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# Divided Scholarship Over Divided Government: Why do the President and Congress Seem Unable to Work Together?

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Divided Scholarship over Divided Government: Why Do the President and Congress Seem  
Unable to Work Together?

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*David Mayhew's book *Divided We Govern* (1991, 2005) has profoundly affected the way political scientists not only study but also understand "divided government" in American national politics. By analyzing hundreds of congressional statutes enacted during periods of both divided and unified government, Mayhew showed that divided government is not as bad as often thought. The scholarly response to Mayhew's book has continued to reshape how divided government is perceived and studied by considering the role of other aspects of our political system that Mayhew overlooked, such as the formation of party coalitions in times of divided and unified government, the recent polarization both within and between the Democratic and Republican parties, and the impact of individual actors—particularly the president—on legislative productivity. The scholarly literature on divided government can help us to understand better the current political impasse in Washington, D.C. where a Democratic president and a Republican-controlled Congress battle over rival policy agendas. Is the gridlock and limited legislative output the result of divided government, party polarization, or ineffective executive and legislative leadership? My project seeks to answer this question by analyzing the evolving literature on divided government.*

David Mayhew's *Divided We Govern* has profoundly affected the way political scholars not only view divided government but also research. The past six decades of academic study has explored the causes of divided government by analyzing political parties, presidents, Congressional coalitions, and public mood. However, Mayhew raised the question of whether divided government is really as bad as widely thought. The groundbreaking answer he came to through analyzing hundreds of pieces of legislation was a simple 'no.' He based his findings on the minimal difference in legislative output seen from divided government and unified government. He conducted a study of 267 pieces of legislation passed by unified and divided governments, in that study he concluded divided and unified governments produce very similar amounts of legislation. This suggests something else may be the greater cause of gridlock. The scholarly work that resulted from Mayhew's original work in 1991 has been important in changing how divided government is perceived and studied by political scientists.

A scholar challenging the accepted belief that divided government was ineffective opened the floodgates of perspectives in relation to the phenomenon. Immediately there were

political scientists jumping at their chance to delve further into divided government in the United States. Mayhew's book sparked responses from numerous political scientists. The sheer possibility that Mayhew may have been on to something led to a plethora of studies looking at different explanations for what divided government really resulted in. Gregory Thorson (1998) took Mayhew's (2005) work one step further and looked beyond the amount of legislation produced. Thorson asserted that divided government affects the legislative coalition building processes involved in creating policy regardless of the number of policies enacted. Divided government can present legislators with uncertainty and lead them to coagulate differently when their party is in the majority than in the minority. A Democrat in a unified system under Democratic control has the power of the party behind him/her and does not need help from Republicans to pass legislation. However, in that same instance a Republican must alter his/her coalitions in response to being in the minority party (Thorson, 1998). Another study in response to Mayhew is Sarah Binder's (Binder 1999) study that challenges how the political parties cooperate within their own party. Rather than challenge how the different political parties cooperate, she challenged the political parties themselves and how they cooperate among their own in order to produce policy under divided and unified government (Binder 1999). A third response to Mayhew's work comes from a collaboration of scholars. George Edwards III, Andrew Barret, and Jeffrey Peake analyze the impact a president can have on the success, and failure of policy proposals. They also inspect the presidents' impact under divided government opposed to unified government (Barret, Edwards, and Peake 1997). Lastly, John Coleman (Coleman 1999) studies the impact divided government has on party responsiveness to public mood. He explores the possibility that although divided government can produce similar

amounts of legislation as unified government, it cannot react to the voter as quickly as unified government.

These four studies mentioned are examples of the impact Mayhew's work has had on the academic community surrounding American government, particularly divided government. It led to not only questions being asked that not only introduced new ideas but also forced scholars to question whether divided government was good or bad. The mere concept of divided government encompasses not only the parties and branches involved but also the individual actors involved. Whether it is political parties, presidents, congressional coalitions, or public opinion, scholars are asking questions related to divided government. These four different factors effect legislative output and do so differently under divided and unified government. Examining the relationships between these actors and legislative output can provide insight as to why gridlock occurs and under political climate it is most detrimental to policy production.

### **Divided We Govern- David Mayhew**

David Mayhew, an American political scientist, went against the grain when he proclaimed there was little to no difference between a divided government's ability to forge legislation and a unified government's ability to do so. His book *Divided We Govern* explores the possibility of divided government being equally effective as party government by analyzing the amount of significant legislation produced from 1946 to 2002. The 56-year period is broken into 28 different Congresses (every two years) by being classified as either divided government or unified government. Mayhew defines divided government, perhaps too simply, as both political parties having control of either the legislative or executive branch. He then conducts

“sweeps” of each Congressional session and identifies the significant legislation from each period. *Divided We Govern* tests conventional wisdom and studies that believed party government (unified government) was the most effective means of passing legislation.

In order to analyze Mayhew’s work with regard to the legislation passed, it is critical to understand what he classifies as significant legislation. He combs through all the significant laws passed by Congress throughout the 56-year period with what is referred to as two “sweeps.” The first sweep is done by examining journalists’ annual end-of-session wrap-up stories written in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* (Mayhew 2005, 37). These pieces thoroughly studied each Congress’s effectiveness and covered pieces of legislation by analyzing these well written probes of each Congress. Mayhew was able to determine which laws passed by Congress were worthy of being labelled significant and ultimately included in his study. This first sweep (Sweep One) essentially targeted what legislation the average person thought to be important (Mayhew 2005, 40). Sweep two took a different approach when determining what was considered to be significant legislation. Mayhew relied on retrospective evaluations of policy experts in relation to the actual effectiveness of legislation. “By drawing on the long-term perspectives of policy specialists about what enactments have counted most in their areas, it adds a dimension of expertise.... It pursues the effects of laws, not the promise attached to them when they were passed” (Mayhew 2005, 44). This “sweep” relies on the political scientists. Finally, Mayhew blends the two “sweeps” results together by using the acts that appear in both “sweeps”, as well as other acts he considers to be significant. This produces a list of 267 acts passed by Congress from 1946 to 2002 that were either significant in the eyes of the public, experts, or both.

Mayhew’s findings are significant because they raise numerous questions about our system of government, political parties, and divided government. If anything can be taken from

Mayhew's work it is this: divided government and unified government have both proven to be effective means of producing policy as well as ineffective means of producing policy. While the sheer number of acts and policies produced is surprisingly similar, there are a number of other points pertaining to unified and party government that Mayhew raises. The first is how divided government is capable of passing equal numbers of legislation compared with unified government. "If all 267 laws are counted equally, the nine "unified" two-year segments average 12.8 acts, the thirteen "divided" segments average 11.7" (Mayhew 2005, 76). While the average over the 56-year period is similar, the ebb and flow of policy production over the 56-year period varies greatly in relation to who was president. It is difficult to understand how one presidential time period could average 7.8 pieces of legislation per session in Congress, while another is capable of averaging 18.5 pieces of legislation (Mayhew 2005, 76). Not only do these numbers fluctuate frequently throughout the years but divided government has little relation to these averages. Analyzing the effects of other actors, such as political parties, particular presidents and Congressional leaders, and public opinion, will help grasp the legislative process and what affects it. Understanding that a president must cooperate with not only Congress, but also the dynamics of political parties.

Mayhew delves into this question substantially in *Divided We Govern*. He attacks the influence of certain policy areas, how the parties can affect their respective members in Congress, ideology, public opinion, and societal issues. All of these aspects modify how policy is produced but some may have more of an impact on policy production than one would think. First, the remarkable effect a policy agenda can have on an administration and Congress's ability to create legislation cannot be understated. Regardless of the parties, president, or anything else, a good agenda that everyone can get behind is a simple way to generate popularity and support.

Combining this with a time period that is open to change (such as Johnson's Great Society in the 1960s) as well as a leader capable of inspiring people, legislation will flow regardless of party or divided government. Beyond a workable agenda that avoids controversy and partisan splits, a true leader can also spur legislation. Reagan was proof of this in the 1980s when he led an economic revolution. "Very few Presidents can claim legislative triumphs that are truly turning points in domestic policy... Ronald Reagan could claim such a breakthrough in 1981. Like Johnson, but unlike Truman or Kennedy, Reagan won the major legislation he asked for" (Mayhew 2005, 93). This is another instance in which there is a conundrum pertaining to divided and unified government; two presidents working with unified government (Truman and Kennedy) failed to reach their lofty goals, but two presidents (Johnson and Reagan) were able to side-step the alleged impediment of divided government. Attributing the victories solely up the Johnson and Reagan administrations would be a hasty mistake. They were attacking different issues at different time periods with different types of parties controlling Congress. Reagan enjoyed the luxury of having a cluster of Democrats in Congress more than willing to aid his proposals' passage. Kennedy and Truman perhaps paved the way for Johnson's success by initiating the fight for civil rights, education, and environmental programs by battling their Democratic Congress throughout their terms. The point is that it is too simple to declare divided government good or bad. It is a complex thing that can be fueled or derailed by parties, prominent leaders, or workable policy that is simply less controversial. While Mayhew's work is profound, it raises questions about how our government interacts among the different branches and agencies as well as in relation to party lines.

The way the Democratic and Republican Parties interact is crucial to analyzing divided and unified government. How does a unified government produce significantly less legislation

than a divided government? After all, they are a part of the same organization and identify with the same political party. The issue may lie within each respective party and its ideology. For example, the Southern Democrats' defection because of the Civil Rights movement during the Truman and Kennedy administrations hurt the progress of the Democratic Party as a unit. This is an example of division within the party that can be seen in present day politics. The ideological splits within the parties themselves can be more detrimental than anything else. Whether it is the Tea Party polarizing the Republican Party or ultra-liberal Democrats doing the same, a polarized party that cannot work together will simply cripple itself throughout the primary elections or on the floor of Congress as the Southern Democrats did for so long. Mayhew showed at least one thing: divided government is perhaps the least of our problems. Identifying the true factors that cause our government to shut down and also what creates legislation is imperative to creating a system that can work. Whether that means finding people with the passion and charisma required to pull the two polarized parties together, crafting a workable agenda that moves policy in a direction, or simply identifying issues in society and generating public support, is yet to be determined. By studying other scholars work related to the president, Congressional coalitions, party polarization, and public mood, we can learn what really affects legislative output. Yes, Mayhew has established that divided government and unified government produce similar amounts of legislation, but I want to know why. There are other factors affecting legislative output to varying extents at different points in time. Deciphering the most influential can help voters—as well as everyone involved—understand the nuances of divided and unified government. This, in turn, can lead to appreciating legislative successes and recognizing there are multiple actors responsible for the lack of policy production.

First, we must address why these scholars were chosen when there are plenty of works out there in response to David Mayhew's *Divided We Govern*. The current state of American government and the public perception of its purpose in recent years influenced the choice of articles. They all relate to each other in one way or another: the president, Congress, and political parties are interrelated. To the average citizen who watching the nightly news, there is simply a dysfunctional government whose parts cannot cooperate with one another. However, these scholars highlight the biggest issue with public perception; many citizens are naïve, uninformed, and do not understand the structure of their very own government. Some presidents have worked with their opponents, while others did not. Still, a president who can work with an opposition party may face a Congress unwilling to approve legislation it does not fully agree with. Congress and the president are both capable of single handedly stalling agendas and legislation regardless of how effective their opposition is. Additionally, the make-up of the political parties can change the dynamic of both institutions. A party willing to cooperate with the other undoubtedly affects how effectively policy can be produced, but what if the parties cannot cooperate internally? Party polarization is rampant in today's political environment and greatly affects how all these moving parts work before divided government is even considered. The scholarly articles reviewed here examine the interactions of all these working parts and effectively consider other options and possibilities while testing their hypotheses.

### **Party Polarization and Legislative Gridlock**

A particular scholar's response to David Mayhew's work was done by Sarah A. Binder. She examines the relationship among intra-branch conflict, party polarization, and policy stalemate. Like Mayhew, she used the *New York Times* to decipher a list of issues pertaining to

each two-year Congressional period from 1947 to 1996. She then determined the number of times the issue was mentioned in *New York Times* editorials along with the ultimate fate of the issue. Lastly, she calculated the gridlock score by determining the number of issues on the agenda for an administration and whether it was resolved. Her findings were mixed but significant. She shows that divided government does induce more gridlock within the national government, but she also recognizes divided government can still produce similar amounts of legislation (Binder 1999, 527). Furthermore, she looks into the issue of partisan polarization and ideological diversity.

Despite the faith of responsible party advocates in cohesive political parties, the results here suggest that policy change is less likely as the parties become more polarized and the percentage of moderate legislators shrinks. Clearly, there are limits to the power of political parties to break policy deadlock. Indeed, it appears that intense polarization can be counterproductive to fostering policy change. (Binder 1999, 527)

While it is easy to simply blame either the Democrats or Republicans for gridlock, the situation is much more complicated than that. Party polarization forces Democrats and Republicans to respond appropriately in order to remain in office. This could mean going further left, right, or center depending upon their political climate. The fact is that splintering among the parties and the party ideologies are detrimental to a government's ability to produce policy legislation. For example Reagan was able to navigate numerous pieces of significant legislation through divided government due to the support he received from Southern Democrats while other presidents could not pass a note to the Speaker with unified government. This raises the question of what truly is the problem with our government and its tendency to breed gridlock. Ideological differences are obviously culprits as well because that is the basis of all policy disagreements, but they manifest themselves differently. Ideological differences can surface through the voter,

parties, candidates, branches, and other political factors. Which of these factors is the most influential when affecting policy production, and does it have anything to do with divided government? Binder and Thorson both raised points in relation to interactions among government branches and actors. Thorson analyzed coalitions between the political parties. Binder researched the political parties and the polarization of ideologies. Both came to valid conclusions that coincide with Mayhew's thesis pertaining to divided government, but they expanded upon the notions of divided government and gridlock.

### **Divided Government's Effect on the Formation of Congressional Coalitions**

Mayhew's *Divided We Govern* has provoked multiple studies seeking to challenge or support his thesis. Thorson challenges not the specific number of policies enacted but rather the content of those policies being altered due to either unified or divided government. The legislative coalition-building Thorson is concerned with is important not only to how different actors in the legislative process interact but also to how policy is created and passed. The real concern is not the amount of legislation passed but rather how divided government can affect coalition-building is significant. Thorson argues that "during divided government, members will be uncertain as to the coalitions that will form on the passage of significant legislation, and this uncertainty will lead them to accept the suboptimal payoffs" (Thorson 1998, 756). Thorson tests whether unified government increases the likelihood of partisan coalitions, as opposed to bipartisan, forming on the final passage vote for significant legislation. Thorson also argues that divided government leads Democratic and Republican Party members to settle when bargaining with each other because of the uncertainty divided government brings to the legislative process (Thorson 1998, 756). The results showed that in both houses of Congress it is more likely that

the parties will stick together. He shows this by calculating the proportion of significant legislation passed in both houses with party unity votes (majority of the dominant party favored and majority of minority party opposed). While his results are undoubtedly significant in showing the effect divided government has on our legislative system, it is yet to be determined whether divided government or unified government is preferred, and how significantly the two affect the legislative process.

Achieving a party unity vote is telling of the state of the parties. If the majority and minority are willing to stick together, then the polarization within the parties themselves should be relatively low and the policies produced will be more partisan than not. This raises the question of whether this is desirable for government. In Washington D.C. there is a substantial amount of separation not only between the Democratic and Republican parties but also within the parties. While Thorson raises a significant point in relation to how Mayhew's work misses a key factor in producing legislation (coalitions, political parties, public perception), his analysis is incomplete. Party loyalty fluctuates throughout the decades Mayhew is analyzing. There are times in when unified government was capable of producing significant legislation and times divided government was as well. However, there were also times when neither unified nor divided government could pass any type of legislation, let alone significant legislation. During all of these periods parties ranged from polarized to centrist; and while Thorson's work shows there is a tendency for unified government to lead to party loyalty and more party unity votes, neither of those factors has definitively been shown to increase the production of significant legislation they just give one party more influence.

### **Party Responsiveness to Public Mood**

Another scholarly point of view questions whether divided or unified government is more responsive to public mood and opinion. John J. Coleman combines the work of Mayhew and political scientists George Edwards, Andrew Barrett, and Jeffrey Peake in order to formulate a list of significant legislation. Coleman then splits the same time period Mayhew used (1946—1992) into either unified Democratic, unified Republican, divided Democratic, or divided Republican. Additionally, Coleman explores the possibility of legislation proposed during divided government being more likely to pass during a period of unified government in the future. “Another sign that unified government solves the problems that divided government leaves behind would be the adoption during unified government of important enactments that stalled during divided government” (Coleman 1999, 828). This is a legitimate objection to Mayhew’s work that examines failed agendas initiated during divided government and the possibility they are more likely to be successful during unified government. Therefore a Democratic agenda will fare better during a time of Democratic unified government perhaps two terms down the road, as opposed to a divided period. While Coleman finds no significant evidence to suggest this is a statistically valid point (Coleman 1999, 828), it is logical. Moreover, Coleman’s work extends to party responsiveness and the parties’ abilities to handle different types of government.

The last part of Coleman’s study seeks to determine which party is better equipped to handle different types of government. However, the issue concerns which type of government allows parties to respond as quickly to public opinion. The last point he raises relates to party responsiveness to public mood. Coleman measures party responsiveness by examining the amount of legislation a party is able to pass during unified government, as opposed to the average number of enactments passed during

divided government. “During unified governments, by contrast, they lead to the adoption of from three to five more significant enactments, produce nine fewer failed pieces of legislation, and boost the percentage of successful legislation by 23 points compared to non-supermajoritarian government” (Coleman 1999, 832). This point considers the structural advantages that unified government offers and the challenge that divided government presents. When a party is able to control the executive branch, Senate, and House of Representatives, it is able to streamline the legislative process—assuming the party itself is unified—and pass legislation rapidly. While this is effective and shows unified government in a positive light, it is a skewed perspective. It operates under the assumption that the political party is unified. If the party is united then legislation can be forged efficiently. However, unified government can also fall apart. Without strong and unified leadership in Congress and the presidency this method of governance can struggle. It can be an effective system so long as it is accompanied by certain variables. Is it truly the structure of Congress that accelerates unified government’s production of legislation and aids the party in power? Or is it the Democratic and Republican parties’ ability (or inability) to get along with one another? Furthermore, is it a strong leader’s ability to unify their party toward one common goal? There are multiple questions raised by this study that question Mayhew’s thesis and conclusion.

### **The Impact of the President on Legislative Productivity**

Several scholars differ from Mayhew in their approach to divided government and its effect on legislative production. Opposed to Mayhew’s categorizing of legislation that *passed* from 1946 to 2002, Barret, Edwards III, and Peake examine the policy proposals that *failed*

throughout periods of divided and unified government. They hypothesize that divided government allows members who oppose the president's party ample opportunity to create gridlock, and vice versa (Barret, Edwards, and Peake 1997, 547). They used *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* to document policy proposals that failed and they also discover why they failed. Their research established several points.

Presidents oppose significant legislation more often under divided government, and much more seriously considered, important legislation fails to pass under divided government than under unified government. Furthermore, the odds of such legislation failing to pass are considerably greater under divided government. The pre-Mayhew conventional wisdom was correct: divided government inhibits the passage of important legislation. (Barret, Edwards, and Peake 1997, 562)

They focus on how a president perceives legislation. Their results show that the president is 25% more likely to oppose legislation produced by Congress during divided government than unified government. They specifically cite the Kennedy and Johnson administrations as well as the Reagan administration in order to magnify the differences in policy opposition (Barret, Edwards, and Peake 1997, 556). Furthermore, there is little difference in the number of bills that failed to pass during divided government and unified government when they are supported by the president (Barret, Edwards, and Peake 1997, 559). This is an interesting point because it suggests that the presidents' influence is greater when it comes to legislation they oppose compared with legislation they support. The Democratic activism and the members' willingness to support Republican presidents may have something to do with this, but it could also simply be there are some presidents better than others in their ability to negotiate and attract bipartisan support.

The last significant point brought about by this study is the relationship between presidents opposing bills and the fate of those bills, regardless of unified or divided government.

We find that presidents succeed in blocking 94% of the legislation they oppose under divided government and 92% under unified government. In addition, there is a 52% failure rate of legislation the president supports under divided government and a similar 54% rate under unified government. (Barret, Edwards, and Peake 1997, 562)

This last point is perhaps the most interesting because it suggests the president's influence is the same regardless of type of government. The amount of legislation passed is similar whether government is divided or unified, as Mayhew has shown, and there is also little difference in the amount of legislation being passed and blocked. Divided government's unclear effects on policy production raise questions elsewhere. Is enacting legislation a function of presidential leadership, the political parties abilities to cooperate, or perhaps sheer willingness of the actors involved to move legislation along?

### **So What?**

David Mayhew's *Divided We Govern* has been the catalyst of multiple works pertaining to divided government, and it has transformed the way divided government is studied. Divided government has been shown to affect policy positively as well as negatively. However, the timely and efficient enactment of policy is also affected by other factors including the formation of party coalitions, polarization of the Democratic and Republican parties, party responsiveness, and the individual actors who make up the federal government (particularly the president).

Analyzing these four contributors to policy enactment can help us to understand the political turmoil seen in Washington, D.C. today. Is the ongoing gridlock a result of divided government, party coalitions, party polarization, party responsiveness, individual actors, or a combination of these factors?

Divided and unified government are comparable in terms of the number of policies enacted, but that does not mean that parties function in the same manner under different conditions. The polarization of parties can also be related to the specific time periods that Mayhew and other scholars examine, particularly the presidential term of Ronald Reagan. Reagan, a Republican, faced a Democratic Congress for half of his presidency, yet some people consider him to be one of the best presidents of the last fifty years. What was it about this time period that allowed Congress and the president to work so well together, while today's Congress and president rarely cooperate? A possible explanation is the stark difference between the political parties of the 1980s and those of today. Reagan enjoyed the support of Democrats, which allowed him to convince enough Democrats in Congress to support his agenda. Today's political atmosphere breeds political combat via media outlets, so it is impossible to envision a large number of partisans from either side coming together on a crucial vote. Not only would doing so be political suicide, but nobody seems even to want to. Substituting Reagan's moderate Congress with today's polarized Congress would create an interesting scenario and it could help answer questions about divided government. If Reagan—an effective president—failed to generate legislation with a polarized Congress, then perhaps the greater influence on policy production is not divided government but party polarization. However, if Reagan still managed to produce legislation at a similar rate, then a leader with better political skills may be more important to legislative productivity. There is no clear answer resulting from either outcome simply because of the complexity of the political system. It would be easy to declare Reagan the best and credit him with the success of that period, but doing so would be unjust to other actors in the political system.

This hypothetical is not meant to produce answers but only observations pertaining to the current state of affairs in Washington, D.C. Barack Obama is facing not only a Congress that is divided against him but also parties that are divided internally. Which of these factors is more influential on legislative output? The Democratic and Republican parties seem to be in a constant battle, slowing down the legislative process. In his response to *Divided We Govern*, Thorson tests the likelihood of party voting (Thorson 1998).

During divided government, just over 8 percent of significant legislation passed during divided government with a party unity vote favoring the dominant party. The percentage increases to over 16 percent when the dominant party controls both the House and presidency but does not have enough members to obtain cloture in the Senate. It increases to nearly 30 percent when the dominant party does have enough members to obtain cloture. (Thorson 1998, 758)

By this logic, divided government means that parties are likely to face greater internal party polarization; the more unified the government, the less internal party conflict. Conversely, the most unified form of government—capable of winning a cloture vote in the Senate—passes 22% more significant legislation than divided government. This analysis stretches the definition of party unity vote but it is sensible. A party that can round up more than half of its members to oppose half of the other party's members should be considered undivided. Thus divided government and unified government differ; unified government produces partisan coalitions that stick together and pass significant legislation, while divided government seemingly does the opposite. So is the key to legislative productivity party cooperation, a skilled president, the parties getting along internally, or is it a combination of all of these factors? Government functioning as it did during the Reagan era is similar to building the perfect team. The era had the perfect combination of political parties willing to interact with one another, a leader capable of uniting both fronts, and parties unified internally.

All these factors are helpful when passing legislative agendas and lacking just one of them complicates the entire process. For example, in order for President Obama to be able to appeal to Republicans, he must know what they desire. In order to tell President Obama what they desire, Republicans must first know what they want. Currently, there are about twenty different views coming from twenty different candidates for the Democratic and Republican presidential nominations. As divided as a party can be, Republicans are struggling to find an identity—this problem affects Democrats as well—and they therefore are struggling to identify with voters. This disconnects the party and the people as well as party leaders from party loyalists in Congress. This is detrimental to the president's ability to cooperate across party lines and to formulate any type of bipartisan policy whether under divided or unified government. Good communication and clarity when articulating a party's vision for the country is just as important as putting forth a quality candidate to run for president. One without the other magnifies weaknesses and leaves our system of government gridlocked, confused, and frustrated.

A skilled and charismatic leader can attract votes and attention from all sides. Good presidents like Reagan and Johnson overcame political turmoil and hardship in order to achieve their agendas. Reagan faced divided government and Johnson faced unified government, and both provided us with two of the best presidential administrations in terms of legislative output. One divided, one unified. One polarized, one not so polarized. One with strong parties, one with weak parties. There seems to be no apparent rhyme or reason for these presidencies being so effective and no common denominator. Parties have shown their power in determining how operational policy will be, through internal or external conflict. Whether there is divided government or not does not seem to matter, nor does the strength of the parties. So what explains the differences? Strong presidential leadership can unify as well as divide a government. If

he/she can make the deals and decisions to bring all of the moving parts together successfully, then yes, a president can help spur legislation. On the other hand, a key variable could be the presence of a time period with little confrontation because of a widely popular agenda. Other times it could be extremely controversial issues—as seen in today's society—with the president and Congressional leaders fighting viciously. In that case where does the blame fall? Every time period is unique, but can the leaders of the government find a way to make it work? If they can succeed at negotiating with different actors with different perspectives, good leaders can help the system adapt and enact significant policy effectively.

President Obama and congressional leaders are often criticized for being ineffective politicians who do not get anything done. This can be seen with the Republicans' general reluctance to accept anything said or done by Democrats, and in general with the polarization within the public. This situation has several consequences. First is the effect of public perception and how the government responds to it. Unified government—as Coleman (Coleman 1999) demonstrated—produces more significant legislation and less failed legislation, and it raises the chances of passing significant legislation nearly 25%. This suggests that the party controlling unified government is more equipped to respond to its supporters. However, divided government can also produce similar amounts of legislation and perhaps a similar ability to respond to public mood. Public mood and perception are not the cure for divided government, but they do contribute to a solution. There are times when the public mood is rather passive and willing to compromise. Then there are times when the public mood is enraged with the current political situation and demands change. Both of these situations can come about during divided or unified government very easily. There is good unified government and bad unified government, just as there is good divided government and bad divided government. Which situation prevails is

related to whether the parties are polarized and the current state of the public. Polarized parties fed by emotional supporters are not likely to cooperate, but moderate parties with stable supporters may. Unified government that is controlled by a party with no real direction and factions within is just as dangerous to legislative productivity as divided government controlled by two polarized parties. There is give-and-take with both forms of government, and there are a plethora of factors contributing to whether policies are enacted.

By being obstructionist, any one of the players mentioned thus far can block the entire process. If the block is a result of public mood and perception being intensified, then it may be a time period of status quo or a sign that the country is simply in disagreement and not ready to progress on those specific matters. This last point is undervalued because it is difficult to quantify. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has brought boundless amounts of technology, new beliefs, and some of the most controversial issues our country has ever faced. The racial, gender, sexual, political, and economic divides are boundless. Coming to any sort of agreement on just one of those matters is difficult; doing so on all of them is impossible. It is not an accident that Obamacare is being fought till the end by the Republicans, or that same-sex marriage has produced such backlash and controversy. A significant portion of the population opposes change, accepting other people, and aiding other people because they were raised to chase the American dream and to work hard for their own. There is also a significant portion of the country generously willing to lend hands to others and to accept them because that is how they were raised. Today we reside in an America that is transitioning from the one dominated by the Baby Boomers to an America that truly does attempt to grant equality to all citizens regardless of their differences. This transition is not quick nor can it be forced. The divide extends to Congress and the president and

undeniably adds to the cumbersome policy production and negative impressions of the government's leaders.

In this project I have come to realize there is no right or wrong answer to how divided government affects policy legislation. That is because it involves too many other moving parts in the government. Divided government has exhibited the capacity to polarize parties at times—as seen in today's political environment—or help bring parties together to formulate bipartisan policy. However, unified government too has shown it can lead parties to polarization or convergence. This suggests that while divided government can certainly affect how parties react, it may simply just push them in one direction or another rather than dictate the outcome. That is, divided government seems likely to increase the split between them. The constant battle may either push them further apart or encourage them to work together to create bipartisan legislation. This analysis is applicable to the political climate in Washington, D.C. today where a divided government breeds constant controversy. Is this what creates the political impediments—polarized parties magnified by divided government—or could it also be the lack of leadership seen in Congress and the presidency? Speaker of the House John Boehner, House Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, and President Obama have stark battles within their parties as well as with the opposition party. At what point are the leaders responsible for taming their and at what point are they rendered helpless? Party zealots must be removed by the voters. Putting these extremists in power and allowing them to pull the parties apart hurts everyone. It negates a leader's ability to communicate with the other side effectively, polarizes the parties between themselves, and divides the Democratic and Republican parties internally. Every government is unique in how it is built and every one requires different approaches from the actors involved in order to create legislation. It may require a leader that can bring the parties together, or parties

that bring leaders together. It may require parties willing to cooperate while facing a public mood that simply is not on board with the agenda. Our government is fashioned to force different branches and players to work together either by design (unified), or to clash in order to create legislation most representative of the population. The true challenge is finding the right people and members that can make this work regardless of the structural blockades. The best legislative periods simply made the situation at hand work and produced significant legislation regardless of the presence or absence of divided government.

### **Conclusion**

David Mayhew helped spur scholarly work pertaining to divided government when he wrote *Divided We Govern*. The responding works challenge and qualify his book in a multitude of ways, each asking different questions and coming to different conclusions. After analyzing Thorson (1998), Binder (1999), Barrett, Edwards, and Peake (1997), and Coleman (1999) it is safe to say divided government is no simple concept. The numerous factors affecting policy production muddy the waters when examining divided government. The true difficulty in studying divided government is being able to separate all of the different factors from one another. If party polarization, legislative coalitions, the president, and public mood could all be studied in a vacuum, a clearer picture of divided government's impact could be drawn. Instead, scholars must weigh the influence of these actors in relation to divided government's affect and then draw conclusions. This leads to opinions and hypotheses relating to divided government but little hard evidence. Our system of government is more complex than we can fathom. Because each administration encounters new obstacles—whether it be a polarized opposition party, a president unwilling to compromise, or sensitive matters of public opinion—the government will have to adapt in order to produce legislation. Finding the right combination of working with and

against other political parties and branches of government cannot be done with the same formula every four years; each term presents different oppositions in different forms. Identifying a method for studying the various factors independently affecting legislative output independently can lead to a solution to gridlock in the United States.

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