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Symbols on Parade: Comparing Government Symbols and Legitimacy Attitudes across the Three Branches

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy

in

Political Science

by

Reagan J. Bijou

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2022

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Dedication

To my husband.

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"errrtttttttttttttttttttttttttttttt"

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Abstract

Governments are highly symbolic entities, featuring constellations of symbols such as grand buildings, prestigious offices, official seals, and other various embellishments. These symbols are common artifacts of politics that citizens routinely encounter throughout their lives. Curiously, there is little that we know about how these symbols matter to political life. This dissertation takes aim at this large gap in existing knowledge, posing the following questions: (1) how do government symbols shape people's attitudes towards government and (2) under what conditions are symbols more (or less) effective to that end? To address this question, I offer a general theoretical framework arguing that such symbols work like cues that, upon exposure, bring to people's minds thoughts related to power and procedural justice which, in turn, reinforce their sense of legitimacy towards the institution.

This dissertation applies my theory in the context of the U.S. federal government as such symbols are featured across its three branches—legislative, executive, and judicial. Using multiple online surveys, I explored and compared the effects of exposure to varying government symbols on legitimacy attitudes. Overall, I find limited and nuanced support for my theory. Chapter 3 establishes that exposure to government symbols does elicit thoughts related to power (irrespective of institution), yet Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrate this does not directly translate to enhanced legitimacy attitudes. Instead, I find that government symbols appear to amplify pre-existing attitudes towards a given institution, and that these effects are mostly limited to the judicial context.

Chapter 1
Introduction

> "Castles are just, like, houses that're wearing armor, maaan."
> —Pascal, Animal Crossing: New Horizons

Governments are highly symbolic entities, featuring constellations of symbols such as grand buildings, prestigious offices, official seals, and other various embellishments. These symbols are typical artifacts of political life that citizens routinely encounter throughout their lives. Curiously, there is little that we know about how these symbols matter to political life. What (if at all) do citizens think about them? Do they matter in how people think and reason about politics and government? And if so, how?

Citizens encounter the ornamentation of government throughout their lives. This begins with early formal political socialization when children learn about the structure of government and the political world around them (Easton and Dennis 1969; Greenstein 1965). Such symbols can be found depicted in the textbooks and on the walls of classrooms throughout the United States. As Niemi and Hepburn note, this is likely purposeful: youth are "to learn about U.S. political history and to develop positive attitudes about our greatest leaders" (1995).

This continues throughout the lifespan with ongoing exposure to news coverage of politics and government (Gibson and Caldeira 2009; Schill 2012). Government symbols are inevitably featured in politicians' speeches and press conferences as well as in formal events such as inaugurations, where "every visual element is carefully managed" (Schill 2012). Such symbols have also proliferated online as governments feature and manage their official websites and social media accounts—the online "face" of government (Jensen 2010; DePaula, Dincelli, and Harrison 2018).

In the study of government symbols, however, scholars have only pulled a few puzzle pieces out of the box. There is a strain of literature in political science that contends such symbols can help explain public support for judiciaries—chiefly, the U.S. Supreme Court—which distinctly lack legitimating institutional features such as elections and enforcement powers. According to Positivity Theory (Gibson and Caldeira 2009), people are routinely exposed to symbols of judicial authority (e.g., black robes, gavels) in news coverage of Court decisions and events like confirmation hearings. These symbols help paint an image of the Court as an apolitical, legalistic authority that makes fair, principled decisions, reinforcing a "myth of legality" (Casey 1974) that uniquely undergirds its legitimacy as an institution in American government (Tyler and Rasinski 1991; Caldeira and Gibson 1992; Gibson, Caldeira, and Baird 1998; Spill and Oxley 2003).

In this near-exclusive focus on the trappings of government in judiciaries, it appears to have been implicitly assumed that such symbols matter less in understanding public support for legislative and executive institutions. Is this a fair assumption? Perhaps. After all, the U.S. President and Congress derive legitimacy from other important sources: consent of the governed (i.e., being elected) and having formal enforcement powers (i.e., the "sword" and the "purse"). Yet, these political institutions nonetheless make use of and manage such symbols of authority (e.g., the Presidential

Seal, the Capitol building), and so it remains an open question theoretically and empirically as to whether and how symbols matter in shaping people's political attitudes.

My dissertation takes aim at filling this gap in knowledge, as I ask, broadly: how do government symbols shape people's attitudes towards government, and under what conditions are symbols more (or less) effective to that end? To address this question, I offer a broad, generalizable story about the legitimizing potential of government symbols across all three branches of the American federal government. I argue that these symbols work like heuristic cues that, upon exposure, bring to people's minds thoughts related to power and/or procedural justice. So even as each institution—legislative, executive, and judicial alike—features its own parade of unique symbols, these symbols nonetheless have a great deal in common as reinforcers of legitimacy in the minds of the public.

The remainder of the dissertation proceeds as follows. In the next chapter, I provide my general theoretical framework for understanding government symbols as a sort of informational cue that shapes citizens' legitimacy attitudes towards government. This includes a substantive discussion of the context for analyzing symbols in the dissertation: the mythology of each of the three branches of the U.S. federal government.

In chapter 3, I discuss my initial investigation into people's perception of government symbols across the three branches. Results from two online surveys provide suggestive, though limited, evidence that government symbols elicit thoughts of power and authority across the institutions, but fairness and procedural justice are more uniquely elicited by judicial symbols. Importantly, this chapter establishes some support for my theory's key assumption about the relevance of thoughts of power irrespective of institution.

Chapter 4 places a close lens on the institution in American government that may stand to benefit the most from the legitimating potential of symbols: the U.S. Congress. I discuss the results of an experiment that varies exposure to the Capitol building as well as perceptions of partisanship, a critical ingredient in shaping attitudes towards the national legislature. I find some suggestive evidence that exposure to the Capitol building has divergent effects on attitudes towards the national legislature as a function of partisanship.

Chapter 5 reports the results of an online survey experiment designed to compare the effects of exposure to government symbols across the three branches of the American federal government. By and large, there were no significant effects of exposure to government symbols on legitimacy attitudes towards their respective institution. A key contribution of this chapter is the first validation of a legitimacy attitudes battery of items that can be used across the three branches of federal government.

Finally, in Chapter 6, I conclude with a brief discussion summarizing my findings across the studies in the three prior chapters, discuss potential implications of their results, and offer potential directions for future research. Overall, I find mixed and nuanced support for my theory. My evidence largely suggests that mere exposure to government symbols does not have a direct impact on legitimacy attitudes, but there are a few exceptions. In Chapter 4, I find exposure to the Capitol building enhanced legitimacy towards Congress, but only among Republicans; and in Chapter 5 I find that exposure to the official seal of the Supreme Court decreased legitimacy attitudes towards it, but only among people who were already dissatisfied with the judiciary.

Even as scholars have theorized about the role of government symbols (Edelman 1967) the messages that such symbols convey upon exposure has, thus far, been empirically taken for granted. For instance, scholars of judicial politics typically assume that judicial symbols convey messages of procedural justice (Gibson and Caldeira 2009). While I find support for this notion, my results suggest power is the dominant consideration when people are exposed to government symbols, regardless of institutional context. I offer the first investigation into how government symbols are perceived by the public as well as an initial comparison of their effects across multiple institutions. This dissertation will hopefully serve as the beginning of a long-overlooked discussion on what visual stimuli of the government are actually communicating to the public.

Chapter 2
Towards a Theory of Government Symbols and Information Processing

> "*Politics is for most of us a passing parade of abstract symbols, yet a parade which our experience teaches us to be a benevolent or malevolent force that can be close to omnipotent.*"
> —Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*

What Symbols Are and Why They Matter to Government

A symbol is "any object used by human beings to index meanings that are not inherent in, nor discernable from, the object itself" (Elder & Cobb 1983). Anything can be a symbol should humans attribute meaning to it, including ideas (freedom, justice), objects (flags, uniforms), and even each word and character inscribed on these pages. Yet, symbols are creatures of context. They carry no inherent meaning, but are instead subject to human interpretation, which differs across time, space, and people. For example, paper money is merely a blend of cotton and other fabrics that intrinsically means nothing, but its value is in its representation of what people understand to be currency. To investigate the meaning of symbols and their effects on people's thought and behavior, we must root the discussion in context.

Symbols are the vehicles that make human communication possible. No symbol will be universally understood by all people in exactly the same way, but they remain nonetheless useful to coordinate human understanding and, consequently, action. Take, for example, the widespread circulation of religious symbols including images of prominent religious figures (e.g., Gautama Buddha, Jesus) and other visual symbols (e.g., Christian cross, Hindu Trishul, Muslim star and crescent). Religions rely heavily upon their unique constellations of symbols, myths, and rituals to "bind people together into cooperative communities organized around deities" (Graham and Haidt 2010). Even as no two people will have perfectly identical understandings of and experiences with these symbols, they still aid tremendously in organizing a common belief system for people to understand and navigate the world.

My interest is in *government symbols.* In the broadest sense, I refer to the humanly-devised elements that comprise the pageantry and dramaturgical props of government (Merelman 1969); examples include its flags, seals and insignias, monuments, settings of lawmaking activity (e.g., courtrooms, offices) and its furnishings (e.g., desks, gavels), garb of authority figures (e.g., uniforms, robes, pins), the use of titles and honorifics, music and anthems, and so on. As I argue in the dissertation, these symbols are alluring accoutrements of authority, the *miranda* of government which "weave a halo around authority and give it beauty as well as force" (Marriam 1934, 106).

For theoretical and terminological clarity, I turn to a brief explanation of how my inquiry into *government symbols* fits in the broader framework of *symbolic politics.* Since its conception (Edelman 1964; Sears 1993), *symbolic politics* is often held in contrast to theories of rational choice or self-interest as explanations of political attitudes and behavior (Downs 1957). This theoretical tradition contends that people's politics is largely *symbolic*—that is, people have enduring *symbolic attitudes* gained from political

socialization (e.g., partisan identification and racial prejudice) which people use to make sense of the political world (Sears, Lau, Tyler, and Allen 1980; Reny and Sears 2020; Mendelberg 2018). For example, *symbolic racism* refers to early-acquired anti-Black sentiments that persist and produce anti-Black prejudice later in life (Sears, Hensler, and Speer 1979; Kinder and Sears 1981). Much work has documented the role *symbolic racism* plays in shaping Whites' opposition to racially egalitarian policies, especially in contrast to Whites' material or self-interested political concerns (Rabinowitz et al. 2009; Tesler and Sears 2010).

While I draw upon the foundations of *symbolic politics* (Edelman 1964; Sears 1993), my investigation of *government symbols* differs in two critical ways. First, I use the term *symbols* in a slightly different, more specific manner in my conception of *government symbols.* By this term, I mean the visual stimuli that represent and/or adorn an institution of government and, in this dissertation, I am focused specifically on such symbols in the context of the three branches of U.S. federal government. In the empirical chapters that follow, I operationalize *government symbols* as (a) government buildings (e.g., the Supreme Court), (b) settings of lawmaking activity (e.g., the Oval Office), and (c) official seals (e.g., the Presidential Seal).

Second, my investigation of *government symbols* primarily concerns how these symbols are perceived by the public. I am chiefly interested in exploring what messages are being conveyed by *government symbols* and how this differs across institutional context. This is different from many scholars' use of *symbolic politics* with an eye towards how political elites manipulate symbols to invoke an emotional response from the public. For instance, legislators may make references to important historical figures in their speeches (Dietrich and Hayes 2020; Hill and Hurley 2002), and political leaders may use symbolic rhetoric to sow division and support for war between ethnic populations (Kaufman 2018).

Government Symbols and Legitimacy Attitudes

Scholars have long suggested that *government symbols* play an important role in uniting citizens into polities. The symbols, rituals, and mythology of government make any sense of political community possible, as they provide people with an understanding of the structure of political life and reassurance for what to expect from its institutions (Edelman 1967; March and Olsen 1984; Hayward and Dumbuya 1983). Early political socialization is an important vehicle for creating, motivating, and sustaining "deep feelings of loyalty and obedience" toward government (Easton and Dennis 1969; Easton and Hess 1962; Edelman 1967). As early as elementary school, children are exposed to government symbols while learning about political authority—it is at this same time children tend to hold the most positive perceptions of authority as trustworthy and benevolent (Easton and Dennis 1969; Hess and Torney 1967; Greenstein 1960; Niemi and Sobieszek 1977). This exposure likely increases all the more during high school years as "society makes the most explicit and concentrated effort to teach political knowledge and civic values" to its citizens-in-training (Sears and Brown 2003; Niemi and Hepburn 1995).

Again, my dissertation research focuses on a narrow subset of *government symbols* that are the visual stimuli that represent or decorate it (e.g., buildings, official seals). In alignment with early theorizing on government symbols, I suggest these symbols provide a layer of aesthetic reinforcement to government as the ultimate authority in political life—in a word: legitimacy. There are two dominant strands of literature which have examined whether, and how, exposure to government symbols may shape people's legitimacy attitudes toward government institutions as well as subsequent evaluations of institutional output. Scholars of judicial politics have generally conceived of judicial symbols as conveying myth whereas scholars of public administration tend to understand government symbols as part of an institution's brand.

Judicial Symbols

There is a long-held assumption in the judicial politics literature that judicial symbols—black robes, gavels, the temple-like building—are a key component to sustaining the legitimacy of the Supreme Court. All institutions need some level of legitimacy or diffuse support in order to function (Easton 1965), yet legitimacy is of particular importance to the Court since it lacks an electoral connection and formal enforcement powers. Symbols of judicial authority work toward this end by perpetuating a "myth of legality" (Casey 1974), or more generally the notion that courts are special or otherwise "different from ordinary political institutions" (Gibson, Lodge, and Woodson 2014).

However, empirical research on the legitimizing potential of judicial symbols is scarce, and there exists no work—to the author's knowledge—that directly examines just how judicial symbols are perceived by the public. In recent years, a few scholars have used experiments to examine whether exposure to judicial symbols boosts people's acceptance of unfavorable court decisions.

Gibson, Lodge, and Woodson (2014) find some evidence in favor of this proposition in the context of the United States Supreme Court. When faced with a personally unfavorable Court decision, symbols appeared to amplify people's pre-existing level of support for the Court. That is, people high in Court support expressed greater support for the decision whereas people low in Court support expressed less support for the decision. Furthermore, symbols were only effective in boosting support for an unfavorable decision among people with relatively lower knowledge about the Supreme Court.

A similar experiment was employed in the context of the High Court of Australia by Nielsen, Robinson, and Smyth (2020). Here, the authors find judicial symbols to have significant positive effects on acquiescence to unfavorable decisions, not conditional on prior support or knowledge. These results remained robust in conditions where participants saw either the more "modern" symbols of the High Court (black robes), or its recently-retired "old" symbols (wigs).

More recently, Thurman (2021) examines the effect of judicial symbols in the context of U.S. immigration courts. From a more nuanced vantage point, the author argues that judicial symbols create expectations of procedural justice which may lead to greater disappointment when people also learn about unfair procedures in the courtroom.

In line with expectations—though not to statistical significance—respondents were more accepting of court decisions when exposed to court symbols, but less accepting when symbols were paired with information about unfair procedures.

In sum, the existing evidence regarding of the effects of judicial symbols is mixed. It remains unclear whether judicial symbols have conditional, unconditional, or any effects at all on people's acceptance of court decisions. Considering these discrepancies, it may be reasonable to reassess existing knowledge on how judicial symbols work—something that this dissertation seeks to advance.

Symbols in Public Administration

Scholars of judicial politics are not the only to recognize and evaluate the influence that symbols can have on the public's attitudes towards governments and policies. A recent strand of public administration literature has similarly devoted attention to such symbols of governments, conceptualizing them as part of the "branding" of government agencies, cities, and institutions (Leijerholt, Biedenbach, and Hulten 2019). That is, government symbols may simply promote positive thoughts about their respective institution and its outputs. For instance, Marvel (2016) found that American citizens who watched an advertisement for the United States Postal Service—ripe with symbolic imagery of the USPS—were more likely to favorably evaluate its performance. Similarly, Karens et al. (2016) find that the branding of the European Union—the E.U. flag and logo—increased people's trust in policy proposals of the E.U.

Other public administration scholars think of such symbols as potential distractors from people's assessments of government performance. Alon-Barkat (2020) suggests these symbols in government communication are designed to "evoke positive associations and emotions" which encourage people to view governments as trustworthy. Evidence from experiments suggest that government agencies, like the Israeli Environment Protection Ministry and the Israel Electricity Corporation, may be able to escape some level of warranted criticism about their poor performance by strategically pairing this information with symbols (Alon-Barkat 2020; Alon-Barkat and Gilad 2017).

Towards a Theory of Government Symbols and Legitimacy Attitudes

My theoretical approach stitches together these disparate strands of literature into a single, simple framework. In a nutshell, I contend even as government symbols differ in *form*, they are nonetheless similar in *function* with respect to bolstering legitimacy for their respective institution. How, though, do symbols "work" in this function? What mechanism(s) underlie how a given symbol conveys legitimating thoughts toward an institution?

Government Symbols as Cues

First, I assume that government symbols work like cues. Cues are pieces of information that people can use to form judgments and make decisions without having extensive knowledge about a particular area (Bowler and Nicholson 2018; Eagly and

Chaiken 1993). It makes sense to think of symbols as cues because symbols are an economical means by which humans can non-verbally communicate various "ideas, norms, values, or knowledge" to others by "[stimulating] sensory perceptions and [activating] a wide array of emotions" (Boussaguet and Faucher 2020). Symbols are like cues in the sense that they are condensed aesthetic packages of information that people consciously and non-consciously use to better understand and navigate the world around them.

When it comes to understanding how people process information such as cues, scholars generally agree there are two tracks of evaluation. On one track, people may engage in effortful, deliberate, conscious thought, variously referred to as systematic processing (Petty and Cacioppo 1986) or System 2 processing (Kahneman 2011). On the other track, people can make quick, non-conscious, automatic judgments, called heuristic processing (Chaiken 1980) or System 1 processing (Kahneman 2011). In general, whether people use systematic or heuristic processing when they encounter a piece of information is largely a function of their motivation and ability to critically evaluate it (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). When people have sufficient motivation and/or ability to scrutinize information, they are likely to engage in deliberate, systematic thought; conversely, without enough motive nor ability to do so, people are instead likely to use shortcuts, rules-of-thumb, or heuristic processing.

In conceptualizing government symbols to work like cues, they can operate under either track of information processing depending on citizens' (1) motivation and (2) ability to engage with political information. For both of these reasons, I assume that government symbols are—for most people, most of the time—subject to non-conscious heuristic processing. In what follows, I explain how both of these factors lead me to this assumption. I then discuss implications for how the heuristic processing of symbols can interact with, or distract from, people's processing of other political information.

First, there is typically little motivation for people to think critically about government symbols. The symbolic pageantry of government and its institutions are normalized, regular components of its communication and practices. Citizens encounter the ornamentation of government throughout their entire lives, especially during formal political socialization (Easton and Dennis 1969). Beyond formal education, citizens routinely see these symbols in formal government communication and media coverage of political events (Schill 2012).

So even as the miranda of power are aesthetically pleasing indicators of status and authority, there is nothing particularly surprising about seeing them. Government symbols are established, routinely encountered objects in the everyday lives of citizens, so there is little reason for people to give them much thought. For example, in his book, Banal Nationalism, Billig notes that seeing the U.S. national flag hanging "attracts no special attention" among American citizens (1995). Such public displays of the flag, and other symbols adorned by government, are so banal, ordinary, and commonplace that they are often ignored. In being everyday cues that people are accustomed to seeing, government symbols are not likely to arouse direct attention or be the subject of deliberate conscious thought. When it comes to information processing (Petty and Cacioppo 1986), it stands to reason there should be little to no motivation for most people to engage in systematic, cognitively demanding processing when they encounter the

regular, non-unique symbols of their government. In the conservation of their time and mental energy, people will often evaluate government symbols using heuristic, automatic, non-conscious processing.

Second, a considerable number of people lack the ability and/or motivation to critically engage with the political world. Many people simply do not have the time, resources, or interest to expend effort into becoming more knowledgeable about politics in the first place (Converse 1964; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Prior and Lupia 2008). In conserving their time and efforts, citizens instead may rationally turn to experts, elites, and other political leaders to help inform their political decision-making (Downs 1957; Zaller 1992). Citizens' use of heuristic cues, such as source cues from elites, falls short of a panacea for their ignorance, however, it does help them to make "good enough" and often the "right" decisions without incurring the cost of becoming informed (Lupia 1994; Lau and Redlawsk 2001; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1993; Bowler and Nicholson 2018).

What do Government Symbols Convey?

Having established my conceptualization of government symbols as cues, I now turn to a discussion of just what information is being communicated to people upon exposure. At least in the American context of this dissertation, each institution features its own arrangement of unique symbols that are embedded in its traditions, practices, and presentation. However, my second key assumption is that the information conveyed by government symbols can ultimately be boiled down into two primary dimensions: power, and procedural justice. I suggest that, by way of activating considerations of power and/or procedural justice, government symbols quietly yet powerfully reinforce belief in the institution as a legitimate political authority.

I suggest there are two main reason why people may feel compelled to support an institution. On one hand, people may feel they *ought* to obey what is *just;* on the other, people may feel they *must* obey what is *powerful.* Although these are two theoretically distinct concepts, they need not be—and are often not—mutually exclusive. In fact, these legitimacy-promoting vehicles are perhaps most convincing when paired together. Nonetheless, I offer a brief discussion of each one separately here.

Power

"The essence of Government is power…"

—James Madison

Power is a fundamental component of how people understand government and politics. As Dahl (1957) notes, power is a relational concept: "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do." In American politics, the amount of power that should be allotted to the federal government has been debated feverishly since the writing of the Federalist Papers. It is common for members of the American public to express admiration for, suspicion of, and ambivalence toward, power and authority (Elder and Cobb 1983). Yet, the government provides structure to

the political world seated comfortably at the top of the political hierarchy. An intuitive expectation, then, is that government symbols convey such an authoritative "aura of grandeur" to its citizens (Hayward and Dumbuya 1983). In other words, they serve as subtle visual reminders that the institution is powerful, important, and thereby worth of deference and respect.

There is certainly room for variation along this dimension. Time, for example, is a necessary part of the institutionalization and legitimization processes of any institution. Even as the branches of American federal government were granted certain powers upon ratification of the Constitution, public understanding of these powers did not simply develop overnight. The extent to which an institution is perceived as powerful is likely related to its longevity, durability, and resilience over the test of time. Another source of variation in power may lie along a vertical hierarchy within government. That is, the judicial branch of the federal government is likely perceived as more powerful than the judicial branch of a given state government which is in turn likely perceived as more powerful than the judicial branch of a given local government. A final source of variation in understandings of power may lie across institutions. Many American children would likely answer "The President" if asked to identify the most powerful branch of government (Easton and Dennis 1969; Greenstein 1965; Hess and Torney 1967). Because the president is at the heart of American politics, it may be that the executive branch is perceived as the most powerful of the three.

Power alone is often insufficient to understand why people obey government. After all, the strongest governments need not *actually* deploy force to induce compliance among its citizens (Jackman 1993). Classical studies in social psychology demonstrate the effects that exposure to symbols of authority can exert on human behavior (Milgram 1963; Zimbardo et al. 1971). Mere exposure to symbols of authority (e.g., Milgram's experimenter wearing a lab coat; Zimbardo's prison guards wearing khaki uniforms bearing police clubs) can induce obedience and compliance without the actual deployment of force. Similarly, in field experiments, Bickman (1974) and Bushman (1984) find that people tend to heed the commands of authority figures such as police officers, guards, and fire fighters—denoted by wearing uniforms, insignias, and badges—with little resistance. This has inspired much empirical work in the policing literature on how symbols of the police (e.g., police vehicles, uniforms, batons, vests) shape perceptions of the police as well as induce compliance (Bell 1982; Volpp and Lennon 1988; Johnson et al. 2015; Simpson 2018; Simpson 2020). The power, authority, or status of an institution *may* be inherently enough to perceive it as legitimate, but only to an extent. How that power is used is another matter of importance.

Procedural Justice

"…and power, lodged as it must in human hands, will ever be liable to to abuse."

—James Madison

Procedural justice is the second key dimension underlying how people understand government and politics. This is the extent to which people perceive an institution to behave in a manner that is just, fair, right, or proper. The American public, in particular,

is no stranger to skepticism of political power and authority figures (Elder and Cobb 1983). Simply wielding enforcement powers and/or having an electoral connection with the public is not enough for an institution to sustain the long-term compliance and confidence of the public. People tend to obey laws because they feel it is the right thing to do, not because they fear the threat of force (Tyler 1990; Jackman 1993).

Naturally, there exists considerable variation along this dimension as well. A chief source of variation is across political institutions, as procedural justice is largely believed to distinguish judiciaries. As mentioned before, the Supreme Court's legitimacy is largely derived from the fact the public does not view it as "just another political institution" (Gibson and Nelson 2017). Thus, it is natural to suspect that the Supreme Court wields a unique advantage compared to the other "ordinary" political branches when it comes to procedural justice. Variation may also exist across the judicial hierarchy as well, such that the Supreme Court is perceived as more just than all courts below it.

Conceptual Hypotheses

In sum, I have argued here that government symbols work like cues and, upon exposure, activate thoughts of power and/or procedural justice in people's minds in a way that reinforces its mythology. This leads me to my first general prediction:

- *Mere Exposure Hypothesis* When exposed to a government symbol (as opposed to not), someone will extend greater legitimacy toward the respective institution.

This hypothesis is tested in the legislative context in Chapter 4, which includes an experiment that randomized brief exposure to the Capitol building. This hypothesis is also examined across all three branches in Chapter 5 in another experiment that randomized brief exposure to the official seals of one of the three institutions.

Even as my dissertation offers a broad, general theory to examining government symbols, I do want to be clear that I don't necessarily expect uniform effects of symbols across institutions nor by the populations exposed to them. When it comes to institutional context, I expect judicial symbols to be particularly effective due to their strong associations with both power *and* procedural justice. This aligns with the longstanding belief in the judicial politics literature that these symbols help to positively differentiate the Court from its political brethren—Congress and the Presidency. As such, I present my second general prediction:

- *Judicial Advantage Hypothesis:* The legitimacy-conferring effects of symbols are greater for judicial symbols, as compared to legislative or executive symbols.

Chapter 3 offers the first empirical investigation of the conventional wisdom in judicial politics regarding the unique messages conveyed by judicial symbols. That is, it explores whether the underlying theoretical mechanism for judicial symbols—procedural justice—is working as is commonly believed. Chapter 5 formally tests the *Judicial Advantage Hypothesis* in an experiment that randomized exposure to a government symbol across the three institutions.

In the real world, symbols do not often exist in a vacuum. It is prudent to consider the conditions under which government symbols may be more or less effective in conveying legitimacy. The first, called the "objection precondition" or "legitimacy is for losers" (Gibson and Nelson 2017) is necessary for studying legitimacy attitudes. Simply put, it is the assumption that *legitimacy* comes into play when the government makes decisions or takes actions with which one disagrees. Symbols serve as a natural layer of insulation to governments, so that they retain ongoing support from the public even as it invariably makes unpopular decisions.

Alternatively, the symbol may distract people from negative information; if symbols work like positive, legitimating cues, people may discount or ignore the accompanying information (Alon-Barkat 2020; Alon-Barkat and Gilad 2017). Incorporating this assumption flows to my third general prediction:

- *Mythbuffer Hypothesis:* The legitimacy-conferring effects of symbols are greater when people are also exposed to unfavorable (as opposed to favorable) information.

The experiments in Chapters 4 and 5 additionally test this hypothesis across all three branches.

Symbols are subject to human interpretation, so it is likely that the effects of symbols will also differ along individual differences across people. These key differences, chiefly, include (1) level of exposure to symbols in the news and (2) pre-existing affect toward the institution it represents. When it comes to exposure to symbols, it's easy to imagine people who are heavily "pre-treated" by seeing them regularly in the news—we wouldn't expect a single exposure to have much effect, if at all. People who know more about political institutions may already exhibit stronger legitimacy towards them (i.e., again, "pre-treated"). Government symbols may additionally proc and amplify people's own pre-existing knowledge, thoughts, and feeling towards its respective institution. That is, symbols amplify institutional support in the direction it already points, whether that be in a positive or negative direction. Thus, the final hypotheses:

- *Exposure Hypothesis:* The legitimacy-conferring effects of symbols are greater among people who are less (as opposed to more) often exposed to them.
- *Knowledge Hypothesis:* The legitimacy-conferring effects of symbols are greater among people who are less (as opposed to more) knowledgeable about the institution.
- *Motivated Reasoning Hypothesis:* The effects of symbols are (de)legitimizing among people who have prior (negative) positive attitudes towards the respective institution.

These conditional hypotheses are also tested in the experiments in Chapters 4 and 5.

The Context:

In my dissertation I will focus exclusively on the symbols displayed by each of the three branches of American federal government. Each institution—judicial, executive, and legislative alike—routinely features its own unique symbols and pageantry which, as I have argued, subtly imbue it with legitimacy. Americans inevitably see these symbols of government throughout their entire lives, beginning in their formal schooling about politics and government and in exposure to ongoing news coverage of political and governmental affairs. The section that follows explores the symbolism and unique mythology of each of the three branches of American government in turn.

Judicial Symbols

Scholars have long noted that the Supreme Court enjoys a deep "reservoir of goodwill" among the American public (Easton 1965), and that surrounding the Court is a "myth of legality" that makes it popular with the public (Casey 1974). The Court enjoys legitimacy despite lacking an electoral connection with the public or the ability to enforce its own decisions. According to Positivity Theory (Gibson and Caldeira 2009), this is because the Court's legitimacy is bolstered by the plethora of judicial symbols (e.g. black robes, gavels, temple-like buildings, the use of honorifics) in media coverage of political events such as confirmation hearings. As the name suggests, judicial symbols convey positive messages to the public such as notions of procedural fairness, the idea that the Court is a special institution that makes its decisions on the basis of fair, objective legal principles (Gibson and Caldeira 2009; Gibson, Caldeira, and Spence 2003; Spill and Oxley 2003). This paints the Court quite favorably in stark contrast to the undesirable, everyday political skirmishes and bickering within the other branches, Congress and the Presidency (Baird 2001; Scheb and Lyons 2000; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995).

Little empirical work has confirmed this theoretical tradition. At the time of writing, there are just two studies which have examined whether exposure to judicial symbols boosts citizens' acceptance of unfavorable court decisions. Gibson, Lodge, and Woodson (2014) provide some evidence for the legitimizing potential of judicial symbols, conditional on one's existing support or knowledge of the Court. They find exposure to symbols seems to amplify people's existing support (or lack thereof) for the Court: people with low initial support become more resistant to unfavorable decisions, whereas people with high initial support become more supportive of unfavorable decisions. Furthermore, they find symbols only "work" to boost support for unfavorable decisions among people with little knowledge about the Supreme Court. People with greater knowledge about the Court don't "need" to see these symbols to acquiesce to unfavorable decisions; they are, in a sense, heavily "pre-treated" by these legitimizing judicial symbols. A similar study was employed in the context of the High Court of Australia by Nielsen, Robinson, and Smyth (2020). Unlike the Gibson, Woodson, and Lodge piece, this work found significant, positive main effects of judicial symbols on citizens' acquiescence to unfavorable decisions made by the High Court. This was true whether participants saw the more modern symbols of the High Court (black robes) or the recently-discarded "old" symbols (wigs). Whether we should expect main effects, conditional effects, or both, remains an empirical question in the judicial politics literature.

Executive Symbols

Just as the “myth of legality” is central to understanding public sentiment toward the Supreme Court, there is nothing short of a unique mythology of the American Presidency. The President is often enveloped in a distinct pageantry that magnifies their special position at the heart of American politics. The trappings of the Presidency are many: symbols such as the White House, the Presidential Seal, and the Oval Office; the use of honorifics (“Mr. President”); and official ceremonies including the Presidential Inauguration and the State of the Union Address.

Americans become intimately familiar with the Presidency and its symbols beginning in early childhood socialization. Many American children idealize the President as a benevolent authority bestowed with the entire power of government (Easton and Dennis 1969; Greenstein 1965; Hess and Torney 1967). Furthermore, comparative socialization research has found that American children are far more likely to recognize the President than children in other countries recognize their own leaders (Niemi and Sobieszek 1977). To some extent, these unique and special perceptions seem to persist throughout the lifespan, as the President is generally viewed as the “symbol” of government themselves, frequently receiving a great deal of attention from the media. Indeed, the modern Presidency spends a great deal of time, money, and resources in its communication with the public (Kernell 2006), suggesting that symbols of executive authority are likely fundamental accoutrements that reinforce the legitimacy of the President.

Jimmy Carter wrestled with executive decorum as he sought to soft-pedal the trappings of his Presidency, doing away with playing “Hail to the Chief” during his public appearances. Since the song’s first association with the Presidency in honoring George Washington in 1815, it has been played during nearly every administration to some extent, especially during Presidential Inaugurations and in marking the President’s entrance to public events. After removing this song, Carter was surprised to find “there was an outcry of condemnation” and later explained “it was so unpopular with the American public—because they wanted to show reverence to the President.” Indeed, we can assume Carter quickly learned that not using symbols can be risky, because they are beloved and expected by the public. So even as scholars have not yet explicitly examined the effects of executive symbols, it is not difficult to imagine they matter a great deal in shaping people’s thoughts of the President and the Presidency.

This is not to say that discarding presidential symbols is always poorly received by the public. Some former presidents ran successful campaigns as Washington outsiders (e.g., Jimmy Carter, the peanut farmer, and Donald Trump, the businessman) which inherently involves standing in contrast to the image of government “insiders” wielding those very symbols. The rising popularity of “outsider” or “anti-establishment” politicians and candidates—congressional and presidential—has been attributed to low levels of trust in government overall (Dyck, Pearson, Merkowitz, and Coates 2018; Hansen and Treul 2021). Future work may seek to examine the perceptions and effects of government symbols when invoked by political outsiders.

Legislative Symbols

Congress is increasingly unpopular with American citizens, having been described as nothing short of "Public Enemy" (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). This is certainly far afield from the cultural expectation that Congress acts as "The People's Branch." When it comes to legitimacy, it appears that Congress can use all of the help it can get. As such, Congress is perhaps the most interesting institution to examine the legitimizing potential of government symbols. Or, as Edelman puts it, "governments which most often outrage their citizens […] plainly have the greatest need for reassuring symbols" (1967). Legislative symbols include the Capitol building, the House and Senate chambers, the use of honorifics ("Representative", "Senator"), congressional pins, and engraved name plates.

Legislative symbols are routinely circulated among the American public, especially during election campaigns, as legislators engage in "advertising" to "create a favorable image" of themselves (Mayhew 1974). That is, the incumbency advantage includes congressmembers' associations with the positive, legitimizing accessories of the legislature. At the same time, though, Fenno notes that legislators may "run for Congress by running against Congress" (1978), which may undermine the legitimacy-enhancing capacity of these symbols in the first place. This, coupled with the rise in popularity of "anti-establishment" candidates and politicians (Dyck et al. 2018) presents the possibility that legislative symbols may be used to evoke *negative, delegitimizing* information. One fruitful area for future research would be in examining how these symbols are manipulated by congressional incumbents and challengers to their seats.

Chapter 3

Perception of Government Symbols: Comparisons across the Legislative, Executive, and Judicial Branches

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I sketched a theory to explain how government symbols may enhance people's perceived legitimacy of government institutions. One important part of this theory is the assumption that government symbols work like cues which convey information about an institution in two main dimensions: power, and procedural justice. This chapter offers the literature an initial assessment of the thoughts and associations brought to mind when people are exposed to government symbols.

I find evidence suggesting my assumption about the nature of government symbols is reasonably based. Whereas thoughts of power are highly relevant across the symbols of all three branches, thoughts of procedural justice are more uniquely elicited by judicial symbols. Further, my results appear to indicate that power is the primary dimension of information conveyed by symbols whereas procedural justice plays more of a secondary role. This may be of particular interest to scholars of judicial politics, as it suggests long-standing theorizing about how judicial symbols "work" to convey legitimacy towards courts is incomplete. After all, it is by comparing government symbols across different institutions that we stand to learn more about judicial symbols and how they may be special.

Expectations

In the context of the U.S. federal government, it is likely that the symbols of each branch equally convey messages of power to their respective institution. Americans learn about the separation of powers and checks and balances during formal political socialization, even if only at a brief, surface level. Since power is a core concept associated with government, I expect that exposure to government symbols will elicit thoughts of power irrespective of institution. Further, as the federal government sits uniquely on top of the American political structure, I suggest its symbols are more likely to elicit more thoughts of power compared to symbols of other non-government entities.[1]

- *Power Hypothesis* 1: Government symbols—legislative, executive, and judicial alike—will elicit thoughts related to power at similar rates.
- *Power Hypothesis* 2: Government symbols—legislative, executive, and judicial alike—will elicit thoughts related to power at higher rates than non-government symbols.

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[1] I do not suggest that government symbols are the only type of symbol that can elicit thoughts of power. There is certainly variation in the extent to which a government symbol elicits thoughts of power compared to symbols of other non-government institutions. For instance, symbols of churches or corporations may also strongly elicit thoughts of power, although this can vary according to the specific institution.

I expect greater differences when it comes to the procedural justice dimension. Part of the unique "myth" or "brand" of the judiciary is the belief in its commitment to equal justice under the law, impartiality, and fairness in decision making. Thus, I expect that exposure to judicial symbols uniquely elicits thoughts of procedural justice.

- *Procedural Justice Hypothesis* 1: Judicial symbols will elicit more thoughts related to procedural justice compared to legislative or executive symbols.
- *Procedural Justice Hypothesis* 2: Government symbols—legislative, executive, and judicial alike—will elicit more thoughts related to procedural justice compared to non-government symbols.

The Present Research

To test these expectations and otherwise explore people's perceptions of government symbols, I conducted two studies. In the first, I use open-ended responses to examine thoughts elicited by a variety of government symbols. In the second, I employ closed-ended items to assess the extent to which these same symbols elicit thoughts of power and procedural justice. Full questionnaires for both studies can be found in Appendix A.

Both were fielded on a sample of undergraduate students for extra credit at the University of California, Merced in Spring 2021.[2] Of course, I can make no claim this is a representative sample (roughly 66% Hispanic, 75% female, almost entirely between the ages of 19-22). However, undergraduate students are of particular theoretical interest in this area of research. This population has recently emerged from formal education about government and politics in high school, and is arguably still undergoing political socialization in higher education.

Study 1

Data and Methods

I recruited 206 undergraduate students who participated in an online survey for extra course credit. Participants were asked to briefly evaluate 13 images, and then complete a brief questionnaire to collect basic demographics. To encourage participants to quickly respond, rather than engage in deliberate thought, they were instructed: "We will show you 13 images. For each one, we'd like to know what comes to mind when you see it. Don't think too long on any image, just tell us a few words or thoughts that first come to mind." On average, participants spent 7 minutes and 51 seconds[3] to complete the entire study.

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[2] Participants had the choice to participate in either or both studies. However, participants could not take Study 1 (open-ended) if they previously took Study 2 (closed-ended), to prevent the specific words evaluated in Study 2 from contaminating Study 1.
[3] Median time of completion was 6 minutes and 3 seconds.

Nine of the images were government symbols, three for each branch: its building, its interior, and its official seal. Two were non-government images intended to serve as a baseline: for the buildings, Union Station; for the interiors, a conference table. Union Station serves as a control for the architectural design and physical location of the buildings in Washington, D.C., but it does not serve as a control in terms of recognizability of the buildings. The conference table serves as a control for the basic color scheme and purpose of decision making but is not a control in terms of recognizability. There is no baseline image for the seals. Finally, there were two other symbols, the American flag, and the Constitution. All images used in the survey are provided in Appendix B.

For each image, participants were asked a single open-ended question: "What 1-3 words or thoughts come to mind when you see this image?" The text responses to this question constitute the dependent variable for this analysis. To test my hypotheses, I use the tidytext package in R (Silge and Robinson 2016) to compare the 10 most common words (or phrases) provided by participants for each image.[4] Results are presented in Table 3.1.

Results

Before diving into an assessment of the hypotheses, a few trends merit attention. First, the bulk of the text responses, perhaps unsurprisingly, appear to be simply labels or descriptions of what the participants sees (or believes they see). When asked about the seals of each branch, for instance, many responses include literal descriptions such as "seal", "badge", or "logo" of the branch in question. These types of responses suggest many participants did work through the survey quickly—as instructed—and provided thoughts more at a gut-level. So even as other concepts may appear far less frequently (even in the single digits), these numbers may be underinflated due to the dominance of literal responses.

Second, upon seeing the buildings of each branch: 45% of participants typed the "White House" when viewing the White House, 32% indicated the "Capitol" when viewing the Capitol, and 17% said "Lincoln" when viewing the Supreme Court (just 9% said "Supreme Court). To be clear, participants were not instructed to identify the buildings, so this trend cannot be accurately understood as resulting from differences in political knowledge. Yet, these responses may still suggest there is great variability in the recognizability of each building. The White House is by far the most recognizable, perhaps due in part to early childhood political socialization highly centered around the presidency (Easton and Dennis 1969; Greenstein 1965).

[4] Stop words, such as "the", "of", and "and", are excluded. In some cases, words or concepts are counted together either because they have the same root (e.g., "legislature" and "legislative") or because the words are functionally synonymous for this analysis (e.g., "seal" and "badge").

Table 3.1. Most Common Thoughts Elicited by Government Symbols by Branch

Legislative

Capitol		House Chamber		HOR Seal	
Word(s)	N	Word(s)	N	Word(s)	N
Capitol	66	Congress	32	HOR/Representatives	34
White House	33	Senate	18	Government	27
Riot/Insurrection	19	Debate(s)	16	President	13
Government	16	HOR/Representatives	16	Congress	12
President	14	Meeting(s)	14	Seal/Badge	12
Washington D.C.	12	(Supreme) Court	14	Politics/Politicians	10
Congress	10	Laws	10	People	9
Power/Powerful	**9**	Votes/Voting	10	**Power**	**7**
Senate/HOR	8	Government	7	AOC	6
Legislature/ive	6	**Power**	**6**	America	5

Executive

White House		Oval Office		POTUS Seal	
Word(s)	N	Word(s)	N	Word(s)	N
White House	92	President(s)	77	President	63
President	26	Oval Office	47	United States	31
White	17	Office	36	Seal/Badge	30
House	10	White House	13	Government	23
Important/ce	8	Presidential	10	**Power**	**13**
Government	7	**Power**	**9**	Biden	12
Washington D.C.	6	Obama	8	Leader	10
Power	**6**	Trump	8	Executive	7
Big	4	Oval	7	Official	7
Executive	4	Biden	6	Eagle	6

Judicial

Supreme Court		Court Bench		SCOTUS Seal	
Word(s)	N	Word(s)	N	Word(s)	N
Lincoln	35	Supreme Court	32	Supreme Court	40
Supreme Court	18	Judge(s)	27	**Justice**	**27**
Government	16	Court	17	Government	23
Court	13	Meeting(s)	14	Law(s)	21
Capitol	12	**Justice**	**13**	Seal/Badge	17
Washington D.C.	12	Hearing(s)	12	Court	14
White House	10	Law(s)	11	Judge(s)	12
History	7	Government	10	**Power**	**9**
Judicial branch	6	**Power**	**9**	United States	8
Justice	**6**	Senate	7	RBG	8

Table 3.1. (cont'd)			
Non-Government			
Union Station		Conference Table	
Word(s)	N	Word(s)	N
Government	24	Meeting(s)	118
America(n)	18	Room	39
Flag(s)	17	Conference	28
United States	11	Important	16
Washington D.C.	9	Office	16
Power	8	Business	13
White House	7	Decision(s)	10
Capitol	6	Power	6
Embassy	6	Discussion	5
Important	6	Men	5

Third, beyond mere labelling of images, other thoughts running through participants' minds upon seeing these images include recent events and popular figures in American politics. When viewing the Capitol, 9% of participants referenced the January 6th riots/insurrection/break-in; when viewing the Supreme Court Seal, 4% mentioned the Notorious RBG; when viewing the House of Representative Seal, 3% mentioned AOC. Other common references were simply to "government" across nearly all of the images, as well as "Washington D.C." across all images of buildings.

The responses provide support for Power Hypothesis 1 but not for Power Hypothesis 2. "Power" was explicitly referenced in the top 10 concepts for every single image except for the Supreme Court building. Differences in the exact count are marginal across the three branches, which is strongly in line with expectations. However, thoughts of power are similarly elicited across the non-government images as well. This may be due, in part, to participants being cued to think about government and power in the context of the survey as a whole, so that these thoughts were transferred even to the non-government images.

Another reason may be because of the specific images used as the baseline. Union Station features the same neoclassical architecture of the buildings of the three branches, so it may simply be the case that people associate this particular style with government. The conference table may highlight the fact that governments are not the only entities that can be understood in terms of power. After all, it was one of only two images that did not receive reference to "government". The world of business may also be one that is associated with power, important meetings, and decision-making.

The results provide some initial support for both Procedural Justice Hypothesis 1 and 2. Justice is explicitly referenced[5] in the 10 most common responses exclusively among the three judicial symbols. In accordance with the long-held assumption in judicial politics, it seems judicial symbols are indeed heavily and uniquely coated with notions of procedural justice.

[5] This excludes the use of the term as an honorific for specific Justices.

Study 2

Data and Methods

203 undergraduates students participated in Study 2 for extra credit, 99 of which had previously participated in Study 1. Participants completed an online survey in which they were asked to evaluate 5 images, answer some questions to assess their knowledge of government and politics, and finally answer some demographic questions. The same images from Study 1 were used in Study 2, but participants only saw one (randomly selected) image from each of the following categories: legislative, executive, judicial, non-government, and national.

For each image, participants were asked to rate (1) their general affect on a 7-point scale ranging from "Very negative feeling" to "Very positive feeling", and (2) the extent to which the image made them think about 10 concepts, such as power and justice, on a 5-point scale ranging from "Not at all" to "A great deal". Additionally, for all images except the seals and the flag, participants were asked a multiple-choice question, "What do you think this is an image of?". The results presented here are participants' responses to each image regardless of whether or not they correctly identified the image.

The dependent variables for this analysis are participants' ratings of how much an image evokes the concepts of (1) power, and (2) justice. The additional words of "authority" and "fairness" were added as a robustness check for their respective dimensions, the corroborative results for which can be found in Appendix C. To test my hypotheses, I examine the extent to which symbols elicit thoughts of both concepts across institutions as well as compared to the non-government baseline images.

Results

Figure 3.1 depicts the average extent to which participants felt the (A) buildings, (B) interiors of those buildings, and (C) seals, evoked thoughts of power and justice across all three institutions and a baseline comparison (except for seals). Significant differences between ratings are indicated with a solid bracket when found at the .05 level in a two-tailed test.

There are some important notes to make before assessing my primary expectations. First, across all images, thoughts of power were elicited at much higher levels compared to justice. This trend may suggest that power is the dominant dimension by which people think about and understand American federal government whereas process may play more of a secondary role. Alternatively, these low indications of thoughts on the procedural justice dimension may be due to participants' dissatisfaction with the federal government more generally. Second, because my theory includes the assumption that power and procedural justice are two separate dimensions of information conveyed by symbols, I explored the possibility that power and process may be correlated across participants' ratings. In line with my assumption, Appendix D demonstrates that ratings of power and justice for any given image are generally very weakly correlated with one another.

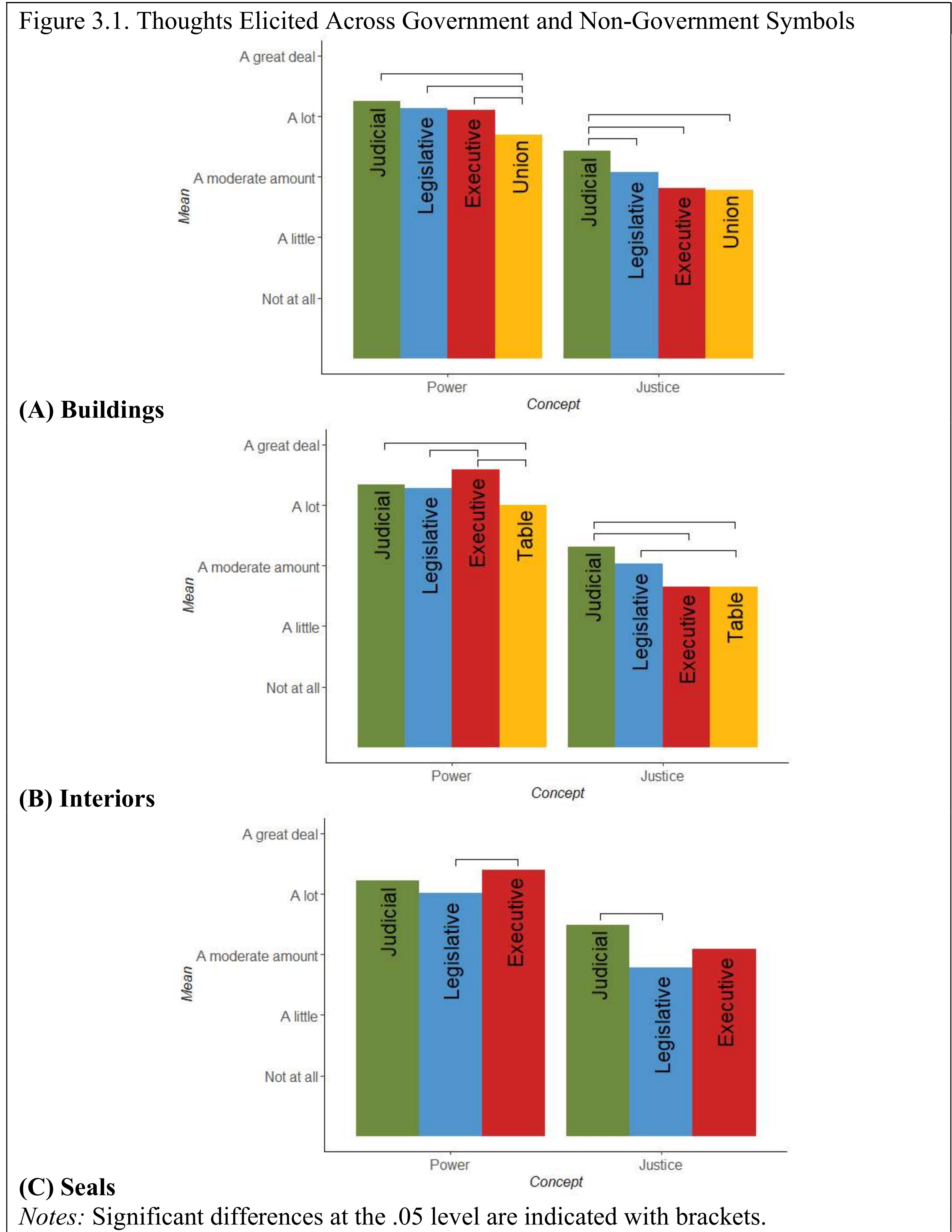
First, I examine the results across buildings. Thoughts of power were similarly elicited across all three branches of government, with minute differences that do not come close to approaching statistical significance. This provides evidence for Power Hypothesis 1, which predicts no major differences in power across the three branches. Further, participants rated the Capitol ($p < 0.02$), the White House ($p < 0.02$), and the Supreme Court ($p < 0.00$) as eliciting more thoughts of power compared to Union Station. In line with Power Hypothesis 2, the buildings of each branch of federal government are more strongly associated with power than a non-government entity. Justice was significantly more salient for the Supreme Court compared to all other buildings (Capitol, $p < 0.09$; White House, $p < 0.00$; Union Station, $p < 0.00$). This provides support for Procedural Justice Hypothesis 1, and some support for Procedural Justice Hypothesis 2. The Court building appears to be unique in conveying messages of procedural justice compared to the buildings of the other branches as well as those of non-government entities, yet other institutions of federal government do not enjoy this advantage over non-government symbols.

Next, I turn to the interiors of the buildings. The Oval Office elicited thoughts of power at significantly higher levels than the House Chamber ($p < 0.04$) and just shy of significance when compared to the Court Bench ($p < 0.08$). This provides some nuanced support for Power Hypothesis 1, since power is similarly elicited across the branches, but the executive branch may wield some unique advantage on this dimension. Compared to the conference table, the Oval Office ($p < 0.00$) and the Court Bench ($p < 0.02$) elicited greater thoughts of power, but this difference was shy of significance for the House Chamber ($p < 0.06$). Taken together, this provides some additional support for Power Hypothesis 2.

The Court Bench elicited more thoughts of justice compared to the Oval Office ($p < 0.00$) but not the House Chamber ($p < 0.17$). Interestingly, the House Chamber was nearly perceived as eliciting more thoughts of justice than the Oval Office ($p < 0.06$). Taken together, this provides some support for Procedural Justice Hypothesis 1, since the Court elicited thoughts of justice more than only one other branch. Compared to the conference table, both the Court Bench ($p < 0.00$) and the House Chamber ($p < 0.04$) elicited greater thoughts of justice. This provides some support for Procedural Justice Hypothesis 2, as only two different government interiors were perceived as more just than a non-government symbol.

Finally, I analyze the responses for seals. The Presidential Seal elicited greater thoughts of power compared to the House of Representatives Seal ($p < 0.02$). Similar to the interiors analysis, then, the executive may wield some slight advantage in terms of power, but there is still some modest support for Power Hypothesis 1. The Supreme Court Seal evoked more thoughts of justice compared to the HOR Seal ($p < 0.00$), and just shy of significance than the Presidential Seal ($p < 0.05$). Altogether, this provides some suggestive evidence in support of Procedural Justice Hypothesis 1, whereby symbols of the Court are more unique in conferring thoughts of justice.

Figure 3.1. Thoughts Elicited Across Government and Non-Government Symbols



(A) Buildings

(B) Interiors

(C) Seals

Notes: Significant differences at the .05 level are indicated with brackets. Participants were asked “To what extent does this image make you think about…” the indicated concepts of Power and Justice. Responses range from “Not at all” (1) to “A great deal” (5).

Overall, the evidence here provides moderate support for Power Hypotheses 1 and 2. The symbols of each of the three branches fared comparably in terms of eliciting thoughts of power, although the executive symbols may wield a slight advantage compared to those of its political counterparts. In nearly every case, the symbols of each branch were perceived to bring about more thoughts of power compared to a non-government baseline image.

There is also some moderate support for Procedural Justice Hypotheses 1 and 2. Judicial symbols were uniformly rated the highest of all the images in terms of eliciting thoughts of justice, and many of the differences were to a statistically significant level. Indeed, judicial symbols were particularly unique when compared to the symbols of the other branches as well as non-government symbols. The results, then, offer nuanced support for Procedural Justice Hypothesis 2, whereby judicial symbols are often the only to be perceived as more just compared to non-government baseline images.

General Discussion and Conclusion

General Discussion

The use of open-ended responses in Study 1 offered a strict test of my expectations. Even as the bulk of responses appear to simply label or identify the image, there were still consistent explicit references to "power" across all government images, and references to "justice" uniquely across the judicial symbols. Study 2 expands on this analysis with a direct empirical approach and largely comports with these results. Power was highly salient across the symbols of all three branches whereas justice was elicited to the greatest extent by judicial symbols.

Across both studies, I find great support for Power Hypothesis 1. Government symbols—regardless of the institution—are strongly associated with the concept of power at similar rates. Although, consistent with early childhood political socialization research (Easton and Dennis 1969; Greenstein 1965), some evidence suggests executive symbols may be particularly advantaged in terms of recognizability and eliciting thoughts of power across the branches. Evidence for Power Hypothesis 2 can be considered when taking the results of both studies together. Study 1 suggests thoughts of power may be relevant for both government and non-government images and was limited in its capacity to find much empirical difference between the two. However, Study 2 offered an explicit empirical comparison of closed-ended responses, and the results suggest that differences can be found with respect to how strongly thoughts of power are associated with government compared to non-government symbols.

I also find strong support for Procedural Justice Hypothesis 1 and moderate support for Procedural Justice Hypothesis 2 in both studies. Judicial symbols were the sole elicitors of the concept of "justice" and were consistently highest on this dimension compared to all other images. These findings corroborate the conventional wisdom held in judicial politics, that judicial symbols help to convey the notion that courts are "special" institutions that make their decisions on the basis of fair legal principles.

The analysis of buildings as government symbols offered the most consistent support in favor of my expectations, and largely comport with the conventional wisdom.

Here, I find government symbols irrespective of federal institution elicit thoughts of power, and that judicial symbols are simply unique across all other types of symbols. Scholars interested in examining the potential effects of government symbols may find it useful to use buildings as the stimuli for experiments.

Conclusion

This chapter sought to answer questions about how the symbols of different government institutions are perceived by the public and thus what specific mechanisms underly how they may work to convey legitimacy. In two online surveys, I find some underlying support for my assumption regarding how government symbols carry information in two dimensions: power and procedural justice. Government symbols appear to strongly elicit thoughts of power regardless of institution whereas judicial symbols are more unique in conveying message of procedural justice.

Interestingly, I find that power is considerably more relevant to the participants' thinking about government symbols than procedural justice. This disparity may indicate that power is the primary piece of information conveyed—at least among this college student sample—when people are exposed to government symbols while procedural justice is a secondary dimension which helps to differentiate between institutions. Although not inconsistent with the expectations of Positivity Theory in judicial politics, it is of note that procedural justice may not be the only—or even the most relevant—dimension underlying how judicial symbols work. If power is the dominant piece of information, then it is reasonable to expect symbols across institutions may work to convey legitimacy as well. This possibility is explored in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 4
Capitol Gains? Symbols of Legislative Authority and the Legitimacy of the U.S. Congress

Introduction

Water is wet, the sky is blue, and the U.S. Congress is highly unpopular with the American public. Recent trends show alarmingly low support for the institution, with Congress' job approval averaging at just 20% since 2005 (Gallup 2022a) and public confidence in it reaching an all-time-low of 7% in early 2022 (Gallup 2022b). This isn't a new story; Congress has long received the brunt of the public's discontent, disapproval, and disaffection among the institutions of the U.S. federal government (Fenno 1975; Patterson and Magleby 1992; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995; Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn 2000). Research suggests such poor attitudes are related to support for institutional change such as implementing congressional term limits (Southwell and Waguespack 1997; Karp 1995; Donovan and Snipp 1994) and campaign finance reform (Jorgensen, Song, and Jones 2018).

There is no dearth of research on the various causes of Congress' increasing unpopularity with the American public. One strain speaks to pessimistic evaluations being related to negative perceptions of the legislative process more generally (Doherty 2015; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Gangl 2003; Jones and McDermott 2010; Ramirez 2009, 2013; Skitka, Winquist, and Hutchingson 2003; Tyler 2001). Chief among these factors is how congressional politics is portrayed in the media, especially in being characterized as conflict-ridden, deeply partisan, and hyper-polarized (Adler and Wilkerson 2013; Butler and Powell 2014; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995; Flynn and Harbridge 2016).

In this chapter, I apply my theoretical framework to the legislative context. I suggest that people's exposure to symbols of the national legislature may work to shape their legitimacy attitudes toward the institution, even as the public perceives it is acting "badly." To examine this possibility, I designed and ran an online survey experiment which randomized (1) exposure to the Capitol building and (2) perceptions of partisanship in Congress. My results offer little to no evidence supporting my hypotheses detailed in the next section.

Expectations

First and foremost, I translate the *Mere Exposure Hypothesis* to the legislative context as specified in the experiment:

- *Capitol Gains Hypothesis:* People who are exposed to the Capitol building (as opposed to not) will extend greater legitimacy toward Congress.

My experiment also randomized whether people saw information about Congress as either partisan or bipartisan. Assuming that partisan bickering and heightened polarization are key ingredients in shaping Congress' poor reputation (Dancey and

Sheagley 2018; Flynn and Harbridge 2016; Harbridge and Malhotra 2011), I posit the following:

- *Partisan Loss Hypothesis:* People who are provided with information about Congress as partisan (as opposed to bipartisan) will extend lesser legitimacy toward it.

The literature also suggests a condition under which this hypothesis holds true. *Weak* partisans may have a stronger preference for bipartisanship relative to *strong* partisans, so the negative effect of partisan information may be stronger among them. Furthermore, partisans who are in alignment with the current majority in Congress may have a stronger preference for partisanship because bipartisanship implies compromising one's general ideological preferences (Harbridge and Malhotra 2011; Dancey and Sheagley 2018). In this experiment following the 2020 election, then, the negative effect of partisan information may be stronger among Republicans (as the Democratic Party won 235 seats).

Tying these hypotheses together, I operationalize the *Mythbuffer Hypothesis:*

- *Interaction Hypothesis:* Among people who receive information about Congress as partisan, those who are exposed to the Capitol building (as opposed to not) will extend greater legitimacy toward Congress.

As theorized, I do not necessarily expect the effects of symbols and/or partisan information to be uniform across all people. Given the available data in the experiment, I am able to examine the following conditional hypotheses:

- *Knowledge Hypothesis:* The effects proposed in the 3 main hypotheses will be greater among people who are less (as opposed to more) knowledgeable about Congress.
- *Motivated Reasoning Hypothesis:* The effect of exposure to the Capitol building will increase (decrease) legitimacy toward Congress among people with positive (negative) prior affect towards it.

Overview of Experiment

To test my hypotheses, I ran an experiment in a module of the 2020 CCES (Cooperative Election Study) with a nationally representative sample of 1,000 respondents. Participants were randomized to one of four conditions in a 2x2 experiment in which participants were asked to consider a brief article headline. As shown in Figure 4.1, manipulations were (1) a photo of either the Capitol building or a tree with a similar color scheme and (2) a headline which describes Congress in either a partisan or bipartisan manner. The information contained in the headline is an adaptation of the Harbridge and Malhotra (2011) experiment.

Figure 4.1. Experiment Stimuli

The dependent variable, legitimacy attitudes, was assessed with 2 items, shown below. These items were adapted from the study of legitimacy attitudes toward the Supreme Court (e.g., Gibson, Lodge, and Woodson 2014; Gibson, Caldeira, and Spence 2003), meaning they are novel in the study of attitudes towards Congress.

- *Do Away:* "If the U.S. Congress started passing a lot of bills that most people disagree with, it might be better to do away with the Congress altogether."
- *Obey Congress: "*People should obey the U.S. Congress even when they disagree with its decisions."

Responses to these items correlate at R = 0.23 and collectively attain a Cronbach's alpha of just 0.366. For this reason, I report the results for each variable separately, rather than combined into an index for analysis.

Additionally, specific support was assessed with 1 item: "The U.S. Congress can usually be trusted to do what is right for the country as a whole." This is offered as a point of comparison throughout the displayed results in the following pages.

Results

Main Effects

Figure 4.2 depicts the baseline results of the experiment. There were no significant differences in legitimacy attitudes across the experiment due to exposure to the symbol, the partisan information, or the interaction of the two. Thus, there is no support for the baseline hypotheses.

Conditional Effects

Knowledge of Congress was assessed with two questions. The first asked "Who is the current Speaker of the House of Representatives?" and the second asked "How long is the term of office for a U.S. Senator?" Participants were classified as "High" knowledge if they correctly answered both questions, and "Low" if otherwise. Figure 4.3 displays the average level of legitimacy held by participants split into these two categories.

Among "High" Knowledge respondents, there were no significant differences found in the experiment. Among the "Low" knowledge respondents, those who received the Partisan information were less willing to obey Congress than those in the Bipartisan conditions, though the effect is just shy of statistical significance ($p < 0.05$). Overall, though, there is no real support here for the conditional hypotheses by level of knowledge in Congress.

Approval of Congress was assessed with a 4-point scale ranging from Strongly Approve to Strongly Disapprove. For the sake of comparison and parsimony in this analysis, I condense approval into a binary measure (0 = Disapprove, 1 = Approve) and present the results in Figure 4.4. I find no significant differences across the experimental conditions as a function of approval.

Moving onto partisan identity, as a prior identity that may shape current affect toward Congress, I compare the results among partisans: self-identified Democrats and Republicans. There were no significant differences found in either subgroup as a function of the experiment, as depicted to Figure 4.5.

The final conditional test is based on partisan strength. This analysis separates the results of the experiment first by *weak* versus *strong* Democrats (Figure 6), then *weak* versus *strong* Republicans (Figure 4.7). Among *weak* Democrats, exposure to the symbol appears to slightly dampen trust in Congress, though the effect is just shy of significance ($p < 0.05$) but does not affect the legitimacy items. Among *weak* Republicans, those exposed to the Capitol were much less willing to "do away" with Congress ($p < 0.028$), which offers the only piece of support for the *Capitol Gains Hypothesis*. Among *strong* Republicans, those in the Partisan conditions were much less willing to "do away" with Congress when they were also exposed to the Capitol ($p < 0.00$), providing one area of support for the *Interaction Hypothesis.*

Figure 4.2. Main Results of the Experiment

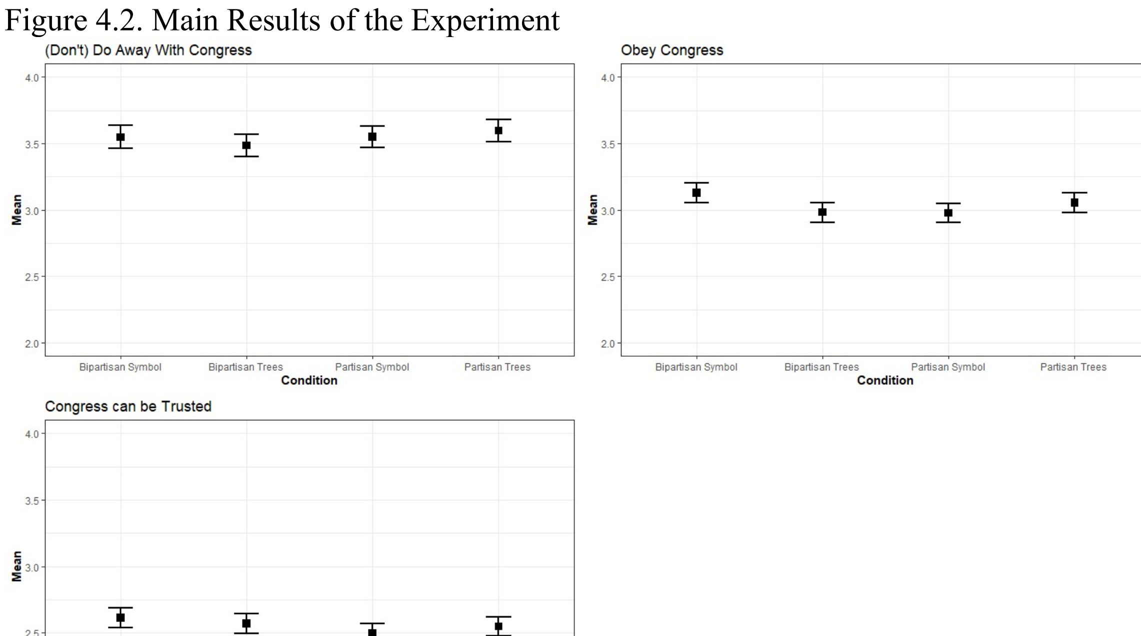


Figure 4.3. Results of the Experiment, by Knowledge of Congress

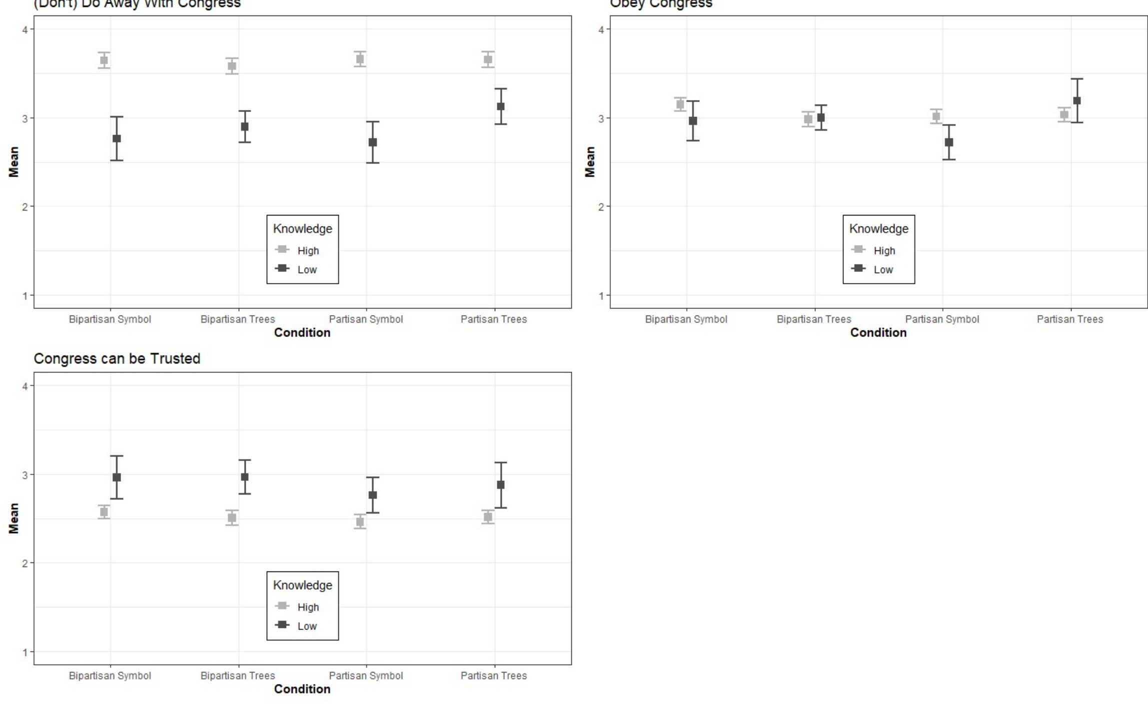


Figure 4.4. Results of the Experiment, by Prior Approval of Congress

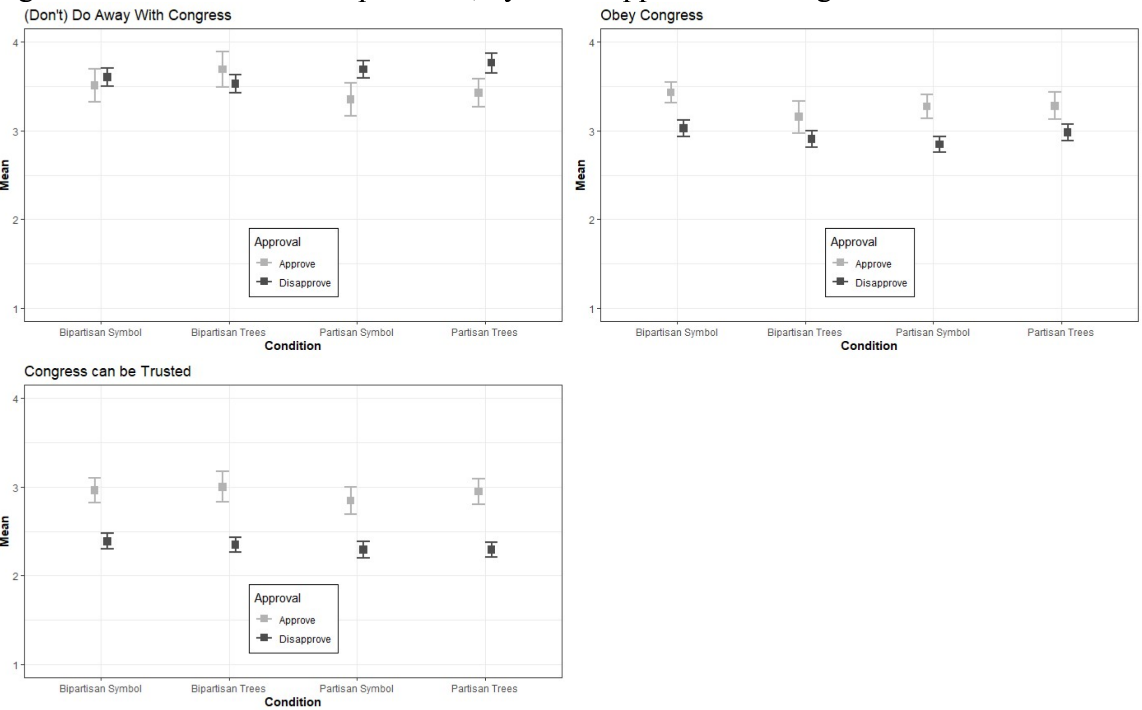


Figure 4.5. results of the Experiment, by Partisan Identity

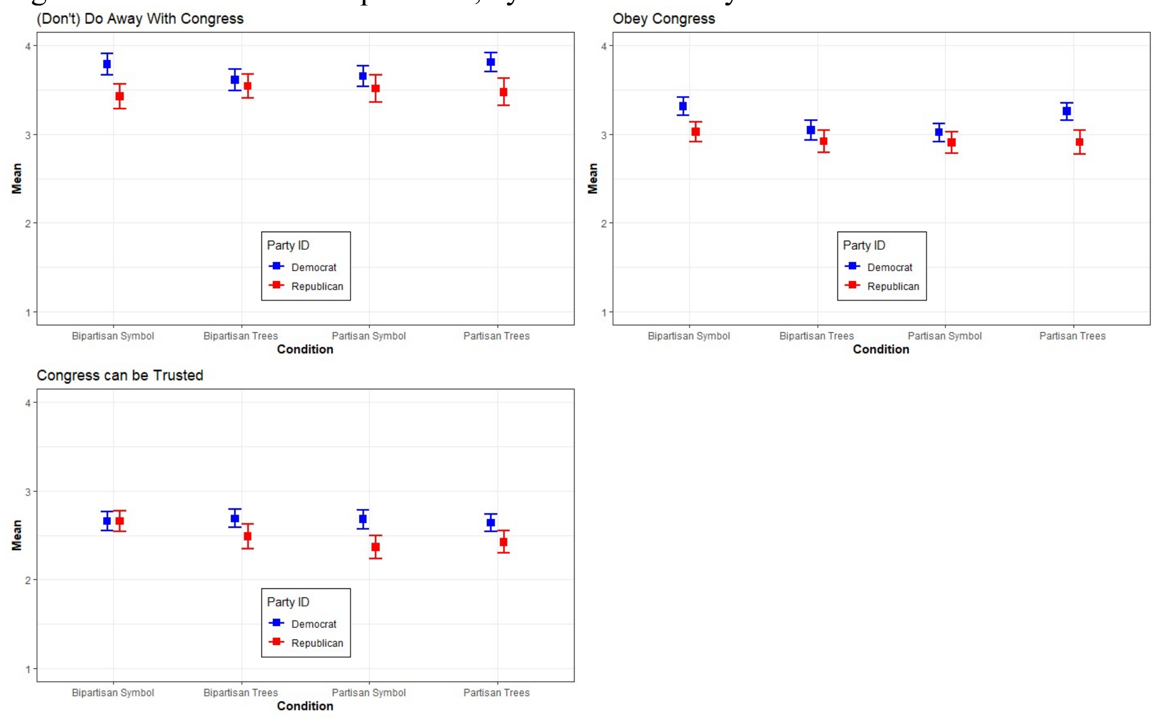
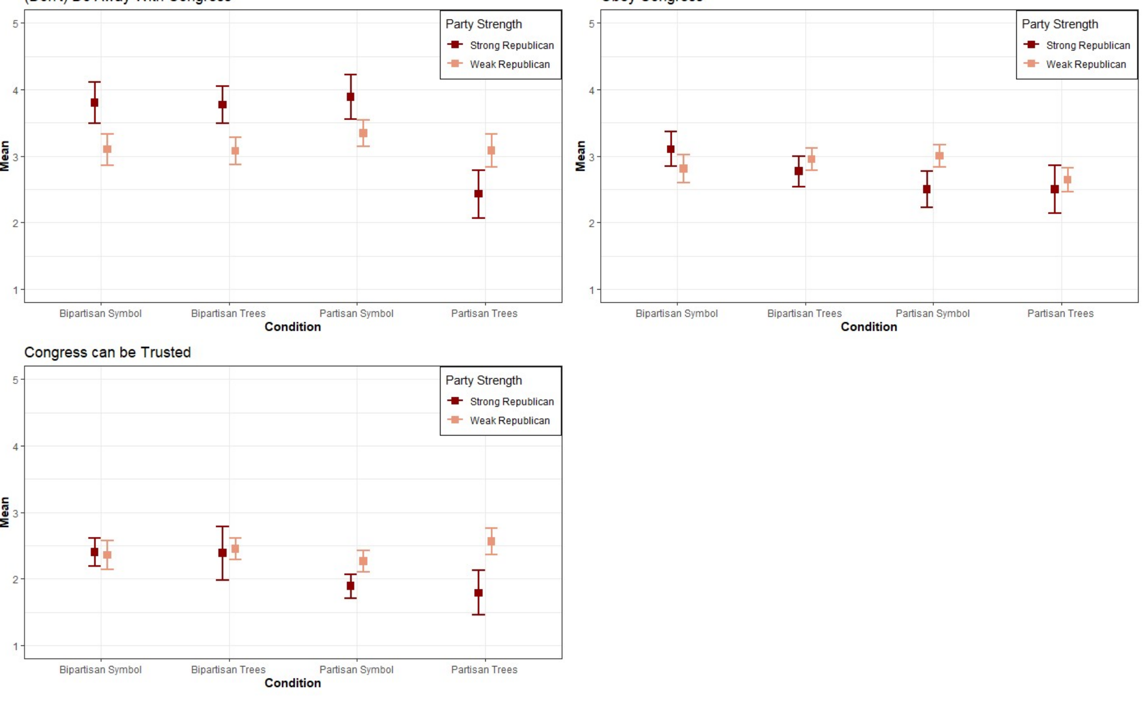


Figure 4.6. Results of the Experiment, by Partisan Strength (Democrats)

Figure 4.7. Results of the Experiment, by Partisan Strength (Republicans)



Discussion and Conclusion

I find limited evidence for the *Mere Exposure Hypothesis,* as the posited effects held only among weak Republicans. There is only one piece of evidence for the *Interaction Hypothesis,* which works as predicted just among strong Republicans. One possible explanation for this trend is that my theoretical orientation is seemingly better-suited to explain the effects of symbols on legitimacy attitudes of Republicans, relative to Democrats. This could be due to underlying differences in the psychological predispositions of Republicans and Democrats via ideology (e.g., Goren 2005; Hibbing, Smith, and Alford 2013). Another possibility, given the partisan nature of attitudes towards Congress, may be that my results may help explain Republicans' legitimacy attitudes in the 2020 election cycle (at the time, minority party in Congress), but may explain Democrats' legitimacy attitudes in another.

Overall, the fact that the bulk of these results are null cannot be ignored. One reason for this could be that the brief, limited exposure to the Capitol was not "strong" enough to shape attitudes toward Congress during the survey. Future work may consider more immersive methods by which people could be exposed to symbols in order to detect fine movement in these attitudes. One potential implication of this finding is that legislative symbols may not work as effectively as judicial symbols in lacking the trademark positive associations with procedural justice. The next chapter presents an experiment designed to test such a possibility.

Chapter 5
Comparing the Legitimizing Effects of Government Symbols Across the Legislative, Executive, and Judicial Branches in an Experiment

Introduction

The study of government symbols has largely been limited to the judicial context—and even more specifically, that of the U.S. Supreme Court (Gibson, Lodge, and Woodson 2014; Gibson and Nelson 2016). Positivity Theory was designed as an explanation for how the public subscribes to a "myth of legality" that helps to sustain the Court's institutional legitimacy even when it makes unpopular decisions. Its very name is derived from the assumption that symbols of *judicial* authority invoke positive messages of procedural justice—relative to its political counterparts—in people's minds upon exposure.

Nonetheless, it is not immediately evident that symbols of *judicial* authority are unique in their legitimacy-conferring capacity, compared to those of *legislative* or *executive* authority. Even as the U.S. Congress and President derive legitimacy from other important sources (i.e., elections and enforcement powers), there are reasons to believe symbols matter for them, too. After all, political leaders in these branches have limited control over the type and extent of media coverage they receive; they can, however, shape their appearance in formal settings such as inaugurations, press conferences, and other televised events (Schill 2012). For instance, the White House spends over $6 million on its website annually (The Hill, December 2017) while the Executive Office of the President spends roughly $40 million per year on advertising and public relations (Government Accountability Office 2016).

As I have argued in the dissertation, each institution features its own unique assortment of symbols that may activate legitimacy-enhancing thoughts of power and/or procedural justice. This chapter expands upon our existing knowledge by incorporating three different institutional contexts—legislative, executive, and judicial—in a single experiment. In doing so, I am able to investigate whether the judiciary is truly unique by way of symbolic messaging, or whether a more general story can be told.

Expectations

The conceptual hypotheses presented in Chapter 2 need only to be operationalized. Flowing from my theoretical framework, and my evidence from Chapter 3, I predict that by way of eliciting thoughts of *power*, people's exposure to government symbols will enhance their legitimacy attitudes across all three branches:

- *Mere Exposure Hypothesis:* People who are exposed to an official seal of government (as opposed to not) will extend greater legitimacy toward the respective institution.

However, given that judicial symbols additionally elicit thoughts related to *procedural justice,* it may be that such symbols are particularly effective in producing support for the Court:

- *Judicial Advantage Hypothesis:* The legitimacy-conferring effects of the government seal will be greater for the Supreme Court relative to Congress and the Presidency.

Exposure to government symbols may not enhance legitimacy *ceteris paribus.* Given that "legitimacy is for losers," I posit the following:

- *Mythbuffer Hypothesis:* The legitimacy-conferring effects of the government seal will be greater when people are exposed to negative (as opposed to neutral) information about the respective institution.

I can test the following conditional hypotheses based on data available in the experiment. That is, the extent to which symbols are effective as cues depends on prior levels of exposure to symbols (i.e., "pre-treatment") as well as people's pre-existing affect towards it. Thus, I hypothesize:

- *Exposure Hypothesis:* The effects proposed in the 3 main hypotheses will be greater among people who are less (as opposed to more) interested in political news.
- *Motivated Reasoning Hypothesis:* The effect of exposure to the seal of a government will increase (decrease) legitimacy towards its respective institution among people with positive (negative) prior affect towards it

Overview of Experiment

To test these expectations, I designed and implemented a survey experiment with a 3x2x2 design administered by Prolific in June 2022 to a nationally representative sample of 4,175 participants. Participants were first randomized to one of three branch conditions in which the survey's context was tailored to either Congress (N = 1,389), the Presidency (N = 1,380), or the Supreme Court (N = 1,392). Within each branch, participants were then randomized into a 2x2 experiment which varied (1) exposure to that branch's official seal or a generic "breaking news" logo and (2) negative or neutral information about the branch in an article headline in a fictional Tweet. Figure 5.1 displays the conditions in the Congress version (see Appendix for others).

Participants were instructed to read the news headline and answer the questions that followed. On the same page, participants were asked "distractor" questions about their likelihood to read this news as well as their likelihood to share or retweet it. Participants were shown the fictional tweet twice as they answered just one of the distractor questions on each page. This was aimed at strengthening the subtle treatment with just a brief exposure to the headline and image.

Figure 5.1. Experimental Stimuli (Legislative Condition)

Following the experimental conditions and distractor questions, participants were then asked the following battery of items to assess legitimacy attitudes, adapted from those commonly used in the judicial politics literature:

- *Do Away:* "If [Congress/ the White House/ the Supreme Court] started making a lot of decisions that most people disagree with, it might be better to do away with [Congress/ the White House/ the Supreme Court] altogether."
- *Obey:* "People should obey [Congress/ the White House/ the Supreme Court] even when they disagree with its decisions."
- *Reduce Decisions:* "The right of [Congress/ the White House/ the Supreme Court] to make certain types of decisions should be reduced."

As a point of comparison, participants were also asked one question about trust (i.e., specific support) for the respective institution: "[Congress/ the White House/ the Supreme Court] can usually be trusted to do what is best for the country as a whole." For the legitimacy attitudes and trust items, responses ranged on a 5-point scale ranging from

strongly disagree to strongly agree. Items were coded such that greater values are associated with greater support for the institution.

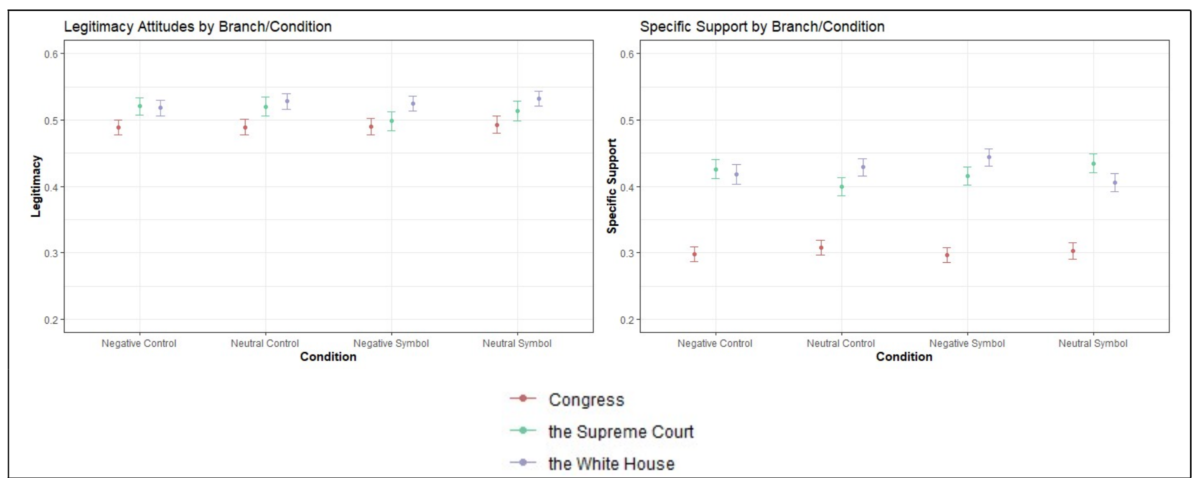
Results

It is worth first discussing the key dependent variable, legitimacy attitudes, since their application to the legislative and executive context is a novel contribution of this dissertation. These three items attain a Cronbach's alpha of 0.675 across all experimental conditions (0.658 for Congress, 0.564 for White House, and 0.781 for Supreme Court). Perhaps unsurprisingly, these items initially designed for the judicial context work more harmoniously together relative for the Supreme Court relative to the other branches. Nonetheless, these items fare well above conventional standards of 0.4, so for the sake of simplicity I combine them into a single index of legitimacy attitudes and rescale it to range from 0 (low legitimacy) to 1 (high legitimacy).

Main Effects

Figure 5.2 depicts the baseline results of the experiment for Legitimacy Attitudes (left) and Specific Support (right). Within each branch, there were no significant differences across the four conditions for either dependent variable, meaning there is no support for either the *Mere Exposure* nor the *Mythbuffer* hypothesis. Judicial symbols did not perform significantly differently from its counterparts, offering no support for the *Judicial Advantage Hypothesis.* Notably, levels of legitimacy were *not* significantly different across the three institutions, all hovering near the mid-point of the scale. This suggests some level of commonality in the American public's sense of legitimacy towards the three branches. Not surprisingly, Congress suffers from significantly less specific support than the White House and the Supreme Court.

Figure 5.2. Baseline results.



Conditional Effects

There were no significant differences found in the experiment when analyzing the results separately by participants' level of news interest (i.e., level of "pre-treatment" by exposure to symbols in the news). This holds true whether analyzing the results for legitimacy attitudes (Figure 5.3) or specific support (Figure 5.4). Thus I find no support for the *Exposure Hypothesis.*

Figures 5.5 and 5.6 depict the results as split by participants' pre-existing affect toward the institution. In the Supreme Court experiment, exposure to the symbol was associated with decreased loyalty toward the institution among those with Low Affect towards it ($p < 0.05$). In other words, exposure to the judicial symbol *amplified* pre-existing negative attitudes, providing some support for the *Motivated Reasoning Hypothesis.* Since these results were only found for the Supreme Court, there is also some support for the *Judicial Advantage Hypothesis.*

There were no significant differences found in the experiment when limiting the analysis to participants who self-identified as Democratic or Republican (excludes pure independents), as seen in Figures 5.7 and 5.8. However, it is interesting to note that Republicans expressed much more loyalty toward the Supreme Court relative to Democrats, regardless of experimental condition. This partisan divide is not found anywhere near this extent in the political branches. This aligns with the *Motivated Reasoning Hypothesis* in the political climate leading up to summer 2022. Although I can only speculate, it may be that Democrats are more willing to make fundamental changes to the institution of the Supreme Court (i.e., "court packing") since the Court holds a solid conservative majority; conversely, Republicans may be less willing to make such changes, being more satisfied with the Court's ideological composition.

Figures 5.9 and 5.10 display the results when looking only at Democrats split by partisan strength. No significant differences were found across the experiment either among *weak* or *strong* Democrats. Figures 5.11 and 5.12 consider the results only among Republicans. Among *strong* Republicans, I find that exposure to negative information decreased legitimacy attitudes only in the legislative context ($p < 0.039$). Ultimately, I find no real support for my hypotheses conditional on partisan strength.

Figure 5.3. Results for Legitimacy Attitudes by Branch, Conditional on News Interest

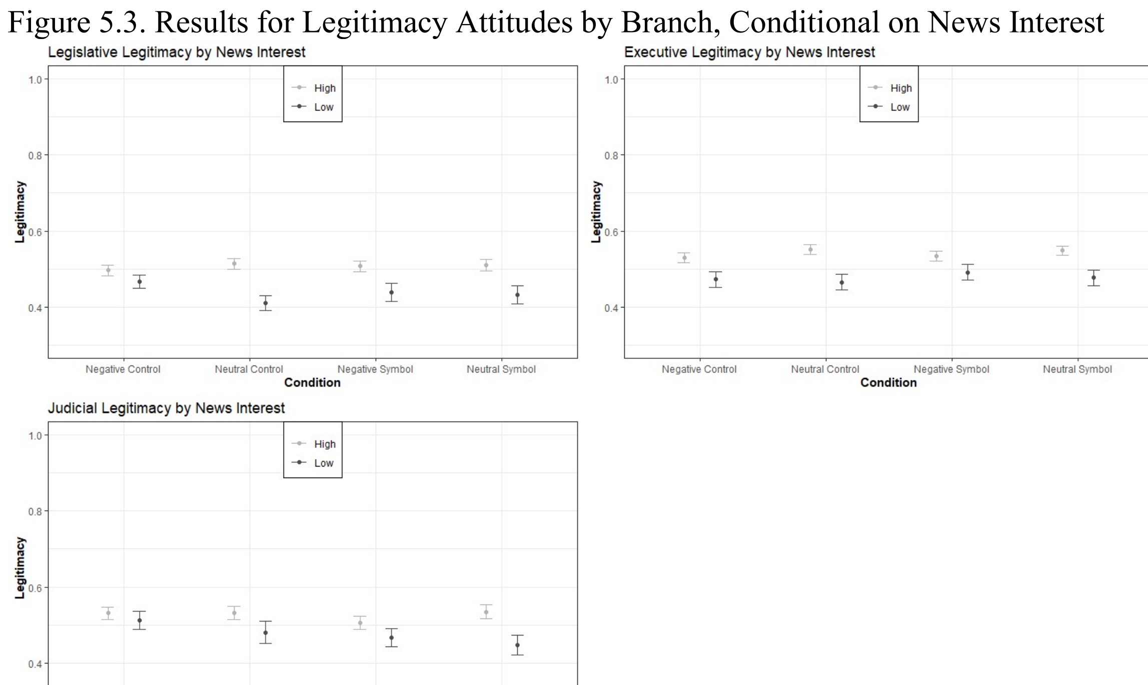


Figure 5.4. Results for Specific Support by Branch, Conditional on News Interest

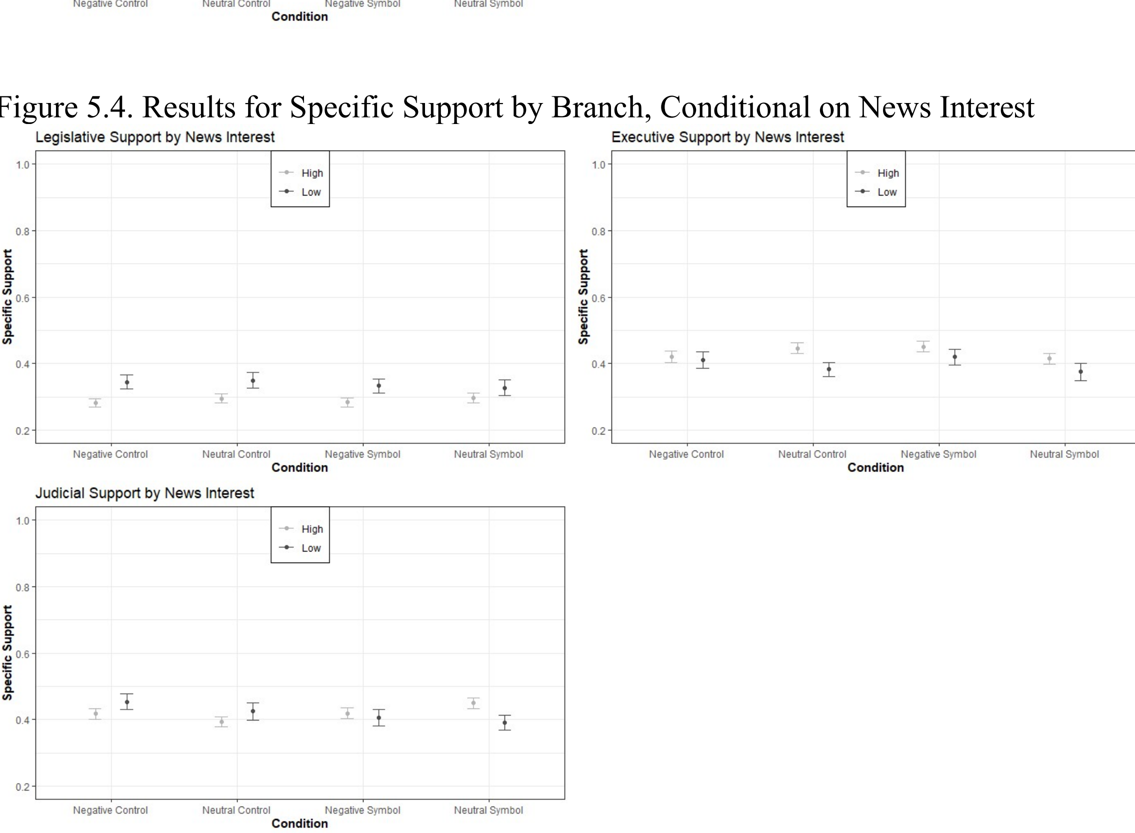


Figure 5.5. Results for Legitimacy Attitudes by Branch, Conditional on Prior Affect

Figure 5.6. Results for Specific Support by Branch, Conditional on Prior Affect

Legislative Support by Prior Affect
Executive Support by Prior Affect
Judicial Support by Prior Affect
High
Low
Specific Support
0.8
0.6
0.4
0.2
Negative Control
Neutral Control
Negative Symbol
Neutral Symbol
Condition

Figure 5.7.

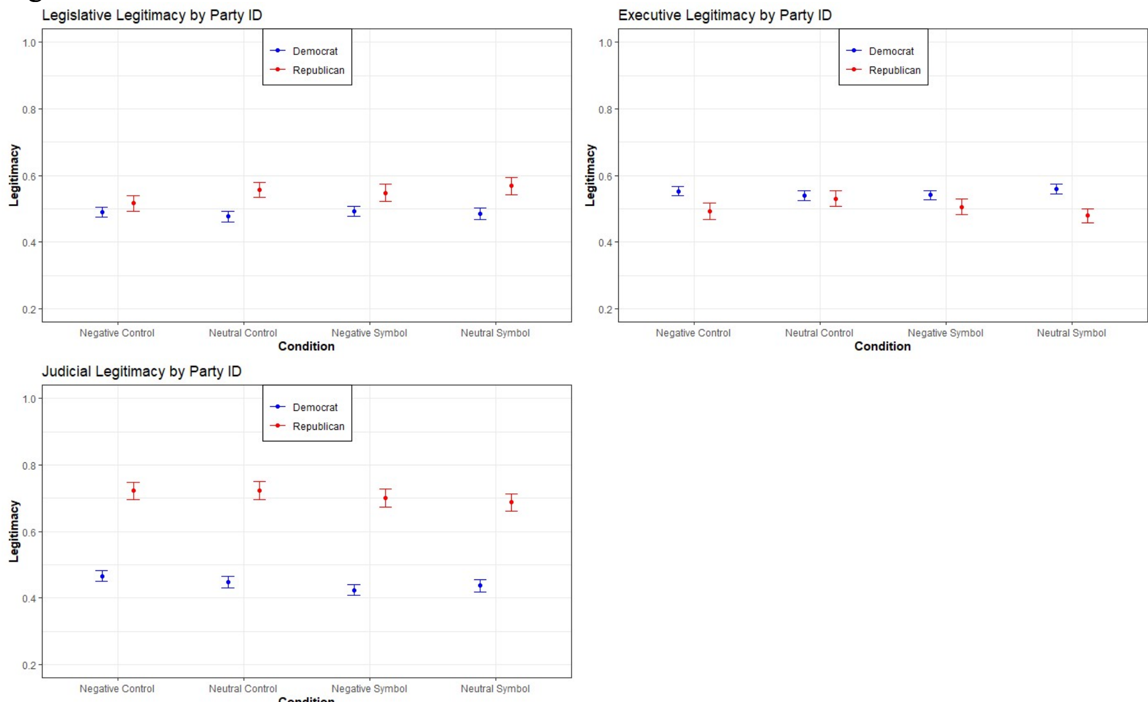


Figure 5.8.

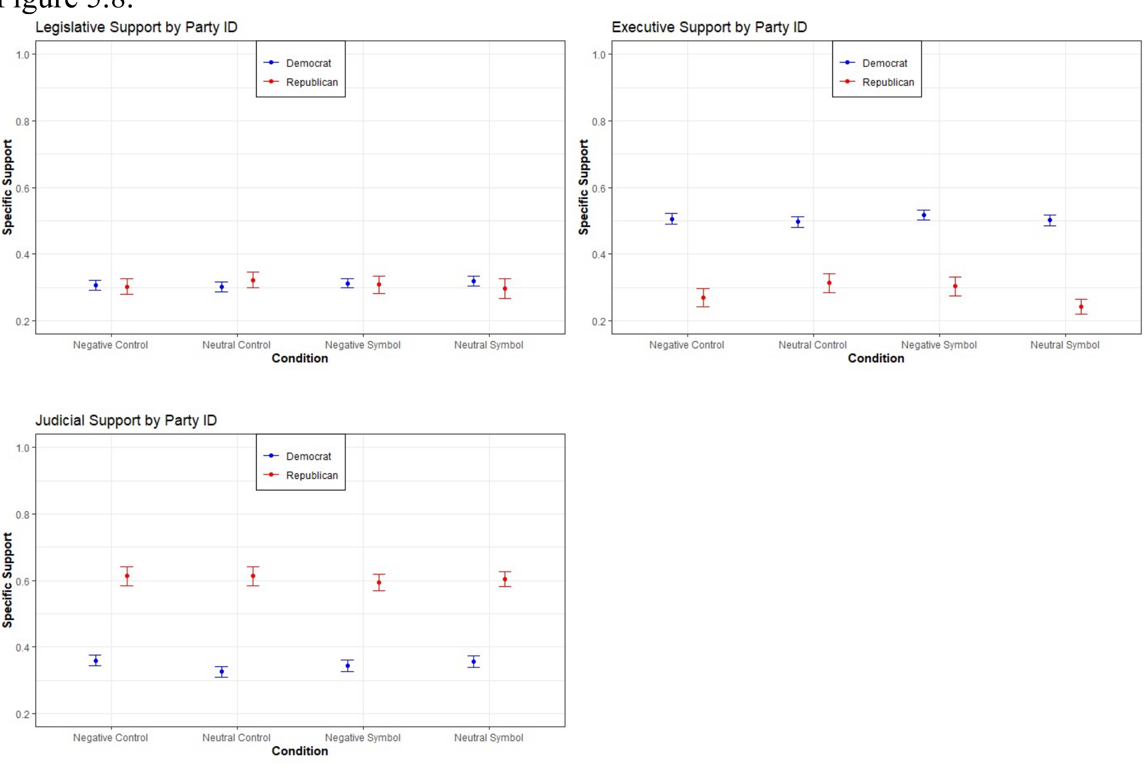


Figure 5.9.

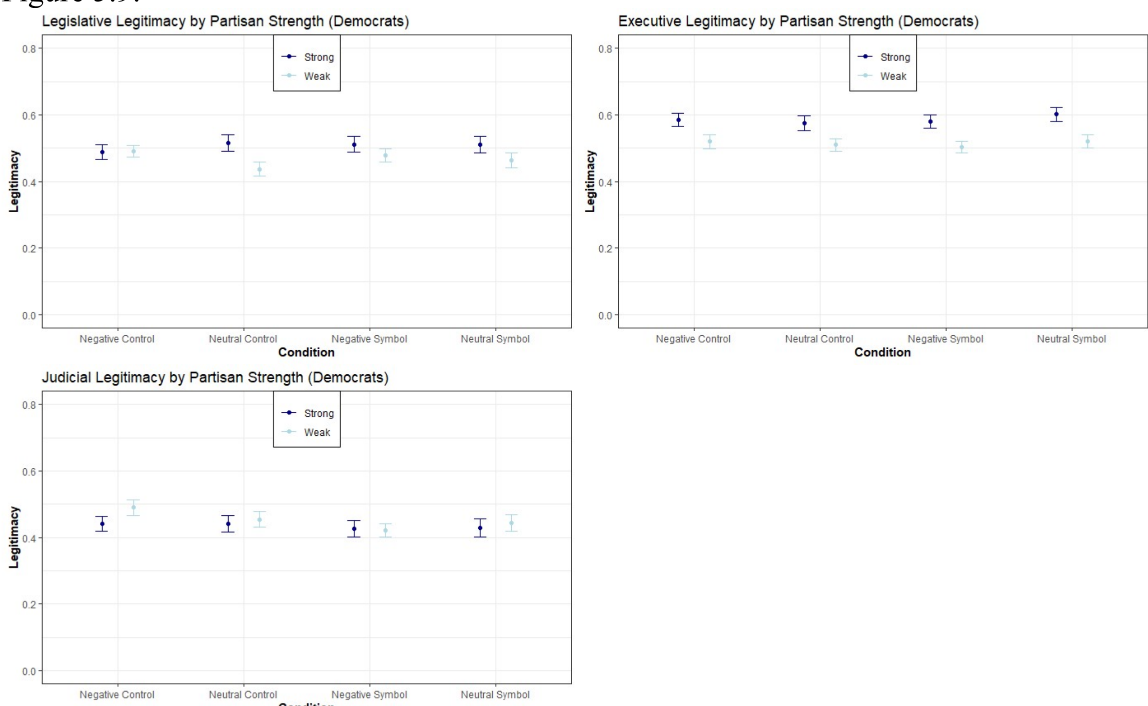


Figure 5.10.

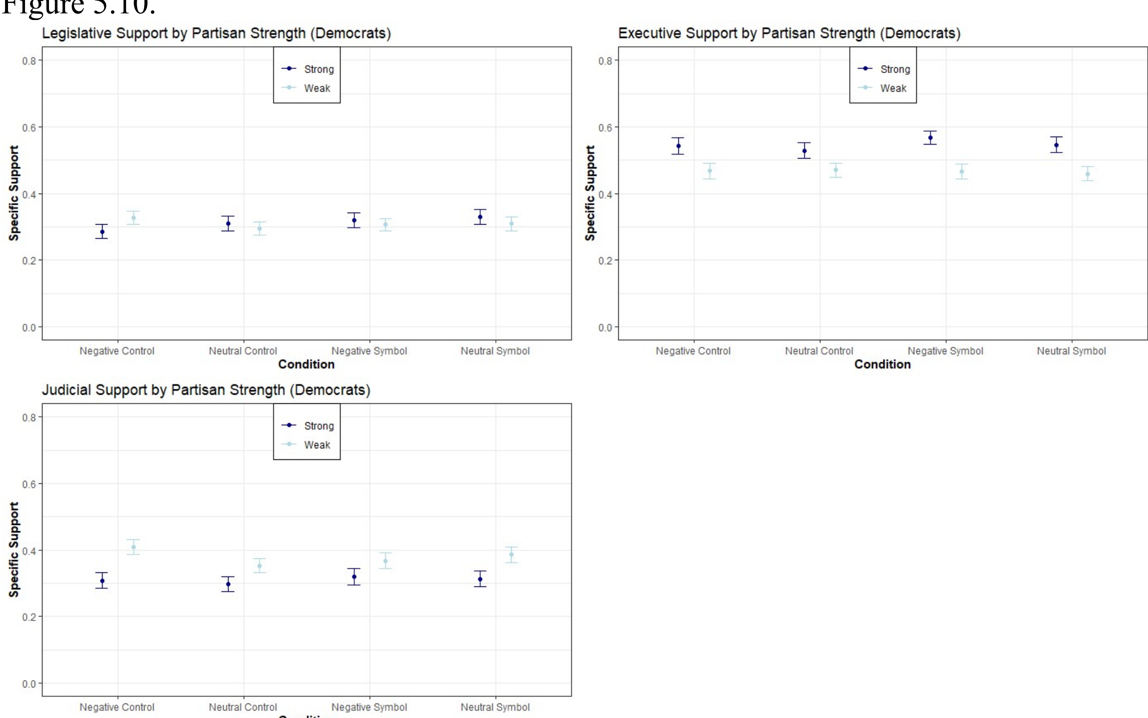


Figure 5.11.

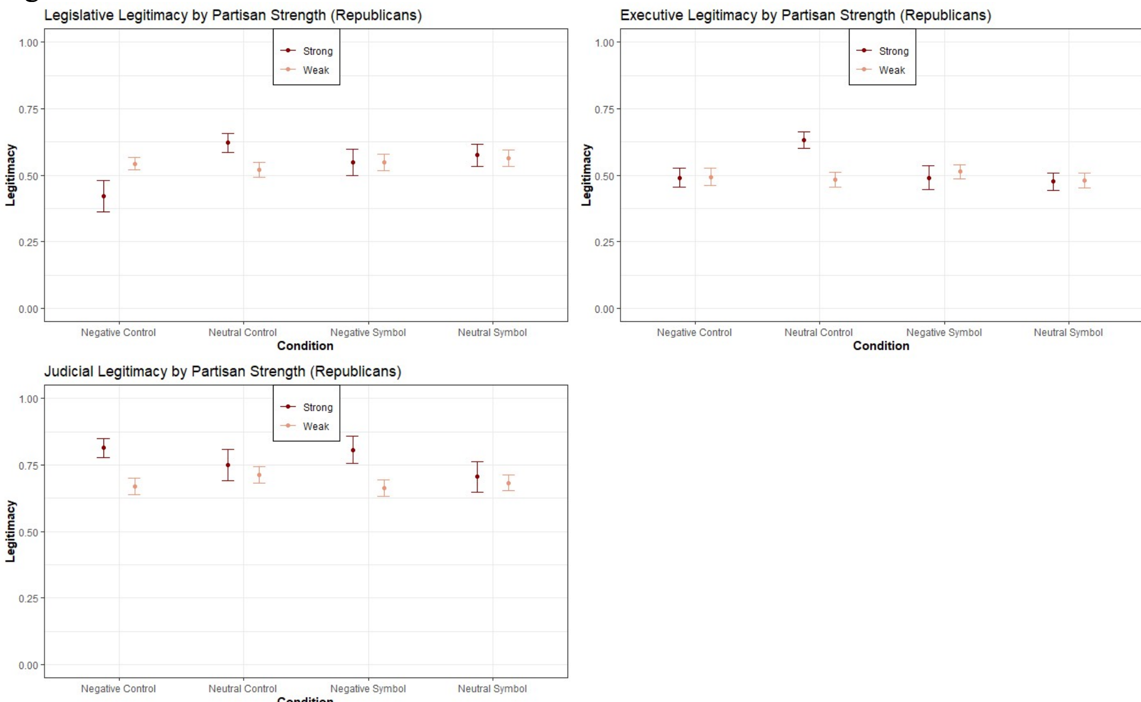
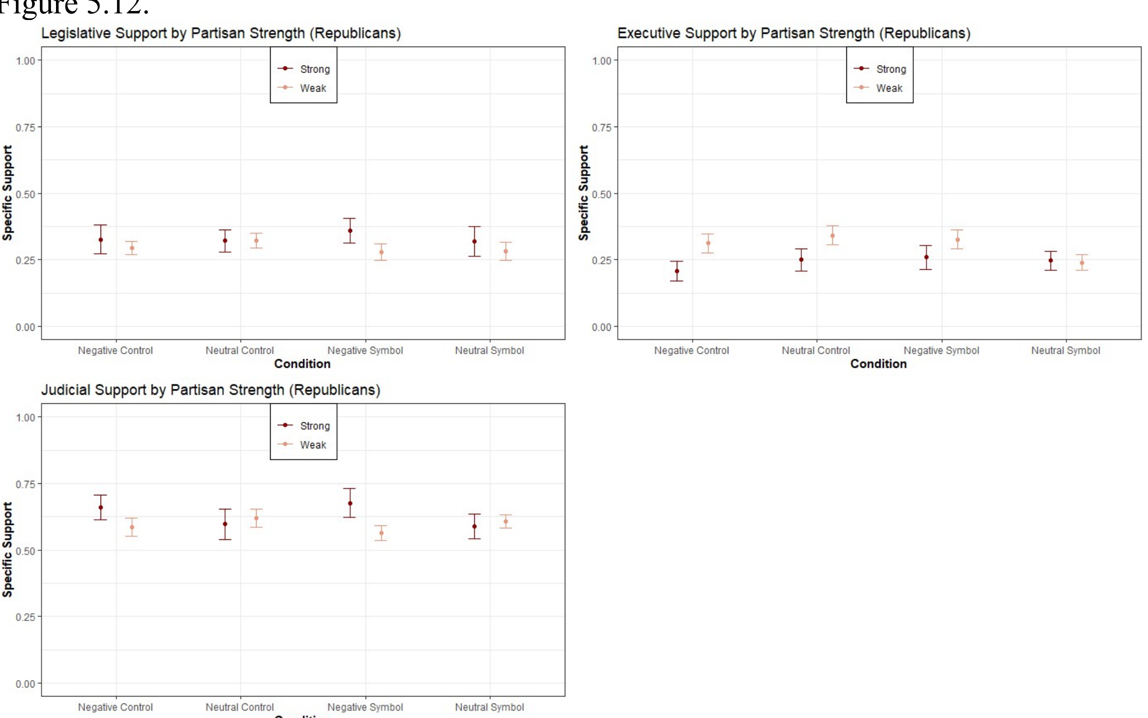


Figure 5.12.



Discussion and Conclusion

By and large, there were no significant differences in participants' expressed level of legitimacy towards any of the three branches across the experiment. There is one exception in the Supreme Court experiment, where mere exposure to the official seal was associated with *lower* legitimacy towards the judiciary, but only among people who had lower support for it to begin with. Thus, I primarily find support for the *Motivated Reasoning* and *Judicial Advantage* hypotheses. These results are consistent with those of Gibson, Lodge, and Woodson (2014), that judicial symbols do not have a direct effect of legitimacy attitudes, but rather amplify people's pre-existing attitudes towards the Court. A critical takeaway from this is that judicial symbols may be "unique" in their relationship with judicial legitimacy attitudes, relative to those featured in other institutional contexts.

This experiment was not without limitations that may impact its results. First, and perhaps most critical, is the timing of the survey. The survey ran in June 2022 prior to the Court's *Dobbs* decision reversing *Roe v. Wade* (June 24, 2022), although by this time the leaked majority draft (May 2, 2022) of this opinion had spread thoroughly in the news cycle. An increasingly conservative Court making counter-majoritarian decisions, especially such as *Dobbs,* may have had significant and negative consequences for the Court's legitimacy overall (Gibson 2022; Jessee, Malhotra, and Sen 2022). As Gibson notes, however, for some people, "*Dobbs* may have pushed them over the edge. But prior to *Dobbs,* many seem to have already been perched very near the edge" (2022). Indeed, these results comport with my findings that Republicans and Democrats diverge in legitimacy (and specific support) in the Supreme Court experiment, but not in the other branch contexts. This also may explain why exposure to judicial symbols *decreased* legitimacy attitudes among participants who were dissatisfied with the Court to begin with. Second—though not unrelated to the first point—is the subtle, brief nature of the experimental treatment. Exposure to a single news headline and accompanying image may simply not be powerful enough to shift expressed attitudes. Future work may benefit from employing a more immersive or concentrated exposure to government symbols.

Nonetheless, this chapter makes an incredibly important contribution to the study of government symbols and legitimacy attitudes. I provide the first empirical investigation of legitimacy attitudes in a direct comparison across government institutions, which has so far been mostly limited to the judicial politics subfield. The legitimacy attitudes battery appears to port well and perform similarly across institutions. This novel measure should prove fruitful in future research that seeks to better understand the underpinnings of institutional loyalty. Furthermore, I offer the first set of evidence suggesting that symbols may only "work" to convey legitimacy to governments in the context of judiciaries; specifically, judicial symbols appear to activate pre-existing levels of support (or lack thereof) rather than enhancing legitimacy *ceteris paribus.*

Chapter 6
Conclusion

Summary of Argument and Results

For decades, scholars in political science have largely overlooked the role that visual symbols of government play in shaping people's attitudes towards the government. My dissertation breathes new life into this area of research, offering a broad, simple theory and a rigorous empirical investigation in the context of American politics. I argued that government symbols work like cues, activating thoughts related to power and/or procedural justice when people are exposed to them. Flowing from this, I suggested that government symbols—irrespective of institutional context—work similarly to enhance people's sense of legitimacy toward the institution.

Overall, I find limited and nuanced support for my theoretical framework. My results from Chapter 3 support the notion that symbols across the three branches of U.S. federal government have more in common than previously appreciated. This chapter relied on two online surveys of college students, in which I found that government symbols appear to elicit thoughts related to power more so than procedural justice. In Chapter 4, I conducted an online survey experiment using a nationally representative sample, and I found that exposure to symbols of Congress enhanced legitimacy attitudes towards Congress, but only among (weak) Republicans. Chapter 5 offers the first-ever comparison of the legitimizing effects of government symbols across multiple institutional contexts. Results from an online survey experiment suggest that exposure to symbols affects people's legitimacy attitudes, but only in the judicial context among people who were already displeased with the Court; that is, exposure to judicial symbols *amplified* their displeasure with the institution in the form of depressed legitimacy.

Contributions and Directions for Future Research

Significant contributions to the literature are three-fold. First, I contribute a significant sum of empirical and theoretical labor to the judicial politics subfield. I offer an initial set of evidence to assess the long-held assumption that symbols of judicial authority work to help paint the Court as special compared to its political brethren in federal government. My evidence suggests that government symbols across the three branches similarly elicit thoughts of power, but judicial symbols do appear distinct in their capacity to bring to mind thoughts of procedural justice. My hope here is that my dissertation inspires further deep dives into the underpinnings of symbols of judicial authority (and beyond). After all, comparing symbols across institutional contexts may be the most fruitful way to better understanding what makes judiciaries and their symbols special and unique in people's minds.

Second, in expanding upon the received wisdom in judicial politics, I offer the broader political science discipline a more comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding and examining the effects of government symbols. I theorized that stories akin to that of Positivity Theory in judicial politics (Gibson and Caldeira 2009; Gibson, Lodge, and Woodson 2014) may be ported to multiple institutional contexts. A natural

extension of this work could further explore whether, and how, symbols of government authority work in other institutional contexts, such as lower levels of the U.S. government. One area of work that would be particularly interesting to examine would be in the significant variation in government symbols across state governments. State governments vary in terms of their *professionalization,* or the extent to which they mimic certain features of their counterparts in federal government (Squire 2008; Squire 1993; Rosenthal 1996). As one example, Texas and Idaho have state Capitol buildings with essentially identical neoclassical architecture of the U.S. Capitol, whereas other state's Capitol buildings are designed in styles like Romanesque (e.g., New York) or Art Deco (e.g., Louisiana).

Of course, moving outside of solely the U.S. context would be another important step for future research. With this broad theoretical framework in place, scholars need only to identify the parade of symbols featured by a given government and adapt the legitimacy attitudes battery for that context. As noted in judicial politics, symbols may be of particular importance in shaping legitimacy attitudes among institutions that distinctly lack enforcement powers. For instance, Karens et al. (2016) finds that exposure to symbols of the European Union may enhance support for it. Thus, it may be particularly useful for research on international organizations to focus on their symbolic imagery (i.e., its "face") more than its enforcement capacity (i.e., its "teeth).

Third, I offer the first empirical investigation of the effects of government symbols across institutions (limited to the American context). In doing so, I tested and validated a Legitimacy Attitudes battery that can be ported to multiple institutions. This should prove fruitful in future research that seeks to compare the nature of legitimacy attitudes across institutions, regardless of whether government symbols are theoretically involved.

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Appendix

Chapter 3 Appendix.
Appendix 3A. Questionnaires for Studies 1 and 2

Study 1

For each image in Appendix B, participants were asked the open-ended question: "What 1-3 words or thoughts come to mind when you see this image?" After the open-ended section, all participants were given the following questionnaire.

- What is your gender?
- What is your age?
- What race do you identify with most?
- In what country did you mostly grow up?
- What year in school are you?
- What is your major?
- Here is a 7-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Where would you place yourself on this scale?
- Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, or what?

Study 2

Participants were randomly assigned to see only 5 of the 13 images in Appendix B. For each image, they were asked the following questions.

- When you see this image, how does it make you feel?
- To what extent does this image make you think about… [Power, Justice, Corruption, Loyalty, Humanity, Authority, Fairness, Conflict, Law, Freedom]
- What do you think this is an image of?

Then, all participants were given the following questionnaire.

- In general, how much interest do you have in what's going on in government and politics?
- Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements.
    - Sometimes, politics seems so complicated that a person like me can't really understand
    - what's going on in government.
    - I feel I have a good understanding of the important issues debated in government.
    - I don't think that the government cares very much what the people think.

- People don't have any say about what the government does.
- How much of the time do you think you can trust the federal government in Washington, D.C. to do what is right?
- How well does the following statement describe you? "I consider my self a patriot."
- Who is the current Vice President of the United States?
- Which political party currently holds the majority (has the most members) in the House of Representatives?
- Whose responsibility is it to determine whether a law is constitutional or not?
- Which political party, Republican or Democratic, is more conservative/
- How much of a majority is required for the US Senate and House to override a presidential veto?

Participants were asked to answer the same demographic questions as listed in Study 1.

Appendix 3B. Images Used in Studies 1 and 2

Images provided where there is open access. Links are provided where there is not.

Legislative Symbols

United_States_Capitol_west_front_edit2.jpg (2953×1529) (wikimedia.org)

https://specials-images.forbesimg.com/imageserve/5e1e684bda6d380006299c72/960x0.jpg?cropX1=0&cropX2=999&cropY1=0&cropY2=663 (475×315)

File:Seal of the United States House of Representatives.svg - Wikipedia

Executive Symbols

ratio3x2_720.webp (720×480) (hdnux.com)

President Joe Biden at his desk in the Oval Office of the White House Stock Photo - Alamy

Seal of the President of the United States - Seal of the President of the United States - Wikipedia

Judicial Symbols

https://nxslink.thehill.com/view/6230db47fee9ef39a7647318gl1n7.1he3/6ea57515

media.dojmt.gov

File:Seal of the United States Supreme Court.svg - Wikimedia Commons

Non-Government Symbols

From Contact Us - Mason Harriman Group (mason-harriman.com)

From Charming-modern-minimalist-meeting-room-interior-design.jpg (620×250) (itbusiness.ca)

National/Other Symbols

From Flag United States Wind Stock Photo 2004048251 | Shutterstock

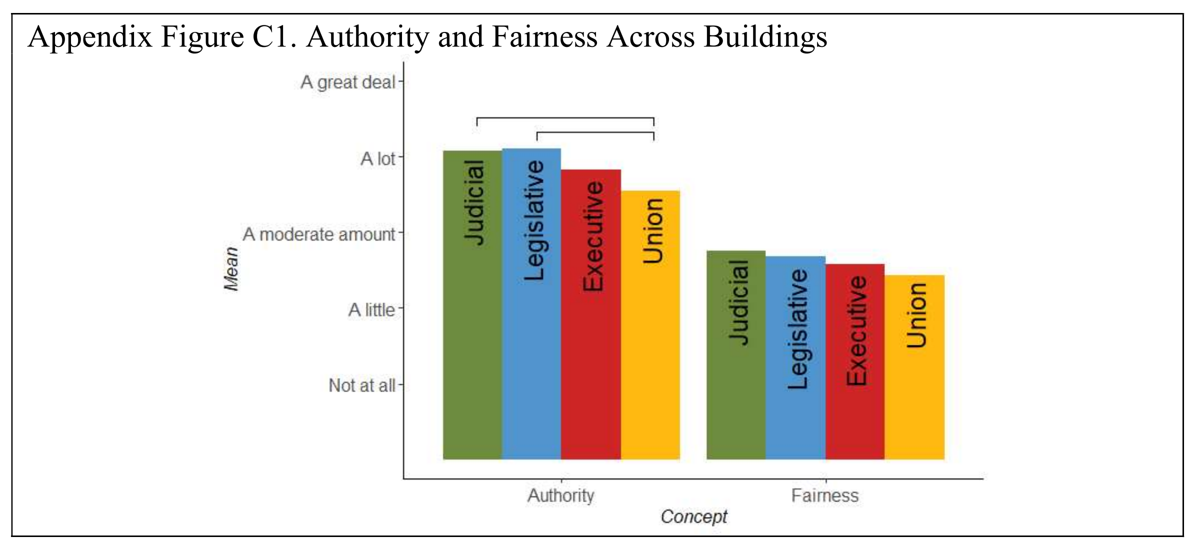
From Constitution of America, We the People Stock Photo - Alamy

Appendix 3C. Additional Concepts Rated in Study 2: Authority and Fairness

Buildings

Results for authority are nearly identical to those found for power in the main analysis. There were no significant differences in participants' ratings for authority across the three branches. When compared to Union Station, both the Capitol ($p < 0.00$) and the Supreme Court ($p < 0.00$) were stronger elicitors of authority, but not the White House ($p < 0.14$). Results for fairness are more limited than justice in the main analysis. The Supreme Court only had a slight advantage in fairness compared to Union Station, though not in a two-tailed test ($p < 0.06$).

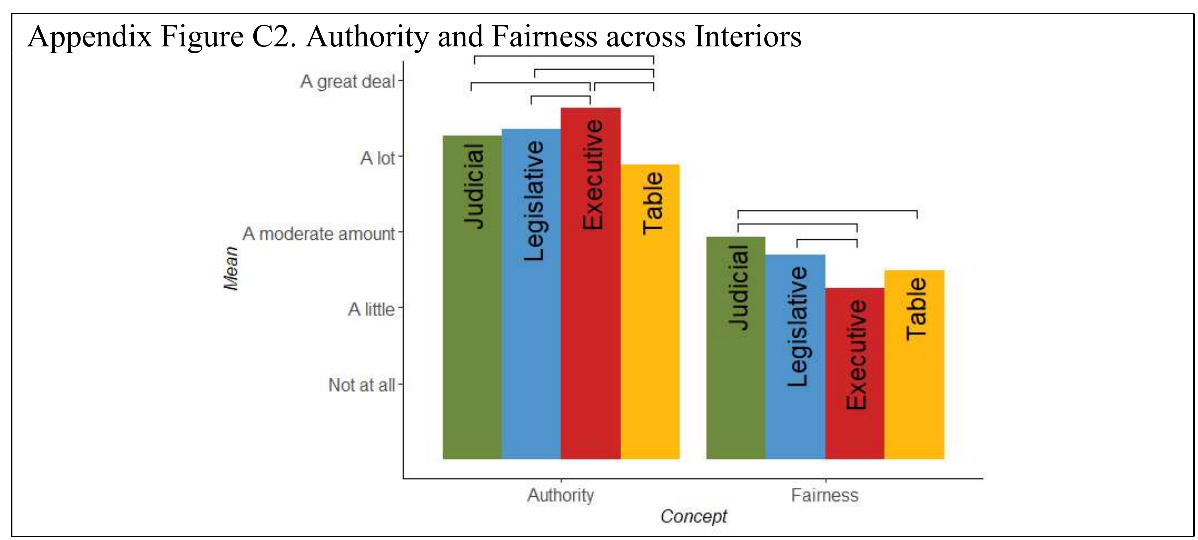
Appendix Figure C1. Authority and Fairness Across Buildings



Interiors

Results for authority were slightly more supportive of my expectations than power in the main analysis. Similar to power, the Oval Office conveyed message of authority at higher levels than the interiors of the other branches (House Chamber, $p < 0.04$; Court Bench, $p < 0.01$). All three branches were perceived to elicit more thoughts of authority than the standard office at the .05 level (Oval Office, $p < 0.00$; House Chamber, $p < 0.00$; Court Bench, $p < 0.00$). Results for fairness are slightly different than justice in the main analysis. The Court Bench similarly elicited more thoughts of fairness relative to the Oval Office ($p < 0.00$) as well as the House Chamber ($p < 0.02$). Yet, in this case the House Chamber was perceived as fairer than the Oval Office too ($p < 0.02$). Only the Court Bench was perceived as fairer than the standard office ($p < 0.01$).

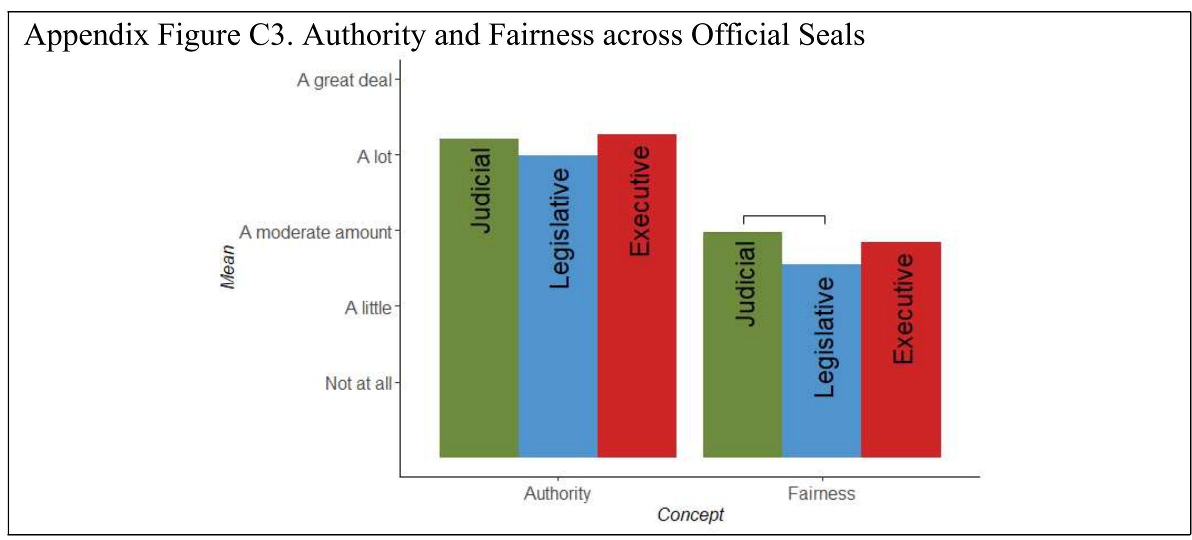
Appendix Figure C2. Authority and Fairness across Interiors



Seals

Results for authority are slightly more suggestive than power in the main analysis. There were no significant differences in perceived authority across the three branches. Results for fairness are slightly weaker than justice in the main analysis. The Supreme Court Seal only enjoyed an advantage in fairness over the HOR Seal ($p < 0.02$).

Appendix Figure C3. Authority and Fairness across Official Seals



Appendix Table C1. Correlations of Power and Justice across Images in Study 2

Image	Pearson's *r*
Buildings	
• White House	.462
• Capitol	.506
• Supreme Court	.441
• Union Station	.482
Interiors	
• Oval Office	.156
• House Chamber	.280
• Court Bench	.193
• Office	.305
Seals	
• Presidential	.317
• HOR	.024
• Supreme Court	.216

Chapter 5 Appendix

Appendix 5A. Questionnaire

After consenting to participate in the study, participants were asked the following questions:

- How many hours per day, on average, do you spend on social media? (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, Twitter)
- Generally speaking, how interested are you in what's going on in government and politics?
- We'd like to understand your feelings towards some institutions in American government using a "feeling thermometer". A rating of 0 degrees means you feel extremely cold and negative, whereas a rating of 100 degrees means you feel extremely warm and positive. You would rate the institution at 50 if you don't feel particularly positive or negative.
    - 3 sliders: Supreme Court, Congress, White House

Participants were then randomized to 1 of 3 institutional contexts and shown the experimental stimuli listed in the paper and later in the Appendix. They were asked the following questions:

- How likely would you be to read this news article?
- How likely would you be to share or retweet this news article?
- If [BRANCH] started making a lot of decisions that most people disagreed with, it might be better to do away with [BRANCH] altogether.
- People should obey [BRANCH] even when they disagree with its decisions.
- The right of [BRANCH] to make certain types of decisions should be reduced.
- [BRANCH] can usually be trusted to do what is best for the country as whole.
- In which state do you currently reside?
- What type of community best describes where you currently live?
- Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?
- Below is a 7-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Where would you place yourself on this scale?
- What is your sex?
- What is your age?
- Which racial or ethnic group best describes you?
- What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?
- What is your annual income?

Appendix 5B. Experimental Stimuli

The Presidency

The Supreme Court