Research Statement
William "Ajax" Peris, PhD

My research agenda broadly covers American political behavior, congressional elections, and public opinion through examination of the characteristics of voters, politicians, and the electoral process. I am interested in questions concerning the relationships between knowledge, perception, and political attitudes; and in the intersection between partisanship and orientation on social issues. I seek to better understand how voters form their attitudes and positions on political issues and candidates

My current research is an extension of my dissertation, which examined congressional elections and the relationships between voters' perception of their own and candidates' partisanship. I explored whether and how voters misperceive candidate ideology. The question is drawn directly out of Bawn and Zaller's (2012) theoretical work suggesting an electoral "blind spot" in which voters' assessments of candidates' ideology is blurred by indifference to the space that is blinded. Bawn and Zaller do not offer a mechanism for the misperception and that is what I set out to uncover.

My work demonstrates that there is in fact a blurring of candidate placements but it is not in the manner Bawn and Zaller suspected. The shape and placement of the electoral blind spot seems to be driven by one particular thing: partisanship. There is a connection between voters' perceptions – and misperceptions – of candidates and the partisanship of those candidates. My work synthesized previous work on information and elections (Lupia 2016; Popkin 1991; Alvarez 1997; Jacobson 2009; Althaus 2002) and work on motivated reasoning (Lodge and Taber 2006, 2013; Steenburgen and Lodge 2003; Zaller 1992) to show the way information – whether provided by candidates or sought out by voters – and partisanship interact in congressional elections.

To facilitate my analysis, I developed measures of candidate ideology and voter perceptions of those ideologies. Since I was interested in both incumbents and challengers I needed a measure of ideology that is not rooted the individual's legislative voting record. Like others (Nyhan and Montgomery 2015; Hall 2015; Thomsen 2014) I used data on the ideology of donors and supporters of each candidate (the Database on Ideology, Money in Politics, and Elections) in a given election to approximate each candidate's ideological positioning (Bonica 2016). To these data I added data from numerous sources, including the Federal Election Commission; the Cooperative Congressional Election Study; and the Weslyan Advertising Project to calculate whether voters correctly percieve their candidates' ideology. My evaluation of perception – and misperception – proceeded with analyses of both individual and aggregate district-level measures.

My work demonstrates that voters' ability to accurately identify candidate ideology is correlated to demographic characteristics and conventional sources of political information, but is also largely driven by partisan identities. Voters percieve a significant majority of congressional candidates as being more centrist than they actually are. Generally, voters are more likely to recognize non-centrist partisanship among Republican congressional candidates than they are Democrats, but more importantly, people are less likely to recognize non-centrist ideology in their co-partisan candidates, while they are much more likely to see opposite-party candidates as non-moderates.

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Building on the findings of my dissertation, I continue to explore an effect I have dubbed "The Partisan Mirror" in which voters' perception of their congressional candidates are reflections of the voters' own strength of partisanship. In other words, the more voters consider themselves to be moderate, the more likely they will perceive candidates of both parties to also be moderate, and a voter who identifies as a strong partisan is more likely to perceive candidates of both parties to be more extreme.

The Partisan Mirror effect has an intriguing partisan aspect: the influence of voter ideology on perceptions of candidate ideology is weakest among liberal respondents' perceptions of Republican candidates for Congress. Voters' own ideology has its greatest influence on perception among conservative respondents considering Democratic congressional candidates, in which cases the effect of actual ideology is less than that of voters' own ideology. My current objective is to try to explain this differential effect, as well as to determine whether the Partisan Mirror effects are a result of voters' inability to correctly identify their own ideological postion, possibly exacerbated by a tendency for voters to assume the ideological postion of their favored candidates.

I am also interested in exploring possible mechanisms for why the parties in Congress have been moving away from one another over the last decade or so. One possibility is that parties are nominating more extreme candidates (Jacobson 2000, 2013; Abramowitz and Saunders 1998, 2008) because voters are demanding these candidates. My research suggests this may not be true. I view my findings as important part of the conversation about whether the polarization in Congress is being driven from the ground up or the top down. These findings are squarely in the top down category.

If parties control seats in Congress that are relatively safe, they can rely on the pattern I demonstrated: their in-party voters will perceive their candidates as being more centrist than they are. This means that parties can sneak an extreme candidate by the voters, and voters' electoral blind spots will prevent them from noticing. Alternatively, in competitive seats, this strategy backfires as out-partisans view opposing party candidates as systematically more extreme than they actually are. To regain moderation in Congress the implication of my work is that we need a larger number of competitive seats.

Some of my past research includes a collaboration project comparing the characteristics of supporters of Donald Trump with voters who supported other non-traditional candidates in previous eras (see Peris and Ray 2017). By modeling voters who supported Donald Trump before he became the presumptive nominee in 2016, we looked at past "outsider" candidates to determine whether their contemporary supporters exhibited similar demographic, ideological, or other attitudinal characteristics. The notion was that there may be a "type" of voter who prefers "insurgent" candidates and that may mean different things in different elections. We found limited evidence to support our hypothesis.

Moving forward my work will nearly always be closely tied to contemporary political questions, patterns, or challenges with evidence drawn from survey work as well as administrative datasets and historical texts.