

Partisan Polarization in Presidential Support:

The Electoral Connection

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Abstract

By every measure, politics in Washington became increasingly polarized along partisan and ideological lines between the Nixon and G.W. Bush administrations. One component of this development has been the growing partisan disparity in congressional support for presidential initiatives. This trend has a manifest electoral and popular basis. Survey and aggregate electoral data show that the extent to which presidents and members of the opposition party in Congress share electoral constituencies has declined significantly, and the parties' respective electoral bases have become increasingly polarized in term of both ideology and presidential voting patterns. These changes have been consequential, because presidential support scores among members of Congress vary with the president's electoral support in their constituencies. Presidential job approval data also show a widening gap in the average approval ratings expressed by self-identified Republicans and Democrats. These changes have substantially reduced incentives for opposition members to support the president, while making it politically more attractive for the president's own partisans to support his positions. If, as the evidence suggests, partisan differences in presidential support have sturdy electoral roots, they are likely to persist. The overwhelming bipartisan popular and congressional support initially enjoyed by George W. Bush after the terrorist attacks of September 11 is not sustainable absent a fundamental and durable change in mass political attitudes.

Introduction

The Washington community responded to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on 11 September 2001 with a remarkable display of bipartisan unity. The day's events provoked human responses that transcended party; conservative Republican Dick Armev was observed draping a consoling arm around Maxine Waters, among the House's most liberal Democrats. Republican and Democratic leaders found themselves getting acquainted in a new way as they shared an emergency bunker while waiting out the immediate threat of further attacks.¹ President George W. Bush, whose path to the White House had left many Democrats embittered and questioning the legitimacy of his presidency, received a thundering bipartisan ovation as he addressed a joint session of Congress on the crisis. In the days that followed, bipartisan consultation and cooperation flourished as Congress quickly complied with the president's requests for emergency legislation to deal with the consequences of the attack.²

The display of unity was all the more striking in its contrast to the political climate prevailing prior to the attack. By every measure, national politics had become increasingly polarized along partisan and ideological lines over the decades between the Nixon and G.W. Bush administrations. Indeed, partisan rancor in Washington had grown so familiar that it became a central target of Bush's 2000 campaign. Promising to be "a uniter, not a divider," Bush emphasized his status as a Washington outsider with "no stake in the bitter arguments of the last few years" who could "change the tone of Washington to one of civility and respect."³ That hope, apparently dashed by a victory that came only after the fierce partisan struggle over Florida's electoral votes, revived with the bipartisan surge of support for Bush after 9/11. Not for long, however; it quickly became clear that bipartisan consensus on administration measures to combat terrorism did not extend to measures dealing with the issues that had split the parties before the attacks. Although muted in tone, aggressive partisanship continued to shape congressional-presidential relations even as Democrats almost uniformly accepted the administration's leadership in the war on terrorism.

The swift reemergence of partisan conflict is not surprising, for sharp partisan divisions have become deeply embedded in national political life. The growth of party line voting and the widening ideological gap between the congressional parties have been thoroughly documented (Aldrich 1995; Rohde 1991; Sinclair 2000; McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 1997, Poole and Rosenthal 1999; Fleisher and Bond 1996, 2000; Collie and

¹ Janet Hook, "Under the Shadow of War, Congress Declares a Truce," *Los Angeles Times*, September 22, 2001, A21.

² Only a single member of Congress, Democratic Representative Barbara Lee of California, voted against the joint resolution passed on September 14 authorizing the president "to use all necessary and appropriate force against the nations, organizations, or people that he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks on the United States that occurred September 11, 2001" (PL 107-46). A week later, the airline relief bill (PL 107-42) passed 356-54 in the House, 96-1 in the Senate. A broad anti-terrorism bill requested by the administration (PL 107-56) passed 357-66 in the House, 98-1 in the Senate during the last week of October.

³ Speech to Republican National Convention, 3 August 2000, accepting the nomination.

Mason 2000; Jacobson 2000a). The growing polarization of the congressional parties is most clearly depicted in the Poole-Rosenthal DW-Nominate index, summarized in Figure 1. DW-Nominate scores are calculated from all non-unanimous roll call votes cast by House and Senate members; the score locates each member for each Congress on a liberal-conservative scale that ranges from -1.0 to 1.0; the higher the score, the more conservative the member.⁴ On average, Democrats in both Houses became increasingly liberal over the last half of the 20th century (mainly through the gradual atrophy of their conservative southern wing); Republicans drifted left until the mid-1970s; since then, they have moved strongly to the right. The result is that by the 106th Congress, ideological divisions between parties in the House and Senate were widest for entire time period depicted and, indeed, wider than at any time since before World War I.

[Figure 1 here]

A parallel and closely related trend has been the growing partisan disparity in congressional support for presidential initiatives and preferences, displayed in Figures 2-4. For this analysis, presidential support is measured as the percentage of votes for the president's position on conflictual roll calls, defined as those on which less than 80 percent of members in a chamber voted with the president.⁵ Despite some noticeable differences, Figures 2 (House) and 3 (Senate) reveal the same pattern of increasing partisan polarization in presidential support scores that we observe in DW-Nominate scores. The differences are clearest from Figure 4, which traces out the partisan gap in average presidential support scores from the Eisenhower through the Clinton administrations. The House parties were somewhat more polarized on presidential initiatives than on ideology during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, and the Senate parties were somewhat less polarized during Bill Clinton's first Congress. Still, the spreading partisan disparity in presidential support from the Nixon administration onward is unmistakable, and party differences were greater during the Clinton administration than in any other in the series. Figures 2 and 3 indicate that both the president's partisans and opposition partisans contributed to the trend, although on the House side, opposition partisans made the larger contribution.

[Figures 2-4 here]

Another graphic perspective on the trend is presented in Figures 5 and 6, which display the frequency distributions of House and Senate members' presidential support scores for selected administrations during the period of growing partisan polarization. During the first Nixon administration, presidential support scores of Republicans and Democrats in both houses overlapped extensively. Eight years later, during the first Reagan administration, the degree of overlap had diminished but was still notable. The parties in both houses had moved further apart on this dimension by the G.H.W. Bush

⁴ For an explanation of their methodology, see Poole and Rosenthal (1999). I am obliged to Keith Poole for providing the data through the 106th Congress.

⁵ The data were compiled by George C. Edward III and are available at <http://bush.tamu.edu/cps/cps/archivedata/index.html>. For these charts, the annual scores are averaged for each Congress.

administration. And during Clinton's second administration, polarization was nearly complete; only a handful of members had support scores overlapping those of the other party's members.

[Figures 5 and 6 here]

What is behind the growing partisan difference support for the president's issue positions? Clearly, the trend is intimately linked to the increasing ideological polarization of the congressional parties. Fleisher and Bond (2000), for example, note that the near-disappearance of "cross-pressured" members—those whose DW-Nominate scores are closer to the other party's mean than to their own party's mean—has made it more difficult for presidents to win support from the opposition party and easier to win support from their own party. Although the relationship between ideology and presidential support has not always taken the expected form,⁶ since the 92nd Congress (1971-72), the correlation between the two measures has averaged .68 for House members of the president's party, .81 for members of the opposing party. The equivalent averages for the Senate from the 101st Congress (1989-1990) forward are .55 and .85.⁷ Thus whatever explains the parties' ideological polarization should also help to explain growing partisan differences in presidential support, and vice versa. That "vice versa" is crucial, for presidents and their agendas have been major contributors to the ideological polarization of the parties, both in Congress and in the electorate.

In previous papers (Jacobson 2000a, 2000b), I have sought to show that the widening ideological divide between the congressional parties is firmly rooted in electoral politics. Contrary to arguments implying that elite and popular partisanship have been moving in opposite directions (Wattenberg 1998; Ladd 1995; Shea 1999), the electoral coalitions that members of Congress rely on to keep their jobs have, like the members themselves, also become more sharply divided by partisanship and ideology. In this paper, part of the same larger project investigating the electoral basis of polarized politics, I focus on the electoral and popular bases for the growing party disparities in presidential support scores. I find that electoral changes have reduced incentives for opposition party members to support the president, while making it politically more attractive for the president's own partisans to support his positions. The extent to which presidents and members of the opposition party in Congress share electoral constituencies has declined significantly, and the parties' respective electoral coalitions have become increasingly polarized in terms of both ideology and presidential voting patterns. These changes have been consequential, because presidential support scores among members of Congress vary with the president's electoral support in their constituencies, although the structure of the relationship varies across administrations, parties, and chambers.

⁶ During the four congresses of the Eisenhower administration, conservatism was negatively correlated with presidential support among House members of both parties (the range was from -.37 to -.86 across congresses and parties). The sign was also "wrong" for both parties Nixon's first Congress (the 91st, 1969-70); the more liberal the Republican or Democrat, the higher the support for Nixon's positions.

⁷ Information to match Senate data sets on presidential support and DW-Nominate scores is not available for senators prior to the 101st Congress; for this analysis, liberalism is correlated with support for Democratic presidents, conservatism is correlated with support for Republican presidents, so the expected sign is always positive.

Presidential job approval data also show a widening gap in approval ratings of self-identified Republicans and Democrats, largely because of declining approval ratings from partisans of the opposition party. These trends have substantially reduced incentives for opposition members to support the president. Presidents have not been passive figures in this process, to be sure; rather, their own ideological positions have strongly influenced the level of support they have received from each congressional party; presidents have in fact been instrumental in creating and sustaining national partisan and ideological divisions.

In the sections that follow, I present arguments and evidence for these claims. I then consider whether any of the extraordinary events the United States has experienced during the present Bush administration might have altered the political configurations promoting partisan conflict and conclude that they have not.

Presidential Support in Congress: The Electoral Connection

The extensive literature on the “electoral connection” (Mayhew 1974, and countless followers) suggests a simple hypothesis regarding presidential support in Congress: other things equal, the greater the support for the president among the voters that a member relies on to win and hold office, the more inclined the member will be to vote for the president’s positions. In this formulation, members are expected to be sensitive mainly to what Fenno (1978) identifies as their “reelection constituency” and that I will call their “electoral constituency,”⁸ not to the entire constituency. Within the electoral constituency, support for the president can take several forms, including voting for the president, favoring the president’s positions, sharing the president’s party or ideology, and approving of the president’s performance in office.

A companion hypothesis is that, in general, the more a member’s electoral constituency overlaps with that of a president, the more supportive of the president voters in that constituency are likely to be. If this hypothesis is accurate, then partisan changes in support for presidents in Congress will reflect changes in the extent to which members from each party share electoral constituencies with the president. More specifically, we would expect a decline in support for the president among opposition party members of Congress to be associated with a decline in the overlap between the electoral constituencies of the president and the opposition party members. This is exactly what both survey and aggregate data indicate.

The Decline in Shared Constituencies: Survey Evidence

The American National Election Studies provide unambiguous evidence of growing partisan coherence in the electorate over the past 30 years.⁹ The relationships among party identification, ideology, issue positions, and electoral choice have all

⁸ I use this slightly different terminology because my analysis extends beyond congressional incumbents seeking reelection.

⁹ The National Election Studies data analyzed in this paper are from Sapiro, Rosenstone, et al. (2002).

become stronger. Voters' views of the parties and candidates have become increasingly differentiated and polarized. As a consequence, the electoral constituencies of Republicans and Democrats in Congress have become increasingly disparate (Jacobson 2000a, 2000b).

The trend toward increased partisan coherence has affected presidential and congressional voting alike, strengthening the connection between the two. As Figure 7 shows, the incidence of ticket splitting between presidential and congressional candidates has declined noticeably from its peak; in the two most recent elections it has fallen to levels last seen in the 1960s. Figure 8 reveals one source of the decline in ticket splitting; as the proportion of voters able to place themselves on the 7-point liberal-conservative scale has grown¹⁰, so has the extent to which vote choices in both presidential and congressional elections have been consistent with the respondent's ideological self-location.¹¹ In the two most recent elections, about 60 percent of votes in all three kinds of elections have been cast in line with ideology. Of the remainder, only about 15 percent were cast for the "wrong" candidate ideologically; the rest were cast by voters who placed themselves in the middle of the scale.

[Figures 7 and 8 here]

These changes have reduced the proportion of electoral constituents the president has shared with members of the opposition party in Congress and have increased the ideological differences between the two parties' respective electoral constituencies. Figures 9 and 10 show how the proportion of voters for opposition party's representatives and senators who also voted for the president has declined over the past three decades. For example, when Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, he faced a congress in which 34 percent of House Democrats' voters and 37 percent of Senate Democrats' voters had also voted for him. When G.W. Bush took office in 2001, he shared only 19 percent of House Democrats' voters and only 14 percent of Senate Democrats' voters. This represents the lowest proportion of overlapping electoral constituencies since 1960 and second lowest in the entire time series. The proportion of electoral constituents that presidents share with their own party's members has fluctuated but remains high, averaging nearly 80 percent in recent elections.

[Figures 9 and 10 here]

The electoral constituencies of the two parties have also become more dissimilar ideologically. The difference in average self-placement on the 7-point liberal-conservative scale between the congressional parties' electoral constituencies more than doubled over the period under observation (Figure 11).¹² The gap between Republican and Democratic presidential voters, larger to begin with, also increased noticeably.

¹⁰ From 77 percent of voters in 1972 and a low of 70 percent in 1980 to 88 percent in 1996 and 2000.

¹¹ Defined as respondents placing themselves right of center and voting for Republicans or respondents placing themselves left of center and voting for Democrats; respondents placing themselves at the center ("4" on the scale) are included in the denominator.

¹² The scale takes the value of 1 for most liberal, 7 for most conservative, with 4 representing the middle of the road.

As a consequence, the opposition party's congressional voters have located themselves and the president increasingly further apart on this scale. The data in Table 1 show that voters electing congressional Democrats have placed Republican presidents further to their right, and voters electing congressional Republicans have placed Democratic presidents further to their left, since the 1970s. Electoral constituents of the president's party's members have seen themselves as somewhat more centrist than the president, but the gap is much more modest and shows no clear temporal trend.

[Figure 11 and Table 1 here]

Polarizing Electorates: Aggregate Evidence

Aggregate electoral data tell the same story. They confirm, first of all, the growing articulation of voting across federal offices. Figure 12 shows how the correlation between district-level presidential and House shares (here taken as the percent Democratic of the major party vote) shares has changed over the past half-century. The correlation of the district-level vote for the two offices was above .80 during the 1950s, fell to a low of .52 in 1972, then rose until it again surpassed .80 in 1996 and 2000. Figure 13 shows the comparable trend involving elections at the state level. The analysis here is more complicated, because only two-thirds of the states hold elections in any presidential election year, and each subset of Senate contests coincides with the presidential election only once in 12 years. To get more complete coverage, I have therefore computed the correlations for midterm elections (using the presidential vote in the most recent past presidential election) as well as for each presidential election year. The three Senate "classes" are color coded to facilitate comparisons. Correlations were highest in the 1950s; but note that those for the three most recent elections were higher for their respective classes than at any time since then.¹³

[Figures 12 and 13 here]

The greater articulation between presidential and congressional voting is also evident in the diminished proportion of districts and states producing split results—majorities for a presidential candidate of one party, for the House or Senate candidate of the other. As Figure 14 shows, the proportion of split House districts, which reached a peak of 45 percent in 1984, had fallen to 20 percent in 2000, its lowest level since 1952. Outcomes also became more consistent at the state level (Figure 15), with the proportion of Senate seats held by the party losing the state in the presidential election, which stood as high as 59 percent in 1972, reaching its lowest level for the entire half-century (29 percent) in 2000. To be sure, close presidential elections such as that of 2000 are less likely to yield split outcomes, but note that state and district level outcomes showed more partisan consistency in 2000 than in any of the other close elections (1960, 1968, and 1976) in the series.

¹³ This remains true if analysis is confined to non-southern states, although dropping southern states does get rid of the negative relationships between presidential and Senate voting in 1966, 1972, and 1974.

[Figures 14 and 15 here]

The increasing partisan articulation of aggregate voting across offices contributed to a widening disparity between the presidential voting patterns in Republican and Democratic districts and states (Figures 16 and 17). Back in 1972, for example, the vote for George McGovern was, on average, only 7.6 percentage points higher in House districts won by Democrats than in those won by Republicans; in 2000, the average vote for Al Gore was 18.3 percentage points higher in Democratic than in Republican districts. In terms of presidential voting, the parties' respective House district electorates were more polarized after 1996 and 2000 than after any other election during the period under review. By the same measure, Democratic and Republican Senate constituencies—whole states—were also more polarized after these two elections than after any since the 1950s.¹⁴

[Figures 16 and 17 here]

Constituency polarization is also vividly manifest when we trace changes in the distribution of each party's House seats according to the presidential vote in the district. Figure 18 displays the distribution of seats held by each party after the 1972, 1980, 1988 and 1996 elections (the same set displayed earlier in Figure 5) across the range of presidential vote divisions (using 5 percentage-point intervals to define the categories and smoothing the lines connecting them). Notice how the overlap in these distributions has diminished across these four elections. Again, the evidence indicates that the two parties have represented increasingly divergent electoral coalitions and therefore have faced increasingly divergent incentives to support the president.¹⁵

[Figure 18 here]

Constituency Voting and Presidential Support

Aggregate electoral data, like the survey data presented earlier, leave no doubt that the proportion of electoral constituents a typical member of the opposition party in Congress shared with the president declined substantially during the same period that the opposition party's support for the president on roll call votes declined. If the connection between the two trends is more than coincidental, we should also observe that, for any particular president, other things equal, the higher his vote in a district or state, the greater his level of support from its representative or senator. With some interesting and informative exceptions, this is precisely what we do observe. Table 2 presents the results

¹⁴ The presidential vote gap between the parties' Senate constituencies is smaller than for House districts in part because, with two senators each, some states have split delegations, netting out to zero. But the increase in electoral consistency has also produced a decrease in the proportion split Senate delegations; at the high point in the 96th Congress (1979-80), 54 percent of the states' Senate delegations were split between the parties; by the 107th Congress (2001-2002), only 26 percent remained split, the lowest proportion since the 1950s.

¹⁵ A similar pattern of change can be detected among Senate seats, although it is muted by the Senate's larger constituencies, smaller size, and overlapping six year terms.

of the regression of presidential support scores on the state or district-level presidential vote for each party's delegation in each administration since Eisenhower's first. For this analysis, the dependent variable is the support score for each member in each session of the two congresses in each administration; the independent variable is the share of votes won by the president in the state or district in the election that installed the administration.¹⁶

[Table 2 here]

For most administrations, the president's share of votes in a member's constituency has a positive and statistically significant effect on his or her level of support for the president's position on roll call votes. From Nixon's first administration onward, the average coefficient for the president's party's delegation is .71 in the Senate, .57 in the House; for the opposition party's delegation, it is .97 in the Senate, .45 in the House. Roughly speaking, then, a one percentage point difference in the presidential vote in a constituency is associated with a one-half to one percentage-point difference in its member's presidential support score. There is, however, considerable variation across administrations, parties, and chambers in the size of the coefficient and the share of variance explained by the presidential vote (see the R^2 's). Figure 19 provides a sampling of this variation among the set of administrations selected for more detailed analysis in Figures 5, 6, and 18. The lines in the graphs cover the actual range of presidential vote shares for each party's state or district in the relevant election year.

[Figure 19 here]

Notice that in the first Nixon administration, party differences were relatively small, and in the Senate, Democrats from states where Nixon ran more strongly actually supported him less frequently. In the other cases, presidential support is estimated to increase by between 6 and 40 percentage points as the presidential vote increases from its lowest to highest value. The results of this analysis thus suggest that the growing divergence in the distribution of presidential vote shares in states and districts held by opposing congressional parties contributed to partisan polarization in presidential support scores. But the results also make it clear that this is only part of the explanation, for the gap between the parties' support scores increases independently of changes in constituency voting patterns; compare the party differences in the Senate and House graphs for the second Clinton administration to graphs from earlier administrations.

The Impact of the President's Position

The anomalies in the regression results (negative or zero coefficients) are also informative, for they suggest that the president's own ideological position has something

¹⁶ The means that the number of cases analyzed is approximately four times the average size of the party delegation in the chamber during the administration; House data from congresses after midterm elections that had been preceded by extensive redistricting and for which the presidential vote was not recalculated for the new districts (1962 and 1966) are omitted.

to do with the support he receives from the two party coalitions. Eisenhower got less support from House and Senate Republicans the larger his share of the vote in their constituencies. The relationship between roll-call ideology (measured by DW-Nominate scores) and presidential support is also negative for House Republicans in these congresses (data for Senate comparisons are not available). Apparently, conservative Republicans, those representing the most solidly Republican districts, were more likely to reject Eisenhower's "modern Republicanism." Nixon also pursued relatively moderate domestic policies during his first administration, muting partisan differences (Bond and Fleisher 1990). The Kennedy-Johnson administration, in contrast, pursued a liberal agenda that put it at odds with conservative southern Democrats who represented states that, in 1960, still voted disproportionately Democratic in presidential elections.

More systematic evidence for the importance of the president's own ideological location in determining his level of partisan support is provided by the analyses reported in Tables 3 and 4.¹⁷ Table 3 shows that, generally, the more moderate the president (e.g. the closer the president's DW-Nominate score is to the center point, zero), the less ideologically distant the opposing party's senators and representatives.¹⁸ The relationship is not perfect, because, as we saw in Figure 1, the distance between the party delegations has widened substantially since the 1970s; hence, for example, Clinton was more moderate than Carter by this measure, but he was further from the Republican House and Senate means. But the overall pattern makes the important if obvious point that the president's own ideological location, no less than that of the opposition party coalition, determines the width of the ideological gap between the president and the congressional parties.

[Table 3 here]

The regression equations Table 4 show how this gap affected presidential support in the House. Leaving out the Eisenhower administration, with its anomalous relationships between ideology and presidential support,¹⁹ we find a robust relationship between ideological distance and presidential support. For comparison, the first equation in each pair displays the bivariate relationship between ideology and presidential support. The two are indeed related, as we would expect, and the coefficients indicate that ideology has a large substantive impact on presidential support.²⁰ The relationship is even stronger, however, when we take the president's own ideological position into account by including as an independent variable the gap between the DW-Nominate

¹⁷ The president's first dimension DW-Nominate score was estimated by Poole and Rosenthal from his positions on legislation before Congress during his administration.

¹⁸ More moderate presidents also tend to be closer to their own party's congressional delegations.

¹⁹ Including the Eisenhower administration weakens the relevant relationships in the "Republican Administrations" set and produces smaller coefficients but does not change the substantive conclusions.

²⁰ For example, the difference in predicted presidential support scores between members whose DW-Nominate scores are one standard deviation above and one standard deviation below the party mean ranges from 13.4 percentage points for Republicans during Republican administrations to 29.2 percentage points for Democrats during Democratic administrations.

score of the House member and the president.²¹ For representatives of the president's party, both ideology and ideological distance make a major difference in the level of presidential support. But for opposition party members, ideological distance has a much larger effect than ideology per se when both are in the equation. In every case, taking ideological distance into account significantly improves the equation's ability to predict presidential support, confirming that the president's own stance affects the level of support he receives from both parties. Thus the ideologically extremity of both the president and the congressional parties determine the extent of party polarization on presidential initiatives.

[Table 4 here]

Presidential Approval

Elections are not the only venue in which a representative or senator's constituents register their level of support for the president. Between elections, polls regularly ask voters whether they approve or disapprove of the how the president is handling his job and thus provide something of an ongoing referendum on the president. When these job approval ratings of partisan identifiers are viewed separately, yet another pattern of increasing partisan polarization emerges (Bond and Fleisher 2001; Fleisher and Bond 2001). Figure 20 displays the average quarterly presidential job approval ratings offered by the president's and the opposition's partisans from 1953 through 2000.²² The data carry vivid reminders of the varying fortunes of different administrations: Even Democrats liked Ike; the Vietnam War brought Johnson down; Nixon's approval plummeted as Watergate unfolded; Carter managed to alienate both parties, Bush rode high through the Gulf War, then saw his support among Democrats collapse in the subsequent recession. Amid the shifting tides of fortune, however, is a discernable secular trend toward lower presidential approval by opposition party identifiers.²³ Only G.H.W. Bush managed to buck the trend—until the fall of 1991—by keeping an unusual proportion of Democratic identifiers happy.

[Figure 20 here]

Figure 21 shows how this trend widened party differences presidential job approval. From Eisenhower through Carter, the partisan approval gap never exceeded an average of 48 percentage points in any quarter or an average of 41 percentage points for any president. For Reagan, the average gap exceeded 50 percentage points in 26 of 32

²¹ The president's ideology entered by itself would produce identical substantive results, but the procedure I use here makes the results easier to interpret.

²² The data are from the Gallup Polls; data for 1953 through 1998 were kindly supplied by George C. Edwards III; later data were supplied by the Gallup Organization.

²³ The trend is statistically significant, with the regression coefficient on time (measured in quarters) estimated at $-.12$ with a t -ratio of 7.9 and an adjusted R^2 of $.25$. The same analysis applied to the partisan gap shown in Figure 21 produces a regression coefficient of $.11$ with a t -ratio of 9.3 and an adjusted R^2 of $.32$. Thus the gap has widened by an estimated 1.75 percentage points per four-year administration, or from 32 to 53 points over the entire period.

quarters and stood at 52.9 points for his entire presidency. The average party difference in approval of Clinton's performance during his presidency was 55.1 percentage points; it was greater than 50 points in every quarter but two (when it was 49.5 points and 49.8 points); during five quarters, it exceeded 60 percentage points.

[Figure 21 here]

Although electoral logic would suggest that the incentive for a member to support the president would vary with the popular standing of the president, particularly among people identifying with the member's party and therefore likely to be part of his or her electoral constituency, the literature leaves this connection in considerable doubt. The relationship between overall approval and presidential success in Congress has been subject to extensive research and debate (Edwards 1980; Rivers and Rose 1985; Bond and Fleisher 1990; Ostrom and Simon 1985; Collier and Sullivan 1995), with the balance of research indicating at best, a very modest relationship. Bond and Fleisher (1990) show that Edwards' (1980) initial discovery of strong link between approval levels of fellow partisans and support for presidents was based on a flawed analysis, and their own analysis turns up only tenuous evidence for such a link.

However, Bond and Fleisher focus mainly on presidential success rates rather than individual member's support scores, and they use a fine-grained (monthly) measure of presidential approval designed to pick up the effects of short-term changes, not the broader impact of sustained higher or lower approval levels. Their analysis is thus not designed to assess the effects on presidential support of the broad secular trend toward wider partisan disparity in presidential approval. More to the point is Edwards's (1997) coarse-grained analysis (based on yearly approval and success data) indicating that approval levels do affect presidential support, the more so when partisans (members and respondents) are analyzed separately. If Edwards is right, then the widening partisan gap in presidential approval would help explain the widening partisan gap in presidential support scores.

Certainly we know that party differences in presidential approval and in House and Senate support scores have grown in rough parallel. Figure 22 maps all three trends (based on yearly averages) on the same scale, and their kinship is unmistakable. It is far from perfect, however. While the party difference in presidential approval is fairly highly correlated with party difference in presidential support the Senate ($r=.75$), it is not strongly related to party difference in presidential support in the House ($r=.27$), partly because of poor fit in the Kennedy-Johnson years (if analysis is confined to the Nixon administration forward, the correlation rises to $.50$).

[Figure 22 here]

Regression analysis also supports the idea that partisan approval levels affect presidential support, again with a stronger relationship in the Senate than in the House. Table 5 reports estimates of the regression of presidential support scores on presidential approval, controlling for presidential vote in the member's state or district, for each party

in each chamber for each type of administration (Democratic or Republican).²⁴ As before, the presidential vote in the constituency has a strong effect on presidential support. So, however, does presidential approval (by the member's fellow partisans), except in the case of House Republicans, for whom one coefficient is small and the other displays the wrong sign.²⁵ These are, to be sure, underspecified models,²⁶ and the analysis ignores all of the important time series complications. Still, the results make it clear that the growing partisan disparity in presidential support in Congress is consistent with, rather than contrary to, partisan trends in public approval of the president. Again, party polarization in Congress appears to have a solid popular basis.

G.W. Bush

Implicit in G.W. Bush's campaign pledge to end the partisan bickering in Washington was the idea that party conflict in national politics was largely an inside-the-beltway phenomenon having little resonance among ordinary American elsewhere. The evidence presented here suggests otherwise. Like other manifestations of greater congressional partisanship, the growth of party differences in presidential support rests on a firm electoral and popular foundation. Over the past three decades, presidents have shared progressively fewer constituents with senators and representatives of the opposing party. They have become more ideologically distant from these members' electoral constituents as well. The difference in presidential voting patterns between districts and states electing the parties' respective congressional delegations has widened substantially. And between elections, party differences in presidential job approval ratings have grown.

Nothing in the data from the 2000 elections even hints at any reversal of these trends; quite the contrary, they were almost uniformly extended (review Figures 7-17 and Table 1). Moreover, the aftermath in Florida that had politicians and activists of the two parties at each other's throats also split ordinary citizens sharply along party lines. Polls found huge differences between Bush and Gore supporters (that is, largely between Republicans and Democrats) on a variety of relevant questions. For example, among Bush voters, 92 percent thought Bush had won legitimately, and 92 percent approved of the Supreme Court's decision stopping the manual recount of ballots in Florida. Among Gore voters, 81 percent thought Bush was not the legitimate victor, and 80 percent disapproved of the Supreme Court's decision. Most Gore supporters (65 percent) thought the Court's decision was partisan, while most Bush supporters (84 percent) thought it was impartial. The two sides were also starkly divided over whom the Florida voters had intended to vote for and whether the Court's decision to stop the recount was fair (Jacobson 2001).

²⁴ Presidential approval is the yearly average approval rating; to facilitate comparisons across administrations, the Democratic presidential vote is entered as the deviation from the mean Democratic vote in the relevant election year.

²⁵ Edwards (1997), analyzing the support data aggregated by party and year (N=42), and thus without the constituency vote variable, got virtually the same substantive results.

²⁶ Although adding DW-Nominate scores and difference from the president's DW-Nominate score as controls (in the House equations, where this can be done) does not alter the substantive conclusions.

With such profound partisan disagreement over the legitimacy of his election, it is not surprising that Bush entered the White House with the widest partisan difference in approval ratings of any newly elected president since approval has been polled. In doing so, however, he merely extended a trend toward greater partisan polarization during the early-term “honeymoon” period that had begun during Reagan’s first administration (Figure 23). By this indicator, the honeymoon was already largely a thing of the past.

[Figure 23 here]

There was little sign during the first eight months of Bush’s administration that partisan conflict had subsided.²⁷ The administration’s strategy of moderating its conservative proposals only far enough to peel off the moderate Democrats needed to win 60 votes in the Senate paid off in a victory on the \$1.35 billion tax cut bill but was not designed to diminish partisan conflict.²⁸ Exceedingly narrow House and Senate majorities put a premium on party discipline. The dramatic political impact of Senator Jeffords’s defection, which broke the tie and gave the Democrats a one-vote Senate majority, underlined the primacy of party.²⁹ The future portended a continuing partisan power struggle that only some decisive future election could end.

This, like almost every other assumption about the continuity of national political life, was thrown into question by the terrorist attacks of September 11. The bipartisan unity displayed by Congress in its response to Bush’s call for action against terrorism was echoed in the public, as Americans of all political stripes rallied around the president. Bush’s approval ratings shot up from the 50s to the highest levels ever recorded, topping 90 percent in some September and October polls. The largest change by far occurred among Democratic identifiers, as Figure 24 indicates. Approval of Bush among Democrats jumped by more than 50 percentage points, from an average of 30 percent in the period before September 11 to an average of 81 percent in the month following the attacks. Support also rose among Republicans (to 98 percent in polls taken through October) but it was already so high (89 percent) that the Republican contribution to the overall rise could be only modest.³⁰

[Figure 24 here]

In this new context, the partisan gap in presidential approval, which, with an average of nearly 59 percentage points, had been well on its way to eclipsing the record

²⁷ Most of the public did not notice any diminution; when an ABC NEWS/*Washington Post* Poll conducted April 12-22, 2001 asked, “Do you think Bush has reduced the political partisanship in Washington, or not?” 54 percent said no, 34 percent said yes, and 11 percent had no opinion.

²⁸ Ordinary Democrats and Republicans were nearly 50 percentage points apart on the wisdom of Bush’s tax cut proposals (CBS News Poll, April 4-5, 2001; Gallup Poll Release, March 9, 2001).

²⁹ Citizens were, characteristically, sharply divided along party lines over Jeffords’s switch; according to the CNN/USA Today/ Gallup Poll of May 24, 2001, Democrats thought it would be good for the country (75% said good, 9%, bad), while Republicans thought it would be bad for the country, (75% said bad, 14% said good).

³⁰ As usual, self-defined independents approximated the national figures, going from an average of 52 percent approving before September 11 to an average of 86 percent approving over the next month.

set during the Clinton administration, plummeted to as low as 14 percentage points. But as Figures 24 and 25 show, the gap began to widen again almost immediately, as Republican approval remained very high (in the mid-90s) while Democratic approval began a steady decline. By June of 2002, the gap had widened again, to an average of more than 40 percentage points.³¹

[Figure 25 here]

Like Democrats in Congress, Democratic identifiers in the public responded to Bush's leadership in a bifurcated way. He got strong bipartisan approval for leadership in the war on terrorists, but this did not spill over into unrelated domestic matters. For example a poll taken in February 2002 found 81 percent of Democrats approving Bush's handling of the campaign against terrorism, 72 percent approving of his overall job performance, but only 39 percent approving of his handling of the economy.³² Congressional Democrats were thus left free to continue to oppose Bush on matters that had divided the parties before September 11, such as energy policy, how to stimulate the economy, and what to do about HMOs. *Congressional Quarterly's* vote studies for 2001 reflect this circumstance; while the proportion of "party unity" votes³³ in the House and Senate was well below its mid-1990s peak, Democratic and Republican party unity scores on those party unity votes remained at or near their highest levels since *CQ* began keeping track in 1954.³⁴ Presidential support scores comparable to those analyzed in this in this paper are not yet available for the Bush administration, but, among Democrats, the difference between votes on proposals dealing directly with the terrorist threat and those dealing with the domestic agenda are likely to be dramatic.

Conclusion

The surge of national unity provoked by terrorist attacks on the United States in September 2001 set up something of a natural experiment testing the durability of the strong party divisions that had emerged over the previous three decades. The results so far suggest that polarized politics is indeed a durable component of national politics. This is not surprising, for, as I have tried to show in this paper and others, deep party divisions in Washington are firmly rooted in electoral politics and consistent with divisions in popular opinion. Elite and popular consensus supporting the president's war on terrorism has remained strong but narrowly focused; it has not spread to issues that split the parties before 9/11, and congressional Democrats feel little pressure from electoral constituents to support Bush's positions on them.

³¹ Data are from the 52 Gallup Polls covering the first 18 months of the Bush administration.

³² CBS News Poll, February 24-26, 2002, at <http://www.cbsnews.com/htdocs/pdf/cbspoll0228.pdf>.

³³ *CQ* defines party unity votes as those floor votes in which a majority of one party votes against a majority of the other party.

³⁴ For the House and Senate combined, Democrats had a party unity score of 85 percent for 2001, tying their highest ever (1993); the combined Republican score was 90 percent, surpassed only by 91 percent in 1995 (*CQ Weekly*, January 12, 2002, 142).

If the analysis presented here is correct, the only force able to affect party differences in presidential support (on issues unrelated to the war on terrorism) in the short run is the president himself. More moderate presidents win greater support from the opposing party; Bush could presumably increase his support among Democrats by pursuing policies closer to those they prefer, as he did on his education package. But given his own ideological instincts, and considering the resistance he would get from the highly disciplined, largely conservative Republican majority in the House, this seems unlikely. With control of both Houses up for grabs in November, neither side is in a mood to back down prematurely. Unless and until electoral constituents tell them otherwise, there will be little pressure on either party to bend.

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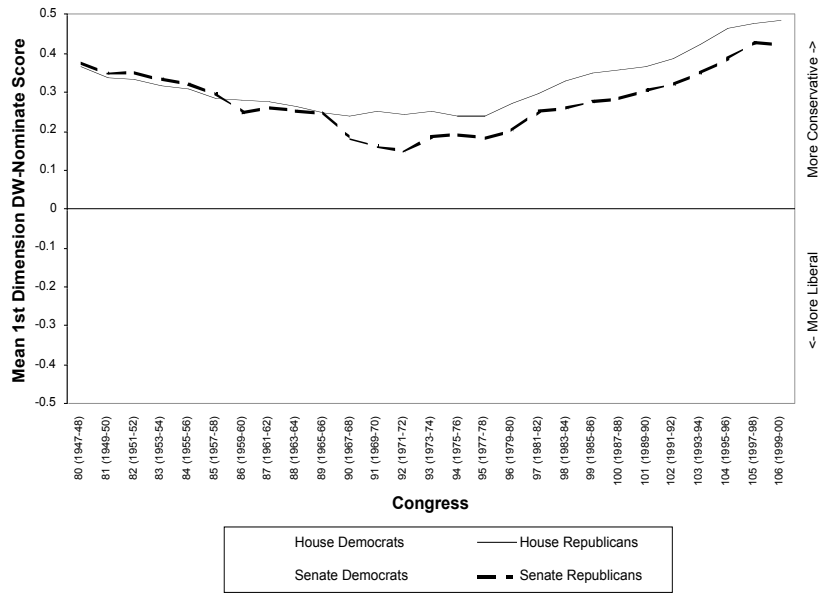
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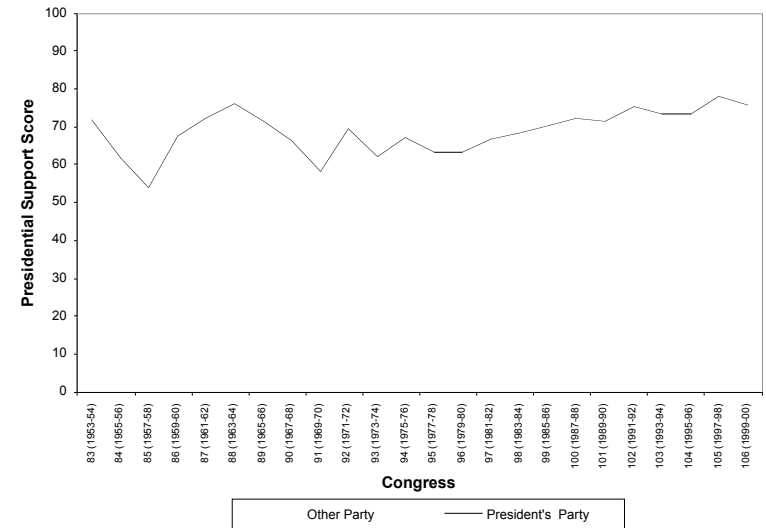
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**Figure 1. Ideological Positions of House and Senate Party Coalitions
80th to 106th Congresses**



**Figure 2. Presidential Support in the House of Representatives
83rd-106th Congresses**



**Figure 3. Presidential Support in the Senate
83rd-106th Congresses**

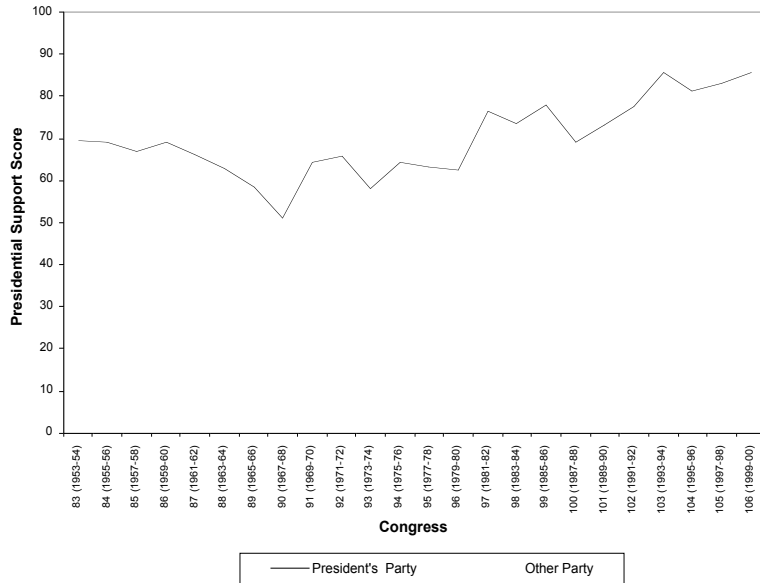


Figure 4. Partisan Differences in Presidential Support 83rd-106th Congresses

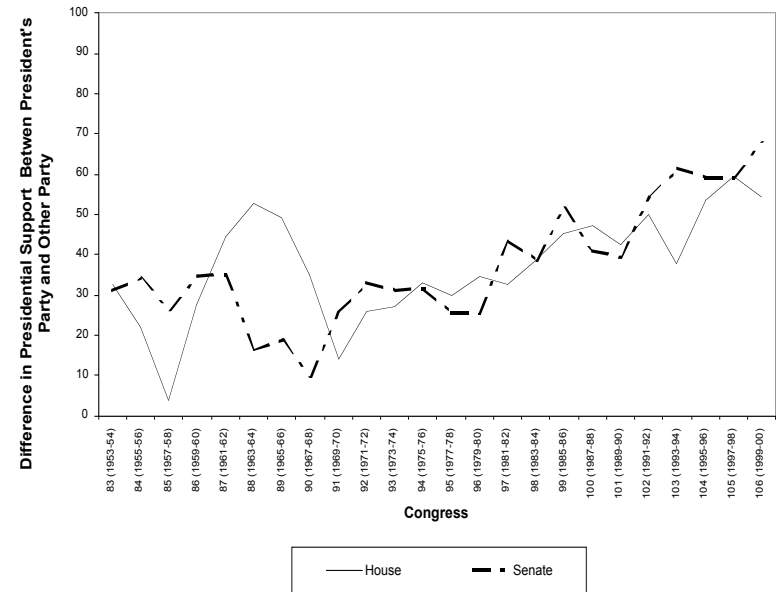
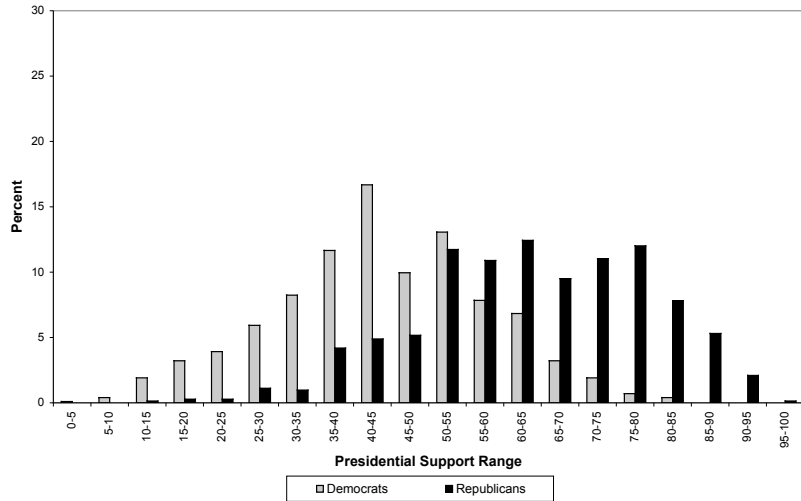
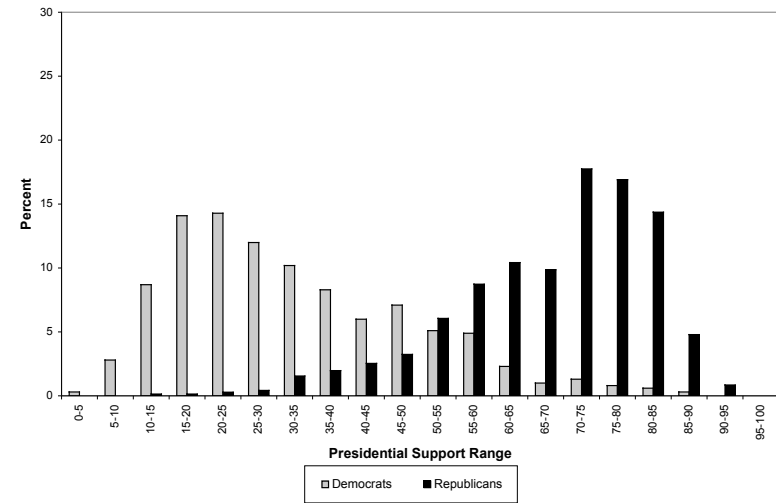


Figure 5. House of Representatives

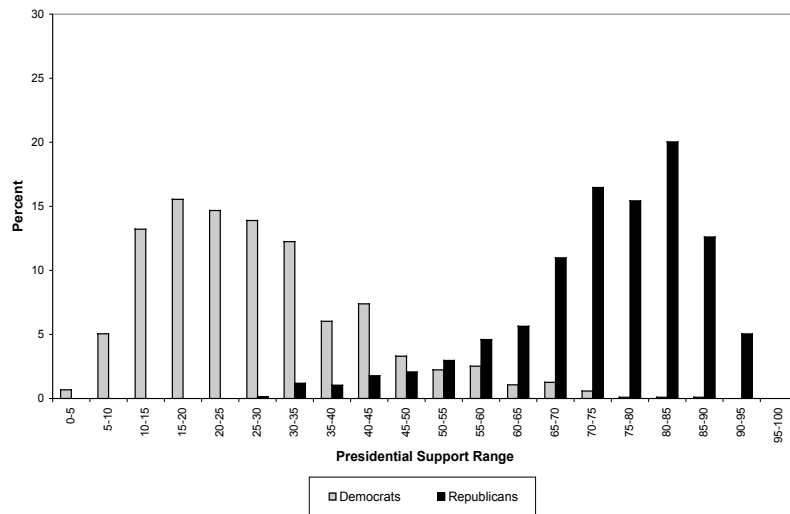
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First Reagan Administration (1981-1984)



Bush Administration (1989-1992)



Second Clinton Administration (1997-2000)

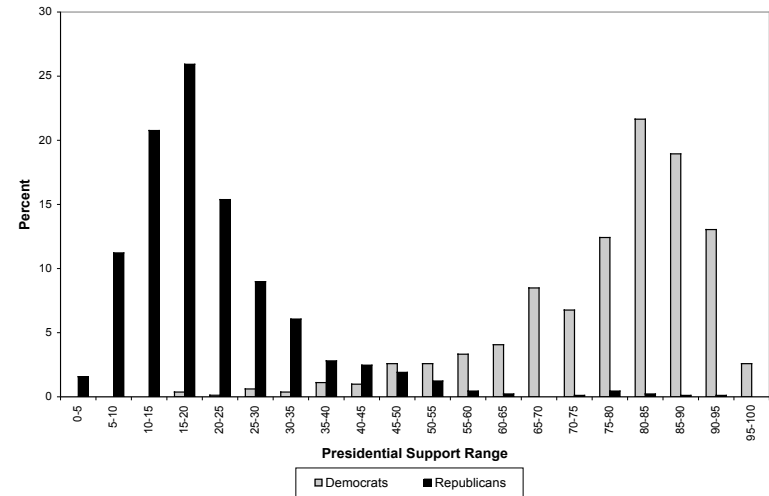
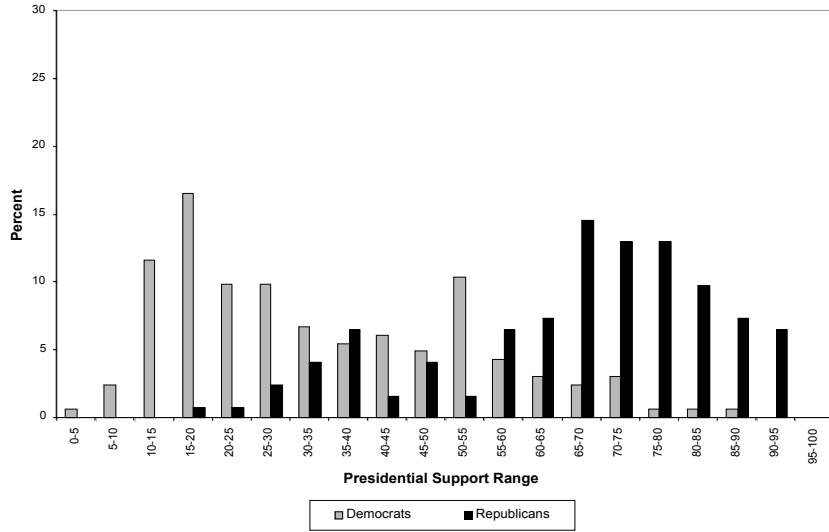
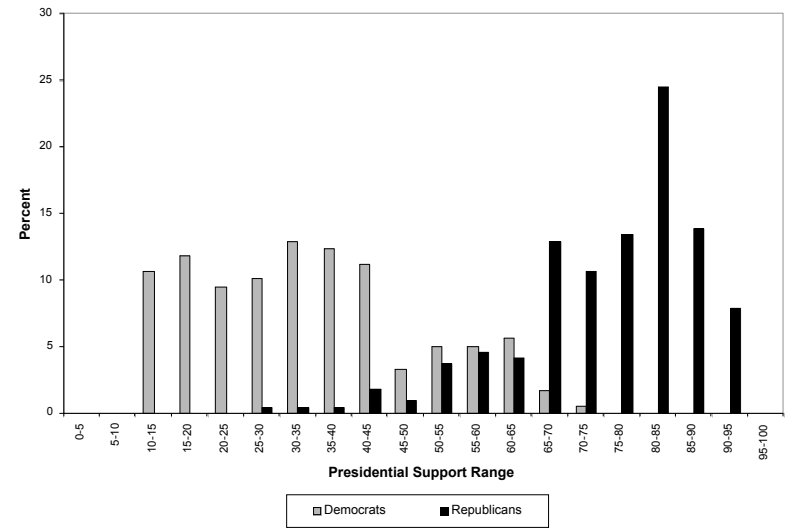


Figure 6. Senate

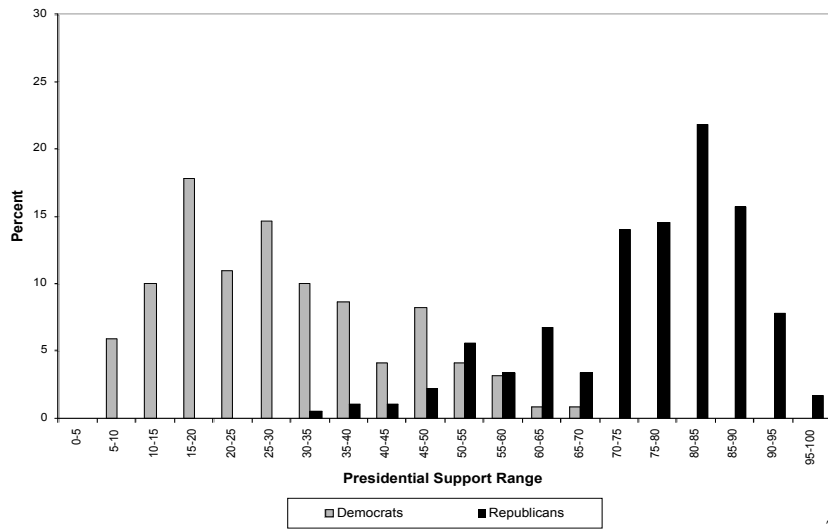
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First Reagan Administration (1981-1984)



GHW Bush Administration (1989-1992)



Second Clinton Administration (1997-2000)

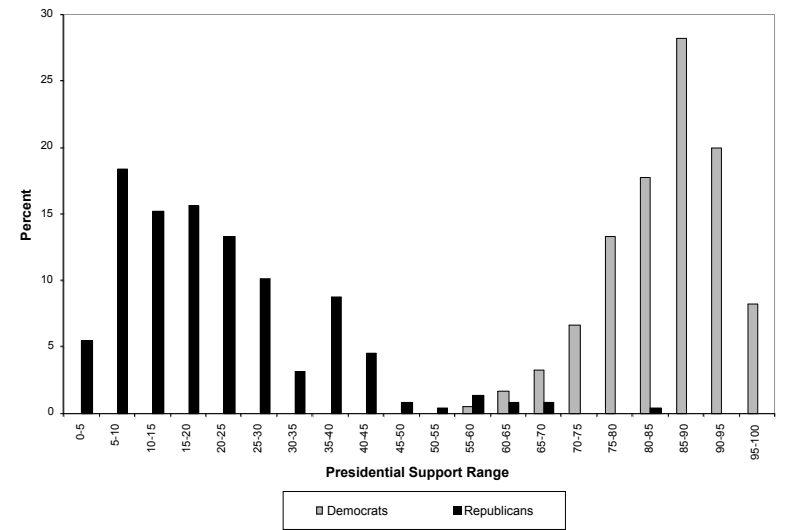
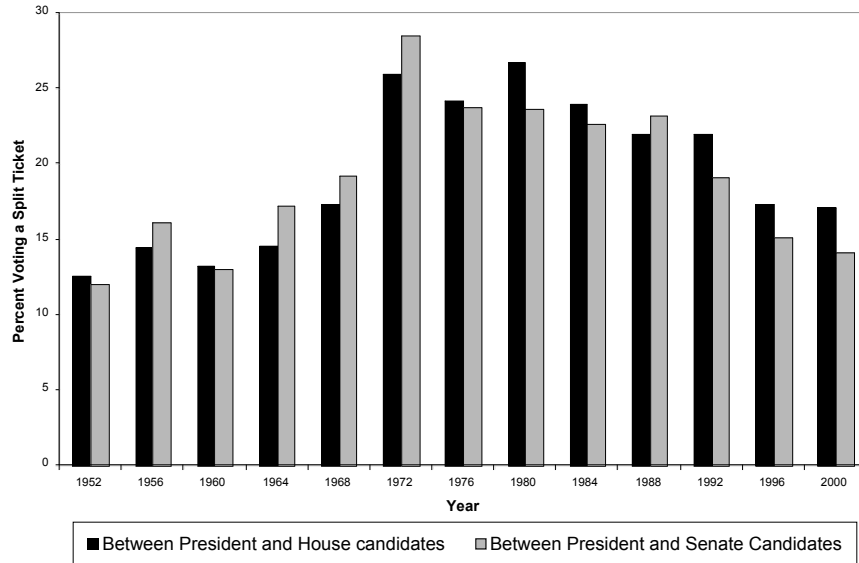
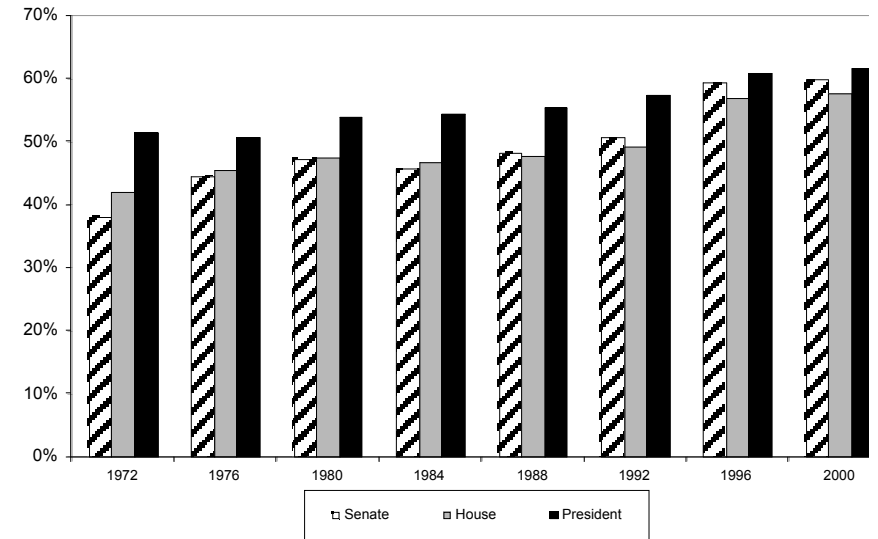


Figure 7. Ticket Splitting in National Elections, 1952-2000



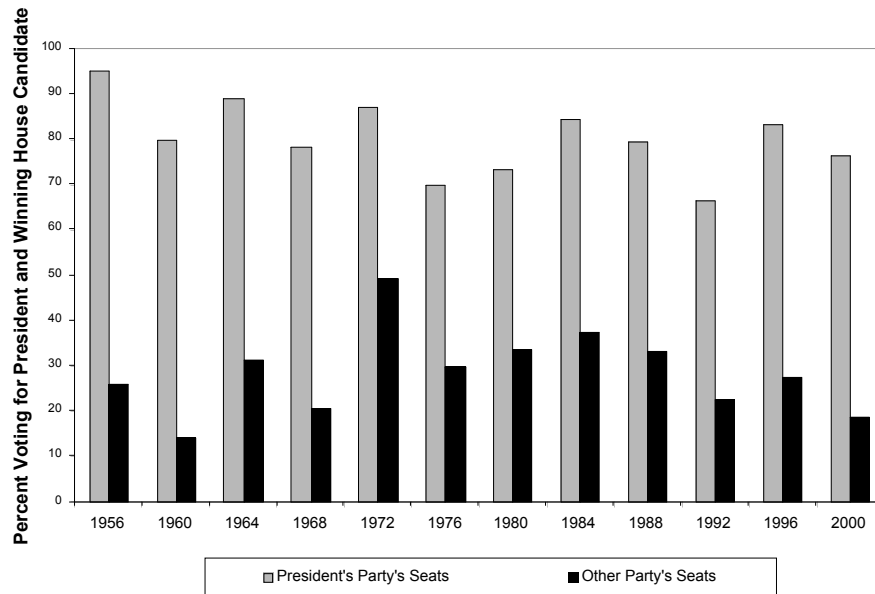
Source : American National Election Studies

Figure 8. Votes Consistent with Ideology, 1972-2000



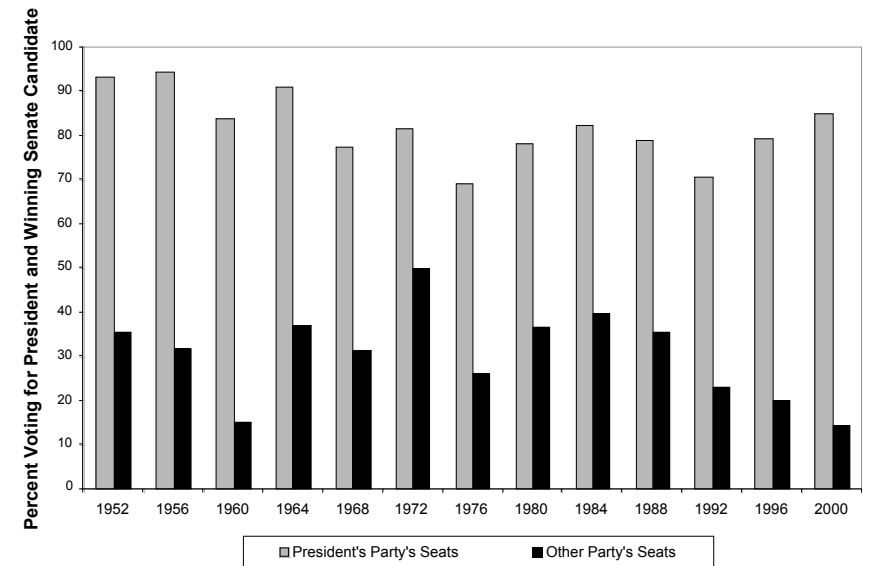
Source : American National Election Studies

Figure 9. Shared Electoral Constituencies, U.S. Representative and President, 1956-2000



Source : American National Election Studies

Figure 10. Shared Electoral Constituencies, U.S. Senator and President, 1952-2000



Source : American National Election Studies

Figure 12. Correlations Between District-Level House and Presidential Voting, 1952-2000

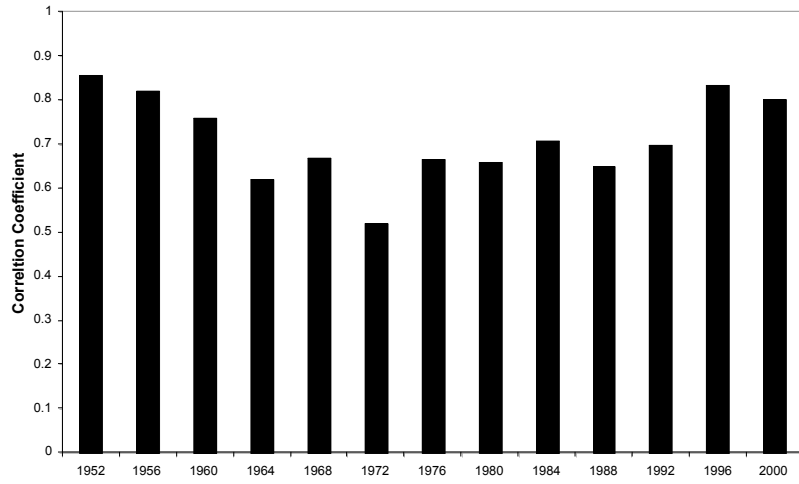


Figure 13. Correlations between Senate Vote and Most Recent Presidential Vote in the State

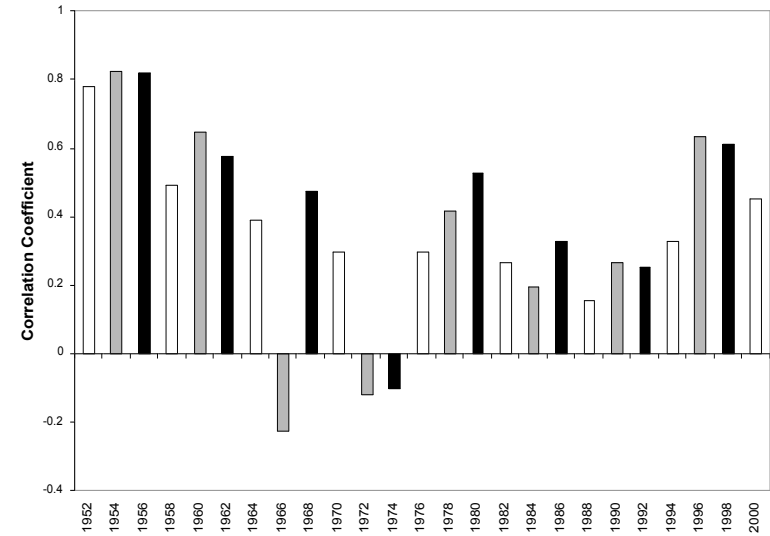


Figure 14. House Districts with Split Results, 1952-2000

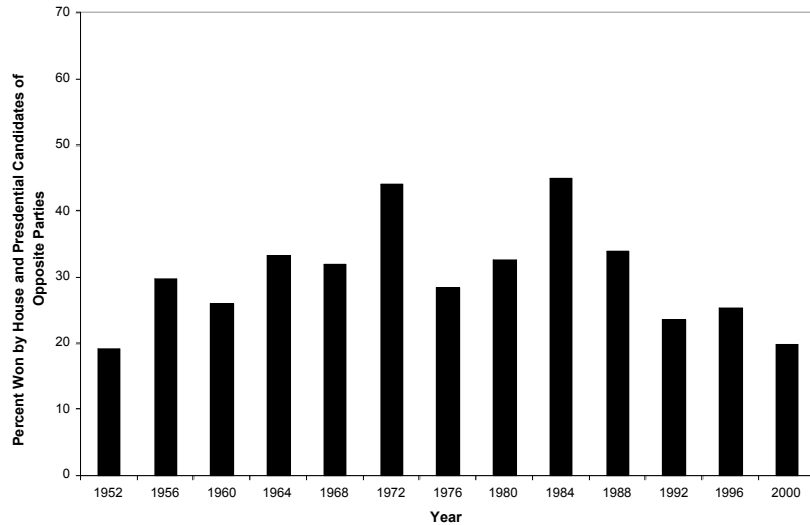


Figure 15. Senate Seats Held by Party Losing the State in the Presidential Election, 1952-2000

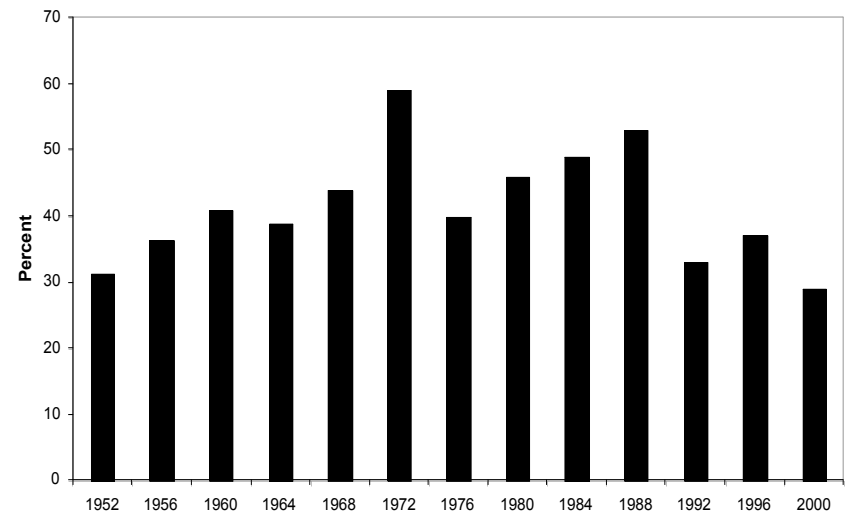


Figure 11. Differences in Ideological Self-Placement of Republican and Democratic Electoral Constituencies

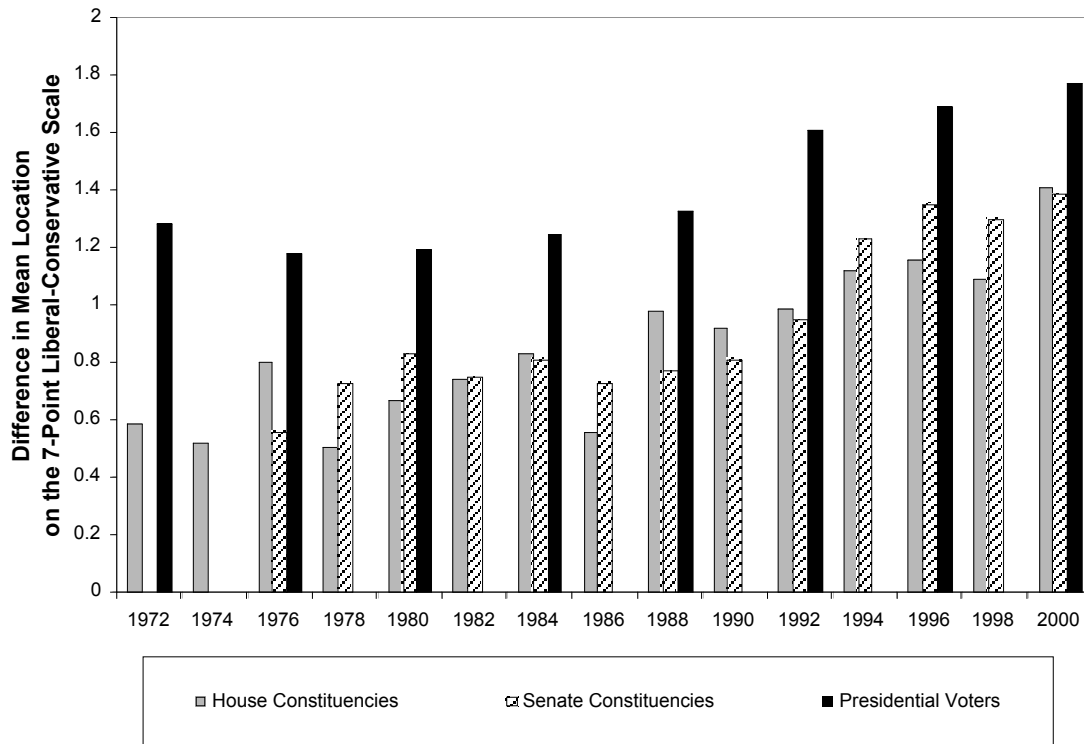


Table 1. Differences in Placement of President and Self on the 7-Point Liberal-Conservative Scale by House and Senate Electoral Constituencies

	House		Senate	
	<i>President's Party's Electoral Constituents</i>	<i>Other Party's Electoral Constituents</i>	<i>President's Party's Electoral Constituents</i>	<i>Other Party's Electoral Constituents</i>
<i>Republican Presidents</i>				
Nixon (1972)	-0.29	-1.17	-0.54	-0.78
Reagan (1980)	-0.59	-1.40	-0.38	-1.51
Reagan (1984)	-0.57	-1.39	-0.80	-1.07
GHW Bush (1988)	-0.36	-1.34	-0.70	-2.04
GW Bush (2000)	-0.48	-1.73	-0.03	-1.85
<i>Democratic Presidents</i>				
Carter (1976)	0.78	1.92	0.55	1.70
Clinton (1992)	0.59	2.17	0.43	1.83
Clinton (1996)	0.35	2.54	0.46	2.97

Note: Entries are derived from 7-point scales where 1 most liberal and 7 is most conservative.

Source: American National Election Studies

**Figure 16. Polarization of House Districts, 1952-2000
(Presidential Vote)**

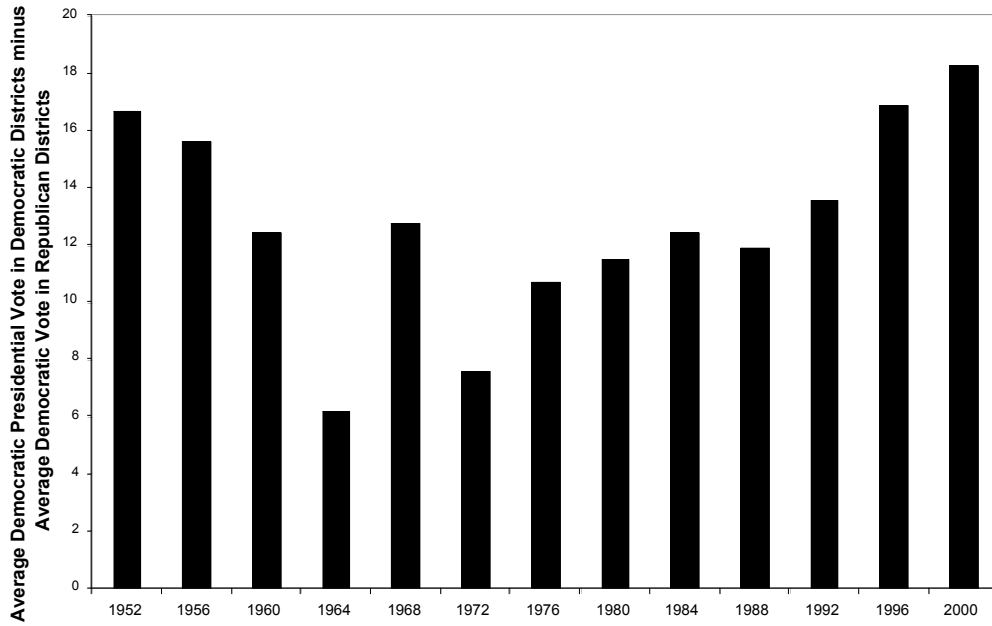


Figure 17. Polarization of States, 1952-2000 (Presidential Vote)

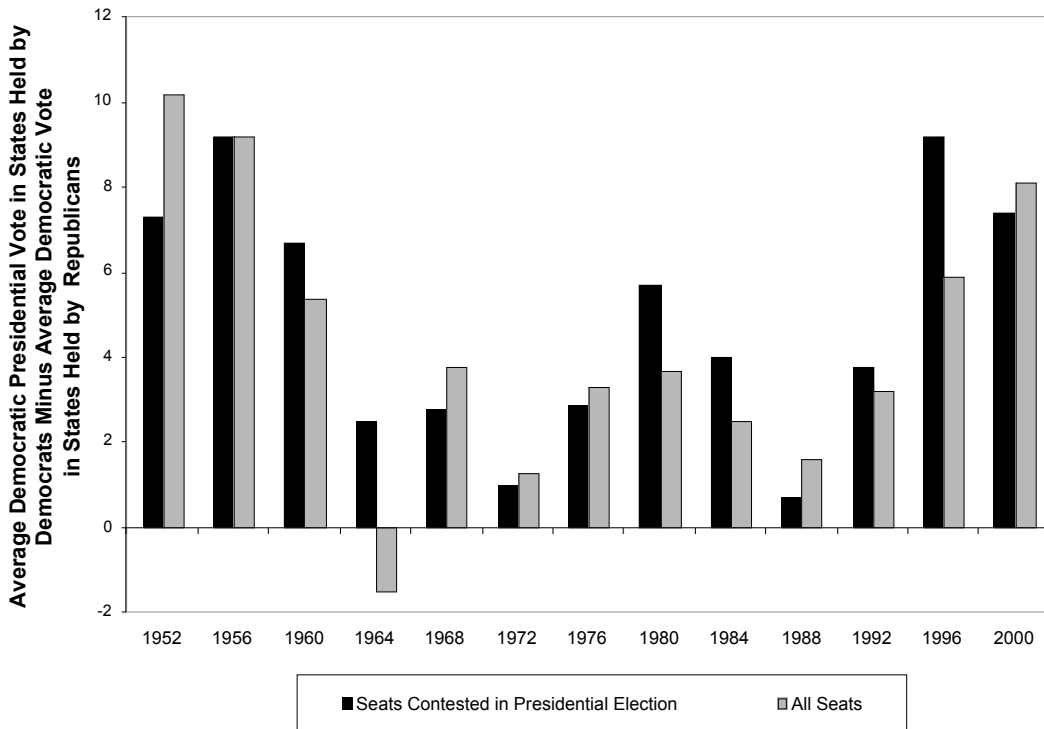


Figure 18. The Distribution of Republican and Democratic House Districts by Presidential Vote

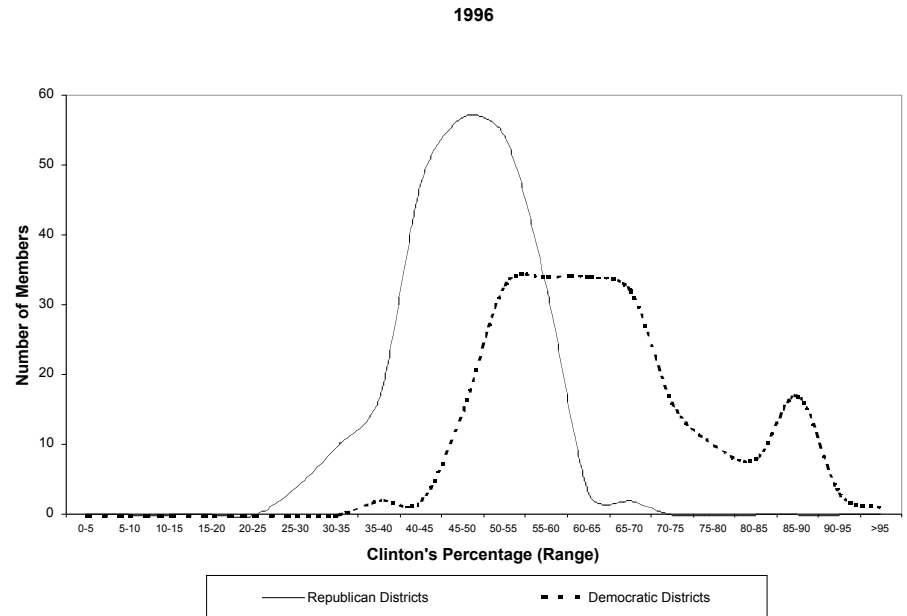
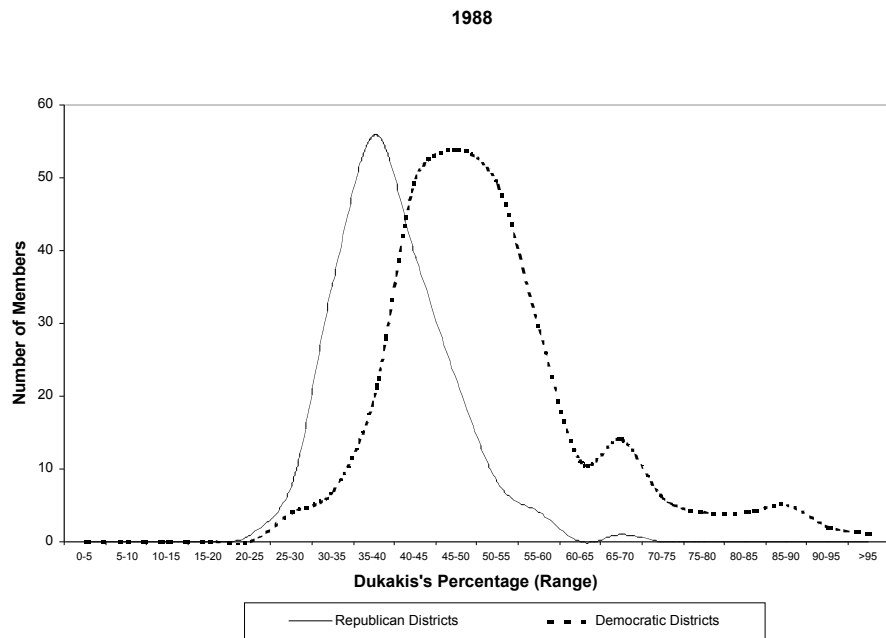
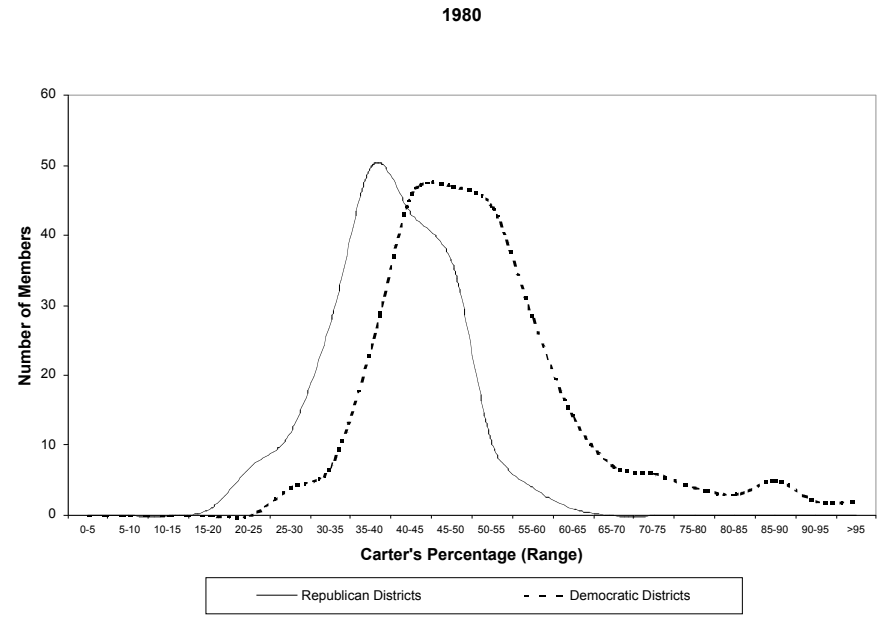
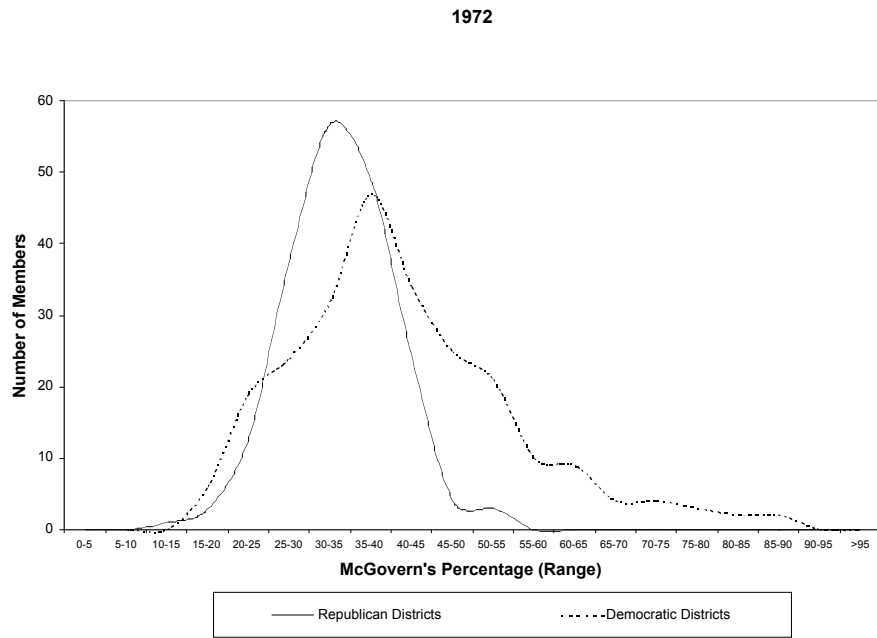


Figure 18. The Distribution of Republican and Democratic House Districts by Presidential Vote

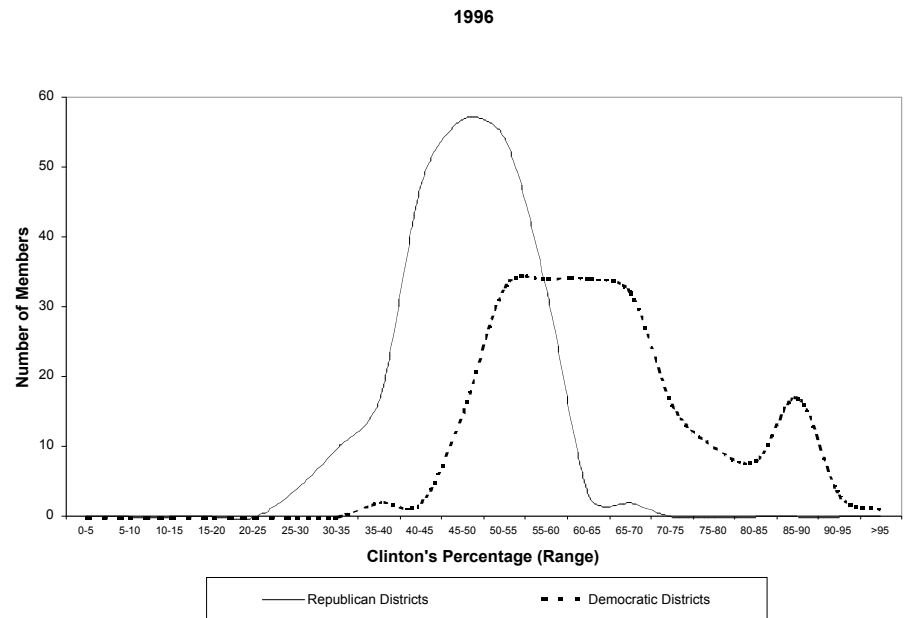
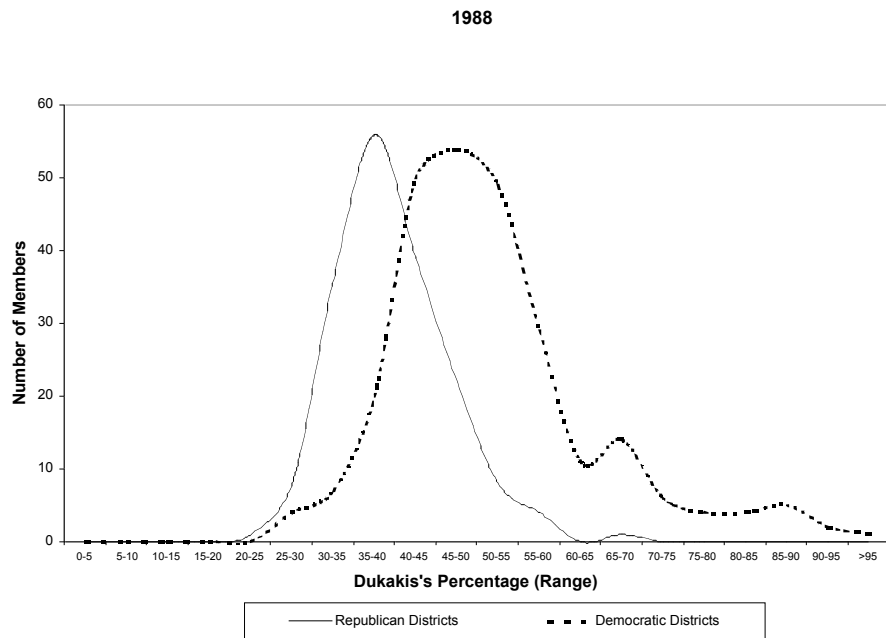
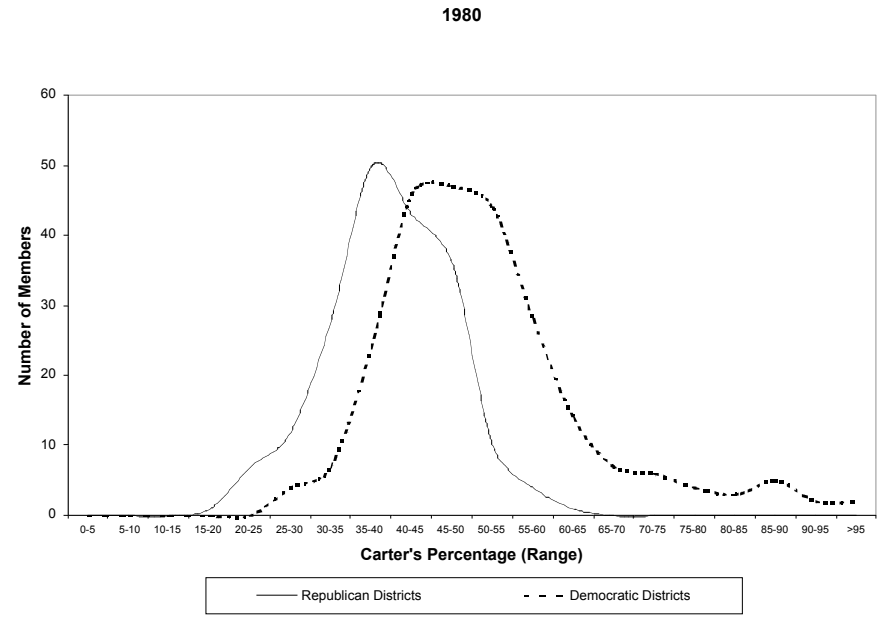
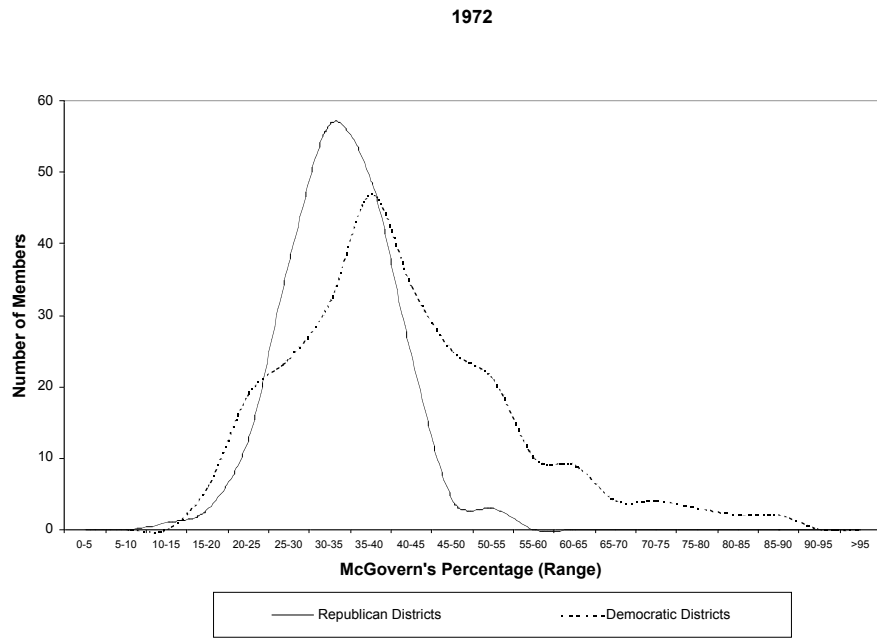


Table 2. Coefficients from Regression of Presidential Support Scores on the State- or District-Level Presidential Vote

<i>Administration</i>	<i>President's Party</i>			<i>Opposition Party</i>		
	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Standard error</i>	<i>R²</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Standard error</i>	<i>R²</i>
<i>Senate:</i>						
Eisenhower I	-1.05***	.21	.11	.31*	.13	.03
Eisenhower II	-.13	.28	.00	.12	.11	.01
Kennedy-Johnson	-1.15***	.25	.08	1.31***	.36	.09
Johnson	.70***	.07	.25	1.24***	.16	.31
Nixon I	.84***	.18	.11	-.32*	.16	.02
Nixon II	1.66***	.21	.29	1.42***	.12	.37
Carter	-.00	.15	.00	1.66***	.21	.14
Reagan I	.22*	.10	.02	.26	.16	.00
Reagan II	1.16***	.17	.19	1.55***	.22	.20
GHW Bush	1.13***	.15	.27	1.24***	.17	.19
Clinton I	.50***	.09	.13	1.06***	.14	.23
Clinton II	.19*	.09	.02	.92***	.12	.23
<i>House:</i>						
Eisenhower I	-.50***	.10	.03	.22***	.05	.03
Eisenhower II	-.21	.11	.01	.27***	.05	.03
Kennedy-Johnson ^a	.37***	.10	.03	1.12***	.14	.17
Johnson ^a	1.21***	.06	.40	.93***	.09	.28
Nixon I	.19*	.08	.01	.22***	.04	.03
Nixon II	.54***	.03	.26	.65***	.08	.10
Carter	.46***	.07	.07	.18***	.04	.02
Reagan I	.50***	.06	.08	.33***	.04	.06
Reagan II	1.10***	.07	.26	.57***	.03	.25
GHW Bush	.91***	.06	.23	.62***	.06	.28
Clinton I	.29***	.03	.08	.40***	.06	.05
Clinton II	.57***	.04	.22	.64***	.05	.18

^aData are from the first Congress of the administration only; the presidential vote was not available for the second Congress because of redistricting.

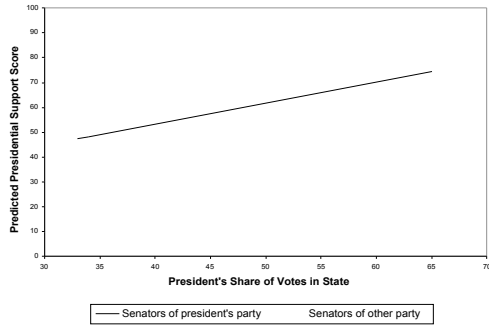
*p<.05.

***p<.001.

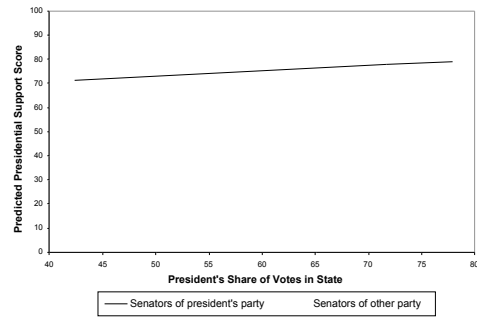
Figure 19. Presidential Vote and Presidential Support

Senate

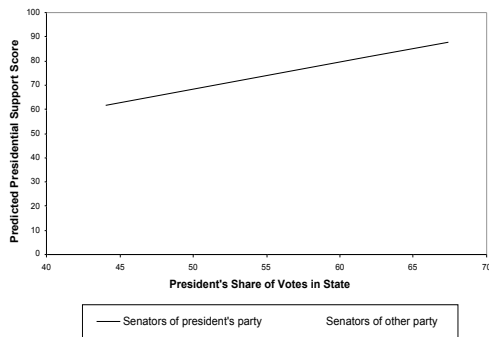
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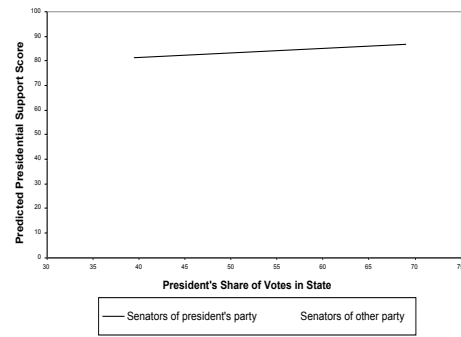
First Reagan Administration (1981-1984)



GHW Bush Administration (1989-1992)

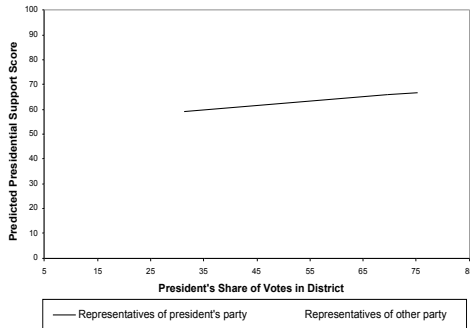


Second Clinton Administration (1997-2000)

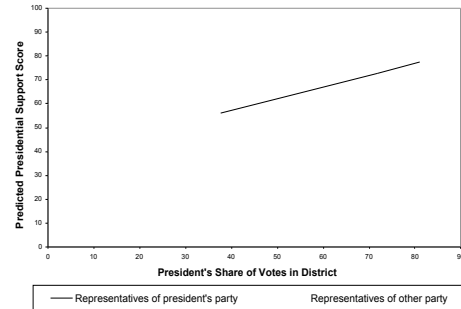


House

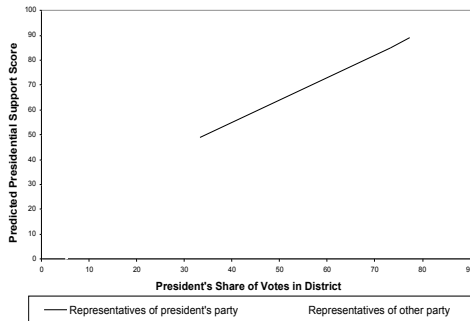
First Nixon Administration (1969-1972)



First Reagan Administration (1981-1984)



GHW Bush Administration (1989-1992)



Second Clinton Administration (1997-2000)

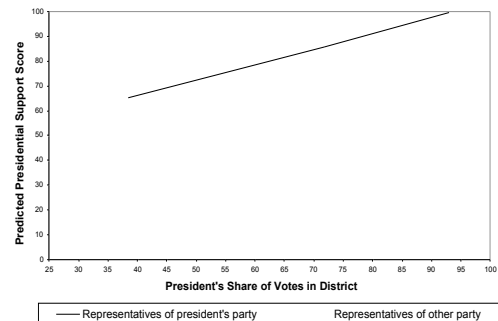


Table 3. Presidential and Congressional DW-Nominate Scores

	House				Senate		
	<i>President's DW Nominate score</i>	<i>Difference from own party's mean</i>	<i>Difference from other party's mean</i>	<i>% Closer to president than to own party's mean</i>	<i>Difference from own party's mean</i>	<i>Difference from other party's mean</i>	<i>% Closer to president than to own party's mean</i>
<i>Republicans</i>							
Eisenhower	.267	-.032	.492	26.4	-.038	.459	26.4
Nixon	.280	.032	.543	17.5	.117	.551	15.9
Ford	.251	.012	.539	13.3	.060	.546	13.1
Reagan	.479	.148	.783	2.9	.215	.775	0.5
GHW Bush	.456	.083	.775	2.3	.145	.792	0.0
<i>Democrats</i>							
Kennedy	-.524	-.300	-.793	0.8	-.277	-.781	5.4
Johnson	-.412	-.169	-.656	3.9	-.142	-.625	11.4
Carter	-.470	-.188	-.725	1.3	-.185	-.665	7.6
Clinton	-.363	.003	-.827	0.2	.022	-.763	5.2

Table 4. DW-Nominate Scores and Presidential Support Scores, Kennedy through Clinton Administrations

	<i>Republican Administrations</i>				<i>Democratic Administrations</i>			
	Republicans		Democrats		Republicans		Democrats	
Constant	57.3*** (0.5)	67.0*** (0.6)	45.9*** (0.4)	63.0*** (0.8)	43.9*** (0.5)	67.1*** (1.8)	53.0*** (0.4)	69.1*** (0.8)
DW Nominate Score	35.3*** (1.4)	26.0*** (1.3)	46.4*** (1.0)	4.7* (2.0)	-51.2*** (1.1)	-8.2* (3.4)	-62.3*** (1.0)	-36.2*** (1.5)
Absolute difference from president's DW Nominate Score		-42.2*** (1.9)		-42.6*** (1.8)		-49.7*** (3.7)		-40.0*** (1.9)
R ²	.27	.44	.49	.58	.54	.58	.60	.67
Number of cases	1701	1701	2461	2461	1785	1785	2352	2352

Note: The dependent variable is the member's presidential support score; standard errors are in parentheses.

*p<.05.
***p<.001

Figure 20. Presidential Approval, Eisenhower to Clinton (Quarterly Averages)

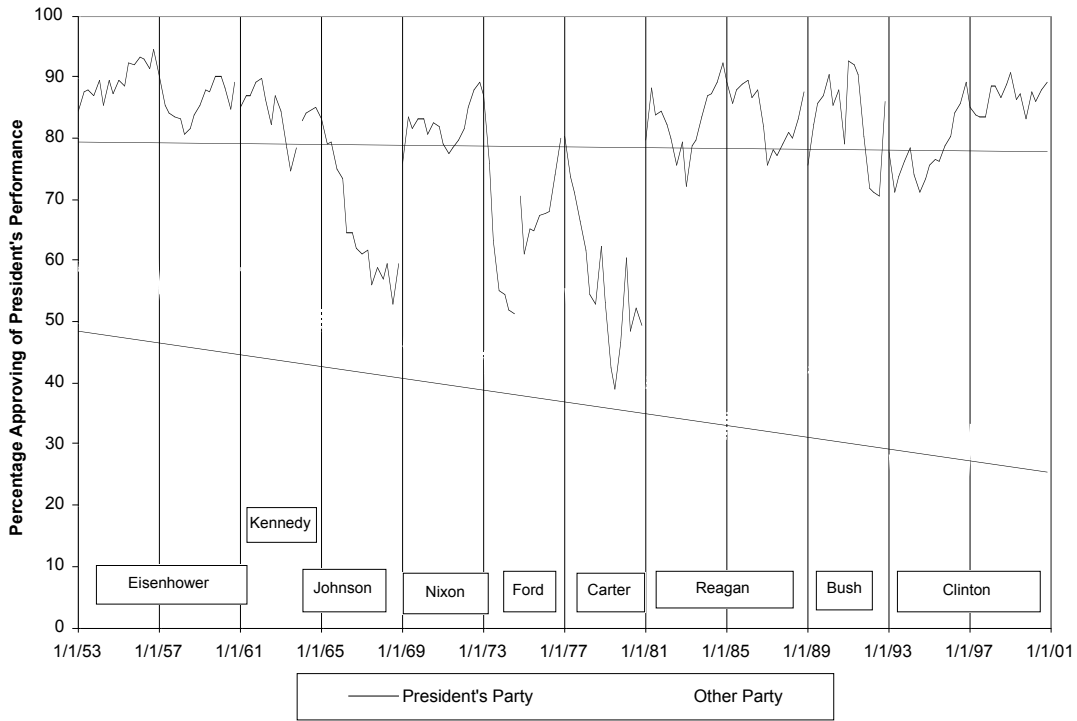


Figure 21. Partisan Differences in Presidential Approval, Eisenhower through Clinton (Quarterly Averages)

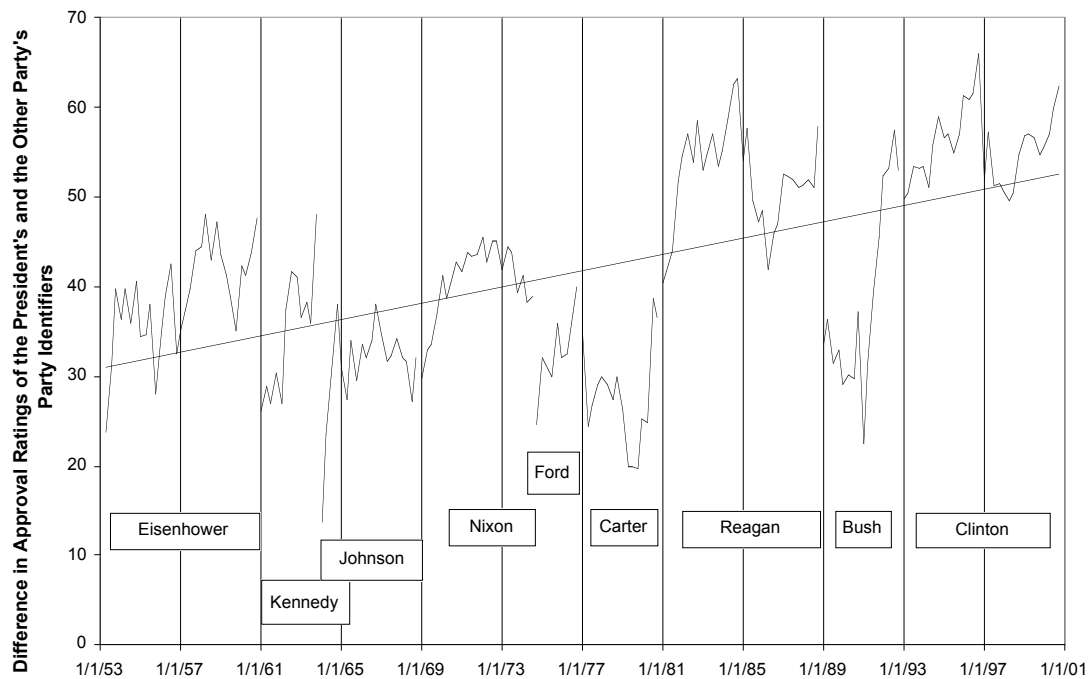


Figure 22. Party Differences in Presidential Approval and Support, 1953-2000

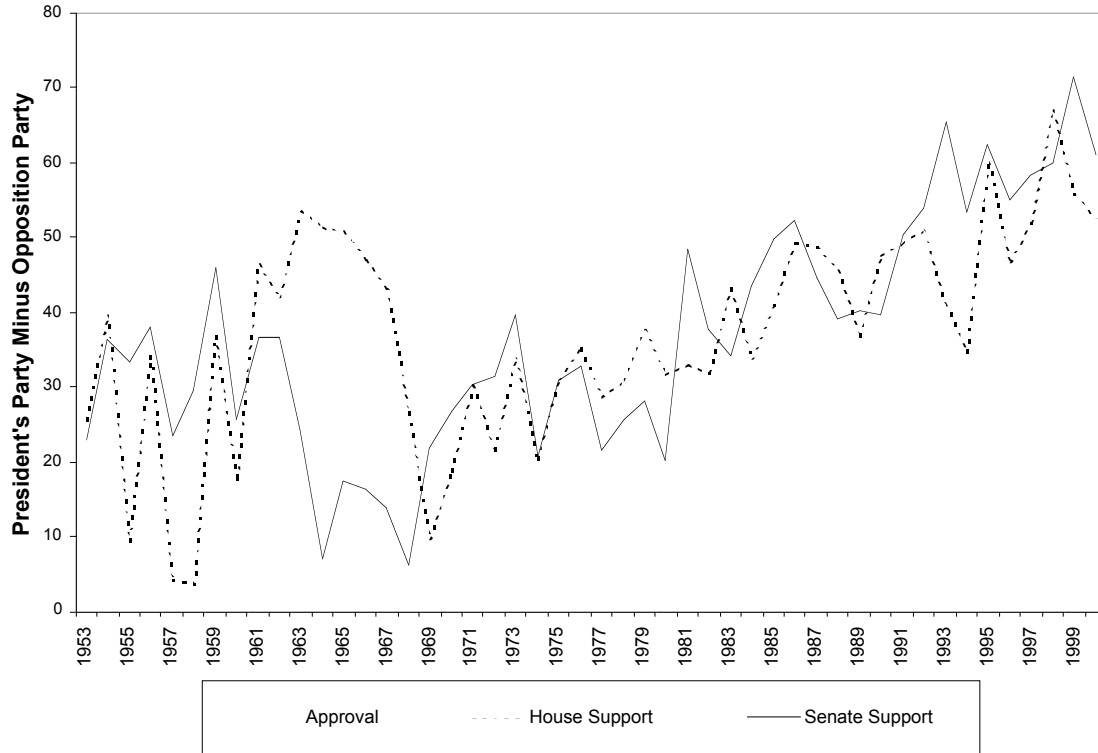


Table 5. Presidential Approval, Constituency Presidential Vote, and Presidential Support, 1953-2000.

	Constant	Presidential Approval by Member's Partisans	Adjusted Democratic Presidential Vote in Constituency	R ²	Number of Cases
<i>House of Representatives</i>					
Democrats, Democratic administrations	51.3*** (1.4)	.24*** (.02)	.52*** (.02)	.16	4352
Republicans, Republican Administrations	59.9*** (2.1)	.05* (.03)	-.36*** (.04)	.03	4945
Republicans, Democratic administrations	32.5*** (0.7)	-.08** (.02)	.66*** (.03)	.13	3275
Democrats, Republican Administrations	26.3*** (0.7)	.28*** (.02)	-.41*** (.02)	.11	6822
<i>Senate</i>					
Democrats, Democratic administrations	30.9*** (2.9)	.51*** (.04)	.44*** (.07)	.16	1133
Republicans, Republican Administrations	43.3*** (4.6)	.31*** (.06)	-.45*** (.07)	.06	1259
Republicans, Democratic administrations	19.5*** (1.7)	.40*** (.05)	1.23*** (.09)	.23	839
Democrats, Republican Administrations	23.7*** (1.4)	.26*** (.04)	-.44*** (.06)	.07	1442

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses.

*p<.05. **p<.01. ***p<.001.

Figure 23. Average Party Difference in Presidential Approval During The First Quarter of a New Administration

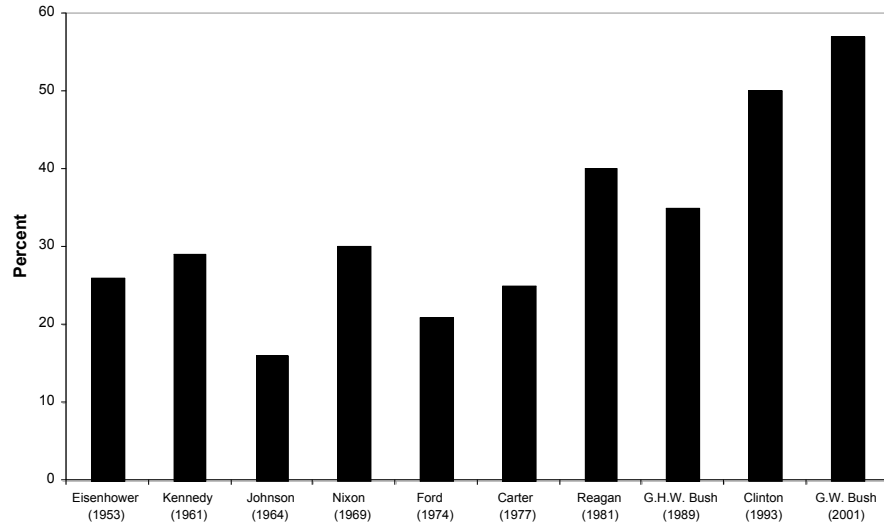


Figure 24. G.W. Bush Job Approval Ratings Through June 23, 2002

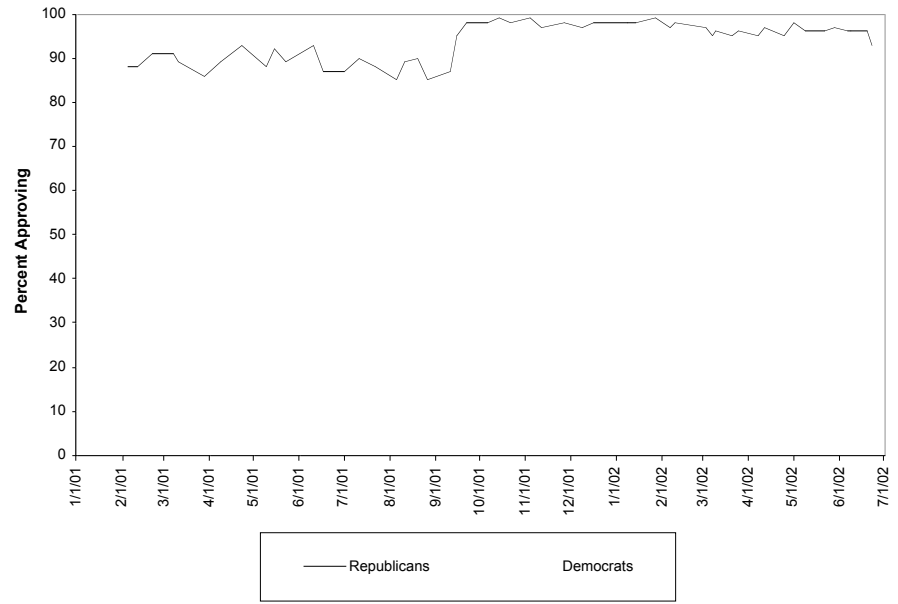


Figure 25. Party Difference in G.W. Bush's Job Approval Ratings

