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Divided Government and Foreign Relations Approval

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During divided government, the public tends to attribute credit and blame for economic conditions to both the president and Congress. However, the “two presidencies” thesis argues that presidents have more influence vis-à-vis Congress in shaping foreign policy compared to domestic policy, so the public may attribute all foreign policy outcomes to the president alone. This suggests that the boost presidents typically receive in their overall approval during divided government due to sharing the blame for negative economic conditions will not extend to their foreign relations approval numbers. We find that presidents do enjoy higher overall approval during divided government. However, contrary to the two presidencies thesis, presidents also enjoy higher foreign relations approval during divided government. We explore four potential explanations for this puzzle and point to future research questions the puzzle raises.

Since World War II, most presidents have faced divided government during at least part of their tenure in office. Although divided government significantly limits the frequency of the president’s legislative success (e.g., Fleisher, Bond, and Wood 2008), presidents generally enjoy higher approval ratings during periods of divided control (Nicholson, Segura, and Woods 2002). In the United States’ separated system, the public can attribute credit and blame for national conditions to either the president or Congress. When the executive and legislative branches are controlled by different parties, at least some of the blame for negative conditions can fall to the opposition Congress, buoying the president’s polling numbers.

To date, studies of the ways the public attributes blame during divided government have focused primarily on economic conditions, generally finding that under divided government, the public blames both the president and Congress for poor conditions (e.g., Rudolph 2003a). Thus, the public does not blame the president as much for negative economic conditions during divided government as it does during periods of unified control. Consequently, the president’s approval ratings, based in part on assessments of economic conditions and the degree to which the president is responsible for them (see Edwards 1990), tend to be a bit higher during divided government than they would be during similar conditions under unified control (Nicholson, Segura, and Woods 2002). However, many presidency scholars have argued that the president has more unilateral control of foreign policy than domestic policy, arguing that there are really “two presidencies” (e.g., Wildavsky 1966; Canes-Wrone, Howell, and Lewis 2008). If sensitive to the two presidencies, the public during divided government might well lay some of the blame for economic conditions at the feet of Congress, but it may not do so for negative foreign relations outcomes. Consequently, divided government may buoy overall approval, but not public views of the president’s handling of foreign policy. We test whether the public is
sensitive to the two presidencies, giving presidents a break by partially blaming Congress for economic downturns during divided government, but not doing so in the foreign policy realm.

Responsibility Attributions, Divided Government, and The Two Presidencies Thesis

A substantial body of literature explores the formation and effects of responsibility attributions within the political context. Early on, Key (1966) described attribution of responsibility for the economy as a simplistic, retrospective process. Citizens were thought to base their voting preferences on their perceptions of recent financial trends. Essentially, this model assumed that the public automatically regarded the president and his party as responsible for the condition of the economy and allocated support accordingly. In other words, the public would reward the president and his party when the economy thrived and punish the president and his party when the economy floundered. By identifying retrospective economic evaluations as the sole factor involved in the sanctioning process, this “reward-punishment” model minimized the importance of other institutional factors. This model implies a rather naïve, narrow-minded public sensitive only to retrospective economic evaluations—a citizenry that is either unable or unwilling to consider other contextual factors when making responsibility attributions.

Recent scholarship has challenged the basic reward-punishment model. At the heart of this challenge lies the notion that the public does not automatically attribute credit or blame for economic conditions to the president or his party. For example, Peffley (1984) argues that in order for economic conditions to shape voting behavior, voters must believe either that the government created the economic conditions or that it is the government’s duty to fix them. Thus, sanctioning for negative economic conditions is not automatic, as described by the reward-punishment model. Instead, citizens act as “intuitive jurors using various decision rules to evaluate the evidence surrounding the president's responsibilities” (Peffley 1984, 275).
What factors, then, comprise the “evidence” Peffley describes? Studies have identified a host of factors that affect responsibility attributions. Rudoph (2003a) discusses three factors shaping judgments of responsibility for economic conditions: economic ideology, perceptions of institutional context, and partisanship. Gomez and Wilson (2001) find that an individual’s level of political sophistication matters; the lower an individual’s level of political sophistication, the more likely the individual is to hold the president responsible, given the president’s status as the most visible political figure in the nation. Arceneaux (2006) argues that, under specific conditions, citizens are able to make distinctions between national, state, and local levels of government and attribute responsibility accordingly, as opposed to automatically blaming the president and his party. Malhotra and Kuo (2008) make a similar claim, finding that citizens are able to make principled responsibility attributions when provided with information about public officials’ responsibilities. Collectively, these studies point to a heterogeneous sanctioning process in which the institutional context plays a significant role in attributing credit and blame to the president.

Of particular interest to our study is the effect of divided government on the sanctioning process. A substantial body of research suggests that divided government influences the attribution of political responsibility (e.g., Anderson 1995, 2000; Lewis-Beck 1988; Leyden and Borrelli 1995; Lowry, Alt, and Ferree 1998; Paldam 1991; Powell and Whitten 1993; Rudolph 2003a, 2003b). Divided government makes responsibility attribution more difficult because it obscures causal relationships. The public must determine whether the president or the opposition Congress deserves the blame for political circumstances. As government control becomes more clearly consolidated in a single party or individual, citizens can more easily identify the lines of responsibility and shape their evaluations of sitting officials accordingly (Nicholson and Segura...
For example, at the state level, in states where the same party controls the governor’s mansion and the state legislature, the governor is 5 to 9 percentage points more likely to be deemed responsible for state conditions than under divided government (Rudolph 2003b).

At the national level, Nicholson, Segura, and Woods (2002) studied the effects of divided government on presidential approval. Their analysis of the 1972-1994 American National Election Studies (ANES) found that the probability of approving of the president’s performance was 17 points higher during periods of divided government, controlling for various other factors. Moreover, from 1949 to 1996, aggregate approval ratings were about 2 points higher during quarters with divided rather than unified control of government.

Whether individuals realize government control is divided or unified is of special importance to Nicholson, Segura, and Woods’ individual-level analysis. They argue that individuals who are aware that the government is divided should be less likely to attribute blame to the president and therefore more likely to approve of the president’s performance than individuals who are unaware of the fact that the government is divided. Their evidence supports this hypothesis; generally, the effect of divided government on approval ratings is strongest among those who know that government is divided. For example, among individuals who knew that control was divided, the probability of approval was 19 points higher during divided government. For those who did not know control was divided, the probability of approval was only 6 points higher during divided government (all else equal). This analysis aligns with Gomez and Wilson’s (2001) conclusion that a higher level of political sophistication corresponds with a reduced tendency to attribute responsibility for political circumstances to the president.
The studies discussed thus far have focused on the ways in which divided government impacts attributions of economic conditions, economic voting (e.g., Rudolph 2003a, 2003b; Gomez and Wilson 2001) or overall presidential approval (Nicholson, Segura, and Woods 2002). The effects of divided government in these realms are well documented. However, no studies to date have investigated the effect of divided government on foreign affairs approval. Does divided government affect foreign affairs approval in the same way that it affects economic voting and general approval? The two presidencies thesis (Wildavsky, 1966), an idea that remains controversial today (see Cane-Wrone, Howell, and Lewis 2008), lies at the heart of this question.

The two presidencies thesis argues that the president exercises significantly more influence in the realm of foreign affairs than in domestic policy. Presidents share responsibility for domestic policy much more closely with Congress; on foreign policy issues, so the argument goes, presidents maintain more independence from Congress and have a comparatively free hand. While Wildavsky himself eventually deemed his own theory “time and culture bound” in the face of the data at his disposal (Oldfield and Wildavsky 1989, 55), some recent scholarship identifies the two presidencies as a real and enduring phenomenon. Most significantly, Canes-Wrone, Howell, and Lewis (2008) identify three institutional features that grant the president augmented influence in foreign affairs: the president’s ability to order prompt action in the international environment, the president’s information advantage on foreign issues, and the president’s electoral incentive to serve as a strong foreign policy leader. They test the empirical implications of the two presidencies thesis by analyzing budgetary appropriations, ultimately finding that presidents achieve more budgetary success on foreign policy issues than domestic policy issues.
If the two presidencies thesis is correct and the public is sensitive to differences in presidential power across domestic and foreign policy domains, the lines of responsibility normally obstructed by divided government should remain clear in the foreign policy realm. The public will be less likely to split the attribution or responsibility for foreign policy outcomes between Congress and the president because of the expanded scope of the president’s power. Thus, the public opinion boost divided government provides may be limited to the domestic domain, leaving foreign affairs approval ratings unaffected by the nature of the government’s partisan alignment.

**Data and methods**

Our general approach to test whether divided government shapes foreign relations approval follows that of Nicholson, Segura, and Woods (2002). They first examined the impact of divided government on presidential approval at the individual level, estimating probit models of approval using ANES data from 1972 to 1994, finding that the probability of approval was significantly higher in years when control of the White House and Congress was split. They then turned to the aggregate level, estimating time series models of the percentage of the public that approved of the president each quarter from 1949 to 1996. Again, they found that aggregate approval was higher during periods of divided control. We follow this two-pronged approach, first estimating models of general approval, then models of economic and foreign relations approval to see whether divided government has different effects in different domains.

We begin by using ANES data from 1972 to 2008 to estimate probit models of the probability of approval.\(^2\) We then move to models of foreign relations approval\(^3\), using ANES data from 1980 (the first year the domain-specific approval items were asked) to 2008. Since the foreign relations approval items are 4-point scales, we estimated ordered probit models.
We constructed the same individual-level models as Nicholson, Segura, and Woods, with *Divided Government* as the key independent variable (coded 1 for divided, 0 otherwise). If the presidency and one or both chambers of Congress are controlled by different political parties, they consider control to be divided. The 1972 to 1994 period includes 9 surveys during divided government (1972-1976, 1982-1992) and 3 surveys during unified government (1978, 1980, and 1994). The augmented period adds 5 surveys during divided government (1996-2002) and 2 under unified government (2004 and 2006), bringing the total to 14 studies during divided government and 5 during unified control.

Nicholson, Segura, and Woods also included measures of *Party Identification* (coded 0-6 with the highest value signifying strong identification with the president’s party), *Ideology* (coded 0-6 with 6 being extreme conservatives during Republican presidencies and extreme liberals during Democratic presidencies), and *Retrospective* and *Prospective* evaluations of personal financial conditions. Retrospective evaluations are coded -1 for those who said their they were worse off now than a year ago, 0 for those who said they were the same, and 1 for those who said they were better off. Prospective evaluations are coded -1 for those who said they would be worse off a year from now, 0 for those who said they would be the same, and 1 for those saying they expected to be better off. Nicholson, Segura, and Woods also constructed a measure of *Events* (often called rally events) likely to affect evaluations of presidential performance by relying on Brace and Hinckley’s (1992) list of major events affecting aggregate approval ratings. They examined the number of positive and negative events occurring in the first three quarters of each survey year and coded the variable 1 if more positive than negative events had occurred, -1 if more negative than positive events had occurred and 0 for years in which the balance was split. They also included an indicator variable for *Midterm* years, coded 0.
for surveys occurring during presidential elections and 1 for surveys occurring during midterm election years.

Finally, to test whether individuals who know that government is divided are more likely to attribute blame for negative conditions to both Congress and the president and therefore to be more likely to approve of the president, they created an interaction term between knowledge of divided government and divided government. Although the ANES did not ask whether control was divided or unified, the studies routinely ask which party is in the majority in the House of Representatives. Nicholson, Segura, and Woods reason that, assuming individuals know the party of the president, if an individual knows which party controls the House of Representatives, he or she will know whether control is divided or unified. Thus, as a measure of knowledge of divided government, they use Knowledge of House Control (coded 1 for respondents who know and 0 for those who do not). They interact this measure with divided control, expecting a positive coefficient, which would indicate that those who are aware of divided control would be most likely to give the president a break during divided government.

**Individual-Level Analysis**

We begin by estimating the same models Nicholson, Segura, and Woods (2002) present, but include the entire 1972 to 2008 period. Recall that they found the probability of approval to increase by 17 percentage points during divided government, with all other variables held at mean levels. As the first model of Table 1 shows, during this period, we find the probability of approval to increase by 24 percentage points during divided government, again holding all other variables at mean levels.6

Second, as Nicholson, Segura, and Woods found, we also find knowledge effects seeing a positive and statistically significant interaction between knowledge of divided control and
divided government (see model 2 in Table 1). As we noted above, to illustrate the differing impact of divided government among those who were aware of whether control was divided and those who were not, Nicholson, Segura, and Woods estimated separate models for the different knowledge of divided control groups. Those who knew control was divided were 19 points more likely to approve, while those who did not know control was divided were only 6 points more likely to approve under conditions of divided government. We find similar results in models 3 and 4. Those who knew of divided control were 26 points more likely to approve during divided government compared to unified government, while those who were unaware of shared control were 8 points more likely to approve during divided government than during unified control. To sum up, adding 14 new years of data in the form of seven new surveys provides significant support for Nicholson, Segura, and Woods’ claims. There is a stable and enduring tendency for individuals to be more favorable toward the president during divided government.7

[Table 1 about here]

Is foreign relations approval different? Contrary to the two presidencies hypothesis, the results suggest not. The probability of foreign relations approval is higher during divided government (see Table 2, column 1). In fact, the estimated impact of divided government is actually a bit greater in this domain, as the model predicts an 18-point increase in the probability of strong approval during divided government compared to unified government, holding other variables at mean levels.

[Table 2 about here]

Again, the significant interaction between divided government and knowledge of divided control suggests that those who know control is divided were the most sensitive to divided government (see Table 3, column 2). The effect is illustrated in Figure 1. As was the case for
economic approval, holding all other variables at mean levels, strong disapproval of the
president’s handling of foreign relations was most likely during unified control. Those who
knew control was unified had a .42 probability of strongly disapproving, compared to .39 for
those who did not know. During divided government, those who were unaware of divided
control had a .25 probability of strong disapproval, while those who knew control was shared
had a .21 probability of strongly disapproving. At the other end of the spectrum, strong approval
was much more likely during divided government. When the same party controlled both
branches, those who knew this was the case had only a .15 probability of strong approval,
compared to .18 for those who were unaware. During divided government, those who did not
realize control was shared had a .29 probability of strong approval, while those who were aware
had a .33 probability of strongly approving. Despite the fact that the president appears to have
more influence in foreign relations, meaning the public should focus its attribution more squarely
on the president even during periods of divided government, the public continues to hold the
president’s handling of foreign relations in higher esteem during divided control. The public
does not appear to be sensitive to the two presidencies in ways we hypothesized.

Aggregate-Level Analysis

Nicholson, Segura, and Woods also employed time series methods, estimating a quarterly
model of the percentage of individuals who approve of the president from 1949 to 1996.
Controlling for economic conditions and major events, aggregate approval was about 2 points
higher during periods of divided control. To assess whether the public gives the president a
break in the economic realm, but holds presidents more accountable in the foreign relations
domain, we estimated a quarterly model of economic approval and foreign relations approval.
We updated McAvoy’s (2006) quarterly measures of economic approval and foreign relations
approval, which were constructed from Gallup and New York Times/CBS News Poll surveys using Stimson’s (1999) algorithm. These questions were only asked frequently enough to enable analysis beginning in the first quarter of 1977 and ending in the first quarter of 2008, the last quarter during the George W. Bush administration that the questions were asked.

As we did above, we adopt Nicholson, Segura, and Woods’ model. The key independent variable is again Divided Government, coded 1 in quarters of divided government and 0 otherwise. They also included major Events, long known to affect aggregate approval ratings (e.g., Mueller 1973; MacKuen 1983; Ostrom and Simon 1985; Brody 1991; Brace and Hinckley 1992). As they did in the individual-level analysis, Nicholson, Segura, and Woods relied on Brace and Hinckley’s (1992) list of events, coding quarters with more positive than negative events as 1, quarters with more negative than positive events as -1, and months with no events or an equal number of positive and negative events as 0. We updated their list using the list of events provided by Newman and Forcehimes (2010). To capture the impact of economic conditions, Nicholson, Segura, and Woods included the Unemployment rate, Inflation rate (quarterly change in the CPI, annualized), and GDP Growth (official estimate of the quarter’s economic growth, annualized). Finally, they included Lagged Approval “following well-established conventions” (714). This approach has come under scrutiny (e.g., Achen 2000), but alternative methods lead to results similar to those we report. To this list, we add the log of the number of troop deaths in Iraq given findings that battle deaths have shaped approval ratings for George W. Bush and earlier presidents (e.g., Kernell 1978; Ostrom and Simon 1985; Hibbs 1987; Baum and Kernell 2001; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Newman 2002; Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2005/06).
To begin, we estimate Nicholson, Segura, and Woods’ model using the 1977 to 2008 data. Generally, we find comparable results. As Table 3 shows, controlling for economic conditions and major events, aggregate approval was about 2 points higher when the president faced divided government, an estimated effect virtually identical to that reported by Nicholson, Segura, and Woods. Again, our results, based on a different time period, buttress their original analyses and conclusions. Divided government is generally associated with a boost in aggregate presidential approval.

[Table 3 about here]

Moving more to our central focus, Column 2 presents the same model, but with foreign relations approval as the dependent variable. Models of foreign relations approval are rare in the political science literature, but the series appears to respond to the political environment in ways roughly similar to general approval (see Table 3, column 2). As expected, major events (especially 9/11), along with deaths in Iraq are related to foreign relations approval. In addition, foreign relations approval is higher when inflation declines. More importantly for our purposes, foreign relations approval is roughly 2 points higher during divided government, exactly the opposite of what we would expect if the public were sensitive to the two presidencies. Thus, we have seen that at the individual and aggregate levels, the public gives the president a break in terms of general approval, economic approval, and foreign relations approval.

The Puzzle of Foreign Relations Approval During Divided Government

Our results present a puzzle. Why would the public be more likely to approve of the president’s handling of foreign relations during divided government, particularly to the same degree that it is more likely to approve of the president’s handling of the economy, if the president has more unilateral influence in foreign relations? Our data cannot offer a full
explanation, but we discuss four possibilities. Future research should take them up more directly than we can here.

First, the public simply may not think the president has greater unilateral power in foreign relations. Given the mountain of data pointing to the public’s general lack of political awareness (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Gilens 2001; see Sniderman 1993), this would not be terribly surprising. Moreover, political scientists have disagreed about whether there truly are two presidencies. Canes-Wrone, Howell, and Lewis (2008, 2) note that “literally scores of studies cast doubt on the [two presidencies] paradigm,” so it may be that the public is not sensitive to the two presidencies because there really aren’t two presidencies. Without specific measures of attribution or questions pertaining to perceptions of presidential power in various domains, we cannot know whether the public sees two presidencies.

Second, one reason why presidents are more popular during divided government that we have not mentioned relates to an opposition Congress’s ability to force the president to compromise. As Cohen (2008) has shown, the public generally prefers moderate policies and an opposition Congress tends to lead to greater policy moderation from the president. Thus, part of why presidents are more popular during divided government stems from presidents’ pursuit of more moderate policies. When we included the measure of policy moderation Cohen used, a measure based on Bailey’s (2007) ideal point estimates for the president, the results do not change significantly. Moderation does lead to higher probability of approval, as Cohen argues, but divided government continues to have a positive effect on general approval and foreign relations approval. What is unclear is whether and to what extent Cohen’s reasoning applies in the foreign policy domain. To what extent does the public prefer moderate foreign policies? To what extent does an opposition Congress force the president to moderate in this domain? Even if
the president has more control over foreign than domestic policy, that control may still be constrained by an opposition Congress. It may be that an opposition Congress forces presidents toward the center on domestic and foreign policy even though the president is still more independent of Congress in foreign affairs, consistent with the two presidencies thesis. At this point, we do not know the answers to these questions or how those answers might explain the puzzle of divided government’s impact on foreign relations approval.

Third, divided government may lead to increased approval for different reasons in different domains. Extant research provides strong support for the hypothesis that the public attributes the blame for poor economic conditions to both Congress and the president during divided government, at least partially explaining why general approval is higher during divided government. However, a different dynamic may explain why foreign relations approval is higher during divided government, a dynamic relating to the flow of information via news media.

Focusing on periods of military crisis, Groeling and Baum (2008) spell out the implications of opposition elites’ incentives to support or oppose the president along with the news media’s incentives to present novel, balanced, and credible stories for the coverage of the crisis (e.g., Graber 2010). Typically, they argue, opposition members of Congress (MCs) have incentives to support the president during a crisis. As they note, criticism of the president during a major crisis brings considerable political risk. The public may well credit or blame the commander in chief more than Congress for the success or failure of any military endeavor. Consequently, opposing the president will yield little benefit if the critic is right and much blame if the critic is wrong. As Groeling and Baum (2008, 1071) note, “An MC who supports a policy that subsequently fails may pay some political price—such as emboldened opposition at the next election—but the cost of opposing a successful policy is likely to be greater. After all, a
victorious commander-in-chief (along with his party in Congress) will, more than an unsuccessful one, possess both the motive (political retribution) and opportunity (in the form of enhanced political capital) to punish recalcitrant MCs.” Presumably, during divided government, conflict between the president and Congress is typical. Given news media’s tendency to present stories with balance and conflict (Graber 2010), news coverage during divided government is presumably replete with conflict between the branches. Thus, during a crisis, when many of the opposition MCs heed the logic Groeling and Baum delineate and remain positive toward the president, news agencies may well cover the relatively novel agreement between the branches, leading to relatively favorable coverage of the president’s activities. Such coverage is also relatively credible to the public given the support of the typically critical opposition. Thus, the support of the opposition MCs is likely to be covered and relatively persuasive.

Groeling and Baum’s data show that media coverage during rally events is especially favorable during divided government. According to their content analysis of network news coverage 30 days before and after the initiation or announcement of “militarized interstate dispute”, the ratio of praise to criticism of the president is roughly 10 points higher during divided government. Since militarized interstate disputes pertain most to foreign relations, it may well be that this more favorable coverage provides a boost in approval of the president’s handling of foreign relations.

Fourth, scholars of divided government have focused on its capacity to obscure responsibility, but under some conditions divided government may actually pinpoint the lines of accountability. Divided government can highlight the president’s responsibility when the president and Congress clearly advocate different policies and the president’s preferred policy clearly wins the day. Congress and the president will be most likely to articulate different
policies when they are controlled by different parties; the president is most likely to win the policy dispute most clearly in the domain of foreign relations, at least if the two presidencies thesis holds any weight.

A few examples may illustrate. Consider the Iran-Contra affair. President Reagan clearly preferred to fund the Contras and Congress clearly opposed doing so. When it became public that the administration had funded the Contras it was clear that the executive had won the policy battle. It was also clear that this was not what Congress preferred. In this instance, divided government highlighted the Reagan administration’s responsibility for the activity and Reagan’s overall approval dropped 17 points in the month after the first revelations and another 7 points just after the Tower Commission Report detailing the administration’s activities was released. Similarly, approval of Reagan’s handling of foreign relations dropped 19 points (from 51 percent in July to 32 percent after the release of the Tower Commission Report).

Another example arose more recently in relation to the war in Iraq. In the run up to the war, George W. Bush was clearly the driving force advocating for military intervention, at least vis-à-vis Congress. However, the Republican Congress was largely silent or supportive, ultimately granting Bush the powers necessary to carry out the war. Thus, someone who did not favor the war could conceivably have blamed both the president and Congress for deciding to go to war. However, after the Democrats won majorities in both chambers of Congress in the 2006 election, the Democrats held and won several high profile votes signaling a wish to change Iraq policy. Those legislative efforts to check the president largely failed because Bush vetoed them. In this case, Congress and the president offered dramatically different alternatives and the president’s preferred policy largely won the day, highlighting the president’s hand in the Iraq war domain. In this context, an individual opposed to Iraq policy would presumably be more
likely to blame the president alone since Congress clearly attempted to alter the president’s policy.

Although we cannot offer strong tests of these explanations, we can explore some implications of the last two. If coverage of rally events is generally more positive during divided government, the impact of events should be greater during divided government. To test this hypothesis, we included an interaction between rally events and divided government in our time series model of foreign relations approval. A positive and significant interaction will suggest that rally events provide a bigger boost to presidents during divided government than they do during unified control. We cannot attribute such a result to patterns of media coverage directly, but this result would be consistent with the logic spelled out above.

We can also examine the effect of divided government on the political cost of the war in Iraq to see whether divided government might have clarified the lines of responsibility rather than obscured them. The shift in control of Congress from the Republicans to the Democrats during the war provides something of a natural experiment. We can assess the cost of the war under unified government and compare it to the cost of the war under divided government, when Democrats were clearly pursuing a different path, laying the blame for American troop deaths at George W. Bush’s feet. To do so, we interact divided government with the troop deaths variable. If divided government made Bush more accountable for the war, at least in terms of foreign relations approval, the interaction should be negative and statistically significant.

The results, presented in column 4 of Table 4, support both points. The interaction between divided government and rally events is statistically significant. The model estimates that during unified government, rallies boost foreign relations approval by about 3 points, but during divided government they boost approval by about 7.5 points. In addition, the interaction
between deaths in Iraq and divided government is also significant. Interestingly, the model estimates that during unified government, Bush’s foreign relations approval did not decline as troop deaths increased. However, once the Democrats officially proposed and passed alternative policies in Congress, mounting troop deaths took their toll on Bush’s foreign policy approval.11 We reiterate that this last model provides only interesting suggestive results, but these results point to potentially fruitful lines of research.

**Conclusion**

This analysis generates two important conclusions and raises various questions for future research. First, we provide additional empirical support for the logic Nicholson, Segura, and Woods set forth. Significantly extending the period of their individual-level analysis provides additional support for their conclusions. Extending their time series analysis by another 12 years also leads to similar results, reinforcing their findings that the public is more supportive of the president during periods of divided government.

Second, various studies of attribution (esp. Nicholson, Segura, and Woods 2002; Rudolph 2003a, 2003b) argue that divided government makes it more difficult for the public to attribute blame for economic conditions. Applying this logic to foreign relations raises a puzzle. If presidents have more discretion in foreign relations and the public is aware of this, divided government should not provide much benefit to presidents’ foreign relations approval simply because the public would not be willing to shift some of the blame for conditions to Congress. We found no evidence that the public thinks along these lines. Instead, presidents have enjoyed higher standing in the public’s views of their handling of foreign relations during divided government. The puzzle points to a new theoretical wrinkle in thinking about attribution during divided government. In some instances, divided government actually clarifies who’s responsible
in a system of separated powers. The puzzle also raises questions about how the public views the relative influence the president has in domestic and foreign policy domains. Ultimately, the results presented here add to and broaden extant evidence that presidents benefit, at least to some degree, from divided government, while raising a number of novel twists to our understanding of how the public attributes credit and blame in a system of separated powers.
Works Cited


Newman, Brian and Andrew Forcehimes. Forthcoming. “’Rally Round the Flag Events’ for Presidential Approval Research.” *Electoral Studies*.


### Table 1: Individual-Level Approval Models, 1972-2008 ANES

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Probit standard errors in parentheses
+ significant at 10%; * significant at 5%; ** significant at 1%
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Ordered probit standard errors in parentheses
+ significant at 10%; * significant at 5%; ** significant at 1%
Table 3: Quarterly Time Series Models, 1977-2008

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Standard errors in parentheses
+ significant at 10%; * significant at 5%; ** significant at 1%
Data: American National Election Studies. Predicted probabilities calculated by CLARIFY (Tomz, Wittenberg, and King 2003) based on models presented in column 4 of Table 2. All other variables in the model were held constant at their mean or modal values.
Notes

1 We thank Greg McAvoy, Steve Nicholson, and Gary Segura for providing their data. All errors are ours.

2 Question wording: “do you approve or disapprove of the way [the president] is handling his job as president?” Coded 1 for approve and 0 for disapprove. Starting in 1980, the ANES asked a follow-up question, “do you [approve/disapprove] strongly or not strongly?” allowing for a 4-point measure of approval including strong disapproval, not strong disapproval, not strong approval, strong approval (coded 0 for strongly disapprove to 3 for strongly approve). Ordered probit models employing this 4-point measure from 1980 to 2008 support the conclusions we draw from the binomial probit models.

3 Question wording: “do you approve or disapprove of the way [the president] is handling relations with foreign countries” followed by a question of whether the respondent approved/disapproved strongly or not strongly. This question was adopted in 1984. In 1980, we used the question “do you approve or disapprove of Jimmy Carter’s handling of the crisis brought about by the taking of Americans as hostage in Iran?” “Do you [approve/disapprove] strongly or not strongly?” In 1982, we created a foreign relations approval measure by taking the average response to questions of whether the respondent approved or disapproved of Reagan’s handling of nuclear arms control, relations with the Soviets, and national defense (alpha = .82). No foreign relations approval questions were included in the 1986 and 1990 ANES.

4 We consider control to be divided in 2002 in the wake of the Jeffords switch, which moved the Senate from a perfect partisan split to a narrow majority for the Democrats.
Retrospective evaluations based on the question, “are you better off or worse off financially than you were a year ago?” Prospective evaluations based on the question, “now, looking ahead—do you think that a year from now you will be better off financially, worse off, or just about the same as now?” Scholars have debated both whether prospective or retrospective evaluations are more relevant and whether pocketbook or sociotropic evaluations of economic conditions are more important for presidential approval (e.g., MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1992; Clarke and Stewart 1994; Norpoth 1996). We follow Nicholson, Segura, and Woods in including both retrospective and prospective evaluations to capture whatever effect these two types of assessments might have. The choice of pocketbook rather than sociotropic measures is largely pragmatic: sociotropic measures were not available in the 1970s. We estimated models using retrospective and prospective evaluations of national conditions and found similar results to those presented below, even when we included evaluations of business conditions, which were queried in the 1970s rather than national economic conditions.

When we replicated the Nicholson, Segura, and Woods model on the same period they employed, we found very similar results, but with a smaller case count. For example, their basic model included 18,197 observations, but ours only includes 13,555. We assume the difference must be a function of differing ways of dealing with missing values. By our count, in the 1972 to 1994 studies, 16,931 respondents answered the ideology question, a number falling short of the total number of observations Nicholson, Segura, and Woods report including in their basic model for the same period. Our replication actually points to stronger effects of divided government than Nicholson, Segura and Woods originally reported (we estimate that the probability of approval increases by 20 percentage points, versus the 17 points they reported).
The logic behind Nicholson, Segura, and Woods (2002) and other studies of attribution suggest that we should see similar effects in the domain of economic approval since Congress and the president share the powers of economic policymaking. The evidence (not shown) bears out this expectation. Based on an ordered probit model of economic approval, the probability of approving of the president’s handling of the economy is 10 points greater during divided government than during unified control, holding all other variables at mean levels. As above, those who know control is shared give the president a larger break. Strong disapproval is most likely under unified government; those who know control is unified had a .45 probability of strong disapproval, compared to a .40 probability for those who were unaware of unified control. Under divided government, the probability of strong disapproval shrinks even lower to .35 for those who did not realize control was divided and drops to .30 for those who did. The opposite is true for strong approval. Holding all other variables constant, those who knew the same party controlled both branches had only a .09 probability of strong approval, while those who did not know had a .12 probability of strong approval. Strong approval was more likely during divided government, when those unaware of divided control had a .15 probability of strong approval and those who knew control was divided had a .18 probability of strong approval.

James Jeffords left the Republican caucus in May, 2001. We code the first two quarters of 2001 as unified government, then divided government from the third quarter of 2001 through the fourth quarter of 2002.

In particular, lagged dependent variables pose problems when the dependent variable is fractionally integrated (as the approval series is) as noted in Lebo, Walker, and Clarke (2000) and Clarke and Lebo (2003). They pose a way of dealing with this issue in an ARFIMA framework (see also Lebo and Cassino 2007). We estimated ARFIMA models with an error
correction mechanism (i.e., the model employed in Lebo and Cassino 2007) and found results very similar to those presented here.

10 To be sure, general approval and foreign relations approval are related. However, Granger tests find no evidence that foreign relations approval are caused by general approval. In contrast, Cohen (2002) and McAvoy (2006) find foreign relations approval Granger cause general approval.

11 Additional analyses find that the same was true for Bush’s overall approval.