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The Journal of Politics, Volume 57, Issue 1 (Feb., 1995), 197-209.

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The Journal of Politics

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New Evidence Undercutting the Linkage of Approval with Presidential Support and Influence

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This article resolves the conflict between standard analyses of approval and presidential influence; one suggesting a strong relationship, the other suggesting very little relationship. We introduce a new sequential approach, specifying two theoretical linkages: the standard "success" linkage and a "conversion" linkage. We use "sway" and headcount data to test the standard hypotheses about approval, including Neustadt's (1960) "shift of range" and asymmetry hypotheses and Edwards (1989) partisan and bounded partisanship hypotheses. We demonstrate that approval plays little role in presidential influence. Future research will apply this approach and data to more complex, less standard conceptualizations of the linkage.

Often, politicians and analysts have linked presidential influence with prestige. For example, Wilson (1908) believed the presidency's strength rested on its claim to speak for the nation. Some scholars have echoed these sentiments (Neustadt 1960; Polsby 1978; Kernell 1986). While politicians clearly believe that prestige plays a significant role in leadership, empirical research provides little reassurance. Different researchers have characterized prestige as an essential determinant of legislative success, as a marginal influence, and as playing no role whatsoever. Though some analyses utilize different methods, the dispute between findings ultimately derives from one operational problem: coalition formation, where approval might affect influence, occurs behind closed doors leaving little evidence.

The authors thank the Albert Center, Dirksen Center, the Research Institute, University of Texas, the LBJ Foundation, and the Eisenhower Institute for their support. We acknowledge Allan Meltzer and the Center for the Study of Political Economy, Graduate School of Industrial Administration, Carnegie-Mellon University and the Lilly Endowment and Institute for the Arts and Humanities, University of North Carolina who supported Terry Sullivan during this project. We also appreciate the assistance rendered us by LBJ archivists: Nancy Smith, Linda Hansen, and Claudia Anderson. And we acknowledge David Lowery, Benjamin I. Page, Jon Bond, Bruce Buchanan, and Carl Cavalli for their comments. And we acknowledge the advice of the referees for this article.

THE JOURNAL OF POLITICS, Vol. 57, No. 1, February 1995, Pp. 197-209

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This note explores one branch of the dispute over prestige using information about pre-voting behavior. The first section summarizes the dispute and defines two linkages, "conversion" and "success," and an approximation of influence called "sway." It then explores these linkages. Empirical findings support the basic theme that prestige does not play a role. The last section places this note within the context of a broader analysis of prestige.

UNDERSTANDING PRESTIGE AND INFLUENCE

The mainstream approach to understanding prestige and influence relies on calculating something like the percentage of times each member supports the administration's position on "key" votes (Bond and Fleisher 1980, 1984; Bond, Fleisher, and Northrup 1988; Edwards 1980, 1985, 1989; Ostrum and Simon 1985; Rivers and Rose 1985). In assessing this relationship, call it a linkage with congressional "success," analysts have suggested a number of hypotheses. In addition to a general relationship, for example, Neustadt (1960) and Edwards and Wayne (1990) argued that prestige operates "mostly in the background" (using the same words). Neustadt (1960, 87) argued, "Rarely is there any one-to-one relationship between appraisals of popularity in general and responses to (presidential) wishes in particular." He further suggested that while it may affect general success, increasing prestige would not necessarily affect a specific bill. Or it may affect member decisions but only after a "shift of range" (or major change) occurs (Neustadt 1960, 96). Lastly, Neustadt suggested an "asymmetry effect": a stronger effect with declining approval than with improving approval.

Edwards (1980, 93) also identified a "partisan" effect: since party best suggests support, any general effect ought to work within partisan confines. First, he found a high correlation between approval among party identifiers and how party representatives supported the administration, with one exception. Republicans supported Democratic presidents more than vice versa. Pursuing this relationship in his newest book, Edwards (1989) suggested that partisanship plays a role because it mirrors a predisposition. Hence, prestige has upper and lower bounds: no matter how low the president's standing some members will support the administration, i.e., those from the administration's party. Similarly, no matter how high approval, a significant opposition will remain (Edwards 1989, 109). Edwards (1989, 110ff) did find that support among the president's allies falls the furthest in bad times and rises the least in good times. Conversely, support among the president's opponents rises the quickest in good times and falls the least in bad times.

Thus, the Neustadt-Edwards et al. tack on prestige suggests four basic effects: a "general" effect, a "shift of range" effect, an "asymmetry effect," and a "partisan effect." Additionally, the partisan effect has two variants: (1) as a ceiling on supporter responsiveness or a floor under opposition and (2) improving approval undermines opposition more than it bolsters supporters, while declining approval undermines supporters more than bolstering opposition.

Bond and Fleisher's research represents an extensive challenge to these findings. In 1980 and in 1990, they suggested that as approval increases, support increases only among the president's partisans. Their analysis also suggested that opponents responded negatively to increased approval. These results challenge the possibility of general and partisan effects. They reported uniformly low correlations and statistically insignificant coefficients. Moreover, Bond and Fleisher (1990, 189) tested for the shift of range effect, the asymmetry effect, and the partisan effect yielding no empirical support.

AN IMPROVED APPROACH

While these studies differ in substantive results, they use similar empirical approaches, lacking data about the coalition-formation process itself, i.e., data detailed enough to distinguish between what might be thought of as two separate linkages with prestige. First, we have the standard success linkage already described between prestige and floor support. Analysts have focused on this linkage more for empirical than theoretical reasons. A second linkage involves the administration's ability to convert members from initially not supporting the administration to voting favorably. Call this the "conversion" linkage: members *convert* more readily when facing appeals from a popular president. As yet, no systematic evidence directly addresses this linkage despite its theoretical appeal.

We propose a sequential approach, dividing coalition formation into stages, to address both these linkages. Using data from different stages in the legislative process, this approach distinguishes between the two linkages. The analysis begins by distinguishing between "initial" support and "final" (or voting) support.¹ For data about the conversion linkage, we rely on a combination of standard voting data and administration headcounts.

For headcounts, this article covers five administrations, Eisenhower through Ford, obtaining data from presidential libraries and other archives (see Sullivan 1987 and 1990b). Given the lead time required for archival processing, these data represent all the material currently available.² A bill's first headcount represents initial support. Typically, administrations receive less initial support than needed, reflecting the extraordinarily charged politics surrounding such issues. While most

¹Our approach recognizes that the legislative process generates several temporal distinctions. One, anticipated reactions, comes before initial support. A second distinction comes between initial and final support, call it "intermediate support." Unlike the current approaches, our approach allows for analyzing these other elements (e.g., Sullivan 1992 or 1990a). We assume that anticipated reactions do not play a determinant role in defining initial support. Typically, this data set (as opposed to the standard vote-derived sets) involves only issues on which serious controversy reigns. On controversial issues members will probably not preempt presidential action by reacting positively to anticipated pressure. For one thing, as demonstrated elsewhere (Sullivan 1990b), such anticipated reactions would forego bargaining opportunities.

²For example, the Carter Library, the next in order, has yet to process liaison files. The data includes DDE (77 counts), JFK (36), LBJ (125), RMN (45), and Ford (36). We can estimate whether we have a

headcounts cover both caucuses, some cover only one. For analysis of general effects, we use only whole house counts, but for hypotheses covering partisan effects, we add one-party counts.

The analysis views voting as final support. For each issue, we identified a “critical vote”—the closest vote on which CQ said the administration took a position or those identified as critical in administration documents.³ The analysis then uses the difference between initial and final support as approximating “influence.” We use two comparisons, beginning with raw differences. Since differences may have a strong correlation with initial support (the less initial support the more the final difference), these comparisons may mislead. Thus, we also adjust the raw difference for initial support. We call this adjusted measure “sway” (see Sullivan 1991):

$$\text{Sway}_{\lambda} \equiv \left\{ \left(\frac{\% \text{Support}_{\text{voting}} - \% \text{Support}_{\text{initial}}}{1 - \% \text{Support}_{\text{initial}}} \right) \times 100 \right\}^4$$

Thus, the same 10 point improvement represents higher sway when initial support leaves fewer members to convert than when it leaves many.

Some analysis relies upon Bond and Fleisher’s (1990) estimates of the president’s “core” support and some analysis replicates the Bond and Fleisher research using the descriptive variables they used. In estimating approval, we use the Gallup results prior to the count or the vote, respectively.⁵ Some analysis includes a simple dummy for divided government. We also distinguish between the data to analyze the success linkage and that to assess the conversion linkage. The new sequential approach adopted here, of course, allows for testing both linkages. In most of the analysis, we replicate the methods of Edwards (1989)/Bond–Fleisher’s research.

representative sample by comparing the count distribution to that for roll calls. The table compares roll calls on which the president took a position with each administration’s counts.

Administration	Votes*	% of Votes	% of Counts
DDE	844	21.3	24.0
JFK	560	14.1	11.3
LBJ	1,210	30.5	39.2
RMN	943	23.8	14.1
GRF	408	10.3	11.3
Total <i>n</i> of votes	3,965	100.0	99.9

Note: *Votes reported in Ornstein, Mann, and Malben (1992), table 8–1.

It does appear that the proportions of counts and votes seem comparable, given the agenda differences between administrations.

³Typically, these close votes reflected a very tight situation. See Sullivan (1991), note 6 for details. Average vote splits depended upon between 10 and 25 votes in the House and 6 and 20 votes in the Senate.

⁴A 10-point change from 60% receives a higher score (25%) than that change from 20% initial support (12.5%).

⁵Using moving averages made little difference.

FINDINGS

Our approach suggests several hypotheses:

H1 (General effect): Approval has a positive correlation with success (batting averages) and conversion.

H2 (Shift of range effect): A major “shift of range” affects success and conversion, e.g., improving approval improves support.

H3 (Asymmetry effect): Approval has a more potent effect when it declines than when it improves.

H4 (Partisan effect): Approval ratings among constituency groups have a strong correlation with the members’ tendency to support the administration and to convert.

H5 (Upper bounds for partisan responsiveness): A currently high approval limits the responsiveness of congressional supporters to further improvement.

H5' (Upward responsiveness): Given supporters’ already higher support, improving approval affects opponents more.

H6 (Lower bounds for partisan responsiveness): A currently low approval limits the responsiveness of congressional opponents to further declines.

H6' (Downward responsiveness): Given opponents’ already lower support, declining approval affects supporters more.

General Effect

Table 1 reports correlations between approval, success, and conversion.⁶ The top half of the table repeats Bond and Fleisher’s (1990) three categories of “success” data: the set of controversial votes on which the administration takes a position, a subset involving key votes, and the remaining, less important votes. They concluded that little evidence supports the success linkage. Indeed, while approval has a statistically significant correlation with success scores only on the less important votes, even those correlations have extremely low values, .09 to .15. Examining our more focused subset of “critical votes” does not change the results. The House

⁶Linking approval and conversion poses a methodological question, if we find a prestige effect. When a member converts, how do we assess what generates that conversion? Might conversion result from special favors or varying degrees of presidential involvement (ranging from a mild-mannered note to a genuinely chilling and threatening personal interview) instead of varying approval? Those who find prestige effects in simple bivariate relationships certainly face the methodological burden of assessing such alternative explanations. Since (following Bond and Fleisher) we anticipate no relationship, we do not have this thorny explanatory problem. Obviously, though, if we had found some positive relationship only using process data and sequential methodology would allow for separating out these alternative explanations. The authors acknowledge the suggestion of one referee.

TABLE 1
CORRELATIONS BETWEEN APPROVAL, SUCCESS,
INITIAL AND FINAL SUPPORT, AND SWAY

	House	Senate
<i>Success data (1953–1984)</i>		
All conflictual votes [†]	.09*	.13*
Less important votes	.09*	.15*
More important votes	.08	-.03
Critical votes [†]	.05	.21**
<i>Process data (1953–1976)[†]</i>		
Initial support	.18	.02
Final support	.10	.22**
Sway _λ (conversion)	-.11	.08
<i>N</i>	360	352

Notes: [†]Data from Bond and Fleisher (1990, Table 7.1, 182).

[†]Data compiled by authors.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < .01$.

coefficient has no statistical significance and even though the Senate has a significant correlation, the coefficient itself has a very small value (i.e., .23).⁷

The table's second half reports process data. These also do not support an approval effect on either initial or final support. On initial support, neither the House nor Senate have a significant correlation. On final support, the Senate relationship carries a significant coefficient, but it has a very small value. The House relationship exhibits no significant value. The conversion linkage (sway) in both houses seems consistently disappointing. These results disconfirm a general effect.

Shift of Range—Asymmetry Effects

Table 2 reports on Neustadt's "shift of range" and asymmetry hypotheses. Following Bond and Fleisher (1990), we assess the shift of range hypothesis by dividing bills into three groups based upon the previous six months' shift in approval. Bond and Fleisher note that postwar approval ratings have two regimes, pre/post-1969. Accordingly, we identified as a shift of range any change which reflected one standard deviation from the era's mean.⁸

Using success data only and the "steady" category as base, a shift of range pattern does emerge. In both the House and the Senate, improving approval actually

⁷Correlations perform no better when using a lag or moving average.

⁸For the two eras, Bond and Fleisher (1990, 189, note 13) report the mean and standard deviation (1953–1968) as $-2.2\% \pm 6.3$ and (1969–present) as -3.1 ± 10.9 .

TABLE 2
THE SHIFT OF RANGE AND ASYMMETRY EFFECTS

Shift of Range	House				Senate			
	Success Data	Process Data			Success Data	Process Data		
	Critical Votes	Initial	Final	Sway λ	Critical Votes	Initial	Final	Sway λ
Improving	66.7	37.3	54.6	27.6%	55.6	36.0	51.6	24.4%
Steady	71.2	38.2	55.0	27.2%	58.3	43.8	51.1	12.9%
Declining	71.4	40.0	54.7	24.4%	61.9	46.7	56.3	17.9%

Note: Data compiled by authors.

undermines success. Given the base from which to work, success declined 7%.⁹ In the Senate, the decline represents a 10% loss. These patterns do not support the shift of range hypothesis. While the House conversion results suggest the right direction, the differences, either as unadjusted or as sway, carry no statistical significance. Likewise, in the Senate, the differences demonstrate no statistically significant patterns nor do the variables carry the expected signs. Despite these results, an administration’s best conversion rate does occur as the administration’s approval improves. Thus, the conversion data do not support the shift of range hypothesis. These process data do afford some idea as to why success trends the way it does. In each house, the administration’s *initial* support declines with improving approval while its ability to convert seems to remain fairly constant.

The table also contradicts the asymmetry hypothesis, that declining approval affects success/conversion more than improving approval. The success data suggest that deteriorating approval actually improves success, while the process data clearly do not support any version of an asymmetry effect. Deteriorating approval does not lead to shrinking support or sway.

Table 3 concludes the analysis of these two hypotheses by reporting a multivariate logistic regression similar to that reported by Bond and Fleisher (1990) and designed to assess the degree to which prestige acts as a “contextual variable.” In their model, significant shifts in prestige had no discernible impact on the success of administration issues. These results include shift of range analysis, asymmetry analysis, and an analysis of the absolute approval level (“High”/“Low”¹⁰). The results in table 3 seem consistent with their analysis. Using the same variable coding but

$$^9\text{Adjustment: } \lambda_{\text{House}} \equiv \left(\frac{\% \text{Success}_{\text{increasing}} - \% \text{Success}_{\text{steady}}}{1 - \% \text{Success}_{\text{steady}}} \right) = \left(\frac{66.7 - 71.2}{1 - 71.2} \right) = -7\%$$

¹⁰Bond and Fleisher (1990, 189, note 13) termed prestige “high” (1953–1968) when it exceeded the mean (62.3%) by one standard deviation (11.3) and (1969–) when it exceeded 48.1 by 10.9.

TABLE 3
 APPROVAL AS CONTEXTUAL VARIABLE, A LOGIT MODEL
 OF ITS EFFECT ON SUCCESS, 1953–1976

Variable	Condition	House		Senate	
		Coeff.	Stand. Error	Coeff.	Stand. Error
<i>Presidential approval (current level)</i>					
	High	7.15	20.11	.15	.70
	Low	.05	.53	-1.26	.46
<i>Previous conditions (shift of range)</i>					
	Improving	-.36	.55	-.16	.45
	Declining	.07	.68	-.36	.59
	Divided government?	-1.26	.57*	-.90	.45*
	Intercept	-.12	.43	.41	.31
	% predicted correctly	72.1		64.1	
	χ^2 Log likelihood ratio	113.01		161.56	
	Degrees of freedom	98/5		122/5	

Sources: Compiled by authors.

* $p > 0.05$; ** $p > .01$.

different success data (the “conflictual” votes), the table reports no significant effects associated with approval. Shifts of range have no discernible impact.¹¹ Only the divided government dummy variable performed consistently well.

Partisan Effects

Despite finding weak general prestige effects, Edwards reports much stronger effects when analyzing support using approval among partisan groups. Table 4 reports two kinds of results. The first two data columns report results similar to Edwards’ which support this notion that “constituency group” changes have a reasonably strong correlation with success. Among both parties and within both institutional settings, group approval seems correlated with initial and final support. The conversion effect seems somewhat muddled.

Bond and Fleisher suggest that these kinds of correlations, however, derive from failing to control for party tendencies toward administration support. Partisan levels of presidential approval and support occur simultaneously, generating spurious correlations. Bond and Fleisher recommend a coding which distinguishes only between administration “supporters” or “opponents” rather than party. Table 4 reports the earlier data recoded in this way. Obviously, the transformation eliminates

¹¹The analysis assessed several specifications including more control variables (i.e., agenda size, the economy, party seats, etc.) and shifting range still showed no effect.

TABLE 4
CORRELATIONS BETWEEN APPROVAL AND SUCCESS, SUPPORT,
AND SWAY, BY GROUPS, 1953–1976

	Democrats		Republicans		Supporters		Opponents	
	House	Sen.	House	Sen.	House	Sen.	House	Sen.
<i>Success data</i>								
Critical votes (by caucus)	-.53**	-.24**	-.29*	-.12	.09	.17	.09	.11
Critical votes	-.17*	.02	.13	.24*	.11	.16	.02	.26**
<i>Process data</i>								
Initial support	-.53**	-.16	-.55**	-.48**	.07	-.16	.25**	.25**
Final support	-.56**	-.37**	-.67**	-.32**	.07	.06	-.07	.03
Sway _λ	-.24**	-.32**	-.16	-.08	.07	.08	-.00	-.16

Sources: Data compiled by authors.

* $p > 0.05$; ** $p > .01$.

the within-party effect. These results on success and conversion seem consistent both with the Bond and Fleisher analysis and with the other results reported here. Apparently, little evidence supports the hypothesis suggesting a partisan effect.

Bounds and Responsiveness

Hypotheses 5 through 6' eschew the direct linkage and suggest that approval acts as a context, setting the upper and lower bounds of responsiveness. Table 5 reports on responsiveness, using the distinction between the two postwar eras to define "high" and "low" initial approval and "improving" and "declining" shifts of range. Hypothesis 5 suggests that when improvement occurs on top of already high prestige levels, supporters, already near their limit, would not respond as strongly as opponents. As indicated, supporters *have* reached high initial support (i.e., 65.5%), while opponents average only 14%. On first observation, it appears that the evidence weakly supports the hypothesis about an upper bound for supporters. In the House, for example, while supporters increase their support by 13 points, opponents increase their support by more than 20 points. The story for the Senate, however, does not resemble this pattern: opponents respond only slightly while supporters respond strongly. Both of these data patterns can appear misleading, however. The second half of table 5 presents data on sway, rather than pure difference. Recall that sway adjusts for the *statistical* fact that support can only rise to 100%. Thus, sway represents a useful statistic for separating out the approval phenomenon under examination from the purely statistical one, as well as presenting a good approximation of influence. If we adjust the data using sway, then the differences disappear and a consistent pattern develops. In the House, for example, supporters respond to an improving shift with a 37% increase while opponents only

TABLE 5
 LEVELS OF SUPPORT (SUCCESS LINKAGE) AND SWAY (CONVERSION LINKAGE)
 DEPENDING UPON PREDISPOSITION, INITIAL APPROVAL,
 AND SHIFT OF RANGE BY HOUSE, 1953–1976

Predisposition	Initial Approval	Shift of Range	Success Linkage					
			House			Senate		
			Initial Support	Final Support	Diff.	Initial Support	Final Support	Diff.
Supporters	High	Improving	65.5	78.1	12.6	42.6	63.6	21.0
		Steady	66.3	77.9	11.6	67.6	72.0	4.4
		Declining	—	—	—	—	—	—
	Normal	Improving	59.3	77.3	18.0	59.4	72.3	12.9
		Steady	49.3	70.1	20.8	47.7	68.1	20.4
		Declining	44.6	88.7	44.1	54.3	65.3	11.0
Opponents	High	Improving	14.2	34.4	20.2	23.9	25.6	1.7
		Steady	10.0	23.8	13.8	39.4	14.7	-24.7
		Declining	—	—	—	—	—	—
	Normal	Improving	18.6	33.5	14.9	26.4	45.0	18.6
		Steady	16.2	32.2	16.0	31.6	35.6	4.0
		Declining	16.2	13.7	-2.5	37.0	49.8	12.8

Predisposition	Initial Approval	Shift of Range	Conversion Linkage	
			House	Senate
			Sway _λ	Sway _λ
Supporters	High	Improving	36.5%	36.6%
		Steady	34.4%	13.6%
		Declining	—	—
	Normal	Improving	44.2%	31.8%
		Steady	41.0%	39.0%
		Declining	79.6%	24.0%
Opponents	High	Improving	23.5%	2.2%
		Steady	15.3%	-40.8%
		Declining	—	—
	Normal	Improving	18.3%	25.3%
		Steady	19.1%	5.9%
		Declining	-3.00%	20.3%

Sources: Data compiled by authors.

respond with a 24% increase. The Senate also reflects this pattern. Thus, the data, once adjusted for the statistical phenomenon, do not support Hypothesis 5.

Note that the data do not present any presidents with unusually low approval ratings, so these data cannot test Hypothesis 6. However, table 6 reports data for Hypotheses 5' and 6', having to do with shift of range without reference to initial approval. The results here resemble those in table 5. Clearly, in both the House and

TABLE 6

LEVELS OF SUPPORT AND SWAY DEPENDING UPON PREDISPOSITION
AND SHIFT OF RANGE, BY HOUSE, 1953–1976

Predisposition	Shift of Range	House				Senate			
		Initial	Final	Diff.	Sway _λ	Initial	Final	Diff.	Sway _λ
Supporters	Improving	58.0	75.0	17.0	40.5%	49.5	65.9	16.4	32.5%
Opponents	Improving	14.2	34.4	20.2	23.5%	23.9	25.6	1.7	2.2%

Senate, supporters respond more to improving approval regardless of their high initial support.

FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS

This research note lends further support to the notion that approval has little effect on presidential influence. The process data presented here, data capable of addressing both the “conversion” and the “success” linkages and capable of looking inside the legislative process, presented no significant linkage. What to make of this result? First, this analysis clearly undermines the original Neustadt/Edwards conception of the power of prestige. In all of its forms, the process data did not find a significant approval effect.

Second, this note does not represent the final word. While it contributes to the standard debate over the power of prestige, its results only address a portion of the larger debate. Others, particularly Ostrom and Simon (1985) and Rivers and Rose (1985), using more sophisticated empirical modeling techniques, have identified results suggesting a prestige effect. While both of these analyses rely only on standard data similar to Edwards and Bond and Fleisher (1990) we intend to apply our process data to these more sophisticated operationalizations.

Third, while the analysis presents a more detailed picture of the process, it deals with only a limited portion of that sequence, comparing the initial and final support. It excludes support developed before initiating the process (e.g., “anticipated reactions”) and the patterns of support that occur in between initiation and voting (what might be called intermediate support), and it does not address the strategic questions of agenda size and content (see Gleiber and Shull 1992 for a general discussion). That every administration starts out considerably “in the hole,” as indicated earlier, suggests that anticipated reactions may not make much of a difference. Almost certainly low initial support taps only the administration’s core supporters leaving the vast majority uncommitted. Elsewhere, similar process evidence has suggested the unlikelihood of anticipated reactions (Sullivan 1991).

Mouw and MacKuen (1992) recently introduced the question of linking prestige with agenda control and strategic positioning. With a standard spatial framework, they identified a very weak role for presidential prestige: when the president enjoys high approval, supporters tend to “go for broke,” asking for stronger legislation,

while opponents tend to propose bipartisan amendments. Their findings still originate from members' voting patterns rather than from process data. And given the lack of strong empirical evidence, though intriguing, their empirical results as they now stand seem very preliminary. Nevertheless, their model focusing on agenda formation suggests a potentially important role for prestige within the precoalition stage.

Likewise, Covington and Kinney's (1992) new analysis suggests that popularity may play its biggest role in the legislative process leading up to the decision agenda. For example, the congressional leadership may find it more difficult to ignore the administration's legislation when it comes from a popular president. Clearly this model has a good deal of appeal, it focuses on the process while not losing sight of the output from that process. And clearly, the tack that Covington and Kinney (1992) take suggests an entirely new empirical analysis, one that could easily rely heavily on strategy memorandum among those congressional leaders responsible for organizing the legislative schedule. These kind of data would differ substantially from the kinds of analysis discussed in this note or planned in future developments of this current research agenda. Their analysis, however, would represent an important complement to the process analysis proposed and carried out using sequenced headcounts.

Manuscript submitted 12 July 1993

Final manuscript received 11 April 1994

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