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The White House and public relations: Examining the linkages between presidential communications and public opinion

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the linkages between presidential public relations activities—speeches and press conferences—and public opinion towards the presidency from 1961 to 1997. The results show that there is a positive linkage between presidential news conferences and foreign policy job approval, and between presidential speeches and general as well as foreign policy job approval. Overall, the findings reveal stronger linkages between presidential news conferences and job approval than between presidential speeches and job approval, but also that the topic of the information subsidies and the specific type of job approval matters.

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Over the last 50 years, the American political system has dramatically transformed. “Going public” as a strategy has become more important at the expense of bargaining and coalition building off the public radar (Kernell, 2007). Press conferences, speeches, and other political public relations activities have become more important for building public support and influencing other policymakers (Kumar, 2007). But what is the impact of presidential press conferences and speeches on presidential job approval? This article shows that there are several associations between presidential press conferences and speeches, and that both the kind of public relations tools used and the topic of news conferences and speeches matter for their linkages with presidential job approval.

The importance of investigating the White House’s use and impact of presidential public relations tools should be evident, considering that policymaking and governing have become more intertwined with public political communication and campaigning, exemplified by the phenomenon of permanent campaigning (Blumenthal, 1980; Ornstein & Mann, 2000). As noted by Wattenberg (2004), “if the power of the presidency is the power to persuade, then the ability to communicate with the American public is one key tool in exercising that power” (p. 557). McNair (2004) writes that “public relations is more important than ever in the management of political communication” (p. 327), while at the same time, the management of political communication has become more important than ever in the policymaking processes (Iyengar & McGrady, 2007; Kernell, 2007).

Broadly speaking, political public relations “involves working with candidates for office—and often continuing to work with them after their election—to handle problems, strategies and activities such as speech writing or publicity” (Newsom,

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Turk, & Kruckeberg, 2007, p. 9). However, despite its substantial impact, our theoretical and conceptual understanding of political public relations remains underdeveloped. Although the number of studies on the impact of public relations in campaigns and elections is growing, there is less work on the influence of political public relations once candidates are elected. At the level of the presidency, examining the role of the White House communications offices confers a key opportunity to expand knowledge in this area. In their current status, the White House communication offices include five branches and, according to one estimate, “approximately 350 people [...] working in communications and supporting operations” (Kumar, 2007, p. 5).

Among the major objectives in the use of political public relations efforts by presidents is to gain media coverage for and increase the salience of their agendas, influence foreign nations, garner public support for their administrations, and send signals to legislators and the bureaucracy (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2006; Gleiber & Shull, 1992; Kernell, 2007; Kumar, 2003, 2007). Two major tools employed for achieving such aims are press conferences and speeches, yet little research has explored the relationship between such activities and public opinion, with the notable exception of research on the effects of the State of the Union address on public opinion (Cohen, 1995; Edwards, 2004; Hill, 1998; Young & Perkins, 2005). This project investigates the associations between the use of press conferences and speeches by the White House and U.S. presidential job approval from 1961 to 1997.

1. Theoretical background

1.1. Agenda-building and information subsidies

To better understand the interplay between presidential public relations efforts and public opinion, the concepts of agenda-building and information subsidies offer a relevant theoretical background for explicating relationships among these variables. In contrast to traditional agenda-setting theory (McCombs, 2004; McCombs & Shaw, 1972), an agenda-building perspective suggests that the process of salience formation involves several key stakeholder groups, such as policymakers, activist groups, and businesses (Lang & Lang, 1981). As a consequence, research has extended the application of agenda-building and agenda-setting to other objects in communication messages, including political candidates, companies, and foreign nations (Kiouisis & McCombs, 2004; McCombs, 2004; McCombs & Ghanem, 2001; McCombs & Reynolds, 2002). The influence of public relations has significantly added to the literature on agenda-building (Berger, 2001; Cameron, Sallot, & Curtin, 1997; Curtin, 1999; Lee & Solomon, 1990). Serving as principal sources in news, public relations professionals contribute heavily to the media agenda, often through the dissemination of information subsidies (Gandy, 1982).

While several types of subsidies have been identified in the literature (McNair, 2003; Moloney & Colmer, 2001; Tedesco, 2005a, 2005b), most scholars have concentrated their efforts on investigating the impact of news releases (Harris, Fury, & Lock, 2006). For example, Turk (1986) probed the role of news releases in influencing news media coverage of government agencies in the state of Louisiana. Her findings confirmed a positive association between news releases and media attention towards these government offices. In a political campaign context, Kaid (1976) noted that candidate news releases are often printed verbatim in news coverage. Lancendorfer and Lee (2003) reported that the salience of issues in campaign news releases affected the salience of issues in news media content during the 2002 Michigan gubernatorial race.

Less investigated in the literature are the linkages between political public relations efforts and public opinion, yet scholars have underscored the theoretical importance of this relationship (Carroll & McCombs, 2003; Cho & Benoit, 2005; Lancendorfer & Lee, 2003). One exception is Walters, Walters, and Gray (1996) empirical inquiry comparing news releases prepared by the Bush and Clinton campaigns during the 1992 presidential election with levels of perceived issue salience among voters, who found a stronger association between the issue priorities of the Clinton campaign and voters than between the Bush campaign and voters. In a related analysis of the 2002 Florida gubernatorial election, Kiouisis, Mitrook, Wu, and Seltzer (2006) not only uncovered connections between news releases and media content concerning political issues and candidates, but public opinion as well.

1.2. Presidential public relations

Despite the growing attention to political public relations and public opinion in campaigns, less is known about this association with regard to White House communication activities once candidates are elected. White House communication activities have increasingly been identified as paramount to the successful management of the Executive branch of government (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2006; Iyengar & McGrady, 2007; Kelley, 1956; Kernell, 2007; Kumar, 2007; Mayer, 2004). While some studies suggest influence on public opinion (Cohen, 1995; Hill, 1998; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Lawrence, 2002), others display or suggest limited impact (Edwards, 2004; Young & Perkins, 2005; see also Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2005). One reason for this discrepancy in research is that studies typically have focused on only one form of presidential communication, most often the State of the Union address. Few investigations have explored the *comparative role of different types of information subsidies* beyond news releases in a political public relations context. This separation of presidential messages may be crucial in assessing influence, especially as the media environment has become increasingly fragmented, leading to a greater need for presidents to communicate both directly to voters and indirectly through shaping the news agenda (Wattenberg, 2004).

This study broadens our knowledge of presidential public relations and agenda-building by comparing the role of information subsidies and public opinion over time. In particular, it will include two of the most meaningful information subsidies

at the disposal of any president: presidential press conferences (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2003; Kumar, 2003, 2005) and major presidential speeches (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2006; Hill, 1998; Wattenberg, 2004; Young & Perkins, 2005). Research on information subsidies also has key implications for other areas of public relations scholarship, including issues management, corporate reputation, and crisis communication (Bridges & Nelson, 2000; Carroll & McCombs, 2003; Hallahan, 1999, 2001). The study of public relations efforts in agenda-building contributes to our understanding of salience development among several major stakeholder groups beyond the news media.

1.3. Dimensions of public opinion

When conceptualizing public opinion towards the presidency, most scholars have traditionally used general job approval as the core indicator of public sentiment towards the White House. This approach may be limited, however, by not incorporating public reactions towards political issues. Indeed, recent empirical work has recommended employing additional indicators to assess public judgments towards the presidency (Cohen, 2002), especially when they expose divergent views (Kiouisis, 2003). Research has demonstrated a stronger public agenda-setting impact from State of the Union addresses with regard to foreign policy and civil rights issues than with the economy (Hill, 1998; Young & Perkins, 2005), further highlighting the need to explore the impact of presidential public relations efforts on both general and specific issue job approval. The current project includes multiple dimensions of public opinion towards the presidency.

1.4. Hypotheses

The first two hypotheses build on the notion that presidential news conferences and major speeches should be considered as information subsidies to be used within the larger realm of political public relations efforts. Although both news conferences and major speeches are used for different purposes, one chief goal is to influence public opinion, including the president's approval ratings (Kernell, 2007). While previous research has yielded different results with respect to the impact of presidential communication actions on public opinion (Cohen, 1995; Edwards, 2004; Lawrence, 2002; Young & Perkins, 2005), we expect to find a positive connection between presidential news conferences and major speeches, and presidential job approval ratings. Thus, our first two hypotheses are:

H1. A positive relationship exists between the frequency of presidential news conferences and presidential job approval ratings.

H2. A positive relationship exists between the frequency of presidential speeches and presidential job approval ratings.

In addition to general performance, the linkages between presidential communications and job approval on specific issues, such as the economy and foreign policy, are also paramount. The comparative strength of such relationships is unclear, however, as the reason for going public might be to boost approval ratings, as well as to counteract a negative trend in approval ratings, and this might vary across topics and time. Previous research suggests, however, that the public's susceptibility to the news media agenda is greater when it comes to unobtrusive issues such as foreign policy than when it comes to obtrusive issues such as the economy (McCombs, 2004; Wanta & Hu, 1993; Watt, Mazza, & Snyder, 1993). Research has also shown that the president is in a stronger position to influence the agenda and the framing formation processes in foreign policy rather than domestic policy matters (Bennett & Manheim, 1993; Domke, Graham, Coe, John, & Coopman, 2006; Entman, 2004). Extending this logic, our next two hypotheses are:

H3. There will be a stronger and positive relationship between the overall frequency of presidential news conferences with regard to foreign policy than the economy.

H4. There will be a stronger and positive relationship between the overall frequency of presidential speeches with regard to foreign policy than with the economy.

While the third and fourth hypotheses recognize the difference between the topic of foreign policy and economy respectively, they do not directly address the actual topic of the presidential news conferences and speeches. They focus more on the nature of the topics as such, than on the topics of the news conferences and speeches. To remedy this, while keeping with the same logic that applies to H3 and H4, our final two hypotheses are:

H5. There will be a stronger and positive relationship between the frequency of presidential news conferences focusing on foreign policy and public opinion than those focusing on the economy.

H6. There will be a stronger and positive relationship between the frequency of presidential speeches focusing on foreign policy and public opinion than those focusing on the economy.

2. Method

This longitudinal study compared patterns in White House public relations activities and public opinion of the presidency from 1961 to 1997. Data encompassing presidential communications and public opinion were collected from the American Presidency Project archive at the University of California, Santa Barbara (<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>), Ragsdale

Table 1

Correlations between the frequency of presidential communications and public opinion of the president.

	Presidential news conferences	Presidential speeches
Overall job approval	.27*	.14
Economic job approval	-.15	-.18
Foreign policy job approval	.48*	.26

* $p \leq .05$.

(1996), and the Gallup poll. Specifically, presidential communications in the form of speeches ($n = 210$) and news conferences ($n = 676$) were tracked on an annual basis to estimate White House public relations activities. News conferences were defined as “all formal exchanges with reporters during which a written transcript of questions asked is kept” (Ragsdale, 1996, p. 147). Speeches were defined as “live nationally televised and broadcast addresses to the country that preempt all major network programming” (Ragsdale, 1996, p. 165).

We coded all speeches and news conferences for mentions of the economy and foreign policy. Both topics could occur in the same speech or news conference. Both speeches and news conferences discussed foreign policy more than the economy. Out of the 676 news conferences, 53.8 percent mentioned the economy and 91.1 percent foreign policy. Out of the 210 major speeches, 39.5 percent mentioned the economy and 50.9 percent foreign policy.

Intercoder reliability was tested on a subsample of five percent of presidential communications by two trained graduate-student coders. Coder reliability (Holsti, 1969) for both news conferences and major speeches was .91.

Two dimensions of public opinion were measured: perceptions of overall presidential performance and perceptions of performance in specific policy arenas. Overall performance was assessed based on a yearly average of the traditional Gallup poll measure of job approval. The Gallup poll methodology involves the recruitment of a nationally representative U.S. sample of approximately 1000 respondents.¹ To measure issue performance, public opinion concerning the president's average approval ratings for the economy and foreign policy was monitored on an annual basis as well.

2.1. Data analysis

Due to its exploratory nature, a correlational approach was implemented in this study to examine linkages between presidential communications and public opinion of the presidency. However, more accumulated evidence would be needed across several studies to determine the extent of causal relationships. The emergence of meaningful associations in this project can lay the foundation for future research looking at potential causal relationships, but the absence of meaningful associations would falsify the proposed theoretical framework (McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-Escobar, & Rey, 1997). It should be noted that the current analysis was limited by the small number of data points included in the study, making more advanced procedures for time-series designs, such as ARIMA, inappropriate.

3. Results

H1 and H2 predicted positive associations between the frequency of presidential news conferences and speeches, and overall presidential job approval ratings. As shown in Table 1, the data supported our expectations for news conferences ($r = .27, p < .05$), but not speeches.

As described earlier, both news conferences and speeches focused more on foreign policy than on the economy, and this was particularly evident with news conferences. H3 and H4 also anticipated stronger positive associations between the overall frequency of presidential communications (news conferences and speeches) and public approval of foreign policy than the economy. The data supported H3 for news conferences ($r = .48, p < .05$), but not for speeches. Although by no means conclusive, this suggests that the stronger focus on foreign policy in news conferences did make a difference.

However, to determine whether differences emerge due to topic focus in presidential communications, H5 and H6 predicted that presidential communications mentioning foreign policy would show stronger positive relationships with public opinion than those focusing on the economy. Table 2 summarizes the findings.

As shown in the table, the data support H5 for news conferences as increased foreign policy news conferences were positively associated with both overall ($r = .29, p < .05$) and foreign policy ($r = .46, p < .05$) job approval ratings. For economic news conferences, a meaningful positive association was found with overall job approval ($r = .28, p < .05$), but a negative one was detected for economic job approval ($r = -.43, p < .05$). H6 was not supported by the data for speeches, where no significant relationships appeared.

¹ Generally speaking, the Gallup polls are based on a representative U.S. sample of 1000 respondents aged 18 and over. The final sample is weighed to correct for sampling errors on the basis of various demographic variables, such as age, gender, race, education, or region of the country. In simplified terms, the margin of error with a sample size of 1000 respondents is ± 3 percent. Further information about the Gallup methodology can be found at <http://brain.gallup.com/help/faq.aspx?id=105>.

Table 2

Correlations between the frequency of foreign policy and economic presidential communications and public opinion of the president.

	Economic news conferences	Foreign policy news conferences	Economic speeches	Foreign policy speeches
Overall job approval	.28*	.29*	-.17	.14
Economic job approval	-.43*	-.11	-.17	-.23
Foreign policy job approval	.14	.46*	-.20	.04

* $p \leq .05$.

3.1. Supplemental analysis

To explore the robustness of the aforementioned relationships, supplemental statistical analyses were also performed to control for additional factors that might explain the observed associations. Among the key factors identified in prior literature affecting White House communications and public opinion of the presidency are time in office, the economy, and the political party affiliation of the president (Simonton, 1987; Stimson, 1976; Young & Perkins, 2005). As a consequence, the U.S. Gross Domestic Product and Consumer Price Index figures were employed as control variables for a series of partial correlations reexamining the bivariate tests explored above. In addition, two variables were also created to represent a president's year in office and their political party affiliation.

As displayed in Table 3, the significant positive relationship between news conference frequency and overall job approval dissipated in the multivariate comparisons, while a negative one was detected with economic job approval ($pr = -.63, p < .01$). In comparison, the positive linkage with foreign policy job approval remained robust ($pr = .50, p < .05$), even after incorporating the stringent controls. Concerning presidential speech frequency, two positive relationships emerged with overall job approval ($pr = .36, p < .10$) and foreign policy job approval ($pr = .45, p < .05$).

Shifting to the topic focus of the two subsidy types, Table 4 reveals that the positive linkages between both types of news conferences and overall job approval declined in the multivariate comparisons, while the negative association between economic news conferences and economic job approval remained robust ($pr = -.48, p < .05$). A negative association was also detected between foreign policy news conferences and economic job approval ($pr = -.56, p < .05$). When examining foreign policy job approval, a positive association surfaced with economic news conferences ($pr = .35, p < .10$), while the positive relationship found with foreign policy news conferences stayed robust ($pr = .47, p < .05$). The earlier findings concerning speeches were also replicated, except that a positive and significant relationship between economic speeches and economic job approval was found ($pr = .57, p < .01$).

Assuming that higher job approval ratings is one major objective behind the use of presidential information subsidies, the collective findings suggest that news conferences may be more effective communication vehicles for the White House given that 8 of 18 possible comparisons showed positive relationships with public opinion in comparison to just 3 out of 18 for speeches. This suggests different theoretical and practical implications for our understanding of political public relations and the presidency. Topic emphasis also appeared to play a role—albeit limited—in impacting relationships between presidential information subsidies and public opinion, as both types were positively associated with job approval ratings in 3 out of 12 comparisons. Some of the results might however be due to the higher frequency of news conferences than speeches, and the stronger focus on foreign policy than the economy in both news conferences and major speeches.

Table 3

Partial correlations between the frequency of presidential communications and public opinion of the presidency.

	Presidential news conferences	Presidential speeches
Overall job approval	.27	.36 [#]
Economic job approval	-.63**	-.08
Foreign policy job approval	.50*	.45*

* $p \leq .05$.** $p \leq .01$.[#] $p \leq .10$.**Table 4**

Partial correlations between the frequency of foreign policy and economic presidential communications and public opinion of the president.

	Economic news conferences	Foreign policy news conferences	Economic speeches	Foreign policy speeches
Overall job approval	.03	.33	.05	.23
Economic job approval	-.48*	-.56*	.57**	-.33
Foreign policy job approval	.35 [#]	.47*	-.22	.27

* $p \leq .05$.** $p \leq .01$.[#] $p \leq .10$.

4. Discussion

In general, the results suggest a more complicated and less straightforward relationship between presidential public relations messages and job approval ratings than expected. Presidential speeches and news conferences belong among the most essential vehicles by which presidents can communicate directly to the public and through the media, but the usage of these vehicles does not necessarily translate into higher general or issue-specific job approval. With regard to presidential news conferences, and taking our control variables but not the topic focus into consideration, there is a positive linkage with foreign policy job approval but a negative linkage with economic job approval. With regard to presidential speeches, a positive linkage with general job approval and foreign policy job approval similarly emerged (see Table 3).

The linkage between job approval, general and issue-specific, appears weaker with presidential speeches than with presidential news conferences. This might be partly explained by the lower number of presidential speeches compared with the number of presidential news conferences. The difference between the shares of presidential communications mentioning the economy and foreign policy was also greater with news conferences than with presidential speeches. When taking topic focus and the control variables into consideration (Table 4), the results show stronger linkages between news conferences and presidential approval than between major speeches and presidential approval. In the case of news conferences, four out of six correlations were significant, compared with only one meaningful correlation in the case of speeches.

Both the kind of public relations tools used and the topic of news conferences and speeches thus appear to matter. While the relationships with economic job approval generally (although not always, as noted above) are negative or non-existent, they are more often positive and significant in the case of overall and foreign policy job approval.

The results here suggest that there are linkages between presidential communications and both overall and issue-specific job approval, and that it varies whether “more is worse” or “more is better.” With the reservation that many other factors influence these job approval indicators, one conclusion might be, for example, that a president who aims to increase his foreign policy job approval should hold press conferences rather than speeches while a president who aims to increase his economic job approval should hold speeches focusing on the economy rather than press conferences. If this is indeed the case, the practical importance of this finding is clear, although more research is needed before such generalizations can be substantiated. The emergence of connections between presidential communications and public opinion should prompt further research on the use of different presidential public relations activities and their impacts on public opinion of the presidency.

The theoretical ramifications of this analysis also merit attention. For example, the contrasting linkages with public opinion clearly imply that topic area matters and that existing conceptualizations of information subsidies and their role in agenda-building should not be treated uniformly. That is, the findings indicate that future scholarship should reconsider the assumption that higher volumes of information subsidies are associated with greater attention in media coverage and public opinion. Obviously, the nature and quality of information subsidies, as well as the topic, are just as critical as quantity.

One strategy for accomplishing this might be through a more nuanced analysis of presidential information subsidies and their associations with public opinion. In particular, further research should identify potential distinctions between presidential news conferences and speeches, why they are being used, and how they interact with public opinion. Recent research on the role of both object and attribute salience formation in the agenda-building and agenda-setting processes might be helpful in such investigations (Kiouisis et al., 2006). Moreover, the inclusion of other types of information subsidies, such as staff statements, media interviews, and so forth, would help clarify the interplay of presidential public relations activities, news media coverage, and public opinion. Further research should also try to differentiate between proactive and reactive uses of presidential public relations activities and how these different approaches affect relationships with public opinion. Such an approach would add to the growing literature emphasizing public relations evaluation and assessment (Eisenmann & Paine, 2007; Hon, 1998).

Expanding existing research on information subsidies and agenda-building would not only extend our knowledge of political public relations processes, but would also represent a key opportunity for theory building in other areas of public relations scholarship. Exploring the comparative impact of different types of information subsidies should deepen our conceptual understanding of issues management processes. Recent research has suggested that agenda-building theory offers a useful framework for better tracing the role of public relations in reputation management and corporate social responsibility (Carroll & McCombs, 2003; Kiouisis, Popescu, & Mitrook, 2007). The explication of second-level agenda-building described above may also be useful for such efforts.

In summary, this study indicates that there are associations between presidential communications and job approval, but more importantly, it underscores the need to incorporate both multiple means of presidential communications and multiple dimensions of public opinion towards the presidency. Although it is clear that “going public” has become an increasingly paramount strategy, with political public relations becoming more vital than ever, this study warns us not to believe that more is always better, or that the means of communication is independent of the particular ends of specific activities. It also demonstrates that there might be major differences across topics. Although an exploratory study, we find the results encouraging as an early step towards a greater understanding of the antecedents, processes, and consequences of political public relations efforts and activities.

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