Presidential Position Taking and the Puzzle of Representation

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A significant debate rages in the literature. Although going public success is a function of mass public support for a policy, presidents respond to partisan liberalism in their public rhetoric. This presents a puzzle: how do presidents reconcile their need to target policies that are popular with the mass public to go public successfully, when they respond primarily to partisan opinion in their speeches? Our comparison of the president’s policy proposals from 1989 through 2008 with both centrist and partisan public opinion reveals that presidents are more partisan than centrist in their policy priorities, which adds weight to the partisan representation side of this debate.

The president’s representational responsibilities are unique and varied. Because a national constituency elects the president, the centrist model of representation contends that presidents must respond to and lead the entire nation. Woodrow Wilson (1961, 67-68) observed this when he wrote that as “political leader of the nation,” the president is “representative of no constituency but of the whole people.” James MacGregor Burns (1973, 106) echoed this perception: “the President is custodian of popular safety, national destiny, and the conscience of the people.” Consistent with the centrist view of representation, numerous scholars have found that presidents are highly responsive to changes in national public mood (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Jacobs 1992; Stimson, Erikson, and MacKuen 1995), respond to the national public concerns about foreign and economic issues (Cohen 1999), and respond to national public preferences conditionally, by issue area, popularity, and the president’s electoral cycle (Canes-Wrone and Shotts 2004; Rottinghaus 2006).

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AUTHORS’ NOTE: We thank Paul Collins and an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments. We appreciate Jun-deh Wu’s assistance with data collection.
Being a partisan political figure, the president also represents party interests (Skinner 2008). This partisan model of representation holds that presidents must consider their partisan’s policy preferences to win their party’s nomination (see Key 1964), and the president’s success in Congress is predicated on party control (Bond and Fleisher 1990; Edwards 1989). Unsurprisingly, party predicts presidential liberalism and contributes to presidential representation of public opinion (Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995). Wlezien (1996), in particular, finds that the president’s party affiliation is a strong indicator of representation on defense spending in the 1970s and 1980s. Wood (2009) not only shows that the partisan model best explains the relationship between presidential liberalism and public mood, but, consistent with Wlezien’s (1995) thermostatic model of representation, he also demonstrates that the national public does not follow, but rather tends to move away from the president’s policy liberalism over time.

Yet, debate persists on two levels regarding the president’s responsiveness to public opinion. First, despite the plausibility that presidents may prefer taking positions on partisan issues and recent evidence that confirms this tendency (Wood 2009), most research that considers presidential-public relationships builds upon the centrist model of representation, that presidents represent the nation. Canes-Wrone’s (2006) strategic model of going public, for example, hinges on presidential leadership of issues that are popular with the mass public. Canes-Wrone and Shotts (2004) also develop a model of centrist presidential representation. Still others argue that presidents may try to satisfy both constituencies by switching their support between mass and partisan public opinion (Druckman and Jacobs 2006; Pious 1996, 184), but this is not without costs, as the public shifts its support away from the president when he takes partisan positions (Wood 2009, 158). Second, public opinion is measured in both aggregated, ideological ways (Simson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995; Wood 2009; Wood and Lee 2009) and directly through public opinion polling (Canes-Wrone and Shotts 2004; Rottinghaus 2006). Despite having certain advantages, these alternative measures may produce different conclusions about presidential representation.

Since presidents have myriad reasons to represent partisans and there are multiple ways to measure representation, reexamining presidential representation may clarify the role presidential partisans play in the president’s policy positions. The purpose of this article is to build on the existing literature by analyzing the impact of mass and partisan opinion on the representational position taking of several presidents. We ask, do presidents tend to be more representative of mass or partisan publics on their specific policy positions? And what factors explain this behavior? We first catalog presidential partisan and national representation according to the president’s publicly stated positions on specific policies from 1989 to 2008. We then match the president’s positions with national and partisan survey responses to those issues and indicate whether a majority of the national or partisan public supported the president. Our theoretical framework, adapted from Canes-Wrone and Shotts (2004) and Wood (2009), illustrates that presidents are more representative of partisan than national preferences and are most representative of partisan preferences when they are popular during presidential reelection years.
This topic is important for several reasons. First, the type and quality of representation is fundamental to exploring the effectiveness of a democracy. A tradition of democratic theory assumes that presidents represent the nation. But if they do not, we may wish to revisit what a partisan representational presidency means for presidential responsiveness, presidential speechmaking, and legislative success. Second, the tendency for presidents to represent the masses or their partisans is important for how presidents lead as the only nationally elected official in the United States. If we find more evidence of partisan than centrist leadership, this raises questions about the conditions under which presidents may actually represent the nation and not their partisans. Third, the relative balance between partisan and centrist presidential representation may encourage researchers to ask whether presidents can successfully go public on partisan issues, or whether they are bound to speak on issues that have majority support of the mass public.

Centrist and Partisan Presidential Representation

Presidential representation may be conceived of in two forms. On the one hand, according to the centrist model of representation, presidents take issue positions that are congruent with a majority of the mass public to build favorable approval ratings, which assist in the president’s policy and reelection goal achievement. Presidents who are more popular with the American people stand a better chance of influencing Congress (Neustadt 1990). If presidents hope to win reelection, having a majority of Americans approve of the president’s job performance predicts reelection victory (Holbrook 1994), especially as reelection day nears. Indeed, one constant of political representation in the United States is that it varies by electoral cycle. As scholars have repeatedly shown that senators become more representative of their constituents as their reelection campaign nears (Elling 1982; Kuklinski 1978), so too has scholarship begun to test the variation in presidential representation by proximity to Election Day.

In a seminal article, Canes-Wrone and Shotts (2004) (or CWS, hereafter) held that presidents are more likely to take positions popular with a majority of the public during the second half of their first term in office. Simply, presidents appeal (or even pander) to the public when Election Day nears so as to maximize voter support. Yet proximity to reelection year is only one factor in the president’s decision calculus. The president’s likelihood of advocating policies that are congruent with a majority of public opinion tends to be conditional on his current popularity. CWS demonstrated that presidents with below (above) average approval are more (less) likely to be congruent with national public opinion as their reelection nears. In other words, presidents take positions popular with the majority when they are unpopular to improve their popularity and chances for reelection.

On the other hand, presidents are responsive to partisan publics. Wood (2009) illustrates that presidents are more likely to respond to trends in partisan, not mass public opinion. Bailey, Sigelman, and Wilcox (2003) find that Democrats were more likely to support President Bill Clinton’s policy on gays in the military. Murray (2006) notes that President Ronald Reagan was more responsive to Republican Party activists (see also
Druckman and Jacobs 2011). In addition, Miller and Sigelman (1978) report that President Lyndon Johnson tailored his public statements on Vietnam to the hawkish or dovish partisan Democratic audience to whom he was speaking. Signals sent to core political consistencies are often as important as leading public opinion in the aggregate sense and is often easier for the White House to accomplish.

There are several reasons why presidents should be representative of partisan opinion. If presidents have to bargain with Congress to achieve their legislative goals while also desiring reelection, they will be more interested in responding to preference of active segments of their party. These individuals should be more proactive in the reelection process than the masses who may be placated with general ideological representation through rhetoric or symbolic actions (Druckman and Jacobs 2006). Especially when the president is in the majority, he has less incentive to respond to the opinions of the median voter but prefers to maintain his majority by responding to partisan preferences (Wood 2009). And when presidents are confronted with a reluctant and inattentive public (Edwards 2003), there are still critical issue publics that pay attention to the president. Presidents find partisan publics to be receptive audiences when attempting to build support for their policies (Brace and Hinckley 1992; Heith 2004; Rottinghaus 2006). It may also follow that if presidential rhetoric does not persuade the nation to support the president’s issue positions (Edwards 2003), then a more productive strategy may be for presidents to propose policies that are already likely to be supported by their copartisans.

The partisan nature of primaries, ideology, and the president’s job approval ratings also foretell presidential partisan representation. First, presidents may be more inclined to represent their partisan constituents because primary voters—who tend to select more partisan candidates (Crotty and Jackson 1985, 93)—are often more liberal (with Democrats) or more conservative (with Republicans) than the general electorate. Second, the nature of ideology means that presidents appeal more to their partisans—those that are closer to the president’s ideological perspective—than to the general public. Pushing a focused, ideological policy agenda allows presidents to convert their electoral coalition into policy supporters (Edwards and Wayne 1997, 404). Third, partisans are simply most likely to support the president. Presidential approval ratings are strongly affected by party affiliation, after all, as Republican presidents receive consistently higher approval ratings from their partisans than from the mass public, Democrats, or Independents. In 1959, for example, 88% of Republicans approved of President Eisenhower’s job performance, but less than two-thirds of the nation supported him. A similar pattern exists for all other presidents since 1953 (see Edwards 1983, 214; 1989, 111; Edwards with Gallup 1990; Ragsdale 2010).

Measuring Presidential Representation

Recent academic debate and a range of divergent but plausible findings raise questions about the degree to which presidents are responsive, to whom, and under what conditions presidents are representative. For instance, scholars find substantial
agreement between the mass public and the president (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995), agreement primarily between partisan publics and the president (Wood 2009), and conditional responsiveness by issue (Canes-Wrone 2006; Manza and Cook 2002) or level of popularity (Canes-Wrone and Shotts 2004) and proximity to election year (Rottinghaus 2006). Scholars also find presidential responsiveness to the policy agendas of the mass public on required, such as the economy or foreign affairs, but not necessarily discretionary policies (Cohen 1999). These relationships are also mostly reciprocal (Hill 1998). Still other scholars argue that the public’s preferences are manipulated by the rhetoric from the White House, as presidents frame issues in ways that make them look responsive even when they are not (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; but see Edwards 2003). Moreover, presidents can nuance their language to keep a coalition together by modulating their positions to avoid capitulating fully to either side, their coalition of support, or the mass public (Canes-Wrone 2001).

These studies provide important theoretical and empirical guideposts to identifying the relationship between public opinion and the president. Nevertheless, these works tend to indirectly measure presidential interaction with public opinion, perhaps contributing to the variation in the findings. For instance, Canes-Wrone and Shotts (2004) use budget requests and preferences for spending increases to test presidential responsiveness to public preferences (see also Wlezien 1995). Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson (1995, 550) find that presidents are responsive to public mood but use policy positions taken by presidential supporters in Congress as a base measure for presidential ideology (see also Cohen 1999). Wood (2009, 64-66) also uses a global opinion measure of public liberalism because it matches best with his dependent variable of presidential liberalism, but he does not match specific positions with specific public opinions.

These studies limit what we can conclude about presidential representation for two primary reasons. First, many of studies of presidential representation do not take specific presidential positions into account. Instead, they amalgamate all liberal or conservative positions by the president as a way to test for responsiveness. Although this provides an excellent broad measure of ideology, it may miss presidential responsiveness to important subgroups that are important to presidential success in Congress and reelection. This may also miss important issues not included in the measure or which do not load on a traditional left-right scale (Page 2002). A second issue is that, without specific policies to explore representation, we may overstate the president’s representational qualities. For example, if a president unveils a predominately liberal policy but only talks about the conservative elements, one might misrepresent to whom the president responds with his legislative agenda. Presidents could also be forced to take public positions in response to circumstances outside of their control, which might overrepresent these issues as part of the president’s larger policy agenda. Related to this, minor deviations in responsive tendencies are coded the same as large deviations. For instance, Canes-Wrone and Shotts’s (2004) dichotomous measure of congruence may overstate or understate presidential representation in that even a small increase or decrease in the president’s budgetary request would be coded as being fully congruent with the public.
Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

The tendency for presidents to be representative of the nation, their copartisans, or other groups tends to be driven by the president’s rational incentive to achieve his primary goals in office: good policy, reelection, and historical achievement. The success presidents have achieving these goals is often a function of public preferences, the institutional context, election cycle, and the president’s own popularity. Presidents may be more or less representative of the nation or his partisans depending on variability in each of these conditions. The questions that we explore are whether presidents will represent the nation or their partisans on substantive issue positions, why they do so, and the nature of this representation with respect to the two ways we might measure public opinion. In this section, we explain the centrist model of presidential representation (Canes-Wrone and Shotts 2004) and then adapt it to test our hypotheses concerning partisan presidential representation.

The centrist view, espoused through the CWS framework, holds that presidents represent the median voter with their issue positions and leads to two primary expectations. First, presidents who have below average approval ratings will take positions more popular with the nation. Presidents are most likely to move to the center when they have greater need of support, and the push to move their issue positions will occur when the president has less than average approval ratings. Second, presidents will take positions more popular with the nation during reelection years. Taken together, therefore, the CWS framework of presidential representation should reveal a statistically significant and positive relationship between below average approval ratings, reelection years, and higher likelihood of congruence between the president’s policy positions and a majority of centrist opinion.

The partisan view allows us to generate expectations for the president’s position taking relative to partisan public opinion, which we express through a modified partisan CWS theoretical framework. The modification is important and hinges on the mobilization of partisan support, not building it, the latter being vital to the centrist CWS theoretical framework. According to CWS, presidents take positions popular with the mass public when they are unpopular with them. They may do so because citizens close to the center of the political spectrum (independent voters, perhaps) are less attached to one or the other political party (Wood 2009, 32) and may therefore be more persuadable than stronger partisans (Zaller 1992). By this logic, presidents may be much less likely to change their copartisans’ policy preferences and, therefore, will act to mobilize their support—and take positions congruent with partisans—when their support is already high. The partisan view holds that presidents have very little incentive to respond to centrist opinion (Wood 2009) but instead have numerous incentives to be congruent with partisans on most policies relevant to their legislative and reelection successes.

Indeed, our partisan adoption of CWS holds that presidents with above average approval from their copartisans are more likely to represent partisan opinion. Why do presidents take positions congruent with partisans when their partisan approval ratings

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1. We use the term congruent or congruence to determine whether the president’s issue position matches centrist or partisan opinion on that issue. In many respects, our treatment is more similar to
are high? To paraphrase Wood (2009, 34), the degree of presidential responsiveness to partisans should be conditional on the president’s relative need for partisan support. The president is likely to take positions congruent with a majority of partisans when he needs partisan support, which occurs under two primary circumstances. First, presidents are most likely to be able to endorse major legislation that may be controversial to a majority of the public when partisan approval of the president is higher. In high partisan support, that is, the president has a source of prestige that allows him to take ideological or partisan positions on key issues when he might otherwise not have centrist support necessary to push those priorities through Congress.

Second, presidents may take positions that a majority of partisans support when they are running for reelection. Increased representation by presidents with above average partisan approval ratings is most likely to occur during reelection than in other years in office. After all, presidents’ electoral strategies are often defined by their ability to represent partisans and motivate their base to vote for them (Shaw 2006), just as the turnout of core supporters can be the difference between victory and defeat in close elections. As presidents approach reelection, they need to make sure that they secure and motivate their partisan base. This not only helps ensure that they avoid a primary challenge, detrimental to the reelection campaigns of Presidents Jimmy Carter and George H. W. Bush, but also that they can motivate their supporters to turn out to vote. Thus, it seems even more likely that presidents will take positions that are popular with their partisan supporters to improve their reelection chances.

Under these scenarios, presidents are either representative of their partisan base or to the national public, which is a logical byproduct of presidential position taking in that the policies supported by each group are likely to be different. The institutional context should therefore be important to presidential representation (Wood 2009, 113-16). Simply, the president’s incentives to take positions congruent with either partisan or national public opinion may vary by the likelihood that he will succeed on his policy priorities. Because conditions of divided government suppress the likelihood of presidential success in Congress (Bond and Fleisher 1990), presidents may choose to achieve other goals, such as appealing to his partisan supporters, when Congress is divided. Others maintain that movement to the center is much less likely when the president already has a majority; one indication of this is unified government (Wood 2009, 38). Another constancy of the presidency is the presidential honeymoon period. Theoretically, it is during their honeymoon periods that presidents should be most likely to tackle partisan issues since this provides presidents with the best opportunity to translate their electoral coalitions into support in Congress.

Monroe’s (1998) depiction of issue “consistency.” Nevertheless, the literature upon which we build, including articles by Canes-Wrone and Shotts (2004) and Rottinghaus (2006), uses congruence to describe levels of representation.

2. Given a limited sample of presidencies over which we may reliably find partisan opinion data, we have adapted the CWS framework slightly. We focus on presidential representation during reelection years or not. This contrasts with the CWS framework because that research examines the first and second halves of each term in office.
Data

Our sample of presidential positions spans three presidential administrations (George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush) and 20 years (1989-2008). We draw from an existing data set of presidential positions on domestic policies provided by Eshbaugh-Soha (2005) and updated by Eshbaugh-Soha and Miles (2008-2009). Although most of these positions were stated by presidents in their annual State of the Union address, some were offered during nationally televised addresses or other significant speeches on policies. We selected these more recent presidents given the declining availability of public opinion polling questions by partisanship back in time. Despite our best efforts, roughly half of this list of presidential proposals had to be deleted for lack of available data on partisan opinion. This still left us with a data set of 95 observations in which we could identify a presidential position, national opinion, and partisan opinion. Because these are specific policy initiatives matched to opinion data, this is a reasonably large number. We determined that the president’s position was congruent with the partisan public when over a majority of Republicans (Democrats) supported a Republican (Democratic) president’s policy position. We determined that the president’s position was congruent with the national public when over a majority of Americans supported the president’s policy position. Each variable is coded 1 when these conditions are met and 0 otherwise, comprising our primary dependent variables.

We collected partisan approval ratings from the quarterly values reported by Ragsdale (2010) and create our measures using three steps. First, we coded the partisan approval ratings for each president, meaning that Republican presidents are matched with Republican approval and Democratic presidents are matched with Democratic approval ratings. Second, we matched the date of the president’s policy announcement with the partisan approval rating for that quarter. Third, we calculated above and below average partisan approval ratings, based on a partisan approval average of 81.8% for our sample, subtracting it from the quarterly partisan approval average. We collected and coded measures of national public approval of the president’s job performance using Gallup data and following the second and third decision rules, with an average national approval measure of 55.46% for our sample.

3. There exist other plausible and alternative collections of presidential positions. These include presidential positions on roll-call votes provided by Congressional Quarterly and Wood’s (2009) measure of presidential liberalism. Unfortunately, CQ associates the president’s position with the roll-call vote date, whereas we needed to identify the date he took a public position; and Wood’s aggregate liberalism measure does not allow us to match specific opinions with specific presidential positions.

4. Indeed, lack of data precludes us from testing the CWS more in line with what they offer; and does not allow us to replicate some of Wood’s (2009) partisan models of representation.

5. Two examples help illustrate our coding decisions. First, in 1989 President George HW Bush supported a cut in the capital gains tax, with 58% of Republicans but only 48% of Americans in support. Therefore, this was coded as a 1 for a policy that exhibited partisan representation, and zero for our centrist representation dependent variables. Second, George W. Bush supported an immigration reform bill that was supported by a majority of Americans (54%), but not by Republicans (with 15% support). Thus, this was coded as a 1 for centrist representation and zero concerning effective partisan representation. On some issues, the president’s position was congruent with both centrist and partisan majorities and, so, were coded 1 in both models.
The remaining variables are coded as follows: divided government is coded 1 during years of divided government (1989-92; 1995-2006) and 0 otherwise; presidential reelection years (1992, 1996, and 2004) are coded 1, and 0 for other years; presidential dummy variables are coded 1 for the president’s years in office (1989-92 for George H. W. Bush; 1993-2000 for Bill Clinton; and 2001-2008 for George W. Bush). We also controlled for the president’s honeymoon period, coded 1 for the president’s first year in office and 0 otherwise, and interact our below average national approval ratings and above average partisan approval measures with presidential reelection years.

Findings

We present our evidence below in two stages. First, we illustrate the general tendency of presidents to take positions that are congruent with the mass public and their partisans. We do this by presenting basic descriptive data with respect to partisan and national opinion. Second, we present two probit regression models utilizing the data in Table 1 to determine which variables affect the likelihood of presidential representation. Specifically, our expectations are that presidents should be more congruent with partisan public opinion as their popularity among partisans is above average, during reelection years, and during moments of divided government.

Descriptive Evidence

Table 1 presents evidence that presidents are highly representative of partisan, not of national public opinion. Several points attest to this. First, on only a small percentage of issues for each term do presidents take positions that are congruent with neither a majority of their copartisans or centrist public opinion. Some of these positions include

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level of Centrist and Partisan Presidential Representation by Term</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. H. W. Bush</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton I</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clinton II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bush I</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bush II</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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Note: Numbers in parentheses are percentages. Numbers do not match the number of observations in the quantitative models because presidents can represent both partisans and mass opinion on the same position. The low number of positions for Bush’s second term is not for a lack of position taking, but due to limited public opinion data on his positions.

Source: Data compiled from the authors using the Public Papers of the Presidents and the Roper Public Opinion database (various polls).
George H. W. Bush’s unpopular bailout for savings and loans at the beginning of his tenure. Others are simply a function of the data. When the survey question asks whether President Clinton’s cuts in spending are too much, not enough, or about right, it is rare that a majority will respond that the president’s position is “about right.” This demonstrates that the research with respect to presidential representation is generally correct: presidents tend to be representative public agents. Second, the presidents are highly representative of both centrist and partisan public opinion. Except in Bush’s second term (where only one-third of his positions were determined to be representative of either group), presidents were representative of partisan opinion, centrist opinion, or both on roughly 85 to 95% of their policy positions. Several of these include policy positions on widely popular programs like Head Start and tax credits for parents with dependent children. Even the Brady Bill was supported by both groups. Presidents tended to represent partisans only on clearly partisan issues such as cuts for capital gains taxes or health care reform.

As noted, our sample of presidents are more representative of partisan than centrist public preferences when matched with a number of presidents’ domestic policy priorities. Except during Bush’s second term, an aberration, presidents represent the majority preferences of partisans at a greater frequency than that of the national public. Congruence ranges from a low of 47% during the first Clinton term to a high of 58% during George W. Bush’s first term. All in all, these findings corroborate that presidents are highly representative of the American people in their position taking, although some publics are better represented than others. They also indicate that presidents are more partisan figures than the centrist model of presidential representation contends.

Predicting Presidential Representation

Table 2 presents two statistical models of presidential representation. Given that our dependent variables are bivariate measures, we use probit to test our modified CWS framework on partisan representation.7 The first model examines the tendency for presidents to represent partisan opinion. Here the dependent variable is whether or not the

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6. This is an aberration due to limited public opinion questions on the president’s specific issue positions. We speculate that this is because Bush’s second term was dominated by Social Security and Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Iraq throughout his term, and the 2008 election in 2007 and 2008. Survey organizations simply were asking about matters unrelated to the president’s domestic policy agenda.

7. One limitation of this approach is the issue of causality and endogeneity. Although Wood (2009) is able to overcome this by applying Vector Autoregression to a monthly measure of presidential and public liberalism, we admit that one limitation to our study is not being able to determine more precisely whether presidents take positions in response to heightened public support or whether it is their positions on the issues that increase public support. We can infer that presidents are unlikely to move public opinion (see Edwards 2003) but are unable to demonstrate the precise causal mechanism in our study. Our problem is compounded by a relative lack of public opinion data and good questions that relate to the president’s specific policy positions.
president represented a majority of copartisans with an issue position. The findings reveal several important points. First, presidents are much more likely to take positions that are congruent with their copartisans when an above average percentage of copartisans approve of their job performance. Presidents who score above average partisan approval ratings are 2% more likely than presidents with below average partisan approval ratings to take issue positions congruent with a majority of their partisans. As expected, this relationship

8. A better test of these models is to include both above and below average approval in each model. Given a relatively small sample size for what we hope to accomplish, doing so produces substantial multicollinearity. Although more data is one way to remedy this problem, we are constrained by the relative lack of partisan public opinion data available prior to 1989. Moreover, we cannot match many of the president’s policy positions with either mass or partisan public opinion data because questions do not ask at a reasonable level of specificity. Therefore, we have excluded below average approval from the partisan approval model, and above average approval from the centrist model. We think that this is less of a problem because we have run a variety of model specifications that corroborate the direction and significance of the variables that we present in Table 1.

### TABLE 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Partisan Representation</th>
<th>Centrist Representation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Divided Government</td>
<td>0.71 (0.51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honeymoon</td>
<td>0.53 (0.38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above Average Approval</td>
<td>0.09* (0.05) [+0.02]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-election Year × Above</td>
<td>0.24* (0.08) [+0.05]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below Average Approval</td>
<td>0.09* (0.05) [+0.02]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-election Year × Below</td>
<td>–0.11 (0.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-election Year</td>
<td>0.10 (0.51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. H. W. Bush</td>
<td>–0.65 (0.50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. W. Bush</td>
<td>–0.77 (0.53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.47 (0.37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wald $\chi^2$</td>
<td>26.13* (4.60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRE (%)</td>
<td>13.3 (8.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correctly Predicted (%)</td>
<td>86.3 (76.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modal Category (%)</td>
<td>84.2 (74.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area under ROC curve</td>
<td>0.68 (0.62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>95 (95)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05.

Note: Standard Errors in parentheses; percentage change for significant variables are in brackets. Clinton is the reference category.
is conditional upon and more likely during reelection years. Stated differently, presidents with above average partisan approval ratings are 5% more likely to take positions that are congruent with a majority of their partisans during their reelection years. It is during reelection years that presidents will want to take positions congruent with partisans to excite and mobilize these supporters—something a popular, partisan president can do most effectively.

Second, contrary to our expectations, none of the other factors predicts presidential-partisan congruence. For instance, although conditions of divided government encourage presidents to take positions that are congruent with a majority of their copartisans, as expected, the coefficient does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. This holds, as well, for the president’s honeymoon period where the coefficient is not statistically significant. Moreover, most of the remaining variables act as controls and have no statistically significant impact on the likelihood of partisan congruence. It is especially noteworthy that each president in our sample, when included separately as a dummy variable, exhibits no statistically significant difference in his tendency to represent his copartisans through position taking. It seems that the relationship between partisan approval, elections, and congruent position taking is substantially strong enough to outweigh other potential covariates.

The second model explores the president’s tendency to take congruent positions with respect to centrist public opinion. Here, we’d expect that if presidents respond to national opinion through their positions and in a way that the centrist CWS framework predicts, that the president would be more likely to represent national concerns as Election Day nears and when his approval ratings are below average. Our evidence shows that this is not the case. In the second model in Table 2, none of the coefficients reaches statistical significance, suggesting that none has a strong effect on the president’s congruence with centrist opinion. Further evidence of the tendency for presidents to act more as partisan leaders is the goodness of fit measures, which reach statistical significance in the partisan but not centrist model. Moreover, the area under the receiver operating characteristic (ROC) curve for the partisan model is slightly more than the centrist model, suggesting that it offers a better test of presidential representation.9

Conclusion

Scholars have long explored presidential representation and its causes and consequences in American politics. Presidential representation to the mass public may reveal a president concerned with maintaining a national mandate, while presidential representation to partisan interests may signal a president who is calculating in terms of the groups he most needs to represent for electoral victory. The larger picture painted by our results is not only that presidents represent their partisans extensively in their position taking, but also that they tend to do so in a manner consistent with our modified CWS

9. We note that a best ROC value is closest to one.
partisan representational framework. This study makes a notable contribution to the literature by adapting a centrist model of presidential representation to a more partisan framework as it pertains to the president’s position taking on a variety of domestic policy issues and allows us to test the theory with data specific to partisan interests. This article has also introduced a more specific measure of congruency between the president and his partisans or the mass public than the general ideological measures often used to date, an important check on the robustness of the findings in the literature.

In terms of the debate we framed at the beginning of the article, our results side with Wood’s (2009) view of partisan representation. We, too, report significant partisan representation and less centrist representation with respect to the president’s public positions especially during reelection years. In the debate over the representativeness of the president, it seems clear that partisan publics are more likely to be represented by presidents on specific policy positions (as we find here) and are more likely to be more broadly responsive with their public rhetoric to ideological shifts in opinion when elections are near (as Wood [2009] finds). Although Canes-Wrone and Shotts (2004) argue that the proximity of the presidential election is essential to the president’s responsiveness to centrist opinion, we demonstrate that presidents are responsive to their partisans closer to elections. This finding makes sense given that presidential partisans are critical to the president’s reelection. We think that these differences are in part a function of our analysis of policy proposals and not budgetary requests, the latter being but a small subset of the range of topics on which presidents may be representative.

While stark in contrast with the CWS model of centrist representation, we certainly do not offer the final word on presidential representation vis-à-vis centrist and partisan opinion. After all, there are numerous limits to examining systematically the public’s policy preferences and the president’s issue positions as we have done here. The president takes numerous positions that do not register in public opinion polls, polling organizations do not ask questions of many of the president’s specific positions, and partisan public opinion is very difficult to find prior to 1989. The specification of the data also seems to matter a great deal, as different models and data coding yield different estimates. Therefore, although we find support for the partisan view, our null findings concerning the effectiveness of the centrist model in explaining presidential position congruence with the mass public do not lead us to claim that this model is necessarily wrong. We reserve judgment on that question and encourage future research to explore it.

More importantly, we think that one significant question raised by our article needs additional clarification. How do we reconcile two seemingly contradictory features of recent major and significant research on the public presidency: presidential success in going public hinges on making public appeals on issues popular with a majority of public opinion, but presidents are highly responsive to partisans in their position taking? This article does not offer an answer but encourages scholars to explore this question as systematically as possible given well-known limitations to our public opinion databases. After all, much of our research on how presidents translate public support into greater legislative success hinges on public support of the nation. Moreover, as research questions even the president’s ability to reach a national, mass audience in the age of polarized
presidential politics (Kernell and Rice 2011), this question becomes increasingly im-
portant to our understanding of the American presidency.

References


