



Iowa Research Online
The University of Iowa's Institutional Repository

Department of Political Science Publications

8-1-1986

Congressional Support For the President: the View From the Kennedy/Johnson White House

Cary R. Covington
University of Iowa

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2131174>

Copyright © 1986 Southern Political Science Association. Used by permission. <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayJournal?jid=JOP>

The Journal of Politics, 48:3 (1986) pp. 717-728. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2131174>

Hosted by Iowa Research Online. For more information please contact: lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Congressional Support for the President: The View from The Kennedy/Johnson White House

Cary R. Covington
University of Iowa

This paper describes characteristics of presidential support scores compiled by the Office of Congressional Relations (OCR) from 1961 to 1967. These characteristics are compared to similar scores compiled by Congressional Quarterly (CQ). The OCR scores were based on votes known to be important to the presidents, while CQ could not make such distinctions. This difference in vote selection generated important substantive and methodological implications. For example, the OCR scores reveal that Republicans and southern Democrats were much less supportive of the presidents than CQ suggests, while northern Democrats were much more supportive. This, along with other CQ shortcomings revealed by the analysis of CQ-OCR differences, argues for the use of the OCR scores when attempting to explain presidential influence, and a sensitivity to important problems with the CQ scores when the OCR data are not available.

For decades, students of presidential-congressional relations have sought the field's "holy grail": an explanation of the nature and determinants of presidential influence in the legislative process. Formidable theoretical and empirical problems surrounding that quest have made progress difficult. In its stead, a sizable literature addressing more modest and prior empirical questions about the nature, distribution, and determinants of presidential support has emerged (see, for example, Bond and Fleisher, 1980; Edwards, 1980; Fleisher and Bond, 1983; Shinn, 1983; Martin, 1976). However, the goal remains, as the title of Edwards' seminal book reveals, an understanding of *Presidential Influence in Congress* (1980).

*Thanks to Sara Brandes, Gregory Markko, Steven Poe, Laura Behrens, Jim Grifhorst, and Chia-Hsing Lu for their help in transforming the archival records into a useful data set, and in the preliminary analysis of that data. The collection of a part of these data was aided by NEH Travel to Collections Grant RY-20789-84.

Limitations on available data have forced quantitative analyses of influence or support to study congressional roll-call voting. No change in that constraint is likely for the foreseeable future. Within that context, arguably the most difficult problem confronting scholars is the decision of what votes to include in their analyses. Presidents try to influence only those votes that are important to them, and no valid means of assessing the subjective importance that presidents attach to votes has been developed. In the absence of such a data base, most studies have opted for reliability over validity by using Congressional Quarterly's (CQ's) Presidential Support Scores (PSSs) and derivatives thereof in their analyses. CQ uses all votes on which a president takes a position as the basis for its calculations. However, Bond and Fleisher point out, "The President expresses a preference on many votes, but he devotes a great deal of time and personal attention to influencing the outcome of only a small number" (1984, p. 299). They show that even attempts to assess importance, like using CQ's "Key Votes," are subject to error: "These designations, of course involved subjective judgments, and there is no guarantee that votes perceived as important to informed political observers at Congressional Quarterly are also important to the President" (p. 300). While Bond and Fleisher argue that despite these limitations, some form of the CQ scores can be used, their misgiving are reinforced by the judgments of presidential legislative liaison aides, who dismissed CQ's scores as "really pretty worthless" (Wilson, 1966a); "not . . . meaningful, (Manatos, 1968); and distortions of both key supporters and known opponents (Sanders, 1968b).

Clearly, what we need are lists of votes that the presidents themselves considered to be important, and actively tried to influence. No outsider can provide such a list; it can only come from within the presidency itself. Fortunately, such lists have become available for the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, and should be eventually obtainable for administrations dating back to Truman. These lists for Kennedy and Johnson were compiled by their Office of Congressional Relations (OCR). I will describe this data set to establish its validity against political criticisms, and then describe the nature and origins of the differences between CQ's PSS and the PSS developed by OCR. I will conclude by drawing out potentially important implications of the OCR data set.

THE OCR PRESIDENTIAL SUPPORT SCORE DATA SET

OCR annually compiled a list of roll-call votes to generate its own estimate of congressional support for the president (Office of Congressional Relations, 1961-1967). Selection was based on whether a vote was "critical" to the president (O'Brien, 1964). The lists averaged 51.6

votes per year, covered a wide range of issues, and included substantive and procedural motions. Scores were computed by dividing the number of times a member voted or "paired" with the president by the number of times the member voted or paired on OCR's list of motions. These scores were used to identify supporters for future votes, and to help decide how to respond to congressmen's request for presidential aid (Sanders, 1979; Pika, 1978).

TABLE I
DISTRIBUTION OF VOTES BETWEEN CQ AND OCR LISTS

	VOTES ON BOTH LISTS	VOTES ON CQ LIST EXCLUSIVE	VOTES ON OCR LIST EXCLUSIVE	VOTES ON CQ LIST INCLUSIVE	VOTES ON OCR LIST INCLUSIVE
1961	40	25	3	65	43
1962	50	12	7	62	57
1963	43	29	1	72	44
1964	30	22	5	52	35
1965	73	39	8	112	81
1966	44	60	7	104	51
1967	44	83	6	127	50
Total/ Average	324/ 46.3	270/ 38.6	37 5.3	594/ 84.8	361/ 51.6

A number of doubts about the OCR data set have been raised (Edwards, 1985). However, close examination reveals each to be groundless. First, only seven years of data have been collected: does this limit over time analyses? Fortunately, this is only a temporary obstacle. Preliminary requests have turned up lists of votes for 1949, 1957-1958, partial lists for 1960 and 1975, and summary scores for 1949-1952. Nixon is known to have compiled lists (Pika, 1978). Moreover, there is little reason to believe that such a widespread and useful practice would be discontinued. On-site searches of presidential archives should generate more complete records.

Second, multiple lists of presidential priorities exist: does this create a validity problem? A close review of the Johnson Library materials reveals two types of lists: those for public consumption or targeting future priorities, and the OCR lists. They were separate undertakings, and are easily distinguished. The other lists were compiled repeatedly in the

course of a year—the OCR lists were generated once at the end of each session of Congress. The other lists identify pieces of legislation by subject matter or bill number—the OCR lists consist of specific motions, identified by bill number, motion type (e.g., procedural, final passage), content, the president's position, the vote date, and the number for and against (divided by party and region), and were maintained in special notebooks. There should be no confusion or problem of validity.

Third, Edwards cannot computationally replicate OCR's scores, so he questions their accuracy. He did not specify the formulae employed, and I have not yet analyzed the Senate data on which he based his criticism, so this issue cannot be resolved with complete certainty. However, it probably is due to OCR's practice of including both votes and "pairs" in its calculations, while Edwards, in his own work, counts only votes. When OCR's method is employed on the House data, the scores are replicated without error. OCR clearly states its formula on most of the lists of motions it uses.

Fourth, Edwards points out that OCR excludes absences from the denominator of its PSS: does this mean when they were inflating scores for political purposes? No; OCR chose to treat absenteeism as an important problem apart from the issue of support. Mike Manatos, for example, reported to Johnson on 1967 Senate support that "on these 78 votes absences [sic] were not counted for or against, but I believe that statistic is most telling" (1968). Indeed, the problem of absenteeism generated a separate study which recommended that Johnson "emphasize the importance of attendance at the upcoming [congressional] leadership meeting" (Panzer, 1968). The larger issue remains, however: did OCR have an incentive to distort scores? Had the scores been public, then such might have been the case. However, records show the scores were confidential. The Truman and Ford staffs clearly labelled their scores "Confidential" (Murphy, 1950; Friedersdorf, 1975). Sanders confirms the same practice for Johnson (1979, p. 295). More generally, a little uncertainty in the minds of congressmen can be a persuasive tool, so maintaining the confidentiality of the lists would be useful.

In fact, the OCR had an incentive to be accurate. It would not want to mistakenly provide aid to nonsupportive congressmen on the basis of artificially high support scores; aiding weak supporters would send the wrong message to others, leading them to expect favors for even mediocre levels of support. Of even greater concern was the possibility of failing to identify and reward their real supporters. This was one of the key reasons OCR discounted absences and CQ's PSS (Sanders, 1968b). So OCR's scores are probably accurate.

Thus, the OCR data set appears to be a valid, reliable and eventually comprehensive data set to be used in studying presidential influence with Congress.

PRESIDENTIAL SUPPORT SCORES:
CQ VERSUS OCR

Both CQ and OCR used roll-call votes to measure support. OCR's reliance on them provides a strong rationale for the use of roll-call votes to measure support. IF OCR used an invalid indicator of support, it ran the unacceptable risk of failing to respond to, or even punishing, truly supportive congressmen, and rewarding nonsupporters. Thus roll call votes do constitute a valid base for measuring support.

CQ and OCR differed in two respects: first, in their technique for calculating PSS, and second in their choice of votes to include. Methodologically, CQ includes absences in the denominator of its measure, while OCR, for reasons discussed above, did not. They also differed in their treatment of pairs. OCR credited congressmen with support when they paired in favor of the president's position. Some congressmen may not feel free to vote openly with the president, or they may not be in Washington, and yet still want to help him. The decision to pair accommodates those concerns. Thus, OCR gave paired support weight equal to a vote in support of the president in its calculation of support scores.

OCR was more restrictive in its selection of votes upon which to base the calculation of its PSS. CQ cannot reliably identify presidential priorities, and so must content itself with including any vote on which it can be determined the president took a public stand before the vote. However, OCR's intimate involvement in the presidents' legislative deliberations enabled it to identify those priorities and so limit itself to important votes. Thus, one would expect the OCR lists to be a subset of the CQ lists, and, for the most part, they are. As table 1 indicates, in no year did OCR include as many votes as CQ, and on average, included only 61% as many votes as CQ. However, OCR did include 37 votes which CQ did not. Apparently, either the presidents did not find it advisable to "go public" on every important vote, or CQ was unable to reliably identify presidential votes even though OCR considered them "critical."

EMPIRICAL DISCREPANCIES: CQ VERSUS OCR

Basic Differences

What led OCR to dismiss CQ's PSS? The answer appears to lie in the quantitative differences in the two sets of scores. For this analysis, each representative constitutes a case for each year that member is in office. Only members who were eligible for all votes in a year are included. Table 2 shows that CQ and OCR PSSs are highly correlated, dipping below .80 only for northern Democrats. This is due in large part to the overlap in the votes each measure uses. However, the quantitative differences are substantial. Column Four in tables 2 through 5 provides a *Discrepancy Score*. It measures the difference in support attributed to each group of congressmen by the two scores being compared. Table 2 shows that CQ overestimates Republican support by 8.9%, and underestimates northern and southern Democratic support by -12.8% and -3%.

TABLE 2
DIFFERENCES IN CQ AND OCR PSS AS COMPUTED BY CQ AND OCR

	AVERAGE CQ SUPPORT SCORE	r	AVERAGE OCR SUPPORT SCORE	DISCREPANCY SCORE	N	GAP	
Total	58.6	.90	60.7	-2.1	2997		
Republicans	39.3	.81	30.4	8.9	1158		
Democrats	70.7	.83	79.8	-9.0	1839	17.9	Partisan
Northern Democrats	79.3	.52	92.1	-12.8	1127	21.7	Core
Southern Democrats	57.2	.86	60.2	-3.0	712	9.8	Democrat

The utility of the Discrepancy Scores becomes evident when one considers the gaps they measure. These gaps can be calculated by subtracting the over- or underestimate of one subgroup from another. Of particular interest are the *partisan gap*, between Republicans and Democrats, the *core coalitions gap*, between Republicans and northern Democrats, and the *Democratic gap*, between southern and northern Democrats. The partisan gap reveals that, from the presidents' perspective, the divergence between the two parties was 17.9% greater

than CQ suggests. More striking is the 21.7% gap between the core coalitions. The 9.8% gap between southern and northern wings of the Democratic party reveals that its well-known dual nature was even greater in the presidents' eyes than CQ reports. Relative to the presidents' own view of congressional support, the CQ measure systematically muddies the important patterns. The presidential view is much more partisan and conflictual than CQ reports, particularly between the core coalitions.

Accounting for the CQ-OCR Differences

CQ and OCR differed in two basic ways: the formula used to compute the PSS, and their selection of votes. To control for computational differences, CQ's measure was recalculated using OCR's method. Table 3 reveals that the adjustment elevates the average CQ score, but the Discrepancy Scores remain significant. The correction reduces the underestimate of northern Democratic support to -0.9%, but switches the sign of and enlarges the magnitude of the discrepancy for southern Democrats to 5.6%. It also increases the overestimate of Republican support to 13.1%. The gaps are diminished but persist: the partisan gap at 11.5%, the core coalition gap at 14%, and the Democratic gap at 6.5%. Thus controlling for the effects of absenteeism and pairing does not rectify the systemic error in CQ's scores.

The second difference between CQ and OCR was their selection of votes. To identify the effects of that difference, the 361 votes used by OCR (the *OCR-inclusive* set) are compared with the 270 votes that appear exclusively in the CQ index (the *CQ-exclusive* set). Scores for both sets will be computed using the OCR formula.

TABLE 3
DIFFERENCES IN CQ AND OCR PSS USING OCR'S FORMULA

	AVERAGE CQ SUPPORT SCORE	r	AVERAGE OCR SUPPORT SCORE	DISCREPANCY SCORE	N	GAP	
Total	66.8	.98	60.7	6.1	2997		
Republicans	43.6	.87	30.4	13.1	1158		
Democrats	81.4	.98	79.8	1.6	1839	11.5	Partisan
Northern							
Democrats	91.2	.96	92.1	- 0.9	1127	14.0	Core
Southern							
Democrats	65.8	.97	60.2	5.6	712	6.5	Democrat

Table 4 shows the effect on support scores of the differences in votes selected. Support scores for Republicans and southern Democrats are inflated an additional 15.2% and 16.9% over their CQ-inclusive scores. These differences cannot be due simply to non-controversial votes in the CQ-exclusive set, because northern Democratic scores decline 1.5%. The Discrepancy Scores more than double those reported in table 3. The partisan gap grows to 25%, the core coalition gap to 30.8%, and the Democratic gap to 14.9%.

TABLE 4
DIFFERENCE IN CQ-EXCLUSIVE AND OCR PSS USING OCR'S FORMULA

	AVERAGE CQ- EXCLUSIVE SUPPORT SCORE	r	AVERAGE OCR- INCLUSIVE SUPPORT SCORE	DISCREPANCY SCORE	N	GAP	
Total	73.7	.87	60.7	13.0	2997		
Republicans	58.8	.61	30.4	28.4	1158		
Democrats	83.1	.85	79.8	3.4	1839	25.0	Partisan
Northern Democrats	89.7	.56	92.1	- 2.4	1127	30.8	Core
Southern Democrats	72.7	.81	60.2	12.5	712	14.9	Democrat

Thus, OCR's decision to dismiss CQ's scores appears to rest largely on the "nonpresidential" nature of the CQ-exclusive votes. Computational corrections did not resolve the discrepancies. Rather, the CQ-exclusive votes apparently lacked sufficient importance to be used as indicators of presidential priorities, and created distortions relative to the presidents' own perceptions of support in the Congress.

IMPLICATIONS

Substantive

The OCR scores established the highly partisan nature of the conflict over Kennedy's and Johnson's legislative agendas much more decisively than do the CQ scores. While both PSSs put average southern Democratic support at about 60%, the OCR measure shows that Republicans were substantially less supportive than the CQ measure suggests. They supported the presidents almost 40% of the time according to CQ, and almost 60% of the time on the CQ-exclusive votes. However, they were with the presidents on the OCR votes only 30.4% of the time—an exaggeration of nearly 30% and 100% respectively. In contrast, OCR gives far greater credit for support to northern Democrats than does CQ. While CQ credits them with less than 80% average support, OCR indicates that their true support was 92.1%

Viewed from the White House, Congress was divided into two main *opposing camps*. The key to success lay with the camp in the middle, the southern Democrats. Of course, the truth of that proposition has always been known, with or without CQ's or OCR's presidential support scores. The advantage of the OCR measure lies in the starkness with which it distinguishes the sizable differences among the three groups. It strongly substantiates the concerns of the OCR staff that CQ's measure was masking over important partisan differences.

Methodological

A comparison of the qualities of the CQ and OCR measures provides a strong rationale for using the OCR scores in studies seeking to assess presidential influence, and to keep the lessons of the comparison in mind when using the CQ scores. The OCR measure possesses four advantages over CQ measure. First, it is clearly based on important votes that the president tried to influence (Sanders, 1968a, p. 1). This is a critical consideration for researchers seeking to strengthen the validity of their findings on presidential influence by limiting their analysis to those votes on which the president was likely to have attempted to alter the outcome.

Second, the OCR provides a more discriminating measure of support. The standard deviation of the OCR measure is 32.5, compared to 23.3 for the CQ measure. Thus, the OCR scores distribute the congressmen more widely around the mean. This is useful because it does so in a fairly systematic and theoretically pleasing fashion. Republican scores are substantially reduced, and northern Democratic scores are even more dramatically increased. The ideological differences within the Democratic party are highlighted as the differences between the northern and southern contingents increases. Thus, research seeking to explain

variation in support on the basis of partisan and ideological grounds is more likely to achieve significant results.

Third, OCR is able to include important votes, even if the president did not go public with his position. As table 1 indicated, CQ did not include 37 votes that OCR identified as being of particular importance to the president—an error of 6.2%. While few in number, the characteristics of these unpublicized votes suggest the true significance of their omission. Table 5 shows that the discrepancies between support scores based on these OCR-exclusive votes and the CQ-exclusive votes are even greater than those reported in table 4. The partisan gap increases to 34.2%, and the core coalition gap rises to 36.6%. Thus, CQ was unable to take into account a number of votes that were particularly controversial and partisan.

TABLE 5
DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CQ-EXCLUSIVE AND OCR-EXCLUSIVE PSS USING
OCR'S FORMULA

	AVERAGE CQ- EXCLUSIVE SUPPORT SCORE	r	AVERAGE OCR- EXCLUSIVE SUPPORT SCORE	DISCREPANCY SCORE	N	GAP	
Total	73.7	.72	56.9	16.9	2975		
Republicans	58.8	.28	21.0	37.8	1152		
Democrats	83.1	.60	79.6	3.6	1823	34.2	Partisan
Northern							
Democrats	89.7	.19	88.5	1.2	1119	36.6	Core
Southern							
Democrats	72.7	.60	65.5	7.5	704	6.3	Democrat

Finally, the OCR scores are intrinsically more immune to the threat of political manipulation than are the CQ scores. Henry Wilson, for instance, confided in private correspondence that "I personally had a good bit to

do with slanting these [CQ] scores for my completely unobjective purposes at the time" (1966b, p. 5). Thus, the OCR may have padded the CQ's scores in order to enhance the appearance of success in the public's eyes. In contrast, as discussed above, OCR had a strong incentive to avoid precisely that sort of behavior. The use of the OCR scores thus reduces one more threat to the validity of studies of presidential influence, while correspondingly highlighting the risk inherent in the CQ measure.

We now possess two measures of presidential support, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. The OCR measure provides a subjectively valid and precise measure of presidential priorities, and therefore a meaningful measure of the support they received from each congressman. The scores it reports differ significantly from those reported by CQ. However, data is presently available for only two presidents. The CQ measure, while subject to a variety of selection and computational biases that result in systematic distortions in the levels of support reported for the president, is currently more widely available and comprehensive in its coverage of presidents. Thus, for research attempting to assess presidential influence, the OCR measure should probably be used whenever appropriate. When the CQ measure is used, care should be used to minimize the distortions it creates.

REFERENCES

- Bond, Jon R., and Richard Fleisher. 1980. The Limits of Presidential Popularity as a Source of Influence in the House. *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 5: 69-78.
- _____. 1984. Presidential Popularity and Congressional Voting: A Re-Examination of Public Opinion as a Source of Influence in Congress. *Western Political Quarterly*, 37: 291-306.
- Edwards, George, III. 1980. *Presidential Influence in Congress*. San Francisco: W.H. Freeman.
- _____. 1985. Measuring Presidential Support in Congress: Alternative Approaches. *Journal of Politics*, 47: 667-685.
- Fleisher, Richard, and Jon R. Bond. 1983. Assessing Presidential Support in the House: Lessons from Reagan and Carter. *Journal of Politics*, 45: 745-758.
- Friedersdorf, Max. 1975. Memo, Friedersdorf to the President, 4/8/75, WHCF, LE5, Gerald R. Ford Library.
- Manatos, Michael, 1968. Memo, Manatos to the President, 2/12/68, "1/13/68," LE5 - Voting Records, Box 170, WHCF, LBJ Library.
- Martin, Jeanne. 1976. Presidential Elections and Administration Support Among Congressmen. *American Journal of Political Science*, 20:482-490.
- Murphy, Charles. 1950. Memo, Murphy to Nash, 1/13/50, Truman Library.
- O'Brien, Lawrence. 1964. Memo, O'Brien to the President, 11/19/64. "7/15/64-5/6/65," LE5 - Voting Records, Box 169, WHCF, LBJ Library.
- Office of Congressional Relations. 1961. No title. Voting Analysis 1961—87th Congress 1st Session (2nd folder). Box 6, Papers of Mike Manatos, LBJ Library.
- _____. 1962. Roll Call Votes. Office Book 87th Congress 2nd Session—House—1. Box 12, Papers of Barefoot Sanders, LBJ Library.

- _____. 1963. House of Representatives. 1963—House Voting Records 88th Congress—1st Session—Mr. O'Brien's Book. Box 3, Papers of Barefoot Sanders, LBJ Library.
- _____. 1964. Eighty-eighth Congress 2nd Session 1964. 1964 House Voting Records 88th Congress—2nd Session—Mr. O'Brien's Book. Box 4, Papers of Barefoot Sanders, LBJ Library.
- _____. 1965. Eighty-ninth Congress 1st Session 1965. 1965 House Voting Records 89th Congress—1st Session Office Book. Box 4, Papers of Barefoot Sanders, LBJ Library.
- _____. 1966. No title. 1966 House Voting Records 89th Congress—2nd Session Office Book. Box 6, Papers of Barefoot Sanders, LBJ Library.
- _____. 1967. Summary of Votes 90th Congress, 1967 House Voting Record 90th Congress, 1st Session. Box 6, Papers of Barefoot Sanders, LBJ Library.
- Panzer, Fred. 1968. Memo, Panzer to Sanders, 1/18/68, "1/13/68-," LE5, Box 170, WHCF, LBJ Library.
- Pika, Joseph. 1978. White House Office of Congressional Relations: A Longitudinal Analysis. Presented at the 1978 annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association.
- Sanders, Barefoot. 1968a. Memo, Sanders to the President, 1/11/68. 1967 Voting Statistics. Box 30, Papers of Barefoot Sanders, LBJ Library.
- _____. 1968b. Memo. Sanders to O'Brien, 1/12/68, 1967 Voting Statistics. Box 30, Papers of Barefoot Sanders, LBJ Library.
- _____. 1979. Congressional-Executive Relations During the 1960s, in W. Livingston, L. Dodd, and R. Schott, eds., *The Presidency and the Congress: A Shifting Balance of Power?*. USA: Board of Regents of the University of Texas.
- Shinn, Doh C. 1983. Exploring a Model for Presidential Influence in the Senate. *Political Methodology*, 9: 121-146.
- Wilson, Henry H. 1966a. Memo, Wilson to the President, 12/20/66, "9/7/66-6/30/67." Box 170, LE5—Voting Records, LBJ Library.
- _____. 1966b. Letter, Wilson to Gordon, 12/2/66, Brookings Institution. Box 11 Office Files of Henry Wilson, LBJ Library.