

With Friends Like These, Who Needs Enemies? Unified Government and Congressional  
Opposition to Presidential Crisis Policy

Dennis M. Foster  
Professor of International Studies and Political Science  
Virginia Military Institute  
434 Scott Shipp Hall  
Lexington, VA 24450 USA  
fosterdm@vmi.edu

ABSTRACT

Scholarship has long assumed that strong co-partisan majorities in Congress provide presidents with latitude in the conduct of coercive foreign policy. Testing a revised theoretical model against new data on congressional opposition to presidential crisis policy since 1918, this paper poses a fundamental challenge to this conventional wisdom. Analyses reveal that while divided government and increased representation does invite opposition party criticism to crisis policy, congresspersons of the president's party are much more likely to criticize presidential crisis policy when government is unified and when their partisan contingent is large and internally unified. All told, rather than providing presidents with increased autonomy, it would seem that increased party strength in Congress and unified government generally provide legislative and executive co-partisans with an "invitation to struggle" over the shape of crisis policy.