

With a Little Help from His Friends:

The Impact of Presidential Campaign Visits on Congressional Roll-Call Votes

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Abstract

Presidential campaigning for fellow partisans is becoming increasingly popular, and some evidence suggests that presidential visits affect campaign outcomes—often making the difference between victory and defeat. We expect presidents to reap initial benefits from the election of fellow partisans. Using data recording presidential campaign visits for congressional candidates during the 2002 midterm election and roll-call voting data from the 108th Congress, we estimate the impact of presidential visits on floor voting. We find presidential visits had a significant affect on presidential support among members of Congress who were in office prior to the 2002 election, but no influence among newly-elected House members. The lack of freshmen support is due to the overwhelmingly high levels of support for the president's agenda among *all* first-termers. Overall, we find evidence that a President who campaigns for his fellow partisans is likely to reap significant benefits in the passage of his legislative agenda.

In 2002, President George W. Bush mounted an extensive campaign effort in support of Republican candidates nationwide. From January to November, Bush made campaign stops—at least one in every region—for 72 House, Senate, and gubernatorial candidates. He also made several visits to assist Republican Party committees and a conservative-leaning PAC. The vast majority of the president's visits were made to assist candidates in competitive races, although a few, such as visits to House Speaker Dennis Hastert and Florida congressman Bill Young, appear to have been intended to create goodwill among safe but powerful incumbents. Scholars, journalists, and political practitioners have commented on presidential campaign visits, but the systematic research on either the president's role as congressional campaigner or the benefits that accrue to presidents as a result of their campaign activities is still limited.

One of the few papers on this subject shows President Bush's campaign visits in the 2002 congressional elections had a positive impact on the electoral fortunes of a number of House Republicans in close races (Herrnson and Morris 2005). In this study, we assess the impact of one or more presidential visits on the subsequent roll-call voting behavior of House Republicans, including first-term members and returning incumbents. We find that presidential visits had a demonstrable effect on subsequent congressional roll-call voting behavior, but only among returning incumbents. We attribute the lack of influence of presidential campaign visits on freshmen representatives to the overwhelmingly high support for the president among *all* Republican freshmen. We discuss these findings, including their broader implications for our understanding of congressional-presidential relations during periods of significant partisanship and identify several avenues for future research.

Presidential Support Revisited

The literature on the foundations of presidential support in Congress, can be effectively divided into three schools of thought: the presidency-centered school, the Congress-centered perspective, and the structural approach (Lockerbie, Borrelli, and Hedger 1998). The presidency-centered model—which dates back to at least Neustadt (1960)—focuses on the ability of individual presidents to use the arsenal of resources that come with the office or their personal political skills to influence the roll call votes of members of Congress. Some studies utilizing this model provide detailed personal or psychological depictions of presidents (Barber 1985 and Kellerman 1984) and their interactions with legislators. Sullivan (1987; 1990; 1991) and Hager and Sullivan (1994) focus on the president's ability to move legislative votes on important bills. Fleisher, Bond and Wood (2002) use quantitative data to assess the legislative skills and political capabilities of different modern presidents. Covington's (1986) research provides an important reminder that presidential efforts to influence Congress are supported by various institutions within the White House, including the Office of Congressional Relations (see also Pfiffner 1988 and Edwards 1989). Kernell (1986) establishes the impact of the president's broader popularity on legislative success. Research in the presidency-centered vein tends to focus on the president's use of personal or institutional resources to engender legislative support from various members of Congress.

Congress-centered models—such as those developed by Bond and Fleisher (1980 and 1990) and Oppenheimer (1993)—focus on changes in the political dynamics or character of Congress to understand the variation in support for presidential policy initiatives over time. Because partisan balance in the chambers of Congress and the underlying ideological orientations of the members seem to have such a strong impact on their roll-call votes (Bond and Fleisher 1990; Peterson 1990; Jones 1994; but see Mayhew 1991), the Congress-centered focuses finds little room—and little need for—presidency-oriented variables.

The “structural” or “procedural” perspective tends to focus on the impact of the institutional characteristics of the lawmaking process and executive branch, the relationship between Congress and the president, and the ebb and flow of presidential support. For example,

such factors as honeymoon periods cannot be adequately incorporated into either the presidency-centered or the Congress-centered perspective. The same is true of the distinctive behavior of first-term legislators, institutional variations across chambers, and the nature of the agenda items before the legislature. Other research informed by the structural perspective focuses on presidential coalition-building (Covington 1987a; 1987b; 1988a; 1988b; Covington, Wrighton and Kinney 1995; and Peterson 1990) and agenda setting (Light 1989; and Wildavsky 1966). The institutionalist research of Skowronek (1993), Oleszek (1995), and others also falls into this category.

One common strand among all of the different schools of thought on presidential support is the focus on activities that occur when Congress is in session. Presidential negotiations on legislation are assumed to occur during legislative sessions; Sullivan's "headcount" research is based explicitly on the assumption that presidents are able to change support levels in Congress from the beginning of a legislative session to the end. Congress-centered models are dominated by partisan or political dynamics—such as the partisan balance in each chamber—that are constant (or practically so) during a legislative session. Finally, structuralist variables, such as legislative timetables and the substantive character of agenda items are also focused on "in-session" dynamics.

We contribute to this literature by examining the capacity of the president to influence legislative support through strategic *pre-session* activities—specifically, campaigning for fellow partisans. Though our focus is novel, our approach reflects aspects of each of the existing schools of thought on Congress-president relations. Our model may be viewed as president-centered because of its concentration on the ramifications of the individual campaign activities of the president—what we view as the engine driving the relationship. This work may also be viewed in Congress-centered terms because of our concern with party dynamics and partisan balance. Finally, electoral calendars and the distinctive behavior of freshmen concern us in a manner that would not be uncommon among structural theorists. In sum, our approach draws something from each approach to studying presidential-congressional relations and introduces a new focus—presidential campaigning—into an integrated model.

Partisanship, Presidential Campaigning, and Congressional Support

Until recently, midterm losses by the president's party were the surest bets in American electoral politics. With the exception of the 1934 and 1998 elections, presidential parties lost seats in the House of Representatives relative to the opposition during every midterm election in the 20th century. While some losses were small (4 seats in 1962), others were extensive (45 in 1946 and 53 in 1994) and shifted the balance of power in the chamber. A sizable literature has developed to attempt to explain these losses.¹ Structural theories involving coattail effects and the surge-and-decline of the electorate (Campbell 1966), contextual theories focusing on presidential popularity (Kernell 1977; Tufte 1975, 1978) and the state of the economy (Hibbs 1986, 1987; Tufte 1975, 1978), and theories positing linkages between structural and conditional factors (Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Campbell 1985) have been used to try to explain midterm election outcomes. Nevertheless, these theories ignore a potentially important aspect of recent midterm elections: the president as congressional campaigner.

Current political conditions provide major incentives and that technological advances provide the means for a president to try to influence congressional elections (Herrnson and Morris 2005). The relatively even balance between Republicans and Democrats in both houses of Congress ensures that control of either house depends on the results of a very small number of contests. The prospect of a change in partisan majorities increases the marginal value of each additional seat, and it gives the president strong motivation to actively campaign for his party's candidates. The ideological polarization and internal cohesiveness of the congressional parties (Jacobson 2003) provide additional policy-related incentives for presidential campaigning.

Current conditions also make it easier for the president to influence congressional elections. The decline in the number of competitive House races has made it simpler for the president and party organizations to effectively target and coordinate their campaign efforts (Hoddie and Routh 2004). The emergence of a nationalized system of campaign finance has made it easier for political leaders to influence the flow of campaign contributions to congressional candidates (Francia et al 2003; Herrnson 2004). Popular presidents, such as Bush in 2002, are in a particularly good position to capitalize on these resources. Finally, advances in high speed travel, namely those offered by the modern Air Force One, make it possible for a president to crisscross the country efficiently and with relative ease.

The existing incentive structure and modern technology have encouraged presidents to spend more days campaigning for fellow partisans (e.g., Keele, et al. 2004). Presidential campaign efforts have been shown to improve congressional candidates' fundraising (Jacobson, et al. 2004) and electoral fortunes (Herrnson and Morris 2005). We believe they also can improve a president's ability to enact his policy priorities. Congress-centered models of presidential success underscore that a president whose party picks up additional seats in an election is likely to enjoy greater legislative success than a president whose party has lost seats. However, contributing to a change in the partisan composition of Congress is only one way that presidential campaigning can boost legislative support for presidential initiatives. And, the overall level of partisan change is a blunt measure that may mask a more subtle dynamic. We concentrate on the impact that presidential campaign visits to help specific congressional candidates can have on fostering future legislative support from those candidates.

The indebtedness hypothesis maintains that when a president successfully campaigns for congressional candidates, House members' express their gratitude by becoming more supportive of the president's legislative agenda. The fact that presidents often discuss that agenda when campaigning with their fellow partisans adds a substantive policy to tie the link between campaign assistance and legislative support.

A president's ability to influence a member of Congress is conditioned by a variety of factors. We expect legislators elected from districts that heavily supported the president in the previous election to be more supportive of the president's policy initiatives than legislators from districts where the president was relatively less popular. Moreover, presidential visits and presidential popularity should have a synergistic effect on congressional support for the president's agenda. We anticipate that candidates from districts where the president was extremely popular and who benefited from one or more presidential campaign visits are especially likely to support presidential initiatives. Of course, a legislator's own ideological orientations might be important (Poole and Rosenthal 1991, 1997). The stronger the similarity between a legislator's and the president's orientations the more likely the legislator is to support the president's agenda. Similarly, traditional regional dynamics—such as the social liberalism of New England and Mid-Atlantic Republicans—might also explain why certain members tended to oppose presidential policy initiatives.

Structural factors also might influence the variation in legislators' support for the president's policy preferences. Leaders and more senior members of Congress traditionally enjoy more policymaking freedom than their more junior colleagues. Likewise, members who are planning to retire at the end of the term enjoy considerably more freedom than their colleagues running for re-election (Herrick, Moore, Hibbing 1994). The same is true of members from safe seats, though legislators draw distinctions between attentive and inattentive publics (Key 1961; Arnold 1990). Whether this freedom increases or depresses members' support for presidential initiatives is an open question. Finally, given that presidential honeymoons tend to be relatively short lived we expect the effect of a presidential campaigning to fade with time (e.g. Brace and

Hinckley 1992). We hypothesize that the effect of a presidential visit will be greater during the first session than during the second session.

Data and Methods

We draw on several data sources to investigate the impact of presidential visits on representatives' support for the president's policy agenda during the 108th Congress. Data for presidential campaign visits during the 2002 midterm congressional election are more detailed than the data for earlier elections. They include the names of every candidate or party committee for whom the second president Bush made a campaign visit, the dates for each visit, and the purpose of each visit. These data were provided by Mark Knoller, a CBS News White House reporter who has tracks presidents' schedules.² Knoller divides visits into two categories: rallies and fundraising visits. The president attended rallies on behalf of twelve candidates, fundraising visits on behalf of four candidates, and visits of both types on behalf of ten candidates. This came to a total of three dozen discrete visits to 22 districts in which Republicans were competing in contested elections. All of these visits took place in the specific candidate's district. We include all publicity-oriented and fundraising campaign stops in our analysis because they all are intended to influence the election outcome.

The information about House members' presidential support scores were collected from various editions of the *Almanac of American Politics* (Barone, Cohen and Ujifusa 2003, 2005). The *Almanac* is also the source of the president's share of the vote in individual congressional districts, and several variables that could influence House members' legislative freedom, including seniority, leadership positions, retirements, and margin of victory in the 2002 election.³ We use Poole and Rosenthal (1991, 1997) DW-NOMINATE scores to assess the ideological distance between President Bush and House members.

After making a preliminary assessment of the impact of presidential campaign visits on presidential support in Congress, we use ordinary least squares regression to estimate the effects of our independent variables. We report robust standard errors for each of the coefficients to address issues related to heteroskedasticity..

Our first set of analyses test the impact of presidential campaign visits on presidential support in Congress among returning House incumbents. *Presidential support* is operationalized as the percentage of recorded votes cast in support of the president's position on bills on which the president took a position. *Presidential visits* is coded zero, one, two, or three (the maximum number of visits) depending upon the number of campaign visits made by the president for a congressional candidate. *Presidential vote in the district* is a standard measure of presidential coattails. It is included because Republican House members representing districts where the president ran well in the previous election are more likely to respond to constituent pressure—real and anticipated—to support the president than those in districts where the president ran poorly. An interaction term for *Presidential visits X Presidential vote* in the district is used to assess the synergistic effect of these two factors. We control for the ideological proximity of individual House members and the president using *NOMDIF1* for the first DW-NOMINATE dimension and *NOMDIF2* for the second DW-NOMINATE dimension for the 108th Congress.⁴ These measures are simply the absolute values of the difference between the position of the president and the individual member of Congress on each of the DW-NOMINATE dimensions. We use *Presidential support in 2002* to control for individual House members' predisposition to support the president's agenda. Victory margin, seniority, holding a congressional leadership post, or planning an imminent retirement are believed provide members with more freedom when casting their legislative roll-call votes. However, as noted above we have no theoretical expectation of whether they will use this freedom to support or oppose the president's agenda. Preliminary analysis of the data demonstrated that these variables to have no statistically significant relationship to presidential support so we dropped them from the final model.

After analyzing the impact of presidential campaign visits on returning incumbents' support of the president's legislative agenda, we assess the relationship between presidential visits on first-term legislators' presidential support. Here, we expect the relationship to be much weaker because first-termers, who tend to be the most vulnerable House members, are usually preoccupied with shoring up their support among constituents. Their need to place reelection first and foremost in their congressional activities provides them with less freedom to take other considerations into mind, including supporting or opposing the president, when casting their roll-call votes. However, this part of the investigation needs to be treated as preliminary because we are unable to control for a number of factors that influence House members' presidential support, including previous presidential support and ideology.

Results

An overview of the data provides some evidence for the effects of presidential campaign visits on congressional support in Congress (see Table 1). First, it should be noted that Republican House members across-the-board tend to be very supportive of President Bush's legislative agenda. During the first session of the 108th Congress, Republican legislators for whom the president did not campaign (including returning incumbents and first-term members) supported 91.4 percent of the bills comprising the president's legislative agenda. Although Republican candidates who benefited from one presidential visit were slightly less supportive of the president, casting 88 percent of their votes in accordance with his position, GOP candidates who received two or three campaign visits supported the president more than 94 percent of the time. The pattern of support for the president's agenda also is evident for the second session of the 108th Congress, however, the overall support provided by Republican legislators is significantly lower.

<<Table 2 about here>>

The regression results further demonstrate that presidential visits to help incumbents who sought reelection had a strong impact on their propensity to support his legislative agenda immediately after Congress reconvened. For each campaign visit Bush made on behalf of a returning House member, he received an increase of almost 3 points in support during the first legislative session. Those who benefited from three campaign stops had support scores that were roughly 9 points higher than those for whom the president did not campaign. This contrasts sharply with the impact of the president's popularity in House members' congressional districts, as Bush's share of the 2000 presidential vote had no significant independent impact on his support in Congress. Moreover, the interaction between presidential campaign visits and presidential vote returns suggests that not only are presidential visits more important than presidential vote returns, the synergy between them does nothing to secure the president more legislative support. The two measures for ideology demonstrate that the more dissimilar the House members' policy perspectives are from the president's views, the less supportive they are of his legislative initiatives. Not surprisingly, support for the president's agenda in the previous Congress is very strongly related to support for his agenda in the first term of the 108th Congress. Region also matters. House Republicans representing districts in the New England states, which tend to be among the most liberal provided the president with less support in Congress.

<Table 3 about here>>

These patterns persist in the second session of the 108th Congress. Moreover, the relationship between presidential campaigning and presidential support in Congress is even stronger. A presidential campaign visit on behalf of a returning House member is associated with a 4.5 point increase in support during the second legislative session. The magnitude of the effects of most of the other significant variables also increase, suggesting that the differences in the results for the first and second legislative sessions are largely an artifact of the lower levels of presidential support in the second term reported in Table 1. The greater variation in support of

the president's agenda results in those who received presidential campaign visits standing out more starkly from those who did not.

Contrary to the findings for incumbents, the results for first-term Republican representatives demonstrate that presidential campaign visits have no significant impact their level of presidential support. We find some limited evidence of a regional effect, but otherwise, the variance in first-termers' support for the president is unexplained. Again, it is important to remember that first-termers are—as a group—overwhelmingly supportive of the president, so the variance for which we cannot account is quite limited. All of the freshmen were strong Bush supporters, so any open seat or challenger victories that added to the number of Republican freshmen in 2003 were victories for strong Bush supporters.

Discussion and Conclusion

Congress-president relations have been a topic of some interest since the Founding. Over the last two decades we have seen a plethora of new work on this relationship from a variety of different perspectives. We contribute to this literature by examining the impact of *pre-session* presidential activities, specifically presidential campaign visits, on congressional support for presidential policy positions. The evidence suggests that presidential campaign activities not only have the potential to affect the electoral prospects of House candidates but that presidential campaigning also effects subsequent roll call voting. For years scholars have focused on the president's ability to build coalitions during legislative sessions. It is now apparent that presidents can start building support in Congress well before legislators are even elected.

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Table 1. Average Presidential Support Scores by Number of Presidential Campaign Visits

Visits	First Session	Second Session
0	91.4	83.97
1	88	79
2	94.3	86.5
3	96	88
(N)	(228)	(226)

Table 2. The Impact of Presidential Campaign Visits on Presidential Support Among Returning House Members

	2003	2004
Presidential Visits	2.98** (1.57)	4.52*** (1.69)
Presidential Vote in the District	.045 (.07)	.10 (.08)
Presidential Visits*Presidential Vote	-.07** (.03)	-.08** (.03)
NOMDIF1	-20.69*** (4.97)	-31.71*** (6.29)
NOMDIF2	-7.38*** (3.28)	-7.90** (4.02)
Presidential Support in 2002	.92*** (.11)	.81*** (.12)
North East	-10.58*** (2.11)	-9.25*** (2.21)
Mid-Atlantic	-1.20 (1.16)	-1.13 (1.58)
Constant	15.21 (9.22)	15.84 (11.95)
R ²	.68	.56
N	193	192

Notes: The coefficients were generated using OLS regression. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. *p<.10, **p<.05, ***p<.01, one-tailed test.

Table 3. The Impact of Presidential Campaign Visits on Presidential Support Among First-Term House Members

	2003	2004
Presidential Visits	13.92 (24.01)	-3.29 (22.96)
Presidential Vote in the District	-.10* (.06)	.22* (.13)
Presidential Visits*Presidential Vote	-.27 (.47)	.06 (.43)
North East	-11.29*** (.91)	-1.64 (1.39)
Mid-Atlantic	-3.71* (2.70)	-4.32* (4.02)
Constant	101.28*** (3.70)	76.04 (7.38)
R ²	.29	.18
N	34	33

Notes: The coefficients were generated using OLS regression. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. *p<.10, **p<.05, ***p<.01, one-tailed test.

Notes

¹ See Flemming (1995) for a review of this extensive literature.

² Unfortunately, Knoller indicated that he could not make available data for 1998 or any previous year.

We have not included the 2000 data in this analysis because several of our rival hypotheses are based on the assumption that the sitting president will be working with future congresses, which is obviously not true in President Clinton's case.

³ In some cases, the retirement data were augmented using legislators' and candidates' websites).

⁴ These scores were downloaded from the Voteview website at

<http://www.voteview.com/dwnl.htm>.