



Midterm Elections and Divided Government: An Information-Driven Theory of Electoral Volatility

STEPHEN P. NICHOLSON, SANTA CLARA UNIVERSITY

GARY M. SEGURA, CLAREMONT GRADUATE UNIVERSITY

Divided government affects individual choices over how to vote in midterm elections because it increases uncertainty in the minds of voters. Particularly, divided control of government makes blame attribution more difficult by obscuring causal connections and reducing the overall amount of usable information. As a result, we argue that under divided government, voters are less likely to vote for the House candidate not of the President's party. Using both NES and election-specific contextual data, we examine divided government's effect on the voters' political knowledge and candidate preferences in all midterm elections from 1978 to 1994, controlling for well identified factors that shape outcomes in House elections. We find, first, that divided government reduces the amount of political information held by voters. Second, divided government helps the President's party by lowering the probability that an individual votes for the out-party candidate.

The 1994 election resulted in one of the more dramatic changes of political fortune. In two years, the Democrats went from winning their first presidential election in 16 years to their largest midterm loss and, more importantly, the loss of control of the House of Representatives for the first time in 40 years. Was 1994

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just simply the result of the known cyclical patterns in American elections or was something new at work?

The events of 1994 are consistent with some existing theories of midterm losses, inconsistent with others, and open to endless interpretation.¹ It is not our intention to add to this. Rather, we wish to examine the 1994 election in its political context, comparing it to other midterm elections of similar and different circumstances. Specifically, we want to examine the choices in 1994 as they were perceived by the voters. What information could voters have about the performance of government, the positions of parties, and the effects of both on their lives? How does this level of information and uncertainty compare with the choices faced by voters in other midterm elections? What factors best explain these differences?

We hypothesize that voters in 1994 differed from recent previous midterm election voters in that they made their evaluations and arrived at their decisions on how to vote in the context of unified government. We believe that divided government obscures causal connections and increases uncertainty so that the overall propensity to vote against the candidate of the President's party is lower. We will show how voters' knowledge of partisan government controls changes across periods of unified and divided government and, further, demonstrate that these changes affect the propensity of voters to punish the President's party. In so doing, we examine the preferences and decisions of voters in all midterm elections from 1978 to 1994, controlling for other well-identified factors that shape outcomes in House elections. Finally, we offer some thoughts on the implications of these findings to issues of electoral stability and governance.

THE IMPACT OF DIVIDED GOVERNMENT ON VOTERS

Studies of divided government fall into two broad categories: causes and consequences. Scholars interested in causes ask how and why voters produce divided control of the Presidency and Congress. Some look to how elites, both intentionally and unintentionally, structure vote choices that produce divided government (Alvarez and Schousen 1993; Jacobson 1990a; Petrocik 1991; Segura and Nicholson 1995; Wattenburg 1991). Others argue that voters intentionally choose divided government (Alesina and Rosenthal 1995; Fiorina 1992).

In contrast, research on the consequences of divided government explores its impact on public policy (Cox and McCubbins 1991; Fiorina 1992; Mayhew 1991; McCubbins 1991) and the strategic behavior of politicians in the legislative arena (Ginsberg and Shefter 1990; Kernell 1991). Curiously, this research has seldom asked how unified or divided government affects political attitudes among the citizenry. The only two exceptions we know of are Bennett and Bennett (1993), who examine the factual information held by voters over time, and

¹ For research addressing this event, see Abramowitz (1995) and Klinkner (1996).

Leyden and Borrelli (1995), who examine state-level economic evaluations as endogenous to state-level divided government. Examinations of actual behavior are harder to find.

We seek to fill this lacuna by exploring the question of whether voters are more, or less, likely to punish the President's party at the midterm election based on partisan control of the Presidency and Congress. For example, in periods of unified government (e.g., 1994) do voters attribute greater responsibility to the President and his party? Are voters less likely to hold the President's party accountable under divided government?

These questions have important implications for the responsible party model of government, which assumes that voters can hold the party in power responsible for its actions. Some have found support for this type of behavior with regard to economic voting (Fiorina 1981), but others have found the electorate unable to meet the demands necessary to engage in this behavior (e.g., Converse 1964). Here, we explore whether during unified government, voters more closely approximate the behavior needed to sustain a responsible party model.

MIDTERM ELECTIONS AND PRESIDENTIAL POLITICS

Efforts to explain the phenomenon of midterm losses by the President's party have contributed substantially to our general understanding of American elections (Alesina and Rosenthal 1995; Campbell 1966; Cover 1985; Erikson 1988; Jacobson 1990a; Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Kernell 1977). Explanations of this phenomenon fall into three broad categories.

The turnout explanation, generally referred to as "surge and decline" (A. Campbell 1966; J. Campbell 1993), presupposes no inconsistent voting behavior on the part of citizens, nor any change of preference. Rather, part-time voters who turned out for the presidential election, who Angus Campbell infers disproportionately favor the ultimate victor, fail to turn out in the less salient midterm year. Their votes, central to the election of some of the President's co-partisans in the presidential election year, are sorely missed in the midterm election.

In "evaluative" explanations, the argument is that some voters will vote in midterm elections in a manner inconsistent with their vote for President just two years before, at the expense of the President's party, because of economic evaluations (Tufte 1975), the personal (un)popularity of the President (Kernell 1977),² or a desire to balance the ideological composition of the elected branches

² That Presidents have systematically appeared at the nadir of their popularity as the midterm approaches is an empirical regularity upon which the theory was built. The effects described are asymmetric (Kernell 1977), meaning the benefits accrued to a Presidency from a good economy and favorable policy evaluations are substantially smaller than the costs associated with the converse. When the President takes office his popularity and the expectations of the electorate are invariably high. Declining evaluations represent an aggregate level regression to the mean and should be expected under most circumstances (but see Erikson 1988).

(Alesina and Rosenthal 1995; Fiorina 1992).³ The midterm election, then, is driven by the voter's evaluation of the President, economic conditions, or the desire to achieve moderate policy outcomes.

A final explanation of midterm outcomes is provided by Jacobson and Kernell's (1983) "strategic politicians" model, which relies on the sophistication and awareness of potential candidates and donors, who make decisions about whether to run, or to whom to donate, based on their subjective estimation of the probability of winning. This estimate, in turn, is driven by national-level political forces—macro-economic performance, issues, presidential popularity—thereby associating these forces with outcomes. The result is that the President's party does poorly—not because voters are sophisticated consumers of national trends but because potential candidates and political elites behave as though they were.

Mixed Messages and the Attribution of Responsibility under Divided Government

These three explanations of midterm losses are not mutually incompatible and each is likely working at some level. Evaluative (and likely strategic) explanations of midterm election losses are, to a greater or lesser extent, built upon two assumptions. First, voters must hold the President accountable, or at least politicians, potential candidates, and political elites must believe that they do. That is, blame must be attributed—by voters or by potential candidates—to the President for policies and economic circumstances deemed unfavorable.

But, as Fiorina (1992) has observed, the attribution of blame is tricky in a system of separated powers. The President is only a single participant in a much larger structure so the opportunity exists for the attribution of blame to be mixed, with the President pointing his finger at the Congress while the majority there does the reverse. Co-partisans, at the very least, distance themselves from the President. This is the second critical assumption. For these models of midterm losses to work, voters must draw connections between the President, whom they must blame, and members of Congress from his party.

Accountability across electoral branches would be enhanced by a responsible party model of government, but declining partisanship among the electorate, coupled with the advantages of incumbency and the personalization of the representative-constituency relationship, make such a model unlikely. In short, partisan conflict between the branches introduces uncertainty into any calculations over the attribution of blame.

³ In Alesina and Rosenthal's (1995) model of institutional balancing, moderate voters achieve moderate policy outcomes through balancing partisan control of the Presidency and Congress. The ability to do so, however, is enhanced at the midterm election when voters' decisions are made under greater certainty—they know which party controls the Presidency. We have expressed skepticism about this theory elsewhere (Segura and Nicholson 1995). Nevertheless, the argument suggests that moderate policy desires are the driving force behind midterm voting.

Divided government exacerbates the uncertainty problems in blame attribution. [I]f responsibility was problematic in American politics even when government was unified, the problem is compounded when government is divided. Presidents blame Congress for obstructing carefully crafted solutions, while members of Congress attack the President for lack of leadership. Citizens genuinely cannot tell who is to blame, and the meaning of election outcomes becomes increasingly confused. (Fiorina 1992: 109-10)

In a period of divided government, partisanship fails to bridge the inter-branch gap when assessing whom one wishes to hold accountable for the failings of government.

Furthermore, when government is divided, press coverage critical of the administration is almost certain to be tempered with an “either/or” balance, where the Congress of the other party is offered—usually by an administration spokesman—as an alternative source of difficulties. With their focus and format tailored to political conflict, nightly news and Sunday morning network political magazines will, rather than offering critiques of policies authored with the cooperation of both branches, weigh the merits and demerits of policy positions offered by each institution and the party which controls it. Prominent political voices from both ends of the spectrum will be audible, competing in the attribution of responsibility for all things good and bad. In short, the messages upon which the citizen must rely in forming judgments will be mixed.

Cognitive Implications of Mixed Messages

Divided government both muddies the informational waters and, at some level, reduces the amount of usable information. As a result, it is harder to relate the relative approval or disapproval of the President and the political parties to public perceptions of policy outcomes or economic performance. Under divided government, plausible cases can be made for holding either institution and/or either political party responsible for outcomes. This increase in noise with a decrease in usable information, in turn, generates considerable uncertainty in the minds of voters and potential candidates alike who are approaching decisions.

For the economic voter, blame or credit for good or bad economic performance is hard to offer. While it is generally assumed that the President bears the greater burden, divided government must ameliorate the effects. Similarly, presidential popularity is likely to decline at a much slower rate if the public perceives (or is successfully convinced) that the apparent failings of the President are the product of a hostile Congress. Under virtually any circumstances, and holding other things equal, the aforementioned effects on the President and, by extension, the electoral prospects of his co-partisans should be smaller in a period of divided government.⁴

⁴ Similarly, for challengers and incumbents alike, who must decide whether to run for (re)election, this uncertainty is equally vexing. For Jacobson and Kernell (1983), quality challengers of the

We do not mean to imply that none of the public holds the President responsible in a divided government regime. The President is the focal point of government for most citizens (Lowi 1985) and we would expect that to remain the case for many people even in a divided government environment. But the portion of the electorate attributing blame to the President is smaller than it might be, as is the share of the total blame assigned to the President. This hedging in attribution of responsibility may be sufficient to damp the electoral swings we would normally expect in midterm elections for any given set of economic and political circumstances.

TESTING THE INFORMATION EFFECTS OF DIVIDED GOVERNMENT

We have argued that the presence of divided government affects information levels among voters, who, in turn, have less information about which party is to blame for whatever dissatisfactions they have with government. The effect, we believe, benefits the President's party during midterm elections. Before we test this hypothesis, we want to demonstrate the occurrence of the information effects that drive our argument. Specifically, we turn now to whether voters really do possess less electorally useful information in periods of divided government.

A simple way to test this question is to ask exactly how many respondents actually know whether government is divided (a useful piece of information that we shall employ in another context momentarily). Bennett and Bennett (1993) asked a similar question. Their dependent variable was a three-point scale which was the sum of two dichotomies: the correct identification of the pre-election and post-election House majorities. Using 17 regressors, all but one significant, they were able to explain 28 percent of the variance. With respect to the effect of divided government, they found that "people find divided government confusing, but unified party control of national elective institutions boosts political information" (76).

Our hypothesis is simpler and our measure focused on the pre-election period of interest in this effort. We expect that during periods of divided government, a smaller percentage of the electorate can identify which political party controls the House before the election. This is a good question by which to judge the level of information since the answer is both simple and, for the time period of this study, always the same—the Democrats.⁵ In short, this is a very low high-bar over which we have asked the respondents to jump.

President's party usually prefer to sit out midterm elections while good challengers from the opposition smell blood and qualify. Incumbents deciding whether to retire face similar choices and incentives. But if these potential candidates are less certain about the tilt of national forces and the prospects of success, both effects are almost certain to be damped.

⁵ We assume that no one who correctly identified the party controlling Congress would be unaware of the President's partisan identification. Unfortunately, the NES, to our knowledge, has never asked this question during the years of our study.

Using data from the National Election Studies for midterm elections from 1978 to 1994, pooled, we compared the responses on this question, grouping 1978 and 1994 as unified government periods and 1982, '86, and '90 as divided government periods. The variable *Divided Government* is coded one (1) if the partisan control of the two elective branches is divided prior to the midterm election, and zero (0) if the government had been under unified party control.

As is clearly apparent in Table 1, divided government dramatically reduces the level of usable information. When government was unified, 72.02 percent of all respondents could correctly identify the Democrats as the party controlling the House. When government was divided, only 38.33 percent of respondents could perform the same task. That is, over 60 percent of respondents got this question wrong in 1982, '86, and '90 despite the fact that the answer had been unchanged for 30-40 years prior to the respondent's interview. The difference is statistically significant, with Chi-square =1009.44 and an associated p-value of .000.

≡ TABLE 1

CROSSTAB OF KNOWLEDGE OF PARTY CONTROLLING THE HOUSE BY PARTISAN CONTROL OF GOVERNMENT IN MIDTERM ELECTIONS: 1978-1994

Partisan Control of Government	Knowledge of Control of the House				Total	
	No		Yes			
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Unified	1037	27.98	2669	72.02	3706	100.0
Divided	3416	61.67	2123	38.33	5539	100.0
Total	4453	48.17	4792	51.83	9245	100.0

Pearson Chi² (1) = 1009.4378 Pr = .000

To see how important divided government is to producing this difference, we ran a Probit model where the ability to identify correctly the party controlling the House was the dependent variable. In addition to *Divided Government*, we control for two predictors of voter knowledge. First, *Level of Information* is the NES interviewer's assessment of the respondent's political knowledge, a variable found elsewhere to be both reliable and valid (Bartels 1996). Second, *Partisan* is coded one (1) for both weak and strong partisan identifiers and coded zero (0) for Independents and independent Leaners (toward one of the major parties). We estimated models for all NES respondents, as well as for only those respondents who voted.

In Table 2, the model examining all respondents predicts 72.7 percent of the cases correctly, and has a Proportional Reduction of Error (Lambda-p) of .433. Not surprisingly, those respondents the interviewer assessed as politically knowledgeable and strong partisans were likely to get it right, and the effects are highly

≡ TABLE 2

PROBIT COEFFICIENTS ESTIMATING EFFECTS ON THE LIKELIHOOD OF RESPONDENTS
KNOWING PARTISAN CONTROL OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES BEFORE
MIDTERM ELECTIONS: 1978-1994

Variable	All Respondents	Midterm Voters Only
Partisan	.193*** (.033)	.131** (.045)
Divided Government	-.984*** (.030)	-1.104*** (.046)
Level of Information	.555*** (.015)	.508*** (.024)
Constant	-.485*** (.036)	-.148** (.063)
N	9164	4334
Chi Square	2729.81	1085.91
Significance	.000	.000
Percent Predicted Correctly	72.7	73.4
PRE (Lambda-p)	.433	.246

*Significant at $p \leq .05$ **Significant at $p \leq .01$ ***Significant at $p \leq .001$

significant. But more to our point, even when we control for these obvious and powerful predictors, *Divided Government* still suppresses the level of information—more respondents get it wrong. When we look at the changes in the predicted probabilities associated with changes in the values of the independent variables, *Divided Government* actually outperforms *Partisan*. The model predicting the knowledge level of midterm voters predicts 73.4 percent of the cases correctly and has a PRE of .246. The results were consistent with the earlier model, the only difference being a slight reduction in significance for *Partisan*, almost certainly a product of the self-selection effect of those who turned out. *Divided Government* is once again an extremely powerful predictor.

Since probit coefficients are not directly interpretable, it is helpful to examine the change in the predicted probabilities resulting from the model across the range of values of each independent variable while holding all others constant.⁶ For all respondents, *Divided Government* decreased by 37.4 percent the likelihood that the respondent would correctly identify the party controlling the House, *ceteris paribus*. Among actual midterm voters, the decrease was 40.1 percent. In both cases, *Divided Government* was clearly stronger than strength of partisanship. *Partisans* were 7.6 percent more likely to know who controlled the House among all

⁶ We thank J. Scott Long for his innovative program to generate predicted probability changes.

respondents, and only 5.1 percent among actual voters. Not surprisingly, the largest effect was from the interviewer's assessment of the respondent's information level, with an increase across the range of values of 73 percent for all respondents and 67.3 percent for midterm election voters. Nevertheless, the importance of *Divided Government* to the knowledge of the respondent is demonstrable.

We wanted to check if this information deficit appeared in other contexts, perhaps more directly related to the congressional elections in which we are interested. We look, therefore, at questions about whether respondents could recall the name and party of both candidates running in their House district. Even in unified periods, only 8.67 percent of all respondents could recall the name and party of both candidates. But when government was divided, the number recalling both names decreased to 5.65 percent. The Chi-square (38.17) was again significant at $p = .000$. The conclusion here is simple. During periods of divided government, voters clearly have less politically and electorally useful information.

THE 1994 CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS IN CONTEXT

Having demonstrated, we think, that the amount of useful information—and specifically information relevant to blame attribution—varies significantly from divided to unified electoral environments, we arrive, again, at the starting point of this effort. The 1994 congressional elections took place in a period of unified government. Under such circumstances, it is our expectation that the attribution of blame for unsatisfactory policy or economic performance is a simpler task for most citizens and reinforced by relatively consistent messages to be found in both the media and the public discourse.⁷ The results in 1994, while they might have been worse than we might otherwise have expected for the Democratic incumbents given the contemporary performance of the economy, were driven in part by the unified nature of national politics. All policymaking branches were in the hands of the same political party.⁸

In order, then, to get a handle on the information-driven processes at work, we hypothesize that at the individual level, *ceteris paribus*, the likelihood of a respondent preferring a congressional candidate not of the President's party in midterm elections is smaller when the national government is divided. Specifically, using the National Election Studies for midterm congressional elections

⁷ Our explanation is also consistent with Jacobson and Kernell's strategic model, since politicians and donors may also have difficulty perceiving the prevailing direction of national trends in a poor information environment.

⁸ Taken to its natural conclusion, we would hypothesize that, at the aggregate level, the size of the midterm loss by the President's party will be smaller than it otherwise would have been (controlling for economic and political conditions) should an election take place in an era of divided government. Such a hypothesis is difficult to test given the relatively small N and the inability to control for important factors such as campaign spending prior to 1972.

from 1978-94, we will examine the vote choice of respondents in their district's race for the House of Representatives.⁹ Controlling for incumbency, spending, respondent's party, presidential approval, economic evaluations, and other factors usually associated with midterm voting, we will estimate the probability of voting for the out-party—the party not currently in control of the White House¹⁰—between periods of unified and divided government. In so doing, we take a close look at the 1994 election to assess if it is an “outlier” or consistent with the rhythms and dynamics of congressional elections.

The effects of unified or divided government may not be the same across all voters, especially with regard to political knowledge and degree of partisan identification. First, as for political knowledge, we are curious as to whether this effect varies across respondents who know, or do not know, whether government is unified or divided. Those knowledgeable about the partisan control of government should be more susceptible to the hypothesized effects than those without this knowledge. However, those with high information levels might also be sufficiently partisan or aware of the issues at hand that blame attribution remains a straightforward task, even in an era of divided government.¹¹ Therefore, the relative strength of the relationships we hypothesize will vary across strength of partisanship. Those strongly identified with a party are less likely to cross party lines to vote, regardless of presidential popularity, economic evaluations, or the quality of their party's candidate, thus reducing the available variance for which the information environment and the divided control of government might account. Independents and partisan leaners should be more subject to the forces traditionally perceived to be at work in midterm elections, and specifically the factors identified here, though their lower level of information and sophistication may confound these effects.

⁹ The inclusion of campaign finance as a control variable seemed essential but limits our analysis to elections that post-date the Federal Elections Commission Act. The election of 1974 was excluded because of the previously documented overwhelming effect of Watergate.

¹⁰ By custom in the study of American politics, “out-party” refers to the political party not occupying the Presidency, regardless of their status in the Congress. That is, in periods of divided government, the out-party is the majority party in the Congress.

¹¹ Another confounding factor is that the hypothesis does not, strictly speaking, require the respondents to know whether government is divided or unified. Even respondents unaware of the political control of the electoral branches might manifest differences if, as we have argued, the information environment and the nature of political messages varies across different circumstances. A respondent in 1982 or 1990, for example, may not know that political control is divided, but is still subjected to conflicting messages of credit claiming and blame attribution, while respondents unaware of unified government in 1978 and 1994 could be sensitive to an information environment characterized by a consistent message that the Democratic party is the problem. We will test, then, to see if factual knowledge of unified or divided government is related to the size and strength of the effect we hypothesize.

DATA AND VARIABLES

The data used for our analysis are a merged set of two distinct collections of information. First, as we have indicated, we pooled responses to the 1978-94 midterm National Election Studies. We then merged this individual-level data with contextual variables appropriate to the congressional race in that respondent's home district: the presence or absence of an incumbent, the quality of the challenger, the relative spending of the two candidates involved (as reported to the FEC), and the partisan identification of the incumbent and challenger. In addition, we included several dummy variables to account for the presence or absence of divided government, by year and in total. The resulting data set, then, contains both individual and contextual level variables that collectively take into consideration multiple explanations of voting at the midterm.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is a simple dichotomy of whether the respondent voted for the "out-party" candidate in the district's House election. This variable was obtained by recoding each respondent's self-reported vote, where *Outparty* equals one (1) if the respondent claimed to have voted for the candidate not of the President's party and zero (0) if the vote was cast for the President's co-partisan. Those who report having not voted are—for obvious reasons—excluded from the analysis. The resulting N from these five midterm elections is 3636.

Independent Variables

We control for three individual-level variables of importance: *Party ID*, *Ideology*, and *Presidential Approval*. *Party ID* is a seven-point scale that incorporates both partisan preference and strength of preference. It is recoded for each year in a manner such that the highest value (6) corresponds with that of the out-party candidate while the lowest value (0) implies strong identification with the President's party. Naturally, we expect that strong identification with the out-party is a positive predictor of casting a vote for that out-party candidate.

Ideology is the respondent's self-reported ideology, again recoded in a manner such that the highest value indicates an ideological bias for the out-party and against the President. Our reason for including this variable alongside partisanship is that committed non-partisans who have an ideological self-identification and a traditionally partisan voting preference would be missed by the previous variable. These two variables are not collinear, correlating at only .31, well below the usual threshold for concern. We again expect a positive relationship.

Presidential Approval is the respondent's assessment of the President, coded as a simple dichotomy where one (1) indicates the approval of the President and zero (0) the disapproval. This variable is included to account directly for the negative voting thesis previously discussed. *Ceteris paribus*, we expect *Presidential*

Approval to be negatively related to the probability that a respondent votes for an out-party congressional candidate.¹²

We include two variables to account for the specific context in which the voting decision was taking place—that is, district-specific variables: *Spending*, and *Quality*. *Spending* is the ratio of dollars spent by the two candidates. To reach this figure for each race, we divide the spending of the out-party candidate by the spending of the candidate of the President's party. In-party candidates who spent nothing have been recoded to one dollar to avoid undefined terms. The measure that results should be positively associated with the likelihood that the respondent votes for the out-party congressional candidate. The impact of money on congressional elections has been documented on numerous occasions (e.g., Fenno 1982; Jacobson 1980, 1990b; Sorauf 1988 among many others) and our expectations do not vary. Significant spending is the only way challengers can accumulate the necessary name recognition and is a well-recognized part of the incumbent's advantage, given his/her generally higher access to contributions from both individuals and groups. A substantial spending differential in favor of the President's co-partisan could prevent a loss of a seat, even in the presence of other factors tending in the opposing direction. We control for *Spending*, therefore, in order to prevent its effect from potentially overwhelming the information-driven behavior we want to identify.

Quality, like *Spending*, is a relational measure of the two candidates. The quality of each candidate is coded as two (2) if the candidate is an incumbent, one (1) if holding (or having held) other political office, and zero (0) if the candidate is a political neophyte.¹³ The resulting quality score of the candidate from the President's party is then subtracted from that of the out-party candidate. The resulting variable, *Quality*, ranges from 2 to -2 and should be positively correlated with the likelihood of a voter casting a ballot for the out-party candidate. Without doubt, incumbency, and the advantages it accrues to a candidate, is a huge advantage in an election (Alford and Hibbing 1981; Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987; King 1991). Similarly, the literature on the importance of challenger quality is large (Abramowitz 1988; Jacobson 1990a; Squire 1992) and with few exceptions (e.g., Segura and Nicholson 1995) seems to suggest that the relative political experience of candidates is strongly associated with predicting congressional election votes and outcomes. Quality challengers running against incumbents of the President's party are far more likely to produce a midterm seat loss than those with no political experience.

¹² Some respondents did, in fact, refuse to either approve or disapprove of the President, but they represented only 1.15 percent of all respondents and less than 1 percent (.82 percent) of those who voted. For the purpose of simplicity, they were dropped from the analysis, but their inclusion does not, in any way, alter the size or significance of the other estimates nor the predictive power of the model.

¹³ We thank Gary C. Jacobson for providing us with these data.

In addition to these district-specific contextual variables, we account for the different political circumstance through the inclusion of two variables: *Divided Government*, and *Economic Evaluation*. Again, *Divided Government* is coded one (1) if the pre-election partisan control of the elective branches is divided, and zero (0) if it is unified. *Ceteris paribus*, *Divided Government* should damp the attribution of blame to the President's party and therefore be negatively related to the probability that a respondent votes for the out-party House candidate.

Economic Evaluation is used here as a control variable since it has been widely suggested (Jacobson 1990b; Kramer 1971; Tufte 1975) that the voter's perception of the macro-economy's performance leading up to the midterm election has much to do with the evaluation of the President as well as the vote in the midterm House elections. We measure *Economic Evaluation* using a retrospective evaluation question from the NES. Specifically, respondents indicated whether they thought the economy had improved, worsened or stayed the same in the last year.¹⁴ The variable is recoded so that poor economic assessments are coded as one (1), a perception of an improving economy as negative one (-1), and no change coded zero (0). The resulting measure should be positively related to the likelihood of voting for the out-party.

TESTING AND RESULTS

Table 3, column 1 presents estimates from a multivariate probit analysis. The chi-squared statistic is highly significant which means that we can reject that null-hypothesis that all the independent variables in our model are unrelated to voting for the out-party in these midterm elections. Furthermore, the model correctly predicts 81.8 percent of the cases with a Proportional Reduction of Error (Lambda-p) of .609 over the null model. Taken together, these tests indicate that our model is well-suited to explaining voting for out-party candidates at the midterm.

Turning to individual predictors, we see that our hunch was correct: voters are less likely to vote for the out-party during periods of divided government. Controlling for other factors, divided government has a statistically significant negative effect ($p = .001$) on voting for the out-party House candidate at the midterm. To make any judgments about this effect in the 1994 congressional elections, in column two we reestimated the model by disaggregating the two periods of unified government in our sample by election. Both the 1978 and 1994 dummy variables are statistically significant ($p < .05$ for 1978, $p < .001$ for 1994) and the signs of the coefficients are positive, meaning that unified gov-

¹⁴ For 1978, the specific question wording referred to the "business conditions." The exact question wording used in the other four surveys was not employed in the 1978 survey, so the discrepancy was unavoidable. Results on this variable, then, should be read with caution but, we think, are suggestive. Nevertheless, we think this approach is superior to an aggregate level measure of inflation and unemployment which can only vary across the five elections.

TABLE 3

PROBIT COEFFICIENTS ESTIMATING INFLUENCE OF PARTISAN CONTROL OF
GOVERNMENT ON VOTING FOR THE OUT-PARTY IN MIDTERM ELECTIONS: 1978-1994

Variable	Model 1	Model 2
Party Identification	.366*** (.015)	.366*** (.016)
Ideology	.195*** (.042)	.195*** (.042)
Economic Evaluation	.048 (.035)	.055 (.035)
Spending	9.16e-07* (4.68e-07)	8.84e-07* (4.68e-07)
Quality	.371*** (.017)	.373*** (.017)
Presidential Approval	-.274*** (.063)	-.264*** (.064)
Divided Government	-.199*** (.063)	—
1978	—	.128* (.074)
1994	—	.278*** (.077)
Constant	-.996*** (.087)	-1.203*** (.090)
N	3417	3417
Chi Square	1998.67	2001.97
Significance	.000	.000
Percent Predicted Correctly	81.8	82.0
PRE (Lambda-p)	.609	.614

*Significant at $p \leq .05$ **Significant at $p \leq .01$ ***Significant at $p \leq .001$

ernments in these two elections increased the probability that a voter chose the out-party candidate. To be sure, the effect in 1994 is larger, but it does not alone drive our findings on the importance of divided or unified government.

To estimate the approximate effect of the independent variables, we again turn to the changes in the predicted probabilities associated with each. In column 1, *Divided Government* decreases the likelihood of a voter choosing an out-party congressional candidate by 7.8 percent, a substantial change given the presence of important controls like partisanship, incumbency (as part of *Quality*), and *Spending*. In the second column, the year dummies also have a substantial effect. Since each of the years represent elections under unified government, we

would expect the change to be positive. The 1978 dummy increases the likelihood of voting for the out-party by 5.1 percent, while the 1994 dummy increases the probability by 10.8 percent. As we shall see momentarily, when we subdivide the electorate by their strength of partisanship and level of information so that we can look at potential swing voters, these effects are even stronger.

Most of the control variables worked as we had expected. The impact of party identification, ideology, spending, and the quality of candidates (taking into account both challengers and incumbents) all had statistically significant coefficients with signs in the predicted directions. Like most research on congressional elections, partisan identification and candidate attributes appear to be the most important determinants of voting.¹⁵

An unexpected result is the marginal insignificance of the respondent's evaluation of the economy. Recall we expected that voters offering a more critical assessment of recent economic performance would be more likely to choose candidates from the out-party. The coefficients are in the predicted direction but they fail to reach significance, with a p-value of .083 for the model with *Divided Government* and .061 for the model with the two year dummies.

Who Decides on the Basis of Divided Government?

Whose choices are affected by the presence or absence of divided government? Earlier, we hypothesized that not all voters should behave in this manner. Indeed, we expect that many voters do not care, or even know, if government is divided. For those voters who do not care, we expect them to have partisan attachments. In this group, we would expect them to resist information that is inconsistent with their partisan dispositions. Democrats blame Republicans and vice versa. Based on these considerations, we break the sample into two groups: (1) partisans, which includes both strong and weak party identifiers; and (2) Independents, which includes both Independents who lean toward either the Democratic or Republican parties and "pure" Independents. Given that both groups include respondents with varying levels of commitment to either party, we still must include the partisan identification variable to take into account the very different candidate preferences of these groups.

We further subdivided the sample by whether or not the respondent was able to identify correctly which party controlled the House of Representatives (again assuming they know the party of the President). Those unable to perform this task correctly are far more prone to blame attribution "errors" since they lack the specific

¹⁵ The most significant danger in our general approach is the possibility of serial autocorrelation. We tested for such a possibility by including the full array of time dummies. Since divided government only varies across time, it by necessity falls out of the equation. The resulting model, however, does not appreciably affect the remaining coefficients nor improve the predictive capacity of any of the models we present, suggesting that autocorrelation is unlikely.

knowledge that the policymaking branches were controlled by the same or different parties. We expect that the effect of divided or unified government on the probability that a respondent votes for an out-party House candidate would be weaker or missing among respondents who do not know whether government is divided.¹⁶

We tested our model in each of these four groups, expecting that only pure Independents and independent Leaners who correctly identified the party in control of the House would be influenced by divided or unified governments. Able to make the necessary causal attributions of responsibility and unhindered by partisan disposition, these voters should be influenced by clear or unclear attributions of responsibility that are based on control of the two branches of government. Independents uninformed about control of Congress, for obvious reasons, cannot bring this information to bear on their vote choice. One could argue that even if these voters “got it wrong,” they may nevertheless vote like the group that “got it right.” We think this scenario unlikely given that these respondents are not generally well informed about politics.¹⁷ Finally, since causal attributions of responsibility are less important to these partisans, we also expect that this group will not show much effect from divided or unified government on their vote choice.

The analysis largely supports our hypotheses. Looking at the first two columns of Table 4, partisans were less affected by the unified governments in 1978 or 1994. There was no support for a unified government effect among strong partisans in 1978, whether or not they had correct information on congressional control. For 1994, there appears to be a significant effect among those who could correctly identify the party controlling the House, but no effect among those less informed. Instead, it appears that the vote choice for partisans is affected primarily by the strength of their partisan identification, presidential approval, and candidate quality.

Columns 3 and 4 depict the results for Independents and Leaners. Those knowledgeable about the partisan control of Congress (column 3) voted on the basis of unified government in the 1978 and 1994 midterm elections. What is most striking about this finding is its strong effect. When compared to other groups of voters, Independents and Leaners who correctly identified the party controlling Congress appear to be highly influenced by unified government.

¹⁶ We suggested earlier that this assumption might not be correct if the information aspects of this dynamic, i.e., the media's presentation of either/or explanations for policy failure or economic distress, might have a sufficient effect on even uninformed voters to maintain the difference between voting behaviors under unified and divided governments. If this is correct, we would expect that the *Divided Government* coefficient would remain significant across the two groups (albeit, perhaps, of a smaller magnitude among those unaware of partisan control).

¹⁷ The correlation between the interviewers' assessments of the respondents' political knowledge and Knowledge of Congress is ($r_s = .32$). While this correlation is moderate, it likely severely underestimates the association between general sophistication and the dichotomous measure given that some respondents probably guessed correctly which party controlled the House.

TABLE 4

PROBIT COEFFICIENTS ESTIMATING THE INFLUENCE OF UNIFIED GOVERNMENTS ON
VOTING FOR THE OUT-PARTY IN MIDTERM ELECTIONS, BY PARTISANSHIP AND
KNOWLEDGE OF HOUSE CONTROL: 1978-1994

Voters Knowledge of House Control	Strong or Weak Party Identifiers		Partisan "Leaners" and Pure Independents	
	Correct	Incorrect	Correct	Incorrect
Party Identification	.357*** (.022)	.339*** (.027)	.450*** (.079)	.622*** (.107)
Ideology	.270*** (.066)	.031 (.091)	.189* (.086)	.185 (.132)
Economic Evaluation	.070 (.055)	.041 (.076)	.030 (.074)	.088 (.108)
Spending	9.25e-07 (8.22e-07)	8.56e-07 (7.22e-07)	5.10e-07 (1.06e-06)	2.60e-06 (2.21e-06)
Quality	.359*** (.027)	.347*** (.033)	.405*** (.037)	.471*** (.052)
Presidential Approval	-.266** (.105)	-.285* (.128)	-.260* (.139)	-.076 (.186)
1978	.030 (.119)	.106 (.172)	.383** (.158)	.236 (.210)
1994	.264* (.116)	.233 (.422)	.414** (.163)	.323 (.505)
Constant	-1.238*** (.142)	-.908*** (.169)	-1.624*** (.292)	-2.049*** (.396)
N	1568	851	601	330
Chi Square	1087.98	516.07	229.78	149.41
Significance	.000	.000	.000	.000
% Predicted Correctly	84.6	82.6	76.7	77.6
PRE (Lambda-p)	.676	.583	.524	.507

*Significant at $p \leq .05$ **Significant at $p \leq .01$ ***Significant at $p \leq .001$

When we look at changes in the predicted probabilities, this impression is supported. Among Independents who knew which party controlled the House, our potential swing voters, unified government significantly increased the likelihood that they would vote for the out-party by 15 percent and 16.2 percent for 1978 and 1994, respectively. More remarkable is how potent this effect is given the presence of the control variables like spending and ideology. In sum, unified and divided governments are critical factors for these so-called "swing voters" in midterm elections.

Although partisans in 1994 were influenced by unified government, the effect is little more than half the size of the effect on Independents and Leaners. Thus, despite the general effect of unified government identified here, it appears that the elections of 1994 did have a greater effect on partisans than in the elections of 1978. This insight regarding partisan influences certainly merits further investigation in studies of the 1994 elections.

CONCLUSION

We began by hypothesizing that divided government shaped the choices made in elections. Specifically, the muddled informational environment would enhance the prospects of candidates of the President's party, who normally are held accountable for all that ails the society but, when government is divided, can blame the other side.

Our findings are supportive of our claims. In the first analyses, we show that respondents and voters alike are less likely to be able to identify which party controls the House of Representatives under divided government, even controlling for other important predictors including overall assessments of political information levels and strong partisanship. In the second set of analyses we examined vote choice for all respondents who voted in the midterm elections from 1978 to 1994, and saw that unified government was a significant predictor of voting for out-party candidates while divided government damped this effect, holding constant other important factors. Unpacking different segments of the electorate, we saw that divided government's impact was greatest among pure Independents and independent Leaners who knew about the partisan control of Congress. Among these voters, causal attributions of responsibility, blaming who is firmly in charge, can be achieved when institutional circumstances permit.

It could be suggested that our information-driven theory is similar to extant evaluative explanations, particularly the policy-balancing model (Fiorina 1992; Alesina and Rosenthal 1995), insofar as voting for House members is linked to the President. But our argument is distinct in that the causal mechanism is the institutional context of the evaluation, i.e., unified or divided government. More importantly, our findings would not support policy-balancing as an alternative explanation. The causal mechanism in the balancing model is the ideological proximity of House candidates to the President. Voters employing this decision rule would vote always for the out-party House candidate who is more ideologically distant from the President. The presence of divided government, then, should make no difference at the individual level of analysis. Since the balancing voter "wants" divided government after the election, the institutional context before the election is irrelevant to their preferences. Of course, the number of "policy-balancers" in the electorate could, itself, be endogenous to divided and unified government. But even in this event, the inclusion of divided government

as a predictor of midterm voting behavior represents an explanatory contribution distinct from what the policy-balancing argument offers.

It is worth noting that we have not attempted an examination of aggregate outcomes. The effect of divided government estimated here is on individual behavior. How this behavior aggregates into the partisan division of the House of Representatives is a complicated question. A full model of seat loss would need to account for individual preferences, which we examine here, as well as individual decisions over whether to vote, the recruitment and funding of quality candidates, retirements, and the distribution of partisans across electoral districts, none of which we are able to address fully with these data. For this reason, we cannot definitively answer why 1994 was such a debacle for the Democrats. Unified government, however, certainly made the Democratic party an easier target—blame attribution was simpler.

What are the broader implications of our study? First, the responsible parties model of government has long held sway among political scientists. This model depends on the ability of citizens to link policies and performance to particular political actors. Divided partisan control of government has significant implications for the workability of such an ideal type since it deprives voters the opportunity to judge only one party for policy outputs—the *sine qua non* of responsible party government—and it appears to have a significant effect on voters' decisions.

Second, our findings seem to suggest something that political observers have speculated about for some time—Presidents might benefit politically from divided government. Though partisan division of the elected branches does seem to shape the electorate in a manner contrary to the President's interests, it seems also to reduce the likelihood that any given voter holds the President at fault and punishes his partisan colleagues. This logic could conceivably be extended to presidential approval and disapproval, a subject beyond the specific scope of this article but certainly worthy of study. In addition, divided government's effects on the composition of the electorate, a subject just beginning to be examined at the aggregate level (Franklin and Hirczy de Miño 1998), should be more closely examined at the individual level. Finding that the President's political fortunes are not only divorced from those of his partisan colleagues in the legislature but, perhaps, inversely related to them would suggest that prospects for responsible party government will remain poor, and the future of divided government lengthy.

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snicholson@scu.edu

gary.segura@cgu.edu
