

**Building Back with Partial Praise:
Public Opinion on the Biden Agenda**

Matt Grossmann

Michigan State University

Paige Haight

Michigan State University

Abstract:

President Joe Biden's central agenda, packaged as Build Back Better, was dramatically cut, and reshaped to later pass as the Inflation Reduction Act. Public support was muted, perhaps as a product of unsuccessful framing by advocates or public confusion about its contents or perhaps because its components were just not that popular. To assess, we conducted surveys (in Michigan, a critical swing state) at the height of the debate in December 2021 and then again after passage. During the debate, associating the plan with Biden's agenda reduced public support. But no frame mattered after respondents had answered questions about the bill's provisions. Support for the eventual Inflation Reduction Act law was higher than support for Build Back Better and did not depend on information or naming. But both omnibus social and environmental bills were less popular than Biden's traditional infrastructure bill. Some provisions, such as senior health care, were dramatically more popular than others, such as tax enforcement funding. These results suggest that some of the Biden agenda's modest popularity depended on the information the public received about it, but support was mostly driven by the mixed popularity of its many provisions, especially during the height of congressional debate.

With Democrats in full control of Congress and the White House in 2021, newly elected President Joe Biden laid out a comprehensive and ambitious agenda under the moniker Build Back Better, fostering comparisons to Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. It included energy and electricity development, environmental regulations, transportation infrastructure and subsidies, school development and funding, healthcare expansions under Medicare, Medicaid, and the Affordable Care Act, corporate and individual taxes and tax enforcement, national childcare and pre-kindergarten, family and medical leave, free community college, union expansions, and social welfare benefits.

But the administration immediately recognized that some parts would be a harder lift than others. They divided their announcement into two pieces: the American Jobs Plan (focused on infrastructure) and the (more redistributive) American Families Plan. After discussions with pivotal legislators, they isolated the least controversial provisions to include in a bipartisan infrastructure bill separate from a more ambitious and partisan Build Back Better Act. They also quickly began negotiating away key provisions of each measure to try to gain the support of recalcitrant Democratic Senators Joe Manchin and Kirsten Sinema.

At a few points, the agenda seemed in peril. In October and November 2021, House Democrats could not agree to pass either the infrastructure bill or the Build Back Better bill because of a dispute over whether to tie them together. On December 19th, Manchin announced that he would not support Build Back Better, making it impossible to pass. After restarting summer negotiations over a smaller package, Manchin walked away again in July, in what seemed like a death knell. But later that month, Manchin and Senate leaders came together around a renamed Inflation Reduction Act, salvaging several climate, tax, and health provisions and enabling passage.

Along the way, all sides appealed to public support for their positions. Biden, of course, claimed all of his goals had wide support. Republicans unsurprisingly claimed the proposals were unpopular. Manchin claimed that his revisions were making the bill more popular whereas those on the left, such as Senator Bernie Sanders, claimed they were eliminating popular provisions. Others blamed the framing of supporters or the media. As debate raged and polls saw reduced support over time, some thought the name of the package or its association with Biden was the problem and voters had not learned about the bills' contents.¹ By the time they passed, neither the infrastructure bill nor the Inflation Reduction Act gave Biden a boost in popularity. After Democrats lost control of Congress in the midterm election, hopes for more action largely evaporated—and voters increasingly sided with Republicans on the economy—leading many Democrats to perceive a missed opportunity.²

The Biden agenda did not fail completely with the public. It was far more popular than former President Trump's main initiatives at the time they passed.³ But given Democrats' rare chances to pass policies under unified government, the fall from grand ambitions to limited legislation with meager public reaction still raises the question: how popular was the Biden agenda? Did voters support its provisions but get turned off by the label? Did cutting back on its ambitions lead to a more acceptable outcome or lose the chance to gain more public support?

These are not just practical questions about one presidency. Political science has long found that voters may favor individual liberal policies but still react negatively when too many become law (Soroka and Wlezien 2022). But voters also hold stable moderate preferences across a range of issues (Fowler et al. 2022) and prefer compromise (Wolak 2020), perhaps providing a path to popular restrained policymaking. Americans do react to how issues are framed, especially if they are associated with a particular political leader (Druckman 2001). But the devil is often in the details. It

could be that voters turn against proposals once they see the specifics debated in Congress through the filter of the media, either because voters dislike the conflicts that ensue (Lovett 2021) or because the media emphasizes the political incentives of each side rather than policymaking as problem solving (Atkinson 2017).

If any policymaking process in Congress reduces public support, that would be bad news for any president and any set of congressional leaders. Alternatively, if public support is a function of the underlying popularity of the proposals and the public's support for moderation, that would suggest a more obvious path down the middle of the road. If public support can be easily manipulated by the names of bills or their associations with political leaders, that would open a lot more agency for presidents and congressional leaders to affect the outcomes, pursuing their own goals, moderate or extreme, with leverage to change public views.

As an initial step, we review public opinion on Biden's agenda (in Michigan, a critical swing state) at two time points: in the height of the battle in 2021 and after passage in 2022. We use survey experiments to assess whether learning the details of policy makes a difference for public opinions as well as whether Americans are moved by associating proposals with Biden. We also assess two comparisons: first, the popularity of individual provisions versus the package as a whole and second, support for the social and environmental agenda versus the infrastructure bill. We do so both as a practical after-action report on the Biden agenda and as a window into just how much information and policy details matter for public support. Although we find some effects of the information presented to the public, we also confirm that some of Biden's successes and failures were a simple function of mixed public support for Democratic proposals. Putting everything in one package means citizens assess the parts they support and oppose, leading to varied and differentiated support.

Political Sponsorship, Proposal Specificity, and Public Opinion

To gain support, government leaders and politicians often situate information such that their ideas resonate with prior beliefs of constituents about a topic or subject. This hope is that this persuasion can not only show immediate benefits for a specific proposal, but also have longer-lasting effects on political attitudes and voting behavior. Media coverage can also frame particular issues, such as support for public policy proposals, as instances of broader categories or consequences of particular considerations, even if reporters do not share the persuasive intent of policymakers. Biden's proposals were framed by Democrats to emphasize problems they were designed to solve, by Republicans as an agenda to arbitrarily move power to Washington, and by the media as a debate between warring factions between the parties and among Democrats.

Framing, the study of communications presenting information to cue a specific response from the recipient, is a multidisciplinary research area with a variety of overlapping frameworks and theories. But inconsistency in how framing is conceptualized and operationalized limits its usefulness as a broad theory (Oxley and Clawson 1997). Rather than test a generic category of frame expected to consistently produce the same outcomes, researchers reviewing the field recommend replacing framing terminology with precise language matching the cues used in specific contexts and their expected consequences (Cacciatore, Scheufele, & Iyenga 2015). Nonetheless, research findings have pinpointed some common patterns in public opinion response. Experiments show that framing is more likely to influence opinion change if the respondent understands the idea and the information is readily available in the respondent's mind, if the presented information is salient to a constituents' experiences, and if the respondent consciously evaluates the framing language for relevance to a specific question (Druckman 2001; Amsalem and Zoizner 2020).

In our case, different aspects of Biden’s agenda were available to Americans based on which policy proposals were emphasized, but the public may have come to the discussion with different accessible notions of what constitutes “infrastructure” or economic development policies. To some, environmental or health initiatives may have been less applicable to these broad goals; to others, the specific programs may have connected more with their personal experiences. Framing from supportive politicians could influence these perceptions—but only to a degree—and had to compete with opponents’ frames in media coverage. In real-world applications, it is useful to recognize that voters are already treated by a vast array of political messages from politicians and prior experience, limiting the potential for any new information to dislodge prior views.

Studies conducting survey experiments on framing effects often phrase questions either by presenting different information that is logically equivalent (equivalency framing) or presenting information that emphasizes a particular solution for a preference choice (Cacciatore, Scheufele and Iyengar 2016; Druckman 2001; Oxley 2020). But our interest is less in any one strategy than in how voters evaluate proposals with different information at hand. We can use split-sample experiments, comparisons across policy proposals, differences across time and context, and associations between support for specific provisions and the broader package to evaluate the consistency and malleability of voter views. Researchers can both show the existence of some potential framing effect but also evaluate how much it might matter in a real-world political situation, especially in comparison to other large prior differences in opinion.

One key relevant prior finding is the influence of a policy’s perceived political sponsorship. Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus (2013) demonstrated that a politician’s party affiliation can significantly impact public reception of policies. In experimental settings, the same policies were more likely to be approved when associated with a party that constituents favored, illustrating a

distinct bias based on political affiliation. These findings were later extended by Leeper (2017), who found that the framing effect could be magnified or diminished depending on the public's prior knowledge and opinion of the politician sponsoring the policy. In situations where a controversial politician was linked to a policy, participants exhibited stronger reactions, either positive or negative, based on their pre-existing attitudes towards the politician. In our case, Biden went into the congressional debates with lower approval ratings, polarized by partisanship, perhaps putting a ceiling on public support for proposals identified with him.

The specificity of a policy proposal also significantly affects public perception, as found in studies conducted by Jerit (2009) and Boudreau and MacKenzie (2014). Both studies highlighted that increased specificity often led to heightened public scrutiny and criticism. For instance, Jerit found that participants were more likely to oppose a policy if it was presented in greater detail, possibly due to an increased perception of risk or uncertainty. Boudreau and MacKenzie (2014) showed that specificity could either bolster or undermine support depending on the policy's inherent complexity. For simpler policies, increased detail often fostered support. In contrast, more complex policies suffered from greater specificity, presumably due to the potential for confusion or misunderstanding. Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook (2014) found that the effect of policy specificity could be moderated by the attributed politician's popularity. Highly detailed proposals from unpopular politicians were more likely to face rejection, while the same level of specificity from a popular politician could increase policy acceptance.

The differentiation can be useful to framers but it may make the experimental findings less applicable to a polarized environment and multi-dimensional policy debate where lots of different frames are used. The level of detail can matter, but it depends on how citizens evaluate those details

in their political environment. And not all proposals will be equally subject to change based on how they are described.

In our case, the trade-offs associated with specificity were only partly analogous. The discussions were less about the specificity of any particular proposal than about the omnibus nature of the package: without any specificity, there was little besides a name. But once you started naming specific proposals in a very large bill, there was not an obvious place to stop in the details. Indeed, the public is always trying to understand policy complexity with labels and categories. Kuklinski et al. (2020) found that individuals often apply cognitive shortcuts when evaluating policies. Patterson (2021) and Garcia-Retamero & Cokely (2021) found that media framing and social media discussions can significantly affect how a specific policy is perceived. Hawthorne and Lang (2021) suggested that changing a policy's name could shift public opinion due to varying semantic connotations. The transition from "Build Back Better" to "Inflation Reduction Act" might influence perceptions, simply due to the change in terminology, as might the emphasis on the name rather than the provisions. We take from prior findings that the name and association with the president could have mattered, as could which provisions are highlighted, but do not expect any one description to dramatically alter opinion.

In an omnibus package, it is also unclear how voters should feel about the overall initiative based on which of the specific proposals they favor. In the arena of voting, political scientists assess whether citizens vote "correctly" based on how their policy preferences match up to those of the candidates (Lau and Redlawsk 1997). If voters support one candidate's policy views more than the others, a correct voter would be for that candidate. As a starting point, we can assess the extent to which an analogous decision rule applies to support for big policy packages. To what extent do

voters who support most of its components support the overall bill? Did Biden need voters to support only the majority of his packages' provisions or nearly everything?

The Perceived Effects of Framing and Provisions on Popularity of the Biden Agenda

Consultants and media commentators viewed Biden's name "Build Back Better" as crucial for the policy's reception and its eventual success or failure. The name here invokes a sense of resilience and progressive change. It conveys the idea of not only recovering ("building back") from the COVID-19 pandemic and associated recession, but also improving upon what was before ("better"). The phrase was a strategic frame meant to connect with voters who had experienced setbacks—but also an umbrella big enough to incorporate all kinds of particular policies. It sought to convey a simple, understandable goal: recovering from the current crisis and striving for something better. For example, Senator Elizabeth Warren often referred to the policy by its name when talking about it, emphasizing the need to "Build Back Better" from the pandemic, climate change, and economic inequality.

The policy's specific provisions, such as investments in infrastructure, green energy, and education, were wrapped under the name "Build Back Better." Politicians, such as Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg, pointed out these specific provisions in public addresses to highlight the policy's comprehensive approach. For example, Buttigieg would often underscore the name when talking about specific infrastructure projects, emphasizing the cohesive nature of the proposal. But the understanding of the policy's specifics by the general public varied. A significant part of the public discourse was indeed focused on its broad themes rather than the intricate details of the plan. But criticism also focused on its unwieldy, mixed nature, with many focused only on its high price tag (initially summarized as a \$3.5 trillion proposal, paired down to a \$1.85 trillion proposal in

December 2021 and then a \$500 billion proposal in summer 2022) and fights over just how big it would be. These dynamics are common for large policy proposals, as it can be difficult to effectively communicate all the complex components of such a plan to the public, but it took on an extraordinary scale as Biden and Democrats tried to unite their disparate issue area interests into one massive proposal.

But research on congressional dynamics and media coverage suggest that it might be difficult for particular leader frames to make a difference in the course of the sausage making. Voters do prefer compromise, both in the abstract and when it comes to particular policies (Wolak 2020). Congressional policymaking makes these compromises nearly inevitable, as leaders usually have to choose between gutting large components of their initial proposals or not passing anything at all (Curry and Lee 2020). When a bill does not pass, fingers point in every direction to explain failure. But even when a bill does pass in compromised form, it usually provokes whimpering support for the final product among proponents and forthright disdain among the opponents, leading to media coverage that is not very positive (Curry and Lee 2020). When the media covers conflicts and compromises in motion, it often focuses on the conflicts themselves, which are in turn made more salient by the close attention (Lovett 2021). Indeed, Build Back Better coverage was mainly about whether any bill would pass given wide divergence across Democrats and uniform opposition by Republicans. The media also emphasizes the political incentives each side is facing to pass something and maintain popularity, rather than how the proposed policies will affect constituents (Atkinson 2017). Perhaps all it takes for a policy to be more popular is for debates over it to recede from media coverage and pass under the radar.

Assessing Public Support for the Biden Agenda

To test the contours of public opinion on the Biden agenda, this study uses two rounds of the State of the State Survey (SOSS) from December 2021 and December 2022, conducted by the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research (IPPSR) at Michigan State University. The SOSS is a statewide survey, launched three times per year to adult Michigan residents for responses on a variety of social and political topics. The surveys are fielded by YouGov to be representative of the statewide population, using panels of hundreds of thousands of repeat respondents to create a group of respondents matching census data for the statewide population. It is then further weighted by race, age, education, and partisanship.

Michigan was a swing state in the 2016 and 2020 elections, famously surprising analysts by moving to the Republican column and enabling Trump's victory in 2016 but then returning to the Democratic column in 2020 to propel Biden's victory. Michigan campaigns tend to emphasize transportation infrastructure and manufacturing jobs, but Michigan voters largely mirror the American public in their interests and support for health, environmental, and social welfare initiatives. Michigan voters also largely mirror the nation in their level of attention to congressional policymaking and their overall support for Biden (both low).

The two surveys used for this analysis conducted a split-sample experiment by randomly assigning participants into one of three questions about the Build Back Better Bill (December 2021 survey) and the Inflation Reduction Act (December 2022 survey). The December 2021 survey collected a total of 1,351 responses of the 2,680 invitations. The December 2022 survey collected a total of 1,242 responses from the 6,036 invited. The final datasets included 1,000 complete responses for both surveys.

In addition to the random assignment, the 2021 and 2022 surveys included a question about support for the Infrastructure bill (before the treatment) and each provision in the bills (after the

treatment). After hearing all of the provisions, respondents in each condition were then asked again whether they supported the proposal. That enables comparisons across treatments as well as, for each treatment, comparison between the initial question and after hearing the provisions. In addition, we can compare support for the social and environmental agenda with support for the infrastructure bill and we can compare across support for different provisions and the total package.

Each question is framed to include different levels of information. We based these on poll questions that were being asked at the time and getting different results. That means that we can assess whether differences in reported opinions might be based on what information was included, but cannot isolate any one specific provision or language difference that leads to any differences. The three versions of the split-sample question include either just the name of the bill and its association with Biden, basic information about the bill, or detailed information about the bill's provisions. In the first survey, respondents were randomly assigned into one of three questions:

- “Do you support or oppose President Biden’s \$1.85 trillion Build Back Better spending plan currently being debated in Congress?”
- “Do you support or oppose the \$1.85 trillion reconciliation bill before Congress to fund clean energy programs, pre-kindergarten, healthcare initiatives, and other soft infrastructure?”
- “There is a proposal in Congress to spend \$1.85 trillion over the next ten years to expand health insurance coverage, subsidize renewable energy use, extend tax credits for families with children, fund early childhood education, and increase taxes on corporations and high-income individuals. Based on what you know, do you support or oppose this plan?”

Respondents' level of support was measured on a 5 – point Likert scale where 1 = Strongly oppose and 5 = Strongly support. After respondents were asked for their level of support for one of the three questions, all respondents are asked for their level of support for each provision of the bill (see appendix A for all provision questions) using the 5-point Likert scale.

Following the provision questions, all respondents were asked a second time for their level of support of Build Back Better bill: “Now that you know more about the provisions in the Build Back Better plan Congress is considering, do you support or oppose the plan?”, and coded using the same coding scheme. Before any of these questions, respondents were asked for their level of support for the Infrastructure Bill: “Do you support or oppose the \$1 trillion bill passed by Congress to build roads, bridges, railroads, and other hard infrastructure?” All responses were also collapsed and recoded into 1 equals “support” and 0 equals “all else” to get the proportion of support.

In the December 2022 survey, respondents were again asked about the infrastructure bill and then randomly assigned to one of three similar treatment questions about the IRA:

- Do you support or oppose President Biden's \$500 billion Inflation Reduction Act passed by Congress?
- Do you support or oppose the \$500 billion reconciliation bill Congress passed to fund clean energy programs and healthcare initiatives?
- Congress passed a bill to spend \$500 billion over the next ten years to subsidize renewable energy use, address climate change, and expand health insurance coverage. It was funded by increasing taxes on corporations and tax enforcement to reduce the deficit. Based on what you know, do you support or oppose this bill?

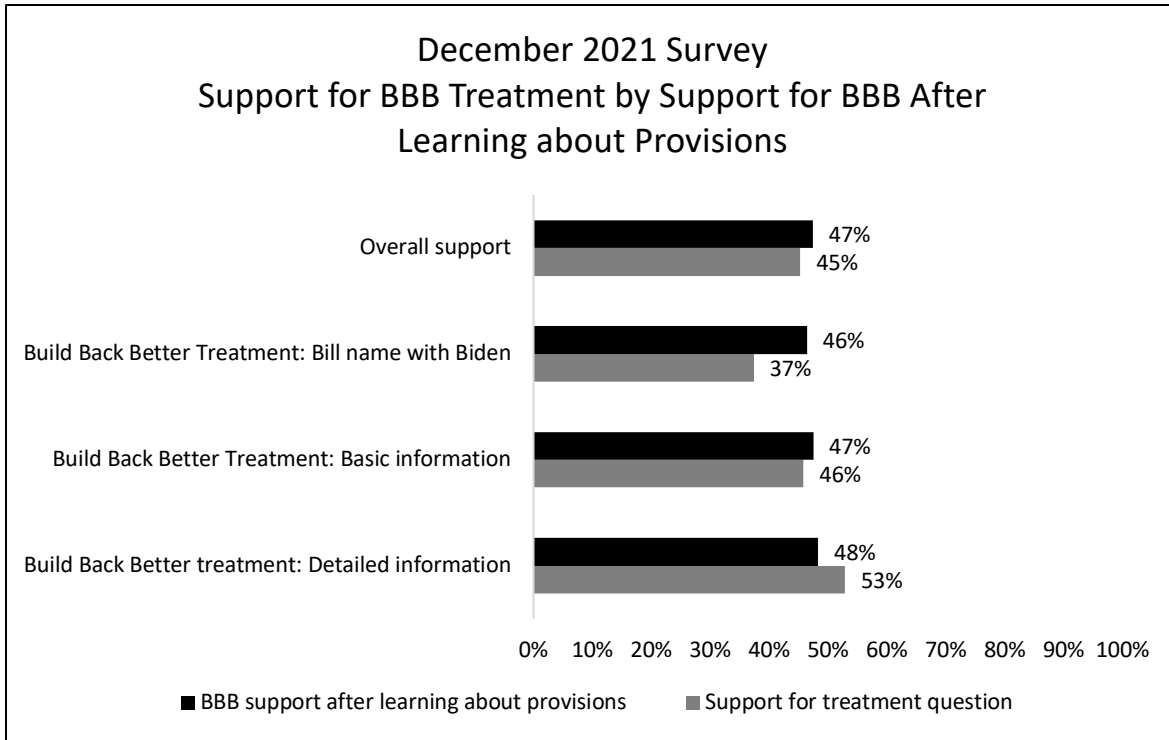
Response options for the treatment questions in the 2022 survey were dichotomous. For this analysis, data were recoded to match the December 2021 survey such that “support” equals 1 and “all else” equals 0.

Respondents were again asked their overall support for each provision of the IRA (see Appendix A for complete set of questions). Response options were also on a 5 – point Likert scale. The final question asked whether respondents support or oppose the IRA after answering for each provision. The order of questions in the December 2022 survey followed the same format as the December 2021 survey where respondents were first asked for their overall support of the Infrastructure Bill, then given a randomly-assigned question about the level of support for the IRA, followed by asking for their level of support for each provision of the IRA, and finally asking if they support or oppose the IRA.

Analyzing Public Support for the Biden Agenda

In December 2021, Americans had already endured months of media coverage about Biden’s agenda and fights in the U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate surrounding its provisions and Biden’s attempt to build support for them. The infrastructure bill had already passed and Build Back Better had been slimed down. But there was still public confusion about its provisions and goals. Figure 1 reports public support for Build Back Better across the three randomly-assigned conditions, each for the initial question and then after respondents have recorded their support for each of the bill’s provisions.

Figure 1. Support for Build Back Better Package Across Experimental Conditions



Comparing the proportion of support for the Build Back Better across treatment groups before learning about the provisions, we found 46 percent of respondents supported the bill who received basic information, which was less than 53 percent in support who received detailed information; either led to much higher levels of initial support than naming only Biden and the bill's name (37 percent). These differences were statistically significant ($p < 0.00$). This suggests that more detailed information about the bill led to greater support. Associating the bill with its name and Biden's support led to the lowest level of support. These differences were also significant and similar in magnitude in analyses that use the full scale of responses from strongly support to strongly oppose ($p < 0.01$).

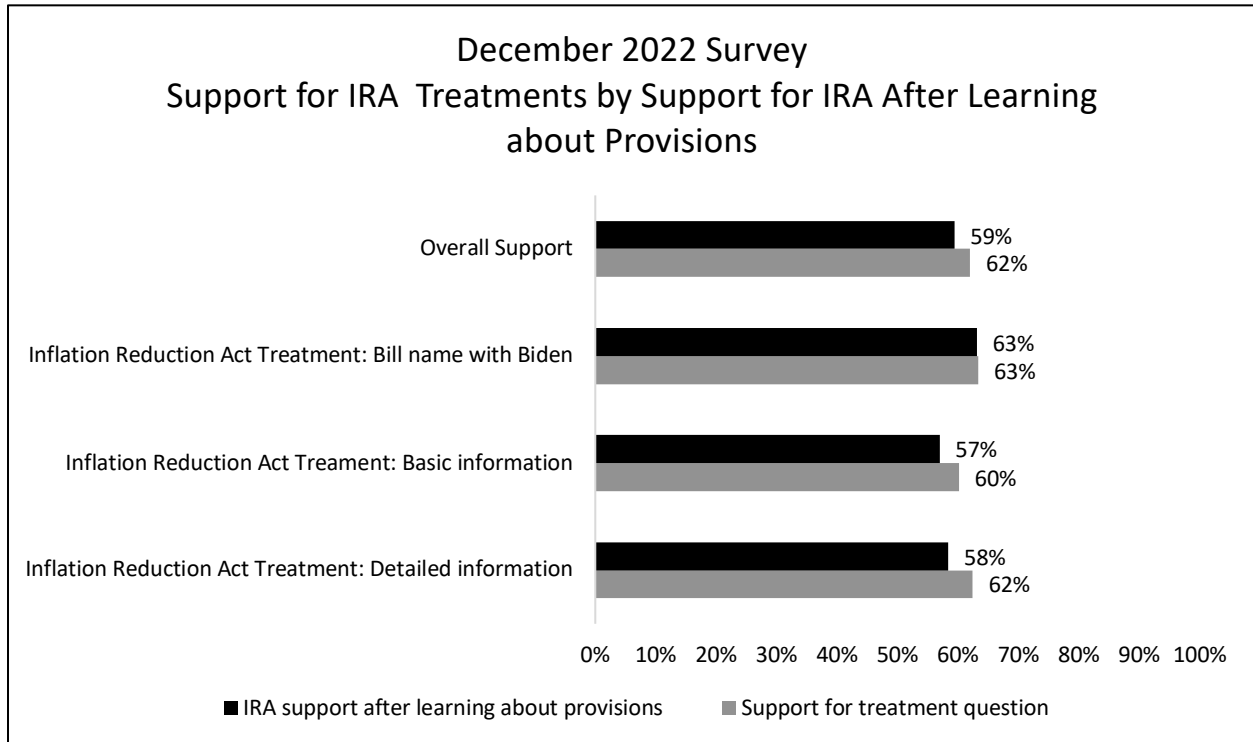
We also saw some significant changes from the first response citizens gave to the second response after answering questions about each of the provisions. For those who received the detailed treatment, the average level of support after learning about the provisions decreased

($p < 0.00$). From those who received the Biden name and bill title, the average level of support after learning about the provisions increased (even though it was still called Build Back Better), ($p < 0.01$). There was no change for the basic treatment. That suggests that learning the detailed provisions may increase support for those who only know the bill by its name and association with Biden, but might actually decrease support if they are asked about some provisions they like less than those they focus on in an initial detailed description. The tests for proportions approving reflect similar findings as the test in means for the full scale ($p < 0.00$).

Prior to receiving the randomly-assigned question, respondents were asked their level of support for the Infrastructure Bill. More respondents favored the infrastructure bill (57 percent) than the Build Back Better Bill after learning its provisions (47 percent). The average support across all provisions was 56 percent, meaning that more respondents favored most provisions than the bill as a whole. These differences were both statistically significant, as were differences using the full Likert scales ($p < 0.00$).

In the December 2022 survey, we asked respondents for their opinions of the Biden agenda. But by this time, the bill had been transformed and passed into law as the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA). It now contained mostly environmental and tax provisions, with some health provisions. Figure 2 reports levels of support for the proposal described by its name and association with Biden, in simple terms, and in detailed terms.

Figure 2. Support for Inflation Reduction Act Package Across Experimental Conditions

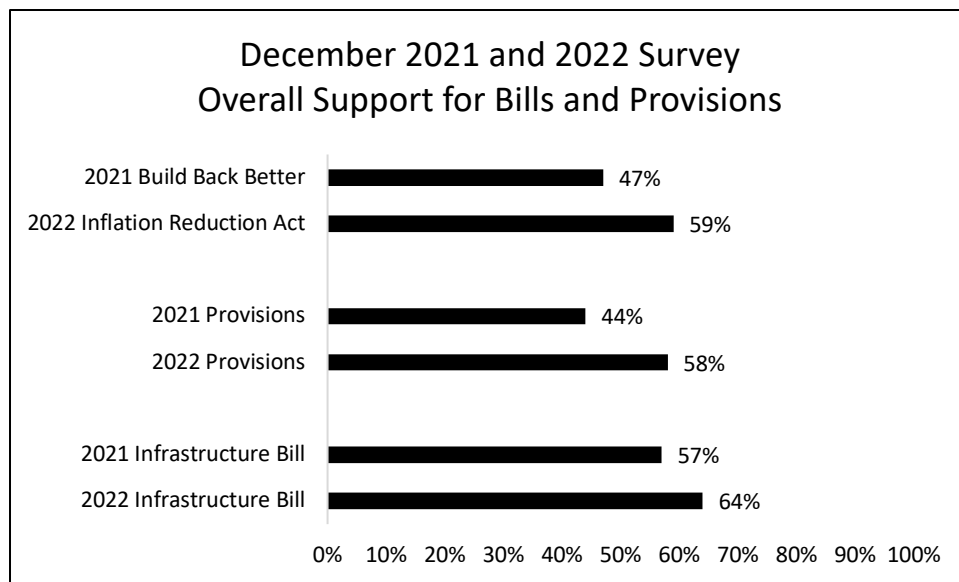


Tests comparing the proportion of approval from the December 2022 survey found no significant differences across the IRA treatment questions. Support averaged 62 percent across treatments, much higher than for Build Back Better one year earlier. Associating the bill with Biden or its name no longer made a difference in levels of voter support and nearly did the level of information provided about its provisions. Asking voters to assess individual provisions also did not increase support among those who had already heard a detailed description. Voter opinion was not as malleable, but was actually more supportive, after the agenda became law.

Since this survey was after the IRA’s passage, this might suggest more people were already aware of the bill’s provisions because of media coverage, perhaps perceiving it less controversially. But it also may suggest Michiganders simply liked the more circumscribed bill more than the larger Build Back Better package.

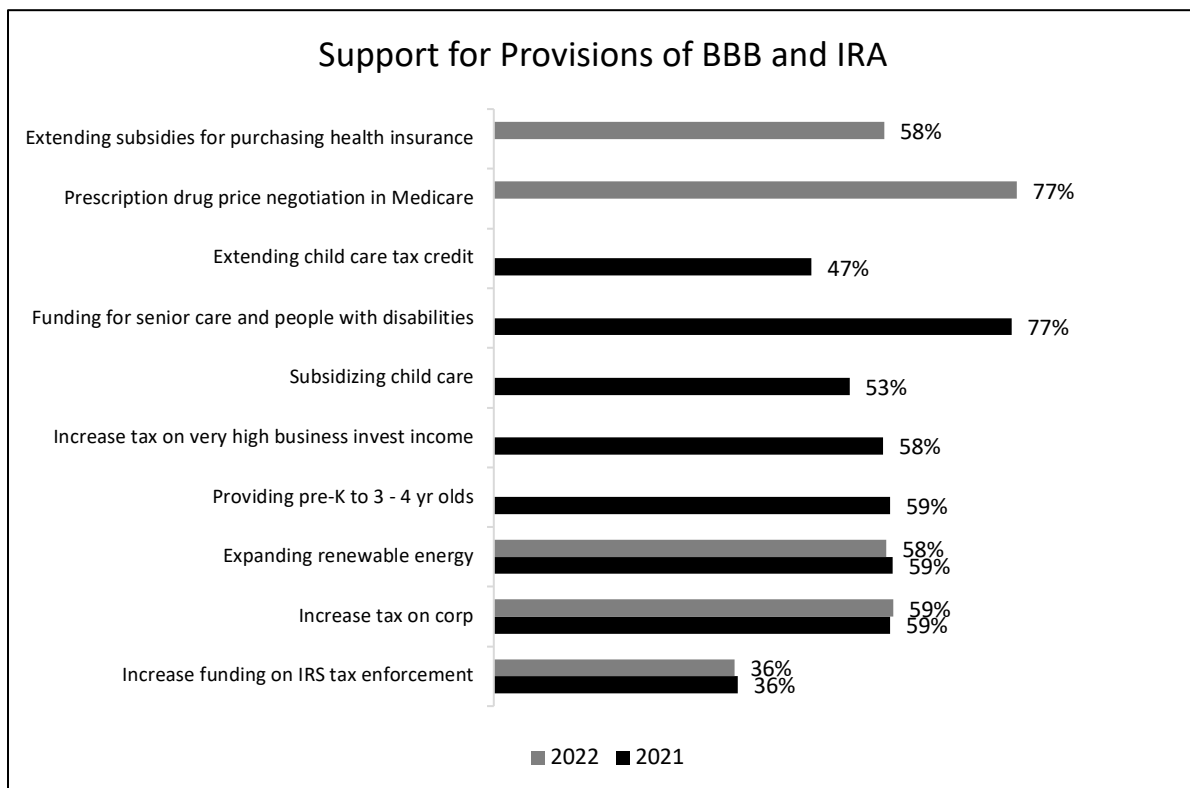
Indeed, the bill was more popular, garnering majority support. On average, 59 percent of Michiganders supported it after hearing about its provisions. The average level of support across different provisions was also 58 percent. This was still lower than support for the Infrastructure Bill in the same survey (now 64 percent) but was roughly the same as support for the Infrastructure Bill in the 2021 survey. Comparing the proportions in a test, more people supported the Infrastructure Bill than the average provision of the IRA or the IRA as a whole after learning about its provisions in 2022. Figure 3 summarizes public support for the two packages. The infrastructure bill was most popular, especially a year after its passage in the 2022 survey. But the IRA was also popular, both in its individual provisions and for the bill as a whole. Only the Build Back Better bill was moderately unpopular, both in its provisions and for the package. The effects of different information and of associating the bill with Biden were only apparent on Build Back Better and not large enough to make the bill more popular than the IRA.

Figure 3. Overall Support for Packages and Provisions Across Surveys



We have thus far averaged support across provisions, but not all provisions were equally popular. Figure 4 reports the levels of support for each provision we tested, including some that were only in the Build Back Better package, some that were only highlighted in the Inflation Reduction Act package, and some that were included in both. Findings from the proportion of support for provisions from the 2021 and 2022 survey were similar within shared questions about both. This included the consistently unpopular increase in tax enforcement funding and the consistently popular increase in corporate taxes and renewable energy investments.

Figure 4: Support for specific provisions of Build Back Better and the Inflation Reduction Act

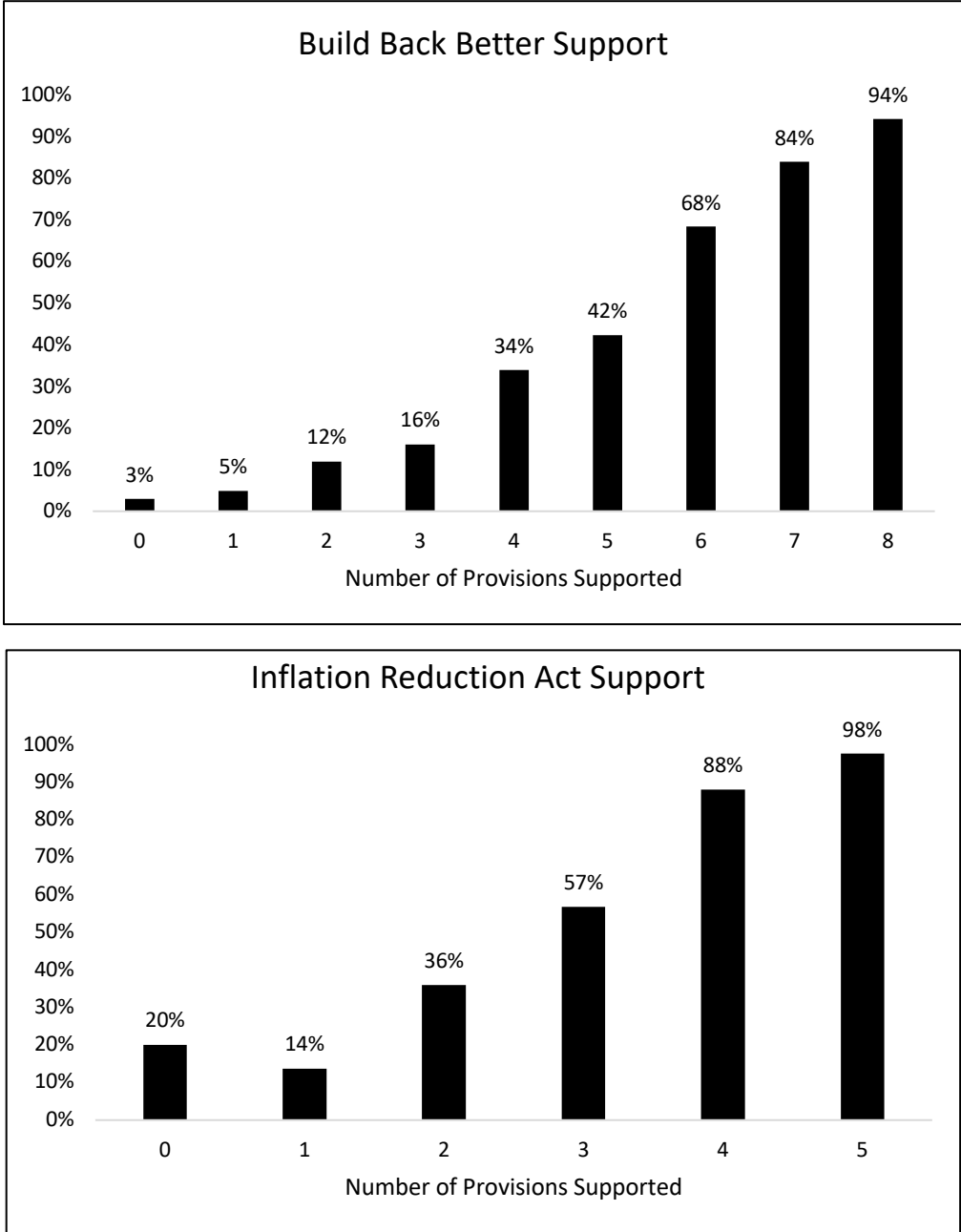


Some provisions of each package were also popular: led by the funding for senior care in Build Back Better and the prescription drug price negotiation in the IRA. Other provisions of Build

Back Better received close to half public support, including child tax credits and subsidized child care, two provisions later dropped from the package. The picture that emerges matches neither the triumphant claims of Democrats that the bill was full of exceedingly popular provisions and simply held back by subpar marketing nor the claims of Republicans that the public only supported hard infrastructure and objected to the high costs or taxes in the package. Instead, the public had mixed views on the provisions and that was largely reflected in their mixed views on the package as a whole. Although Democratic leaders did remove some of the unpopular provisions in the scaled down version of the bill they passed, it still included an unpopular provision.

Figure 5 summarizes support for each bill in the question following the provision questions based on how many of the individual provisions respondents supported. This is somewhat analogous to the “correct voting” standard, where citizens should support the option mostly aligned with their preferences. Build Back Better was larger and we asked about more of its provisions (a total of 8) compared to the IRA (5 provisions). There is clear relationship between support for provisions and support for both bills, suggesting that Michiganders are at least on the right track matching their individual preferences with their support for the broader packages. Support increases monotonically for Build Back Better as respondents support more provisions and nearly so for the IRA. Yet there is a key difference: respondents had to support 6 of the 8 Build Back Better provisions to yield majority support for the bill as a whole whereas they only had to support a majority of IRA provisions (3 out of 5) to reach majority support for the IRA as a whole. This suggests that the relative popularity of the IRA provisions helped increase its overall support but did not entirely explain why voters held the Build Back Better to a higher standard in the midst of debate. Perhaps bills are judged more by their least popular provision or are judged more poorly if they are too multifaceted and complex.

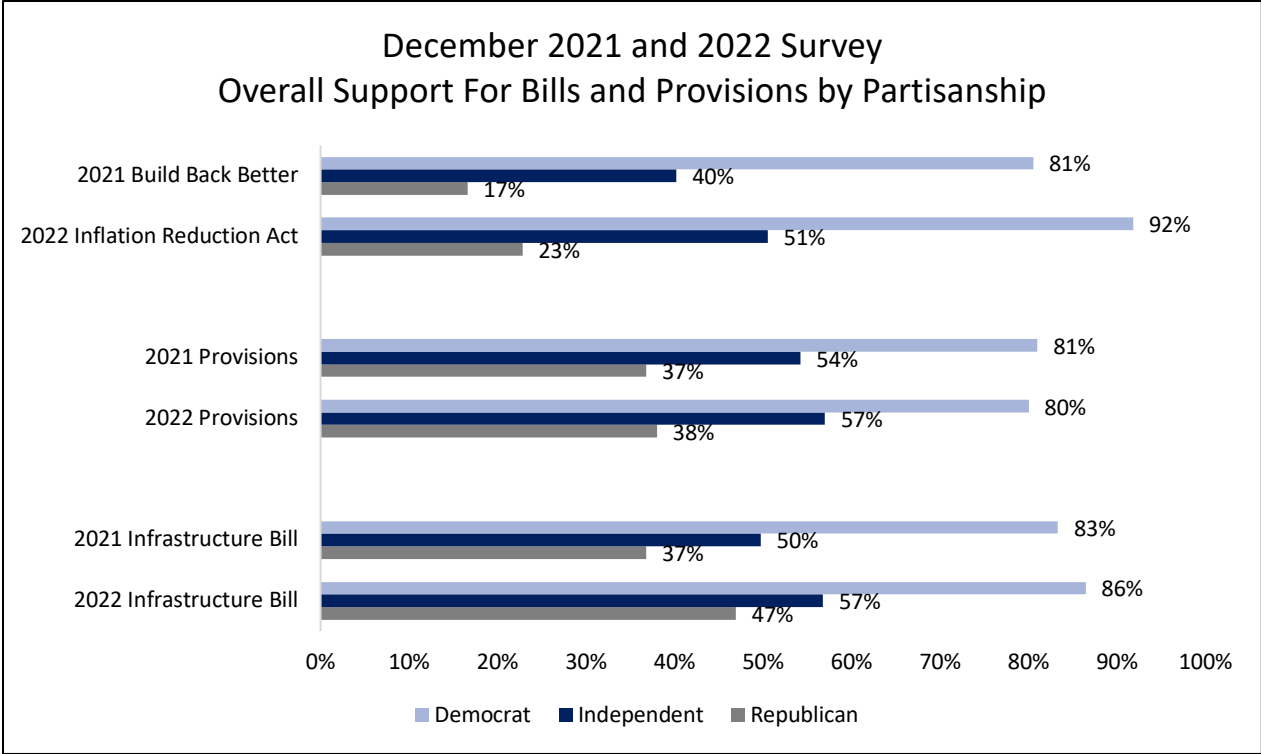
Figure 5. Support for Each Package Based on the Number of Provisions Supported



One factor limiting support for any of the bills was, of course, partisanship. Republican leaders opposed the bills and that likely moved Republican voters further against them. Figure 6 summarizes support by respondents’ partisanship, for the Infrastructure bill, the Build Back Better bill, and the IRA, along with the average support for each bill’s provisions from the 2021 and 2022

surveys. Unsurprisingly, all of President Biden’s agenda was most popular among Democrats and least popular among Republicans. But several trends were clear across partisan lines. The IRA was more popular than Build Back Better, even though both had popular and unpopular provisions. The Infrastructure bill remained popular in both surveys; the IRA was a bit more polarizing across partisan lines. In all cases, the bills had large partisan splits but Democrats did not uniformly support them and Republicans did not uniformly oppose them.

Figure 6: Support by Party for Build Back Better and the Inflation Reduction Act



Democrats supported Biden’s agenda at high levels—though when they objected, they did so most strongly for the same provisions that raised alarm among Republicans. Independent support largely matched overall levels of support for the bills, though in most cases it was closer to Republican than Democratic levels of support. There is little evidence that Democrats objected

because the bills did not go far enough toward the liberal priorities. Instead, it seems that Democrats were largely supportive, and Independents objected to the bills with the largest size and scope.

Although the bills were wide in scope and generated significant media coverage during the congressional debates, they were not as salient as some other important policy changes during the Biden administration. Our December 2022 survey asked respondents in an open-ended question to recall the most significant policy changes over the last two years. Only 30 respondents out of 1,000 spontaneously mentioned the IRA, though 93 respondents mentioned something about climate or energy (and may have had the IRA in mind). Only 58 mentioned the infrastructure bill. The most popular response by far (with 396 mentions) was the Supreme Court's abortion decision. The survey also asked respondents in closed-ended questions how much they had heard about each of the major policy changes on a scale from "none" to "a lot." Only 6 percent of respondents had heard a lot about the IRA (described with its provisions) whereas 58 percent said they had heard nothing. The salience of the IRA trailed the abortion decision and student loan changes but was slightly more salient than the infrastructure bill. Despite all of the communications effort designed to alter public perceptions of the Biden administration's core domestic agenda, much of the public paid little attention or quickly forgot about it.

Implications for Policymakers and Public Opinion

President Biden's agenda was scaled back dramatically to pass Congress. Although public opinion was not responsible for the failure, which is a normal part of legislating, modest public support was seen as a hinderance. If Biden's proposals had been overwhelmingly popular, perhaps they would have faced less pushback from swing-state Senators or moderate House members. Rather than take credit for the IRA's success, commentary afterwards has focused on what went

wrong. It is always easier to point to failures of communication over consistently unpopular ideas. And there is political science evidence that framing by politicians, or the media can matter. But overall, our results are more consistent with a large agenda having mixed popularity than a failure to sell a universally popular deal.

The evidence is consistent with some informational framing effects at the height of the battle over Build Back Better, when the bill's name and association with Biden proved less popular than spelling out its provisions. But even those initial differences were eliminated once Michigan voters were asked about their support for each of the specific provisions of the bill. At that point, those who had heard less about it became more supportive and those that had heard more about it became less so, equalizing support across conditions. After the IRA became law, it increased in popularity relative to Build Back Better and became much less susceptible to framing. Through it all, the infrastructure bill remained more popular. Some specific provisions of Biden's agenda were also quite popular, including some that were dropped. But some provisions of the bills were a lot less popular, including some that remained. The differences between popular and unpopular provisions were far greater than the differences in support following different framings. Internal Revenue Service enforcement, which was included in both bills, was least popular and became the subject of Republican attack ads in the 2022 campaign.

Overall, Michiganders were largely voting "correctly" on each overall bill based on their support for its provisions. But they held Build Back Better to a higher standard, meaning they had to support most of the bill's spending and tax provisions to register support for the overall bill. That suggests that the context of the debate do matter. Perhaps media coverage of the fighting among Democrats signaled conflict rather than problem solving for voters, as it has for prior legislation (Atkinson 2017; Lovett 2021). But despite Democrats' restrained enthusiasm for the final passed law

(matching prior instances of compromised policymaking, see Curry and Lee 2020), the bill became more popular as the distance from that conflictual policymaking grew. It also may have faded from memory, with few Michiganders recalling it as an important recent policy change.

The circumstances of our investigation were not ideal for isolating the effects of frames independent of ongoing political debates. Some respondents likely heard of these provisions, names, or Biden associations before. But that is a more realistic scenario for the choices faced by lawmakers trying to sell a proposal. Most frames are deployed against opposition frames and within the context of a media trying to convey both sides and add its own frames. In that context, we can replicate findings that point to the importance of associating plans with political leaders and some findings on the importance of specificity. But we do not see much evidence that frames alone can overcome unpopular ideas or undermine popular ideas. Instead, it seems to be mostly a matter of attention, with voters judging omnibus packages based on which provisions come to mind. By the time the law passed, reminding voters of the association with Biden or the bills many provisions no longer made a difference: voters had largely made up their mind, even if it was not at the top of their mind.

For policymakers, the lessons are not that promising. If they want to advance a package that combines popular and unpopular elements—especially if the unpopular provisions are pay-fors for more popular options—it will be difficult to sell. Although some of the tax increases were popular, for example, enforcing tax collection with more Internal Revenue Service agents remains unpopular. But it is not clear that passing all of the provisions individually would be any more successful. Put all of your agenda items together and you may suffer voter confusion and anger. But pull them apart and you can let others take credit for the popular aspects without finding a way to pass the less popular components. That is why more liberal lawmakers wanted to link the popular infrastructure bill with their own wish list. In the end, they achieved quite a bit and maintained middling but

reasonable popularity—but that does not mean there was a way to pass an even larger popular bill. The best argument for doing more legislatively might simply be that the public will eventually forget the whole ordeal, likely making an electoral impact much bigger in theory than in practice.

Biden was able to pass a relatively popular set of bills by negotiating away many of the more controversial elements. That does not seem to be because Manchin renamed it as an inflation fighting vehicle or because they systematically removed everything unpopular. Instead, they satisfied the holdouts by reducing the size of the package, which may have let voters focus on a smaller number of proposals. Biden did not get all he wanted, but the legislative process did produce a more popular bill and the compromises many claim to favor. The next president will probably bite off more than they can chew at the start as well. They should expect to win some and lose some, rather than blame the wrong message or public misunderstanding for the inevitable compromises in policymaking.

¹ For example, see Kelsey Snell and Barbara Sprunt. 2021. “Democrats are struggling to sell Biden’s agenda. It isn’t the first time, either.” NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2021/12/10/1062895561/democrats-struggles-to-sell-bidens-agenda-mirror-past-messaging-woes>

² For example, see Lydia Saad. 2023. “Neither Party Well-Liked, but GOP Holds Advantage on Issues.” Gallup. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/511979/neither-party-liked-gop-holds-advantage-issues.aspx>

³ See the comparison chart of popularity across major presidential initiatives from Chris Warshaw. 2018. “The extraordinary unpopularity of Trump’s child separation policy (in one graph).” The Washington Post Monkey Cage Blog. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/06/19/the-extraordinary-unpopularity-of-trumps-family-separation-policy-in-one-graph/>

REFERENCES

- Amsalem, E., & Zoizner, A. (2022). Real, but Limited: A Meta-Analytic Assessment of Framing Effects in the Political Domain. *British Journal of Political Science*, 52(1), 221–237.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123420000253>
- Atkinson, M. L. (2017.) *Combative Politics: The Media and Perceptions of Lawmaking*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bolsen, T., Druckman, J. N., & Cook, F. L. (2014). Communication and Collective Actions: A Survey Experiment on Motivating Energy Conservation in the U.S. *Journal of Experimental Political Science*, 1(1), 24-38. doi:10.1017/xps.2014.2
- Boudreau, C., & MacKenzie, S. A. (2014). Informing the Electorate? How Party Cues and Policy Information Affect Public Opinion about Initiatives. *American Journal of Political Science*, 58(1), 48-62. doi:10.1111/ajps.12054
- Cacciatore, M., Scheufele, D., & Iyengar, S. (2015). The End of Framing As We Know it ... and the Future of Media Effects. *Mass Communication & Society*, 19.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2015.1068811>
- Curry, J. M. and Frances E. Lee. 2020. *The Limits of Party: Congress and Lawmaking in a Polarized Era*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Druckman, J. N. (2001). *The Implications of Framing Effects for Citizen Competence*.
- Druckman, J. N., Peterson, E., & Slothuus, R. (2013). How Elite Partisan Polarization Affects Public Opinion Formation. *American Political Science Review*, 107(1), 57–79.
doi:10.1017/S0003055412000500

- Fine, T. S. (1992). The impact of issue framing on public opinion: Toward affirmative action programs. *The Social Science Journal*, 29(3), 323–334. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0362-3319\(92\)90025-D](https://doi.org/10.1016/0362-3319(92)90025-D)
- Fowler, A., Hill, S. J., Lewis, J. B., Tausanovitch, C., Vavreck, L., and Warshaw, (2023). Moderates. *American Political Science Review*, 117(2): 643-660. doi:10.1017/S0003055422000818
- Garcia-Retamero, R., & Cokely, E. T. (2021). Communicating Health Risks with Visual Aids. Unpublished manuscript.
- Hawthorne, J., & Lang, A. (2021). Impact of Policy Terminology on Public Opinion: A Case Study of U.S. Health Care Reform. Unpublished manuscript.
- Jacoby, W. G. (2000). Issue Framing and Public Opinion on Government Spending. *American Journal of Political Science*, 44(4), 750–767. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2669279>
- Jerit, J. (2009). Understanding the Knowledge Gap: The Role of Experts and Journalists. *The Journal of Politics*, 71(2), 442-456. doi:10.1017/S0022381609090355
- Kuklinski, J. H., Quirk, P. J., Jerit, J., Schweider, D., & Rich, R. F. (2020). Misinformation and the Currency of Democratic Citizenship. Unpublished manuscript.
- Lau, R. R. and D. Redlawsk. 1997. “Voting Correctly.” *American Political Science Review* 91(3): 585-598.
- Leeper, T. J. (2017). How Does Treatment Self-Selection Affect Inferences About Political Communication? *Journal of Experimental Political Science*, 4(1), 21-33. doi:10.1017/XPS.2016.9
- Lovett, John. (2021). *The Politics of Herding Cats: When Congressional Leaders Fail*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Nelson, T. E., Oxley, Z. M., & Clawson, R. A. (1997). Toward a Psychology of Framing Effects. *Political Behavior*, 19(3), 221–246.

Oxley, Z. (2020). *Framing and Political Decision Making: An Overview*. Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1250>

Patterson, T. E. (2021). Media Framing of Political News and Its Impact on Public Opinion: A Study of 2020 U.S. Presidential Election. Unpublished manuscript.

Schaffner, B. F., & Clark, J. G. (2022). Age, Socioeconomic Status, and Policy Preference: An Analysis of American Public Opinion Data. Unpublished manuscript.

Soroka, S. and Wlezien, (2022). *Information and Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wolak,. (2020). *Compromise in an Age of Party Polarization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Appendix A

December 2021 Survey

All response options for the Likert scale were coded as 1 = strongly opposed, 2 = somewhat opposed, 3 = don't know, 4 = somewhat support, 5 = strongly support for the analysis.

1. Do you support or oppose the \$1 trillion bill passed by Congress to build roads, bridges, railroads, and other hard infrastructure?

2a. "Do you support or oppose the \$1.85 trillion reconciliation bill before Congress to fund clean energy programs, pre-kindergarten, healthcare initiatives, and other soft infrastructure?"

2b. "There is a proposal in Congress to spend \$1.85 trillion over the next ten years to expand health insurance coverage, subsidize renewable energy use, extend tax credits for families with children, fund early childhood education, and increase taxes on corporations and high-income individuals. Based on what you know, do you support or oppose this plan?"

2c. "Do you support or oppose President Biden's \$1.85 trillion Build Back Better spending plan currently being debated in Congress?"

3. "Below is a list of provisions Congress is considering. For each provision, say whether you support or oppose it."

a. Providing pre-K to all three and four year-olds

b. Subsidizing child care for younger children

c. Funding long- term care for seniors and people with disabilities

d. Extending the Child Tax Credit, which provides parents up to \$300 per month for each child

- e. Funding for expanding the use of renewable energy
- f. Increasing taxes on corporations
- g. Increasing taxes on individuals with very high business or investment income
- h. Increasing funding on Internal Revenue Service tax enforcement

3. “Now that you know more about the provisions in the Build Back Better plan Congress is considering, do you support or oppose the plan?”

December 2022 Survey

All response options for the Likert scale were coded as 1 = strongly opposed, 2 = somewhat opposed, 3 = don’t know, 4 = somewhat support, 5 = strongly support for the analysis.

1. “Do you support or oppose the \$1 trillion bill passed by Congress to build roads, bridges, railroads, and other hard infrastructure?”

Treatment Questions for December 2022 Survey

Response options for treatment questions in the December 2022 survey were coded 1 – Oppose, 2 – Support

2a. “Do you support or oppose the \$500 billion reconciliation bill Congress passed to fund clean energy programs and healthcare initiatives?”

2b. “Congress passed a bill to spend \$500 billion over the next ten years to subsidize renewable energy use, address climate change, and expand health insurance coverage. It was funded by

increasing taxes on corporations and tax enforcement to reduce the deficit. Based on what you know, do you support or oppose this bill?"

2c. Do you support or oppose President Biden's \$500 billion Inflation Reduction Act passed by Congress?

3. "Below is a list of provisions Congress is considering. For each provision, say whether you support or oppose it."

- a. Funding for expanding the use of renewable energy
- b. Increasing taxes on corporations
- c. Increasing funding on Internal Revenue Service tax enforcement
- d. Prescription drug price negotiation in Medicare
- e. Extending subsidies for purchasing health insurance

4. Now that you know more about the provisions in the Inflation Reduction Act Congress passed, do you support or oppose the plan?