

The President's Honeymoon with Congress:
Explaining Reagan's 1981 Victories

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The President's Honeymoon with Congress: Explaining Reagan's 1981 Victories*

This paper will present empirical evidence that presidents have honeymoons in their relationships with Congress during their first hundred days in office. Presidential support scores and other quantitative indicators of the legislative records of seven newly inaugurated presidents indicate that presidents who face divided government should expect to be more favorably treated during their first hundred days than they will be later in their administrations. The same honeymoon effect is not as evident for presidents who face unified government. Because Ronald Reagan faced a Republican Senate and a Democratic House, his administration provides a good case study for testing the real-world applicability of the quantitative findings. A detailed qualitative analysis of his first hundred days supports the general finding and also calls attention to some of the weaknesses of the quantitative indicators of presidential success in Congress.

Introduction

This paper presents evidence in support of the conventional wisdom that the first hundred days of a presidency are characterized by an especially productive relationship with the Congress. Previous research has documented other types of “honeymoons” with the press and with the public. But prior to this effort, claims about the congressional honeymoon have not been rigorously tested.

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In particular, this paper tests whether presidents have an improved relationship with Congress that can be measured during the first hundred days of a presidency. One hundred days, of course, is an arbitrary benchmark, even if it is one that has historical roots and popular appeal. Historically, the first famous “hundred days” in American politics¹ was the period from March 4 to June 12, 1933. During those hundred days, Franklin Roosevelt put dozens of innovative programs before the Congress, and the Congress passed them, sometimes with as little as an hour of debate.² Since then, the “hundred days” benchmark has traditionally been a tool that journalists use to evaluate presidents. Although no president’s first hundred days can compare to Roosevelt’s, columnists, reporters, commentators, and purveyors of conventional wisdom regularly evaluate presidents’ successes at the end of this supposed “honeymoon” period.³ Implicit in these evaluations are inappropriate comparisons to Roosevelt’s successful record. FDR faced a unique set of historical circumstances: an overwhelmingly favorable partisan balance in Congress, a discredited predecessor, a widely recognized national emergency, and a specially called session of Congress.⁴ It would be unfair to expect that every new president’s sweeping proposals will whiz through the Congress as they did in 1933. Presidents come into office with different personal strengths and face different political environments, so it is not obvious why presidents should have a honeymoon period at all, much less why it should be especially visible within the confines of the first three and a half months of a presidency. But

¹ The first “hundred days” was actually from March 20 to June 28, 1815, and referred to the period between Napoleon I’s escape from Elba and his defeat at Waterloo.

² See William E. Leuchtenberg, *Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), David Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) pp. 135-153.

³ “100 Days,” Editorial, *New York Times* 29 April 1981: 22; “President Bush’s Hundred Days Seen Against Reagan’s 2,922 Days,” Editorial, *New York Times* 23 April 1989: 22; “Bill Clinton’s Hundred Days,” Editorial, *New York Times* 29 April 1993: A22; “Mr. Bush’s Beginning,” Editorial, *New York Times* 29 April 2001: 16.

⁴ Richard E. Neustadt, “The Presidential ‘One Hundred Days’: An Overview” in David Abshire, ed., *Triumphs and Tragedies of the Modern Presidency* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001) pp. 47-52.

popular wisdom about the presidency has long held that the first hundred days are particularly important, and so it is as good a place as any to look for a honeymoon effect.

The analysis that follows compares the president's record of success during his first hundred days to other similar periods of his presidency, and finds that he is in fact more successful, on average, during that period. Measuring presidential success in the legislative arena is a controversial endeavor. Scholars have tried in the past to account for presidential successes and failures using several different dependent variables including box scores,⁵ presidential support scores,⁶ key votes,⁷ and others.⁸ This paper evaluates whether presidents have "honeymoons" using several of these measures of the dependent variable and several different theory-driven independent variables. It then tests the conclusions drawn from these measures against a detailed case study of Reagan's first hundred days.

Are presidents more successful in Congress during their first hundred days?

The hundred days difference

The first hundred days of a new administration are different from other time periods in ways that are significant to hypotheses about potential honeymoons.

During a president's first few months in office, he is treated favorably by both the press and the public. In their study of portrayals of the president in the press, Michael Baruch Grossman and Martha Joynt Kumar found that during the inaugural year of the administrations

⁵ For example, Douglas Rivers and Nancy L. Rose, "Passing the President's Program," *American Journal of Political Science* 29 (May, 1985) pp. 183-196.

⁶ George C. Edwards III, *Presidential Influence in Congress* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman, 1980); Richard Fleisher and Jon Bond, "Assessing Presidential Support in the House: Lessons from Reagan and Carter" *Journal of Politics* 45 (August 1983).

⁷ Lee Sigelman, "A Reassessment of the Two Presidencies Thesis" *The Journal of Politics* 41 (Nov., 1979) pp. 1195-1205.

⁸ George C. Edwards III, "Measuring Presidential Success in Congress: Alternative Approaches" *The Journal of Politics* 47 (June, 1985) pp. 667-685.

of Presidents Eisenhower through Carter, the press covered the president in greater volume and in a more positive light than later in the term. Their analysis showed that early coverage was favorable to presidents because reporters rely heavily on official White House briefings while they develop their own administration sources, and because reporters and editors believe announcements of policy proposals and profiles of new members of the administration are inherently newsworthy. If conflicts or scandals emerge in the first hundred days the press will cover them in ways that might be perceived as negative toward the president, but barring scandals or major missteps, presidents can expect their press coverage to be neutral or positive.⁹ This rosy relationship diminishes as reporters develop informal sources within the administration and as political conflicts emerge over specific proposals made and results achieved.

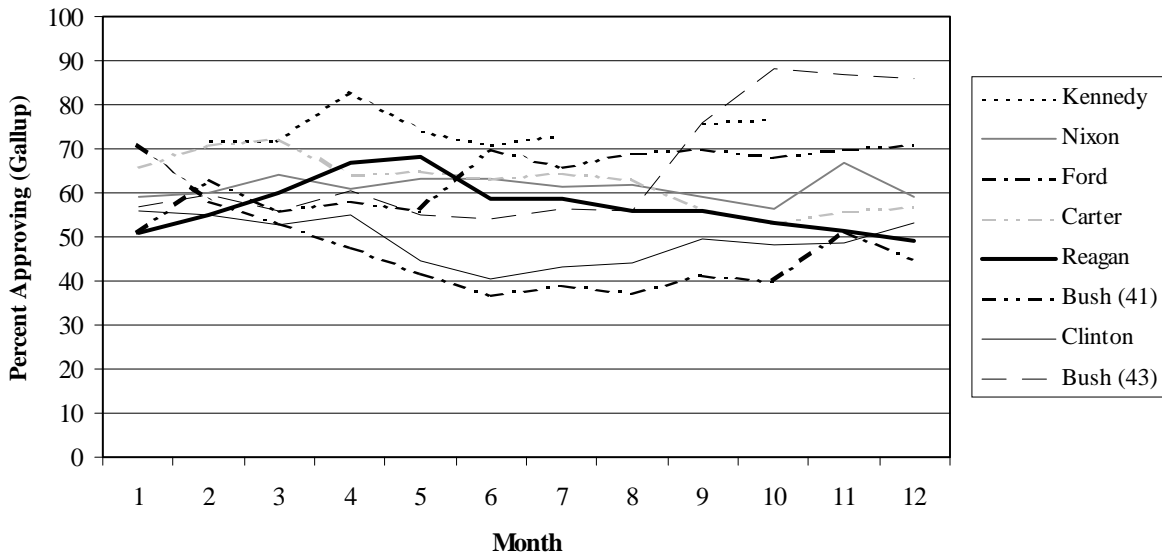
Public opinion research has also identified a presidential “honeymoon” with the public. Approval ratings are stable and higher than average during their first few months. Most presidents achieve higher approval ratings at some later point in their administration, but those ratings are based to some degree on the president’s job performance. New presidents have high, stable approval ratings because the ratings are at least partially based on a president’s record of achievement, which new presidents lack. At the beginning of an administration, when polls ask whether respondents approve of the job the president is doing, partisans of the president respond by saying they approve of his performance, as do a sizeable number of independents and opponents who will change their minds once he actually builds a record on which to make judgments. Many others offer “no opinion.”¹⁰ So during the first hundred days, most presidents have higher than average approval ratings, but those ratings are neither guaranteed to last nor confined to the first hundred days in office.

⁹ Michael Baruch Grossman and Martha Joynt Kumar, *Portraying the President* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981) pp. 259-265 and 275-279.

¹⁰ Richard A. Brody, *Assessing the President* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991) pp 28-44.

Figure 1 shows the average monthly approval ratings during the inaugural years of Presidents Kennedy through G. W. Bush. Although the “honeymoon” is not clearly discernible, the chart does show that public approval ratings tend to be above 50% and fairly stable through the first four months of an administration.

Figure 1: Average Monthly Approval Ratings, Inaugural Years



The first hundred days are also different from the rest of an administration because of what the president and his staff do during that period, especially during the first month. New presidents must nominate people to positions that require senate confirmation. These executive appointments are almost always confirmed by the senate, even if the nominee is controversial. So it is fair to say that one component of any systematic congressional deference toward presidents early in an administration is that even Senates controlled by opposing parties grant new presidents wide leeway in appointing executive personnel of their own choice.¹¹

¹¹ Acknowledging this tendency, votes to confirm appointees are excluded from analyses in this paper so that they do not artificially drive up a president’s congressional support score and mask other kinds of honeymoon effects.

Perhaps driven by the State of the Union and the necessity of designing a budget, presidents propose more legislation during the springtime. During the first hundred days of any given year, presidents propose an average of 96 specific policies in their messages to Congress.¹² During both inaugural and non-inaugural years, presidents make more proposals during the first hundred days than they do during the second or third hundred days.¹³ There is not a statistically significant difference between the number of proposals made during inaugural and non-inaugural years. This increased proposal activity is reflected in press coverage of the president, which is more voluminous during the first five months of any given year when he is announcing his agenda and making news.¹⁴

While the president is publicly quite active, Congress is busy behind the scenes—in committee—and less so on the floor of the House and Senate. Congress takes fewer roll call votes (as recorded by the *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*) during the first hundred days (63) than during the second (149) or third (184) hundred days of the average inaugural year.¹⁵ But the average number of roll call votes taken during the first hundred days of inaugural years is not significantly different than the number taken during non-inaugural years. So the pattern of slower floor activity applies to all spring months, not just to a president's first year in office.

While fewer roll call votes are taken in Congress, presidents express stated positions on a greater percentage of those votes during the first hundred days of any given year. During the

¹² This was calculated based on the number of proposals presidents make in their messages to Congress, from data kindly provided by Andrew Rudalevige. Andrew Rudalevige, *Managing the President's Program: Presidential Leadership and Legislative Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

¹³ Calculated from Rudalevige, 2002. The average number of proposals made during the first hundred days of the non-inaugural years 1962-1996 is 106. The average for the second hundred days is 29; for the third hundred days, 20. The first hundred days average is statistically significantly higher than the average for the rest of the year in a one-way ANOVA test, $p < .001$. For inaugural years, presidents make an average of 82 proposals during the first hundred days 51 during the second hundred days, and 43 during the third. Here too, the proposal count for the first hundred days is higher than the rest of the year, $p < .05$.

¹⁴ Grossman and Kumar, 264.

¹⁵ The difference between the first and rest of the inaugural year is statistically significant at $p < .01$.

inaugural year, presidents take positions on an average of 41% of the roll call votes that come before the Congress during their first hundred days in office. This is a statistically higher percentage of positions than they take later in their inaugural years.

Both in terms of the organizational tasks that presidents perform, and in terms of quantitative measures of presidents' legislative activity, the first few months of an administration certainly seem to comprise a special period. But these organizational differences do not ensure that presidents will also be more successful with the Congress than they would ordinarily be. If the hundred days is not just organizationally different, but also a "honeymoon" of sorts, presidents should win more often than usual when they take positions on Congressional roll call votes, and ordinary predictors of presidential support in Congress should be unable to account for those wins. Based on the factors that make the hundred days different from other similar time periods, there are both reasons to expect to find a "honeymoon" effect, and reasons not to.

On the one hand, presidents do receive favorable treatment from the public and the press. Each of these factors could independently influence members of Congress to treat a new president more favorably than they otherwise would. In addition, the immediate post-inaugural period is often characterized by rhetoric of bipartisan cooperation, a coming-together after a divisive election. During the first hundred days a new president has not had many opportunities to make enemies or alienate potential allies, and so he might win the support early on of people who will oppose him later in his term. If presidents do have honeymoons, the effect might be due to an initially high level of popular and professional prestige, and because of deference from members of Congress who will later become opponents.¹⁶

¹⁶ Richard Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents* (New York: Free Press, 1990), J. E. Mueller *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (New York: John Wiley, 1973).

On the other hand, it is also reasonable to question whether the first hundred days gives the president special advantages. A new president comes into office with unique background and skills, and faces a particular set of electoral circumstances. It is unreasonable to expect that every new president will receive the same happy welcome from the Congress.¹⁷ In addition, a newly inaugurated president is in the process of organizing his administration, and might not yet have the skills, personnel or institutional capacity to deal effectively with Congress. Finally, the hundred days is an arbitrary time period. Although a president's first year might be a time when he is more likely to be successful with Congress, he might not be more successful during his first hundred days than during his second or third hundred days in office. Or if there is a hundred days advantage, that might be due to calendar year differences in Congressional activity, and be present during those three months of every year. In addition, even if on average presidents might tend to have "honeymoons," that advantage might not apply equally to all presidents in all circumstances.

The Honeymoon Effect

So is the first hundred days of a president's first year in office in fact a "honeymoon period" with the Congress? In short, it is.

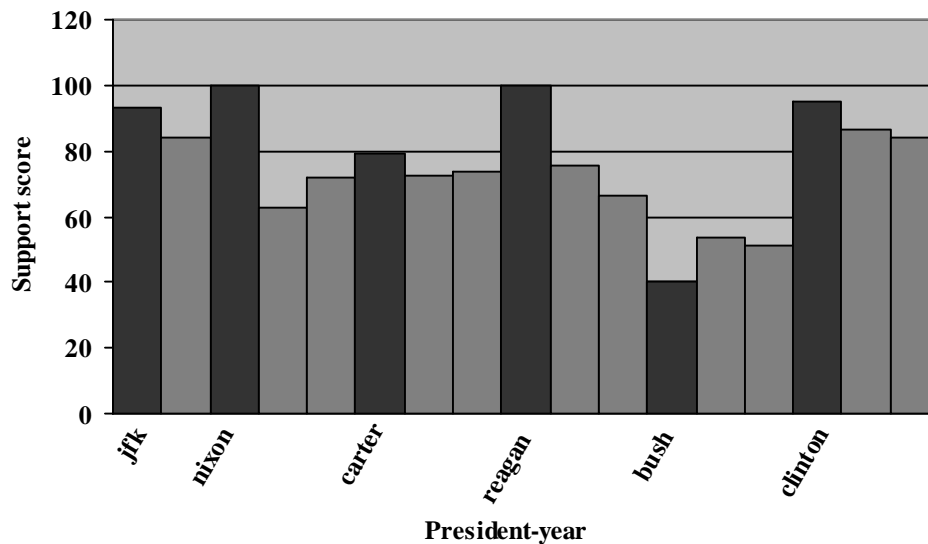
My first measure of the "honeymoon" is based on presidential support scores¹⁸ calculated from the roll call votes on which the president expresses an opinion (as registered by the *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* for that year). I created these support scores for hundred-day

¹⁷ Charles O. Jones, *The Presidency in A Separated System* (Washington: Brookings, 1994).

¹⁸ Presidential support scores are the percent of votes that the president wins out of all roll call votes on which he expresses a position as recorded by *Congressional Quarterly*. A "win" is any vote on which a president expresses an opinion where his opinion prevails. If he opposes a bill, motion, or amendment, and that bill, motion or amendment is voted down by whichever house of Congress is considering it, that vote is considered a "win" for the president. There may be, therefore, multiple votes in this dataset on the same bill—including votes on rules, amendments, motions to recommit, motions for cloture, passage in the House and/or Senate, and votes on conference reports and veto overrides. The analysis presented here includes all votes.

blocks¹⁹ of the inaugural years of six presidents, separately for the House and the Senate.²⁰ I excluded confirmations. The analysis that follows is based on the inaugural years of six presidents: Kennedy (1961) Nixon (1969), Carter (1977), Reagan (1981), Bush (1989) and Clinton (1993).²¹ Figure 2 shows the support scores for the first, second, and third hundred days of the inaugural years of these six presidents.²² The first hundred days are shown in a darker color, and you can see that the first hundred days the support score is higher than later in the same year for every president except George H. W. Bush.

Figure 2: House Support scores for hundred day blocks of Inaugural Years



¹⁹ The “first hundred days” goes from January 20-April 30. The second hundred days starts May 1 and ends on August 8th. The third hundred days starts with the first vote after the August recess (usually during the first week of September) and ends when the session ends (generally in November or December).

²⁰ Support scores for each house of Congress are separately included in each analysis in this paper so that it is possible to test whether a “honeymoon” is more present in one house of Congress than another. Edwards (1985) argues House and Senate support should be evaluated independently. As it turns out, the president does win more often on average in the Senate.

²¹ The inaugural hundred days of Lyndon Johnson and Gerald Ford do not take place during the January-April period covered by the rest of the dataset, and both presidents came into office under extraordinary conditions. So although the other years of their presidencies will be included in other analyses in this paper, I do not count 1963 or 1974 as “inaugural years” for Johnson or Ford.

²² In 1961, Kennedy did not have the roughly 300 days of congressional session-length that later presidents faced. The session continued through August and ended in September. So only his first and second hundred day intervals are included in the averages presented in Figure 2 and Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1 (below) shows that during their inaugural years in office, presidents do better, on average, during their first hundred days than they do later in that same year. Their average support score for their first hundred days is statistically significantly higher than it is during the rest of the year.

Table 1: Inaugural year average support

| | Presidential Support Score |
|-----------------|----------------------------|
| First 100 Days | 86%* |
| Second 100 Days | 79% |
| Third 100 Days | 70% |

*The average support score for the first hundred days is significantly higher than the average for the rest of the inaugural year in a one-way ANOVA test. * indicates $p < .05$. The standard deviations are as follows: First hundred days, 17, Second hundred days, 11, Third hundred days, 11. Source: Calculated from Congressional Quarterly Almanacs, 1961-2000.*

These higher average support scores hold up to several alternative explanations. For example, one might expect that the president strategically takes positions on votes that he knows he will win, and that this strategy drives up his inaugural year support score. Setting aside the question of why presidents would be *more* strategic during their first hundred days than they would be later on, one piece of evidence that selective position-taking drives the higher average support would be if presidents took positions on a smaller, more selective group of roll call votes during the first hundred days than during the rest of the year. But the opposite is the case. In fact, presidents express *more* opinions on roll call votes (as a percentage of all votes) during the first few months of their administrations, and still yet they still win more often when they express those positions. It seems likely that if presidents avoided taking positions on votes they might lose, the combined facts that they take more positions and that they win more often before April 30 reinforces the first hundred days advantage.

One might also expect electoral success to correlate with a more successful first hundred days in office. But the percent of the two-party vote received by a presidential candidate does not

correlate with his overall support score for his first hundred days in office. Regardless of the size of victory, once newly elected presidents take office they seem to be treated as legitimate legislative leaders.

Table 2: Electoral Results and Hundred Days Congressional Support

| Year | Two-Party Popular Vote Share | Overall Support Score |
|------|------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1961 | 50.1 | 95 |
| 1969 | 50.4 | 100 |
| 1977 | 51.1 | 84 |
| 1981 | 55.3 | 87 |
| 1989 | 53.9 | 59 |
| 1993 | 53.4 | 87 |
| 2001 | 49.7 | 67 |

Pearson's correlation coefficient for vote share and support score is -.210, and does not meet the conventional test for significance. $P < .66$

Another alternative hypothesis is that the president's honeymoon with the public accounts for the first hundred days difference in Congress. But as evident in Table 3, average public opinion is not significantly different in the first hundred days than it is in the rest of the year. This does not exclude the possibility that the honeymoon with the media and public influences the attitudes members of Congress have towards the president's program, but on its face, public opinion does not seem to account for the hundred days advantage in Congress.

Table 3: Inaugural year average public approval rating

| | Average public approval rating |
|-----------------|--------------------------------|
| First 100 Days | 62 |
| Second 100 Days | 61 |
| Third 100 Days | 58 |

Source: Gallup. Standard deviations are as follows: First one hundred days: 7.3, Second 100 days: 9.3, third 100 days: 7.3. The differences between each 100 day segment and the rest of the year are statistically insignificant.

Perhaps he proposes far more bills during the first hundred days, and overwhelms the Congress with his agenda. One model of presidential success in Congress holds that the more

ambitious a president's program, the fewer battles the president is likely to win.²³ Presidents do make more proposals during the first hundred days than they do later in their first year. During their inaugural years, Presidents Kennedy through Clinton made an average of 82 requests of Congress during their first hundred days, compared to an average of 50 during the second hundred days, and an average of 43 during the third hundred days.²⁴ But because presidents propose more legislation during the first hundred days of every year, that is not likely to be a source of an inaugural year honeymoon. And although presidents make more policy proposals during the first hundred days than during the second or third hundred days, regression analysis shows that its effect on presidential support in multivariate analysis is dwarfed by a number of other variables, including a dummy variable for the first hundred days period itself.²⁵

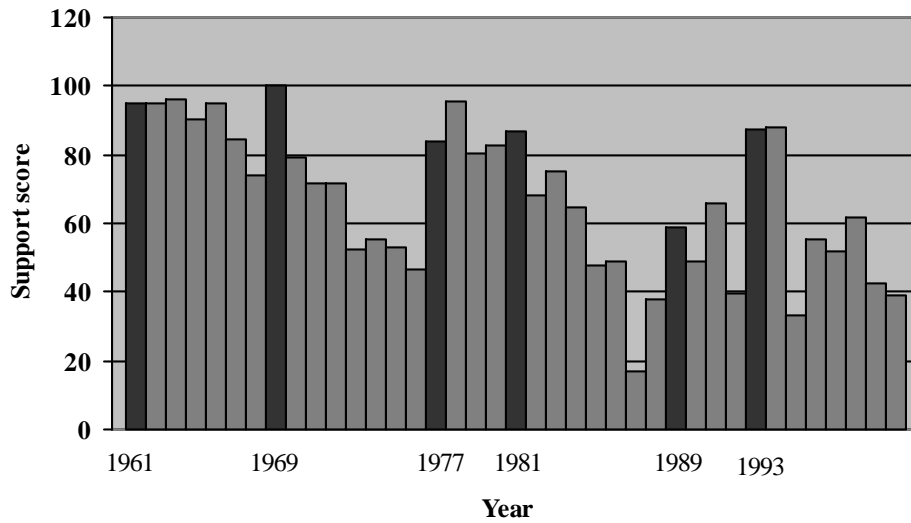
So a president will tend to score better with Congress during the first hundred days of his first year in office than later in his inaugural year. But are presidents also more successful in the first hundred days of their first year in office than they are during the first hundred days of any other year? Is the honeymoon period merely a side effect of being president when a new Congress is organizing itself? Do some presidents have larger honeymoons during their first hundred days than others do? These are questions that can be answered by comparing the same hundred-day period (January 20-April 30) of all of the years between 1961 and 2001. Figure 3 shows the distribution of support scores during the first hundred days of each year.

²³ Rivers and Rose, 1985.

²⁴ Rudalevige, 2002.

²⁵ OLS regression model is $y_{\text{support score}} = 71.3 (\text{constant}) + .038 B_{\text{number of proposals}} + 11.9 B_{\text{first 100 days}} + e$. The first 100 days dummy variable is significant at $p < .05$. The R^2 is .152. Dependent variable is presidential support score for the first, second, and third hundred day periods of the inaugural years of Presidents Clinton, Reagan, Bush, Nixon, Kennedy, and Carter. Results are similar when also controlling for public approval ratings, dummy variables for each presidency, the percent of votes on which presidents take positions, and whether the support score is for the House or Senate. The proposal counts for the hundred day segments are calculated from the Rudalevige (2002) data set.

Figure 3: Avg. Support scores during first hundred days of every year



Presidential support scores during the inaugural year are higher, on average, than during non-inaugural years. The average support score for inaugural years is 86 and for non-inaugural years is 65.²⁶ The inaugural year is still a significant predictor of support scores even when holding constant whether the president’s party controls that house of Congress. Table 4 (below) shows that being in the first year of an administration makes the president likely to have a higher support score, holding constant party control of the house in question, although being in the inaugural year has a smaller effect than unified government. This finding is consistent when holding constant average approval ratings, the number of policies he proposes, and several other factors that might be expected to account for the early-term advantage (see table notes). It also appears that this effect is stronger in the House than in the Senate.

²⁶ This difference is statistically significant in a one-way ANOVA test; $p < .01$.

Table 4: Regression effects on presidential support score during first 100 days, all years 1961-2001

| | House | Senate |
|---|------------------|----------------------------|
| Inaugural year | 22.4** (7.5) | 10.7 [#] (6.3) |
| President's party in control ^a | 31.7*** (8.8) | 23.4*** (5.4) |
| Constant | 49.8 (6.23) | 59.9 (3.8) |
| Adj. R2 | .357 | .372 |

*Table presents Cochrane-Orcutt AR(1) regression coefficients (standard errors in parenthesis). These coefficients have been corrected for autocorrelation in the data. [#] p<.1, * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001. Dependent variable is the president's support score in the house or senate for the hundred days between January 20 and April 30 of every year between 1961 and 2001. Results are not significantly different when additionally using dummy variables to control for each President, his average approval rating, the number of proposals he makes, the percent of votes on which he expresses an opinion, whether there is a new Congress or a re-elected president, or whether the presidency takes place before or after Watergate. In this model only the post-Watergate dummy variable meets the conventional test of significance, but including it in the model does not change the size of the inaugural year coefficient.*

^a *Party control here is coded as a 0-1 variable for whether the president's party is in control of the house of Congress. Separate analysis was run with party control operationalized as the percent of the house of Congress that was controlled by the president's party. The size of the inaugural year's coefficient was virtually the same and it still met conventional significance tests.*

Thus far, the honeymoon effect has only been measured in terms of a president's average support on roll call votes. This is problematic for several reasons. Presidents may offer only lukewarm support for particular pieces of legislation, making their "win" rates substantively uninteresting. Support scores can also include multiple votes on individual bills, skewing a president's average rating based on how many amendments Congress considers on the floor.²⁷ For the honeymoon to be a substantively significant concept, it should be possible to see that presidents are more successful on a variety of measures during the first few months of their administrations.

²⁷George C. Edwards discusses these problems in detail in "Measuring Presidential Success in Congress." As do Jones (1994) pp. 189-195 and Mark A. Peterson, *Legislating Together* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990) Appendix B.

One way to eliminate these problems is to eliminate votes on amendments and motions and focus only on passage votes. This measure is less likely to be skewed by large numbers of votes that are driven by a particular member or faction and are unrelated to the president's real agenda. The table below shows that both the size of the coefficients and their significance, and the overall fit of the models are substantively the same using both measures.

Table 5: Comparison of measures of legislative success during the first hundred days of 1961-2001

| | House Support score based on all votes | House support score based only on passage votes | Senate Support score based on all votes | Senate support score based only on passage votes |
|------------------------------|--|---|---|--|
| Inaugural year | 22.4** (7.5) | 21.9** (8.0) | 10.7# (6.3) | 14.2# (8.5) |
| President's party in control | 31.7*** (8.8) | 35.9*** (9.7) | 23.4*** (5.4) | 21.3** (6.1) |
| Constant | 49.8 (6.2) | 51.2 (7.2) | 59.9 (3.8) | 69.3 (4.2) |
| Adjusted R2 | .357 | .344 | .372 | .285 |

*Table presents Cochrane-Orcutt AR-1 regression coefficients, which have been corrected for autocorrelation in the data (standard errors in parenthesis). # p<.10, * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001. Dependent variable is the president's support score in a house of Congress for the hundred days between January 20 and April 30 of every year between 1961 and 2001. Results are not substantively different when additionally using dummy variables to control for each President, whether there is a new Congress or a re-elected president, and the percent of the president's party in each House. A dummy variable indicating the presidency takes place in the post-Watergate era is significant, but does not substantively affect the size of the inaugural year coefficient.*

It is worth noting that of the potential measures of presidential success in the legislative arena, support scores and support scores based only on passage votes are less fraught with problems than some other measures. But in an effort to be thorough, I looked for the honeymoon effect on as many different measures as possible. On one, David Mayhew's list of "important enactments," presidents are not more successful during their first year in office.²⁸ In fact, a far greater number of important enactments are signed into law during the second sessions of

²⁸ David R. Mayhew, *Divided We Govern* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

Congresses. Since major legislation requires time to analyze and build coalitions, this is hardly surprising. On another, a president’s success rate on *CQ* -selected “key votes,” presidents’ success rates are higher (81%) during inaugural than during non-inaugural (63%) years. Unfortunately, “key votes” tend to be selected for their controversial nature and for whether the vote was important to the president so overemphasize major presidential victories and defeats.

Variation in the hundred days honeymoon effect

It seems that the journalists were right, and the first hundred days is a time when the president should be expected to do well in Congress—better than later in his term, better than later in his first year in office. But the honeymoon effect does not bestow advantages uniformly on all presidents. In fact, it seems to only confer significant advantages to a president in his dealings with a House or Senate that is controlled by the opposing party.

In their dealings with houses and senates controlled by their own party, the first hundred days of a new presidency are no different from similar periods in subsequent years. Table 6 suggests that for a president whose party controls a given house of Congress, the honeymoon doesn’t end, while for presidents whose opponents control the house, the honeymoon is confined to the inaugural year.²⁹

Table 6: Average presidential support scores in unified and divided government (first 100 days of 1961-2001)

| | Inaugural years | Non-inaugural years |
|---|-----------------|---------------------|
| President’s party controls house/senate | 89 | 86 |
| Out-party controls house/senate | 83 | 52 |

Entries are mean support scores for Presidents Kennedy-Bush 43 on votes taken between January 20 and April 30. These averages include votes in both houses of Congress. The finding holds for both the House and Senate, although it is more pronounced in the House.

²⁹ When a dummy variable representing an inaugural year in which the president and the house or senate are of a different party (divided control) is included in the regression equations specified in Table 5, that variable’s coefficient is large and the Adjusted R-square of the model improves. Both the coefficient and the statistical significance of the inaugural year as a predictor of support scores decreases to irrelevance.

This partisan effect is evident not only when comparing across years, but also when comparing hundred day segments within the inaugural year. Even presidents who get to deal with a friendly House or Senate score slightly better during their first hundred days than later in their inaugural year, but the effect of the first hundred days is stronger when the other party is in control. If one only looks at inaugural years, presidents who are dealing with a house of Congress controlled by their own party have support scores in that house about 10 points higher during their first hundred days than during their second or third hundred days. The effect is even larger, though, for presidents who face divided government—about an 18 point difference between the first hundred days and the rest of the first year. So on average, even presidents whose co-partisans control the Congress do a little better during their first hundred days in office than they will later that year. But the honeymoon effect is much more pronounced for presidents whose opponents control a given house of Congress. This indicates that the election and inauguration of a new president temporarily decreases both parties' willingness to oppose him when he takes a public position on a vote, but as might be expected, that dampening effect is much stronger for those who are more likely to oppose him—partisan opponents who control one house of Congress. These findings perfectly support the conventional wisdom that opponents of the president give him a break, a “honeymoon,” when he first comes into office.

Significance of the hundred days effect

Conventional wisdom indicated that presidents benefited from a hundred days honeymoon with Congress, and that proved to be correct. The same purveyors of conventional wisdom often recommend that presidents should “hit the ground running” and make ambitious proposals early in their administrations, for the best chance of success. To prove that the

honeymoon is substantively interesting, it must be shown that presidents win more often on votes that are significant to their presidencies.

One measure of presidential success in Congress does indicate that presidents achieve more of the goals they set out during their first year than the ones they set later on. On average, Congress eventually passes into law about 6.6% of the proposals that a president makes during the first hundred days of his inaugural year. That average is statistically higher than the average for proposals made during the first hundred days of non-inaugural years, 2.3%.³⁰ Neither average is very high, indicating that presidents' wish lists are often ignored by Congress entirely.

Looking at the same data in another form tells a slightly more interesting story. Based on a small random sample of passage votes from the first hundred days of the years 1961-1996, I found that during the first year, the bills that make it to the floor for a vote are more likely than in later years to be in support of policies that a president has proposed in messages to Congress or his state of the union address. The table below shows the percent of the sampled votes that were mentioned in a message or speech.³¹

Table 7: Percent of Passage Votes That Were Mentioned by the President

| | Inaugural years | Non-inaugural years |
|--------------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| Unified government | 58% | 50% |
| Divided government | 41%* | 15%* |
| Overall average | 52%* | 28%* |

** indicates that the differences between inaugural and non-inaugural year averages meet the conventional test of significance in a one-way ANOVA test. Sources: From CQ Almanacs, I compiled a list of all votes for passage during the first hundred days of all years, 1961-1996. I then randomly sampled 90 bills from that list, half from inaugural years, half from non-inaugural years. I then used the Rudalevige dataset and CQ Almanacs to search for whether the substance of a given vote was mentioned in a message to Congress or State of the Union*

Table 7 indicates that during inaugural years, Congress' agenda is based more than usual on measures that are presidential priorities. It also confirms the finding that the honeymoon

³⁰ Calculated from Rudalevige data on specific policy proposals made in presidential messages.

³¹ I counted only votes that the president proposed and Congress acted upon favorably. If Congress passed a bill contrary to the request of the president, that was not counted as Congressional action on a presidential request.

effect seems to operate more strongly during the inaugural year of presidents who face divided government. Congresses of the same party as the president are equally likely in his later years as in his first year to vote to pass an item of presidential priority. But Congresses that oppose a president are far more likely to vote to pass presidential priority policies during the inaugural year than they are later on. This does not prove that presidents who “hit the ground running” with ambitious proposals will have them enacted. But it does indicate that Congresses, especially those controlled by the president’s partisan opponents, may be more willing to take up and act upon his proposals when he first comes into office.

Ronald Reagan’s First One Hundred Days

Because Ronald Reagan dealt with both a Democratic House and a Republican Senate during his inaugural year, his experience provides a good test case for the real-world validity of these conclusions.

Reagan won two House and 31 Senate votes during his first hundred days in office, several of which were on bills that were especially important to the president. The Senate passed his ambitious budget reconciliation bill with few major changes. Both houses passed bills increasing the debt limit. The debt limit bill was one of the president’s first requests of Congress and his support of that policy caused some fiscally conservative Republicans who had never before voted to increase the national debt limit to support his position. Table 8 shows the votes that Reagan won and lost during his first hundred days in office.

Table 8: Roll call votes between January 20 and April 30 of 1981 (excluding confirmations)

| House of Representatives | Senate |
|---|---|
| *Passage of Debt Limit Increase bill 2/5/81 | Rejection of motion to approve lower debt limit increase 2/6/81 |
| Passage of Oil Industry Antitrust Exemption 3/10/81 | *Passage of bill to increase debt limit 2/6/81 |
| | Resolutions of disapproval of pay raises for federal officials 3/12/81 |
| | Amendment to establish a quota on the importation of milk products. 3/24/81 |
| | Passage of a bill to eliminate an increase in milk price supports. 3/25/81 |
| | Won 16 votes on amendments to the Budget Reconciliation Instructions |
| | *Passage of the Budget Reconciliation Instructions 4/2/81 |
| | *Ratification of the US-Canadian Maritime Boundary Treaty 4/29/81 |
| | Two procedural votes and Passage of the Development Banks Authorization bill 4/29/81 |
| No losses | Lost a vote on an amendment to nullify the president's order to terminate oil and gas controls. 3/10/81 |
| | Lost a procedural vote in support of milk price supports. 3/17/81 |
| | Lost four votes on amendments to the Budget Reconciliation Instructions 3/27-4/1/81 |

*Source: CQ Almanac, 1981 Sections H and S. * represents a bill that the president had proposed or explicitly supported in a message to Congress, (Rudalevige, 2002).*

This table highlights some of the problems with presidential support scores. The lists above translate into a House support score of 100%, even though it is based on two votes, and a Senate support score of 86%. The lower Senate score contains the significant budget victory while the House score does not. Fortunately, the passage vote support scores are both 100%, and so are a little more accurate, but even they still imply that he was as successful in the House than in the Senate. This is true but also fails to take into account the greater number and importance of Senate victories. Because these statistical scores mask some important information, it is important to test their validity with qualitative examinations of historical fact.

When Reagan took office, the Senate was controlled by Republicans for the first time in almost thirty years. His inaugural year support score and passage vote score were both very high

and very similar to presidents who came into office under similar circumstances.³² The quantitative story told above predicts that Reagan should do quite well under these circumstances, which he did. It also suggests that his first year should not be significantly more successful than subsequent years. His Senate victories are consistent with this story because the victories he achieved and losses he suffered were fairly consistent throughout the four years his party controlled the Senate. During the first hundred days of the years 1982-1986, he won between four and ten passage votes and during all but one year he had a support score above 75%. He suffered a total of 5 losses on passage votes. Only one of these, a vote on the constitutional amendment requiring a balanced budget, was on a major presidential priority. The other losses were on bills that had been initiated by Congress and were opposed by the president. These bills increased spending on popular domestic programs that the president did not like. For example, in 1984 the Senate voted to override his veto of a bill funding water research, and in 1985 it voted to phase out supplemental compensation while allowing those already on the rolls to continue receiving benefits. In both cases, the president's position was handily rejected, even by Republicans. So the quantitative story's prediction that presidents should not expect significant honeymoons—but rather a consistent record of success—when they face congresses controlled by their own party seems to be borne out in the Reagan case.

If his presidency conforms to the trend laid out in this paper, Reagan should have achieved an unusual number of victories on his priorities in his dealings with the House of Representatives in 1981 because it was controlled by the Democrats. Although during his inaugural year there were only two votes on which to base such a conclusion, his position did

³² Reagan's inaugural year Senate support score was 86. The average for new presidents facing friendly Senates was 88. All of the presidents who faced senates controlled by their own party, including Reagan, had passage vote support scores of 100% during their first hundred days.

prevail on both, and one of the victories, increasing the debt limit, was an issue of presidential priority.

President Ronald Reagan's first hundred days are often considered the classic case of a presidential honeymoon because he was able to win passage of his landmark budget reconciliation bill, which included massive tax and spending cuts, from a Democratically-controlled House of Representatives. This seems on its face to be significant evidence for the idea that new presidents get special treatment from Congress. As far as the hundred days honeymoon goes, this story is slightly inaccurate, since only the Republican-controlled Senate voted on his budget reconciliation bill before May 1, 1981, his hundredth day in office. The House approved the reconciliation bill a week later, but not after attempting to water down the president's proposal. On April 7, the House Budget Committee rejected the president's proposal and substituted it with a bill that included less defense spending and a smaller tax cut. The president criticized this move in the speech he made to a joint session of Congress on April 28 after his recovery from the assassination attempt. The House finally responded by passing the administration's version of the bill on May 7.³³ Whether that victory can be attributed to a "honeymoon effect," or the assassination attempt, or other factors is unclear.

Compared to later in his own term, Reagan's dealings with the House in 1981 did seem to be especially successful. He would win similar numbers of passage votes (between one and five) in other years, but in subsequent years these victories were always accompanied by the same or a greater number of defeats. The vast majority of his defeats in the House were votes to pass bills that were initiated in the Congress and opposed by the president, although a few, like his proposals to aid the Nicaraguan rebels, were initiated by him and rejected by the House. His

³³ *Reagan's First Year*, ed. Mary McNeil (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1982) pp. 97-102.

priorities did not dominate the House's floor agenda as they had in his first year, and when he proclaimed opposition to bills, they tended to pass anyway.

Of the three presidents who faced houses of Congress controlled by opposing parties during their first hundred days, (Reagan, Bush, Nixon) only Reagan's substantive record is that impressive. Bush scored victories on bills on which he crafted compromises with the Democrats who controlled Congress. His position was rejected by the House on several issues on which he stated an opinion, although none were presidential priorities. Nixon scored mainly routine victories; his only real accomplishment was winning an extension of an existing education law so that his administration could have time to develop its own alternative proposal.

It still remains the case that like other presidents in similar circumstances, Reagan did not suffer major congressional losses during his first hundred days in office, and that defeats in Congress would be much more common during later periods of his and other administrations. So perhaps the effect of the first hundred days honeymoon is not that it guarantees substantive victories, but that it may decrease the probability that new presidents, especially those facing hostile Congresses, will suffer major defeats.

Conclusions

What has been demonstrated here is that several different measures of presidential success capture an early-term tendency for presidents to win when they take positions on congressional roll call votes, and an increased tendency for Congress to consider the policies they propose. Because presidents who face congresses controlled by the opposing party are increasingly unsuccessful as their terms progress, they seem to benefit most from the initial propensity of members of Congress to give the president what he asks for. Although each individual victory and defeat can be explained by causes more proximate than the honeymoon

effect, there does seem to be a systematic tendency to win in the first hundred days. This paper has simply demonstrated that the popular mythology about the “first hundred days in office” is more than just myth, and that a true honeymoon period seems to exist.

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