

## *Polls and Elections*

# Opinion Formation, Polarization, and Presidential Reelection

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*The authors examine the dynamics of public opinion formation and change around a sitting president and their implications for reelection contests. Because of the biases inherent in information processing and the information environment, two distinct, but simultaneous, effects of citizen learning during a presidential term are expected. For those with prior opinions of the president, learning contributes to more polarized evaluations of the president. For those initially uncertain about the president, learning contributes to opinion formation about the president. Because the gap in uncertainty generally favors the incumbent over a lesser-known challenger, races with an incumbent presidential candidate are typically marked, perhaps paradoxically, by both a polarization of public opinion and an incumbency advantage.*

*I'm a uniter not a divider.*

—George W. Bush, 2000

Despite George W. Bush's bold promise during the 2000 election campaign to unify the country, the American public became markedly more polarized while he was president. Although the public was deeply divided in their judgments of Bush and his

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policy goals, he won reelection in 2004 with a clear majority of the popular and Electoral College vote, increasing his margin of victory from four years earlier. In the face of such intense polarization, why did Bush enjoy electoral success? As scholars, journalists, and political commentators have sought to answer this question, there has been considerable debate about the dynamics and impact of public opinion about President Bush (Fiorina and Abrams 2008; Jacobson 2006; Nivola and Brady 2006). In this brief article, we provide historical and theoretical context by examining the dynamics of opinion formation and opinion change during a president's term in office.

Using the American National Election Study (NES) and other survey data to examine the six most recent presidencies, our analysis traces the empirical regularities of citizen learning about a sitting president. We show that each presidency creates an opportunity for citizens to acquire new information about the character, abilities, and policy preferences of the winning candidate, and this learning has consequences for the subsequent reelection contest.

Building on theories of information processing, we argue that citizen learning about a sitting president contributes to two distinct but simultaneous dynamics in public opinion over the course of a president's first term in office. First, for those individuals with prior opinions of the president, learning contributes to more polarized evaluations of the president by the next election. So whatever his stated intentions were, George W. Bush was to some degree destined to be a "divider" because polarization occurs within virtually every presidency.

Second, for those individuals initially uncertain about the president, learning contributes to opinion formation about the president by the time he stands for reelection. Following on a rich literature showing that risk aversion in the electorate tends to favor incumbents over challengers, we are left with a paradoxical aggregate pattern: Electoral contests with an incumbent presidential candidate are often marked by both a polarization of public opinion and an incumbency advantage. Thus, in contrast to the conclusions of some scholars that polarization dampened Bush's reelection margin (Campbell 2005) and the long-held assumption that moderation is the key to electoral victory (Downs 1957), our analysis shows that polarization tends to be greatest among those presidents who were successfully reelected.

## Beyond the Campaign

The intensity of a lengthy U.S. presidential campaign creates a ripe environment for citizen learning. It is well documented that voters can learn during a presidential campaign and that learning is central to voter decision making (Alvarez 1998; Gelman and King 1993; Holbrook 1999). With the intensive media coverage, campaign advertising, campaign events, and increased political discussion, political campaigns provide an information-rich environment that helps voters in selecting a preferred candidate by election day. But there is no reason to expect such learning to end on election day. Following the election, the public has four years to develop and update opinions about the winning candidate as he governs. Moreover, even in an intense presidential race, there

might be some individuals who do not receive the information they feel necessary to render an evaluation of a candidate, but who might eventually gather the necessary information *between* campaigns. The president is the most newsworthy and heavily covered person in American politics; even the most detached citizens are likely to encounter at least some information about the chief executive. The cumulative volume of information naturally grows the longer the president is in office, making it easier for previously uncertain individuals to develop opinions.

The attitudinal consequences of such learning depend on the way new information about the sitting president is processed, which, in turn, depends on each individual's political predispositions. As Zaller so aptly observed, "every opinion is a marriage of information and predisposition" (1992, 6). For people who already harbor strong opinions at the beginning of a president's term, the processing of information about the president during his administration will almost never be objective or balanced. This happens because individuals with existing opinions are more likely to selectively expose themselves to information (Taber and Lodge 2006) and selectively internalize and weigh these messages (Goren 2007; Lord, Ross, and Lepper 1979). Based on this literature, then, our first hypothesis is that opinions about the president will strengthen and become more extreme along existing political cleavages, particularly among those most likely to consume new information. Predispositions and political awareness are necessary preconditions for polarization to occur (Layman and Carsey 2002), so only this subset of the electorate should polarize over the course of a president's term. This leads to the basic prediction that polarization is often an inevitable consequence of time in office.

At the same time, the consequences of incumbent-centered learning should be somewhat different for those without preexisting opinions of the newly elected president.<sup>1</sup> Lacking prior opinions to filter political messages, those who are uncertain about the president should be more likely to simply absorb whatever information happens to penetrate their daily lives (Popkin 1994), a process that has been termed "passive learning" (Krugman and Hartley 1970). As Zukin and Snyder explain, "the mere absence of resistance, rather than the presence of motivation and purposive involvement, is all that is necessary for learning to occur" (1984, 629). As professional marketers know, information gathered passively generates less arousal and resistance, and so is more easily accepted.

There are a number of reasons why these people without preexisting views should be more likely to develop favorable opinions of the sitting president. Individuals without prior opinions about the president are less politically engaged, interested, and knowledgeable, that is, individuals who tend to receive information about politics passively. And as recent research has demonstrated, less attentive people are more likely to get their

1. Although our expectations are consistent with previous work on information processing and opinion change, most of the existing research tends to overlook opinion formation, by either omitting respondents without preexisting opinions or by assuming that respondents have particular opinions based on respondent characteristics (e.g., Bartels 2002; Taber and Lodge 2006; Zaller 1992). For instance, Zaller's model is silent about how individuals with low information and weak predispositions react to information because it is assumed that they are not likely to be exposed to much information. Respondents without measurable predispositions are omitted from most of the analyses in his 1992 book, although later work concludes that these individuals tend to be most responsive to changing economic and foreign policy conditions in presidential elections (Zaller 2004).

political information from talk shows and other soft or entertainment-based news, which offers more favorable and more personality-based coverage (Baum 2003; Newman, Just, and Crigler 1992).

These previously uncertain individuals might also be expected to develop favorable evaluations because of simple risk aversion. At the end of the president's term, many of those previously uncertain individuals will know more about the incumbent's policy positions and personality traits than they do about the challenger. This differential should favor the incumbent, all else constant (Glasgow and Alvarez 2000). As Alvarez concludes, the "greater the individual's uncertainty about the candidate's policy positions, the lower their utility for the candidate and hence the lower their probability of supporting the candidate, all other things held constant" (1998, 36). The prevalence of risk aversion and the preference for incumbents with known characteristics have been demonstrated elsewhere (Bartels 1986). There are, of course, many other reasons that we might expect informational asymmetries that advantage the incumbent, including resource differences or the ability to control the agenda. Our expectation is that the benefits associated with such information gains occur only in the subset of the electorate without preexisting opinions, even as another subset comes to increasingly dislike the incumbent as they learn more about him.

In summary, we argue that while learning about the president is ubiquitous, the patterns of opinion formation and change that result are neither unbiased nor uniform. Opinion *formation* should favor the incumbent, while opinion *change* should increase polarization. Whether or not "learning" is the ideal term for these two processes, they clearly represent opinion formation and opinion change because of new information, not unlike Bayesian learning. Given the extensive literature on risk aversion, our hypotheses suggest a counterintuitive aggregate relationship in which the presidents who engender the most public learning polarize the electorate at the same time that they improve their reelection chances. We wish to be clear in stating that we are not arguing that a president can directly improve his reelection chances by being a polarizer, but rather that a president who takes clear ideological stands is more likely both to polarize one portion of the electorate while simultaneously raising his evaluations among another portion of the electorate. In other words, increased polarization is a marker of higher levels of citizen learning, and learning tends to improve a president's reelection chances. This counterintuitive link between polarization and reelection has never been recognized, yet it flows somewhat naturally from our understandings of how citizens differentially process political information. In the remainder of this article, we attempt to empirically evaluate our core hypotheses.

## Data and Methods

We examine opinion formation and change around six incumbent presidents who won election and sought reelection during the lifetime of the cumulative National Election Study (NES) surveys.<sup>2</sup> Given the limited number of presidential races for which

2. These presidents are Richard M. Nixon (1968 and 1972), Jimmy Carter (1976 and 1980), Ronald Reagan (1980 and 1984), George H. W. Bush (1988 and 1992), Bill Clinton (1992 and 1996), and George

we have public opinion data, it is, of course, difficult to develop a fully satisfactory test of the hypothesized trends. But looking across different election years using multiple indicators offers an initial test of our expectations. We examine incumbent-centered learning using both open-ended and closed-ended measures of candidate evaluations, including feeling thermometers, volunteered likes and dislikes about the candidates, and, from Gallup surveys, presidential approval time series.

Across a variety of measures, we evaluate the extent of learning about a sitting president by analyzing aggregate changes in the likelihood of answering various questions about the president by the end of his first term (1) compared to the beginning and (2) compared to a challenger from the opposing party. We assume that the ability and willingness of respondents to evaluate a politician indicates their uncertainty about the person. In using this same approach, Bartels (1988) explains that the willingness to rate a candidate on a feeling thermometer indicates that a candidate has passed the basic threshold of familiarity and that the respondent is sufficiently certain about the candidate's traits. In other words, we assume that those who answer questions have more information than those who do not.

To gauge polarization in opinion, we track changes in attitudes among partisan identifiers using several different evaluative dimensions. For example, we analyze how differences in partisans' perceptions of the president change over the course of the first term and when an incumbent faces a challenger. In concluding, we reconnect these findings and point to a different normative interpretation of citizen learning about politics.

## Learning about the President

We first want to verify the intuitive claim that citizens continue to learn about the winning presidential candidate *after* the election. The first evidence of such learning comes from comparing citizen knowledge about a sitting president relative to his reelection campaign challenger. Although the imbalance between incumbent and challenger campaigns is well established in congressional elections, researchers often "assume that there is little difference in the relative knowledge of challengers and incumbents in presidential races" (Alvarez 1998, 163), perhaps because presidential challengers may already be high-profile public figures, especially by the end of the nominating season. Our data make clear that presidential incumbents enjoy a significant informational advantage.<sup>3</sup> For each of the six incumbent reelection efforts in the NES time series, we report in Table 1 the mean number of likes and dislikes volunteered about the candidates. Responses to open-ended questions offer especially clear evidence that a respondent is familiar with and able to evaluate a candidate. To be sure, each candidate and campaign

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W. Bush (2000 and 2004). This approach omits Gerald Ford, who ascended to the presidency midterm after Nixon's resignation. Lyndon B. Johnson might be included, but many of the measures we use, such as feeling thermometers, were not available in the 1964 NES.

3. Alvarez (1998) makes a similar conclusion based on evidence that voters learn more about the challenger than the incumbent over the course of the campaign.

**TABLE 1**  
**Likes and Dislikes for Incumbents and**  
**Challengers**

Year	Incumbent	Challenger	Difference
1972	2.31	2.08	+ .23*
1980	2.69	2.32	+ .37*
1984	2.99	2.21	+ .78*
1992	2.93	2.27	+ .66*
1996	2.87	2.40	+ .47*
2004	2.72	2.26	+ .46*

Note: Entries are the mean number of combined likes and dislikes for each candidate.

\* Indicates *t*-test is significant at  $p < .05$ , one-tailed.

season has its idiosyncrasies.<sup>4</sup> But the uniqueness of each candidate and campaign makes the general consistency of the pattern all the more remarkable. In every one of these elections, the mean is higher for the incumbent, indicating that respondents simply know more and can say more about the sitting president than his challenger.<sup>5</sup> On average, a respondent has 25% more to report about an incumbent than a challenger. In addition (not shown in the table), the means typically rise for candidates between their first election and reelection campaign.

As another measure of increasing certainty about the president, we calculate the percentage of respondents who could not give a substantive rating to the feeling thermometer questions in a president's initial election and attempt at reelection. We define uncertain responses as "don't knows," refusals, and placements at 50, reflecting individuals who had no opinion or had ambivalent attitudes.<sup>6</sup> Giving any of these responses reveals uncertainty about the candidate because it shows an inability or unwillingness to evaluate the candidate, a basic requirement in the process of opinion formation. Table 2 shows that the electorate is always more certain about the incumbent than the challenger. For example, in 1984, only 1 in 10 respondents could not evaluate incumbent Ronald Reagan compared, to 1 in 5 who were unable to rate challenger Walter Mondale, the vice president just four years earlier. Again, while there are important differences across years in the degree to which voters were able and willing to evaluate candidates—no doubt attributable both to the qualities of the candidates and to basic sampling and measurement error—the regular asymmetry remains between incumbents and challengers facing one another in the same election year.

4. For example, respondents had somewhat less to say about incumbent George W. Bush in 2004 than they had about incumbent Ronald Reagan in 1984. The smaller estimates for both candidates in 1972 likely reflects the fact that the NES coded only as many as three responses per respondent in 1972 but as many as five in subsequent years. Even still, we see the same knowledge gap benefiting the incumbent.

5. In contrast, the average responses are nearly identical for candidates in open seat races.

6. Although some might object to combining the lack of an opinion and an ambivalent opinion, the two are nearly impossible to separate with the thermometer scale because many without opinions select the middle category. The thermometers display far fewer "don't knows" than most other attitudinal measures, suggesting that most of the uncertain respondents are falling into the 50 category. Moreover, in at least one year, the NES actually coded "don't knows" as 50. In any case, the main differences of interest continue to hold even if only explicit "don't knows" are used.

**TABLE 2**  
**Uncertainty about Candidates Using Feeling Thermometers**

Year	Incumbent	Challenger	Difference in Uncertainty
1972	12.1%	20.0%	-7.9*
1980	8.5%	17.5%	-9.0*
1984	11.7%	20.5%	-8.8*
1992	14.8%	16.8%	-2.0*
1996	7.0%	18.4%	-11.4*
2004	8.4%	15.8%	-7.4*

Note: Entries are the percentage of respondents who could not rate a candidate at a non-neutral position on the feeling thermometer (i.e., a rating of 50, refusal, or "don't know" response) in the NES postelection surveys.

\* Indicates statistical significance at  $p < .05$ , one-tailed.

Cutting these data somewhat differently, we can evaluate whether uncertainty about particular presidential candidates declines between their first victory and their reelection attempt four years later. That is, rather than contrast incumbents and challengers, we see whether uncertainty about the same candidate decreases after four years in office. Figure 1 displays the change in information levels, again using the ability to rate on the feeling thermometer as a measure of certainty. For all six presidents, the lines are negatively sloped, indicating that the ability to evaluate develops beyond the campaign period. The average drop in uncertainty is 7 points, and all six presidents are statistically significant at  $p < .05$  using a difference of proportions  $t$  test. The variation among presidents is also of interest. It is notable that the two shallowest lines belong to the two candidates who lost. Jimmy Carter and George H. W. Bush (41) fell by 4.3 points on average, while the other four fell by an average of 8.5 points.<sup>7</sup> The presidents who showed the greatest amount of learning during their presidency were the most successful in their reelection bids, while the smallest decline is for those incumbents who lost reelection.

By several measures, we have shown that more respondents are able to evaluate the president by the end of his first term. Although one might critique any particular indicator, the pattern of uncertainty reduction is quite consistent across measures. In analyses not reported here, we find similar declines in the percentages of respondents who fail to assess incumbent trait assessments (e.g., "moral") and moods that they inspire (e.g., "angry"). Regardless of which measure is employed, we find consistent evidence that respondents know more about the incumbent president than his challenger and more about the president during his reelection effort than they did during his first campaign.

To track uncertainty reduction in a more continuous fashion, we shift from analysis across election years to time series of presidential approval questions collected within

7. Although the Nixon line is also relatively flat for a president who easily won reelection, the unique coding system in the 1968 NES jeopardizes the comparability of the Nixon data. As the NES cumulative file codebook notes, in 1968, "'Don't know's' were coded as 50 on thermometers; groups about which the respondent 'didn't know much' were also placed at 50 degrees. The 50 degree mark was labeled '50 degrees; no feeling.'" For the other five presidents, more of the uncertainty is reflected in responses of 50 rather than "don't know" by a ratio of about four to one.

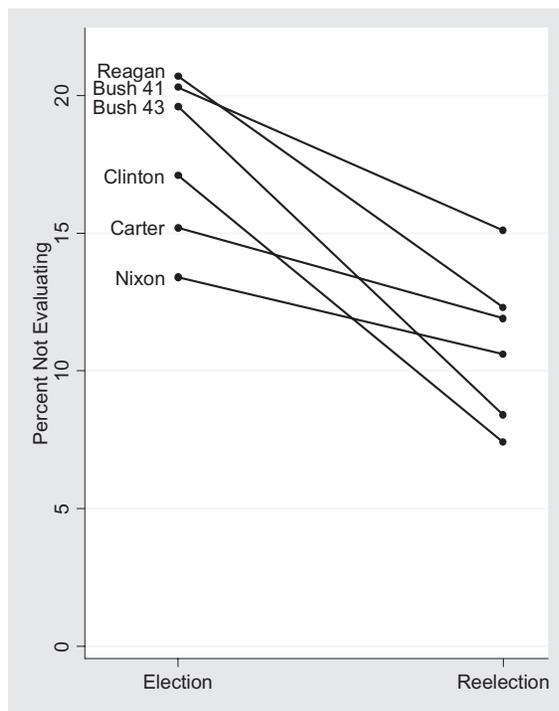


FIGURE 1. Changes in Uncertainty over a Presidential Term.

Note: The vertical axis is the percentage of respondents who evaluate candidate at 50 or fail to evaluate candidate. All differences between election years are statistically significant at  $p < .05$ , one-tailed.

each president's term. We graph in Figure 2 the percentage of respondents in monthly Gallup surveys who responded "don't know" when asked whether they approved or disapproved of the way the president in question was handling his job. (When multiple polls appeared in a month, the percentages were averaged.) That is, for each of the presidents, we plot the percentage of the public that was uncertain enough that they failed to evaluate their performance on a simple approve/disapprove basis. The mean value for the six presidents is also represented by a black summary line. The figure shows quite clearly that uncertainty dramatically declines in the early months of a presidency, from roughly 20% of the public having no opinion to around half that level. Previous research has identified a "honeymoon" period in which presidents receive higher approval ratings in the first few months of a presidency (Mueller 1973), but this graph indicates that there is also a sizeable portion of the electorate not willing to rate the president at all in his early days in office. Although the decline is most dramatic in the first 100 days, uncertainty continues to decline even after that point, resulting in more than 9 of out every 10 respondents able to evaluate the president by the end of his term.<sup>8</sup> In addition

8. The overall mean level of uncertainty (the dark line) correlates with time at  $-0.79$  ( $p < .001$ ). If we restrict the analysis to the period after the first six months in office, when the "honeymoon" has clearly ended,

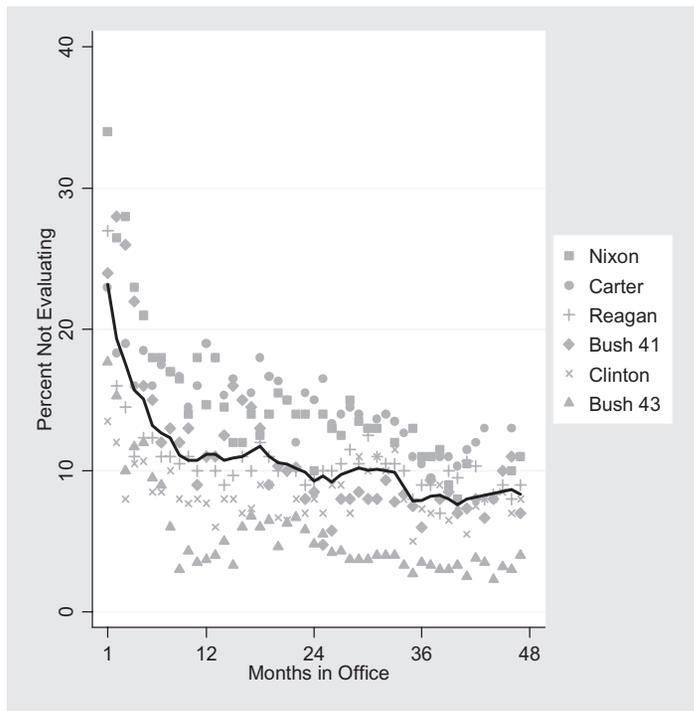


FIGURE 2. Uncertainty about Presidential Approval.

Note: The vertical axis is the percentage of monthly Gallup survey respondents who neither approve nor disapprove of the president's job performance.

to this general pattern of uncertainty reduction, we again see that the candidates who were successfully reelected—and who we later show are among the most polarizing—have the lowest levels of uncertainty throughout their term and at the time of their reelection bid.

Extensive research has shown that voters are more likely to vote for those candidates about whom they have greater certainty (e.g., Alvarez 1998), contributing to voters choosing the “devil they know.” As a consequence, the uncertainty reduction that comes as voters learn about a sitting president should offer an electoral advantage come reelection time. Comparing the evaluations of presidents seeking reelection finds lower levels of uncertainty for winning incumbents than for losers, whether looking at the NES (9.7% versus 13.5%) or Gallup (7.6% versus 10.7%) measures.<sup>9</sup>

The systematic learning effects we have identified seem to contribute to an electoral advantage for an incumbent president, yet until recently, there has also been limited

this correlation actually strengthens to  $-.90$ , indicating that the decline in uncertainty is not attributable to the honeymoon period. Looking at the trends for each president individually finds similar patterns.

9. The NES measure reports estimates from the reelection year survey and the Gallup measure averages responses in the last three months of the president's first term (to overlap the NES fielding period).

recognition or understanding of a presidential incumbency advantage.<sup>10</sup> The incumbency advantage had previously been studied primarily in the context of congressional races, with the advantage often attributed to the specifics of legislative office, including redistricting, pork barrel spending, and so on (Cox and Katz 2002). Indeed, following the one-term presidencies of Lyndon B. Johnson, Gerald Ford, and Jimmy Carter, many scholars and pundits concluded that incumbency was a disadvantage because “public expectations of the office were growing precipitously even as its institutional capacity to meet them was declining” (Hargrove and Nelson 1984, 189).

Yet the broader historical record offers evidence of a presidential incumbency advantage. Since 1900, 14 out of 19 presidents have won their reelection bids, a reelection rate of 73.7%.<sup>11</sup> This is only slightly below the 1946-2002 reelection rate of U.S. senators at 78.4%.<sup>12</sup> Recent research has found that incumbent presidents benefit from such things as unified party conventions, greater campaigning experience, the ability to control the agenda, and simply looking presidential (Campbell 2000; Mayhew 2008; Weisberg 2002). Our analysis suggests that the advantage an incumbent gets when he seeks a second term might also be attributable in part to the inevitable learning that occurs among individuals who were initially uncertain about him. Our findings offer additional evidence that incumbency success cannot be explained solely by the largess of legislative office, but is also a general phenomenon related to the electorate’s information and preferences.

## Polarization of Opinion

Because political predispositions govern exposure to and acceptance of messages about the president, we expect opinions about the incumbent to polarize among people with preexisting judgments. There are a multitude of predispositions that we might identify for evidence of such polarization of opinion: partisanship, issue preferences, ideology, or demographic indicators, among others (Zaller 1992). Within the electoral context, the most prominent is thought to be party identification. Party identification serves as a heuristic that provides a baseline evaluation of candidates who represent the two major parties. Citizens who share the president’s party affiliation are predisposed to support him, but partisanship also “serves as a filter through which changes in the environment are evaluated” (Ostrom and Simon 1988, 1011). For instance, Bartels (2002) finds that Republicans are more likely to believe the economy is going well under a Republican president, while Democrats are more likely to indicate that the economy is going well under a Democratic president. Although we rely on party identification to demonstrate the fundamentals of polarization, we might expect polarization defined by

10. One exception is Alvarez (1998), who shows that incumbents enjoy an advantage because of risk aversion within the electorate. Some presidential election forecasting models also imply an incumbency advantage. See Campbell (2000) for an extensive discussion.

11. If the analysis is limited to presidents who won their initial elections (e.g., not Gerald Ford), the rate is 10 out of 14, or 71%. Extending the analysis back to 1860, the reelection drops to 66%, still significantly better than chance.

12. This figure is computed from Table 1-17 of Stanley and Niemi (2003).

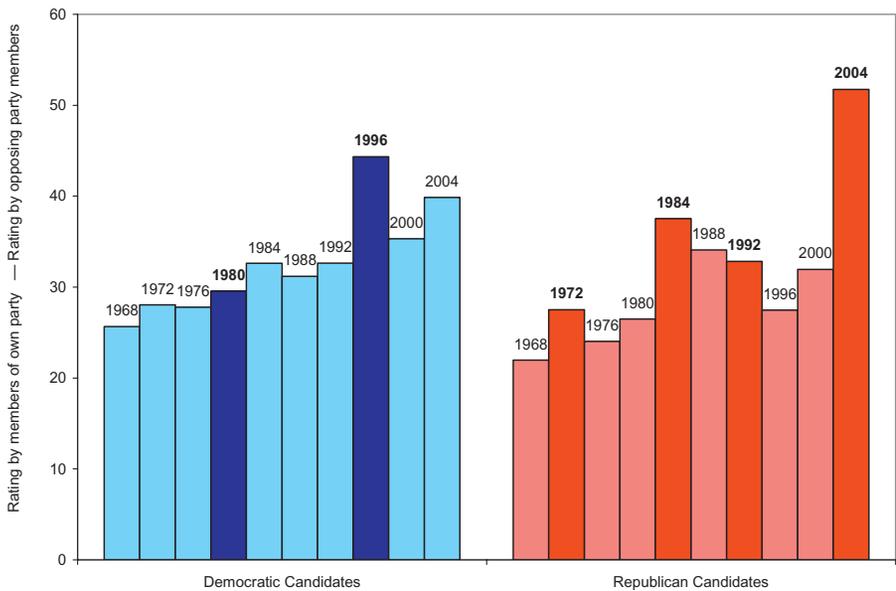


FIGURE 3. Partisan Gap in Thermometer Scores (1968-2004).

Note: Races with an incumbent candidate are in bold.

other predispositions as well. We expect that respondents with preexisting opinions of a president—whatever the source—should follow a similar pattern of biased processing, contributing to an inevitable increase in polarization of opinions about the sitting president by the end of his term.

Comparing thermometer ratings of incumbents in their first elections compared to their second elections for the six most recent American presidents shows initial evidence of polarization along partisan lines. For partisans of the same party as the president, the average thermometer rating increases from 76 to 79 degrees, while the ratings of out-party partisans decline from an average of 46 to 41 degrees. Although these are not enormous changes, keep in mind that they include two incumbents who lost their bids for reelection. Among only those presidents winning reelection in the last four decades, the partisans of the in-party increased their thermometer rating by an average of more than 7 degrees from the first to the second election, while partisans of the out-party reduced their rating by 7.5 degrees for an increase in polarization of 15 points in just four years.

In Figure 3, we graph a similar measure of partisan polarization, computed as the difference in a candidate's thermometer ratings between members of his own party and members of the opposition party. The figure shows that the partisan gap in thermometer ratings is typically greater when an incumbent runs for reelection compared to the previous election.<sup>13</sup> For example, the partisan gap around incumbent Bill Clinton in 1996

13. We find an identical trend when we look at a measure of partisan bias (partisans' ranking of their own candidate minus their ranking of the opposition candidate). In contests with an incumbent, the partisan bias increases relative to the previous election.

TABLE 3  
Partisan Gap in Thermometer Ratings (1968-2004)

	Democratic Candidates	Republican Candidates
Incumbent	4.12* (2.15)	8.20* (3.17)
Year counter	1.57* (.30)	1.81* (.54)
Constant	23.20* (1.87)	18.33* (3.43)
Number of cases	10	10
Adjusted $R^2$	.78	.52

Note: Data taken from Figure 3.

\*  $p < .05$ , one-tailed test.

was 44 degrees, an increase from a gap of 33 degrees when he ran as a challenger in 1992. Polarization of opinions of Bush was the highest ever recorded at 52 degrees. In contrast, his father, George H. W. Bush, was the only president for whom partisans were *less* polarized by the time of his reelection bid. On average, incumbents have a partisan gap in thermometer ratings of 37.3 degrees compared to 27.9 degrees for nonincumbents, a difference that is statistically significant at  $p < .05$ .

As an additional test of the relationship between incumbency and polarization, we regress the partisan gap in thermometer scores on two variables. We include an indicator variable for races with an incumbent running to test our contention that polarization is linked to incumbency. As a control, we include a year counter variable to capture any secular polarization over time (Hetherington 2001; Jacobson 2006).<sup>14</sup> As reported in Table 3, these variables are statistically significant and of the expected sign for candidates of both parties. The partisan gap has increased an average of 1.7 points each election year, but this gap jumps substantially more in incumbent reelection years. The average partisan gap grows about 4 points for Democratic incumbents, while the partisan gap increases twice that amount for Republican incumbents.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the oft-noted polarization of opinions of Bush in 2004 surely stems in part from his approach to governing, but it also reflects both a long-term secular increase in polarization of partisan evaluations of candidates and a short-term jump in polarization that comes as part of any president spending time in office. Based on the estimates in Table 3, roughly 25% of the partisan

14. Although there is some debate about the extent of polarization over time, the year counter serves as a strong control variable that makes it more difficult to discern an incumbency effect. Moreover, including a variable for incumbent opponent has no effect on the partisan gap, reinforcing the conclusion that polarization is occurring around the incumbent in office as opposed to presidential candidates in general.

15. The larger effect of incumbency for Republicans is partly driven by George W. Bush's administration. Removing 2004 from the analysis reduced the coefficient on *Incumbent* to 5.2, much closer to the Democratic estimate of 4.2. So even without George W. Bush included, polarization around Republican candidates increases about 5 points when an incumbent is running.

gap in thermometer ratings of President Bush in 2004 could be attributed to the average incumbency effect that is observed in every reelection campaign, rather than something unique to the Bush presidency.<sup>16</sup>

If polarization over the course of a presidency is at least partly attributable to an increase in information, or citizen learning, then we should find the sharpest changes in attitudes about an incumbent among those most attentive to political affairs.<sup>17</sup> Political awareness is thought to be the best measure of an individual's motivation to find or receive new information (Price and Zaller 1993). The most politically aware respondents should be exposed to more messages about the president, but should also be more selective about accepting messages that reinforce their predispositions.

Figure 4 reports the difference between Democratic and Republican ratings of presidential candidates in their first and second elections by levels of political awareness.<sup>18</sup> Each panel represents a different president, with dotted lines indicating the first victory and solid lines representing the reelection effort. As expected, the partisan gap in thermometer ratings of a president is largest among the most aware partisans. But the figure also indicates that the *change* in the gap between a first and second election increases the most among the highly aware. In other words, the most aware partisans start out more polarized, and they become even more polarized by the time of the reelection contest. Partisans of all awareness levels rate their own party's candidate more favorably than the opposing party candidate, but among the least aware, opinions do not change much from one election to the next. For instance, the least aware Republicans rated Reagan 28 degrees warmer than the least aware Democrats in 1980, and by 1984, the gap had increased only to 32 degrees. In contrast, the Reagan rating gap between the most aware Republicans and Democrats increased from 42 to 52 degrees. These findings fit nicely with current research that allows partisanship to have a variable affect on polarization depending on a respondent's sophistication and interest (Carsey and Layman 2006; Zaller 1992). Again, the exceptions to this pattern are Carter and George H. W. Bush, the two presidents in the sample who also failed to win second terms, offering additional evidence of the link between polarization and reelection success.

If we instead use strength of partisanship to gauge exposure to information about the president, we find a similar pattern. Strong partisans start out more supportive of their own party's candidates, and then to polarize further around the candidate in the second term. On average, strong partisans showed a partisan gap of 40.6 points in thermometer ratings of first term presidents, but a partisan gap of 50.9 points for candidates running for reelection. The opinions of weak partisans also polarized over the course a president's term, but to a much lesser extent. On average, weak partisans had

16. The year counter accounts for another 54% of the partisan gap, suggesting that Bush was characterized by 26% more polarization than we might have expected with another president.

17. One alternative explanation for the public's polarization in candidate evaluations is the possibility that the incumbents are in fact becoming more extreme while in office. As a rough test of this hypothesis, we compared the first- and second-term liberal-conservative ratings of Zaller (1999). Based on this admittedly imperfect measure, only one president became more extreme (George H. W. Bush), while two did not alter their positions (Carter and Clinton), and three became more moderate (Eisenhower, Nixon, and Reagan).

18. Political awareness is measured based on the interviewer rating, which others have found to be a valid indicator (Zaller 1992).

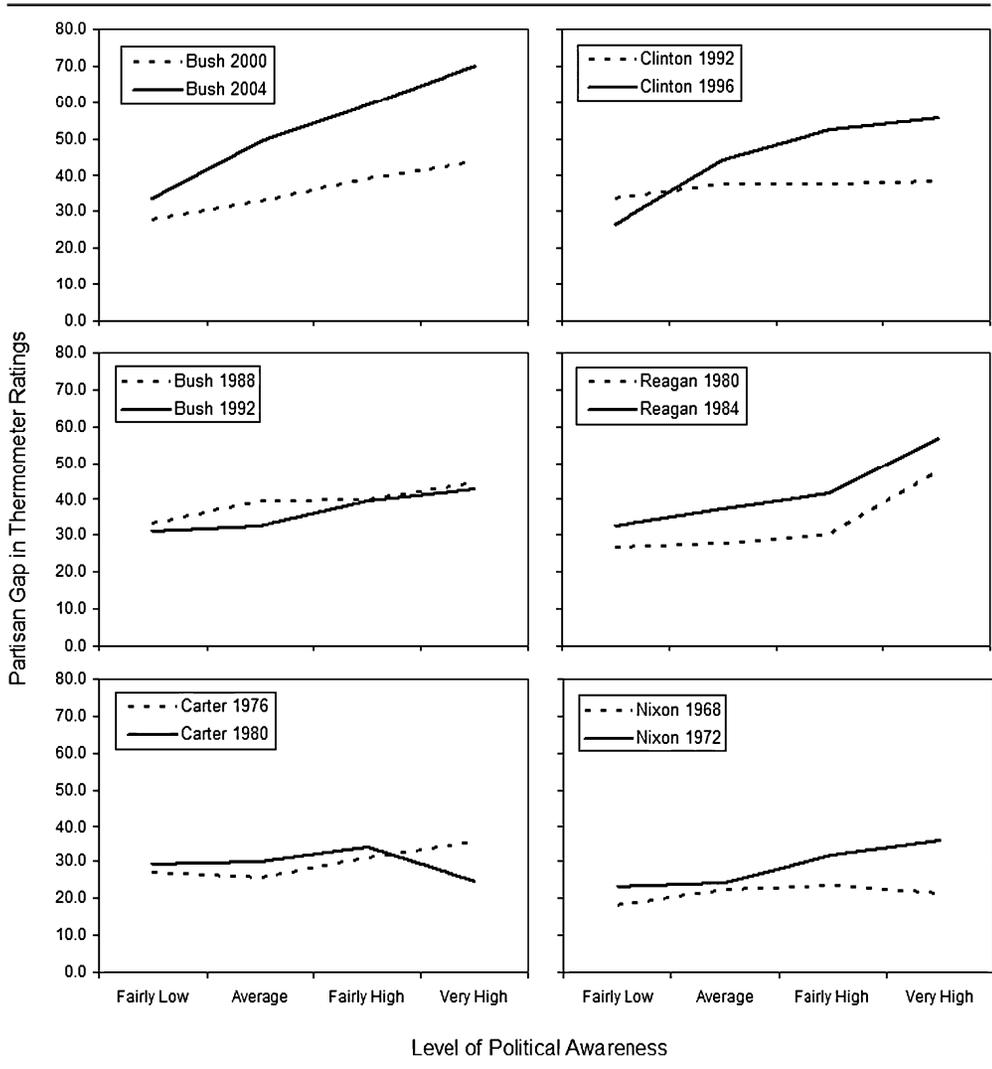


FIGURE 4. Polarization, Information, and Incumbency.

a partisan gap of 19.3 points in the thermometer rating of first term presidents, and a partisan gap of 25.4 points for candidate running for reelection.<sup>19</sup>

As the last in a series of more polarizing presidents, George W. Bush stands out for both the initial level of polarization and the historic rise relative to his first term. Bush might have accelerated partisan polarization through his actions in office, but the growing divide in opinions around the president is also a regular effect that holds for nearly every incumbent. The only exceptions to the polarization trend are those

19. As with the awareness findings, we find among strong partisans that the partisan gap for losing candidates (George H. W. Bush and Carter) actually declined slightly between the first and second elections, while the gap increased ever so slightly among weak partisans.

presidents who lost their reelection bids. It is ironic that polarization is most pronounced when a candidate wins reelection rather than when he loses.

## Conclusion

The conventional view of U.S. two-party politics suggests that moderation is the key to winning elections. Building on the influential work of Downs (1957), one would expect that candidates who moderate toward the center of the ideological spectrum would be most likely to win election (and reelection). On first blush, George W. Bush appears to run against this expectation. Despite being a “divider” rather than a “uniter,” he managed not only to win reelection in 2004, but also to increase his vote share over 2000. Our analysis shows that this counterintuitive connection between polarization and incumbent reelection is not limited to Bush, but rather stems from learning patterns that operate within nearly every presidential administration.

The empirical patterns that emerge from our analysis reveal that citizens continue to learn about the winning candidate after the campaign ends, and the information acquired has consequences for the subsequent for opinion change and formation. Our findings connect several public opinion theories and document regular empirical patterns that have previously been overlooked. Incumbent-centered learning appears to contribute to two predictable patterns of opinion change. Biased processing among partisans leads to a polarization of opinions toward the president because of biased assimilation of new information, while learning among those previously uncertain leads to the crystallization of opinions that, all else constant, tends to favor the incumbent candidate. When a president sought reelection, we found that uncertainty in the incumbent candidate’s evaluations drops by 7.7 percentage points, the partisan gap in these evaluations rises by 4-8 points, and open-ended comments about the incumbent rise by 25%. Moreover, overall levels of uncertainty are lower when an incumbent is running for reelection than in an open seat race. With these two distinct, but simultaneous, processes occurring within different subsets of the electorate, these patterns suggest that the learning that takes place during governing tends to provide a president with an advantage in the reelection contest and contribute to partisan polarization during the first term in office. It is striking that polarization increases under all presidents but tends to be greatest among those who were successfully reelected. And while these trends were particularly dramatic under George W. Bush, it appears that polarization occurs within almost every presidency.

Citizen learning is thus something of a double-edged sword. Voters do indeed gather more information about politics, widely viewed as a desirable outcome, but this comes at the expense of greater polarization. Even those without strong predispositions are biased learners, typically in favor of the incumbent. While political learning in the abstract might be touted by most political scientists who value civic engagement, scholars must also realize that most learning deviates systematically from a simple model of objective information gathering.

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