Which Presidents Are Uncommonly Successful in Congress?

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Acknowledgements: We are grateful to the departments of Political Science at Fordham University and Texas A&M University for supporting this research, and to Christina Suthammanont for help with data coding. An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the 2002 Annual Meeting of the Southern Political Science Association, and we appreciate helpful comments from Richard Conley.

Abstract

Which Presidents Are Uncommonly Successful in Congress?

Scholarship on the presidency suggests that what the president does or fails to do is a crucial determinant of success in Congress. If presidential activity exerts a general and systematic influence, then when compared to a common baseline that accounts for political conditions that affect success rates, we should observe some presidents who are "uncommonly" successful and unsuccessful. We test this expectation with an empirical analysis of presidential success on roll call votes from 1953-2001. We construct a baseline model of presidential success grounded in theory and recent research, and evaluate which presidents appear "uncommonly" successful or unsuccessful relative to the baseline. We find that presidential success in Congress is largely determined by whether political conditions are favorable or unfavorable. Few residuals from this model could be considered "uncommon," and those that are unusual occur only slightly more frequently than random chance. Thus, we find no evidence that any of the ten presidents analyzed here were "uncommonly" successful or unsuccessful.

Which Presidents Are Uncommonly Successful in Congress?

Over four decades ago, Richard Neustadt (1960, i) focused the study of the presidency on presidential behavior, "what a President . . . can do, as one man among many, to carry his own choices through that maze of personalities and institutions called the government of the United States." Although students of presidential-congressional relations have produced numerous innovative and high quality studies testing Neustadt's insight, a great deal of theoretical ambiguity remains. Empirical research provides clear and convincing evidence that political conditions existing in that "maze of . . . institutions called the government" affect presidential success in achieving his policy goals. Neustadt (1960) argues, however, that skilled presidents are able to capitalize on the advantages and overcome the disadvantages of whatever political conditions they face. Or as Roger Davidson (1984, 374) put it, some presidents are not just successful; they are "uncommonly successful." The evidence that the president's activities and performance systematically alter legislative success is less convincing.

Much of the difficulty in demonstrating the effect of skills results from theoretical ambiguity in how to define and measure this key concept. Rather than offering one more study testing one more measure of presidential performance, we approach the problem indirectly. In particular, we seek to leverage what we know with some confidence about the determinants of presidential success in Congress to test an empirical generalization about presidential performance: If presidential activity exerts a general and systematic influence on success in Congress, then when compared to a common baseline that accounts for political conditions, we should observe some presidents who are "uncommonly" successful and unsuccessful.

We test this expectation with an empirical analysis of presidential success on roll call votes in the House and Senate from 1953-2001. We construct a baseline model of presidential success grounded in theory and recent research, and then evaluate which presidents appear "uncommonly" successful and unsuccessful relative to the baseline. This analysis indicates that presidential success in Congress is

determined largely by whether political conditions are favorable or unfavorable. None of the ten presidents analyzed here were "uncommonly" successful or unsuccessful. Few residuals from this model could be considered "uncommon," and those that are unusual occur only slightly more often than would be expected from random chance. The few "uncommon" residuals are also inconsistent with common perceptions of which presidents had strong or weak skill. Although our analysis does not test the effects presidential skill, these results do suggest that presidential activities are a marginal determinant of success in Congress.

Literature and Theory

The initial impulse of scholars who seek to understand political leadership is to focus on characteristics and activities of the leader. Yet leadership implies a relationship with followers, and the behavior of followers in this relationship is as important as the behavior of the leader. A fruitful strategy to understand the effects of leadership, therefore, is to focus on followers. The study of presidential-congressional relations can be viewed in a similar way.

The literature on presidential-congressional relations offers guidance on two key issues in the evaluation of whether a president is uncommonly successful with Congress. First, a number of scholars have attempted to analyze the effects of presidential activities on legislative success. The evidence is mixed at best. Although these studies have been unable to provide convincing evidence about the effects of presidential performance, they do offer clues for another research strategy. That strategy is to focus on Congress—i.e., analyze the behavior of followers. Second, the literature provides guidance about the specification of models of congressional behavior that predict and explain presidential success on roll calls.

Evidence of the Effects of Presidential Performance

Early efforts to analyze presidential leadership skill relied on in-depth case studies. Although conclusions from case studies may be based on sound scholarship, generalizing findings from a single case is problematic. Even a multiple-cases approach that applies common standards of assessment to analyze several presidents' performances on several important issues (Kellerman 1984) suffers from questions about selection bias and interpretation of findings (see Bond and Fleisher 1990, 34-40).

Several studies attempted to go beyond case studies and analyze the effects of presidential performance on legislative success quantitatively. These studies use two research strategies. One set of studies develops measures of one or two presidents' activities, and assesses the impact of these activities on success (Covington 1987a, 1987b, 1988a, 1988b; Covington, Wrighton, and Kinney 1995; Fett 1994; Lockerbie and Borelli 1989; Sullivan 1988, 1990, 1991). Recognizing the inherent difficulty of directly measuring presidential performance, other studies use an indirect approach. These studies assess the success of presidents relative to some baseline to determine if presidents reputed as skilled are more successful than those reputed as unskilled (Bond and Fleisher 1990; Edwards 1980, 1989; Fleisher and Bond 1983, 1992). Evidence from both types of studies provides only tenuous support for the hypothesis that presidential skill leads to uncommon success. And what supportive evidence there is cannot be generalized.

Lockerbie and Borrelli (1989) relied on journalists' assessments to measure the performance of presidents Carter and Reagan. They constructed a monthly measure of presidential performance from a content analysis of columns by George Will and Meg Greenfield. This measure may come closer than any other to testing Neustadt's (1960, chap. 4) notion that Washingtonian's perceptions of presidential skill are a more relevant "reality" than any actual activity. Although they found no overall effect of this variable on

House roll calls in each month, further analysis focusing on "high skills" indicated that presidents were more successful in months when journalists reported most favorably on their skills.

Interpreting this evidence as support for the skills hypothesis is dubious for several reasons. First, the measure may be influenced by the outcome. Journalists are more likely to see and report about presidential competence when there is a visible success or failure. In other words, there is an endogeneity problem that must be addressed when using such a measure. To claim that skilled performance causes success, we must be sure that the outcome did not produce the assessment of skill. Second, this measure assumes that presidential reputation undergoes meaningful month-to-month change. While this study found month-to-month variability, much of this variation may be measurement error. Relying on assessments of only two journalists increases the chance of measurement error. Finally, even if we accept the measure's validity, we have assessments of only two presidents in one chamber. Although quantitative evidence is an improvement over qualitative assessments in traditional case studies, generalizing from two presidents in one chamber is risky.

Another attempt to assess presidential performance relies on data from administration headcounts (a series of pre-vote polls of members' positions). This research finds that some members change their position between the first poll and the vote (Sullivan 1991), and some co-partisans abstain rather than vote against the administration (Covington 1988a). But attributing switches and strategic abstentions to presidential influence is debatable. Some "conversions" to a pro-administration position reflected insincere, strategic position-taking on the initial count (Sullivan 1990). In addition, some members reverted to an anti-administration position (Sullivan 1988), indicating that even if such activity does influence members' votes, the influence is not always positive.

Other research suggests that presidents focus on influencing core supporters. Fett (1994) found that the more often a president mentioned an issue, the more likely core supporters were to vote with him. Covington (1987a) found that presidents mobilize core supporters more on issues important to them. While presidential activity might increase support among core supporters, it might also indicate that presidents place a higher priority on issues on which they and their core supporters already agree. If so, then these findings might indicate that the president is responding to key allies in Congress rather than skillfully influencing them. In addition, Fett's (1994) measure is just the number of times the president mentioned an issue rather than an assessment of how skilled the president's performance was or how Washingtonians perceived it as with Lockerbie and Borrelli's (1989) measure. And each of these studies was limited to two presidents, raising questions about generalizability.

Finally, Covington, Wrighton, and Kinney (1995) focus on the president's positions and his influence over the agenda. Their analysis demonstrates that both majority and minority presidents have about the same probability of winning votes on which the president supports passage, and votes that are on the president's agenda regardless of whether he supports or opposes passage. Although this innovative study offers important insights about the effect of presidential performance, it also shows why party control is such an important political condition affecting success in Congress. Compared to majority presidents, minority presidents are much less likely to support passage of bills that get to the floor, and they are much less likely to get their on-agenda items to the floor for a vote. And since this analysis is based on the experience of only three presidents who served between 1953 and 1975, questions of generalizability remain.

Thus, attempts to directly measure presidential performance have not produced convincing, generalizable evidence. Although we admire the innovative tests in these studies, the lack of progress in

demonstrating general empirical effects suggests the need for another approach. Other studies have used an indirect approach to compare presidents since Eisenhower. These studies rely on general assessments of presidents' reputations, and then compare presidents' success against various baselines based on characteristics and conditions in Congress.

The case study literature does give an indication of which presidents have reputations as skilled politicians and which ones do not. Recall that Neustadt (1960, chap. 4) views perceptions of the president's professional reputation as most relevant even if these differ from more objective indicators. A review of this literature (Bond and Fleisher 1990, 198-204) indicates that Lyndon Johnson, Ronald Reagan, and Gerald Ford are reputed to be highly skilled, while Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter are reputed to be unskilled. Historical assessments of Eisenhower and Kennedy are mixed, and reputations of more recent presidents are still being formed.

Edwards (1980, 1989) found that presidents reputed to be skilled did not receive more support from certain groups of members (i.e., northern Democrats, southern Democrats, Republicans) than other presidents of the same party. This finding was similar for measures of presidential support based on non-unanimous votes as well as on Key Votes in both the House and Senate. The analysis of Key Votes is noteworthy because it limits the analysis to a few issues likely to be viewed as highly important to presidents and members of Congress. Comparing presidents of the same party controls for a major factor known to influence individual presidential support scores, and the analysis of several presidents' success in both chambers of Congress contributes to generalizability of the findings.

Fleisher and Bond (1983, 1992) expanded on Edwards' approach with a statistical model that estimates the effects of party, ideology, and presidential popularity on individual House members' support the president. They compared forecasts from this model to members' actual levels of support for Carter

and Reagan during their first years in office. Consistent with perceptions of Carter as unskilled, this analysis revealed that on average members of Congress supported Carter less often than predicted. But contrary to perceptions that Reagan was unusually influential, Reagan also received less support from House members than predicted (Fleisher and Bond 1983). A similar analysis of the senior Bush's first year suggested that support for Bush was also below predicted levels, even among individuals identified as his close friends and political allies (Fleisher and Bond 1992). These studies, however, were limited to analysis of success in the House during these presidents' first years in office.

Bond and Fleisher (1990, Ch. 8) used a similar statistical baseline to analyze annual success rates of presidents from Eisenhower to Reagan in the House and Senate. This analysis found that presidents reputed as highly skilled did not win more roll call votes given the political conditions they faced than did presidents reputed as less skilled.

Edwards' and Bond and Fleisher's studies may be criticized because their crude, global assessments treat leadership skill as static. Perceptions of skill are probably not as fluid as popularity, but they are likely to vary over the course of a term.

The choice of a baseline also has come under scrutiny. Joslyn (1995) criticized Fleisher and Bond (1992) for using a model based on data from 1953-1974 to forecast presidential support in 1989. Using a baseline so far removed in time from the behavior being predicted assumes that relationships estimated in the forecast model do not change over time. Joslyn (1995) found different results using a model that included observations closer to the period being forecast. This critique raises the more general point that assessments of presidential performance depend heavily on model specification. An improperly specified model will dump more unexplained variance into the error term, increasing the number of factors included in the residuals.

Thus, studies that compare presidential success to some baseline fail to find evidence that perceptions of skill have systematic effects. This approach, of course, is not a direct test of skills. Yet constructing a better-specified model than those used in previous research for both chambers would at least allow us to see which presidents were uncommonly successful and unsuccessful relative to the conditions they faced. This research strategy is likely to produce findings that can be generalized at least to presidents since Eisenhower for whom we have indicators of legislative success. The task we face is to estimate a properly specified model. We turn now to the literature on presidential success in Congress to identify the variables that belong in the baseline.

The Determinants of Presidential Success in Congress

To estimate a well-specified baseline model of presidential success in Congress requires a theory of congressional behavior. Fortunately, students of Congress and presidential-congressional relations have identified the basic determinants of congressional behavior and how presidential preferences and activities fit into members' decision-making calculus.

Our theory assumes that members of Congress are rational actors motivated by two goals: policy and reelection (Aldrich 1995; Aldrich and Rohde 2000; Arnold 1990; Fenno 1973; Mayhew 1974; Rohde 1991). Because members must make decisions with imperfect information under severe time constraints, they rely on cues, or shortcuts, to help them cast votes that advance their goals. Previous research establishes that the most important determinants of roll call votes in Congress are cues from party, ideology, and constituency, and only rarely does a member need to search more broadly for guidance (Jackson 1974; Kingdon 1981; Matthews and Stimson 1975). These cues tend to dominate decision making in large part because of substantial overlap among them. Elections tend to select representatives with partisan and policy preferences that are compatible with their constituency, so members seldom

experience conflict between constituent preferences and their party and personal ideology (Fenno 1978). For most members, following their party and ideology contributes to reelection–or at least does not threaten it.

If these primary cues are not in conflict, then members vote with the consensus. Only when there is conflict do members expand their search to other cues both in and out of government (Kingdon 1981). This expanded search may include inputs from staff, interest groups, bureaucrats, experts, the news media, and mass public opinion, as well as the president. But note that the president is only one of many competing outside influences, and seldom is he dominant in members' calculus. Cues from the president must always compete with the stronger influences of party, ideology, and constituency. Because the primary cues are strong and rarely in conflict, presidential influence on members' voting behavior is marginal, and most likely to occur when the primary cues are in conflict.

Developing a Baseline Model of Presidential Success

The literature suggests a number of variables that should be included in a fully specified model of presidential success. The first and most important determinant is party. Previous research shows that presidential support is higher among members of the president's party than among the opposition, and the president's position is more likely to win when his party controls Congress than when the opposition party is in power (Bond and Fleisher 1990; Edwards 1989).

We have solid theoretical reasons to explain why party exerts a strong influence on congressional behavior (Bond and Fleisher 1990). First, because members of the same political party must satisfy similar electoral coalitions, they share a wide range of policy preferences. Support is higher among members of the president's party because they and their constituents are more likely to agree with his policy preferences than are members of the other party. Second, members of a political party share a psychological

attachment to a common political symbol; in a sense, they are part of the same political "family." Although diverse, decentralized parties and different institutional perspectives inevitably lead to disagreements between the president and his co-partisans in Congress, "bargaining 'within the family' has a rather different quality than bargaining with members of the rival clan" (Neustadt 1960, 187). Third, members of the president's party must run on his record as well as their own, so they have an incentive to help him succeed.

This partisan support translates into higher success if the president's party has a majority in Congress. Part of the explanation of why majority presidents win more votes in Congress than minority presidents is simple arithmetic—majority presidents have more members on the floor with incentives to support their policy preferences. But more important than numbers is control of the levers of power in Congress. The majority party in Congress controls committees as well as access to the floor. Consequently, the issues on the congressional agenda and how choices are presented to members on the floor are more likely to reflect the president's preferences when his partisans control the chamber (Covington, Wrighton, and Kinney 1995). Bond, Fleisher, and Wood (2003, Table 1) show that the percentage of the president's party in Congress has no effect on presidential success independent of majority control. The simple dichotomy of unified or divided party control the chamber, therefore, provides a sound beginning for explaining presidential success.

A second explanation to add to the model is timing during the president's term. The notion of a "honeymoon" is a frequently noted aspect of presidential-congressional relations. The honeymoon refers to the early part of a president's term when the public, the Washington press corps, and members of Congress are predisposed to give him the benefit of the doubt. An American government textbook hints at the origin of the analogy: the "honeymoon" is the period "during which, presumably, the president's love

affair with the people and the Congress can be consummated" (Wilson 1992, 344). This period is widely viewed as the most propitious time for presidential initiatives. But paradoxically, the first year is also a period of learning and adjustment for the president, so there is no guarantee that he will be able to exploit the potential benefits of the honeymoon. Bond and Fleisher (1990, 211-13) find evidence that presidents Johnson, and Reagan seemed to have successful honeymoon years, while Nixon and Carter had less impressive beginnings. They suggest that having unusually successful first years may have contributed to Johnson and Reagan's reputations as skilled, while Nixon and Carter's less than impressive first years contributed to their reputations as unskilled.

The honeymoon concept is closely tied to presidential elections, but there is a question of how to code cases if the president assumes office without an election, and if a president wins reelection. President Johnson assumed office following the Kennedy assassination when there was a strong rally of public support for American institutions. As a result, Johnson received an early honeymoon prior to his election. In contrast, President Ford, who was appointed Vice President and ascended to the presidency after Nixon's resignation, seems to have had no honeymoon. As he assumed the presidency, Ford said to Congress, "I do not want a honeymoon with you. I want a good marriage." Yet despite vows of "communication, conciliation, compromise, and cooperation," Cronin (1980, 226) observes that Ford's "hoped-for holy wedlock soured and unholy deadlock set in. . . ." And renewal of vows for a second term also appears not to merit a second honeymoon (Light 1982, 39).[1]

A third explanation of presidential success in Congress is popularity with the public. Neustadt (1960) proposes electoral self-interest as a theoretical rationale for why public approval should affect

[1]Other timing effects include a "cycle of increasing effectiveness" as the president's knowledge and expertise grow, and a "cycle of decreasing influence" as the president's political capital and energy are depleted (Light 1982). Since these are offsetting influences without precise measures, it is difficult to include both in a statistical model. The effects of mid-term elections are captured by partisan influences in the model.

success in Congress. The president's popularity affects calculations of electoral self-interest because members fear electoral retribution if they oppose a popular president or support an unpopular one. As Neustadt (1960, 86) explains, members of Congress "must take account of popular reactions to their actions. What their publics think of them becomes a factor, therefore, in deciding how to deal with the desires of a President. His prestige enters into that decision; their publics are part of his."

Presidential approval, however, has only a marginal effect on success. Presidential approval is not likely to cause members of Congress to systematically alter their behavior, because the public's evaluation of the president plays only a small role in deciding the outcome of most congressional races. Few voters have sufficient knowledge of their representative's level of presidential support to make a connection between their evaluation of the president and their decision of which congressional candidate to support. If presidential popularity influences congressional elections, it most likely works indirectly through the candidate recruitment process, helping or hurting members of the president's party without regard to their specific levels of presidential support (Jacobson 1990; Jacobson and Kernell 1983). Furthermore, because presidential popularity is fluid, using it as a guide in casting roll call votes is risky. The president's popularity on election day is more important than his popularity months or even years earlier when members must cast votes supporting or opposing the president. Members cannot predict with any certainty presidential popularity on election day. For these reasons, the effect of public approval on members' electoral self-interest is limited and uncertain. Since public approval has only a limited effect on members' electoral self-interest, its effect on their roll call voting decisions will also be marginal (Bond, Fleisher, and Wood 2003).

A final factor that affects presidential success in Congress is party polarization. But we do not expect polarization to directly raise or lower success. Instead, our theory predicts that polarization affects success by conditioning the effects of presidential popularity and party control. Bond, Fleisher and Wood

(2003) develop a theoretical rationale explaining why party polarization conditions the relationship between presidential approval and success in Congress. The level of partisanship in Congress systematically alters the relationship, because members search more or less broadly as primary cues change. Partisan behavior is a function of the consistency among cues from party, ideology, and constituency. During times of low partisanship, Congress has more cross-pressured members who experience conflicts among these primary cues (Fleisher and Bond 2000). When many members experience such conflict, public approval becomes more important as members expand their search. During periods of high partisanship with fewer cross-pressured members, primary cues are reinforcing. When few members experience conflict among the primary cues, the effect of public approval declines.

This theory may be extended to explain how party polarization should also condition the relationship between party control and presidential success. Presidents typically reflect preferences of their party mainstream (Aldrich and Rohde 2000, 69; Bond and Fleisher 1990). When parties are polarized, presidential cues reinforce primary cues of more members of his party resulting in fewer defections, leading to higher success if his party controls the chamber.

The effects of the interactions, however, are likely to differ in the House and Senate. Two features of the Senate tend to insulate Senators from popular influences and might mute the effects of both public opinion and party. First, Senators serve six-year terms and only one-third must face the voters in any given election. The president's popularity is less likely to affect the reelection chances of the two-thirds of Senators whose next election is two or four years away. Second, Senate rules allow individuals and the minority party to block legislation they oppose, whereas House rules empower even a slim partisan majority to win if it is cohesive. Polarized parties, therefore, should increase the success of majority presidents in the House because they can win without votes from the minority. But majority control is less

of an advantage in the Senate, and the interaction with polarized parties should be weaker than in the House.

Measures for the Baseline Model

Thus, the literature identifies the major determinants of presidential success in Congress. We turn now to a description of the measures used in our model.

Presidential Success in Congress

The dependent variable is presidential success on the floor of the House and Senate, measured as the annual percentage of conflictual roll calls from 1953 through 2001 on which the president's position won (presidential roll calls were identified by Congressional Quarterly, Inc. 1953-2001). A conflictual presidential roll call is one on which less than 80% vote in agreement with the president (Bond and Fleisher 1990; Fleisher and Bond 2000). We exclude consensual presidential victories to limit the analysis to relatively important issues. A check of issues passed by near unanimous margins with the president's support reveals that, with rare exceptions, these are minor and routine issues. Votes that the president lost with more than 80% voting against him remain in the analysis. These relatively unusual cases when the president stands alone against a united Congress represent instances of important institutional conflict. Such cases are neither trivial nor routine, and belong in the analysis. Presidential success ranged from 17.6% to 89.0% with a mean of 55.36 and standard deviation of 20.54 in the House, and from 23.5% to 90.0% with a mean of 62.12 and a standard deviation of 17.07 in the Senate.

Party Control

We model the effect of party with a binary variable coded one when the president's party controls the chamber and zero otherwise. Consistent with findings in Bond, Fleisher, and Wood (2003), the size of president's party had no significant effect beyond the effects of majority status in any of our specifications,

so we omit this variable. Substantively, this finding suggests that having the president's partisans control committees and the floor agenda is more important than incremental changes in the number of co-partisans in the chamber.

Honeymoon

The honeymoon is indicated by a binary variable coded one for the first year after the president's first election and zero otherwise. Consistent with the discussion above, we coded Johnson with an early honeymoon in 1964, but Ford with no honeymoon. Second term presidents did not receive a second honeymoon.

Presidential Approval

We measure presidential popularity with the Gallup job approval question (Edwards with Gallup 1990; updates from Gallup), "Do you approve or disapprove of the way [the incumbent] is doing his job as president?" Our measure is the average annual percentage approving of the president's job performance. Approval ranged from 37% to 75%, with a mean of 56.48 and standard deviation of 10.67.

Partisanship in Congress

Partisanship in Congress is the frequency of party voting in each chamber during each year. Our measure is the annual percentage of all recorded votes on which a majority of Democrats opposed a majority of Republicans (Ornstein, Mann, and Malbin 1998; Willis 2002). The greater the percentage of party votes, the more often members are following partisan cues in deciding their votes. In the House, party voting ranged from 27% to 73%, with a mean of 47.02 and standard deviation of 10.73. In the Senate, party voting ranged from 30% to 69%, with a mean of 46.14 and a standard deviation of 8.97. We do not

expect party unity to directly affect presidential success. Instead, we expect party unity to condition the effects of public approval and party control.[2]

Interactions

We analyze the House and Senate separately and expect similar, but not identical, relationships in both chambers. As discussed above, we expect the effects of presidential approval and party control to be weaker in the Senate than in the House, and the interactions should also be weaker in the Senate.

Results from the Baseline Model

Table 1 reports results as we sequentially add variables in constructing the baseline model for the House and Senate. To be conservative and to take account of potential autocorrelation and heteroscedasticity, we report t-statistics calculated using Newey and West (1987) autocorrelation and heteroscedasticity consistent standard errors. The full model for each chamber is in the last column of each part of the table. To assess the veracity of the full model, however, it is instructive to observe how the model changes as we sequentially add each theoretical component.

[Table 1 about here]

The first column of models for the House and Senate shows results of what we might term a naïve model that predicts presidential success from party control alone. This simple model suggests that majority party control yields a substantial bonus for the president in both chambers, but as expected, the benefit is somewhat stronger in the House than in the Senate. Although the ultimate result of majority party control is a predicted success rate of about 76% in both the House (i.e., 44.41 + 31.54 = 75.95) and the Senate (i.e., 50.59 + 25.68 = 76.27), the increase associated with majority status is larger in the House.

[2] In a separate set of analyses, we measured party polarization using Poole and Rosenthal's DW-NOMINATE scores. The results were similar to those reported below, but somewhat weaker. We suspect the difference results because DW-NOMINATE scores vary only biennially.

Compared to minority presidents, the models predict that success rates of a majority president should be 31.54 percentage points higher in the House, and 25.68 points higher in the Senate. This naïve model is also fairly powerful, in that it explains about 55% of the variance in annual presidential success for the House, and about 57% in the Senate.

Adding the honeymoon effect (shown in the second column) improves the model substantially. The honeymoon effect is similar in the House (11.5%) and Senate (10.5%), suggesting that the president receives about the same amount of good will at the start of his term in each chamber.

Adding presidential approval to the model yields little additional explanation in the House, but a statistically significant increase in the Senate. Our theory suggests that approval should affect members' behavior only at the margins after party, ideology, and constituency are taken into account. The weak effect in the House, therefore, is consistent with this theory, but the significant effect in the Senate is not. Our theory suggests that 6-year staggered terms should insulate Senators from outside influences such as presidential approval, so we expected a weaker relationship in the Senate than in the House.

Our theory also suggests that the effect of approval on presidential success should be conditioned by the degree of polarization in Congress, and there is empirical support for this theory (Bond, Fleisher, and Wood 2003). In addition, we offered a theoretical rationale to expect a conditioning effect for majority control. Therefore, to evaluate the effects of public approval and majority control on presidential success, we need to test for interactions with party polarization.

The last column of models for each chamber reports results of adding the interactive effect of party polarization on presidential approval and majority party status. Consistent with the models reported in Bond, Fleisher, and Wood (2003), the interaction of presidential approval and party polarization is significant in both the House and Senate. The negative interaction indicates that the relationship between

public approval and legislative success declines as partisanship rises. Consistent with our theory, the negative interaction effect is two times larger in the House than in the Senate. Each one percent increase in partisanship reduces the effect of public approval on presidential success about -0.02 (-0.017 rounded up) in the House, and -0.01 (-0.008 rounded up) in the Senate.

The coefficient for approval in this model indicates the effect at zero partisanship. In the absence of partisanship, the model suggests that the effect of public approval would be positive with a larger effect in the House than in the Senate--a one percent rise in approval is associated with nearly a one percent (.91) increase in success in the House and about a .66 increase in the Senate. But zero partisanship is not a realistic value. Consider now how polarization affects the relationship between presidential approval and success at average levels of party voting. The average percentage of party votes from 1953-2001 was about 47.02 in the House and about 46.14 in the Senate. Over the entire time period, the average effect of public approval on presidential success in the House was about 0.11 (i.e., 0.91 + [47.02*-0.017] = 0.11), and about 0.29 (i.e., 0.66+[46.14*-.008]=0.29) in the Senate. Thus, at average partisanship, a 10% increase in public approval produces about a 1.1% increase in success in the House and a 2.9% increase in the Senate. This result means that a relatively large 10% rise in presidential approval translates into about one additional House victory and two additional Senate victories (i.e., 65*.011 = 0.72 in the House; 72*.029 = 2.09 in the Senate).[3] These effects are small, especially compared to the effect of the president's party controlling the chamber. And if partisnship increases one standard deviation above the mean (to 57.75 in the House and 55.11 in the Senate), the effect of presidential approval is negative in the House (i.e., 0.91 + [57.75*-0.017] = -0.07) and remains small in the Senate (i.e., 0.66 + [55.11*-.008] = 0.22).

[3]The average number of party votes over the period of this study was 65 in the House and 72 in the Senate.

Finally, consider how polarization conditions the relationship between party control and success. The interaction of party control and polarization is positive in both chambers, implying that unified parties produce higher success if the president's party controls a chamber.[4] With same party control in the House, each one percent increase in polarization produces a 1.44% increase in success. The coefficient is smaller and not significant in the Senate. It implies that under same party control each one percent increase in polarization would increase success about 0.41%.

Since the coefficient for party control indicates the effect of majority status at zero partisanship (no party votes), we need to evaluate the effects at more realistic levels. At average partisanship in the House, the majority party bonus is about 30 points (-37.38 + [1.44*47.02] = 30.33), and at one standard deviation above mean partisanship, the majority bonus increases to about 46 points (-37.38 + [1.44*57.75] = 45.78). At average partisanship in the Senate, majority presidents receive about a 25 point bonus (5.91 + [.41*46.14] = 24.83), and at one standard deviation above mean partisanship, the majority bonus is about 29 points (5.91 + [.41*55.11] = 28.51).[5]

These results indicate that polarization increases the success rates of majority presidents. And as predicted by our theory, the effects are muted in the Senate: the direct effect of majority control is smaller in the Senate than in the House, and the boost in success that majority presidents receive if the parties are polarized is also smaller in the Senate.

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[4]When interacting a binary and a continuous variable, one typically includes both in the model. But including polarization as well as the interactions produces severe multicollinearity, so we omit polarization. This omission imposes the theoretical restriction that polarization has no effect generally, but only in interaction with other variables. This restriction is consistent with our theory that polarization does not directly cause success to rise or fall.

[5]Since the coefficient for majority party control is not significant in the Senate model, one might prefer to treat it as zero. If we do, the estimates are reduced to 18.92 at the mean and 22.60 at plus one standard deviation.

Which Presidents Do Better or Worse Than Expected?

The purpose of this analysis was to produce a well-specified model of annual presidential success in Congress in order to establish a common baseline. The residuals indicate whether any of the ten presidents in the sample appear "uncommonly" successful or unsuccessful after accounting for political conditions that theoretically affect success in Congress.

Is the baseline model well specified? The final models with the interactions explain 77% and 70% of the residual variance in the House and Senate respectively. The standard errors of estimates show that the average residual error is about 10.42% and 9.95% respectively. In other words, if we used these models to predict presidential success, we could be wrong on average by about 10% in each chamber. We tried adding some other potentially interesting variables, including magnitude of the president's election victory, turnover in congressional seats in the prior election, and individual year dummies. None of these variables produced statistically significant change.[6] We also ran a fourth order Ramsey's (1969) RESET test for model misspecification; the test was not statistically significant. Based on these results and tests, we are confident that the model is well specified.

To determine if any of these ten presidents were unusual, we calculated *studentized residuals*. These are standardized residuals made independent by calculating the model fit while sequentially omitting each of the *i* observations. This approach to constructing an index of the relative "unusualness" of observations takes into account both the leverage that an observation exerts on the regression, as well as the absolute size of each residual. *Studentized residuals* follow a t-distribution with T-k-1 degrees of freedom (43 degrees of freedom with our models). Using a 95% confidence interval, absolute values of

[6]One study included the number of positions taken, as a measure of risk taking by the president (Brace and Hinckley 1992). This measure is non-stationary in time series terms and often produces spurious relationships (Granger and Newbold 1974). In addition, our dependent variable contains the total number of votes on which the president took a position, so the number of presidential positions would be endogenous in our analysis.

s*tudentized residuals* greater than about 2.017 would be considered unusual. By random chance, we would expect one in twenty to appear unusual. For our sample of size 49, we would expect about 2.45 unusual observations by random chance in each chamber.

Figure 1 plots the *studentized residuals* for the House and Senate. We find only three "unusual" observations in each chamber. In the House, the "unusual" observations occur in 1960, 1971, and 1988; in the Senate, they occur in 1958, 1977, and 1999. These outliers occur for different presidents in different years in each chamber, and there is no systematic relation between chambers that would suggest simultaneous uncommon success of any particular president. Since we expect 2.45 "unusual" observations in each chamber by random chance, this analysis suggests there is little systematic in the residuals that would point toward "uncommon" presidential success or failure.

[Figure 1 about here]

Of course, one might argue that the "unusualness" standard implied by *studentized residuals* is arbitrary and that there are patterns in the residuals that imply other factors. We do, of course, observe periods within presidencies when a president was more or less successful than predicted by the model. For example, Eisenhower appears more successful than predicted through most of the second term. Nixon was more successful in the House than predicted by the base model from 1971 through 1973. And Clinton was less successful than predicted during the second term.

Attributing such patterns to presidential performance and skill, however, is not appropriate. Although we are confident that our statistical baseline is well-specified, as with any statistical model it contains error resulting from unknown sources. Some presidency scholars emphasize the importance leadership skill, and we know our model omits this potentially important variable. But we have no scientific

way to determine how much of the error variance (if any) is attributable to this (or any other) omitted variable.

Nonetheless, this analysis ought to raise serious questions about leadership skill as a systematic explanation of presidential success on roll call votes in Congress. Just as the clue of the dog that didn't bark pointed Sherlock Holmes to the true culprit in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's mystery *Silver Blaze*, let's consider what this analysis does not find.

First, the failure to find more than a random number of cases of "uncommon" success suggests that the baseline model has identified the most important determinants of success. If leadership skills were an important and systematic variable omitted from the model, then we should see more presidents who did much better or worse than expected relative to the conditions they faced.

Second, theoretical discussions do not suggest that different skills are required to succeed in the House and Senate, or that skills operate differently in the two chambers. If political skills or the lack of them lead to uncommonly high or low success, then we would expect to see some uncommon cases for the same president in both chambers simultaneously. The few observations of uncommon success appear randomly distributed across president and chambers. No single president had uncommon success in both chambers in the same year. Eisenhower is the only president with more than one outlier and they are in different years (the Senate in 1958 and House in 1960).

Finally, the few "uncommon" cases do not match up to presidents identified by qualitative research as highly skilled or unskilled. Neither Johnson nor Reagan, who according to the journalistic and scholarly consensus were highly skilled, appear as uncommonly successful relative to the political conditions they faced. To the contrary, Reagan's success in the House in 1988 was one of the unusually low cases. And the presidents viewed as least skilled, Nixon and Carter, also fail to conform to expectations of the skills

explanation. Although Carter's success in the Senate in 1977 was unusually low, Nixon's success in the House in 1971 was uncommonly high.

Conclusions

Presidency scholars claim that presidential success is a function of both skill and political conditions. Although students of presidential-congressional relations have been unable to demonstrate convincingly that presidential activities systematically affect success, the literature provides substantial theory and evidence regarding the political conditions that determine presidential success in Congress. Our analysis contributes additional evidence that presidential success on the floor of Congress is determined primarily by whether political conditions are favorable or unfavorable. Although our model leaves some variance unexplained, few of the residuals would be considered outliers. That is, none of the ten presidents analyzed here were uncommonly successful or unsuccessful relative to the conditions they faced. The few instances of uncommon success could occur by random chance.

Presidential skill, nonetheless, continues to occupy a central, if not dominant, position in the literature. This analysis cannot refute skill as an explanation. Previous research has found a number of interesting and important cases on which a skilled performance (or lack of it) made the difference between success and failure. But the debate over the relative importance of skills cannot be resolved simply by agreeing that skills matter some of the time on some issues. If presidential skill is to provide a theoretical understanding of presidential success on par with that provided by political conditions, then we should be able to observe more than idiosyncratic effects on a small number of issues. The burden of providing systematic evidence rests on proponents of the skill part of the explanation. The persistent failure to find systematic evidence should raise doubts about skill as scientific theory.

We should also continue to work to improve our understanding of the conditions that affect presidential success, and how they operate. Our finding of significant interactions of party polarization with public approval and majority control is noteworthy. Party control sets the basic condition for presidential success, and presidents do somewhat better in their honeymoon year. The marginal effect of public opinion on success is conditioned by the level of partisanship in Congress. At low levels of partisanship, the president's standing with the public has a modest positive effect on success. But at high levels of partisanship, which have characterized Congress in recent decades, the marginal effect of public approval diminishes (and even turns negative in the House). Party polarization also interacts with party control, enhancing the benefit of majority status.

Thus, polarized parties further reduce the ability of presidential activities to affect success even at the margins. In polarized periods, electoral processes reduce the number of moderate and cross-pressured members, the very members who are most inclined to search beyond the primary cues of party and ideology for guidance in making decisions. Fewer members who look beyond party and ideology, means fewer members subject to presidential persuasion. This condition places a high premium on having majorities in the House and Senate. Unless the level of partisanship in Congress declines, a rational strategy for a president who seeks to improve his legislative success is to focus on maintaining or winning partisan majorities in the House and Senate. President Bush seems to have successfully followed this strategy in the 2002 midterm elections. Ironically, electoral activities aimed at electing sympathetic majorities in Congress are likely to contribute to more party polarization.

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Figure 1
Which Presidents Were More or Less Successful Than Expected in Congress

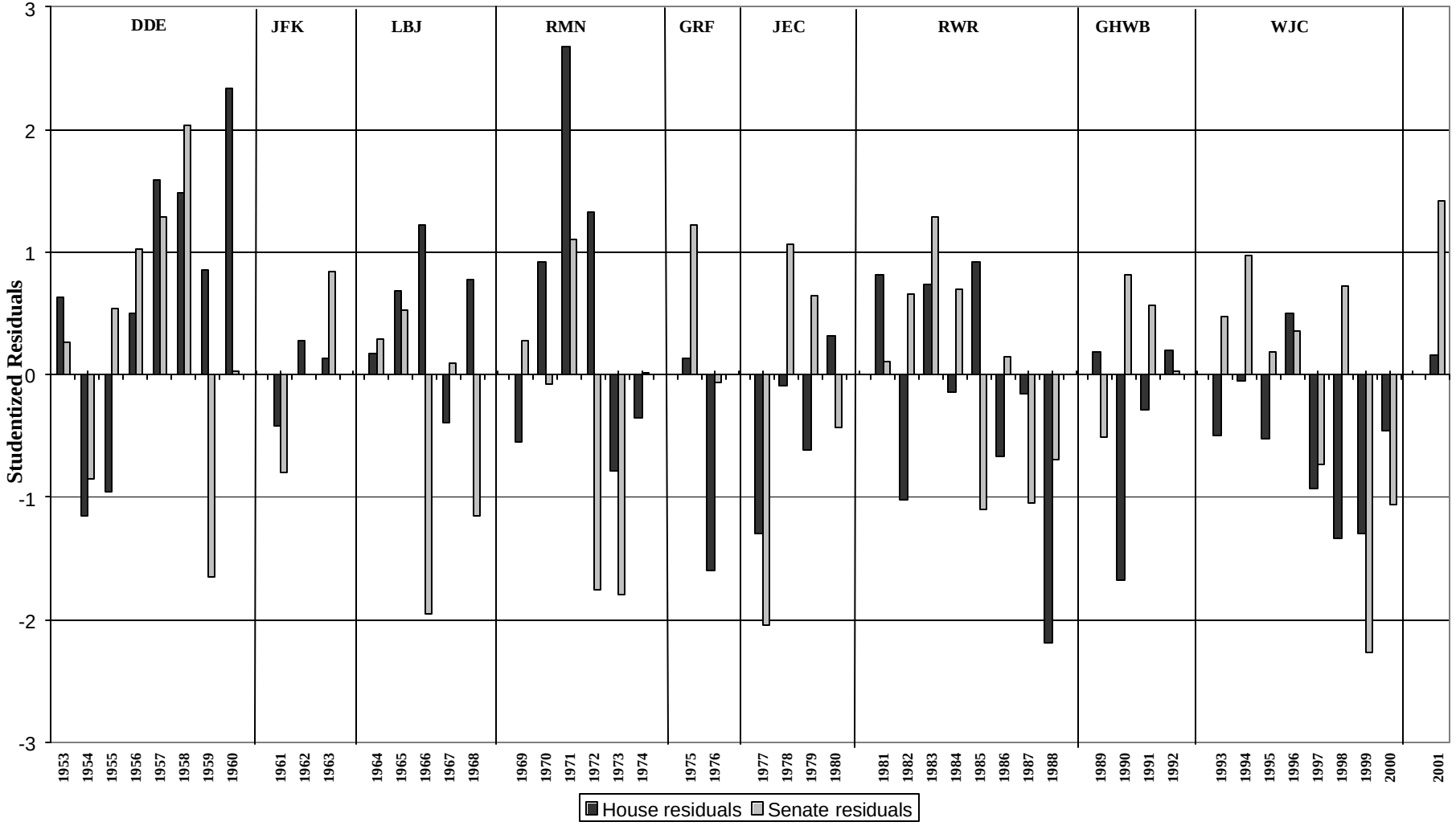

TABLE 1: Regression Analysis of Determinants of Presidential Success in the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate, 1953-2001

Variable	HOUSE				SENATE			
	Party Control	Add Honeymoon	Add Approval	Add Polarization	Party Control	Add Honeymoon	Add Approval	Add Polarization
Party Control	31.54	27.88	27.96	-37.38	25.68	23.51	24.61	5.91
	(7.35)	(7.02)	(7.05)	(-3.58)	(7.55)	(7.50)	(8.52)	(0.45)
Honeymoon		11.50	11.16	4.64		10.48	7.20	6.29
		(3.48)	(2.88)	(1.41)		(3.29)	(2.17)	(1.70)
Approval			0.03	0.91			0.29	0.66
			(0.23)	(5.46)			(2.36)	(4.24)
Approval*Polarization				-0.02				-0.01
				(-5.71)				(-2.54)
Party Control *Polarization				1.44				0.41
				(6.94)				(1.44)
Constant	44.41	43.33	41.68	38.72	50.59	49.43	33.23	32.87
	(13.05)	(12.72)	(5.48)	(6.94)	(19.78)	(19.44)	(4.94)	(4.97)
N	49	49	49	49	49	49	49	49
R^2	0.55	0.59	0.59	0.77	0.57	0.63	0.66	0.70
σ	13.99	13.43	13.57	10.42	11.29	10.61	10.33	9.95

Note: The dependent variable is the president's annual percentage success on conflictual roll call votes from 1953 through 2001. The numbers in parentheses are t statistics calculated using Newey-West (1987) autocorrelation and heteroscedasticity consistent standard errors.