Presidential Negative Partisanship

Going Public for Partisan Gain, Not Policy Success

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Abstract

Presidents are national and party leaders. Yet the balance has shifted toward the latter. Contrary to theories of going public, presidents use negative rhetoric to attack the opposition rather than forge legislative compromise. What happened? I argue presidents who perceive low prospects for policy success eschew out-party persuasion. Instead, they go public as negative partisans to rally their base and electorally advantage their party. I collect all presidential speeches delivered between 1933–2024 and use transformer-based methods to measure how often, and how negatively, presidents reference the out-party. Consistent with the argument, they do so increasingly when the congressional environment is unfavorable: when majorities are more tenuous, government is divided, and elections approach. I provide support for one mechanism with a quantitative case study of Democrats' 2009 filibuster-proof Senate majority. This research provides an institutional, not personality-driven, explanation for partisan demagoguing, raising concerns about the president's durable role as negative partisan-in-chief.

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In February of 2024, a group of senators released the text of a bipartisan border security bill. Republicans had demanded the legislation as a pre-condition for voting on aid to Ukraine, and Democrats seemed willing to approve "a rightward shift" (Groves, Jalonick and Mascaro 2024) in policy to shore up their party's weakness on immigration. Yet before anyone could read the text, Republicans were rejecting it. Former President Trump voiced his opposition, Senate Minority Leader McConnell suggested the bill was weak, and at least one Republican argued it would be malpractice to vote for a bill that would help Democrats in an election year (Raju, Zanona and Fox 2024). In traditional theories of presidential leadership, Biden would bargain further with congressional leaders (Neustadt 1990) or give a measured speech defending the bill to a national audience (Kernell 1997). Instead, he abandoned efforts at compromise and cast blame on the opposition, promising "the American people are going to know that the only reason the border is not secure is Donald Trump and his MAGA Republican friends" (Biden 2024). Negative rhetoric of this sort is well understood in theories of congressional messaging, where it is 'aimed at defining 'us versus them' rather than finding common ground," and is "characteristically blunt and harsh" (Lee 2016, 51). But it runs counter to our general understanding of presidents—who speak in a "national voice" (Heith 2013), "above the fray" of partisan politics (Coleman and Manna 2007; see also Cavari, Yoel and Lowenkamp 2021; Rhodes 2014; but see Azari 2014). In an analysis of presidential communication between 1940–1980, Hinckley (1990, 65) wrote that "It could not be known from the presidents' accounts that they were associated with a party or had won an election." Something has changed.

For all their power, presidents are dependent actors. They cannot achieve their goals without congressional support (Bond and Fleisher 1990; Neustadt 1990). This dependence has been present since the Founding, but how presidents obtain that support has changed over time (e.g., Pluta 2023; Tulis 1987). During the twentieth century, presidents moved away from negotiating with congressional elites and toward "going public," appealing di-

rectly to the people to build policy support and achieve legislative success (Kernell 1997). Lawmakers are responsive to constituents (Arnold 1990); by directly changing public attitudes, the president can indirectly influence congressional voting. This strategy is unlikely to durably change public opinion, "but even if the effect is only short-term, it may still carry important policy gains" (Cavari 2017, 3; see also Cohen 2019; Edwards 2000). Yet many doubt that presidents can do even that (see Eshbaugh-Soha 2016) in today's climate of polarization (Cameron 2002) and competition for institutional control (Lee 2016). Public attitudes toward the president are polarized by party (Donovan et al. 2019), and opposition lawmakers have incentives to obstruct, rather than work constructively with, the president (Lee 2009; Noble 2023*b*). What can presidents do to achieve their goals? The consensus is: not much. Success redounds to the partisan and ideological makeup of Congress, which is "largely beyond the president's control, especially in the short run" (Edwards 2003, 14). Presidents are cautioned to "stay private" or stick to issues where public opinion is already favorable (Canes-Wrone 2006; Edwards 2003; Eshbaugh-Soha 2016). Yet presidents go public as often as ever, over a diverse range of issues—raising a question of "why presidents persist" (Edwards 2003, 242). Without resolving this puzzle, we misunderstand how presidents persuade, and thus, achieve their goals, in our polarized era.

I argue that presidents respond to congressional resistance by changing *how* (not how often) they go public. When presidents perceive low prospects for legislative success, they go public as negative partisans—eschewing policymaking today to electorally advantage their party tomorrow. In the abstract presidents aim to pass their agendas (Light 1999), but doing so is not always easy, or even possible. Where presidents like Johnson and Reagan took advantage of lower polarization and limited congressional competition to build cross-party coalitions and pass sweeping legislation (Beckmann, Chaturvedi and Garcia 2017; Canes-Wrone 2006; Lee 2016; Sinclair 2006), recent presidents face a more hostile political environment. Ideological polarization (Sinclair 2006) and competition for

institutional control (Lee 2016) raise the prospect that presidential leadership, especially as embodied by traditional theories of going public, may be ineffective, or worse, backfire (Lee 2009). When presidents see limited prospects for legislative success, they may recognize there is nothing they can do in the short term to change their situation (Edwards 2003). However, that does not mean circumstances are beyond their *longer run* influence. As the most salient national and party leader, presidents can use their platform to shape perceptions of themselves and their parties (Jacobson 2019). Rather than focus on the current Congress, they can work toward electing a new one. To do so, they will abandon the language of cross-party coalition-building and turn toward mobilizing co-partisans through negative, out-party appeals. Voters are increasingly motivated by negative partisanship—animus toward the opposition rather than love for their own party—and this style of rhetoric may help presidents displace blame for policy inaction and animate supporters (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Ballard et al. 2022; Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018; Webster 2020). If presidents behave as I predict, we should see an increase in out-party references and negative out-party sentiment when the legislative going gets tough: namely, when control of congress is in play, during divided government, and as major elections approach.

To test these hypotheses, I measure how often, and how negatively, presidents evoke the out-party in their speeches. To do so, I collect a corpus of all public presidential statements delivered between 1933–2024. I identify all references to (i) the opposition party, (ii) recent out-party presidential predecessors, and (iii) current out-party congressional leaders. I also use a pre-trained BERT model to code the sentiment of each paragraph. Consistent with my expectations, presidents reference the out-party more often when congressional majorities are more tenuous, when experiencing divided government, and as midterm elections and reelections approach. Presidents' out-party references are also more negative in general, and especially so during periods of majority competition and divided government. Finally, I test one potential mechanism for this behavior with a case

study of the 2009 Democratic filibuster-proof Senate majority. I find that when Democrats unexpectedly lose their 60th seat in 2010, and legislating becomes more difficult in the face of Republican obstructionism, President Obama references Republicans more using more negative language.

This research contributes to the literature on going public (Canes-Wrone 2006; Kernell 1997; Rottinghaus 2010) as well as message politics and institutional negative partisanship (Groseclose and McCarty 2001; Lee 2016; Noble 2023*b*), highlighting the president's role as negative partisan-in-chief. The theory and results provide an institutional logic for presidential negative partisan appeals grounded in recurrent features of divided government and congressional competition—as opposed to features of the office itself (e.g., Hinckley 1990) or the person who inhabits it. As long as polarization, divided government, and competition for congressional control are with us, we should not expect presidents to turn down the rhetorical temperature and return to a more traditional style of going public. Although this strategy may advantage presidents and their parties, normatively, it raises concerns about increasing negative partisanship among the public. Previous research has found that negative partisan messages from lawmakers have the power to increase mass negative partisanship, non-compliance, and political distrust (Bøggild and Jensen 2024; Skytte 2021, 2022). One should worry that these effects are even stronger and more damaging when negative partisanship is promoted by the "leader of the free world" (cf. Dickson and Hobolt 2024).

The Offensive President

Presidents pursue reelection, policy preferences, and their historical legacy—all of which are facilitated by passing a legislative agenda (Light 1999). Yet, the separation of powers requires that presidents collaborate with lawmakers whose goals may differ markedly from their own (Bond and Fleisher 1990). Presidents lack the formal power to

enforce congressional compliance, so they are left to bargain and persuade using informal means (Beckmann 2010; Neustadt 1990). However, technological changes, like the advent of railroads and mass media, provided presidents with a new prospect for marshaling congressional support: speaking directly to the public (Pluta 2023). By going to straight to constituents, presidents could raise the salience of issues (Canes-Wrone 2006), circumvent costly horse-trading, and implicitly threaten lawmakers electoral safety (Kernell 1997).

These theories posit a two-step pathway in which presidents first affect the public's policy attitudes, which then indirectly influences how lawmakers vote on issues (Bond and Fleisher 1990; Canes-Wrone 2006; Cavari 2017; Edwards 2003; Kernell 1997; Rottinghaus 2010). Yet this causal pathway rests on the premise that there exists some national audience amenable to persuasion, and then by extension, lawmakers who are responsive to those constituents. While likely true in the mid-twentieth century when these theories were first developed, modern presidents operate in a more fragmented media environment (Heith 2013; Scacco and Coe 2021) and a more polarized political environment (Sinclair 2006). Out-partisans are unlikely to be persuaded by presidential rhetoric (Cavari 2017), and "For most members of Congress, following...the opinion of those constituents who regularly vote for them now means supporting a president of their own party *and* opposing a president of the other" (Sinclair 2006, 242-3, emphasis original).

This new reality has not stopped presidents from going public—which produces its own puzzle. After all, they must surely recognize that their efforts to create short-term legislative coalitions cannot overcome strident partisanship and polarization of opposition party voters, to say nothing of opposition lawmakers. So why do they continue to speak so often? Some suggest that presidents simply err: "they underestimate their opponents and eschew necessary compromises in the mistaken belief that they can move the public" (Edwards 2003, 248-9). This may be true, in part. However, I argue that the resolution to the puzzle lies in questioning the policy-driven motivations behind going

public. I argue presidents do not always target the public's policy attitudes in the first place. Presidents' legislative prospects are often dependent on the partisan and ideological makeup of Congress (Bond and Fleisher 1990), so an alternative path to policy success lies not in negotiating with the current Congress, but rather, working to elect a different one (cf. Noble 2023*a*).

As the most salient and visible party leader (Jacobson 2019; Kriner and Reeves 2015), presidents attract significant attention, and no actor is "as important as the president in defining the collective images of the parties" (Lee 2009, 77). Beyond leading on policy, presidents also play a key role in defining their party (Jacobson 2019) and motivating supporters (Edwards 2003; Hawley 2021). Theoretically, mobilization could take the form of promoting one's own party or denigrating the other, but the later is often more effective (Valentino et al. 2011; Phoenix 2019; Webster 2020). Negative attacks are especially likely to feature in presidential rhetoric given the public turn toward "negative partisanship," identification with a party due to negative attitudes toward the other rather than positive attitudes toward one's own (Abramowitz and Webster 2016). In particular, hostility toward the opposition party has become a key driver of political participation (Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018). Presidents may, then, inveigh against the out-party to activate co-partisans' affective evaluations of the opposition and displace responsibility for legislative inaction.

This rhetoric is not without tradeoffs, however. When the prospects of collaboration are high, presidents may want to hold their fire to avoid antagonizing a willing governing partner (Coleman and Manna 2007; Rhodes 2014). Larger coalitions insulate policy against political swings (Arnold 1990), and even token bipartisanship can increase public support for a policy (Westwood 2021; but see Case and Ommundsen 2024). Thus, presidents may value cross-party support where they can get it. However, when the prospects for legislative success are low, presidents have little to lose and much to gain by going negative. Like congressional messaging, the logic of such rhetoric is "losing to win:"

those engaged in it do not intended to "wrestle with policy complexity or to identify 'both/and' solutions," but rather, heighten the saliency of partisan differences and give voters a reason to choose the them over the opposition (Lee 2016, 52-3).

Ultimately, I expect that presidents will act more like negative partisans (i.e., more, and negative, opposition references) when they perceive lowered prospects of legislative success. Here, I describe three empirical implications of this broader theory that each yield a testable hypotheses:

Congressional competition for the majority. During the mid-twentieth century, Democrats were the dominant congressional party. They controlled huge chamber majorities, and did so with little fear of losing their institutional power (Sinclair 2006). Given their durable majorities, Democratic presidents viewed their party as dominant while Republican presidents felt they were a persistent minority (Galvin 2009). Broad acceptance of this fact ironically allowed for cross-party cooperation. Republicans were willing to work with Democrats as they felt it was their primary means of exercising policy influence (Lee 2016). Given the size of its majority, the congressional Democratic coalition was also ideologically heterogeneous. The Southern democrats were economically liberal but racially conservative, providing a swing constituency presidents of both parties could target (Bond and Fleisher 1990). Ultimately, ideological heterogeneity and lack of competition led to lower polarization in Congress and the mass public, providing presidents with opportunities to go public in the traditional sense and work across the aisle (Bond and Fleisher 1990; Coleman and Manna 2007; Hinckley 1990; Rhodes 2014).

Conditions changed beginning in the 1970s and 1980s as Southern voters elected conservative Republicans to replace conservative Democrats, resulting in a more sorted and polarized Congress (Sinclair 2006). Republican victories in the Senate in 1980, and especially in the House in 1994, led to "a politics of destruction, concerned less with legislation than with investigation and obstruction" (Hemmer 2022, 8; see also Kriner and

Schickler 2016). "The 1994 elections destabilized the political environment" and forced Clinton and his successors to acknowledge their party was no longer the natural majority (Galvin 2009, 255). This renewed competition for chamber majorities changed incentives for lawmakers. Rather than work together to exercise influence, minority parties engage in "messaging"—withholding policy support and drawing clear contrasts with the opposition to win back control of Congress (Lee 2016). These changing congressional conditions limited presidents' ability to pass their agenda, especially during divided government. Whereas presidents may have been able to win over the opposition by going public in the past (Kernell 1997), more recent presidents have polarized the opposition by championing specific issues publicly (Lee 2009). These intra- and inter-branch conflicts are not without precedent. Indeed, Truman faced a similarly hostile and partisan Congress in the 1940s when majorities were also slimmer (Galvin 2009; Lee 2016)—pointing toward a recurrent institutional explanation for inter-branch conflict. Given the degree to which competitive congressional environments limit the prospects for cross-party policymaking and for presidents to pass their agendas, I expect presidents will act more like negative partisans when both parties believe they can win congressional majorities.

Divided government. Few factors affect presidents' prospects for governing success more than party control of Congress (Bond and Fleisher 1990; Levinson and Pildes 2006). When presidential co-partisans hold the majority, they have incentives to support "their" president. These lawmakers innately share overlapping programmatic and ideological goals (Bond and Fleisher 1990), and presidential success serves as a voting cue in congressional elections that boosts party vote shares (Gronke, Koch and Wilson 2003; Lebo and O'Geen 2011). Out-partisans have symmetric incentives to oppose the president on programmatic and strategic grounds (Christenson and Kriner 2017; Groseclose and McCarty 2001; Kriner and Schickler 2016; Lee 2009; Noble 2023*b*). By denying the president and his party success, they stop programs they oppose and make a case for their own

institutional control. Thus, presidents should act more like negative partisans when government is divided.

Electoral timing. As elections approach, presidents simply have less time to pass new policy (Light 1999). Out-partisans should be especially resistant as they do not want to give opposite-party presidents “a win” right before an election. Even co-partisans may be busy securing their own reelection bids rather than legislating. In their role as party leaders, presidents must also turn their attention to promoting their existing record and mobilizing voters to reelect them or elect their congressional party. Partisan affect (Huddy, Mason and Aarøe 2015; Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018; Phillips 2024), negativity (Fridkin and Kenney 2019), and anger (Phoenix 2019; Valentino et al. 2011; Webster 2020) are key to turning out one’s base. Consistent with this idea, Coleman and Manna (2007) finds that presidents are more likely to emphasize the value of partisanship over bipartisanship in the months before elections. Presidents should act more like negative partisans when midterm elections or their own reelection approaches.

Identifying Negative Partisanship in Presidential Rhetoric

I test these hypotheses using a corpus I collected, which includes the text of all presidential speeches delivered between March 4, 1933 (Franklin D. Roosevelt’s first day in office) and March 29, 2024 (near the end of Joe Biden’s first term). I collected the text and associated metadata from the American Presidency Project (APP) website (Woolley and Peters N.d.), a total of 27,663 speeches.[1] These speeches cover a range of presidential rhetoric from major national addresses, to minor statements, political rallies, exchanges with the press, and more. If a document contains multiple speakers (e.g., a joint appearance, interview, etc), I make every effort to automatically remove all text spoken by anyone other than the president, stage directions, and section headers. This corpus extends

[1] See Appendix A.1 for more on data collection and inclusion criteria.

the literature's focus on a small number of major televised addresses. Presidents promote their policy agendas using a sustained strategy (Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2011) and only focusing on the most salient addresses can bias our understanding of presidents' agendas (Russell and Eissler 2022).

To determine when presidents invoke the opposition party, I focus on three specific types of references. First, I look for presidents' explicit use of party labels (i.e., "democrat" or "republican").[2] Next, I look for presidents' references to their two most recent out-party predecessors by last name (e.g., "Obama" or "Trump").[3] Finally, I look for references to the current opposition leaders in the House and Senate. Whenever a Republican president references the Democratic Party, one of the two most recent Democratic presidents, or a Democratic congressional leader, the instance is coded as an out-party reference (and vice-versa for a Democratic president). To put these references on a meaningful scale, and to account for presidents' differential propensities to go public, I transform my dependent variable to the number of out-party references per 1,000 words.

In Table 1, I provide descriptive statistics illustrating presidents' uses of opposition references during their tenure in office. In the second column, I indicate whether the president experienced institutional variation—both unified and divided government—during their tenure. This measure proxies the degree to which the congressional majority is in play in presidents' and lawmakers' minds. Next, I present several types of out-party references made per 1,000 words. For example, President Trump referenced Bill Clinton and Barack Obama at a rate of 0.50 times per 1,000 words, Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer 0.17 times, and the Democratic Party 1.05 times for a total of 1.71 out-party references per 1,000 words. For context, President Trump spoke about 2,500 words a day. Thus, for every day he held office, President Trump referenced Democrats over four

[2]A naive search for party labels will turn up many false positives, such as "democratic principles" or "republican government." I create a custom dictionary of relevant unigrams and bigrams after removing likely false positives. See Appendix A.2.

[3]I avoid the use of more distant predecessors as, over time, older presidents can become exemplary and non-partisan symbols (Cavari, Yoel and Lowenkamp 2021). This search also includes references to signature policies like Obamacare.

Table 1: Presidential Party References per 1,000 Words, 1933-2024

President	Institutional Variation	*Out-Party References* President	Leader	Party	All	Total Speeches	Words (1000s)
F. Roosevelt	0	0.02	0.04	0.23	0.29	737	978
Truman	1	0.10	0.03	2.60	2.73	938	1,482
Eisenhower	1	0.03	0.01	0.08	0.11	898	1,313
Kennedy	0	0.17	0.00	0.32	0.49	742	826
Johnson	0	0.18	0.06	0.29	0.52	1,605	2,080
Nixon	0	0.18	0.03	0.23	0.43	1,030	1,548
Ford	0	0.09	0.02	0.40	0.51	1,223	1,576
Carter	0	0.17	0.07	0.43	0.67	1,429	2,607
Reagan	0	0.06	0.04	0.40	0.50	2,747	3,552
H. Bush	0	0.06	0.04	0.45	0.55	1,822	2,537
Clinton	1	0.08	0.05	0.35	0.48	4,708	8,653
W. Bush	1	0.03	0.02	0.36	0.41	3,836	6,344
Obama	1	0.05	0.05	0.56	0.66	3,005	5,151
Trump	1	0.50	0.17	1.05	1.71	1,623	3,653
Biden	1	0.35	0.06	0.81	1.22	1,320	2,300

Note: Institutional Variation is an indicator for whether a president experienced both unified and divided government. This variable indicates periods of higher congressional uncertainty and competition.

times on average. Compare that with Johnson, who referenced Republicans less than a third as often when Congress was less competitive. Table 1 makes clear that presidents deploy out-party references at differential rates. Eisenhower used the fewest at 0.11 per 1,000 words, whereas President Truman used the most at 2.73 per 1,000 words. Presidents are also much more likely to talk about parties broadly, rather than specific individuals. However, Trump and Biden both represent a deviation from this pattern—increasingly invoking their predecessors and congressional leaders. Overall, there is a positive correlation between institutional variation and the use of opposition references: 0.43. As anticipated, presidents in more uncertain and competitive congressional environments use more opposition references, as expected.

What is not clear from these simple counts is whether these references are partisan attacks or bipartisan entreaties. Are presidents appealing to the opposition for support or are they going negative, attacking the out-party and blaming them for obstruction and

inaction? Answering this question is difficult for two reasons. First, measuring sentiment in political rhetoric can be fraught given the common use of negation, irony, and sarcasm as well as political valence (e.g., communism is typically negative in U.S. politics) and semantic polarization (e.g., welfare has a negative connotation on the political right). A second challenge for this study in particular is that the quantity of interest is sentiment *about the opposition*, not sentiment of the speech overall. Politicians engaged in partisan messaging frequently make contrasting statements—putting their party in a positive, and the opposition in a negative, light (Lee 2016). Paragraph-level sentiment, then, may misclassify negative opposition references as neutral, or even positive, when aggregating over both in-party and opposition references in the same statement.

To address these challenges, I take a two step approach to code the positive-vs-negative sentiment of each speech paragraph.[4] First, I use OpenAI's `GPT-4o-mini` model in an effort to isolate the contextually-relevant portions of each speech paragraph. Through iterative refinement, I developed a few-shot prompt to instruct the GPT model to extract only the contextually relevant portions of text that would allow me to better measure out-party sentiment without including in-party contrasts or unrelated asides (see Appendix A.3 for more details).[5] For example, consider the following statement made by President Clinton:

> "**But the Republicans in Congress have proposed a budget that will undermine the dignity and independence of our senior citizens.** Here's how: Medicaid's the way our country helps families pay for nursing homes, home care, or other long-term care for elderly or disabled persons. Some people would have you think that Medicaid just helps poor children. Well, it does do that, and that is very important. Almost one in four American children are poor enough to need help from Medicaid."

Notice how the bolded piece of text (extracted by the GPT model) explicitly criticizes

[4]Here, I use paragraph as the unit of analysis to focus more precisely on the nature of each unique reference to the opposition party.

[5]Although the model was specifically instructed not to create new text, I validated the output on a small sample of statements and found no instance in which the model created text that did not appear in the original statement.

congressional Republicans for their efforts to cut the budget. After this attack, Clinton goes on to describe the benefits of Medicaid, especially for poor children. The valence of this aside is more positive than negative and is somewhat disconnected from his specific criticism of Republicans. The GPT step attempts to extract only the relevant portion of the paragraph, which results in substantial improvements when calculating sentiment.[6] The sentiment score (computed as I describe below) for the entire paragraph is 0.27 while the sentiment of the bolded snippet is much lower, 0.05, better reflecting Clinton's negative attitude toward the Republican party.

To produce sentiment scores, I use a pre-trained BERT model, fine-tuned for sentiment classification (specifically the `twitter-roberta-base-sentiment` model). Unlike dictionary-based sentiment classification methods (e.g., VADER, AFINN) or static embeddings (e.g., word2vec, GloVe), BERT and other transformer-based methods are sensitive to the context in which a token (e.g., word) appears. Unlike a dictionary (and like static embedding methods), the BERT model assigns each token a dense vector, where tokens more similar to one another have more similar vectors. If a dictionary did not contain the word "wonderful," it would not contribute to a paragraph's sentiment score. The advantage of an embedding model is that it has learned that "wonderful" is similar to other positive words like "amazing" and "awesome," which are all positively valenced, and thus, it accounts for any valenced word without the need of a pre-built word dictionary. Unlike static embeddings, however, the BERT embeddings for individual tokens change depending on the context. For example, a static embedding would represent "taxes" using the same vector, whether it was preceded by the word "high" (negative valence) or "low" (positive valence). Indeed, a naive model may even interpret the word "high" as more positive than "low." BERT will represent the token "taxes" differently depending on which of these two adjectives precedes it (as well as other words that precede and succeed it). These contextual relationships allow BERT to better understand the sentiment of

[6] In the few instances where the model failed to extract text, I manually extract the relevant context.

a sentence and provide a more nuanced label. Ultimately, each text snippet is assigned a score on a scale from 0 (most negative) to 1 (most positive) based on a weighted average of its negative, neutral, and positive scores as predicted by the pre-trained model. To facilitate comparisons between speeches that do and do not reference the opposition in a standard regression framework, I use the same model to code the sentiment of all words in paragraphs that do not contain a partisan reference and only the extracted snippet in paragraphs that reference the opposition.

To what extent is this classifier effective? To highlight face validity, I present five out-party-referencing paragraphs and their associated scores in Table 2 from more positive to more negative. I present the entire paragraph and bold the contextually relevant portion extracted by the GPT model. First, the advantages of this GPT procedure are clear. Although imperfect and stochastic, it tends to perform well at isolating the relevant portions of the text. This advantage is particularly clear in some of the more negatively-scored paragraphs. In the fourth paragraph from W. Bush, the GPT model extracts the criticism of the Democrats while removing other positive references like the president's evocation of small business owners and his support for the Republican candidate. The BERT sentiment model also provides a fairly low sentiment score as it understands the negative valence of raising taxes despite the lack of negative words in the sentence. Similarly, in the long Trump paragraph, the model extracts the specific Democratic criticism while ignoring the tangent about Michael Jackson as well as positive contrasts with the Republican party. This two step approach also correctly ascribes positive valence to the first two references and neutral valence to the third. Ultimately, these examples demonstrate face validity of this approach.

To assess performance quantitatively, I hand-coded a small set of randomly sampled out-party referencing paragraphs and compared them to the machine generated labels (see Appendix A.4).[7] The accuracy score is 0.69. Given that I structured my validation

[7] I assigned my out-party reference sentiment label by reading the entire paragraph, not just the GPT-extracted portion. This method provides a more robust coding of the sentiment that incorporates both GPT

Table 2: Sentiment of Paragraph Excerpts Referencing the Out-Party

President	Text	Sentiment
Clinton	That is the challenge of the 21st century. That is why I've asked the Congress to pass this antiterrorism legislation. And before he gets here, **I thank Senator Dole for committing to pass that bill and put it on my desk by the end of the month. It was a good and noble thing and a great gesture.** I thank him for that.	0.99
Obama	Now, to their credit, **one vision has been presented and championed by Republicans in the House of Representatives and embraced by several of their party's Presidential candidates. It's a plan that aims to reduce our deficit by $4 trillion over the next 10 years, and one that addresses the challenge of Medicare and Medicaid in the years after that.**	0.83
Biden	By the way, you've got a**—you've got a Republican leader in the United States Senate.** I was able to work out something with Intel. They're going to provide for over 7,000 jobs in this State, out of Columbus, making computer chips.	0.59
W. Bush	If you're a small-business owner who wants to pass on your life's work to your children and grandchildren, **the Democrats want to raise your taxes**. If you're a small-business owner, you better vote for Mike Sodrel to make sure your taxes stay low.	0.18
Trump	You've seen that, right? I had not heard that. You hear "late-term abortion." You never heard that. But the governor of Virginia, the one that thinks he's Michael Jackson—the one whose wife stopped him, whose wife from trying to imitate Michael Jackson moonwalking. Now one thing we know, he's not gonna be Michael. There's no, there's nobody, there's nobody that can moonwalk like Michael. See. He got very lucky. That would have been the end if he would've done that. But **the Democrats champion Planned Parenthood, an organization founded on racism that continues to target the Black community.** In the Republican party, we believe in protecting all Black lives, including the unborn. We believe that every child, of every race, born and unborn, is made in the holy image of God. Republicans believe that all human life is sacred.	0.08

Note: Excerpts from more positive and negative paragraphs referencing the out-party. Text is presented in its original form for readability, but sentiment is computed on uncased text. Italicized portions indicate the OpenAI-extracted contextually relevant portions on which sentiment is computed.

as choosing between three categories (positive, negative, and neutral), a random guess would be accurate 33% of the time while guessing the most prevalent category (negative references) would be accurate 44% of the time. Thus, this approach yields a substantial improvement over baseline. Using the entire paragraph rather than the GPT-extracted

error and BERT labeling error.

snippet also produces a lower, but still improved, accuracy of 0.60. With that in mind, I proceed to descriptive statistics.

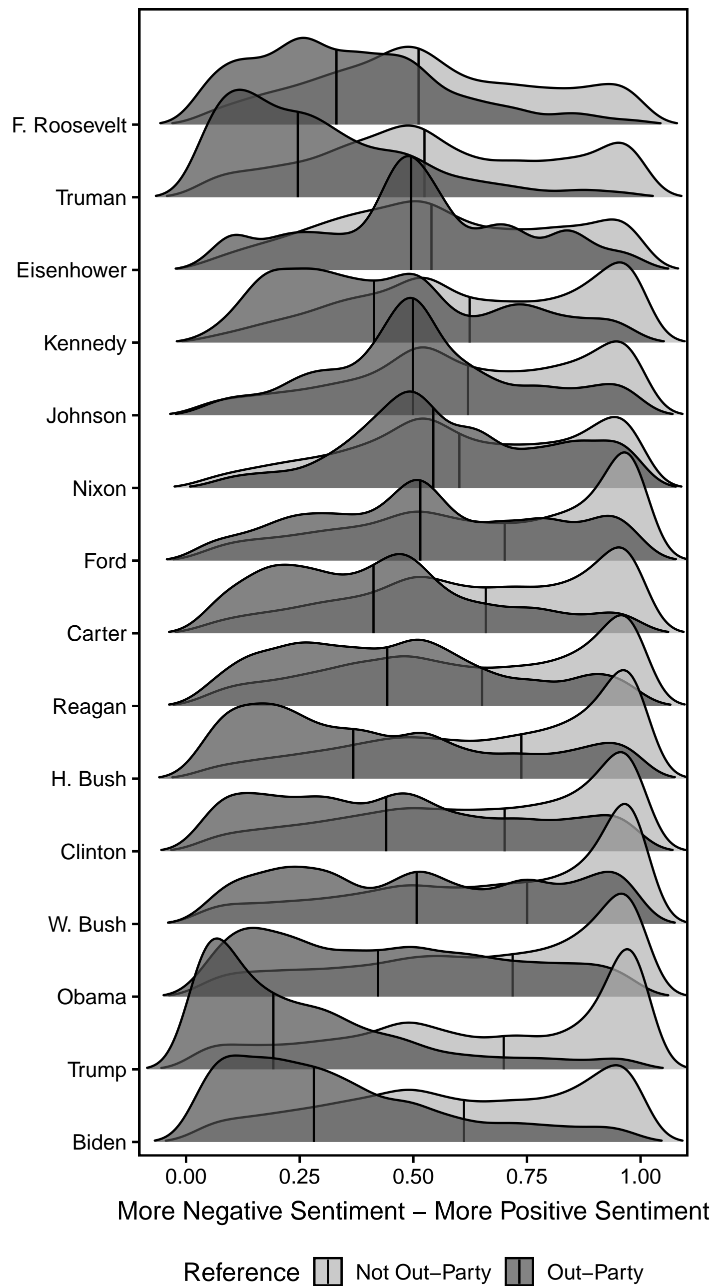
I visualize the sentiment of presidential speech over time in Figure 1. Each row represents the distribution of sentiment across paragraphs for each president, with out-party referencing paragraphs in dark gray and all other paragraphs in light gray. First, as expected, paragraphs containing opposition references are more negative than those not containing opposition references. Truman is, again, an outlier, but his negativity is rivaled by more recent polarized, presidents—especially Biden and Trump. The mid-twentieth century, when massive Democratic congressional majorities were the norm, stands out as a period of relative positivity toward the opposition. This trend toward out-party negativity is not a product of presidents getting more negative over time. Indeed, presidents are getting more negative toward the out-party even as their other rhetoric becomes more positive. These descriptives comport with my expectations regarding presidential negative partisanship, and I test my hypotheses more formally in the following section.

Empirical Strategy

The summary statistics and figures in the previous section provide descriptive evidence of presidential negative partisanship when presidents prioritize electioneering over legislating. To test the argument formally, I conduct a series of correlational analyses using ordinary least squares regression. To get additional leverage on the legislative mechanism, I also present evidence from a quantitative case study focusing on changes in President Obama's rhetoric when Democrats gained, and then lost, a filibuster-proof Senate majority in the 111th (2009-2010) Congress.

First, I focus on how often presidents invoke the out-party. To do so, I define my dependent variable as the number of out-party (i.e., party, past predecessor, and congressional leader) references per 1,000 words at the speech level. To test the congressional

Figure 1: Sentiment of Presidential Speech Paragraphs



Note: Density plot of presidential paragraph sentiment. Sentiment of paragraphs that (do not) contain out-party references are in dark (light) gray. Vertical lines are the distribution medians. Although out-party references are consistently more negative, these paragraphs are more negative for presidents in more competitive congressional environments. They have become increasingly negative over time even while other presidential rhetoric has become more positive.

majorities hypothesis, I specify my independent variable in two ways, following insights from Galvin (2009) and Lee (2016). One is the *Institutional Variation* measure presented in the previous section. This variable is 1 for any president who experienced both unified and divided government (i.e., Truman, Eisenhower, Clinton, W. Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden), and 0 otherwise. It accounts for the fact that these presidents were operating in a more uncertain congressional environment. Second, I follow Lee's (2016) periodization of intense *Majority Competition*. This variable takes on a value of 1 for the 80th–84th Congresses (1946–1956) and the 97th Congress and beyond (1981–2024), and 0 otherwise. To test the divided government hypothesis, I create a variable, *Divided Government* that takes on a value of 1 any time government is not fully unified, and 0 otherwise. Finally, to test the electoral timing hypothesis, I code a *Major Election* period as 1 every day between Labor Day and Election Day of a midterm or presidential re-election year, and 0 otherwise. The coefficients on all of these variables should be positive if presidents reference the out-party as I expect.

Second, I investigate the correlation between opposition references, the aforementioned independent variables, and the sentiment of those references. Here, the dependent variable is a paragraph-level measure of sentiment as previously described where more positive (negative) values indicate more positive (negative) sentiment. I interact each of the independent variables with the total number of references per 1,000 words at the paragraph level and include all constitutive terms. To account for correlation across speeches, I cluster standard errors at the speech-level. Here, the marginal effect of an additional out-party reference, conditional on each independent variable, should be negative. That is, during periods of majority competition, divided government, and major elections, additional opposition references should be associated with more negative presidential rhetoric.

My models include a series of controls: the president's approval rating in the most

recent Gallup survey,[8] whether a major war was occurring,[9] whether it is one of the president's first 100 days in office,[10] the president's term, and month fixed effects to account for seasonality. Models that include the *Institutional Variation* and *Majority Competition* variables include the president's party. Models that do not include these variables include president fixed effects, allowing me to examine within-presidency change in references and sentiment as a function of the relevant independent variables.

Results

In Table 3, I test my core hypotheses. Column 1 presents the most basic test of the argument. The first row, Institutional Variation, tests whether presidents who experienced both unified and divided government deployed more opposition references. The positive coefficient indicates they do—in line with the congressional competition hypothesis. On average, presidents who experienced institutional variation referenced the opposition 0.18 times more per 1,000 words spoken. Similarly, presidents operating in divided government (as compared to fully unified), when legislating is more difficult, make about 0.10 additional opposition references per 1,000 words. Finally, during major election periods, presidents are delivering over half an additional reference per 1,000 words. These positive and statistically significant coefficients support all three hypotheses advanced in this paper: presidents facing legislative constraints increasingly invoke the opposition party.

In the remaining columns, I test these hypotheses again with different specifications. In column 2, I replicate these results using the measure of congressional competition as described in Lee (2016). In column 3, I drop the over-time variables and add president

[8]As Gallup polling did not begin until the 1940s, some Roosevelt observations are dropped.

[9]These dates come from Howell and Rogowski (2013). Although they do not include an end-date for the post–9/11 wars, I count the "end" of these conflicts after President Bush delivers his "Mission Accomplished" speech in May of 2003 and the wars became more divisive.

[10]Truman, Johnson, and Ford are not assigned a first 100 days as they were un-elected.

Table 3: Presidential Out-Party References During Congressional Competition, Divided Government, Elections

DV: Out-Party References per 1,000 Words	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Institutional Variation	0.175***				
	(0.021)				
Majority Competition (80–84th, 97–118th)		0.174***			
		(0.024)			
Divided Government	0.103***	0.072***	0.207***	0.174***	0.121***
	(0.021)	(0.022)	(0.028)	(0.021)	(0.028)
Major Election Season	0.534***	0.531***	0.562***	0.547***	0.540***
	(0.038)	(0.038)	(0.038)	(0.029)	(0.037)
Republican	−0.099***	−0.145***			
	(0.021)	(0.020)			
Presidential Approval	−0.013***	−0.014***	−0.007***	−0.007***	−0.004***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Major War	0.089**	0.113***	0.015	−0.010	−0.035
	(0.031)	(0.032)	(0.041)	(0.031)	(0.044)
First 100 Days	0.055	0.048	0.060	−0.011	−0.006
	(0.053)	(0.053)	(0.054)	(0.041)	(0.052)
Term	−0.157***	−0.147***	−0.045+	−0.015	0.000
	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.025)	(0.019)	(0.025)
Fixed Effects					
President			✓	✓	✓
Month	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Num.Obs.	26,954	26,954	26,954	26,954	26,028
R2 Adj.	0.037	0.036	0.054	0.065	0.044
R2 Within Adj.	0.023	0.023	0.012	0.019	0.009

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Note: Coefficients are from ordinary least squares models where the dependent variable is the number of references to the presidential out-party per 1,000 words in a presidential speech. Models 1-3 are fit on the entire corpus using the dependent variable as described in the previous sections. In model 4, the dependent variable is a subset of the original, focusing only on references to the opposition party (not leaders or past presidents). Model 5 excludes Truman, with the original dependent variable.

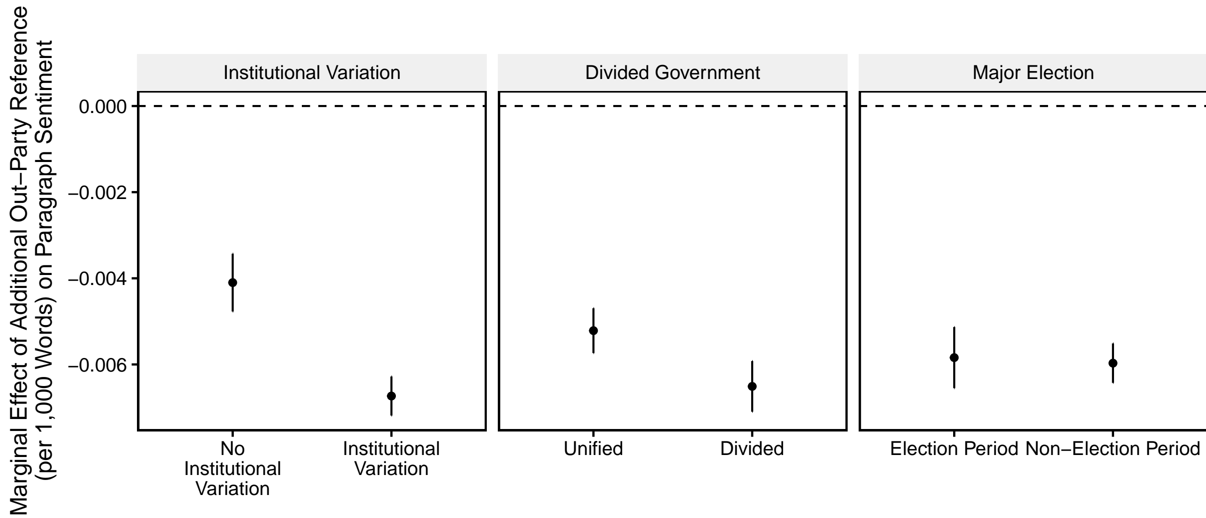
fixed effects. Here, we can see that the divided government and major elections coefficients continue to be positive and statistically significant *within* presidencies. For example, an individual president who experiences both unified and divided government is expected to invoke the opposition 0.21 times per 1,000 words in divided government as

compared to when he is serving under unified government. Given concerns about references to opposition presidents and leaders erroneously capturing incorrect references (e.g., Hillary rather than Bill Clinton), in column 4, I re-run the model in column 3 using only references to the opposition party (not presidents or leaders). Finally, in column 5, I re-rerun the model in column 3 excluding Truman, a clear outlier as can be seen in Table 1. Without over-interpreting a control variable, I note that presidential approval is consistently negative and statistically significant. That presidents invoke the opposition at lower rates when they are popular is consistent with research about presidents' legislative success and high approval ratings (Barrett and Eshbaugh-Soha 2007; Canes-Wrone and de Marchi 2002). Across all five specifications, I show that presidents increasingly invoke the out-party when congressional competition increases, when government is divided, and when major elections approach.

However, my theory is not only about volume, but also, valence. It could be the case, for example, that presidents reference the opposition more positively during divided government in an effort to produce compromise legislation. Alternatively, as I argue, they may attack the opposition to mobilize their party at the expense of legislative gain. I run a series of similar models interacting the number of references with the key independent variables from Table 3. These are presented in Table B.1. Here, I focus on the marginal effect of an additional out-party reference (per 1,000 words) as I vary key independent variables.

In the left-most panel, I present the marginal effect of the additional reference on sentiment for presidents who did and did not experience institutional variation. When a president experiences no institutional variation, an additional opposition reference is associated with rhetoric that is -0.004 points more negative. Presidents who experience institutional variation do not seem to reach out to the opposition, as each additional reference is associated with an 0.003 decrease in sentiment. In the second panel, I conduct a similar exercise for divided versus unified government (with fixed effects, meaning vari-

Figure 2: Marginal Effects of Out-Party References on the Sentiment of Presidential Speech Paragraphs



Note: Presidential references to the opposition are more negative for those who experienced institutional variation and during divided government. More negative (positive) values indicate more negative (positive) sentiment. Marginal effects in the left panel do not include president fixed effects and are produced from the model in column 1, Table B1. Marginal effects in the middle and right panel use presidential fixed effects and are produced from the model in column 3, Table B1.

ation comes from presidents who experience institutional variation, within-presidency). Opposition references are associated with more negativity at the paragraph-level, irrespective of institutional control, but references are associated with even more negativity during divided government. Again, presidents do not seem to be engaging in outreach when the legislative going gets tough. Finally, references are associated with no more or less negativity during or outside of major election periods, in contrast to the major elections hypothesis. Ultimately, increasing negativity at elections comes from additional references, but they are no more negative. Substantive effect size is difficult to interpret, but these effects are similar in magnitude to greater positivity during presidents' first 100 days and to an increase in approval of 10 points. Given that presidents rarely have as much goodwill as during their first 100 days and that a 10-point change in approval is unthinkable in today's polarized era, these effect sizes are quite substantive.

To summarize: presidents evoke the out-party more often when legislating is difficult.

They reference the out-party more, and more negatively, when congressional majorities are more tenuous, and when government is divided. Presidential references to the opposition become no more negative during major elections, but they do increase and are fairly negative at baseline. Further, these plots demonstrate that *in no instance* is referencing the opposition party associated with *more positive* presidential rhetoric. It appears that the primary way presidents appeal to the opposition is by *not* talking about them, not by speaking about them more favorably (cf. Noble 2023*b*). Taken together, these results provide support for the argument that presidents act like negative partisans when legislating becomes difficult and when electoral considerations take center stage.

A Quantitative Case Study: Obama's 2009 Senate Super-Majority

To this point, I have focused on slow-moving and regularly occurring environmental variables to test the relationship between legislative and electoral constraints and presidential negative partisanship. However, the argument is broadly about presidential prospects for legislating and whether strategic disagreement from the out-party (Gilmour 1995) leads presidents to focus on negative partisanship and messaging over legislating. Here, I provide additional evidence in favor of the legislative mechanism through a case study analyzing how President Obama's rhetoric changed in response to unexpectedly gaining, then losing, a filibuster-proof Senate super-majority in the 111th (2009-2010) Congress. In line with my argument, I find that Obama references Republicans more, and more negatively, after the brief period in which Democrats controlled 60 Senate seats. These results are consistent with the idea that presidents engage in negative partisanship, rather than bipartisan outreach, when legislatively constrained.

The Context

In 2008, when Barack Obama won the presidential election, Democrats retained control of both chambers of Congress—increasing their margins to 257 House seats and 58 ef-

fective seats in the Senate (56 Democrats and 2 Independents caucusing with Democrats). However, the contest between Al Franken (D) and Norm Coleman (R) for Minnesota's seat was too close to call. Although Franken led, Coleman challenged the result, leading to a lengthy court battle. During this period, Arlen Specter (R-PA) unexpectedly switched parties on April 28, 2009. Franken was then declared the victor on June 30, 2009, officially giving Democrats their 60-seat super-majority, allowing them to unilaterally overcome any Republican filibuster.

During the 2009 session, President Obama and Democrats focused on developing and passing what would become the Affordable Care Act. Although the president was not naive, recognizing that the opposition had strategic incentives to oppose the package, he did engage in good faith negotiation with the few key Republicans—despite his super-majority. As summer wore on, however, the president saw that these effort were failing, writing in his memoir that, [Senator Max Baucus's] optimism that he could produce a bipartisan bill began to look delusional." (Obama 2020). Further complications followed. On August 25, 2009, Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA) passed away. A new democratic senator was appointed to take his place, and a special election was scheduled for January 19, 2010. During this brief period of Democratic control, the party passed the Affordable Care Act through the House and Senate with no Republican support. As lawmakers returned from Christmas break, they needed to reconcile the two versions of the bill by passing the same legislation through both chambers. Ultimately, this effort would be stymied by Scott Brown's (R-MA) unexpected victory in the special election. With only 59 Senators, Democrats could no longer unilaterally overcome a Republican filibuster.

The president could have given up, tried to restart the process with more Republican input (however unlikely), or tried other procedural tactics to pass the legislation without Republican support. The president chose the latter, using the reconciliation process to pass the bill through the Senate with a simple majority. As this process played out, the president attacked Republicans rather than trying to engage them in good faith. He

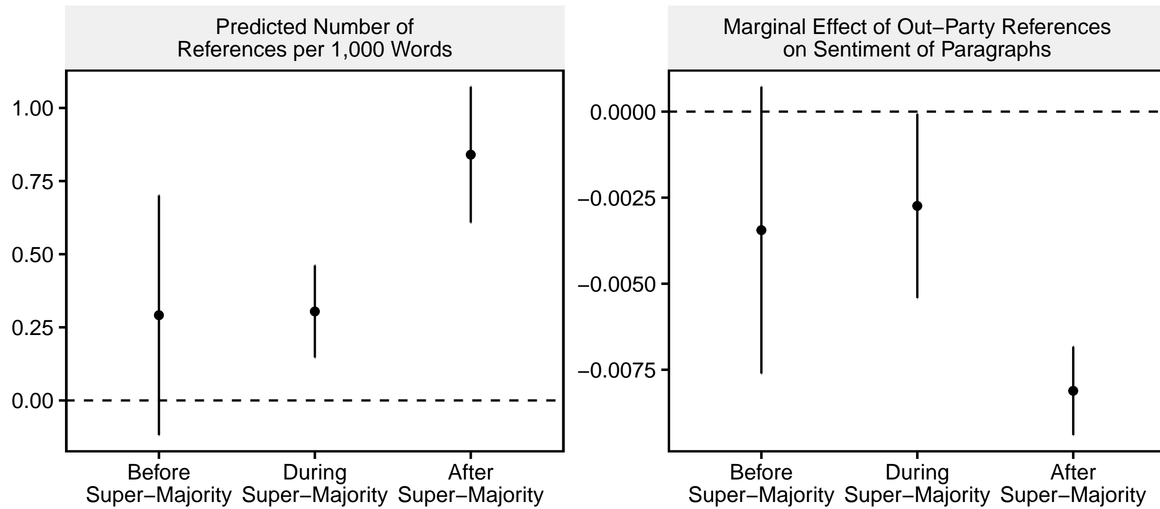
held two televised events in which he took questions from Republicans about the bill and listened to their proposals. Although these events may have had the veneer of bipartisanship, in his memoir, the president noted, "it was clear throughout both sessions that nothing I said was going to have the slightest impact on Republican behavior...What mattered was how the two events served to reinvigorate House Democrats, reminding them that we were on the right side of the healthcare issue" (Obama 2020, 463)—that is, mobilization. Rather than work with the opposition, the president tried to rally co-partisans through these public events. He also spent his time talking to hesitant Democratic lawmakers, arguing that "a 'no' vote was more likely to turn off Democrats than it was to win over Republicans and independents" (Obama 2020, 465). Ultimately, the challenge of legislating only encouraged the president to work harder to marshal his own side rather than reach out to the opposition—in contrast to his more bipartisan efforts when his party held 60 seats.

Obama Attacks Republicans After Losing the 60th Seat

My theory of presidential negative partisanship would suggest that the loss of the 60th seat, combined with the recalcitrance of Republicans, would prompt President Obama to act more like a negative partisan after January 20, 2010, than during the period in which he controlled 60 seats. To test this, I run similar models to those in the previous section focused specifically on the 111th Congress. I create a trichotomous indicator for whether the date is before July 1, 2009 (the first day after Franken was declared the winner), after January 19, 2010 (the date Scott Brown won the special election), or in between, when Democrats effectively held a filibuster proof majority. To support my hypotheses, the president should reference Republicans more, and more negatively, outside of the brief filibuster-proof window between July 1, 2009 and January 19, 2010.

I provide evidence of these effects in Figure 3 (models are in Table B2). In the left panel, I present the predicted number of out-party references per 1,000 words at three key

Figure 3: Effects of Out-Party References on the Number and Sentiment of Obama Opposition References, 111th Congress



Note: President Obama's references to Republicans increased, and were more negative, after losing the 60-seat Senate majority. The predicted number of references were generated from the model Table B2, column 1; the sentiment marginal effects are produced by the model in column 2.

periods: before the 60-seat super-majority, during, and after. Both before and during that period, President Obama made about 0.30 references to the out-party per 1,000 words. However, after losing the 60th seats, the president nearly tripled the number of references made per 1,000 words. As shown in the right panel, these references were not polite entreaties for cooperation. The sentiment associated with each additional reference per 1,000 words was also about three times more negative during this period. Consistent with the underlying argument, President Obama was *less* likely to talk about Republicans when he had more legislative influence. After losing this influence, Obama was more likely to reference Republicans and did so in an increasingly negative manner, consistent with the idea of presidential negative partisanship and at odds with the idea of bipartisan consensus-building.

Conclusion

In this paper, I argue that when the prospects for legislative success dim, presidents go public as negative partisans, not national leaders. Presidents benefit themselves and their parties by passing their agendas (Lebo and O'Geen 2011; Light 1999). Knowing this, congressional parties pursuing electoral success have incentives to deny the governing party legislative victories (Lee 2009, 2016). Presidents continue to go public despite their limited prospects for success (Edwards 2003)—which has raised a puzzle as to what presidents hope to achieve by doing so. I show that it is the content of their rhetoric that has changed, rather than the strategy of going public. I assemble a corpus of all spoken presidential speech from 1933–2024 and measure how often, and how negatively, presidents reference the opposition party. In line with theories of congressional message politics (Lee 2016) and presidential party building (Azari 2014; Galvin 2009), I find that presidents go public as negative partisans when congressional competition for majority status increases, during divided government, and as elections approach. I provide support consistent with the legislative mechanism through a case study of Democrats' short-lived filibuster-proof Senate majority in the 111th Congress.

This research contributes to our developing understanding of message politics and institutional negative partisanship (Groseclose and McCarty 2001; Lee 2016; Noble 2023*b*), highlighting the president's role in the partisan arena. This research also extends our understanding of going public, proposing motivations beyond short-term, legislative coalition building (Cavari 2017; Canes-Wrone 2006; Edwards 2000; Kernell 1997, 2023; Rottinghaus 2010). This is not, however, a criticism of extant literature. Like theories of congressional behavior developed during the era of the "Textbook Congress" (e.g., Shepsle 1989), traditional theories of going public came to prominence during an unusual ebb in polarization and competition, when presidents were viewed as truly national leaders (Dearborn 2021). Thus, one resolution to the puzzle of why presidents speak more, but with less policy influence, lies in considering what presidents hope to achieve by going

public in the first place. This more comprehensive view, through the use of more extensive data and measurement than previous accounts (Hinckley 1990; Coleman and Manna 2007; Rhodes 2014), shows that presidents' efforts to appear above partisan politics were time-bound.

Although this study has considered the macro-factors contributing to presidential negative partisanship, future work could consider more dynamic, time-varying measures of the legislative process. Although my case study of the 111th Congress is a first step, subsequent studies could match the topics of presidential speeches to bills moving through Congress. Do presidents respond dynamically, with more or less negative partisanship, as negotiations progress? Or is there some threshold at which presidents shift from bipartisanship to negative partisanship? Second, I have provided strong evidence of presidential negative partisanship, premised on behavioral the microfoundations of mobilizing co-partisans. However, scholars should design survey experiments to test whether such messages have the intended effect, and under what conditions.

Even as presidents promise unity, or to represent all Americans, they cannot resit partisan rhetoric. I argue that these changes are a consequence of the legislative environment in which presidents now operate. Without legislative results to run on, presidents must turn toward mobilizing allies by demonizing enemies. Normatively, this shift likely advantages the president's party electorally, but at the cost of the reputation of the office. Where once the president was seen as a problem solver and a national leader (Dearborn 2021), when presidents act as negative partisans, they surely reinforce their reputations as party leaders (Jacobson 2019), contribute to a focus on politics over policymaking, and increase mass partisanship, polarization, and distrust (Skytte 2021; Bøggild and Jensen 2024).

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Supplementary Information

Presidential Negative Partisanship

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A Construction of the Corpus and Measures

A.1 Corpus Construction

To create my corpus of presidential speeches, I scrape documents on the American Presidency Project Website, hosted by UC Santa Barbara (Woolley and Peters N.d.) at `https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/`. The collection of this corpus proceeded in waves. In the first wave, I collected all speeches tagged as `Spoken Addresses and Remarks` and `Miscellaneous Remarks`. In subsequent collection waves, these categories had been combined into a single `Spoken Addresses and Remarks` category, which I collected. In addition to adding new documents, the authors of the project may update the site, recategorize documents, and change attributes. As such, the data I collected may include or exclude documents that the webhosts changed after my initial collection efforts.

In the final corpus, I exclude speeches given before the president's first day in office, those given during their lame duck period or after, and eulogies. For presidents who die in office, I exclude speeches given on their final day in office which may have been prepared but not delivered.

A.2 Dependent Variable Keywords

To identify party references, I identify all speeches that contain at least one of the following keywords: `democrat`, `democrats`, or `republicans`. These words are preceded and followed by a regex word boundary character, `\b`, to avoid false positives. I also search for all of the following keywords preceded by the word `democratic` or `republican`: `party`, `ticket`, `congress`, `president`, `administration`, `leadership`, `leader`, `platform`, `governor`, `candidate`, `convention`, `senator`, `victory`, `congressman`, `senate`, `majority`, `house`, `member`, `committee`, `congressmen`, `nominee`, `side`, `caucus`, `congressional`, `controlled`, `delegation`, `issue`, `fundraiser`, `opposition`, `program`, `primary`, `votes`, `team`, `chair`, `congresses`, `chairman`, `speaker`, `national`, `and`, and `or`. These words are not followed by a regex word boundary character to capture plurals and possessives.

To identify references to predecessors, I search for references to the last names of the two presidents of the opposite party serving before the sitting president. To identify references to congressional leaders, I search for the last name of any individual who served as the Speaker of the House, minority floor leader, or Senate majority or minority leader during the Congress in which a speech was delivered.[1] The names of these individuals

[1] In the 79th and 80th Congresses, the Republican floor leader was Wallace H. White Jr. Here, I manually screen each speech that references "White" to ensure I don't capture false positives like White House.

come from Heitshusen (2019) through 2019 and were updated by the author thereafter.

A.3 GPT Method to Extract References

To instruct the GPT model to extract the relevant text, I progrmatically called the OpenAI API `GPT-4o-mini` model and fed it the below instructions. To focus the model on the references, I replaced each out-party reference in text with a unique placeholder that begins with 'zzoutref_', ensuring it would not be confused for any other piece of text. After the model extracted relevant portions, they were returned as a column of a data frame and the named entities were replaced before conducting sentiment analysis.

> Given the following text from political speeches, extract the parts that are directly relevant to or describe the entity represented by 'zzoutref' (with trailing text and numbers you can ignore e.g., zzoutref_pres10). The entity described by 'zzoutref' is always the opposition political party or a member of the opposition party. You can use this information to inform your judgment of what should or should not be included.
>
> Note that the extracted text will be used to perform sentiment analysis with the goal of predicting the speaker's stance toward 'zzoutref'. It is crucial to extract all parts of the text directly relevant to 'zzoutref' and the surrounding context to accurately assess the speaker's view. However, balance is key: include enough context to determine stance without including irrelevant content that might skew the sentiment analysis. It is also very important to note that many statements may compare and contrast 'zzoutref' with the speaker or another group. The pieces relevant to our understanding of the stance toward 'zzoutref' should be captured, but be very careful not to include the parts of the statement where the speaker is speaking about themselves or another group, even if it means breaking the sentence when you return extracted text.
>
> Follow these guidelines strictly:
>
> 1. **High Relevance (Always Include):**
>
>   - Text that directly mentions 'zzoutref'. You must **always** include the 'zzoutref' reference in your extracted text.

- Text that clearly refers to the same entity using pronouns (they, them) or descriptive phrases (these people, the opposition) immediately before or after a mention of 'zzoutref'.
- If a reference to 'zzoutref' spans multiple sentences, include all relevant text that forms part of that reference.

2. **Medium Relevance (Include if directly connected):**

   - Text that provides important context about the actions, characteristics, or impact of 'zzoutref', even if 'zzoutref' is not directly mentioned.
   - Text that describes party or partisan politics as these may be relevant to our understanding of how 'zzoutref' should be thought of (perhaps in a positive, bipartisan manner or a negative partisan manner).
   - Text that describes ongoing debates or lawmaking if it is relevant to our understanding of 'zzoutref' either negatively (e.g., opposition, obstruction, delay) or positively (e.g., bipartisanship, compromise, cooperation).
   - Only include these if they are clearly about the same topic and do not represent deviations from 'zzoutref'.
   - Comparative statements that describe 'zzoutref' in relation to others, but **do not** include parts that are referring to the speaker or others.

3. **Low Relevance (Do Not Include):**

   - Sentences that introduce new topics or subjects not directly related to 'zzoutref'.
   - Personal anecdotes or tangential information that doesn't directly characterize or impact 'zzoutref'.

4. **General Instructions:**

   - If there are multiple 'zzoutref' mentions, consider them as referring to the same entity or group.
   - Maintain the original wording and order of the extracted text. **Do not** create any new content. Only maintain subsets of the original content. Include the trailing numbers when you return the 'zzoutref' reference (e.g., return 'zzoutref_13' **not** 'zzoutref') as it is important for internal tracking.

- Return the extracted text as a single, continuous string without any additional commentary or modifications.
- If in doubt about the relevance of a sentence, err on the side of exclusion.

Before returning the results, carefully analyze each sentence:

1. Identify the main subject of each sentence.
2. Determine if and how it relates to ’zzoutref’.
3. Assess its importance for understanding the speaker’s stance toward ’zzoutref’.
4. If it’s a comparative statement, include only the part that is directly relevant to ’zzoutref’.
5. You may need to break up sentences and return fragments depending on the context and nature of the text. You may also need to merge sentences or phrases that are not naturally connected if the intervening text is not relevant to ’zzoutref’.
6. Decide whether to include it based on the relevance guidelines above.

Remember, no matter what, you must **always** include the ’zzoutref’ reference in your extracted text. Ignore any parts of the text that are not directly related to ’zzoutref’ or crucial for understanding the speaker’s stance toward ’zzoutref’.

Below are some examples with commentary to inform your decision-making:

Original Text 1: ”I’d like to add a comment about a very important matter as well. It’s ironic that on a day when we are making an announcement like this, I again have the responsibility to set the record straight because of false allegations made by the zzoutref_pres10 nominee for President, Governor Reagan.”

You should extract: ”It’s ironic that on a day when we are making an announcement like this, I again have the responsibility to set the record straight because of false allegations made by the zzoutref_pres10 nominee for President, Governor Reagan.”

Comments: The point about ”adding a comment” is not relevant to the reference and should be excluded.

Original Text 2: ”I want every American, every Member of Congress, every State official, everybody who works for a mayor or a city government to join me in putting this strategy to work. This is a national strategy, not a Federal strategy. I don’t want it to become partisan in any way, shape, or form. This should unite us in America: people in the private sector, people in Government, people at the local level, people at the national level, zzinref and zzoutref_rep145, people who are inside this institution, and people who are beyond its walls. We have a common interest in saving our country. And all of us have a personal responsibility to pursue. This drug strategy we announce today is our attempt to be your partner and pursue our personal responsibility. And together, together we can do it.”

You should extract: ”I don’t want it to become partisan in any way, shape, or form. This should unite us in America: people in the private sector, people in Government, people at the local level, people at the national level, zzinref and zzoutref_rep145, people who are inside this institution, and people who are beyond its walls. We have a common interest in saving our country. And together, together we can do it.”

Comment: Here, some of the text preceding the reference is relevant to understanding the fact that the speaker wants zzoutref to work with them for the common good. Note too that some of the later text is excluded but the last point about working together is included because it helps us understand the context of what ’zzoutref_rep145’ should do.

Original Text 3: ”The zzoutref_rep14 Party should work with the zzinref Party to get rid of this. It is a bad precedent. We’re spending more and more money on interest on the debt. It we don’t balance the budget next year, we’ll spend more on interest than we do on defense. This year, the budget would be in balance but for the interest we pay on the debt run up in the 12 years before I took office. And we’ve taken the deficit from $290 billion to $160 billion a year, and we ought to go all the way until we get the job done. America should invest in the future, not squander the present. And we should all be for that.”

You should extract: "The zzoutref_rep14 Party should work with the zzinref Party to get rid of this. It is a bad precedent. We're spending more and more money on interest on the debt. It we don't balance the budget next year, we'll spend more on interest than we do on defense. This year, the budget would be in balance but for the interest we pay on the debt run up in the 12 years before I took office. And we've taken the deficit from $290 billion to $160 billion a year, and we ought to go all the way until we get the job done. America should invest in the future, not squander the present. And we should all be for that."

Comment: This is a tricky one! Here the entire paragraph is relevant for understanding why the speaker wants zzoutref_rep14 to work with them.

Original Text 4: "The zzoutref_lead1 talk tough, the liberal zzoutref_pres2, about crime. But let me tell you something: The other day I had a visit in the Oval Office from eight individuals, grassroots family men, all coming up there. They said, 'We are for you for President,' and they represented the Fraternal Order of Police of Little Rock, Arkansas. I was proud to have their support."

You should extract: "The zzoutref_lead1 talk tough, the liberal zzoutref_pres2, about crime."

Comments: This one is straightforward. After the speaker references zzoutref_lead1 and zzoutref_pres2, they move on to other irrelevant anecdotes.

Original Text 5: "Mr. Chairman, Commander Burdine, the zzoutref_dem4 Senator from Maine, distinguished guests, my fellow veterans and friends:"

You should extract: "the zzoutref_dem4 Senator from Maine"

Comments: This is a list of individuals so the additional information in the paragraph is not connected to the 'zzoutref_dem4'. Note that here you need to break up the sentence to return the relevant context.

Original Text 6: "At the end of the war the zzoutref_pres2 said we couldn't provide

60 million jobs. But we did it. We now have over 62 million people employed in this great country."

You should extract: "At the end of the war the zzoutref_pres2 said we couldn't provide 60 million jobs."

Comments: The speaker says this and then begins talking about their own achievements. The rest should not be included because it would make the sentiment positive when the reference to 'zzoutref_pres2' is negative.

Original Text 7: "When it comes to detaining terrorists, what's the zzoutref_dem26 answer?"

You should extract: "what's the zzoutref_dem26 answer"

Comments: This one is tricky! Here, the reference to terrorists is topical but not relevant to the 'zzoutref_dem26' reference. The relevant part is their answer, but that doesn't necessarily depend on the topic. The speaker could have just as easily have said "When it comes to lowering the debt," and so because it is a generic lead-in, it should not be captured.

Original Text 8: "This work has nothing to do with partisan politics—nothing at all. A great many of you are zzoutref_rep117, a good many are Democrats; quite a number do not belong regularly to one party or the other. We are not the least bit interested in the partisan side of this picture."

You should extract: "This work has nothing to do with partisan politics—nothing at all. A great many of you are zzoutref_rep117, a good many are Democrats; quite a number do not belong regularly to one party or the other."

Comments: Although the first sentence is not a direct reference to 'zzoutref_rep117', the speaker mentioning partisan politics is relevant to our understanding of how they think about 'zzoutref_rep117'.

Text: {text}

Extracted relevant text:

A.4 Sentiment Accuracy

To assess accuracy, I randomly sampled 230 paragraphs that referenced the opposition party. I coded statements as negative, neutral, or positive blind to their machine-labeled score. I then trichotomized the machine-labled, continuous measure into terciles where those below 0.33 were coded as negative, at or above 0.66 as positive, and in between as neutral. Below are the confusion matrices for the GPT-extracted paragraphs (accuracy of 0.69) and full paragraphs (accuracy of 0.6). Both accuracy scores well exceed the 0.33 accuracy of a random guess and defaulting to negative, 0.44.

Table A1: Confusion Matrices for GPT-Extracted Paragraphs (Top) and Full Text (Bottom)

	Machine Labeled		
Hand-Coded	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Negative	72	20	9
Neutral	14	34	9
Positive	3	17	52

	Machine Labeled		
Hand-Coded	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Negative	59	24	18
Neutral	16	27	14
Positive	3	16	53

B Additional Empirical Results

B.1 Regression Results for Sentiment Analysis

In Table B1, I present regression results for a series of models examining paragraph-level sentiment. Column 1 is the baseline, interacting the number of out-party references per 1,000 words with the variables from Table 3, column 1 in the main text. The interaction terms show that an increase in presidents referencing the opposition is associated with more negative sentiment for presidents who experienced institutional variation and

who served during divided government. Although speech is more negative during major elections, references themselves do not become more negative. These results generally hold across the remaining specifications.

In column 2, the periodized competition measure is used instead of institutional variation. Column 3 includes presidential fixed effects. Given a concern that sentiment may be harder to detect in paragraphs that mention both parties, I re-specify references as a dummy that takes on a variable 1 if and only if the out-party is referenced at least once and the in-party is not in a paragraph. Here, the interaction with divided government is still negative and statistically significant, as is the coefficient on major elections. In column 5, I re-specify references as only references to the opposition party (not leaders or presidents). Here, major elections is positive and statistically significant. The instability of the coefficient on major elections likely reflects the fact that during elections, presidents often evoke opposition *voters* in a positive light but elected officials negatively. By focusing only on opposition references (that do not include in-party references as in column 4) excludes many of these positive outreach messages to voters but preserves negative attacks on electeds. By contrast, focusing only on party references (as in column 5) includes many of these while excluding more direct attacks on specific leaders.

B.2 Regression Results for Obama Case Study

In Table B2, I present results for the relationship between President Obama's filibuster-proof Senate super-majority and the number and sentiment of references to Republicans.

Table B1: Regression Results for Sentiment Models

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Out-Party Ref. per 1,000 Words	−0.003***	−0.003***	−0.005***		
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)		
Out-Party References Only (paragraph does not reference in-party)				−0.255***	
				(0.005)	
Party Refs. Only					−0.007***
					(0.000)
Institutional Variation	−0.001				
	(0.002)				
Out-Party Ref. x Institutional Variation	−0.003***				
	(0.000)				
Majority Competition (80–84th, 97–118th)		0.009***			
		(0.002)			
Out-Party Ref. x Majority Competition		−0.004***			
		(0.000)			
Divided Government	0.005*	0.004+	0.005*	0.006*	0.005+
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Out-Party Ref. x Divided Government	−0.001**	−0.001*	−0.001***		
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)		
Major Election Season	−0.023***	−0.022***	−0.023***	−0.020***	−0.023***
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Out-Party Ref. x Major Election	0.000	0.000	0.000		
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)		
Out-Party References Only x Divided Government				−0.019**	
				(0.006)	
Out-Party References Only x Major Elections				−0.023***	
				(0.007)	
Party Refs. Only x Divided Government					−0.001*
					(0.001)
Party Refs. Only x Major Elections					0.001*
					(0.001)
Republican	0.017***	0.017***			
	(0.002)	(0.002)			
Presidential Approval	0.001***	0.001***	0.001***	0.001***	0.001***
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Major War	−0.032***	−0.028***	−0.016***	−0.015***	−0.015***
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
First 100 Days	0.010+	0.009+	0.007	0.007	0.006
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Term	0.002	0.002	0.010***	0.011***	0.011***
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Fixed Effects					
President			✓	✓	✓
Month	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Num.Obs.	734,918	734,918	734,918	734,918	734,918
R2 Adj.	0.021	0.021	0.033	0.042	0.032
R2 Within Adj.	0.018	0.018	0.014	0.023	0.013

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Notes: Coefficients are from ordinary least squares models. The dependent variable is a measure of paragraph-level sentiment where more positive (negative) values are associated with more positive (negative) rhetoric. Standard errors are clustered at the speech-level.

Table B2: Obama's Filibuster Proof Majority and Number, Sentiment of Opposition References

	DV: Party References	DV: Sentiment
	(1)	(2)
After Super-Majority	0.536***	−0.048**
	(0.146)	(0.018)
Before Super-Majority	−0.013	0.051
	(0.225)	(0.031)
Out-Party Ref. per 1,000 Words		−0.003*
		(0.001)
Out-Party Ref. x After Super-Majority		−0.005***
		(0.002)
Out-Party Ref. x Before Super-Majority		−0.001
		(0.003)
Major Election Season	0.443**	−0.079***
	(0.141)	(0.013)
Presidential Approval	−0.004	−0.007**
	(0.017)	(0.002)
First 100 Days	0.051	0.011
	(0.159)	(0.021)
Intercept	0.449	1.004***
	(0.927)	(0.117)
Num.Obs.	968	26,077
R2 Adj.	0.075	0.019

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Note: Coefficients are from ordinary least squares models. In column 1, the dependent variable is the number of references to Republicans per 1,000 words in a presidential speech. The dependent variable in column 2 is a standardized measure of paragraph-level sentiment where more positive (negative) values are associated with more positive (negative) rhetoric. In this model, standard errors are clustered at the speech-level.

References

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