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Comparison of Presidential Support among Freshmen and Non-freshmen

COMPARISON OF PRESIDENTIAL SUPPORT AMONG THE FRESHMEN AND
NON-FRESHMEN: THE CASES OF CARTER, REAGAN, BUSH AND CLINTON

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Abstract

This paper investigates the important determinants of support of the freshmen members in the House of Representatives for presidents Carter, Reagan, Bush and Clinton in their first years. Different independent variables: party, ideology, members' margin of victory in election, percentage of the presidents' vote in the congressional districts are considered as explanations for freshmen members' support for presidential positions. From the results of regression analysis, the paper concludes that party, presidents' vote percentages, region and margin of victory of the members have different effects on the freshmen and non-freshmen.

Introduction

Though the literature is rich in the area of congressional support for the president, scant attention is paid to how much the freshmen support the president. Literature on congressional support for presidential positions focuses on the role of party (Carter 1986, Tatalovich and Gitelson 1989, Shaffer 1980). Schneider (1979) emphasizes the importance of the ideology of the members in their support for the president. One of the important variables determining presidential support is pressure from the constituency (Sullivan, 1987, Fiorina 1974, Bond, Covington, and Fleisher 1985, Johannes and McAdams 1981, Whitby and Gilliam 1991). One way to assess the constituency pressure is the president's electoral performance (Edwards 1978, and Schwarz and Fenmore 1977). Sullivan (1987) points out that whether a member will be close to a presidential position is conditioned by the margin of victory.

With an analysis of House support for presidents Carter, Reagan, Bush, and Clinton for the years 1977, 1981, 1989, and 1993, this paper seeks to investigate whether the different determinants of congressional support for presidential positions have different impacts for the freshmen and

non-freshmen. Congressional support for the presidents in their first years has been considered in this paper because the presidents usually enjoy more support during these years. Moreover, the impact of presidential victory on the members, especially the freshmen members is more salient in the first years.

Several authors argue that freshmen vote in accordance with their party positions more often than their counterparts (Brady et. al 1987, Brady and Lynn 1973, Weinbaum and Judd 1970, Hurley 1989). One of the arguments claims that freshmen tend to support the party more often than others because they are not yet socialized to such cues as committees and state delegations (Weinbaum and Judd 1970). If the freshmen are more partisan than the non-freshmen, it will be interesting to investigate whether the freshmen would be more supportive of the president if he is from the same party. Freshmen members compared to non-freshmen are more vulnerable to defeats. The freshmen are in the primary stage of their relationship with the constituents, while the non-freshmen have already established a solid relationship with the constituents, which guarantees their reelection in most cases (Davidson and Oleszek, 1994). Lawrence Dodd (1986) argues that there is a difference between the freshmen and non-freshmen in the way they make their strategic decisions. Even though all members of Congress are driven by reelection desires, Dodd (1986) argues that freshmen in the House have to focus on reelection security more often than any other issue.

Research Design

Data are based on Congressional Quarterly's roll call votes in which the president took a position. Freshmen support scores are calculated from the *CQ Almanac's* support scores for presidential positions for the years 1977, 1981, 1989 and 1993. The common criticism against the roll call votes is that all issues are weighed equally, including lopsided votes and often several votes on the same issue. Because many of the issues on which the president takes a stand are not controversial and are decided by nearly unanimous votes, including them in a measure of support for the president can distort the results by inflating the measure (Edwards, 1989, 21). According to Edwards (1989), a measure relying on key votes is attractive because the key issues help to exclude votes on less important issues. A key vote includes one or more of the following: a matter of major controversy; a test of presidential political power; and a decision of potentially great impact on the nation and on lives of Ameri-

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cans (Edwards, 1989, 22). But the usefulness of the key votes is limited by the relatively small number of bills that are included in key votes. There are relatively few major issues each year. Moreover, presidents take positions on most but not all the votes on these issues. In order to ensure validity and reliability, Edwards (1989) suggests multiple measures for assessing congressional support for presidential positions. That is why this paper includes *Congressional Quarterly's* key issues and the roll call votes. Despite the limitations of the use of the roll call votes, they are used with relative precision because they provide a genuinely reliable and valid measure of presidential support (Bond and Fleisher 1990). On the other hand, there are substantially more presidential positions on roll call votes from which support scores are calculated. From the period 1957 through 1980, the number of presidents' positions on all votes exceeded the number of positions on key votes by a "margin of 10 to 1 in Congress, 8 to 1 in the House, and more than 12 to 1 in the Senate" (Zeidenstein 1983, 534). Freshmen included those members who were newly elected along with a new president in 1976, 1980, 1988 and 1992. It also included those members who were elected in the special elections of 1977, 1981, 1989 and 1993.

Independent Variables

Based on the review of the literature on presidential support, independent variables examined include party identification of the members, the percentage of the vote each member received, the president's victory margin, and region. Members' percentage of vote is used because the literature argues that the marginal members tend to support the administrative positions more than the other members.¹ The percentage of votes received by the president in each congressional district is based on the data in Barone and Ujifusa's *The Almanac of American Politics*, 1978, 1982, 1990, 1994. Rohde (1991) suggests that presidential vote in the districts can be used as an "imperfect but still useful indicator of voters' policy preferences."

In order to determine the differences between the freshmen and non-freshmen, this paper used t-statistic. T-statistic is an appropriate method because it allows the researcher to assess the differences between the freshmen and non-freshmen in their mean support for presidential position.² Statistical significance of the mean difference is also assessed based on the t-statistic.

The results in Table 1 show that there is a significant difference between

the marginal Republican freshmen and non-freshmen with respect to President Carter's support. Marginal Republican freshmen are more supportive of President Carter compared to the non-freshmen. Based on key votes, there is a significant difference between the marginal Republican freshmen and non-freshmen. Terry Sullivan (1987) explored the impact of margin of victory on congressional support for the presidents. But the results in Table 1 show that the impact of victory margin is different for the freshmen and non-freshmen. Statistically, based on key votes, a significant difference exists between the Southern freshmen and non-freshmen. Southern freshmen probably felt an obligation to support the president from the South. Democratic and Republican freshmen gave slightly more support for President Carter. But the difference is not significant. Marginal freshmen felt more pressure to support the new president because of the lack of electoral safety.

Table 1. Mean Support for the presidents

	Carter		Reagan		Bush		Clinton	
	Fresh	Nfresh	Fresh	Nfresh	Fresh	Nfresh	Fresh	Nfresh
Democrat	63.91 (65.38)	62.35 (60.64)	42.78 (37.59)	42.75 (36.86)	43.14 (50.07)	36.12* (42.97)	76.72 (74.93)	76.60 (76.70)
Republican	42.50 (34.65)	42.13 (28.91)	69.61 (76.38)	66.58* (75.33)	69.33 (74.66)	69.11 (78.85)	40.98 (74.93)	40.63 (76.70)
Mar.Demo	64.30 (63.67)	64.13 (60.02)	48.66 (42.20)	37.66* (26.90)*	45.60 (58.26)	36.99 (55.45)	75.43 (70.65)	77.42 (77.20)
Mar.Rep	45.00 (37.40)	37.15* (25.35)*	71.12 (77.50)	63.87* (66.37)*	68.00 (68.00)	71.27 (71.27)	40.41 (40.41)	35.00 (35.00)*
Southern	49.70 (49.35)	48.48 (36.40)*	68.04 (75.17)	59.11* (64.27)*	59.93 (72.13)	55.87 (68.41)	61.38 (50.89)	62.04 (57.40)

Entries are mean support based on roll call votes, mean support based on key votes are in parentheses, * denotes significance at .05 level.

Table 1 shows a statistically significant difference between the Republican freshmen and non-freshmen. The Republican freshmen had a higher level

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of support for Reagan compared to the corresponding support by the non-freshmen. It means that the freshmen were more partisan under Reagan compared to the non-freshmen. Reagan's victory in 1980 with a large number of Republicans in the House had influenced the partisanship in the freshmen.

Marginal freshmen from both parties provided a higher level of support than the non-freshmen. The difference is significant. It adds to the findings of Sullivan (1987) by showing that the marginals, if they are freshmen, tend to support the administration's positions more than the non-marginals. The difference between the Southern freshmen and non-freshmen is also significant. Southern freshmen felt the same commitment as Reagan with regard to the role of government and to bring about changes. An analysis of the key votes also shows the similar results.

Table 1 shows that on roll call votes, a significant difference exists between the democratic freshmen and non-freshmen in terms of their support for Bush. In terms of key votes, there is no significant difference between the freshmen and non-freshmen. Bush's centrist position probably influenced many Democratic freshmen compared to non-freshmen to vote more for Bush. But when the vote on key issues came, there was no significant difference between the freshmen and non-freshmen. Marginal Republican freshmen provided lower support for Bush compared to the non-freshmen. The marginal Republican freshmen probably did not feel comfortable with Bush's moderate positions.

In the case of President Clinton based on key votes, statistically significant difference exists between marginal Republican freshmen and non-freshmen. Marginal Republican freshmen had a large number of Democrats in their districts. As a result, they were pressured to vote for President Clinton. The results in Table 1 can be justified from the point of constituency pressure on the marginal Republican freshmen.

Regression Analysis

This study took into consideration regression analysis of House members' party, region, members' victory percentage and presidential voting percentage in members' district on Presidents' support in order to determine whether freshmen and non-freshmen use different cues in terms of voting for presidential positions.³ Regression analysis is used to assess the independent effect of each of the variables taken together. In Table 2, party appears as the

strongest variable affecting House members' support for the presidents. But party is a more important factor affecting freshmen support for the presidents compared to the non-freshmen. Based on key votes, in Bush's case, the freshmen were less partisan than the non-freshmen in their support. Table 2 also shows that freshmen were more partisan under Reagan than under Bush. One of the explanations why party emerged as an important variable for Reagan's support was the Republican tide in the 1980 election with an unusually strong coattails from him. From the analysis of key votes, partisanship had less influence in Bush's support than in Reagan's.

Fleisher and Bond (1992) found that support for Bush among the Republicans was considerably lower than expected. They also found that Bush did better among the Democrats, and liberal Democrats were slightly more supportive than predicted. Bush's centrist position was not very popular with the conservative Republicans. According to Fleisher and Bond (1992), as a minority president, Bush faced a difficult task dealing with Congress.

Table 2. The Effects of Different Independent Variables on House Support for Presidents

Independent Variables	Carter		Reagan		Bush		Clinton	
	Fresh	Nfresh	Fresh	Nfresh	Fresh	Nfresh	Fresh	Nfresh
Presidential Vote (%)	.28* (.27)*	.11* (.11)*	.30* (.28)*	.26* (.25)*	.17 (.18)	.26 (.16)	.28* (.25)*	.27* (.20)*
Region (South)	-.30* (-.32)*	-.34 (-.39)	.28* (.28)*	.25 (.27)	.26* (.25)*	.25* (.24)*	-.01 (-.02)	-.02 (-.04)
Party	.64* (.59)*	.55* (.53)	.68* (.75)*	.61* (.53)*	.58* (.29)	.56* (.49)*	.65* (.71)*	.64* (.68)*
Marginal Members	.16 (.09)	.02 (.03)	.13 (.05)	.05 (.05)	-.03 (-.01)	.06 (.02)	.12 (.02)	.05 (.04)
R Square (Roll Call)	.53	.52	.75	.64	.69	.74	.79	.76
R Square (Key Votes)	.52	.52	.72	.55	.60	.54	.72	.68

Entries are Standardized Regression Coefficient (Beta), Beta based on key votes are in parentheses, * denotes significance at 05 level.

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George Edwards (1993) claims that Bush started his presidency with one of the worst strategic positions of any newly elected president in history. Bush came to office facing the largest opposition majority in Congress for any newly elected president in American history—Democratic advantages of ten seats in the Senate and 85 seats in the House (Edwards 1993, 185).

Bush was the first candidate since John F. Kennedy to win the White House while his party lost seats in the House. His inability to carry over others may be partly due to his message "Stay the Course" (*CQ Almanac* 1988, 14C). After 1989, there were 258 Democrats and 176 Republicans in the House and 1 seat was vacant. There were so few Republicans in the House that there was little possibility that Bush could build a working majority with a conservative coalition. Hence, the situation forced Bush either to reach an agreement with the opposition party and thereby reduce support from his own partisans or to take a strategy that increased the chances of defeat on the House floor (Fleisher and Bond 1992).

Presidents' vote percentages had a significant impact on freshmen support for presidential positions with the exception of Bush in roll call votes. In Bush's case, non-freshmen were more influenced by Bush's victory margins. The impact of the president's victory margin on freshmen support is greatest in the case of Reagan. The freshmen played an important role in enacting Reagan's agenda. In 1980, Reagan was elected to the White House with 74 freshmen members who played a major role in enacting Reagan's legislative programs. The Republicans gained 33 seats in the House after the 1980 election (Fleisher and Bond 1983). Carter's and Clinton's victory margins were a more potent force for freshmen compared to non-freshmen support for them. Carter came to the White House during the aftermath of Watergate and Vietnam with the election of several new members of Congress. Democratic new members shared the same commitment as Carter to bring about a change in the government. Similarly, Clinton came to the White House with a Congress in which one fourth of the members of the House were freshmen. A high level of partisanship also characterized the new Congress. Democrats and Republicans in both chambers voted with the majority of their parties more often than in any year in the previous four decades (*CQ Weekly Reports*, Dec 18, 1993, 3432). New Democratic members elected to the Congress shared the same commitment as Clinton to bring about changes. Moreover, twelve years of Republican presidency had unified the Democrats in support for Clinton. Hav-

ing gained control over both the White House and the Congress, new members felt the pressure of breaking the gridlock that characterized the last years of the Bush presidency (Clark and Young 1994). The freshmen Democrats, especially, felt that their success or failures were tied to those of President Clinton. Moreover, "Clinton showed a willingness and considerable ability to work Congress, arguing, cajoling, trading and doing almost anything within reason to get his way" (*CQ Weekly Reports*, Dec 18, 1993, 3427).

Region (South) had a positive impact on both Reagan and Bush's support. Southern freshmen's level of support for presidents Reagan and Bush were higher than the non-freshmen. Reagan carried on an extensive legislative program with a coalition of the Republicans and conservative Southern Democrats, who provided a working majority in the House. As a matter of fact, Republicans and Southern Democrats provided the crucial support for Reagan. According to Salaman and Lund (1988), the Reagan administration continued articulation of the broad principles of conservatism in its government. Reagan was successful in mobilizing support from his native coalition of Republicans and Southern Democrats (Wayne 1982).

Region (South) had a negative impact on Carter and Clinton's support. But the strength of negative effect of Southern freshmen support for Carter and Clinton was lower compared to the non-freshmen.

Marginal freshmen members provided greater support for the presidents with the exception of President Bush. So, the results clearly show a greater impact of the margin of victory on the freshmen than on the non-freshmen. In Bush's case, marginal freshmen gave a lower level of support than the non-freshmen. His lower approval rating probably influenced the marginal freshmen to move away from the president's position. However, the effect of marginal members on presidential support is not statistically significant. As such, the paper cannot draw a conclusive generalization.

Conclusion

This study sought to investigate how different variables for congressional support affect the freshmen and non-freshmen in their support for the presidents. From the results of regression analysis, it is clear that freshmen follow the party line more than the non-freshmen in their support for the presidents. Presidents' vote percentages also have an impact on how the freshmen and non-freshmen support the presidents. From the results, the freshmen are more influenced by the presidents' vote percentage in their congressional districts. This paper agrees with the literature, which claims the influence of constituency pressure (measured in terms of a president's victory margin), on members' support for the presidents. But it adds to the literature by showing that the influence of constituency pressure is more pronounced in the case of freshmen than non-freshmen. The paper also investigates the effect of members' electoral margin. Results of the mean support show that the freshmen marginals gave more support for the presidents compared to the corresponding support from the non-freshmen. The paper agrees with the findings of Sullivan who claims that marginal members tend to support the president's position more than others do. But the results in this paper show that the effect of member's victory margin is more influential in the case of the freshmen. The effect of region (South) is more evident in the case of freshmen support for the presidents.

In order to assess the differences between the freshmen and non-freshmen, this study undertook both roll call votes and key votes. However, empirical results do show some differences but they are not significant. It signifies the validity of both measures in congressional support.

Future research should focus on the difference between the freshmen and non-freshmen because of the increased size of the freshmen in Congress in recent years. After the 1994 election, there are 13 freshmen Democrats and 74 freshmen Republicans in the House of Representatives (*CQ Weekly Reports*, Nov 12, 1994, p. 3232). Considering the Republican agenda, it will be interesting to see whether there will be a significant difference between the freshmen and non-freshmen, especially to observe whether the new freshmen will be more partisan in their support for President Clinton than those of the 103rd Congress. The difference between the freshmen and non-freshmen will gain an additional importance if congressional term limit is enacted into law in most of the states.

Notes

1. Following Mayhew (1974), marginals were coded as those members of the House whose margin of victory was less than or equal to 55 percent and non-marginals were those members whose margin of victory was more than 55 percent.

2. In order to determine the mean support, the sample was divided as follows: Democratic freshmen and non-freshmen; Republican freshmen and non-freshmen; marginal Democratic freshmen and non-freshmen; marginal Republican freshmen and non-freshmen; and Southern freshmen and non-freshmen.

3. In order to deal with the problems of regression analysis with the nominal data, dummy variables were created; for example, party was coded 1 for Democrat, 0 for Republican in the cases of Carter and Clinton. Republican was coded 1 and Democrat was coded 0 for Reagan and Bush. Region South was coded 1 and non-South was coded 0. Following Mayhew (1974), members with a victory margin of less than or equal to 55 were coded as 1 and members with a victory margin greater than 55 were coded as 0.

Because of the high correlation between party and ideology that may lead to the problem of multi-collinearity problem, this study precluded ideology from analysis.

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