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Presidents, Public Opinion, and the Political Parties

I achieved results only by appealing over the heads of the Senate and House leaders to the people, who were the masters of both of us.

(Theodore Roosevelt 1926)

On August 5, 2015, President Obama addressed the nation on the nuclear agreement with Iran, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, signed by the United States, five additional countries, and the European Union. The president appealed directly to the American people: “Today I want to speak to you about this deal and the most consequential foreign policy debate that our country has had since the invasion of Iraq.” The timing of the speech and its intention were very clear – to pressure Congress when, in the words of the president, it “decides whether to support this historic diplomatic breakthrough or instead blocks it over the objection of the vast majority of the world.” Echoing the view of President Theodore Roosevelt from nearly one hundred years ago, Obama called Americans to contact their representatives in Congress: “Remind them of who we are. Remind them of what is best in us and what we stand for so that we can leave behind a world that is more secure and more peaceful for our children.”

The speech was part of an orchestrated campaign to pressure members of Congress to support the deal with Iran, which – following the Nuclear Agreement Review Act of 2015 (signed into law on May 22) – needed to undergo a sixty-day review in Congress and eventually be voted on. The Obama administration understood that it was an uphill battle. Despite the administration’s enthusiasm about the deal, most Americans showed strong skepticism about it. According to a Pew study during the

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week after the deal was struck, among the 79 percent of Americans who have heard about the agreement, just 38 percent approved it. Forty-eight percent disapproved it. This skepticism, however, carried a strong partisan dimension. Seventy-three percent of Republicans disapproved of the agreement, whereas 58 percent of Democrats have been supportive of it. Within each party group, the stronger your ideology – liberal or conservative – the stronger your position was, in favor or against, respectively.¹

Speaking to the American people was a tool to pressure members of Congress to support the deal and avoid an embarrassing vote against the deal. Given the partisan balance in Congress – Republicans holding 247 seats in the House and fifty-four seats in the Senate – and the unprecedented campaign of Republicans against the agreement, the president's campaign needed to at least maintain the support of his fellow Democrats in the Senate to fend off a vote against the deal (Republicans lacking a filibuster-proof majority).

By the end of the sixty-day review period, in September 2015, public support has remained unsupportive. Among people who heard about the agreement, only 27 percent approved the agreement. Yet again, attitudes were extremely partisan – even more so than two months earlier. Support among Democrats remained essentially the same (55%); Republican opposition climbed to 82 percent; and a majority of independents (52%) disapproved of the agreement.² In Congress, Republicans failed to garner the support they needed from Democrats and no action was made, in effect giving a green light to the administration to implement the agreement.

In talking to the American people, President Obama was following the practice of almost every president since the turn of the twentieth century. Presidents make routine public remarks, issue well-crafted national addresses, travel across the nation, and appear on radio and television talk shows. They invest time and resources in these actions because they believe that they need to lead the public and that they are able to do so (Kernell 1986). However, recent studies suggest that in spite of their efforts, presidents rarely succeed in changing public opinion (Edwards 2003, 2009, 2012). Why then do presidents – rational actors who manage their time and resources carefully – invest in a behavior that allegedly offers them little political gain?

¹ Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Political Survey, July 2015.

² Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Survey, September 2015.

This book demonstrates that presidents are successful leaders of public opinion – once we recognize the dynamics of public opinion, and the partisan nature of the presidents’ activities and public response to them. Presidents have a significant advantage over every other political actor in reaching and affecting the views and preferences of Americans. But they do not operate in a vacuum, and they rarely command the dynamics of public opinion. Rather, presidents occupy one side in a political environment that is characterized by a multi-sided information flow (Zaller 1992). In this environment, additional actors respond to or initiate policy debates, and offer countervailing views to those presented by the president. The ability of a president to affect public opinion, therefore, depends on the strength of his messages and of the countervailing messages, on the nature of the issue debated, and on the opportunities that are provided by the partisan nature of the political environment (Rottinghaus 2010).

To assess the effect of speeches of presidents on public opinion, we should therefore control for or incorporate the impact of the political environment on presidential leadership efforts. In the following chapters, I do both. I control for the political environment in order to assess the direct effect of presidential rhetoric on public opinion; and I incorporate the political environment in order to assess the opportunities and limitations for public leadership that it provides.

To control for the political environment, I examine the immediate effect of a speech on public opinion before other factors weigh in on public opinion. Having an immediate effect on public opinion is a necessary step for any success in public leadership. To affect public opinion, presidents need to generate an interest in or support for their policies when they appeal to their audience. Occasionally, they will succeed in prolonging this immediate effect, but even if the effect is only short-term, it may still carry important policy gains. Presidents can time a speech carefully to maximize its political gain: They can schedule the speech before a key vote in Congress or use the speech to move first on an issue and frame it to their advantage. A temporal shift in public opinion in the direction of the president may therefore be all that a president needs.

Beyond the immediate, perhaps short-term, change of public opinion, any evaluation of presidential public leadership should consider the intermediating effect of the partisan nature of the American political system. Americans approach politics with a partisan label: they identify themselves politically as partisans; they support policies advanced by leaders of their parties and reject others; and they vote along their partisan identifications. Presidents operate within this context: they are elected in

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overwhelmingly partisan elections; they gain support in Congress from members of their party; they enjoy public approval and support from their partisan constituents; and they cater to their partisan audiences in their public actions (Azari 2014; Cohen 2010; Skinner 2008; Wood 2009). In such a partisan environment, the party label of a president affects the relationship between presidential actions and public opinion. The premise of this book, therefore, is that Americans see presidents through partisan lenses and respond to their speeches accordingly.

Following this premise, I examine and show that speeches of presidents affect public opinion – by increasing support for their policies among their fellow partisans, and by affecting the public perceptions of their parties for handling policy. Both effects are consequential: Presidents use their speeches to mobilize and energize their partisan base, and they generate a policy image of their party that affects the political discourse and partisan attachments.

PRESIDENTIAL RHETORIC AND PUBLIC OPINION

Despite a very extensive body of work on the effect of presidential rhetoric on public opinion, we have yet to understand fully the impact of speeches of presidents on public opinion. Some scholars argue that speeches of presidents influence public opinion and that their command of the bully pulpit benefits them politically. Others question the ability of presidents to affect public opinion and the political gain it may offer. Still others suggest that presidential influence over public opinion is conditional, and we need to understand the conditions that facilitate or frustrate presidential leadership efforts. These studies can be divided into three bodies of research that differ in what they measure as the public response:³ (1) policy preferences; (2) public agenda (policy priorities of Americans); and (3) president's approval ratings. I briefly review below the current work on each of these effects. In the following chapters, I focus on the first two aspects of the relationship between presidents and public opinion – policy preferences and the public agenda – and add another – the effect of presidents on the public image of the parties for handling the policy priorities of Americans.

³ Several studies examine the effect of presidential rhetoric on the policymaking process focusing on the response of legislatures and the bureaucracy (Canes-Wrone 2006; Eshbaugh-Soha 2006; Fett 1994; Whitford & Yates 2009). The focus of the book however, is public opinion and hence these important effects are not addressed here.

Presidential Rhetoric and Policy Preferences

The ability of presidents to affect policy preferences is the most straightforward goal of presidential communications, yet draws most disagreements about its success. The first camp, most associated with Samuel Kernell (1986), suggests that “going public” is a successful governing tool that is used routinely by presidents to overcome the lack of traditional political alliances needed for promoting policies. In talking to the nation, presidents go over the heads of their fellow politicians to appeal to the source of their support. By gaining public support for their policies, presidents pressure members of Congress to align with their positions.

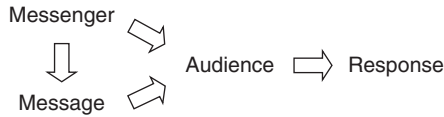
The theory of going public seems to resonate with the practice of presidents and their view of the effect of their actions. President George H.W. Bush articulated this view in his Address to the Nation on the Federal Budget Agreement (October 2, 1990): “Now is the time for you, the American people, to have a real impact. Your Senators and Congressmen need to know that you want this deficit brought down, that the time for politics and posturing is over, and the time to come together is now.” The president was using the bully pulpit to reach out to the American people as a tool to gain congressional support for the Federal Budget Agreement.

A series of studies offers case-specific evidence of successful presidential campaigns. For example, Truman’s backing of aid to Greece (Kernell 1997); John Kennedy’s advocacy for the Limited Test Ban Treaty (Wenger & Gerber 1999); Ronald Reagan’s advancement of economic reform (Kernell 1997; Sloan 1999) and commitment of troops to Lebanon and Grenada (Rosenblatt 1998); and Bill Clinton’s endorsement of national health insurance (Koch 1998) and criticism of the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy (Bailey et al. 2003).

Against this view, several case-specific studies demonstrate ineffective public leadership. For example, Woodrow Wilson’s campaign for the League of Nations (Hogan 2006); Franklin D. Roosevelt’s inability to obtain public endorsement for supporting America’s allies and preparing for World War II (Edwards 2009); Jimmy Carter’s failed attempt to reform health care (Finbow 1998); Bill Clinton’s failure to mobilize public support for his foreign policies (Jacobs & Shapiro 1994); George W. Bush’s failure to gain public support for using force in Iraq (Edwards 2003); and Barack Obama’s inability to convince the American public to support his health-care reform (Edwards 2012).

Beyond these case studies, George Edwards offers systematic evidence of presidential ineffectiveness in leading public opinion (2003, 2009,

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MODEL 1 Simple model of presidential public leadership

2012). Edwards examines public support for a wide range of policies advanced by President Reagan and President Clinton, the “Great Communicators,” and finds that, on each issue, public opinion remained more or less fixed within the same range as it was prior to presidential promotion. Analyzing news coverage of presidential addresses, he also finds that presidents rarely control the systematic agenda and that only a small percentage of Americans watch their speeches.

Edwards reasons that if the public is unaware and unmoved, the efforts of the president seem unlikely to shift policies in Washington. He therefore concludes that none of the parts of the “simple model of presidential public leadership” work (illustrated in Model 1): The messenger cannot control the message; neither the messenger nor the message influence the audience; and the expected response – change in public opinion – rarely occurs. Presidential public appeals, Edwards concludes, fall “on deaf ears.” The breadth of data Edwards analyzes, his significant findings, and his clear theoretical explanation for presidential inability to change public opinion flipped the conventional wisdom from strong to weak presidential leadership of public opinion.

If presidents are unable to lead public opinion, why do they invest enormous resources in speaking to the nation? In an attempt to solve this puzzle, several scholars offer a more balanced tone between the two conflicting views – strong (Kernell) versus minimal (Edwards) effect – which recognizes that presidential influence on public opinion is conditional and that we need to understand the conditions that facilitate presidential leadership efforts. Rottinghaus (2010) brings to the fore the political environment and argues that presidential leadership of public opinion is conditioned by countervailing influences in the political process. He supports his argument with rich systematic data on presidential actions, public opinion data, and extensive attention to the temporal conditions that characterize the political environment. Similarly, Cohen (2010) connects between the presidential leadership of public opinion and the changing political setting – mainly, the current “partisan polarization and fragmented media” (p. 11) – which creates new demands and

opportunities for presidential leadership. Cohen focuses on the latter and demonstrates that presidents actively affect the volume and tone of local news reporting of their actions and that these affect public feelings toward them.

In the following chapters, I provide support for the conditional leadership thesis and argue that presidential leadership of public opinion should be examined while accounting for the partisan nature of the American political environment. By examining the effect of speeches of presidents on the attitudes of the partisan publics, and the effect of these speeches on evaluations of the parties, I demonstrate that presidential rhetoric falls on partisan ears and that their effect on the party system is consequential.

Presidential Rhetoric and the Public Agenda

Presidents speak from a national platform with a national perspective unlike that of any other politician except perhaps for those with presidential ambitions. As symbolic representatives of the nation at large, presidents are expected to be problem identifiers, policy purveyors, managers of the public good, international leaders, and unifying representatives of all Americans (Wood 2009). Consequently, the policy priorities of the president are more likely to resonate with the public than those of most other political leaders who are usually viewed as representing local or factional interests. When problems arise, the public looks to the president for leadership in deciding whether a problem should be considered a high-priority issue or not (Cohen 1995).

Control over the public agenda gives presidents an important political power. It allows a president to relegate the public discourse on issues that he dislikes, while advancing those that he favors. He can also use the agenda-setting power strategically to present himself as a leader, promoting issues that Congress is likely to pass and demoting those that are more controversial (Cohen 1995; Light 1999).

Several studies examine the direct effect of a speech on the public agenda, reaching mixed conclusions.⁴ Some survey and experimental

⁴ See Cobb and Elder (1972) for a discussion of the difference between the systematic or public agenda and the government or formal agenda. For work focusing on the indirect effect of the president on the public agenda through the media, see, for example, Behr & Iyengar 1985; Cook et al. 1983; Dearing & Rogers 1996; Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake 2011; Gans 1980; Gilberg et al. 1980; Iyengar & Kinder 1987; Lang & Lang 1983; McCombs 2004; McCombs & Shaw 1972; Peake & Eshbaugh-Soha 2008; Wanta & Foote 1994; Wanta et al. 1989.

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evidence suggest that mere reference to a policy in major addresses affects the policy agenda (Cohen 1995; Hill 1998; Villalobos & Sirin 2012). Other studies question the effect and its magnitude in the current political and media environment (Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake 2011; Young & Perkins 2005).⁵

In this book, I provide evidence in support of strong presidential leadership of the public agenda. I examine a systematic dataset of a large range of speeches during the post-World War II era and combine it with aggregate data of the public agenda. To assess the causal relationship between presidential rhetoric and the public agenda, I further examine individual-level data of issue priorities and their correlation with exposure to presidential speeches.

Presidential Rhetoric and Presidential Approval

The third body of work on the effect of presidential rhetoric on public opinion focuses on public approval of the president. A president's popularity is a political resource that can help him achieve his program, keep challengers at bay, and guide expectations about his and his party's prospects in presidential and congressional elections (Brace & Hinckley 1992; Brody 1991; Brody & Sigelman 1983; Edwards 1983; Kernell 1997; Mondak 1993; Neustadt [1960] 1990; Newman & Ostrom 2002; Page & Shapiro 1992. But see, Cohen 2009; Canes-Wrone 2004, 2006). Not incidentally, the "approval ratings" of the president are the most frequently measured and best-known political "fact" in the current

⁵ Other related studies examine the effect of speeches on *how* people think about issues, rather than what they think about them. Policy issues are usually complex and subject to alternative interpretations. This creates an opportunity for the president, as well as other political actors, to influence opinion. Arguably, presidents can *frame* what the policy is about, meaning to define the organizing idea for making sense of an issue. For example, the faith-based initiative of President Bush could have been framed in terms of the services it aimed to render and thus have been treated as a social welfare issue. Or it could have been framed in terms of its qualifying guidelines and thus have been treated as an issue of religion and state. Naturally, President Bush took great pains to frame it as the former.

Studies that empirically examine the efforts of presidents to frame the public debate find that presidents are rarely free to frame the issues as they wish. They note that framing is conditioned by many factors, such as predispositions, and levels of education, awareness, and knowledge, that make it difficult to assess a priori how the public would react to framing efforts. The media are also unlikely to adopt uniformly or reliably the White House's framing of issues, thus limiting the ability of the president to present a clear frame to a national audience. For a detailed discussion of the effect of framing and its limits, see Edwards (2009: 66–77).

American political environment (Ragsdale 1996). They are treated as the “Dow Jones Index for Politics” (Brehm 1993: 6). Presidential approval ratings are widely reported in the news media and discussed as a measure of presidential power and success. These ratings are analyzed at length by political scientists interested in assessing the factors that shape support for the president and are used as a common control in many aggregate and individual-level studies of political behavior.⁶

It follows naturally that presidents try to bolster their approval rating to enhance their success and legacy. One tool at their disposal is direct public appeals. By talking to the public through media outlets or by traveling across the country, presidents bypass the modern media’s propensity to critique the president and his administration. Direct rhetorical appeals allow presidents to present their own version of events, generate a more favorable view of their performance in office, and influence the public’s evaluative criteria to tilt in their favor (Cohen 2010; Cohen & Powell 2005; Druckman & Holmes 2004; Kelleher & Wolak 2006; Ragsdale 1984).

Approval ratings are often used as a measure of public opinion in studies of public leadership – an increase in approval ratings is viewed as successful public leadership. No change or, worse, a decline in the ratings are viewed as indicators of failed public leadership. Yet, the focus on the personal or political aspects of political communications undermines the interest in deliberative communication that stands at the core of this book (Jacobs and Burns 2004). As the theoretical lynchpin of going public has well recognized (Kernell 1997), speech is not an empty exercise; it is governance (Hart 1987). I therefore focus on the effect of presidents on policy preferences and on the policy agenda. Still, given the indirect effect that the words of presidents can have on the policy preferences and the public agenda through change in the presidents’ approval ratings (Wood 2007), I include these ratings (or an individual evaluation of the president) in every model in the book.

⁶ In addition to overall performance of the presidents in office, numerous pollsters ask about the evaluation of the president on specific issue domains – especially economic and foreign policies. These questions allow for a more focused evaluation of the president’s reputation among Americans. Several studies examine trends in these evaluations, analyze the relationship between the issue-specific series and general approval trends, and test the causes for issue-specific evaluations (Cohen 2002a, 2002b; McAvoy 2006; Newman & Lammert 2011; Nickelsburg & Norpoth 2000; Wood 2007).

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The scholarly work on the public presidency largely overlooks the importance of the party system.⁷ Most of the original work on the topic responds to a political setting where the parties were weak and presidents were viewed as independent of their constraints (Burnham 1982; Coleman 2003; Collie & Brady 1985; Milkis 1993; Neustadt [1960] 1990; Polsby 1983). Consequently, these studies shared the view that parties do not offer presidents a leadership tool – either because they are inapt (Lowi 1985) or because they are irrelevant (Kernell 1986; Tulis 1987). When there are no unified party programs and the political structure is fragmented, the president has no choice but to create a program of his own and then go out and raise the necessary popular support (Arnold 2009) or act alone (Mayer 2001). In such public appeals, presidents are viewed as above the fray of partisan politics. Ragsdale articulated this view nicely (1995: 41):

The single executive image endures in presidents' own words, public impressions, and press coverage. In their speeches, presidents offer the country the single executive image. They sponsor the dual notions of presidential omnicompetence and omnipresence. They suggest that they alone are linked to the American people, above politics, beyond party, and touched by God.

This political setting, however, does not fit with our current understanding of the political parties and their dominant role in American politics. Political parties are ideologically coherent, organizationally strong, and electorally effective (Green & Herrnson 2002). Presidents are inherently part of that system, and their actions are affected by and have an effect on partisan divisions (Milkis & Rhodes 2007; Skinner 2008). To speak of American politics in our time is to speak of political parties, and therefore the current reading of the political environment and the real-world practice of going public force us to rethink the behavioral model used to assess presidential leadership of public opinion (Azari 2014).

The partisan divide that characterizes the current political system further puts the existing studies of presidential public leadership in an important perspective. These studies demonstrate that recent presidents have failed to lead public opinion and were rarely successful in achieving

⁷ A significant body of literature has focused on leadership of the more functional aspects of parties: the ability of a president to lead his party in Congress (Bond & Fleisher 1990; Edwards 1980; Kingdon 1973), to lead his party organization (Bass 1984; Davis 1992; Reiter 1984), or to lead his party during elections (Campbell 1985, 1991; Ferejohn & Calvert 1984; Flemming 1995).