



# Foreign Policy Votes and Presidential Support in Congress

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This paper explores the role of foreign policy votes on presidential support in Congress. We postulate that a selection effect is inherent in this topic. Failing to consider that certain factors will influence whether a president takes a position on an issue in the first place can yield misleading results. For instance, presidents might not take positions during lame duck years or when their popularity is low. They might be more willing to take positions on international votes, votes requiring super majorities, or those that take place during a honeymoon period. In turn, this decision regarding position-taking can bias the outcome. We also capture the relationship between Congress and public opinion in our models as it is important to consider that the Congress is listening to its constituents as well. If the public identifies international problems as the most important to the nation, Congress might be more willing to vote in favor of the president on international votes. Testing key vote data from 1953 to 2003 for each chamber, we show that presidents are more likely to take positions if the vote is international, if the public identifies the “most important problems” as international ones, and if the vote requires a super majority for passage. They are less likely to take positions if they are up for reelection and are lame ducks. In turn, international votes, the percentage of the public identifying international problems as the most important, and the size of the president’s majority have positive effects on presidential support. These findings are obscured if selection is not taken into account.

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In their annual study of “presidential success” in Congress, *Congressional Quarterly* concluded that President Barack Obama was victorious 96.7 percent of the time he took a clear position on a bill that was voted on by the US Senate (his score in the House of Representatives was 94.4 percent). The magazine called this “a new record...for getting Congress to vote his way” (Beckwith 2010), besting the previous high mark, set by Lyndon Johnson in 1965, by nearly four percentage points.

Sarah Binder (2010), commenting on the *Congressional Quarterly* study, draws a compelling conclusion about how Obama could be so successful, “especially in light of the prevailing news coverage depicting numerous hard fought legislative battles.” She states that

“... Obama’s record breaking success rate was due in large part to his strategic selection of votes on which to take a public position. It seems clear that Obama chose relatively few votes on which to take a position (though generally speaking recent presidents have similarly avoided taking positions). Assuming that the president’s staff limited those votes to those on which he had the best chance of winning, it is not surprising that Obama fared so well.”

Binder’s observation suggests an interesting question: Are presidents strategic in their foreign and domestic policy position-taking? Further, under what conditions do presidents decide to give their backing to some proposals that go to the House and Senate floor, while choosing to stay on the sidelines on other matters? And, ultimately, how does the president’s decision to take or not to take a position affect the level of congressional support that he enjoys?

The focus of this paper is the link between presidential position-taking and the congressional support a president receives for his preferred positions, with a particular focus on the international arena. We argue that many of the same factors that affect levels of presidential support in the House and Senate also play a role in whether the president decides to take a position on a measure in the first place. In addition, we contend that since a president may be strategic about throwing his weight behind certain bills in Congress, that possibility must factor into any properly specified model of a president’s legislative success. Indeed, we maintain that the failure to do so has clouded many attempts to measure support and success, and to get at the roots of how presidents exercise, as Neustadt (1990) famously wrote, their “power to persuade” Congress.

### **The Potential Influence of Selection Effects on Presidential Position-Taking in Congress**

Students of the American presidency have long sought to understand what drives a president’s legislative success and failure in Congress. Accordingly, there is a voluminous literature that probes the multiple factors that purportedly influence each president’s “batting average” at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue. Among the variables that have been employed in this line of research are character and personality (Barber 1977); job approval ratings (Rivers and Rose 1985); and ideological polarization between the president and congressional majorities (Binder 1999; Rudalevige 2002; Marshall and Pacelle 2005). Still other scholars note that legislative success is largely limited or bolstered by the numerical strength of the president’s party in Congress (Bond and Fleisher 1990; Shull and Shaw 2004), and his role as party leader may only allow him to influence Congress “at the margins” (Edwards 1989).

The independent variables used in most quantitative studies of presidential success tend to center around the political and/or legislative environment in which the president must operate as he performs his governmental duties (for example, his job approval rating, the partisan composition of Congress). These are unquestionably important variables. However, one potentially important factor that has largely gone unexamined is the degree to which the president chooses to be selective about which legislative issues he chooses to take positions on.

Kernell (2007) shows that presidents will purposefully attempt to bring public pressure to bear on recalcitrant legislators by “going public.” Cameron and Park (2008) conclude that presidents more actively submit their own policy agenda items to Congress during periods of unified government, anticipating that such items are more likely to be enacted under these favorable circumstances. Finally, Barrett and Eshbaugh-Soha (2007) demonstrate that presidents will make concessions to Congress in order to increase the probability that bills will successfully pass with at least some content the president wants. There is clear evidence that such strategic activity by presidents is not uncommon and is part of their legislative dance with the House and Senate.

There are, to be sure, a number of reasons a president might decide to take a position on a given issue. Bond and Fleisher (2000) and Edwards (1989), for example, have shown that the larger the margin of the president’s party in Congress, the more assertive the president will be in taking a public stand on an initiative. Marshall and Prins (2007) make the case that presidents often take positions on legislation in order to “claim credit” for popular and successful initiatives. Thus, they theorize that presidents will be especially likely to take positions when they believe they have a good chance of being on the winning side (see also Covington, Mark Wrighton, and Kinney 1995; and Shull and Shaw 2004).

Nevertheless, not all position-taking is motivated by the desire of presidents to build a reputation for winning, credit-claiming, or demonstrating power and influence. They may take positions in order to prove to the public that they are on the “right side” of an issue, and not because they expect to see a given measure pass (Marshall and Prins 2007). Moreover, Peterson (1990) and Edwards and Wayne (2010) find that presidents will, on occasion, take principled positions on issues that run contrary to public opinion and the attitudes of a majority of members of Congress. This type of position-taking would clearly drive a president’s measured level of support in Congress downward, and must be accounted for.

In the end, we know that presidents do not take official positions on *all* legislation that comes before the House and Senate. Instead, they pick and choose which initiatives to throw their weight behind. This is not a vision of an executive helplessly buffeted by the political and institutional conditions at hand in Congress or in the country at large. Instead, it is a president charting his own course and deciding either to commit his name (and perhaps his time and political capital) to an issue, or letting the opportunity pass. In particular, little of the quantitative presidency literature attempts to account for those occasions in which the chief executive chooses to stay above the political fray in Congress (Marshall and Prins (2007) are an exception). Thus, we believe that a more nuanced interpretation of presidential position-taking is warranted.

If a president is strategic in deciding whether to take stands on initiatives in the House or Senate, the decisions he makes will, by definition, have an impact on his congressional “batting average.” It is important, therefore, for students of executive-legislative relations to deal theoretically and empirically with those choices and factor them into any properly specified model of legislative support for the president’s program. This can be most effectively accomplished through the use of a more fully specified *selection effects model* that acknowledges that variables that determine whether a president chooses to take positions on legislation may also affect the level of support he gets in favor of his positions. Indeed, if these selection effects exist and are not accounted for, they may potentially bias the outcome of any empirical analysis of presidential support in the House and Senate.

**Factors Influencing Presidential Position-Taking and Support in Congress***Public Approval and Presidential Support*

The effect of the president's public approval on his legislative support in Congress has been hotly debated over the years. Presidency scholars often include measures of job approval in their quantitative analyses of presidential support, albeit with mixed results. Some scholars argue that a president's popularity has little or no effect on whether his position on a bill carries the day (Edwards 1989; Bond and Fleisher 1990; Covington et al. 1995), while another group seems certain that job approval significantly influences members of Congress (Rivers and Rose 1985; Brace and Hinckley 1992; Rudalevige 2002).<sup>1</sup>

But there is, of course, an additional factor that may be at work here. Not only might the president's job approval rating affect Congress's willingness to support his policy position, but it might also influence his strategic decision of whether or not to take a position in the first place. That is, popular presidents may simply take more public stands on pending legislation than unpopular ones, reasoning that Congress will be more likely to bend to their will when they hold the confidence of the electorate. Thus, we will explore whether presidents are most aggressive in their position-taking when their approval ratings are most favorable. We will specify this variable for both houses of Congress in each of our selection effects equations.

However, we will go beyond simple measurements of a president's core popularity as the prime indicator of the strength of his policy positions with the American public. We will also test the impact of one aspect of public opinion that has not been studied extensively in connection with a president's policy success in Congress. It involves public assessments of *general issue areas* that look to be the most salient to voters at any given point in time. Neustadt (1990) hints, and Hutchings (1998) finds, that members of Congress are more reactive to the views of constituents on issues that are salient to the public, especially when the president has taken a clear stance (see also Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002).

We argue that, in many cases, the particular salience of foreign affairs issues should bolster the relationship between public opinion and the activities of members of Congress in that area (Burgin 1993). It is, after all, generally the case that such issues rise to the top of the public's agenda during unusual and visible circumstances, such as wars and international crises. In one specific anecdote, Burgin (1993) relates a story about a member of Congress who voted against aid to Nicaraguan Contras because his constituency was so firmly opposed to it. He did this despite the fact that he supported the aid, but felt it was too salient and controversial to his constituents to risk ignoring their views.

When examining the effect of public opinion on a president's legislative support in Congress, we will consider two broad categories—international and domestic issues. On international issues, some scholars find that pressure from the public has little effect on the votes of members (Fleisher 1985). This perspective appears to be buttressed by data that indicate that the American public does not generally pay much attention to foreign affairs (Page and Shapiro 1992).<sup>2</sup> Others, however, are certain that constituency influence is vital to determining member's votes on foreign affairs (Bartels 1991; Overby 1991), and

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<sup>1</sup> Canes-Wrone and de Marchi (2002) take an intermediate position on this issue stating that presidential popularity only has a statistically significant effect on a president's success in the House when the legislation is complex and salient to the public.

<sup>2</sup> Burgin (1993) maintains that broad knowledge among the public about foreign affairs and defense issues is not a prerequisite for constituents to influence the positions of their representatives. Instead, only a representative's *perception* of what constituents know is necessary to influence where they fall on an issue.

specific examples of public influence on foreign affairs votes abound in the literature.<sup>3</sup>

In this research, we will assess the influence of issue salience on a president's position-taking and legislative support in Congress using a data set assembled by Feeley, Jones, and Larsen (2001) from data compiled by the Gallup Organization. These data measure the percentage of the American public identifying either international (MIP-I) or domestic (MIP-D) issues as the most important problems confronting the United States in any individual year.<sup>4</sup> We anticipate that the president will be more successful in gaining the cooperation of members of Congress on specific issue positions when the public is focused more intently on the general policy area at hand (international or domestic). More specifically, we will use these data to indirectly explore a supposition proffered by Canes-Wrone, Howell, and Lewis (2008) that when foreign policy issues are supreme on the national agenda, presidents will reach more of their foreign policy goals—in this case, moving closer to achieving their *legislative* goals in foreign policy.

Furthermore, with modern presidents being such active consumers of public opinion information, we expect that they will be more likely to take positions on votes where the public has shown the greatest interest or concern about an issue (Schorr 1991). They do this hoping that public pressure on Congress can be maximized under such conditions. Thus, not only will presidents be more successful in Congress when an issue has generated strong public interest, they will also be more likely to take a stand on legislation involving that issue.

#### *Supporting the President in International and Domestic Policy*

The hypothesized contrast in congressional support for presidents between international and domestic issues has been part of a long-simmering debate among scholars concerning the utility of Aaron Wildavsky's "two presidencies" thesis. In the thesis, Wildavsky (1966) concludes that presidents find more legislative success in the international realm than in the domestic arena due to the significant constitutional and institutional advantages they have over Congress in international affairs (for example., being commander-in-chief of the military, having control over diplomatic and intelligence bureaucracies).<sup>5</sup>

Wildavsky's core argument, however, has been slowly chipped away over time. Critiques of the thesis have been fairly comprehensive, involving such issues as the time frame of his study (LeLoup and Shull 1979), the selection of relevant cases (Sigelman 1979), and the lower levels of purported bipartisanship found on issues of foreign policy as opposed to domestic policy (Fleisher, Bond, Hanna, and Krutz 2000). Others have limited the scope of his thesis to Republican presidents (Zeidenstein 1981; Fleisher and Bond 1988) or have concluded that any difference between a president's success in foreign policy and domestic

<sup>3</sup> Edwards (2008) highlighted the case of Ronald Reagan riding a strong wave of favorable public opinion toward him and his policy plans to get Congress to pass a large increase in defense spending early in his first term. Burgin (1993) discovered that significant numbers of members of Congress cited constituency influence as important to their Persian Gulf War votes. (Note: The president was cited slightly more as an influence on their votes.)

<sup>4</sup> This data are slightly different from data used by Canes-Wrone (2001) to assess issue salience. In that research, Gallup's "Most Important Problem" survey asks respondents to name the individual domestic or foreign policy issue that is most important to them at that time. The Feely, Jones, and Larsen data measure the importance of domestic and international issues as dichotomous general categories and not specific issues within those categories.

<sup>5</sup> A recent example of this is the notable success that George W. Bush had pushing through initiatives regarding Afghanistan, Iraq and terrorism while having difficulty getting Congress to fall in line with his domestic agenda (Edwards and Wayne 2010). However, Bush faced an emboldened Democratic majority after the 2006 elections and Iraq became the centerpiece of numerous Democratic objections to his use of his commander-in-chief powers (Mycroft and Pika 2007).

policy has effectively vanished (Schraufnagel and Shellman 2001). Notwithstanding recent evidence that foreign policy proposals backed by the president have a better chance of successfully passing Congress than domestic ones (Rudalevige 2002), the two presidencies thesis, as measured in terms of the president's legislative "batting average," has largely fallen out of favor among scholars of American politics.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, the work of Rudalevige (2002) and others provides some evidence that something of a two presidencies effect, though not as strong as Wildavsky believed, may still operate in the presidential-congressional relationship. We would suggest that such an effect, if it exists, will be more effectively teased out by our selection effects model. Hence, we assume in this research that, *ceteris paribus*, presidents will be more likely to take positions on international affairs than on domestic matters, and that they will find more support in Congress in the international realm.

As Wildavsky (1966) explains, each president exercises his unique constitutional roles in foreign and defense policy through such events as negotiating treaties and sending soldiers into battle. He also has an impressive array of formal and informal powers that give him enormous advantages over Congress in foreign policy, such as the veto, the ability to act secretly, and easy access to the media to set the terms of debate (Lindsay 1993). While Congress has attempted to reassert its influence on foreign policymaking through new processes like the War Powers Act of 1973, it has difficulty competing with executive branch bureaucracies that have well-developed expertise and superior access and control over information (Ripley and Lindsay 1993; Cameron and Park 2008). Shull and Shaw (2004) even argue that the increasing size of the executive branch facilitates presidential position-taking, and echoing Peterson (1990), influences relations between Congress and the president. They maintain that a larger staff puts more policy expertise in the hands of the White House and enables a president to entertain a broader agenda.<sup>7</sup> There can be little doubt that the national defense bureaucracy has grown exponentially in the years since World War II.

It certainly helps the president that the public sees him as the leader in foreign and defense policy (Ripley and Lindsay 1993). Sinclair (1993) maintains that the president has "special standing" with the American people in this policy domain. Congress, too, often views the president as the prevailing actor in directing the country's foreign policy, and he receives a certain level of deference from its members (Lindsay and Ripley 1993; Cameron and Park 2008).

Members of Congress have a number of good reasons for giving the president a freer hand in foreign policy and are likely to delegate foreign policy making discretion to him (Canes-Wrone et al. 2008). From a policy perspective, members may not want to undercut a president's negotiating position or their country's diplomatic relations with another nation (Lindsay and Ripley 1993).<sup>8</sup> For reasons of electoral self-preservation, members might also defer to the president in order

<sup>6</sup> Yet, some scholars have sought evidence of the "two presidencies" thesis beyond roll-call votes. Marshall and Pacelle (2005) claim that the thesis is alive and well, demonstrating that the strategies of presidents in issuing executive orders differ a great deal between the areas of foreign and domestic policy. Also eschewing the use of roll-call votes, Canes-Wrone et al. (2008) argue that presidents have much more influence over budget appropriations and the creation of administrative agencies in the foreign affairs realm than they do in the domestic policy arena. Lastly, in the deliberations of the Supreme Court, Yates and Whitford (1998) conclude that the justices are more likely to side with presidents on matters of foreign policy than domestic policy.

<sup>7</sup> Shull and Shaw (2004) further assert that the president does not "consciously think about the size of the federal government when deciding to take a position, but that as an institutional constraint, it has factored into presidential actions without even being noticed." (p. 600)

<sup>8</sup> Ripley and Lindsay (1993) presume that a few senators would have changed their votes in 1991 to allow George H.W. Bush the authorization to commit forces to Operation Desert Storm in Iraq if that became necessary to prevent the president from losing that crucial vote.

to avoid positions that would open them up to criticism, especially at times of international crisis (Lindsay and Ripley 1993). In fact, fighting the president on foreign policy issues can be so politically damaging for opposition party leaders and rank-and-file members (possibly even viewed as unpatriotic) that bipartisan agreement on foreign affairs issues is more common than conflict (Sinclair 1993).<sup>9</sup>

The level of congressional deference given to the president does not change much with the mode of foreign policy activity being exercised. Most legislators agree that the president is primarily responsible for diplomatic matters and that successful diplomacy only comes about through strong presidential leadership (Lindsay 1993). The same is true for US trade policy. While O'Halloran (1993) contends that Congress has some sway over trade policy, Destler (1986) alleges that it has little desire to bring its influence to bear on the president in trade matters.

With all of the public and congressional expectations on the president to be at the forefront of American foreign policy, it is not unreasonable to expect that presidents will take the lead and more aggressively adopt positions on foreign affairs legislation. This would be especially true in contemporary times if, as Sullivan (1991) states, Democratic and Republican presidents have been equally successful with their foreign policy proposals in Congress, but somewhat less successful with domestic ones. So, it is indeed possible that selection effects will show up most strongly in matters of international affairs.

#### *Other Factors Influencing Presidential Position-Taking and Congressional Support*

There are other independent variables in the presidency literature that may have an effect on presidential position-taking and congressional support. Some involve the role of timing. For example, scholars and political professionals have assumed that each new president enters office with a reservoir of goodwill known as a "honeymoon" (Light 1991). Newly elected presidents regularly claim a popular mandate after an election, and there is evidence that members of Congress do, in fact, defer to presidents in their initial months in office (Lockerbie, Borrilli, and Hedger 1998; Canes-Wrone and de Marchi 2002; Beckmann and Godfrey 2007). Yet, not all presidents find their "honeymoons" to be triumphant ones, at least in legislative terms (Bond and Fleisher 1990).

While there is some disagreement over the degree to which the president can use his honeymoon period to achieve greater congressional support in Congress, it is often presumed that new presidents are, nevertheless, better off being proactive in position-taking during their initial months in office. Light (1991) and Edwards and Wayne (2010) advise presidents to take advantage of any positive feelings members of Congress and the public have for them early in their first terms by swiftly pushing forward their primary legislative proposals during this period.

In addition to the honeymoon period, there are other variables linked to the electoral calendar that may play a role in presidential position-taking and support in Congress. A lame duck president, for instance, who is in the last two years of his second term in office and no longer able to run for reelection, may be less willing and less able to champion his legislative agenda (Light 1991; Grossman, Kumar, and Rourke 1998). As members of both parties coalesce around the next set of presidential candidates (typically including members of

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<sup>9</sup> Sinclair (1993) highlights one interesting example from the Vietnam era. Under the premise of allowing President Nixon to rightly exercise his institution's necessary supremacy over foreign policy, Democratic leaders blocked legislative efforts by their own rank-and-file members to scale back war efforts in Vietnam arguing that the president should have some leeway in charting the country's course on this policy.

Congress), the incumbent becomes increasingly irrelevant to the political landscape, particularly in domestic affairs. During such a period, sitting presidents may feel the need to hoard whatever remaining political capital they possess by taking stands on fewer issues than before.

Scholars have also probed the effect of reelection campaigns on presidential position-taking and legislative support in Congress. Edwards (1989) indicates that presidents avoid taking positions on controversial issues during a reelection campaign year. Lockerbie et al. (1998) attribute the lack of position-taking and success in this pre-election period to presidents and members of Congress trying to avoid two situations: collaborating on policies they could be blamed for later and teaming up on popular initiatives that would provide their opponents too much credit if they are passed as the election approaches. Inevitably, presidents are the focus of intense scrutiny during their reelection campaigns and this should be a time they are reluctant to take positions that might damage their electoral prospects.

Presidents must also work with Congress within its institutional rules, and that may shape their support and position-taking in the House and Senate on various issues. For example, a small number of votes require a “super majority” for passage in Congress. The types of issues that demand a *two-thirds* super majority vote during the time period of this study include Senate “advice and consent” on treaties negotiated and agreed to by the president, cloture votes to end Senate filibusters (up until 1975), House and Senate votes to propose constitutional amendments, presidential veto overrides in both houses,<sup>10</sup> passage of House bills under suspension of the rules, and Senate votes to remove President Clinton from office in 1999 (after the House passed two articles of impeachment through a simple majority vote). In addition, there are two procedural issues among the votes of this period that required a *three-fifths* majority (60 votes) in the Senate: cloture votes to end a filibuster in the Senate (post-1975) and votes to waive spending limit provisions of the Budget Act of 1974. In all of the above cases, with a higher vote threshold to achieve, we would expect the president to be *less* successful in shifting members of Congress toward his stated position.

Likewise, the institutional rules of Congress may change a president’s willingness to take positions on various issues. On votes in the House and Senate that require a “super majority,” we expect presidents to be *more* prone to expressing a position. This would certainly be true for many of the specific—and highly salient—matters we have identified in our data for which a super majority is necessary—Senate “advice and consent” on treaties, veto overrides, and constitutional amendments being proposed by Congress (and, obviously, President Clinton had a clearly stated stand on whether the Senate should remove him from office). While we cannot predict a president’s position on the more procedural super majority votes in Congress (for example, “suspension of the rules” in the House, and waiving Budget Act spending limits), we venture that the president is more likely to have a known position on super majority votes generally than not to have one.

Finally, in the international relations literature, Stoll (1987) observes that “rally effects” associated with uses of force can result in increased legislative support and victories in Congress. Lian and Oneal (1993) and Meernik and Waterman (1996) disagree. Since public approval for the president can, in the short run, increase as a result of various international crises (Mueller 1973), we believe that members of Congress will follow the lead of the public and lend their support more consistently to the president’s positions on issues in Congress following uses of force the president deems necessary.

<sup>10</sup> Canes-Wrone and de Marchi (2002) find that veto override votes (where a supermajority vote is required) are statistically significant factors in explaining a president’s legislative success in Congress.

From this discussion of selection effects and support for the president's positions on issues in Congress, we derive three hypotheses. The first two deal specifically with a president's decision to take or not take a position on a specific piece of legislation:

**Hypothesis 1:** *Presidents are more likely to take positions on key votes when their prospects for achieving higher levels of support in Congress are most favorable (for example, when their approval ratings are high, when the public is more concerned about international matters than domestic ones, during their "honeymoon" period, and on many votes requiring a super-majority).*

**Hypothesis 2:** *Due to the perceived policy and institutional advantages presidents have in international affairs, and the expectations and willingness of the public and Congress to defer to presidents on international issues, presidents are more likely to take positions on international key votes than on domestic ones.*

One important aspect of this paper is an attempt to more definitively capture the relationship between Congress and public opinion. An important segment of the presidency literature focuses on the potential of the president to influence votes of members of Congress. Yet, it is important to recognize that members of Congress listen to *the public* at least as much as they listen to the president. The response of a member of Congress to presidential lobbying and arm-twisting may depend on their assessment of the public's specific interests and concerns. Therefore, if voters identify international problems as the most pressing issues facing the country at a given point in time, Congress might be more willing to defer to the president on matters of foreign affairs. Moreover, for the reasons noted above, congressional support for the president's position should be greater when international issues are salient (often during a crisis or war) than when domestic issues are more salient. It is with this outlook in mind that a third hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 3:** *Once selection effects and public opinion on international affairs are accounted for, presidents should receive more support on international key votes than on domestic ones.*

Overall, our study of the impact of selection effects on presidential position-taking and support in Congress will make three important contributions. First, we provide a longer time horizon than many studies in this area, covering the period from 1953 to 2003. Second, we consider the possibility that selection effects help to govern the behavior of a president in his legislative relationship with Congress. And third, we attempt to more fully measure the effect of public opinion on congressional support for the president's positions on key issues in international and domestic affairs. Much of the research on presidential success in Congress models the president's personal popularity as a key source of influence in the House and Senate. The model presented here accounts for more than just this single dimension of public opinion. We are particularly interested in the effect of general issue salience ("most important problem") as both a determinant of whether a president takes a legislative position on a key international or domestic vote facing Congress and whether this salience has an impact on Congress' support for the president's position on that issue.

In the next section, we outline our research design. Following that, we provide results from our selection effects models. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the results in light of our expectations.

## Research Design

### *Observations*

The observations here are House and Senate international and domestic key votes from 1953 through 2003 as identified by Congressional Quarterly, Inc. (CQ). Every year, CQ selects roughly ten to eighteen votes each in the House and Senate that they believe reflect major issues before Congress and the president. These key votes are reported in a year-end CQ summary publication called *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*. Each key vote entry details whether the president has taken a position (positive or negative) on that specific vote and the results of the vote for or against the president's stated position.

CQ key votes have often been used as a unit of analysis in presidency research (for example, Sigelman 1979; Zeidenstein 1981; Fleisher and Bond 1988; Edwards 1989; Schraufnagel and Shellman 2001). In its definition of "key votes," CQ states that each roll-call vote meets one or more of the following tests: "a matter of major controversy," "a test of presidential or political power," and/or "a decision of potentially great impact on the nation and lives of Americans" (CQ Almanac 2007: C3). While all data are imperfect, Fleisher, Bond, and Wood (2008) insist that using CQ key votes as the unit of analysis isolates issues that are likely to be considered of vital interest to both the president and members of Congress. Schraufnagel and Shellman (2001: 700) concur, declaring that the use of CQ key votes is appropriate for "defining matters of substance" and "remov(ing) trivial or purely procedural roll call votes from consideration." This would not be the case with data sets that account for all floor votes in the House and Senate. Shull and Shaw (2004) rightly point out that using all floor votes can complicate vote analysis in Congress since multiple votes are often connected to just one piece of legislation.<sup>11</sup>

### *Method*

Selection effects occur when unobserved factors introduce systematic bias into a sample. For example, DeRouen (2003) used selection models in his study of United Nations effectiveness. There is a potential for selection bias if the UN systematically only intervenes in difficult cases. Not taking this selection bias into account could understate the true success of the UN. In the present context, we must be aware that the president could be systematically more likely to take positions on international votes because it is easier to garner support on these issues. Not controlling for selection could actually overstate the ability of the president to garner support on key votes. We hypothesize that the president should be more inclined to get involved under conditions that typically foster higher levels of support in Congress, such as during the "honeymoon period". In addition, as explained earlier, presidents may be more likely to take positions on votes relating to international matters than votes involving domestic issues.

A two-stage Heckman process provides consistent estimates by modeling the selection and outcome equations jointly (Blanton 2000, 127). We employ Heckman models with a selection equation specified with a dichotomous variable coded as "1" if the president took a position on the vote, and zero otherwise. In the outcome equation, the dependent variable is the percentage of the vote in the chamber in support of the president's stated position.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> In fact, Shull and Shaw (2004) chose not to include the Senate in their analysis since using all Senate votes would require them to include votes on non-germane amendments that have no relevance to the legislation to which they are attached.

<sup>12</sup> We also used a bivariate probit with the outcome equation dependent variable coded as one for victory (president wins) or zero for a loss. The main findings are robust to this alternate specification.

The Heckman output generates a Wald statistic indicating whether this type of model is appropriate and whether factors that increase the likelihood of position-taking increase or decrease the percentage of votes in support of the president.

The specific variables used in our models are discussed below. Because we are assuming that presidential position-taking and congressional support for the president's position on a key vote share some of the same key determinants, it should be noted that the selection and outcome equations have a fair amount of overlap. In pointing out the pitfalls inherent in Heckman modeling, Sartori (2003) observes that such similarity in the two equations is acceptable if the two-step process is close together temporally and the decisions/goals are linked. It is not a problem to fulfill these conditions in the present study. Position-taking on key votes and the subsequent vote in Congress typically occur in close proximity. Further, the decision to take a position would ordinarily be based on the president believing that his position will affect the outcome of the vote.

#### *Dependent Variables*

##### **Presidential Position-Taking**

As noted above, the dependent variable in the selection equations is presidential position-taking. It is coded as "1" if the president took a position on a CQ key vote in the House or Senate from 1953 to 2003, and "0" otherwise. These data have been culled from yearly editions of *CQ Almanac*.

##### **Presidential Support in the US House or Senate**

The dependent variable in the outcome equations is presidential support. It is measured as the percentage of votes in favor of the president's stated position on an individual international or domestic key vote in either the House or Senate (see Bond and Fleisher 1984; Edwards 1986; Schraufnagel and Shellman 2001). These data are also derived from the yearly *CQ Almanac*.

#### *Independent Variables – Variables of Primary Interest*

Unless otherwise noted, each of the independent variables is specified in both the selection and outcome equations.

##### **Public Approval of the President**

The presidential approval data for this study come from Gallup polls taken from 1953 through 2003. The data are assembled from several sources: Edwards with Gallup (1990), *The Gallup Poll Monthly* reports, and Gallup data from *PollingReport.com*. The combination of these three sources enables us to double-check the accuracy of presidential approval data between sources as well as fill a few gaps in the data that were discovered while organizing the data set.

##### **“Most Important Problem”**

As described before, we use data compiled by Feeley et al. (2001) to create two indicators: one measures the proportion of Americans naming international issues as most important (MIP-I), while the other provides the same information for domestic issues (MIP-D).

### **International Votes**

Based on the descriptions of each key vote from *CQ Almanac*, a dichotomous variable is coded as “1” if the key vote in question relates to an international issue, and “0” otherwise. Here is a sampling of “international” votes: foreign aid, defense spending, Vietnam, the United Nations, refugee issues, and international trade.<sup>13</sup> If the vote is strictly procedural, it is not considered international (for example, votes on House or Senate rules).

#### *Independent Variables – Control Variables*

### **Honeymoon Period**

The duration of the honeymoon period is something that is marginally contested among scholars. In this research, we code the honeymoon variable as “1” if a vote is taken in the first six months of a new president’s term in office (Peterson, Grossback, Stimson, and Gangl 2003).

### **“Lame Duck” Year of a Presidency**

The lame duck variable in this analysis is coded as “1” if a vote is taken in the last year of a two-term presidency, or if the vote is taken after a first-term president loses his bid for reelection.

### **Votes Requiring a “Super Majority” in Congress**

As discussed previously, votes will receive a score of “1” if their passage depends on a majority vote greater than 50% + 1, and “0” otherwise. Information concerning votes requiring a super majority can be found in each year’s list of key votes in *CQ Almanac*.

### **Majority/Minority Margin**

To capture the degree to which the president’s party has an advantage or disadvantage in the House or Senate, we include a variable in the outcome model that measures the difference between the seats held by the president’s party and the opposition party.<sup>14</sup> If the president’s party is the majority party in the House or Senate, the margin between the majority and minority party will be a positive value. If the president’s party is the minority party, its margin will be measured in the data as a negative value. The data for this variable are drawn from Edwards, Wattenberg, and Lineberry (2006).

### **Polarization**

To account for ideological polarization between the president and each chamber of Congress in the outcome model, we employ the first dimension of Poole’s (2004) DW-NOMINATE data. This measure captures the ideological distance between the president and members of the opposition. The polarization variable

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<sup>13</sup> Among other issues coded as “international” are military intelligence, use of military force, confirmations of Secretaries of State and Defense and the CIA Director, ambassadorial issues, the Peace Corps, overseas sales of surplus agriculture, country-specific student visas, territorial waters disputes, international base closings, etc.

<sup>14</sup> In past research, Shull and Shaw (2004) and Canes-Wrone and de Marchi (2002) have similarly accounted for the president’s party margin in the House and/or Senate by measuring the percentage of the president’s fellow party members in each chamber.

used in these analyses is the distance between the median Democratic and Republican scores. It is assumed that presidents will be near the center of their party's position. A higher score means a more polarized political environment between the parties.

### Use of Force

This variable is specified in the outcome equation. We expect that subsequent to uses of force, there is a general increase in congressional support for the president consistent with the "rally around the flag" literature (see DeRouen 1995). These data are from Fordham (1998) and are updated with information from the Congressional Research Service (Grimmett 2004). We record the number of uses of force in the quarter prior to the vote.

### Reelection Year

Our position-taking models include a "reelection" variable that is coded as "1" if the vote took place in the same calendar year of and prior to the date of the election.<sup>15</sup>

### Size of Executive Branch

In the position-taking equations, the size of the executive branch (the number of civilian employees measured in thousands) will be used to address the prospect that a larger executive branch aids presidential position-taking. These data are taken from Stanley and Niemi (2003). We should note that while staff numbers do generally increase over time, the trend line does not move monotonically upward. Indeed, there are times when staffing levels actually decline from one administration to the next. Consequently, this measure is not simply a stand-in for secular time. The data are summarized in Table 1.

## Results

### *Presidential Support in the House of Representatives and Senate*

Our presidential support results are recorded in Table 2. Each of the Heckman models does a good job of predicting presidential support on key votes in Congress. The significant Wald tests in each table (testing whether  $\rho = 0$ ) indicate that Heckman modeling is the appropriate technique. The first thing to observe in the model is that Hypothesis 3 looks to be confirmed in both the House and Senate. We find that IR votes have a positive and statistically significant impact, with the president successfully gaining around 10% more votes from members of the House on key votes.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, as anticipated, the proportion of citizens identifying international concerns as the most important problem facing the country (MIP-I) has a positive and statistically significant effect on House presidential support [marginal effect (ME) = +20%], while its domestic counterpart (MIP-D) has a statistically significant but negative impact. Other important determinants of House support for the president's position on key votes in the

<sup>15</sup> Lockerbie et al. (1998) used an election year dummy variable in their presidential success model that included *midterm* election years and found it was not statistically significant. We limited our election variable to *presidential* election years since we assume that a president's reelection year will have the most direct effect on the positions he take in Congress.

<sup>16</sup> When applying OLS regression to a simple model with percentage votes in support of the president's position as the dependent variable, the international vote variable is negative and not statistically significant in either the House or Senate models (results available from authors).

TABLE 1. Summary Statistics

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Obs</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
House					
Position	699	0.6938484	0.4612235	0	1
Votes (uncensored)	486	0.5226543	0.1564284	0.03	1
Polarization	699	0.6370186	0.1000147	0.524	0.864
Most Important Intl.	683	0.2096384	0.1701547	0.028	0.636
IR vote	699	0.2346209	0.4240651	0	1
Approval	691	55.37771	12.24073	24	90
Super majority	699	0.0858369	0.2803237	0	1
Republican pres.	699	0.5951359	0.4912172	0	1
Force	696	0.704023	0.8790354	0	5
Honeymoon	696	0.0804598	0.2721993	0	1
Lame duck	699	0.1144492	0.318584	0	1
Size majority	699	-12.84835	86.21787	-147	155
Reelection	699	0.1556509	0.3624676	0	1
Size of executive branch	668	2231.85	1127.631	1221	5721
Senate					
Position	691	0.6555716	0.4755257	0	1
Votes (uncensored)	452	0.5462611	0.1665056	0.13	1
Polarization	691	0.6101867	0.0859172	0.449	0.785
Most Important Intl.	675	0.2135481	0.1709325	0.028	0.636
IR vote	691	0.2575977	0.437628	0	1
Approval	688	55.73256	11.75792	25	89
Super majority	691	0.1664255	0.3727319	0	1
Republican pres.	691	0.6063676	0.4889088	0	1
Force	687	0.6768559	0.8471028	0	5
Honeymoon	690	0.0695652	0.2545974	0	1
Lame duck	691	0.121563	0.3270171	0	1
Size majority	691	1.380608	17.546	-30	36
Reelection	691	0.1635311	0.3701175	0	1
Size of executive branch	660	2281.559	1174.797	1221	5721

Heckman models are the relative number of seats held by the president's party (ME = +3%) and whether or not the president has "lame duck" status (ME = -9%).

The findings for the Senate in Table 2 closely resemble those for the House. For instance, if the Senate key vote is an international one, the president will successfully gain roughly 9% more support in the upper chamber.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, the public designating international issues as the most important problems facing the country (MIP-I) has a positive and statistically significant influence on presidential support (ME = +20%), while naming domestic issues as more critical (MIP-D) has a statistically significant but negative impact. Finally, as was true in the House, the size of the president's majority in the Senate has a statistically significant and positive influence on success (ME = 10%). Unlike the House, however, a Senate key vote requiring a super majority tends to slightly depress the vote for the president's position (ME = -1%), while the president's status as a

<sup>17</sup> Some might see these results as surprising. Conventional wisdom would suggest that the Senate sits atop the foreign policy hierarchy in Congress largely due to its "advice and consent" powers afforded in the Constitution. Perhaps, then, the Senate would be less willing to defer to the president on foreign policy issues than the House. Ripley and Lindsay (1993) conclude otherwise. They perceive that the House has become increasingly aggressive on foreign policy issues, and there is now an intense competition between the two chambers in this area, particularly among their respective foreign and military policy committees. This competition, they explain, has increased the influence of the House on foreign matters, making it no more likely to defer to the president than the Senate.



Table 2. (Continued)

	House		Senate	
	Heckman	Marginal Effect	Heckman	Marginal Effect
Obs	656		646	
Censored obs	194		228	
Uncensored obs	462		418	
Wald chi-sq.	50.67		63.98	
Prob > chi-sq.	0.0000		0.0000	
Wald test (rho = 0)	16.68***		88.69***	
Rho	0.736		0.861	
			Heckman	Heckman
			646	646
			228	228
			418	418
			63.98	48.90
			0.0000	0.0000
			88.69***	94.29***
			0.861	0.864

(Notes. Significance levels: \*\*\*0.005, \*\*0.05, \*0.10, two tailed tests; robust SE).

<sup>†</sup>DV = ‘1’ if the president took a position on a CQ key vote.

<sup>‡</sup>DV = % vote for the president’s position.

“lame duck” does not appear to have any effect on the level of support he receives in the Senate.

*Selection Effects in the House of Representatives and Senate*

The results from the selection equations are contained in the second part of Table 2. In the House, Hypothesis 2 is confirmed as there is indeed a higher probability that the president will take a position on a key vote if the vote is international in scope. The marginal effect of this variable is 21%. Our findings further reveal that Hypothesis 1 is partially supported since the president is more likely to take a position on a key vote when the public specifies international issues as the “most important problem” (MIP-I) facing the nation (ME = +33%) or if the vote requires a super majority (ME = +21%).

Conversely, the president is less likely to take a position on a piece of legislation if he is a lame duck (ME = -13%) and, interestingly, if he is up for reelection (ME = -7%). Presidents look as if they have little leverage (and perhaps understand this) in the first situation. They simply may be more risk-averse in the second circumstance.

When the results of the Senate selection models are compared to those of the House, a number of similarities are apparent. Again, Hypothesis 2 is affirmed, and Hypothesis 3 is partially affirmed, as international votes (ME = +18%), votes that occur at a time when international issues (MIP-I) are dominant in the minds of the public (ME = +34%), and votes that require a super majority (ME = +13%) all have statistically significant and positive influences on presidential position-taking. On the other side of the ledger, the “lame duck” portion of a president’s term in office has a negative influence on presidential position-taking in the Senate (ME = -12%).

The differences in the House and Senate position-taking models are relatively minor. First, the reelection year variable is not statistically significant in the Senate. Evidently, running for reelection does not inhibit presidential position-taking vis-à-vis the Senate as it does in the House. Second, the “size of the executive branch” variable is statistically significant and negatively influences presidential position-taking in the Senate (ME = -21%). Contrary to what we anticipated, presidents appear *less* likely to take positions on key votes in the upper house when they enjoy greater staff resources.

When looking at the link between selection effects and presidential support in Congress, the findings seem clear. The positive rho statistics in each model imply that the factors that drive the president to take a position on a key vote have an unobserved positive effect on the percentage of the House or Senate vote in favor of the president’s position. This demonstrates the importance of considering selection effects in modeling presidential support in Congress.

*International Key Votes and Presidential Support in Congress*

Figures 1–4 provide graphic representation of the effects of international votes. Figure 1 examines presidential position-taking across vote types and as a function of changes in the percentage of Americans viewing international issues as the most important problem. The probability of position-taking is higher for international votes at all points along the  $x$ -axis but the difference between international and domestic votes declines at very high levels of MIP-I. In Figure 2, the  $x$ -axis is MIP-D (that is, the proportion of voters selecting domestic issues as the most important). Again, there is a greater probability of position-taking when the vote is international, but the two vote types actually diverge as MIP-D increases.

These relationships are very similar for the Senate (Figures 3 and 4). On the whole, presidents look less likely to take positions on domestic votes when the

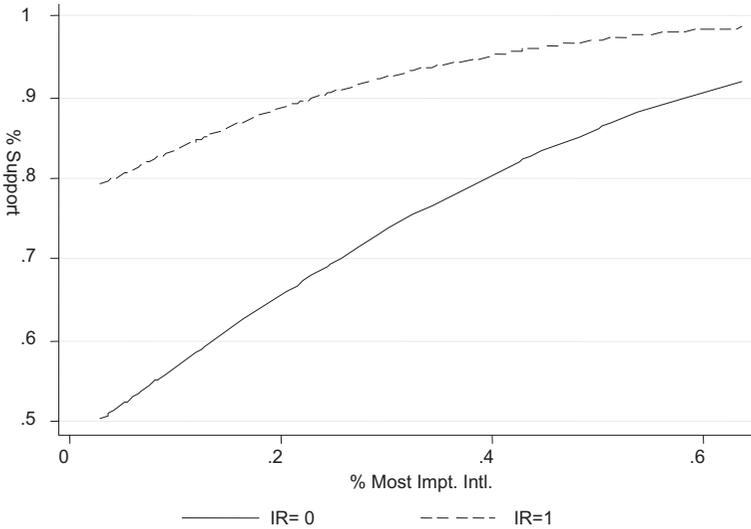


FIG 1. House: Support in Congress and % of Public Identifying International Issues as Most Important Problem

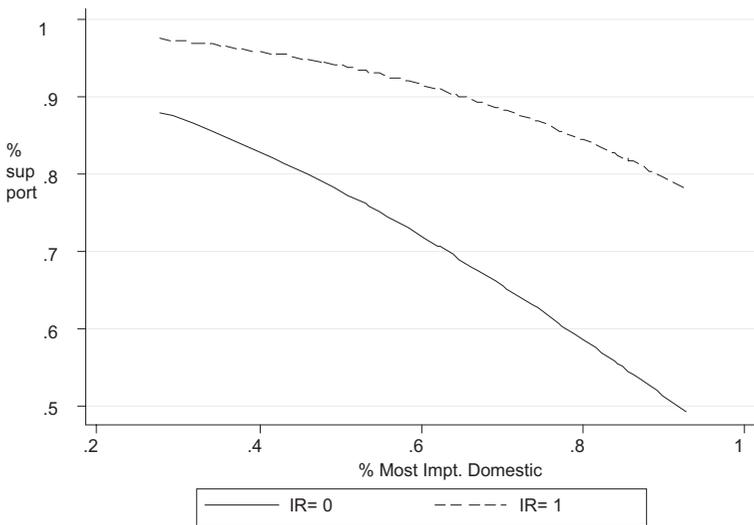


FIG 2. House: Support in Congress and % of Public Identifying Domestic Issues as Most Important Problem

public is deeply concerned with domestic issues. The situation is reversed when the public is highly attentive to international matters.

Finally, we turn our attention to a more detailed analysis of the marginal effects of our variables (see Table 3). The baseline prediction for position-taking is 72% for the House and 65% in the Senate. Not surprisingly, presidents are fairly likely to take positions on key votes. These numbers rise to 87% in the House and 78% in the Senate if the key vote is international. If MIP-I is at its maximum, the numbers jump to 92% and 87%. A best-case scenario (combining these two independent variables during a non-lame duck year on a vote in which a super majority in the House or Senate is required) leads to a 99% probability

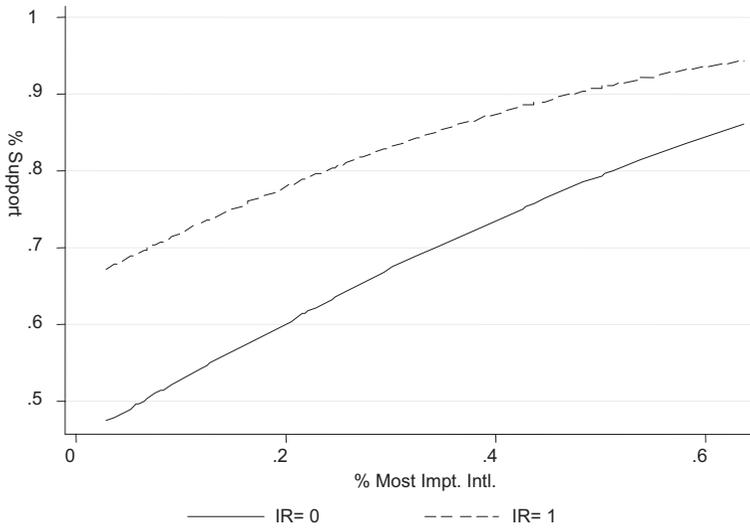


FIG 3. Senate: Support in Congress and % of Public Identifying International Issues as Most Important Problem

of position-taking in the House and a 97% probability in the Senate. A worst-case scenario equates to a 30% and 35% probability of taking a position, respectively.

The predicted percentage of support for the president on these key votes is 38% in the House and 35% in the Senate. These numbers increase to 45% and 42% if the vote is international. When MIP-I is at its maximum, these values increase to 51% and 49%, respectively. The best-case scenario for votes in favor of the president's position is 58% for the House and 62% for the Senate.<sup>18</sup> When the public is concerned about foreign affairs and the vote is international, the president is more likely to take a position *and* more likely to gain votes in the House and Senate. Moreover, gaining congressional support is impeded by lame duck status and enhanced by the size of a president's partisan majority.<sup>19</sup>

### Conclusions

Forty-five years after Aaron Wildavsky first proposed his two presidencies thesis, our analysis provides evidence that presidents do, in fact, enjoy greater support in Congress in the international arena than they do in domestic affairs. This effect, however, must be understood in the context of prospective strategic decision making on the part of the president, as well as the interaction between public opinion, partisan competition, and constitutional authority.

As the selection effects analysis reveals, presidents can be strategic in choosing their legislative battles, and these choices have a bearing on the level of support they receive in Congress. Our findings suggest that presidents may avoid taking a position on an issue when they are less likely to find congressional support on that issue. So, for example, we uncover evidence that presidents are less motivated to put themselves on the line when they are in the final months of their

<sup>18</sup> We suspect that these numbers appear low relative to expectations due to the prevalence of divided government during much of the period under consideration. Yet, there are those who assert that divided government has little effect on the production of significant legislation in Congress (Mayhew 1991).

<sup>19</sup> We also note that Stoll (1987) results are not replicated. American uses of military force do not spur increased legislative support or success for the president. These findings parallel those of Meernik and Waterman (1996) who argue that there is little or no relationship between uses of force and legislative success in Congress.

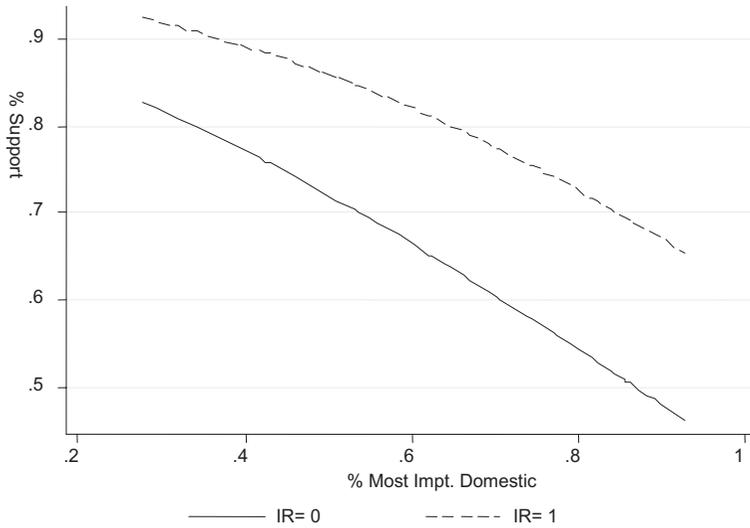


FIG. 4. Senate: Support in Congress and % of Public Identifying Domestic Issues as Most Important Problem

TABLE 3. Marginal Effects Simulations

<i>Simulation</i>	<i>Predicted Probability of Position-Taking (%)</i>	<i>Predicted Percentage of Votes for President's Position</i>
<b>House</b>		
Baseline	72	38
International vote = 1	87	45
MIP-I = max	92	51
Lame duck = 1	61	30
Super majority = 1	91	—
Size of majority = max	—	39
Best case	99	58
Worst case	30	19
<b>Senate</b>		
Baseline	65	35
International vote = 1	78	42
MIP-I = max	87	49
Lame duck = 1	55	—
Super majority = 1	76	36
Best case	97	62
Worst case	35	24

(Notes. Simulations based on Heckman models in Table 2; variables not manipulated are set to mean. House best-case support model: international vote = 1, MIP-I = max, lame duck = 0, size of majority = max. House best-case selection model: international vote = 1, MIP-I = max, reelection = 0, lame duck = 0, super majority = 1. Senate best-case support model: international vote = 1, MIP-I = max, super majority = 0, size of majority = max. Senate best-case selection model: international vote = 1, MIP-I = max, lame duck = 0, super majority = 1. Worst case takes the reverse values of each variable)

administration (the so-called lame duck period), and, contrary to the findings of Lockerbie et al. (1998), when they are pushing for another term in office during a reelection year.

But we also find that presidents are, in general, more likely to take positions on international key votes than on domestic ones. Some (starting with Wildavsky) argue that the power of being the commander-in-chief endows presidents

with superior constitutional and informational resources in the international domain, giving them a sizeable advantage over Congress in foreign affairs. Not only do our findings support this position, they further suggest that presidents are notably predisposed to take strong public stands on international key votes when international issues are regarded by the public as the “most important problems” facing the country. To some extent, this may simply reflect the need for presidents to react to threatening behavior by other nations or non-governmental forces. The public, after all, is most prone to be focused on foreign and defense concerns during periods of war or international crisis. It is also likely, however, that presidents view such circumstances as an opportunity to assert themselves and the interests of the nation, as well as fight for their international (and perhaps domestic) agenda.

In any event, it is clear that selection effects involving the president are powerful and that they apply equally to their relationships with *both* the House and the Senate. Therefore, any model seeking to explain presidential success in attracting votes in Congress must account for the fact that presidents do not respond to every issue or every bill introduced at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue in an easily predictable fashion. Instead, they take political conditions, issue domains, and public opinion into account when deciding whether or not to take a firm position on any key vote. Only by building these selection effects into our voting models can we validly test the effects of independent variables on presidential position-taking and vote-gathering in Congress.

Once selection effects are incorporated into the models, our findings reveal that presidents are, in fact, more successful in securing House and Senate support on international key votes than those in the domestic arena. This result is statistically significant for both chambers, and the substantive effect is remarkably similar in each (roughly a 10% increase in support). Interestingly, the level of support a president attains in Congress is further enhanced when the public regards international affairs as the “most important problem” facing the country. It should be underscored that the findings here reveal that *even after controlling for a president’s public approval*, presidents are still more likely to take stands on international issues and more likely to find increased support in Congress when they formally state those positions. While it is true that the president’s foreign/domestic split on issues in Congress is not as dramatic as the one originally reported by Wildavsky, it is clear that presidents are more likely to find support in the House and Senate when they take a stand on a foreign policy initiative vs one on a domestic matter. Perhaps it is more accurate to assert that the divide Wildavsky observed between a president’s success on international and domestic votes has waned, but has not entirely faded away.

Finally, our results confirm the important role that partisanship plays in successfully acquiring votes in Congress. As expected, presidents achieve greater success in either legislative chamber when their party is more dominant. Perhaps because of the unique ability of a Senate minority to obstruct legislation through the filibuster, this factor is more pronounced in the upper house than in the lower one.

Clearly, the factors that cause presidents to succeed and fail in Congress are both systematic and idiosyncratic. We do not deny that the unique skills and character traits observed by previous scholars provide some presidents with advantages that others do not enjoy. Some presidents, no doubt, are simply more persuasive than others (Neustadt 1990).

Nevertheless, we find that many of the factors that influence presidential action and accomplishment in Congress transcend individual-level factors such as experience, temperament, and charisma. Specifically, every president, regardless of personality or “character,” benefits from institutional and constitutional advantages in the realm of international affairs. These advantages, in

combination with heightened public interest in international affairs, allow presidents to find more support in the foreign policy arena than they do in the realm of economic and social policy. This remains true despite the Vietnam War complicating the relationship between the executive and legislative branches on matters of national security. In short, even after Vietnam, Watergate, and decades of increasingly heated partisan rancor, the president is still given wider latitude to achieve his foreign policy goals in Congress than the House and Senate will grant him in pursuing his domestic policy objectives.

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