

# You Lie! Patterns of Partisan Taunting in the U.S. Senate

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“Unless you were a hermit living in a cave [...] you couldn’t have missed how miserably the administration has failed”  
(Wyden, 2006)

“This temper tantrum must end. The Democrats [...] cannot disregard election results simply because things did not go their way.”  
(DeMint, 2006)

“Lucifer sat and built a palace there. That palace was called Pandemonium...that is exactly what will happen (if this bill is passed) - pandemonium.”  
(Byrd, 2002)

“we have the liberals getting out to destroy a member of a minority group because he was so uppity as to be an articulate conservative”  
(Wallop, 1991)

“indecent and obscene [...] this sort of state censorship in Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and in the Soviet Union”  
(Cranston, 1989)

## 1. METHODOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTION

### Methodology of most text coding projects: INCORRECT

Goal: Estimating *aggregate* quantities:  
Social science is about broad patterns, not idiosyncratic details.

(BAD) current practice: optimize only *individual* coding accuracy

- Increase % agreement (inter-coder reliability)

Better practice: Optimize *aggregate* quantities of interest:

- Directly assess unbiasedness
- Some individual errors are irrelevant for unbiasedness
- Direction of the errors matter!

### For example, in our application:

Goal: Estimating “% Taunting” (for a Senator, congress, etc)

BAD practice: maximize only inter-coder reliability of individual speeches.

Better practice: reduce bias of “% Taunting”

Details: Extraordinary difficult task.

- weak signal: (e.g., 1 sentence in a 4 page speech)
- impossible to automate
- 31,634 hand-coded speeches, 5% double coded

• Errors (after coding procedures designed to avoid bias):

- Unrelated to our quantities of interest (party, time, region)
- Related to procedural variables (no problem!)

- Average time used by coders to code each speech
- Coders’ disagreement on the use of external reserach

Results: unbiased estimates (regardless of inter-coder reliability levels)

Partisan Taunting Score:

Using the information about taunting in previous years for each senator, the average taunting of the years and assuming constant variance across Senators:

$$TauntIndicator_{sen,year} \sim Bernoulli(\pi_{sen,year})$$

$$\pi_{sen,year} = TauntingRate_{year} + TauntingRate_{sen,year}$$

$$TauntingRate_{sen,1} \sim N(0, 1000)$$

$$TauntingRate_{sen,year} \sim N(TauntingRate_{sen,year-1}, \tau_c)$$

$$\sqrt{\tau_c} \sim Unif(0, 1000)$$

## 2. EMPIRICAL CONTRIBUTION

■ **Definition of Partisan Taunting:** *Explicit, public and negative attacks on another political party or its members, usually using vitriolic and derogatory language.*

■ **Data:** Senate Speeches, 1989 to 2006, 195 Senators  $\approx$  162 speeches/senator.

### No evidence for political science (and media) claims about trends

No evidence of (A) an extraordinarily partisan era, (B) a culture of partisanship, or (C) an inexorable increase in partisan taunting (despite most Senatorial resignation speeches and claims in the literature)

### Partisan Taunting is a *rational behavior*:

- Senators taunt the other party to draw attention to themselves
- Most prevalent taunters: Senators with the smallest odds of affecting legislation or offending their constituents:
  - ideological extremists of both parties
  - minority party members
  - out party members, especially when the president is unpopular

### Other Individual incentives exist:

Much remaining individual variability in taunting, unexplained by either *trends* or *rational behavior* (which we will try to *influence* below)

## 3. NORMATIVE CONTRIBUTION

### Taunting: individually rational but collectively irrational

- The media picks off the loudest, most extreme voice on any day to appear on the news
- Each Senator taunts to get their voice above the din
- Your constituents only hear from you when you make extreme statements
- *Taunting undermines deliberation* (spitting on your negotiating partner doesn’t breed trust)

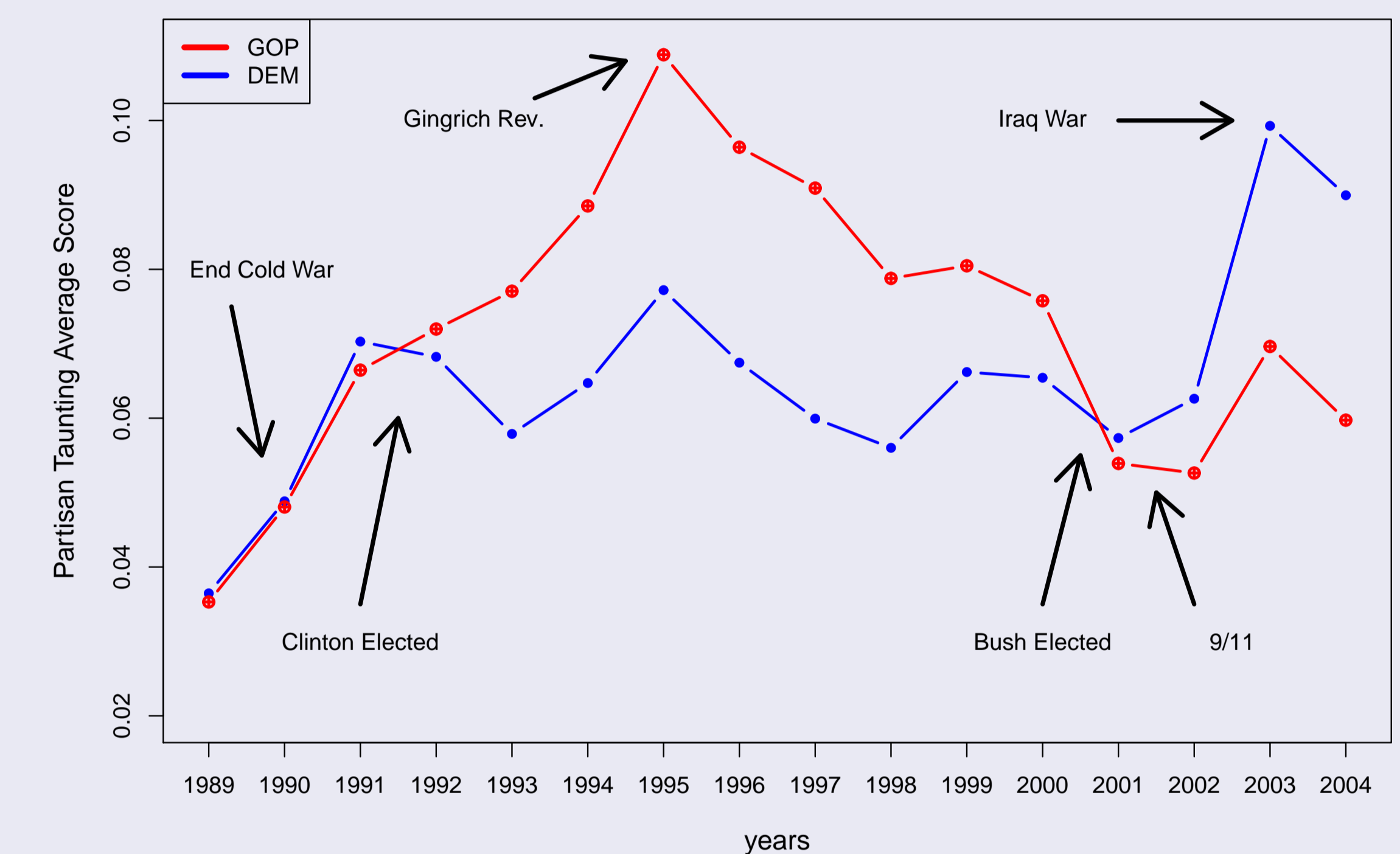
➔ **Constituents have incomplete information:** they hear from their senator rarely, but more often when taunting and the comments often resonate

### We will make Senatorial taunting behavior visible (and name names!), to change:

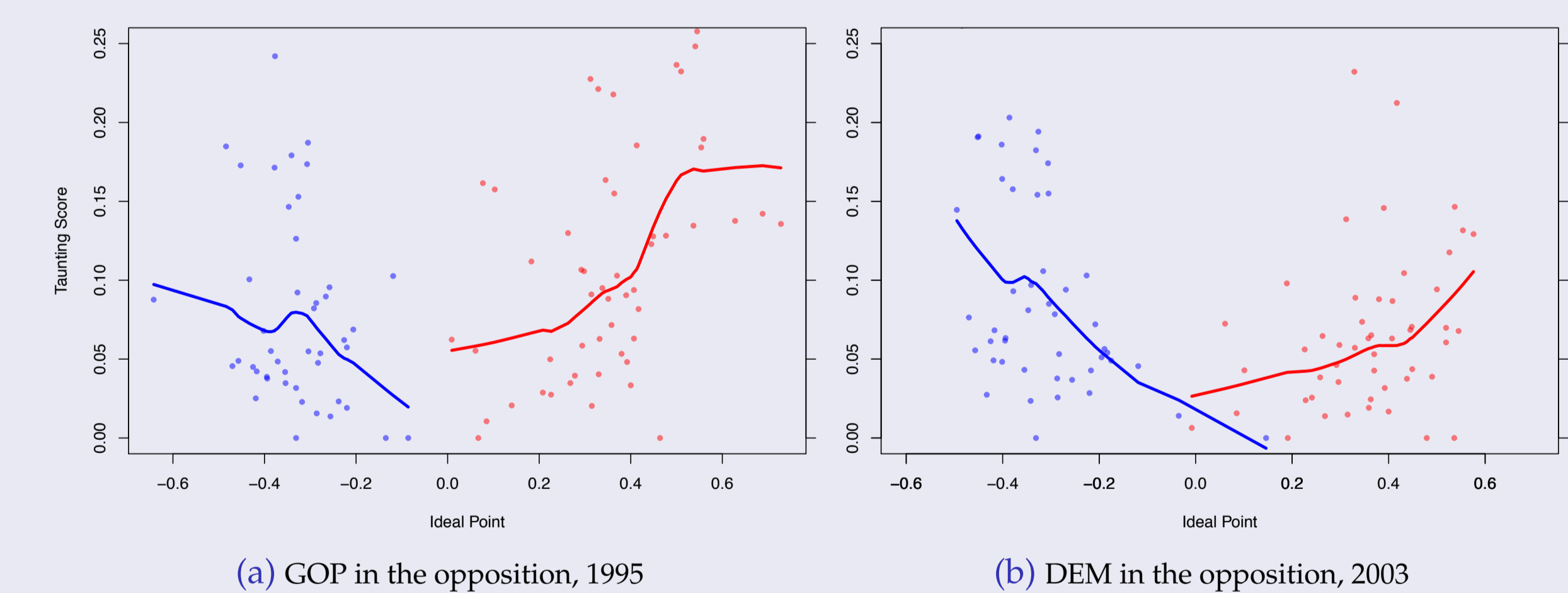
- One clever taunt may be popular, but what will constituents think if they learn their Senators are spending most of their time taunting rather than trying to solve national problems?
- Senators who learn they will be ranked on their taunting behavior may change that behavior
- Perhaps with less taunting, deliberation will increase

## 4. PRELIMINARY RESULTS

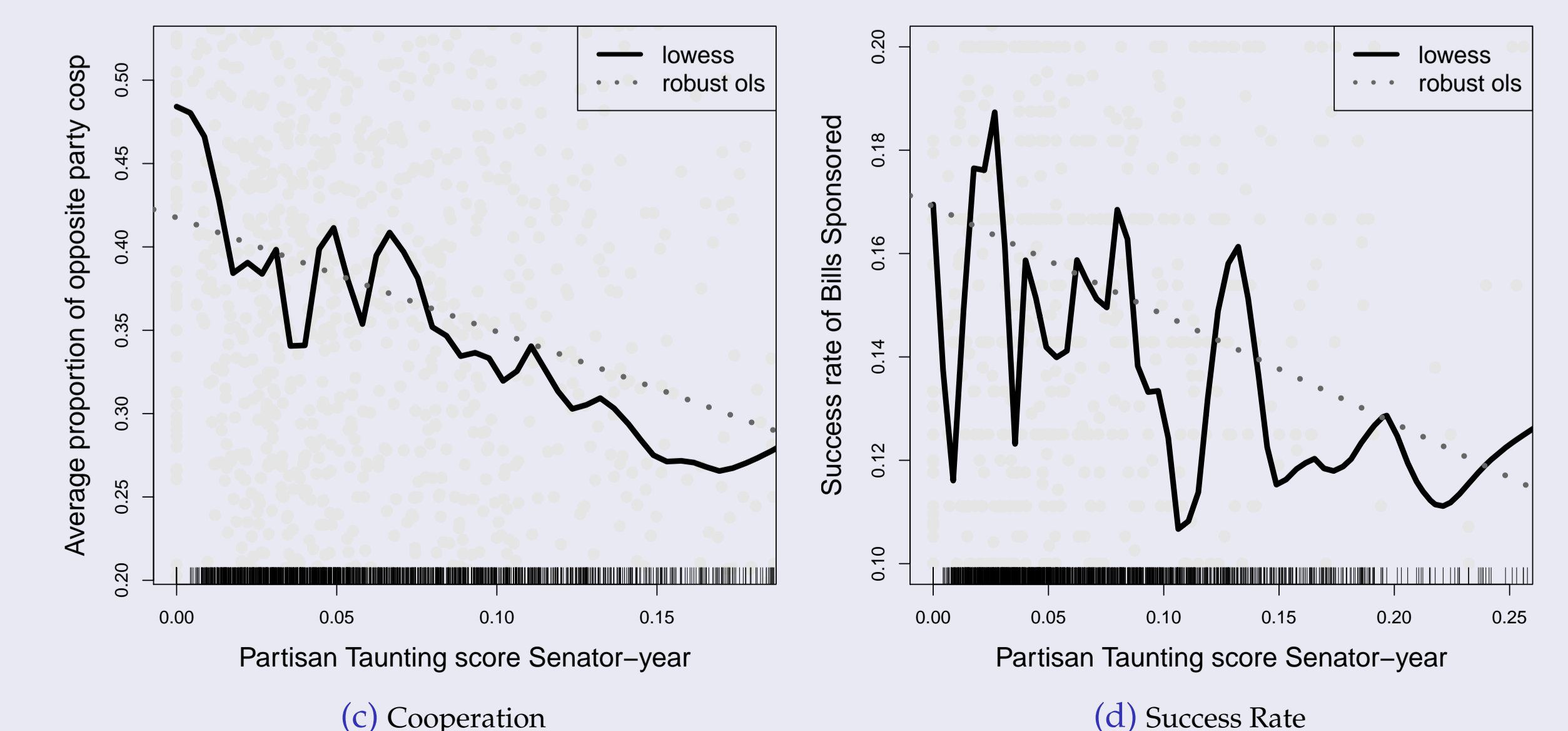
➔ **Periodic not a Steady Increase:** Taunting higher for *opposition* and depends on specific national and international events:



➔ **A Strategic Choice:** Taunting higher among *ideologically extreme* individuals, when at the *opposition*.



➔ Taunting goes up: *productivity and bipartisan cooperation go down*.



**Note:** Confirmed also in a model with Senator and Year fixed effects and controlling for ideology.