Presidential-Congressional Relations in an Era of Polarized Parties and a 60-Vote Senate

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American Gridlock: Causes, Characteristics, and Consequences of Polarization
American University
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Basics of Presidential-Congressional Relations

- The president needs Congress to vote to support his positions
  - It’s a hard sell
  - Some presidents are more successful than others

- Party control of Congress is the **most important determinant** of success
  - The president wins more roll calls if his party has a majority
  - The advantage of majority control is less in the Senate
    Or more accurately: the *disadvantage* of minority status is less in the Senate

- Party Polarization in Congress has altered this relationship
  - Different effects in the House & Senate
  - Majority presidents still win more often in both chambers, but polarization
  - **Amplifies** the benefit of majority control in the House:
    - Majority presidents win more; minority presidents win (a lot) less
  - **Suppresses** success rates of both majority & minority presidents in the Senate
The Puzzle

Why does polarization suppress presidential success in the Senate?

The short answer:
(paraphrasing a motivational line from Clinton’s campaign book)
“It’s the minority *Party* filibuster stupid”
Evidence of the Minority Party Filibuster

- Exponential increase in cloture votes over time (Fig. 1)
- Before Clinton cloture less common on presidential roll calls (Fig. 2)
- Institutionalization of 60-vote Senate by George W. Bush administration
- Transformed filibuster & cloture into Minority *Party* tool (Fig. 3)
Figure 1
Cloture Votes on Senate Roll Calls (by presidential administration)
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Cloture Votes on Senate Roll Calls (by presidential administration)

y = 0.00005x^2 - 0.00009x + 0.00275
R² = 0.96653

y = 0.0008x + 0.0231
R² = 0.1711

DDE
JFK/LBJ
RMN/GRF
JEC
RWR
GHWB
WJC
BHO

Cloture on all roll calls
Other super-maj pres roll calls

0%
10%
20%
30%
40%

0% 10% 20% 30% 40%

Year
Percentage
Evidence of Minority Party Filibuster

- Exponential increase in cloture votes over time (Fig. 1)

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Cloture Votes on Senate Roll Calls (by presidential administration)
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Cloture and Cloture-Related Votes on Presidential Roll Calls
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Figure 2
Cloture and Cloture-Related Votes on Presidential Roll Calls

- DDE, 0.0%
- JFK/LBJ, 1%
- RMN/GRF, 1%
- JEC, 1%
- RWR, 3%
- GHWB, 6%
- BHO, 15%
- GWB w/ UCA60, 30%
- BHO w/ UCA60, 34%
- Other super-major pres roll calls

Year:
Percentage:
0% 10% 20% 30% 40%
Figure 2
Cloture and Cloture-Related Votes on Presidential Roll Calls

Year


Percentage

0% 10% 20% 30% 40%

Cloture on all roll calls

Other super-majority president roll calls

DDE, 0.0%
JFK/LBJ, 1%
RMN/GRF, 1%
JEC, 1%
RWR, 3%
GHWB, 6%
GHWB, 10%
BHO, 15%
WJC, 10%
GWB, 23%
GWB w/ UCA60, 30%
BHO w/ UCA60, 34%

Evidence of Minority Party Filibuster

- Exponential increase in cloture votes over time (Fig. 1)

- Before Clinton, cloture less common on presidential roll calls (Fig. 2)

- Institutionalization of 60-vote Senate by George W. Bush administration

- Transformed filibuster & cloture into Minority *Party* tool
  - No formal change in cloture rule (or its interpretation until Nov. 2013 nuclear option)
  - But behavior changed—voting on presidential roll calls has become highly partisan
    - Partisanship increased on all types of presidential roll calls
    - Especially high on cloture votes (Fig. 3)
Figure 3
High Party Unity on Cloture and Other Presidential Roll Calls

- Cloture
- Other supermajority votes
- Majority votes

Percent of Votes with Party Difference GT .80

Cloture
Other supermajority votes
Majority votes

DDE  JFK/LBJ  RMN/GRF  JEC  RWR  GHWB  WJC  GWB  BHO

Percent of Votes with Party Difference GT .80
How Does Polarization Affect Presidential Success?

- House: **Augments** advantage of majority control
  - As polarization increases, majority presidents win more; minority presidents win less (Fig. 4a)
Figure 4a
The Effects of Party Polarization on House Presidential Success

The figure illustrates the relationship between party polarization and presidential success in the House. The scatter plot shows the percentage of party votes against the presidential success rate. Two regression lines are depicted:

- **Minority Presidents**: $y = -1.10x + 1.18$, with $R^2 = 0.63$.
- **Majority Presidents**: $y = 0.55x + 0.42$, with $R^2 = 0.44$.

The data points indicate a trend where party polarization affects presidential success, with minority presidents experiencing a greater impact compared to majority presidents.
Figure 4a
The Effects of Party Polarization on House Presidential Success

\[ y = 0.55x + 0.42 \]
\[ R^2 = 0.44 \]
Figure 4a
The Effects of Party Polarization on House Presidential Success

Majority Presidents
\[ y = 0.55x + 0.42 \]
\[ R^2 = 0.44 \]

Minority Presidents
\[ y = -1.10x + 1.18 \]
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Figure 4a
The Effects of Party Polarization on House Presidential Success

Majority Presidents
\[ y = 0.55x + 0.42 \]
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Minority Presidents
\[ y = -1.10x + 1.18 \]
\[ R^2 = 0.63 \]
How Does Polarization Affect Presidential Success?

- Senate: **Suppresses** presidential success
  - As polarization increases, success rates of both majority & minority presidents decrease (Fig. 4b)

- If it’s the filibuster & cloture, then the pattern on non-cloture votes should look more like the House (Fig. 4c)

- And the pattern of presidential success on cloture votes, should be a mirror image of the House (Fig. 4d)
Figure 4b
The Effects of Party Polarization on Senate Presidential Success

Minority Presidents
\[ y = -0.33x + 0.77 \]
\[ R^2 = 0.10 \]

Majority Presidents
\[ y = -0.21x + 0.90 \]
\[ R^2 = 0.06 \]
Figure 4b
The Effects of Party Polarization on Senate Presidential Success

Minority Presidents
\[ y = -0.33x + 0.77 \]
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Majority Presidents
\[ y = -0.21x + 0.90 \]
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The Effects of Party Polarization on Senate Presidential Success

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  \( R^2 = 0.10 \)

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  \( y = -0.21x + 0.90 \)
  \( R^2 = 0.06 \)
How Does Polarization Affect Presidential Success?

- Senate: Suppresses Success Rates
  - As polarization increases, Success rates of both majority & minority presidents decrease (Fig. 4b)

- If the minority party filibuster is the cause, then the pattern on non-cloture votes should look more like the House (Fig. 4c)

- And the pattern of presidential success on cloture votes, should be a mirror image of the House (Fig. 4d)
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The Effects of Party Polarization on House Presidential Success

Majority Presidents
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Figure 4b
The Effects of Party Polarization on Senate Presidential Success

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\[ y = -0.33x + 0.77 \]
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**Majority Presidents**
\[ y = -0.21x + 0.90 \]
\[ R^2 = 0.06 \]
Figure 4c
The Effects of Party Polarization on Senate Presidential Success (Non-cloture)
How Does Polarization Affect Presidential Success?

- Senate: Suppresses Success Rates
  - As polarization increases, success rates of both majority & minority presidents decrease (Fig. 4b)

- If it’s the filibuster & cloture, then the pattern on non-cloture votes should look more like the House (Fig. 4c)

- And the pattern of presidential success on cloture votes, should be a mirror image of the House (Fig. 4d)

- Why is a 60-vote Senate so hard on majority presidents? It’s just simple arithmetic of the minority party filibuster (Table 1)
Figure 4a
The Effects of Party Polarization on House Presidential Success

- Minority Presidents: \( y = -1.10x + 1.18 \)
  \( R^2 = 0.63 \)

- Majority Presidents: \( y = 0.55x + 0.42 \)
  \( R^2 = 0.44 \)
Figure 4d
The Effects of Party Polarization on Senate Presidential Success (Cloture)

Minority Presidents
\[ y = 2.06x - 0.78 \]
\[ R^2 = 0.50 \]

Majority Presidents
\[ y = -0.74x + 0.74 \]
\[ R^2 = 0.19 \]
How Does Polarization Affect Presidential Success?

- Senate: Suppresses Success Rates
  - As polarization increases, success rates of both majority & minority presidents decrease (Fig. 4b)

- If it’s the filibuster & cloture, then the pattern on non-cloture votes should look more like the House (Fig. 4c)

- And the pattern of presidential success on cloture votes, should be a mirror image of the House (Fig. 4d)

- Why is a 60-vote Senate so hard on majority presidents? It’s just simple arithmetic of the minority party filibuster (Table 1)
### Table 1
Presidential Positions on Cloture Votes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Minority Presidents</th>
<th>Majority Presidents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nay</td>
<td>Yea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Bush Years</td>
<td>67.8%</td>
<td>95.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(40/59)</td>
<td>(44/46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bush/Obama Years</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
<td>97.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(30/36)</td>
<td>(81/83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Years</td>
<td>73.7%</td>
<td>96.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(70/95)</td>
<td>(125/129)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Presidents win 93% if they opposed invoking cloture vs. 15% if they support it
  - It’s a lot easier to win if you only need 41 votes rather than 60
- Minority party presidents usually oppose invoking cloture (74% nay positions)
  - Increased from 68% in pre-Bush years to 83% for Bush & Obama
- Majority party presidents almost always support cloture (97% yea positions)
  - Not much room to increase in recent years (96% to 98%)
  - But Bush & Obama took positions on 83 cloture votes vs. 46 in pre-Bush years
Conclusions

- Party polarization: different effects on presidential success in the House & Senate

- House:
  - As parties become more cohesive, party control becomes more important—majority party presidents win more; minority party presidents win less
  - Why?
    - House is a majoritarian institution
    - Cohesive majorities help majority presidents & hinder minority presidents

- Senate:
  - As parties become more cohesive, both majority & minority presidents win less
  - Why?
    - Senate is a super-majoritarian institution
    - Cohesive parties hinder both majority & minority presidents
      - Majority presidents less likely to get opposition votes necessary to invoke cloture
      - Minority presidents less able to impede scheduling of objectionable floor votes
Thank you

Jon, Rich, and Jeff
Figure 1
Partisanship on Presidential Roll Calls in the House and Senate
Figure 3a
Partisanship on Cloture and Other Presidential Votes

- Cloture
- Other supermajority votes
- Majority votes

Mean Difference in Party Positions

- DDE
- JFK/LBJ
- RMN/GRF
- JEC
- RWR
- GHWB
- WJC
- GWB
- BHO
The Measures

- **Dependent Variable: Presidential Success Score**
  - Annual percentage of presidential victories on conflictual roll calls, 1953-2013

- **Party Control**
  - 1 if president’s party controls the chamber; 0 otherwise
  - Why not use interval measure w/ more information (percent of president’s party)?
    - More on this shortly

- **Party Polarization**
  - Annual percentage of conflictual roll calls w/ majority of Dems. vs. majority of Reps.
  - Exclude consensus roll calls (less than 10% in the minority)
  - Interpretation: percentage of all conflict on roll call votes that is party conflict

- **Presidential popularity**
  - Average annual percentage approving of the president’s job performance (Gallup)
Wouldn’t it be better to use percent of the president’s party?

- Dichotomous party control variable throws out information
  - Standard practice is to use percent of the president’s party

- Does the interval measure add *useful* information over the simple majority/minority dichotomy?
  - Not much
  - Primary benefit of party control = president’s co-partisans control key levers of power (committees; agenda control)

- Let’s look at some evidence (Table 1)
Table 1
The Effects of Party Control & the President’s Party Margin on Presidential Success in the House & Senate, 1953-2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>House</th>
<th>Senate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Party Control (majority party president = 1)</td>
<td>38.49</td>
<td>11.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5.57)</td>
<td>(2.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President’s Party Margin (President’s party % - Opposition party %)</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>0.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(-0.71)</td>
<td>(2.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>41.24</td>
<td>55.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(11.36)</td>
<td>(18.77)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significant coefficient for president’s party margin in the Senate

- Implies that percent of president’s party has independent effects in the Senate
- Magnitude of effect seems similar to party control dummy
- Plot of the relationships suggests a different interpretation

*t-values in parentheses*
Figure 1
The Relationship between Party Control & Presidential Success in the House

Overall

\[ y = 0.73x + 58.68 \]

\[ R^2 = 0.39 \]
Figure 1
The Relationship between Party Control & Presidential Success in the House

Overall
\[ y = 0.73x + 58.68 \]
\[ R^2 = 0.39 \]

Minority Presidents
\[ y = -0.19x + 40.27 \]
\[ R^2 = 0.01 \]
Figure 1
The Relationship between Party Control & Presidential Success in the House

Overall
\[ y = 0.73x + 58.68 \]
\[ R^2 = 0.39 \]

Majority Presidents
\[ y = -0.07x + 78.71 \]
\[ R^2 = 0.01 \]

Minority Presidents
\[ y = -0.19x + 40.27 \]
\[ R^2 = 0.01 \]
Figure 2
The Relationship between Party Control & Presidential Success in the Senate

Overall

\[ y = 0.66x + 61.02 \]

\[ R^2 = 0.42 \]
Figure 2
The Relationship between Party Control & Presidential Success in the Senate

Minority Presidents
\[ y = 0.55x + 57.85 \]
\[ R^2 = 0.13 \]

Overall
\[ y = 0.66x + 61.02 \]
\[ R^2 = 0.42 \]
Figure 2
The Relationship between Party Control & Presidential Success in the Senate

Minority Presidents
\[ y = 0.55x + 57.85 \]
\[ R^2 = 0.13 \]

Majority Presidents
\[ y = 0.27x + 69.49 \]
\[ R^2 = 0.05 \]

Overall
\[ y = 0.66x + 61.02 \]
\[ R^2 = 0.42 \]