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PASSING THE PRESIDENT'S PROGRAM:  
PUBLIC OPINION AND PRESIDENTIAL INFLUENCE IN CONGRESS

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ABSTRACT

Correlations between legislative support scores and presidential popularity do not accurately reflect the relationship between public opinion and presidential influence in Congress. Presidents make strategic choices to expend their public prestige to obtain congressional approval of programmatic initiatives. Previous studies have ignored such choices as well as other features of the strategic environment which tend to lower the apparent legislative success rates of popular presidents. A model of presidential and congressional behavior is proposed and it is estimated that a one percent increase in a president's public support level increases the president's legislative approval rate by approximately one percent (holding program size fixed).

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1. Introduction

Elections, it has long been recognized, do not provide American presidents with clear policy mandates. In part this is because the voice of the electorate is often ambiguous. Elections are a good indicator of voters' general state of mind--whether they are pleased or displeased by the overall course of government policy--but they give legislators little specific guidance on how existing programs should be changed or what new programs are needed. Presidents will read into their electoral majorities what they like, but Congress is under no obligation to take the same interpretation.

The president's legislative program represents one interpretation of what the public demands; the congressional response to it represents another. Political scientists have traditionally shown a healthy skepticism toward the claims of congressmen that they merely give the public what it wants, but this impulse does exist and is reinforced by certain institutional arrangements--most notably, but not exclusively, elections. In this paper we will try to determine how and to what extent the fate of the president's legislative program rests on public opinion. We argue that previous studies have understated the extent to which congressional support of presidential policy initiatives depends on the president's public standing, but have also neglected some of the perils inherent in a presidential leadership style that rests on the president's personal popularity.

Much of the argument is familiar. Twenty years ago Richard Neustadt identified "public prestige" as a source of presidential influence in Congress. While he points out that public support for a president "operates mostly in the background as a conditioner, not the determinant of what Washingtonians will do about a President's request," Neustadt also suggests that "the weaker his apparent popular support, the more his cause in Congress may depend on negatives at his disposal like the veto, or 'impounding.'" (Neustadt, 1980: 65)

The connection between a president's public prestige and his influence in Congress is, according to Neustadt, a consequence of their sharing of "publics." The relevant public varies from issue to issue. On matters of little concern to most citizens, congressmen may be effectively shielded from public opinion. Occasionally members of the public may not be presidential or congressional "constituents" in the narrow sense at all. Foreign policy, for instance, concerns allied leaders and "world opinion"; congressmen may be able to ignore this public, but the president surely cannot. Since their publics do not overlap entirely, there need not be any one-to-one relationship between the president's overall popularity and his congressional influence.

Neustadt does not attempt to quantify this relationship. In fact, he deplors the tendency to "keep scores" of presidential initiatives (Neustadt, 1955: 1017) and stresses that a president's public prestige cannot be translated into precise numbers, even by the Gallup poll. Personal popularity and public prestige, he warns are

not the same thing: in assessing the president's public standing Washingtonians "are no less concerned with what he is liked for, than with how many like him." (Neustadt, 1980: 65) The relationship between public support for a president and congressional passage of his program is subtle and is unlikely to be captured by simple-minded quantification.

Where Neustadt feared to tread, others have been less cautious. Edwards (1976) marshalls the most extensive quantitative evidence on the relationship between public approval of the president and presidential influence in Congress. His results are decidedly mixed. On domestic issues, for example, he find that Gallup presidential approval ratings are correlated with Congressional Quarterly (CQ) presidential support scores in the Senate but not in the House. There is a much stronger correlation between presidential popularity among Democrats in the electorate and presidential support among Democrats in Congress, but this mostly reflects a tendency of Democratic partisans to approve of Democratic presidents and disapprove of Republican presidents and a corresponding tendency of Democratic congressmen to support the programs advocated by Democratic presidents and to oppose those advocated by Republican presidents. Controlling for the president's party, Edwards even finds a negative partial correlation between presidential popularity among Republicans in the public and presidential support among Republicans in Congress.

This study, however, leaves much room for additional work. First, Edwards' measure of congressional support for the president's

program involves a sampling of issues which is likely to exaggerate the extent of presidential influence in Congress. CQ support scores are based on roll call votes on "key issues" on which the president has taken a clear position. They exclude measures which the president supported but which Congress refused to consider or on which no final floor action was taken. The bias in CQ support scores is suggested by an examination of their levels. Even at the height of the Watergate scandal, when Nixon's popularity had fallen below 30% and, according to contemporary press reports, the administration's program was stalled in Congress, his CQ support scores remained above 50%. Regression estimates computed using a censored sample such as this will be attenuated. (Heckman, 1979) The same is true of correlational measures.

The second problem with Edwards' analysis is his reliance on correlation coefficients to gauge the relationship between public support for the president and congressional approval of his legislative program. Though comparison of correlational measures can be suggestive, this method is, for most purposes, inferior to obtaining the relevant regression estimates. There is great advantage in precisely specifying what model we are estimating so we can decide whether or not the model is consistent with the data. Edwards does propose a very simple two-equation model, but this model is seriously underspecified and, in any event, not identified without some overly restrictive (and unstated) assumptions.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, though Edwards is obviously interested in testing

some propositions in Presidential Power, he does not perform tests of statistical significance or even report standard errors for any of his parameter estimates. He argues that significance tests are inappropriate because the entire population--all congressmen and senators--was analyzed. (Edwards, 1980: 113) This misunderstanding stems from his failure to specify the behavioral model he is estimating. Since congressional behavior is to some degree random (i.e., dependent upon factors not explicitly included in the model, but whose effects are captured by an error term with some probability distribution), each observation should be thought of as one realization of a stochastic process. Since Edwards does not report standard errors for any of his parameter estimates it is impossible to judge their reliability.

This paper attempts to correct these deficiencies by developing a more completely specified model and estimating its parameters. It is our view that previous studies have been hindered primarily by the use of inadequate models rather than limitations of the data, though these limitations are serious. We show that it is possible to find stronger connections between presidential influence in Congress and public support for the president--using the same types of opinion and roll call data as Edwards and others--if a richer specification of presidential-congressional interaction is employed. The ideas motivating the development of the model are discussed in section 2 and the corresponding econometric specification is explained in the following section. The data used to estimate the model are

described in section 4. The estimation results are presented in section 5 and some implications of these results are discussed in section 6.

## 2. Sources of Presidential Influence in Congress

By "presidential influence in Congress" we mean the president's ability to obtain passage of his legislative proposals by Congress. His ability to do this depends on what he requests--the form and content of his legislative program--and on the strategic situation in Congress. Neither variable lends itself to precise definition or measurement.

Presidential influence cannot be detached from the content of the president's program, for it is the content of the program which inevitably provokes political controversy. Congressmen will differ among themselves and with the president over what are the proper objectives of government policy. When they are in agreement over policy objectives they will differ over the means by which an objective is to be reached or the priority to be assigned to an objective in the face of scarce government resources. Influence may enable the president to obtain approval of programs whose content is opposed by a substantial fraction of Congress. It is interesting only insofar as it allows the president to substitute his policy objectives and priorities for those of Congress.

To determine whether presidential influence had been exercised in obtaining congressional approval of a presidential legislative request, one would need to know the extent of congressional opposition

to the content of that proposal: where there is little prior opposition to the content of a proposal, there is no need for influence. Similarly, an unambitious legislative program will not provide a test of presidential influence in Congress. A high congressional approval rate of presidential requests could indicate considerable success in overcoming congressional opposition or merely reluctance to press Congress for passage of controversial measures. In operational terms, large programs--as measured by the sheer quantity of presidential legislative requests--are likely to be ambitious ones and vice-versa. When a president offers a large number of policy proposals the likelihood on Congress approving a specific proposal, if only because of time constraints, falls.

In trying to persuade congressmen to support legislation they might otherwise be inclined to oppose on the merits, the president must resort to bargaining and persuasion. The resources available for bargaining define what we have called the strategic situation. Presidential resources include patronage, perquisites, and similar incentives. Public opinion is another important feature of the strategic situation, though it is less obvious how the president might use this resource to increase his influence in Congress.

The president's election victory is of surprisingly little help to him in pushing his program through Congress. Rejection at the polls leaves the minority party disorganized and disheartened, but even a landslide defeat may not strip it of the resources necessary to resist the president's policy initiatives. At the beginning of his

term a president typically enjoys a short honeymoon with Congress during which the opposition party yields some of its prerogatives. But soon relations between the president and his opponents in Congress are restored to the usual pattern of bargaining and persuasion with each side bringing its full array of political resources to battle.

The problem, of course, is that the president, even with public opinion on his side, has few sanctions at his disposal that might make Congress more cooperative. Congressmen, either of his own party or the opposition, do not owe their election to him, nor, if past experience is any guide, can he do much to remove them. Presidential attempts to unseat uncooperative congressmen have a notoriously bad track record. Presidential coattails, if ever strong, are now so weak that, according to Burnham (1975: 412), incumbent congressmen have become quite effectively insulated from the electoral effects . . . of adverse presidential landslides." A congressmen's best chance to ensure his reelection is through constituency service and credit-claiming and it will probably not make much difference to the voters how faithfully he has supported the president's program.

If congressmen need not fear reelection defeat or party discipline if they oppose presidential policy initiatives, how can the president use public opinion as a resource to increase his influence in Congress? The connection, we believe, rests not on any calculation by the congressmen of how his constituents will judge his support of or opposition to the president's program, but on a sense of "common fate"<sup>2</sup> among congressmen based on their understanding of how the

public holds government accountable for policy failures. The degree to which congressional election outcomes depend on aggregate national fluctuations will determine the extent of electoral interdependence among congressmen. The strength of the national component in congressional voting has varied over time (Stokes, 1975) and recently appears to be on the decline, but it still exists and is something congressmen worry about. These swings register public dissatisfaction with the course of government policy. An unfavorable public judgment will mean a loss of seats for the party which currently occupies the White House but will, to a lesser degree, damage the reelection prospects of all incumbents. Incumbents will be rewarded if the public approves of their performance, though it is in the nature of public opinion that punishment for failure will be swifter and more severe than reward for success (Bloom and Price, 1975). Finally, the best barometer of public dissatisfaction with government performance between elections is the president's public standing as measured, for example, by the Gallup poll.

Taken together, these characteristics of public opinion describe a system that is performance oriented and in this case it is the president's performance that matters. As an institution Congress is ill-suited as a source of programmatic initiatives. Congress counts on the president to set its agenda in the form of a legislative program which it can "respond to or react against." (Neustadt, 1980: 7) Congressmen realize that if the president's program fails, the public will, in part at least, also count it as a failure of Congress.

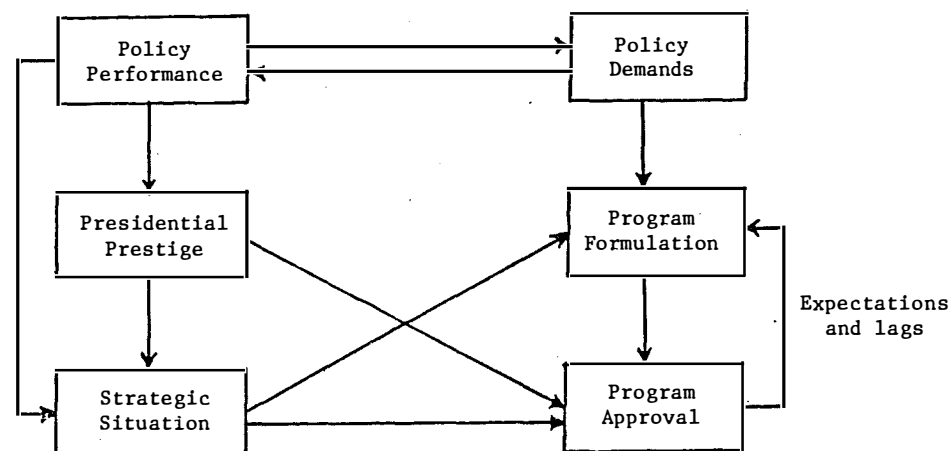
Inasmuch as congressmen share a "common fate" it is the same fate that awaits the president and this connection promotes congressional support for the program of a popular president.

We recognize, however, that the link between a president's public prestige and congressmen's electoral fortunes is supported by relatively weak institutional incentives. When confronted by a choice between supporting a popular president and the clear interests of his constituents, the president's public prestige is a poor match for his or her constituents' interests. But on many issues constituency interests are not easily perceived or irrelevant. When constituency opinion on a particular bill is unformed or the constituency interest is not apparent, congressmen are more likely to defer to a popular president or to go along with the party leadership.

Figure 1 provides a schematic representation of the argument. The strategic situation, which encompasses, among other things, presidential prestige and presidential party strength in Congress, ultimately rests on the retrospective judgments of the electorate about policy performance. The president formulates his program with the strategic situation in mind. When his position is strong--as, for example, when public opinion is on his side--he can use his influence to extract policy commitments from Congress that would not be possible in other situations. The president also takes into account the likely congressional response to his program initiatives; this reflects learning (did Congress approve earlier requests?) as well as expectations of future conduct. But the sort of program the president

Figure 1

## MODEL OF PRESIDENTIAL INFLUENCE IN CONGRESS



finally submits to Congress (specifically, the size of the program) will affect its chances of passage. Hence, program formulation and program approval are simultaneously determined.

Nonstrategic factors also influence formulation of the president's program and may, in fact, counter the strategic factors. Poor policy performance, for example, may weaken the president's strategic situation while it creates demands for policy initiatives to remedy the poor performance. Here lies the dilemma for the president: his influence is likely to be weakest when policy demands are greatest. This is a point we return to in the concluding section.

### 3. Econometric Specification

Translating informal institutional descriptions into a set of estimating equations is a difficult task and it is not necessary, or even advisable, to model all of the interactions in Figure 1 simultaneously. Instead we concentrate on the effects of strategic factors--especially public support for the president--on congressional passage of the president's awareness of these strategic factors in formulating his program. The effect of public opinion on presidential success in Congress cannot be analyzed in isolation, but we restrict our attention to the simplest and most obvious characteristic of the president's legislative program: its size.

The president's program in year  $t$  consists of  $N_t$  requests ( $t = 1, \dots, T$ ). Congressional support for the president on any particular request, denoted  $Y_{it}^*$ , depends on the total quantity of presidential requests for legislative action ( $N_t$ ), the strategic

situation in Congress ( $POP_t$ ,  $PARTY_t$ ,  $d_t$ ), and unmeasured factors specific to the bill (captured by the error term  $u_{it}$ ):

$$Y_{it}^* = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 \log N_t + \alpha_2 POP_t + \alpha_3 PARTY_t + \alpha_4 d_t + u_{it} \quad (1)$$

Here  $POP_t$  is the president's level of public support,  $PARTY_t$  is the strength of the president's party in Congress, and  $d_t$  is a dummy variable indicating the first year of a new administration. (Variables are described in greater detail in section 4.) The particular functional form was arrived upon after some experimentation, though a simple linear specification performed almost as well. We anticipate  $\alpha_1 < 0$  since a large number of presidential requests is likely to generate congressional resistance.

Next, we postulate that the number of requests in the president's program will depend on his prior experience with Congress (measured by the fraction of his requests Congress approved in the previous year, denoted  $\bar{Y}_{t-1}$ ), the party of the president ( $REPPRES_t$ ), and a dummy variable for new administrations ( $d_t$ ):

$$\log N_t = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \bar{Y}_{t-1} (1 - d_t) + \beta_2 d_t + \beta_3 REPPRES_t + v_t \quad (2)$$

Here we anticipate  $\beta_1 > 0$  since the president is likely to expand his program if he was previously successful in obtaining congressional passage of his program.

We do not observe the actual level of congressional support for the president on any bill ( $Y_{it}^*$ ), but only whether that bill passes



or not. (Roll call voting data might be used to measure support on bills which came to a vote, but, as we indicated at the outset, much of the president's program never reaches this stage. We prefer the similar approach of only using the discrete outcome of passage or nonpassage.) Let  $Y_{it}$  be a binary indicator which takes the value one if Congress approves the  $i$ th presidential request in year  $t$  and takes the value zero otherwise ( $i = 1, \dots, N_t$ ). A request is approved if congressional support for that request exceeds some threshold necessary to ensure passage of the request. Since we have free choice of origin and scale for  $Y_{it}^*$ , we may set this threshold equal to zero:

$$Y_{it} = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if } Y_{it}^* > 0 \\ 0 & \text{if } Y_{it}^* \leq 0 \end{cases}$$

Last, we need to specify the joint distribution of the errors: the  $u$ 's and  $v$ 's are assumed to be joint normally distributed; the  $u$ 's each have zero mean and variance equal to  $1 - \rho^2$  and are distributed independently of one another;  $v_t$  has mean zero and variance  $\sigma_v^2$ ; and  $E(u_{it}v_s) = \rho\sigma_v$  if  $t = s$  or zero if  $t \neq s$ . This completes our discussion of the model specification.

Equations (1) and (2) were estimated using the method of Rivers and Vuong (1984). Under our assumptions, equation (2) is already written in reduced form so the marginal likelihood for  $N_t$  is maximized by applying ordinary least squares. The conditional likelihood for  $Y_{it}$  given  $N_t$  is of the probit form, augmented by the reduced form errors from (2):

$$\text{Prob}(Y_{it} = 1 | N_t) = \quad (3)$$

$$\Phi(\alpha + \alpha_1 \log N_t + \alpha_2 \text{POP}_t + \alpha_3 \text{PARTY}_t + \alpha_4 \text{REPPRES}_t + \rho v_t / \sigma_v)$$

where  $\Phi(\cdot)$  denotes the cumulative normal distribution function. Replacing  $v_t$  by the least squares residuals  $\hat{v}_t$  in (3) and applying probit analysis yields the two-stage conditional maximum likelihood estimator. This estimator is particularly convenient since, as Rivers and Vuong (1984) point out, the  $t$ -statistic associated with  $\hat{v}_t$  in (3), is a form of the Wald test for exogeneity of  $N_t$ . That is, to test whether or not program size and approval rates are simultaneously determined, we need only test for the significance of the residuals  $\hat{v}_t$  in (3). In fact, it turns out that the null hypothesis of exogeneity of  $N_t$  is easily rejected, so equation (1) does require this more elaborate treatment. Details of the estimation procedure and its properties may be found in Rivers and Vuong (1984).

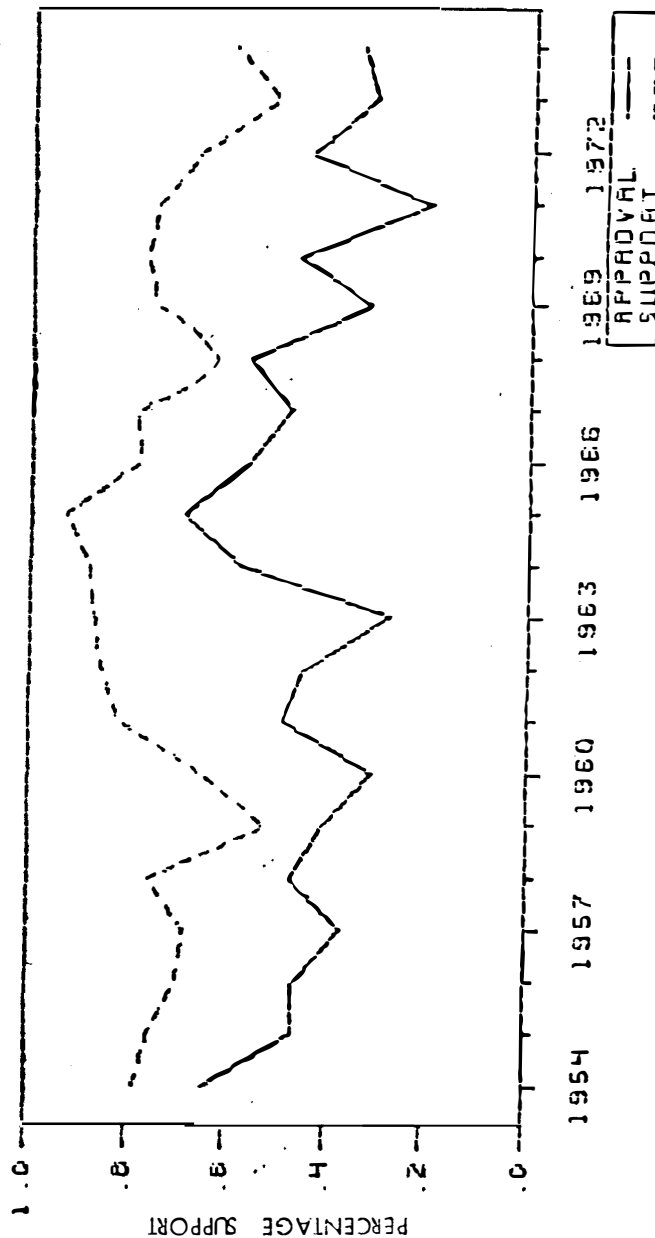
#### 4. Data

As suggested section 1. CQ support scores are a poor measure of the size and success of the president's legislative program. They cannot account for size at all since the number of roll call votes is a function of congressional action and controversy, not of any underlying presidential program. CQ also compiles a "presidential boxscore" which would appear to provide a more satisfactory basis for a measure of presidential legislative success. Included in the boxscore are all presidential requests for legislation and congressional action taken on them by the end of each session. This list includes measures which received no congressional attention, as

well as those on which Congress votes (roll call or otherwise). This measure distinguishes a president who gets 80% of his program to the floor, one half of which passes, from one who gets 20% of his program to the floor, one half of which passes again. Under such circumstances the first president would receive a boxscore rating of 40% and the second a boxscore rating of 10% despite support scores of 50% for both. Figure 2 compares CQ support scores with our measure constructed from the CQ boxscore.

Since CQ counts each detail of programs the president requests in public addresses letters to Congress, and other messages, the boxscores are not a perfect solution to the problem of measuring presidential success in Congress. If the president requests passage of a consumer protection bill, this is listed as one request. If, however, he details each section of a proposal--as did Eisenhower in 1954 with his 19 revisions of the Taft-Hartley Act or Johnson's 18 sections of campaign finance reform--each section will be counted separately. Support scores are also subject to the same shortcomings as almost any measure one could reasonably expect to create. These shortcomings include equal weighting of major and minor requests, the lack of differentiation between top presidential priorities and "off-hand" requests, and the difficulty in determining whether the action taken by Congress constitutes approval or rejection of the president's position (e.g., if Congress appropriates \$500 million for a project that the president requested \$900 million for in a special message). In an earlier version of this paper we attempted to correct for the

FIGURE TWO  
COMPARISON OF ALTERNATIVE MEASURES OF PRESIDENTIAL SUPPORT



first problem by grouping requests which were likely to be considered in one bill and which were in the same subject area (e.g., treating five proposals for small business investment assistance proposed in 1972 by Nixon as one request). The results were not substantially different from those reported here using the ungrouped data.

Since the method used by CQ to compute boxscores through 1953 was not consistent with that employed during the remainder of the study period, 1954 was chosen as the first period of the estimation range. Similarly, the sample period ends in 1974 when CQ discontinued the boxscore series.

Congressional party strength was measured by averaging the percent of the House and the percent of the Senate that belong to the president's party. Presidential popularity is the annual average percentage approving of the president's performance in the standard Gallup poll question.

### 5. Estimation Results<sup>3</sup>

Parameter estimates for Equations (1) and (2) are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Two versions of each equation were estimated, the first using the specification described in Section 4 and the second replacing the party or new administration dummies by administration dummies.

For each percentage point the president increases the size of his program, the congressional approval rate falls between 0.26% and 0.33%. A president who presents Congress with a long laundry list of proposals will tend to have a lower program approval rate than one

TABLE 1

TWO-STAGE CONDITIONAL MAXIMUM LIKELIHOOD ESTIMATES  
OF PRESIDENTIAL SUPPORT EQUATION (1)

Variable	(1.1)	(1.2)
Constant	2.017 (0.730)	2.333 (0.411)
$\log N_t$	-0.832 (0.178)	-0.687 (0.090)
$POP_t$	0.025 (0.016)	0.023 (0.014)
$PARTY_t$	0.045 (0.006)	0.038 (0.024)
$d_t$	0.084 (0.062)	-- --
Eisenhower dummy	--	0.105 (0.069)
Kennedy/Johnson dummy	--	-0.154 (0.065)
$\rho/\sigma_v$	1.028 (0.204)	0.637 (0.160)
Log Likelihood	-3715	-3666

Asymptotic standard errors in parentheses.

with a smaller number of requests. A large program may still be rational presidential strategy since a lower approval rate for a larger number of requests may mean a greater absolute quantity of legislation is passed than for a higher approval rate for a smaller program. We should caution, however, that our analysis does not take into account presidential priorities. In presenting his program, the president may identify certain items as being more important than others and the chances of Congress approving these priority requests may not be affected by the introduction of further requests.

The remaining coefficient estimates in equation (1) generally confirm our prior expectations. A new administration can expect a friendlier congressional response than an old one, though the difference in approval rates is small (about 0.3%) and insignificant. Congressional party strength is a much more important determinant of presidential influence in Congress: increases in the president's congressional party strength of one percent lead to an increase of almost two percent in the president's congressional approval rate. The president's Gallup approval rating shows a somewhat smaller (roughly half as strong as the party effect--about point for point increases), though still substantial effect--on the president's congressional approval rate. In interpreting these results, however, one should remember that Gallup approval ratings exhibit much greater variation than congressional party strength. Over the short run congressional party strength is fixed and midterm fluctuations of more than 10% are rare. From the president's point of view his personal

popularity might appear to be a more important source of influence in Congress. Finally, other things equal, Democratic presidents will generally fare much worse than their Republican counterparts, with approval rates 6% to 8% lower. Of course, other things are not equal. For most of the postwar period Democratic congressional party strength has been between 15% and 20% higher than Republican party strength. Our data indicate that a Democratic president with the usual Democratic congressional support (about 60% party strength) can expect only slightly greater congressional approval rates than a minority Republican president (about 40% party strength). This undoubtedly reflects the heterogeneity of the Democratic coalition. The Democratic "majority" in Congress includes a substantial fraction of southern Democrats who may often act independently of party members from other regions. The more homogeneous Republican party is likely to offer stronger, more cohesive support for a Republican president.

Finally, it is of particular interest that the exogeneity of  $N_t$  is easily rejected. This means that correlations between presidential success rates and program size (or any of the other variables) do not accurately reflect the underlying strategic interactions between president and Congress. Of course, our simple model hardly captures the full complexity of this relationship, but it does show that attempts to describe only presidential or congressional behavior in isolation are likely to be misleading.

The main finding obtained from estimating equation (2), reported in Table 2, is that presidents behave strategically in

TABLE 2  
ORDINARY LEAST SQUARES ESTIMATES OF  
PROGRAM SIZE EQUATION (2)

Variable	(2.1)	(2.2)
Constant	5.264 (0.190)	4.718 (0.159)
$\bar{y}_{t-1}(1 - d_t)$	1.278 (0.362)	1.124 (0.391)
$d_t$	0.518 (0.211)	0.480 (0.243)
REPPRES	-0.549 (0.085)	-- --
Eisenhower dummy	--	-0.116 (0.112)
Kennedy/Johnson dummy	--	0.618 (0.108)
$R^2$	0.828	0.840

Standard errors in parentheses.

setting the size of their programs. An increase in last years program passage rate of 1% leads to a 1.2% increase in program size the following year, other things being equal. Democratic administrations tend to submit much larger programs than Republican administrations with the typical Democratic president submitting over 50% more requests than a Republican president under the same conditions. In their first year, an administrations actually submits fewer requests than it otherwise would, though this is difficult to tell from the table (note that  $\bar{y}_{t-1}(1 - d_t) = 0$  for new administrations; otherwise  $\bar{y}_{t-1}$  usually falls in the range of 0.5). This confirms the conventional wisdom that Democratic presidents tend to be activists and that it takes a new administration some time to put together a full program.

Considered jointly, the equation estimates reveal an important simultaneity between presidential program formulation and congressional passage of the president's program. If they have any success in obtaining congressional passage of their programs, presidents then tend to submit a larger number of requests in subsequent years and receive, as a consequence, lower approval rates. Thus, bivariate correlations between a president's public prestige and congressional approval rates will understate the extent to which these factors are sources of presidential influence in Congress.

#### 7. Discussion and Conclusions

The empirical analyses reported in the previous section indicate that, contrary to some earlier claims, public opinion is an

important source of presidential influence in Congress. Simple correlational measures of the relationship between public support for the president or the president's congressional party strength and legislative success scores systematically understate the strength of this relationship. We have tried to put the study of presidential-congressional relations on a firmer methodological footing by proposing a model that captures some of the complex behavioral processes in the formulation and passage of the president's program, collecting the relevant data, and estimating the model.

That presidential influence in Congress does in fact depend on the president's public standing is hardly a surprising discovery, though we think the implications of this relationship for the way policy is made in the federal government have not been fully drawn out. The fixed electoral term of American presidents frequently gives rise to a situation unknown in parliamentary systems: a president loses public confidence, his popularity falls to 30% or less, and his program stalls in Congress, but a year or more still remains in his term. Short of impeachment, there is no way to remove a president in such circumstances. A leadership vacuum ensues. No other political figure occupies an institutional position sufficient to exercise policy leadership.

Neustadt suggested that presidents closely guard their prestige and power to avoid these situations. While this is good advice for presidents, we doubt that even "experienced politicians of extraordinary temperament" will solve what are more basic

constitutional problems. Though our analyses show that presidential influence in Congress rises and falls with the president's public prestige, we do not think presidents will have much success in converting their personal popularity into congressional support.

The more ephemeral sort of presidential popularity associated with charisma, personal trustworthiness, and similar qualities provides the president with little leverage on controversial policy issues. When asked why his Gallup poll rating had fallen from 79% to 69%, John Kennedy, who understood these matters as well as anyone, commented:

I think that if I were still at 79 percent after a very intense congressional session I would feel that I had not met my responsibilities. The American people are rather evenly divided on a great many issues, and as I make my views clearer on these issues, of course, some people increasingly are not going to approve of me. (quoted in Chase and Lerman, 1965: 292)

When voters judge government performance a failure, they will not concern themselves very much with the president's personal qualities. A president with an ambitious program must count on successful performance to maintain his public support and buttress his influence in Congress.

Yet it is when policy demands are greatest that the president's public standing is likely to be the lowest. The public tends to rally to the president's support in short crises, but after a long period of a slack economy or runaway inflation the president will have few defenders. There is one important exception to this pattern. A new administration will not be blamed for the previous

administrations's failures. New presidents usually start their terms with great public prestige and Congress is more willing than to accomodate presidential requests. But transitions are difficult and the new administration needs some time to put together its program. Time, however, is one thing it doesn't have. The president's public support almost invariably falls and soon the previous administrations's failures become its own.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Namely, that the disturbance covariance matrix is diagonal so that the system of equations is recursive.
2. The phrase is D.T. Campbell's (1958). The reference was kindly provided by Doug Price and Hayward Alker.
3. Variable effects are calculated by computing partial derivatives. In a probit equation,  $\text{Prob}(y_t = 1 | x_t) = \Phi(\beta'x_t)$ , we have:

$$\frac{\partial \text{Prob}(y_t = 1 | x_t)}{\partial x_{tk}} = \beta_k \phi(\beta'x_t) \approx 0.4\beta_k$$

if we evaluate the normal density function  $\phi(\cdot)$  at  $\beta'x_t = 0$ . For an equation in semilog form,  $\log y_t = \beta'x_t$ , such as (2):

$$\frac{\Delta y_t}{y_t} \approx \frac{1}{Y_t} \frac{\partial Y_t}{\partial x_{tk}} = \frac{\partial \log Y_t}{\partial x_{tk}} = \beta_k$$

where  $\Delta y_t$  is the change induced by increasing  $x_{tk}$  one unit.

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