for co-partisan challengers to PSC affiliates also suggest a discipline beyond the inner workings of Congress.

⁹ The patterns in Figure 1 are consistent with other descriptive analyses of the PSC (Neely 2019; Rickert and Smith 2020), including over different time-horizons (e.g., pre-/post-caucus formation).

Problem Solvers appear to be more willing to contribute to greater bipartisanship in the U.S. House when compared to their legislative colleagues.

Figure 2. Problem Solvers Caucus Ideology Compared to Other House Members

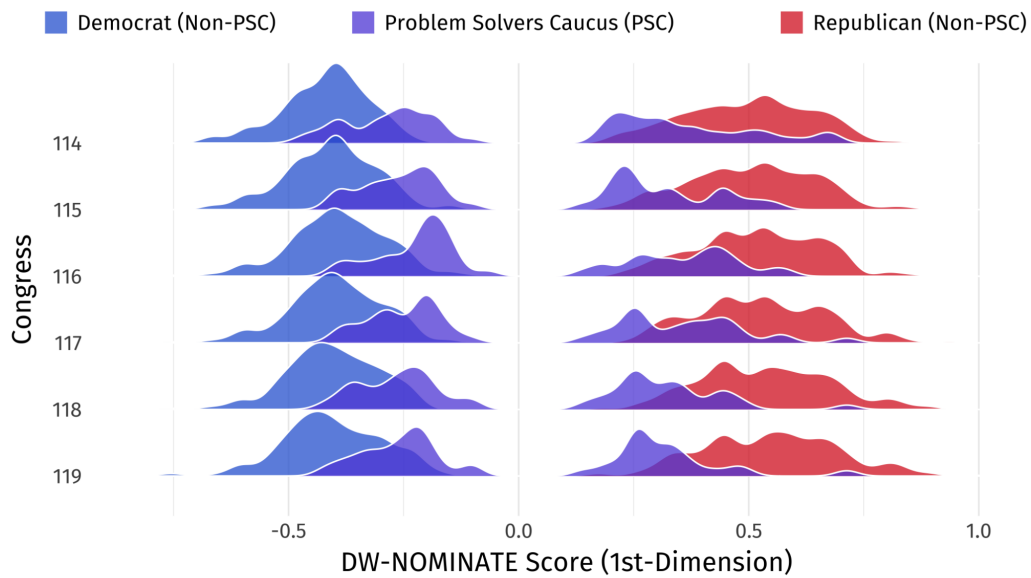


Figure 3. Bipartisanship Scores of Problem Solvers Caucus (114th-118th Congresses)

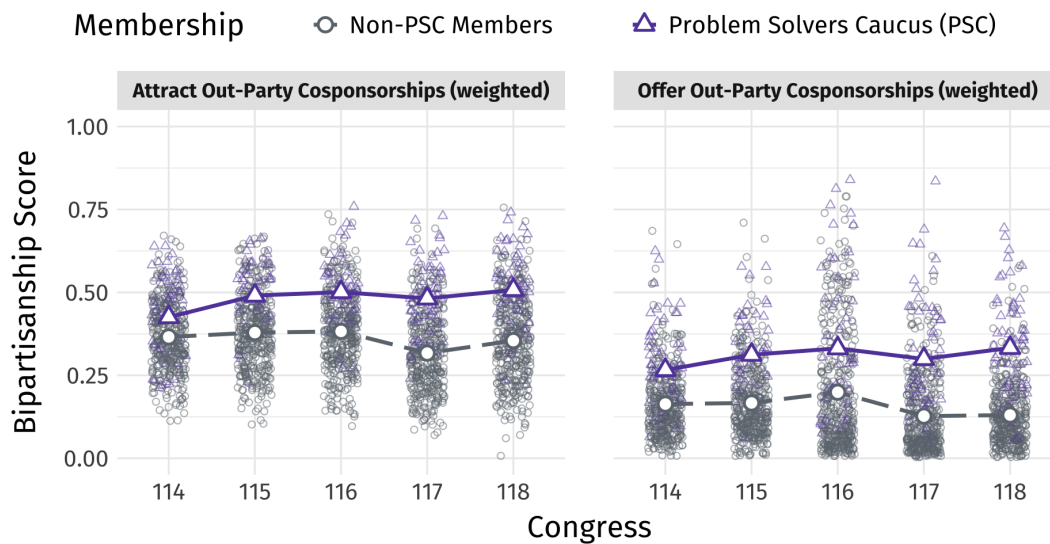


Table 1. Comparing PSC and Non-PSC Legislative Effectiveness, After Accounting for Seniority, Majority Party Status, and Committee Leadership Positions

	Below Expectations	Meets Expectations	Exceeds Expectations	Number of Lawmakers
Non-PSC Representatives				
114	34.8% (129)	42.0% (156)	23.2% (86)	371
115	32.3% (127)	47.6% (187)	20.1% (79)	393
116	33.8% (131)	45.1% (175)	21.1% (82)	388
117	36.4% (143)	44.8% (176)	18.8% (74)	393
118	34.5% (133)	45.1% (174)	20.5% (79)	386
Average	34.3% (663)	45.0% (868)	20.7% (400)	1931
Problem Solvers Caucus (PSC)				
114	25.8% (17)	51.5% (34)	22.7% (15)	66
115	20.4% (10)	53.1% (26)	26.5% (13)	49
116	21.6% (11)	41.2% (21)	37.3% (19)	51
117	20.7% (12)	43.1% (25)	36.2% (21)	58
118	14.8% (9)	55.7% (34)	29.5% (18)	61
Average	20.7% (59)	49.1% (140)	30.2% (86)	285
Note: Percentages represent the share of lawmakers in each expectation category and counts are shown in parentheses. All averages are pooled. Data from the Center for Effective Lawmaking, 114th-118th Congresses.				

Finally, the PSC appears to skew towards relatively high levels of legislative productivity. This, of course, is consistent with at least one reading of their claim to “solve problems” and get things done in an often gridlocked legislative environment. From the 114th - 118th Congress, roughly 30% of lawmakers affiliated with the Problem Solvers “exceeded expectations” in the Center for Effective Lawmakers database; these lawmakers were more likely to advance meaningful legislative proposals after accounting for majority party status, committee leadership positions, and seniority

(Volden and Wiseman 2014). By comparison, only 21% of PSC members fell into this highest category of legislative effectiveness.¹⁰

Taken together, the observational data reviewed in this section suggests that the task of branding the PSC begins from a position of relative strength. After all, it would be much more difficult to credibly signal a distinctive reputation if affiliated lawmakers were not more centrist, more bipartisan, or more effective than their peers in the House.

Reasons to Expect a Weak Bipartisan Brand

On the other hand, there are several reasons this bipartisan effort may yet fail. First, critics routinely and publicly attack the core claim – i.e., the underlying product – of the organization. Political opponents challenge the “effectiveness of the Problem Solvers Caucus label” (Stein 2018), and news coverage and opinion pieces often paint a picture of an ineffective organization with strong talking points that belie questionable bipartisan credentials and accomplishments. For example, Congressman Tim Ryan (Democrat, OH-13) claimed that “they’re yet to have made any progress with any real legislation” (Nilsen 2018), and others point to high rates of partisan loyalty in their observed voting behavior.¹¹

Despite their attempts to foster greater unity through a formal organization, simply observing the different positions staked out by members of the PSC can lead to some confusion. Internal fights and disagreements suggest a *high* variance message

¹⁰ As a more basic comparison, the median legislative effective score for PSC members was higher than non-PSC members in all five congresses for which we have LES data. This gap is particularly large in the 118th Congress: the median LES was 0.884 for PSC members, compared to 0.624 for other lawmakers in the House.

¹¹ For example, *ProPublica* routinely displayed each lawmaker’s propensity to vote against their own party. As of 2024, Rep. Josh Gottheimer (Democrat, NJ-05) voted with his party on over 93% of recorded votes (ProPublica 2024).

communicated to even politically engaged Americans. As an example, consider the internal conflict that recently led to one PSC leader's abrupt resignation (Ryan 2026). Rep. Nicole Malliotakis (Republican, NY-11), a Vice Chair of the PSC at the time, sponsored the Smithsonian American Women's History Museum Act (H.R. 1329 2026) in the 119th Congress. A few months later, the Problem Solvers formally endorsed the legislative proposal with glowing praise from PSC affiliates of both parties (Problem Solvers Caucus 2025b).¹² After a controversial amendment process, support for the bill within the PSC fell apart. Ultimately, the proposal – which is still listed among the bills endorsed by the bipartisan Problem Solvers Caucus as of July 2026 (Problem Solvers Caucus 2025b) – was defeated in a strict party-line vote (H.R. 1329 2026). In response, Rep. Malliotakis abruptly resigned from the caucus, writing a remarkably blunt assessment of the bipartisanship signaled by the behavior of her colleagues in the house:

I have repeatedly found myself disappointed by the lack of help Republicans receive from our Democrat colleagues on this [Problem Solvers] Caucus when their vote would actually make a difference [...] Yesterday's vote on H.R. 1329, the Smithsonian American Women's History Museum Act, a Caucus-endorsed bill which 20 Democrat members of this Caucus co-sponsored, was the latest example and deeply disappointing to me as both a member and vice chair of our caucus, as the main co-sponsor of this legislation and as a woman. If not one Problem Solvers Democrat would vote for a straightforward measure to transfer federal land for a women's history museum simply because it was amended through regular order, during the committee process, to ensure that only biological women are exhibited, then what can we actually rely on the [Problem Solvers] Caucus' Democrats to join us on? (Malliotakis 2026).

¹² Recall that a formal endorsement indicated a 75% approval from the PSC *and* a majority of both party contingencies within the faction.

If we take Rep. Malliotakis' comments at face value, members of the PSC only weakly adhere to their own rules. By extension, we should question the strength of the bipartisan signal offered by the group.

In the next section, we evaluate the credibility of a bipartisan brand directly through a randomized controlled trial that carefully manipulates only the Problem Solvers Caucus affiliation. More specifically, we consider the hypothesis that the Problem Solvers Caucus brand makes affiliated lawmakers appear more centrist. If the PSC has succeeded in creating a label that cuts through meritless claims of bipartisanship, we anticipate that highly engaged Americans will be more likely to view affiliates of the bipartisan group as distinct from their co-partisans and more ideologically centrist (i.e., closer to the opposing party).

Research Design

To empirically evaluate the possibility of causal, bipartisan branding effects, we borrow designs from previous research on political brands (Butler and Powell 2014; Clarke 2023; Lupu 2013). More specifically, we introduce a national sample of politically engaged citizens to real screenshots introducing the two co-chairs of the PSC in 2023: Republican Brian Fitzpatrick (PA-01) and Democrat Josh Gottheimer (NJ-05). Both conditions were given the *same* publicly available information from the PSC website that identified two legislators as members of their respective parties along with brief biographical details. Respondents in the treatment condition were also provided with the official Problem Solvers Caucus logo prominently displayed above each blurb along with some text identifying the two lawmakers as co-chairs of the PSC.

After reviewing information about the two lawmakers, respondents were asked to estimate how liberal/conservative the two co-chairs were on a left-right, 0-100 sliding scale, alongside “a typical Democrat in Congress” and “a typical Republican in Congress.” In our pre-registration plan, we committed to using this outcome data in two key ways. First, we evaluated shifts in the perceived ideological location of both Rep. Gottheimer and Rep. Fitzpatrick on our scale to discern if treatment condition respondents placed each of them closer to the ideological center of this scale. Second, we constructed a dichotomous indicator for each lawmaker to evaluate if respondents viewed them as more centrist than their respective co-partisans.¹³

Survey Sample

Prior research suggests that faction brands target niche markets to capture valuable political resources, so it was important that our sample include individuals that were more likely to pay attention to American politics, donate to political candidates, and volunteer their time for political causes.¹⁴ To collect a verified, national sample of politically engaged Americans, we worked with an extensive team of undergraduate researchers to hand-code publicly verifiable contact information for over 80,000 Americans.¹⁵

¹³ Later, respondents were asked to rate their familiarity with the PSC (“Nothing at All”, “A little”, or “A lot”) and to express their views on the caucus in an open-ended question. We review the results of that question in the appendix.

¹⁴ Seo and Theriault (2012) find that general-election vulnerability does not explain why a lawmaker joins a moderate (intraparty) caucus. It is, thus, plausible that a moderate group like that of the PSC are not cultivating their brand for general-election voters and, in lieu, niche donors, potential volunteers, etc.

¹⁵ The survey included several other experimental modules and, importantly, a request to each potential respondent to share their advice and perspectives with college students interested in politics and public service. All contact information came from publicly verifiable sources, as of Summer 2023.

The largest subgroup in our sampling frame, by far, was a comprehensive list of every public school board member in the country as of Summer 2023. This included over 10,000 school districts nationwide, with a sampling frame of 53,518 potential, verified, elected officials. It's worth noting that many school districts have established norms or policies discouraging elected officials from engaging in external communication as an individual member of their respective boards; despite these obstacles, 1,400 individuals from this sub-sample took the time to share their thoughts in this survey. Over 60% of our eventual sample was an elected member of a public board of education.

We also carefully collected an exhaustive list of verified state legislators and their staff. Email addresses were hand-coded from Legistorm's curated database of all 50 state legislatures for a sampling frame of 7,012 potential state legislators (3,122 Democratic, 3,822 Republican, 68 not clearly affiliated with a major party). Our sampling frame also included 7,717 state legislative staffers (4,162 Democratic staffers, 3,260 Republican staffers, and 295 staffers not publicly affiliated with a party). Nearly 19% of our final sample were verified state lawmakers or state legislative staff.

Next, we included party activists and local political candidates. Student researchers obtained contact information on verified county party leaders from both major political parties in all 50 states and produced a list of 8,597 potential respondents (4,978 current or former Democratic Party leaders and about 3,619 current or former Republican Party leaders) with nearly 400 responding. At the time of data collection, the

North Carolina (NC) State Board of Elections also provided a detailed list of 2022 candidates on their public website. After cleaning the source data and eliminating any possible duplicates in our other sub-samples (e.g., school board candidates), this sub-sample included 2,205 potential survey respondents. Over 20% of our final sample were verified political candidates or local party leaders.

Finally, we included a younger demographic of highly engaged individuals. We invited just under 1,000 members of collegiate partisan organizations (511 College Dems and 482 College Republicans) by manually combing through hundreds of websites to hand-code the contact information of major clubs throughout the United States. Almost no college partisans took the survey, and this group made up less than 1% of our final sample.

To summarize, Table 2 provides an overview of our sampling frame, our eventual sample of 2,326 participants, and the response rates, broken down by each sub-group. Importantly, we conducted identical, parallel surveys for each of these sub-groups to preserve the ex-ante identification of their sub-sample affiliation. The parallel administration of these identical surveys further meant that our experiment effectively used a stratified random assignment procedure, with random assignment occurring within each sub-sample's identical survey.¹⁶

¹⁶ Our primary results in this manuscript include FE for the strata used in our random assignment procedure. Our pre-registration documents do *not* indicate our intention to include fixed effects or robust standard errors. This was due to a mistake in our initial thinking about the design. We split our sample into twelve parts primarily to have ex-ante sample indicator measures to confirm response rates and, for some sub-samples, partisan identities without worry about pre or post-treatment concerns to collecting these data. Once we realized we had effectively stratified our random assignment procedure, we committed to including strata fixed effects in all models. Nevertheless, we include additional models in Appendix B that exclude strata (i.e., sub-sample) fixed effects in the appendix.

It is worth emphasizing that our survey sample is not representative of all policymakers and party activists in America. With response rates in the single digits, our findings almost certainly reflect some meaningful selection bias. For example, the state senators who took the time to complete our survey likely differed in a number of ways from those who never bothered to open our email in the first place. Participating state senators may have been less busy, and the reasons they may have been less busy may have been correlated with the professionalization of their legislature, their institutional status in their chamber, the nature of that state's legislative calendar, or any number of other factors. It is also possible that a state senator was more or less likely to take our survey based on an ideological view of higher education institutions or a specific experience with the institutional affiliation of the authors.

Our sample is also far from a representative sample of the broader U.S. population, and our results should therefore not be conflated with a carefully weighted poll of American public sentiment. Our respondents were overwhelmingly white (82.8%), with a much smaller group of Black or African American (5.5%) and Hispanic or Latino (4.0%) respondents. Meanwhile, we had a roughly even split between those that described themselves as men (46.7%) and women (47.2%), with about 1.5% choosing to describe themselves in some other way.¹⁷ The sample also overwhelmingly described themselves as straight (85.5%) with only 7.2% of respondents identifying as

¹⁷ Some of the responses indicating that they view themselves not as a man or a woman, but “in some other way” were really used to express dissatisfaction with our decision to allow more than two gender identity options in the question. For example, one respondent identified as a “Cat D11 Bulldozer.”

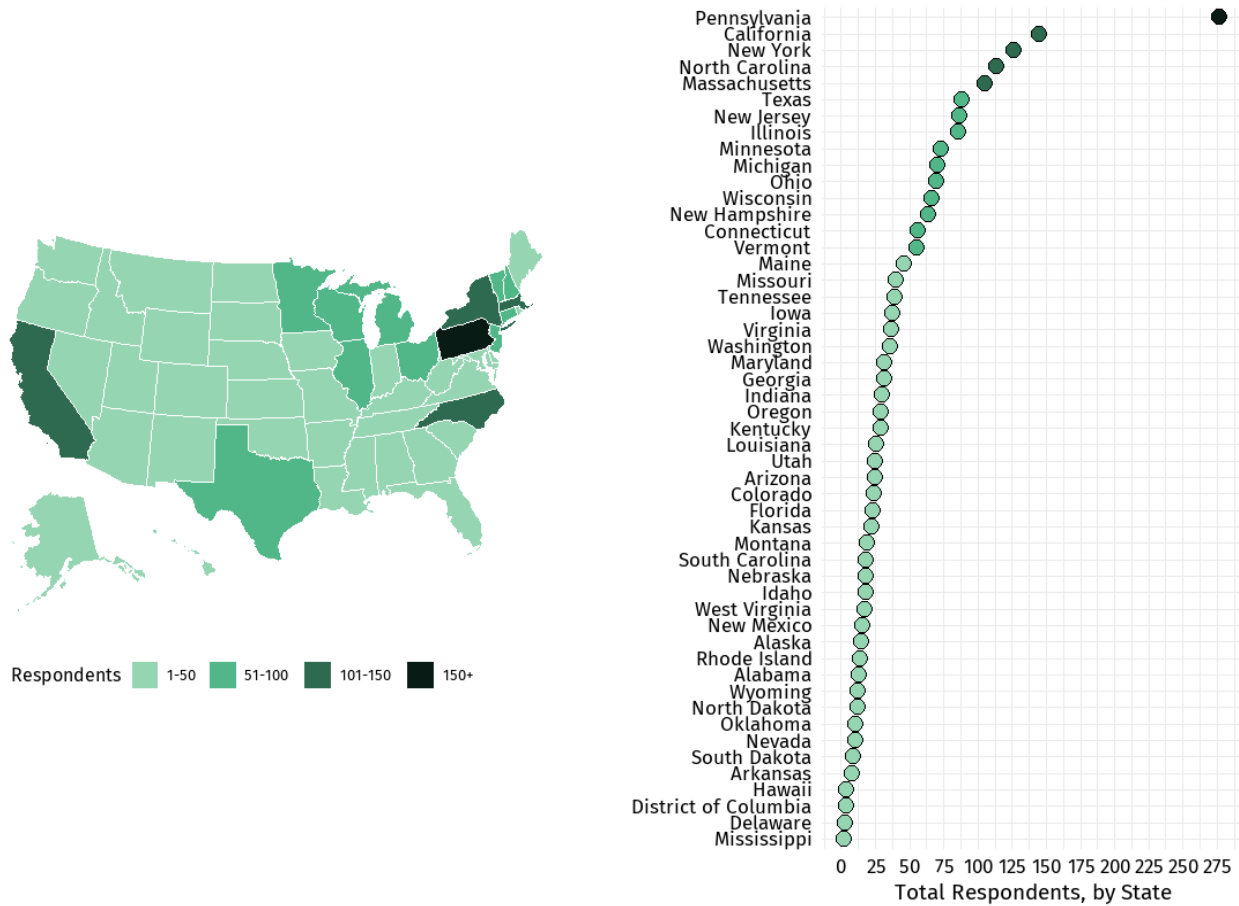
gay, lesbian, bisexual, or something else. Finally, a little under one-third of participants indicated that they were primary caretakers of young children.

While these apparent limitations in external validity are worth keeping in mind, we should also emphasize the strengths of our sample. Unlike convenience samples with persistent concerns about “bots” and falsified response information, we are confident that every respondent in our survey is a verified member of one of the politically engaged sub-groups listed in Table 2. As Figure 4 shows, our survey sample also includes perspectives from every state and the District of Columbia. Moreover, the vast majority of our sample are highly involved in practicing politics – from working professionally to running for local office – and are more likely to be prospective donors and political supporters, relative to the broader American public.

Table 2. Summary of Respondents Completing Survey Experiment by Sub-Sample

Sample	Invited	Respondents	Response Rate	% of Full Sample
School Board Members	53,518	1,400	2.6%	60.2%
State Lawmakers (Democrats)	3,122	89	2.9%	3.8%
State Lawmakers (Republicans)	3,822	64	1.7%	2.8%
State Lawmakers (Others)	68	1	1.5%	0.04%
State Legislative Staffers (Democrats)	4,162	180	4.3%	7.7%
State Legislative Staffers (Republican)	3,260	93	2.9%	4%
State Legislative Staffers (Others)	295	9	3.1%	0.4%
Local Party Leaders (Democrats)	4,978	271	5.4%	11.7%
Local Party Leaders (Republicans)	3,619	125	3.5%	5.4%
Political Candidates (North Carolina)	2,205	80	3.6%	3.4%
College Democrats	511	7	1.4%	0.3%
College Republicans	482	7	1.5%	0.3%
Total	80,042	2,326	2.9%	100%

Figure 4: Visualizing the Geographic Distribution of Survey Respondents



Results

The results of our experiments suggest that the Problem Solvers Caucus brand *can* shift perceptions of ideological location, but these effects are not necessarily shared across all faction affiliates. Figure 5 provides the full distribution of treatment and control condition responses to the question “how liberal/conservative is Rep. Josh Gottheimer (NJ-05).” At a glance, the distribution of responses overlap considerably,

with both groups clearly peaking around the midpoint of the 0-100 scale. The median responses for the two groups evaluating Rep. Gottheimer were also strikingly similar; the control group placed Gottheimer as a 48, while the median treatment response was 49. Comparing the cumulative density functions of these two groups also suggests very little difference in the overall patterns of responses; the biggest gap between the two group's distribution of responses, as measured by Kolmogorov-Smirnov (KS) test statistic (D), was 0.05 ($p=0.129$). Looking at the full distribution of responses, we do not see overwhelming evidence that the PSC brand reshaped the perception of Rep. Josh Gottheimer's ideological position.

Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick's (PA-01) mere affiliation with the Problem Solvers Caucus seems to have shifted respondents' perceptions of his ideological location to a greater extent. In Figure 6, we provide the full distribution of responses to our primary outcome instrument (0-100 slider). While we still see a modest difference in the overall distributions across the two groups (as measured by our K-S statistic), we observe a four-point difference in median responses by experimental group.

In Table 3, we further provide the results from two pairs of regression models with robust standard errors and fixed effects for each strata (i.e., sub-sample) used in our random assignment procedure. For both lawmakers, we evaluate the average shift in ideological position on a 0-100 scale and the proportion of respondents in each group that indicated each lawmaker was more centrist (i.e., a smaller absolute difference from

50 on a 100 point scale) than their typical co-partisans in Congress (Democrats for Gottheimer, Republicans for Fitzpatrick).

Figure 5: Density Plots of Gottheimer Survey Responses (Control vs. Treatment)

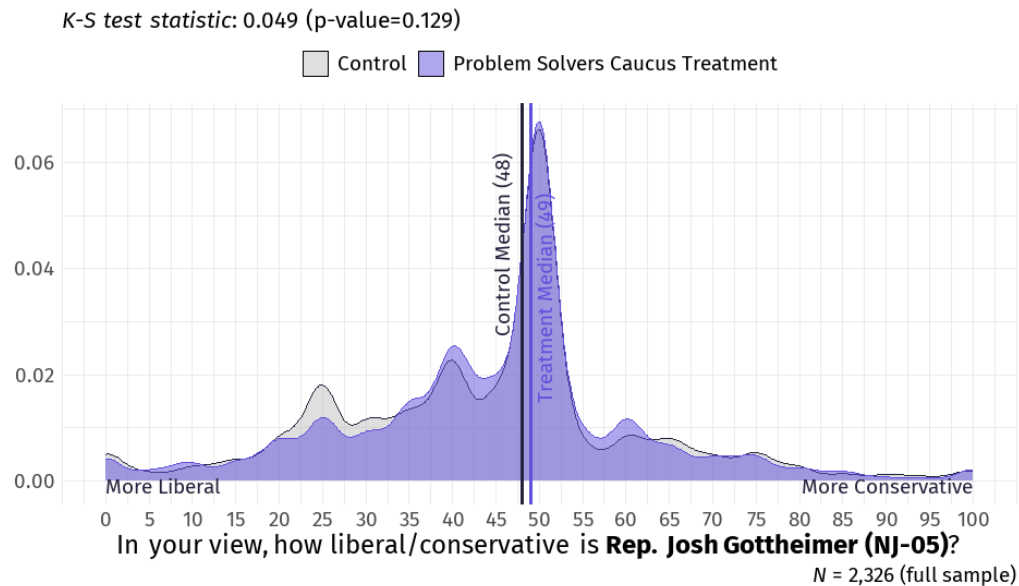
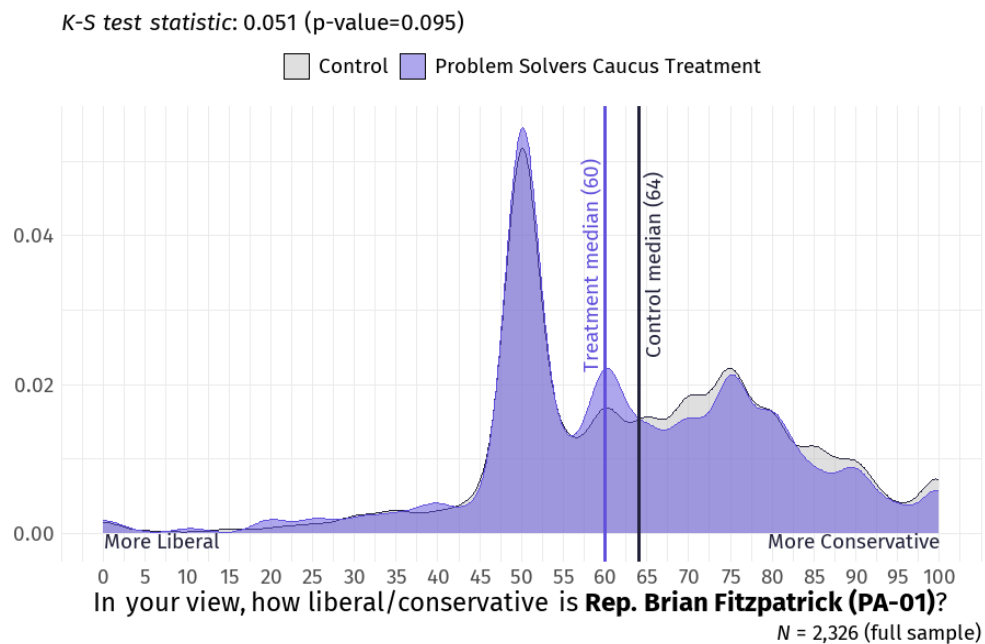


Figure 6: Density Plots of Fitzpatrick Survey Responses (Control vs. Treatment)



The results show that a majority of respondents in both groups placed Rep. Gottheimer closer to the ideological center when compared to typical Democrats, with little difference between the two experimental conditions. While the treatment coefficients for Rep. Gottheimer all remained in the expected direction, none are statistically significant. Simply put, the PSC branding effects for Rep. Gottheimer appear to be negligible across both models.

By contrast, the bipartisan brand appears to have shifted perceptions on Rep. Fitzpatrick. Americans randomly assigned to the treatment condition viewed the Republican lawmaker as more centrist than a comparable group of Americans that did not receive PSC branding or affiliation details ($-1.524, p=0.04$). These effects build upon a reasonably centrist baseline assessment of the lawmaker, too; over half of respondents in the control condition indicated that the lawmaker was closer to the ideological center of our scale when compared to a typical Republican in Congress – a proportion similar to the baseline reported for Rep. Gottheimer. Unlike his Democratic counterpart, however, a larger share of respondents viewed Rep. Fitzpatrick as more centrist than typical Republicans when assigned to the treatment condition ($0.06, p=0.003$).

Table 3: Experimental Results

	Rep. Josh Gottheimer (NJ-05, Democratic Party)		Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick (PA-01, Republican Party)	
	Perception of Ideological Location (0,100)	More Centrist than Typical Co-Partisan (0,1)	Perception of Ideological Location (0,100)	More Centrist than Typical Co-Partisan (0,1)
PSC Treatment	0.559 (0.725)	0.012 (0.020)	-1.524 (0.742)	0.060 (0.020)
	p-value: 0.441	p-value: 0.546	p-value: 0.040	p-value: 0.003
Strata FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Num.Obs.	2326	2326	2326	2326

Note: Coefficients from OLS models with strata fixed effects with robust (HC2) std. errors in parentheses. Perceived ideology is a 0-100 slider where higher values indicate more conservative.
"More centrist" = 1 if estimated absolute difference from 50 is smaller than a typical co-partisan.

To better understand these results, we next moved beyond our pre-registered models to more exploratory considerations. First, we evaluated how the PSC brand may lead to a perceived ideological convergence between the Republican and Democratic co-chairs of the caucus. Second, we evaluated how affiliation with a bipartisan faction may lead to a greater sense of ideological divergence from typical co-partisans in Congress. The results for these three models are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Exploring Ideological Convergence and Divergence

	Absolute Distance Between Fitzpatrick and Gottheimer	Absolute Distance Between Gottheimer and Typical Democrat	Absolute Distance Between Fitzpatrick and Typical Republican
PSC Treatment	-1.766 (0.937)	0.493 (0.666)	1.603 (0.644)
	p-value: 0.060	p-value: 0.460	p-value: 0.013
Strata FE	✓	✓	✓
Num.Obs.	2326	2326	2326

Note: Coefficients from OLS models with strata fixed effects with robust (HC2) std. errors in parentheses. Perceived ideology is a 0-100 slider where higher values indicate more conservative.
Distances are absolute differences between 0-100 sliders.

Does leading the PSC with a member of the opposition party lead Americans to view bipartisan faction co-chairs as more closely aligned? The results from the first model reported in Table 4 suggests some small step towards ideological convergence. Despite the fact that both lawmakers were presented side-by-side in the control *and* treatment condition, respondents randomly assigned the bipartisan brand placed the two co-chairs 1.766 points closer to each other ($p=0.06$).

The results for our tests of co-partisan divergence once again suggest bipartisan branding effects for the Republican co-chair in our study, but not his Democratic counterpart. Respondents randomly assigned to receive PSC branding information did not meaningfully shift the distance they placed between Rep. Gottheimer and a typical Democratic co-partisan (0.493, $p=0.46$). By contrast, those that were informed that Rep. Fitzpatrick was a co-chair of the bipartisan Problem Solvers viewed him as significantly distinct from other Republicans (1.603, $p=0.013$). If the benefits of PSC affiliation include a credible signal that members are a different sort of partisan, these benefits do not appear to be uniformly shared across the two parties.

Finally, we consider the impact of the Problem Solvers Caucus brand on how individuals perceive the identity of Democrats and Republicans more generally. Lawmakers that produce a bipartisan faction brand remain affiliated with the broader, much more powerful partisan identities they bring to the PSC. By attempting to signal ideological divergence from one of the two major parties, the Problem Solvers Caucus may actually undermine the clarity of the overall party brand. To consider this

possibility, we look at the variance around perceptions of a “typical Democrat” or “typical Republican” in both the control and treatment conditions in Table 5. In short, the introduction of the Problem Solvers Caucus label does nothing to impact perceptions of the more generic Democratic brand, but even a single introduction to the Problem Solvers’ bipartisan brand introduces a bit *more uncertainty* around the Republican Party’s overall position. While these shifts are very small, they suggest that bipartisan branding may have the potential to undermine attempts to clearly anchor the identity of a major party to a specific ideological location (e.g., the far-right tail of a left-right ideological scale).

Table 5: Exploring Variance of Party Estimates

Measure	Control		Treatment		Variance Ratio (C/T)	p-value
	N	SD	N	SD		
Typical Democrat	1,194	20.56	1,132	20.54	1.00	0.973
Typical Republican	1,194	20.13	1,132	21.36	0.89	0.043

Note: Variance Ratio = Control Variance / Treatment Variance. p-values from F-tests for equality of variances.

Taken together, the results presented in this paper suggest that the Problem Solvers Caucus *can* modestly shift perceptions of an elected official’s ideological position – but the effects are not a given for all faction affiliates.¹⁸ When we ask respondents to consider *the exact same* lawmakers with and without the PSC label, respondent views differed systematically – but only for the Republican co-chair of the

¹⁸In the appendix materials, we include a series of robustness checks (e.g., balance tests) and additional analyses beyond the primary research design in our pre-registration plan.

group. Exploratory analyses (i.e., beyond our pre-registration plan) further suggests that the Problem Solvers brand may lead people to view co-chairs as more closely aligned, ideologically. Like our primary analyses, we find that Republican Problem Solvers may be viewed as more distinct from typical co-partisans, but the same is not true for Democratic members of the caucus. These results are complemented by open-ended responses, which provide a range of both positive and deeply critical perspectives.

Discussion

Given the deep divisions in American politics today, it was unusual for Democratic and Republican lawmakers to formally establish a new organization to more systematically collaborate *across* party lines in the highly polarized U.S. House of Representatives. The Problem Solvers Caucus may be the most enduring and institutionalized bipartisan coalition in the last century of congressional politics, and, yet, the group has relatively little scholarly attention to date.

Prior research makes the case that factions within American parties can cultivate their own political brand in the hopes of capturing valuable and scarce political resources independent of party leadership. To our knowledge, our study is the first rigorous evaluation of a *bipartisan* branding effort. Investigating the Problem Solvers Caucus thus allows us to address an important gap in the literature with implications for our understanding of political power in an increasingly centralized legislature (Curry 2015).

We began our paper with a set of descriptive analyses using new Problem Solvers Caucus membership data, and we found that members of the PSC were meaningfully distinct from other legislators in the U.S. House. Despite many anecdotes to the contrary, the Problem Solvers do appear to be more centrist, more bipartisan, and more effective than their legislative colleagues. These data point to a potentially strong underlying “product” for a bipartisan branding campaign.

Beyond these descriptive patterns, we conducted a large-scale, pre-registered experiment designed to isolate the causal effect of an established bipartisan brand among a national sample of verified political leaders and highly engaged Americans from every state and Washington, D.C. Our experimental results suggest that bipartisan brands *can* – but do not always – shift perceptions of legislator ideology. While the Democratic co-chair of the Problem Solvers was viewed virtually the same across control and treatment conditions, respondents consistently viewed his Republican counterpart as more centrist and more distinctive from Republican co-partisans. Exploratory analysis, beyond our pre-registration plan, even suggests that the presence of the Problem Solvers Caucus may inject some uncertainty into views of the generic Republican party brand.

These findings are relevant to ongoing – and sometimes heated – conversations within both major parties as to how they might secure majorities in congressional elections. If candidates can make themselves more competitive by tacking to the political center, a strong Problem Solvers brand may credibly signal bipartisan

credentials to prospective political donors. Our results suggest that bipartisan factions may help Republicans in this regard, but we find no evidence that Democrats will be viewed differently as a function of their bipartisan faction affiliation.

These findings also call out for greater research on factional competition in polarized legislatures. In the U.S., the highest profile Republican factions of the last few decades have grown out of a competition to pull the party further to the right. The Republican Study Committee, the House Liberty Caucus, the Tea Party Caucus, and, most recently, the House Freedom Caucus have all occupied increasingly conservative ideological spaces, while only the relatively unknown Republican Main Street Partnership has attempted to appeal to more centrist Republicans. By contrast, Democrats have a broader distribution of ideological factions, ranging from the Progressive Caucus on the left to the once-prominent Blue Dog and New Democrat Coalitions vying to establish themselves as influential centrist factions. Our experimental results may reflect a broader understanding of factional arrangements, but we need additional theoretical and empirical work to better understand the complex competition over scarce political resources among both inter- and intra-party factions.

More generally, this research carries normative implications for broader debates on partisan polarization and its prospective remedies. In the context of deepening and potentially destabilizing American political divisions, scholars should critically investigate the emergence of highly organized bipartisan coalitions. Weak brands – through false advertising or failed collective action – may serve to deepen our collective

sense of partisan fatalism. By contrast, successful bipartisan brands may lead to enduring and meaningful incentives among legislators to oppose more extremist elements within their own party, just as they may undercut the clarity of strong progressive or conservative party positions. Whether the Problem Solvers Caucus proves to be a durable and impactful institution or an ephemeral political marketing ploy is a question that deserves systematic research along with measured public scrutiny.

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Bipartisan Political Brands

Online Appendix

August 2026

Appendix A: Survey Instruments

Figure A1. PSC Treatment Image

Please take a look at the brief bios of Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick (PA-01) and Rep. Josh Gottheimer (NJ-05), the Co-Chairs of the Problem Solvers Caucus.



Problem Solvers Caucus



For 14 years prior to representing his hometown of Pennsylvania's First Congressional District, Brian Fitzpatrick served our nation both as an FBI Special Agent and Federal Prosecutor, fighting both domestic and international political corruption, and supporting global counterterrorism and counterintelligence efforts – including being embedded with U.S. Special Forces as part Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Working to promote freedom and democracy at home and abroad, Brian also served as National Director for the FBI's Campaign Finance and Election Crimes Enforcement Program and as a National Supervisor for the FBI's Public Corruption Unit at FBI Headquarters, where he was recognized as an expert in restoring integrity to governmental institutions.

Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick (PA-01)
Republican Party



Josh Gottheimer represents New Jersey's Fifth Congressional District in the northernmost part of the state, which includes parts of Bergen, Passaic, and Sussex counties.

In Congress, Josh serves on two Committees, including the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, where he is the Ranking Member of the National Security Agency and Cyber Subcommittee, and is a member of the National Intelligence Enterprise Subcommittee. Josh also serves on the House Financial Services Committee, where he is a member of the Subcommittee on National Security, Illicit Finance, and International Financial Institutions, the Subcommittee on Digital Assets, Financial Technology and Inclusion, and the Subcommittee on Capital Markets.

Rep. Josh Gottheimer (NJ-05)
Democratic Party

Figure A2. PSC Control Image

Please take a look at the brief bios of Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick (PA-01) and Rep. Josh Gottheimer (NJ-05).



For 14 years prior to representing his hometown of Pennsylvania's First Congressional District, Brian Fitzpatrick served our nation both as an FBI Special Agent and Federal Prosecutor, fighting both domestic and international political corruption, and supporting global counterterrorism and counterintelligence efforts – including being embedded with U.S. Special Forces as part Operation Iraqi Freedom.

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and the Subcommittee on Capital Markets.

Rep. Josh Gottheimer (NJ-05)
Democratic Party

Figure A3. Outcome Measurement Instrument

In your view, how liberal/conservative are the following individuals?



Note: We randomly flipped the order of choices presented to respondents (i.e., respondents viewed Democrat, Gottheimer, Fitzpatrick, Republican or Republican, Fitzpatrick, Gottheimer, Democrat).

Table A1. Baseline Summary Statistics on Continuous Outcome Measure (Control Group)

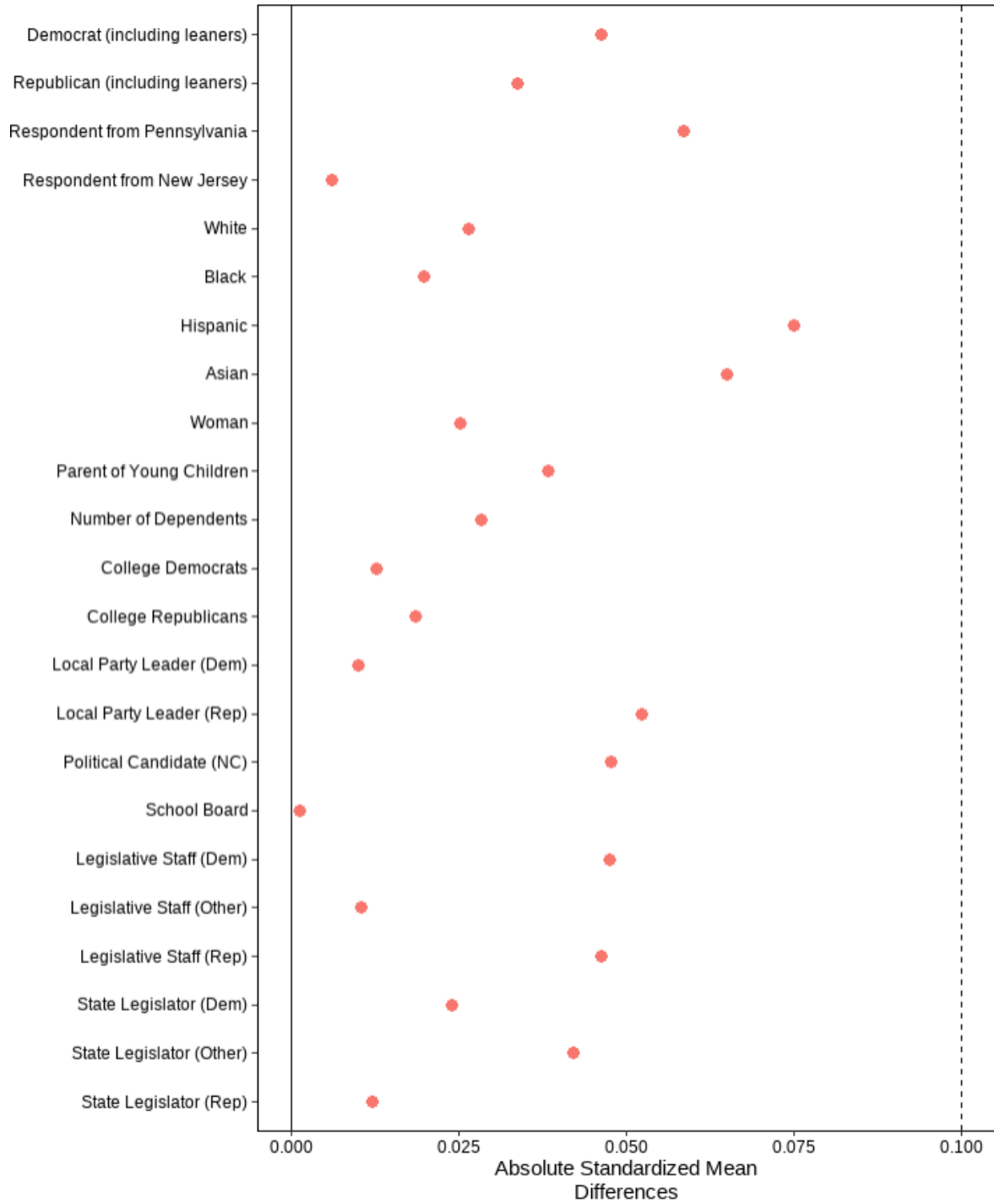
	Mean	SD	Median	Density	Histogram
Typical Democrat	34.2	20.6	30.5		
Rep. Josh Gottheimer	44.3	17.9	48.0		
Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick	64.0	17.9	64.0		
Typical Republican	72.8	20.1	76.0		

Appendix B: Balance on Covariates

Table B1. Standardized Difference in Means Across Treatment Conditions

Variable	Standardized Mean Difference
	Treatment-Control
Democrat (including leaners)	0.046
Republican (including leaners)	-0.034
Respondent from Pennsylvania	-0.059
Respondent from New Jersey	0.006
White	0.026
Black	-0.020
Hispanic	0.075
Asian	-0.065
Woman	0.025
Parent of Young Children	0.038
Number of Dependents	0.028
College Democrats	-0.013
College Republicans	0.019
Local Party Leader (Dem)	-0.010
Local Party Leader (Rep)	-0.052
Political Candidate (NC)	0.048
School Board	-0.001
Legislative Staff (Dem)	0.048
Legislative Staff (Other)	-0.011
Legislative Staff (Rep)	-0.046
State Legislator (Dem)	0.024
State Legislator (Other)	0.042
State Legislator (Rep)	-0.012
Cells are standardized mean differences (pooled SD). Shaded cells exceed 0.10 .	

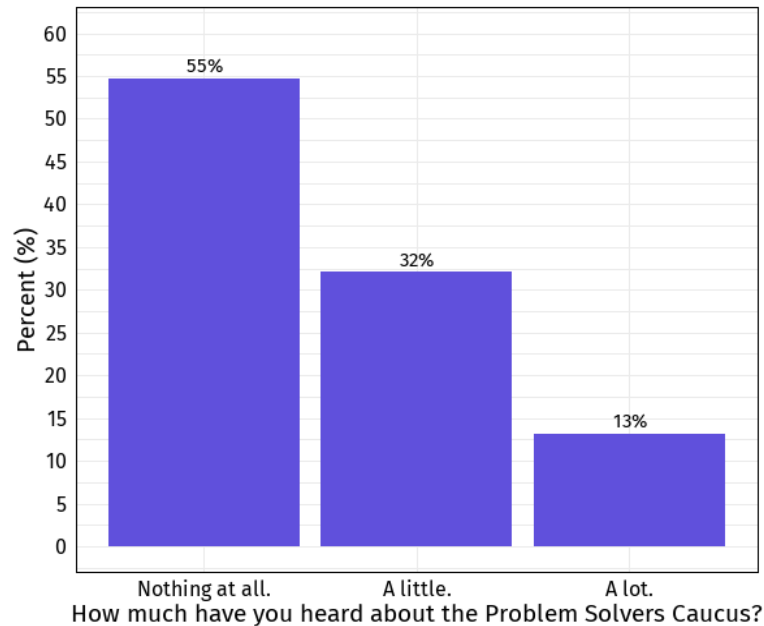
Figure B1. Standardized Difference in Means Across Treatment Conditions
Balance across Treatment Conditions



Appendix C: Familiarity with the PSC

In this section, we report responses from an additional question asked towards the end of our survey about how much individuals had heard about the Problem Solvers Caucus. In Figure C1, we report the distribution of expressed familiarity with the PSC among control group respondents.¹ Overall, the bipartisan group was *not* particularly well-known at the time of our study, even among politically engaged Americans. In the control group (n=1,186), 54.7% said they knew “Nothing at all” about the PSC, followed by 32.1% who said only “a little,” and 13.2% responded with “a lot.” Put differently, a majority of respondents had not even heard of the group prior to our study, but a sizable proportion of respondents said they had at least some familiarity with the group. These numbers stand in stark contrast to the reportedly high levels of familiarity with the House Freedom Caucus in Clarke (2023), where over 96% of respondents indicated at least some familiarity with the Freedom Caucus and a majority (58.8%) of said that they knew a lot about the conservative faction. These descriptive patterns suggest a relatively weak Problem Solvers Caucus brand.²

Figure C1: Familiarity with Problem Solvers Caucus (Control Condition Only)



¹ These results were only considered among the control group responses because asking respondents familiarity with a group that we included earlier in the treatment group’s survey experience risks inducing post-treatment bias. In the appendix materials, we also plot these responses by sub-sample.

² The group of lawmakers may not be frequently advertising their affiliation, or they may be failing to break through in the current, fragmented media environment. In any event, knowing about the underlying organization is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for a strong branding effect, and this data should temper expectations of a causal impact in our experiment.

Figure C2. PSC Familiarity Numerical Totals, Control Group-Only

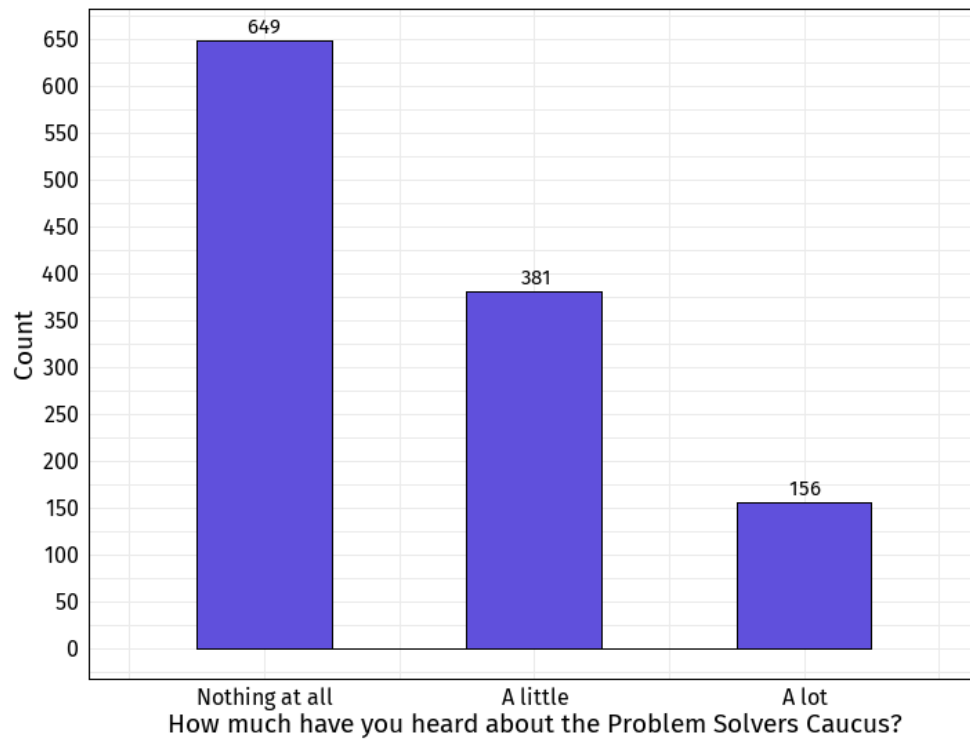
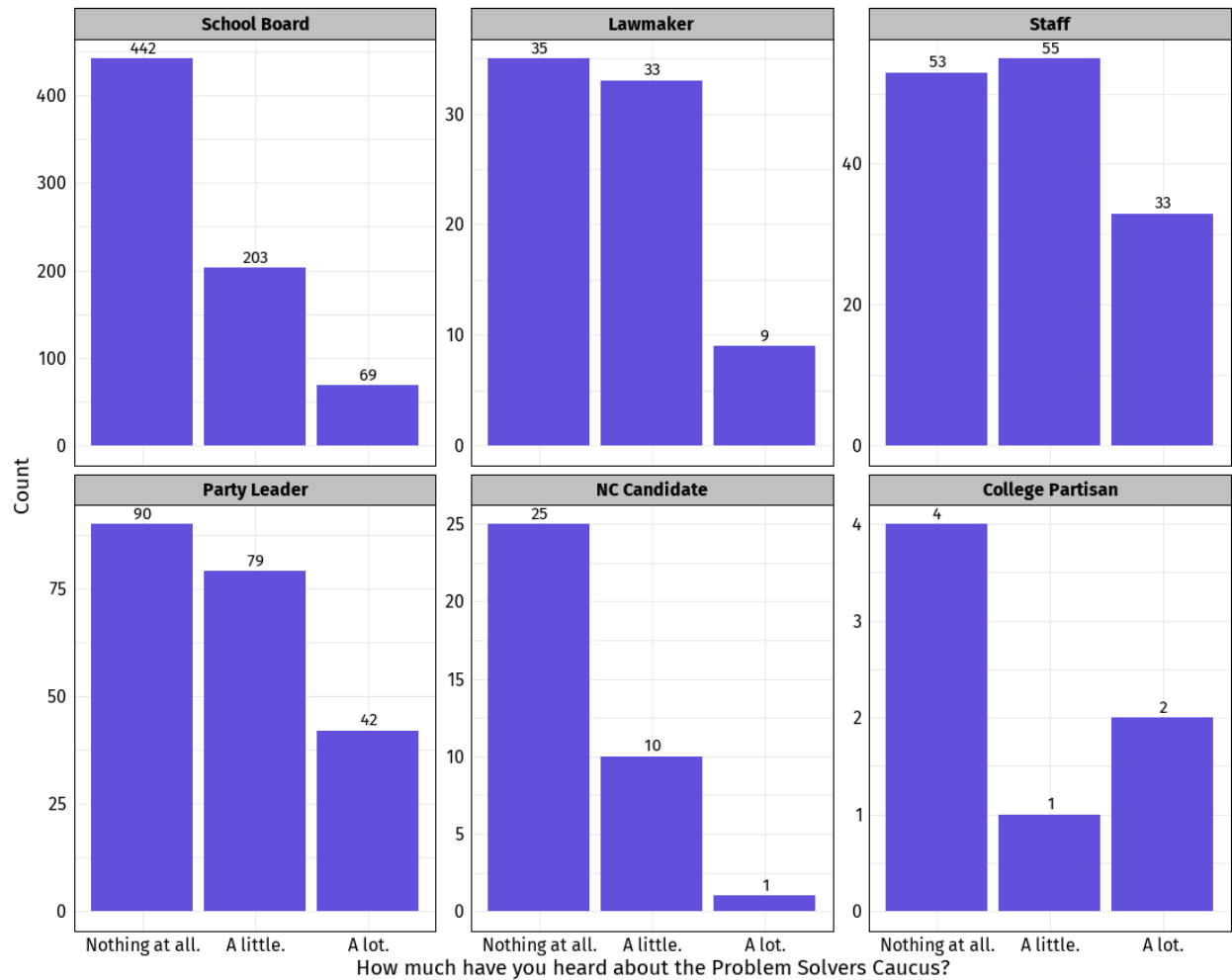


Figure C3. PSC Familiarity Numerical Totals, Control Group-Only, by Sub-Sample



Appendix D: Additional Regression Models

Below, we re-run our analysis without strata fixed effects. As we noted in the main body of the paper, we distributed several identical surveys in parallel, by sub-sample, to secure ex-ante measures of partisanship and carefully record response rates without concern of attrition or post-treatment effects. We did not realize that we had effectively stratified our random assignment procedure until after we filed our pre-registration plan. For transparency, we report the model detailed in our pre-registration below, but we maintain that the inclusion of strata fixed effects are the appropriate model for our study.

Table D1: OLS Results without Strata Fixed Effects

	Rep. Josh Gottheimer (NJ-05, Democratic Party)		Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick (PA-01, Republican Party)	
	Perception of Ideological Location (0,100)	More Centrist than Typical Co-Partisan (0,1)	Perception of Ideological Location (0,100)	More Centrist than Typical Co-Partisan (0,1)
PSC Treatment	0.723 (0.729)	0.009 (0.020)	-1.454 (0.743)	0.060 (0.020)
	p-value: 0.321	p-value: 0.674	p-value: 0.051	p-value: 0.003
Intercept	44.258 (0.518)	0.592 (0.014)	64.003 (0.519)	0.566 (0.014)
	p-value: <0.001	p-value: <0.001	p-value: <0.001	p-value: <0.001
Num.Obs.	2326	2326	2326	2326

Note: Coefficients from OLS models with robust (HC2) std. errors in parentheses.
 Perceived ideology is a 0-100 slider where higher values indicate more conservative.
 "More centrist" = 1 if estimated absolute difference from 50 is smaller than a typical co-partisan.

Table D2: Exploratory Analysis of PSC Effects Among Co-Partisans

	Rep. Josh Gottheimer (NJ-05) (Subset to Only Democratic Respondents)		Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick (PA-01) (Subset to Only Republican Respondents)	
	Perception of Ideological Location (0,100)	More Centrist than Typical Co-Partisan (0,1)	Perception of Ideological Location (0,100)	More Centrist than Typical Co-Partisan (0,1)
PSC Treatment	0.971 (0.891)	0.015 (0.027)	-2.656 (1.215)	0.075 (0.034)
	p-value: 0.276	p-value: 0.573	p-value: 0.029	p-value: 0.030
Strata FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Num.Obs.	1302	1302	833	833

Note: Coefficients from OLS models with strata fixed effects and robust (HC2) std. errors in parentheses.
 Perceived ideology is a 0-100 slider where higher values indicate more conservative.
 "More centrist" = 1 if Fitzpatrick's estimated absolute difference from 50 is smaller than a typical co-partisan.

Appendix E: Open-Ended Responses

In this appendix, we explore responses to an open-ended question soliciting views about the Problem Solvers Caucus. We had considerable variation across the hundreds of responses we received to this question; some respondents were extraordinarily informed, while others vaguely referenced the “Problem” in Problem Solvers as an opportunity to let us know what the real problems are in the U.S. today, from their point of view. Many responses were extremely positive and supportive, while others were scathing in their critique. Below we offer several illustrative quotes to add context to the experimental results to follow.

Some respondents were clearly not sold on the PSC brand and expressed deep skepticism about the authenticity of the underlying claims made by the group. For example, a state legislator from Wisconsin described the Problem Solvers as, “basically a gimmick that allows Republican politicians to hide behind their extremist votes [...] while still appearing reasonable and moderate on some minor issues.” An elected official from Michigan described the PSC as, “typical fetishization of bipartisanship for the sake of bipartisanship, which is usually a stalking horse for monied conservative interests.” Lawmakers in our sample referred to the Problem Solvers as “charlatans,” “bullshitters,” and “a moderate front” or a “cover [...] to look moderate.” The group was designed to “hide their true political leanings by claiming they are part of a group perceived as moderate.” There was a recurring sentiment among legislators, in particular, that *others* bought into the “posturing” and “appearance of faux moderation,” but that the PSC was truly a “performative group” whose greatest achievement has been “the occasional bipartisan interview for cable shows.”

Others seemed to believe the group was simply naive or doomed to fail. The PSC, to these individuals, faced “tough sledding in this polarized environment.” One former member of the U.S. House of Representatives in our sample reflected on their direct experience with the Problem Solvers Caucus by saying, “I think they are well intentioned but often pick the wrong battles. (I was not a member of the Problem Solvers in my time in Congress.)” Another respondent had a “very dim view of people who operate in spaces like this” because it led to “the labelling and fetishization of bi-partisanship” without a real shot at success; their view was, “if you want to be moderate, fine, be moderate. That’s a good thing generally, I think,” but “we don’t live in an era of realistic bi-partisanship.” One midwestern legislator provided a pretty thorough critique on what they perceived to be the PSC political strategy:

From what little I know about them, and from my experience with similarly premised groups, I remain highly skeptical of their ability to actually solve problems. The premise of these groups seems to be that we could solve problems if we approached them from a completely non-partisan lens. That might be true in certain instances. But that non-partisan lens will never be adequate for navigating what is and ever will be a partisan political process. Such groups may

trip upon a good idea. But if they cannot wargame how to advance it through the partisan political process as such, it won't be worth much to anyone.

Finally, an elected member of a public school board expressed a similar, if considerably more concise, assessment: “useless as teats on a boar.”³

Despite these objections, many respondents were extremely supportive of the Problem Solvers Caucus. A pair of school board members praised the PSC as, “a last vestige of moderation in a deeply polarized political landscape,” and a group responsible for “creating a viable ‘middle’ that would reduce polarization and allow for more effective governance.” A political candidate from North Carolina described them as a “great group of public servants,” because “they are working hard to break the congressional logjam and get something done in spite of the partisan divide. Bully for them.” Another school board member noted, “I’m all for it...my congressional representative is a member and I like him all the more for it.” A county party leader similarly declared, “I’m all in. My congressman was in then dropped out because I believe he was not encouraged by party leadership to continue membership. Membership is disincentived (*sic*) by party leadership.” Other respondents expressed their personal affinity for the group:

I appreciate the Problem Solvers Caucus for its bipartisan approach in finding practical solutions to challenges. It aligns with my moderate conservative values, emphasizing cooperation across party lines to address issues effectively. The caucus’s commitment to fostering dialogue and consensus reflects a pragmatic and constructive approach to governance, which I find commendable.

Clearly some political observers saw the appeal in the PSC’s bipartisan brand.

Several respondents referred to the PSC as an “excellent idea,” and, in some cases, even pointed to a possible diffusion of the Problem Solvers model to state and local political contexts. One state legislator from New Hampshire said, “I think its (*sic*) an excellent idea. We are starting up a similar caucus here in our state legislature.” A lawmaker from Montana similarly praised the group as “excellent,” drawing comparisons to “the Solutions caucus in our state.”

These perspectives illustrate a range of perspectives on the Problem Solvers. Comments ranged from downright mean to ebullient in their praise, but throughout many of our open-ended responses we found consistent consideration of the *brand* offered by the PSC. In fact, a number of respondents explicitly addressed the (perceived) branding objectives of the caucus. The PSC was described as a “marketing/branding strategy to identify themselves as more moderate/reasonable than the fringes;” the caucus, from their perspective, was “created for messaging purposes alone.” Respondents differed, however, on their views of the bipartisan

³ There were, of course, even more blunt assessments of the PSC that went beyond “useless lobbyist driven clowns.” Some people also seemed to dislike the individuals in the group, specifically, “The Caucus thinks they’re better people than non-members. (Prideful).”

brand's success; some saw the brand as strong (e.g., “sounds like good branding,” “excellent PR name”), while others believed it to be weak (“publicly their brand is known by very few”). We turn next to an analysis intended to investigate causal effects of this bipartisan brand on perceptions of U.S. lawmakers.

Appendix F: Extended Bipartisan Discussion

This, in turn, raises questions about why we see defections from opportunities for public demonstrations of bipartisanship within the PSC. One possibility is that while strong *partisan* signals are clearly beneficial in an era of competitive primary elections, the value of bipartisanship, and thus the public good, is diminishing even among more moderate members of the two major parties. Prior research shows a mixed record on voters' perceptions of bipartisanship.⁴ While lawmakers employ a broad, often fluid definition of “bipartisanship,” it is difficult for voters to define the term. One might simply define bipartisanship as cooperation across party divisions, but, as Paris (2017) notes, the term is often bundled with ostensibly correlated factors, such as legislative productivity and civility. As such, bipartisanship may be an appealing rhetorical ploy for many lawmakers (Westwood 2022).

Recent studies have attempted to disentangle bipartisan behavior from the confounding influence of civility and legislative productivity, but these results do not always suggest strong benefits to working across the aisle (Paris 2017). While Americans may prefer a Congress that compromises, their partisan desires seem to be stronger than their desire for individual lawmakers voting with members of the other party (Harbridge and Malhotra 2011; Harbridge, Malhotra, and Harrison 2014; Pyeatt 2015; Sweetser and Tedesco 2014). Even if bipartisanship boosts confidence in Congress, several studies suggest that voters may remain indifferent – applying no significant and unconditional benefits or penalties – in response to acts of bipartisanship (Morris and Witting 2001; Paris 2017; Case and Cottle Ommundsen 2024).

Research on political donors, more specifically, also leads to mixed support for bipartisanship. Some research suggests that small donors tend to give money to more ideologically extreme candidates but this benefit only extends to incumbents (Culberson, McDonald, and Robbins 2019). Experimental research even indicates that donors perceive bipartisan stances as “undesirable” relative to extreme and party-aligned candidates (Gooch and Huber 2020, 555). By contrast, others find that lobbyists tend to give to both parties as well as ideologically moderate and legislatively effective candidates (Duffy 2022; Heerwig 2018), which may include more bipartisan lawmakers (Harbridge-Yong, Volden, and Wiseman 2023).

Taken together, our view is that prior research does not establish a clear, universal benefit to bipartisanship. The public may claim to favor “compromise” and

⁴ Scholars have typically defined “bipartisanship” as both parties voting together on the floor (Adler and Wilkerson 2012) or as co-sponsorships from both parties (Harbridge and Malhotra 2011; Harbridge, Malhotra, and Harrison 2014). Bipartisan coalitions have been defined as having 20% or more co-sponsorships from the opposite party of the sponsoring legislator (Harbridge 2015).

bipartisanship in Congress (Pew Research Center 2014), but the scholarly evidence appears far from definitive in the aggregate. One possible reason for this apparent contradiction is that prior survey work on American attitudes towards bipartisanship targets a generic, broad audience. The PSC may appeal to a particularly niche market of prospective supporters, such as co-partisans looking for lawmakers open to compromise.⁵ If that is the case, the average effects we have seen in studies on bipartisanship may pool opposition from strong partisans with a much smaller – possibly underpowered – number of Americans with weak party attachments (Harbridge and Malhotra 2011).

Alternatively, Americans may simply disbelieve claims of bipartisanship. After all, lawmakers of all ideological positions have a habit of claiming bipartisan bona fides – even if they do not actually take bipartisan action (Westwood 2022). Given the extraordinary noise around bipartisan claims, the PSC can reasonably be viewed as an attempt to construct an institution capable of delivering a more credible signal. Moreover, the organizational features that require Republican-Democratic parity in the ranks of the Problem Solvers Caucus attempts to mitigate the real threat of partisan counter messaging, which prior research has shown offset the benefits of bipartisanship in Congress (Case and Cottle Ommundsen 2024).

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⁵In the appendix, we revisit our experimental results after subsetting to co-partisan respondents for this reason.

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