

Presidential-Congressional Relations in an Era of Polarized Parties and a 60-Vote Senate

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American Gridlock: Causes, Characteristics, and Consequences of Polarization

American University

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Basics of Presidential-Congressional Relations

- The president needs Congress to vote to support his positions
 - It's a hard sell
 - Some presidents are more successful than others
 - Party control of Congress is the **most important determinant** of success
 - The president wins more roll calls if his party has a majority
 - The advantage of majority control is less in the Senate
 - Or more accurately: the *disadvantage* of minority status is less in the Senate
 - Party Polarization in Congress has altered this relationship
 - Different effects in the House & Senate
 - Majority presidents still win more often in both chambers, but polarization
 - **Amplifies** the benefit of majority control in the House:
 - Majority presidents win more; minority presidents win (a lot) less
 - **Suppresses** success rates of both majority & minority presidents in the Senate
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The Puzzle

- Why does polarization suppress presidential success in the Senate?
 - The short answer:
(paraphrasing a motivational line from Clinton's campaign book)
“It's the minority *Party* filibuster stupid”
-

Evidence of the Minority Party Filibuster

- ❑ Exponential increase in cloture votes over time (Fig. 1)
 - ❑ Before Clinton cloture less common on presidential roll calls (Fig. 2)
 - ❑ Institutionalization of 60-vote Senate by George W. Bush administration
 - ❑ Transformed filibuster & cloture into Minority *Party* tool (Fig. 3)
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Figure 1
Cloture Votes on Senate Roll Calls (by presidential administration)

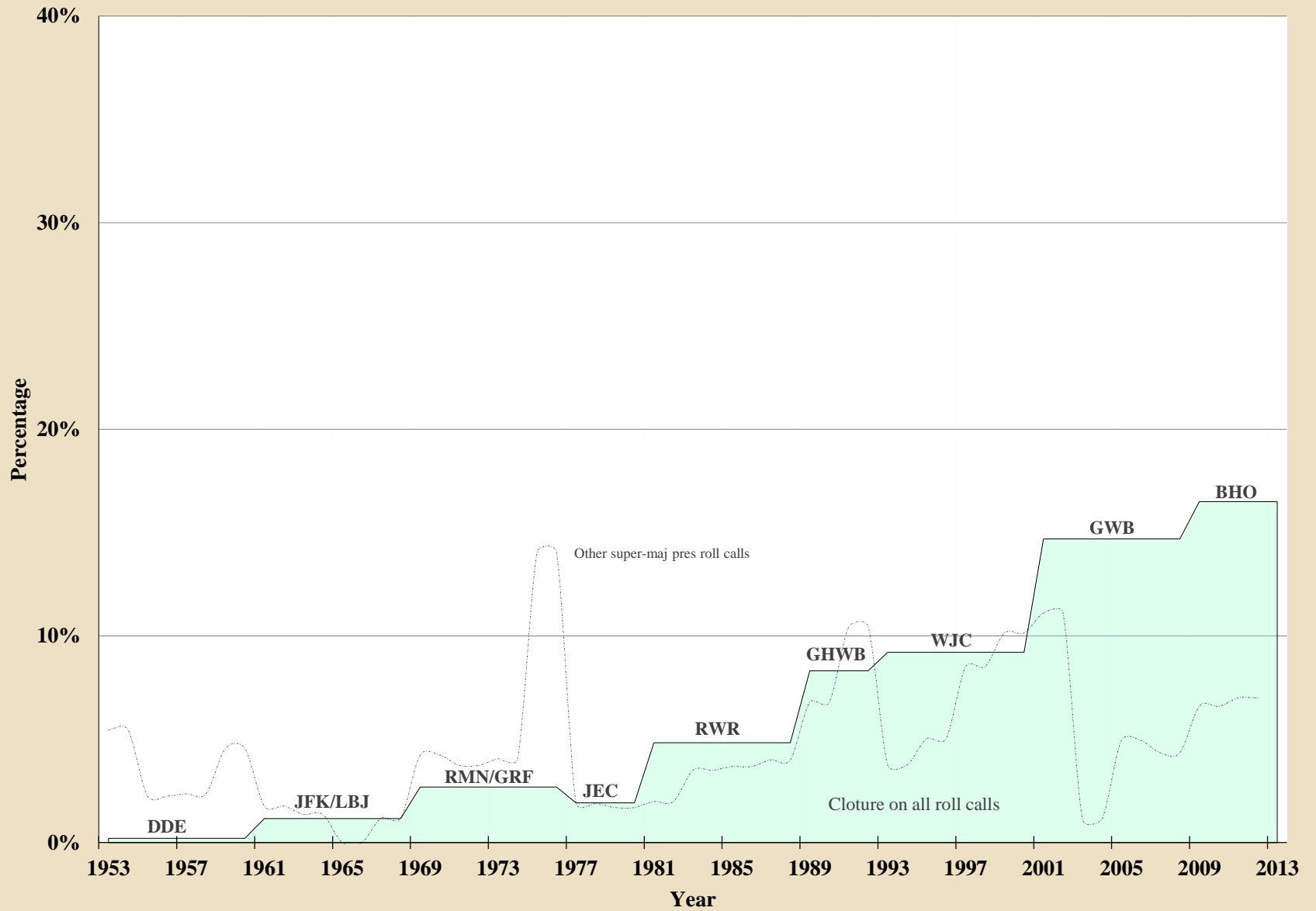


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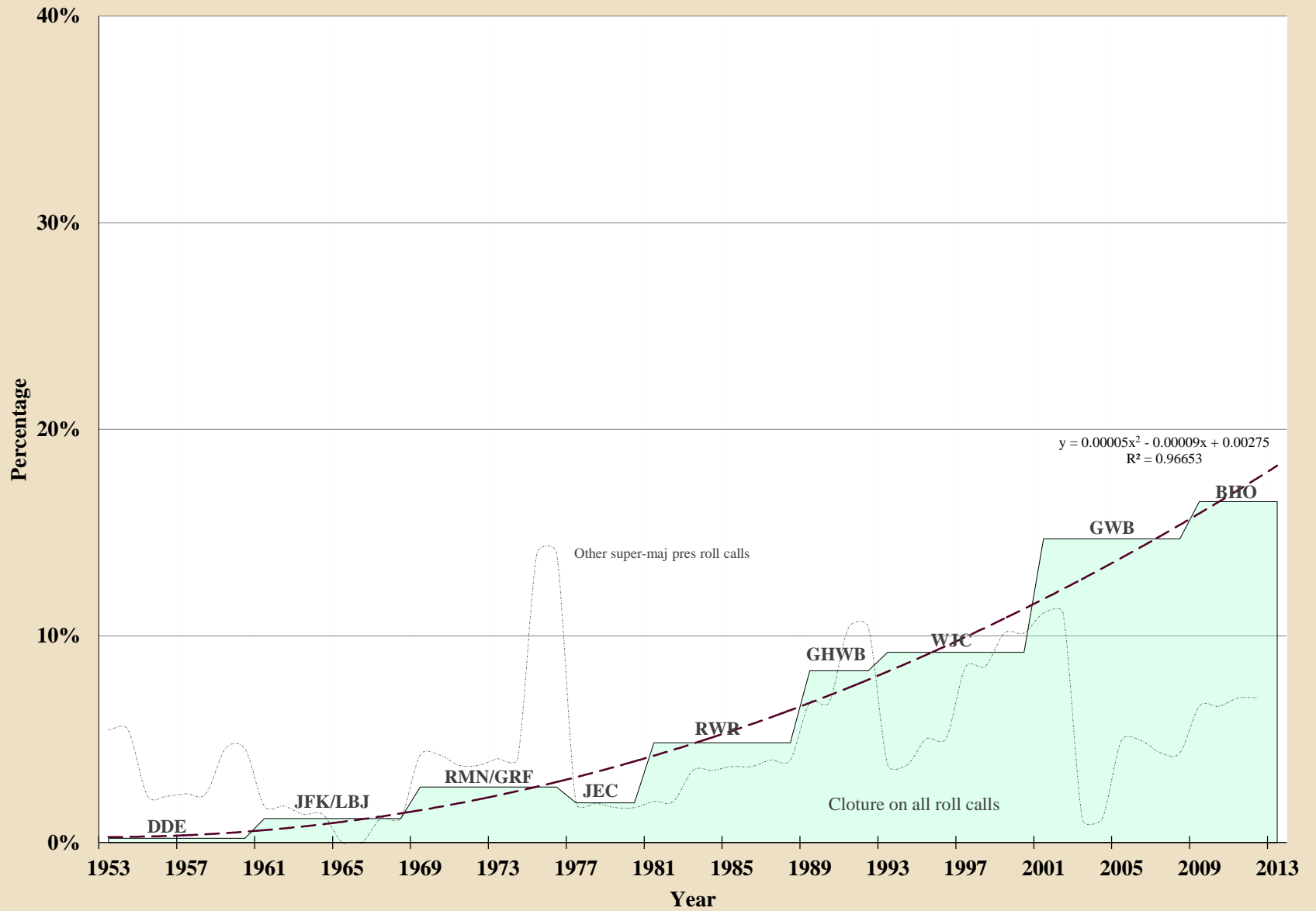
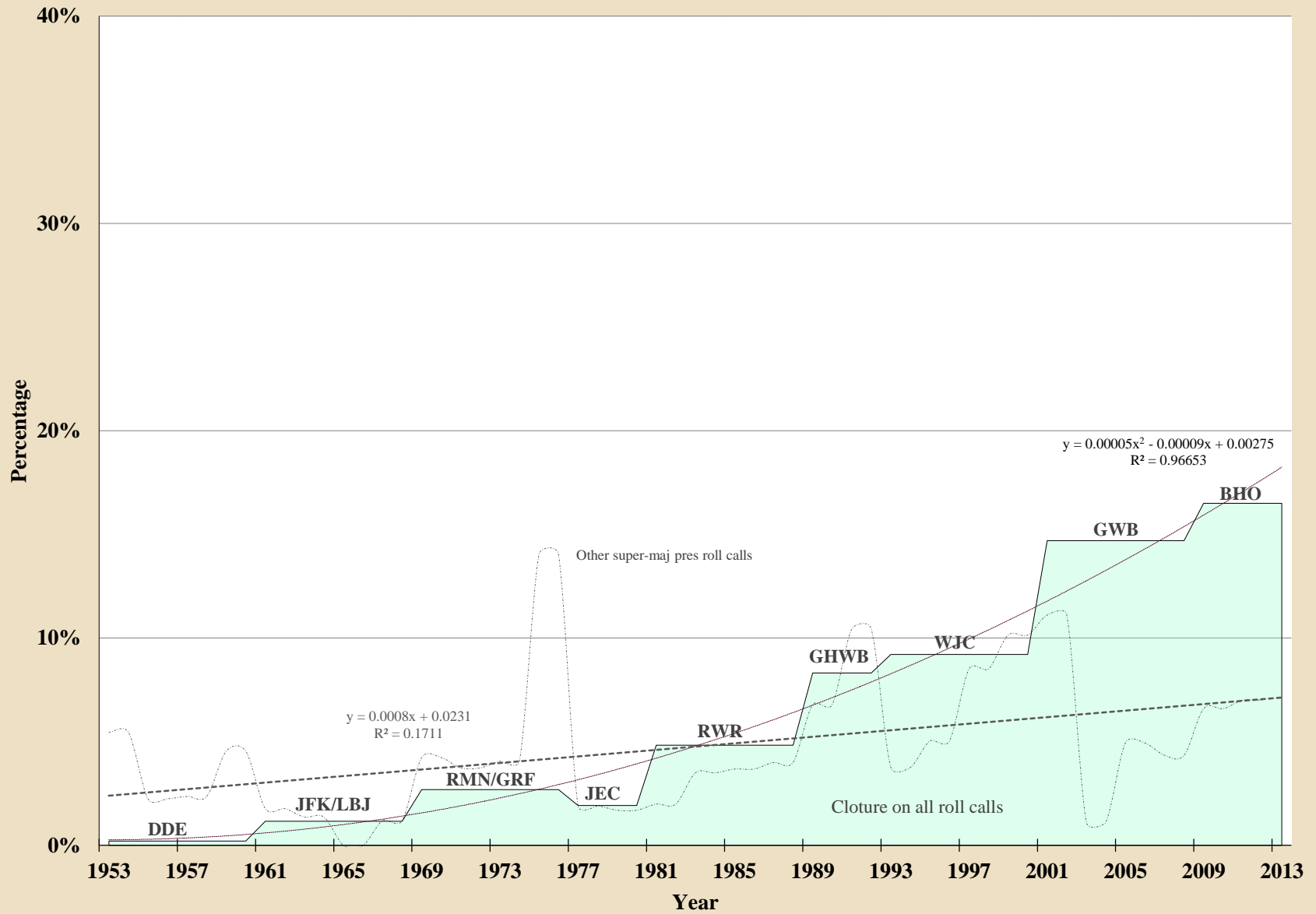


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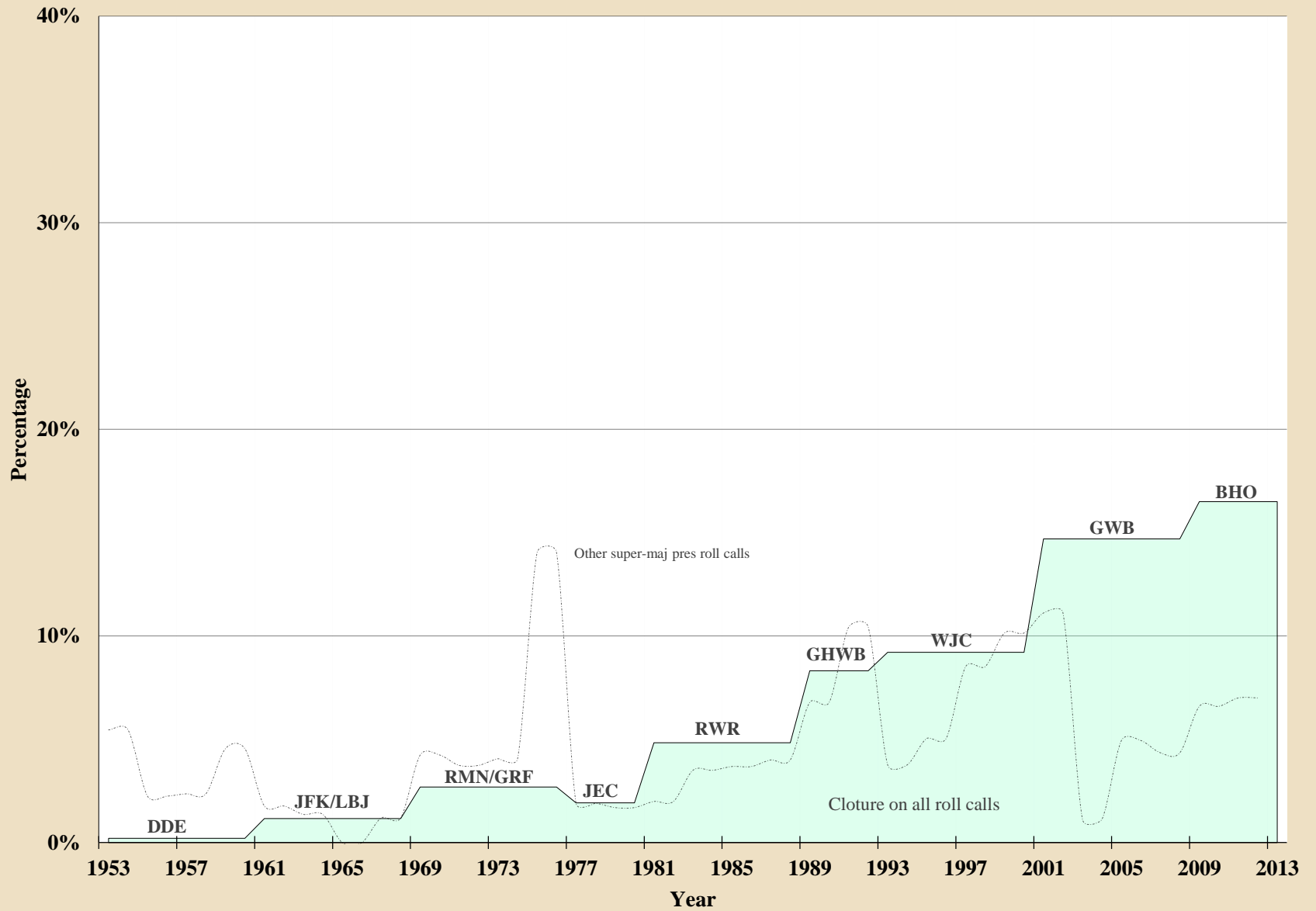
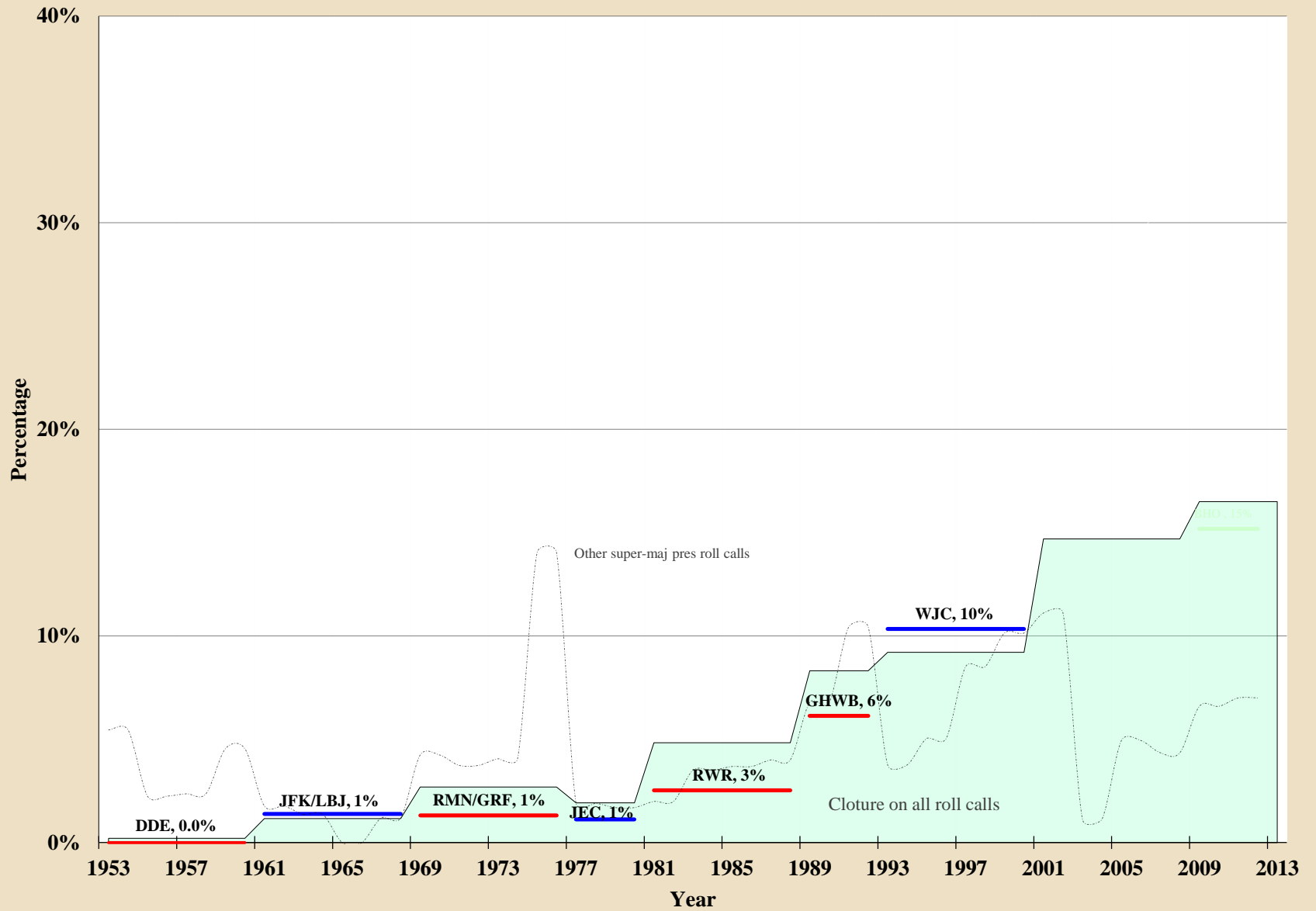


Figure 2
Cloture and Cloture-Related Votes on Presidential Roll Calls



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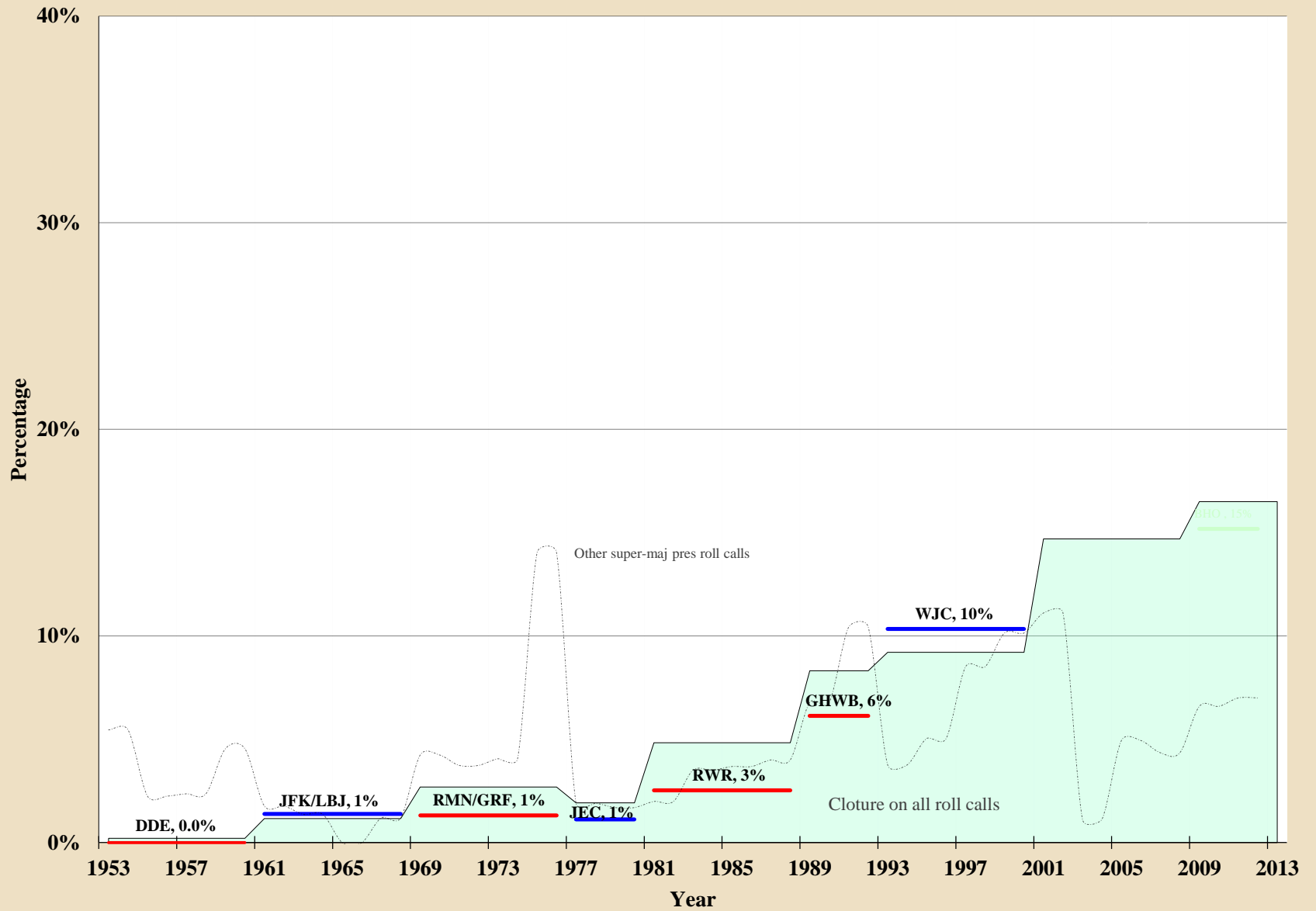
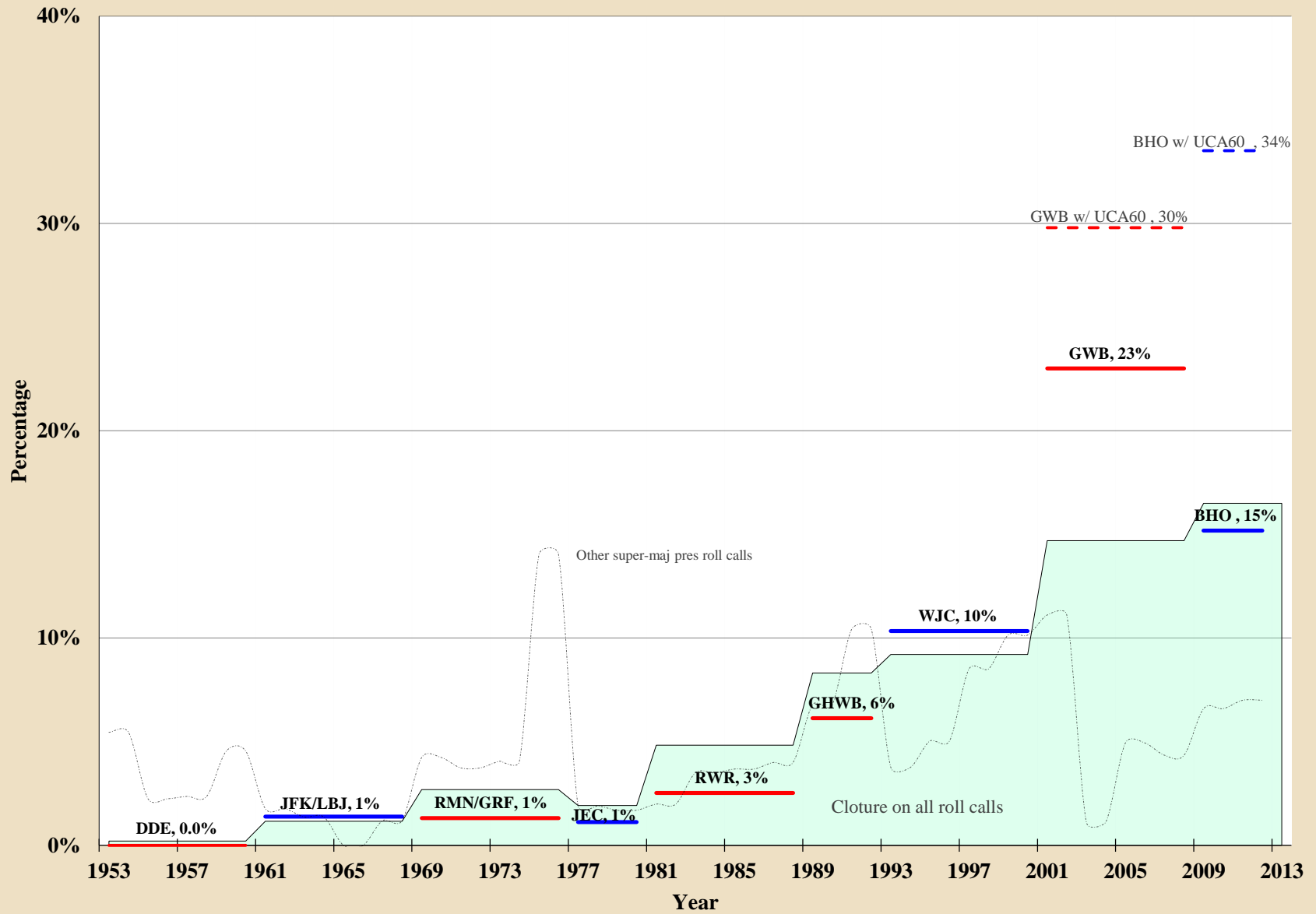


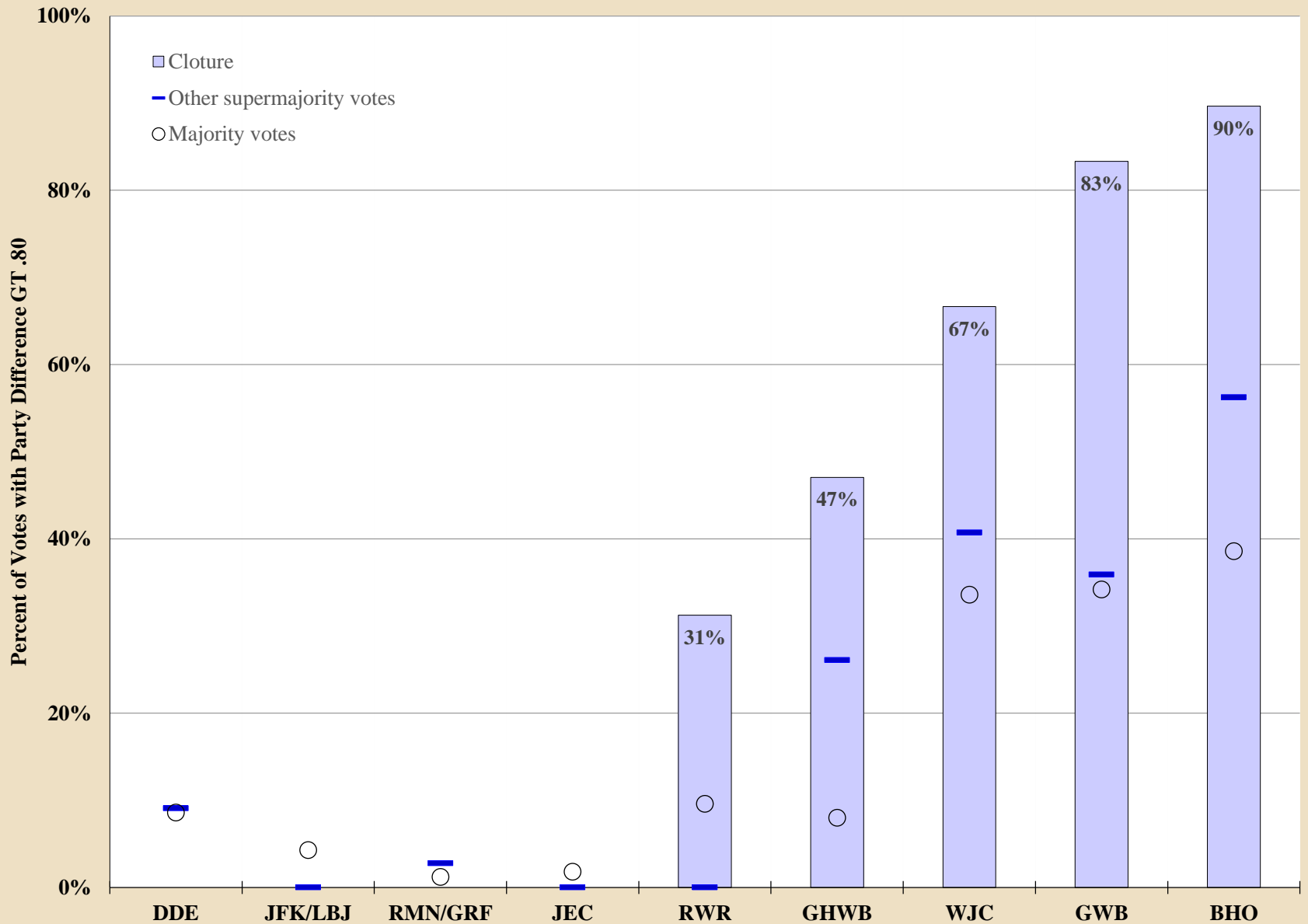
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Evidence of Minority Party Filibuster

- Exponential increase in cloture votes over time (Fig. 1)
 - Before Clinton, cloture less common on presidential roll calls (Fig. 2)
 - Institutionalization of 60-vote Senate by George W. Bush administration
 - Transformed filibuster & cloture into Minority *Party* tool
 - No formal change in cloture rule (or its interpretation until Nov. 2013 nuclear option)
 - But behavior changed—voting on presidential roll calls has become highly partisan
 - Partisanship increased on all types of presidential roll calls
 - Especially high on cloture votes (Fig. 3)
-

Figure 3
High Party Unity on Cloture and Other Presidential Roll Calls



How Does Polarization Affect Presidential Success?

- House: **Augments** advantage of majority control
 - As polarization increases,
majority presidents win more; minority presidents win less (Fig. 4a)
-

Figure 4a
The Effects of Party Polarization on House Presidential Success

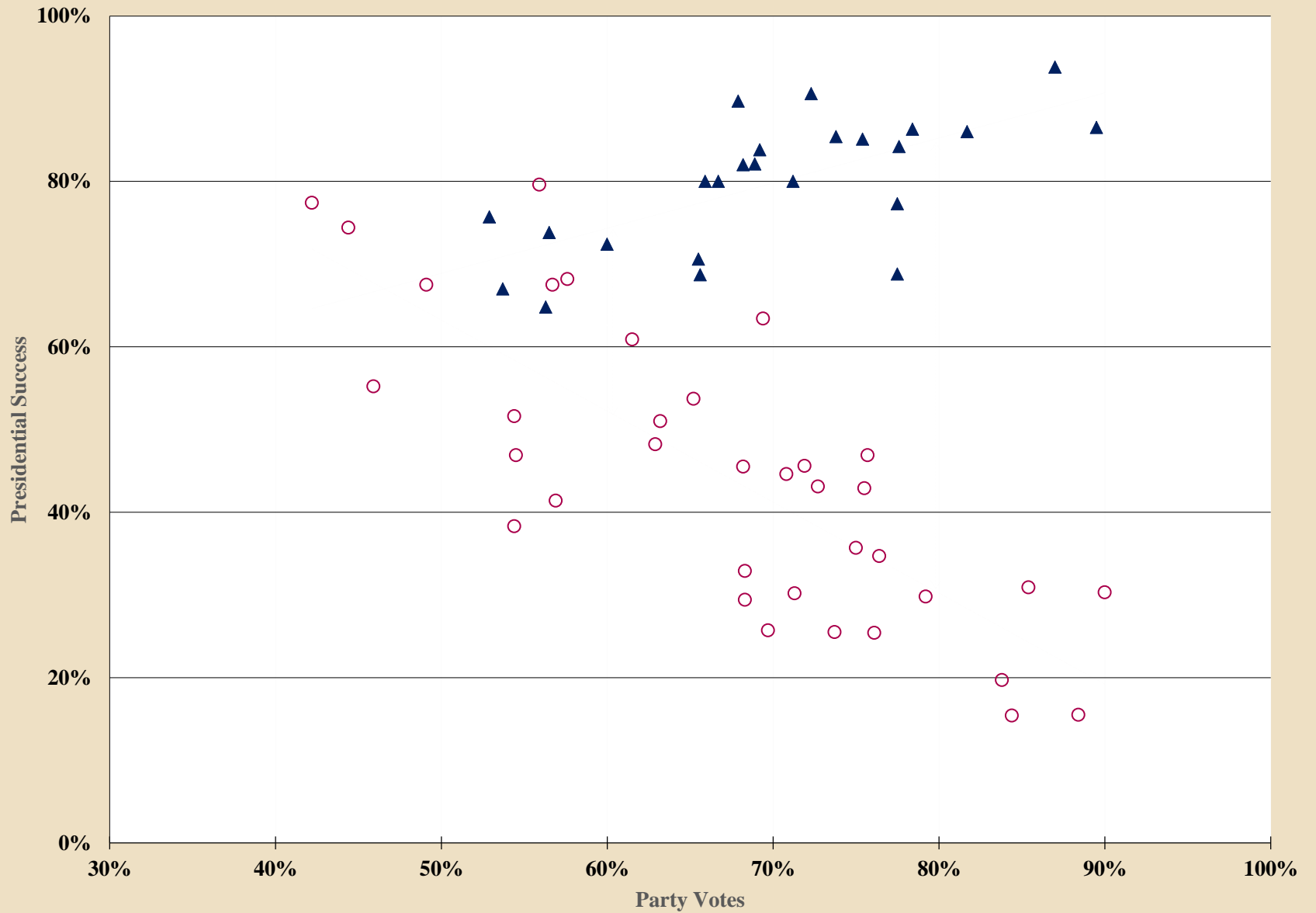


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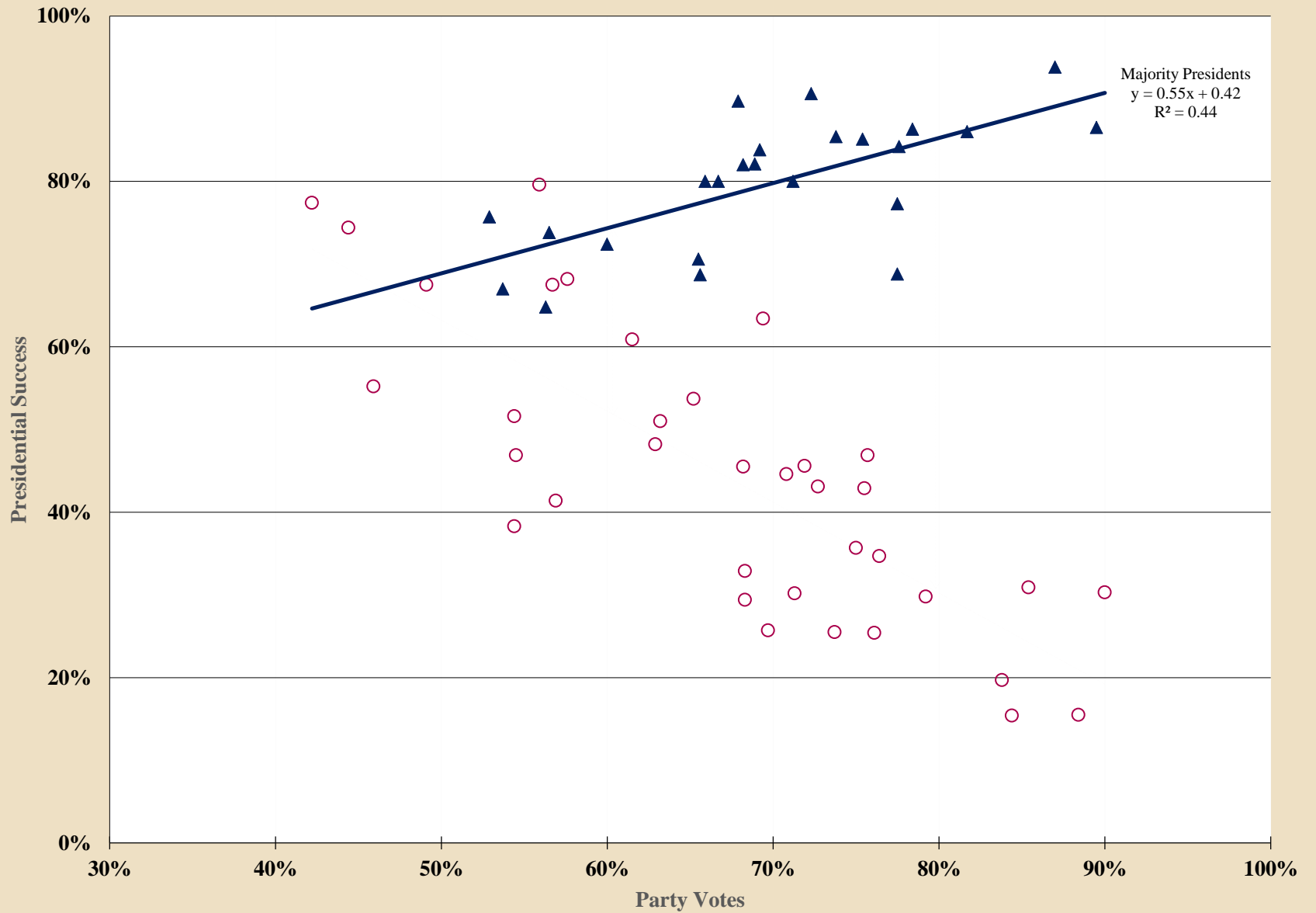


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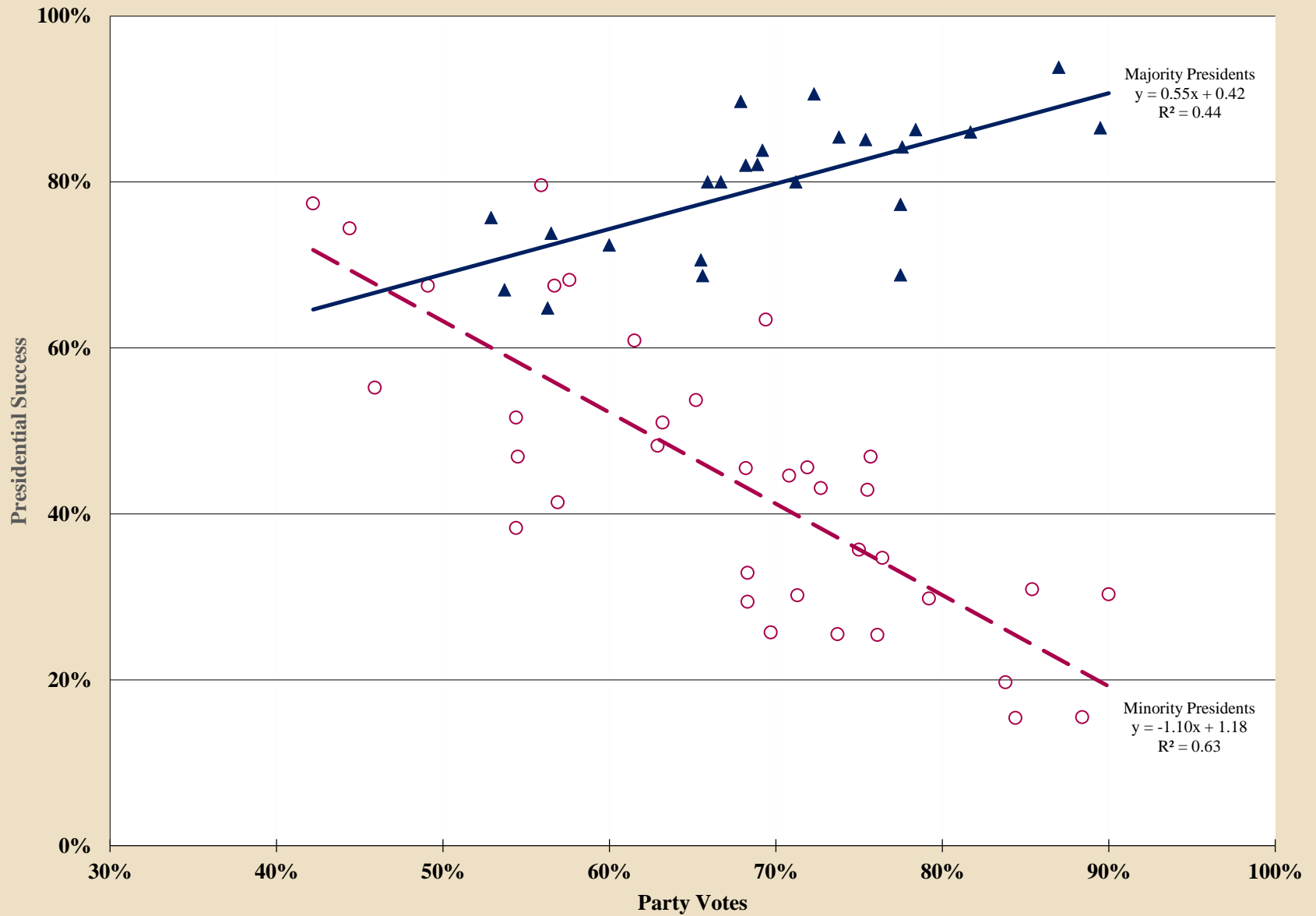
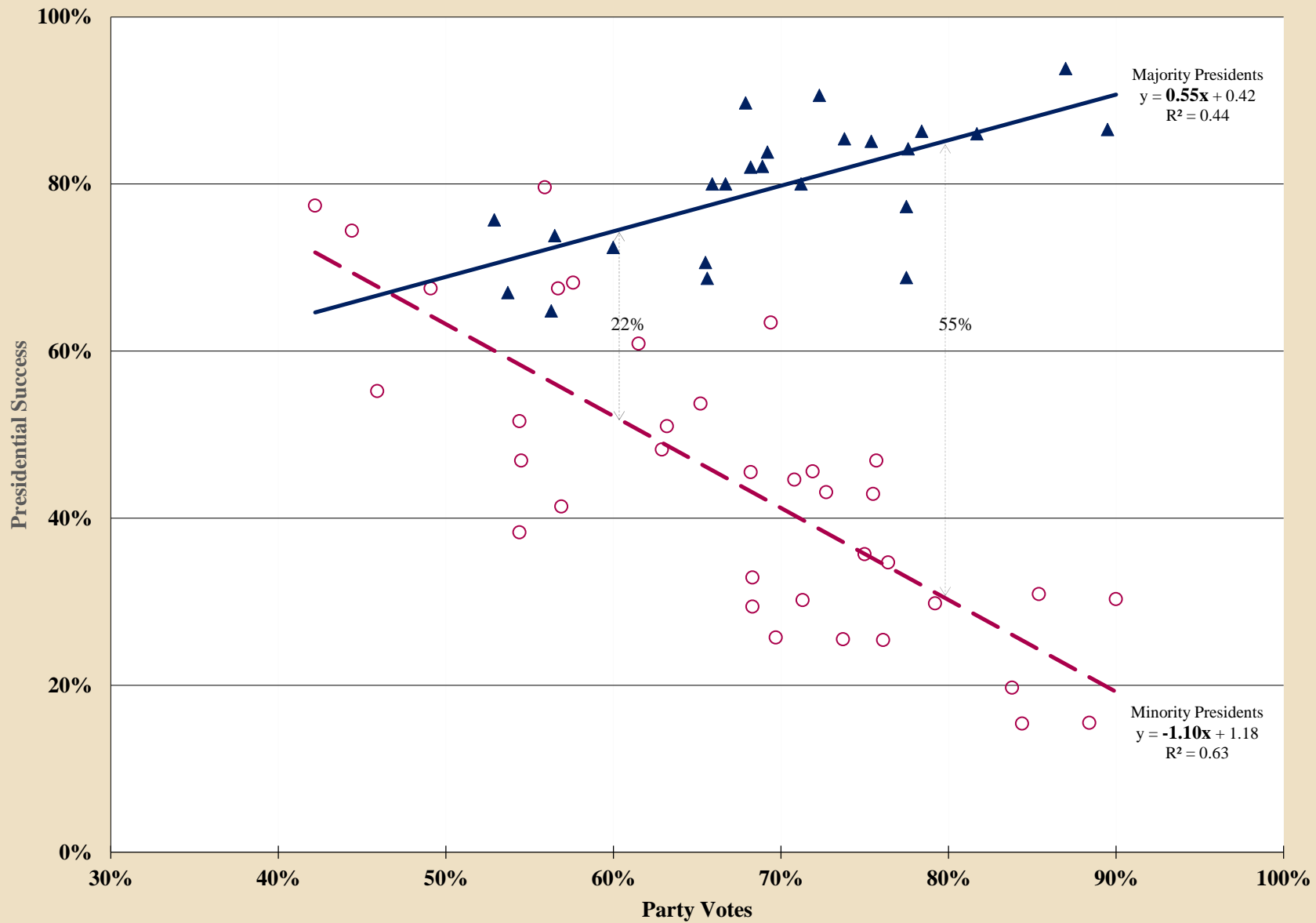


Figure 4a
The Effects of Party Polarization on House Presidential Success



How Does Polarization Affect Presidential Success?

- Senate: **Suppresses** presidential success
 - As polarization increases, success rates of both majority & minority presidents decrease (Fig. 4b)

 - If it's the filibuster & cloture, then the pattern on non-cloture votes should look more like the House (Fig. 4c)

 - And the pattern of presidential success on cloture votes, should be a mirror image of the House (Fig. 4d)
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Figure 4b
The Effects of Party Polarization on Senate Presidential Success

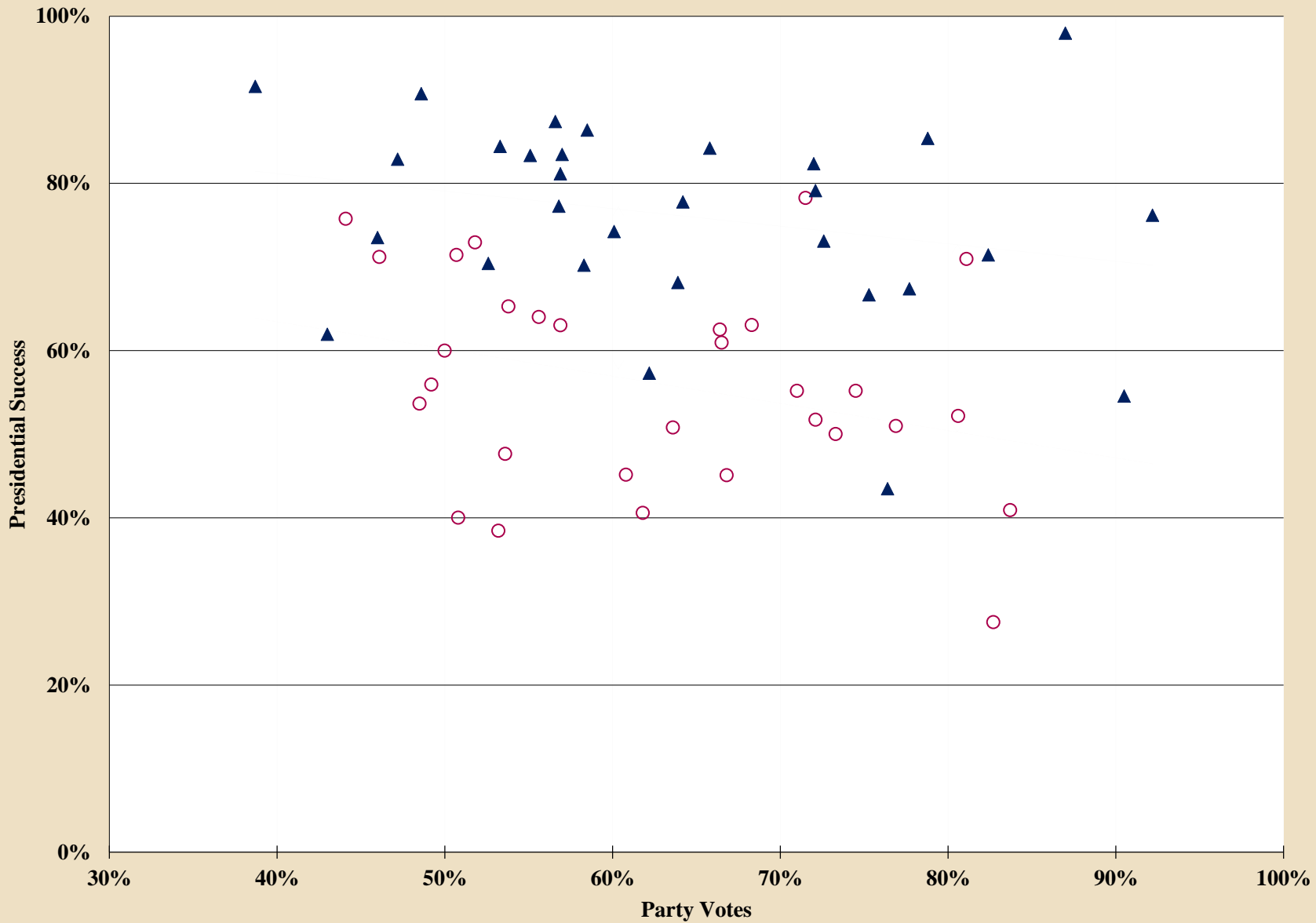


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The Effects of Party Polarization on Senate Presidential Success

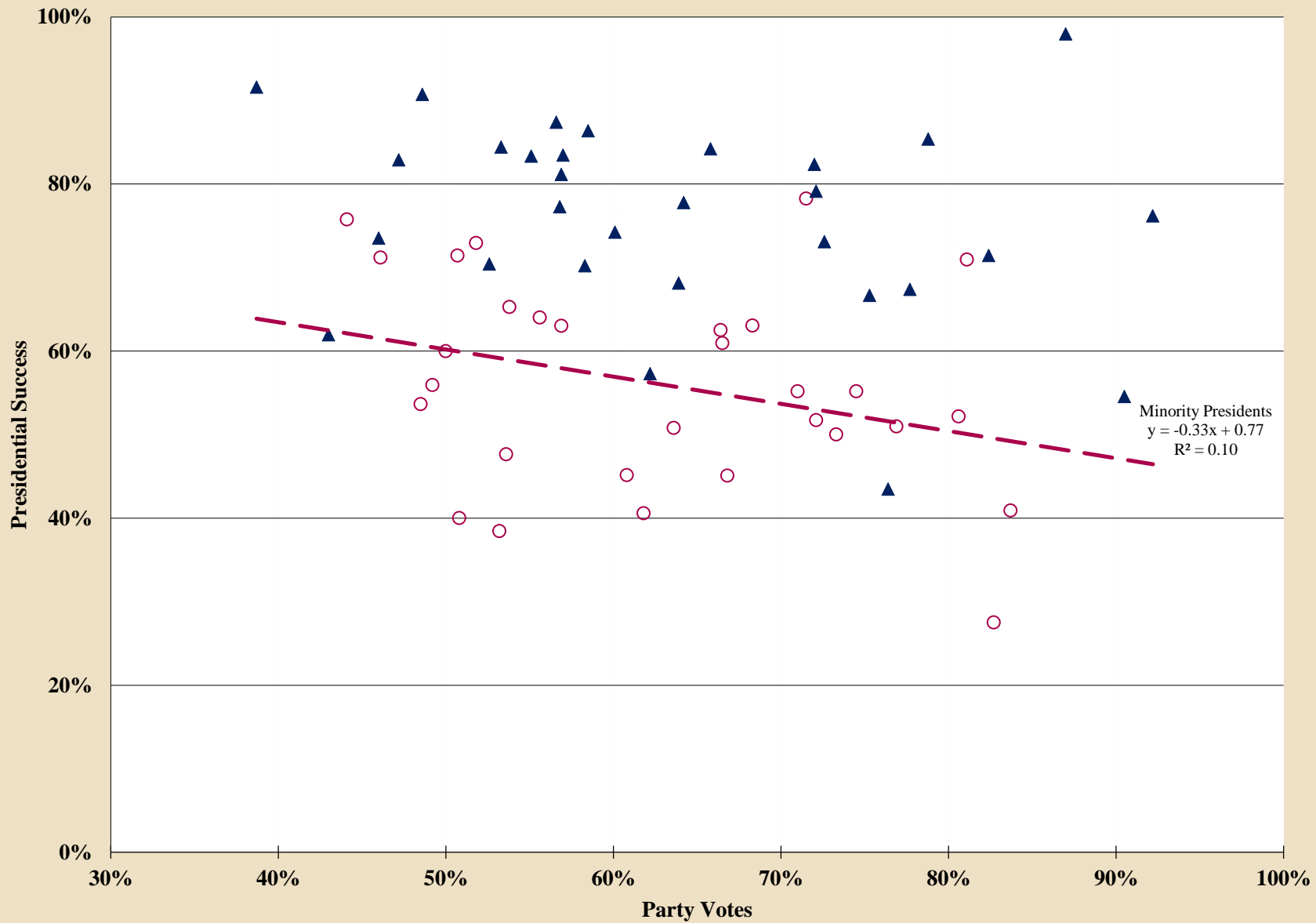


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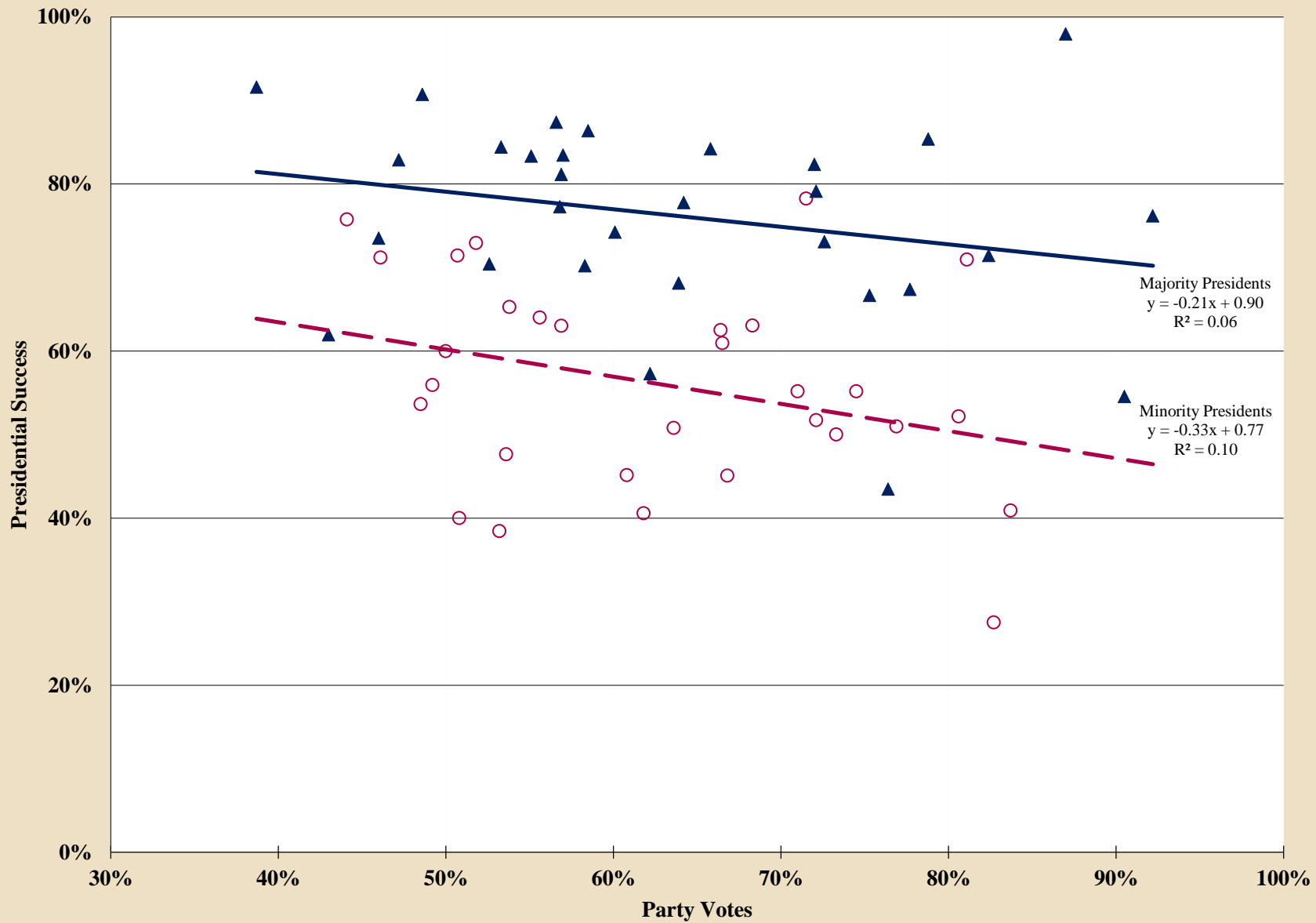
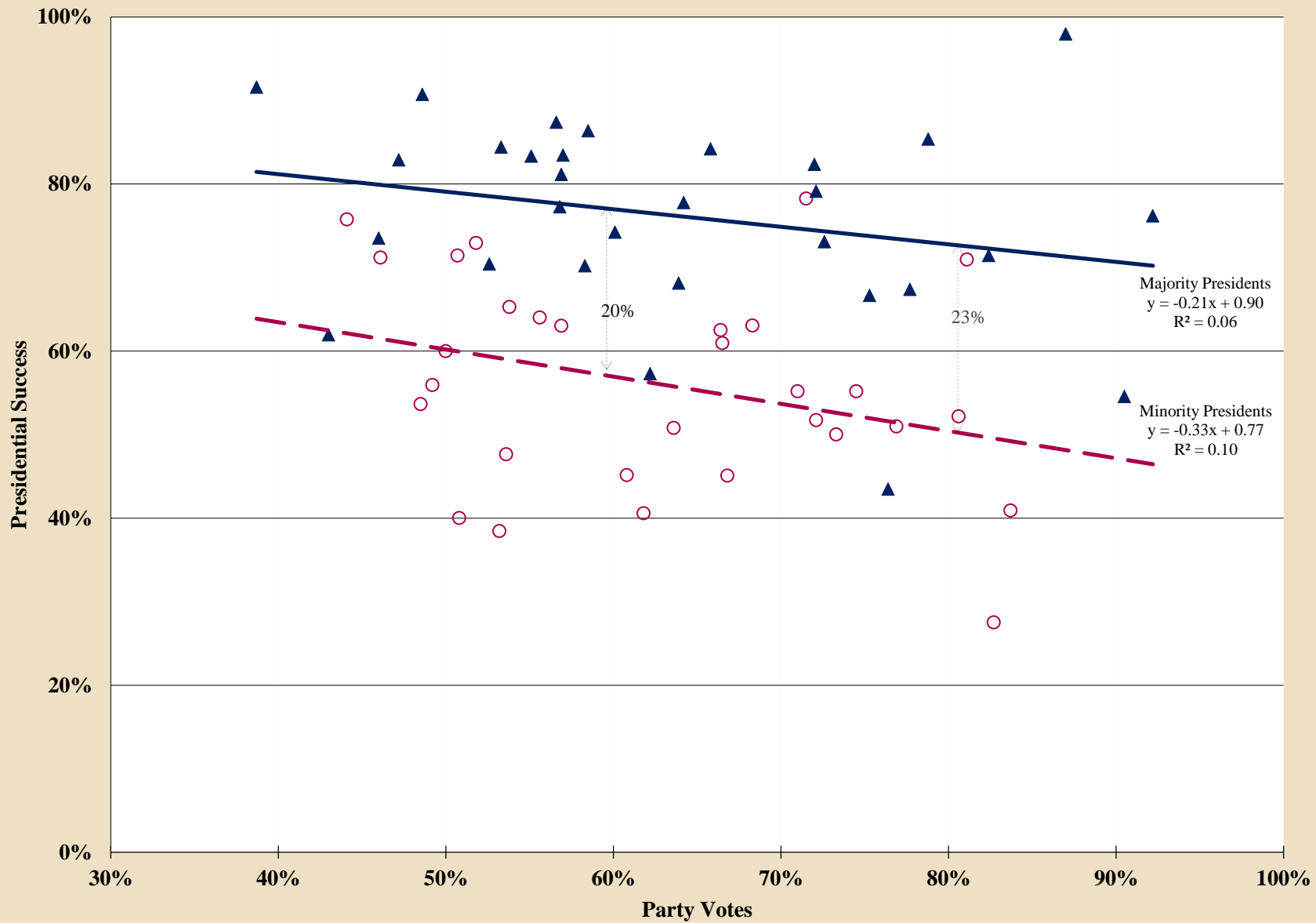


Figure 4b
The Effects of Party Polarization on Senate Presidential Success



How Does Polarization Affect Presidential Success?

- Senate: Suppresses Success Rates
 - As polarization increases,
Success rates of both majority & minority presidents decrease (Fig. 4b)

 - If the minority party filibuster is the cause, then
the pattern on *non-cloture* votes should look more like the House (Fig. 4c)

 - And the pattern of presidential success on cloture votes,
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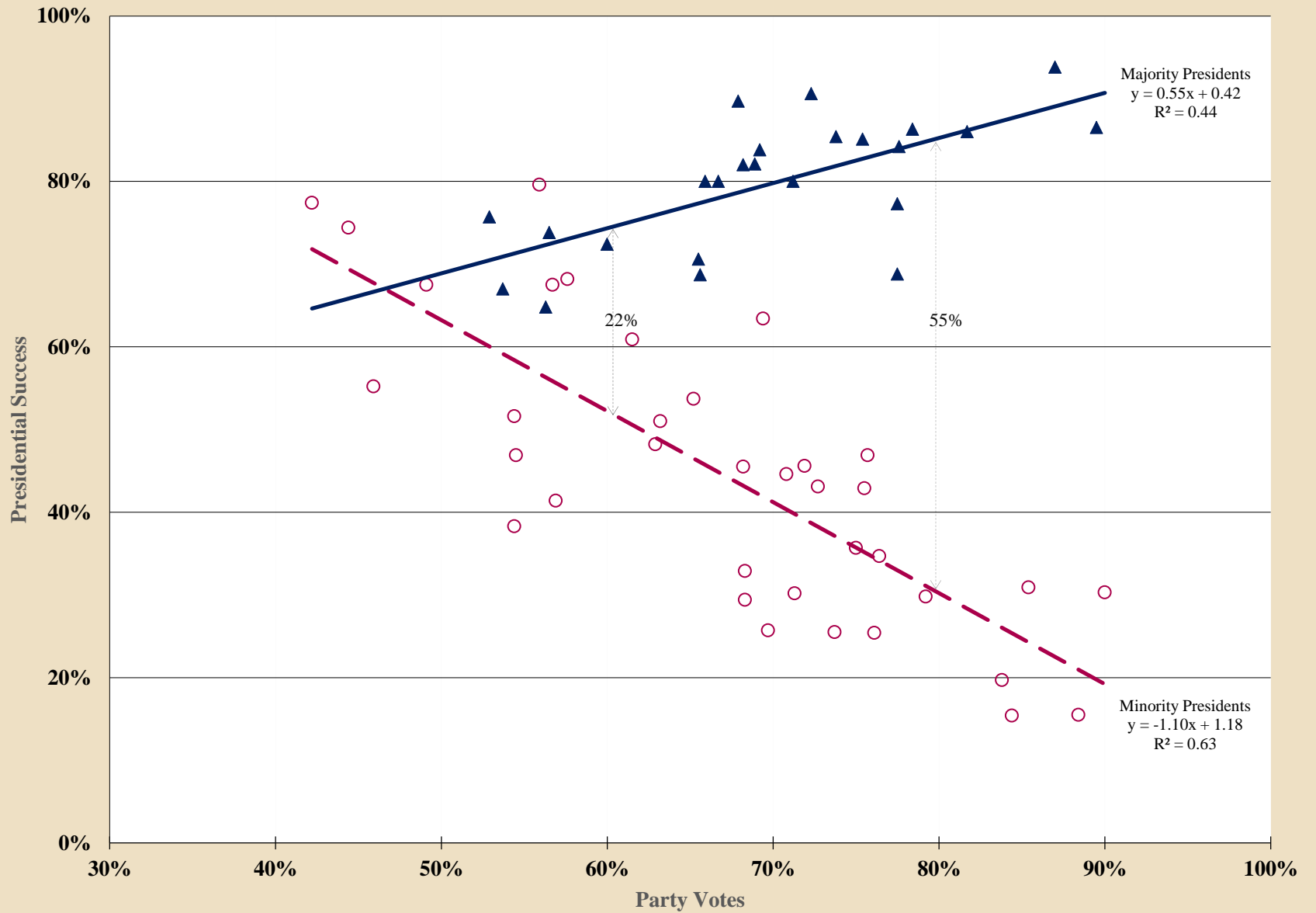


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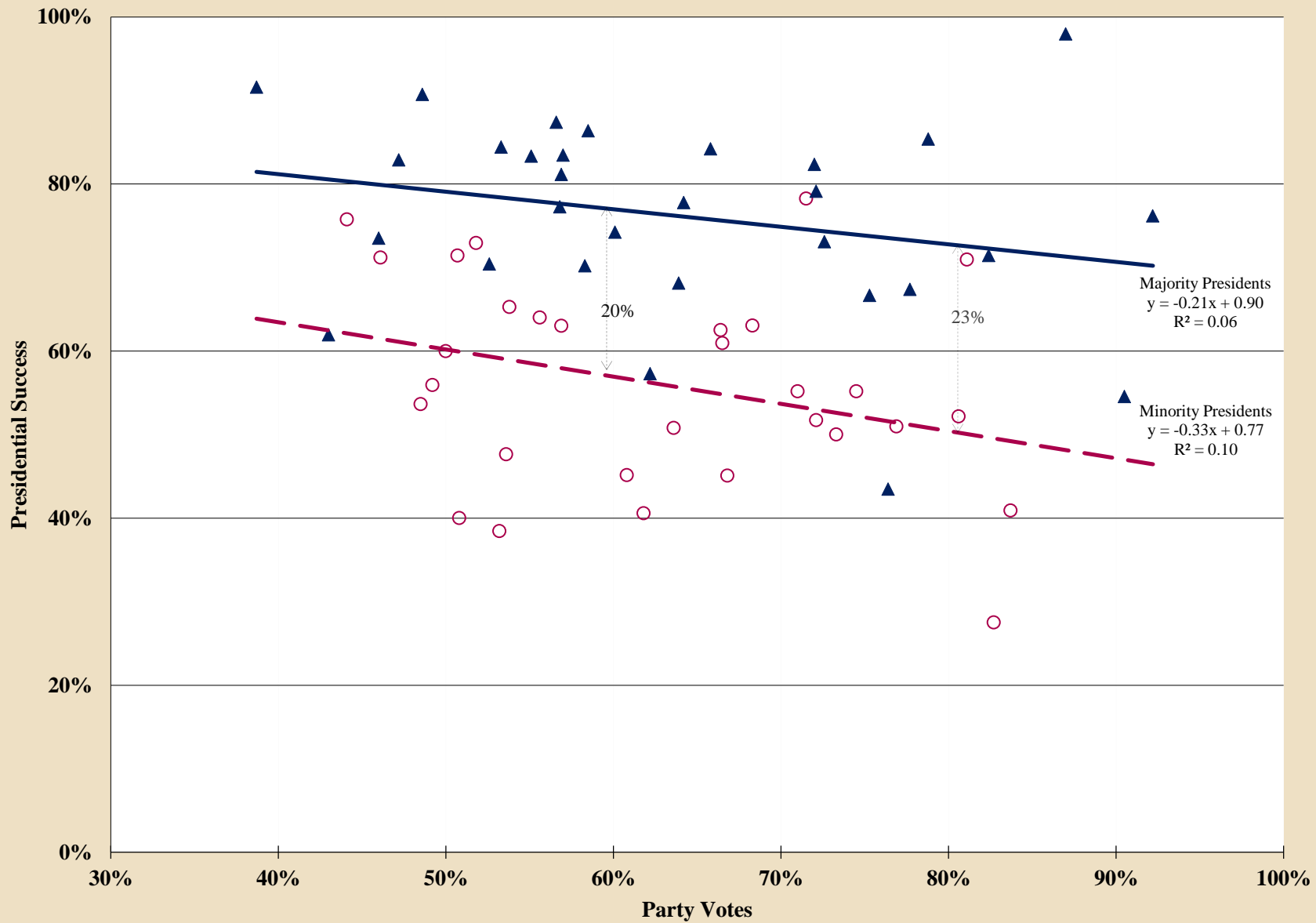
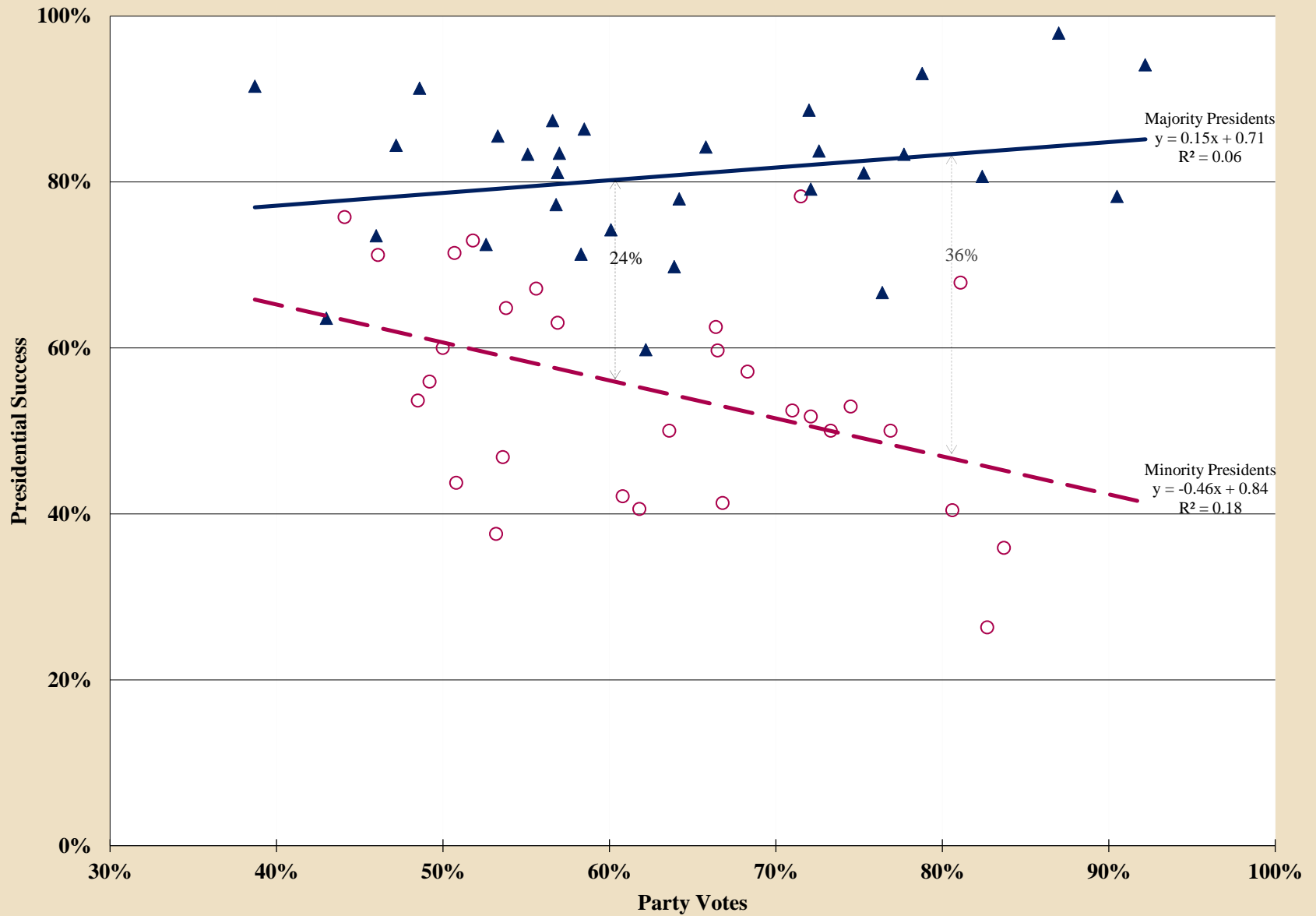


Figure 4c
The Effects of Party Polarization on Senate Presidential Success (Non-cloture)



How Does Polarization Affect Presidential Success?

- Senate: Suppresses Success Rates
 - As polarization increases,
Success rates of both majority & minority presidents decrease (Fig. 4b)
 - If it's the filibuster & cloture, then
the pattern on non-cloture votes should look more like the House (Fig. 4c)
 - And the pattern of presidential success on cloture votes,
should be a mirror image of the House (Fig. 4d)
 - Why is a 60-vote Senate so hard on majority presidents?
It's just simple arithmetic of the minority party filibuster (Table 1)
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The Effects of Party Polarization on House Presidential Success

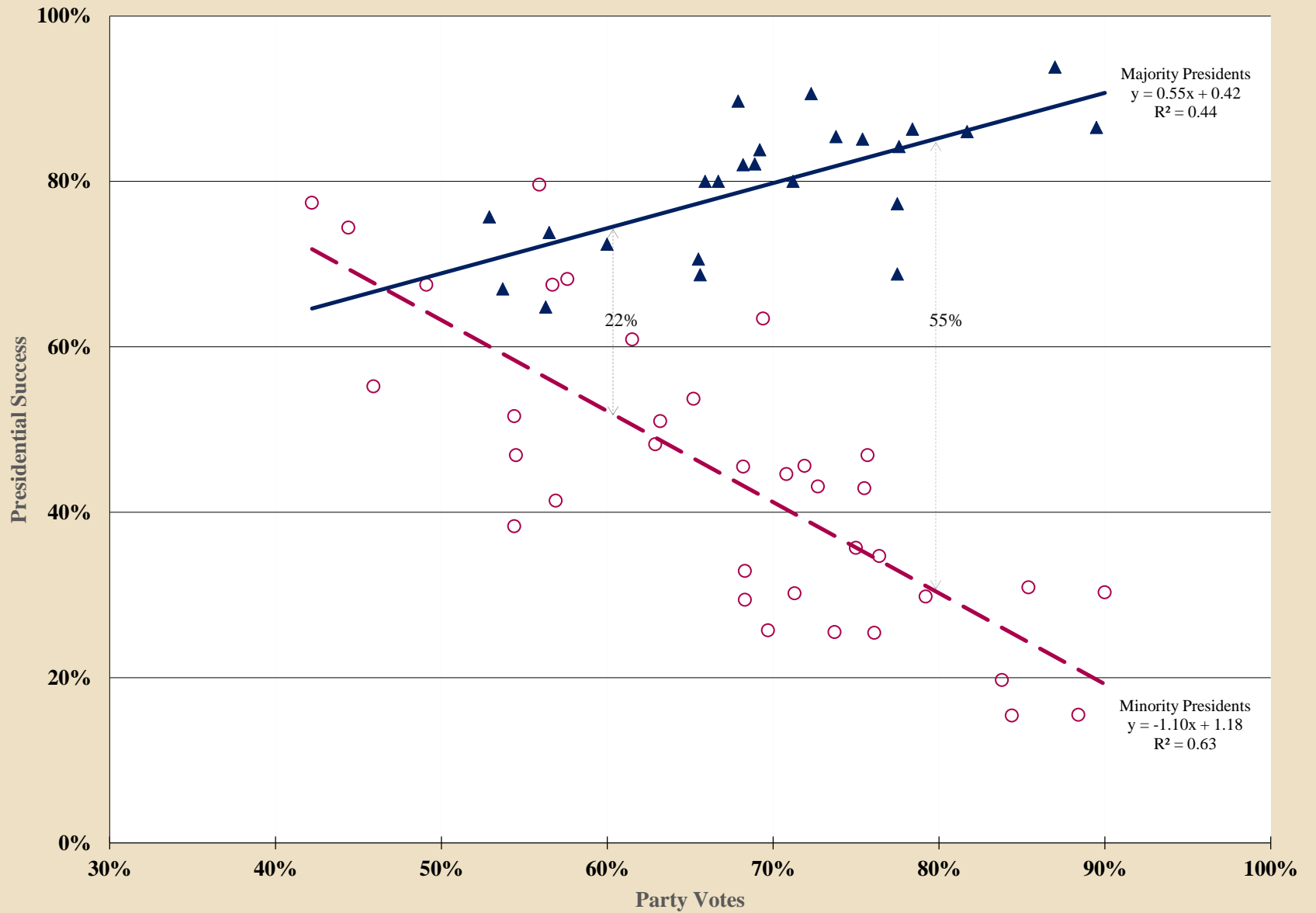
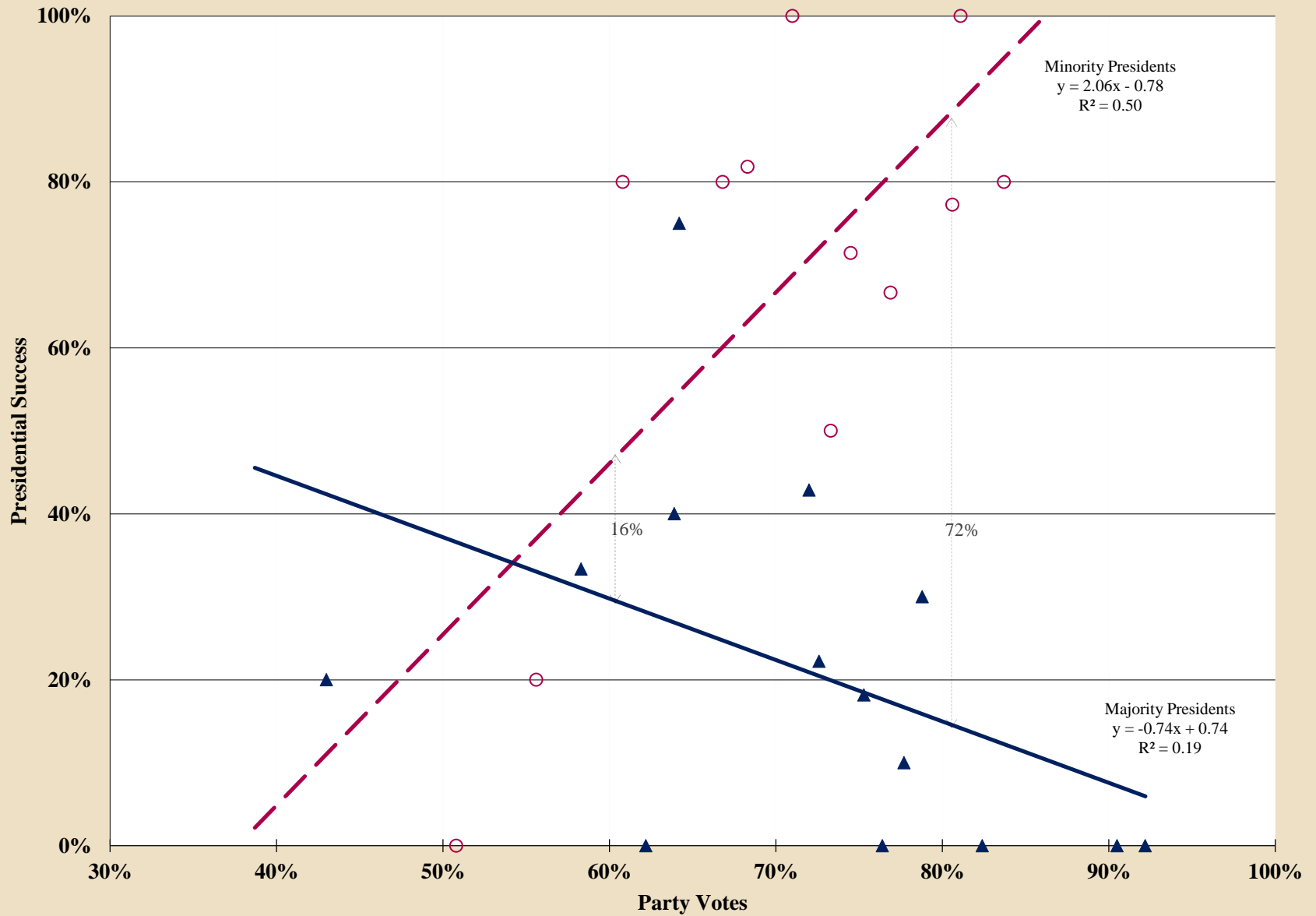


Figure 4d
The Effects of Party Polarization on Senate Presidential Success (Cloture)



How Does Polarization Affect Presidential Success?

- Senate: Suppresses Success Rates
 - As polarization increases,
Success rates of both majority & minority presidents decrease (Fig. 4b)
 - If it's the filibuster & cloture, then
the pattern on non-cloture votes should look more like the House (Fig. 4c)
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Table 1
Presidential Positions on Cloture Votes

	Minority Presidents	Majority Presidents
	Nay	Yea
Pre-Bush Years	67.8% (40/59)	95.7% (44/46)
Bush/Obama Years	83.3% (30/36)	97.6% (81/83)
All Years	73.7% (70/95)	96.9% (125/129)

- Presidents win 93% if they opposed invoking cloture vs. 15% if they support it
 - It's a lot easier to win if you only need 41 votes rather than 60
- Minority party presidents usually oppose invoking cloture (74% nay positions)
 - Increased from 68% in pre-Bush years to 83% for Bush & Obama
- Majority party presidents almost always support cloture (97% yea positions)
 - Not much room to increase in recent years (96% to 98%)
 - But Bush & Obama took positions on 83 cloture votes vs. 46 in pre-Bush years

Conclusions

- Party polarization: different effects on presidential success in the House & Senate
 - House:
 - As parties become more cohesive, party control becomes more important—majority party presidents win more; minority party presidents win less
 - Why?
 - House is a majoritarian institution
 - Cohesive majorities help majority presidents & hinder minority presidents
 - Senate:
 - As parties become more cohesive, both majority & minority presidents win less
 - Why?
 - Senate is a super-majoritarian institution
 - Cohesive parties hinder both majority & minority presidents
 - Majority presidents less likely to get opposition votes necessary to invoke cloture
 - Minority presidents less able to impede scheduling of objectionable floor votes
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Thank you

Jon, Rich, and Jeff

Figure 1
Partisanship on Presidential Roll Calls in the House and Senate

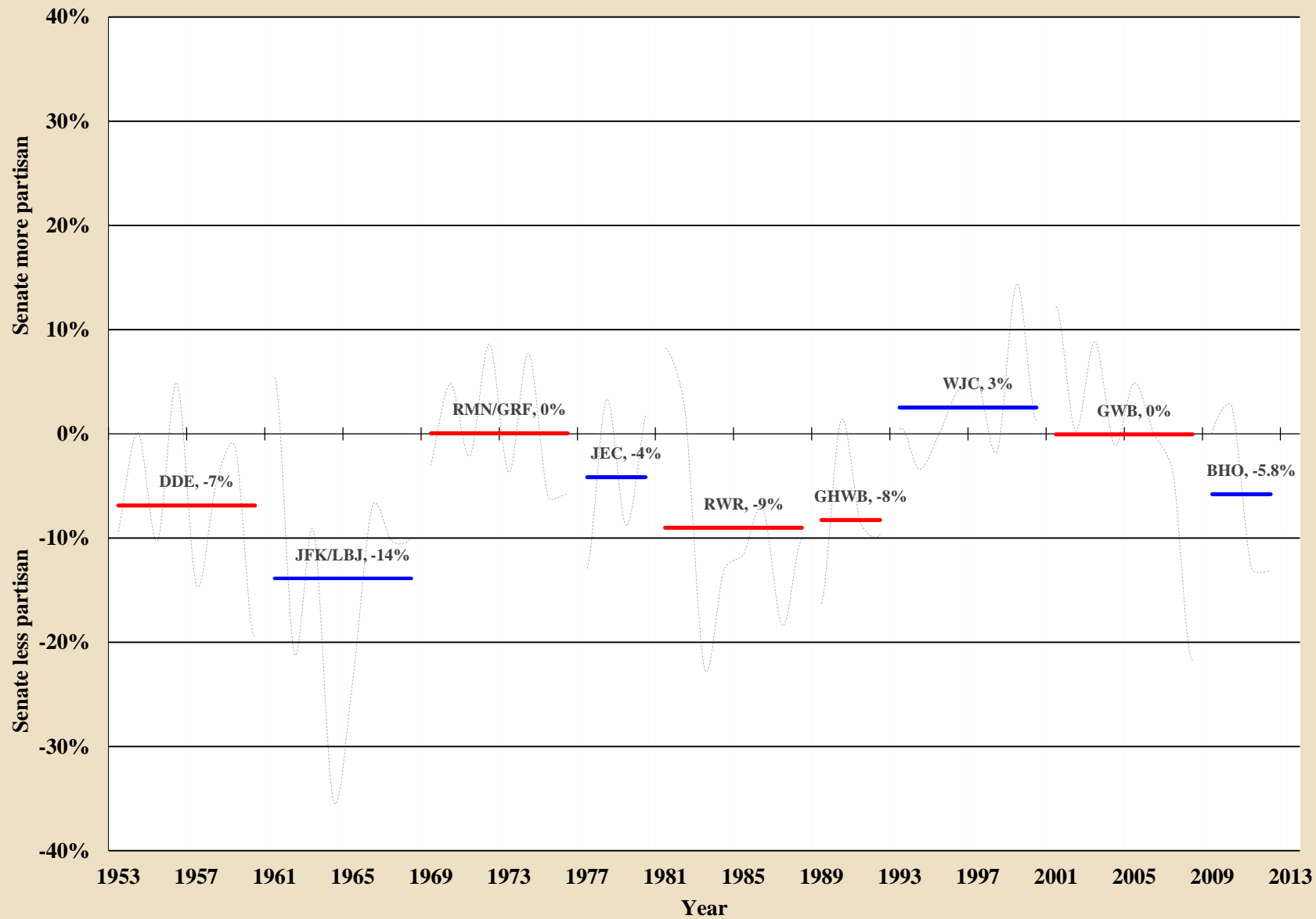
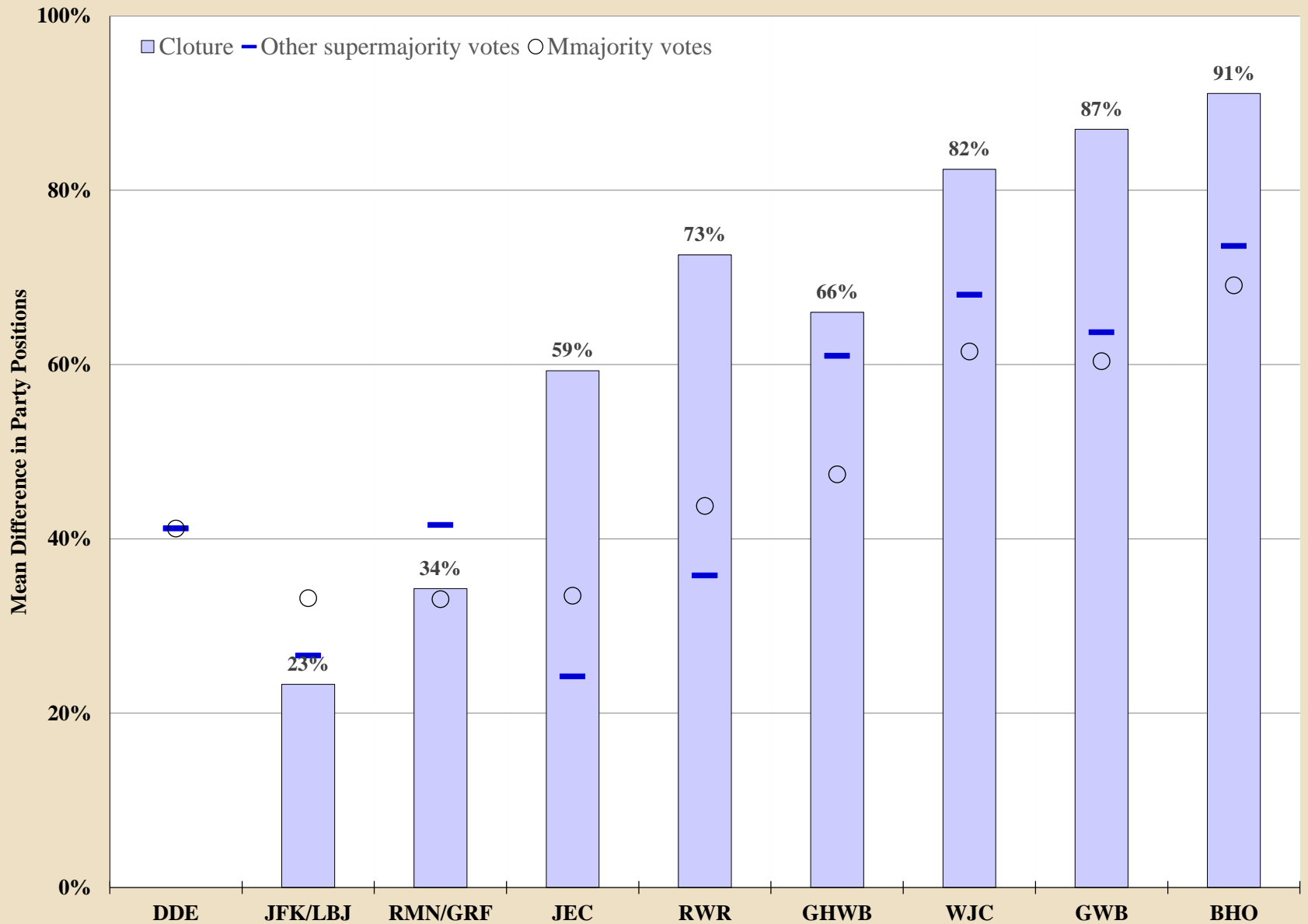


Figure 3a
Partisanship on Cloture and Other Presidential Votes



The Measures

- Dependent Variable: Presidential Success Score
 - Annual percentage of presidential victories on conflictual roll calls, 1953-2013
 - Party Control
 - 1 if president's party controls the chamber; 0 otherwise
 - Why not use interval measure w/ more information (percent of president's party)?
 - More on this shortly
 - Party Polarization
 - Annual percentage of conflictual roll calls w/ majority of Dems. vs. majority of Reps.
 - Exclude consensus roll calls (less than 10% in the minority)
 - Interpretation: percentage of *all conflict* on roll call votes that is *party* conflict
 - Presidential popularity
 - Average annual percentage approving of the president's job performance (Gallup)
-

Wouldn't it be better to use percent of the president's party?

- Dichotomous party control variable throws out information
 - Standard practice is to use percent of the president's party

 - Does the interval measure add *useful* information over the simple majority/minority dichotomy?
 - Not much
 - Primary benefit of party control = president's co-partisans control key levers of power (committees; agenda control)

 - Let's look at some evidence (Table 1)
-

Table 1

The Effects of Party Control & the President's Party Margin on Presidential Success in the House & Senate, 1953-2010

Variables	House	Senate
Party Control (majority party president = 1)	38.49 (5.57)	11.97 (2.10)
President's Party Margin (President's party % - Opposition party %)	-0.13 (-0.71)	0.37 (2.18)
Constant	41.24 (11.36)	55.87 (18.77)
N	58	58
R ²	0.61	0.47
<i>t-values in parentheses</i>		

- Significant coefficient for president's party margin in the Senate
 - Implies that percent of president's party has independent effects in the Senate
 - Magnitude of effect seems similar to party control dummy
 - Plot of the relationships suggests a different interpretation

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The Relationship between Party Control & Presidential Success in the House

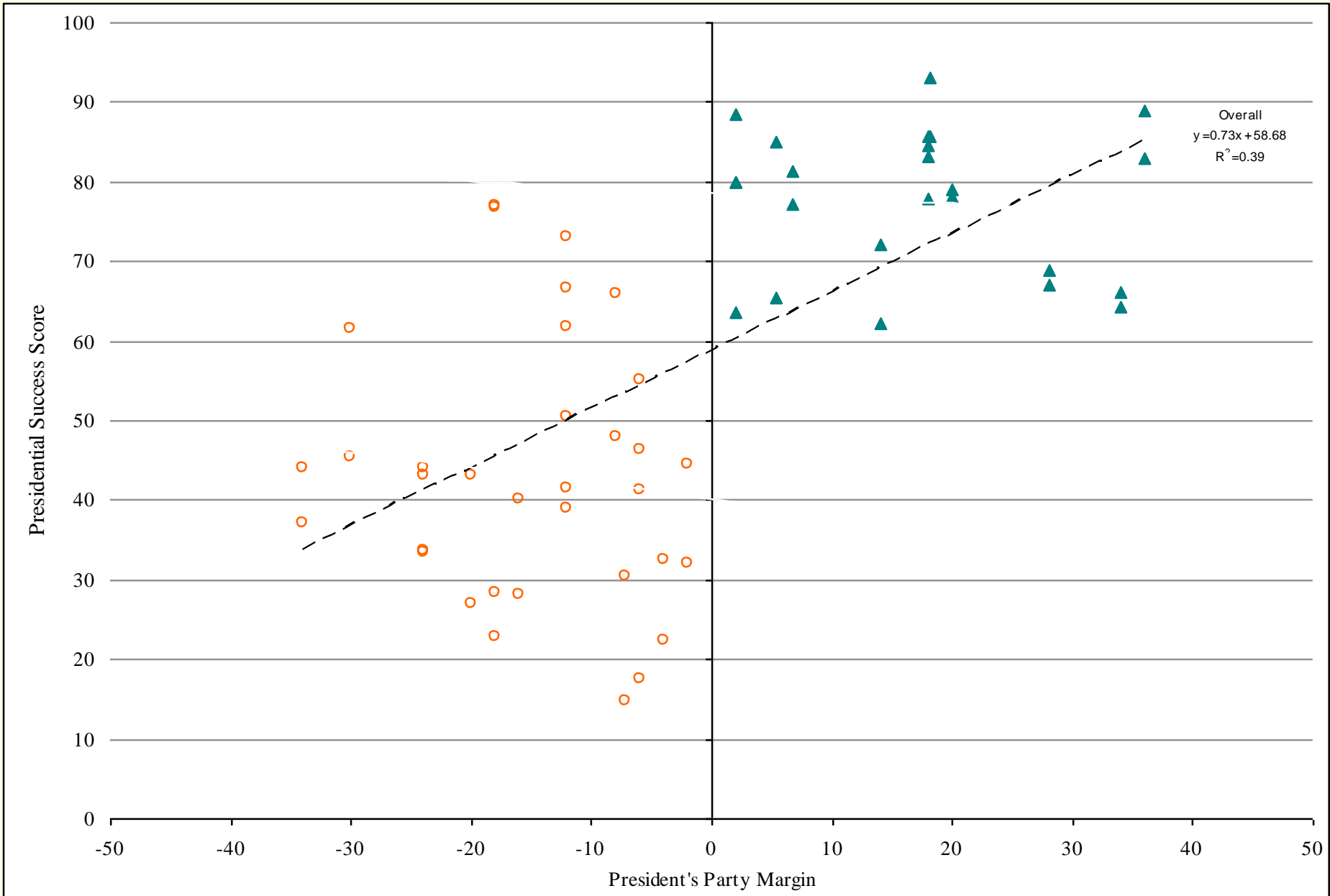


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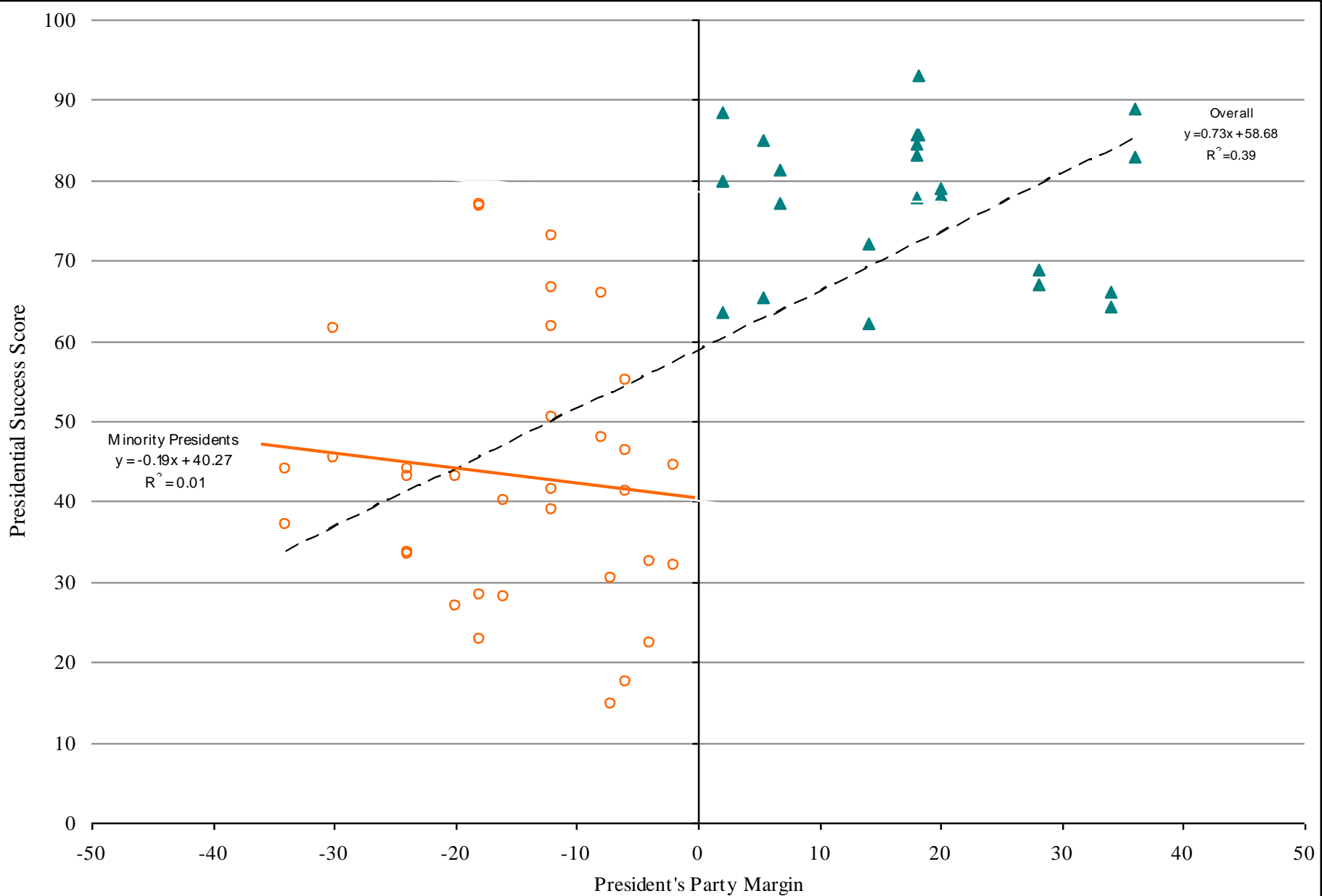


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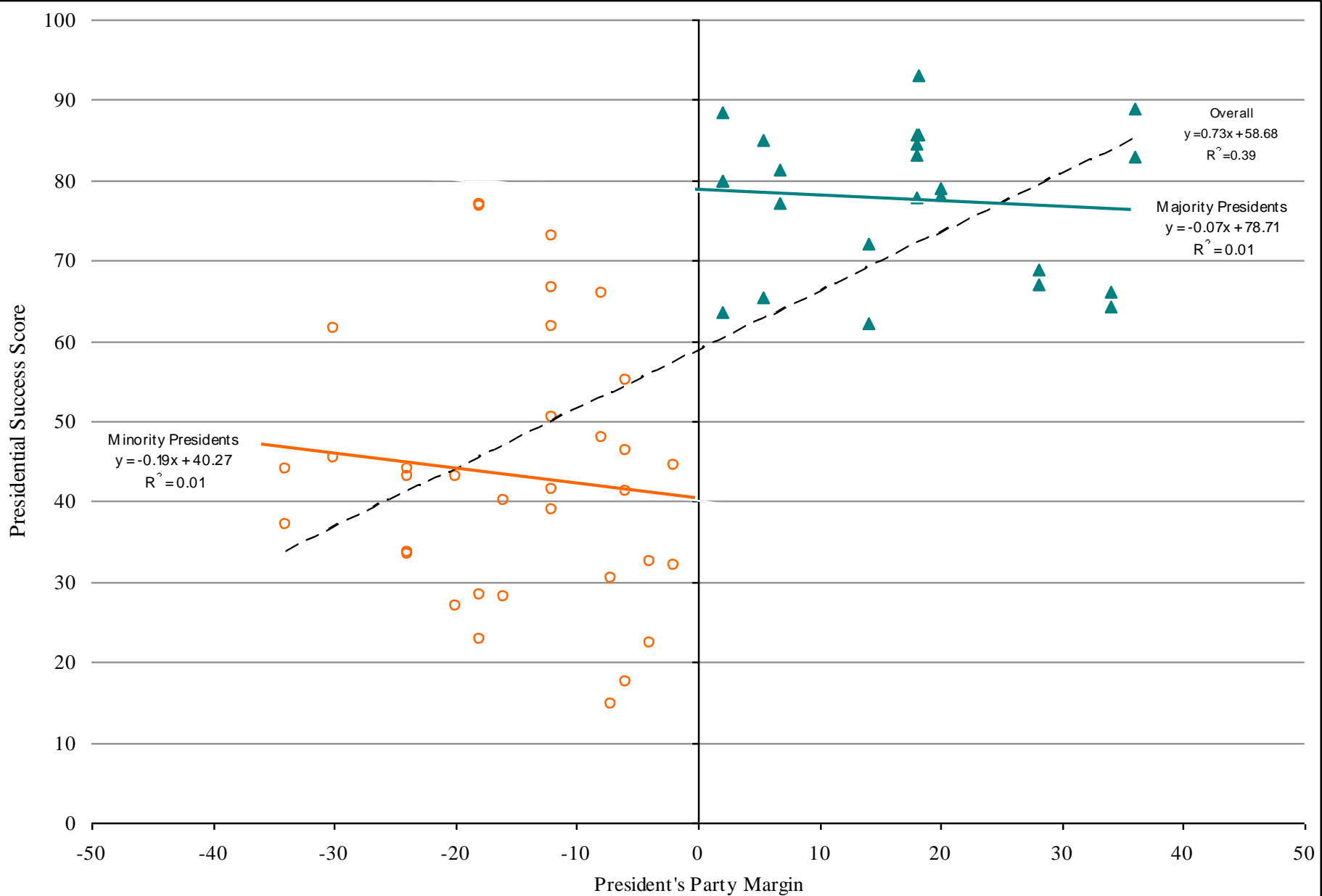


Figure 2

The Relationship between Party Control & Presidential Success in the Senate

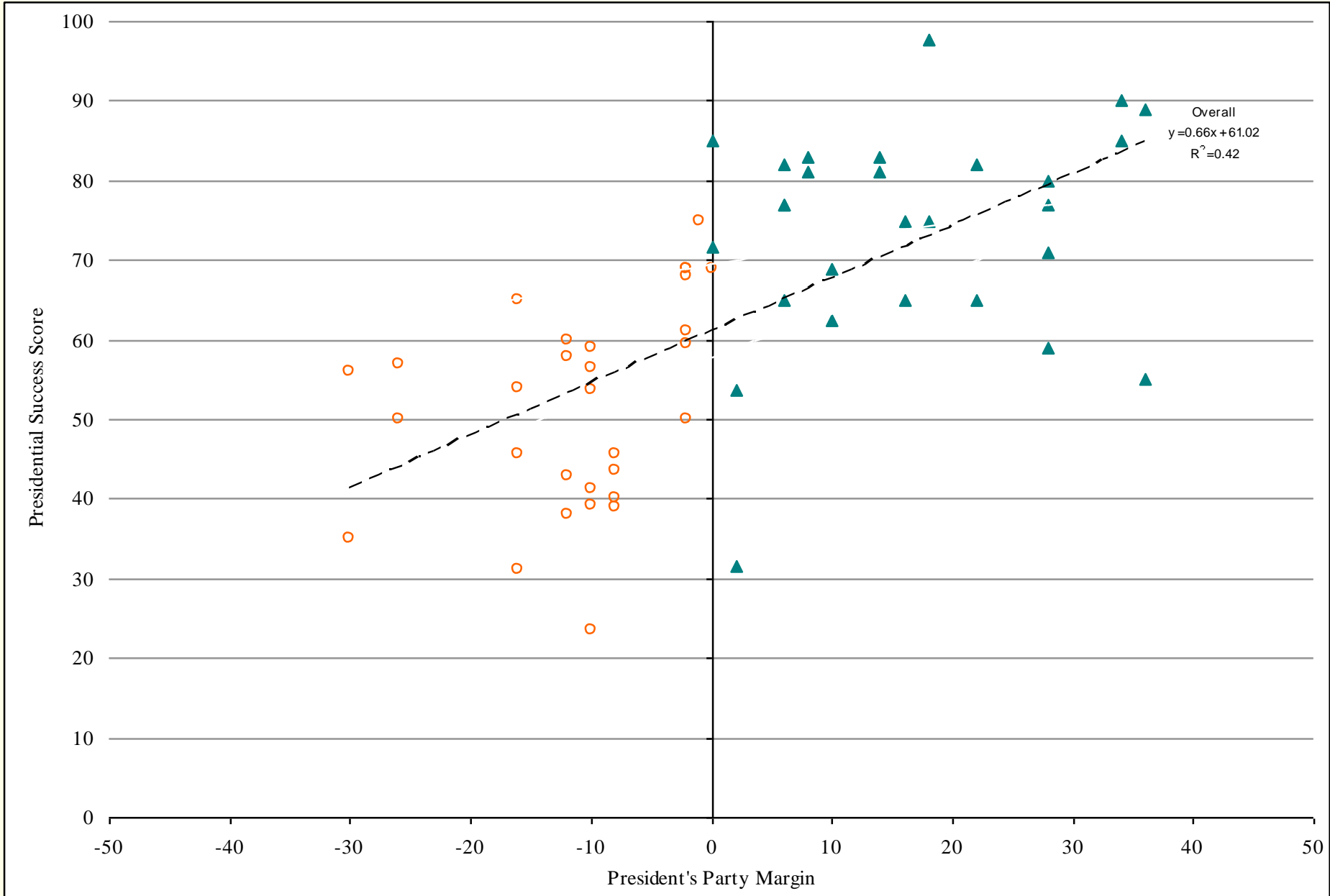


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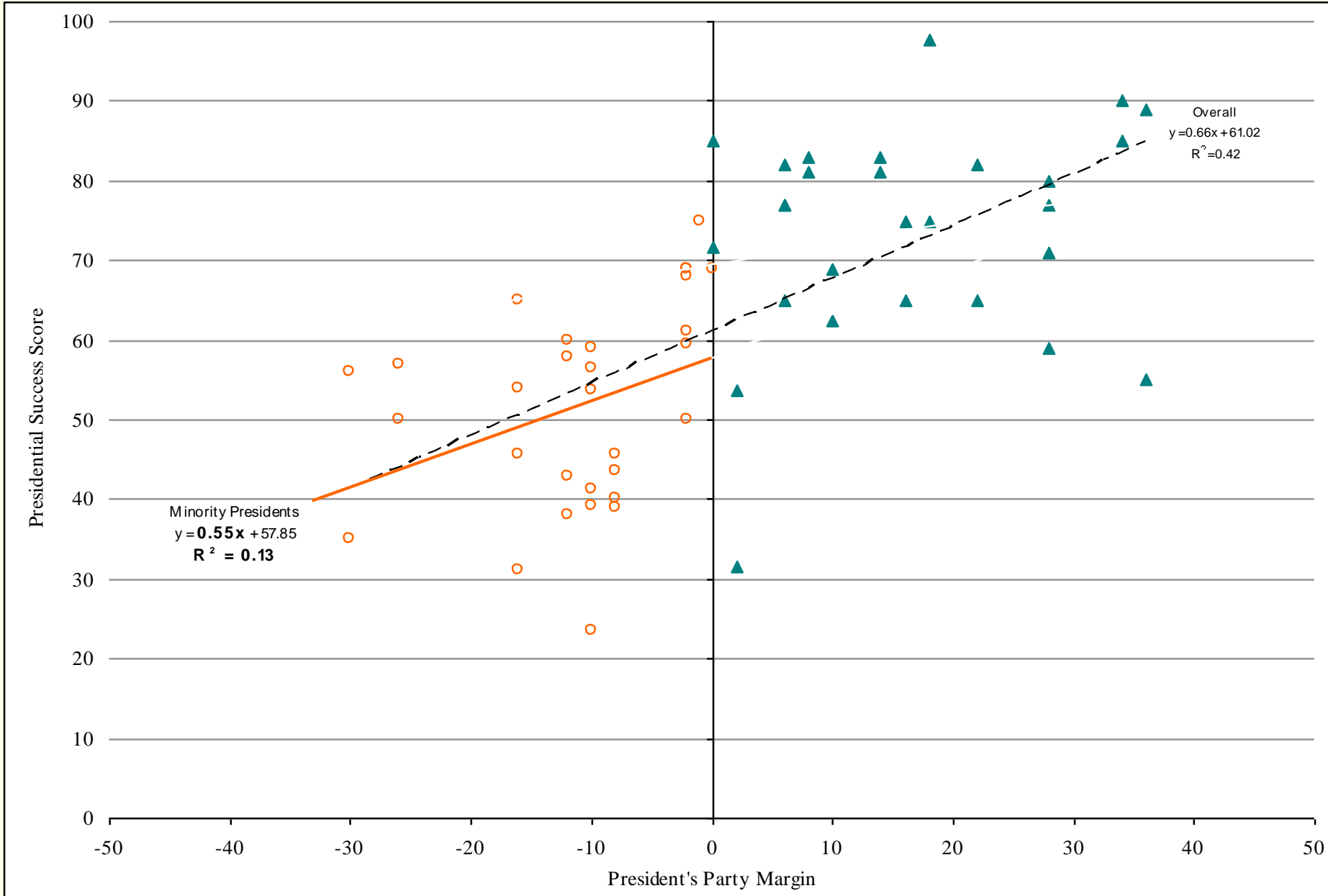


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