Presidential Influence in Congress: If We Ask the Wrong Questions, We Get the Wrong Answers

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Terry Sullivan (1991) has given us a thoughtful and carefully executed article on presidential influence in Congress. He is to be congratulated for his efforts to move into new ground and to exploit new data sources in doing so. At the same time, I think there are some important questions to be raised about the research's theoretical underpinnings, its orientation toward studying influence, and its data base. In this comment I shall restrict my remarks to the basic structure of the analysis, raising questions that I believe will be of interest to those concerned with studying presidential influence.

A Bank Account?

The premise of the piece, the "bank account" presidency, reflects conceptual confusion. The author cites politicians and scholars, including Paul Light (1982), Richard Neustadt (1960), and myself (1988), as the author of the section on congressional relations of the National Academy of Public Administration's report on the 1988–89 presidential transition, which advised presidents to move fast and do well early in their tenures. This discussion is presented as evidence that there is a "bank account" view of presidential influence lurking in the conventional wisdom.

Actually, there is no such thing. These commentators are simply and correctly pointing out that the president has a greater chance of obtaining congressional passage of important legislation earlier rather than later in a term of office. Lyndon Johnson knew what he was talking about.

Greater success early in a term is not logically incompatible with a president who enjoys greater ability to influence individual votes later in a term (although whether a president has such influence is an open question). If the president needs to convert fewer members of Congress early in a term, especially following an election such as that of 1964, which most observers perceived as giving the president a mandate for change, then he has a decided advantage and would be wise to exploit it. To view *conversion* of individual members of Congress as the core of presidential leadership is to miss the forest for the trees, a point to which I will return below.

Equally important, I know of no scholar who argues that a single deposit of

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political capital is made and that it then diminishes over time. There is good reason for this. Despite the author's repeated reference to a "fairly consistent temporal pattern of decline in prestige," even a brief look at the presidential approval data shows that approval can *increase* within a president's term (Edwards 1990). Eisenhower ended his first term five percentage points higher in the approval polls than when he began. After two full years in office, Kennedy was two percentage points higher than when he began. Johnson and Carter did not follow such a pattern, but Richard Nixon was eight percentage points higher in the Gallup Poll at his second inauguration than at his first. (It is obviously quite misleading to refer to an average seven-percentage-point-per-year decline in Nixon's approval ratings.) Gerald Ford took office under highly unusual circumstances and with greatly inflated approval ratings, which plummeted after one month in response to his pardon of Richard Nixon. When he left office, however, his approval rating of 53% was three percentage points above his September 1974 figure. Ronald Reagan enjoyed much higher approval ratings on the average in his fifth and sixth years in office than in any year in his first term, and George Bush started very low in the polls and had much higher approval in January 1990 than in January 1989.

The party makeup of Congress changes less often than public approval, but the point remains the same. For example, Ronald Reagan had more Republicans in the House in 1985–86 than he had in 1983–84. Lyndon Johnson had dozens more liberal Democrats in the House in 1965–66 than he had in 1964. In sum, the evidence is clear that there is little basis for the view of a bank account presidency.

Needless to say, I was quite surprised to find myself associated with such a view. I have argued at length (Edwards 1980, 1989) that the president is dependent on his environment for resources with which to influence Congress, but it certainly does not follow that these resources are deposited *once*.

Thinking about Influence

A second area of conceptual confusion regards the definition of influence. Although the adoption of Dahl's classic definition is generally appropriate, the assertion that presidential influence requires presidential *involvement* is not (see Edwards 1980, 49). For example, virtually all theorists of power, including Dahl (1991, 45), recognize anticipated reactions as an aspect of power. Central to Neustadt's (1960) formulation of presidential power, for example, are the concepts of professional reputation and public prestige, neither of which requires that the president act to obtain support on a specific vote. Yet both may be sources of presidential influence. (Sullivan discusses "anticipated reactions" in the Appendix, but for a narrower purpose, one not focused on the fundamental question of defining influence.)

The demand for evidence of *change* in a member's position following an initial headcount also raises conceptual problems. The search for change is commendable, but as noted earlier, conversion is not at the core of presidential influence (see Edwards 1989). In any given year, members of Congress in the aggregate cast thousands of votes on matters on which the president has taken a stand. The president and his staff are involved directly with attempting to "sway" only a tiny fraction of these votes (which is not to say that these votes are not sometimes crucial). Yet as discussed above, the president "influences" many other votes, including many of the votes that go into the "right" column in the initial headcounts.

Thus, any measure of influence that requires change *following* an initial headcount risks missing much of the influence, and the change, that already may have occurred. "Sway" is a small part of presidential influence, even on most of those issues on which the White House commits all of its persuasive resources.

Attributing Influence

Nevertheless, Sullivan's presentation of the outline of "a sequential approach" to measuring influence is a valuable contribution to our thinking about an aspect of presidential influence. Another problem arises, however, because we have no theoretically meaningful independent variable employed here, that is, no measure of presidential involvement (except that a headcount was taken). Thus, as the author recognizes, it is difficult to draw inferences about influence. We cannot attribute whatever changes do take place to the president.

Yet the focus throughout the article is on, as the title puts it, "the temporal path of influence." If we do not know what the president's influence was, we cannot trace its temporal path.

The Data Base

What remains is a description of the movement of members of Congress from nonsupport to support of the president. The utility of this depiction is dependent on the data described, and I believe that there are severe problems with the validity and reliability of the data base. Let us look at the House data in Table 1, which presents the average headcounts for the Johnson administration. First, we find that, according to the table, in 1963–64 the White House began with nearly a majority in the House, even on what the author characterizes as tough votes. The evidence contrary to such an assertion is overwhelming. Suffice it to say that anyone familiar with the frustrations of the Kennedy administration's dealings with Congress knows why Medicare, aid to education, and the like did not pass until 1965: the administration did not have the votes. Kennedy was slowly building momentum so that he could strike after what he anticipated would be a great victory in the 1964 election. The victory turned out to be Johnson's, of course, but the point remains the same.

According to the data in Table 1, President Johnson was notably worse off in 1965–66 than in 1963–64! This flies in the face of the testimony of virtually every participant in congressional relations at the time (see Edwards 1989, 172, and sources cited therein) and, indeed, of simple common sense. Are we really to believe that the addition of 37 Democrats in the 1964 election, almost all of whom voted consistently for Lyndon Johnson, did not improve the president's strategic position?

Johnson certainly did not think so. After the results of the liberal Democratic landslide in 1964 were in, he called his chief lobbyist, Lawrence O'Brien, and told him, "We can wrap up the New Frontier program now, Larry. . . . We can pass it now" (quoted in O'Brien 1975, 180–81). He even kept Congress in session until just 17 days before the election of 1966 to exploit his sympathetic majority to the fullest, in the process limiting the opportunities for incumbent Democrats to campaign for reelection (Renka 1984, 21; see also Bolling 1974, 232). The author himself quotes White House lobbyist Henry Hall Wilson as terming the 89th Congress (1965–66) a "fat" one.

Similarly, House Majority Leader Carl Albert attributed the remarkable productivity of the 89th Congress to members of Congress doing what they wanted to do. "We had the right majority," he recalled (1969, 23–24). In other words, as President Johnson's domestic policy adviser Joseph Califano argued, the House had a liberal majority that was very receptive to the president's proposals (1975, 155).

Equally intriguing is the table's implication that the loss of 47 Democrats in the 1966 election hardly affected the president's strategic position at all. Is this likely to have been true? Of course not.

When we look at the 89th Congress more closely, we find that even if all those listed as "right" or "leaning right" were Democrats, there still are 126 Democrats unaccounted for. Many of them must have been in the "no comment" category, which the author places at the "wrong" end of the spectrum for each Congress. When some of these Democrats show up at the "right" end in the final vote, they are counted as converts. We have to be cautious about inferring that many of these members were somehow converted to supporting the president and were not already predisposed to supporting him.

The fact that headcounts are often not very reliable will come as no surprise to anyone who has closely studied the process by which they are taken and the large potential for error in them. They are often taken in a hasty fashion in which miscommunication can easily occur, and they may be ended abruptly, before all the responses have been obtained. Such data are interesting, but a conversation with Lawrence O'Brien and an exchange of letters with his successor as Johnson's chief legislative liaison aide, Judge Barefoot Sanders, indicate that they must be used with considerable caution.

Conclusions

It is not surprising that the author did not find a bank account temporal path, since there was no good reason to expect that there would be one. Moreover, there is a circularity at the core of the analysis. The author conceives of influence in terms of sway, and the president can only sway those who are not already in support of the White House after an initial headcount. When the president has weaker initial support, there is a larger pool of members of Congress who may be swayed and, more important, a greater *need* to sway members. We might reasonably expect that presidents who make greater efforts to sway members of Congress are more likely to be successful than those who do not because they have less need to do so. Thus, the nature of the data set (discussed above), virtually guarantees that sway would be flat or increase over time, since the data indicate no need for sway in the early part of Johnson's tenure. But we should not conclude that his ability to influence Congress was equal to that of the earlier years. It clearly was not. In other words, the absence of presidential effort from the model will ensure that the estimates of sway are too large for years in which initial support is low.

Similarly, if the economy is performing poorly and if this has a depressing effect on the president's public approval (there is no good theoretical reason for a *direct* relationship between the performance of the economy and sway), the president will have fewer initial supporters and thus more need to move those who otherwise might be inclined to support him. The fact that he can move some of them is not evidence of a rally for the president in economic hard times. It is just an indication of a larger pool of potential convertibles that the president *needs* to convert and hence is likely to exert more effort to influence.

Sullivan summarizes his findings by concluding that "what appears to affect the path [of influence] of each administration is . . . the nature of the strategic situation facing each administration." I agree. In essence, a president's efforts to persuade individual legislators occur in an environment largely beyond the White House's control. In most instances presidents exercise their legislative skills at the margins of coalition building, not at the core.

Certainly presidents have intervened successfully with a bargain or amenity, occasionally winning a crucial vote because of such an effort. The critical point is that sway is not predominant in determining presidential support in Congress on most roll calls. Neither in their published memoirs nor in their oral histories do Kennedy and Johnson legislative liaison aides attribute Johnson's success with Congress to his legendary persuasive abilities. Nor do congressional leaders John McCormack, Carl Albert, Charles Halleck, and Everett Dirksen in their oral histories (Edwards 1989, 172, and sources cited therein).

Even when the environment is favorable for the White House, there are usually severe limits on the exercise of sway. Ronald Reagan's administration, for example, could press hard for its budget and tax policies in 1981, but otherwise had a very limited agenda. When the issue of the sale of AWACS planes to Saudi Arabia arose, the White House initially handled it clumsily and had to come from behind to win a victory that should never have been in doubt. It was simply preoccupied with other matters and could not devote its attention and persuasive skills to the next item on the agenda.

Despite my reservations about the structure of the argument in this article, I await Sullivan's future work with keen anticipation, knowing that he will continue to contribute to advancing our understanding of presidential influence in Congress.

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