

Andrew J. Clarke* and Jeffery A. Jenkins*

Who are President Trump's Allies in the House of Representatives?

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Abstract: We conduct a preliminary analysis of the first 200 days of the Donald Trump presidency, to determine who his principal allies in the US House have been. We build our analysis around three groups of Republicans, based on caucus affiliations: members of the Republican Main Street Partnership (RMSP), the Republican Study Committee (RSC), and the House Freedom Caucus (HFC). We find that House Republicans, regardless of caucus membership, broadly support President Trump and largely shared in his electoral success. Yet, we also uncover suggestive evidence that the HFC is maneuvering into a position of influence with President Trump. Freedom Caucus members are more closely tied to his electoral performance than members of other conservative groups, and they appear to receive more time with the President relative to a comparable group of House Republicans. While these results are interesting, they are also initial and more time is needed to assess how President Trump builds a winning coalition with Republican House members.

Introduction

We are now over 200 days into the Donald Trump presidency, and Republicans are struggling to make good on their most salient campaign promises. Despite unified control of the federal government, the GOP has not been able to pass any pieces of legislation from the President's "Contract with the American Voter."¹ Why? Political observers frequently offer a pair of related explanations.

¹ This contract included six measures on corruption, seven protectionist positions, and five policies on security and the constitutional rule of law. NPR has created an annotated report of related executive actions here: <http://www.npr.org/2017/04/24/520159167/trumps-100-day-action-plan-annotated>.

***Corresponding authors:** **Andrew J. Clarke**, Assistant Professor, Department of Government and Law, Lafayette College, Easton, PA 18042-1780, USA, e-mail: clarkeaj@lafayette.edu; and **Jeffery A. Jenkins**, Provost Professor, Public Policy, Political Science, and Law; the Judith and John Bedrosian Chair of Governance and the Public Enterprise; and Director of the Bedrosian Center at the Sol Price School of Public Policy, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA 90089-0626, USA, e-mail: jajenkins@usc.edu

First, the federal government is only *nominally* unified. Republicans have an incredible opportunity to revise public policy, but organized blocs – particularly in the House – are fighting to pull the GOP in divergent directions. Moreover, the Senate majority is rather slim (pp. 52–48), rendering major policy revisions vulnerable to potent dilatory tactics, such as the filibuster. Unified government has stoked intra-party conflict, and as the dramatic effort to “repeal-and-replace” the Affordable Care Act illustrated, Republican leaders have struggled to confront significant fault lines within their coalition.

Internal Republican divisions are particularly damaging in an era of strong ideological polarization and partisan teamanship (Lee 2009, 2016). While party leaders in the mid-20th century may have been able to cross the aisle to secure the passage of important bills, the gulf between the two major political parties has widened both at the state and national level (McCarty and Shor 2015). Congressional polarization is, by leading accounts, at a historic high (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016). The cost of bipartisanship is simply too high for most legislators, and Democrats have been unified in their opposition to Republican initiatives in both the House and Senate.

Second, the executive branch is led by an anti-establishment president. Unlike most of his predecessors, Donald Trump was elected without strong ties to Republican elites. In fact, his position as a political outsider appeared to be a key element of his popular appeal. Moreover, his rhetoric seemed orthogonal to traditional conservative policy positions. Trump was the only GOP candidate to refuse to sign the Republican National Committee’s “loyalty pledge” in an August 2015 debate. And while he eventually ruled out a third-party spoiler campaign, Trump threatened to abandon the pledge throughout the 2016 primary race.² As the GOP’s standard bearer, moreover, he advanced protectionist and populist rhetoric despite the party’s support for pro-business and free-trade policy proposals.

Taken together, these two claims demand further consideration. Navigating the political skirmishes sure to develop over the coming months requires a careful examination of President Trump’s connection to conservative factions in Congress. As DiSalvo (2012) notes, “a president’s relation to factions within his party ... shapes his policy priorities, strategies, and governing tactics” (p. 114). Republicans must address differences within their own ranks if they are to secure significant legislative victories, but the head of their party is unusually set apart from the broader constellation of conservative elites. President Trump, according to his own domestic policy team, takes a “transactional” approach to legislative

² The full RNC “loyalty pledge” is here: <https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/2329448/republican.pdf>.

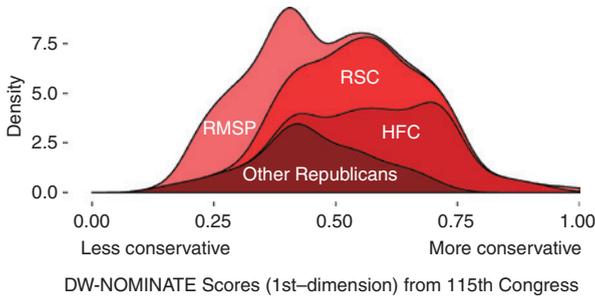


Figure 1: Distribution of Conservative Factions in the 115th Congress.

affairs; he is “not an establishment Republican,” and he defies the typical ideological framework adopted by most politicians.³ In short, the President, a self-described master of bargaining, will need to build bridges in Congress if he is to succeed.

In this article, we take a small step towards understanding the relationship between the White House and Republican factions in the House of Representatives. We begin with a discussion of three dominant Republican factions in the 115th Congress and their connections to the Trump administration. We then examine which representatives provide consistent support for the president in legislative affairs. Finally, we attempt to identify patterns in White House attention across conservative factions. These empirical patterns are meant to provide some preliminary answers to what we believe is an important question: who are President’s Trump’s principal congressional allies?

Three Important Groups

We first consider members of three groups of conservatives as potential Trump allies: the Republican Main Street Partnership (RMSP), the Republican Study Committee (RSC), and the House Freedom Caucus (HFC). Despite broad agreement among Republicans in the House, the RMSP, RSC, and HFC occupy distinct regions on the conservative half of the ideological spectrum. Figure 1, which presents a stacked density plot of Republicans serving in the 115th Congress, illustrates their differences. While there is significant overlap among members of the RSC and Republicans without faction affiliations, the RMSP and HFC have come

³ Blackwell Ken, quoted in “The Education of Donald Trump,” *Politico*, 27 Apr. 2017. <http://www.politico.com/story/2017/04/27/the-education-of-donald-trump-237669>.

to dominate the centrist and non-centrist tails of the party distribution, respectively.⁴ In what follows, we briefly introduce each group and describe President Trump's relations with prominent faction members to date.

The Republican Main Street Partnership represents the centrist members of the House GOP. Their mission is to serve as “the governing wing of the Republican Party,” with an emphasis on economic and national security policy.⁵ The RMSP includes the less formal “Tuesday Group,” with prominent leaders like Charlie Dent (PA-15) and Elise Stefanik (NY-21). The RMSP has been around for over 20 years, and provides moderate Republicans with important institutional support when they disagree with their more socially conservative co-partisans (Lucas and Deutchman 2007).

The RMSP represents a bloc of natural allies in many respects. The group frequently emphasizes infrastructure investment and tax reform, with regional strengths in the northeast. In fact, President Trump's first congressional endorsement came from the RMSP; following Jeb Bush's withdrawal from the 2016 primary, Chris Collins (NY-27) announced his support for a “chief executive, not a chief politician” and lauded Donald Trump's private sector experience.⁶ Moreover, Tom MacArthur (NJ-03) offered the amendment that resurrected the American Health Care Act in the House and provided an incremental victory for the White House.

On the other hand, several members of the RMSP have forcefully criticized the President. In some respects, the Trump presidency has divided the bloc of centrists, with faction leaders levying general and personal attacks. Following the release of the now-infamous Access Hollywood tapes, RMSP officials issued a formal statement denouncing Donald Trump's sexism.⁷ Charlie Dent has warned of an “illiberal populist” realignment in American politics, called Trump's proposed travel ban unfair, and ultimately refused to vote for Trump in the 2016 election.⁸ And in response to these attacks, the President claimed, in a Cabinet Room meeting, that Dent was “destroying the Republican Party.”⁹

⁴ The Republican Study Committee has overlapping rosters with the other two factions. In this figure, and all that follow, we code faction membership exclusively. RSC membership here indicates those legislators that are in the RSC and *only* the RSC, while members of the HFC and RSC are coded as HFC, for example.

⁵ <https://republicanmainstreet.org/>.

⁶ <http://www.cnn.com/2016/02/24/politics/congressman-chris-collins-endorses-donald-trump/index.html>.

⁷ <https://republicanmainstreet.org/statement-sarah-chamberlain-president-ceo-republican-main-street-partnership-regarding-donald-trumps-vulgar-comments/>.

⁸ <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/07/28/charlie-dent-profile-moderates-trump-tuesday-group-215417>.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Table 1: Former House Members in the Trump Administration.

Name	Position	Faction
Mike Pence	Vice President	RSC
Ryan Zinke	Secretary of the Interior	RMSP
Tom Price	Secretary of HHS	RSC
Mike Pompeo	Director of the CIA	RSC
Mick Mulvaney	Director of the OMB	HFC

By contrast, the Republican Study Committee has maintained a relatively low profile. Their quiet disposition towards the White House reflects the size and variation among their ranks. The RSC formed in the 1970s to offset what they perceived to be a moderate Nixon administration. As one of the oldest factions still operating in the House, the RSC constructed a research-oriented organization that reflected the most successful sub-party institution in its day (the Democratic Study Group). The organization is aptly named, as it places great emphasis on legislative bulletins and public policy memos circulated widely on Capitol Hill. The modern RSC is less combative than other conservative blocs in the House, and many view the organization as an informal extension of the GOP leadership team.

Nevertheless, the RSC has managed to secure key administration positions. As Table 1 shows, the RSC has strong allies in Vice President Pence, Secretary Price (HHS), and Director Pompeo (CIA).¹⁰ Pence and Price even served as RSC Chairmen in the 109th and 111th Congresses, respectively. Director Mulvaney was a prominent member of the RSC for many years, only leaving the organization after losing a hotly contested RSC leadership race to Bill Flores (TX-17) in 2014. No other faction can claim to have ties so important and deep in the Executive branch. Still, the Republican Study Committee is a large and loosely disciplined organization. President Trump may have key RSC allies on hand, but it is not clear that the RSC can be effectively mobilized to support the President's agenda.

The House Freedom Caucus represents a smaller, more cohesive bloc of conservatives. The HFC formed as a splinter group to the Republican Study Committee on January 26th, 2015, and quickly distinguished itself from prior attempts to form organized conservative blocs in the Republican Conference.

¹⁰ We use the May 11th list of administration officials provided by *The New York Times* (https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/us/politics/donald-trump-administration.html?_r=1). Dan Coats, who served in the House from 1981 to 1989, is excluded from this list as we lack faction data for this period.

Unlike the short-lived Tea Party Caucus, the HFC requires much of their members. HFC members must attend meetings, pay dues, and vote as a bloc if 80% of the organization is in agreement. The HFC is also distinct from the enduring RSC model by imposing tight control over its membership. Candidates are thoroughly vetted and must secure sponsorship from a current member before joining the HFC, and uncooperative members may be removed from the organization's ranks.

These institutional features make the Freedom Caucus an appealing partner in legislative negotiations. Leaders of the organization can credibly signal a unified bloc of conservative votes in a way that other groups cannot, and after being formally courted by then-candidate Trump, several members of the HFC came out as strong supporters of the President.¹¹ And the Freedom Caucus appears to have had some early success in influencing executive branch policy making. For example, HFC co-founder and budget hawk Mick Mulvaney (SC-05) managed to secure a critical appointment to the Office of Management and Budget (see Table 1). And former member Scott Garrett (NJ-05) is President Trump's nominee to run the Export-Import Bank after supporting a Freedom Caucus attempt to let the bank's charter expire in 2015.¹² The Freedom Caucus is thus well positioned to reduce the size of the federal government.

The HFC's capacity to coordinate in opposition to the GOP's legislative agenda has also strained relations with President Trump. As the American Health Care Act appeared to unravel in the House, the President used Twitter to attack the Freedom Caucus for saving Planned Parenthood, maintaining the Affordable Care Act, and obstructing tax reform. The President identified HFC leaders, by name, as enemies of his legislative agenda, and privately threatened members [e.g. Mark Sanford (SC-01)] with electoral pressure. The hostile relations between the Freedom Caucus and the Trump administration culminated in a startling, public threat to back primary challengers in 2018 if they continued to hold out on health care – a threat reminiscent of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1938 purge campaign (Price and Boskin 1966; Milkis 1985; Dunn 2010).

In short, there is reason to suspect that Trump may favor any of the three dominant GOP factions as he attempts to build alliances in the House. We turn next to descriptive analyses of electoral and legislative data in the hopes of identifying more systematic patterns of support for the President.

¹¹ "Trump campaign reaches out to Freedom Caucus," *Politico*, 11 May 2016, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/05/trump-freedom-caucus-223065>.

¹² As of September 2017, Garrett has still not received Senate confirmation.

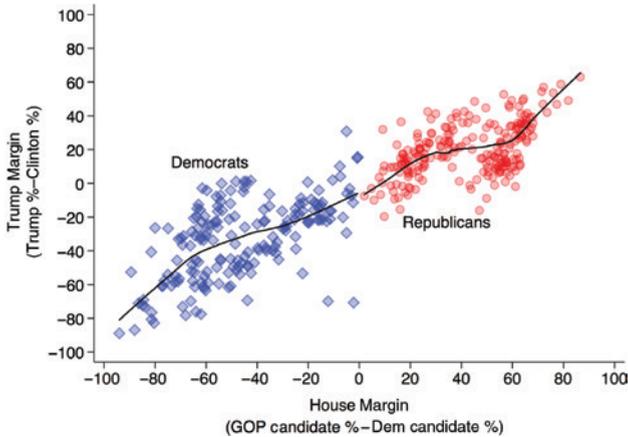


Figure 2: Congressional and Presidential Margin of Victory in House Districts.

Who Supports Trump?

We begin by identifying the electoral conditions that might encourage support for President Trump. Electoral returns from the 2016 campaign were collected in two steps. First, we use Trump's district-level margin of victory as presented by FiveThirtyEight.¹³ The "Trump Margin" subtracts Hillary Clinton's vote share from Donald Trump's vote share in each congressional district. Positive values indicate electoral terrain more favorable to the President. Second, we identify each congressional incumbent's margin of victory. We supplement congressional election returns scraped by David Taylor,¹⁴ with special elections provided by Ballotpedia.¹⁵ We subtract the Democratic candidate's vote share from the Republican candidate's vote share to create a comparable "House Margin" variable. This measure is also increasing in support for the Republican candidate.

Figure 2 plots the presidential two-party margin of victory against that of the House, excluding uncontested general elections. Two distinct Locally Weighted Scatterplot Smoothing (LOWESS) plots are added to the scatter plots. This figure shows that Trump's electoral success is, unsurprisingly, highly correlated with the margin of victory in House races (0.86, $p < 0.01$). President Trump's success increases – in a largely linear fashion – with the level of Republican support in House races.

¹³ <http://fivethirtyeight.com/>.

¹⁴ https://github.com/Proofreader/election_2016_data.

¹⁵ https://ballotpedia.org/United_States_House_of_Representatives.

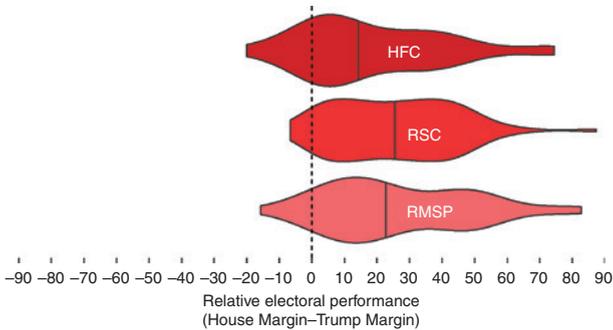


Figure 3: Relative Electoral Performance by Conservative Faction.

We combine these two indicators of electoral success to create a new variable that estimates differences in district-level popularity. We subtract the Trump Margin from the House Margin as a proxy for each representative’s incentive to support the President. Negative values of this “Relative Electoral Performance” variable indicate House candidates that under-performed President Trump in their congressional district.

Figure 3 illustrates the distribution and median Relative Electoral Performance of the three primary factions in the Republican Conference. In each of these three “violin” plots, the solid line within each caucus represents the group’s median Relative Electoral Performance, while the overall shape provides the full distribution of faction members. Values at the dashed line indicate a congressional district in which the House GOP candidate beat his or her Democratic opponent by the same margin that Trump defeated Clinton in that district. As the plots indicate, each group of incumbents generally outperformed Trump, with a small share of faction members under-performing the President. Among the three groups, the HFC appears most closely linked to the President’s electoral support. Nevertheless, votes cast in 2016 may ultimately prove to be a poor proxy for current levels of district support.

How do these electoral conditions translate to legislative support of the President’s agenda? In Figure 4, we plot Republicans’ relative electoral performance against one measure of support for President Trump’s public policy preferences. We measure the President’s presidential support using FiveThirtyEight’s “Trump Score.”¹⁶ The Trump Score indicates the number of votes a legislator has cast in support of the President’s position divided by the total number of votes a legislator

¹⁶ “Tracking Congress In The Age of Trump,” FiveThirtyEight: <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/congress-trump-score/>.

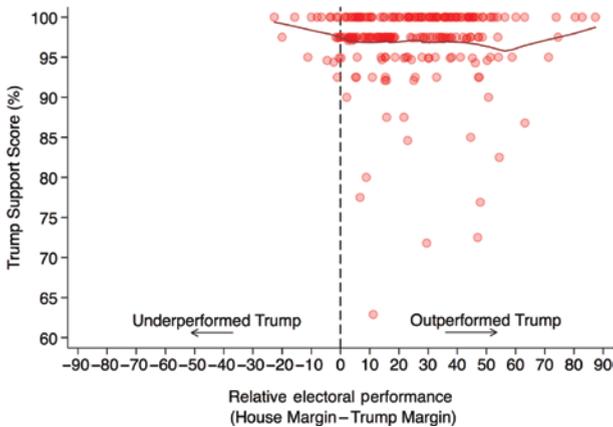


Figure 4: Relative Electoral Performance and Support for President Trump.

has cast (among votes with a known Trump position). This percentage provides a running, individual-level measurement of legislative support for the President's legislative agenda.¹⁷ These data were collected through August 2nd. While there is variation within the Republican Conference, the LOWESS trend is relatively flat, indicating little relationship between a legislator's relative electoral performance and legislative support.

We next pair FiveThirtyEight's Trump Support Score with the revealed preferences of lawmakers to understand the relationship between political ideology and legislative support for the President. In Figure 5, we plot the Trump Score against first dimension DW-NOMINATE Scores from the previous (114th) Congress.¹⁸ In so doing, we restrict our analysis to incumbent House members. Lagging this variable is necessary, as votes cast in the calculation of contemporary NOMINATE scores are also present in the Trump Scores. Figure 5 once again combines scatter plots with LOWESS trends; legislative support for the President is increasing on the Y-axis, and prior conservatism is increasing on the X-axis.

Unsurprisingly, President Trump received little legislative support from Democrats. While Trump support does appear to increase as one moves towards the center of the ideological spectrum, the average level of Trump Support among Democrats is just over 14%. Bonnie Watson Coleman (NJ-12) had the lowest support score at 2.5%, while only two Democrats – Henry Cuellar (TX-28) and Collin Clark Peterson (MN-07) – had scores above 50%.

¹⁷ Missing votes are excluded from both numerator and denominator. Additional details about this score can be found here: <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/introducing-the-trump-score/>.

¹⁸ For more on NOMINATE scores, see Poole and Rosenthal (2007).

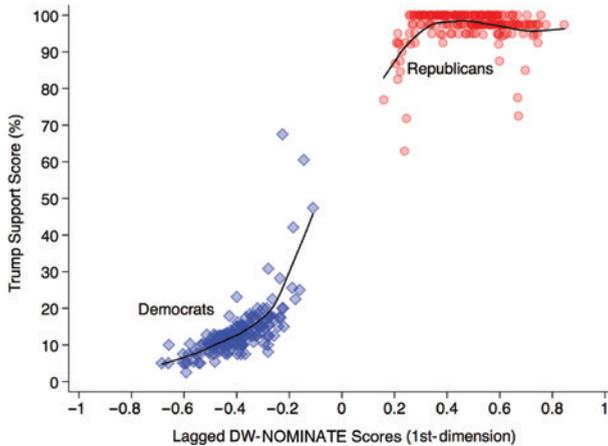


Figure 5: Legislative Support for President Trump Among House Members.

Republicans also follow a largely predictable pattern of support. The average Republican had a Trump Support score of 97%, with 99 lawmakers providing perfect support for the President. Interestingly, we see dissension among centrist *and* non-centrist Republicans. For example, two of the three least supportive Republicans were from competing factions; Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (FL-27) is a member of the Main Street Partnership, while Justin Amash (MI-03) is a founding member of the House Freedom Caucus and a vocal opponent of the President.¹⁹ Despite this “ends-against-the-middle” dynamic, Republicans have provided solid support for President Trump. The least supportive GOP lawmaker (Walter Jones, NC-03) still maintained a Trump Score of roughly 63%.

The most obvious – and least interesting – take away from Figure 5 is that President Trump will need to look to the Republican Conference to find allies. These patterns suggest that rank-and-file Republicans are his most solid supporters, but nearly every Republican has offered extensive support to date.

Taken together, these analyses provide a collection of interesting observations. The electoral circumstances of GOP House members are clearly related to the President’s success in 2016, but by and large, incumbents outperformed Trump in their districts. While we may be able to glean that the HFC is most closely tied to Trump in electoral politics, notable members proved to be outliers in offering significantly lower support for the President’s legislative agenda. Finally, the

¹⁹ Amash is also the leader of the House Liberty Caucus, a libertarian group of Republicans that has great overlap with the roster of the Freedom Caucus.

President enjoys broad support among Republicans in the House, and *still* failed to deliver on virtually all of his key policy proposals in the first 200 days of his administration.

Who Does Trump Support?

We turn next to an analysis of President's Trump support for members of Congress. Measuring presidential support for lawmakers is complicated. Unlike the prior analyses, we cannot simply count presidential actions in support of each individual lawmaker's legislative agenda. Nevertheless, we can use best-available proxies to glean which lawmakers receive a disproportionate amount of attention from the President.

Towards this end, we begin by coding all House members' interactions with the President using Politico's "Unauthorized White House Visitor Logs."²⁰ This measure "includes executive order signings, White House meetings, public appearances, phone calls and interactions at Mar-a-Lago."²¹ Superficial interactions (e.g. the White House Easter Egg Roll) were excluded from this measure, and data was collected through August 1st, 2017. Approximately 46% of the Republican Conference has received no face time with President Trump. By contrast, the three Republicans who received the most face time are the top GOP leaders in the House: Speaker Paul Ryan, Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, and Majority Whip Steve Scalise. Using these data, we create a dichotomous measure we refer to as Trump Visit.

Does membership in a conservative faction increase the likelihood of spending time with the President? To estimate the importance of faction affiliation, we begin by approximating a "control" group of Republicans that are similar *except* for their faction affiliations. More specifically, we employ a coarsened exact matching algorithm (Iacus, King, and Porro 2012) to prune observations that significantly diverge from faction members in their electoral conditions (the Trump Margin in 2016), prior legislative behavior (DW-NOMINATE Scores in the 114th Congress), party leadership status, and any overlapping faction affiliation.²² As an example, this process allows us to compare Freedom Caucus members to

²⁰ <http://www.politico.com/interactives/databases/trump-white-house-visitor-logs-and-records/index.html>.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² For example, the House Freedom Caucus matches on membership in the Republican Study Committee or Republican Main Street Partnership.

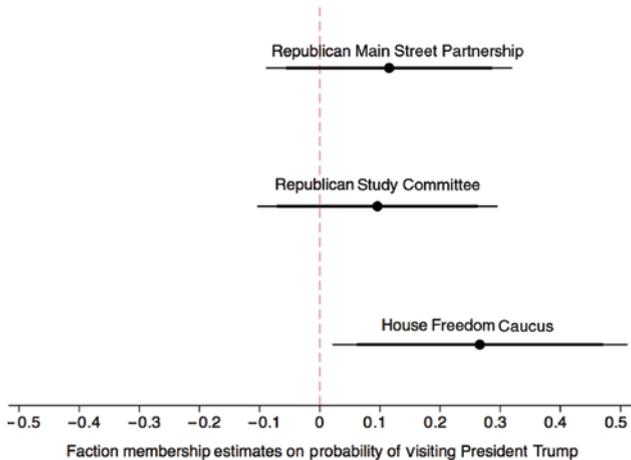


Figure 6: Faction Affiliation and Face Time with President Trump.

non-Freedom Caucus members with similar electoral constraints, institutional power, and prior vote history. We then estimate three linear probability models in which Trump Visit is regressed on membership in the RMSP, RSC, or HFC.²³ Coefficients from these three, distinct models are plotted with 95 and 90% confidence intervals in Figure 6.

The results suggest that, after accounting for several possible confounding variables, membership in the House Freedom Caucus increases the probability of receiving face time with President Trump. By contrast, membership in the RMSP and RSC produces no such relationship. These findings suggest that the Freedom Caucus enables its members to more effectively communicate their policy preferences with the President.

There are, however, a few important caveats to consider when interpreting these models. First, our empirical strategy attempts to address some obvious confounding variables, but this study lacks a more powerful causal identification strategy. The results are thus better interpreted as associational evidence. Second, we believe these estimates provide a snapshot of the relationship between faction affiliation and White House attention, and as any casual observer of American politics knows, the President's actions occur in a dynamic political landscape. We say nothing here of changes in faction favor over the course of the last 200 days. Third, and finally, it is difficult to interpret the substantive nature

²³ Results are similar in a logistic regression models with the weights from the coarsened exact matching process. We employ linear probability models for ease of interpretation.

of a visit with President Trump. It is possible that the White House is curating a mutually beneficial relationship with the Freedom Caucus. It is also possible that these visits are a direct result of the faction's obstructionist politics in the House. While we cannot distinguish these competing interpretations, we maintain that the opportunity to communicate directly with the President of the United States is valuable to all legislators at some level.

Conclusion

Who are Trump's allies in the House? It is difficult to give a single answer to this important question. Republicans broadly support the president and largely shared in the President's electoral success. It is possible that the Freedom Caucus is maneuvering into a position of influence with the President. The group is more closely tied to President Trump's electoral performance than other conservative groups, and Freedom Caucus members seem to receive more time with the president relative to a comparable group of House Republicans. Nevertheless, these data are suggestive at best, and the President's contentious primary threats directed towards the bloc of conservatives should not be dismissed lightly.

After a series of descriptive, quantitative analyses, we do not believe that the President has clearly aligned himself with any one type of Republican in the House. As a result, the GOP is currently led by a president that lacks a power center in a fractured Republican Conference. President Trump's lack of ties to any one faction within the GOP means that the legislative affairs operation in the White House remains something of an open book. This may allow the President to serve as a neutral party in the midst of intraparty disputes. If, as some claim, President Trump is agnostic to the substance of any potential political success, then his lack of ties to any conservative bloc may improve his capacity to broker deals.

The White House may be able to convert the President's ideological ambivalence into a position of strength at the House bargaining table, but his Senate prospects appear to be crumbling. The President and Majority Leader Mitch McConnell are reportedly no longer speaking, after a profanity laced phone call and several hostile tweets.²⁴ Trump also appears confident in his capacity to use primary challengers to cow obstinate co-partisans, as the simmering

²⁴ <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/450788/donald-trump-mitch-mcconnell-republican-congress-arizona-jeff-flake-kelli-ward-legislative-agenda-stalled>.

proxy war in Jeff Flake's (AZ) re-election campaign suggests.²⁵ A divided Senate Republican caucus would sink most, if not all, of the President's campaign promises.

It is possible Trump values political enemies more than allies in his pursuit of re-election; legislative success may be a secondary objective in the President's political calculations. But running against one's party is unprecedented for a modern president. The only individuals who have tried such a strategy were John Tyler and Andrew Johnson in the 19th century. During their time in office, Tyler and Johnson had become pariahs from their respective parties (the Whigs and Republicans), and sought to realign existing partisan forces for their own reelection benefit. Neither was successful.²⁶ Whatever President Trump's strategy may be, congressional Republicans are in for a challenging couple of years. Having secured the full legislative power of the federal government, they now face the daunting task of preserving a fractured coalition in the House and overcoming publicly advertised disagreements with the White House.

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²⁵ Trump has reason to believe that primary threats would be effective. Loyalty to the President is an increasingly common component of campaign rhetoric in contested GOP races: <http://www.politico.com/story/2017/08/21/trump-republicans-loyalty-arizona-241861?cmpid=sf>.

²⁶ In fact, Tyler and Johnson's strategies were such dismal failures that they were not even candidates in the general election (1844 and 1868, respectively). Interestingly, Tyler and Johnson only reached the White House because of assassinations – they were Vice Presidential candidates chosen to broaden a national ticket. Only when William Henry Harrison and Abraham Lincoln were murdered did Tyler and Johnson ascend to the Presidency, and only then was it clear how out of step they were with the mainstream elements in their respective parties.

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