



Issues in GOVERNANCE STUDIES

Number 54

December 2012



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What to Expect in the Second Term: Presidential Travel and the Rise of Legacy Building, 1957-2009

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

But for a glossy, twenty-page pamphlet released two weeks before election day, President Barack Obama's reelection campaign offered up little in the way of specific plans for a second term. Our study of presidential travel from President Eisenhower through George W. Bush provides some hint of what's in store during the next four years.



Reuters

If President Obama follows in the footsteps of his predecessors, he will spend less time in swing states and more time abroad. To date, little attention has been dedicated to the study of the "public presidency" in the second-term, despite the fact that securing reelection represents an achievement capable of granting one entrance to our nation's pantheon of "great" presidents. Prior studies of first-term presidential travel reveal the profound impact of the permanent campaign and the accompanying tendency for presidents to focus their travel in swing states. Without such an electoral incentive, we became interested in the factors that guide a second term president's travel decisions. Our analysis of second-term presidents reveals a distinct uptick in international travel and the demise of the permanent campaign strategy. We suggest that such a change in priorities reflects an emphasis on legacy building.

Introduction

The “public presidency” has become a broadly accepted notion in the United States. Since the mid-twentieth century especially – when air travel became commonplace – citizens have expected presidents to pay visits to towns and cities across the country at times of both crisis and celebration. Since the presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower, these trips have become much more frequent, and the so-called public presidency has morphed into a hyper-public presidency.¹ This increase in travel, however, cannot be ascribed to improvements in transportation alone. Nor is it apparent that the “demand” side of the equation has particularly increased – conferences and ceremonies, or natural disasters and war, have been a constant feature of the domestic and international scene. Rather, what we have seen is an increase in presidential “supply.”

Since the Nixon era, scholars have noted that first-term travel is largely motivated by the quest for reelection, thereby raising the importance of electorally valuable states under the Electoral College system.² The shorthand term for this phenomenon is the “permanent campaign,” which reflects the notion that presidents (and their advisors) are constantly fixated on their reelection prospects – to the point where the first term in office becomes a vehicle for maintaining and expanding their electoral coalition.³

Presidential advisors seeking to capitalize on the release of federal grants, or new discretionary programs, for example, might plan to make such announcements outside Washington, D.C., choosing to do so in swing states instead (those states where the president narrowly won or lost the initial election). Indeed, our earlier research into first term travel dramatically illustrates the presence of the permanent campaign.⁴ These findings, however, raise the question of motivation for travel during a president’s second term – given that the prospect of reelection no longer exists. At that point, what incentives drive presidential travel?

This study analyzes the second-term presidential travel of Presidents Eisenhower, Reagan, Clinton, and George W. Bush. We incorporate international travel so as to capture the entire scope of the “public presidency” during a president’s second term. As we demonstrate below, second-term presidents make fewer domestic trips, and do so in a less strategic manner than first termers. In addition, it appears that presidents prefer to travel abroad in their final years in office. Rather than an electorally motivated strategy, we suggest that second term presidential travel reflects a legacy building goal.

We begin by explaining our approach and data collection method, and present charts illustrating recent trends in presidential domestic and international travel from 1953 to 2009. Through use of regression modeling, we provide evidence that demonstrates the presence of a very different dynamic in the second term of a presidency – the waning of the permanent campaign

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strategy. Instead, we found a marked increase in international visibility, in line with our ideas about legacy building. We conclude with a discussion of how these findings might shape the second term of an Obama administration and the political landscape more broadly.

The Public Presidency in a Second Term

Securing a second term is often considered one way for a president to gain admission into the pantheon of “great” presidents. Yet, as a general topic, presidential second terms have generated little scholarly attention, and travel in the second term has been almost entirely neglected.⁵ Various scholars have touched on aspects relevant to second terms: examining success rates for second term judicial appointments, for example, or linking lame duck status to the increased exercise of unilateral powers.⁶ While interesting and thought provoking, none of these efforts is directly relevant to our line of inquiry on the *public* dimensions of the second-term presidency.

Using the *Public Papers of the President*, we have systematically gathered new data on presidential travel to fill this void. The *Public Papers* – published by the Government Printing Office – provide a record of the president’s public speeches, informal remarks, and interviews with journalists, along with the date and location.⁷ For both domestic and international travel, we count the number of “trips” the president takes, rather than individual events or days of travel. More specifically, we record each time the president visits a distinct geographic location outside of Washington D.C. as a single trip, provided he engages in *public* and *substantial* activity that is *connected* to that location.

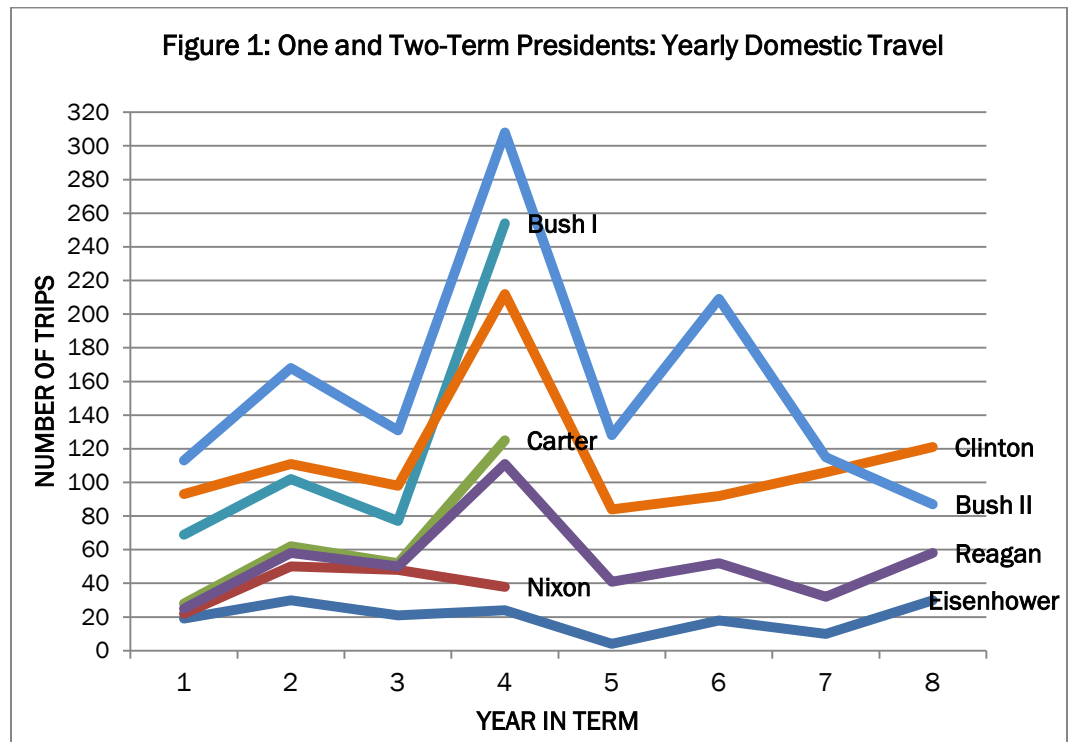
Typically, the president makes a public speech, but an extensive exchange with reporters that touches on his reasons for being in a particular location, or includes some acknowledgment relevant to the local community, would also count. Alternatively, he might throw out the first pitch at a baseball game, or tour a local manufacturing facility, without offering specific remarks. We include such instances due to the public nature of the activity, the president’s central role therein, and the visible connection to the local community. In contrast, the president’s remarks are sometimes incidental to the location in which he is currently situated – as when he engages in a brief exchange with reporters at an airfield while en route to a different location, or when the president is asked to comment upon developing national or international events while on the road. If such incidental remarks are the only “activity” in a particular location, we exclude it from our dataset. Campaign fundraisers are included under these guidelines, unless they are held at a private residence.

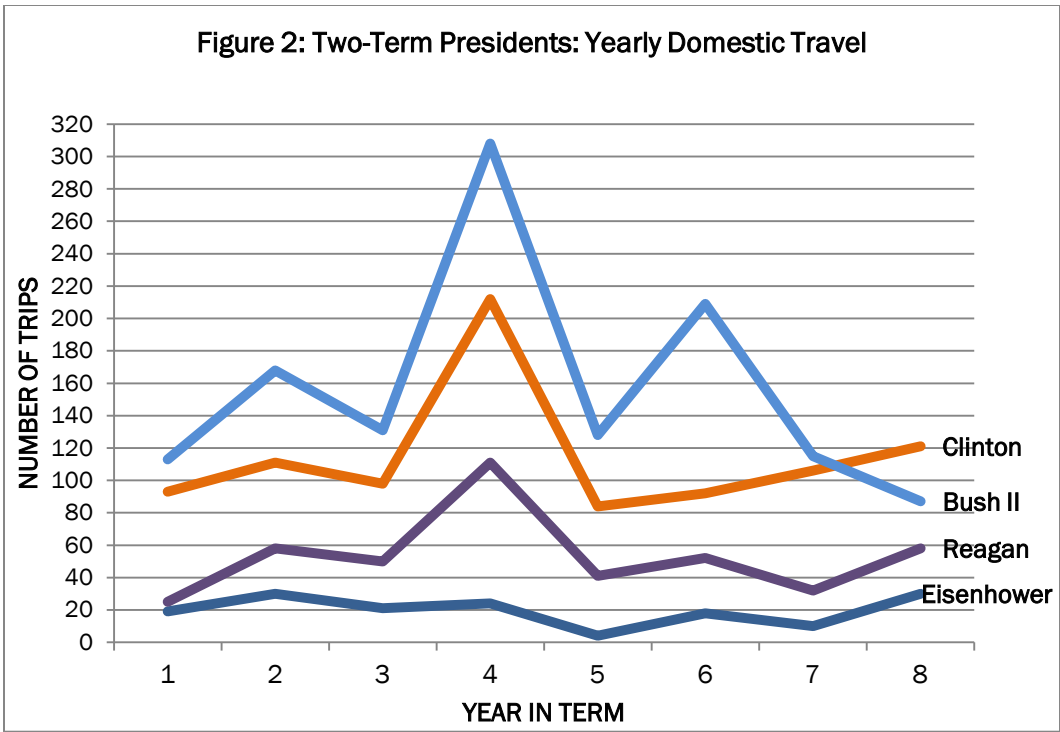
Given our emphasis on distinct *locations*, the president may participate in multiple *events* in the same location but those activities would be recorded as a single *trip* (even if the visit to that location extended over several days). Similarly, he may take *multiple trips* within the same day if he attends discrete events in different locations. It is rare, but possible, that a specific location will be counted

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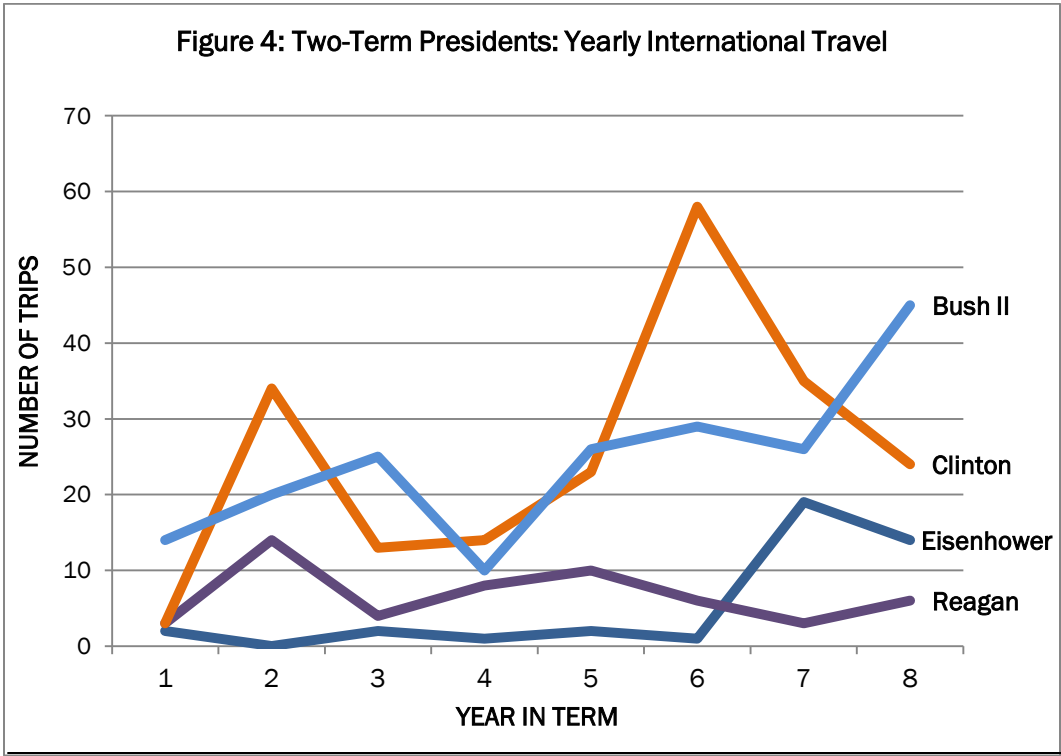
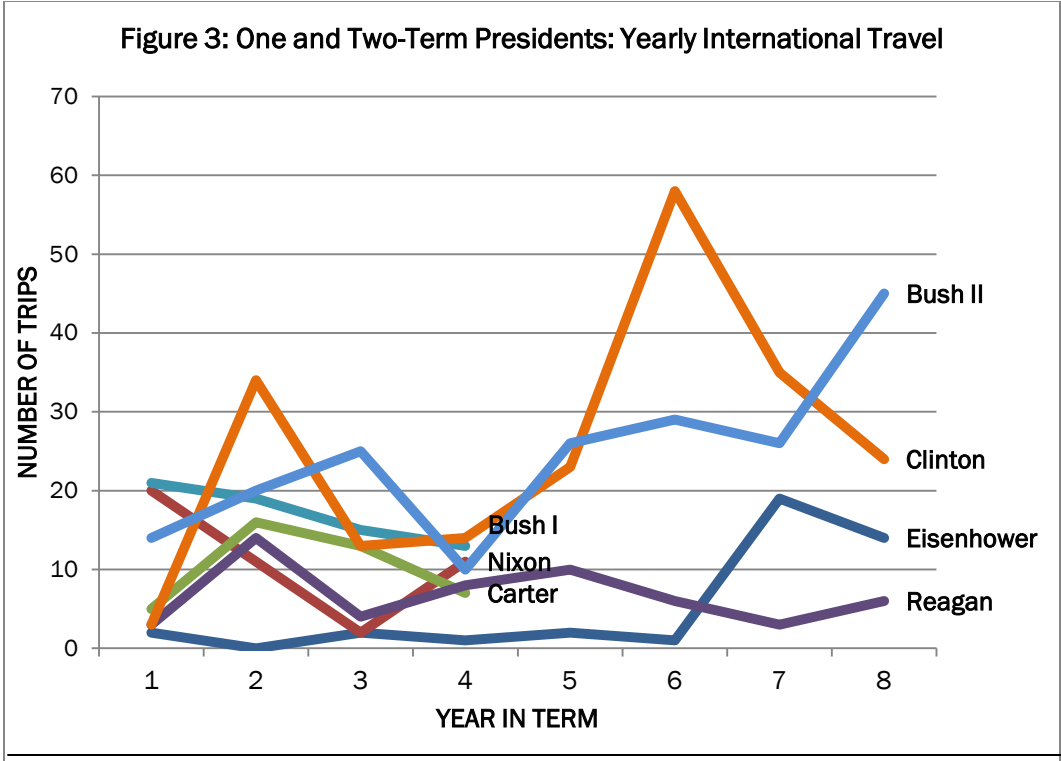
twice in the course of a particular visit, if the president attends an event in one location, travels elsewhere for another, then returns to the original location for a further activity. This method provides sensitivity to changes in geographic location, without overemphasizing specific places where several events may be clustered due to population concentration or scheduling considerations.⁸

Confining our focus to the domestic sphere, Figures 1 and 2 show the basic contours of presidential travel over time, demonstrating a stark pattern of election-related travel in the first term, and – for those that win reelection – an overall decline in domestic travel as a president works his way through the second term. The inclusion of President Eisenhower provides a helpful baseline from which to examine what travel looked like before the growth of television and the twenty-four hour news cycle, changes in the electoral process that required more retail campaigning, and the public’s ever-growing expectations of presidential action. Even at the height of his reelection campaign in 1956, Eisenhower traveled only a fraction of what his successors did, especially compared to President George W. Bush in 2004.





Turning to the international realm, the data reveal a second-term president’s predilection for travel abroad, as shown in Figures 3 and 4. While the increases are not a straightforward function of time – an expectation of greater international travel with each passing year – the *cumulative* amount of international travel undertaken during the second term far exceeds the first term in office.



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This figure demonstrates that all four two-term presidents were exceedingly reluctant to leave the United States during their first year in office. Compare this to the start of their second term. Each of the two-term presidents was more willing to travel abroad in this fifth year of his political career. There was even more travel abroad in the latter years of the second term – with the exception of Reagan who was bogged down by the Iran-Contra scandal and increasing health concerns. Even in the exceptional case of Eisenhower, we still find a more pronounced pattern of international travel in the seventh and eighth years. Such travel presumably raises the international profile of the chief executive, offering opportunities to inhabit the symbolically powerful and unifying role as Head of State, helping to build a type of legacy that an Electoral College strategy cannot.

The Disappearance of the Permanent Campaign Mentality

Regression analysis of both domestic and international travel allows us to put a finer point on this evidence. Our earlier study demonstrated the emergence of an “Electoral College” strategy in which presidents prioritized travel to swing states across the country. Since the 1970s, presidents have tended to visit larger and more competitive states as the reelection year approaches in order to secure those important electoral votes. All other things equal (and in line with our previous findings), we would expect that presidents tend to target states that are larger, especially when their margin of victory was narrow in the previous election, and particularly in the later years of the first term. The question thus arises, does this pattern exist in the second term?

The answer – perhaps unsurprisingly, given the absence of reelection – appears to be no. In the case of Eisenhower, we find that none of the coefficients stands out as statistically significant.⁹ President Eisenhower engaged in relatively little travel throughout his presidency. The regression model suggests that Electoral College considerations were not driving the few trips he did take in his second term. In the case of President Reagan, the coefficients also suggest no strong preference in the second term for visiting larger and more competitive states. With President Clinton, the effect is not highly significant, nor does it appear to be conditioned by the president’s margin of victory in the previous election. Finally, in the case of President George W. Bush, none of the coefficients stand out as particularly strong or significant. At most, the data suggest a weak general preference toward visiting larger and more competitive states – relative to those that were smaller and less competitive.

This pattern of largely non-findings stands in marked contrast to our results for first-term travel, where recent executives have been shown to engage in appreciable amounts of strategic travel based on Electoral College considerations.¹⁰ The contrast is particularly striking in the case of George W. Bush, who had placed the heaviest emphasis on large swing states during his first term. With reelection no longer a factor in Bush’s decision-making calculus,

the attractiveness of visiting a states like Florida or Pennsylvania seemed to diminish rapidly.

Looking to the Future

What factors could have weighed heavily when deciding where to travel in the second term? As discussed above, presidents who are successful in a reelection bid may well shift their focus from electoral concerns to building a legacy during the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth years. To be sure, presidential memoirs are replete with references to one's place in history and long-term legacy – reflections that appear to loom more heavily the longer a chief executive occupies the White House. Writing in the *New Yorker* recently, journalist Ryan Lizza quoted Reagan administration memos that highlight the legacy building mentality:

It seems to me that the President needs to decide what his legacy is going to be,' [presidential adviser Tom] Korologos wrote on January 24, 1985, a few days after Reagan's second inaugural. 'What is he going to be the most proud of when he's sitting at the ranch with Nancy four and five years after his Presidency? Is it going to be an arms control agreement? Is it going to be a balanced budget? Is it going to be worldwide economic recovery? Is it going to be a combination of all of this: peace and prosperity? . . . Every speech; every appearance; every foreign trip; every congressional phone call and every act involving the President should be made with the long-range goal in mind.¹¹

For incumbent presidents, winning reelection is not simply about renewing your lease to govern, but unveiling an opportunity to make your mark on history.

As Korologos suggests, that legacy might be built atop signature domestic policy issues, but arguably, international travel provides a less contentious and, perhaps, personally appealing way to raise their stature. Presidents often shine most brightly and are perceived as most statesmanlike when representing the United States abroad. We would therefore expect that as the number of trips across the U.S. declines in the second term, and domestic travel becomes less dependent on Electoral College strategies, presidents would venture outside of the country more frequently.

An examination of second-term presidential travel provides at least two broad lessons in this regard: one is that without the shackles of the permanent campaign, presidents are liberated to pursue their own goals (legacy building); and second, a liberated president tends to spend more time abroad. These findings demonstrate a previously unknown tension between domestic and international travel. Where first-term presidents are committed to bolstering their reelection prospects and thus prioritize trips within the United States, the

absence of this pressure allows the chief executive to spend more time abroad. President Clinton, for example, sought to improve the relationship between the Israelis and the Palestinians during his last years in office, though his hard-fought efforts did not result in the peaceful breakthrough for which many had hoped. Nevertheless, presidents free of electoral ambition can chart their own course, aiming high and hoping for the best without paying constant attention to the electoral impact of their actions.¹² Additionally, rather than a distorted set of travel priorities that favors the swing state voters and their issues, the choice of where a second term president spends his time can be more inclusive, enabling the chief executive to visit a wider swath of the citizenry and the international community.

This study also makes it quite clear that the “permanent campaign” is a time-bound phenomenon restricted to the first term. This examination of second term travel essentially provides a null case, and, as one might expect, the absence of the permanent campaign allows presidents to decrease their time away from the White House and spend more time abroad. This shift in priorities may well alter the dynamic within the White House staff as members with expertise in domestic policy may lose their clout to those with knowledge of international relations and foreign policy. Apart from natural disasters or other domestic crises, the second term may be a difficult time in which to encourage a president to push for innovative domestic policies and programs. On a related note, a Congress that perceives the president to be a lame duck may be unwilling to assist the outgoing president in securing such domestic achievements. Given the difficulty that President Obama faced during his first term in office, it is unlikely that a Republican-controlled House would alter its behavior in a way that might cast the president in a positive light.

A greater awareness of the changing priorities within a two-term presidency may alter public expectations of performance. Such recognition might allow presidents the necessary leeway to fulfill their constitutionally mandated duties in an increasingly complex world. President Obama should seize this leeway, focusing on new opportunities instead of lamenting the second term’s inherent limitations.

Governance Studies

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Endnotes

¹ This study stems from a paper prepared for the 2012 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association. For an overview of domestic presidential travel, see Emily Jane Charnock, James A. McCann and Kathryn Dunn Tenpas, “Presidential Travel from Eisenhower to George W. Bush: An ‘Electoral College’ Strategy,” *Political Science Quarterly* 124:2 (2009): 323-339. See p. 327 esp. for evidence of the rising frequency of presidential travel.

² See Charnock et al. (2009); also Brendan J. Doherty, “Elections: The Politics of the Permanent Campaign: Presidential Travel and the Electoral College, 1977-2004,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 27 (December 2007): 749-773; and Brendan J. Doherty, *The Rise of the President’s Permanent Campaign* (Lawrence: Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2012).

³ Journalist Sidney Blumenthal is credited with popularizing the term, “permanent campaign,” while political scientists have provided research-based analyses to add credence to this term. Sidney Blumenthal, *The Permanent Campaign* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1982); Corey Cook, “The Permanence of the Permanent Campaign: George W. Bush’s Public Presidency,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 32:4 (2002): 753-764; Doherty (2007, 2012); John J. Hudak, “The Politics of Federal Grants: Presidential Influence over the Distribution of Federal Funds,” PhD Dissertation, Vanderbilt University, May 2012, available on-line, http://etd.library.vanderbilt.edu/available/etd-03302012_084834/unrestricted/HUDAK DISSERTATION FINAL.pdf; Kathryn Dunn Tenpas, “The American Presidency: Surviving and Thriving Amidst the Permanent Campaign,” in Norman Ornstein and Thomas Mann, *The Permanent Campaign and Its Future* (Washington, D.C.: AEI and Brookings Press, 2000), pp. 108-133; and Kathryn Dunn Tenpas and James A. McCann, “Testing the Permanence of the Permanent Campaign: An Analysis of Presidential Polling Expenditures, 1977-2002,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 71:3 (Fall 2007): 349-366.

⁴ Charnock et al. (2009).

⁵ See, however, Paul Brace and Barbara Hinckley, “Presidential Activities from Truman through Reagan: Timing and Impact,” *The Journal of Politics* 55:2 (1993): 382-398, esp. 393-396; and Robert E. Darcy and Alvin Richman, “Presidential Travel and Public Opinion,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 18:1 (Winter 1988): 85-90.

⁶ There are also a number of speculative articles about what might happen in the second term (in terms of policy, staffing and the like). For an interesting article on the use of unilateral powers at the end of the second term, see William G. Howell and Kenneth R. Mayer, “The Last 100 Days,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 35:3 (2005): 533-553.

⁷ From the Carter administration onward, the *Public Papers* also include a weekly “Digest of Other Presidential Announcements,” which includes the president’s daily schedule, and also notes locations visited. This supplemental publication allows us to verify the basis of the trip if the *Public Papers* entry is incomplete or questionable.

⁸ There are a number of other factors that we also take account of in assessing domestic presidential travel – the proximity of Maryland and Virginia to Washington, D.C., for example, and the large number of federal installations located there, makes them common destinations for the president. Similarly, the president’s own private residence or preferred vacation destinations increase his travel to the states in which they are located. As such, our analysis controls for visits to these states. Our guiding rationale has been that the activity be public, substantive and relevant to the location, though we have also developed rules to deal with a number of other, rarely

occurring situations. Culling through the *Public Papers of the Presidency* is a tedious, arduous task that requires careful consideration of each trip. Appreciating these nuances and unique circumstances, we have done our best to produce the most accurate account of presidential travel.

⁹ Actual regression coefficients available on request - contact mccannj@purdue.edu.

¹⁰ Charnock et al. (2009); Doherty, (2007).

¹¹ Ryan Lizza, "The Second Term: What Would Obama do if Reelected?" *The New Yorker*, June 18, 2012. Accessed August 12, 2012, from http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2012/06/18/120618fa_fact_lizza#ixzz23NpvnSaR.

¹² A summer skirmish in the 2012 presidential campaign reflects this point of view. Responding to Republican criticism that President Obama had not visited Israel, his aides indicated that he would be willing to go to Israel in a second term. They also noted that President George W. Bush did not go to Israel until his 8th year in office. See CNN political ticker, <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2012/07/23/obama-aides-president-will-visit-israel-in-a-second-term/>.