

# The Ability of Political Conditions to Predict Congressional Discussion of the President

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## Introduction

The nature of presidential support in Congress and its relationship to the president's success in passing an agenda has long been the subject of debate, but research tends to focus on voting as the dominant measure of these concepts (Bond et al. 2003; Jacobson 2003). In this study we ask what factors influence discussion of the president in congressional speeches along partisan lines. One such factor may be increased partisanship. As polarization increases in Congress and the electorate, fewer Congress members come from districts that voted for a presidential candidate of the opposing party, lessening incentives for members to engage in cross-party support (Jacobson 2003). Other factors may be related to political, social or economic events; entrance into a foreign conflict, for example, might provide a "rally-round-the-flag phenomenon" that diminishes criticism while increasing mentions of the President among his own party (Groeling and Baum 2008).

What makes the opposition party relatively more or less likely to talk about the president than his own party? We expect that opposition party mentions will increase relative to same party mentions during times of low presidential approval, executive scandal or economic downturn.

## Data and Methodology

### MODEL

For this study I used an Ordinary Least Squares regression model with a lagged dependent variable to account for autocorrelation between quarters.

$$P_t = \alpha + \beta_1 A_t + \beta_2 S_t + \beta_3 C_t + \beta_4 W_t + \beta_5 D_t + \beta_6 E_t + \beta_7 L_t + \beta_8 P_{t-1} + \varepsilon_t$$

$$\text{And } P_t = \left( \frac{X_P}{X} - \frac{Y_P}{Y} \right)_t$$

Where:

$P_t$  is the variable of interest, the difference between the fraction of speeches given by the opposition party mentioning the President ( $\frac{X_P}{X}$ ) and the fraction of speeches by the presidential party mentioning the president ( $\frac{Y_P}{Y}$ ) in a quarter  $t$ .

$A_t$  is the presidential approval rating.

$S_t$  is a dummy representing whether or not an executive scandal was occurring in quarter  $t$  (Nyhan 2013).

$C_t$  is consumer sentiment measured by the University of Michigan Consumer Sentiment Index

$W_t$  indicates the number of casualties from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan

$D_t$  is a dummy indicating if the opposition party was in control of the house.

$E_t$  is a dummy indicating presidential election years

$L_t$  is a dummy indicating quarters in which there were fewer than 200 speeches made

$P_{t-1}$  is a lagged dependent variable.

$\varepsilon_t$  is a randomly distributed error term.

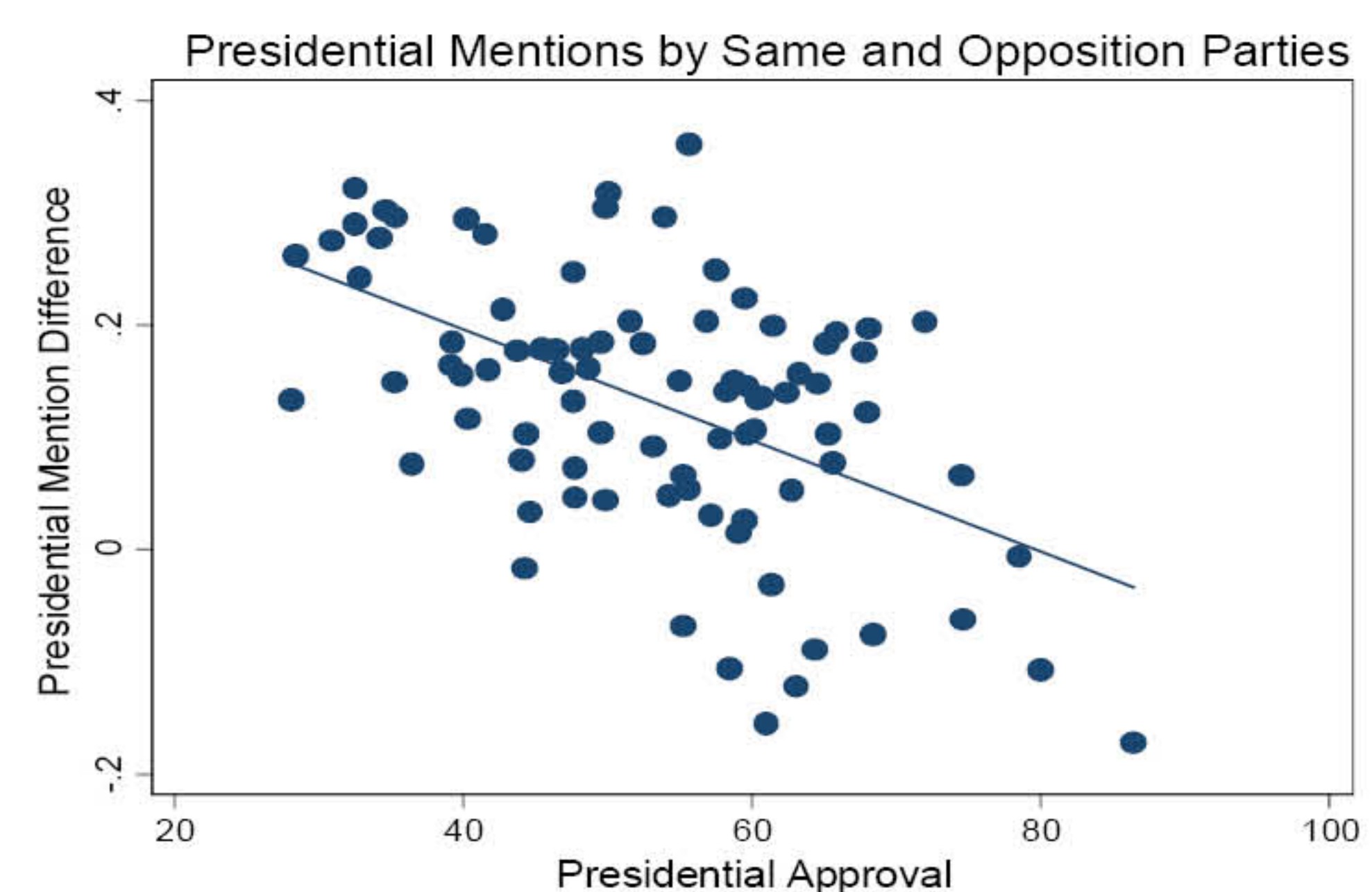
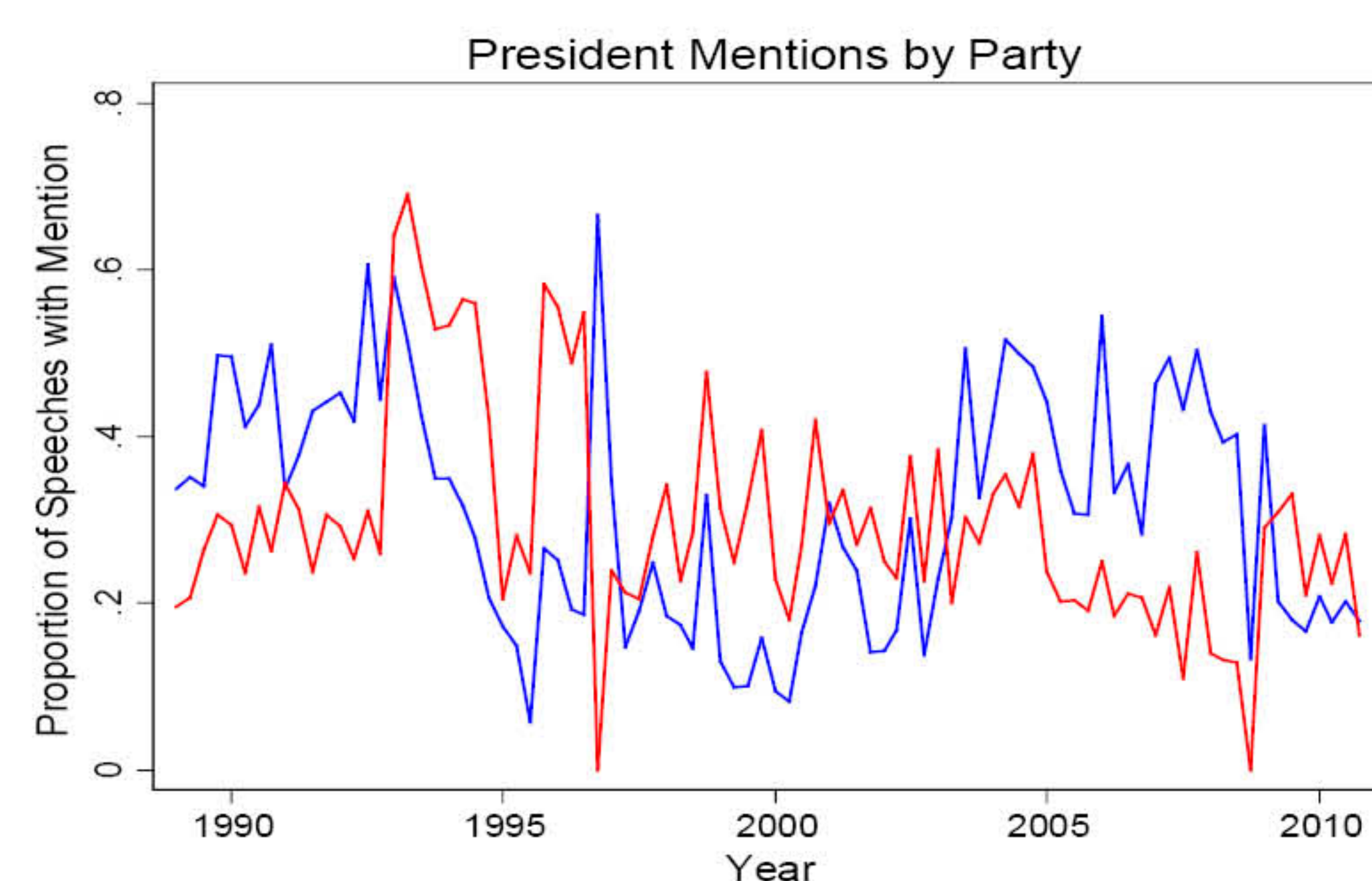
### DATA

This study relies on the over 40,000 one-minute speeches that were delivered in the House from the 101st Congress (1989-1990) to the 111th Congress (2009-2010). One-minute speeches occur at the beginning of the day in the House of Representatives. Any House member may speak for one minute on the topic of their choosing. These speeches were collected and machine coded by the program Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC). The program searched each speech for a set of key words, including "President" and the last name of the current president during each Congress. Because only four one-minute speeches were made in the fourth quarter of 1996, we dropped that observation.

### AUTOCORRELATION

An initial Durbin-Watson test on the model without a lagged dependent variable revealed some autocorrelation (a d-stat of 1.149). It makes theoretical sense that autocorrelation would be present in the model as discussion of the President is likely to spillover from one quarter to the next. To account for this we included a lagged dependent variable  $P_{t-1}$ . We then ran a Breusch-Godfrey test that resulted in a Chi-Square of 0.8357, showing autocorrelation to be at an acceptable level.

## Figures



## Results

Variable	Coefficient (Standard Error)
Presidential Approval	-0.00383*** (0.00095)
Scandal	-0.00445 (0.02333)
Consumer Sentiment	0.00132* (0.0007)
Casualties	0.00003 (0.0001)
Divided Control	0.05562 *** (0.02095)
Election Years	0.00794 (0.02288)
Light Quarters	-0.07535** (0.03055)
Lagged Mentions	0.33029*** (0.07024)
Constant	0.15414 (0.07782)
N	87
Adjusted R-Squared	0.5581

Significance Level: 0.10=\*, 0.05=\*\*, 0.01=\*\*\*

## Discussion

As Bond et al. argue, presidential approval may be too minor of a cue to affect partisan votes, but this study shows that approval differentials do result in variance in partisan rhetoric. These differences in rhetoric may translate to increased polarization rather than unity as the president's approval (or lack thereof) is a point of partisan discourse.

When the opposition party controlled the House of Representatives ("divided") we also saw higher rates of opposition discussion of the President. This might be because executive and congressional clashes to pass an agenda manifest in one-minute speeches.

There was no confirmation that scandals or low consumer sentiment led to relatively more opposition mentions. This may be because in times of scandal or economic downturn, presidential party members spend as much time defending the president as the opposition does criticizing him.

Future research might investigate the relationship between these rhetorical cues of presidential support and presidential success in passing a legislative agenda.

## References and Acknowledgements

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- Groeling, Tim, and Matthew A. Baum. "Crossing the water's edge: Elite rhetoric, media coverage, and the rally-round-the-flag phenomenon." *Journal of Politics* 70.4 (2008): 1065-85.

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