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# Agenda Setting from the Oval Office: An Experimental Examination of Presidential Influence over the Public Agenda

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## Abstract

This study employs an experimental approach to isolate and directly test the extent to which presidents can affect public perceptions of issue importance and support for policy action, taking into consideration key factors that condition such effects. Our findings provide new empirical evidence that presidents can, in fact, positively influence public opinion through agenda setting, particularly by increasing the perceptual importance of low salience foreign policy issues. However, the results also indicate that such positive effects do not translate into public support for policy action; instead, presidential appeals actually decrease support. Last, our study offers new evidence that employing bipartisan cues can help presidents further increase public perceptions of issue importance, though such cues are unlikely to spur increased support.

Over the years, scholars have asserted that U.S. presidents play an important role at the agenda setting stage of the policy making process (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Cohen, 1995, 1997; Downs, 1972; Kingdon, 1995; Light, 1991). Given their formal position atop the hierarchy of the executive branch and high visibility in the media, it makes sense that presidents would have “a presumptive right to play a leading role in identifying and defining the problems that command governmental attention” (Cobb & Elder, 1972, p. 182; Jones, 1994; Kingdon, 1995). Nevertheless, despite a vibrant and growing literature, important questions linger concerning the full extent to which presidents can be influential agenda setters.

In a recent critical overview of presidential agenda-setting research, Wood (2009) points out that, “Although it seems evident that presidents *should*

be influential agenda setters at both the systemic and institutional levels, hard scientific evidence showing that presidents *are* influential agenda setters is limited” (p. 109). Among the quantitative studies that systematically examine the agenda-setting ability of presidents, most scholarly work has been restricted to time series research designs. Even though time series analyses have proved to be highly valuable in contributing to the accumulation of scientific knowledge in this area of research, limitations in historical data often oblige scholars to resort to using short time periods, a small sample of issues, and a few administrations (see Lawrence, 2004, p. 17). As a viable alternative to time series research, Wood (2009, p. 117) posits that scholars should look to experimental designs for further exploring presidential influence in agenda setting.

Building on and extending the literature on presidential agenda setting, and addressing the call for alternative research designs in this area of scholarship, this study employs an experimental approach to isolate and directly test the extent to which presidents can affect public perceptions of issue importance and support for policy action, while taking into consideration several key factors that may condition such effects. Specifically, we consider three central factors that influence public reactions to presidential policy initiatives at the agenda setting stage: Issue salience, policy domain, and the type of cue (bipartisan *versus* partisan) that presidents use in their messages to the public.

Our experimental study focuses on issue salience, policy domain, and presidential cueing for several reasons. To begin with, past studies tend to examine either low salience issues (e.g., trade or foreign aid) or high salience issues (e.g., the economy or a military intervention), but often fail to compare the two. In addition, although presidential agenda setting in domestic policy has been widely examined, foreign policy agenda setting has been relatively overlooked (but see Andrade & Young, 1996; Peake, 2001; Wood & Peake, 1998). Among the few works that do look at foreign policy, they mostly do so without systematically comparing it to the domestic policy domain. Therein, scholars who examine presidential influence on the foreign policy agenda generally investigate media coverage and congressional attention to issues rather than public attention (but see Cohen, 1995, 1997; Hill, 1998; Lawrence, 2004). Building on these works, we consider the conditioning effects of high and low salience issues across both policy domains with regards to presidential influence on the public agenda.

Most studies also tend to overlook how presidential use of bipartisan or partisan cues in their public appeals may influence the public agenda. Although Ragsdale (1987) finds that non-partisan speeches can have a positive impact on presidential approval, her study does not test the impact of presidential speeches on issue salience or public support for policy action. Other studies focus instead on how other informational cues, such as source cues

(e.g., whether a president endorses a policy), elite cues (e.g., signaling elite consensus or dissent), or voting cues (e.g., political party affiliation) affect evaluations of presidential performance, voting behavior, etc. (see, for example, Hetherington, 2001; Sigelman, 1980; Sigelman & Sigelman, 1981). To address this gap in the literature, we take into consideration how focusing on broad (bipartisan) or narrow (partisan) constituencies may further condition the effect presidential appeals may have on public perceptions of issue salience and support for policy action.

In all, by bringing together the key factors of issue salience, policy domain, and presidential cueing within an experimental setting, this study advances the debate over whether and to what extent presidents can effectively influence public perceptions of issue importance and garner support for policy action. Our findings provide new insights on how presidents can refine their use of public appeals to help maximize their potential as agenda setters.

### Presidential Agenda Setting and the Mass Public

Agenda setting generally refers to “the process whereby matters of concern for the political system become defined as policy problems for consideration on political agendas” (Wood, 2009, p. 108). This process involves an ongoing competition among numerous issue proponents to gain the attention of media outlets, the public, and policy elites (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p. 2).

At the outset, in addressing the extent to which presidents can influence the agenda-setting process, scholars asserted that “no other single actor in the political system has quite the capability of the president to set agendas” (Kingdon, 1995, p. 23; see also Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Cobb & Elder, 1972; Schattschneider, 1960). However, more recent scholarly works argue that presidential influence in agenda setting is inherently weak due the difficulty of attaining agenda space within a highly competitive and dynamic environment (e.g., Edwards & Wood, 1999; Wood & Peake, 1998).

Such scholarly investigations have helped stimulate a vibrant and growing literature on presidential agenda-setting influence over (a) political institutions, particularly Congress (e.g., Edwards & Barrett, 2000; Bond & Fleisher, 1990), (b) the media (e.g., Edwards & Wood, 1999; Peake & Esbaugh-Soha, 2008; Wood & Peake, 1998), and (c) public opinion (e.g., Behr & Iyengar, 1985; Cohen, 1995, 1997; Hill, 1998; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Lawrence, 2004). Building on the latter vein of this area of research, our study examines the impact of presidential public appeals on public perceptions of issue importance and support for policy action. In doing so, we provide additional evidence and new insights to the literature concerning presidential influence on the public agenda.

## **Influence of Presidential Public Appeals on Perceptions of Issue Importance**

A number of scholars have demonstrated empirically that presidential speeches can influence which issues become a topic of public discourse (Behr & Iyengar, 1985; Canes-Wrone, 2001; Cohen, 1995; Druckman & Holmes, 2004; Hill, 1998; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). For instance, analyzing presidential speeches for the period from 1974 to 1980, Behr and Iyengar (1985) find that presidents are able to shape public concern for the issues of inflation and energy, but not unemployment. Similarly, Iyengar and Kinder (1987) find that presidential speeches addressing the issues of energy and the economy lead to increases in public concern. Examining State of the Union addresses for the 1953–1989 period, Cohen (1995) demonstrates that presidential issue priorities mentioned in such messages have strong effects on public evaluations of issue salience (see also, Hill, 1998). Extending Cohen's data to 2002, Young and Perkins (2005) find that presidential rhetoric has lately become less influential over the public agenda, which they relate to the changing television climate (see also, Rottinghaus, 2009). Other scholars suggest that presidential rhetoric is limited in affecting the issue perceptions of the public (see, for example, Edwards, 2003; Edwards & Wood, 1999). In view of these findings, we first test the general hypothesis that

*H1:* Exposure to a presidential speech addressing a policy issue will increase an individual's perception of the importance of that issue.

Extending beyond the traditional model of agenda setting that focuses on the president as the principle actor, more recent studies have pointed out a number of limitations presidents face in a competitive political environment (e.g., Edwards & Wood, 1999; Young & Perkins, 2005). In particular, several studies show that presidents are limited in their ability to set the agenda when addressing topics that are consistently salient (Edwards & Wood, 1999; see also, Wood & Peake, 1998). For instance, the media may continuously cover a declining economy and thereby interfere with a president's ability to take the lead in drawing attention to the issue rather than responding to it (Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2005; Peake & Eshbaugh-Soha, 2008). Under such circumstances, if the public already perceives an issue to be important at the outset, presidential attention to a high salience issue may only marginally increase the perceived level of importance associated with that issue, resulting in a ceiling effect (see Wood & Peake, 1998).

Compared to high salience issues, presidents have greater potential for influencing the agenda when addressing topics that are less salient to begin with. As Peake (2001) puts it, "Lower salience decreases the competition Presidents receive from the media, possibly increasing the President's influence in relation to other agenda setters" (p. 72). In fact, even if the salience of

an issue is typically high, fluctuations in national conditions and issue salience over time may affect the scope of presidential influence on public perceptions of issue importance. For instance, Esbaugh-Soha and Peake (2005) suggest that "a strong economy provides an opportunity for presidential agenda influence because a strong economy is typically less salient than a struggling one" (p. 128). Thus, when the president addresses an issue that is not already a major public concern, the public's perception of that issue may shift from a low level of importance to a markedly higher one (see Edwards & Wood, 1999; Peake, 2001). Accordingly, we hypothesize that, following a presidential public appeal,

*H1a:* The change in the perceived importance of an issue will be greater for a low salience issue than a high salience one.

Until recently, few studies have considered presidential agenda setting with respect to both domestic and foreign policy domains (e.g., Edwards & Wood, 1999; Cohen, 1995, 1997; Hill, 1998). Scholarly research regarding presidential influence on the policy agenda has largely focused on domestic policy issues whereas the foreign policy domain has been relatively overlooked. Among scholars who do examine presidential influence on foreign policy agenda setting, most look into media and congressional attention rather than public attention (see, for example, Cohen, 1995; Hill, 1998; Lawrence, 2004; Peake, 2001; Wood & Peake, 1998).

Scholars note that, compared to domestic politics, the public confers a much higher degree of deference to the president in the foreign policy realm (Cohen, 1995; Hill, 1998; Hurwitz, 1989; Peterson, 1994; Schlesinger, 1989). Equipped with enhanced diplomatic and military powers, presidents may indeed have greater agenda-setting influence in foreign policy (Peake, 2001). For instance, Cohen (1995) finds that presidential agenda setting influence on foreign policy lasts longer than on civil rights and economic issues (see also Hill, 1998). However, Edwards and Wood (1999) find increased presidential influence in domestic issues. More recently, Lawrence's (2004) comprehensive study finds mixed evidence regarding presidential effectiveness in placing foreign policy issues on the public agenda.

Given the dearth of systematic research that compares both policy domains and in light of the mixed findings mentioned above, this study considers the differences between domestic and foreign policy domains vis-à-vis the president's ability to influence the national agenda. In doing so, we focus on the differences between the two domains with regards to public perceptions of issue salience. Since domestic policy issues generally have more of a direct effect on people than foreign policy ones (excluding a national security threat), people are likely to view a domestic issue as more salient and more relevant to their lives. By comparison, research shows that people are relatively uninformed about foreign policy issues and may often feel detached from the

foreign policy domain compared to the domestic one (Holsti, 1996; Jentleson, 1992; Page & Shapiro, 1992). Barring a foreign policy crisis, people may thus perceive foreign policy issues as less salient than domestic policy ones. As such, one may expect more room for change in the perceived importance of foreign policy issues and the possibility of a ceiling effect for already more salient domestic policy issues. Under such circumstances, presidents may have more success in increasing the salience of a less salient foreign policy issue than a highly salient domestic one. Accordingly, we hypothesize that, following a presidential public appeal,

*H1b:* The change in the perceived importance of an issue will be greater in the foreign policy domain than in the domestic one.

We also examine whether an interactive relationship exists between issue salience and policy domain in determining public perceptions of issue importance. Given that issues in the foreign policy domain are generally perceived as less salient than domestic issues and that the amount and availability of information for salient foreign policy issues is generally greater than for less salient foreign policy ones, we expect that a low salience foreign policy issue will demonstrate the least well-formed priors and lowest level of knowledge among the public overall (see Rosen, 1973). On the other hand, people generally have more information available to them regarding low salience domestic policy issues compared to low salience foreign policy ones. Moreover, the difference in the amount of information between low and high salience domestic policy issues is not as great in comparison to that between low and high salience foreign policy issues. Previous research suggests that when systemic attention to an issue is generally low and the president makes the issue a policy priority, presidential success in setting the agenda increases (see Peake, 2001). Accordingly, we hypothesize that, following a presidential public appeal,

*H1c:* There will be less difference in the degree of change in issue importance between high and low salience issues in the domestic policy domain than in the foreign policy domain.

Presidents can also employ certain cues to influence the extent to which an issue becomes important in the eyes of the public. In doing so, presidents make choices about the audience they wish to target—they can either call on party supporters to rally around a certain issue or call on the entire country to unite in a bipartisan effort to address it. Recent studies of public opinion suggest that a majority of the U.S. public tends to favor bipartisan cooperation and policy making, and disdains partisan bickering in government (Ramirez, 2009). As such, whether presidents are inclusive (i.e., bipartisan) in their remarks may influence the degree to which members of the public find an issue worthy of consideration on the national agenda (even among those who might disagree with a president's policy preferences). Otherwise, Hetherington

(2001) points out that when presidents employ partisan streams of information for their public appeals, it is more likely that “respondents will express opinions that reflect the heavily partisan stream” (p. 622), thereby reducing (or dividing) public interest in the issue. In addition, Rohde and Barthelmy (2009) point out that “A highly partisan targeting strategy is unlikely to sway independent voters and, in fact, may undermine the president’s ability in the long term to influence this [key] group’s vote” (p. 304). Therefore, people should view bipartisan messages as an important step towards cooperation with key opposition party members within an otherwise partisan and polarizing political environment (Ragsdale, 1987; Ramirez, 2009). Accordingly, we hypothesize that

*H1d:* A presidential public appeal with bipartisan cues will generate more change in the perceived importance of an issue than one with partisan cues.

### **Influence of Presidential Public Appeals on Public Support for Policy Action**

Although public appeals may help presidents increase perceptions of issue importance, such positive effects may not necessarily translate into increased public support for policy action when individuals are exposed to the substantive details of a presidential policy initiative. To illustrate, one can look back at the unprecedented “60 Stops in 60 Days” tour for Social Security reform that President George W. Bush embarked on in the wake of his re-election. By addressing the issue as his top domestic policy priority for 2005, President Bush increased the perceptual importance of Social Security among both the public and Congress, making it one of the most salient issues in terms of public debate and media coverage (see Edwards, 2007). However, as Bush took his case for reform to the public, not only did they not respond to the president’s appeals concerning his specific policy initiative aimed at privatizing Social Security through the creation of private investment accounts—public support actually dwindled steadily over time (Edwards, 2007, p. 312). Thus, it may be far easier for a president to ask the public to simply consider an issue (and thereby heighten its level of importance) than it is for the president to convince the public to accept the specific policy facets of their initiatives (see Edwards, 2003, 2009).

Although some early studies found that certain segments of the public are more likely to show support for a policy proposal if it is attributed to the president (see Hurwitz, 1989; Rosen, 1973; Sigelman, 1980), others provided evidence that identification of the president’s support for particular policies may fail to increase public support, or even backfire and diminish support (see Glaroff & Miroff, 1983; Sigelman & Sigelman, 1981). Since then, Edwards (2003, 2007, 2009) has consistently demonstrated that presidents are very



limited in their ability to garner and maintain public support for their policy agendas. Given the more recent empirical evidence on presidential limitations in moving public opinion, we hypothesize that

*H2:* Exposure to a substantive presidential public appeal regarding a particular policy initiative will decrease an individual’s support for that particular initiative.

Experimental Design

Experimental Structure

Our experiment uses a 2×2×2 factorial design composed of three manipulated factors (i.e., independent variables): (a) Issue salience (*high* vs. *low*), (b) policy domain (*domestic* vs. *foreign*), and (c) the type of cue used in the president’s speech (*bipartisan* vs. *partisan*). The experiment consists of eight experimental conditions structured as different combinations of these experimental factors (such as “high issue salience, domestic policy, bipartisan cues,” “low issue salience, foreign policy, partisan cues,” and so on) presented in the form of presidential speeches. The dependent variables we analyze are: (a) Change in the perceived level of importance attributed to an issue; and (b) change in the level of support for policy action addressing such issue, after exposure to a presidential speech promoting a given policy initiative concerning that issue. A total of 163 undergraduate students participated in the experiment and were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions. Figure 1 below illustrates

Figure 1.  
*Experimental design*

Pre-experimental questionnaire (perceived issue importance and support for policy action)



Exposure to a presidential speech based on the following conditions:

Total N = 163		Policy Domain			
		Domestic		Foreign	
		Presidential Cue		Presidential Cue	
Issue Salience	High (Energy security)	Bipartisan n = 20	Partisan n = 21	Bipartisan n = 20	Partisan n = 19
	Low (Medical aid for disaster victims)	n = 22	n = 20	n = 20	n = 21



Post-experimental questionnaire (perceived issue importance and support for policy action)

the design of the experiment and reports the number of participants in each experimental condition (The full experimental questionnaire is available upon request).

At the beginning of the experiment, participants were asked to complete a pre-experimental questionnaire inquiring about their opinions on several policy issues, particularly vis-à-vis their perceptions about the importance of those issues and whether they would support policy action to address such issues. After completing the questionnaire, participants were exposed to a presidential speech (which varied in accordance with their respective experimental condition) about a certain policy initiative on a given issue. Following their exposure to the speech, participants next completed a post-experimental questionnaire by indicating the extent to which the speech influenced their opinion concerning the importance of the issue and their level of support for policy action to address it. The pre- and post-experimental questionnaires thus served as the basis for running manipulation checks for the independent variables and measures of the dependent variables.

Responses to the pre-experimental questionnaire constituted the baseline (control) for determining the initial policy position of the participants *within* each experimental condition before receiving the treatments, while each experimental condition functioned as a baseline treatment (control) for comparison *across* other experimental conditions. This is not only preferable for our particular experimental design and for the testing of our hypotheses, but also a necessary alternative to the more “traditional” application of a no-treatment control group (see Morton & Williams, 2010, for an in-depth discussion of the nuances and misperceptions concerning experimental control treatments; see also Morton & Williams, 2009, p. 342). To ensure maximum experimental control, the structure and content of each presidential speech for each respective condition was held constant except for the manipulated factors of issue salience, policy domain, and presidential cueing.

### Operationalization of the Dependent Variables

As mentioned above, the dependent variables we analyze are: (a) Change in the perceived level of importance attributed to an issue and (b) change in the level of support for policy action addressing such issue, after exposure to a presidential speech promoting a given policy initiative concerning that issue. To measure the initial issue positions, the pre-experimental questionnaire asked the participants to rate several issues on a scale of 0–10 in terms of their level of importance, as well as the participants’ level of support for policy action to address such issues. The main issues of interest were energy security and medical aid for victims of natural disasters, which we used as manipulations of high and low issue salience, respectively. To avoid any priming effects, the pre-experimental questionnaire listed these issues along with several other

issues (including education, safety of imported consumer goods, climate change, international competitiveness of the U.S. space program, Social Security, terrorism, economic security, and the Iraq War). Following their exposure to the presidential speeches promoting a given policy initiative, all subjects completed a post-experimental questionnaire in which they were asked to rate on a scale of 0–10 how important they thought the issue they read about was and to what extent they supported or opposed policy action to address that issue.

### Operationalization of the Independent Variables

To test our hypotheses, we operationalize three concepts central to our study as our main experimental factors: (a) Issue salience (*high* vs. *low*), (b) policy domain (*domestic* vs. *foreign*), and (c) presidential cueing (*bipartisan* vs. *partisan*).

**Issue Salience.** In this experiment, we manipulate issue salience by exposing half of the participants to a presidential speech promoting a policy initiative addressing a high salience issue and exposing the other half to a presidential speech promoting a policy initiative addressing a low salience issue. As our high salience issue, we chose energy security not only for its potential to substantively affect an individual's way of life (i.e., with regards to the availability and sustainability of energy resources), but also due to the increasing amount of attention the issue has received over the last decade by the media, interest groups, and policy makers (see Bolsen & Cook, 2008). As our low salience issue, we used the issue of providing medical aid for victims of natural disasters, which entails humanitarian-based concerns that receive far less attention compared to issues or crises that entail U.S. national interests and security (see also Peake, 2001, regarding foreign aid).

**Policy Domain.** We manipulate policy domain by exposing half of the participants to a presidential speech promoting a domestic policy initiative and exposing the other half to a presidential speech promoting a foreign policy initiative. For the domestic policy domain, the corresponding presidential speeches focus on seeking *internal* sources of energy security for the high salience issue and providing medical aid for victims of natural disasters *within* the United States for the low salience issue. For the foreign policy domain, the corresponding presidential speeches focus on *international* sources of energy security for the high salience issue and providing medical aid for victims of natural disasters *outside* the United States for the low salience issue.

**Presidential Cueing (*Bipartisan* versus *Partisan*).** The third factor we incorporate into the experimental design relates to the manner in which presidents use bipartisan versus partisan cues in their public appeals when seeking to influence perceptions of issue importance and support for policy action for their policy initiatives. We manipulate presidential cueing by exposing half of

the participants to a presidential speech invoking bipartisan cues and exposing the other half to a presidential speech invoking partisan ones. In the bipartisan conditions, presidential speeches refer specifically to the need to “think beyond partisan lines and come together as a nation” and “build a bipartisan coalition.” For the partisan conditions, presidential speeches mention in particular a lack of support from “across the aisle” while legislators of the president’s party have “stepped forward” in contributing to the development of the policy initiative.

## Results

Our experimental design focuses on two main research questions: First, can presidents change public perceptions of issue importance through the use of public appeals to promote certain policy initiatives? Second, can presidents increase support for policy action on a given issue through substantive public appeals? In addressing these questions, we consider how variations in issue salience, policy domain, and presidential cues condition such relationships.

### Manipulation Checks

Before testing our hypotheses, it is necessary to ascertain whether our manipulations of issue salience (*high* vs. *low*), policy domain (*domestic* vs. *foreign*), and presidential cueing (*bipartisan* vs. *partisan*) worked as intended by our experimental design. First, to evaluate whether participants’ baseline perceptions of issue importance corresponded with our theoretical expectations, the pre-experimental questionnaire included a question asking participants to rate (on a 0–10 scale) the importance of a variety of policy issues. We embedded therein the issue related to the specific experimental condition. Our ANOVA results indicate that participants in the *high salience issue* (energy security) conditions judged the policy to be more important ( $M=7.3$ ) than did those in the *low salience issue* (medical aid for victims of natural disasters) conditions ( $M=6.1$ ), [ $F(1, 159)=10.37, p<.001$ ]. This result is consistent with our expectation that the participants would perceive energy security as a more salient issue than medical aid for natural disaster victims. Moreover, our ANOVA results indicate that participants in the *domestic policy* conditions judged issues to be more important ( $M=7.05$ ) than did those in the *foreign policy* conditions ( $M=6.31$ ), [ $F(1, 159)=3.67, p<.05$ ]. After their exposure to a presidential speech, the post-experimental questionnaire asked participants how bipartisan (on a 0–10 scale) they thought the speech was. Our ANOVA results indicate that participants in the *bipartisan* conditions judged the speech as more bipartisan ( $M=5.5$ ) than did those in the *partisan* conditions ( $M=4.93$ ), [ $F(1, 159)=2.57, p<.05$ ]. In all, the manipulation checks

Table 1.  
*Change in the Perceived Importance of an Issue in Response to Presidential Public Appeals*

Independent variables		df	<i>M</i> square	<i>F</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value
Analysis of variance (repeated measures)					
Change in perceived issue importance		1	39.106	20.645	<.0001
Issue salience		1	52.888	7.049	<.01
Policy domain		1	20.314	2.708	<.05
Presidential cueing		1	20.801	2.772	<.05
Issue salience * Policy domain		1	8.951	4.725	<.05
<i>n</i> = 163					
Independent variables			<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>n</i>
Means table					
Pre	Issue importance		6.69	0.19	163
Post	Issue importance		7.39	0.15	163
Pre	Low salience, Domestic policy		6.68	0.37	42
	High salience, Domestic policy		7.42	0.37	41
	Low salience, Foreign policy		5.49	0.37	41
	High salience, Foreign policy		7.16	0.38	39
	Low salience, Domestic policy		7.22	0.29	42
	High salience, Domestic policy		7.82	0.30	41
	Low salience, Foreign policy		7.14	0.30	41
	High salience, Foreign policy		7.35	0.30	39

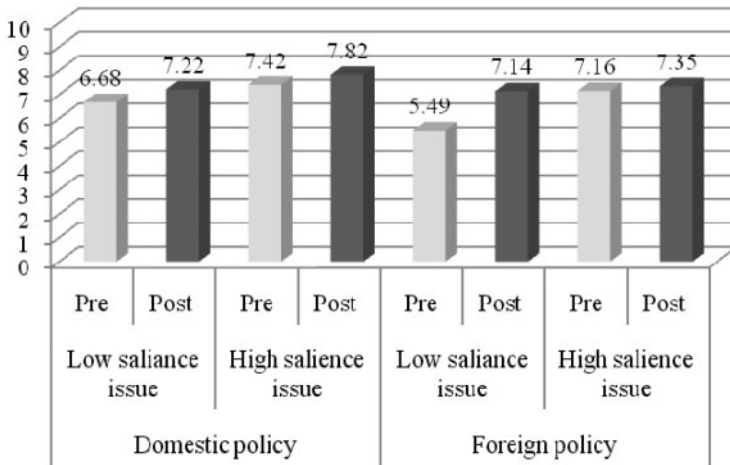
served to ensure that we executed an accurate manipulation of the factors of interest and thus confirm the internal validity of our experiment.

**Change in the Perceived Importance of an Issue in Response to Presidential Public Appeals**

Our first set of hypotheses concern changes in the perceived level of importance attributed to an issue following exposure to a presidential speech promoting a given policy initiative on such issue. To test our hypotheses, we conducted repeated measures ANOVA. Overall, we find that exposure to a presidential speech increases an individual's perception of issue importance, which is consistent with H1 (Table 1). Specifically, the results show that the mean level of perceived issue importance across all conditions increases from 6.69 to 7.39 after exposure to a presidential speech [ $F(1, 155) = 20.65, p < .0001$ ].

The results of the repeated measures ANOVA also demonstrate significant main effects for all three experimental factors (i.e., issue salience, policy domain, and presidential cueing). To begin with, participants in the high

Figure 2.

*Change in the perceived importance of an issue (Issue Salience \* Policy Domain)*

salience issue conditions registered significantly less change than those in the low salience conditions following exposure to a presidential speech [ $F(1, 155) = 7.05, p < .01$ ]. This falls in line with our expectation that change in the perceived importance of an issue is greater for low salience issues than high salience ones (H1a). Regarding policy domain, participants in the foreign policy conditions showed greater change in their perceptions of issue importance after a presidential speech than did those in the domestic policy conditions [ $F(1, 155) = 2.71, p < .05$ ], which substantiates H1b. In terms of presidential cueing, we find that bipartisan cues embedded in a presidential speech led to a greater amount of change in the perceived importance of an issue than did partisan ones [ $F(1, 155) = 2.77, p < .05$ ], which is consistent with H1d.

In addition to the hypothesized main effects, we expected an interaction between issue salience and policy domain. As Figure 2 shows, there is less difference in the magnitude of change between high salience and low salience issues in the domestic policy domain than in the foreign policy domain [ $F(1, 155) = 4.73, p < .05$ ], which is consistent with H1c. Specifically, for domestic policy conditions, the magnitude of change in the high salience issue condition is .40 [ $(M_{\text{post}} = 7.82) - (M_{\text{pre}} = 7.42)$ ], compared to .54 for the low salience issue condition [ $(M_{\text{post}} = 7.22) - (M_{\text{pre}} = 6.68)$ ]. On the other hand, within foreign policy conditions, the magnitude of change in the high salience issue condition is .19 [ $(M_{\text{post}} = 7.35) - (M_{\text{pre}} = 7.16)$ ], compared to 1.65 for the low salience issue condition [ $(M_{\text{post}} = 7.14) - (M_{\text{pre}} = 5.49)$ ].

Table 2.  
*Change in Support for Policy Action in Response to Presidential Public Appeals*

Independent variables	df	<i>M</i> square	<i>F</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value
Analysis of variance (repeated measures)				
Change in level of support	1	99.825	29.949	<.0001
Issue salience	1	14.108	1.875	<.10
Policy domain	1	78.899	10.488	<.001
Presidential cueing	1	11.132	1.480	>.10
Issue salience * Policy domain	1	12.214	3.664	<.05
<i>n</i> = 163				
Independent variables		<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>n</i>
Means table				
Pre	Level of support	6.91	0.19	163
Post	Level of support	5.80	0.18	163

**Change in Support for Policy Action in Response to Presidential Public Appeals**

Our final hypothesis (H2) considers changes in the level of support for policy action to address an issue following a presidential public appeal. Specifically, we proposed that

*H2:* Exposure to a presidential speech promoting a policy initiative on a given issue diminishes an individual’s support for policy action pertaining to that issue.

The results of the repeated measures ANOVA (Table 2) corroborate this hypothesis. Specifically, the mean level of support that participants expressed for policy action to address an issue before reading the presidential speech decreased from 6.91 to 5.8 following their exposure to the speech [ $F(1, 155) = 29.95, p < .0001$ ]. Compared to our findings regarding the changes in the perceived importance of an issue, it appears that presidents are much more likely to succeed when they simply try to draw attention to an issue (and thereby heighten its level of importance) than when they try to convince the public to accept the specific policy facets of their initiatives.

Last, it is worth noting that the effect of bipartisan presidential cues on one’s support for policy action is not significant. Thus, even though bipartisan cues may enhance a president’s ability to increase the perceptual importance of an issue, people may be less responsive to bipartisanship when actual policy initiatives are put forth. For members of the public who belong to the same party as the president, the prospect of bipartisan compromise may be unappealing since it can oblige a president to alter or water down an initiative to fit the demands of a broader constituency, rather than focus on the policy

preferences of the president's base of support. Partisan opponents, meanwhile, may be hesitant to embrace an opposition president's initiative as an acceptable solution to a societal problem, even if certain conciliations are offered.

### External Validity of the Experimental Results

In view of the results of our experimental analyses, a few comments are warranted regarding the use of the experimental method in this study. Whereas political scientists in general acknowledge the high internal validity of experimentation as a means for testing hypotheses, debate continues over the external validity of this method. Therein, most criticism is directed at the use of college students and the artificiality of laboratory settings with regards to the representativeness of the experimental samples and the generalizability of results (e.g., Kinder & Palfrey, 1993; McDermott, 2002; Sears, 1986).

In addressing this debate about experimentation, we echo the sentiments expressed by Mook (1983) that, "what makes research findings of interest is that they help us understand everyday life. That understanding, however, comes from theory or the analysis of mechanism; it is not a matter of 'generalizing' the findings themselves" (p. 386). In other words, the research objective and the conclusions drawn from an experiment relate solely to the logic of one's theory and hypotheses. As such, the main purpose of most experimental studies is neither to estimate the characteristics of a given population from sample characteristics nor to draw inductive conclusions about that population, but to investigate if the theorized relationships exist between the variables of interest.

As Gartner (2008, p. 100) suggests, experiments using hypothetical scenarios allow scholars to capture the broader range of processes concerning public opinion by enabling one to manipulate and vary the factors of interest in accordance with one's research objectives. Employing hypothetical scenarios also allows a researcher to prevent any bias or confusion that might arise by referring to present or past time real-world actors and events, which could contaminate the validity and reliability of the findings if not applied properly. Nevertheless, the experimenter should avoid developing hypothetical scenarios that are unrealistic or artificial. With these considerations in mind, we designed our experimental scenarios in the form of presidential speeches in close concert to the content found in actual presidential speeches given by Presidents Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama, as provided in the *Public Papers of the President* archives.

We also emphasize that the experiment used in this study was designed for examining public perceptions of presidential public appeals rather than that of elite decision makers. Otherwise, using students in an experiment that aims to study elite perceptions would be problematic since the information acquisition and processing patterns, associative memory structures, levels of experiential



knowledge, and decision strategies are different for the public and the elite. A number of scholars suggest that experimentation is an appropriate method when the real-world equivalent of a student sample in an experiment is the public—not the political elite (see Mintz, Redd, & Vedlitz, 2006; Morton & Williams, 2010). Indeed, in comparing the results of his national-level experiment on public support for war with the results of his laboratory experiment using students, Gartner (2008) does not find a significant difference between the reactions of students and older adults. In sum, even if the actual link between presidential public appeals and changes in perceived issue importance and support for policy action might differ in strength and degree with respect to the general population, we believe that the basic cognitive and psychological processes that lead to the proposed outcomes should be essentially similar among all members of the public (see Willnat et al., 2006).

### Discussion

The results of our experimental analyses provide new evidence that presidential efforts to affect public perceptions can, in fact, positively influence the public agenda. Adding to the systematic quantitative knowledge in this line of research, which has almost exclusively been restricted to time series analyses, our experimental approach has allowed us to more directly tease out the extent to which presidents can affect public perceptions of certain issues while taking into consideration key factors that may condition such effects. In particular, we find that presidents can increase overall public perceptions of issue importance when they publicly address an issue, especially a low salience issue in the foreign policy domain. Since domestic issues are generally more salient to the public than foreign policy issues and since presidents hold more leeway in foreign affairs (see Peterson, 1994; Schlesinger, 1989, p. 420), presidents are keen to maximize on their ability to wield influence in raising (or reasserting) the importance of issues abroad that otherwise lack public awareness and/or suffer from lapsed media attention (see also Peake, 2001). Given that most studies on agenda setting have focused on the domestic policy sphere, these insights provide an incentive for scholars to further explore presidential influence in foreign policy agenda setting.

In addition to addressing how issue salience and policy domain affect presidential influence on the public agenda, we also considered whether and to what extent presidential cueing (with respect to bipartisan versus partisan appeals) may affect public perceptions of issue importance. In this way, we address an important gap in the literature, which has otherwise been dominated by studies that examine how other informational cues (e.g., source cues, elite cues, or voting cues) affect evaluations of presidential performance, voting behavior, and so on. Our findings suggest that bipartisan rhetoric serves as a

useful tool that signals more effectively the importance of an issue to a broader audience than does a more partisan approach that focuses on appealing only to one's base of support. Given the public disdain for partisan bickering in government (Ramirez, 2009), presidents who add a bipartisan tone to their public appeals are more likely to spark widespread public interest and instigate a national debate over a given policy issue.

Once a president is able to influence public perceptions of issue importance, the ability for the president to further influence the policy-making process largely depends on having enough public support for taking policy action. Indeed, scholars note that public support endows presidents with a "political resource," a degree of justification for pursuing their political agendas (Brody, 1991, p. 3; Cornwell, 1965; Neustadt, 1990), whereas presidents who lack (or lose) public support are subject to frustration and vulnerability at the hands of their political opponents (Edwards, 2003, p. 4). Interestingly, our findings indicate that although public appeals may help presidents increase perceptions of issue importance, such positive effects do not translate into increased public support for policy action in the presence of substantive policy initiative details. Instead, our results demonstrate a *decrease* in support following a substantive presidential appeal. This finding falls in line with previous research, which suggests that presidents may be more likely to induce a public backlash than rally support when they actively seek to move public opinion by way of garnering support for their policy initiatives (see Edwards 2003, 2009). Similarly, our findings also indicate that bipartisan rhetoric, while helpful for affecting perceptions of issue importance, is unlikely to spur increased public support for policy action. This outcome makes intuitive sense when one considers how much easier a task it is to get people to agree that an issue is important (e.g., the public's health) than it is to get people to compromise on their partisan policy preferences (e.g., universal government-run health care versus private health care coverage) and unite behind a president's policy initiative.

Implicitly, our findings suggest that presidents can best maximize their policy success by raising the perceptual importance of issues that already generally enjoy a vast amount of support among the electorate (Canes-Wrone, 2001). Otherwise, presidents may be better off focusing on the general need for policy action than in trying to promote a particular policy initiative, which may otherwise lead to division and opposition among constituents once placed under public scrutiny. Nevertheless, presidents may be able to spur support by providing an optimal amount and type (e.g., technical, symbolic, mundane, etc.) of information embedded in a speech, though that is a subject for further scholarly inquiry.

With regards to the disconnect between traditionalists who have asserted that presidents are the most influential political actors in shaping the national agenda (e.g., Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Kingdon, 1995) and the more recent

scholarly assertions that presidential influence in agenda setting is inherently weak (e.g., Edwards & Wood, 1999; Wood & Peake, 1998), our findings suggest a middle ground: Presidents have much influence in bringing attention to issues otherwise lacking salience, but they are, on the other hand, very limited in affecting or shaping public perceptions about issues already well ingrained into the national consciousness. As an example, President Barack Obama's success in increasing the perceptual importance of health care early in his first year in office, which led to a vigorous public debate that stood shoulder to shoulder with debates on other already highly salient issues (in particular, a faltering economy and two wars abroad), appears to reflect our findings about the president's ability to influence perceptions of issue importance. One might also surmise that the president's subsequent struggle to further influence public perceptions of the health reform initiative itself is somewhat reflective of the ceiling effect that occurs once issues have reached a high level of salience. Moreover, the resultant decrease in public support for policy action on health care, which transpired even as the president's health care bill slowly progressed through the Democrat-controlled Congress, is further reflective of the limitations presidents face in trying to shape public preferences.

In light of our findings, questions remain concerning the potential and ability that presidents have for shaping public perceptions in promoting their political agendas. As mentioned above, further experimental research should explore whether and how variations in the amount and type of information embedded in a presidential speech may affect public responses to presidential appeals. Therein, scholars may also employ alternative experimental designs with larger samples to examine the extent to which an individual's level of political knowledge can affect one's policy perceptions and preferences following exposure to presidential public appeals (see Lawrence, 2004), as well as how other intervening factors (e.g., new information technologies) may further condition such effects.

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