

**Searching for Evidence of a Presidential Mandate
in Representatives' Support of the President**

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Political scientists have found little evidence in election returns to support presidents' claims of mandates from the voters. This analysis tests hypotheses that congressmen of the two political parties react differently to election results following a president's initial win and subsequent reelection. In the first year of an administration, there exists a relationship between presidential vote and presidential support only for representatives of the opposition political party. In the fifth year of an administration, there exists a relationship between vote and support principally for representatives of the president's party. In all, three-fourths of regression coefficients for presidential vote variables behave as predicted. These results suggest that congressmen respond in a manner consistent with the concept of a presidential mandate but that responses are conditioned by political party and age of the administration.

Presidents commonly claim a mandate from the voters following their election. It is understandable for a president with a sweeping victory to believe a mandate has been bestowed. Following his resounding reelection, Richard Nixon stated, “[W]e feel that we have a mandate, a mandate not simply for approval of what we have done in the past, but a mandate to continue to provide change that will work in our foreign policy and our domestic policy.”¹ Eight years later, Ronald Reagan said following his triumph over Jimmy Carter, “I ran on the platform; the people voted for me on the platform; I do believe in that platform and I think it would be cynical and callous of me to suggest that I’m going to turn away from it” (Conley 2001,106). But presidents who win narrowly also are confident that they have received a mandate. Following one of the

¹ “Remarks on Plans for the Second Term,” November 27, 1972, *Public Papers of the President: Richard Nixon*. In an unusual interpretation of election results as a providing a mandate, Nixon (1978,351) in his memoirs wrote of the 1968 election: “My votes and Wallace’s totaled 56.8 percent, and together they represented a clear mandate.” Nixon’s argument rested on the belief that both he and Wallace were advocating reductions in national government activity.

closest elections in American history, John Kennedy told aide Theodore Sorensen that “a margin of one vote would still be a mandate” (Sorenson 1965,219). Similarly, George W. Bush proclaimed after winning reelection by a slim margin, “I’ve earned capital in this election, and I’m going to spend it for what I told the people I’d spend it on.”²

Political scientists, however, are less prone to award mandates to presidents. Weinbaum and Judd (1970) find little evidence supporting a hypothesis that the 1936 and 1964 elections conferred mandates, concluding that the elections’ impact was in altering the composition of congress. Examining voters’ decisions in 1964 and 1972 landslides, Kelley (1983,139) asserts that “Johnson’s and Nixon’s specific claims of meaningful mandates do not stand up well when confronted by the evidence.” The evidence, according to Kelley’s analysis, was that majorities of voters did not endorse the candidates’ views leading policy questions. Hibbs (1982) challenges the popular view of Reagan’s 1980 victory as conveying a mandate, arguing that Reagan’s defeat was a predictable outcome of the poor performance of the economy under Carter’s watch and did not reflect a shift among the electorate toward conservative policies. Dahl (1990) questions mandate claims as being undemocratic and out of line with the Framers’ conceptualization of the presidency. On the flip side of the debate, Peterson, Grossbeck, Stimson, and Gangl (2003,411) argue that “if politicians act on the perception of a mandate, then in an important sense a mandate has occurred.” Their analysis of congressional voting following the 1964, 1980, and 1994 elections concludes that “Members adjust their behavior, in the direction of the policy message” of the election, indication of a mandate effect (pp. 424-425; see also Grossbeck, Peterson, and Stimson 2007). This is consistent with the observation of Speaker of the House Thomas P. “Tip” O’Neill in 1981. “The record shows there was no mandate”

² “The President’s News Conference,” November 4, 2004. *Public Papers of the President: George W. Bush*.

O'Neill commented. "But Congress thinks there was and it's reacting in that manner." Thus, under the right circumstances, a mandate might be discerned in congressional behavior.³

Studies searching for links between a president's popular vote and subsequent support within the House of Representatives have yielded mixed results at best. Yet a key to understanding the influence of presidential election results on representatives' support of a president's agenda is that legislators interpret the election results differently depending on partisan circumstances. Given the complexity of legislative decision making, it is likely that the effects of election returns on congressmen's choices on roll-call votes vary by political party affiliation and the age of an administration. This analysis probes partisan differences in responses to presidential popular votes as indicators of possible mandate effects.

Congressional Response to Presidential Elections

While the House of Representatives typically responds most favorably to the president's legislative agenda during the first year of an administration, the extent to which this support is a direct result of public support for the president revealed in the election—the result of the president's mandate—is unclear. Research consistently has shown that members of the president's party have higher levels of support for his program and a relationship between ideology and presidential support, for example, conservatives being more supportive of a Republican president's agenda than liberals (Bond and Fleisher 1990; Edwards 1981 and 2009). The relationship between vote for president in a congressional district and the congressman's

³ There is a rich literature on link between presidential approval measured by opinion polls and support within Congress, with a mix of findings: A number of studies identify a connection between a president's public approval rating and support from congressmen on his legislative actions (e.g., Canes-Wrone and De Marchi, 2002; Edwards, 1980; Rivers and Rose 1985; Rohde and Simon 1985) while others find little or no relationship between the two concepts (e.g., Bond and Fleisher 1990; Borrelli and Simmons 1993; Cohen, Bond, Fleisher, and Hamman, 2000; Collier and Sullivan, 1995; Kennedy 2016; Shull and Shaw 2002).

subsequent support of the president's legislative agenda is less clear (e.g., Buck 1972; Edwards 1980; Grose and Middlemass 2010; Martin 1976; Pritchard 1986; Weinbaum and Judd 1970).

A congressman's support for the president's legislative agenda could be the product of three different dynamics.⁴ First, support of the president could be result of shared values and preferences. Norpoth (1976) argues that party *per se* is not an influence on congressmen's decisions but that parties in Congress are comprised of people who share values. Level of cohesion within a political party at the time of Norpoth's analysis, most notably with the Democratic party's southern and northern wings, was principally the product of members entering Congress with sets of policy preferences. This argument is extended easily to presidential-congressional relations. Party is an intervening variable between the congressmen's and president's *a priori* policy preferences and subsequent policy decisions, reflected by presidential positions on issues and congressional roll-call votes. Congressmen vote to support the president's position on roll calls because of shared values and preferences. The strong correlations between presidential support and the predispositional factors of party and ideology found in many studies of executive-legislative interactions reinforce this perspective.

Second, a president can exert influence on representatives, convincing them to support the administration's policy agenda. Neustadt's (1960) theory of presidential power places an emphasis on bargaining, with a president using public prestige and reputation within Washington to leverage members of Congress. There might be limits to a president's influence. Kingdon (1973) concluded from his interviews with congressmen in during the first year of Nixon's presidency that the administration has little influence on representatives while conceding that

⁴ There is a fourth possibility: Rather than outlining his own preferences, a president could structure his agenda to appeal to a majority of representatives—both of his party and of the opposition party—thereby generating higher levels of support. While a president might seek to build support for an agenda by incorporating popular policies, it is assumed that a president will not abandon his own preferences simply for a high “success score.”

members of the president's party are more receptive to his influence than members of the opposition party. In particular, a president might urge congressmen of his party to support the administration out of party loyalty. This mechanism for gaining congressional support also is related to the cartel theory of political parties (Cox and McCubbins 1993), that parties have a stake in advancing a policy agenda. To achieve this success, congressmen of the president's party could be pressured to vote for the administration's proposals in a show of unity with the White House.⁵ Kingdon (1973, 172) quotes a Republican congressman as saying: "As a party matter, this means a great deal to the administration, and it's my administration. If there would be something that I was sure they were wrong on, I'd go against them. But when in doubt, I don't want to see the administration embarrassed." Other Republicans interviewed by Kingdon offered similar rationales for supporting the Nixon administration. A very public example of this dynamic occurred during the first months of the Clinton presidency; Democratic Senator Bob Kerrey offered as a reason for supporting the administration's economic program, which he considered flawed, that "I could not and should not cast a vote that brings down [Clinton's] presidency" (Drew 1994,272). Congressmen might act with the altruistic motive of helping their party's president, or from the practice perspective of self-preservation. As Edwards (1989,36) notes, "Members of the president's party have an incentive to make him look good, because his standing with the public may influence their own chances for reelection."

Third, congressmen can respond to constituency opinion and cast roll-call votes that reflect their interpretations of constituents' preference regarding a president's policy agenda. A clear signal of constituency preferences, at least in the days before ubiquitous public opinion polls, was the vote in the preceding presidential election. Taking election results as a voting cue,

⁵ Covington, Writton, and Kinney (1995) show support or opposition of party leaders to presidential proposals to impact a president's success in the House of Representatives.

representatives might support a president's agenda because of a perception—accurate or not—that the voters were endorsing that president with their ballots. The level of support for a president would be a product of the level of vote in the district. Other things being equal, a representative from a district where the president received a high percentage of the vote might interpret these results as a popular endorsement of the president's platform and, in the role of an instructed delegate, respond by supporting the president's legislative agenda. Or political instincts might lead a congressman to believe the election was not an endorsement of the president but—always conscientious that continued service in the House depends on voter support (Mayhew 1974)—a representative might support the administration's agenda out of fear of voter retaliation in the next election. Either way, the vote in the election influences the representative's decision when needing to vote in the House on the administration's program.

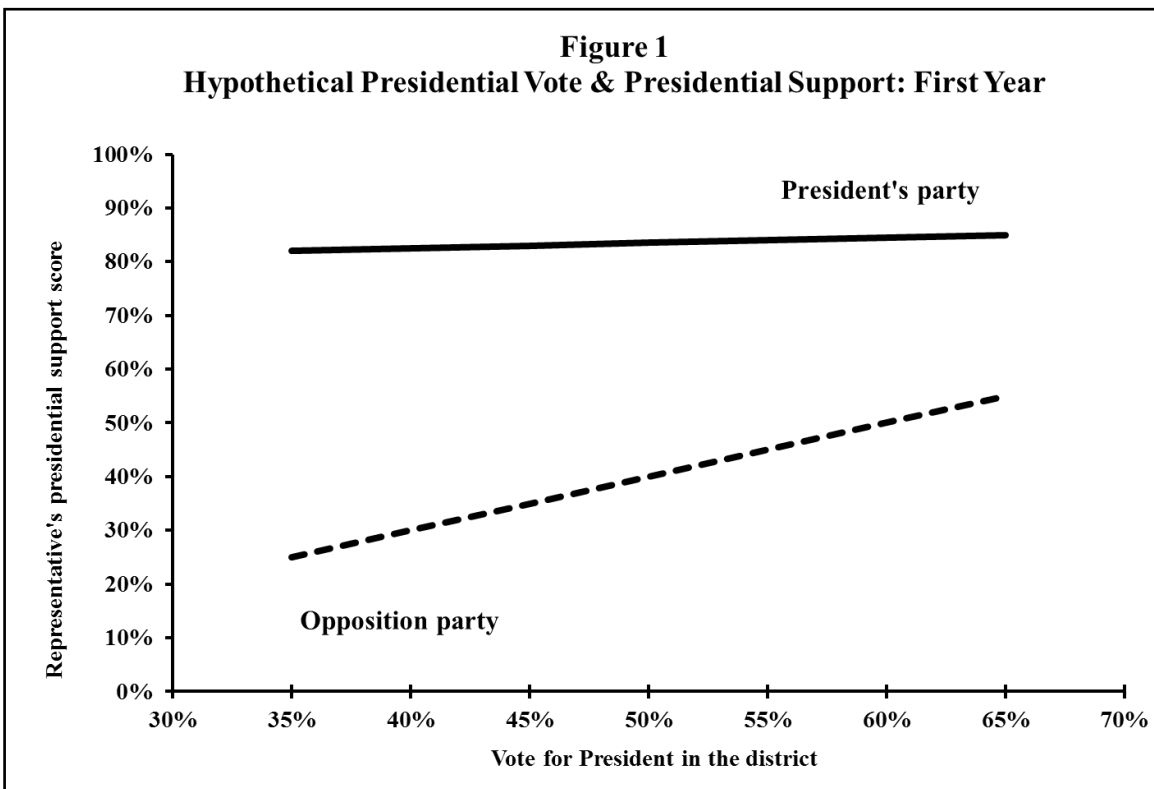
However, it is unlikely that members of the two political parties respond to the president's policy proposals in the same way or for the same reasons. The president's fellow partisans might support his policy initiatives either based on shared values/preferences or because of partisan loyalty, not wanting to appear as opposing their own party's president. Following Kindgon's (1973) perception, these representatives would be susceptible to pressure from the White House, to appeals of party loyalty, and to appeals not to allow the president to fail in efforts to achieve his agenda early in his term; the popular vote in the constituency during the recent election will have little bearing. Opposition party representatives will be immune to pleas of not allowing the administration to fail but are likely to respond to their perceptions of a mandate. If it appears that the voters in the district support the president, the representative will support the president's legislative agenda. Thus, the relationship between election results and presidential support in the House should be conditioned by political party. Evidence of this

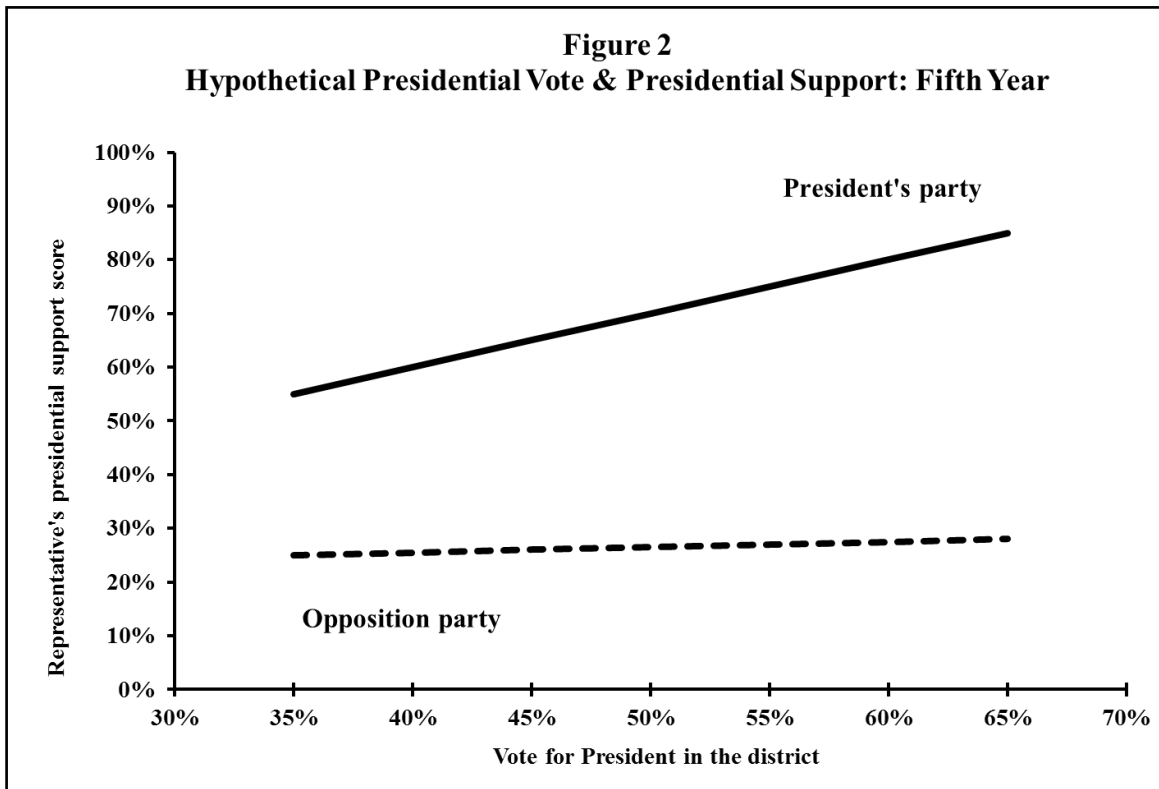
pattern is found by Martin (1976) and Pritchard (1986), who find low correlations between 1968 presidential vote and support of Nixon policies among Republicans and higher correlations between these concepts among Democrats. Similarly, Buck (1972) finds high levels of support for Eisenhower among Republicans with little variation across categories of election outcomes, but greater variation among Democrats across similar categories.

Furthermore, it is unlikely that a reelection bid will generate support from opposition party representatives. A second term president is a lame duck with less ability to pressure or persuade representatives to support his agenda. Thus, the mandate influence is altered. Members of the president's party—with eyes on the upcoming midterm election and the next presidential election—now might respond to the president's agenda based both shared policy preferences and representatives' perceptions of popularity in their districts, which might remain high among those identifying with the party but likely has declined among independents, an important voting bloc. Opposition party representatives now have even less incentive to fear the president and will cast their House votes based more on their own policy preferences than on perceptions of the president's popularity in the district. The typical decline in a president's approval ratings in the fifth and sixth years will likely harden resistance to the administration's agenda.

Thus, the relationship between vote and subsequent support varies by political party and whether the election results are from an initial election or reelection. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship in a president's first year in office. Members of the president's party will be highly supportive of the administration's agenda regardless of popular vote in the district; whether this is the product of shared policy preferences, pressure from the White House and congressional leaders, or a desire to advance the party does not matter. Members of the opposition party,

however, will be attentive to the president's popularity among their constituents, as indicated by the vote the president received in attaining reelection. Four years later the pattern in the relationship reverses (Figure 2). Now presidential party representatives will be watchful of the president's approval in the district, as measured by vote percentage in achieving reelection. As president's approval ratings drop over the course of an administration and drop most precipitously among identifiers with the opposing political party. Congressmen of the opposition party, while not ignoring popular sentiment in the district, will be freer to vote their policy preferences and perceive less of a need to vote with the administration.





This conceptualization of the influence election results in the district has on a representative's subsequent roll-call votes in support of the president's position yields two hypotheses:

- H₁** In the first year of a presidency, there is no relationship between presidential vote in a district and support of the president for representatives of the president's party and a positive relationship between presidential vote in a district and support of the president for representatives of the opposing party.
- H₂** In the fifth year of a presidency, there is a positive relationship between presidential vote in a district and support of the president for representatives of the president's party and no relationship between presidential in a district and support of the president for representatives of the opposing party.

These hypotheses are tested using individual representatives' levels of presidential support in the first and fifth years of administrations of the seven most recent presidents: Richard Nixon (1969, 1973); Jimmy Carter (1977); Ronald Reagan (1981; 1985); George Bush (1989); Bill Clinton (1993, 1997); George W. Bush (2001, 2005); and Barack Obama (2009, 2013).

Methodology

Two models are estimated for assessing the influence of district-level vote on congressmen's roll-call decisions. The first is a base model specified as:

$$Y_{it} = b_0 + b_1P_i + b_2I_{it} + b_3V_{t-1} + e_t \quad (\text{equation 1})$$

The second model is used for testing the hypotheses of condition effects of election results on representatives' subsequent support of a president's legislative agenda is specified as:

$$Y_{it} = b_0 + b_1P_i + b_2I_{it} + b_4VP_{t-1} + b_5VO_{t-1} + e_t \quad (\text{equation 2})$$

where:

Y_{it} is representative i 's support for the president in year t ;

P_i is representative i 's political party affiliation, scored 1 if a member of the president's party and 0 otherwise;

I_{it} is representative i 's ideology for year t , measured as the representative's ADA score adjusted for nonvoting and to align with the president's ideology;

V_{t-1} is the president's vote percentage in the prior election ($t-1$) in a representative's district (equation 1);

VP_{t-1} is the president's vote percentage in the prior election ($t-1$) in districts represented by a member of the president's political party and 0 otherwise (equation 2);

VO_{t-1} is the president's vote percentage in the prior election ($t-1$) in districts represented by a member of the opposing political party and 0 otherwise (equation 2); and e_t is the error term.

Model estimates are generated using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression.

The dependent variable is measured by a variant of Congressional Quarterly's presidential support score. The specific measure is the representative's percentage of agreement with the president in year t on nonunanimous roll-call votes. George C. Edwards III calculates nonunanimous support scores based on roll-call votes on which the winning side received less 80 percent of the vote. This approach, Edwards argues, provides a comprehensive measure of presidential support with fewer distortions than are found in indices based on CQ's overall presidential support scores or CQ's key votes (Edwards 1985).⁶ Members participating in less than two-thirds of roll calls are excluded.

Political party affiliation and ideology are indicators of shared policy preferences or a representative's predisposition to support or oppose a particular president's legislative agenda. These are projected to effect positively representatives' levels of presidential support ($b_1, b_2 > 0$). Following Rudalevige's (2002) lead, Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) scores are used to measure ideology. ADA scores have the advantage of indicating a representative's voting record in a particular year rather than a representative's career, as a representative's own policy positions might shift over a career, especially over a notably long career. ADA scores are adjusted first for nonvoting (ADA's original scores essentially treat absences as voting against its position) and second to align scores with the party of the president. A representative's ADA score adjusted for nonvoting are used for years with a Democratic president, since a high ADA

⁶ These data are available on Edwards' website: www.georgecedwardsiii.com. Professor Edwards is thanked for his generosity in providing the data and absolved of responsibility for the conclusions drawn from the analysis presented herein.

score indicates a liberal voting record. For years with a Republican president, a representative's adjusted ADA score is subtracted from 100. These adjustments produce a measure that allows for hypothesizing a positive relationship between ideology and presidential support.

The variables for testing the hypotheses of conditional effects are the measures of presidential vote. Since members of the president's party and the opposing party are expected to react differently to the cue of the popular vote, it is necessary to measure presidential vote in the district differently by representative's party. The common method of using an interaction term for testing conditional effects is inappropriate in this instance, as the conditional effects are not constant across years of an administration. Instead, separate measures of popular vote in the district for constituencies represented by a member of the president's party and those represented by a member of the opposing party. The hypotheses tested with the regression estimates of equation 2 project that b_4 will not be significantly different from zero and $b_5 > 0$ for the first year of a presidency, and that $b_4 > 0$ and b_5 will not be significantly different from zero in the fifth year of a presidency. The president's actual vote percentage, rather than the president's percentage of the major-party vote, is used on the belief that representatives base their judgments of the electoral backing a president received in the district; how vote percentages of independent and third-party candidates are interpreted will likely vary with the particular election context, the nature of the district, and the party of the representative.⁷ Thus, it is not assumed that a single interpretation was given to the votes of other candidates or that a single rule can be applied here in assessing the effect presidential vote has on congressmen's decisions. Similarly, the president's vote is not measured relative to that of the representative as congressmen are likely to

⁷ Four of the ten elections included in this study involved independent or third-party candidates who received substantial shares of the popular vote: George Wallace, 1968; John Anderson, 1980; and Ross Perot, 1992 and 1996.

assess the president's popularity in the constituency separately from their own popularity, which they understand stems from many factors.

Findings

Table 1 displays the OLS regression estimates for the base model of presidential support (equation 1). The goodness-of-fit measures generally indicate that the model performs well. The regression estimates for 1969 stand out for two reasons: the R^2 value is low and the negative coefficient for ideology indicates liberals being more supportive of the Republican president's agenda. These likely result from a pair of interrelated factors, the small difference in mean presidential support scores of Republicans and Democrats (nine points) and the Nixon not being ideological in domestic legislative programs (Light 1997). On the whole, however, the predispositional factors of political party affiliation and ideology—the control variables in this analysis—exert substantial influences on representatives' roll-call votes across most years of the analysis. However, the effect of presidential vote in the district on subsequent presidential support is inconsistent. In only four of the ten years is this effect statistically significant. This lack of a consistent impact of presidential vote on presidential support corresponds with many prior studies of this relationship.

Table 2 displays the OLS regression estimates for the model of conditional effects on presidential support for the first year of each president's administration. Goodness-of-fit measures of the model and regression estimates of the control variables closely match those of the base model. Of interest here are the regression coefficients for the two measures of popular vote. In four of the five presidencies, our expectations are confirmed: there is no relationship between presidential vote and presidential support in districts held by a member of the

Table 1
Direct Influence of Presidential Vote on Representative's Support

Year	Party	Ideology	Vote	Constant	R ²	N
1969	8.844*** (1.650)	-.038* (.018)	.107* (.061)	42.408 (2.441)	.133	407
1973	17.036*** (1.238)	.368*** (.021)	.075* (.061)	50.279 (3.239)	.870	423
1977	13.938*** (1.460)	.415*** (.028)	-.026 (.047)	25.293 (2.138)	.796	427
1981	9.502*** (1.006)	.520*** (.015)	-.005 (.033)	71.995 (1.997)	.898	429
1985	11.192*** (1.330)	.553*** (.021)	.026 (.036)	64.325 (3.064)	.912	432
1989	7.523*** (1.572)	.493*** (.025)	.027 (.038)	20.138 (1.533)	.899	425
1993	32.161*** (2.444)	.147*** (.034)	.025 (.049)	31.005 (1.813)	.804	431
1997	12.600*** (4.106)	.556*** (.067)	.044 (.076)	13.551 (2.585)	.912	429
2001	2.225 (2.639)	.785*** (.034)	.040 (.032)	86.074 (3.855)	.969	427
2005	.127 (4.532)	.670*** (.054)	.239*** (.048)	74.201 (6.086)	.947	433
2009	29.601*** (5.889)	.537*** (.078)	.061 (.055)	9.227 (1.998)	.956	432
2013	37.044*** (4.615)	.501*** (.065)	.192*** (.056)	-.769 (2.099)	.978	428

***p<.001 **p<.01 *p<.05 †p<.10 (one-tailed tests)

Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.

president's party but there is a positive, statistically significant relationship between presidential vote in the district and representatives' subsequent support for the president in districts held by the opposing political party. Congressmen of the president's party are supportive of the administration regardless of how well the president as a candidate fared in their districts.

Congressmen of the opposition party, on the other hand, are responding in part to the election; the magnitude of change is not tremendous but there is an increase in presidential support associated with increased presidential vote in the district. In all, nine of ten regression coefficients for the presidential vote variables conform to the first hypothesis.

The two exceptions are 1981 and 1989, when the relationship between vote and support for opposition party members is weak and not statistically significant. The uniqueness of the 1980 election outcome—an unexpected, resounding defeat of the incumbent president by a candidate who promoted a clear agenda (tax cuts and a heightened defense establishment to challenge the Soviet Union)—perhaps led some Democratic congressmen to support President Reagan's agenda regardless of the district-level vote. An example of this would be Reagan's tax-cut proposal, supported by Democrats and Republicans alike on the final vote after an effort by House Democratic leaders to advance an abridged version of the president's proposal failed. The 1988 election also was somewhat unique with the incumbent vice president winning the Oval Office for the first time in more than a century; many perceived this as a third Reagan term without Reagan's name being on the ballot. Congressional Republicans perhaps were being supportive in the usual manner for a first-term president while congressional Democrats were responding in the manner anticipated for a reelected president.

Table 2
Effects of Presidential Vote in the District on Representatives' Presidential Support: President's First Year

Variable	Nixon 1969	Carter 1977	Reagan 1981	G. Bush 1989
Political party	14.755** (5.755)	22.101*** (4.167)	15.975*** (6.101)	10.361* (6.101)
Ideology	-.035* (.018)	.414*** (.028)	.520*** (.015)	.494*** (.025)
Presidential vote: Presidential party district	.015 (.104)	-.049 (.048)	-.098 (.051)	-.015 (.107)
Presidential vote: Opposing party district	.144* (.072)	.127* (.067)	.021 (.035)	.035 (.037)
Constant	44.690 (2.909)	18.478 (2.765)	18.825 (1.428)	19.729 (1.442)
R ²	.135	.797	.898	.899
MSE	12.2	9.2	7.1	7.1
F	15.79***	423.52***	1038.65***	1134.10***
N	407	427	429	425
*** p<.001 ** p<.01 * p<.05 (one-tailed tests)				

Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.

Table 2 (continued)
Effects of Presidential Vote in the District on Representatives' Presidential Support: President's First Year

Variable	Clinton 1993	G.W. Bush 2001	Obama 2009
Political party	55.041*** (4.444)	7.205* (3.654)	52.117*** (7.237)
Ideology	.153*** (.034)	.785*** (.034)	.533*** (.077)
Presidential vote: Presidential party district	-.079 (.051)	-.034 (.058)	-.029 (.055)
Presidential vote: Opposing party district	.525*** (.090)	.065* (.034)	.449*** (.103)
Constant	12.496 (3.572)	6.664 (1.135)	-7.359 (3.958)
R ²	.812	.969	.959
MSE	10.0	6.1	7.8
F	502.73***	2719.18***	3573.85***
N	430	427	432
	*** p<.001	** p<.01	* p<.05 (one-tailed tests)

Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.

Table 3
Effects of Presidential Vote in the District on Representatives' Presidential Support: President's Fifth Year

Variable	Nixon 1973	Reagan 1985	Clinton 1997	Bush 2005	Obama 2013
Political party	7.619 (6.373)	-17.798** (6.764)	9.253** (3.26)	22.123*** (5.148)	37.535*** (5.228)
Ideology	.368*** (.021)	.555*** (.018)	.525*** (.021)	.692*** (.047)	.502*** (.063)
Presidential vote: Presidential party district	.198* (.093)	.373*** (.103)	.029 (.082)	-.092 (.063)	.188* (.078)
Presidential vote: Opposing party district	.053 (.036)	-.010 (.029)	.098 (.083)	.342*** (.055)	.200*** (.039)
Constant	14.737 (1.791)	66.493 (2.458)	11.240 (3.115)	2.953 (1.984)	-1.066 (1.496)
R ²	.871	.918	.912	.950	.975
MSE	7.6	6.7	8.6	7.3	6.1
F	989.63***	1664.55***	1837.48***	1893.27***	7333.39***
N	423	432	429	433	428

*** p<.001 ** p<.01 * p<.05 (one-tailed tests)

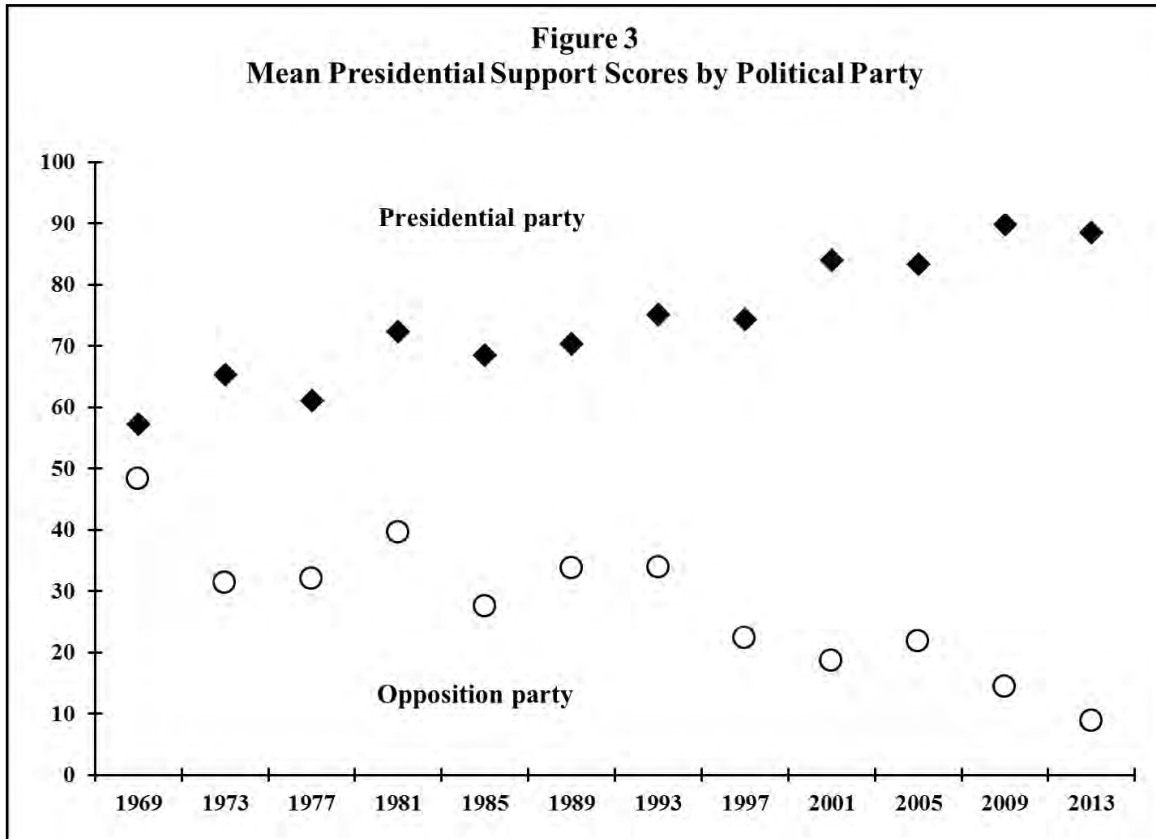
Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.

An interesting facet of Table 2 is that the regression coefficients for vote in presidential-party districts are negative, although not statistically significant, for all years except 1969. An examination of bivariate scatterplots indicates that presidential support increases very slightly with popular vote in the district in the lower and middle ranges of vote percentage, but support levels off at higher ranges of vote percentage. This suggests representatives from districts giving a president the highest vote percentages likely are disappointed that the president does not advance a more ideologically pure agenda. These representatives might oppose some legislation in hopes that a defeat will yield a second bill more to their liking, or they might simply remain true to their values (and judgments of constituent preferences) and vote against moderate legislation.⁸

The regression estimates presented in Table 2 clearly support H_1 but the regression estimates presented in Table 3 provide mixed support the second hypothesis. Six of the ten regression coefficients for the presidential vote variables conform to the second hypothesis, but in only two of the five years examined, Nixon's and Reagan's fifth in office, does the pattern of the regression coefficients reflect the hypothesis of a positive, statistically significant effect of presidential vote for presidential-party representatives and a relationship that is not statistically significant for opposition-party representatives. In Obama's fifth year, the relationship between presidential vote and support among Democrats was as expected, but there was also a positive, statistically relationship between vote and support among Republicans. Neither measure of presidential vote had a statistically significant effect on support for Clinton in 1997, which means only one coefficient is as predicted. For 2005 the pattern of the regression coefficients

⁸ Alternative measurements (the natural log of presidential vote and truncating the presidential vote variables) and specifications (adding a measure of the square of presidential vote to reflect a parabolic relationship) did not alter the substantive conclusions to be drawn from the analysis; thus, the regressions with the original measures and specification are reported.

was opposite of what was predicted for the fifth year of a presidency, demonstrating instead our hypothesized first relationships between presidential vote and subsequent support in the House. The bottom line regarding the regression estimates presented in Table 3 is that H₂ has partial but not full support.



It is important to note that increased polarization within Congress, indicated by the general disappearance of moderates (Fleisher and Bond 2004), is mirrored in support for the incumbent administration by members of the House of Representatives. As seen in Figure 3, mean presidential support scores for the two parties have grown increasingly farther apart. Political parties are now more homogeneous ideologically and party leaders are motivated to present a unified party position on key issues. Nevertheless, Table 2 and 3 provide evidence of

congressmen being responsive to their constituents even in an environment where party loyalty is expected and fostered within the chamber. The voices from back home, expressed in presidential voting, are not silenced.

Conclusion

According to a well-worn cliché, art is in the eye of the beholder. So too, it seems, a presidential mandate is in the eye of the beholding politico. “In the aftermath of an election,” Conley (2001,6) notes, “politicians try to figure out what the outcome signifies.” Presidents have no difficulty reading the election results as endorsements of themselves and their idea, but have an obvious motive in claiming a mandate as a strategy for establishing the contours of debate over policy. Congressmen, on the other hand, find themselves beholding the art but do not have a complete portrait before them. They must provide representation for their constituents in legislative debates and votes while simultaneously positioning themselves for another election in less than two years. “If they make inaccurate inferences about the public and pursue these claims through their legislative agendas, they will be punished at the polls in the future,” Conley notes (2001,6). “They never have perfect information about voters, and yet they must decide on a policy agenda.” In the absence of perfect information, congressmen look to the information that is available. Election returns are among the most visible signs of constituent preferences, imperfect as they might be.

An element of discussion about responses to mandates must be to identify the particular component of election returns congressmen are looking to for understanding the voters’ message. For congressmen of the president’s party, the simple fact that their party’s candidate prevailed could be the most important piece of information needed: The voters told us they want our

party's leader to be driving the policy agenda; therefore, we will support the administration's legislative proposals in the first year without parsing vote percentages among candidates. On the other side of the aisle, election returns will serve as an indicator of constituent preferences to be weighed with other factors, including members' own policy preferences. The fifth year of an administration brings a different calculus: Presidential party congressmen now consider the popularity in the district of an incumbent whose overall approval ratings have likely declined despite winning reelection. Opposition party congressmen now give less weight to election results knowing that their fellow partisans in the constituency were likely to first to lose confidence in the incumbent.

Efforts to uncover evidence of presidential mandates typically limit their analyses to a few elections that might be classified as "landslides" with one candidate winning by substantial margins; the elections of 1936, 1964, 1972, and 1980 commonly are examined based on such criteria (e.g., Weinbaum and Judd 1970; Kelley 1983; Peterson et al. 2003; Grossback, Peterson, and Stimson 2007). But there is no reason to believe that congressmen look to election results for cues of constituent preferences only following landslide elections. Congressmen must stand before the electorate again in two years, regardless of whether the incumbent president won by a landslide or by a razor-thin margin. Our exploration of how district-level presidential vote affects levels of support among U.S. representatives on roll-call votes shows substantial evidence for the proposition that congressmen react to election returns based on party affiliation and age of the administration, and that these effects are not limited to landslide elections. Measuring presidential vote separately by party of the representative produced twelve tests of our hypotheses linking presidential vote and support for representatives of each party. The regression estimates confirmed our projections regarding presidential party congressmen in ten

of twelve years and confirmed our projections regarding opposition party congressmen in eight of twelve years. Although not perfect, a combined rate of projection accuracy of seventy-five percent is nonetheless impressive.

Many factors contribute to creating a president's legislative agenda (Light 1997; Gelman, Wilkenfeld, and Adler 2015; Rudalevige 2002). Similarly, many factors contribute to a congressman's decision to support or oppose a presidential proposal with pressure from the administration only influencing the decision under select circumstances. Grossback, Peterson, and Stimson (2005,418) observe that "Instead of capitulating to a powerful president, Congress reflects what it believes are the preferences of the electorate." Congressmen's predispositions, reflected by party affiliation and ideology, undoubtedly dominate decision making. But the role election returns plays as cue cannot be overlooked. The evidence presented here suggests that congressmen respond in a manner consistent with the concept of a presidential mandate but that responses are conditioned by political party and age of the administration.

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