

**“A Revisionist View of George Bush and Congress, 1989:
Presidential Support, ‘Veto Strength,’ and the Democratic Agenda”***

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Abstract

This article uses primary data gathered at the Bush Presidential Library in College Station, Texas to examine the president’s legislative strategy and congressional support for his positions on 24 “key votes” prioritized by the White House in 1989. The empirical analysis of presidential support scores on this subset of issues shows that Bush received higher levels of support from his co-partisans and moderate-to-conservative Democrats than scholars’ baseline models forecast. The data analysis underscores Bush’s strategy of maintaining “veto strength” on priority issues in conjunction with veto threats to win policy compromise from the Democratic majority. The article concludes that while scholarly and popular perceptions of Bush’s legislative presidency have been sharply critical, Bush was highly successful by the standards he set for his legislative presidency.

Introduction

Assessments of George Bush's legislative presidency have been sharply critical. In the absence of an active, first-year agenda in 1989 many observers chided his first one hundred days as "'lagging,' 'faltering,' 'wasting time,' 'playing a losing hand,' and 'hitting the ground crawling'" (Kellerman 1989). To the chagrin of liberals, his steadfast commitment to maintaining Reagan's policy legacy allegedly held the country "marching in place" for four years (Duffy and Goodgame 1992). Some scholars have typecast Bush's successful use of the veto as "negative achievement" (Foley 1994), even as his exceptional ability to sustain his vetoes when challenged by the Democratic majority has now come to puzzle others (Cameron 2000).

Application of several measures of presidential success—from positions on roll-calls to individual-level support in Congress—seemingly confirmed Bush's failure to meet expectations for his legislative presidency. His 54 percent roll-call success rate in 1989 was the lowest first-year figure recorded by *Congressional Quarterly* since the organization began keeping track of presidential position votes in 1953 (Congressional Quarterly Almanac 1989). Presidential scholars Jon Bond and Richard Fleisher (1992) found that congressional support of the president in the House of Representatives was much lower than anticipated by a baseline model, particularly among Bush's co-partisans. Although later analysis suggested that Bush's legislative support was roughly what might be expected in the postreform era (Joslyn 1995), conventional views of his putative shortcomings in the legislative arena have been difficult to dislodge.

This research challenges some of the prevailing wisdom about Bush's legislative presidency in 1989 by introducing different criteria for presidential success—the *benchmarks used by the Administration itself*. Prior studies have not fully come to grips with Bush's strategic adaptation to opposition party control of Congress. With the aid of primary data culled from the

Bush Presidential Library in College Station, Texas, a more subtle analysis of floor votes prioritized by the White House in 1989 reveals that Bush did far better in terms of individual legislative support than scholars' baseline models have predicted.

Archival records also reveal much about White House legislative strategy. Bush emphasized maintaining “veto strength” on priority floor votes, most of which were connected to the Democratic majority's agenda, rather than prevailing necessarily on the immediate roll-call outcome. The strategy was aimed at ensuring that initial roll-calls on select bills evidenced enough support for the president—33 percent or more—to foreclose the possibility of a successful override by the Democratic leadership if the president cast a veto. Grasping the Administration's focus on partisan and cross-partisan support on floor votes, frequently under the veil of veto threats, sheds new light on the foundation for Bush's highly successful veto record.

The analysis is organized in three sections. The first section places Bush's legislative presidency into context by examining agenda magnitude between the branches and characteristics of voting alignments on the president's positions. The empirical analysis presented in the second section reconstitutes prior studies' forecasts of Bush's first-year congressional support among party factions in the House of Representatives using bills identified by the White House as a priority. A comparison of predicted and actual legislative support rates on this subset of White House “key votes” shows that Bush did far better than expected, particularly among his Republican party base, even if he lost on the roll-call outcome. Tracing the legislative histories of the priority legislation underscores how Bush's successful effort to maintain veto strength strengthened his ability to extract policy concessions from the Democratic leadership or halt objectionable legislation. The final section considers the significance of these findings for the larger question of presidential legislative success in recent periods of divided government.

Steering the Legislative Agenda: Bush or the Democrats?

When pressure for governmental action recedes, divided partisan control of national institutions is far more likely to yield policy conflict between the president and Congress (Quirk and Nesmith 1995). George Bush's election in 1988 with a solid majority of Democrats in charge of both Houses of Congress yielded little consensus on the electorate's preferred course of action on the domestic front. Bush's lack of coattails—House Republicans lost three seats and Senate Republicans one—bolstered Democrats' argument that the president had no mandate (Campbell 1992, 103). But widespread split-ticket voting also robbed the Democratic majority of any claims to a mandate. The penultimate challenge for Bush in 1989 was to manage a more cohesive and activist Democratic majority that had responded to Reagan's early legislative victories and confrontational approach by strengthening organizational resources and party cohesion to advance its policy objectives (Rohde 1991; Sinclair 1992; Herrnson and Patterson 1995).

Bush's legislative leadership defied the "FDR" model that has become engrained in popular expectations of the modern presidency (Leuchtenburg 1993). The president's objective was to maintain the status quo and lower public expectations of the federal government (Kenski 1992). Bush promised to guard against encroachments on Reagan's policy legacy. His leadership appeal "was not that he had an agenda for the future," Dean C. Hammer maintains, "but that he was better able to handle whatever situation arose" (1995, 301). Moreover, in light of the federal budget deficits that carried over from the Reagan years and the partisan disadvantage he faced in Congress, Bush did not seek to advance a far-reaching agenda in 1989 (Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report, 12/30/89).¹

[Figure 1]

Congressional Democrats set the basic contours of legislative business and Bush's lack of an agenda placed him in a defensive role on much legislation that emerged. Figure 1 shows the proportion of the total legislative agenda set by first-term presidents during their initial two years from 1953-1994.² The share of legislation connected to Bush's agenda (11%) was the lowest for all presidents. Only five of forty-five measures reflected Administration priorities. Although there is a noticeable decline in presidential agenda-setting since Kennedy and Johnson in an era of greater resource constraints, Nixon, Carter, Reagan, and Clinton all set more than a third of the congressional docket in their first two years.

The import for Bush was that he wound up opposing the lion's share of bills that made it to the floor, particularly in the realm of domestic policy. House Democrats used the organizational perquisites of majority control to push legislation spanning budget issues, social policy, labor, and the environment. Of the eighty-six positions he took on roll-calls in the House of Representatives in 1989, Bush opposed fifty-four of the bills (63%). On average, Democrats supported the president's position less than two-fifths of the time. Party-unity voting was the rule, not the exception. Nearly two-thirds of Bush's policy positions pitted a majority of Republicans against a majority of Democrats.

Bush adapted his legislative strategy to the institutional constraints he met in Congress. Often unable to control roll-call outcomes through cross-party coalition-building and with only 175 Republicans in the House, the president turned party-unity to his advantage in conjunction with implied and applied use of the veto. Veto signals on legislation adopted on partisan grounds, or occasionally with the support of the remaining contingent of conservative Democrats enabled Bush to force policy negotiation. Otherwise, the Democratic leadership was compelled to engage in "blame-game" politics (Groseclose and McCarty 2001) by attempting overrides that were

doomed to failure. A closer examination of congressional support for Bush, and the emphasis on “veto strength” on votes prioritized by the White House, suggests how the president was more successful in the legislative realm in a way that scholars have missed.

Data and Analysis

A fundamental problem inheres in attempts to evaluate presidential success and congressional support for the president on the basis of roll-call outcomes: Which votes should be used? Since 1953 *Congressional Quarterly* has recorded all public positions presidents take on pending legislation. This pool of position votes comprises routine legislation, votes on amendments, as well as priorities of the Administration and congressional leaders. Scholars have suggested a variety of ways to ferret out issues of greatest significance to gauge executive influence, including a focus on *Congressional Quarterly*'s “key votes” (Shull and Vanderleeuw 1987) and “conflictual votes” that exclude lopsided outcomes (Bond and Fleisher 1990).³ All of these measures are aimed at tapping elements of the president's agenda and/or high-profile issues of national importance that are tests of presidential power.

Rarely do scholars have the ideal list of bills *actually prioritized by the White House*. The exception is the discovery of such lists in the archival holdings of the presidential library system managed by the National Archives and Records Administration. Covington (1987) found “headcount” data of members' positions kept by the Office of Congressional Relations for Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, including some issues on which the president chose not to take a public stand (see also Sullivan 1987). Conley (2002) discovered whip-check data and White House lobbying records detailing Gerald Ford's efforts to sustain key veto override votes.

Records uncovered at the George Bush Presidential Library in College Station, Texas, offer a unique, “insider” view of which votes were considered paramount to the White House in

1989. In January 1990 Frederick D. McClure, Assistant to the President for Legislative Affairs, compiled a list of twenty-four House roll-call votes prioritized by the Administration during the first session of the 101st Congress.⁴ McClure believed that his analysis of individual members' support of Bush in 1989 was more useful than *Congressional Quarterly's* measure, which was based on all recorded votes on which the Administration expressed a preference. "By comparison," he wrote to the president, "our analysis is based on selected key votes—those in which a clear Presidential position was taken and the vote was treated as a priority by the Administration" (McClure 1990; emphasis in original). Eighteen of the twenty-four votes concerned domestic policy and budget issues. Six votes concerned foreign affairs and defense. Appendix 1 provides a detailed listing of the votes.

The advantage of using this subset of votes to measure Bush's legislative success and congressional support for his positions is twofold. First, roll-call success and individual members' support scores reflect the Administration's own standards of bills with priority status. Comparing congressional support scores on this pool of bills to scholars' baseline model predictions on all position votes offers an alternative test of presidential influence. Second, McClure's analysis casts light on the White House's legislative strategy for dealing with the Democratic agenda. McClure noted that Bush's position prevailed outright on only thirteen of the twenty-four votes (54%). But he took pains to note that "Significantly, we had veto strength (146 or more votes) on all of the 24 key votes" (McClure 1990). The statement is a straightforward acknowledgment that the Administration approached building legislative support in Congress in anticipation of using implied use of the veto power to influence policy outcomes. It is thus possible to examine more closely how veto strength on the roll-call outcomes that Bush lost did—or did not—work to his advantage in conjunction with veto threats.

Bush's Roll-Call Success on White House Key Votes, 1989

Bush's 54 percent win-loss ratio on priority votes in the House of Representatives paralleled his success rate for *Congressional Quarterly's* overall measure (Table 1). Six of his thirteen victories came with the support of a majority of Democrats. In other cases the president was able to cobble together winning coalitions on the basis of Republican unity and the support of moderate-to-conservative Democrats. Several of his immediate victories were in the realm of foreign policy. Bush prevailed on a bipartisan accord on Central America. Aid to Central America had been one of the most contentious issues to carry over from Reagan's presidency. Bush also beat back several amendments, including one proposal to de-fund "Star Wars" (the Strategic Defense Initiative) in favor of drug interdiction and another restricting military aid to El Salvador. On the domestic front Bush's victories included the savings and loan bailout plan, foiling amendments on emergency supplemental aid and budget reconciliation legislation, and two failed veto override attempts—one on an increase in the minimum wage and the other for appropriations for the Department of Labor that contained provisions to lift some abortion restrictions.

[Table 1]

All eleven of Bush's losses were party-unity votes: A majority of Democrats voted against a majority of Republicans. On the domestic side the losses ranged from legislation charging the president to set up a congressional panel to investigate a labor dispute at Eastern Airlines, two amendments targeting the minimum wage bill, and oil pollution liability. On foreign and defense policy Bush lost votes on a resolution of disapproval on the co-development of the FS-X aircraft with Japan and several amendments on a defense bill (HR 2461).

Bush's success rate on White House key vote roll-calls begs several important questions. How did the support the president received from his co-partisans and conservative Democrats on priority votes compare to forecasts of congressional support? How did "veto strength" on the bills Bush lost bolster his negotiating position with the House Democratic leadership? The next two subsections take up these questions in turn.

Individual Legislative Support: Baselines for Comparison

A comparison of members' actual support of the president on White House key votes to levels of support forecast by regression models based on partisanship, ideology, and the president's job approval tests Bush's legislative influence and success in 1989 from the vantage point of the Administration's issue priorities. Forecast errors may be used to ascertain whether partisan and opposition members supported the president more or less often than expected on this subset of issues compared to all position votes.

Presidential scholars Jon Bond and Richard Fleisher (Fleisher and Bond 1983; Bond and Fleisher 1992) were the first to develop a baseline model of congressional support of the president through regression analysis. They drew a random sample of 500 House members' presidential support scores from 1959-1974. Using party affiliation, the president's mean year public approval, and the absolute difference between members' and the president's support for the *conservative coalition* as an indicator of ideological conflict,⁵ Bond and Fleisher were able to explain 52 percent of the variance in presidential support scores. The model estimation is as follows:

$$PSS = 59.99 + .27PPs - .35ICs + 7.67Xo - .16PPo - .27ICo + e$$

Where:

PSS = presidential support score

PPs = presidential popularity and House member is of the president's party, 0 otherwise;

- ICs* = ideological conflict between the president and member of the president's party,
 0 otherwise;
Xo = 1 if member is of the opposition party, 0 otherwise;
PPo = presidential popularity and the House member is of the opposition party, 0 otherwise;
ICo = ideological conflict between the president and member of the opposition party,
 0 otherwise;

The Bond and Fleisher model suggests that ideological conflict between the branches drives down legislative support at roughly the same rate for members of both parties. Presidential popularity is positively associated with partisan support but shows an inverse relationship for members of the opposition.⁶ As the positive sign for the dummy variable for partisanship (*Xo*) shows, members of the opposition party are *not* automatically predisposed to support the president less often.

Bond and Fleisher's baseline estimation has been critiqued in light of institutional and electoral changes that post-date the sample period 1959-74. Mark Joslyn (1995) argues persuasively that increasing partisanship in the House of Representatives, greater ideological conflict between the parties in Congress, particularly on budget issues, and the strengthening of party leadership structures in the postreform era have diminished presidential support. Drawing inferences about presidential support from data ending in the mid-1970s, he argues, is problematic. Joslyn re-estimates the Bond and Fleisher model using sample data for the period 1977-88 to show how structural change in the House has had a pronounced impact on presidential support. The parameter estimates for the "postreform" sample period were as follows:

$$PSS = 71.66 + .039PPs - .52IC - 26.75Xo + .18PPo - .396ICo + e$$

Joslyn's model explains a larger proportion of the variance in support scores (76%) and shows that ideological conflict between the branches has come to play a much larger role in conditioning presidential support. Opposition members also appear far less supportive compared

to the Bond and Fleisher data. Members of the opposition are expected to support the president nearly 27 percent less than the president's co-partisans. This finding dovetails with evidence of increasing partisanship in the House in recent decades (Rohde 1991; Sinclair 1992; Fleisher and Bond 2000). Public approval is positively related to support for both parties, but the impact is much greater for members of the opposition. Joslyn concludes that presidents' legislative fortunes in the opposition party may be much more contingent upon the public's evaluation of their job performance in the postreform era.

[Table 2]

Bond and Fleisher (1992) and Joslyn test George Bush's legislative support with their respective models based on *all presidential position votes in 1989*. They come to very different conclusions about Bush's legislative strategy and success. Examining columns to the left in Table 2, the forecast errors for the Bond and Fleisher model show that Bush received less support from Republicans than expected. Under-support was most pronounced among cross-pressured Republicans (members of the GOP with ideological scores closer to the Democratic party). Bond and Fleisher attribute the lower levels of support from Bush's GOP base and moderate Republicans to a strategy of reaching out to Democrats. By contrast, Joslyn's model shows far less error in forecasts of congressional support.⁷ Joslyn concludes that congressional support for Bush's was on par with expected levels in the postreform era. Conservative Democrats were somewhat more supportive overall, but Bush's average support among the opposition hovered around 37 percent. At a time of greater intra-party cohesion, the average Republican's support score of 69 percent is very close to the model's forecast.

The goal of the data presented in Table 2 is not to reconcile the debate over the Bond and Fleisher and Joslyn models. Rather, the objective is to show that when the focus of analysis is

narrowed to the subset of votes prioritized by the White House in 1989, *Bush did better generally than either model predicts, particularly among his partisan base*. The two right hand columns of Table 2 present forecast errors using support scores from McClure's analysis of 24 key votes and the parameters of the Bond and Fleisher and Joslyn regression models, respectively. Better-than-expected congressional support of Bush's positions on priority bills substantiates the Administration's efforts to marshal veto strength on these bills with the aid of GOP stalwarts and moderate-to-conservative Democrats.

On the issues of greatest importance to the White House, Bush's overtures to the Democratic majority are less evident and his strategy appears far more partisan than Bond and Fleisher posit. Bush drew the most support from his co-partisans and legislators to the right of the ideological spectrum in both parties. Support of Bush among members of the Republican party base averaged 83 percent ($s = 10.5\%$). This level of support was 10 to nearly 16 percent greater than predicted by the Bond and Fleisher and Joslyn models, respectively. Moreover, Bush did better among more conservative Democrats—by nearly 12 percent over the Joslyn model forecast and nearly 9 percent better than the Bond and Fleisher model. The average southern Democrat supported Bush about 50 percent of the time ($s = 22.9\%$), some 8 percentage points higher than Joslyn's model forecasts. Support from the liberal Democratic base was far less, by about 12 percent, than the Bond and Fleisher model forecasts—but approximately what could be expected according to Joslyn's parameters. Liberal Democrats supported Bush's key vote positions only 26 percent of the time ($s = 9.8\%$), reflecting the substantial inter-branch conflict that developed around the majority's policy agenda.

Analysis of other sub-groups is consistent with Bush's emphasis on building support among congressional conservatives and his party base on key votes. Members of the extended

Republican leadership supported the president, on average, 84 percent of the time on key votes ($S = 10.8\%$).⁸ This level of support is 11 and 17 percent greater than predicted by the Bond and Fleisher and Joslyn models, respectively. Bush relied steadily on the Republican leadership to shore up party-unity. Democratic leaders, mirroring the party's liberal base, were less supportive. The average leader's support score of 33 percent ($S = 16.6\%$) was nearly 7 percent less than forecast by the Bond and Fleisher model but consistent with expectations of the Joslyn model.

The central point of the reconstituted support score predictions using White House key votes is that *not all position votes carry the same weight from the perspective of the White House*. On the votes the White House viewed as paramount, Bush garnered stronger partisan support and backing from cross-pressured Democrats than scholars' models forecast. The lion's share of this support was in opposition to the Democratic leadership's agenda. Because the payoff of such support was not always immediate—Bush lost 11 of the 24 roll-calls—the subtleties of his legislative strategy have drawn inadequate attention.

Bush's veto threats on losing roll-calls, and the appearance of strong partisanship and occasionally conservative Democrats' backing of his positions, facilitated negotiations with Democratic leaders to drop objectionable provisions on some bills. In several cases Bush forced the majority leadership in Congress to engage in "strategic disagreement" (Gilmour 1995) by attempting override votes that were doomed to fail. In several such cases Democrats' bid to win public sympathy was abortive, and Bush won policy concessions on the next round of negotiations.

"Veto Strength" and Veto Threats: A Closer Analysis

Bush's emphasis on veto strength on losing roll-calls in the House of Representatives yielded success most visibly on measures that were vetoed and subject to override attempts.

Bush's ability to withstand challenges to his vetoes halted the legislation on Eastern Airlines and the FS-X aircraft and won compromises from the Democratic leadership on minimum wage and labor appropriations following failed override attempts. Bush had threatened to veto each of these bills save SJR 113, which was a resolution of disapproval of an executive agreement the president had reached with Japan on the co-production of the FS-X fighter jet.

The president forced the hand of the Democratic leadership on several override attempts that were clearly subject to "blame-game" tactics. Democratic leaders chose to ignore the president's veto threats and retain objectionable provisions in bills. After Bush cast a veto, the leadership knew in advance that the overrides would fail because of the veto strength demonstrated on the roll-call outcome—but they pushed forth anyway to publicly demonstrate their resolve. These failed override attempts were a kind of position-taking aimed at building electoral support and posturing for future negotiations rather than affecting immediate legislative outcomes (Conley and Kreppel 2001). However, it was Bush who won key concessions in subsequent bargaining.

The minimum wage bill (HR 2) passed in Spring of 1989 was exemplary. Bush rejected Democrats' efforts to increase the wage floor past \$4.25 per hour and favored the inclusion of a sub-minimum training wage. The majority used its procedural advantages in the House to foreclose passage of the president's proposal, sponsored by Republican Bill Goodling. The Rules Committee employed a "king-of-the-hill" tool to ensure that the president's proposal would be considered first and that the last measure to win approval—favored by the Democratic leadership—would be adopted (Morehouse 1989). The Goodling amendment went down to defeat 198-218, and the Democrats' plan for a more generous wage increase to \$4.55 per hour (the Murphy amendment), was adopted 240-179. Both White House key votes evidenced strong

partisanship and veto strength. Bush vetoed the measure after the Senate approved the bill, calling the increase “excessive” (Devroy and Dewar 1989).

Democrats had tried to dissuade Bush from vetoing the measure by putting public pressure on the White House. Tony Coelho, the House Democratic whip, argued that “If Bush vetoes this, the American people will have to judge whether he is being kinder and gentler toward working people or some other group of Americans” (Rasky 1989). Senate majority leader George Mitchell called Bush’s veto “particularly offensive to millions of poor working Americans” (Devroy and Dewar 1989). The House leadership then launched an override effort to embarrass the president. But Bush and House Republicans viewed the budgetary implications of the increase in the minimum wage as an issue on which to stand firm and show resolve. The symbolic override attempt was defeated by roughly the same margin of votes that won passage of the Murphy amendment. The impasse ultimately compelled negotiations between the branches that produced a compromise agreement some six months later. Bush won both a cap on an increase in the minimum wage of \$4.25 and the training wage he had proposed (Hershey 1989).

In a similar vein, Bush made good on a threat to veto appropriations for the Department of Labor over the issue of abortion funding (HR 2990). The House agreed to a Senate provision allowing Medicaid funding of abortions in cases involving rape and incest, reversing a long-standing rule that provided for abortions only if the life of the mother was in peril. The conference report was passed by a large margin (364-56), as many who supported the bill despite the abortion provisions did so to avoid jeopardizing other programs (Bronner 1989). Bush took a firm position against the Senate amendment, and a separate roll-call passed by only five votes in the House. Despite losing the roll-call the president won strong Republican support and marshaled seventy-one Democrats behind his stand.

Democrats pressed the issue for political gain. The majority hoped to portray Bush's stand against the Medicaid provision as inconsistent with campaign promises to support an exception for rape and incest (Rovner 1989). Bush was undeterred and after casting his veto, made the case to sustain his decision based on the narrowness of the abortion amendment vote. The Democratic leadership recognized that the votes did not exist to trump the president's veto, but wanted to draw attention to increased support of fifty votes for the Medicaid exception compared to the last attempt under President Reagan in 1988 (Rovner 1989; Congressional Quarterly Almanac 1988, 706; 96-H). Pro-abortion groups and some Democrats endeavored to paint Bush and Republicans as out of step with public opinion on the issue. The executive director of the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) contended that the override vote would "galvanize America's pro-choice majority and help identify political targets in 1990 and 1992" while Oregon Democrat Les AuCoin called Bush's veto "a sellout to the extreme right" (Eaton 1989). Nonetheless, the president converted back eighty-two Republicans and fifty-seven Democrats who had voted for the conference report—the vast majority of whom had voted *against* the Senate amendment on abortion funding—and the override was foiled by a comfortable margin. A continuing resolution kept the Department of Labor funded temporarily. A month later Democrats sent Bush a \$157 billion appropriations bill void of the abortion language, which he promptly signed.

Bush carried through on his veto threat of legislation (HR 1231) directing him to set up a bipartisan congressional committee to investigate an eight-month old strike by pilots and machinists at Eastern Airlines. The White House key vote on passage of the measure evidenced strong party-unity and was thirty votes shy of the threshold to override. Bush vetoed the bill on the grounds that the matter belonged in federal bankruptcy court and Congress had no basis to

intervene in such labor-management disputes. But as California Democrat Douglas Bosco contended, “Democrats see political advantage simply in pressing Bush to reject it. The practical reality is that this is going to be the first opportunity to show that George Bush is anti-labor” (Starobin 1989). House leaders brought up an override some five months after Bush’s veto as the strike lingered, in large part to show solidarity with union organizations that had lobbied intensely for the bill (Los Angeles Times 1989). As in the case of the minimum wage legislation and appropriations for the Labor Department, the override vote largely paralleled the passage margin of the original legislation and the president’s veto was sustained. The thwarted override “handed Bush an easy victory” in his second veto showdown with Congress in 1990 (Eaton 1990).

Veto strength in the House also aided Bush’s drive to stave off congressional efforts to impose restrictions on co-production of the FS-X fighter jet with Japan (SJR 113). The resolution was introduced by Democratic Senator Alan Dixon who led forces opposed to the agreement. A separate House resolution (HJRes 254) never emerged from the Foreign Affairs Committee. The White House contended that sensitive technology was protected under the agreement, which Administration officials forecast to bring \$2.5 billion into the U.S. economy. Critics argued protections in the “memorandum of understanding” between the two nations were insufficient and that the trade deficit with Japan would only expand (Surman 1989).

While passage of the resolution in the Senate did not include a record vote, the measure was adopted largely along party lines in the House and some fifty votes below the threshold to override a veto. Bush vetoed the measure on the grounds that the resolution infringed on the president’s constitutional authority in foreign affairs. His argument held water with the Senate, where an override attempt failed by one vote. Regardless, had the Senate succeeded with the

override, House Democratic leaders would have had to surmount a formidable margin of support for Bush's position.

Conclusions

This analysis of key votes prioritized by the White House in 1989 offers a fresh perspective on George Bush's first-year legislative strategy. The results challenge some of the criteria scholars routinely employ to evaluate presidential "success." Archival records emphasize the linkage between congressional support for Bush, veto strength on roll-call outcomes, veto threats on pending legislation, and policy negotiation. Bush's frequent losses on immediate roll-call outcomes belied a more complex strategy for dealing with the opposition majority in Congress. Support from his party base and from moderate-to-conservative Democrats on priority legislation was better than scholars' baseline models predicted. Such support was pivotal in conjunction with vetoes threatened and vetoes cast, even if the payoff was not instantaneous. Grasping this strategy solves some of the mystery surrounding Bush's mastery of the veto power over the course of his term, despite frequent override challenges by the Democratic leadership.

This research raises several broad issues for the study of presidential-congressional relations. First, the analysis points to the potential value of archival records to uncover presidential preferences. At a minimum, the debate about which votes best reflect presidential priorities for scholarly evaluations of legislative success should be reexamined. Clearly not all position votes receive the same level of attention and priority status by the White House. Second, the analysis emphasizes the importance of looking beyond immediate roll-call outcomes to evaluate presidential success. A multifaceted approach that embraces the linkage between individual legislative support, vetoes threatened and applied, and the degree to which policy

outcomes ultimately coincide with the president's preferences furnishes a more comprehensive basis to assess presidential strategy and engagement in the legislative realm.

These points are particularly critical in evaluating presidents' relative success under conditions of divided party control in recent decades. Presidents' emphasis on halting legislation or forcing negotiation with opposition majorities through the veto power entails a different notion of presidential success than the type valorized by the "textbook presidency." Yet the strategy is quite consistent with rise of stronger institutional parties in Congress and more assertive opposition majorities in the 1980s and 1990s that have limited presidents' room to maneuver to build winning legislative coalitions.

This analysis highlights the central paradox of Bush's presidency. Archival records suggest that by the yardstick the Administration used to assess legislative success, the president's ability to halt or modify elements of the Democratic party's agenda in Congress was superior. Scholarly evaluations of Bush's legislative presidency, however, posit a mediocre—if not failed—legacy on the domestic front. Recriminations include his alleged missed opportunity to use extraordinarily high job approval following the Gulf War to advance a comprehensive agenda (Milkis and Nelson 1994, 393), despite few indications that the Democratic majority was willing to follow the president's policy lead in foreign or domestic affairs.⁹ Perceptions of Bush's shortcomings may stem from his inability to preempt the congressional majority and use the bully pulpit effectively to reframe the policy debate through the implied and applied use of the veto power in the way that his successor, Bill Clinton, did so successfully from 1995-96. This may be the lesson, then, of Bush's legislative presidency for future occupants of the Oval Office who face divided government and are forced to rely heavily on the veto power.

Notes

¹ David Mayhew's (1991) analysis parallels this interpretation. Mayhew counted only two "significant" measures for 1989: the savings and loan industry bailout and the increase in the minimum wage. The only first-term president with fewer significant bills passed his first year was Dwight Eisenhower in 1953 (tidelands oil legislation).

² Data are from Taylor (1998). Taylor researched *Congressional Quarterly's* annual listing of "major" legislation on domestic policy alongside presidents' State of the Union addresses and congressional leaders' speeches to determine whether initiatives were linked to the president's agenda or that of the majority party in Congress. The definition of the national legislative agenda is consequently limited to either the president or Congress. To qualify for inclusion initiatives did not have to pass, but only receive attention by Congress.

³ See Edwards (1985) for a detailed review.

⁴ The McClure (1990) memo was subject to a P-5 restriction of the Presidential Records Act (confidential advice between the President and his advisors). Access to the memo was appealed by author and granted. However, elements of the two-page memo to President Bush that accompanied McClure's support score analysis were redacted by archivists at the Bush Presidential Library. This redacted information cannot be accessed until January 2003, at which time the moratorium on the disclosure of confidential advice ends.

⁵ The *conservative coalition* is defined as a majority of Republicans voting with a majority of southern Democrats.

⁶ This finding is not unprecedented. Edwards (1980) found that the relation between presidential prestige and Republican support in Democratic presidential years was negative; see pp. 96-98.

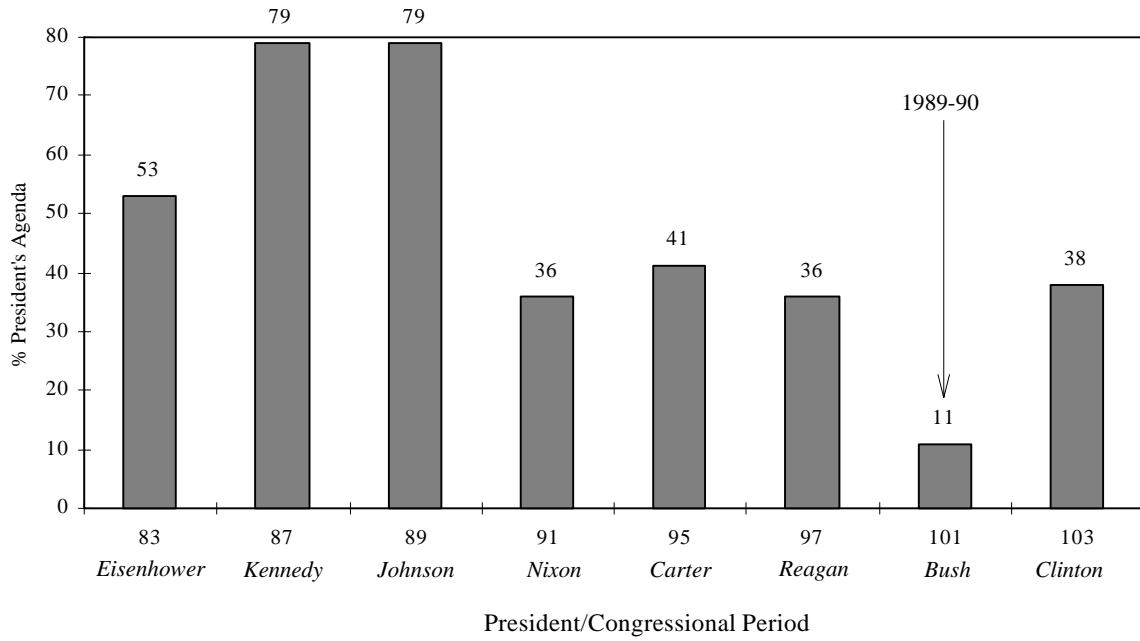
⁷ Joslyn (1995) did not divide out his analysis according to the "four-party" politics of Bond and Fleisher. The coefficients in Table 2 for Joslyn's parameters were replicated by the author.

⁸ Members of the leadership in each party include majority/minority leaders and members of the extended whip system.

⁹ It is important to recall that strong majorities of Democrats in the House and the Senate voted *against* the Gulf War Resolution.

Figure 1

First-Term Presidents' Agenda as a Percentage of the Total Legislative Agenda in Congress



Source: adapted by author from Taylor (1998).

Table 1*

Bush's Victory Ratio on White House Key Votes, 1989

	N = 24
Overall	13 (54%)
Democrats	6 (25%)
Republicans	24 (100%)

* Votes on which the president won a majority of members overall and by party

Table 2

Forecast Errors of Bush's First-Year Legislative Support by Party Factions,
Congressional Quarterly Position Votes and White House Key Votes Analysis

Party Faction	CQ Position Votes, 1989	CQ Position Votes, 1989	White House Key Votes Analysis, 1989	White House Key Votes Analysis, 1989
	Mean Forecast Error <i>Bond and Fleisher Model</i>	Mean Forecast Error <i>Joslyn Model</i>	Mean Forecast Error <i>Bond and Fleisher Model</i>	Mean Forecast Error <i>Joslyn Model</i>
Republican Party base	-9.23	3.50	10.61	15.93
Cross-pressured Republicans	-20.08	-1.92	-6.87	5.90
Cross-pressured Democrats	9.40	4.91	8.73	11.74
Democratic Party base	1.91	4.24	-11.68	-1.53
<i>Mean Forecast Error</i>	<i>-1.77</i>	<i>3.85</i>	<i>-.31</i>	<i>7.10</i>

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Appendix 1
White House “Key Votes” Analysis, 1989

Bill No.	Date	White House Position	Outcome	Democrats	Republicans	Win/Loss	Subject
HR 1231	3/15/89	Nay	252-167	232-15	20-152	Loss	Eastern Airlines Dispute
HR 2	3/23/89	Yea	198-218	44-102	154-16	Loss	Goodling amendment/minimum wage
HR 2	3/23/89	Nay	240-179	221-28	19-151	Loss	Murphy amendment/minimum wage
HR 2	3/23/89	Nay	248-171	226-24	22-147	Loss	Passage of HR 2/minimum wage
HR 1750	4/13/89	Yea	309-110	152-99	157-11	Win	Bipartisan Accord on Central America
HR 2072	4/26/89	Nay	172-252	163-92	9-160	Win	Foley amendment/Dire Emergency Supplemental Appropriations
HCR 106	5/4/89	Yea	263-157	157-96	106-61	Win	Budget Resolution
HR 2072	5/24/89	Nay	227-197	219-33	8-164	Loss	Dire Emergency Supplemental Appropriations/Passage
HR 2442	5/24/89	Nay	205-213	201-47	4-166	Win	Star Wars for Drug Wars Act of 1989
SJR 113	6/7/89	Nay	241-168	205-37	36-131	Loss	FSX Weapon System Development with Japan
HR 2	6/14/89	Nay	247-178	227-28	20-150	Win	Veto override attempt of HR 2/minimum wage
HR 1278	6/15/89	Yea	320-97	196-51	124-46	Win	Financial Institutions Reform, Recovery, and Enforcement Act
HR 2655	6/28/89	Nay	185-233	178-68	7-165	Win	McHugh amendment/El Salvador military aid
HR 2461	7/26/89	Yea	176-244	53-194	123-50	Loss	Skelton amendment/Stealth bomber
HR 2461	7/27/89	Nay	223-201	204-48	19-153	Loss	Stenholm amendment/Davis-Bacon provisions
HR 1278	8/3/89	Yea	221-199	182-67	39-132	Win	Conference Report/Financial Institutions Reform, Recovery, Enforcement Act
HR 3299	9/28/89	Nay	190-239	189-64	1-175	Win	Rostenkowski Amendment/Budget Reconciliation
HR 3299	10/5/89	Yea	195-230	36-214	159-16	Loss	Stenholm amendment/Head Start/Social Services
HR 2990	10/11/89	Nay	212-207	173-71	39-136	Loss	Department of Labor Appropriations
HR 2990	10/25/89	Nay	231-191	189-59	42-132	Win	Override attempt of HR 2990/Department of Labor Appropriations
HR 2710	11/1/89	Yea	382-37	247-2	135-35	Win	Minimum wage
HR 1465	11/8/89	Nay	213-207	173-75	40-132	Loss	Miller amendment/Oil Pollution Liability and Compensation Act
HR 1465	11/9/89	Nay	185-197	150-71	35-126	Win	Miller amendment/Oil Pollution Liability and Compensation Act
HR 3299	11/21/89	Yea	272-128	186-47	86-81	Win	Conference Report/Budget Reconciliation