# ARTICLE

# Presidential "Pitches" and White House Pressure: Interpersonal Presidential Persuasion in a Shared Lawmaking Environment

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*Bargaining is a critical component to exercising shared lawmaking powers. Conventional wisdom holds that presidents are effective at personally persuading members of Congress to support favored legislation, but recent scholarship shows when and how they get involved matters. Yet, we know less about specifically how presidents bargain with members of Congress and which types of interpersonal presidential communication frames persuade members of Congress. Using unique data from the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library concerning the White House's press for passage of the 1983 budget, this article addresses how presidents position their legislative pitches and to which members. While ideology matters most in predicting members supporting the White House's preferred legislation, we find a "compromise" pitch from the White House works better for bipartisan-tagged legislation than appeals to "party unity." These findings provide a unique window into informal bargaining arrangements and allow us to understand how presidents influence members of Congress.*

Interbranch tensions shape the interconnected relationship between the executive and legislative branches. Corwin's (1957) description of the separated powers outlined in the Constitution as an "invitation to struggle" framed scholars' thinking about how separated institutions share powers (Neustadt 1990, 372). Bargaining is a critical component to exercising these shared powers (Cameron 2000; Jones 2005; Krehbiel 1998). Indeed, bargaining works. Given the right circumstances, presidents are better off negotiating behind the scenes to keep public contradictions minimal (i.e., "staying private"; Covington 1987). When presidents involve themselves early in the legislative process, the process runs more smoothly and is more successful for the president (Beckmann 2010). Sullivan (1988) models how the Johnson White House determined which members are likely to be "true" converts and which are "playing politics," showing bargaining can work to sort

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supporters from opponents. We also know that presidential discussion of legislation creates more pressure on Congress to act (Canes-Wrone 2001) and polarizes outcomes more than if presidents do not involve themselves (Lee 2009), drawing out a question of how bargaining successfully functions for presidents.

The president has a primary (and often determinative) role in the legislative process (Cohen 2012; Edwards 1990; Kellerman 1984; Lee 2008), for instance, through the centralization of the executive branch in relation to a president's legislative success in Congress (Rudalevige 2002), in foreign policy (Weissman 1996), in the appropriations process (Kiewiet and McCubbins 1988), and in the president's role in agenda setting and legislative "success" (Beckmann 2008; Covington, Wrighton, and Kinney 1995). Even so, a White House's tactical resources are limited due to time constraints, the partisan makeup of Congress, or limited presidential persuasive ability (Jones 2005). Indirect bargaining may have some effect (Kernell 2007), but this is conditional on the president's persuasive capacity (Edwards 2016; Rottinghaus 2010) and agenda setting success (Edwards and Wood 1999; Wood and Peake 1998).

Yet, we know less about specifically how presidents bargain with members of Congress in terms of their direct, internal persuasive approach. These informal aspects have largely been informally tested (Andres and Griffin 2002; Bond, Fleisher, and Krutz 1996) or tested only by indirect means (Cameron 2000). Cohen (2012) notes that clear records of meetings between the president and legislators might not exist, making it a challenge to pinpoint the president's direct role. Indeed, although there is utility in understanding how members of Congress lobby the White House, accessing these requests has been difficult to do primarily because such requests tend to be private and unpublicized. We also know bipartisanship is key to passing legislation (Curry and Lee 2020) and that party unity is a focusing factor in legislative negotiations (Edwards 2016), but we know little about how this works in practice often because of the veil of secrecy shrouding the process. Ultimately, Shull (2000) argues that more research is needed on such important informal and formal "interactions between Congress and the president" (7; see also Andres, Griffin, and Thurber 2000). One way to accomplish this is to examine presidential efforts to persuade members of Congress on a key White House legislative initiative.

What independent effect did presidential contact on legislation important to the White House have on members of Congress? More specifically, what type of persuasion was effective (if any) in persuading members to side with the president? Using unique and recently uncovered data from the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library concerning the White House's negotiation with Congress for passage of the 1983 budget, this article addresses how presidents rhetorically position their legislative pitches, to which members, and the effectiveness of each pitch. We specifically ask how presidential strategies through appeals to party unity or a call for bipartisanship help persuade members of Congress to side with the White House. In short, which members get which pitches, and which pitches (if any) are the most persuasive in convincing members to back presidential policy goals? Though this case is limited in terms of generalizability, this approach and these data provide a unique window into this "informal" bargaining arrangement and allows us to understand how presidents communicate to members of Congress. This

article can also add to our understanding of how specific presidential involvement affects bargaining.

## Theory and Expectations

Does bargaining work to persuade members of Congress? What types of specific persuasive techniques (pitches) work best? In this section, we outline three possible expectations for which factors might influence a member of Congress to side with the president and what frame is most persuasive.

Presidents focus their attention on strategic opportunities to round up votes for preferred policy positions. Several environmental political variables define the president's political world and may shape the White House's effectiveness. For instance, shared political party establishes a tie that binds to create a "team spirit," but lawmakers also operate according to self-interest in the end (Beckmann 2008; Cox and McCubbins 1993). Majority parties cannot legislate alone—they need the assistance from the minority and the president (Curry and Lee 2020). Likewise, ideological proximity may be a factor in motivating members to side with the president. Presidents focus their attention on swing voters, where they "lobby the pivotal voters with all the tactical arrows in the president's persuasive quiver" (Beckmann 2008, 21; see also Lockerbie, Borelli, and Hedger 1998; Sullivan 1988; 1991). But we also know presidents attempt to set the agenda before the final vote to shape final outcomes, often through direct persuasion (Beckmann 2008).

Ideological ties strengthen the bond between presidents and members of Congress when negotiating over legislation. Presidential nudging of like-minded partisans pressures members to side with the White House. "Leaning" partisans return to the partisan fold after being mobilized by partisan messages from elites. This ideological movement can also manifest across party lines as ideological proximate members side with the president. When presidents succeed in achieving major changes, it was often by mobilizing those ideologically predisposed to support him (Edwards 2009; 2012). Those individuals who are predisposed to approve of the president (those in his coalition) are more likely to support the president on policy issues (Welch 2003). Considering the effectiveness of ideology in cementing like-minded politicians, we should expect ideology to have a strong effect in predicting congressional support of the White House.

> Expectation 1: Members who are ideologically closer to the president are more likely to support the White House's policy preferences.

Party unity is key to maintaining legislative success (Fleisher and Bond 1996; Lebo and O'Geen 2011). The president's goal is more party unity in Congress, consistent with the findings of rising party polarization. The president can use his negotiation or persuasive skills in a polarized setting to ensure members of Congress vote with their party (Edwards 2009). Rohde and Barthelemy (2009) argue that "starting out with a substantial level of solid loyalty and shared preferences with his base in Congress is a much easier way" for the president to begin a vote than by facing a sizable opposition or large groups

of undecided members. Short of a significant degree of loyalty, presidents may have to manufacture this support with their persuasive outreach. Scholars find presidents do have more success bargaining with members of their own party (Bond and Fleisher 1990; Peterson 1990). Priming partisan unity is a strategy to persuade wavering members of the president's party, so we expect that primarily moderate party members of the president's party will be targeted by the White House using the party unity pitch. Indeed, Edwards (2007) notes slippage in partisan support in Congress "forces the White House to adopt an activist orientation towards party leadership and sometimes devote as much effort to converting party members to support them as to mobilizing members of their party who already agree with them" (176). Wood (2009) also argues that partisanship in presidential politics is the norm because of incentives to respond to partisan electorates. Presidents may activate these partisan ties by priming members to side with the White House on legislative matters through persuasive efforts.

> Expectation 2: A "unity" pitch appealing to party loyalty should persuade those targeted copartisan members to support the White House's policy preferences.

Presidential outreach may have unique, direct persuasive effects on a member for an important legislative vote necessary to advance key legislation. A compromise pitch may work for several reasons. Members may want to compromise with the White House out of political expediency, legislative efficiency, or the practical need to advance a policy objective. Public desire for compromise is at the core of the connection, although this is contingent on bipartisan goals (Harbridge, Malhotra, and Harrison 2014). Harbridge (2015) argues bipartisanship is tied to public faith in the political process. Anderson, Butler, and Harbridge-Yong (2020) find that a legislator's willingness to compromise is tied to public approval and fears of electoral defeat. Specifically, members fear that they will face electoral retribution if they reject compromise. Constituents are more likely to overlook unwillingness to compromise when partisanship and issue ownership align, rather than when they disagree (Bauer, Harbridge-Yong, and Krupnikov 2017). Politicians who cannot deliver on specific issue goals—but made promises to do so—may find a stronger electoral rebuke. Similarly, moving the negotiations outside of public view, as presidents do when they communicate in private to members of Congress, may find more success. The more public partisan labeling and political jockeying subvert efforts at compromise—efforts from the White House to foster trust and collaboration may ameliorate distrust (Rountree 2018).

White House targets of persuasion using a compromise pitch should have two specific paths to get to agreement. First, the persuasive effects promoting compromise should be even stronger among targeted cross-pressured members, a significant reason why the White House focuses bargaining efforts on these members (Sullivan 1990). Members who are ideologically closer to the president may feel more connected to the president (regardless of party) and should be more likely to back the White House, especially when the administration's compromise position is made clear. The White House will likely utilize a compromise pitch especially when negotiating with moderates in both parties. Because these members are ideologically closer to the president's position, they are more likely

to support him in passing the White House–backed legislation. Second, the president's influence with members is connected to their shared electoral fate (Sullivan 1990). Many studies find a positive relationship between public approval and support for the White House (Barrett and Eshbaugh-Soha 2007; Beckmann 2008; Bond, Fleisher, and Wood 2003; Brace and Hinckley 1992; Canes-Wrone and De Marchi 2002; Lebo and O'Geen 2011; Ostrom and Simon 1989; Rivers and Rose 1985). Presidential approval at the state and district level is a strong predictor of a member voting with the president, an effect that intensifies during election years (Cohen and Rottinghaus 2019). An offer from a president framed as a compromise has been shown to shift legislative behavior among some of these legislators (Gutmann and Thompson 2010).

> Expectation 3: A "compromise" pitch should persuade those targeted members, especially ideological moderates, to support the White House's policy preferences.

## Reagan Budget Fight Context

The fiscal year 1983 budget was President Ronald Reagan's first full budget battle with Congress (fiscal years 1981 and 1982 were based off Carter White House recommendations). A Republican White House and Senate but a Democratic majority in the House created disagreements resulting in budget passage delays. President Reagan's initial budget reached $757.6 billion. The largest cost in the Reagan budget was the ballooning national defense spending, at roughly $221 billion, a $100 billion increase from President Jimmy Carter's 1981 budget. The biggest contributor to the deficit created by the 1983 budget was a campaign pledge by candidate Reagan to not raise taxes. Congress initially balked at the White House's original budget. As a federal shutdown loomed, the White House had to make strategic maneuvers to ensure a budget resolution passed. Unfortunately for Reagan, his budget was not destined to receive a full vote. Because of cuts in domestic spending, stark increases to the defense sector, and a looming recession, Congress viewed the budget as a nonstarter.

The Senate Finance Committee's 1983 budget resolution reached $831.7 billion with a deficit of $106.1 billion. The Senate committee targeted tax increases of $20 billion for 1983 to cover expenditures, a $6 billion decrease in Social Security, a $33.6 billion cut in entitlement spending over three years, and a $5 billion cut to defense spending for 1983. The House Budget Committee budget had a total outlay of $828 billion with a $103.9 billion deficit. With the House controlled by Democrats, their budget resolution consisted of higher defense cuts ($8.9 billion), larger tax increases ($30.7 billion), and drastically fewer cuts to entitlement services ($3 billion). The final Senate version was steered strongly by Republican leadership, with the major changes increasing the deficit to a whopping $115.4 billion, and it was titled Senate Concurrent Resolution (SCR) 92. Over on the House floor, however, interesting alternatives to their budget resolution were brewing.

Due to a procedural rule ("King of the Mountain") in the House, many alternatives were offered on the 1983 budget resolution: House Concurrent Resolution (HCR) 345, including a bipartisan substitute created by a coalition of moderate Republican "Gypsy Moths" and conservative Democrat "Boll Weevils" titled the Michel-Latta plan (also known as the "Latta I substitute"), the Jones-Budget Committee resolution, and the "moderate bipartisan" Aspen plan. The Jones-Budget Committee plan, which was the original budget resolution offered from the House, called for the smallest cuts in entitlement programs and the largest increase in taxes. The Aspen plan had higher defense cuts and fell somewhere in the middle between the Michel-Latta I and Jones plans with a deficit of only $97.2 billion. As a result of the rule, each alternative had to be voted on the House floor, meaning that there was room for the White House to influence members. After the initial dust had settled on the House alternatives, none of the aforementioned plans garnished enough legislative support to pass, giving Reagan his "first budget defeat" and pushing the House back to square one (CQ Almanac 1982, 193).

After more budget debates, a new bill titled House Concurrent Resolution (HCR) 352 was put forth to a House vote. As with HCR 345, this new resolution again had the original Jones-House Budget Committee plan, the Michel-Latta plan (hereafter titled "Latta II substitute"), and the moderate-bipartisan Aspen plan (CQ Almanac 1982). With the White House needing a budget to pass the House, concessions were made, and the Reagan administration signaled support for the Latta II substitute, which offered a $99.4 billion deficit with large cuts to entitlements and small cuts to defense spending (Brandt 2009; CQ Almanac 1982, 195). Because the Republican Party was in the minority in the House, Reagan principally had to convince a large majority of his own party and as many Democrats as possible to vote for the Latta II substitute. Victory was given to the Reagan White House as the Latta II substitute passed 220–207, while the now-amended HCR 352 had a final vote passage of 219–206 (Brandt 2009; CQ Almanac 1982, 195). The House then performed the technical procedures needed to fuse the final resolution passed with SCR 92, and shortly after the merged resolution was sent to conference reconciliation (Brandt 2009). In the House–Senate conference, the debate between congressional conferees was dominated by Republican members from both chambers, who supported an $822.4 billion budget for fiscal year 1983 with a $103.9 billion deficit (CQ Almanac 1982, 196). Further deficit adjustments and reconciliation occurred between the two chambers over the course of the remainder of the legislative session.

As previously mentioned, after it had been determined that President Reagan's first budget proposal would not receive a favorable vote in Congress, the White House eventually sided with the Latta II substitute proposal in the House. In order to pass the White House–backed legislation, however, Reagan administration officials had to methodically target specific individuals whom they could potentially convince to vote in favor of the bill proposal. The president himself (and the broader White House apparatus) began to contact specific congressional members to promote party unity or to convince legislators that the Latta II was a fair compromise. The White House was systematic in developing a plan of action regarding which congressional members to contact, who would be in contact with them, and what exactly would be said. Each White House member received an individual "Recommended Telephone Call(s)" memo that included key background information on the legislator and talking points to consider when discussing the budget

with said congressional member. Some of the background information included letting President Reagan know that Jack Kemp (R-NY) was interested in "meeting with you to discuss economic policy." Talking points for Reagan included emphasizing certain policy positions that the legislator was concerned about, or, in the Kemp conversation, letting him know that "you are looking forward to sitting down with him in the near future to discuss economic policy." For example, in conversations with House Minority Leader Bob Michel (R-IL), archival documents show that the White House sought to reaffirm their "support for his efforts to develop [a] budget compromise." Further, White House correspondence with Michel indicated that there was "presidential support for [a] bipartisan budget." Moreover, the White House organized many cabinet member phone calls to members who had specific concerns, for example, having Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger contact those who wanted to see defense spending increases (or decreases). Finally, Reagan kept a rolling list of legislators who were in tough reelection campaigns (both Republican and Democrat) and made routine contact with these members.

Interestingly, Reagan himself reached out to Boll Weevil leader Charlie Stenholm (D-TX) in order to "encourage Stenholm to exert his leadership…to get their support for an alternative to the House Democrat budget." Stenholm responded to the president by ensuring his cooperation with the broader White House agenda. Archival data show how tenuous moderate Republican Gypsy Moths were in supporting Reagan's budget. For example, White House conversations show that Gypsy Moth leader Bill Green (R-NY) was "concerned about other cuts besides Medicare…such as Medicaid and AFDC." Other moderate Republicans shared similar concerns, such as Silvio Conte (R-MA). Conversations between the White House and Conte describe how they wanted to "encourage [Conte] to work with…the House GOP to fashion an acceptable budget compromise." Representative Conte responded with reservations, though noting that "he [was] working on it." Reagan was not afraid to pull some strings to ensure a legislative victory. For example, Dan Lungren (D-CA) was primarily concerned with the Latta II's tax cuts, though he also slipped in a point that "he wants a photo with [Reagan]." Another sensational conversation took place between Reagan and Ralph Regula (R-OH), who wanted to get the deficit under control. However, Regula seemed more concerned with making sure he could "join [Reagan] on one of those horseback rides at Quantico." Reagan agreed, responding, "we should do that." Overall, these conversations describe how the Reagan White House needed to reach out to both Republicans and Democrats to ensure compromise and party unity to provide a clear path to the Latta II substitute being passed. Further, these conversations depict the length at which Reagan and the broader White House apparatus were willing to go to ensure the passage of the Latta II substitute—from policy revisions surrounding Medicare to horseback riding, nothing was off-limits if the budget resolution was secured.

Ultimately, the Reagan administration in total targeted 143 congressional members in the lead-up to the passage of the Latta II substitute. It is this period where we test which type of pitch from the White House worked most effectively and on what type of member. Since Congress did not adopt a second budget resolution before the fiscal year 1983 began on October 1, the first and final conference budget resolution (SCR 92 with HCR 352 woven into the framework) became binding. The analysis in this article examines the bargaining that occurred before the final budget in SCR 92 became the final budget agreement.

## Case Selection

Although it was an important piece of legislation for the Reagan White House, as this article examines one president (Reagan) and one case (a budget battle) in one distinct era of executive–legislative relations, generalizability is necessarily limited. However, this case is informative for several reasons. Budgets and tactics surrounding resource allocation are a hallmark of American government, and "scholars have long been interested in the political determinants of this process" (Hammond and Rosenstiel 2020). As the archival context surrounding the 1983 budget shows, this process is enigmatic and tenuous, making studying individual cases instructive to explain that event and to understand the evolution of the budget process. Moreover, data from the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget attest to the difficulty of passing budget resolutions, noting that since 1975, concurrent budget resolutions have only been approved by the enactment deadline a meager six times.[1] The archival data utilized for empirical analysis throughout this article provide firsthand accounts of how interbranch bargaining worked, which may help explain the complexities that take place behind closed doors. Therefore, examining this singular case provides extensive opportunities to explore how presidents interact with Congress to enact budget resolutions, particularly in a time of divided government with ideological heterogeneity among the members.

## Empirical Design

In this section, we outline the advantages to the archival data collected to explore presidential influence, describe the relevant variables, and introduce the statistical identification strategy.

### Advantages to Data

This article fills an empirical gap in modeling internal presidential negotiations and has several advantages (Conley and Yon 2007). First, these data are as complete a record of such written Reagan White House–congressional interaction on this legislation as is known to exist. Second, we know more than just that the principals met—we also know from the archival evidence who was targeted and the White House's specific persuasive approach. In short, we are confident that these data represent a complete universe of Reagan White House–congressional interaction on this legislation.[2] Without question, such informal communication arrangements occurred and side payments off the record

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1. More information can be found at https://www.crfb.org/papers/congress-increasingly-fails-budget.
2. These archival searches revealed no additional methods of congressional communication with the White House (i.e., meetings, requests through party leaders, phone calls) that could be systematically evaluated.

may have been promised; however, they were not systematically recorded and are therefore beyond the bounds of empirical study (see Mackenzie 1981). Therefore, we treat these data as representative of White House and congressional opinion and time dependent, and the conclusions offered are nuanced toward these ends. All of the archival documents utilized here are located in the Ronald Reagan Presidential library in the Craig Fuller files.[3]

The dependent variables are an affirmative vote for (1) the Latta II substitute amendment and (2) the final budget vote. Key independent variables are discussed below.

### Pitch Type

We identified two distinct "pitches" used by the Reagan White House in targeting or contacting members: a "Republican unity" pitch and a "compromise" pitch. The compromise pitch included conversations produced by the White House that urged bipartisanship or compromise between Democratic and Republican leadership. Compromise pitches also included any policy-specific indicators, such as "Medicare savings without reduction of benefits" or urging members of Congress to support tax reductions. For instance, the White House reached out to a Boll Weevil budget leader to encourage this swing member "to develop and support a budget compromise that [could] win." White House officials contacted a swing Republican member to reaffirm "efforts to develop [a] budget compromise" as well as to "indicate pres. support for [a] bipartisan budget." Representative Buddy Romer got a May 15 call from the president to ask for his support for a budget compromise "that will win." The compromise pitch is a dichotomous variable coded "1" if the legislator received the pitch, "0" otherwise. A Republican "unity" message also specifically drew upon members of Congress to "support House Republican leader and whip" or to encourage legislators to vote in support of the White House as the "president [is] counting on him." The White House also contacted moderate Republican Mickey Edwards to "encourage him to work w/Repbl. ldrship for budget compromise." The Republican unity pitch included a few specific calls to "support Reagan as President," which we included in the unity pitch. A Republican unity pitch is a dichotomous variable coded "1" if the legislator received the pitch, "0" otherwise.

Eighty-nine members received the compromise pitch: 54 Democrats and 35 Republicans. This generally conforms to expectations that Democrats, especially moderates, would get the compromise pitch. Forty-nine members received the unity message. Not surprisingly, Republicans primarily (48) received the unity message from the White House, but one Democrat did as well, as expected above. Most Republicans who received the unity message were well-known "Gypsy Moths" or northern Republicans who, though remaining typically loyal to the Republican Party, were prone to separating from the Party on key economic and policy-specific legislative affairs (Roberts 1981). As these Gypsy Moth Republicans were viewed as the most at-risk within the Party (due to their somewhat more liberal leanings), it makes sense that the Reagan White House

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3. Specifically, the document locations are as follows: RWR Presidential Library, Craig Fuller Files, President Reagan's Record of Communications, 1981–1983 [1 of 4 to 4 of 4]. RWR Presidential Library, Craig Fuller Files, President Reagan's Record of Communications,1981–1983 [1 of 4 to 4 of 4, OA 6819].

urged them to remain unified under a time of great political hardship. The one Democrat who received a Republican unity message (as well as the 54 who received the compromise pitch) was predominantly in a group known as "Boll Weevil" Democrats, or "Sun Belt conservative Democrats" who, though loyal to the Democratic Party, felt growing ideological ties to the increasingly right-leaning Republican Party (Roberts 1981). Boll Weevils were Democrats the White House could siphon off if the budget deal was struck in a way that benefited their ideology and constituent base.

## Party

Party identification may be a link between siding with the Republican White House or not, so we include a standard indicator for party: "1" if the member is a Republican and "0" if a Democrat.

## Party and Institutional Resources

Chamber-level attributes, such as roles as committee chairs, ranking members, and party leaders, were coded dichotomously, indicating whether or not the characteristic applied to the member. First, members with greater seniority, who are active party players, or who are powerful heads of committees should be more likely to lobby the president (Andres, Griffin, and Thurber 2000).[4] These individuals are "in the know" and understand the timely flow of information and action is key to the legislative process. As the power of ranking committee members grew in the 1970s, these individuals may have more input into the lawmaking process. Likewise, in acknowledging these interbranch requests, Mackenzie (1981, 9) argues that this process can take the form of "logrolling," where each of the branches defers to each other for their key initiatives. Indeed, committee chairs are shown to support the president more than elected party leaders (Bond and Fleisher 1990; Covington, Wrighton, and Kinney 1995; Fleisher and Bond 1996). All other members not in these categories are coded as "0" and those that were included coded "1." *The 1982 Almanac of American Politics* was consulted to document these variables.

## Ideological Distance

Ideological similarity to the president is measured by absolute distance between the president's Common Space score and the legislator's Common Space score.[5] Common Space scores are used as a measure of ideology as they are comparable across chambers

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4. Here, we include party leaders (of both parties), committee chairs (of both parties), and ranking committee members (of both parties).

5. President Reagan's DW Nominate score was 0.692. President Carter's DW Nominate score was −0.504. The most liberal in this Congress was −0.685 and the most conservative was 0.884. The standard deviation was 0.351.

(Poole 1998). This measure and approach are similar to other measures of interbranch evaluations (Binder and Maltzman 2002; Shipan and Shannon 2003).

### Electoral Support and Support for President in District

To control for the possible electoral connection driving member behavior in a persuasive setting, we included measures of support overall above President Reagan's in the 1980 election and for President Reagan in 1980 over President Carter's prior performance in a district; we control for (1) the percentage of support President Reagan received in the 1980 presidential election minus the percentage of support President Carter received in the 1976 election (Reagan%–Carter%) and (2) the percentage of the two-party vote the members received in their district minus the percentage President Reagan received (Reagan%–Member%). Both figures are taken from *The 1980 and 1982 Almanac of American Politics*.

### Model Estimation

Since we are examining which members the White House lobbied on the budget, we know this group is not randomly selected.[6] The treatment and control groups are not identical before treatment, making traditional analysis insufficient (Heckman, Ichimura, and Todd 1997). To compensate for this, we utilize coarsened exact matching (CEM), a nonparametric method of controlling for the confounding influence of pretreatment control variables (Blackwell et al. 2009; Iacus, King, and Porro 2008). CEM has been shown to be robust to measurement error, it works with multi-category treatments, and it achieves the best covariate balance compared to other matching techniques (Ripollone et al. 2020). The goal of the CEM is to balance the treated and control groups so the empirical distributions of the covariates in the groups are more similar. The estimates do so by matching a treated unit (the targeted members) to all of the control units with the same covariate values. CEM allows the two populations (the treatment, those members targeted by the White House, and the control, those not targeted by the White House) to be matched to determine the existence of a treatment effect.

In effect, through CEM we preprocess the data before analysis. To match the data, a representational set of properties must be chosen to identify the groups. Analysis shows that the variable for ideology was the most imbalanced in the raw data. We allowed the automated algorithm to select the coarsened discrete archetypes that can be used to match

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6. We have also addressed the possibility of sample selection bias in an alternative way. We estimated a two-stage Heckman probit selection model displayed in Appendix Table A1. This system of two equations (selection and outcome) addresses the threat of bias in our estimates generated by systematic differences in those members targeted by the White House and those not targeted. The results demonstrate that selection effects are not an issue—an insignificant rho statistic measuring the error correlations between the equations is not significant. The statistically insignificant rho, $\rho$ statistic of .147 indicates that the error terms of the two equations are uncorrelated, and thus sample selection bias is not a concern. Although the overall selection effect is not problematic for estimating a standard logit model, the results instructively show that those ideologically more distant from the president are less likely to side with the White House.

to other cases with the same signature (48 matched strata; see Blackwell et al. 2009). The match is based on party and ideological distance, for these variables showed imbalance in the raw data to some degree. The matched data retained 345 cases (see Appendix Table A3) where each is matched to other members with the same signature—the rest of the observations are not retained because they are not able to be matched. The match produced substantial reduction in the imbalance (see post-CEM finding in Appendix Table A2). The model estimates in the models below (proportional reduction of error) are improved with the use of CEM weights versus the original unbalanced raw data.

After using coarsened exact matching to preprocess and weight[7] the data, as we can now compare the matched and weighted treatment and control members, we initiate a full empirical strategy to test our expectations by estimating a series of logistic regressions, given that our dependent variable of interest—vote for the budget at two different stages of the legislative process—is binary. We estimate the likelihood of a member's vote for the budget based on a series of theoretically relevant exogenous predictors, including the variables mentioned above in addition to control variables. We then utilize post-estimation simulations to generate predicted probabilities. The findings along with discussion and interpretation are presented in the following section.

## Findings

The White House targeted 143 total House members: 55 Democrats and 88 Republicans. On the Democratic side, the members Reagan reached out to were almost all a part of the "Boll Weevils" (cross-pressured members) and those who held leadership positions within the organized ideological group, as expected. This generally conforms to expectations that Democrats, especially moderates, would get the compromise pitch. Figure 1 displays a histogram illustrating how members in the ideological middle were more likely to get the "compromise" pitch than the ideological extremes. The White House's role in convincing the few Democrats left who aligned themselves with the president likely secured the passage of the budget resolution in the House. Forty-six House Democrats ultimately voted in favor to secure the final passage of the Latta II substitute, with 192 voting against the bill (CQ Almanac 1982, 195). The number of Democrats who ultimately voted in support of the Latta II substitute breaks down to only roughly 24% of the entire Democratic caucus in the ninety-seventh House, many of whom were conservative Democrats (CQ Almanac 1982, 195). We explore below whether the White House's direct contact with these members was influential.

The Republicans needed to be all on board to secure the passage of the Reagan-backed Latta II substitute in the Democratic House, and with Republicans split between conservative and liberal ideologies, there was not much room for error. The White House ultimately succeeded in bringing Republicans to the table on the Latta II substitute vote, with 174 out of 192 members voting in favor, roughly 91%. Without their block voting,

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7. The weight is determined by the ratio of treatment to control for the matched and unmatched cases.
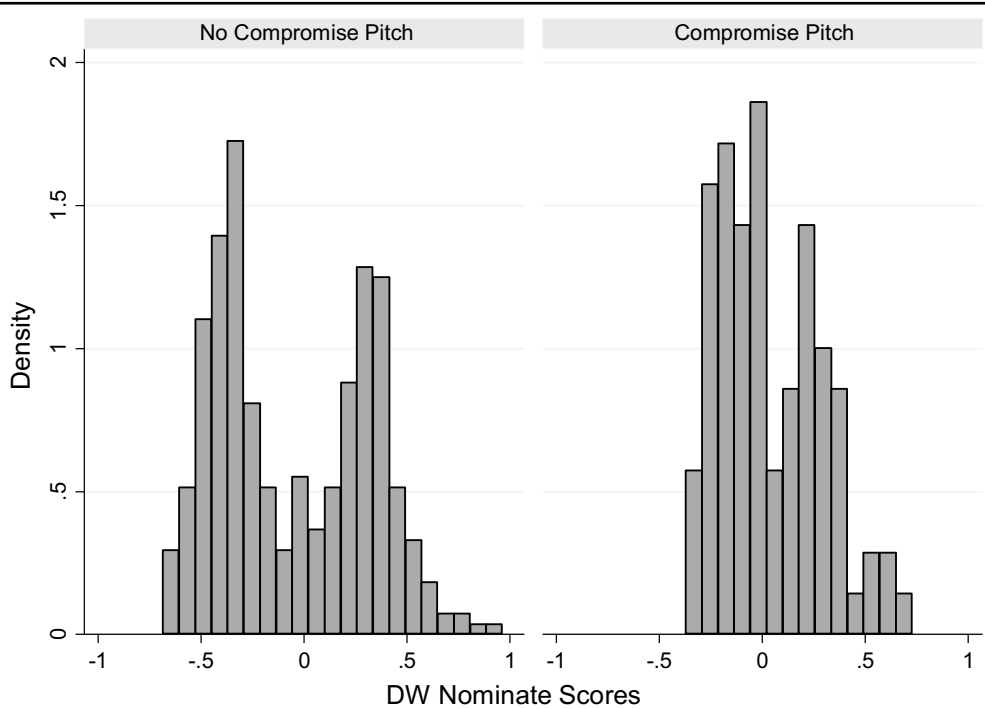
FIGURE 1. Histogram of Ideology and "Compromise" Pitch.

passing the budget resolution would have been a fool's errand, or a task with little hope of success (CQ Almanac 1982, 195). Indeed, Curry and Lee (2020) find most majority party legislation fails because of intraparty conflict. Considering that the Latta II substitute also needed Democratic support in the ninety-seventh House, which eventually was passed with 46 Democrats backing it, the White House specifically targeted members of Congress who were more conservative members of their parties and thus more likely to support legislation that significantly lowered the deficit in comparison to other alternatives.

Table 1 displays four model specifications that examine covariates predicting support for the administration's budget position.[8] The models are all fit well—the pseudo $R^2$ is between a fifth and a half of the variance, and the proportional reduction of error is above 40% for each logit model.

Party by itself (specifically being a Republican) had no statistical effect on the likelihood of voting (or not) for either the Latta substitute or the final vote in the specifications in Table 1. There is very little singular substantive or statistical impact of a member being a Republican on voting with the White House's preferred budget policy—only in the Latta substitute vote as the dependent variable (Models 2 and 4) was being a

8. The unmatched models are displayed in Appendix Tables A4 and A5.

**TABLE 1**
**Logit Model of Pitch Type Using Coarsened Exact Matching**

| | *(1)* | *(2)* | *(3)* | *(4)* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *Latta Sub* | *Final Vote* | *Latta Sub* | *Final Vote* |
| Republican | −.430 | −.432 | −.423 | −.421 |
| | (.356) | (.270) | (.357) | (.270) |
| Ideological distance | −11.2*** | −3.97*** | −11.4*** | −4.11*** |
| | (1.33) | (.669) | (1.36) | (.689) |
| Reagan%−Carter% | −.719 | .370 | −.881 | .185 |
| | (1.73) | (1.28) | (1.71) | (1.27) |
| Reagan%−Member% | −1.10 | −3.03** | −1.60 | −3.10 |
| | (1.43) | (1.15) | (1.41) | (1.14) |
| Committee chair | −.060 | .283 | −.257 | .216 |
| | (.895) | (.913) | (.922) | (.909) |
| Party leader | −4.63** | −2.25** | −3.94* | −1.97 |
| | (1.51) | (1.38) | (1.53) | (1.38) |
| "Compromise" pitch | .851** | .346 | − | − |
| | (.408) | (.320) | | |
| "Republican unity" pitch | − | − | −1.21 | −.516 |
| | | | (.536) | (.393) |
| Constant | 8.59*** | 3.17*** | 9.12*** | 3.41 |
| | (1.04) | (.505) | (1.11) | (.539) |
| N | 345 | 345 | 345 | 345 |
| Pseudo $R^2$ | .457 | .141 | .458 | .142 |
| PRE | 70% | 40% | 66% | 44% |

*Note:* Standard errors are in parentheses. PRE = proportional reduction of error.
*$p$ < .1; **$p$ < .05; ***$p$ < .01.

Republican positive, but in each case the statistical power was low. The effect of party may be subsumed by ideological proximity, discussed below. Lebo, McGlynn, and Koger (2007) find some empirical evidence for why parties may not play as important a role in certain legislative affairs. Specifically, "the strongest predictors of one party's voting unity are the unity of the opposing party" (Lebo, McGlynn, and Koger 2007, 464). As the battle for the Reagan White House–backed budget resolution significantly blurred party unity for both the Republicans and Democrats, it is plausible to attribute the absence of statistically significant party effects on the Latta II substitute or final budget vote because Democrats exerted little effect on the overall budget resolution since Republicans early on displayed a similar lack of party cohesion surrounding the two appropriation pieces.

In contacting committee chairs and party leaders, the White House reached out to several members, including Representative Robert "Bob" Michel (R-IL); Republican House Minority Leader, Representative Trent Lott (R-MS); Republican House Minority Whip, Representative Charlie Stenholm (D-TX), a Boll Weevil leader; Representative Silvio Conte (R-MA); Ranking Member of Appropriations Committee, Representative Bill Green (R-NY), a Gypsy Moth leader; and Representative Buddy Roemer (R-LA), Chairman of the Boll Weevil Budget Task Force. Representative Michel (R-IL) was an

influential figure in securing a passing vote for a prior plan that the Reagan White House backed. White House officials contacted Representative Michel (R-IL) to reaffirm "support for his efforts to develop [a] budget compromise," as well as to "indicate pres. support for [a] bipartisan budget." Likewise, the Gypsy Moth leader Representative Green (R-NY) had the power to convince moderate Republicans that voting in favor of the president-supported budget would be the suitable path. Considering the Democratic majority in the House, Reagan needed both moderate and conservative Republicans on board with his preferred budget. However, Representative Green (R-NY) was "concerned about other cuts besides Medicare...such as Medicaid and AFDC" and was considered an undecided vote. However, in all of the models from Table 1, party leaders were significantly less likely to back the White House's position on either the Latta substitute or the final vote. The statistical effects are small and vary in size but are negative and consistent across all models.

The results from Table 1 show that electoral security—the percentage of the vote won by the member subtracted from President Reagan's vote share in the prior election—has no consistent statistically significant effect related to voting for the Latta substitute or final budget in Table 1. The White House reached out to three House Republicans who were considered involved in tough races but ultimately succeeded in reelection. For example, Representative Gilman (R-NY) cited Medicare as a reelection issue, responding to President Reagan's outreach that "he want[ed] to be supportive." Representative Gilman (R-NY) eventually went on to vote against the Latta II substitute but secured reelection. Representative Evans (R-IA) fell prey to a newly reapportioned House district and as such responded to the president that he would "try to be helpful" in securing the Reagan-backed budget proposal. Representative Evans (R-IA) eventually did support the Latta II substitute; therefore, his newly formed district must not have been as concerned with the budget as the congressman originally thought. Likewise, despite the impression of President Reagan's strong influence with members from districts where he won a greater share of the vote, the size of the vote for Carter in 1976 subtracted from the size of the vote for Reagan in the 1980 election had no independent effect on members' vote for either the Latta II substitute or the final budget.

The results from Table 1 also show that the larger the ideological distance between the president and the member, the less likely a member was to vote for any phase of the White House–supported budget, consistent with Expectation 1. The effects were statistically significant and substantively large: a 100% to 200% reduction in probability of a member voting for either the Latta substitute or the final vote as ideological distance increases. Figure 2 graphically depicts the negative change in probability for both the Latta substitute and the final vote. Both predicted probabilities show a steep negative slope, but the decline is more severe for the Latta substitute vote, showing strong effects even early in the budget negotiation process. Some members may have been bluffing in hopes of extracting bargaining leverage, considering ideological distance was not as strong a predictor, especially for those moderate members, as it was for the final vote. The final vote, instead of the amendments, is often the most significant and public vote, so fundamental effects like ideology may have a stronger effect (Harbridge 2015). Ultimately, a soft ideological rigidity was replaced by a firmer one as ideology became a stronger
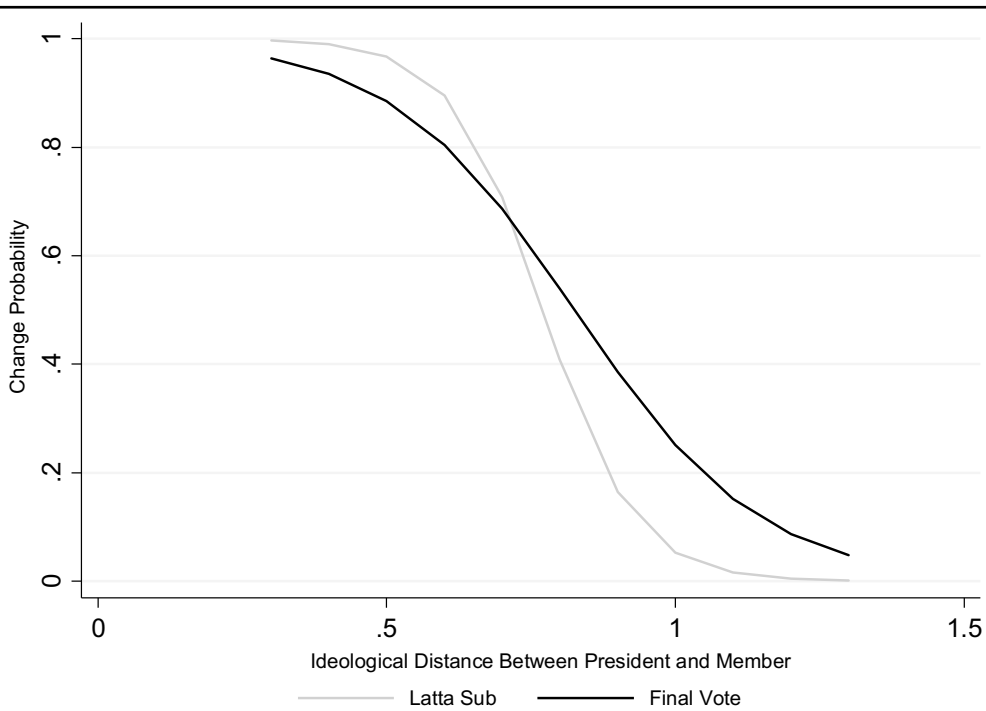
**FIGURE 2. Predicted Probability of Vote for Budget and Ideological Distance from President.**

predictor of support for (among conservatives) or against (among liberals) the White House's position, as Figure 2 shows in charting the probabilities of ideological distance and support for the Latta substitute and then the final vote.

For example, conservative Democrat Representative Buddy Roemer (D-LA) had significant power as the head of the Boll Weevil Budget Task Force, which also meant he potentially was able to influence other conservative Democrats to support the president–backed budget. The White House reached out to the Boll Weevil budget leader to "encourage Buddy Roemer…to develop and support a budget compromise that [could] win." The outreach worked. Representative Roemer signaled to the president that he supported the White House and, as indicated in President Reagan's handwritten note in the margin of his call sheet, "[the budget] sound[ed] ready to go."[9]

Of the group of presidential contacts who received a pitch, only the "compromise" pitch had any strong effect, but this effect was limited to only the first round of budget debate negotiations, consistent with Expectation 2.[10] Specifically, the effect of the presi-

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9. RWR Presidential Library, Craig Fuller Files, President Reagan's Record of Communications, 1981–1983 [1 of 4 to 4 of 4], OA 8619.

10. In alternative models, when interacted with ideological distance, neither the "compromise" nor the "unity" pitch is statistically significant, suggesting that there is not a unique strong joint effect of ideological moderation and the success of either pitch.

dent's compromise pitch was statistically strong by itself for use with members during the Latta substitute vote—28% to 31% more likely as reported in Table 1 (Model 1)—but not the final vote. Because this budget bill was the anointed bipartisan, compromise choice, it makes sense it would confirm our expectations that a compromise pitch from the Reagan White House would solidify votes for the legislation. After the Latta substitute was voted on, the compromise pitch was less successful for the final vote, especially since the final budget leaned slightly in favor of Republican priorities (see above). Table 1 also examines the "unity" pitch, which was almost exclusively received by Republicans (and one Democrat), discussed above. The results show that the "unity" pitch had no independent effect for either the Latta substitute or the final budget vote (Models 3 and 4). This result was unexpected, but the nature of the legislation required more Democrats than Republicans to shift to the White House's priorities, so ideological distance was ultimately a more important factor than party unity. Sullivan (1990) also notes that copartisan bluffing (feigning lack of support for a copartisan presidential initiative) is rarely effective because presidents know they can count on support from their party members. The unity pitch may not have worked because those copartisans were likely to back the White House anyway without receiving the pitch, so the White House's pitch made little difference.

## Conclusion

The 1982 budget battles between the executive and legislative branches of government tested the communicative ability of President Reagan and his administration to secure the passage of the Latta II substitute and final budget after the president's original budget was rejected. Though debate continues about whether President Reagan was a persuasive president (Edwards 2016), this article serves as evidence for the opinion that the president, at least in passing the Latta II substitute, was effective at persuading some members to side with the White House. Compromise conditionally works (Bauer, Harbridge-Yong, and Krupnikov 2017), and in this case when legislators back legislation that is bipartisan, a president who is aligned with those goals can persuade members to join his preferences. However, there are clear limits to compromise since when the bipartisan tag is not present on legislation, a compromise pitch is less effective. Debates about the effectiveness of presidential communication to members of Congress rarely examine direct appeals in a systematic way. This article allows us a rare look inside the White House's efforts to secure passage of a politically critical piece of legislation and to test the effectiveness of the Reagan administration's courting of Congress on necessary budget legislation.

In a polarized political world, there are clear limits to persuasion. President Joe Biden entered office in 2021 with a nearly divided government for the first time since 1981, the same year Ronald Reagan entered office with his party controlling the Senate but not the House. Though Biden's party controlled both chambers, the Senate was split 50–50, resulting in near-partisan gridlock. Similar to 1981, both parties are beset with

ideological divisions: Republicans have pressure from the far right and Democrats face pressure from the far left, requiring compromise for both parties (King 2020). This arrangement does not exclude the need for the majority party to work with the majority party, as majority parties are not as cohesive as they appear. Contemporary parties are less unified than roll-call data suggest, and most majority parties succeed through bipartisanship, making bargaining necessary even in the current partisan era (Curry and Lee 2020).

Although this article is limited by the fact that it examines only one president (Reagan) and one case (a budget battle) in one distinct era of executive–legislative relations, the findings are instructive. First, we find the type of pitch matters—the White House's leverage of political power perception allowed their "compromise" pitch to effectively swing members' votes, even those not initially completely aligned with the president's ideological position. Although ideological lines were not as firm then as now, the compromise pitch worked even when ideological lines were just beginning to harden in the early 1980s. Yet, the lackluster effect of the "unity" pitch shows the limitations of presidential persuasion, even among Republicans who presumably would back the president in times of political conflict. Despite this, there was still a high degree of Republican unity, lending support to findings suggesting some supportive partisans might bluff waning support but ultimately side with the president of their party (Sullivan 1990). Second, ideological distance from the president is the most significant factor in the probability of voting for the two White House–backed budgets. This suggests that actions related to ideological rigidity were occurring at an earlier stage than presumed by scholars.

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