

## **Strategic Leaders: Determining Successful Presidential Opinion Leadership Tactics Through Public Appeals**

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### **Abstract**

Most scholars find presidents generally fail at moving the public's views on policy, however, although presidents may fail at opinion leadership at the aggregate level, examining specific communications tactics may yield a more nuanced view of when presidents succeed or fail at leadership. In this article, using a comprehensive data set spanning 1953 to 2001, several strategic communications tactics through which the president might be influencing temporary opinion movement are examined. We find that presidential use of nationally televised addresses is the most consistently effective strategy to enhance presidential leadership, but the effect is lessened for later serving presidents. Strategies involving domestic travel never positively affect leadership, while televised interactions with the media always negatively affect leadership success. The cumulative results imply that presidents can momentarily lead public opinion with particular tactics, and that the conditions enhancing leadership are partially in their control, suggesting presidential capability to strategically lead public opinion.

A hallmark of presidential agenda setting and policy advancement is the ability to lead public opinion. Given the considerable resources at the disposal of the White House, and with more “certain” information on public preferences from public opinion polling, one would fully expect modern presidents to easily sway public preferences (Jacobs and Shapiro 1995; Geer 1996; Eisinger 2003; Geer and Goorha 2003). In fact, many scholars agree that such presidential leadership is necessary for the advancement of public policy and the sustenance of democratic norms (Cornwell 1965; Kernell 2007). Kumar (2007) contends that presidential persuasion is central to presidential accomplishments and that the public expects to routinely see the president making speeches. Indeed, presidents have not been shy about using the “bully pulpit” to carry their messages to the American public, believing it to be important to their success while in office and to their political and policy legacy (Edwards 2003, 15).

It is surprising, however, to learn that despite lofty expectations and requisite tools, presidents are generally unsuccessful at opinion leadership as an instrument to advance their policy agenda (Page, Shapiro and Dempsey 1987; Neustadt 2001; Edwards 2003). Generally, scholars argue that leadership of public opinion is difficult to manage (Roper 2004). Presidents fail at moving public preferences for a number of reasons, typically in combination with each other, such as shrinking audiences, media message screeners, political partisanship and a lack of public cognition (Edwards 2003). The emergence of divided government and strong party leadership also complicate the advancement of presidential leadership (Aberbach and Rockman 1999). These factors, and others, are beyond the control of the White House and ultimately complicate the president’s ability to chart a successful course for moving public opinion. Edwards (2005) poignantly sums up this line of argument claiming that the “president transmits his

messages in an environment clogged with competing communications from a wide variety of sources,” thereby limiting the influence the president might have in leading public opinion (128).

On the other hand, scholars have found moments of success when presidents attempt to lead public opinion. Qualitative work has advanced our historical understanding of individual presidents through descriptions of successful presidential leadership (Sloan 1996; Wenger and Gerber 1999). Presidents are also shown to be successful at motivating positive perceptions of the economy, a potentially powerful tool in our economic times. Wood (2007) argues that the effect of presidential shaping of economic circumstances is indirect: presidential optimism affects news coverage of the economy, which affects economic approval. Leadership success is also amplified when presidents are making foreign policy speeches (Rosenblatt 1998; Meernik and Ault 2001; Cohen and Hamman 2003) and is more personally popular (Page and Shapiro 1984). But, this literature needs to be expanded because it is important to understand (within these parameters) how presidents find success in leading public opinion.

Therefore, although presidents succeed or fail at opinion leadership at the aggregate level, examining specific communications tactics yields a more nuanced view of when presidents succeed or fail at opinion leadership. Presidents may succeed or fail with certain types of communications tactics, but because studies focus on long term opinion change, one president at a time or treat all presidential speeches homogeneously, we may overestimate or underestimate the specific effect of presidential leadership. For example, many studies of presidential leadership only examine presidential persuasion from a single aspect, including State of the Union messages (Cohen 1995; 1999; Young and Perkins 2005), nationally televised speeches (Canes-Wrone 2001; 2004; 2006), prime

time speeches (Ragsdale 1987), during times of national crisis (Callaghan and Virtanen 1993; Edwards and Swenson 1997), or simply lump all presidential statements together (Page and Shapiro 1984; Bailey, Sigelman and Wilcox 2003; Wood 2007). Similarly, many studies focus on later serving presidents when these presidents may have an easier or harder time leading public opinion than earlier presidents (Edwards 2003). Finally, several studies do not necessarily look at change in opinion but focus instead on change in issue salience (Cohen 1995), presidential popularity (Brace and Hinckley 1992) or responsive position taking (Canes-Wrone 2006).

Indeed, prominent null findings in the literature may mask incidents of momentary success in leading public opinion and affirmative leadership findings may be overstated because the effects of presidential communications tactics are heterogeneous. Indeed, the relative effects on public opinion movement of presidential addresses from the Oval Office are tangibly different from a speech given in Cleveland, Ohio. Similarly, speeches that sound the same theme or argument in a single instance are less likely to be influential than several consecutive speeches on the same topic several times. As argued by other scholars, this query is an important extension of the literature on the public presidency (Young and Perkins 2005, 1203). Ultimately, however, no single work categorizes a comprehensive set of presidential speeches for purposes of analysis of *presidential movement of public opinion*, rather most focus initially on one type of speech that precludes the ability to examine the effects of multiple types of speeches in a comprehensive way controlling for the political environment.

This article adds to previous studies of presidential leadership and offers an account of the variation in short-term leadership segmented by presidential communication technique. Although much has been written about presidential leadership

of opinion, and recent scholarship has significantly advanced our understanding of the conditions and obstacles involved, we are still left with questions pertaining to the systematic success of specific presidential opinion leadership effects throughout the modern presidency, especially considering specific political tactics and presidential movement of public opinion (see Edwards 1996; Edwards 2003, 25; Barrett 2005, 1). In short, although most scholars argue that it is difficult for presidents to move public opinion, we do not know if this assertion holds across all communications tactics. This paper will explore specific political communications tactics that facilitate or frustrate presidential leadership of public opinion through momentary (one time) opinion change before and after multiple presidential speeches from 1953 to 2001.

### **A General Theory of Successful Presidential Leadership**

Theoretically, if there were a time where presidents may succeed at leading public opinion, it would be when they make consistent and unwavering attempts to do so and the public receives their message. Modern presidents who devote considerable attention and focus to leading public opinion with the full resources of the White House over a short time period could theoretically be able to move public opinion.<sup>1</sup> Other scholars have identified the transmission and reception of presidential messages as important elements in presidential leadership. For instance, Kernell (2007) argues that a presidential appeal to the public will work if the president “accurately communicates his preferences to the citizenry” and citizens respond with favorable changes in public opinion (192). However, limiting this effect, Edwards (2005) argues that the “president transmits his messages in an environment clogged with competing communications from

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<sup>1</sup> The public may be the indirect target in this process, as the ultimate goal may be to persuade Congress (Eshbaugh-Soha 2005; Kernell 2007). Therefore, the speeches examined here may be part of a larger strategy to lead Congress. In this article, only the first phase (opinion leadership) is examined, leaving the study of the second phase to another project.

a wide variety of sources,” thereby limiting the influence the president might have in leading public opinion (128; see also Peake and Eshbaugh-Soha 2008). The reception component is also difficult in that many in the public may not listen or understand to what the president says (Cohen 2008).

This prediction should hold for conditions where the president is *attempting* to lead the public. Although a difficult measure to capture, given that one cannot know for certain the myriad of issues on which the White House is trying to lead public opinion, continuous presidential rhetorical mentions of the issue objectively suggests that the president is interested in leading public opinion on the issue (Geer 1996). Since this theory acknowledges, complimented by findings from previous scholars, that presidents are strategic with their communication and covetous of the national spotlight to advance their political agenda, presidential mentions of an issue (1) mentioned during State of the Union message to Congress and (2) in the two days prior to the day we coded the speech should suffice for presidential “attempts” to lead public opinion.<sup>2</sup> Both are included in the models below to assess presidential success in this context.

In addition, the level of political information makes a difference when evaluating political leadership. Specifically, when many in the public already hold an opinion (lower percentage registering “don’t know” in polls), the opportunities for leadership are minimal, yet when fewer hold an opinion, the opportunities for presidential leadership

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<sup>2</sup> Mentions of statements that were also mentioned in the State of the Union (“State of the Union Promise”) were matched to the president’s statement and used as a control for presidential attempt to lead. That is, if the president mentioned the policy issue in question during his most recent past State of the Union message, this variable is coded “1” (and “0” otherwise). Because of the importance and weight of the annual speech, we presume that if the president mentions the issue in his State of the Union message and then again during that year, then the president is attempting to “go public” with the issue (see Cohen 1999). Similarly, the “two days before” control variable captures whether or not the president made the same statement in a speech in the two prior consecutive days. Thus, a positive measure in this variable indicates that the president spoke on the issue for three consecutive days (including the day we capture to use as the statement in question).

should be greater.<sup>3</sup> Related scholarship on the individual roots of mass opinion change is deep. Converse (1962) argues that those individuals with more political information are less likely to be able to be persuaded by elites due to “large storage of political lore” (583). Zaller (1992) similarly finds that those with less political information are more likely to be persuadable because they will have conflicting political considerations, making them susceptible to elite influence. For individuals, reception of the president’s message should theoretically be limited if the individual has firm beliefs in place (less likely to respond “don’t know”). That is, those with more political information know which messages to resist because they are able to “counter argue” against messages aimed at changing their preferences. Indeed, Zaller (1992) finds that as political awareness increases, the ratio of consistent-to-inconsistent considerations increases, or, simply put, that those with more political knowledge are more consistent in their preferences than those who have lower awareness (67, see also Zaller and Feldman 1992). Therefore, in the models presented below, the change (decrease) in the percentage of the public responding “don’t know” to the survey questions is included to model this arrangement.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, the president’s leadership ability does not exist in a vacuum.

Presidents must operate within the boundaries of their political, economic and partisan reality. Therefore, a theory of presidential leadership must include particular events or

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<sup>3</sup> An example of this is a “rally” event where there is a “follower” effect. Specifically, the public (1) becomes more informed about a subject and (2) is persuaded by the president’s message on that subject. Indeed, Mueller (1973) divides public responses to presidential actions into categories (discussed more in the following chapter) and argues that “followers” are individuals who “cue on the position of the president, regardless of party preference” (122) and have “a comparatively close identification with the nation, its leadership, and its destiny; an awareness of and a sympathy for the problems of dealing with other countries in a unified manner; and, consequently, a susceptibility to leadership appeals on issues of international policy” (123).

<sup>4</sup> The post-poll percentage of the public responding “don’t know” is subtracted from the pre-poll percentage of the public responding “don’t know.” Therefore, positive numbers indicate the percentage of respondents responding “don’t know” decreases.

conditions that limit the president's ability to communicate. Specifically, *countervailing elements* are events or conditions that are beyond the president's control that unintentionally disrupt the ability of the president to convey his message credibly or truthfully, for instance, a media willing to challenge the president's message. The greater the number or impact of these countervailing elements, the less likely that presidents are to lead public opinion. It is the rare moment, therefore, where presidents are able to lead public opinion because there are simply so many different ways in which presidential messages will be obscured and comparatively few where (or when) they will be adequately and completely received (see Edwards 2003). The following analysis also offers controls for each of these obstacles to presidential leadership, which allows for us to comprehensively investigate the parameters of presidential success (as suggested by recent scholars, Fine and Waterman 2008). Therefore, to test this broad theory, three communications strategies that may affect political leadership are outlined below (these hypotheses are emphasized in italics).<sup>5</sup>

*Barnstorm*: Akin to Kernell's (2007) "going public" interpretation, the "barnstorm" tactic captures a president making a speech outside of Washington, DC, not on television and to a broad audience (that is, not a fundraiser).<sup>6</sup> *With modern presidents logging more miles to communicate directly with the public, this strategy of presidential leadership should yield success.* Theoretically, this tactic affords the president with

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<sup>5</sup> Although there are literally dozens of tactics by which the president might communicate with the public, we isolate these three instances because they help to advance our understanding of presidential leadership, are each prominently discussed in the literature, are attainable easily from the *Public Papers of the President* and are clearly comparable over time. In terms of coding, if the speech, which was randomly chosen, was delivered in one of these formats, a dummy variable was employed to capture the effect.

<sup>6</sup> "Broad" spoken presidential statements were coded positively if the intended audience for the communication was the entire nation, such as if the president spoke at a national event (like addresses to the Democratic National Convention or ceremonial events like the swearing in of appointees or signing of legislation or executive orders) or was campaigning, and not on live television. Notations in the *Public Papers* were used to determine if the speech was televised or not. An event was assumed to not be on television if the notation did not indicate that the event was on television.

greater chances to get their message directly to the public with less interference from reporters asking tough questions or limitations on the amount of news coverage provided. These efforts have grown in popularity with the White House because of the advantages it provides to their persuasive efforts. Indeed, the president's goal is to use the "bully pulpit" to frame the public's understanding on the issue and trumpet his position directly to the nation in order to persuade as many people as possible. This tactic has grown from presidential prerogative to presidential necessity as contemporary political communication strategies require sure-handed, direct guidance of the White House's message by the president. Presidents have increasingly been taking more trips per year in their first year in office and (Charnock, McCann and Tenpas 2006; Doherty 2007). Kernell (2007) substantiates these findings and finds that domestic travel has significantly increased in the past half century to the point where President Clinton was traveling "every fourth day or so during his first three years in office" (121), demonstrating the effect of the emergence of "going public" (or "going local" (Barrett 2005)) as a consistent political strategy to lead public opinion.

Many studies do find that this tactic has the effect of producing favorable outcomes for presidents (although not necessarily in moving public policy preferences). Domestic political travel (outside of Washington, DC) has been demonstrated to have a modest impact on presidential legislative success (Barrett 2004) and in garnering positive local media ratings (Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2006; Barrett and Peake 2007). Such travel has also been demonstrated to have a modest impact on state-level presidential approval, although the effect is limited to non-election years and in larger states (Cohen and Powell 2005). Ostrom and Simon (1989) also find that President Reagan's domestic travel had a small effect on his popularity. Such travel has been demonstrated to have a

modest impact on presidential policy making outcomes and on presidential popularity, especially during elections. In fact, Holbrook (2002) finds that President Truman's whistle stop tour of the nation was an important factor in earning him victory in the 1948 presidential election. These cumulative findings suggest that presidential travel is linked to campaigning and governing, a potent combination for a president interested in using these corollary resources to move public preferences.

*Major Address:* This tactic encompasses speeches that were delivered on television (either live or taped) from Washington, DC (including State of the Union or Oval Office speeches).<sup>7</sup> This strategy seeks to harness the prestige of the presidency by using the White House (and its trappings) to communicate with the American public (see Cohen 1999). *Presidents will succeed in moving public opinion with the "major address" strategy.* The importance and ability of the White House to communicate directly with the American public via television is critical to modern presidential leadership (Jamieson 1996; Cox Han 2001; Kernell 2007). These speeches allow for the president to bypass the media and Congress and speak directly to the American people (Cornwell 1965, 32) and allow for presidents to "operate in a setting where he is unhindered by rival decision makers or aggressive reporters" (Simon and Ostrom 1989, 61). Cox Han (2005) argues that for recent presidents such as Reagan, Bush and Clinton, changing communications strategies "require each president to go public even more frequently" on television (169). These events allow for more direct and fewer countervailing elements in the transmission of the president's message, concurrent with the theory above.

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<sup>7</sup> Notations for each individual speech in the *Public Papers* were used to determine if the speech was televised or not.

Scholars have also found these speeches to be a successful component of presidential communications, although not necessarily in moving public preferences. Brace and Hinckley (1992; 1993) find that presidents use these major addresses strategically, especially in relation to economic decline, reductions in presidential approval and during presidential reelection years. Cohen (1995; 1999) finds that presidential mentions of issues in State of the Union addresses increased the public's perception of that issue as important. Indeed, in sustaining the themes from the State of the Union, President George W. Bush kept pressing "pillar events" where he would discuss the issues from his previous State of the Union in his stump speeches (Kumar 2007). In moving popularity, Ostrom and Simon (1989) find that President Reagan's speeches (as "discretionary events") did have a modest effect on his short term popularity but this effect was generally smaller than the events taking place in the political and economic environment. Simon and Ostrom (1989) also find that these speeches are most effective in buttressing public support when they are accompanied with a trip and an "approval-enhancing" event (74).

Although television allows the president to speak to more citizens than any other medium, television-viewing habits may limit whom the president can reach. The amount of exposure and education that individuals have is important in determining whether or not they are receptive and receive the message (Welch 2003). Nationally televised presidential addresses are often too broad (that is, covering too many issues) to do much good in influencing mass public opinion (Edwards 2003, 130). Similarly, the audience that is paying attention on television is more partisan than before, ensuring that only some of those who receive the president's message are going to be remotely receptive to it (Wattenberg 2004). Televised speeches thus may actually decrease approval ratings,

particularly if the post-speech news stories were negative (West 1991). Cable television is also referenced as a culprit in ending the “golden age” of presidential communication, where the proliferation of channels has decreased the impact of presidential rhetoric by reducing the viewing audience (Baum and Kernell 1999; Young and Perkins 2005), although none have tested this change on presidential movement of public opinion.

However, despite the difficulty in leading public opinion on television, there are moments where presidents are able to successfully communicate with the public through television, particularly in connecting with certain publics. For instance, prime-time addresses have been shown to be particularly beneficial in boosting presidential popularity on middle- and upper-income people (Ragsdale 1987). Others have found that President Reagan, in particular, was successful at communicating his message through nationally televised speeches to those who were educated and men; however, speeches often had a negative effect on overall presidential approval (Welch 2003). Generally, greater exposure to the content of the speech did engender more positive movement of approval of the president, consistent with the theory above, although these results were contingent upon actual viewership (rather than indirect information on the speech) and when the speech was a foreign policy speech (Welch 2003b).

*Televised Press Availability:* These events are defined as where the White House press corps was allowed direct access to the president and permitted to pose questions to him.<sup>8</sup> These events are occasionally in primetime, however this was not a condition to be

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<sup>8</sup> If members of the media were able to ask any questions attended the event, the event was coded as a “press availability.” These include brief, spontaneous interactions with the press while traveling to or from an event or a scheduled formal press conference. These also include joint press conferences where the president was asked questions by the press with another person (often a visiting dignitary), but in keeping with the rubric for policy issue coding, only the president’s spoken statements were coded. These were consistent with Kumar’s (2003) coding of press conferences. Notations in the *Public Papers* were used to determine if the speech was televised or not.

coded affirmatively in this category.<sup>9</sup> The relationship between the press and the president is largely symbiotic, with each needing the other to engage in their jobs (Grossman and Kumar 1981). The press conference is but one way in which this relationship manifests itself, and news organizations often prefer this format (even if the White House does not) because it allows for direct access to the president with little interference from the White House staff (Kumar 2005). Ironically, press conferences were first televised by the White House because of a fear that the reporters were not fully reporting the president's message and the president as messenger could more readily and persuasively convey his thoughts to the public (Kumar and Grossman 1981). As press conferences became routinely televised, these events transformed into "high-risk performances."

*Considering an aggressive media with reporters asking critical questions, we expect televised presidential press availabilities will not have a positive effect on presidential leadership.* Specifically, press conferences are difficult venues in which to attempt to lead public opinion because presidents are less likely to be able to control the specific trajectory of the discussion and more likely to be boxed into answering a question on issues they may not prefer to discuss (Lammers 1981). Presidents are also constrained by their political circumstances in these instances, making these events reactive instead of proactive (Eshbaugh-Soha 2003). In terms of leading public opinion, presidents will have less direct ability to convey their message unimpeded by critical commentary from reporters and are therefore less likely to persuade the public. As a result of this combative relationship, presidents have made press conferences more

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<sup>9</sup> Alternative specifications which only included prime time televised press conferences yielded similar results. Data available from the author.

formal events (rather than informal in the early years of press conferences) and attempted to find alternative venues for engaging the press “without the risks posed by long news conferences in formal settings” (Kumar 2005, 174). The media act as a countervailing agent and potentially limit the pure reception of the president’s message. The media typically interpret or filter the president’s message, so by limiting a more full reception or challenging the veracity of the president’s message the media act as a constraining force.

### **Measuring Rhetoric and Opinion Leadership Effects**

In order to measure probable presidential influence on public opinion, we coded a random sample of presidential policy statements spoken by the president from the total pages of the *Public Papers of the President* from Presidents Eisenhower to Clinton.<sup>10</sup> For each page, the first statement addressing a specific policy on that page was logged and taken as the unit of analysis.<sup>11</sup> These statements uttered by the president reflect a number of characteristics (or absence of certain characteristics) but in general the statement recorded a *specific* policy issue.<sup>12</sup> Because the *Public Papers* included a massive number of such statements, several criteria were created for what constituted a valid policy statement on each page. An item was considered valid if it came from the president (not

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<sup>10</sup> A 4% random sample was decided upon since it would yield a manageable number of spoken statements to match up with opinion polling. The primary trouble with this method of selection is that the text size per page is larger (that is, fewer words) for the *Public Papers* of Presidents Eisenhower and Ford than other presidents. To remedy this disparity, a three percent sample was used for the statements of Presidents Eisenhower and Ford and a four percent sample was used for the statements of all of the other presidents.

<sup>11</sup> This process was thought to be the most systematic, consistent and relatively simple manner in which to select a case on the page. The *Public Papers* themselves are organized chronologically, but there seems to be no logical way that there would be a consistent bias in selecting the first such statement on the page in question. Although the placement of the page break from page to page in the president’s speech is not technically or purely random, it is various enough to not present any consistent selection bias.

<sup>12</sup> Essentially, the policy issue had to be specific (*e.g.*, “we need to reduce the deficit” or “I support a raise in the minimum wage”) rather than vague (*e.g.*, “we need to work for peace in the world” or “we need to help the neediest people with our programs” or “we need to make government smarter”) and/or make clear (or reasonably clear) the president’s advocacy of a particular policy approach.

subordinates or other actors) and advocated action on a specific policy issue.<sup>13</sup> A vast majority the president’s spoken statements were straight-forward enough to easily code the policy and presidential preference, for example, President Clinton saying “I stand by my decision to send troops to Haiti” or “I applaud the efforts of the Republicans in Congress in passing minimum wage raising” both present a clear indication of policy and direction.<sup>14</sup> This matching has the added value of treating presidential policy statements as individual policy points, rather than collectively (as thorough a whole speech), and engages “leadership” as movement of policy preferences rather than popularity or issue salience.

The online polling archive at the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at the University of Connecticut was used to search for public polling data that was matched with the presidential policy statements described above.<sup>15</sup> Polling data was searched for six months before and after the statement; the closest poll found to the statement was coded.<sup>16</sup> The average distance between the first (pre) poll and the president’s statement

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<sup>13</sup> This process also required excluding several types of statements that violated this general principle. Generally, spoken presidential statements that were not coded include those that were too vague, procedural statements, statements by the White House Press Office, ceremonial statements, political speculation, economic predictions, observations on the general state of the economy, conditional statements (“might” or “maybe” or “considering”) or personnel decisions.

<sup>14</sup> As with any random sample, there is some error surrounding the selection of the particular cases. However, because of the massive range of pages (and even more massive number of statements), this tended to not be a problem. But, to be certain, a complete count of the total statements for each page (subsequent to the selection of the statement which was coded as the dependent variable) was kept to identify the precise sample error. Data on file with the author.

<sup>15</sup> The Roper Center accommodates all major polls released publicly, including Gallup, Harris, Roper, ABC, CBS, CNN, NBC, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *USA Today* and the *Wall Street Journal*, as well as many university-sponsored and independent polls from NORC, NES and GSS. The Roper Center’s archive dates back to 1930 and is the most complete record of all public opinion polling available to researchers.

<sup>16</sup> Page and Shapiro (1983) argue that a one-year lag in opinion and policy congruence is a reasonable time interval and base their results on this thinking (see page 177). We truncate this time frame to enhance our causal arguments.

was 109 days.<sup>17</sup> However, at multiple points in the analysis, we narrow this post-statement window (to one month and three months after the statement) to improve our causal certainty.<sup>18</sup> If a poll question asked about the president’s “handling” of a “specific” situation (such as tax policy, economic program or the crisis in a country) then those polls were also recorded because a specific issue or policy was referenced.

Our dependent variable of opinion “leadership” (for definitional purposes) is signaled by a positive movement of opinion after the president’s spoken statement towards the president’s policy statement (when public opinion polling with the same question wording was found both before and after the president’s statement).<sup>19</sup> This closely mirrors Geer’s (1996) conceptualization of leadership as “Periclean leadership” or Edwards’s (2003) “director,” where presidents move an existing shape of mass opinion distribution closer to their ideal point (47).<sup>20</sup> The matching of the before and after statement poll is important because we can judge the changes as a result of presidential behavior (and other factors) without interference from question wording.<sup>21</sup> In examining

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<sup>17</sup> Including an independent variable for the number of days from the date of the pre-poll to the date of the president’s statement did not have an effect on any of the models run.

<sup>18</sup> While this “matching” approach to measuring opinion-statement congruency is not perfect, it has been utilized by several scholars in important works in examining opinion-policy congruence (see Page and Shapiro 1983; Page and Shapiro 1992; Jacobs and Shapiro 1995; Jacobs and Shapiro 1997).

<sup>19</sup> There are instances where questions were prefaced differently or with respect to the timing of an event or speech but the substance of the question was identical. For instance, a question might alternatively preface “As you may know...” or “Turning our attention to...” In addition, a preface might reference the same point, legislation or event, but would alter this according to where it same in time. For instance, a question might have a preface “Legislation being considered by Congress...” before the legislation passes and “Legislation recently passed by Congress...” after the legislation passed. Ultimately, the questions are worded similarly enough to not make a significant change in the question wording.

<sup>20</sup> Due to space constraints, we leave coalitional (or specific group) leadership (see Cohen 2005) or “Wilsonian leadership” (Geer 1996, 46), where presidents create a new distribution of opinion, to another paper. We also do not address the rich literature in communications and rhetorical studies of presidential speechmaking which also contribute to our understanding of when presidents find leadership success (see Medhurst 1996 and Dorsey 2002 for fine examples of this work).

<sup>21</sup> Therefore, we argue our ability to control for external validity (or “control history”), and considering the same pre-and-post instrument, this quasi-experimental approach has merit (Campbell and Stanley 1963, 39, 42). Longer time periods may inject exogenous uncertainty into the equation, limiting the ability to causally claim certain political factors (which may change in the intervening time period) influence the opinion movement.

short-term opinion change, we model temporary movement in public opinion at a single point in time, resultant from specific factors, and we are therefore able to more precisely control for specific factors influencing public opinion movement.<sup>22</sup> This approach is similar to others who have studied policy leadership (Page and Shapiro 1984; Page and Shapiro 1992; Zaller 1992, 97; Meernick and Ault 2001).

This matching process allows us to construct a simple but effective pre-and-post design to model the possibility of momentary presidential leadership on that issue (which we aggregate over time). To reference an example from the data collected, on February 10, 1995, President Clinton announced a nationwide ban on assault rifles as part of his crime package. On January 3, 67% of the public supported the ban and on February 25, 69% of the public supported the ban.<sup>23</sup> This statement-poll matching process left 666 cases where an opinion poll was found both before and after the president's spoken statement, allowing us to measure possible presidential leadership as the dependent variable in these cases.<sup>24</sup> This total (666) of matched statements encompass approximately one third of the total data (1,976 randomly selected statements), an impressive statistic considering that the range of topics presidents talk about fluctuates

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<sup>22</sup> There are several advantages to examining short term opinion movement. First, this method is consistent with the literature that primarily examines short term effects. The literature on presidential communications success suggests that most presidents find public attention early after they make a speech on a topic, but find the effect temporary (Cohen 1995; Shaw 1999). Second, we are methodologically limited because we do not have a perfect matching of each statement and poll because pollsters do not necessarily poll on every issue (which we statistically correct for below). Extending the randomly sampled policy statements to beyond a single data point would mean extending the time period of the post-poll for a year or longer, obstructing our causal arguments.

<sup>23</sup> The question asked (on both dates), "Do you favor or oppose the nationwide ban on assault weapons?" Both polls were conducted by *CBS News / New York Times*.

<sup>24</sup> The key here is that we are measuring polled opinion *before and after* the president speaks and only for polls that employ the same question and answer choices. This matching can be difficult because pollsters often poll after a president speaks on an issue or do not use the same questions before and after our cataloging of the president's statement on a particular date. This accounts for the relatively low number of yielded cases from the original sample of 1,976. Indeed, Page and Shapiro (1984) conduct a similar analysis of pre-and-post quasi-experimental testing over a comparable time period and also produce a comparable (actually fewer) small number of cases.

from the major (foreign military conflicts) to the minor (specific education initiatives) to the obscure (individual goods under import and export policy).

Admittedly, this is an imperfect measure in that external factors may intervene from the first measure of opinion to the second measure. However, these causal claims are appropriate for several reasons. First, presidents as chief motivators and agenda setters do play a large enough role in this process to believe that much of the opinion movement results from presidential policy pronouncements (Page and Shapiro 1992, 343-50). Presidents also play the role of “facilitator” of opinion into policy by being the educator of public opinion (Hargrove 1998) and by structuring policy choices by framing issues (Edwards 2003, 156). In addition, the president’s support for an issue quickly becomes categorized and crystallized into the opposition or support for a policy. This is especially true given presidential success at defining political “reality” through language (Zarefsky 2004). Similarly, on major issues, presidential policy pronouncements become “indexed” into the media’s reporting of the issue (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000, 320; Farnsworth and Lichter 2006). Indeed, Koch (1998) finds that the debate over health care policy conformed to broad elite “camps” (with President Clinton on one side and opponents on the other). Thus, the opinion movement we measure represents a tacit referendum on the president’s policy since the president plays a major role in directing the policy environment (Light 1999, 160, 238).

Further, this “sequential” approach to understanding the president’s role in the process of leading public opinion is used by several scholars, both quantitative (Page and Shapiro 1984; Page, Shapiro and Dempsey 1987) and qualitative (Edwards 1983; Edwards 2003; Kernell 2007), to estimate the political environment with the president at the epicenter of policy activity. Such studies examine a simple pre-and post-opinion

dynamic (with the president's statement or action in between) and infer a quasi-experimental design to demonstrate causality. We simply aggregate the methods of previous scholars across several presidents and extrapolate conclusions accordingly. In addition, because we are interested in the effect of the president's speech on public opinion, it makes sense to consider individual cases aggregated across time. Sigelman and Rosenblatt (1996) note that a simple "before-and-after" design (comparable to the methods employed here) may have trouble with causal inferences, however, they acknowledge that the "before-and-after" design has merit and, importantly, they suggest that multivariate designs with a before-and-after component that employ several cases across time (as our models specify) solve several of these inference problems.

### **Model Specification**

To analyze our leadership strategies and political conditions in a multivariate model, we use several time variant OLS models that allow us to determine the probable effect of our independent variables on our continuous dependent variable (amount of opinion change from pre-statement to post-statement). We also include several control variables (such as divided government, issue salience and presidential approval) to control for the political environment. As an alternative specification, we employed a Heckman model to control for the potential selection problem since we do not observe the public opinion polls for all presidential statements (or all issues).<sup>25</sup> This approach was rejected in favor of OLS because the lambda (inverse Mills ratio) was insignificant in each model with numerous specifications of the selection equation, suggesting there is no

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<sup>25</sup> It is possible that there is a degree of "self selection" in that pollsters only poll on particular issues (rather than all or a random sample of issues), making sample selection bias a possible problem (Heckman 1979). Specifically, we only observe public opinion polls for those statements that we randomly sample, not the universe of public opinion on that issue. Therefore, since there is a non-random assignment to the treatment variable (and thus a censored sample), a Heckman model was employed (Achen 1986) but rejected (see explanation in text).

selection bias and OLS estimation provides unbiased estimates for our leadership measure (these alternative results are available from the author). The sample of presidents is also divided by early and late presidents to capture any changes in modern political communications tactics changing during the 1970s (Baum and Kernell 1999; Edwards 2003; Young and Perkins 2005) or the emergence of an aggressive media (Clayman, et. al. 2006).<sup>26</sup> We also control for the percentage change of those respondents in each poll responding “don’t know” to survey questions by interacting this with each of the three communications strategies to determine whether or not presidents take advantage of information asymmetries to lead public opinion (similar to Meernik and Ault 2001).<sup>27</sup> Overall, each of the models in Table 1 explains a high percentage of the variance, ranging from 40% to 60% (adjusted for the number of variables).<sup>28</sup> Tests for multicollinearity reveal no significant issues.<sup>29</sup>

We have also included variables in our analyses to control for the possibility of endogeneity. The random selection of the unit of analysis (presidential statement) helps correct for any potential endogenous effects of biased presidential speech selection or greater or less presidential influence during certain moments in their term (such as early

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<sup>26</sup> We also split the data in this manner to mirror the beginning of “modern” polling practices in the White House with the introduction of an in-house pollster (instead of external consultants) during the Carter Administration (see Eisinger 2003) with the assumption that later presidents are better equipped with the knowledge of popular policies.

<sup>27</sup> The change in “don’t know” is measured as the percentage of respondent’s responding “don’t know” to the recorded survey question before the president spoke minus the percentage responding “don’t know” after the president spoke. Negative integers here correspond to a decline in the percentage of “don’t know,” or an increase in the information the public reports they have about a policy issue. Alternative specifications including pre-poll and/or post-poll “don’t know” percentages in the model as straight independent variables yielded substantially similar results.

<sup>28</sup> In an alternative OLS model (Appendix Table 2) we regressed the percentage approving of the president’s policy choice before he made it ( $t_1$ ) on the percentage approving of the statement after he made it ( $t_2$ ). Like Page, Shapiro and Dempsey (1987), who conduct a similar analysis, we find substantial agreement between this model and a model employing change in approval from  $t_1$  to  $t_2$  as the dependent variable (as in Table 1).

<sup>29</sup> None of the principle communications strategies (barnstorm, press availability or major address) were highly correlated with themselves interacted with “don’t know” (the largest was barnstorm at .05).

or late, respectively). Yet, it could be the case that presidents take positions on only popular issues, on issues where they are more certain they can lead or on issues where they are losing support. Therefore, we include several control variables to “furnish a “rival hypothesis”” to make our explanations more plausible (see Campbell and Ross 1968). First, we use a measure of the popularity of the president’s statement (or issue) before the president spoke to control for the overall popularity of the issue (“Popular Before Statement”). This controls for presidential position taking on the popularity of issues, in case presidents more frequently make speeches on popular issues (see Canes-Wrone 2006).<sup>30</sup> Second, considering the president can choose on which issues to speak, we also include controls for those issues which are in the president’s core agenda (in the form of the concurrent policy mentions from the President’s State of the Union message) or on issues which the White House cared greatly about persuading the public on by continually referencing the policy for consecutive days (see discussion above). Finally, models testing for any remaining endogenous effect were conducted on the possible reciprocal relationship between the president’s statement and popularity, election proximity and rally effects and were found to not be a factor.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> This measure controls for the popularity of the polled policy before the president spoke so we can hold constant the popularity of the issue with regards to whether or not the president led on that issue. This is a poll-gauged measure of the popularity of the proposal described in the measurement section above (and coded as a continuous variable). So, if 90% of the public approve of a policy before the president speaks and 91% approve afterwards, the 90% figure is included in the model to control for prior policy approval.

<sup>31</sup> Specifically, we might be concerned that presidents are taking positions only on issues where they are more likely to lead (for instance, during rally events) or are more popular with the public. In two stage least squares models run with each of those three variables as the endogenous variable (and a change in monthly inflation measure as the instrumental variable) two findings lead us to reject the presence of endogeneity. First, the coefficients for each of the three independent variables was not significant in any of the 2SLS models. Second, in OLS and 2SLS model comparisons with a Hausman test, the null hypothesis of endogeneity was rejected in each case ( $\text{Prob} > \chi^2 = .6114, .6623 \text{ and } .6542$ , respectively for the three variables). These results suggest that presidents are not taking position only on policies that are more popular or in key circumstances where they are likely to lead public opinion.

## **Successful Strategies**

To begin, the “two days before” variable in Table 1 captures whether or not the president made that same argument to the public in each of the two days prior to the date of the president’s statement, and this variable suggests that presidents are more likely to lead public opinion when actively pushing their agenda in public (between 7% to 8% in columns 1 and 2). These findings imply, as suggested in the larger theory of opinion leadership, that presidents who continually press an issue in public and who use the “bully pulpit” to buttress their larger political agenda can find success at leading public opinion. However, these trends are temporary as the significance of the coefficient dissipates after the one month window. Interestingly, the information theory outlined above is not fully accurate in Table 1, as an increase in the percentage of the public registering “don’t know” to a policy question assists presidential leadership where it was theorized that the opposite would be true. This suggests that the more the public is learns more about a topic, the more easily (but modestly) the president is able to lead them. In effect, this is the golden apple of presidential communications. Presidents are teaching and leading – the public hears and understands the president’s policy message and alters their opinion on that policy accordingly. However, when interacted with the specific strategies, the coefficients, in contrast to standalone coefficients of each strategy, are smaller or do not retain significance, suggesting that the more public certainty on an issue mitigates the president’s ability to persuade.

The public communications tactics involving television (“major address” and “televised press availability”) demonstrate mixed success in leading public opinion in the two time periods. In Table 1, columns 1 and 3, all presidents taken together find success at leading public opinion with a “major address” tactic (where presidents deliver televised

addresses from Washington, DC). The effect is impressive, with between 12% - 14% change in opinion (when there was not an interaction with change in “don’t know,” columns 1 and 3). Generally, that the “major address” tactic is significant for all presidents suggests that presentations that are more White House-driven (speeches or public events where the White House has more control over the format and message) are more suitable venues for successful presidential leadership, rather than those events where the president must be reactive to questions and explain a potentially complex policy in a relatively short time.

Yet, the coefficient for the major address communications strategy is less strong for modern presidents (Carter to Clinton) in both the one month and three month windows when interacted with decrease in “don’t know” (columns 2 and 4) – the coefficients contracts to between 6 and 7 % change in public opinion, although this is still a substantial amount for short-term opinion change. Therefore, modern presidents are able to lead with major addresses, although less so than all presidents grouped together, but only when considering the interaction with decrease in “don’t know.” This suggests that because later presidents face a more crowded message environment and when the public has more firm opinions on a policy, presidents are less able to lead public opinion, consistent with the theoretical predictions above pertaining to the nature of public opinion and the president’s opportunity to persuade.

[ TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE ]

However, although television does enhance leadership in formal settings like speeches from the Oval Office or the State of the Union, it does not significantly assist either all or modern presidents in leading public opinion during televised press conferences, despite the existence of a national stage and wide public exposure. Indeed,

we find that the coefficient for televised press conference (also interacted with change in “don’t know”) is either negative and significant or not statistically significant, as predicted. The effects are rather large, with a negative change in public opinion of 15% for all presidents in the three month window (column 3) and between 5% and 6% interacted with the change in “don’t know” for later-serving presidents (columns 2 and 4).<sup>32</sup> The significant interaction with a change in the percentage of the public responding “don’t know” to the policy question for later serving presidents reflects the increasing ambiguity of the president’s message created by the media through pointed and probing questions.

The national stage (and concurrent exposure to the public) magnifies the potential problems the public and Congress might have with the policy, and aggressive questions from the national press corps makes the situation that much more difficult to categorically explain the Administration’s position (see Kumar 2005; 2007). As the counterweight to the president’s clear and focused message emerges, it becomes more difficult for the president to maintain cohesion in his message and easier for opponents to follow the lead of the press in finding fault with the president’s policies. Acknowledging this difficulty with communicating through the media as a conduit, more recent presidents are less likely to schedule press conferences as a primary means to communicate with the public. Indeed, press conferences held in prime time have also become more rare with the advent of television (Kumar 2005) and for recent presidents (Mayer and Rozell 2005). This is especially true as the tone of the media’s questions become more aggressive over time (Clayman, et.al. 2005).

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<sup>32</sup> An alternative model was run with all press conferences (not limited to those on television) and the effect was substantively the same.

These results amend previous findings indicating that television does not necessarily buttress leadership. Several authors claim that the rise of television (and the rise in the diversity of viewers) challenges presidential ability to lead public opinion (see Welch 2003; 2003b; Young and Perkins 2005). In fact, television can help presidents to lead public opinion, but the White House must more tightly control the settings and presentation of these events and understand the nature of public opinion for these to have a positive effect. Although the timing and settings of press conferences are set by the White House, the content can drift away from the president's preferred issue, especially in times of conflict or scandal (Hart 1987). Televised addresses, on the other hand, have the potential to dictate the timing, setting and content and allow for a greater chance that the president's message will be transmitted in full either directly or indirectly through a media "echo" effect for subsequent days after important events (Welch 2003b; Farnsworth and Lichter 2006).

Surprisingly, the "barnstorm" tactic is consistently negative (but is only significant in the one month window for later-serving presidents.<sup>33</sup> Why is the "barnstorm" tactic not successful when it was predicted to be? In mobilizing the whole of the public with an event-by-event strategy (visiting several cities or states consecutively), the effect of moving national public opinion is glacial. Although the national media often notices these strategic movements, the effect may be intended to be local in impact (Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2006; Barrett and Peake 2007). This cascading effect suggests that it takes time to sum these effects across the nation and contribute to the total support for a policy. Further, the feedback loop inherent in the

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<sup>33</sup> Interactions with the "two days before" strategy did not improve the statistical significance of the measure. Removing the interaction with change in "don't know" also does nothing to change the sign or significance.

“going public” strategy may take time to mature. It may simply take too long to build support for an issue on a visit-by-visit basis to cities and states instead of a more broad nationally televised message (the “echo” of which will be disseminated nationwide). If the president is successful in altering public preferences while visiting a state (which we do not measure at the state level) then the time for that opinion to manifest itself into pressure on members of Congress could take a few months (and the effect may not be present in national public opinion polls).

## **Conclusions**

This article has expanded our knowledge about the conditions under which presidents are momentarily successful at leading public opinion and the tactics that are most effective for the White House. Our empirical approach allows for presidential leadership to be understood as a useful delineation of presidential strategies (instead of all speeches being treated equally) and the relative success associated with each. Given that the data are limited to only a simple single before and after design, the analysis presented here is limited to explaining only short term opinion change, not long term opinion change which presidents may desire. And, of course, this analysis presumes that presidents desire to lead mass public opinion to further their policy goals, when other rhetorical goals may take priority, including leading individual groups (Cohen 2005), placate coalition members (Edwards 2003) or directly influencing Congress with their rhetoric (Eshbaugh-Soha 2006). This analysis does not preclude these explanations but rather provides empirical evidence for when presidents are likely to temporarily lead public opinion and what tactics are most effective.

Concurrent with previous findings, we discover that presidents are generally unsuccessful at leading public opinion in a complicated political environment (Page and

Shapiro 1984; Edwards 2003). Indeed, many control conditions we included in our models to capture the political environment did not reach statistical significance. However, building on these null findings, presidents are able to lead public opinion with particular communications tactics. For example, the tactic that appears to work for the White House on a regular basis is the “major address” tactic, allowing the president to successfully harness the austere image of the presidency to reach a wide audience. Although Baum and Kernell (1999) find that the emergence of cable television has generally produced fewer viewers of televised addresses, the present findings hint that, used judiciously, presidents can communicate with the public via national addresses. Indeed, Welch (2003b) argues that presidents must carefully choose moments to deliver a nationally televised address to maximize viewership and minimize inattentiveness – this can be done with precise timing and on select issues.

However, other communications tactics are not as helpful in leading public opinion. A “barnstorm” tactic is never found to be significant in strengthening leadership success in part because the matriculation of local opinion lags far behind national polls, may only manifest at the local level or may only affect popularity (Ostrom and Simon 1989). The “televised press availability” tactic is also never found to be successful at leading opinion, which possibly suggests why presidents engage in fewer prime time press conferences over time (Kumar 2005) and why modern presidents have sought to more tightly control their political messages (Maltese 1994). Thus, these findings call into question the frequent use of travel or television to speak directly to the American people without regard to political circumstances or policy timing. The most effective strategies involve utilizing the “bully pulpit” domestically and selectively by capitalizing on tactics that work more efficiently and are controlled by the White House.

Interestingly, later serving presidents possess disadvantages over their earlier-serving colleagues. The analysis suggests that Presidents Carter to Clinton were less able to lead the public with the “major address” and “televised press availability” tactics than earlier presidents at the one month window when taking the percentage of “don’t know” into consideration. Presidential attempts to persuade the public through national addresses and the media (at least on television) limits success for modern presidents compared to earlier presidents, a finding that affirms alternative presidential strategies to “go local” in persuading the public (Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2006; Barrett and Peake 2007) and to host fewer press conferences (Kumar 2005). This compliments findings from other studies that charge the emergence of cable television during the period in question (the 1970s) with the evolution of a crowded media environment and the concurrent negative impact on presidential agenda setting (Baum and Kernell 1999; Young and Perkins 2005). Indeed, the emergence of a more aggressive media, the proliferation of interest groups and rising partisanship partially explains why messages from modern presidents are less powerful than those of earlier presidents.

Overall, the occasions of success of leading public opinion imply that presidents are effective at leadership in instances in which they have only *indirect* control but some control nevertheless. With the capacity to strategically time and deliver policy speeches to amplify attention paid and the ability to select the medium of delivery (through major addresses), presidents could maximize their ability to motivate public attitudes on policy issues. These findings suggest presidents can strategically lead public opinion and presidents have some capacity to facilitate their own leadership success. Yet, these effects are conditional on the nature of public opinion, the time period when presidents address the public and the mode of communications.

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**TABLE 1**  
**Regression Model Results for Opinion Movement at One and Three Months**

Variable	One Month		Three Months	
	Eisenhower To Clinton	Carter to Clinton	Eisenhower To Clinton	Carter to Clinton
Divided Government	.579 (2.46)	1.97 (2.72)	.374 (2.52)	.804 (3.08)
Two Days Before	8.19 *** (3.07)	7.48 *** (2.87)	4.48 (2.94)	2.55 (2.76)
State of the Union Promise	.955 (2.58)	2.76 (2.66)	2.92 (2.56)	6.73 ** (2.83)
Honeymoon	-4.83 (5.18)	-17.1 *** (6.62)	-9.78 ** (5.0)	-19.3 ** (6.48)
Second Term	1.92 (3.21)	-.218 (3.4)	-.332 (3.13)	-3.54 (3.51)
Popular Before Statement	-.085 (.068)	-.011 (.066)	-.073 (.065)	-.013 (.068)
Issue Saliency	.080 (.121)	-.063 (.160)	-.082 (.116)	-.270 (.169)
Presidential Approval	-.131 (.119)	-.091 (.146)	-.059 (.116)	-.030 (.157)
“Rally”	-3.84 (2.49)	-4.23 (2.65)	-1.06 (2.44)	-1.36 (2.72)
Election Upcoming	3.72 *** (1.22)	4.18 *** (1.62)	1.61 (1.22)	2.16 (1.65)
Carter – Clinton	5.49 (3.52)	—	2.44 (3.27)	—
Decrease in “Don’t Know”	.693 *** (.132)	.740 *** (.119)	.714 *** (.143)	.735 *** (.134)
<b>Communications Tactics</b>				
Barnstorm	.950 (2.90)	-3.09 (2.96)	4.35 (2.99)	1.02 (3.15)
Major Address	12.2 ** (5.2)	2.00 (4.06)	14.6 ** (5.77)	-.004 (4.59)
Televised Press Availability	-8.58 (6.23)	—	-15.8 ** (6.43)	—
<b>Communications Tactics (interacted with decrease in “don’t know”)</b>				
Barnstorm	-.337 (.338)	-.592 * (.307)	-.327 (.374)	-.470 (.350)
Major Address	.417 (1.16)	6.62 *** (2.28)	-.206 (1.26)	6.99 *** (2.59)
Televised Press Availability	.866 (1.44)	-5.72 ** (2.58)	2.16 (1.56)	-5.89 ** (2.93)
Constant	-6.36 (10.4)	-1.80 (7.13)	-2.68 (10.6)	-3.24 (7.91)
N	321	254	469	371
Prob > F	.000	.000	.000	.000
R <sup>2</sup>	.596	.683	.515	.628
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.472	.563	.397	.509

NOTE: Dependent variable: continuous variable indicating movement of public opinion from before presidential statement to after (post-statement poll minus pre-statement poll). One and three month columns capture the outer time boundary of survey dates for those data. Standard errors in parentheses. Blank spaces denote variables removed because of data overlap. \*\*\* indicates p<.01. \*\* p<.05. \* p<.10.