THE MYTH OF PRESIDENTIAL REPRESENTATION

In *The Myth of Presidential Representation,* B. Dan Wood evaluates the nature of American presidential representation, examining the strongly embedded belief – held by the country's founders, as well as current American political culture and social science theory – that presidents should represent the community at large. Citizens expect presidents to reflect prevailing public sentiment and compromise in the national interest. Social scientists express these same ideas through theoretical models depicting presidential behavior as driven by centrism and issue stances adhering to the median voter. Yet partisanship seems to be a dominant theme of modern American politics.

Do American presidents adhere to a centrist model of representation, as envisioned by the founders? Or do presidents typically attempt to lead the public toward their own more partisan positions? If so, how successful are they? What are the consequences of centrist versus partisan presidential representation? *The Myth of Presidential Representation* addresses these questions both theoretically and empirically.

B. Dan Wood holds the Cornerstone Fellowship at Texas A&M University. He is the author of *The Politics of Economic Leadership: The Causes and Consequences of Presidential Rhetoric* (2007) and the coauthor of *Bureaucratic Dynamics: The Role of Bureaucracy in a Democracy* (1994), as well as numerous scholarly articles. Professor Wood has served on the editorial boards of the *American Journal of Political Science, Presidential Studies Quarterly, Political Analysis, Political Research Quarterly,* and *American Politics Quarterly* and is a frequent instructor at the European Consortium for Political Research summer methods program at the University of Essex.

To Patricia

The Myth of Presidential Representation

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Preface

This book evaluates the nature of modern presidential representation. Presidents since George Washington have often expressed the view that they represent the community at large. Consider, for example, the following remarks by Washington in a letter to the Selectmen of Boston on July 28, 1795: "In every act of my administration, I have sought the happiness of my fellow citizens. My system for the attainment of this object has uniformly been to overlook all personal, local, and partial considerations; to contemplate the United States as one great whole . . . " (Fitzpatrick 1931). In this letter Washington rejected a role for personal values, local interests, and partisanship in determining presidential behavior and actions. Rather, he believed that presidents should reject these tendencies to reflect the nation as "one great whole."

Modern presidents have commonly expressed similar beliefs about the nature of presidential representation, especially during election seasons and early in their administrations. However, consider the following excerpt from an oral history interview with George W. Bush on November 12, 2008: "I would like to be . . . remembered as a person who, first and foremost, did not sell his soul in order to accommodate the political process. I came to Washington with a set of values, and I'm leaving with the same set of values. And I darn sure wasn't going to sacrifice those values . . . " (Koch 2008). In this statement Bush tacitly admitted that his personal values and partisanship drove many of his decisions as president. If this assessment is true for all modern presidents, then we have moved a great distance from George Washington and the founders' vision of presidential representation.

The founders' vision that presidents should represent the community at large is manifest in notes from the constitutional convention, the Federalist Papers, as well as the original institutional design of the presidency. A belief in nonpartisan, centrist presidential representation is also strongly embedded in American political culture and social science theory. Citizens expect presidents to be willing to compromise in the national interest and to respond to public sentiment. Social scientists express these same ideas through theoretical models depicting presidential behavior as driven by centrism and issue stances adhering to the median voter.

Yet little social science research evaluates the validity of these beliefs and theories. Do modern presidents adhere to a centrist model of representation such as the model reflected in Washington's remarks? Or do they primarily represent their own partisan values, as might be suggested by Bush's remarks? Do presidents change their mode of representation while in office, sometimes following a centrist model and at other times a partisan model? If so, under what conditions are presidents centrists versus partisans? Do presidents attempt to lead the public toward their own partisan positions through persuasion? If so, then how successful are they at leading the public toward their own partisan positions? What factors enhance or diminish presidential efforts at partisan persuasion? What are the consequences for presidential support of partisan representation or failed persuasion?

This book addresses all of these research questions, both theoretically and empirically. The centrist model has been the primary paradigm for social scientists seeking to explain electoral representation in the American system. However, this book develops and tests an alternative theoretical model of presidential representation, which posits that presidents respond to the median partisan, rather than the median voter. The theoretical model is developed formally in Chapter 2. Measures of presidential and public liberalism for testing the partisan versus centrist models are described in Chapter 3. The presidential liberalism measure is constructed by coding every unique liberal and conservative sentence spoken publicly by the president across nine issue domains from World War II through the first George W. Bush administration. The partisan model of presidential representation is then evaluated empirically in Chapters 4 through 6.

The "take away" themes from this book are the following: (1) Modern presidents typically behave as partisan rather than centrist representatives. (2) As partisans, modern presidents have consistently adopted a strategy of attempting to persuade those near the political center toward their own positions, rather than altering their own positions toward the median voter. (3) Presidents have not been very successful at partisan persuasion but are more successful during honeymoon periods, periods of high public approval, periods when they have strong institutional allies, and periods when the proportion of persuadable citizens is high. (4) Presidents are punished by the public for their partisanship through declining policy support and lower approval ratings. (5) Nevertheless, presidents are likely to remain partisan representatives due to self-interest and the nature of the two-party electoral system.

This research reported in this book was initiated in the spring of 2004, with various convention papers delivered in 2006 and 2007. As with any project of this duration, there are many to whom I am indebted. My work has always centered on issues of representation and responsiveness for various political institutions. However, George Edwards, my colleague at Texas A&M, piqued my interest in questions of presidential representation and persuasion. The work of Jim Stimson, my former mentor and friend, sparked my interest in how public opinion affects institutional behavior. Some of my earlier work (Flemming and Wood 1997; Wood and Andersson 1998) confirmed his work with Mike MacKuen and Bob Erikson on Congress and the Supreme Court (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995). However, I was compelled to question their work on dynamic representation by the presidency. Thanks to Jim Stimson for providing the data on public mood that were used in the third through sixth chapters. Jeff Cohen read and commented on various convention papers that later became chapters in this book. Jeff also read the entire manuscript when it neared completion and made various helpful suggestions. I also thank two anonymous reviewers for their insightful suggestions, most of which are implemented in the final manuscript.

I am also indebted to those who provided research assistance to this project. The data on presidential liberalism were initially machine

coded. However, machines are fallible, and considerable human effort was required to ensure valid and reliable measures. The bulk of the human effort was supplied by Han Soo Lee and Sarah Kessler, with work also done by Stephen Huss. Note that some of the findings reported in Chapters 3 and 4 are replicated using different statistical methods in the *Journal of Politics* (Wood and Lee 2009). Han Soo's dissertation potentially extends the work reported here through the inclusion of a measure of media liberalism.

In the interest of future research, I encourage further replication, as well as further application of the data. Thus, all of the data on presidential liberalism reported in the empirical chapters are available on my Web site hosted by Texas A&M University. The Web link is currently http://www-polisci.tamu.edu/bdanwood. A Google search for my name should always find the data.

Ed Parsons of Cambridge University Press offered good advice on how to craft the manuscript. Given my strong methodological leanings, he encouraged me to focus on substance, rather than technical matters that might interest those in the political methodology community. Nevertheless, this book contains both math and statistics to accommodate both social scientific and casual audiences. Where it seemed appropriate, technical materials are relegated to footnotes. Casual readers are encouraged to read explanations in the footnotes, but this should not be necessary to follow the major themes of the book. Where footnotes were not appropriate, discussions involving math or statistics are often accompanied by explanations in plain English. I hope that the materials in this book are not so complex as to deter serious readers. If this is so, then Ed deserves some credit. If not, then I apologize in advance for my shortcomings at communication. Ed was also a pleasure to work with as an editor, especially in securing expert reviewers and facilitating the review and editorial process. Thanks also to Jason Przybylski, who is Ed's Editorial Assistant. Peter Katsirubas of Aptara was the project manager who transformed the manuscript into a book. William H. Stoddard did the actual copyediting.

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also deeply appreciative of my department and university for their supportive intellectual environment.

Finally, I want to thank those closest to me for their understanding and support for my career and research. My wife, Patricia, has been steadfast in helping me in every possible way. I dedicate the book to her.