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Source: *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 4, What Do We Want to Know about the Presidency? (Dec., 2002), pp. 647-663

Published by: Wiley on behalf of the Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27552431>

Accessed: 17-10-2017 18:59 UTC

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# Studying the Polarized Presidency

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*For reasons that political scientists do not fully understand, American political elites are now more ideologically polarized than they have been since the end of World War I. This polarization—in combination with the rise of divided party government—has sweeping implications for the presidency. No aspect of executive-legislative relations is untouched. But also deeply affected are relations with the media, with the judiciary, with the bureaucracy, and even the organization of the president's own staff. Presidential scholars are just beginning to grasp these changes. We face an enormous challenge but also a remarkable opportunity. The polarized presidency makes us confront a broader range of the institution's possibilities—and those of American democracy.*

Presidents are at the center of American politics. So to ask, “What do you want to know about the presidency?” is very close to asking, “What do you want to know about American politics?” For me, answering the latter question is easy, and my answer to the first flows naturally from it. An amazing ideological polarization has swept American political elites. What I want to know is this: what is the *origin* of this polarization and—perhaps even more critically—what are its *consequences*, especially in tandem with divided party government? What I want to know about the presidency, specifically, is how elite polarization combined with divided party government affects that institution—which it does, profoundly.

As a shorthand phrase, I use “polarized politics” to refer to the politics of periods when elites (especially congressional elites) resemble two armed camps at the ends of the American ideological spectrum. And I will refer to the presidency, when politics is polarized and control of government is divided by party, as “the polarized presidency.” Thus, the defining conditions for the polarized presidency are (1) polarized elites (especially the congressional parties) and (2) divided party government.

This brief article lays out something of an agenda for studying the polarized presidency. I begin by summarizing some of the evidence showing that the people at the apex of American politics are more ideologically polarized than they have been in ninety years or more. I also review the frequency of divided party government, the second requirement for

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the polarized presidency. I suggest that the combination of polarized elites and divided government is the “double whammy” characterizing American national politics today. Then I turn to the implications of polarized politics for the presidency, which are (simply put) utterly pervasive. The succeeding section touches on the question of history. Here I suggest that we have spent too much effort exclusively on the “modern” presidents, many of whom served during a period of low polarization. We would be well served by becoming more familiar with the presidency from the close of Reconstruction to the end of World War I (or so), when the polarized presidency was the norm. This may strike some readers as a bit perverse, but I hope it is at least thought provoking. The final section deals with methods, not too tendentiously I hope. Needless to say, as a died-in-the-wool “rational choicer,” I have my favorite *way* to study the presidency. But polarized politics is so important and so interesting that all sorts of ways of studying it—historical, qualitative, quantitative, and formal—will be helpful.

### The Rise of the Polarized Presidency

No one can have failed to notice the signs of something unusual, and rather unpleasant, happening in American politics. The impeachment of President Clinton, the hyperbolically partisan language and displays on Capitol Hill, the vituperative tone of dissents in Supreme Court opinions, the mud-throwing displays on media political talk shows, the snide and nasty language in best-selling political journalism—what is going on?

The answer is both obvious and straightforward: American political elites have polarized ideologically to a truly remarkable degree by recent standards. A full-fledged review of the polarization of elite politics is outside the scope of this brief article, though there are some excellent sources.<sup>1</sup> I present just the key points.

*1. The parties in Congress have headed to the ends of the ideological spectrum.* How do we know this? The statistical arca of congressional roll call analysis sometimes make voting scores seem like black magic. Even at its best, roll call analysis has definite limits. Nonetheless, the robustness of the broad results to details of method, plus the confirmatory evidence offered by qualitative historical materials, is reassuring. Well-constructed voting scores provide an invaluable window into American political history.

For present purposes, particularly useful are Poole and Rosenthal’s NOMINATE scores.<sup>2</sup> These scores, based on all roll call votes, provide an “ideal point” or ideological score for each congressman, in two dimensions. For most periods of American history, however, only the first dimension is needed to account for the bulk of the variance in roll call voting, and I use just the first dimension below.<sup>3</sup> This dimension seems to correspond to economic

1. Particularly good are McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (1997) and Poole and Rosenthal (2001). Of historic importance is Poole and Rosenthal (1984), which was one of the first storm signals.

2. Additional details can be found in Poole and Rosenthal (1997).

3. The second-dimension NOMINATE scores generally reflect a regional factor, often racially motivated. For example, two dimensions are needed during the heyday of the “conservative coalition” of Republicans and Southern Democrats from about the early 1940s through the mid-1980s.

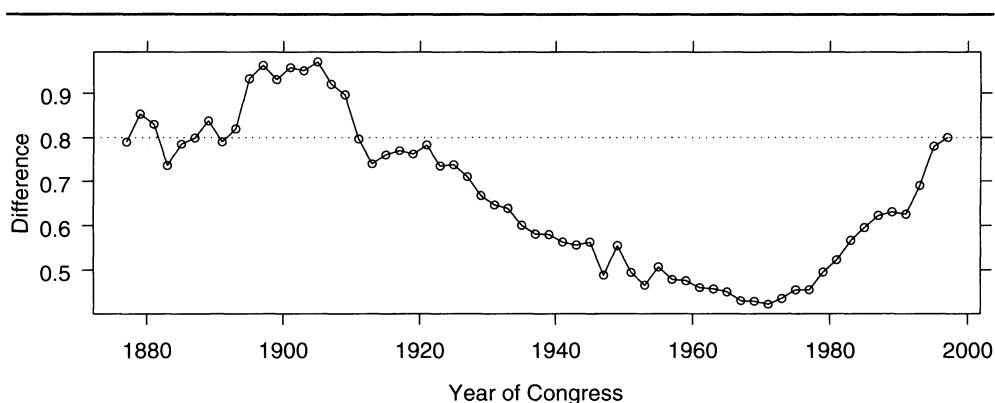


FIGURE 1. Differences in Party Medians in the House, 1877-1999.

issues (liberalism or conservatism) or, under an alternative interpretation, to the “party” dimension. Scores range from about  $-1.5$  (*most liberal*) to  $1.5$  (*most conservative*).

A critical feature of NOMINATE scores is that they are derived from roll calls across many Congresses. Thus, they are available for virtually all of congressional history. In addition, since all the scores for a given chamber are on the same scale (because the scores were calculated using all votes over time simultaneously), the scores are comparable within a chamber over time.<sup>4</sup>

Using the NOMINATE scores, one can calculate various indices of polarization in the House and Senate. In Figure 1, I show perhaps the simplest such index, the distance between the median members of the two major congressional parties in the House. (More sophisticated measures based on formal models of polarization show basically the same pattern.) Roughly speaking, the greater this distance, the greater the ideological polarization in the House.

As shown, in the years since Reconstruction, the low point for congressional polarization occurred in the early 1970s. In the low-scoring Ninety-second Congress of 1971-72, the NOMINATE score for the median Democrat was  $-.232$ , while that of the median Republican was  $.190$ . The difference between the two was  $.422$ , the smallest such distance since 1877.

By this measure, the high point for polarization since Reconstruction occurred around the turn of the twentieth century. The specific Congress in this series was the Fifty-ninth of 1905-6, but all the Congresses from the Fifty-fourth to the Sixtieth (1895-1908) score very highly on this measure.

Do these results make sense? In retrospect, the early 1970s may not seem so pacific. But much of the conflict one remembers involved President Nixon and the Democratic Congress. Within Congress, Southern Democrats and liberal Northern Republicans provided a bridge across the parties, compromises were common because consensus was attainable,

4. Therefore, one need not adjust for shifting and stretching of the scales from Congress to Congress, as one must do for simpler indices like Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) scores or key votes by Congress (Grosseclose, Levitt, and Snyder 1999).

“bomb-throwers” of the Newt Gingrich variety were rare, and politics had a degree of civility. In contrast, politics leading up to and following the election of 1896 was indeed quite polarized. Not only were the scars of the Civil War still apparent, but the transformation of the economy from rural/agricultural to urban/industrial pitted regions against one another, as politicians fought over maintaining or advancing fundamentally different ways of life through monetary and tariff policy. The huge triumph of the Republicans in the House elections of 1894 (in response to the Panic of 1893 and the Pullman Strike of 1894) left a far smaller and ideologically estranged Democratic opposition in the House.<sup>5</sup> Though one might not have picked those periods as the low and high points of congressional polarization, one can see that the measure taps into something interesting.

From a contemporary perspective, however, the most important part of Figure 1 is the period from the low point of polarization in the early 1970s to the present. As the figure indicates, the story of the past thirty years is steadily increasing polarization, a dramatic reversal of six decades of increased moderation. At present, congressional politics appears more polarized than it has been since immediately before the First World War, about ninety years. Congressional polarization has reached about the same levels as prevailed between the end of Reconstruction and the run-up to the election of 1896, a truly remarkable development.

2. *Divided party government is now the norm.* At the same time as congressional politics polarized, another phenomenon with equally important effects emerged: divided party government.<sup>6</sup> For my purposes here, I define divided party government as any period in which the presidency is held by one party and either the House or Senate or both are held by another party.<sup>7</sup>

Figure 2 shows both the incidence and probability of divided party government since the emergence of the party system in the 1830s. Each instance of divided party government is shown by a hash mark at 1.0; each instance of unified party government is shown by a hash mark at 0.0. The undulating line is the fit from a nonparametric, locally weighted regression line showing the estimated probability of divided party government for each Congress.<sup>8</sup>

The figure reveals three eras of unified and divided party governance. The first stretched from the emergence of the party system to the election of 1896. In this period, divided party government occurred regularly, with its probability fluctuating around 50 percent. (The dip after 1860 reflects the expulsion of the South from Congress during and immediately after the Civil War.) The second period began with the dramatic election of 1896 and lasted until the mid-1950s. This period was the great era of unified party government. The first part of the period was characterized by Republican party dominance of the

5. The Democrats fell from 218 in the Fifty-third House to 105 in the Fifty-fourth, while the Republicans increased from 127 to 244. The jump in interparty medians from the Fifty-third to Fifty-fourth Houses, discernable in Figure 1, is due to the leftward shift of the Democrats. For more on the congressional politics of this period, see Brady (1988).

6. For an excellent introduction to the divided government phenomenon, see Fiorina (1996).

7. In my view, the political consequences of split-party control of Congress are somewhat different from those of “pure” divided party government. I pass over this subtlety here.

8. Much the same effect would result from a running average of the 0 to 1 values, but the regression line has superior statistical properties and is just as easy to interpret.

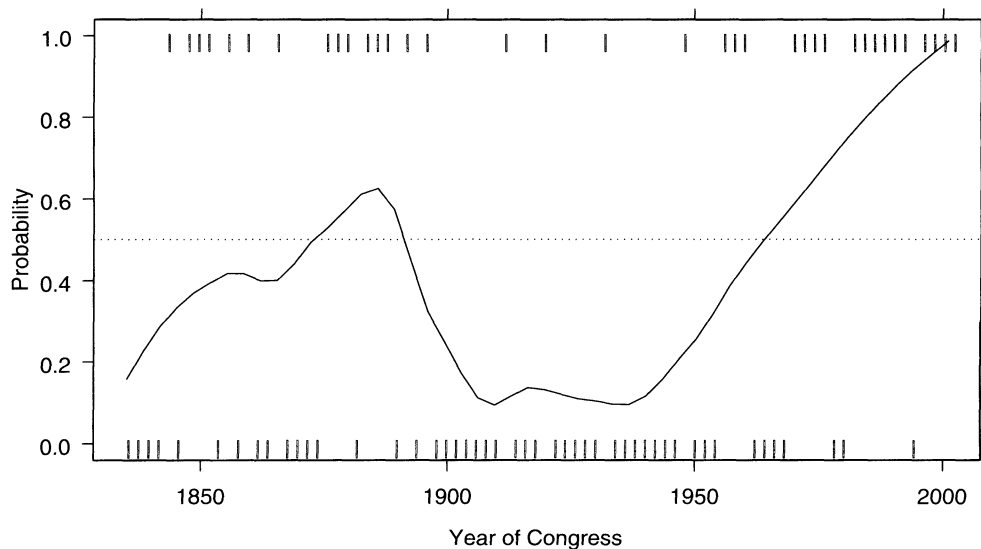


FIGURE 2. The Incidence and Probability of Divided Party Government, 1835-2002.

federal government, the second by Democratic. What was rare was divided party government, the probability of which was 20 percent or less. In fact, divided party government occurred only three or four times during this period, depending on how one dates the end of the era. The three clear-cut cases were Taft and the Democratic House of 1911-12, Wilson and the Republican Sixty-sixth Congress in 1919-20, and Hoover and the Democratic House in 1931-32. The fourth case was Truman and the “do nothing” Eightieth Congress of 1947-48 (actually, quite a productive Congress—but that’s another story).

The era of unified party government drew to a close in the mid-1950s. By the early 1960s, the probability of divided government passed the 50 percent mark and continued to climb. At present, the probability of divided party government appears to be well over 90 percent. A simple comparison of the hash marks at 1.0 indicates that we are living in the greatest period of divided party government in American history. Only the 1880s and 1890s are comparable.

*3. The result: The polarized presidency.* The combination of polarized elites and divided party government creates a distinct period of American politics, and an extraordinarily challenging environment for presidents.

Figure 3 shows the impact of polarization and divided party government on the president’s political environment. The figure shows the ideological distance between the median member of the majority party in the House (measured by NOMINATE scores) and the esti-

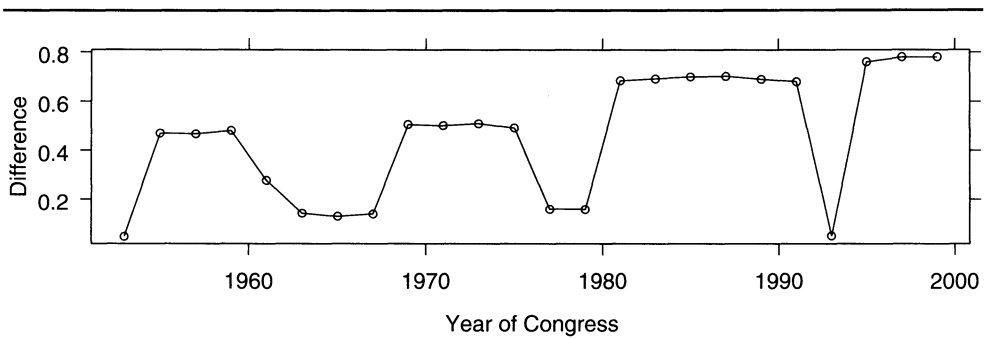


FIGURE 3. Ideological Difference between the President and the House Majority, 1953-99.

mated ideological position of the president on the NOMINATE scale from 1953-99.<sup>9</sup> As shown, this distance was quite small when the House was held by the president's party. But it was considerably larger when the House was held by the opposition.

The figure indicates a distinct watershed in postwar presidential politics. Prior to 1980, the average distance in NOMINATE scores between president and the median majority member in the House was .32. From 1980 onward, the average distance doubled to .65. The combination of polarizing elites and divided party government thus placed presidents from Ronald Reagan onward (with the solitary exceptions of Bill Clinton's first term and a few months of George W. Bush's first term) in a much more charged, confrontational, and hostile political environment.

## Origins

What has caused the polarization of elite politics? There are several possible explanations, but none has yet emerged as really convincing.

Perhaps the most obvious candidate is a polarized electorate: if voters were ideologically polarized, as they surely were in the late nineteenth century when we saw similar levels of elite polarization, then one would expect elite politics to be polarized as well. Unfortunately for this explanation (but perhaps fortunately for American society), survey evidence provides little support for the idea that average Americans are ideologically polarized. In fact, the best available survey evidence seems to suggest the opposite, outside a few notable instances such as opinion toward abortion.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, there is only one group in American society that seems to have grown substantially more polarized over time: strong party identifiers. But this is exactly what one would expect if the parties themselves had polarized absent mass polarization. The people who remain adamant party identifiers are people on the wings

9. These estimates were derived by Keith Poole and Nolan McCarty and are available on Poole's Web page, <http://voteview.uh.edu/>, as are downloadable NOMINATE scores. Poole and McCarty treated the presidents' announced positions as if they were votes in the House, allowing the president to be scaled as if he were a representative.

10. The key reference is DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson (1996).

of American politics. These people still find congenial our relatively extremist political parties.

The absence of mass polarization must be a key element in any satisfactory explanation for today's elite polarization: the key causal mechanism must work *absent* mass polarization.

One possible such explanation is geographic sorting. If the ideologically extreme members of the electorate sorted themselves out of ideologically mixed districts in which they were minorities and concentrated themselves in more homogeneous ones in which they were majorities, this could account for the polarization visible in Congress without increased polarization in the electorate on average. The racial division between suburbs and inner cities lends some plausibility to this explanation, but it falters on the fact that the pattern of polarization in the Senate is virtually identical to that in the House. Ideological sorting by state seems rather unlikely—but some definite evidence on this point would be useful.

Another possible explanation is party control in Congress: perhaps congressmen are the same as they were in the 1970s, but party control has become so strong that moderates are compelled to act like extremists. Reforms that have strengthened the chamber leaders make this explanation worth considering. But again, the polarization of the Senate is difficult to reconcile with this explanation, since few people would claim that the Senate can be ruled with an iron hand. And the extremists on the Right and Left in Congress hardly seem to be reluctant play-actors: they really *are* extreme. Perhaps the organization of Congress plays some role, but a key fact must be that the people in Congress have changed.

The changing makeup of members of Congress thus directs attention to elections, especially primaries. Perhaps primaries have changed so that only extremists can gain party nominations. Still, it is hard to find evidence that primaries have changed dramatically.

Finally, McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (1997) have advanced a particularly interesting explanation. They note that periods of high elite polarization have coincided with waves of immigration and increased income inequality—conditions that have indeed increased since the early 1970s. However, the argument remains incomplete, for it must explain how income inequality polarizes only elites, not the mass electorate. Still, this explanation is probably the leading contender at present.

My own guess—and I do mean guess!—at what has happened goes something like this. There may be no Kulturkampf in American society at large, but surely there has been among American intellectual, economic, and social elites (Himmelfarb 1999). Of course its origins lie in the changes and events symbolized by that inexact phrase “the sixties.” An important part of the story was the initial mobilization of a slice of Americans on the Right during the 1964 election, a phenomenon now being studied to excellent effect by a group of younger historians (Brinkley 1994; McGirr 2001; Perlstein 2001). But the initial politicization of a relatively small number of people by the standards of mass politics was just the beginning. The follow-up was a self-conscious, well-conceived, and extremely well-financed drive among conservatives to create a new intellectual and organizational infrastructure—a drive that succeeded brilliantly. To some extent, the Right's creation of a matrix of intellectuals, publicists, funders, foundations, think tanks, lobbyists, training centers, and political candidates simply mirrored what liberals and the Left had created earlier. But the Right's new coherence further stimulated the Left to bolster its own intellectual networks. Critically, the resulting



infrastructure of politics on the Right and Left is not matched by a similar one in the middle. Moderates simply do not possess and show few signs of gaining the same sort of supportive matrix. Perhaps the concerted, thoughtful, driven, and expensive organizing that is necessary requires a degree of commitment—anger, even—that people in the mushy middle simply cannot muster.

But the Left-Right polarization of cultural elites is not sufficient to explain polarized political institutions. There remains a compelling logic to the median voter theorem (even if rational choice analysts say so). Where moderate electorates exist, one would expect that moderate candidates *ought* to have an advantage. And if Congress and the presidency are held by moderates, then the judiciary and the executive should remain centrist. So a necessary part of the story is the rise of campaign technologies that allow the recruitment, selection, and election of candidates who, in some cases, do not reflect their districts or the overall electorate at all well. The (alleged) increased importance of money in elections—especially centralized money targeted ideologically—may be a key element in this part of the story.

This is hardly a coherent theory of the origin of current American politics.<sup>11</sup> As an explanation for the polarization of American elites, it may be flat wrong. I would love to know the answer! But *whatever* the explanation that political scientists ultimately settle on, polarized elites controlling warring political institutions is our reality, at least much of the time. The consequences for the presidency are profound.

## Implications for the Presidency

The necessity of operating in an ideologically polarized environment affects almost every part of the president's job. I touch briefly on some of the more interesting areas.

### Scandals and Impeachment: An Ever-Present Danger?

The Clinton impeachment seems to have receded from the political stage with remarkable celerity, as Republicans and Democrats both try to distance themselves from an episode that affords little advantage to either (though for different reasons). But what was the systematic meaning, if any, of that sordid chapter in American politics? One's reaction is itself an ideological litmus test. But there are two obvious conclusions that transcend attributions of blame or credit.

First, during periods of polarized politics, impeaching the president—if not convicting and removing him—is a lot easier than one might have expected. A solid and motivated majority in the House is really all it takes. This raises an unsettling question: Could impeachments become a regular part of American politics? Sufficient ingredients would be divided party government, intense polarization, and a Middle East-like cycle of tit for tat: “You did

11. Additional pieces in the puzzle must be the end of the cold war, which dissolved much of the glue uniting otherwise disparate interests across the ideological spectrum (Friedberg 2000); the remarkable religious revival in this country (Fogel 2000); and the Southern realignment (Black and Black 2002).

ours, now watch us do yours.” With any luck, this depressing scenario will remain in the realm of political fiction, but one wonders.

Second, scandals are a genuinely significant part of the landscape during an era of polarized politics. Republican operatives relentlessly bird-dogged every rumor of financial, sexual, and patronage-based wrongdoing in the Clinton administration, seeking ammunition to damage the president, discredit his policies, and drive him from office. (This statement seems relatively uncontroversial to me.) Earlier, Democrats made hay with administrative scandals in the Reagan administration—especially Iran-Contra—though they hung back from the full-court press to impeachment. As I write, the administration of George W. Bush is receiving some hard knocks over alleged financial improprieties of the president, the vice president, members of his cabinet, and top appointees. Perhaps this is a low point for the administration, but it might equally well be just the warm-up to an ongoing search for scandals. In any event, deliberately seeking out and ruthlessly exploiting scandals have become just one more political tactic—an ugly one, but one characteristic of polarized politics.

Perhaps because the topic is so salacious, the politics of scandal has not received the degree of serious scholarly attention it probably deserves. But if scandal seeking and scandal mongering are normal political tactics, like raising money or constituency service, then political scientists need to learn their logic. How should the president try to neutralize this tactic by opponents? What can he do when scandals explode? Conversely, how does an opposition optimally use the ammunition that turns up? And might the president (or his tools) find ways to fight fire with fire?

### **Appointments: Holdup and Strategic Anticipation?**

Appointments during polarized politics have already received a fair amount of attention. This is true for executive appointments in general (e.g., McCarty and Razaghian 1999) but especially for Supreme Court nominees (Moraski and Shipan 1999; Caldeira and Wright 1998; Segal, Cameron, and Cover 1992). But there is a great deal more juice in this orange!

Perhaps the most interesting and provocative notion is some sort of “strategic anticipation” on the part of the president. McCarty and Razaghian (1999) speculate that presidents will schedule their least controversial nominee early, and they find some statistical support for this idea. An even more obvious idea is that presidents facing a truly hostile Senate may moderate their nominees, especially those controlling areas of low priority for the administration. Can the president really get his first choice during polarized politics? Where and when does he compromise? The methodological issues in studying these questions are apt to be intense, but evidence on strategic anticipation and the polarized presidency would be very interesting.

McCarty and Razaghian (1999) have also shown how strategic delay is the tool of choice for sinking an executive appointment. A related topic is the consequences of this tactic: what happens to an administration when its appointees are hung up for long periods in the Senate? Aside from a recess appointment, what can the president do to take charge of agencies whose top leadership ranks remain empty due to senatorial intransigence? What are the implications for governance?

### **Vetoes: A Mainstay of Presidential Power**

I have written at such length about vetoes that I will pass over this subject, except to note the obvious: veto threats, sequential veto bargaining, blame-game vetoes, and override politics all become more frequent, more intense, and more important in periods of polarized, divided party government (Cameron 2000b). I am sure young scholars will find interesting untilled ground here. For example, much more can be done with split-party Congresses. In addition, some in-depth case studies of veto decisions, based on interviews and primary documents, would be useful.

### **Congressional Delegation: Making Do with Less**

One of the predictable consequences of polarized politics is an unwillingness of Congress to grant discretionary authority to the president (Epstein and O'Halloran 1999). There will be exceptions in areas of bipartisan agreement, but this observation is well grounded in theory and historical evidence.

What can the president do about a shorter leash and skimpier warrants of authority? We know that presidents do not issue more executive orders under these circumstances (see below). An obvious alternative is more intense and more effective direction of the executive establishment: using the president's "prerogative powers" as head of the federal establishment to push existing authority as far as it will go—or further. How does this work? How effective is it? How dangerous is it, given the ever-present threat of impeachment? How will Congress respond to this threat to its authority? Whom will the courts support, under what circumstances?

### **Executive Orders: Neither More nor Less, but Different?**

Polarized presidents must fall back on their own resources. Recognizing this, presidential scholars are in the process of creating a rich literature on presidential direct action, especially executive orders (Howell 2002; Martin 2000; Moe and Howell 1999). An interesting finding is that the frequency of important executive orders does not differ that much between periods of unified and divided government, a finding reminiscent of David Mayhew's (1991) celebrated discovery concerning congressional enactments. But a big question is whether polarized presidents use executive orders *the same way* as nonpolarized presidents. When facing a hostile, polarized Congress, do presidents use executive orders to do the same things as when they are not? Do they strategically moderate the content of the orders?

### **Treaties: Changing Content and Timing?**

Treaties present many of the same issues as appointments and executive orders. Do presidents strategically anticipate congressional opposition and alter their content or delay them in the hope of gaining more favorable circumstances? One need not dwell too long on the Panama Canal treaty and the League of Nations to see this as a promising field of

research. More generally, old assumptions about foreign policy need rethinking. Absent the consensual glue of anticommunism—and despite the weaker glue of antiterrorism—what remains of the “two presidencies” thesis?

### **Organizing the Presidency: Taking and Holding Hostile Ground?**

The new infrastructure of polarized politics means that the pool of potential staffers available to an extreme president is richer than it was. Whether the president wears his sympathies on the Right or the Left, he will be able to find intelligent and informed ideologues to serve him. In contrast, a moderate president—if one could make it through the selection process—might have a much tougher time finding good servants. But if the availability of skilled extremists is the upside of the new environment (from an extreme president’s perspective), the downside is the greater difficulty getting the president’s men and women through the Senate, if necessary.

Once in the White House or Old Executive Office Building, extremist staffers will face tough challenges. They will be little inclined to trust career bureaucrats, who have not been nurtured or vetted by the networks of “believer” politics. They will also distrust moderate appointees with their own power base—say, an independent-minded secretary of state. They will be actively hostile to the opposition in Congress. As a result, they will want to ride close herd on the agencies, making sure they follow the party line. But this sort of micromanagement is a huge job, especially if the political jobs closest to the agency are vacant due to Senatorial obstruction. When errors occur—as they inevitably do—the buck will stop at the White House. At the same time, developing new plans and attempting to administer them from the center will be very difficult in the face of continual harassment from the outside.<sup>12</sup>

Attempting to seize and control a huge government perceived as hostile territory requires a large staff. But a large staff of energized “true believers” presents its own problems, including what might be called the “Oliver North/Gordon Liddy problem”: rogue operations trying to circumvent congressional strictures, loopy memos, and vindictive actions directed at “enemies” without and within. The media and the congressional opposition in search of scandal will leap on every blunder, no matter how minor—and real transgressions will provide them with red meat and potential impeachment material. After thirty years of the polarized presidency, these problems are familiar. What to do about them is less so.

### **Reorganization: When and with What Success?**

The spectacular reorganization of federal agencies in response to domestic terrorist attacks will surely revitalize this topic, which has been gathering dust since Jimmy Carter’s efforts (and earlier, Truman’s). In some respects, Congress always reacts in predictable ways when administrations attempt changes that alter the jurisdiction and power of congressional

12. Recall the controversies over Clinton’s behind-closed-doors meetings on his health care plans. Current controversy adheres to the Bush administration’s secrecy over the development of its energy plan: did industry lobbyists write parts of it?

committees. Still, the basic arguments about delegation imply that polarized presidents will probably have an even harder time than those who serve during less difficult periods.

### **Budgets and Appropriations: Deficits and Diversions**

During the era of the Reagan budget deficits, social scientists spilled a sea of ink about the alleged tendency of democracies to run deficits. This cottage industry died out during the Clinton administration, for obvious reasons. Still, there are some extremely interesting questions about tax and fiscal policy and the polarized presidency. To the best of my knowledge, these remain open questions.

For example, McCubbins (1991) suggests that the deficits of the 1980s reflected neither presidential control of fiscal policy nor changes in Congress but the peculiar configuration of divided party government prevalent in those years. In discussion, Barro (1991) faulted McCubbins's implicit model for lack of specificity. Perhaps so, but McCubbins's insight did seem to capture some of the "feel" of the political economy of the Reagan years. Similarly, Stewart (1991) advanced some somewhat similar notions about tax policy.

With the return of 1980s-style structural deficits in the administration of George W. Bush, it seems a safe bet these questions will (and should) be reopened. But now we can take advantage of the additional experience of the George H. W. Bush, Clinton, and George W. Bush administrations. Studies of the polarized presidency and political macroeconomics may be a growth area.

### **Managing Public Opinion: More Leadership with Less Effect?**

Ideologues do not pander to public opinion. They try to shape it, to use public opinion as a weapon in their battles with their foes (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). This fact about polarized politics stands on its head much of the conventional wisdom about presidents and public opinion. But an equally important fact about polarized politics is that presidents will not have things their own way. Because of the new matrix of ideological think tanks and foundation warriors, the president's political enemies quickly have facts, figures, and arguments to counter those of the president. With no monopoly on information or access to the public, presidents will find their capacity to mold public opinion much diminished.<sup>13</sup> In sum, presidents will be increasingly tempted to use Theodore Roosevelt's "bully pulpit," only to find that it has become little more than a noisy corner in Hyde Park.

How will presidents respond to the new era of competitive opinion politics? Will they seek areas where vestiges of their old monopoly power remain? Will they fine-tune the timing of speeches, attempting to offset the counterattacks of their ideological enemies? Will they target key audiences more narrowly or seek new and less cluttered media outlets? Will they focus less on leading the public than mobilizing the faithful?

13. This seems to me an implication of the models in Zaller (1992).

### Relations with the Judiciary: Storm Signals Ahead?

How the federal judiciary fits into the American separation of powers system is a topic of hot controversy among judicial scholars (Ferejohn and Shipan 1990; Epstein and Knight 1998; Segal 1997). So I should be a bit cautious about pronouncing too firmly. But a simple spatial logic suggests that if president and Congress are at loggerheads, an ideologically committed Supreme Court may be tempted to throw its weight to one side or the other, and may have the political running room to do so.<sup>14</sup> Certainly, in the wake of the Supreme Court's breathtaking intervention in the 2000 presidential election, this possibility can hardly be dismissed as a specter. A review of the history of presidential-judicial conflict from the vantage point of polarization and simple models of the separation of powers system would be interesting.

### Presidential Greatness: Gone with the Wind?

In a recent essay, I undertook a statistical analysis of "presidential greatness" (Cameron 2000a). I did this not because I think historians' polls actually measure an objective quality called "greatness." Rather, the historians' polls reflect a particular evaluative benchmark, one based on activist achievement in peace and war. One might call this "the FDR model" of greatness. The FDR model implies high scores for Theodore Roosevelt, JFK, and LBJ and below average ones for Hoover, Coolidge, and Grant.

The statistical analysis produced some clear results: an age of divided party government is unlikely to produce presidencies of the kind celebrated by historians as "great." Strikingly, *no* president who faced a unified opposition for his entire presidency achieved the "above average" rating. Only four presidents who failed to have unified government for their entire presidency have done so. It appears that the polarized presidency means the end of the FDR model of greatness.

Again, some presidential scholars may find this disturbing. But if this is the world we live in—and I believe it is—then it behooves us to understand the strategies and tactics, opportunities and challenges, of presidents whom history has dealt a miserable hand. Trench warfare is not as stirring as cavalry charges, but if it is 1914, studying the latter makes little sense.

## We've Been Here Before—Just Not Lately

The polarized presidency has gradually emerged since the early 1970s. We have learned quite a lot watching it develop. With Clinton and George W. Bush, we seem to have the full-blown article. Still, it would be extremely helpful to have more data, more cases of the full-blown, galloping polarized presidency. Can we get more data?

If one is willing to believe that American politics did not start in 1945 (or even 1932), then Figures 1 and 2 suggest that the answer is yes. As shown in Figure 1, from the end of

14. Some evidence suggests that the Supreme Court tends to lose in confrontations against a unified president and Congress but otherwise fares rather well (Rosenberg 1992).

Reconstruction (marked by the presidential election of 1876) to the election of 1896, one finds highly polarized elites in Congress, at a level very similar to that of today. And as shown in Figure 2, this same period is the only period in American history in which the probability of divided party government approximates that of today. The similarities between the first decade of the twenty-first century and the last decades of the nineteenth century do not end there. Consider immigration, income distribution, technological revolution, large-scale economic changes, political corruption, shady business practices, even terrorism. It is fanciful to claim that we are reliving the Gilded Age—but there are some important ways in which our politics is similar.

So what are the comparison presidencies? After 1896, divided party government became rare until it reemerged in the 1950s. So in some sense, the most relevant comparison yields the administrations of Hayes, Garfield, Cleveland (1), Benjamin Harrison, and Cleveland (2). To this list, one might add Woodrow Wilson's last two years, when he faced a highly polarized, opposition Congress (the Sixty-sixth Congress of 1919-21). Broadly speaking, these presidents faced structural considerations similar to those at present.

Presidential scholars may well recoil from this list. For the most part, the story of the Gilded Age presidents does not make for inspiring reading. Yet it might well be that if one wants to understand the contemporary presidency, almost paradoxically one ought to spend as much or more time thinking about Hayes, Garfield, Cleveland, Harrison, and the later Wilson than more comfortable but arguably irrelevant favorites like FDR, JFK, LBJ, Truman (except for the Eightieth Congress), or Eisenhower (except for 1959-60). In some ways, the 1932-68 experience is now more distant politically than that of the Gilded Age.

A comprehensive and thoughtful study of presidential politics during the Gilded Age—vetoes and veto threats, executive and judicial appointments, the tactical use of scandals and impeachment threats, treaty politics, congressional delegation to the executive, and other elements of the polarized presidency—might well be extremely illuminating.

## How to Get the Knowledge We Need

The emergence of the polarized presidency is such a significant phenomenon, and so interesting, that all sorts of ways of studying it—historical, qualitative, quantitative, and formal—are in order. No individual and no group collectively has a monopoly on good ideas. So there is plenty of work for everyone.

Having made this call for methodological pluralism—sincerely—I would nonetheless feel somewhat dishonest if I did not put in a plug for my favorite style of research: useable theory, combined with lots of data.

What do I mean by “useable theory” about the presidency? As I have argued elsewhere, a general theory about the presidency is so broad as to be vacuous. Such “theory” butters no parsnips. What I want is manageable bits of theory—models—one can take to real data and gain powerful leverage. Particularly exciting are crisp ideas that transport across presidential systems and possibly across history, in form if not detail. Preferable to me are models about

specific, interesting, and important activities that presidents do over and over, because one can test these models against lots of data and, if the models stand up to the test, gain insight into the systematic parts of the president's job. Because presidents operate so often in strategic environments, useful models are apt to be game theoretic. At least, that is my bet.

We have some models like this. For example, presidential scholars have already written an awful lot about the veto game (Cameron 2000a; Cameron, Riemann, and Lapinski 2000; Groseclose and McCarty 2000). Presidential scholars have also done some very interesting work on the "going public" game (Canes-Wrone 2001). We are beginning to get some good models about the executive order game as well (as discussed above). Still, these are the exceptions rather than the rule.

One of the nice things about models like this is that they often are flexible enough to study both polarized and nonpolarized presidencies. For example, in the model of veto politics that I know the best, as ideological distances between president and Congress collapse, vetoes and veto threats simply go away (which is empirically correct). As ideological distances increase, though, interesting bargaining dynamics emerge. Presumably, if presidential scholars had a theory of legislative leadership (which I do not think we do), it might behave in the inverse fashion. Models like this give us tools for understanding the dynamic range of presidential politics.

In short, one part of studying the polarized presidency is creating flexible, useable, game-theoretic models of interesting things presidents do over and over, then confronting the models with lots and lots of data. Some of the most outstanding young presidential scholars today seem to find this approach attractive, so I expect to see more of this kind of scholarship. *But*, I want to emphasize again, the polarized presidency is such a big subject that all sorts of ways of approaching it would be valuable. Sometimes we learn the most from perspectives other than our own.

## Conclusion

In key respects, the world of George W. Bush and Tom Daschle or Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich, is a long way from that of Dwight Eisenhower and Sam Rayburn or Lyndon Johnson and Mike Mansfield. Much of the history of the presidency that we know best and find most comfortable is simply no longer as relevant as it was. As a result, new topics—like the tactical use of scandals—need serious attention. Older ones—like going public and legislative relations—need rethinking and fresh insights. Some of this rethinking is under way. But all in all, the reappearance of the polarized presidency after a six-decade run of increasingly consensual arrangements amounts to a genuine challenge to presidential scholars. Yet this challenge also represents a wonderful opportunity. The range of the American political institutions is very wide, and this is especially true of the presidency. Coming to grips with the new world of the polarized presidency will make us understand the full range of the American presidency far better than we do today and allow us to reimagine and reappropriate American political history in a new and interesting way.



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