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Daniel Paul Franklin & Michael P. Fix

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# THE BEST OF TIMES AND THE WORST OF TIMES: POLARIZATION AND PRESIDENTIAL SUCCESS IN CONGRESS

DANIEL PAUL FRANKLIN

MICHAEL P. FIX

*Department of Political Science, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia*

*For better or for worse, presidents receive much of the credit and much of the blame for their legislative success in Congress. Indeed, much has been written about the correlates of presidential success in Congress. In this article, we test the proposition that presidential success in Congress is mainly a function of context and the context of presidential interactions with Congress has changed over the past 50 years. Specifically, it is both the best of times and worst of times for presidential relations with the legislative branch. It is increasingly the case that because of partisan polarization in Washington, presidents can be quite successful, if they command a majority. However, if they face a divided government gridlock is the result and overcoming that gridlock has gotten to be more difficult over time.*

In January 2013, in order to avoid another fiscal crisis and downgrade of the U.S. credit rating, the House of Representatives in a rare show of bipartisanship passed a modest package of revenue increases and spending cuts that also increased the debt ceiling. House Speaker Boehner lost 33 House Republican votes, but along with the Democrats, the Republican Speaker and the Democratic President were able to cobble together a bipartisan majority that would produce legislation in the House that, for a change, would have a chance of passage in the Senate.

That kind of coalition building was reminiscent of Ronald Reagan's first term when he managed to forge a conservative coalition of Republican and "blue dog" Democrats in the House to pass the lion's share of his legislative agenda. The problem for President Obama (and for Speaker Boehner) was that

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Address correspondence to Daniel Paul Franklin, Department of Political Science, Georgia State University, 38 Peachtree Center Avenue, Atlanta, GA 30303. E-mail: dpfranklin@gsu.edu  
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the House Republicans of 2013 were a lot less tolerant of Speaker Boehner's working relationship with the president, than were the Democrats of 1981 in Tip O'Neil's dealings with President Reagan. Not only were there rumblings in the rank and file about Boehner's leadership, but more important, members were hearing from party activists in their home district and beyond who were threatening a primary fight against members who did not toe the party line.

Relations between the White House and the House Republican leadership broke down soon thereafter and presidential-congressional relations returned to what has become the status quo in contemporary American politics: gridlock associated with divided government. It used to be the case that whereas divided government presented an obstacle to bipartisan coalition building, presidents could reach across the aisle to produce significant legislative accomplishments. However, of late, divided government seems to be more frequent and, due to increasing polarization, a greater obstacle to policy making. On the other hand, the opposite might also be true. If the president commands a majority in Congress, policy making should be all the easier. In this article, we integrate two different lines of research on the relationship between the president and Congress; the correlates of presidential success in Congress and the effects of recent trends in partisan polarization. In doing so, we find that presidential success in Congress is largely a product of circumstances beyond his direct control, as the strongest determinants of success are divided government and partisan polarization.

### **CORRELATES OF SUCCESS AND THE LEGISLATIVE PRESIDENCY**

A number of factors have been shown to predict the success of the legislative presidency. In the past it has frequently been shown that presidential popularity is a significant predictor of presidential success, but that correlation has rarely been demonstrated to be tremendously robust. Rivers and Rose (1985) demonstrate that for every percentage point increase in approval ratings, a president can expect about a percentage increase in legislative success. However, because there are so few significant pieces of legislation passed each year, a percentage point increase in presidential success overall can hardly be that important. Thus, we would put more credence in the Canes-Wrone and de Marchi (2002) examination of presidential success that is based on a selected sample of legislation that is both highly complex and salient using a more robust indicator of presidential prestige and persuasion. Even so, in the Canes-Wrone, de Marchi model, with its intentionally select sample, only about a third of the variance in the equation is explained using the hypothesized predictor variable.

In addition to presidential popularity, two other logical predictors of presidential success would come from two very different levels of analysis. At

the individual level, a logical addition to the prediction model of presidential legislative success would be the role of agency in the president's legislative decision making. For example, Marshall and Prins (2007) demonstrate that timing and strategic position taking condition presidential success. After all, presidents are not passive actors in the legislative process; they must decide how and at what times their prestige is best to be invested (Esbaugh-Soha 2005). Moreover, presidents have found some success in the past utilizing their ability to go over the heads of Congress to make appeals for support directly to the public (Barrett 2004; Kernell 2007).

However, the success of presidential appeals to the public varies as to the substance of policy and timing of the administration (Barrett and Esbaugh-Soha 2007). In fact, Lockerbie, Borrelli, and Hedger (1998) conclude that much of the difference in presidential success lies not so much in presidential agency, but in the relationship between timing and context, with the most important contextual variable being divided government (see also Edwards, Barrett, and Peake, 1997). After all, presidents are often not at liberty to choose their spots. Frequently they must decide on the basis of the electoral cycle and partisan balance in Congress which issues are likely to be influenced in a positive way by a presidential intervention (Cummins 2010). In addition, some evidence suggests that presidential intervention on behalf of a particular piece of legislation may in fact exacerbate partisan tensions and may actually harden opposition response (Lee 2008). Therefore, presidential intervention beyond agenda setting, at best, is of limited effectiveness.

Based on this it seems that a number of contextual factors contribute as much, or more, to an explanation of presidential success in Congress. First, there is the issue of institutional structure. Congress cannot be treated as a unified entity. Specifically it appears that the president's relationship with the House is probably a better predictor of legislative success than the president's relationship with the Senate and this is particularly the case during the presidential honeymoon and lame duck years (Lockerbie et al. 1998). In some sense, the House of Representatives is a majoritarian institution. As long as the leadership appoints the majority of members on the House Rules Committee, and the majority party is relatively cohesive, the leadership controls the legislative agenda (Finocchiaro and Rohde 2008). What is different now in the modern era is that the leadership of the two parties in Congress could hardly in the ideological sense be farther apart reflecting a membership with a disappearing center. Democratic Party Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, a San Francisco liberal with an ADA (Americans for Democratic Action, a liberal group) rating of 95 (on a scale of 100) is facing off against Republican Party Speaker John Boehner with a rating of just 4. That ideological divide is extended and reinforced within the institution by rules that control the agenda and punish members who do not toe the party line (Mann and Ornstein 2008; Theriault 2008;).

In contrast, the Senate is an unusual elective institution in that by design it is insulated from the effects of short-term shifts in popular sentiment. The six-year terms, staggered elections, state representation (that precludes the type of gerrymandering so common in drawing House districts), rejection of the principle of one person, one vote, and the *de facto* supermajority requirement due to the filibuster rule make the Senate one of the least representative institutions in American government. Consequently, even as the House has been sorting itself out into increasingly partisan factions, the Senate is holding the policy, if not partisan, center.

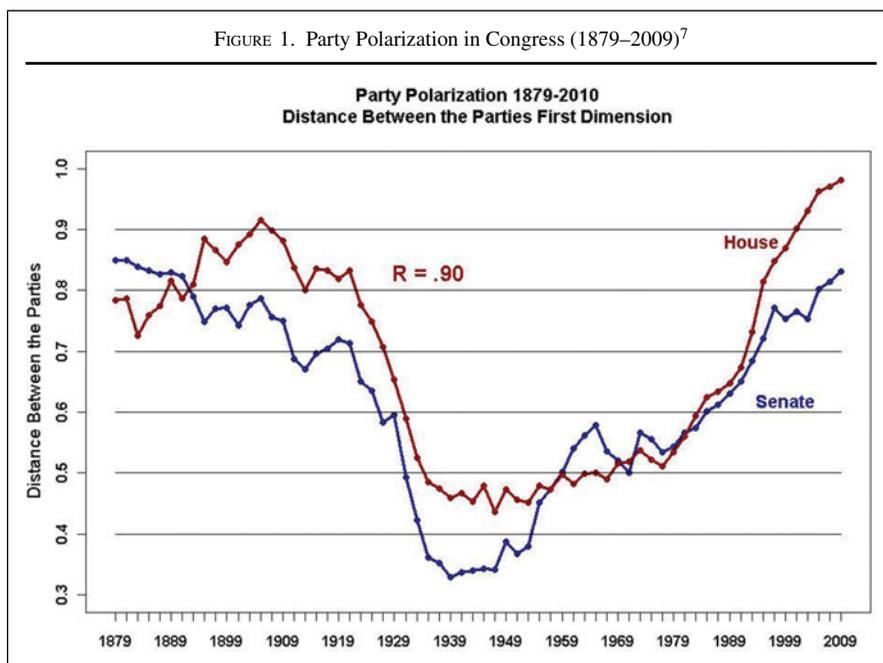
The key to the relative moderation of the Senate is the filibuster rule that requires a 60-vote super majority for the passage of most major legislation. However, this appearance of moderation in the Senate may be illusory. Although it might appear, superficially, that the Senate is less ideologically charged, if one party were to command a supermajority in the Senate, there is no indication that voting patterns in the Senate would be any less ideological than the House (Campbell and Rae 2001; Hartog and Monroe 2011; Poole and Rosenthal 1984; 1987). Therefore, although the Senate may appear to be less partisan due to the filibuster, the Senate is also more prone to gridlock, even when it comes to areas in which it has the sole constitutional authority such as presidential appointments and treaties.

Another consideration in the correlates of presidential legislative success is timing, the point at which in a presidential term the president enjoys the most and the least amount of legislative success. The honeymoon period, or the period immediately following a presidential election is most likely to produce legislative success for the president, and this is true whether or not the president has won election by a large margin (Beckmann and Godfrey 2007). By contrast, in their last two years in office, lame duck presidents suffer a marked decline in legislative influence (Franklin 2014). Furthermore, periods of national crisis, such as the bombing of Pearl Harbor or the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, may create a temporary rally-around-the-flag effect (Kam and Ramos 2008).

### **Polarization and the Correlates of Presidential Success**

Even as parties as institutions are in decline, parties in Congress (and particularly in the House) are stronger than they have been in almost 100 years (Bond and Fleisher 2000; Fleisher and Bond 2004; Lee 2008; Sinclair 2006;). Political polarization in Congress, as represented by ideological distance between parties is at a record high, as Figure 1 illustrates.

The policy consequences of this trend toward greater party polarization in Congress seem to be the movement of policy in fits and starts. Moreover, in a majoritarian institution like the House, the policy effects of partisanship are accentuated (Chiou and Rothenberg 2009; Lazarus and Steigerwalt 2009). In other words, this has led to the genesis of a political atmosphere where policy



moves primarily when the president “commands” a majority, and gridlock prevails when he does not (Brady and McCubbins 2002; 2007; Eilperin 2007).

What is surprising about the advent of partisan polarization is that according to the Median Voter Theorem (Black 1948; Downs 1957; Hotelling 1929), the United States is supposed to have a political system that incentivizes moderation. We are told that a first-past-the-post, single member districting system (majority rule, single member districts) has a moderating effect on politics (Chhibber and Kollman 2002; Cox 1997). That belief has been reinforced by an important case study, the politics of the United States for most of its first 200 years. There have been political conflicts in the United States to be sure, but (with the exception of the Civil War) even the most profound policy disputes pale in comparison to the range and depth of the political divides in other countries.

Much of the moderation in American politics can be traced to homogeneity of American political beliefs, if not its demographics (Handlin 1973; Hartz 1991; Hofstadter 1948; Kaufmann, Petrocik, and Shaw 2008). However, beyond that shared tradition of the immigrant experience, moderation in American politics owes its resilience to the presence of a two-party system wherein the major political actors compete for votes from the political center. In recent times, however, moderation in American politics has been on the decline.

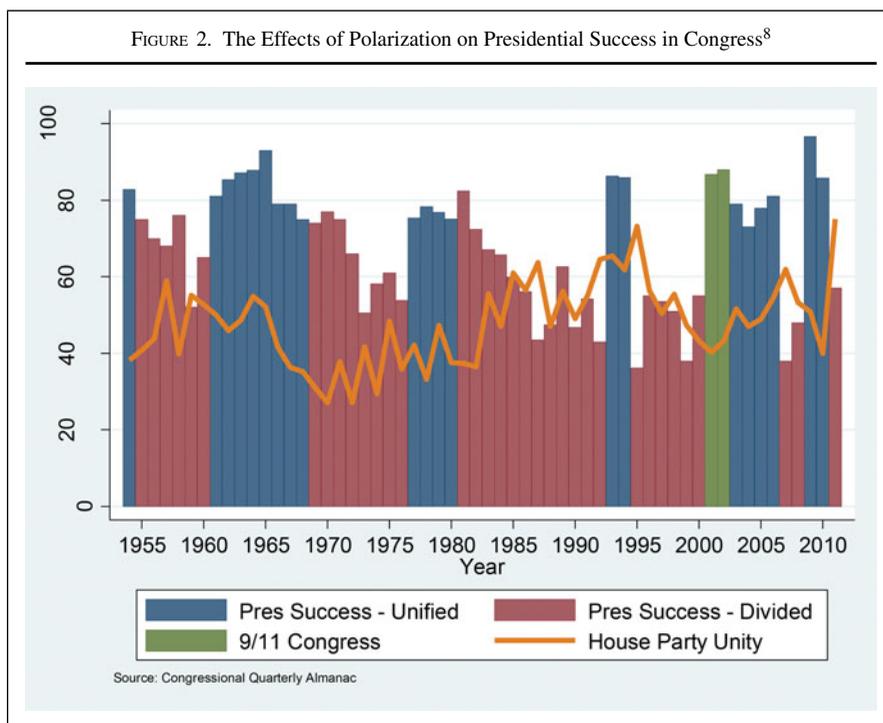
This is why the polarization of politics in the United States in recent years seems so unusual. It may be that the popular political continuum has lengthened and the people themselves have become more divided, but that would suggest a radicalization of the American population for which there is until recently very little evidence (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2010; Lewis-Beck et al., 2008; Mayhew, 2011).<sup>1</sup> The more likely and, in fact, documented explanation for the increased polarization in American politics is radicalization at the top or elite polarization (Abramowitz 2011; Bond 2000; Nivola 2006). That being the case, it still remains to be seen whether that polarization at the top will trickle down to the population as a whole.

From the president's perspective polarization has provided opportunities, but it has also imposed constraints. In short, *it is both the best of times and the worst of times for presidential influence in Congress*. As a result of polarization, presidents can act in ways similar to a prime minister in a parliamentary system when they preside over a unified government. For example, President Obama took advantage of this dynamic when he promoted the passage of the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) in Congress without a single Republican vote.

Conversely, when government is divided, the president is at a greater disadvantage and the political system as a whole falls into a kind of functional paralysis. Unlike a parliamentary system where the government falls when a prime minister loses a vote of confidence and new elections are held, in the United States, presidents finish their term. Thus, the president who is in modern times likely to face a divided government is put at more of a disadvantage than ever before as a result of the rise of political polarization.

Figure 2 shows levels of presidential success<sup>2</sup> in Congress as scored by *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* along with House Party Unity scores to illustrate the relationship between the legislative success of presidents and the level of political polarization. According to Figure 2, it appears that the amplitude of the difference between presidential success and failure appears to be increasing in a kind of geometric progression. Thus, the gap between (overall) presidential successes in divided as opposed to unified governments has been widening over the years. Second, it appears that this increasing amplitude corresponds with a rise in party unity votes, particularly in the U.S. House, as a marker of political polarization. (For the House the bivariate correlation between presidential success and party unity is  $r = -.34$ ;  $p = .01$ ; for the Senate  $r = -.03$ ; NS.)

When it comes to governing, the presidency in this polarized era is presented with a unique challenge. With fewer members of Congress amenable to persuasion, presidents who do not command a majority have very little chance of achieving much in the way of legislative success (Fleisher and Bond 1996). Rather, in the United States in the modern era, presidents often confront the need to manufacture effectiveness without much hope of



legislative support when lacking a majority in Congress (Jacobson 2006; Rockman and Waterman 2007). In that situation, presidents must rely more on their constitutional, administrative prerogatives such as the use and the threat of the use of the veto, executive orders, administrative rulemaking, strategic and sometimes recess appointments, and going over the heads of Congress by making emotional appeals to the public (Howell 2003; Rose 2000).

The challenge presented by divided government is becoming more frequent. Between 1900 and 1950 well over half, 18 out of 25, governments were unified. Yet, between 1951 and 2014, the number had dropped to less than a third (10 out of 32). Combining this with increased levels of polarization in Congress, policy paralysis becomes significantly more likely, relieved only by brief bursts of policy movement when a president happens to command a majority.

Because bloc voting as a characteristic of institutional context becomes the dominant factor in explaining many governmental outcomes, studies that depend on measuring partisanship in Congress as a matter of degree may actually underestimate the importance of context (Canes Wrone and Marchi 2002; Lebo and O'Geen 2011). It no longer matters how much of a partisan disadvantage the president has to face but whether he faces a partisan disadvantage

at all. Although the president might be able to swing an odd vote or two from the other party, it is now the case when a House member votes against his party, it is a remarkable enough event to attract coverage in the press,<sup>3</sup> and to generate a risk of a primary challenge.

In this study, we contend that in the modern context it does not make a difference how wide the partisan divide is, but simply whether there is a partisan divide at all. Because leaders, particularly in the House, can depend on even the slimmest of majorities to carry legislation, the consequences of divided government are much more profound (although at 60+ votes, a party majority in the Senate would also be very consequential, indeed). Consequently, the most powerful independent variable in models predicting presidential legislative success should be divided government, especially in the House of Representatives, regardless of the more nuanced percentage of seats held by the president's party.

As a result of the thickening or increasingly sclerotic political environment that is the consequence of political polarization we posit five separate hypotheses:

H<sub>1</sub> = Overall, during the period examined presidential success in Congress has been on the decline as the thickening of the political environment (the increased frequency of divided government) makes it more difficult for presidents to build coalitions in Congress and rally support with the public.

H<sub>2</sub> = Divided government will be a powerful negative influence on presidential legislative success.

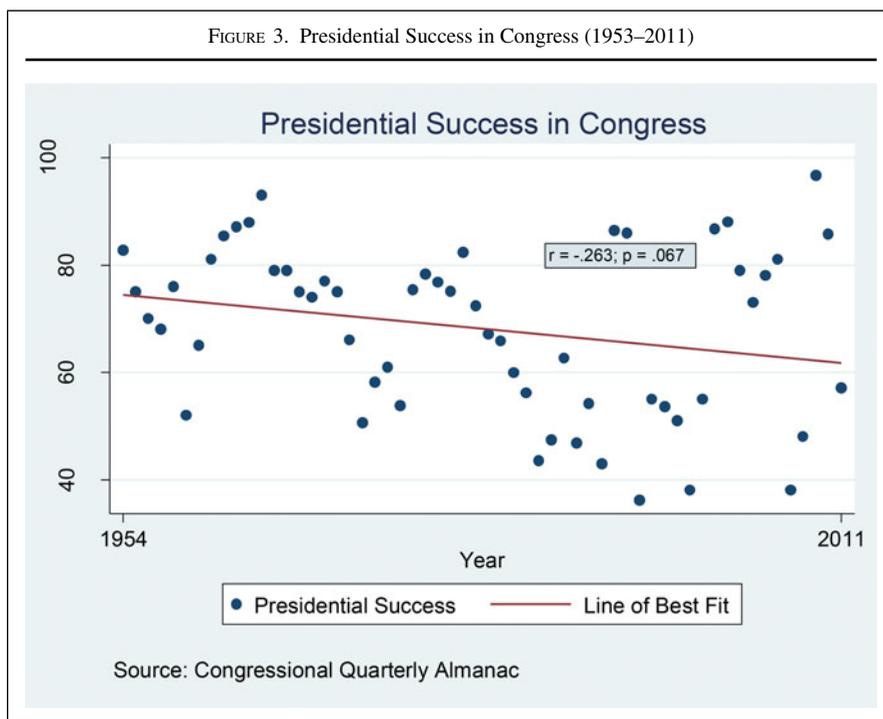
H<sub>3</sub> = The interaction of party unity (polarization) in combination with unified government creates a multiplicative effect that is now the most important predictor of presidential legislative success.

H<sub>4</sub> = The interaction of polarization together with divided government has become such an important contextual factor that it minimizes the effect of presidential agency including the positive influence of presidential popularity.

H<sub>5</sub> = Polarization has become such an important contextual factor that it minimizes the effect of timing factors such as the honeymoon effect.

## THE MODEL

For our dependent variable we use *CQ Almanac* presidential success scores that have been collected since the early 1950s. Congressional Quarterly defines a presidential victory as one in which the president succeeds in getting legislation passed on which he has stated a preference in support. It should be noted that these scores in our models are chamber specific.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the dependent variable reflects presidential success in the Senate in the Senate Model and in the House in the House Model. The Almanac only scores legislation it deems significant, which is not as difficult as it seems, whereas Congress passes many pieces of legislation in the course of a legislative session, there



are actually a limited and reasonably well defined number of important bills, mostly the regular annual appropriations bills and periodic authorizations, which are mostly approved on a regular multiyear schedule.

We are familiar with the criticisms of the CQ measure, specifically the failure to account for variation in the importance of different bills (Barrett and Eshbaugh-Soha 2007). Consequently, a presidential success on the Defense Appropriation is on the order of magnitude hundreds of times more important than success on the much smaller appropriation for the District of Columbia or the Legislative Branch. However, on the substance of most appropriations legislation and on authorizations as well, so much of the spending is committed on a multiyear, programmatic basis that it calls into question the whole idea of discretionary funding. On an annual basis, in percentage terms, very little of the Federal Budget is actually in play. Although issues such as “don’t ask, don’t tell” garner the media’s attention, much of the substance of governmental activity is on automatic pilot. Therefore, we believe that the CQ measure of presidential success is a valid measure, particularly in the long term.

As indicated in Figure 3, presidential success rates are on the decline. This can be seen as a confirmation of what Skowronek (1997) calls a “thickening” political environment. This suggests that although unified control of government is an advantage for the president, divided government is a greater

disadvantage. In addition, this suggests that to fully understand the relationship between these factors and presidential legislative success, we must account for temporal effects. Therefore, we construct a time series model using the Prais and Winsten Feasible Generalized Least Squares (FGLS) estimator to account for AR(1) serial autocorrelation. This approach utilizes a two-stage process, where the first involves FGLS to achieve estimates of  $\rho$  and the second uses the Prais and Winsten transformation to account for the autocorrelation (Greene 2012). We then conduct a Durbin-Watson test on all models to ensure that the second stage estimates are appropriately nonautocorrelated.

In our models we account for many of the factors highlighted in the literature. For timing we include a series of covariates. First, we account for the *Honeymoon* period, or the first year the president is in office and for potential rally-around-the-flag effects in the *Post-9/11* Congress in 2002 (Beckman and Godfrey 2007). There is also a measure of the *Lame Duck* effect, as presidents in their last two years in office (of a two-term, term-limited presidency) should begin to suffer a loss of influence (Crockett 2008; Sullivan and de Marchi 2011).

With respect to agency or presidents' ability to control their own fate, we will include dummy variables to control for the *Johnson* and *Reagan* presidencies. These were presidents who were widely respected for their purported legislative prowess. We will also include a measure of *Presidential Popularity* as a proxy for the potential influence of the public's perception of the president, as presidents who are skilled at courting the public should be able to parlay popularity into legislative success. *Presidential Popularity* is scored as the annualized mean of multiple surveys collected by the Roper Center (n.d.) across the span of a single calendar year.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, we include variables tapping a variety of institutional features that will provide context for the legislative interplay between Congress and the president. *House* and *Senate Party Unity* scores are included as markers of political polarization (*CQ Almanac* 2013; B-22). The data encompass the period from 1954 to 2011. In addition, we include an indicator of divided government for both the House and Senate to account for the presence or absence of *Presidential Party Control* in each house with divided government scored as a "1" and unified government scored as a "0." Whereas others have utilized a more nuanced measure to account for the strength of the president's part in Congress such as the percentage of the House controlled by the president's party (Lebo and O'Genn 2011), for our purposes a simpler indicator of party control provides a more accurate test of our theory than a measure of the degree of control. Because we separate the House from the Senate in our models, controlling for presidential party control can take into account the possibility that at a given time, the president's party controls both houses of Congress, one house of Congress, or neither of the houses.

With these data, we construct two different models. First, our Baseline Models focus exclusively on the impact of contextual factors—including presidential popularity on the president's legislative success in the House (Model 1a) and Senate (Model 1b), respectively. As noted previously, we separate the House and Senate into separate models. Previous research has shown that to the extent that divided government makes a difference in rates of presidential success, that effect is much more profound in the House. There, institutional rules, including Leadership control of the Rules Committee, make the House a much more partisan institution. To combine the House and Senate would be to obscure the differences between the houses and the possibility that divided government might include one house or the other but not both.

Our second set of models are summary models for the House and Senate, respectively. In these models we include all the variables discussed above including timing factors and presidential agency controls. Furthermore, we add a multiplicative term between our measures of *Presidential Party Control* and *Party Unity* on the assumption that the two together create a synergistic effect.

## RESULTS

Table 1 presents the estimates of our baseline models. From this, we can draw a couple of general conclusions related to presidential success in Congress. First, in general, divided government has a corrosive effect on presidential success. This finding is consistent across both houses of Congress and corresponds with previous studies. Second, presidential popularity seems to have little effect on presidential success in either the House or Senate; this is in contrast to the relatively weak but significant findings in earlier studies indicating that presidents can overcome institutional factors. These results imply that institutional factors have become more important over time.

Furthermore, Table 1 demonstrates that House partisanship, more than Senate partisanship is a better predictor of presidential success in Congress. In the Senate Model, party unity, while marginally significant and in the expected direction, exerts a subtler effect on presidential legislative success. By contrast, in the House Model, party unity represents a strong drag on presidential success. This contrast between the House and the Senate is to be expected.

If it is the case that the incidence of divided government has increased over time, and that political polarization is on the rise, it would be reasonable to expect that interaction exists between House party unity and presidential party control such that increasing polarization has had the effect of amplifying the consequences of divided government to the detriment of presidential success. Table 2 presents the results of our full model, including an inter-

	(a)		(b)	
	House Model		Senate Model	
	Coefficient	<i>p</i> -value	Coefficient	<i>p</i> -value
House Party Unity	-0.620 (0.182)	0.00		
Presidential Party Control (House)	-32.161 (3.839)	0.00		
Senate Party Unity			-0.192 (0.113)	0.10
Presidential Party Control (Senate)			-18.592 (2.432)	0.00
Presidential Popularity	0.047 (0.158)	0.77	0.042 (0.104)	0.69
Constant	109.640 (12.288)	0.00	89.618 (8.619)	0.00
N	57		57	
F	31.470		19.890	
r <sup>2</sup>	0.641		0.529	
Adjusted-r <sup>2</sup>	0.620		0.503	
Durbin-Watson	2.019		1.974	

*Note:* All models estimated using the Prais and Winsten Feasible Generalized Least Squares (FGLS) estimator.

action term between party unity and presidential party control as discussed previously.

The results in Table 2 provide substantial support for all five of our hypotheses. Specifically, success in moving legislation about which the president has stated a preference is largely out of presidential control as long as partisanship is at such an elevated level, especially in the case of divided government. The interaction term is statistically significant and in the expected direction in both the Senate and House Models. This, combined with the lack of significance for the party unity constitutive term in each model, tells us that party polarization exerts a strong negative influence under conditions of divided government, but has no significant influence when the president's party is in control. These results are a particularly important influence on presidential success as 37 out of the 58 cases in the sample are instances of divided government (with more frequency in recent years). Finally, with fully 69% of the variance explained (in the House of Representatives model), the robustness of this model highlights the crucial importance of institutional context.

Turning to the timing factors, we see that our indicator of the Honeymoon period is marginally significant ( $p = 0.08$  for both models) showing that the first-year honeymoon is somewhat advantageous to a president's success in

	(a)		(b)	
	House Model		Senate Model	
	Coefficient	<i>p</i> -value	Coefficient	<i>p</i> -value
House Party Unity	-0.226 (0.226)	0.32		
Presidential Party Control (House)	-4.559 (9.495)	0.63		
House Party Unity * Presidential Party Control	-0.555 (0.200)	0.01		
Senate Party Unity			-0.074 (0.172)	0.67
Presidential Party Control (Senate)			8.375 (11.887)	0.48
Senate Party Unity * Presidential Party Control			-0.492 (0.230)	0.04
Presidential Popularity	0.123 (0.149)	0.41	-0.019 (0.104)	0.85
911	-5.841 (9.069)	0.52	30.882 (14.185)	0.03
Lame Duck	-5.749 (4.598)	0.22	-7.216 (3.462)	0.04
Honeymoon	6.870 (3.802)	0.08	4.958 (2.815)	0.08
Johnson	3.770 (7.169)	0.60	-1.384 (5.644)	0.81
Reagan	-1.383 (5.964)	0.82	1.474 (4.157)	0.72
Constant	86.779 (13.418)	0.00	85.338 (11.322)	0.00
<i>N</i>	57		57	
<i>F</i>	15.060		10.210	
<i>r</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.743		0.662	
Adjusted- <i>r</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.693		0.597	
Durbin-Watson	2.103		2.042	

Note: All models estimated using the Prais and Winsten Feasible Generalized Least Squares (FGLS) estimator.

both the House and Senate. Surprisingly, the lame duck president appears to be disadvantaged only in our Senate Model. However, this null finding for the House may simply be an artifact of the fact that *all* term-limited, two-term presidents in their final two years in office have had to deal with a divided government and in *all* cases of two-term lame duck presidents, the House of Representatives was controlled by the other party.

The picture that begins to emerge is that in a highly polarized environment, the president is severely limited in what he can do to promote a legislative agenda. Context appears to be the main determinant. This would

go against the popular notion that presidents are in large part responsible for the fate of their legislative programs. To directly examine the effects of the individual we include a dummy variable for two presidents, Presidents Johnson and Reagan, who have a reputation for persuasiveness and legislative success. We also include an indirect measure of presidential agency, presidential popularity (annualized).<sup>6</sup> Our results suggest that presidential popularity is not a significant predictor of presidential legislative success. Second, Presidents Johnson and Reagan, despite their reputation as savvy legislators do not stand out in this model. If, as Neustadt suggests, Presidents can find success through persuasion, that option in the legislative arena is limited, if not non-existent. Indeed, some evidence suggests that presidential intervention in the legislative process can actually be a drag on the success of the outcome (Lee 2013). In other words, institutional context is the key.

Finally, it should be noted that there is a limit as to how far this trend can go. Party unity cannot exceed 100%. Therefore, we have just about reached our limit in this trend. Short of some kind of short circuit to the separation of powers, for example, through a major Supreme Court decision or a presidential power grab, if polarization remains at the same high level, gridlock in times of divided government will remain the new normal.

## CONCLUSION

These results provide strong evidence in support of Hypotheses H<sub>1</sub>-H<sub>5</sub>. Our primary finding shows that the negative impact of divided government on a president's success in getting his legislative agenda passed is exacerbated when party polarization is high. Within the context of the model only during the honeymoon period can presidents overcome the limitations of this institutional constraint. Thus, the president's options are extremely limited in facing divided government. In the current context, political polarization and its effects are still the most important influence on congressional presidential relations. Therefore, it is unrealistic to expect that a president facing a divided government can be held responsible for what is a difficult political environment, more difficult that it has been for years. Conversely, the negative effect of party polarization disappears in periods of unified government. When presidents have the luxury of unified government, their legislative success appears not to be impacted by the level of party polarization.

This study has been a test of the conventional wisdom that presidents can somehow overcome the obstacle of divided government in their dealings with Congress. However, as a result of the thickening political environment, when facing a divided government, the president must rely more heavily on administrative tools to achieve policy accomplishments or to seek the path of least resistance with an emphasis on foreign policy or in policy areas

in which the presidency already has a constitutional or statutory portfolio, especially after the end of the Honeymoon (Mayhew 2005). This is not to say that nothing gets done when there is divided government in the United States. Previous studies of divided government have shown under conditions of divided government only housekeeping legislation can be passed, whereas groundbreaking landmark legislation is less likely (Coleman 1999; Edwards et al. 1997; Howell et al. 2000; Jones 2001). It remains to be seen whether polarization will continue to be a defining feature of the American political landscape, but if it is, we can expect more of the same. In other words, it will be both the best of times and the worst of times for presidents in their relations with Congress.

## NOTES

1. As The Center for American Progress reports in a summary of its 2009 national survey on the *State of American Political Ideology*; “Despite claims to the contrary, there really is no ‘far right’ or ‘far left’ among the electorate in the country. It is more accurate based on this evidence to talk about “‘far center-right’ and ‘far center-left.’” [http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2009/03/political\\_ideology.html](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2009/03/political_ideology.html)
2. Defined as presidential victories on key votes on which the president has stated a position.
3. The New Republic dedicated an entire article to explaining the vote of Congressman Justin Amash from Michigan, the lone House Republican to vote against the Keystone Pipeline. It was not in support of President Obama’s position. See Rebecca Leber, “One Lonely Republican Voted Against Keystone,” in *The New Republic*, February 11, 2015.
4. The *CQ Almanac* also presents an average Success Score that measures the final outcome. However, using that score would be difficult to interpret because it would obscure the differences between the Houses of Congress which, after all, are coequal partners in the process. Furthermore, isolating the Senate in particular is important inasmuch as treaties and nominations are solely the province of the Senate.
5. <http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/polls/presidential-approval-compare/>
6. This is the mean popularity rating of a president during a calendar year in the Gallup tracking poll as reported by the Roper Center at [http://webapps.ropercenter.uconn.edu/CFIDE/roper/presidential/webroot/presidential\\_rating.cfm#.UcdJ6ZzkpEM](http://webapps.ropercenter.uconn.edu/CFIDE/roper/presidential/webroot/presidential_rating.cfm#.UcdJ6ZzkpEM)
7. McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal, *PolarizedAmerica.com* [http://polarizedamerica.com/polarized\\_america.htm](http://polarizedamerica.com/polarized_america.htm) (Last accessed 3/9/13)
8. <http://library.cqpress.com/cqalmanac/toc.php?mode=cqalmanac-appendix&level=2&values=Presidential±Support±Tables&PHPSESSID=lm63ufouvqc491b87nujmr1171>

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