ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The politics of problems versus solutions: Policymaking and grandstanding in congressional hearings

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Abstract
Several theories of policy change posit that the politics of defining and prioritizing problems differs from the politics of devising and selecting solutions. The former involves simplifying through heuristics like indicators and ideology while the latter incorporates policy analysis and expertise to a greater degree. By employing two large datasets of U.S. congressional hearings to analyze policymakers' behavior of sending political messages, which we call "grandstanding," we offer two findings. First, consistent with our hypotheses, grandstanding is more prevalent when committees are focused on new and emerging problems than when committees examine proposed alternatives or the implementation of existing policies. Second, the cognitive dynamics of problem solving and the incentives to grandstand vary depending on policy issues considered in hearings. Our analysis helps put dissatisfaction with contemporary U.S. policymaking in context: a rise in "messaging politics" derives at least in part from an increased focus on contesting the problem space in agenda-setting venues.

KEYWORDS
congress, grandstanding, hearings

INTRODUCTION

The distinction between problems and solutions is an important concept in policy process research. Kingdon (1984) highlights "solutions in search of a problem" in his multiple streams analysis while Baumgartner and Jones (2015), in analyzing institutional information processing, note that policymakers are more likely to search for expert information as they construct solutions but suppress information about problems in order to winnow and focus attention.[1]

The individual cognitive differences in addressing a decision's problem and solution components aggregate and translate to the organizational or institutional level (Workman et al., 2009). Institutions are designed to channel and prioritize certain information sources. Rules, routines, and norms help facilitate decision-making by structuring issue definition and alternative selection (Cox, 2000; Curry, 2015;

Krehbiel, 1986; Romer & Rosenthal, 1978; Shepsle & Weingast, 1981; Sinclair, 1995). Problem and solution dynamics thus also differ in political institutions.

We argue that the cognitive differences in how individuals and institutions process problems and solutions interact with legislators' incentives for how to participate in policymaking to produce different dynamics in the policy process. Policy scholars have examined the distinction between problems and solutions through institutional organization and information gathering (Baumgartner & Jones, 2015), individual policymakers' voting decisions (Kingdon, 1973), presidential agendas (Light, 1991), and delegation to the bureaucracy (Workman, 2015; Workman et al., 2010).

In this article, we attempt to detect differences in the politics of problems and solutions through committee hearings in the U.S. Congress. While the distinction between problem and solution spaces and the attendant processes associated with each are general to decision-making regardless of setting, we argue that prioritizing problems produces different political incentives and dynamics than does developing legislation. Specifically, we expect to find more political messaging and less substantive participation when committees discuss problems compared to when they are exploring legislative solutions. We leverage two existing datasets to test for differences in the politics of problems and solutions: Lewallen et al. (2016) data on U.S. congressional committee hearing "purposes," including whether they address new and emerging problems or proposed solutions; and the Park (2021) data on congressional hearing transcripts which include "grandstanding" scores, a measure of members' behavior of sending political messages in congressional hearings.

We find that problem-oriented hearings exhibit higher grandstanding scores on average than hearings devoted either to proposed alternatives or the implementation of existing policy and thus lend empirical support for decoupling the politics of problems from the politics of solutions. As hearings related to understanding proposed solutions have decreased significantly over the past several decades (Lewallen, 2020; Lewallen et al., 2016), our finding provides an explanation for the dynamics of legislative grandstanding over time (Park, 2021) by focusing on the difference between problems and solutions in policy-making process.

Scholars, observers, and practitioners alike have described an increase in "message politics" within U.S. lawmaking, which means legislators are increasingly using legislative procedures to send political messages typically to promote partisan goals (Evans, 2001, Saksa, 2021).[2] The two major parties, locked in a "perpetual campaign," are more interested in using policy alternatives to mobilize their supporters than to engage in serious problem solving (Fiorina, 2006; Gelman, 2020; Lee, 2016). The pervasiveness of party polarization (McCarty et al., 2006; Theriault, 2008) only exacerbates these toxic procedures (Jessee & Theriault, 2014; Roberts & Smith, 2003). A former member of Congress offered the following assessment of committee hearings (Sobol & Steinhorn, 2020, p. 31):

> I think there's so much posturing that goes on. Everyone gets their five minutes to question a witness; can't really get much in that time. I've seen people filibuster for four minutes. Then they ask a 20 second question and leave the witness with 40 seconds to answer.

Former Senator Ben Sasse (R-Nebraska) expressed similar sentiments more succinctly: "I don't think anybody in private ever disagrees with me when I say that it's bullshit the way people grandstand for the cameras in here" (U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, 2020).

Our analysis helps us understand how the increasing trend of messaging activities in legislative processes is reflected in legislators' participation styles in congressional committee hearings by identifying which activities see more and less messaging behavior. That is, messaging activities have increased in the policy process in general, and particularly in the committee stage, while activities where we see less grandstanding have become less common.

Our paper proceeds in four sections. The first section elaborates on the distinction between how individuals and policymaking institutions process information for problems and solutions and its relevance to questions of governance. The second section lays out our specific hypotheses and describes the

data we use to test those hypotheses. Our third section analyzes the data and discusses the results while the final section offers future research directions.

ATTENTION TO PROBLEMS VERSUS SOLUTIONS AND "MESSAGE POLITICS"

The distinction between problems and solutions, and how both individuals and institutions process them, is an important feature of the policy process (Jones, 1994a, 2001; Simon & Newell, 1971). For an individual decisionmaker, defining the problem space often is driven by the task environment and previous experience with similar decisions. Choosing alternatives, by contrast, relies on routines and heuristics like filtering, satisficing, and trial-and-error searches (Jones, 2001; March & Simon, 1993; Simon & Newell, 1971). Choosing some solution may imply an underlying problem, but problems and solutions largely are decoupled so that we experience both "problems in search of solutions" and "solutions in search of problems" (Kingdon, 1984).

Addressing the problem space involves omitting details to simplify how problems are represented (Simon, 1959; Simon & Newell, 1964), which includes using heuristics for problem indicators, focusing events, and public opinion. Articulating and selecting alternatives, by contrast, tends to involve a combination of expertise and bargaining to build a support coalition either across or within party lines (Baumgartner & Jones, 2015; Curry & Lee, 2020). Communities and networks of experts including academics and other researchers, bureaucrats and other staff, and interest group analysts generate and evaluate competing solutions (Kingdon, 1984). Decisionmakers use heuristics to select alternatives just as they do to define problems, but the heuristics are different. Solutions may be chosen based on their perceived technical feasibility or through "reasoning by analogy" to import solutions judged to be successful in other contexts (Jones, 1994b). Even when decisions are made through trial-and-error processes, policymakers need information about what worked and what did not (Jones, 2001; Kingdon, 1984). We argue that the key differences in how individuals and institutions process problems and solutions interact with legislators' incentives for how to participate in policymaking to produce different dynamics in the policy process, and specifically the degree of grandstanding or "message politics" in which policymakers engage.

Researchers have found evidence that a competitive electoral environment between the two parties has led to a "perpetual campaign" where they focus more attention on crafting policy messages and distinguishing themselves from each other in an attempt to retain or gain majority status than they do on solving basic public policy problems (Gelman, 2020; Lee, 2016; Theriault & Lewallen, 2012). Two elections in particular signaled increased uncertainty over whether majority status would shift between Democrats and Republicans: the 1980 election, in which Republicans won a majority of Senate seats for the first time since 1954; and the 1994 election, in which Republicans won a majority of House seats for the first time since 1952 and a sitting Speaker of the House lost his re-election bid for the first time since 1862 (Lee, 2016; Theriault & Lewallen, 2012). In an era of "insecure majorities," congressional parties act as public relations organizations while majority party members try to retain their status through messaging and minority party members try to provide a clear contrast for voters in part by thwarting the majority's efforts (Gelman, 2020; Lee, 2016).

Emphasizing Congress's "perpetual campaign" environment might lead to predictions that legislators grandstand regardless of whether they attend to problems, solutions, or something else. And while we do not argue that legislators never grandstand when discussing proposed solutions, we argue in this article that the different cognitive processes described above do lead to discernible differences in "message politics" across the problem and solution spaces. Political parties typically contest elections and construct their platforms and legislative programs to highlight their differing issue agendas — that is, the different constructions of problem spaces (Jones, 1994b; Lee, 2016; Petrocik et al., 2003; Sulkin, 2005). Congress's decision agenda typically reflects the issues that were greater priorities in the president's party platform, at least in the short term, and its interactions with

the bureaucracy reflect party differences in problem prioritization (Fagan, 2018; Workman, 2015). In short, partisan conflict within the American political system and Congress specifically is organized around contesting the problem space. And while the parties might devise competing solutions to the same problem, deliberating over those proposals involves "expert search" less amenable to message politics (Jones & Baumgartner, 2015). We expect, then, that legislators' decisions about how to participate in congressional life vary based on whether they are focused on defining and prioritizing problems or devising and negotiating alternatives.

In this article, we attempt to detect differences in the politics of problems and solutions through congressional committee hearings, which are key arenas for representation, deliberation, and policy debate. They provide a focal point that mobilizes legislator and staff attention and reveals support for or concerns about proposed government action. Hearings help define and redefine public problems, allow committees to claim future legislative authority, and signal which issues the committees feel should be prioritized (Burstein & Hirsh, 2007; Diermeier & Feddersen, 2000; King, 1997; Shafran, 2022; Talbert et al., 1995). In short, hearings are "the principle vehicle for gathering and analyzing information" in Congress (Arnold, 1990, p. 85).

Committee hearings vary in their informative quality (Park, 2017). At one end of the continuum, hearings can focus staff and legislators' time and attention on strong fact-finding and analysis; at the other end, hearings can simply reinforce legislators' existing priorities and positions (Bean, 2018; Huitt, 1954). We are interested in detecting and at least partially explaining precisely that distinction.

Committee hearings are ideal venues with which to detect differences in "message politics" because attention to problems and solutions is decoupled to a greater degree than they are in other activities. While bill introductions, roll-call votes, and laws all can be used to measure individual and institutional issue agendas (Jones et al., 2019; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005; Talbert & Potoski, 2002; Walker, 1977; Woon, 2009), they represent the conjunction of problem and solution; so too do executive branch actions like executive orders or agency regulations (Kennedy, 2018; Workman, 2015). Committee hearings, on the other hand, may be held on pending legislation, a proposed regulation, or a recent court decision, but they may also be held to highlight a new and emerging problem without a particular solution attached. The next two sections describe both our hypotheses and the data used to test them.

HYPOTHESES

Based on our understanding of the how hearing characteristics interact with legislators' incentives and behavior, we offer two hypotheses that directly address the cognitive and institutional processing differences between problems and solutions and how they might affect legislators' messaging efforts. While all legislators engage in a mix of both messaging and "serious" lawmaking, they face a trade-off in how they choose to engage with the policy process; messaging or grandstanding hinders legislative success both at the individual and party-wide levels (Evans, 2019; Harbridge-Yong, 2020; Lee, 2016; Park, 2021).

Over the past several decades most members of Congress, even those in the majority, face fewer opportunities to legislate. Early in his career, Senator Ron Johnson (R-Wisconsin) became so frustrated with the difficulties of legislating that he reputedly threatened to fire his whole legislative staff to focus exclusively on messaging politics (Shiner, 2012). Party leaders strategically shorten the calendar of days in session and use deadlines to force decisions (Curry, 2015; Koger, 2010; Webb Yackee, 2003). Changes to rules and practices since the 1980s have shifted more legislative authority to party leaders and disincentivized committee from legislating (Lewallen, 2020). Because restrictions on legislative debate and agenda space are endogenous, members of Congress could act to give themselves more time to legislate (Nokken & Sala, 2002). Even with self-imposed limits on lawmaking opportunities, a smaller decision agenda puts more pressure on the issue agenda to carry the load of message politics. When a chair schedules a hearing about a problem with no corresponding proposed alternative to that problem, committee members have an opportunity to define their differences and highlight electoral messaging. We thus hypothesize that problem-focused hearings feature more grandstanding.

While different legislators may have different preferences, bargaining over proposed solutions includes the possibility that each legislator gets some of what she wants, which incentivizes direct engagement with the substance of proposed alternatives. One influential view of committees posits their benefit to the broader legislature comes in specialization and a focus on learning about the effects of proposed solutions, a view consistent with the idea that policymakers require more expert information about alternatives than they do about problems (Baumgartner & Jones, 2015; Krehbiel, 1991). We therefore further hypothesize that solution-focused hearings feature less grandstanding because they happen later in the legislative process (Shafran & Theriault, 2013), where bipartisanship is necessarily more important for the bill to make it all the way to becoming a law.

Problem Hypothesis: Grandstanding is more prevalent in problem-focused hearings than other types of hearings.

Solution Hypothesis: Grandstanding is less prevalent in solution-focused hearings than other types of hearings.

Another type of hearings is implementation hearings. Committees hold implementation hearings to check how current programs are being implemented; whether they adequately address the problems they were enacted to tackle; whether they need to act again. While a variety of policy scholars have studied policy implementation, we have less theorizing about decision-making for an "implementation space" the way we do for problem and solution spaces as described in the previous section. We thus use implementation hearings as our default or reference category.

DATA

To test our proposed hypotheses, we measure our dependent variable — the degree of committee members' messaging or, alternately, information gathering — using "grandstanding" scores, which measures the intensity of political messages conveyed in individual statements. Park (2021) develops these scores with a crowd-sourced supervised learning method. She trained Amazon Mechanical Turk online coders who then were asked to choose which of two randomly selected members' statements from a committee hearing contained more grandstanding, which she defined as (1) criticizing or praising an institution or a person, (2) presenting subjective (as opposed to objective) views on a policy issue, or (3) asking questions of a witness just to attack or embarrass them (as opposed to gaining information). By running a Bradley-Terry model linking the coders' answers to 30,000 comparison tasks, each statement was given a continuous score that ranges from 0 (no grandstanding) to 100 (maximum grandstanding).[3]

Using Park's grandstanding scores allows us to assess information gathering and processing using the legislators' own statements and behavior rather than inferring such activity from the witnesses called to testify (Baumgartner & Jones, 2015; Burstein & Hirsh, 2007; Lewallen et al., 2016). Whereas Park has measured grandstanding at the individual level, our unit of analysis is at the member-hearing level, which allows us both to distinguish between hearings oriented to problems, implementations, or solutions and to include control variables at both the committee and congress levels.[4] Its pooled standard deviation, which can be conceptualized as an average of within-member standard deviation across hearings, is 9.697.[5]

We use the U.S. Policy Agendas Project's congressional hearings dataset[6] to measure whether a hearing addresses a problem, implementation, or solution. Lewallen et al. (2016) classify a hearing's purpose into three types: whether it addresses a new and emerging problem, the implementation of the existing policy, or a proposed solution. Examples of the problem category from their codebook include hearings about a recent policy trend, natural disaster, national or international event, or news story; hearings that publicize a recent study or policy brief; or hearings that suggest the U.S. government should become involved in addressing some circumstance. Their examples of implementation-focused hearings include those about existing federal government policy or waste, fraud, and abuse in federal agencies. Their examples of hearings on proposed solutions include those about pending legislation, proposed regulations, or other plans not yet finalized.[7] We test our hypotheses with two independent variables: hearings that

Lewallen et al. (2016) categorize as problem-focused, which we hypothesize have a positive statistical relationship to grandstanding scores; and hearings that Lewallen et al. (2016) categorize as focused on proposed solutions, which we hypothesize have lower grandstanding scores than problem-focused hearings.

Our statistical models include several control variables at the hearing, committee, and congress levels. We include three additional variables from Lewallen et al. (2016): a hearing's "stance," specifically whether a hearing is one-sided in that all the witnesses take the same position; whether a hearing takes place outside Washington, DC, in a legislator's district (field hearings); and whether a member of Congress is one of the witnesses testifying at the hearing (legislator as witness). Lewallen et al. (2018) find that field hearings are more likely to have witnesses who all take the same position, and Burstein and Hirsh (2007) find that legislators who testify as hearing witnesses are more likely to emphasize why a problem is important rather than discuss an alternative's details or projected outcomes; we thus expect to see more grandstanding at all three types of hearings.

Grandstanding and otherwise engaging in message politics is about public relations: communicating to voters a party's image and its differences from the other party (Gelman, 2020; Lee, 2016; Theriault, 2013). Paying attention to issues that constituents care about — as individual legislators and collectively as an institution — is part of a legislature's responsibility as a representative body (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005; Sulkin, 2005). As legislators detect changes in the issues the public finds important or salient, they likely also shift their party messaging strategy to those issues. We thus might expect grandstanding to be particularly prevalent in hearings that address issues more salient with the public, so our models include the percentage of Gallup survey respondents who identify an issue as "the most important problem" facing the country. We expect that higher percentages of survey respondents that named an issue as the "most important problem" facing the country are positively associated with grandstanding scores in congressional hearings. We also include the log of the number of witnesses testifying at a given hearing as it may place more pressure on members to efficiently allocate their time to speak and thus affect their speaking patterns.

Grandstanding in congressional committees is associated with individuals and situations where opportunities to legislate are limited (Park, 2021). We thus include two additional control variables to account for such circumstances. The first is unified party control of Congress and the White House; legislative rules and the president's veto power combine to thwart the majority party's ability to get all of what it wants, particularly under a divided government (Curry & Lee, 2020), so we expect to see less grandstanding under congresses of unified government. The other control variable is an indicator for minority party members who are less likely to see their ideas translated into substantive policy. So, we expect these legislators to engage in more grandstanding.

Finally, our models include the percentage of committee members who are first-term members as a control variable. At an organizational level, turnover represents a form of internal turbulence that disrupts routines and removes a degree of organizational memory (Feldman, 2000; Hyneman, 1938). As an illustrative example, Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) rewarded in 2007 many of her "majority makers," first-term members whose electoral victories gave Democrats the majority, with seats on the Financial Services Committee to help them raise re-election funds from the industries under their jurisdiction. In the wake of the 2007–2008 financial crisis, Financial Services Committee chair Barney Frank (D-Mass.) expressed frustration that so many of his committee members were inexperienced and unknowledgeable about the underlying issues and held a series of hearings to teach his newer committee members how banking and monetary policy works in order to prepare them to legislate (Kaiser, 2013).

While Park (2021) finds that first-term members individually do not grandstand more, committees with a greater percentage of first-term members — those that experienced more turnover — may be less able to call on experience and ask substantive questions of witnesses and more apt to rely on ideology and values to discuss a hearing's subject matter. We thus expect that hearings held by committees with a greater percentage of first-term members will see more grandstanding. The committee membership data were collected from the committee assignment dataset by Stewart and Woon (2017) and the

Congressional Directory, and we calculated this variable as a percentage to account for differences in overall committee size.

DATA ANALYSIS

The Park and Lewallen et al. data overlap for eight committees in the House of Representatives: Agriculture, Armed Services, Budget, Education and Labor, Oversight and Government Reform, Natural Resources, Rules, and Small Business.[8] The Lewallen et al. data extend from 1971 to 2008 while the Park data begin in 1997. We extended the Lewallen et al. measures through 2016 to better match the Park data by manually coding the purpose of a subset of hearings from the 112th, 113th, and 114th Congresses (2011–2016) and then used a Random Forest model as a learning algorithm to predict the codes for the remaining hearings from those congresses.[9]

The distribution of Park's grandstanding scores, our dependent variable, is shown in Figure 1; the data slightly skew to the right with a median of 44.63, a mean of 46.25, and a distribution skewness of 0.626 (see Figure 1).

When we organize grandstanding scores by presidential administration, we find that hearings held during the George W. Bush administration exhibited higher grandstanding scores (47.2) than did hearings held during the Clinton or Obama administrations (45.4 and 45.8, respectively). We visualize these data as points laid over boxplots laid over violin plots. The boxplots allow us to compare median grandstanding scores across the three administrations along with quartiles and outliers while the violin plots better visualize each distribution's shape and kernel density (see Figure 2).

To flesh out what the grandstanding score captures, we provide some examples from the highest and lowest ranges of the score, respectively. Rep. John Michael McHugh (R-NY) received the highest score
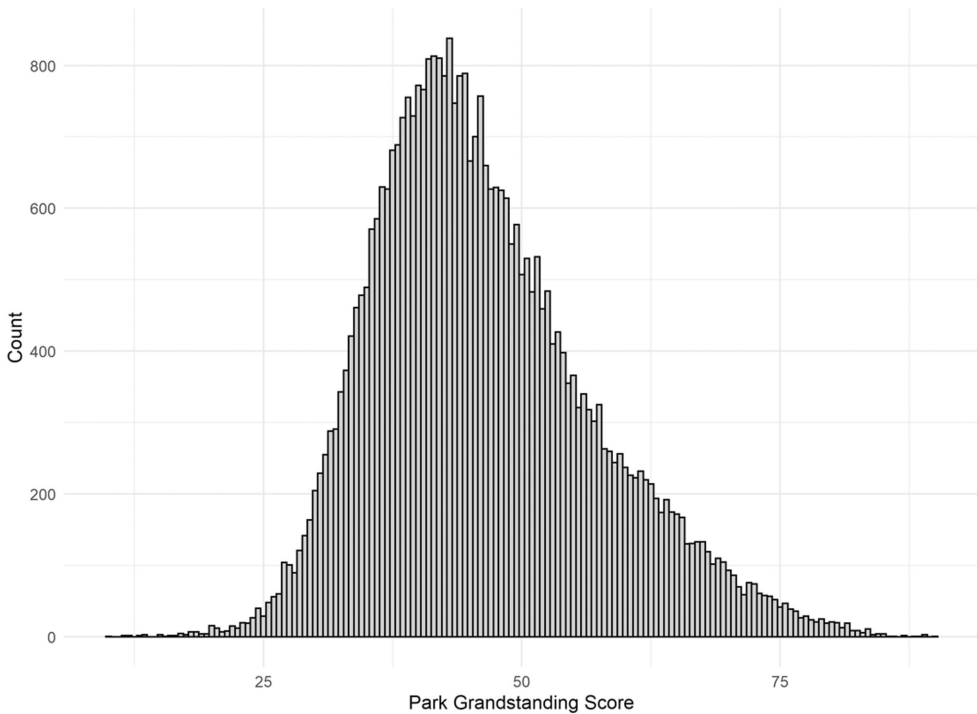

FIGURE 1 Distribution of Hearing Grandstanding Scores in Our Sample. *Source*: Park (2021), compiled by the authors. The dataset is comprised of 37,378 observations from U.S. House of Representatives committee hearing held from 1997 to 2016, measured at the member-hearing level.
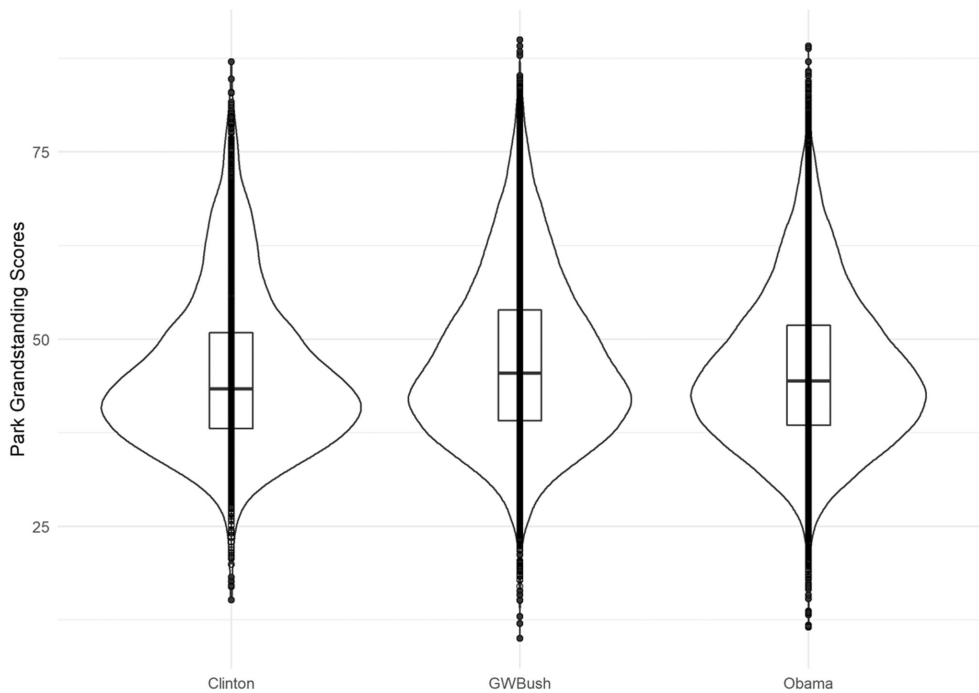
FIGURE 2 Average Grandstanding Scores by Presidential Administration, 1997–2016. *Source*: Park (2021), calculated by the authors.

in our data, 89.98, for his statement in the hearing held before the Oversight and Government Reform Committee on February 6, 2007. Democrats, the House majority, held the hearing to investigate and blame the Bush administration's fiscal malfeasance in Iraq, which McHugh thought was not constructive. Here is an excerpt from his statement:

> Every single war that you have that goes on for any period of time, the President, the administration in power is going to be criticized because people tire of war, but we must remember history and that war is hell. … We are in a war against terrorists, a worldwide war, and in my opinion it is one that we must win. Finding fault and finding things we should correct is fine, but to just have a blame meeting isn't, in my opinion, constructive.

The second highest grandstanding score in our data is Rep. Jared Huffman (D-California) in an oversight hearing held by the same committee on October 16, 2013. In the hearing, Republicans, then the House majority, grilled National Park Service leadership for closing national parks during the recent government shutdown. Below is an excerpt from his statement:

> You know, I–I've almost run out of adjectives to describe this unfortunate hearing that we're having today. The one that I'm left with is "sad." … The fact that it's taking place during a government shutdown manufactured for political purposes by my Republican colleagues just makes it even worse. … I am struck by the fact that despite the over-the-top, made-for-media accusations and sound bites in this kangaroo court, we have no facts at all to suggest you've done anything wrong.

In contrast, the cases with low grandstanding score tend to be filled with information-seeking questions or procedural remarks. Examples include "I will submit my questions for the record" and "In your testimony you spoke briefly about the Disaster Assistance Loan Program. It looks like there

have been some improvements from 28 percent down to 18 percent of these that have been fraudulent. What are you continuing to do to bring this level down, and is there anything we can do to help you?"[10]

A Tukey honestly significant differences test indicates that the average grandstanding score for House members in committee hearings in our data during the Bush administration is more than a full point higher than the average score in the Obama administration era, and nearly two points higher than the average score in the Clinton administration era (see Table 1), even though the Bush administration shows both the highest and the lowest grandstanding scores in our data. While we do not have a theory-driven explanation for why committee members engaged in more message politics during the Bush administration on average we note it here both to say that trends in legislator grandstanding may not be linear and as a precursor to our later analysis.

As an initial test of our two hypotheses, we plot the grandstanding scores for each hearing purpose category as points laid over boxplots laid over violin plots. Our data show that problem-oriented hearings exhibit the highest median grandstanding scores for the committees in our data (47.0) followed by solution-oriented hearings (46.4) and those focused on implementation of existing policies (45.6). The violin plots further show a heavier density of grandstanding scores toward the lower quartile for both implementation and solution hearings than is present for problem-focused hearings (see Figure 3). A Tukey honestly significant differences test indicates that the mean grandstanding scores for each of the three hearing purpose categories are statistically different at the 0.01 level of significance, and that solution-focused hearings have lower grandstanding scores on average than problem-focused hearings consistent with our expectation (see Table 2).

While we did not specifically hypothesize about implementation hearings, we note with interest that the implementation hearings in our dataset have the lowest average grandstanding scores of the three categories, even lower than solution hearings by about 0.76 points on average, which corresponds to 7.8% of the within-member variations. We think implementation hearings have the lowest grandstanding because legislators tend to have higher partisan stakes, and thus grandstand more, in solution hearings that are at the earlier stage of the legislative processes than in implementation hearings where the content or fate of a bill no longer depends on the outcome of the hearing.

Having passed the bivariate analysis, we further test our hypotheses with two multivariate regression models. In addition to an ordinary least squares linear regression model, we include a gamma regression model because the dependent variable is only positive and continuous as seen in Figure 1.[11] Each model includes administration, committee, issue, and member-fixed effects in addition to the variables described in the previous section.[12] Though the specific coefficient and confidence interval estimates differ slightly, we do not find any major substantive differences between the models' results; the adjusted R^2 statistic suggests the gamma model better fits the data while the AIC statistic suggests the opposite. For ease of interpretation, we discuss the OLS model's results. Because the exponentiated gamma model coefficient represents a multiplier on the dependent variable, they require a transformation.

Because the models include indicators for both problem- and solution-focused hearings, implementation hearings represent the reference category. Both models' results support our primary contention that problem hearings have more grandstanding than solution hearings. Consistent with the Tukey HSD test, the grandstanding scores are about 0.83 points higher for problem-focused hearings compared to implementation hearings at the 0.01 level of significance even when accounting

TABLE 1 Tukey HSD test results for grandstanding score by presidency, 1997–2016.

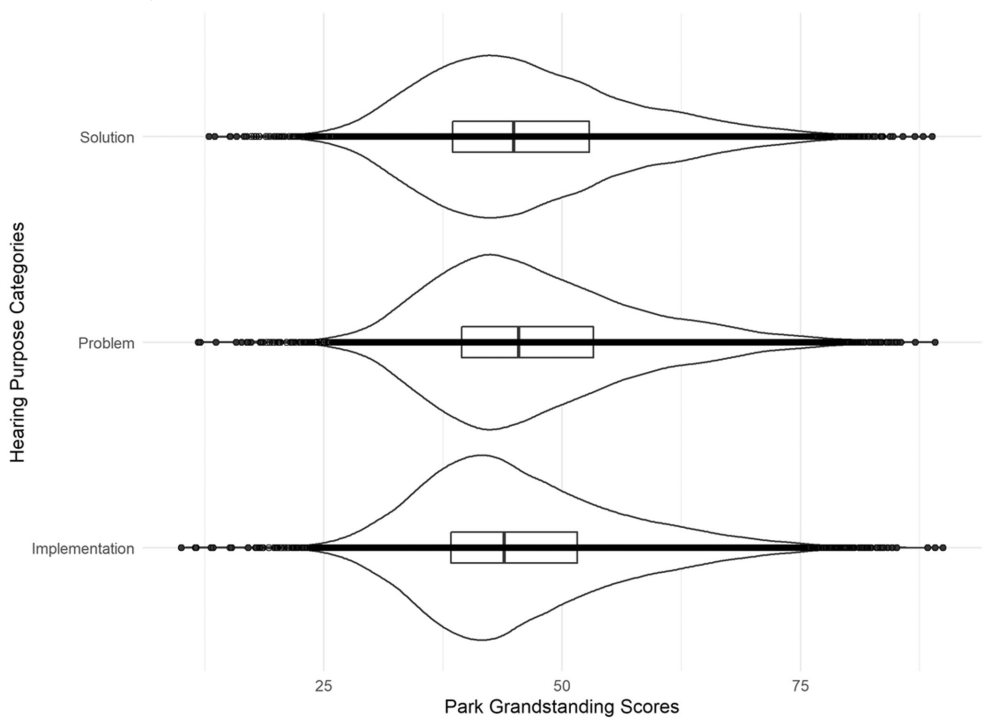| Category comparison	Estimated difference of means	*p*-value
Bush–Clinton	1.78	<0.00001
Bush–Obama	1.42	<0.00001
Obama–Clinton	0.36	<0.20

FIGURE 3 Distribution of Grandstanding Scores by Hearing Purpose Category. *Source*: Park (2021) and Lewallen et al. (2016), compiled and updated by the authors.

TABLE 2 Tukey HSD test results for grandstanding score by hearing purpose.

Category comparison	Estimated difference of means	*p*-value
Solution–Problem	-0.65	<0.00001
Problem–Implementation	1.41	<0.00001
Solution–Implementation	0.76	<0.000001

for other features of committees, hearings, presidential administrations, and members (see Table 3). Although a small number, it accounts for almost 9% of the pooled within-member variations across hearings. The results from the Tukey HSD test for solution hearings also carry over to the multivariate analysis. We find that grandstanding scores in solution-focused hearings are about 0.42 points higher than implementation hearings at the conventional level of statistical significance, explaining 4.3% of the within-member variations. This coefficient remains surprisingly positive, but we do note that it is smaller than that for problem-focused hearings. Our analysis thus indicates that grandstanding behavior on congressional committee hearings differs depending on whether the committee is debating and prioritizing a problem, evaluating an implementation, or discussing a proposed alternative.

Turning to our control variables we can be sufficiently confident inferring that hearings with more witnesses tend to have lower grandstanding scores, a finding consistent with what Baumgartner and Jones (2015) suggest about expert information search; and that hearings where all witnesses take the same position and hearings at which a member of Congress testifies tend to see higher grandstanding scores. The legislator witness coefficient is among the largest in our models; grandstanding scores are

TABLE 3 Grandstanding in different types of congressional committee hearings.

Independent variables	OLS model	Gamma model
Problem hearing	0.87 (0.13)***	0.02 (0.003)***
Solution hearing	0.42 (0.13)***	0.01 (0.003)**
Controls		
One-sided testimony	0.69 (0.12)***	0.01 (0.003)***
Field hearing	−0.37 (0.32)	−0.006 (0.007)
Legislator as witness	1.14 (0.20)***	0.02 (0.004)***
Issue MIP %	−0.27 (1.00)	−0.005 (0.02)
No. of witnesses (log)	−0.56 (0.09)***	−0.01 (0.002)***
Unified government	0.36 (1.26)*	0.01 (0.03)*
Minority party legislator	2.22 (0.14)***	0.05 (0.003)***
Cmte first-term members %	0.01 (0.01)	0.0002 (0.0002)
Intercept	41.13 (2.98)***	3.72 (0.06)***
Pres. administration fixed effects	Yes	Yes
Committee fixed effects	Yes	Yes
Major topic fixed effects	Yes	Yes
Member fixed effects	Yes	Yes
N	35,426	
Adjusted R^2	0.200	0.220
AIC	160,926	259,020

Note: The Appendix lists the number of observations for each level of our congress-, committee-, and topic-level fixed effects variables.

***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$.

about 1.14 points higher on average when a fellow member of Congress testifies at a hearing. Hearings held during unified governments barely reach statistical significance with an estimated effect of increasing grandstanding by 0.36 points.

At the individual level from the OLS model, we are sufficiently confident that minority party legislators have grandstanding scores about 2.22 points higher than majority party committee members. We do not find support for the idea that higher levels of grandstanding are statistically associated with field hearings, issues that more members of the public deem salient and important, and the proportion of first-term members on a committee.

We conclude our analysis of the model results by examining the issue-level fixed effects. Hearings in the government operations major topic code served as our reference category, so the issue-level coefficients help us make inferences about whether hearings on other topics exhibit significantly more or less grandstanding on average than government operations hearings.[13]

The linear regression model's issue-level fixed effects reveal ten policy topics for which the grandstanding score is significantly different from the reference topic category, government operations (see Figure 4). Two of those topics (technology and agriculture) have seen significantly less grandstanding on average. The remaining eight issues — social welfare, law and crime, education, international affairs, civil rights, macroeconomics, environment, and health — have seen significantly more grandstanding. This pattern of grandstanding does not appear to be aligned with the level of issue polarization. According to the study by Jochim and Jones (2013), macroeconomics and social welfare have become more partisan but law and crime and international affairs have not. We find, however, more grandstanding in all four issue areas. Likewise, while the study finds that congressional votes on technology issues have become more structured to the partisan dimension, we find that average grandstanding scores for that topic are lower than any other issues.
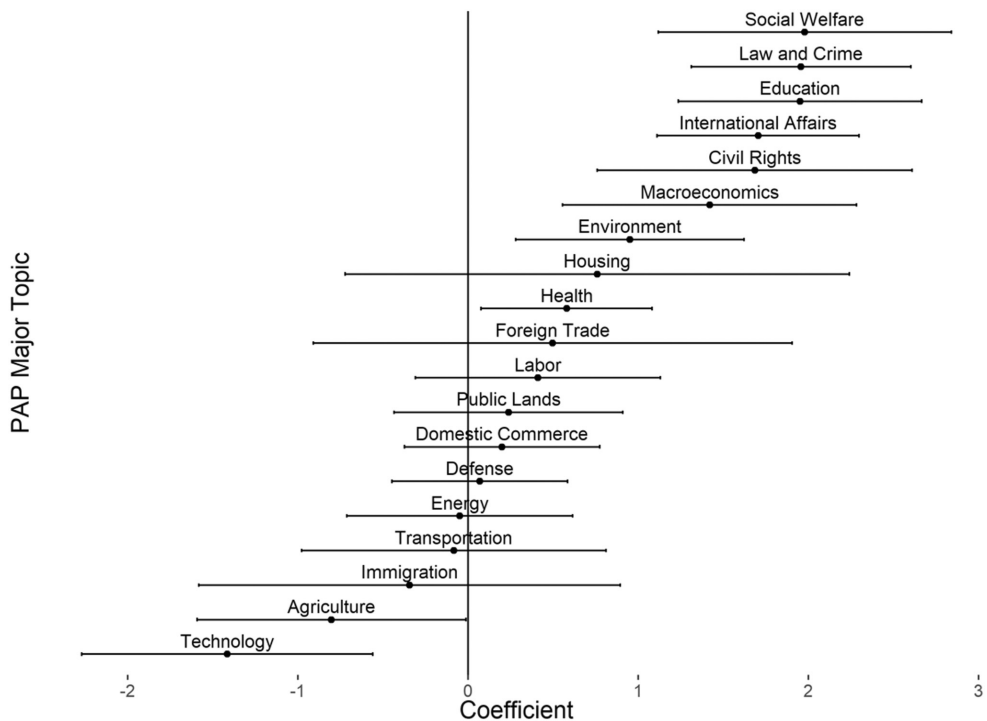
FIGURE 4 Coefficients on major topic fixed effects, OLS regression model. The dots are coefficient estimates from the OLS regression model presented in Table 2 and the lines represent 95% confidence intervals. The reference topic in this analysis is the Policy Agendas Project "Government Operations" category. The plot thus illustrates how confident we would be inferring whether grandstanding scores for hearings in the listed topic categories are significantly higher or lower than government operations hearings.

Our issue-level findings may be related, however, to changes over time in the purpose of hearings in each topic. Lewallen et al. (2020) find that both agriculture and science and technology saw a decrease in the percentage of hearings devoted to problems since the mid-1990s; all of the issues with significantly higher average grandstanding scores, by contrast, have seen relative increases in problem-focused hearings over time. The analysis by Jochim and Jones (2013) — and that of many other scholars — focuses on roll-call voting, at which point problems already have been selected and defined in a way to facilitate reaching a decision (Potoski & Talbert, 2000). The results from our issue fixed effects thus further suggest that differences in party behavior and legislator grandstanding across issues reflect the degree to which agenda setting focuses on processing information about problems or understanding existing or proposed solutions, and emphasize the importance of accounting for differences in the problem and solution spaces in studying policy process dynamics.

CONCLUSION

Several major theories of policy change, along with studies of boundedly rational decision-making on which the theories rely, posit that individuals and institutions process problems and solutions in distinct ways (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005; Kingdon, 1984; March & Simon, 1993; Simon, 1959; Simon & Newell, 1964). Decision-makers rely on heuristics like values and ideology to simplify the problem space while a focus on solutions shifts attention toward expertise and to a greater degree (Baumgartner & Jones, 2015; Kingdon, 1984).

In this article, we empirically illustrate one key difference between the politics of problems and solutions. Unlike bill introductions and cosponsorships, roll-call votes, or regulations, examining committee hearings allows us to identify government outputs solely focused on problems as well as those related to proposed solutions in contrast to implementation hearings. We combine grandstanding scores (Park, 2021) for members of the U.S. House of Representatives aggregated to the hearing level and data on information transmission and processing in hearings (Lewallen et al., 2016) and find that House hearings focused on policy problems exhibit higher grandstanding scores on average than both implementation and solution hearings.

Many academics, legislators, and other observers report the state of U.S. policymaking and a seemingly increasing emphasis on "message politics" and grandstanding at the expense of "serious" legislating (Gelman, 2020; Lee, 2016). Our findings further elaborate how this trend extends to committee hearings: we see more grandstanding in problem-oriented hearings than in solution-oriented hearings as congressional committees are engaging in less legislative activity over time. Because solution-focused hearings have declined since the 1970s (Lewallen, 2020; Lewallen et al., 2016), members may not necessarily "grandstand" more today, but they are engaging in fewer activities that counterbalance such behavior.

Furthermore, our findings help resolve a lingering empirical inconsistency: while we have evidence of a rise in messaging politics, we also continue to see robust bipartisan policymaking. For example, using legislation to solidify a party's "brand" has not consistently produced outcomes achieving the intended goal because the institutional rules and practices in place necessitate bargaining and compromise across a range of issues (Curry & Lee, 2020). Our analysis demonstrates that the rise of problem-oriented activities coupled with legislators' tendency to grandstand more on this type of activity than on solution-oriented activities may lead to more messaging even as serious and bipartisan policymaking persists.

We also find important variation in committee-level "message politics" across issues. The point estimates suggest hearings on social welfare contain more than 3 points more grandstanding than technology hearings. We might conclude that grandstanding in politics takes many forms from partisan "teamsmanship" to cheerleading an agency like the Small Business Administration to advocating for certain solutions regardless of the underlying problem space. (Jones, 2001) suggests that "new" issues take time to become structured into partisan politics. When and how different forms of grandstanding filter into party agendas and policymaking — and when they do not — is another area for further investigation.

While we do not find sufficient evidence of higher levels of grandstanding among issues more salient and important with the public, future research also could examine grandstanding on issues that are higher priorities for other institutions and actors like chief executives. Lee (2009), for example, finds that U.S. senators engage in more partisan "teamsmanship" when presidents take positions and devote more attention to an issue. We thus might expect to see more grandstanding on presidents' issue priorities. By connecting grandstanding scores to legislative issue agendas and institutional information processing, our article can become a starting point for understanding grandstanding in response to cross-institutional incentives and dynamics in addition to the internal and electoral incentives Park's research has highlighted.

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ENDNOTES

[1] "Throughout the paper, by "solutions," we intend to mean "proposed solutions" without any assumption that the solutions will certainly solve any given problem."

[2] In this study, we use message politics and grandstanding interchangeably. This is because while each of them is a broad concept, we use the term, grandstanding, more specifically defined as sending political messages, and this activity lies at the center of the literature on message politics.

[3] See Park (2021) for more on her measure.

[4] We calculate this measure by averaging the grandstanding score by a member in a particular hearing.

[5] The formula for the pooled standard deviation is $\sqrt{\frac{\sum_{i=1}^{k}(n_i-1)s_i^2}{\sum_{i=1}^{k}(n_i-1)}}$ where k is the number of unique members who participated in more than one hearing, n is the number of hearings that a member i participated, and s_i^2 is the variance of her grandstanding scores across hearings.

[6] Jones, Bryan D., Frank R. Baumgartner, Sean M. Theriault, Derek A. Epp, Cheyenne Lee, Miranda Sullivan, and Chris Cassella. 2023. Policy Agendas Project: Congressional Hearings.

[7] See Lewallen et al. (2016, 2018) for more on their measures.

[8] Lewallen et al. (2016) use data from 1971 to 2008 and their sample covers about 30% of the congressional hearings. In their later publication, Lewallen et al. (2018) extended their data to cover an additional two years. While the Lewallen et al. data also include Senate hearings, the Park data do not. As such, we have included only House hearings in our analysis.

[9] We constructed our training set using multiple methods: (1) using all the data available; (2) undersampling; and (3) oversampling. The most recent three congresses are oversampled because we mainly predict hearings for these congresses. We thus could weigh the prediction performance of the model more on these congresses. Additionally, because a relatively small number of hearings were selected into the validation set from the period predicted, we include the hearings from the congresses not predicted to increase the size of the validation set, which would help generating a more stable validation metric. As both the *stance* and the problem-focused *purpose* variables are imbalanced (e.g., for the *stance* variable, 33% of cases are classified as "positional" as opposed to "exploratory."), we used an F1 score as a validation metric. We chose the undersampled training set for each variable as it generated the highest F1 score: 0.625 for the *stance* variable and 0.695 for the problem-focused *purpose* variable. The accuracy rates were 0.724 and 0.796, respectively. We used only the data from 1997 to 2016 for the training set because the language from the Congressional Information Service database used to describe the hearings and to summarize the witness testimony changed significantly beginning with the 104th Congress (1995–1996). Adding data from earlier congresses to the training set did not improve the prediction performance. We therefore began our data with the 105th Congress (1997–1998) to more efficiently manage the replication data.

[10] These examples are from the following sources respectively: The member-hearing observation with the lowest grandstanding score is Rep. Diane Watson (D-CA) in a hearing held by the Oversight and Government Reform committee on April 26, 2006, to seek strategies to seize cocaine and other drugs in the transit zone with declining resources. The case scoring the second lowest points is Rep. Patrick Murphy (D-PA) in a Small Business Committee hearing held on June 5, 2013, to discuss improving Federal Government efficiency. We note that the examples we have used in this section were the only statements that the members made during the hearing.

[11] We estimated the gamma regression model using the glm() function in R with a log link. The estimated shape parameter is 24.60 with a 0.18 standard error. The estimated scale parameter is 1.88.

[12] Of the more than 35,000 hearings in our data, about one-third (just under 12,000) were held by the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee and another 21% (about 7600 hearings) were held by the House Armed Services Committee. We are limited by Lewallen et al.'s data collection strategy and its overlap with Park's data but we also believe the distribution of hearings across committees in our data generally reflects the reality of congressional policymaking activity; not every committee holds the same number of hearings. Among the issues in our dataset, about 21% of hearings deal with defense which we argue again generally reflects congressional issue attention during this period.

[13] The government operations major topic category includes multi-agency appropriations bills as well as subtopics concerning separation-of-powers issues (the bureaucracy, legislative-executive relations, and nominations), campaigns and ethics, the U.S. Census, District of Columbia issues, and other matters related to general government functions like commemorative coins and federal holidays.

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