The Electoral Consequences of Presidential Support

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Abstract

Conventional wisdom suggests that the president’s standing with the public affects his success in Congress. Electoral self-interest is the primary reason to expect a relationship between presidential popularity and the behavior of members of Congress. Although numerous studies have analyzed the effects of presidential popularity, the lack of presidential approval data at the congressional constituency level has hindered a definitive test. This paper offers a way to estimate presidential job approval at the state level, and analyzes Senate elections from 1990-2000 to test whether senators suffer any electoral consequences if their level of presidential support diverges from constituents’ preferences. Controlling for conditions known to influence competition in congressional elections, we find no evidence that divergent presidential support systematically affects incumbents’ election margins or the emergence of experienced, well-financed challengers across six Senate election cycles (1990-2000).
The Electoral Consequences of Presidential Support

The proposition that the president’s standing with the public affects his ability to achieve legislative success is widely accepted among Washington insiders (Edwards 1997). Evidence from systematic quantitative studies testing this relationship, however, is decidedly mixed. An assortment of studies has analyzed different time periods using different research designs, measures, and methods, but a common theoretical rationale—electoral self-interest—motivates this line of research. The logic is straightforward: because members of Congress need to please their constituents to get reelected, they will support the president if he is popular with their constituents and distance themselves if he is unpopular.

Such a linkage assumes that voters hold members of Congress accountable if they fail to adjust their support for the president depending on his popularity, but this assumption has yet to be tested directly. The data necessary for a direct test—presidential popularity in each member’s constituency—has only recently become available. Using state level opinion data (Niemi, Beyle, and Sigelman 2001), we analyze Senate elections to test whether senators suffer any electoral consequences if their level of presidential support deviates from the preferences of their constituents, controlling for variables known to influence congressional elections.

We begin with an overview of research analyzing the effects of public approval of the president on congressional behavior. Then we turn to research on congressional elections to identify the causes of competition in order to establish a baseline against which to compare the electoral consequences of divergent presidential support. Next we discuss our research design, including how we overcame some problems with the state level presidential approval data. Our analysis fails to uncover any systematic impact of divergent presidential support on election
outcomes of senators running for reelection from 1990 to 2000. The conclusion puts our findings into perspective.

**Presidential Approval and Legislative Success**

Research on the relationship between public approval of the president and support in Congress has reported findings ranging from a strong positive relationship, to little or no relationship, to negative relationships under certain conditions.\(^1\) Electoral self-interest is the primary theoretical mechanism explaining why popular approval should be expected to affect congressional support for the president. 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.”

Such a model assumes that voters have information about their representative’s presidential support and that this information influences their vote choice. Although few voters have such specific information, Arnold (1990) argues that members of Congress try to anticipate “potential preferences” of voters. If so, then all that is necessary to establish a relationship is for members of Congress to believe that their support for the president might become a campaign issue and affect voters’ choice. We cannot directly test whether members of Congress alter their presidential support based on beliefs about constituents’ preferences because systematic data on members’ beliefs are not available. But now that public opinion data measuring presidential job approval at the state level have become available (Niemi, Beyle, and Sigelman 2001), we can test directly whether presidential support that diverges from constituent opinion affects senators’ reelection chances.

Because data on presidential job approval among each member’s constituents was not available, past research typically relied on national level presidential approval or election results as substitutes for direct measures of constituency opinion.\(^2\) A common measure of presidential
popularity is the Gallup presidential job approval question (Edwards with Gallup 1990): “Do you approve or disapprove of the way [the incumbent] is doing his job as president?” Although this measure is a valid and reliable indicator of presidential popularity at the national level, the president’s job approval rating varies greatly across states and congressional districts. Thus, Gallup polls based national samples do not accurately gauge public approval at the appropriate level—among each member’s constituents (Bond and Fleisher 1984; 1990, 64-65; Cohen et al. 2000).3

Presidential election results in states and congressional districts reveal some information about how each member’s constituents regard a newly elected president.4 But since the votes are cast before the president takes office, election results alone do not provide a valid assessment of the public’s view of the president’s job performance. Even in cases where a sitting president is reelected, numerous considerations besides job performance affect election results in states and districts. Furthermore, assessments of a president’s job performance can change dramatically over time, but election returns are a static indicator of constituency preferences.

For these reasons, neither national approval of the president nor presidential election results directly measure constituent approval of the president. Without a measure of presidential job approval at the constituency level, we cannot directly test the hypothesis linking congressional support of the president to his popularity with the public.

Fortunately, a number of organizations have been sampling public approval of the president at the state level over several decades. Niemi, Beyle, and Sigelman (2001) have collected these polls. Indicators of state level presidential approval are available for all states in which Senators were up for reelection over six election cycles (1990-2000). Although these state polls did not use a common question wording and were not conducted in the same month in these election years, information from these samples can be used in conjunction with presidential election returns and
national approval to estimate more accurate indicators of presidential job approval at the state level than has heretofore been available.

**The Conditions for Competitive Elections**

Election outcomes are affected by more than just a senator’s presidential support. Hence, we need to control for other factors that affect the competitiveness of a senator’s reelection bid. The literature on congressional elections identifies two general conditions necessary for competitive elections: (1) political conditions must be present to make the incumbent vulnerable, and (2) challengers must have the resources to exploit those vulnerabilities. Although Senate races tend to be more competitive than House races, the same general conditions lead to competition in both Senate and House elections.

**Incumbent Vulnerability**

Research on congressional elections finds that unfavorable constituency partisanship, large population size, and a voting record contrary to constituent preferences increase incumbent vulnerability. The partisan make-up of a constituency establishes the basic parameters of competition. Some constituencies are composed of voters who are overwhelmingly Democrats or Republicans, while others have a more balanced partisan mix. Incumbents who match the dominant partisan leanings of their constituency tend to have less competitive races than those who represent constituencies in which partisanship is more evenly balanced or favors the other party (Abramowitz and Segal 1992; Bianco 1984; Bond, Covington, and Fleisher 1985; Canon 1990; Jacobson 2001; Johannes and McAdams 1981; Krasno 1994; Lee and Oppenheimer 1999). In addition, research on Senate elections indicates that incumbents from large states have more competitive elections than their colleagues from small states (Abramowitz and Segal 1992; Hibbing and Brandes 1983; Krasno 1994; Lee and Oppenheimer 1999).
The partisan balance and size of a constituency are beyond the control of incumbents. A voting record, in contrast, results from the representative’s choices. Previous research shows that incumbents who’s overall voting record diverges from constituent preferences face more competitive races than those with more compatible records (Abramowitz and Segal 1992; Bond, Covington, and Fleisher 1985; Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002; Johannes and McAdams 1981; Krasno 1994). The evidence that a divergent voting record makes incumbents more vulnerable is based on estimates of how well representatives’ overall ideological orientation matches preferences of their constituents. Thus, our baseline model of competition needs to include an indicator of how closely senators’ overall ideological voting record matches the ideological orientation of their constituents.

**Challenger Resources**

To exploit an incumbent’s partisan or behavioral vulnerabilities, a challenger needs adequate resources. A vigorous challenge to an incumbent depends on the challenger’s campaign spending and political experience (Abramowitz and Segal 1992; Bond, Covington, and Fleisher 1985; Canon 1990; Green and Krasno 1988; Jacobson 1980, 1990a, 1990b, 2001; Krasno 1994; Squire 1989). Although spending large amounts of money does not assure victory, adequate financing is necessary for a competitive campaign. Since experienced politicians have run a successful campaign in the past or have other relevant political experience, they are likely to be more effective campaigners than novices.

**Research Design**

The units of analysis are Senate races from 1990 through 2000 in which the incumbent faced major party opposition (n = 157).

**Dependent Variables: Electoral Competition**

We test for the effects of divergent presidential support on two types of indicators of electoral competition. One is the incumbent’s percentage of the two-party vote in the general election: the lower the incumbent’s vote, the greater the competition. The other measures relate to the political
experience and resources of the challenger. The emergence of an experienced, well-financed challenger indicates that politicians act strategically and target incumbents who appear vulnerable (Jacobson and Kernell 1983). Following Jacobson (1990a), we define experienced challengers as those who have held any elective office (1 = experienced; 0 = not). The cost of waging a viable Senate campaign varies in part with the population of the state. To indicate the vigor of challenges across states with varying populations and overall campaign costs, we use the ratio of challenger spending to incumbent spending. Competition is more vigorous in races where the challenger spends as much or more as the incumbent than in those where challenger spending is only a fraction of incumbent spending.

**Determinants of Competition**

**State Partisanship.** Following the lead of previous researchers, we use the state’s presidential vote to estimate state partisanship (Bianco 1984; Bond, Fleisher, and Talbert 1997; Canes-Wrone, Brady and Cogan 2002; Erikson and Wright 2000; Fleisher 1993; Jacobson 2001). Since factors such as issues, candidate image, a strong minor-party candidacy, and the overall competitiveness of the campaign may affect the presidential vote, we norm the presidential vote in each state relative to the national vote, and orient the measure relative to the incumbent’s party. We define the *normed state party* vote as the difference between the percentage of the two-party vote in the state for the presidential candidate of the incumbent’s party and the national percentage of the two-party vote. This measure seems particularly appropriate for this analysis in that it estimates *presidential* partisanship in each state. This variable ranges from –21.0 (21 percent below the national vote for the candidate of incumbent’s party) to 12.5 (12 percent above the national percentage), with a mean of –2.0 and a standard deviation of 6.2.
State Size. We measure state size as the number of House seats in the state.

Incumbent’s Overall Ideological Discrepancy. A measure of ideological discrepancy needs to indicate how far an incumbent’s overall voting record diverges from constituent preferences. Such a measure requires estimates of the representative’s and the constituency’s overall ideological orientation.

Past studies often relied on measures based on roll call votes to indicate the ideological orientation of individual members. We use Poole and Rosenthal’s (1997) DW-NOMINATE scores. This measure is based on all non-unanimous roll call votes, and ranges from −1.0 (most liberal) to +1.0 (most conservative). DW-NOMINATE scores are adjusted for changes in the underlying scale over time, allowing for valid comparisons across Congresses within a party era (Poole 2001).

Although DW-NOMINATE scores indicate a member’s ideological orientation, they do not reveal how well that ideology reflects the constituency. In states composed of extremely conservative voters, a member with an extreme conservative score (+1.0) would reflect constituent opinion quite well, while a member with a moderate score (0.0) would be more discrepant. To estimate the overall ideological orientation of states, we regressed incumbents’ DW-NOMINATE score on the presidential vote in the state and several demographic variables (percent black, percent urban, median family income). Predicted values indicate the ideology that voters prefer; the residuals show how far each senator’s score deviates from estimated constituent preferences.

Because the parties have different ideological orientations, the direction of ideological discrepancy is likely to matter in how competitive the race will be. A Democratic incumbent who is too conservative for a state’s voters is not likely to face a viable Republican challenge from the left; a Republican who is too liberal is unlikely to face a Democratic challenge from the right. We score Republicans who are more liberal than their constituents and Democrats who are more conservative at zero, and then take the absolute value of the residuals. This measure of ideological discrepancy ranged from .00 to .81 with a mean of .31 and a standard deviation of .16.
Senators with similar DW-NOMINATE scores can nevertheless have different ideological discrepancy scores. For example, Harkin (D-IA), Simon (D-IL), Kerry (D-MA), Levin (D-MI), Bradley (D-NJ) and Pell (D-RI) all ran for reelection in 1990 with liberal records (scores between -.40 and -.49). Yet the ideological discrepancy of this group varied. Pell (discrepancy = .06) and Kerry (.12) were slightly more liberal, while Simon (.33), Levin (.38) and Bradley (.33) were much more liberal than predicted based on the behavior of their constituents and their states’ demographic characteristics.

**Campaign Spending.** Campaign spending plays a crucial role in a challenger’s ability to wage a viable campaign. Relative spending is one of our dependent variables indicating the quality of the challenge to the incumbent, but we also expect spending to have strong effect on the incumbent’s vote margin. To account for different population size across states, we measure campaign spending as the ratio of challenger spending to incumbent spending. Campaigns in which challenger spending exceeds incumbent spending (values greater than 1.0) indicate a more vigorous campaign than those in which the challenger spent only a fraction of what the incumbent spent. For the period studied, relative campaign spending ranged from zero to 3.96. The mean was .46 with a standard deviation of .59.

**Challenger’s Political Experience.** Challenger experience is another of our dependent variables, but challenger experience is also likely to have a strong effect on incumbents’ vote margins. Students of congressional elections have measured challengers’ political experience in a number of ways, ranging from a simple dichotomy of holding electoral office or not (Jacobson 1990a) to more elaborate scales that account for other politically relevant characteristics and experiences (Bond, Covington, and Fleisher 1985; Canon 1990; Krasno 1994; Krasno and Green 1988). We include two indicators of challenger experience in our analysis of incumbents’ election margins. The first is electoral experience, indicated by whether the challenger has held any elective office (1 = elective office; 0 = not). The second is other experience indicating whether the challenger had some other characteristic or
experience that might be useful in a campaign (1 = personal or family wealth, celebrity status, party activist, congressional aide, or state or federal appointive office; 0 = none of these attributes). For the period studied, 47% had some type of electoral experience; 18% had some other politically relevant experience.

**Presidential Approval Among Senators’ Constituents**

Niemi, Beyle, and Sigelman (2001) have collected public opinion of polls measuring presidential job approval at the state level over several decades. These polls, based on statewide samples, provide a rich source of data to measure presidential popularity among senators’ constituents. But because numerous polling organizations using different questions conducted these surveys, they do not provide directly comparable indicators necessary for statistical analysis. To construct comparable estimates, we must address two major problems: (1) different question wording, and (2) differences in the availability and timing of polls in various states.

First, question wording about presidential job approval varied across polls. Some ask opinions about overall job performance, while others ask about a specific policy area (e.g., managing the economy or foreign policy). Even the questions about overall job performance used several different question formats with response options ranging from two categories (approve/disapprove) to five categories (strongly favorable to strongly unfavorable). The literature on public opinion shows that minor changes in question wording can influence responses (Asher 1992). Beyle, Niemi, and Sigelman (2002) find that presidential job approval declines as the number of response categories increases.

Second, because we want to analyze the electoral consequences of Senators’ presidential support when it diverges from constituents’ preferences, we need a measure of constituent opinion in the months immediately preceding the election. Although at least one poll using the overall job performance rating existed for each state, the timing and number of polls varied widely across the
states, and not all states had polls in the period just preceding the election. To correct for different question wording, survey techniques, and polls missing at the appropriate time before the election, we regressed the percent approving of the president’s overall job performance in each poll (n=988) on the normed presidential vote in the state and the national Gallup job approval rating in the month of the state poll. We also entered into the equation dummy variables for the number of response categories, the polling organization conducting the poll, the state, and year. Detailed results are reported in the appendix.

The model explains more than three-fourths of the variance (adjusted $R^2=.775$). The strongest predictor of state level presidential job approval is the president’s national level job approval rating in the Gallup poll conducted at the time of the state poll. This finding suggests that state level presidential approval tracks overtime variation nationally. The presidential vote in the state also has a strong positive relationship with approval in the state, indicating that the president’s job approval tends to be higher in states where he ran well in the election. This finding suggests that the partisanship of voters and other considerations that allowed the president to run well in the state continue to influence public assessments of job performance after the election. The coefficients for variables referencing the number of response categories are negative and significant, indicating that more response options tend to depress overall approval relative to the base category of two. Controls for state, year, and polling organization account for idiosyncrasies and unmeasured variables. Several of these controls are significant, but they add little to the variance explained by national approval, the presidential vote in the state, and the number of categories in the question (adjusted $R^2 = .70$ without controls for state, year, and polling organization).

Since we know the presidential vote in each state and the national Gallup job approval rating in each month before the election, we can use this regression equation to estimate presidential job approval in each state in an appropriate month before the election assuming a poll
using the Gallup two-category question format. We chose June of the election year for our estimate. The model’s predictions are highly accurate. The correlation between the model’s prediction and presidential job approval in state polls using the two-category question format is .82 (n = 360 state polls; p < .000).

**Divergent Presidential Support**

Divergent presidential support indicates how far each senator’s support for the president deviates from constituent preferences predicted by the state presidential job approval rating. Our measure of senators’ presidential support is a modified version of Congressional Quarterly’s Presidential Support Score. To calculate a Presidential Support Score, CQ uses all roll call votes on which the president expressed a position. Some of these presidential roll calls, however, involve minor or routine issues on which almost all members support the president’s position. Including these “hurrah votes” in the score distorts the measure of presidential support. The problem is particularly troublesome in the Senate when there are a large number of nominations that are routinely approved by near unanimous votes. Therefore, our presidential support score excludes votes on which more than 80% of members supported the president’s position.\(^\text{10}\)

Similar to our measure of overall ideological discrepancy, we construct a measure that estimates how much each senator’s presidential support score diverges from constituent preferences. Presidential popularity in the state serves as the appropriate baseline. To estimate *divergent presidential support*, we regressed presidential support on our estimates presidential job approval in the senator’s state. The residuals from the analysis indicate how much each senator’s presidential support diverges from that predicted by the president’s popularity among his or her constituents.\(^\text{11}\) Similar to overall ideological discrepancy, the potential electoral consequences of divergent presidential support differ for members of the president’s party and members of opposition. A member of the president’s party with lower presidential support than predicted is not likely to face a challenge from the other party
criticizing the low support; a member from the opposition with higher than predicted presidential support is unlikely to face criticism from a challenger from the president’s party for supporting the president too much. Therefore, we score opposition party Senators with positive residuals and members of the president’s party with negative residuals at zero, and then take the absolute value of the scores. Divergent presidential support ranges from 0 to 54.5 with a mean of 23.2 and a standard deviation of 12.6.

Several senators had presidential support scores that diverged by more than 50 points from the score predicted by presidential approval in the state. This group includes Grams (R-MN), Conrad (D-ND) and Bingaman (D-NM), all of whom were up for reelection in 2000. Grams was the only member of this group who was defeated. Several senators had presidential support scores that were close to that predicted by statewide approval. In the 2000 election, Feinstein (D-CA), Roth (R-DE), Lugar (R-IN), Kennedy (D-MA), Burns (R-MT), Chafee (R-RI), and Jeffords (R-VT) all supported the president at levels close to what would be predicted by statewide approval.

**Findings**

We look first at the results of bivariate regressions of our three dependent variables on divergent presidential support for incumbent senators running for reelection between 1990 and 2000. Although we find no zero order relationship between divergent support and either indicator of a quality challenge (experience or spending), we do find a weak but statistically significant effect of divergent presidential support on the incumbent’s vote margin. The regression result is

\[
\text{Incumbent’s Percent of the Vote} = 62.67 - .115 \text{ Divergent Presidential Support}
\]

The standard error for the regression coefficient is .067 (p < .05); \( R^2 \) is .02. These results suggest that a standard deviation change in divergent presidential support leads to a loss of about 1.5 percent of the vote. While not strong substantively, this finding is consistent with the hypothesis
that members of Congress suffer at the polls if they fail to follow constituent preferences with respect to presidential support.

Bivariate results, however, may be spurious. An appropriate test requires a model that controls for other factors known to affect competition in congressional elections in order to establish a baseline against which to compare the effects of divergent presidential support.

**Vote Margins**

Table 1 presents our baseline model of competition in Senate elections. All indicators of incumbent vulnerability significantly affect the incumbent’s vote share. State partisanship has a strong effect: a one standard deviation decline (6.2%) in the normed presidential vote is associated with a 1.9% drop in the incumbent’s vote. A one standard deviation increase in ideological discrepancy (.15) reduces the incumbent’s vote 1.2%. State size has the expected effect. An incumbent senator’s vote declines .09% for each additional House district. This effect means that an incumbent running for reelection in California would be expected to receive about 4.6% fewer votes than a one running under the same conditions in Delaware.

Challenger resources also have the expected effects. Challenger spending has the strongest effect in reducing the incumbent’s vote. A one standard deviation increase in the ratio of challenger to incumbent spending (.59) is associated with a 3.7% reduction in the incumbent’s vote. If the challenger has electoral experience, the incumbent’s vote drops an additional 4.0%. Challengers with other politically relevant experience cost the incumbent about 2.5%. These results replicate those of previous studies of Senate elections (Abramowitz and Segal 1992).

Adding divergent presidential support to the model does not increase the model’s explanatory power nor is the divergent support coefficient statistically significant (model 2).
Moreover, the addition of the divergent support variable does not affect the performance of the other variables.

Given that we found a zero order relationship, we investigated further, speculating that divergent presidential support might affect voters only under specific circumstances. For instance, divergent support might be meaningful only for members of the opposition party. If members of the opposition party fail to support the president in states where he is popular, the president might publicize the lack of support and activate a voter response against these members. To test this hypothesis, we interacted divergent support with senator’s party to estimate effects for members of the president’s and the opposition party. Results of this estimation revealed no significant effect of divergent support for either members of the president’s party or the opposition.

We also speculated that the effects of divergent support might vary across types of elections. In particular, effects might be stronger in presidential election years than in midterm contests, primarily because presidential campaign activity is greater in presidential election years. To test this possibility, we interacted divergent with election type to get estimates of effects of divergent support in presidential election years and in midterms. Results again indicate no impact.

We also decompose divergent president support into its two components, presidential support and public approval, to test whether these variables have an additive effect on senators’ vote margins. Because the impact of support and approval will vary by party, we interacted support and approval measures for members of the president’s party and the opposition. Results presented on Table 1 indicate that neither presidential support nor public approval affect senator’s voter margins (model 3). Finally, we interacted presidential support and state approval, looking for nonlinear effects. Again, we find no significant effect (model 4). Simply put, we could find no evidence that divergent president support has a systematic effect on a senator’s re-election margins.
**Challenger Experience and Spending**

Table 2 presents the results of our test to see if divergent presidential support affects the emergence of experienced or well-financed challengers. Although our baseline models do not explain much of the variance, they do replicate some findings from previous research. Challengers with electoral experience are more likely to emerge if the incumbent had a close race in the previous election and if state partisanship is unfavorable to the incumbent. In addition, electorally experienced challengers are more likely to run in larger states. This result is not surprising since the pool of experienced candidates increases as state size increases. Well-financed challengers also are more likely to emerge in larger states. Challenger spending tends to be higher in states where partisanship is unfavorable to the incumbent, but this variable is significant at only the .10 level. A voting record that is too liberal or too conservative for the incumbent’s constituents is not significantly related to either indicator of a quality challenge.

Adding divergent presidential support to the models does not improve their explanatory power. Nor do the coefficients reach statistical significance (models 2 and 4). We also tested models comparing members of the president’s party with the opposition, and presidential election years from midterms, as well as decomposing divergent support into its components, as we did for senator’s vote margin (not shown). And again, we found no evidence that divergent presidential support significantly affected the emergence of experienced and well-financed challengers.  

**Conclusions**

Conventional wisdom suggests that the president’s standing with the public affects his success in Congress. Electoral self-interest is the primary reason to expect a relationship between presidential popularity and the behavior of members of Congress. Although numerous studies have analyzed the effects of presidential popularity, the lack of presidential approval data at the congressional
constituency level has hindered a definitive test of the electoral connection. This paper offers a way to estimate presidential job approval at the state level, and analyzes Senate elections from 1990-2000 to test whether senators suffer any electoral consequences if their level of presidential support diverges from constituents’ preferences.

Controlling for conditions known to influence competition in congressional elections, we find no evidence that divergent presidential support systematically affects incumbents’ election margins or the emergence of experienced, well-financed challengers across six Senate election cycles (1990-2000). We tested numerous measures and model specifications in our search for some systematic effect of public approval and presidential support. While we detected a weak zero order relationship between divergent presidential support and senators’ vote margins, the multivariate results were always the same: we could find no impact of divergent presidential support or its component parts, independent of variables that we know affect incumbents’ reelection chances.

These findings suggest several directions for future research. First, while we have analyzed Senate elections over an extended period of time, it would be useful to extend this analysis to the House and to other time periods. Extending the analysis to the House is straightforward. The strongest predictors of presidential job approval in a state are the previous presidential vote in the state and the national Gallup job approval rating at the time of the state poll. Since the presidential vote is available for House districts, if we assume that the overtime relationship between national and state approval is the same for congressional districts, this model could be used to predict presidential approval in House members’ constituencies. The absence of similar polls in congressional districts, however, means that we cannot test the assumption that district level approval tracks national approval in the same way as does state approval, though such an assumption does not seem unreasonable.

Extending state level presidential approval back in time is more problematic. Given the large gaps in the state polling data, estimates for years prior to 1990 are likely to be less valid and reliable.
Failure to find systematic electoral consequences of divergent presidential support over an extended period of time using appropriate data that heretofore have been unavailable, suggests that our theorizing about the connection among legislative behavior, constituency approval of the president, and electoral outcomes may need refinement. While it is premature to reject the basic theory, a fruitful path for future studies might be to focus attention on identifying the conditions under which presidential support can affect elections.
References


Table 1
The Electoral Consequences of Presidential Support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
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<td>.31*** (3.19)</td>
<td>.35*** (3.43)</td>
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<td>-4.02*** (-3.33)</td>
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<td>-.09* (-1.50)</td>
<td>-.10* (-1.64)</td>
<td>-.09* (-1.60)</td>
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<td>Divergent Presidential Support</td>
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<td>--- .10 (.78)</td>
<td>--- -.14 (-.71)</td>
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<td>--- .18 (1.58)</td>
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<td>--- -.33 (-1.23)</td>
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<td>--- .005 (1.30)</td>
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<td>State Approval x PSS (Opposition Party)</td>
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<td>--- .005 (1.30)</td>
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<td>-1.45 (-.76)</td>
<td>-2.48 (-1.04)</td>
<td>-1.63 (-.66)</td>
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<td>-5.01*** (-2.68)</td>
<td>-2.68 (-1.18)</td>
<td>-2.89 (-1.27)</td>
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<td>-1.87 (-.80)</td>
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<td>-3.89# (-1.92)</td>
<td>-3.13 (-1.50)</td>
<td>-3.20 (-1.54)</td>
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<td>1998</td>
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<td>-1.85 (-1.01)</td>
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<td>Constant (2000)</td>
<td>69.77*** (34.77)</td>
<td>69.59*** (33.15)</td>
<td>59.16*** (9.12)</td>
<td>70.90*** (7.06)</td>
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<td>Adjusted R²</td>
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*p < .10; **p < .05; *** p < .01 using a one-tail test; #p < .1; ##p < .001 using a two-tail test.

Note: The dependent variable is the incumbent Senator’s percentage of the two-party vote. Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients; t-test is in parentheses.
Table 2
The Effects of Divergent Presidential Support on the Quality of the Challenge

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Model 1 Challenger Electoral Experience Coeff./(\Delta p)</th>
<th>Model 2 Challenger Electoral Experience Coeff./(\Delta p)</th>
<th>Model 3 Challenger Spending (b) (t-test)</th>
<th>Model 4 Challenger Spending (b) (t-test)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presidential Vote</td>
<td>-.05**/.01 (-1.67)</td>
<td>-.05**/.01 (-1.67)</td>
<td>-.01* (-1.32)</td>
<td>-.01* (-1.34)</td>
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<td>Incumbent’s Previous Vote</td>
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<td>-.05**/.01 (-2.16)</td>
<td>.002 (.31)</td>
<td>.002 (.28)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of House Seats</td>
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<td>.05**/.01 (2.21)</td>
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<td>.14*** (3.01)</td>
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<td>Ideological Discrepancy</td>
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<td>Divergent Presidential Support</td>
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<td>-.16 (-.25)</td>
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<td>.03 (.17)</td>
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<td>52.2</td>
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*p < .10; **p < .05; *** p < .01

Note: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients. Electoral experience models estimated with logit; \(\Delta p\) is calculated using technique recommended by (Greene 1993, 638-41). Challenger spending models estimated with OLS. PRE is proportional reduction in error over the naïve prediction of the modal value of the dependent variable (0 = not experienced) in logit models, and the adjusted \(R^2\) in OLS models.
## Appendix

### Backcast Model of State Presidential Job Approval

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>Beta</th>
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<th>Sig.</th>
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</table>
The dependent variable is the percent approving of the president’s job performance in each state poll. The previous presidential vote in the state is normed relative to the national two-party percentage to adjust for forces other than partisanship that influence the presidential vote in a state. Wyoming is omitted as the criterion state. The poll variable comes from the Beyle, Niemi and Sigelman codebook.
Endnotes


2Cohen, et al. (2000) is an exception. Although this study uses a measure of the president’s popularity in each state, the analysis is based on only one election. This study finds no significant relationship in 1996.

3Bond, Fleisher, and Northrup (1988) use regional approval in place of national approval. Although regional approval has some cross-sectional variation, it still does not measure approval in each member’s constituency.


5Although roll call based measures have been criticized (Jackson and Kingdon 1992), there is evidence that they are reliable and generally valid proxies of members’ ideology (Herrera, Epperlein, and Smith 1995; Hill, Hanna, and Shafqat 1997; Smith, Herrera, and Herrera 1990).

6The adjustment for changes over time means that some members have scores less than –1.0 or greater than +1.0. Another measure is time adjusted ADA scores (Groseclose, Snyder and Levitt 1999). ADA and NOMINATE scores are highly correlated (r > .90). ADA scores penalize for absences. Since this penalty for missing votes can make a very liberal member look more moderate, for our purposes they are less useful than DW-NOMINATE scores.
Although the presidential vote is affected by more than voters’ ideology, this variable is among the strongest in the model. Several demographic variables are also significant. The model explains about 20% of the variance in DW-NOMINATE scores.

We also estimated the model using the Wright, Erikson, and McIver (1993) measure of state ideology, but the estimates of ideological discrepancy using their measure did not perform as well in replicating previous findings for our baseline as did the measure we report here. The updated Wright, Erikson, and McIver measure can be found on John McIver’s website at http://sobek.colorado.edu/~mciverj/wip.html.

Because challenger and incumbent spending are endogenous, estimation of the effects of these variables has been the subject of considerable debate in the literature (Jacobson 1980; 1990b; Green and Krasno 1988; 1990). For our purposes in this analysis, we don’t need to take sides in this debate. We only need a measure that indicates the overall vigor of a campaign, and the ratio of challenger to incumbent spending captures this well.

This measure is similar to Edwards’ (1989) that excludes all votes (victories and defeats) on which more than 80% voted on the same side. Our measure retains votes the president’s lost, including the few cases on which more than 80% voted against the president. Although such votes are nearly unanimous, they clearly differ from those on which the president wins by a lopsided margin. Cases in which the president stands virtually alone against a unified Congress are important instances of institutional conflict. They are neither minor nor routine, and therefore belong in a measure of presidential support.

The model predicting presidential support with state level job approval does not explain a great deal of the variance. The model R² is .18, including dummy variables for Congress; the R² without the dummy variables is .04. Some argue, however, that explained variance is less important than the regression coefficients (King 1991). The coefficient for state approval is significant at the .001 level.

The coefficient for divergent presidential support for presidential partisans was .04 with a standard error of .08 (p = .67) and for opposition party members the coefficient was .09 with a standard error of .08 (p = .23).
For midterm years the coefficient for divergent presidential support was -.08 with a standard error of .08 (p = .35) and in presidential election years the coefficient was .09 with a standard error of .08 (p = .19).

We estimated other models with different measures of divergent support (e.g., including measures of partisanship to estimate predicted presidential support), and without the measure of overall ideological discrepancy. No measure of divergent presidential support was significant.

Contact authors for specific results.