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Going Partisan: Presidential Leadership in a Polarized Political Environment

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Brandon Rottinghaus is an Associate Professor and the Senator Don Henderson Scholar in the Department of Political Science at the University of Houston. His research interests include the presidency, executive-legislative relations and public opinion. He is author of *The Provisional Pulpit: Modern Presidential Leadership of Public Opinion* (Texas A&M University Press). He is also the co-director of the Presidential Proclamations Project.

Debate persists about whether or not presidents lead public opinion, how they do it and the effect it has on Congressional voting behavior. In this paper, I articulate and find support for an alternative strategy to the “going public” presidential leadership tactic. With the United States currently experiencing a hyper-polarized political environment, I argue that the president’s goal in “going partisan” is to directly mobilize local partisans and leaning partisans and indirectly engender greater party support of the president’s party within Congress. The end goal is not to persuade cross-pressured members of Congress or persuade opposition partisans, but rather to hold copartisan members of Congress in the fold. Thus, presidents target wavering *copartisans* in the public and in Congress with their rhetoric. This approach explains why presidents primarily travel to states that they won in previous elections, why presidents spend time courting partisan voters and provides the proper context for modern presidential leadership. Presidential visits have a significant impact on state-based partisan (and leaning partisan) presidential approval and partisan support in Congress.

The implications of this finding allows scholars to reassess the way presidents lead in a polarized political environment, as presidents are not focused on persuading a national persuadable audience but instead on political partisans. In particular, this provides additional evidence of the president’s effectiveness at motivating his partisans and how mobilized partisanship at the state level engenders more partisan support of the president. The effect is modest (about half a percentage

point per year) but effective considering the president's limited options. The creation of mutual executive-legislative partisan goals through greater partisan support softens the bargaining environment for presidents. Importantly, that these effects are specific to a more polarized period in the country and within Congress, there is additional evidence that presidential leadership has evolved into a partisan effect as political polarization has cemented in Congress. The rumors of the death of the president's ability to leverage his popularity into support in Congress is greatly exaggerated. This effect wanes, however, in the polarized period, suggesting new partisan tactics are necessary.

Introduction

When President Obama entered office in 2009, he was confronted by opposition from an unlikely source: his own party. As he pressed Congress to keep his ambitious budget plan intact, President Obama had to navigate "multiple constituencies within his party." Centrist Democrats in the Senate tried to organize into a muscular bloc to influence the president's \$3.6 trillion budget. At the same time, liberal groups, with tacit encouragement from the White House, pushed back, and tried to keep Mr. Obama's core domestic initiatives – on health care, climate change and education – from being watered down. The President needed to hold together a tense and thin margin of support, so the White House "urged supporters to call their members of Congress."¹ The finite resource of presidential time and the low likelihood of picking up Republican votes pressed the White House into a *defensive*, offensive mode and a plan to keep the president's party unified in partisan times.

At the heart of this intra-party confrontation is the evolving debate about how (or whether) presidents lead public opinion and whether that opinion movement has any effect on a president's legislative success. Presidential scholar Richard Neustadt identifies the phenomenon of "president-as-teacher" (as a resource in the "power to persuade") where "a president concerned for leeway inside government must try to shape the thoughts of men outside."² Challenging this assertion, political scientist Sam Kernell argues that presidential efforts to persuade the mass public are directed at persuading members of Congress who are "on the fence."³ Critiquing the ability of presidents to accomplish this, presidential scholar George Edwards suggests that presidents are unable to lead public

1. Zeleny, Jeff. 2009. "Budget Has Obama Courting Fellow Democrats." *The New York Times*, March 25.

2. Neustadt, Richard. 1990. *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan*. New York, NY: Free Press, 30.

3. Kernell, Samuel. 2007. *Going Public*, 3rd ed. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press.

opinion because of a fragmented media and a polarized public.⁴ However, contesting Edwards's assertion about the inability of presidents to lead public opinion, others find that presidential appeals to the public on issues of domestic and foreign policy expenditures produces an increase in allocated spending in the following budget cycle and that presidents are conditionally successful in leading public opinion with some effect on members of Congress.⁵

Yet, if theories of presidential leadership are predicated on the notion that presidents attempt to lead malleable public opinion to persuade "cross-pressured" members of Congress, but a smaller percentage of the public will listen to the president and substantially fewer members of Congress will bargain with him, why would a president continue to spend considerable time attempting to (indirectly) persuade these members? Political polarization has changed the way that the public responds to the president and the success presidents have at bargaining with Congress.⁶ Partisan publics are on the rise, complicating the ability of the president to lead mass public opinion.⁷ A partisan presidency has emerged, as modern presidents receive large "approval gaps" between copartisans and out-partisans.⁸ Parties in Congress have become more polarized, making it more difficult for the president to "reach across the aisle" to forge bipartisan consensus with the opposition party. These diverging elements need to be brought into balance to more clearly understand the relationship between presidential leadership, partisan public opinion and polarized lawmaking.

Presidential Leadership and the Pre-Partisan Presidency

Richard Neustadt argued that the president operates in an environment in which his power is entirely determined by his ability to persuade members of Congress. This persuasive power is dependent on three inter-related factors: White House resources, professional reputation among members of Congress and public prestige. Though simple and concise, Neustadt's leadership model fails to account for the expansion of

4. Edwards III, George C. 2003. *On Deaf Ears: The Limits of the Bully Pulpit*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

5. Rottinghaus, Brandon. 2010. *The Provisional Pulpit: Modern Presidential Leadership of Public Opinion*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press.

6. Jacobson, Gary. 2000. "Party Polarization in National Politics: The Electoral Connection." *Polarized Politics: Congress and the President in a Partisan Era*, edited by Jon Bond and Richard Fleisher. Washington, DC: CQ Press.

7. Abramowitz, Alan I. and Saunders. 1998. "Ideological Realignment in the American Electorate." *Journal of Politics* 60 (4): 634-52.

8. Skinner, Ricard M. 2009. "George W. Bush and the Partisan Presidency." *Political Science Quarterly* 123 (4): 605-623.

government and party polarization, as profoundly witnessed by the modern presidency. In another theory, incompatible with the direct bargaining approach, Kernell's "going public" theory argues that presidents indirectly persuade members of Congress by directly persuading the malleable public. "Going public" is entirely dependent, and only effective, within a specific political environment. The president must be a Washington outsider and his behavior an extension of the "permanent campaign."

Although appealing as a theory, there have been few direct tests of both phases of "going public." Most of the focus is on the first phase of presidential opinion leadership and typically with few positive results for the White House. For instance, scholars argue that presidents fail at moving public preferences for a number of reasons, typically in combination with each other, such as shrinking audiences, partisan media message screeners, the political partisanship of citizens and a lack of public attention to the news. Several authors claim that the rise of television (and the rise in the diversity of viewers) challenges the president's ability to lead public opinion.⁹ Specifically, that viewers have more media choices and that they are exercising these options by turning to likeminded news sources, limiting the president's ability to consistently lead public opinion.¹⁰ Less media attention is paid to presidents, even in venues and on issues that traditionally afforded the president a great deal of coverage, such as foreign policy.

Presidential Leadership in the Post-Partisan Presidency

In an institutional setting, the bargaining approach is feasible; presidents have the ability to persuade members of Congress with handshakes, meals and promises. However, when the political structure moved from institutional to individual pluralism, a public leadership strategy of public persuasion was more pragmatic. Instead of the president bargaining directly with individual members of Congress, the president "goes public," assuming the public will then pressure members of Congress whom the president needs to convince to join his (temporary) coalition. Yet, as argued above, there is debate about whether or not this strategy is effective, with some arguing that it cannot work and others arguing that it can work either indirectly or directly.

In the post-partisan era, two issues limit the president's ability to lead the public and, indirectly, members of Congress. First, the mass public is not inclined to follow the

9. Young, Garry and William B. Perkins. 2005. "Presidential Rhetoric, the Public Agenda, and the End of Presidential Television's 'Golden Age.'" *Journal of Politics* (67): 1190-205.

10. Kernell, Samuel and Laurie L. Rice. 2011. "Cable and the Partisan Polarization of the President's Audience," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 41 (4): 693-711.

president in most conditions. This is partly due to the fact that the media is less likely to cover the president or to cover the president positively, or both.¹¹ The public is also much less moderate than before, and partisan identifiers are much more polarized. Bafumi and Shapiro (2009) argue that the strength of partisan voting is “more ideological and more issue based along liberal-conservative lines” than it has been in more than 30 years.¹² Persuading opposition partisans is also difficult (if not impossible) for modern presidents.¹³ Even independents are partisans in “disguise.” Due to polarization, partisan elites have enhanced ability to shape lower-level, partisan attitudes away from the president’s position. With the growth of party polarization comes an increased likelihood of divided government, which has severely limited the president’s capacity to consistently move mass political attitudes.

The second problem for presidential leadership in the post-partisan era is that there are fewer ideological moderates in each party who may consider crossing party lines to vote with an opposition president. One implication from this trend is that there are fewer cross-pressured members of Congress with whom the president can bargain. The president’s ability to indirectly persuade members of Congress to side with him on a particular issue or piece of legislation is predicated on the possibility that members can be persuaded to vote with the opposition party. In the post-partisan era, the prospect of opposition support in Congress is generally unlikely. As a result of this trend, members of Congress are less susceptible to persuasive efforts by the president unless the president and the member of Congress initially share the same ideology. Because leaders in Congress can facilitate and engender party loyalty, maintaining party loyalty is easier to achieve in the halls of Congress, and activating that loyalty may be the outer bounds of successful presidential leadership.

There are several causes that explain this phenomenon. The sorting of partisans into local geographic clusters encourages the partisan behavior of members of Congress. Economic status contributes to the cementing of partisan attitudes at the local and state level.¹⁴ This polarization at the local level makes partisan voters more partisan and allows campaigns to focus more clearly on loyal partisan voters. Ideological homogeneity within each party is also increasing and has dramatically risen since the 1980s, especially

11. Farnsworth, Stephen J. and S. Robert Lichter. 2006. *The Mediated Presidency: Television News and Presidential Governance*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

12. Bafumi, Joseph and Robert Y. Shapiro. 2009. “A New Partisan Voter.” *Journal of Politics* 71 (1): 1-24, 1.

13. Edwards, III, George C. 2013. “Barack Obama and the Strategic Presidency.” In *Issues in American Politics: Polarized Politics in the Age of Obama*, Edited by John Dumbrell. New York: Routledge.

14. Gelman, Andrew. 2009. *Red State, Blue State, Rich State, Poor State: Why Americans Vote the Way They Do*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

during the reforms under the Speakership of Newt Gingrich. Members of Congress are representing moderate districts in increasingly extreme ways.¹⁵ As a result of this shift toward more partisan polarization at both the local level (voters) and national level (representatives), members of Congress are less connected to the president personally and are more indebted to party leadership for their governing and electoral success.

The Puzzle of Presidential Leadership and Congressional Bargaining

If the primary end goal of presidential leadership is about persuading cross-pressured opposition members of Congress, why do presidents focus their time in states where there are more likeminded partisans? This type of state visit is not uncommon as, for example, President Bush in his second term primarily paid a visit to twenty of the thirty (67%) states he won in 2004. In one instance, on his “60 Stops in 60 Days” tour to bolster support for his efforts to reform Social Security, George Edwards notes that “it appears that the president was seeking friendly audiences where he already enjoyed support to create favorable images and stories for the media.”¹⁶ In fact, presidents most often travel to states they won in previous elections.¹⁷ Figure 1 illustrates this trend graphically. The panels in Figure 1 graph the number of visits where presidents gave public speeches during election years and non-election years (only for those states with more than 10 Electoral College votes, so the graph eliminates smaller states) and the percentage of the two party vote share the president received in the previous election. The trends for *both* election years and non-election years reveal similar upward scaling scatter plot trends: presidents are more likely to visit states where they gained a higher percentage of the two party vote in the previous election.¹⁸

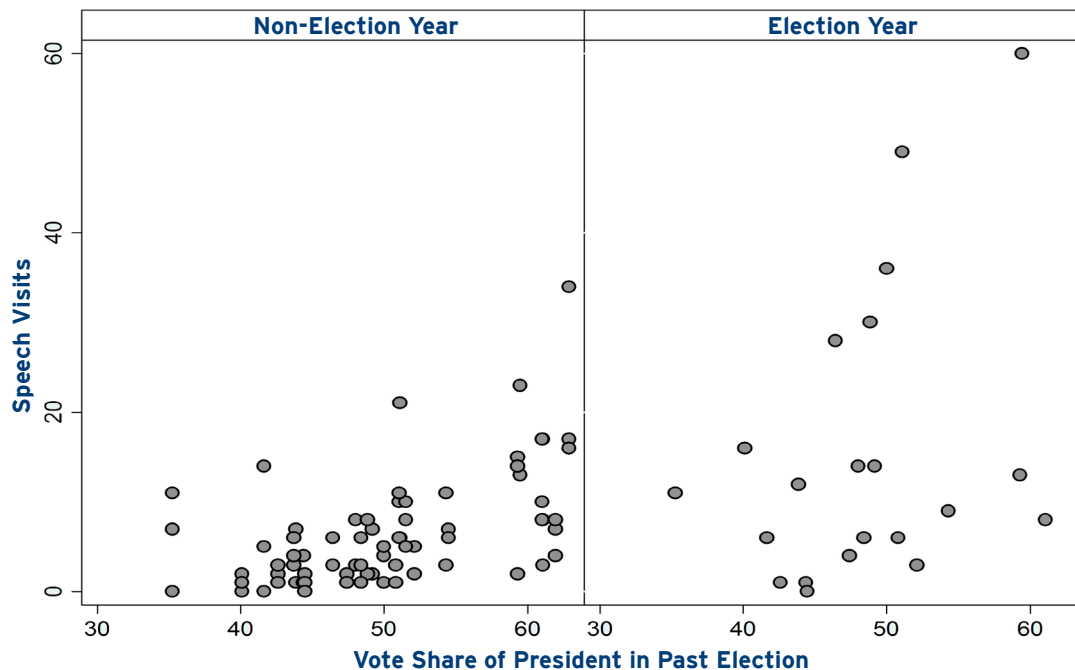
15. Carson, Jamie, Michael Crespín, Charles Finocchiaro, and David Rohde. 2007. “Redistricting and Party Polarization in the U.S. House of Representatives.” *American Politics Research* 35 (4): 878-904; McCarty, Nolan, Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal. 2009. “Does Gerrymandering Cause Polarization?” *American Journal of Political Science* 53 (3): 666-680.

16. Edwards III, George C. 2007. *Governing by Campaigning: The Politics of the Bush Presidency*. New York: Pearson, 266.

17. Charnock, Emily Jane, James A. McCann and Kathryn Dunn Tenpas. 2009. “Presidential Travel from Eisenhower to George W. Bush: An “Electoral College” Strategy.” *Political Science Quarterly* 124 (2): 323-339.

18. Difference of means tests (assuming equal variance) between election year and non-election years reveals that the difference of means of visits for each population between election years are statistically different from 0 (-4.39, $p > .001$).

FIGURE 1:
PRESIDENTIAL VISITS BY STATE, ELECTION AND NON-ELECTION YEARS



This poses a puzzle concerning why presidents primarily travel to and speak in states where they have had previous electoral success. In election years especially, reelection strategy should dictate that presidents travel to states where they are less strong as a means to shore up support or where the party hopes to pick up seats in midterm elections.¹⁹ Likewise, if the “going public” theory of presidential leadership is correct, presidents should be more likely to visit states where the representatives are less likely to support the president (or states where the president was likely to convert popular support) with the intention of drumming up support. The empirical patterns of presidential travel defy our expectations about what presidents ought to do given their electoral or institutional setting in the partisan era. A theory which can explain this puzzling phenomenon is therefore necessary.

19. Lang, Matthew, Brandon Rottinghaus, and Gerhard Peters. 2011. “Revisiting Midterm Visits: Why the Type of Visit Matters.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 41 (4): 809-819.

“Going Partisan”

Growing from the evolving literature on presidential leadership strategies, I propose a new theory of presidential leadership (“going partisan”) which is more suitable to the current political environment of polarized publics and parties. Given that presidents are the most visible members of their party, it is essential that they have the ability to lead public opinion, and in turn, have an effect on congressional voting behavior. Given this strategic necessity, I argue that a highly polarized political environment alters presidential strategies of going public. “Going partisan” holds that presidents do not just visit localities to influence any cross-pressured members of Congress. Rather, the president directly rallies his partisan base by visiting states to mobilize partisan attitudes and encourage greater partisanship among his party’s members of Congress. I outline a three step process. First, presidents consistently visit states that are represented by members of their party in the House and/or Senate. Presidential messages are more clearly received by those in his party, and these messages are often tailored for them anyway. Second, the partisan (and leaning partisan) publics in those localities are mobilized and rally behind the president. Third, members of the president’s party in those localities, being responsive public servants and generally loyal partisans, are encouraged to follow the party leadership and support the president’s initiatives.

Essentially, the key to “going partisan” is not to persuade cross-pressured members of Congress, but rather to hold already partisan members of Congress in the fold of the president’s party. The president’s goal is more support from his fellow partisans in Congress, consistent with the notion of polarized parties, rather than using what little influence travel brings to pressure “swing” members of Congress of the opposition party. The president can use his skills at that point to ensure members of Congress vote with their party.²⁰ Indeed, presidents have more success bargaining with members of their own party.²¹ Slippage in partisan support in Congress “forces the White House to adopt an activist orientation towards party leadership and sometimes devote as much effort to converting party members to support them as to mobilizing members of their party who already agree with them.”²²

20. Beckmann, Matthew N. 2010. *Pushing the Agenda: Presidential Leadership in U.S. Lawmaking, 1953-2004*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

21. Bond, Jon R., and Richard Fleisher. 1990. *The President in the Legislative Arena*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

22. Edwards 2007, 176.

After ginning up local partisan support, the president can influence legislative outcomes through the party leadership's influence on the rank-and-file members.²³ Party support engenders presidential success. Indeed, in a polarized context, recent presidents have focused their legislative bargaining more on their own partisans, especially when their party controls one (or more) chamber in Congress.²⁴ Even in moments where the president's co-partisans are reluctant to side with the White House, they often do so for purposes of party unity. For instance, although Speaker Pelosi and Majority Leader Reid were displeased with negotiations for a "grand bargain" over the debt limit in 2012, the President "wanted a commitment from them that they would get behind the agreement. Neither of the Congressional leaders was wild about the prospect, but they quietly pledged they'd have the president's back."²⁵

Even if the president is less effective at employing his bargaining "skill" to persuade reluctant members of Congress, at least he knows that his partisans can be convinced to stay in the fold. This is a more modest, but also more realistic goal for presidential persuasion, especially in a polarized political environment. Rohde and Barthelmy argue that "starting out with a substantial level of solid loyalty and shared preferences with his base in Congress is a much easier way for the president to begin a vote than by facing a sizeable opposition or large groups of undecided members with which he must negotiate to change preferences."²⁶ Once the base in Congress is solid, presidents can bargain with wavering members of Congress. When a president succeeded in achieving major changes, it was often by mobilizing those predisposed to support him. The president's copartisan leadership in Congress can assist him by solidifying unity to achieve legislative goals. Embracing party unity can help all copartisans since party members all experience "shared risk" where the members' and party's fortunes are linked. On presidential initiatives especially, presidential efforts are likely to cause greater cohesion within the party and conflict with the opposition party.²⁷

This theory solves the empirical and theoretical issues with present theories of presidential leadership. First, it solves the problem concerning whom the president targets with his

23. Covington, Cary R., J.M. Wrighton and R. Kinney. 1995. "A 'Presidency-Augmented' Model of Presidential Success on House Roll Call Votes." *American Journal of Political Science* 39 (4): 1001-24.

24. Lee, Frances E. 2009. *Beyond Ideology: Politics, Principles and Partisanship in the U.S. Senate*. Chicago: University of Chicago.

25. Bai, Matt. 2012. "The Game is Called Chicken." *The New York Times*, April 1.

26. Rohde, David W. and Meredith Barthelmy. 2010. "The President and Congressional Parties in an Era of Polarization." In the *Oxford Handbook and the American Presidency*, eds. George C. Edwards III and William G. Howell. New York: Oxford University Press, 296.

27. Lee 2009.

rhetoric. Although the president is only sometimes able to lead mass public opinion, he can more easily communicate with and persuade his fellow partisans. Indeed, empirical evidence suggests that partisans rally when presidents speak²⁸ and partisans are more attentive to presidents' messages than others', especially recent presidents like President Obama.²⁹ Presidents find partisan publics to be receptive audiences when attempting to build support for their policies and leaning partisans return to the partisan fold after being mobilized by partisan messages from elites. Presidents borrow this "rally" tactic from their campaigns. Presidential approval is built on partisan approval and the stability of partisan approval is enhanced with more partisan activity by the president.³⁰

Second, because there are fewer members of Congress from the opposing party who are willing to adopt the president's position because of hardened partisan attitudes, "going partisan" more accurately portrays the target of the president's strategy to persuade members of Congress. Presidents may try to persuade cross-pressured members of Congress, but the failure of "going public" demonstrates that this strategy is a high risk and low reward one which is costly to the White House as an investment in presidential time.

Findings

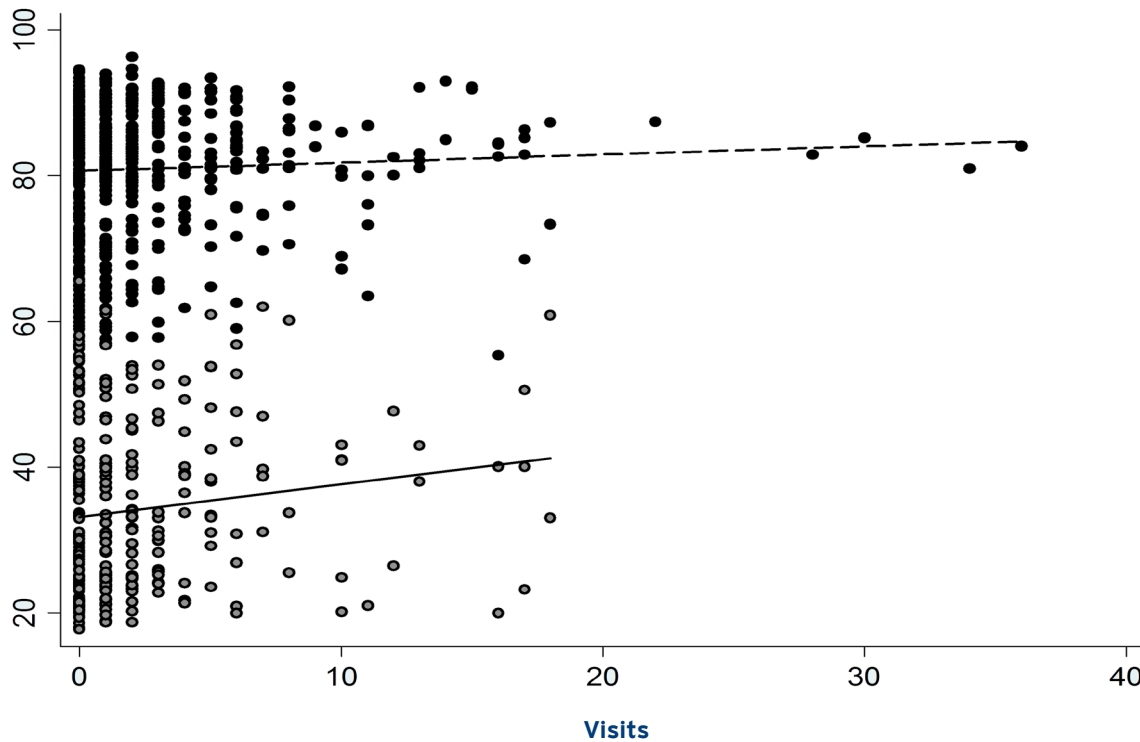
To begin, I examine whether or not the president's visit strategy has an effect on partisan approval at the state level. Figure 2 models the relationships graphically for both partisan and leaning partisan approval. The model uses partisan approval or "leaning" independent approval as the dependent variable and visits as the independent variable. The relationship is positive and statistically significant for both partisan and leaning partisan approval. The linear effect is stronger for leaning partisans, however, suggesting that while the movement of the president's copartisans has a small positive slope, the president's speeches substantially rally latent partisans in the speech locale. Partisans appear to reach a ceiling of copartisan approval which is difficult to increase, even with a strong presidential cue. In general, as expected, presidential visits to specific locations rally local partisans and leaning partisans.

28. Tedin, Kent, Brandon Rottinghaus and Harrell Rodgers. 2010. "When the President Goes Public: The Consequences of Communication Mode for Opinion Change Across Issue Types and Groups," *Political Research Quarterly* (64): 506-19.

29. Milkis, Sidney M., Jesse H. Rhodes and Emily J. Charnock. 2012. "What Happened to Post-Partisanship? Barack Obama and the New American Party System." *Perspectives on Politics* 10 (1): 57-76.

30. Newman, Brian and Emerson Siegle. 2010. "The Polarized Presidency: Depth and Breadth of Public Partisanship." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 40 (2): 342-363.

FIGURE 2
EFFECT OF VISITS ON PARTISAN AND "LEANING" PARTISAN APPROVAL



NOTE: The black circles represent the estimates of the scatter plot of partisan approval and visits and the dotted line is a linear relationship between the two. The gray circles represent the estimates of the scatter plot of "leaning" partisan approval and visits and the solid line is a linear relationship between the two.

More finely put, presidential leadership on key issues in a polarized era often reflects polarized publics. For instance, in 2005, President Bush took his case to reform Social Security using, among other things, private accounts to the public with the hope of rallying support for his proposal. In a poll question querying whether or not the President's "barnstorm" trip made them more or less likely to approve of the President's proposals (reported in Table 1), only self identified Republicans and conservative respondents approved of the proposals more after hearing the President's message (69% and 59%, respectively). Not surprisingly, Democrats and liberals were less likely to indicate that they liked the proposals more (7% and 2%, respectively). So, although mass public opinion did not move, the White House was able to stimulate its base.

TABLE 1

PERSUADED BY PRESIDENT BUSH'S SOCIAL SECURITY PROPOSALS?

	Republican	Democrat	Independent
Liked it More	69%	7%	21%
Liked it Less	13%	54%	30%
Didn't Change	40%	22%	33%
	Liberal	Moderate	Conservative
Liked it More	2%	37%	59%
Liked it Less	32%	46%	19%
Didn't Change	14%	45%	38%

NOTE: Source was CBS / *New York Times* Poll, June 10-15, 2005. Question wording was: "Would you say that the more you've heard about the Bush Administration's proposals on Social Security the more you've liked them, or the more you've heard about the Bush Administration's proposals on Social Security the less you've liked them, or haven't you changed your mind about them?"

Examining the period of 2001 to 2011, do state and district level copartisan and leaning copartisan approval (interacted with a visit and speech from the president) have an effect on party support of the president on key votes in Congress? For both copartisans and leaning copartisans, the greater the approval of the president in each state interacted with a president's speech in that state produces a significant effect on support for the president in Congress on key legislation.³¹ Figure 3 provides a summary of the results, using a technique to account for non-visits to many states.³² First, for the Senate, repeated visits ("many" visits) generate about a half a percentage point movement (.476) per year in presidential support for both interactions of (a) visits and copartisans and (b) visits and leaning copartisans, while only a few visits ("some" visits) and higher approval among both copartisans and leaning copartisans generate about a tenth of a percentage point movement per year (.14 and .153, respectively). Given the statewide geographical representation of Senators, multiple visits ("many" visits) are important to establish a

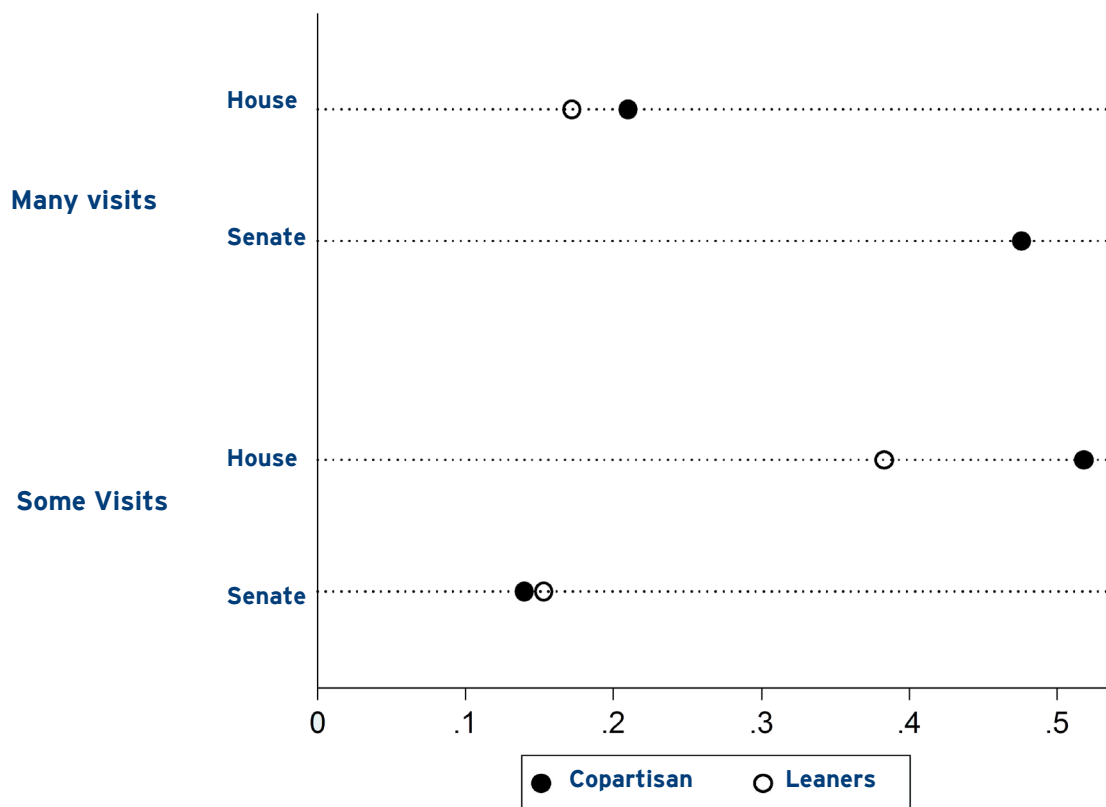
31. In addition, for purposes of analysis, I include the following variables to measure individual elements of this theory: presidential support scores (annual measures established by Congressional Quarterly), presidential visits (registered in the *Public Papers of the President*), presidential first years in office, party unity (as measured by the DW-Nominate scores), divided government and the percentage of the president's seats in the chamber (House or Senate).

32. Because of non-linearity in the results, I use a linear spline to change the magnitude of the slope where I create two dummy variables for the interaction between a nominal measure of the number of visits and the approval of either copartisans or leaning copartisans. This helps to partially remedy the data driven, granular outcome. The dummy variable for "some" state visits was when the number of visits was between 1 and 8, where "many" visits was more than 9. The dummy variable for "some" district visits was when the number of visits was between 1 and 2, where "many" visits was more than 2. These changes in units corresponded to the average number of visits and a standard deviation above those means.

presidential imprint.

Second, for the House, "some" visits had between a third and a half a percentage point movement (.383, .518) in presidential support for leaning partisans and for copartisans per year, respectively. Additional visits (the "many" visits ordinal category) actually reduces the additive ability of the president to generate more support among members of the House, engendering only about two tenths of a percentage point movement in presidential support among members of the House per year (.172 for leaning copartisans and .21 for copartisans). Given the pronounced polarization in the House, mobilization either works after a modest number of visits or not at all.

FIGURE 3
EFFECT OF VISITS ON PARTISAN AND "LEANING" PARTISAN APPROVAL



NOTE: The circles represent the estimates of GLS models for the dummy variable interactions of the ordinal number of visits and the copartisan and "leaning" approval of the president.

Conclusion and Implications

The polarization of politics has had a profound effect on political decision-making and presidential leadership. These changes alter the way that presidents attempt to persuade the public and, indirectly, members of the legislature. The “going partisan” theory is the next step in an evolving lineage of theorizing about how presidents adapt their political persuasion to their political environment. In particular, this theory has a number of advantages. First, it helps to explain how presidents act in a system besieged by partisan polarization. The arc of the political process necessitates that presidents alter their tactics to lead and that scholars update their theoretical expectations about the success presidents may find. Second, the “going partisan” theory helps to explain why presidential leadership doesn’t always work, perhaps more generally why presidential leadership of Congress does not always work. Third, this theory is more cleanly resonant with evidence of the permanent campaign, which dominates the president’s strategic goals in the modern political era.

Ultimately, there is both good news and bad news for presidents. The good news is that big losses are avoided. Presidents, even those with a minority in both houses of Congress, can maintain a defensive position by keeping a minimum amount of opposition unified around the White House’s agenda. Although presidential leadership of the public is never easy, persuading copartisans is an easier task. Indeed, during the skirmishes over the budget and the implementation of the Affordable Care Act in late 2013, President Obama kept the Democrats unified around primary policy goals. Even as the House Republicans crafted their final spending offer before the government shutdown in October, “the Democrats didn’t budge, killing the proposal without a single defection. Their unity was so assured that Majority Leader Harry M. Reid (D-Nev.) didn’t bother to convene a private caucus meeting to discuss the measure before the vote.”³³

The bad news for presidents is that fewer substantial policy innovations or major agenda items are likely to be initiated or maintained. Going partisan is a sustainable strategy only as a defensive measure rather than as an offensive one. That is, presidents should focus on facilitating legislative action when they have majorities, even if opponents howl about an unfair process.

33. Helderman, Rosalind S. and Philip Rucker. 2013. “In Battles Over Budget and Obamacare, Rare Unity Among Democrats.” *The Washington Post*, October 1. http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-10-01/politics/42575791_1_house-republicans-democrats-rare-unity

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