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**“I AM THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY”:
THE ROLE OF WASHINGTON EXPERIENCE IN DEMOCRATIC PRESIDENTS’
SUCCESS**

A thesis presented

by

Coleman P. McJessy

to

The Political Science Department

in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for Honors in Political Science

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Thesis Advisor and Department Chair

Abstract

Upon his election to the presidency, Joseph R. Biden Jr. was the first Democratic President elected in a half century with extensive “Washington experience,” that is experience as a Senator, Congressman, or Cabinet Member. In doing so, he brought a different perspective to the White House, one that was familiar with the electoral, legislative, and organizational institutions that the leader of the Democratic party must manage. In addition, this experience has led Biden to be more trusting of the formal Democratic Party infrastructure and therefore more able to use it to support his goals. In comparison to former Presidents Clinton and Obama, I find that Biden’s Washington experience has led him to be more successful in legislating and in organizing the Democratic Party, but with little to no change in the electoral results of the party.

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Chapter 1: Introduction.

The modern president is not only the commander-in-chief, chief legislator, and chief executive of the United States government, but he also serves as the de facto leader of his political party. His legislative, electoral, and political success or failure determines the perception of his political party to the public. As de facto leader of his party, he is nominally in charge of the messaging, fundraising, and organizational structure of the party. Since 1992 the Democratic party has elected three different presidents: two with limited “Washington experience,” Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, and one with extensive “Washington experience,” President Joe Biden. These men have had different dispositions and approaches to their role as party leader and chief legislator. Over the past thirty years, the Democratic Party has seen varying levels of legislative and electoral success, and given the influence of these men, it stands that they have affected their party’s success.

This thesis examines whether the differing personal approaches and biographies of President Clinton, President Obama, and President Biden have impacted the Democratic Party’s legislative and electoral success as well as the overall health of the national Democratic Party during their tenures. This question gives insight into desirable traits for future Democratic presidents concerning their role of Democratic party leader. The current American political environment and public seems to favor candidates with less “Washington experience,” that is time spent in Washington as a Congressman, Senator, or executive branch employee. This thesis explores whether the nomination of these candidates is truly favorable for the legislative, electoral, and political success of the Democratic party. As the Democratic party is one of only two major political parties in the United States, understanding the role of the president on the party’s political success is of utmost priority for all American political scientists.

Literature Review

Can the Personal Characteristics of a President Impact his Success?

Whether presidents have the ability to personally impact their own success is a heavily debated topic in political science scholarship. In 1960, Richard Neustadt, a former aide of President Truman and one of the progenitors of modern scholarship on the presidency, famously wrote that “Presidential power is the power to persuade.”¹ He includes the ability to persuade Congress, the ability to persuade the electorate, and the ability to persuade co-partisans. Neustadt wrote that this view is “commonly accept[ed] in the sphere of congressional relations.”² Likewise, political scientist James W. Davis contends that “while the president faces numerous constraints in our Madisonian system of checks and balances, he nevertheless can, if he has the inclination and leadership drive, use his party ties to lead the nation to new heights.”³ In more modern times, political scientist Daniel Galvin has argued that “presidents can, and often do, alter their structural confines and ‘restructure the political landscape.’”⁴

Journalist John Dickerson agrees specifically on the ability of the president to influence Congress writing “A hero president might break through the [instability of Congress] and make it work better.”⁵ These ‘individual agency’ scholars all believe that the president’s personal skills and personality can be an effective tool and therefore an independent variable in determining the president’s success.

¹ Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power: The Power of Leadership* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1960). 10

² Neustadt. 37

³ James W. Davis, *The President as Party Leader*, Contributions in Political Science, no. 295 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 14.

⁴ Daniel J. Galvin, “Presidents as Agents of Change: Presidents as Agents of Change,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (March 2014): 95–119, <https://doi.org/10.1111/psq.12089>.

⁵ John Dickerson, *The Hardest Job in the World: The American Presidency*, First edition (New York: Random House, 2020), 137.

Although still popular in the press, this viewpoint has also been challenged. Detractors of this idea include *Vox* Editor Ezra Klein who derisively termed it the “Green Lantern Theory” of politics⁶ and presidential scholar George C. Edwards, who argues that presidents are largely unable to move the public. Edwards also holds that presidents cannot significantly alter the will of Congress.⁷ Rather, Edwards argues that presidents succeed “by recognizing and exploiting effectively the opportunities already present” and that their Congressional influence comes largely from the size of their party’s majorities in Congress.⁸ If Edwards, Klein, and the ‘environment’ scholars are correct, presidents’ personalities and backgrounds would have no influence on their legislative or electoral success, rather making their results simply outcomes of the political environment.

In this thesis, I will align with the ideas of scholars such as Davis and Galvin who believe that presidents have personal agency in their party’s legislative, electoral, and political success. This thesis attempts to add to the critiques of scholars such as Edwards who hold that presidential personality and skill do not determine the success of the president. Furthermore, this thesis seeks to show that the nomination of presidents with less “Washington experience” such as Clinton and Obama have proved less effective to the goals of the Democratic party as compared to the nomination of a president with extensive “Washington experience” such as Biden. I will now analyze the scholarship on the issues of presidential electoral success, legislative or congressional success, and party building success.

⁶ Ezra Klein, “The Green Lantern Theory of the Presidency,” *Vox*, May 20, 2014, <https://www.vox.com/2014/5/20/5732208/the-green-lantern-theory-of-the-presidency-explained>.

⁷ George C. Edwards, *Overreach: Leadership in the Obama Presidency* (Princeton ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), 2.

⁸ Edwards, *Overreach*. ix

Measuring the Determinates of Success

Legislative success is the ability of presidents to get their legislative agenda passed by Congress. Neustadt argues that presidents are able to persuade Congress to change their minds and votes on his agenda. According to this theory, since Congress is dependent upon the public's approval, the president's ability to influence Congress would in turn be dependent on his standing with the public as well as his persuasive ability.⁹ Other theorists, such as Ferejohn and Calvert, also believe that presidents can increase their support in Congress through increased public opinion support. Since "most congressmen wish for re-election or advancement to higher office,"¹⁰ if they believe alignment with a president would give them more support, then they would be more likely to support his agenda. Therefore, presidents would be able to persuade Congress not only through the unquantifiable measurement of personal persuasion, but also through their approval rating.

According to Edwards, legislative success should be directly correlated with the size of the president's party's majorities in Congress, with the president's ability to influence these majorities existing only "at the margins."¹¹ Therefore, presidents should experience greater success when their party controls larger margins in Congress and vice-versa.

Much scholarship regarding the president's electoral influence is based upon the "coattails" or "surge and decline" theories which political scientist James Campbell describes as when "in a presidential election year a successful presidential candidate assists in the election of

⁹ Neustadt, *Presidential Power: The Power of Leadership*.

¹⁰ John A. Ferejohn and Randall L. Calvert, "Presidential Coattails in Historical Perspective," *American Journal of Political Science* 28, no. 1 (February 1984): 128, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2110790>.

¹¹ George C. Edwards, *At the Margins: Presidential Leadership of Congress* (Yale University Press, 1989), 185, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1dr383p>.

his party's slate of candidates.”¹² This theory postulates that voters are likely to vote for the congressional co-partisans of whichever candidate they vote for president. Therefore, in elections when the president is not on the ballot, the support for the president’s party naturally falls.¹³ This theory would hold that regardless of the president’s actions, his party will lose congressional support in the midterm elections.

Another leading argument is that voters align their opinion of a president’s political party with their opinion of the president.¹⁴ Therefore, popular presidents are likely to increase voters’ support for their political party and indirectly assist in electing more members of their party to office.¹⁵ There is also research that demonstrates the impact of ‘negative coattails,’ where a low presidential approval rating causes subsequent losses for his party down ballot.¹⁶ Empirical evidence shows that presidential approval ratings having a positive partisan correlation with House,¹⁷ Senate,¹⁸ and state legislative elections,¹⁹ as well as a “modest, but significant” impact on Gubernatorial elections.²⁰ Others, such as Bafumi et al. argue that the increased support for

¹² James E. Campbell, “Presidential Coattails and Midterm Losses in State Legislative Elections,” *American Political Science Review* 80, no. 1 (March 1986): 46, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1957083>.

¹³ Campbell, 46.

¹⁴ Gary C. Jacobson, “How Presidents Shape Their Party’s Reputation and Prospects: New Evidence: New Evidence,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (March 2015): 26, <https://doi.org/10.1111/psq.12168>.

¹⁵ Ferejohn and Calvert, “Presidential Coattails in Historical Perspective,” 128; Elliott Fullmer and Rebecca Daniel, “Invisible Coattails: Presidential Approval and Gubernatorial Elections, 1994–2014,” *The Forum* 16, no. 2 (July 26, 2018): 283, <https://doi.org/10.1515/for-2018-0013>; Edward R. Tufte, “Determinants of the Outcomes of Midterm Congressional Elections,” *American Political Science Review* 69, no. 3 (September 1975): 283, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1958391>.

¹⁶ James E. Campbell, “Explaining Presidential Losses in Midterm Congressional Elections,” *The Journal of Politics* 47, no. 4 (November 1985): 1147, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2130810>.

¹⁷ Campbell, “Explaining Presidential Losses in Midterm Congressional Elections.”

¹⁸ James E. Campbell and Joe A. Sumners, “Presidential Coattails in Senate Elections,” *American Political Science Review* 84, no. 2 (June 1990): 513–24, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1963532>.

¹⁹ Campbell, “Presidential Coattails and Midterm Losses in State Legislative Elections.”

²⁰ Fullmer and Daniel, “Invisible Coattails,” 283.

the opposition party is simply due to a “balancing” affect where voters support divided government regardless of their approval of the president.²¹

A related theory is that the performance of the president’s party in non-presidential elections is correlated with the performance of the economy.²² If the economy is perceived as doing well, then voters are likely to reward the president whom they see as responsible for its success and vice-versa. According to this theory, the president’s ability to impact the economy is his most active tool in supporting the election of his co-partisans. Lastly, a president’s presence in campaigning for his party’s candidates has been shown to have a positive impact in getting those candidates elected.²³ Therefore, a president can have agency by spending more of his time on campaign appearances. Still others contend that it is a combination of these theories that explains that impact of a president on his party’s midterm performance.²⁴

Lastly, presidents function as party leader from the moment they are nominated through their last day in office.²⁵ As party leader, they are able to control and manipulate the party organization by selecting their choice of national party chairman, who is “dutifully ratifie[d]” by their party’s national convention.²⁶ For the Democratic Party, this position is the Democratic National Committee Chairman. By working alongside their chairmen, presidents are able to direct fundraising and volunteer recruitment efforts,²⁷ investment in both candidates and the

²¹ Joseph Bafumi, Robert S. Erikson, and Christopher Wlezien, “Balancing, Generic Polls and Midterm Congressional Elections,” *The Journal of Politics* 72, no. 3 (July 2010): 705–19, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381610000113>.

²² Campbell, “Explaining Presidential Losses in Midterm Congressional Elections,” 1142; Tufte, “Determinants of the Outcomes of Midterm Congressional Elections,” 824.

²³ Rob Mellen and Kathleen Searles, “Midterm Mobilization: The President As Campaigner-In-Chief During Midterm House Elections, 1982-2006,” *White House Studies* 13, no. 2 (2013): 15.

²⁴ Campbell, “Explaining Presidential Losses in Midterm Congressional Elections.”

²⁵ Davis, *The President as Party Leader*, 27.

²⁶ Davis, 98.

²⁷ Elaine C Kamarck, “Assessing Howard Dean’s Fifty State Strategy and the 2006 Midterm Elections,” *The Forum* 4, no. 3 (January 18, 2006): 2–3, <https://doi.org/10.2202/1540-8884.1141>.

party organization, and party messaging and candidate recruitment.²⁸ Presidents function as the public face of their party and “have a pervasive effect on popular opinion of and beliefs about their parties.”²⁹ As Neustadt wrote, “our national parties are confederations of state and local party organizations, with a headquarters that represents the White House, more or less, if the party has a President in office.”³⁰

Scholarship on presidential party building finds that presidents choosing to actively build up the party organization is not the same between parties. Galvin argues that while Republican presidents seek to build up their party organization and brand, Democratic presidents work “assiduously to personalize their parties” but take “few steps, if any, to leave behind a more robust party organization able to persevere over the long term.”³¹ Galvin argues that in the search for personally charismatic leaders, “Democrats neglected the less glamorous but ultimately more important work of organization-building.”³² While charisma can lead to a president’s individual success, focusing on the individual harms the party overall.

Due to this personality-driven approach to presidential campaigning, which traditionally rejects the Democratic brand in favor of their personal brand, Democratic presidents have tended to cannibalize the party infrastructure for their short-term success.³³ Therefore, a president who

²⁸ Daniel Galvin, “Changing Course: Reversing the Organizational Trajectory of the Democratic Party from Bill Clinton to Barack Obama,” *The Forum* 6, no. 2 (2008): 7.

²⁹ Jacobson, “How Presidents Shape Their Party’s Reputation and Prospects,” 26.

³⁰ Neustadt, *Presidential Power: The Power of Leadership*.

³¹ Galvin, “Changing Course: Reversing the Organizational Trajectory of the Democratic Party from Bill Clinton to Barack Obama,” 6.

³² Galvin, “Changing Course: Reversing the Organizational Trajectory of the Democratic Party from Bill Clinton to Barack Obama.”

³³ Daniel J. Galvin and Josh Vincent, “Democratic Presidents Have Traditionally Hurt Their Parties. Joe Biden May Be Different,” *Washington Post*, January 21, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/21/democratic-presidents-have-traditionally-hurt-their-parties-joe-biden-may-be-different/>; Robert Kuttner, “The Movement, the Party, and the President,” *The American Prospect*, January 11, 2021, <https://prospect.org/api/content/9f2c2208-536a-11eb-834d-1244d5f7c7c6/>; Galvin, “Changing Course: Reversing the Organizational Trajectory of the Democratic Party from Bill Clinton to Barack Obama.”

is less dependent on his personal brand may be more beneficial to the long-term success and organizational health of his party.

In this thesis, I will follow the scholarship that suggests that presidents can have an individualized impact on their own success and that that success can be divided into three types: legislative, electoral, and party organizational. Presidents’ legislative success can be affected by personal persuasion and by the presidents’ approval ratings. Presidents’ electoral success can be affected by presidential visits and fundraising as well as the national political environment. Lastly, as leader of the party, presidents are able to determine and affect the structure of their party’s organization and thusly is responsible for it.

Methods

Due to the ongoing nature of Biden’s presidency, there is limited scholarship pertaining to his leadership from which to draw. Therefore, in my analysis I will limit myself to sources and data from only the first year of each of these presidencies: 1993 for Clinton, 2009 for Obama,

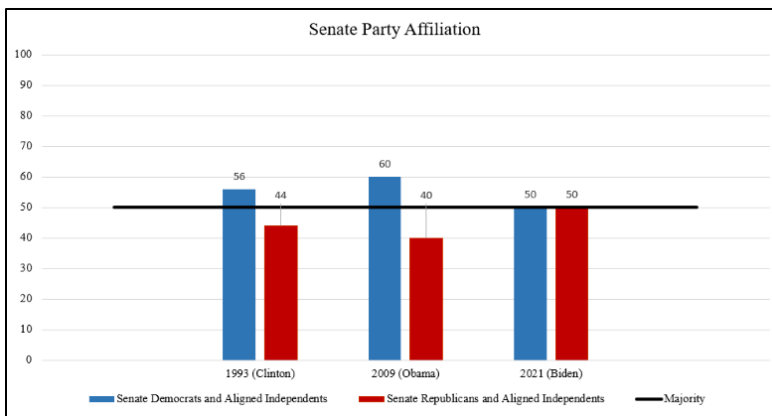


Figure 1.1

*1993 Senate balance was 59D-41R until Sen. Arlen Specter (PA) switched parties on April 30th, 2009
 **2009 Senate balance was 57D-43R until the June 5, 1993 election of Kay Hutchinson (R-TX)
 Source: <https://www.senate.gov/history/partydiv.htm>

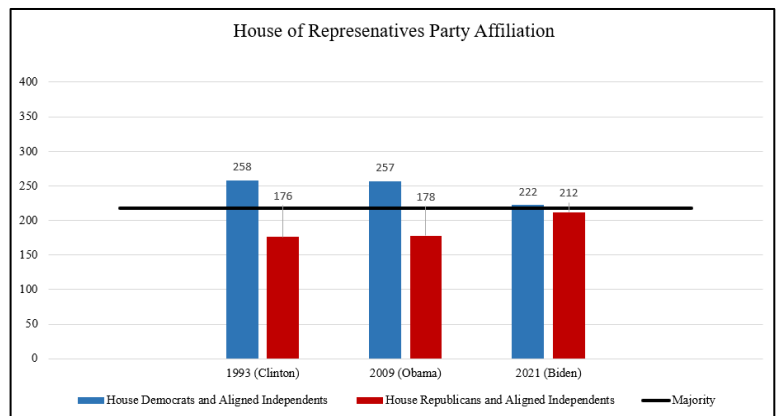


Figure 1.2

Source: <https://history.house.gov/Institution/Party-Divisions/74-Present/>

and 2021 for Biden. Fortunately for the applicability of this work, each of these years have many commonalities in the nature of the federal government. Each of these data points began with a federal Democratic trifecta, although the exact make-up of Congress was slightly different (Figure 1.1, Figure 1.2), each of these years occurred during a period of heightened unemployment due to either an ongoing recession (2007-08 Financial Crisis, 2020-2021 Coronavirus Pandemic) or in the immediate aftermath of one (1990-1992 Recession), and each of years coincided with majority Republican-appointed Supreme Court.

Figure 1.3



In this thesis, I assess legislative success through each president's ability to enact their legislative agenda while accounting for the varying ideological and partisan composition of Congress, specifically through the first stimulus bill that each president pursued. I intend to measure electoral success through the performance of Democratic candidates in off-year races, most notably the Gubernatorial and state legislative elections of New Jersey and Virginia, as well as the qualitative assessment of the president's campaign appearances in support of Democratic candidates. These gubernatorial elections serve as an effective predictor of Midterm Democratic House Vote Share for both states when considering elections over the past 30 years with R-squared values of $> .3$ and R-squared values of $> .75$ when not counting 2001, a year widely



considered an outlier in American electoral history to the outsized impact of the September 11th attacks. Additionally, they are the only elections that routinely occur in the off years that I can access for the purpose of this thesis. However, since they have proven to be predictive, they effectively serve the intended purpose. Lastly, since these elections are the only statewide elections held in these years, they can monopolize the president’s and the party’s political time, making the qualitative analysis simpler and more concentrated.

Lastly, I intend to gauge the political health of the Democratic Party through the quantitative measurement of the president’s fundraising for the Democratic National Committee (DNC), the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC), and the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee (DSCC), as well as the qualitative measurement of insider and media assessment of the party organization.

Chapter Outline

This thesis is centered on the hypothesis that extensive Washington experience bestows intangible benefits upon a president that makes him a more effective party leader and chief legislator. In this thesis, I use Presidents Clinton, Obama, and Biden to test this hypothesis through the measurements of electoral, legislative, and party organizational success. According to my hypothesis, President Biden should be notably more successful than his two predecessors due to his extensive experience in Washington.

Chapter two examines the backgrounds, temperaments, and biographies of the presidents prior to their time serving in the White House. In doing so, it will look specifically at the prior political experience and connections of these men, previewing how these experiences shifted their viewpoints and shaped their approach to the presidency. Chapter three tests the presidents' electoral success through the off year gubernatorial elections in Virginia and New Jersey as well as the Democrats' performance in off year special elections. Chapter four analyzes the presidents' legislative success, looking specifically at economic stimulus legislation pushed by the White House in the president's first year in office. It will compare the presidents' congressional majorities and legislative strategies to the end result of the legislation that was passed into law. Chapter five looks at the presidents' impact on the Democratic Party's organization, specifically analyzing fundraising for the party's national committees, the presidents' involvement with the formal party structure, and the presidents' dedication to building that organization. Finally, chapter six concludes the thesis and compares the results of chapters three, four, and five to my hypothesis.

Chapter 2: Presidential Backgrounds and Personalities

In order to understand the context of the three presidents and presidencies discussed in this thesis, this chapter will provide a background of the political experiences and the personalities of Presidents Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, and Joe Biden. In this section, I use the presidents' autobiographies,³⁴ contemporary reporting in the form of books, and reporting in mainstream press sources to form my understanding of these men. While not comprehensive, as this is not a thesis in political history, it is the aim of this chapter to present a basic understanding of the men that are being analyzed to those who are less familiar with them.

Bill Clinton

William Jefferson "Bill" Clinton III was born on August 19th, 1946, in Hope, Arkansas. He was born to a widowed mother.³⁵ In his childhood, he was raised his grandparents, who "ran a little grocery store"³⁶ where they gladly lent to Black customers even in a segregated South. Later, his mother would remarry "the owner of the local Buick dealership, Roger Clinton"³⁷ a man who would later be physically abusive with Clinton and his mother. Despite his grandparents' racially progressive nature, Clinton writes that his "family was not especially political."³⁸

After graduating from high school, Clinton attended Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service where he received a B.S. in Foreign Service. He then received a Rhodes

³⁴ At the time of writing, Joe Biden's presidency is still ongoing and thus he has not written a memoir of his time in the White House. Instead, I use his most recent book *Promise Me, Dad* as a window into his experience in the Vice Presidency and his personality.

³⁵ Bill Clinton, *My Life* (New York: Knopf, 2004), 1.

³⁶ Clinton, 11.

³⁷ Clinton, 17.

³⁸ Clinton, 37.

Scholarship to Oxford University where he studied for a year before attending and graduating from Yale Law School.³⁹ Without exception, these institutions are some of the most prestigious and academically rigorous in the world. Although his background was not one of privilege, his education certainly was. This background is one that – rightly – made Clinton proud of his intellect. However later during Clinton’s presidential transition, this characteristic would affect his team’s effectiveness:

“The meeting could easily degenerate into one of the endless, rambling, policy seminars that Clinton loved. [Director of the National Economic Council Robert] Rubin didn’t want to presume to chair a meeting Clinton might want to lead, but he felt the proceedings would need a focus and crispness.”⁴⁰

This intellectual banter found in Clinton’s background would grow into a potential for cacophony in his White House, a place where effectiveness is frequently closely related to decisiveness. This would prove to be a challenge for his staff when considering the type of economic plan to put forward:

“Campaign aides had told [Director of the Office of Management and Budget Leon Panetta] that Clinton was deadly slow to make the decisions. ‘The worst thing about him

³⁹ Clinton, 178.

⁴⁰ Bob Woodward, *The Agenda: Inside the Clinton White House* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 81.

is that he never makes a decision,’ [Senior Policy Advisor George] Stephanopoulos had said. ‘He’s not going to give you an answer.’”⁴¹

Only one year after graduating from Yale Law School, Clinton returned to Arkansas and ran for Congress in the 3rd Congressional District. Although he lost by four points, this would not dissuade him from continuing an ambitious career in politics. In 1976, he ran for Attorney General of Arkansas and encountered only minimal opposition before winning the office. Two years later, he would be elected Governor of Arkansas. From there, he would experience a tumultuous political career, losing the Governor’s Mansion in 1980, but then winning it back in 1982 and holding the office for the next ten years. While this would give Clinton significant governing experience, it would entirely revolve around state-level politics in Arkansas. As Woodward wrote of the Clinton Presidential Transition:

“Clinton had dominated [Arkansas] politically for the last decade, running it largely with a Rolodex of 100 important telephone numbers. Now he had 78 days before he would be running the biggest operation in the world, headquartered in the alien culture of Washington. He plunged into the transition, the uncomfortable interlude of neither campaigning nor governing.”⁴²

⁴¹ Woodward, 86.

⁴² Woodward, 59.

Although he had become a national figure through his work on education and his work on the moderate Democratic Leadership Council (DLC),⁴³ he had not served in federal elected office before he took the presidential oath of office on January 20, 1993. However, as a member of the DLC, Clinton was predisposed towards an attitude of compromise and bipartisanship which he described as:

“We believed in keeping the American dream alive for all people. We believed in government, though not in the status quo. And we believed government was spending too much on yesterday – interest on debt, defense, more money for the same health care – and too little on tomorrow: education, the environment, research and development, the infrastructure. I said the DLC stood for a modern mainstream agenda: the expansion of opportunity not bureaucracy; choice in public schools and childcare; responsibility and empowerment for poor people; and reinventing government, away from the top-down bureaucracy of the industrial era to a leaner, more flexible, more innovative model appropriate for the modern global economy.”⁴⁴

However, this is a more progressive framing of the work of the DLC, with Clinton also writing that

⁴³ Clinton, *My Life*, 361.

⁴⁴ Clinton, 361.

“[the DLC] had issued a statement on principles intended to move beyond the tired partisan debate in Washington by creating a dynamic but centrist progressive movement of new ideas rooted in traditional American values.”⁴⁵

When talking about a potential middle class family tax cut, Clinton chose to compromise with himself, described by Woodward as “the ideal Clintonian solution – down the middle and offering a choice.”⁴⁶ From the evidence presented, President Clinton was a man who believed in the politics of compromise and moderation, and aspired to intellectual debate over efficiency.

Barack Obama

Barack Hussain Obama was born on August 4, 1961, in Honolulu, Hawai'i.⁴⁷ He was raised by a single mother, Anne Durham, who was heavily involved in politics and “full of strong opinions,”⁴⁸ in Obama's words, “in my mother's world, the personal really was political.”⁴⁹ After high school, Obama attended Occidental College, where he studied political thinkers⁵⁰ as well as led a campus protest against apartheid.⁵¹ After two years, Obama transferred to Columbia University where he majored in political science.⁵² He describes his experience at Columbia as “holed up in a series of dilapidated apartments, largely shorn of old friends and bad

⁴⁵ Clinton, 364–65.

⁴⁶ Woodward, *The Agenda: Inside the Clinton White House*, 42.

⁴⁷ Barack Obama, *A Promised Land*, 1st ed. (Germany: Crown, 2020), 6.

⁴⁸ Obama, 6.

⁴⁹ Obama, 7.

⁵⁰ Obama, 9.

⁵¹ Peter Kunhardt, *Part I*, Documentary Episode, *Obama: In Pursuit of a More Perfect Union* (HBO Studios, 2021).

⁵² Obama, *A Promised Land*, 11.

habits, I lived like a monk – reading, writing, filling up journals, rarely bothering with college parties or even hot meals. I got lost in my head.”⁵³

Obama’s youth was one of attending private schools and engaging in an excess of intellectualism. This cerebralism would continue to be a trademark aspect of Obama’s personality and political style. While a wide range of knowledge and curiosity is an asset for the Commander-in-Chief, it would occasionally present as a political liability in his dealings with Congress. Years later, a Politico article contrasting Obama and Biden articulated this aspect of Obama’s personality, saying he “and his closest allies seemed unaware of how he would alienate potential allies with his preachy tone, particularly in Congress.”⁵⁴ The same article describes Obama as “very disciplined and cerebral” and reported that “[r]epublicans who negotiated with the [Obama] administration often came away finding Obama condescending.”⁵⁵ For example, when negotiating with then-House Minority Whip Eric Cantor about the 2009 American Reinvestment and Recovery Act, Obama’s demeanor irked Cantor, with him “resent[ing] Obama’s presumption that he knew what Republicans wanted, and what their priorities were, without consulting them.”⁵⁶ In *The Price of Politics*, journalist Bob Woodward wrote

“Cantor might have admired Obama’s self-assuredness – the confidence, the smooth articulation and eloquence – but the president had taken it too far, to the point of ‘arrogance.’ Obama had demonstrated that he didn’t need any other input.”⁵⁷

⁵³ Obama, 11.

⁵⁴ Alex Thompson, “‘The President Was Not Encouraging’: What Obama Really Thought About Biden,” *POLITICO*, August 14, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/08/14/obama-biden-relationship-393570>.

⁵⁵ Thompson.

⁵⁶ Bob Woodward, *The Price of Politics* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 17.

⁵⁷ Woodward, 21-22.

Obama's experience in elected office began in 1994 with a run for the Illinois State Senate on the South Side of Chicago.⁵⁸ In his first race, he utilized Illinois's antiquated rules on petition signatures to knock his most serious opponents off the ballot although he was initially hesitant to do so. From that experience he says that he "learned to respect the nuts and bolts of politics, the attention to detail required, the daily grind that might prove the difference between winning and losing."⁵⁹ However, he never seemed comfortable with the realities of politics. In his memoir, Obama writes "...I had become the very thing that, as a younger man, I had warned myself against. I had become a politician."⁶⁰ The clear negative connotation that Obama has towards politicians and the profession of politics at-large carries through his work.

After eight years in the Illinois State Senate, Obama ran for, and won, a seat in the U.S. Senate. Despite his victory, he almost immediately found a distaste for the slow, methodical movement of Senatorial procedure.⁶¹ Although he worked to dissuade the rumors, his team quickly began to plan for a potential presidential run in 2008. By the time that he announced his run for president in February 2007, he had been a United States Senator for just over two years. It is difficult to say that Obama had much, if any, significant experience in Washington by the time he ran for president. This skepticism of Washington and the Democratic Party at-large is also seen in Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. His message of "change" was persuasive for many Americans, but it also ignored the realities of a polarized and partisan Congress that

⁵⁸ Obama, *A Promised Land*, 30.

⁵⁹ Obama, 30.

⁶⁰ Obama, 38.

⁶¹ David Axelrod, *Believer: My Forty Years in Politics* (Penguin Books, 2016).

President Obama would have to work with. In Obama's famed 2004 Democratic National Convention speech that catapulted him to national prominence, he famously said

“There are those who are preparing to divide us, the spin masters, the negative ad peddlers who embrace the politics of anything goes. Well, I say to them tonight, there is not a liberal America and a conservative America — there is the United States of America.”⁶²

While Obama now says that these words were aspirational, they reflected a deep mistrust of the climate in Washington, D.C. – an underlying belief that both parties were in on the take, that both congressional Democrats and congressional Republicans were at fault for the dysfunctional state of our federal government and body politic. This approach would lead Obama to naively approach his presidency and hamper his success.

Joe Biden

Joseph Robinette Biden Jr. was born in Scranton, Pennsylvania in 1942. At ten years old, his family would move to Delaware for his father to find work. He would describe this experience and move as one of the defining moments of his life and one of the primary shapers

⁶² Barack Obama, “Barack Obama’s Remarks to the Democratic National Convention,” *The New York Times*, July 27, 2004, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/27/politics/campaign/barack-obamas-remarks-to-the-democratic-national.html>.

of his world view.⁶³ Biden would later attend two public schools in his pursuit of higher education receiving a Bachelor of Arts in History and Political Science from the University of Delaware and a Juris Doctor from Syracuse University.⁶⁴ When elected president, Biden would be the first president to graduate from a public university in nearly fifty years. Some write that this made Biden “seem defensive about his intellectual bona fides,”⁶⁵ but it also gave him a more commonplace perspective of the world.

At 28, Biden would run for, and win, a seat on the New Castle County Council. Only two years later, Biden would challenge Republican Senator J. Caleb Boggs in the race for U.S. Senate. He won the race by only one percent, holding the seat that would be his for the next 36 years. Tragically, only weeks after winning the election, his family was struck by truck, killing his wife and daughter. This tragedy would define Biden and his brand of empathy that is key to understanding his personality.⁶⁶

In the Senate, Biden would establish himself as a consummate gladhander, someone who was friendly – perhaps too friendly, as in the case of his relationships with famed segregationists – with everyone, regardless of their party or politics.⁶⁷ Although comfortable in the Senate,

⁶³ Michael Rubinkam and Bill Barrow, “Biden: Trump Has ‘No Idea’ about Working-Class Struggles,” *The Detroit News*, October 23, 2019, <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/politics/2019/10/23/biden-trump-idea-working-class-struggles/40384571/>.

⁶⁴ The White House, “Joe Biden: The President,” The White House, accessed March 16, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/president-biden/>.

⁶⁵ Peter Nicholas, “The Supreme Court Molded Joe Biden,” *The Atlantic*, June 14, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/06/supreme-court-joe-biden-breyer-bork-thomas/619119/>.

⁶⁶ Edward Issac-Dovere, *Battle for the Soul: Inside the Democrats’ Campaigns to Beat Trump* (New York: Viking, 2021), 77.

⁶⁷ Scott Detrow, “Biden Defends Comments About Working With Segregationist Lawmakers,” *NPR*, June 20, 2019, sec. Politics, <https://www.npr.org/2019/06/20/734314194/biden-defends-comments-about-working-with-segregationist-lawmakers>.

Biden would also travel home each night to his home in Delaware, which he credits to keeping him grounded.⁶⁸

However, Biden was not reluctant to engage in partisan politics when necessary. In 1988, as Chairman of the Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Biden would lead the opposition that eventually killed Robert Bork's nomination to the Supreme Court on ideological grounds, breaking decades of precedent that had had the Senate defer to the president's choice of nominee excepting a large scandal. His strategy in the defeating the nomination was described in an *Atlantic* article:

“To prepare, Biden plowed through Bork's writings and held mock hearings during which he tried out various lines of attack. Tribe and others played the part of Bork. Aides videotaped the sessions, and Biden played the tapes for his wife and sons, looking for feedback. Biden hit upon a strategy: He would focus on Bork's view that the Constitution did not hold a general right to privacy, an issue that people who would be watching on television could immediately grasp...

Biden confronted Bork in a matter-of-fact tone, patiently asking him to explain his reasoning that the [*Griswold v. Connecticut*] decision was flawed. His mien was earnest, searching. At no point was he scornful. Days of study paid off. Walking the onetime professor through the *Griswold* case, Biden teased out that Bork would have left it to state legislatures to decide whether a married couple was free to use birth control.”⁶⁹

⁶⁸ The White House, “Joe Biden.”

⁶⁹ Nicholas, “The Supreme Court Molded Joe Biden.”

This would inform Biden's approach to politics; it is necessary to tackle a situation in the manner that wins the day and is the simplest to communicate to people. Intellectual insight is important to prove competence and respect, but it is necessary to communicate in a language that is understood and understandable.

During Biden's lengthy time in the Senate, he would also notch a number of significant legislative accomplishments. When debating the nature of a COVID relief package with Republicans, Biden's understanding of the legislative process would come out:

“Biden had learned over the decades that meetings – particularly long meetings could be useful to move people off their talking points. Most senators only knew the short version of proposed legislation, which could run hundreds of pages. A long discussion might eventually open some areas for compromise. But it took time.”⁷⁰

His understanding that brevity can lead to decisiveness contrasts against Clinton's tendency to allow and enjoy extended debate and compromise. During the Obama presidency, then-Vice President Biden would frequently be sent to Capitol Hill as the emissary of the White House with President Obama praising Biden's “Senate experience and legislative acumen.”⁷¹ In this role, he would successfully convince Senator Arlen Specter (R-PA) to switch his party affiliation,⁷² negotiate a resolution to the 2010 Bush tax credit standoff,⁷³ and the 2011 Debt Ceiling Stand-

⁷⁰ Bob Woodward and Robert Costa, *Peril* (Simon & Schuster, 2021), 308.

⁷¹ Obama, *A Promised Land*, 606.

⁷² Issac-Dovere, *Battle for the Soul*, 78.

⁷³ Obama, *A Promised Land*, 606.

off. Later, White House Chief of Staff Ron Klain explained Biden's approach in these situations to Woodward:

“Klain saw Biden did not have some special way of persuading McConnell, no magic power as the ‘McConnell whisperer,’ as some called Biden during the Obama years. But he did know how to negotiate with McConnell.

‘For example,’ Klain once said, ‘you’re not going to persuade Mitch McConnell that he’s wrong about the estate tax. That he didn’t have the right class at the Kennedy School to explain to him the regressive nature. That’s not what Joe Biden tries to do. He’s like ‘Okay, you tell me what you need to get this done. I’ll tell you what I need.’”⁷⁴

Simply put, Biden's approach to political negotiating is one of realism. To Biden, horse trading and political pressure is an expected and understood part of the political negotiating process. Bipartisanship is ideal to Biden, but not a requirement for successful legislating. When speaking to West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin about getting his American Rescue Plan Act through the Senate, he said:

“Joe, Biden said, I’ve lived through these situations and I’m trying to work through this. I prefer the bipartisan path, but that takes time. Unfortunately, we don’t have time here

⁷⁴ Woodward and Costa, *Peril*, 325–26.

because of the pandemic and the economy. There was a deadline ahead, March 14, when supplemental unemployment benefits would begin to lapse.”⁷⁵

Biden is a man of significant Washington experience. His approach to politics is shaped by the years of legislative and political battles that he experienced during his time in the Senate. Additionally, he is a much older man at the time of his assuming the presidency than either Clinton or Obama was. This gives him an added perspective, having seen numerous presidents operate up close.

Conclusion

Biden has significant Senatorial and Washington experience, making him the first Democratic president elected with such experience since President Lyndon B. Johnson. This experience has informed Biden’s worldview and his approach to his presidency. I hypothesize that this experience will lead to a more successful presidency than those experienced by either President Obama or Clinton.

⁷⁵ Woodward and Costa, 319.

Chapter 3: Electoral Success

This chapter evaluates the electoral success of Presidents Clinton, Obama, and Biden. One of the main goals of the Democratic Party is to hold power. Therefore, as party leader it is important that the president is able to marshal his party to electoral victories. The president's ability to elect his co-partisans is both his responsibility and a reflection of his political strength.

To measure the electoral success of each president, I compared elections in the presidents' first years of their presidencies. Although midterm performances are traditionally used as a measurement of the president's party's strength, the 2022 midterms under President Biden are not available at the time of writing. Future research could use midterm data to extend the analysis done in this chapter. Therefore, this chapter uses the following elections to measure presidential electoral success: the New Jersey and Virginia Gubernatorial races, the New Jersey State Senate races, the Virginia House of Delegates races, and Congressional special elections. New Jersey and Virginia are the two states that hold elections in the off-year and thus work well to have consistent and comparable data. As statewide races, the gubernatorial elections have the largest and most consistent electorates. Fullmer and Daniel also establish the importance of presidents on these elections writing "it is apparent that presidential approval plays a modest, but significant, role in gubernatorial elections."⁷⁶ Therefore, these elections provide a window into the president's ability to influence the electorate while in office.

The New Jersey State Senate was chosen given that it is up for election every off-year and uses single member districts, making comparisons simpler. The Virginia House of Delegates was chosen for the same reason. The New Jersey General Assembly uses multimember districts

⁷⁶ Fullmer and Daniel, "Invisible Coattails."

which makes comparisons much more confounding while the Virginia Senate is only up for election the year before presidential elections. The impact of presidents on state legislative races has also been established in existing research.⁷⁷ Although both states have become more Democratic leaning over the past twenty years, shifts in voting patterns can still be revealing. To account for this shift in partisanship, I calculated the change in each election as compared to the same election four years previous in 1989, 2005, and 2017. In the state legislative elections, I then averaged the change across the entire chamber. Fortunately for the sake of comparison, Republicans held the White House in each of those previous years making comparisons more congruent.

Given that the president's party usually experiences a negative coattails effect, a decline in the Democratic vote share is expected.⁷⁸ However, a more electorally successful president may be able to mitigate this fall-off to an extent. If Biden's status as a president with extensive Washington experience made him a more electorally successful president, one would expect better electoral results for Biden as compared to Clinton and Obama. However, confounding variables may be at work. First, candidate quality does affect the performance of said candidate.⁷⁹ Second, it is possible that the political environment at the time of election has an effect on the party's performance independent of the president's influence. Lastly, it is possible that a declining shift is due to shifting partisanship of the states' overall rather than a reflection of the president.

⁷⁷ Campbell, "Presidential Coattails and Midterm Losses in State Legislative Elections."

⁷⁸ Fullmer and Daniel, "Invisible Coattails."

⁷⁹ Nathan L. Gonzales and Josh Kurtz, "Off-Year Specials Often Provide No Tea Leaves," Roll Call, March 30, 2009, <https://www.rollcall.com/2009/03/30/off-year-specials-often-provide-no-tea-leaves/>.

Data

Data for this section was compiled by the author through using numerous online sources including the New Jersey and Virginia State Boards of Election, Ballotpedia, and a large existing dataset of state legislative results compiled by Klarner et al.⁸⁰

Gubernatorial Elections**Figure 3.1**

Election Year - Previous Year	NJ Gov Dem Change	VA Dem Gov Change
1993 – 1989	-12.94	-9.24
2009 – 2005	-8.59	-10.47
2021 – 2017	-4.81	-3.31

In comparing the gubernatorial elections, I took the percentage earned of the Democratic candidates in the year after the Democratic president was elected and subtracted the percentage of the Democratic candidate from four years prior. In doing so, we find that the Democratic vote share declined in each of the years sampled. However, there is a roughly six percent difference between Biden’s shift and the previous two. This would suggest that Biden had a smaller blowback in the gubernatorial races. Additionally, the only Democratic candidate who won in 1993, 2009, or 2021 was New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy, who barely won re-election in 2021. Again, this supports Biden’s role as a more electorally successful president.

⁸⁰ Carl Klarner et al., “State Legislative Election Returns, 1967-2010” (Harvard Dataverse V1, February 25, 2013), <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=hdl:1902.1/20401>.

Change in State Legislative Races**Figure 3.2**

Election Year - Previous Year	NJ State Senate Dem Change	VA Dem HoD Change
1993 – 1989	-8.631015675	-8.88743296
2009 – 2005	-7.0765631	1.9086999
2021 – 2017	-6.687832328	-7.648757447

The state legislative results from Virginia and New Jersey show a usual six to eight percent fall off between years. The standout exception is the shift in the Virginia House of Delegates from 2005 to 2009 where Democrats gained about an average of two percent. However, aside from this difference there is no clear pattern in electoral shifts. If Biden were significantly impacting the electoral prospects of these legislative chambers, one would expect a favorable shift towards Democrats during his presidency. No such shift exists in Figure 3.2. It is also worth noting that the averages in Figure 3.2 may be affected by races where one party does not field a candidate, but these are about even across parties and should have a limited impact across a large sample size.

Change in Congressional Specials

Figure 3.3

Date	State	District	D-Vote Diff (1993-1992)		
5/4/1993	WI	1	-7.70%		
4/13/1993	MISS	2	-22.80%		
6/8/1993	CA	17	-19.70%		
5/4/1993	OH	2	0.00%		
12/7/1993	MI	3	-15.00%		
6/8/1993	TX	Statewide	-7.30%		
		Average Change	-12.08%		
			D-Vote Diff (2009-2008)		
				**Given that NY allows candidates to run under several parties, I have totaled all votes for a	
3/31/2009	NY	20	-2.90%		

				candidate and placed that value under their main party	
4/4/2009	IL	5	-4.70%		
7/14/2009	CA	32	-38.10%	**This race was unopposed in 2008	
11/3/2009	CA	10	-12.30%		
9/21/2009	NY	23	13.60%	**This race is unique given that a candidate on the Conservative ballot line, Doug Hoffman, received 45.98% of the vote	

		Average Change	-8.88%		
			D-Vote Diff (2021-2020)		
3/20/2021	LA	5	-4.9%	**Given that in the 2020 Election 2 Republicans made the runoff, prior numbers are made through addition of party- affiliated candidates in the primary. Likewise for 2021	
3/20/2021	LA	2	8.3%	**Given that in the 2020 Election 2	

				<p>Democrats made the runoff, 2021 numbers are made through addition of party-affiliated candidates in the primary. Likewise in 2020</p>	
6/1/2021	NM	1	2.1%		
5/1/2021	TX	6	-6.7%	<p>**Given that in the 2021 special election two Republicans made the runoff, 2021 jungle primary</p>	

				numbers are used	
11/2/2021	OH	11	-1.3%		
11/2/2021	OH	15	5.1%		
		Average Change	0.4%		

Due to the nature of Congressional elections, there is a limited sample size to pull from for this section of analysis. However, there are a few takeaways from this data. First, there seems to be a reliable fall-off in the off year. This is consistent with the reverse effect that existing scholarship suggests occurs to the party that controls the White House.⁸¹ Second, there does seem to be a slightly less severe swing during the Biden presidency than the Clinton or Obama presidencies. This may be due to President Biden’s presence in the White House, but it also may be attributed to the decreasing elasticity of federal elections in the United States.⁸² The seats contested in these special elections are also not uniformly safe or competitive seats for either party and therefore do represent a cross-section of congressional seats.

Media Analysis and Presidential Visits

In addition to the election results, the perception of a president’s performance and political strength are also important in assessing the electoral performance of the president. In

⁸¹ Campbell, “Presidential Coattails and Midterm Losses in State Legislative Elections.”

⁸² Harrison Griffiths, “Frontier Country Shows That Elasticity Isn’t Quite Dead,” Elections Daily, July 21, 2020, <https://elections-daily.com/2020/07/21/frontier-country-shows-that-elasticity-isnt-quite-dead/>.

1993, Virginia voters were deeply dissatisfied with President Clinton's performance, with only one in three voters expressing their approval of him. A *New York Times* article describes the impact of this polling on the campaign, saying that Virginia Gubernatorial Nominee Attorney General Mary Sue Terry "steered well clear of asking Mr. Clinton to campaign for her."⁸³ However in New Jersey, Clinton "plunged heavily onto the [Democratic Governor Jim] Florio campaign, run by his own campaign strategist, James Carville."⁸⁴ The *Washington Post* described this loss as "ominous" and said that Clinton's leadership was a contributing factor in the loss of special Senate elections in Georgia and Texas. The same article said:

"Clinton has never enjoyed much leverage with Congress, and after Tuesday, he has less. His approval rating in current polls is hovering at just about the same 43 percent level that his vote was a year ago. There is no "fear factor" to inhibit members from crossing him -- and perhaps some incentive even for Democrats to distance themselves. The same senior White House official was peddling the line Monday that a Florio victory and a defeat for Mary Sue Terry, the Democrat who shunned Clinton in Virginia, would show that "Democrats are better off sticking with the president." They weren't."⁸⁵

⁸³ B. Drummond Ayres Jr., "THE 1993 ELECTIONS: Virginia; Conservative Republican Wins Easily," *The New York Times*, November 3, 1993, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/11/03/us/the-1993-elections-virginia-conservative-republican-wins-easily.html>.

⁸⁴ David S. Broder, "TROUBLE FOR CLINTON," *Washington Post*, November 4, 1993, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1993/11/04/trouble-for-clinton/046b2c5f-905e-4ec8-b1e6-e46a07641641/>.

⁸⁵ Broder.

The media's reporting on Clinton after the November 1993 elections suggest not only that Clinton was unhelpful on the campaign trail, but that the losses contributed to a fall in his political capital with Congress. This implies that Clinton's first year led to an electorally weak president.

In 2009, the gubernatorial results sent a more mixed message. Before the election, President Obama held a 57% approval rating in New Jersey, leading *Roll Call* to conclude that Democratic Governor Jon Corzine's narrow loss was due to his mismanagement of the budget. Additionally, in Virginia, 20% of voters who approved of Obama voted for the Republican nominee for Governor.⁸⁶ Finally, in a competitive Congressional special election held the same evening in New York, the Democratic candidate eked out a 4-percent victory, contradicting the idea of a drag on all Democratic candidates. In sum, *Roll Call* writes "[t]he argument that each gubernatorial contest was simply a referendum on the president's performance simply doesn't hold water." Therefore, it is not clear that Obama had a negative effect on his party's performance.

Additionally, President Obama did campaign in both Virginia and New Jersey, signaling an openness from the candidates to the president's support.⁸⁷ This shows that they did not view his presence as a vulnerability as Attorney General Terry had seen Clinton's. However, there was a drop-off in enthusiasm for the Democratic candidates for Governor from the prior year's

⁸⁶ Stuart Rothenberg, "2009 Election Results Show How the Context Has Changed," *Roll Call*, November 13, 2009, <https://www.rollcall.com/2009/11/13/2009-election-results-show-how-the-context-has-changed/>.

⁸⁷ Ewen MacAskill, "Double Blow for Obama as Republicans Win Virginia and New Jersey," *The Guardian*, November 4, 2009, sec. US news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/nov/04/barack-obama-virginia-new-jersey-republicans>.

victories for Obama.⁸⁸⁹ This suggests that Obama held some unique appeal to voters that did not trickle down to his party at-large. This contrasts to Clinton who found that he held roughly the same level of support as his partisans and that he had held during his presidential election.⁹⁰ Overall, given the conditions of the elections held in November 2009, especially the president's approval ratings and the overall mixed outcome, the president's political capital did not appear to be as damaged as Clinton's following the elections.

Finally, the 2021 elections appeared to reflect more of the message seen in 2009 than 1993. President Biden made several campaign appearances in Virginia, including one less than a week before the election. Although reports said that the Democratic nominee Terry McAuliffe "distanced" himself from the White House, the president and his vice president both made several stops in the state leading up to election day, showcasing a level of influence by both elected officials.⁹¹ In New Jersey, Biden was also welcome, visiting the state to endorse New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy as well as sell his dual infrastructure and social spending bills.⁹² By including the president's legislative agenda in his endorsement for the governor, one sees that he did not view his work in Congress as a potential weakness as Obamacare and the Clinton Healthcare plans had been. As opposed to the large voter fall-off that was seen in 2009 when

⁸⁸ Jonathan Martin, "Obama Praises Deeds in Virginia," POLITICO, accessed April 4, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/story/2009/08/obama-praises-deeds-in-virginia-025902>.

⁸⁹ Rothenberg, "2009 Election Results Show How the Context Has Changed."

⁹⁰ Broder, "TROUBLE FOR CLINTON."

⁹¹ Ryan Teague Beckwith, "Biden Gets Pulled Into Virginia Race After Earlier Cold Shoulder," *Bloomberg.Com*, October 26, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-10-26/mcauliffe-gets-hand-from-biden-after-distance-strategy-failed>.

⁹² Jonathan D. Salant, "Biden to Visit N.J. on Monday, Just 8 Days before Election for Governor," *nj*, October 20, 2021, <https://www.nj.com/politics/2021/10/biden-returning-to-nj-on-monday-just-8-days-before-election-for-governor.html>.

President Obama was not on the ticket, the 2021 elections saw increased levels of turnout for members of both parties.⁹³

Most striking, however, is that following the underwhelming results for Democrats on election day, with a narrow loss in Virginia and a narrow victory in New Jersey, two states that by 2021 had voted for Biden by double digits, the media narrative shifted towards arguing that Democrats may have been hurt by a failure to pass more legislation, not by a backlash to already passed legislation.⁹⁴ Indeed, only twelve days after the elections, Biden's landmark Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill was signed into law after being held up in the House of Representatives for months.⁹⁵ This suggests a political deftness on behalf of the Biden White House, parlaying two defeats for the party electorally into larger legislative victories.

Conclusion

The evidence presented in this chapter on the electoral success of Presidents Clinton, Obama, and Biden does not suggest a clear outcome. While the numerical shifts of the off-year elections have softened slightly over the years to be more favorable, or perhaps more accurately less unfavorable, to Democrats, it is not indisputable that this is due to the occupant of the White House. If this were the case, it would be more likely that Clinton and Obama would have similar percent changes with a large change for Biden. Notably, this is seen in the gubernatorial results, which show a steep drop-off in percent lost for Biden. In the Congressional special elections, a

⁹³ Nina Patel, "Three Takeaways from the 2021 Elections," *Voting Rights Lab* (blog), November 29, 2021, <https://votingrightslab.org/three-takeaways-from-the-2021-elections/>.

⁹⁴ Myah Ward, "Biden: 'I'm Not Sure' Passing Build Back Better Agenda Would've Changed Virginia Election," *POLITICO*, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/11/03/biden-build-back-better-virginia-election-519158>.

⁹⁵ Jim Tankersley, "Biden Signs Infrastructure Bill, Promoting Benefits for Americans.," *The New York Times*, November 15, 2021, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/15/us/politics/biden-signs-infrastructure-bill.html>.

similar phenomenon is seen, with twelve and eight percent losses for Clinton and Obama, respectively, while only a .4 percent loss for Biden. However, contrasting this, for the legislative election for each president, there is a roughly one percent drop-off in Democratic vote share. The quantitative analysis suggests that Biden may have had a less intense backlash to his presidency and exhibited some electoral success in that role, but it is also possible that this is in-part due to the increasing polarization of American politics along with the increasing Democratic-leaning nature of the states utilized. For further information, the 2022 midterm elections should serve as a more consequential dataset.

Lastly, the media analysis does suggest that Biden managed to bear the brunt of the election losses better than Clinton or Obama. The strongest evidence for this is the passage and subsequent signing of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Act less than two weeks after the election. While the election defeats hobbled Clinton and Obama's legislative agendas, it did not seem to do the same to Biden. Also, Biden's presence in both contested states, not as an individual star as in the case of Obama, but as an avatar of the Democratic party, suggests he has a sustained political strength among the electorate – even if it did not lead to a Democrat sweep of the elections.

Chapter 4: Legislative Success

The second measure of presidential success in this project is the president's ability to accomplish his legislative agenda. During their campaigns, presidential candidates run on a set of policies and legislation they wish to accomplish if elected. Once elected, the mandate and bully pulpit of the president causes their agenda to become the agenda of their federal party. As one of the main goals of political parties is to pass policy, whether policy is passed in the form the president wishes is a vital measure of presidential success. The president is presumed to be able to persuade Congress, particularly a Congress of his co-partisans, to pass legislation as closely to his request as possible. This chapter does not measure the efficacy or quality of the economic proposals, but rather the presidents' effectiveness in passing them through Congress. This chapter also touches on the presidents' other legislative accomplishments during their first years in office.

For the purpose of this thesis, this chapter examines in-depth the first stimulus plans of Presidents Clinton, Obama, and Biden during each of their first years in office. Each president assumed office with the intention to address the economic situation in the United States. Clinton faced increased deficits and a stalled economy that he sought to activate through legislative action. Obama assumed office during the Great Recession that had stemmed from the 2007-2008 Financial Crash. Biden took office during the COVID-19 pandemic and faced an economy that was struggling to recover from the impacts of the pandemic.

Each president crafted a bill intended to address the economic difficulties they inherited. For President Clinton, this bill was the Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act of 1993, or

the Short-term Stimulus.⁹⁶ For President Obama, this bill was the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA).⁹⁷ For President Biden, this bill was the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA).⁹⁸

To measure the successfulness of these pieces of legislation, I looked at several objective statistics seen in the chart below. The first statistic is the number of votes won from each caucus and conference (House Democrats, House Republicans, Senate Democrats, Senate Republicans) out of the number of members of that caucus, under the assumption that all presidents would prefer a larger amount of support for their bill. The second statistic is the date that the legislation was signed. Given that each of these bills were meant to respond to an economic downturn, an earlier passage is preferred. The third item is whether the bill was passed through the process of reconciliation, which is a legislative maneuver that allows Congress to bypass the 60-vote filibuster process. This is a tool that demonstrates a familiarity and shrewdness with the legislative process. Finally, the last statistic is the amount of funding that the bill included compared to the amount of funding that the president had initially desired. A president is more successful if he can persuade Congress to allocate the full amount of funding that he wanted.

Figure 4.1

President	Clinton	Obama	Biden
Bill	Short Term Stimulus	ARRA	ARPA
House Dems			
Yes/Total	235/257	246/255	220/221

⁹⁶ Woodward, *The Agenda: Inside the Clinton White House*, 173.

⁹⁷ Woodward, *The Price of Politics*.

⁹⁸ Woodward and Costa, *Peril*.

House Reps			
Yes/Total	0/175	0/178	0/211
Senate Dems		57/58 (*1 Absent	
Yes/Total	56/57	Due to Illness)	50/50
Senate Reps			
Yes/Total	0/43	3/41	0/50
Reconciliation?	No	No	Yes
Days from Inauguration to Signing	94 Days	29 Days	51 Days
Desired Number	\$16.3 Billion ⁹⁹	\$800 Billion to \$1.3 Trillion ¹⁰⁰	\$1.9 Trillion ¹⁰¹
Acquired Number	\$4 Billion	\$787 Billion	\$1.9 Trillion
Percent Acquired	24.5%	98.4% - 60.5%	100%

Overview

Several aspects of Figure 4.1 stand out. First, Clinton and Obama were operating with much larger majorities in both chambers of Congress than Biden. This allowed them larger margins of error in order for them to still pass their legislative agendas.

Second, only one president, Obama, got any Republican buy-in for their stimulus plan. While many pundits find bipartisanship to be an inherent good whose presence benefits all

⁹⁹ "Fiscal 1993 Stimulus Bill Killed," *CQ Almanac 1993*, 1994, 49th edition.

¹⁰⁰ Woodward, *The Price of Politics*, 5.

¹⁰¹ Woodward and Costa, *Peril*.

legislation,¹⁰² this is not by any means a closed debate.¹⁰³ While it should be noted, it is not considered an inarguable good for the purpose of this thesis.

Third, Biden notably got the highest percentage of his desired stimulus despite the close margins in Congress. As legislator in chief, a president aims to achieve as much as his desired agenda as possible. Therefore, Biden's accomplishment is notable for the purpose of this chapter.

Fourth, Biden is the only president of the three that elected to use the Budget Reconciliation process for the purpose of their stimulus. The Budget Reconciliation process is a legislative maneuver that allows lawmakers to make fiscal and budgetary changes once during each fiscal year through only a simple majority in the Senate. This allows the Senate to circumvent the filibuster, which is another Senate rule requiring 60-votes to end debate on a bill.¹⁰⁴ The choice to use this legislative maneuver is a conscious one by the president to accomplish their goals.

Lastly, there is a clear differentiation between when each president signed their stimulus bill into law. Obama signed his bill into law in 29 days, Biden in 51 days, and Clinton in 94 days. The speed at which a bill becomes law is a fair measure of its success, and therefore impacts a president's legislative success.

¹⁰² Bret Stephens, "Can Biden Save His Presidency?" *Twin Cities Pioneer Press* (blog), September 8, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/07/opinion/biden-failed-afghanistan.html>.

¹⁰³ Ezra Klein, "Opinion | 100 Days of Big, Bold, Partisan Change," *The New York Times*, April 29, 2021, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/29/opinion/biden-schumer-manchin-bipartisanship.html>.

¹⁰⁴ Eric McDaniel and Kelsey Snell, "A \$1.5 Trillion Question: What Is Budget Reconciliation? Here's an Explainer," *NPR*, November 4, 2021, sec. Politics, <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/14/1026519470/what-is-budget-reconciliation-3-5-trillion>.

Clinton and the Short-Term Stimulus

Clinton began his presidency with his sights set on a dual track economic plan. First, he sought to pass a short-term stimulus to invigorate a stagnant American economy. Second, he sought to rework the American tax code and federal spending to cut the federal deficit, which was a priority of both Congress and economists, while also aiding middle-class Americans.¹⁰⁵

The details of these plans shifted heavily over the course of the 1992 presidential election. However, on February 18, 1993, Clinton solidified the many debates among his advisers into an address to a Joint Session of Congress. The plan was outlined in *The Washington Post*:

“The package features a four-year, \$493 billion plan evenly divided between tax increases and spending cuts, including a freeze on the pay of federal workers next year and lower raises than scheduled in the following years...

Two-thirds of the money is to go to deficit reduction – bringing the deficit in 1997 down \$140 billion from current projections – and the rest to about \$160 billion in new spending that Clinton describes as investment. Clinton also is calling for an immediate \$30 billion stimulus program to help create jobs in the short run.”¹⁰⁶

The deficit reduction targets in this outline were already significantly lower than those that the Clinton economic team had originally targeted during the campaign “\$240 billion, \$220

¹⁰⁵ Woodward, *The Agenda: Inside the Clinton White House*.

¹⁰⁶ Ruth Marcus and Ann Devroy, “Asking American to ‘Face Facts,’ Clinton Presents Plan to Raise Taxes, Cut Deficit,” *Washington Post*, February 18, 1993, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/states/stories/sou021893.htm>.

billion, or \$195 billion.”¹⁰⁷ This change is due to the warring sides of Clinton’s economic staff. As described in *The Agenda* by Bob Woodward, each of the members of his staff had their own agendas, ranging from Vice President’s Al Gore’s focus on an energy tax, to Labor Secretary Robert Reich’s expansionary fiscal policy, to Office of Management and Budget Chairman Leon Panetta’s deficit reduction. While having many experts in disagreement is not unusual, in this case it led to excessive conflict over policy and strategy.

The first aspect of Clinton’s plan, the short-term stimulus plan, immediately ran into difficulty in Congress. Clinton quickly readjusted his targeted amount to “\$16 billion of quick spending.”¹⁰⁸ Clinton did not want to “start talking compromise and be seen as wavering right out of the box.”¹⁰⁹ This led to a number of conservative Democrats in the House voting against the stimulus. Although the House did pass the “unadulterated,” bill it quickly ran into difficulties in the Senate.¹¹⁰ Republicans, frustrated by the “strong-arm” tactics of the Democratic Senate Majority Leader Robert Byrd, began a filibuster of the stimulus bill. Democrats proved unable to get three Republicans to join them in breaking the filibuster, leading Panetta to attribute the

“problems to a dual failure: no effective message operation to counter Republican charges, and no backup plan to keep the package moving. Success in these situations required movement. Clinton’s economic plan seemed stalled. Clinton had run into two old, unsettled pieces of business in Senate politics: Byrd’s old-baron style and Dole’s to

¹⁰⁷ Woodward, *The Agenda: Inside the Clinton White House*, 88.

¹⁰⁸ Woodward, 150.

¹⁰⁹ Woodward, 152.

¹¹⁰ Eric Pianin, “HOUSE PASSES CLINTON PLAN, ECONOMIC STIMULUS PACKAGE,” *Washington Post*, March 19, 1993, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1993/03/19/house-passes-clinton-plan-economic-stimulus-package/efcaf36d-b5b1-4c63-a01b-3e5a26620b5b/>.

prove he was the party leader who could hold the various Republican factions under one tent.”¹¹¹

Clinton’s unfamiliarity with Congress and the Senate led him to hit a wall in terms of influence in the chamber. As Woodward writes

“once the plan moved outside the Roosevelt Room over to Capitol Hill, it was out of Clinton’s hands. Congress had subjected it to its own process. Multiple committees, powerful personalities, special relationships, and special interests the White House didn’t understand took over.”¹¹²

Despite having two experienced Finance Chairmen in both his Budget Director and Treasury Secretary, the president’s own inexperience made him unable to succeed. Unable to break the Republican filibuster, Clinton eventually capitulated on his \$16 billion plan and instead only signed into law a \$4 billion expansion of unemployment insurance – a major defeat for the White House.

The larger part of Clinton’s economic plan eventually passed through Congress in August 1993. The new portion of the plan was eventually hollowed out, with a focus only on deficit reduction through new taxes and reduced spending that passed with a bare minimum of 219 votes in the House and 50 in the Senate. The deficit reduction amount was increased, the energy tax to combat climate change had been transformed into a 7-cent gas tax, then a 4.7-cent gas tax,

¹¹¹ Woodward, *The Agenda: Inside the Clinton White House*, 159.

¹¹² Woodward, 163.

and “they had effectively wound up with an anti-stimulus package in a weak economy.”¹¹³

Clinton’s inexperience with Congress and Washington directly caused the collapse of his economic legislative agenda.

During 1993, Clinton achieved several other major legislative accomplishments, including the AmeriCorps program, the Brady Bill, and most notably NAFTA. However, each of these bills was welcomed in Congress, and Clinton’s signature issue, healthcare reform, failed to ever pass Congress. Despite the experience of his staff, Clinton’s limited familiarity with Congress proved a weakness in accomplishing his economic agenda.

Obama and the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act

President Obama entered office at the height of the Great Recession. Late during the 2008 campaign, it became clear that a stimulus bill of some sort would be required. However, the severity of the situation grew in the period between the election and inauguration day. At a meeting with his economic staff in December 2009, Obama was told “this is your holy shit moment,”¹¹⁴ underlying the intensity of the crisis. Although his economic team requested a stimulus of \$1.3 trillion, incoming Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel immediately ruled out anything that “started with a ‘t’”¹¹⁵ saying that Congress would not be willing to pass such a bill.

Emanuel, and to a lesser extent then-Vice President Biden, “was seen as something of a political bodyguard for the relatively inexperienced Obama.”¹¹⁶ This mirrors Clinton’s reliance on staff as the primary conduit for political negotiation between the White House and Congress.

¹¹³ Woodward, 263.

¹¹⁴ Axelrod, *Believer*.

¹¹⁵ Obama, *A Promised Land*.

¹¹⁶ Woodward, *The Price of Politics*, 12.

Obama's primary focus was a Keynesian stimulus, predicated upon the idea that "government spending could create jobs and grow the economy."¹¹⁷ To Obama's team "there was no danger of too much stimulus" the only question was "How do you make politically salable?"¹¹⁸ Therefore, it is fair to measure the political success of Obama's stimulus package by whether it was as large as his team believed it could be.

Obama proclaimed his interest in working alongside Republicans to craft the bill. Debates with House Minority Whip Eric Cantor led him to include "elements he assumed Cantor's caucus would support." However, Obama's approach of assuming he knew Republicans' desires did not result in good feelings. Speaking to Cantor, Obama said

"'Republicans like business expensing. They like bonus depreciation.' Cantor resented Obama's presumption that he knew what Republicans wanted, and what their priorities were, without consulting them."¹¹⁹

Despite strong resistance and skepticism from Republican leadership, the White House continued to set expectations high that ARRA would receive Republican votes. However, as the bill was written "it turned out there was less money than expected, and support began to evaporate."¹²⁰ Even Joseph Cao, a Republican from a deep blue district in New Orleans, changed his vote to vote against the plan after the White House put out a list showing his district would receive the least amount of funding of any congressional district. While the minutia of legislative maneuvering is not left up to the president, the president is chief legislator and therefore the wins

¹¹⁷ Woodward, 12–13.

¹¹⁸ Woodward, 11.

¹¹⁹ Woodward, 17.

¹²⁰ Woodward, 17.

and losses are ultimately afforded to him. While the bill that passed Congress was the same amount as originally announced by the White House, it was lower than desired by Obama's economic team and lacked the large amount of bipartisanship that Obama had aimed for.

President Obama's bill was the only stimulus bill of the three to garner Republican votes, although it was not nearly as bipartisan as the Obama White House had envisioned.¹²¹ While Obama's team sought a bipartisan bill that symbolized cooperation during a crisis, in reality they only persuaded three moderate Republican Senators to vote for the bill – the minimum needed to break the filibuster.

It also noteworthy that Obama and Democratic Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid chose not to use the reconciliation process to advance the stimulus bill. Reconciliation, only requiring a simple majority, would have enabled the Democratic Congress to bypass the desires of their more moderate members and the Republicans and pass a larger sized stimulus. This legislative procedure has an extensive number of steps to it, including a sustained back-and-forth between the House and Senate. Given the immediacy of the crisis and Obama's desire to sign the bill before President's Day, leadership may have decided that reconciliation was too lengthy of a process. Indeed, Obama's bill was signed into law the earliest out of the three by nearly a month, marking a victory for him.

Overall, Obama managed to follow through on his announcement and pass ARRA through a heavily Democratic Congress. However, he managed to dampen his own victory by setting high expectations of bipartisanship and failing to meet them. Additionally, his stimulus bill was smaller than his economic team had desired and his legislative relationship with Congress was damaged by the way this bill became law.

¹²¹ Woodward, 17.

Throughout the rest of 2009, Obama's team struggled to accomplish large swaths of his legislative agenda. In large part, this is because of the White House's single-minded focus on healthcare reform. While this focus would pay off in 2010 through the passage of the Affordable Care and Patient Protection Act, commonly known as Obamacare, it overtook the possibility of passing any other major legislation, particularly action on Climate Change that the White House desired. In 2010, Congress and the Obama White House would prove to be exceptionally effective, passing the Dodd-Frank Act, the Fair Sentencing Act, another economic omnibus, and the Repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell. However, for the sake of this analysis, Obama struggled to accomplish his agenda in 2009 following the passage of ARRA.

Biden and the American Rescue Plan Act

President Biden assumed the presidency during both a severe economic recession and the COVID-19 Pandemic. His signature American Rescue Plan therefore sought to address both of these difficulties, with a dual track of investments both in Keynesian stimulus and COVID-19 mitigation, vaccination, and treatment efforts.

Following the wins of Senators Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock in Georgia on January 5th, 2021, Democrats gained a narrow federal trifecta for the first time since 2010. This control empowered Biden and his economic team to push for an expanded stimulus, which they ballparked at \$1.9 Trillion for everything they desired.¹²² Immediately, the Biden White House and Democratic Majority Leader Chuck Schumer began to initiate the reconciliation process to enable themselves to circumnavigate a nearly guaranteed Republican filibuster. However, as Woodward and Costa write, the Biden team also held a meeting with ten moderate Republican

¹²² Woodward and Costa, *Peril*.

Senators, so as to both preserve a working relationship and evaluate the potential for collaboration. However, they did not commit to a bipartisan plan:

“One thing was certain. [The Biden White House] did not want to get ‘Charlie Browned.’ They had seen this play before with the football snatched away at the last minute by the Senate Republicans. They could not wait indefinitely. Even if eight of the Republicans at the meeting voted with Biden, 58 total votes would not be enough – two short of the 60 needed to support a filibuster.”¹²³

Biden’s strategy of pursuing bipartisanship while also empowering his own party to pass a partisan bill on their own terms was one that was shaped by his years of Senatorial politics and political battles. While talking to moderate Democratic Senator Joe Manchin (D-WV), Biden emphasized the time-sensitive nature of the moment:

“Joe, Biden said, I’ve lived through these situations and I’m trying to work through this. I prefer the bipartisan path, but that takes time. Unfortunately, we don’t have time here because of the pandemic and the economy. There was a deadline ahead, March 14, when supplemental unemployment benefits would begin to lapse.”¹²⁴

Indeed, Biden and his team chose to pursue the reconciliation path. In doing so, Biden managed to get his plan passed with hardly any changes made in either the House or the Senate. The only exception was a slight drawdown in unemployment benefits, with a compromise with

¹²³ Woodward and Costa, 320.

¹²⁴ Woodward and Costa, 319.

Sen. Manchin resulting in the program ending one month earlier and the supplemental benefits falling from \$400 to \$300.¹²⁵ Manchin had initially sought further changes to the bill, but Biden managed to corral Manchin using tactics and lessons gleaned from past experience. Woodward and Costa note two of the pivotal strategies used to convince Manchin to vote for the bill. Early on, Biden assessed his approach to Manchin,

“Biden knew it would be hard to persuade Manchin, even if West Virginia was slated to receive lots of money. You had to win him, not buy him”¹²⁶

Later, once the bill had stalled on the Senate Floor, Biden weighed the benefits of getting personally involved:

“He had been through hundreds of legislative fights. The presidential call had a special weight. It was the final twist of the arm”¹²⁷

The knowledge used in both of situations, that of the idiosyncrasies of Senators and how a president’s call can impact their voting behavior, is knowledge gained through years of experience working in Washington, D.C. that proved beneficial to Biden in this moment.

Once signed, Biden’s bill maintained the same topline figure, \$1.9 trillion, that his team had sought and announced – the only of the three bills to be so. His bill was signed into law in

¹²⁵ Cameron Peters, “The Last-Minute Federal Unemployment Insurance Compromise, Briefly Explained,” Vox, March 6, 2021, <https://www.vox.com/2021/3/6/22316811/federal-unemployment-insurance-joe-manchin-compromise-300-week>.

¹²⁶ Woodward and Costa, *Peril*, 319.

¹²⁷ Woodward and Costa, 358.

mid-March, the second of the three examined. Biden's bill received no Republican votes, though he also did not expect it to, nor did he set expectations of a bipartisan bill. Finally, ARPA had the fewest intraparty defections of any of the bills examined, with only Representative Jared Golden (D-ME) voting against the bill. This is the most successful of the three bills by the measurements used.

In 2021, Biden's legislative agenda was divided into two parts: an infrastructure bill that sought to repair America's infrastructure and a social spending bill dubbed the "Build Back Better Act." Of the two, Biden was only able to pass the infrastructure piece, later titled the Bipartisan Infrastructure Act, into law. The failure to pass Build Back Better surely counts as a mark against his legislative agenda. Other Biden goals, including a voting rights bill, a police reform bill, and many others, were unable to overcome Republican filibusters in the Senate. Thus far, 2022 has seen a number of bipartisan bills signed into law, including a bill to reform the United States Postal Service and the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act.

Conclusion

If my hypothesis was correct, that Washington experience made the president a more efficient legislator, then one would expect to see indications that the most efficient president was Biden followed by Obama followed by Clinton. By many measures this is what is seen. Biden succeeded in getting his entire desired amount of stimulus, suffered only one defection, and used an archaic legislative process to maneuver around partisan obstruction. However, one outlier is that under Obama, ARRA was passed a month earlier than Biden's ARPA.

However, it is possible that confounding variables may explain the differences in case studies. For example, it is possible that the smaller Democratic majorities in Congress under

Biden made for more cohesive caucuses since a member might be less likely to contradict leadership alone.

It is also possible that variables that have changed over time explain the difference. For instance, the Democratic party has become more ideologically cohesive over time,¹²⁸ perhaps leading to a party more compliant with the requests of the president. Additionally, the filibuster has become much more common in recent years,¹²⁹ perhaps leading a normalization of legislative steps such as reconciliation that can be used to maneuver around it. Combined, these variables may help explain Biden and ARPA's success in comparison to their predecessors. Regardless, there is substantive evidence presented in this chapter that there is a difference in effectiveness between the legislative success of these three presidents in their first stimulus bill. Clinton was unable to achieve nearly any of his bill while Biden managed to have nearly no change, even while his party's majority in Congress was notably smaller. This suggests a difference in legislative ability which contributes to the premise of this thesis.

¹²⁸ Jeff Lewis, "Voteview | Polarization in Congress," Polarization in Congress, January 20, 2022, https://voteview.com/articles/party_polarization.

¹²⁹ Sam Berger and Alex Tausanovitch, "The Impact of the Filibuster on Federal Policymaking," Center for American Progress, December 5, 2019, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/impact-filibuster-federal-policymaking/>.

Chapter 5: Party Organizational Success

The third and final criterion studied in this thesis is the presidents' ability as party leader to lead a successful and organizationally competent Democratic party. As party leader, presidents are responsible for the organizational health of the entire Democratic Party, including its ability to raise money, recruit candidates, and get out the vote. Organizational strength is vital to ensure the party's success electorally and legislatively continues throughout the long term. Therefore, the president's management of the party determines its success outside of just one election. To measure party organization, this chapter will look at both the fundraising of the national Democratic Campaign organizations as well as media and expert analysis of the party organization under the different presidents.

Jacobson et al. describe presidents as "their parties' chief fund-raisers"¹³⁰ and explain that they can "use their extraordinary fund-raising ability to help their parties win congressional contests they might otherwise lose."¹³¹ Therefore, a president assisting his party in raising more money is one that is investing more into supporting his party's organizational strength. While Jacobson et al. used an in-depth analysis of the money raised from fundraisers that Clinton himself attended, this chapter uses wider-lens analysis in Figure 5.1 to assess the amount of money raised by the big three Democratic campaign committees. Future analysis of this aspect of presidential leadership may find a style similar to Jacobson et al. more advantageous, especially when data from the entirety of the midterm cycles is available.

The campaign finance information is available on the Federal Election Commission's (FEC) website and compiled using receipt statements by the author. This data is also adjusted for

¹³⁰ Gary C. Jacobson, Samuel Kernell, and Jeffrey Lazarus, "Assessing the President's Role as Party Agent in Congressional Elections: The Case of Bill Clinton in 2000," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (May 2004): 159–84, <https://doi.org/10.3162/036298004X201131>.

¹³¹ Jacobson, Kernell, and Lazarus, 179.

inflation using the Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Price Index Inflation Calculator through January 2022.

Figure 5.1

	1993	2009	2021
Organization			
DNC	\$56,982,279.11	\$110,832,616.36	\$ 151,259,719.35
DCCC	\$14,677,359.99	\$73,565,779.90	\$ 146,325,744.53
DSCC	\$20,459,208.42	\$57,622,323.26	\$ 91,207,169.50

The three organizations used here are the Democratic National Committee (DNC), the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC), and the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee (DSCC). These are the three national party committees used by the Democratic party to finance federal campaigns for Congress. Since the president must work with Congress to pass his agenda, he has a vested interest in helping elect his fellow partisans to Congress and fundraising is a key tool to that end.

Figure 5.1 shows that, even adjusted for inflation, the DNC, DCCC, and DSCC have clearly raised the most money under Biden’s presidency, followed by Obama’s, followed by Clinton. This reflects the increased amount of money raised in political campaigns in the United States,¹³² but also the increased ability of presidents to raise money for their party.

Given that the quantitative evidence is not indicative of one president being more effective organizationally than the others, other qualitative evidence will be used to clarify the organizational capacity of the Democratic Party under each of these presidents.

¹³² William C. R. Horncastle, “The Scale of US Election Spending Explained in Five Graphs,” The Conversation, October 15, 2020, <http://theconversation.com/the-scale-of-us-election-spending-explained-in-five-graphs-130651>.

First, the president as party leader is responsible for choosing the Chairman of the Democratic National Committee.¹³³ The DNC Chairman functions as the formal leader of the Democratic Party and is responsible in the long-term for building and supporting the party and in the short-term supporting the president's agenda.¹³⁴ Therefore, each president's choice for DNC Chairman is revealing about their approach to the party organization.

As his first DNC Chairman, Clinton chose David Wilhelm "who had served as Clinton's campaign manager in 1992" and was the youngest DNC Chairman in history.¹³⁵ This choice of a close aide to head the DNC showed a clear intention on behalf of Clinton to maintain a strong influence over the committee's actions. The *Los Angeles Times* noted the difference between Wilhelm and his predecessor Chairman Ronald H. Brown:

"Brown was a polished, prosperous, Washington operator. He stayed out of the party's ideological quarrels and focused on raising big money for the 1992 contest. Wilhelm, by contrast, is a rumpled, homespun outsider who never looks quite comfortable in a suit and tie. Their common allegiance to Bill Clinton conceals a significant shift from plutocracy to populism at party headquarters."¹³⁶

¹³³ Davis, *The President as Party Leader*, 98.

¹³⁴ Edward Issac-Dovere, "Joe Biden's Likely Pick to Lead His Party," *The Atlantic*, November 12, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/11/jaime-harrison-biden-dnc-chair/617086/>.

¹³⁵ Galvin, "Changing Course: Reversing the Organizational Trajectory of the Democratic Party from Bill Clinton to Barack Obama," 7.

¹³⁶ Jacob Weisberg, "LOS ANGELES TIMES INTERVIEW : David Wilhelm : Charting a Permanent Campaign for a Changing Democratic Party," *Los Angeles Times*, March 7, 1993, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-03-07-op-8161-story.html>.

Given the DNC's role, it is perhaps unexpected that Clinton would choose an outsider to run the organization. Indeed, Wilhelm's relationship with Congress was rocky. His leadership was criticized by Democratic members of Congress who felt that the DNC's messaging surrounding President Clinton's budget was "inept."¹³⁷ Wilhelm's selection by Clinton is a choice that signaled a desire to maintain the DNC as practically an arm of the White House as opposed to the headquarters for the party at-large.

President Obama's first choice as DNC Chairman was then-Virginia Governor Tim Kaine. Kaine was a close friend of Obama's and a member of his short list for vice president.¹³⁸ However, unusually for the DNC Chairman, Kaine was serving as the incumbent governor of Virginia through January 2010, meaning that he was limited in his role from the beginning. At the announcement of his chairmanship, he "pledged to be a part-time leader for the party" through the rest of his term as governor.¹³⁹ *Atlantic* reporter Edward Isaac-Dovere described Kaine's job at the DNC as "commuting two days a week to oversee the pilfering of talent, money, resources, and purpose for the Obama reelection effort that was already under way."¹⁴⁰ After leaving the Governor's office in January 2010, Kaine was still dual-employed, teaching as a lecturer at the University of Richmond School of Law.¹⁴¹ While Kaine was a close friend of Obama, he lacked any prior Washington experience himself and maintained a second job

¹³⁷ Dan Balz and Ann Devroy, "HOUSE DEMOCRATS TELL WILHELM DNC IS 'INEPT,'" *Washington Post*, June 23, 1993, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1993/06/23/house-democrats-tell-wilhelm-dnc-is-inept/e24a5221-fdda-4d91-b39d-77d42305a88a/>.

¹³⁸ Obama, *A Promised Land*.

¹³⁹ Dale Eisman, "It's Official: Obama Taps Kaine to Head DNC," *The Virginian Pilot*, January 9, 2009, sec. News, News, https://www.pilotonline.com/news/article_fe03a935-a175-5d88-ae83-07ea67bc2bc9.html.

¹⁴⁰ Issac-Dovere, "Joe Biden's Likely Pick to Lead His Party," 16.

¹⁴¹ University of Richmond Newsroom, "Green Award Honors Anne Holton and Tim Kaine," news, March 1, 2012, https://law.richmond.edu/news/article/-/10472.html?utm_source=news&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=news-story.

throughout his time as DNC Chairman, suggesting a lack of commitment to the position and a lack of interest in building up the organization as a its own force in the party.

President Biden’s choice to lead the DNC was former South Carolina State Party Chair, Associate Chair of the Democratic National Committee and former U.S. Senate candidate Jaime Harrison. Harrison is the only of the three inaugural DNC Chairmen to have prior experience leading a state party and is described as a “institution builder.”¹⁴² In contrast to the Wilhelm and Kaine who were intent on reelecting the president, Harrison entered the position as a “self-proclaimed ‘Howard Dean acolyte,’”¹⁴³ alluding to the former Vermont Governor and DNC Chairman who pioneered an organizational strategy of empowering all 50 state parties.

Harrison also is unique among the Chairmen for his lack of a direct tie to Biden himself. Instead, Harrison was promoted by powerful House Majority Whip Jim Clyburn (D-SC) who viewed him as the ideal candidate for the role due to his past experience as a state party chair, DNC associate chair, and candidate.¹⁴⁴ This lack of a close tie to Biden has led to a somewhat “strained” relationship with the White House as the party navigates difficult political waters.¹⁴⁵ The examples seen through these DNC Chairmen lead to a conclusion that perhaps the ideal Chairman would be one who has creditability with the president, congress, and the state party chairs, as well as someone who is invested in the role for the full term of office. Although imperfect, Harrison seems to have fit these criteria the best out of the three inaugural chairmen.

¹⁴² Galvin and Vincent, “Democratic Presidents Have Traditionally Hurt Their Parties. Joe Biden May Be Different.”

¹⁴³ Galvin and Vincent.

¹⁴⁴ Holly Otterbein, “Clyburn Flexes Muscle on DNC Pick,” POLITICO, December 5, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/12/05/jim-clyburn-jaime-harrison-dnc-443031>.

¹⁴⁵ Natasha Korecki, Jonathan Allen, and Lauren Egan, “DNC Chair Jaime Harrison Has Considered Early Exit amid White House Tensions,” NBC News, January 29, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/elections/dnc-chair-jaime-harrison-has-considered-early-exit-amid-white-n1288208>.

Finally, to completely assess the presidents' overall caretaking of the party, one must look at the actions of the DNC and party apparatus itself under each president. Under President Clinton, he treated the DNC as primarily a messaging apparatus and a base of operations to prepare for Clinton's future re-election. Presidential Scholar Daniel Galvin described the DNC's operations as it worked alongside the White House's push for its economic bill and health care reform:

“Clinton foisted upon the DNC responsibility for running a large portion of his public relations campaign. But rather than pour resources into his party and turn the experience into a party-building affair, the health care campaign swamped normal operations at the DNC and supplanted electoral operations in many state and local party organizations. Rather than prepare for the 1994 midterm elections by developing programs to register voters, enlist volunteers, recruit candidates, raise money, and draw up campaign plans, Democratic Party organizations were told to focus their efforts on selling the president's agenda.”¹⁴⁶

Instead of utilizing the DNC to build up the party's reputation, the party's organizing capacity, or the party's fundraising, the DNC was channeled into a singular purpose of selling Clinton's legislative efforts to the public. While communications and messaging can build popular support for legislation, it does not have the same legislative negotiating ability as the White House. The primary talent of the DNC is to build up capacity to win elections. By shifting

¹⁴⁶ Galvin, “Changing Course: Reversing the Organizational Trajectory of the Democratic Party from Bill Clinton to Barack Obama,” 6–7.

the DNC into an arm of the White House, Clinton harmed his party's ability to compete competitively in future elections.

In contrast to the messaging operation that Clinton demanded from the DNC, Obama's treatment of the organization amounted to cannibalizing it for the purposes of his future re-election with Isaac-Dovere writing that "Obama used the party structure as a host for his campaign."¹⁴⁷ Indeed, Obama seemed uncomfortable with the role of party infrastructure even after he became president and party leader. Therefore, he moved most of the party resources, including money, personnel, and data from his campaign to Organizing for America (OFA), which

"was the product of Obama's deciding to keep his reelection campaign structure active but pulling all its top talent, support, and donors... Instead of spending his second term rebuilding the DNC, Obama created another group to do what the DNC already did, but even less effectively, and only for his own promotion."¹⁴⁸

As opposed to transferring his political might entirely to the DNC or fully integrating OFA within the DNC, OFA "enjoyed 'departmental' status, retained control of its own email list, and was managed by Obama campaign staffers, rather than DNC personnel."¹⁴⁹ This shows Obama's mistrust of the official Democratic Party apparatus, reflective of his brief experience in Washington and his role as an "outsider" during the 2008 Campaign. Both the DNC and OFA

¹⁴⁷ Isaac-Dovere, *Battle for the Soul*, 16.

¹⁴⁸ Issac-Dovere, 36.

¹⁴⁹ Sidney M. Milkis and John Warren York, "Barack Obama, Organizing for Action, and Executive-Centered Partisanship," *Studies in American Political Development* 31, no. 1 (April 2017): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X17000037>.

were responsible for policy advocacy during 2009 and 2010, particularly for the Affordable Care Act. However, those familiar with Obama's approach to the party infrastructure categorize him as exceptionally skeptical of the DNC and the necessity of building a wider Democratic Party, with some categorizing his treatment of the party as "benign neglect"¹⁵⁰ Even supporters of Obama admit that

"Obama never built a Democratic bench and never cared to, aside from a few scattered candidates who interested him"¹⁵¹

Obama's leadership of the Democratic Party was one of a utilitarian purpose and one that had little purpose outside of his own re-election.

Biden, like Obama,¹⁵² entered the White House with scholars believing that he could turn around the organizational strength of the Democratic Party and become "modern history's first Democratic presidential party-builder – that is, the first modern president who prioritizes building up his party as well as enacting policy."¹⁵³ At first glance, it appears that Biden took steps to empower the DNC and through the DNC, state parties. A fundraising agreement was brokered to provide \$23 million to state parties, as well as extra money to states where Republicans are in power.¹⁵⁴ This is the type of party investment that Galvin and others argued would bolster the party infrastructure.

¹⁵⁰ Issac-Dovere, *Battle for the Soul*, 15.

¹⁵¹ Issac-Dovere, 16.

¹⁵² Galvin, "Changing Course: Reversing the Organizational Trajectory of the Democratic Party from Bill Clinton to Barack Obama."

¹⁵³ Galvin and Vincent, "Democratic Presidents Have Traditionally Hurt Their Parties. Joe Biden May Be Different."

¹⁵⁴ Tal Axelrod, "DNC Announces Funding Agreement with State Parties," *The Hill*, May 12, 2021, <https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/553234-dnc-announces-funding-agreement-with-state-parties/>.

However, there have been fissures in the relationship between the Biden White House and the DNC as well. Recent reporting suggests that Harrison and the DNC have been limited in their independence and that there has been friction as to the role of each.¹⁵⁵ However, there has been consistent reporting that Biden and top Democratic campaign officials have begun to meet more frequently as the 2022 midterm elections approach.¹⁵⁶ Biden's long history in Washington indicates that he is familiar with the necessity of building a strong party infrastructure, not just winning the White House in one election.

Conclusion

A famous op-ed by former Senator Bill Bradley argued that the Democratic Party was “still hypnotized by Jack Kennedy, and the promise of a charismatic leader who can change America by the strength and style of his personality.”¹⁵⁷ In many ways, both Presidents Clinton and Obama were presidents in the mold of Jack Kennedy. Both held impressive oratorical skills, were classically good-looking, and gained attention by force of their individual story. In doing so, they found a way of getting elected without navigating or relying upon the traditional Democratic Party structure, and so when they assumed the role of party leader, they neglected those tools that they had found unnecessary. In Senator Bradley's words, “Charisma didn't translate into structure.”¹⁵⁸ This is seen through their choices of DNC Chairs, personal allies with

¹⁵⁵ Mike Memoli, “Biden Greenlights \$15 Million Infusion to Democratic Campaign Committees,” NBC News, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/biden-greenlights-15-million-infusion-democratic-campaign-committees-n1288562>.

¹⁵⁶ Memoli.

¹⁵⁷ Bill Bradley, “A Party Inverted,” *The New York Times*, March 30, 2005, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/30/opinion/a-party-inverted.html>.

¹⁵⁸ Bradley.

little history of institution or party-building, as well as their approach to the DNC, which they viewed as a tool to promote their administrations first and foremost.

In contrast, Biden has taken a party-conscious approach to party leadership. In his choice of Jamie Harrison as DNC Chairman, he empowered someone who had lengthy experience in leading Democratic institutions as well as strengthening ties with a key political ally in Rep. Jim Clyburn. His commitment of national funds to state parties indicates an interest in building up a political bench to be active after his time in office.

One potential reason for this is the uncertainty about whether Biden will seek a second term in office. Preoccupations with reelection drove many of Clinton and Obama's choices to reallocate resources from the party to the president, and given Biden's age, there is bountiful speculation that he will not seek a second term. However, I would argue that the defining variable in Biden's decision-making is not age, but experience in Washington. His half-century in Washington showed him the longevity of politics and the necessity of a continued Democratic party independent of any one president. Having lived through election cycles that were unkind to Democrats, Biden is familiar with the chutes-and-ladders nature of politics and has a vested interest in the long-term success of the Democratic Party as seen through his active choices to empower the party organization.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

During the first presidential debate of the 2020 presidential election, then-President Donald Trump alleged that then-former Vice President Joe Biden and the Democratic Party as a whole was in thrall to the progressive wing of the party, and that if he were to be elected, they would “dominate” him. In response, Biden said

“Right now, I am the Democratic Party...The platform of the Democratic Party is what I, in fact, approved of, what I approved of.”¹⁵⁹

This moment was remarkable. Biden’s unconditional support for and pride in the Democratic Party is unique among the prior two Democratic Presidents. In a world where the past four presidents had challenged their own party infrastructure, whether through Clinton’s work with the DLC, Bush’s “compassionate conservatism,” Obama’s willingness to fault both parties for gridlock, or Trump’s assault on the Republican establishment, it stands out that Biden so strongly affiliates himself with the label “Democrat.” The reason for this is the longevity of Biden’s career. Throughout decades in the Senate and as Vice-President, Biden’s successes were not personal, he lost two prior runs for the presidency, but as a part of the Democratic Party as a whole.

¹⁵⁹ Commission on Presidential Debates, “CPD: September 29, 2020 Debate Transcript” (Commission on Presidential Debates, September 29, 2020), <https://www.debates.org/voter-education/debate-transcripts/september-29-2020-debate-transcript/>.

However, as president, Biden would be empowered as never before to lead the Democratic Party to success. Therefore, this thesis sought to answer whether Biden's experience in Washington and his accompanying affinity for the Democratic Party positively impacted his stewardship of the party over his first year in office as compared to the first years of Presidents Clinton and Obama. To do so, this thesis examined three aspects that define presidential success as party leader: electoral success, legislative success, and party organizational success.

In examining electoral success, this thesis uses the results from the off-year elections of the Virginia and New Jersey Gubernatorial elections, the Virginia House of Delegates election, the New Jersey State Senate elections, and assorted congressional special elections. In order to compare the results to each other, the raw percentage was subtracted from the corresponding percentage of the Democratic candidates four years prior. Analysis of the results found that there was a slight increase in the performance of Democratic candidates under Biden as compared to Obama or Clinton. The most substantial change occurred in the gubernatorial elections, where the Democratic candidates went from losing roughly ten percent to only roughly four percent. However, it was not clear that increase was clearly independent from the general shift towards Democratic candidates seen in New Jersey and Virginia. Therefore, it is unclear that Washington experience in a president makes him a more effective electoral party leader.

To examine legislative success, this thesis used the first stimulus bill of each administration as a case study to compare the presidents' abilities to accomplish his legislative agenda. In order to assess the level of success, this thesis compared the number of votes obtained for the bill, the amount of money in the bill as a percentage of the amount of requested, and the date on which the bill was signed into law. The evidence from this section heavily supports the hypothesis that Washington experience causes presidents to be more successful in legislating.

Clinton, with zero prior years of experience in Washington, was the least successful in all three categories, with the least percentage of money won, the least members voting for the bill, and the latest signing date. Obama was more successful than Clinton, with the earliest signing date, most of the money desired won, and most of each caucus voting for the bill. However, Biden was the unequivocal success story in this chapter, with all of his money desired being included in the bill, only one member of his own party voting against the bill, and a bill signing in between the other two presidents. If Edwards¹⁶⁰ was correct in his argument that the size of majorities determines success, not presidential skill, the results would be the opposite. Therefore, this evidence suggests that Washington experience in a president is beneficial to legislative success.

The third criterion, party organizational success, this thesis used the proxies of fundraising, DNC leadership, and DNC behavior. The fundraising numbers from the national committees, the DCCC, DSCC, and DNC, showed that the amount of money raised has increased dramatically over the years. However, this correlates with the increasing amount of money spent on campaigning in general, so no conclusion can be drawn from the data. Instead, a qualitative analysis of the DNC Chairmen and the behavior of the DNC is more revealing about the success of the party organization under each president.

Clinton and Obama both chose DNC Chairmen who were close personal allies as well as had little prior experience organizing party infrastructure. In contrast, Biden chose a former state party chair and a former DNC associate chair with close ties to Congress to lead the DNC.

Clinton and Obama both turned the DNC into an organization dedicated partly to selling their agenda and partly on their own reelection. In contrast, under Biden the DNC has donated more

¹⁶⁰ Edwards, *At the Margins: Presidential Leadership of Congress*.

money towards state parties than ever before and has begun once again investing in long term party organizing capabilities. Although difficult to measure in the short-term, it appears that Washington experience is beneficial to a president's ability or willingness to successfully build up the Democratic Party infrastructure.

Potential Future Areas of Study

The inherent constraint of this thesis is its timing only one year into Biden's presidency. The first two years through a midterm election of a presidency would be a much more natural period of time for a study such as this because it encompasses the entirety of a Congress, includes midterm results, and has the full election cycle of fundraising information. Future studies will have access to the full two years of information and will better be able to compare each of these presidencies.

Additionally, an academic or journalist with more resources may be able to find a method of counting the number of fundraisers attended and the amount raised by a president. This information, which was recorded for the 1999-2000 election cycle with President Clinton,¹⁶¹ would provide another window into the presidents' dedication to building up the party structure and organization.

This research could also be performed with the Republican Party, using reverse chronology and measuring the success of President Bush Sr. against that of his son and President

¹⁶¹ Jacobson, Kernell, and Lazarus, "Assessing the President's Role as Party Agent in Congressional Elections."

Trump. However, the parallel federal trifecta does not exist for the Republican Party, potentially complicating the comparison.

Finally, future research on this topic could expand the presidents studied in order to draw a more wide-ranging conclusion. In particular, President Carter stands as someone with very little Washington experience in contrast to President Johnson. Given the difficulty of comparing political success over such large shifts in the political climate, it would be more appropriate for a researcher with more resources to include more presidents.

Conclusion

The Democratic Party has declined severely from its prime during the mid-20th Century. At its peak, the party held the House of Representatives for nearly 40 years while also holding nearly 80% of Governorships.¹⁶² Now, even after two unnaturally successful elections for the party, Democrats have a tenuous grip on Congress, hold barely 40% of Governorships, and are facing years in the political wilderness due to a political structure that systemically works against them.¹⁶³ In order to navigate these difficult waters and succeed against the odds, the Democratic Party will need to have exceptionally adroit leadership. The foremost choice that most Democratic voters have over their party is choosing who leads it. Therefore, it is crucial that those voters know what criteria they should be assessing when choosing a presidential nominee and party leader.

¹⁶² Phillip Bump, "The History of Every Governor's Seat in Every State, in 1 Chart," *Washington Post*, February 28, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/02/28/the-history-of-every-governors-seat-in-every-state-in-1-chart/>.

¹⁶³ Nate Cohn, "Why Democrats May Have a Long Wait If They Lose Their Grip on Washington," *The New York Times*, November 12, 2021, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/12/us/politics/democrats-trifecta-power.html>.

Bill Clinton once said, “Democrats want to fall in love; Republicans just fall in line.” This approach, of the Democratic electorate searching for someone who has charisma, intellect, eloquence, political savvy, and is also not part of “Washington” has gotten two recent Democratic presidents elected. It has also led many other candidates to have breakout presidential campaigns, most recently those of Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT) and now-Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg. However, has that approach lead to the most effective party leadership possible? This thesis suggests that it has not.

Despite President Biden’s years of Washington experience and lack of Kennedy-esque charisma, the evidence so far suggests that Biden is just as successful, if not more so, than his two Democratic predecessors. He has done so with markedly smaller margins in Congress and a significantly more polarized electorate. It has yet to be seen how Biden’s presidency will play out and how it will compare to entireties of his predecessors’ presidencies, but at this moment, Biden’s unique amount of Washington experience has proven a boon to his time in office. Although voters seem to prefer and reward candidates who run against government and “Washington experience,” Biden provides a compelling argument in favor of those with experience. Voters, especially Democratic voters, will have to decide in the coming years if they wish to keep looking for the next Kennedy, the next unicorn candidate who has it all, or if they will instead put the federal government in the hands of someone who is well-tested and true. Will they choose style or substance? This thesis argues for substance and experience in our party leadership above all else.

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