

CHAPTER 8

PRESIDENTIAL
RESPONSIVENESS
TO PUBLIC
OPINION

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ONE of the defining features of the “modern” presidency is its pervasive public presence. It is unusual to turn on the television or open a newspaper without seeing the president. No other individual receives as much sustained and intense news coverage and public attention as the president.

The emergence of a public presidency is relatively recent. Before modern transportation and communications, the president’s ability to reach Americans was restricted. White House use of these new opportunities included Herbert Hoover’s appointment of the first press secretary; Franklin Roosevelt’s decisions in the 1930s to use a new media form (radio) and strengthen existing ties with newspapers and film; and John Kennedy’s introduction of television coverage of press conferences.

The new technological capacity became attractive to presidents when it served their political interests. Norms of governance that focused them on avoiding

public promotion in favor of private negotiations with legislators and key interest groups generally constrained presidents early in the twentieth century. Presidents after Franklin Roosevelt, however, increasingly relied on their ability to appeal over the heads of Congress as a rare opportunity to augment their political capital and to unify divided elites. Kernell (1997) argues that changing institutional incentives in a more atomized environment, where power is dispersed, motivated presidents to widen their public presence. By so doing, presidents could pressure other elites in Washington to coalesce around their leadership and policy proposals.

The broader political system encourages and sustains the public presidency. Indeed, the media have developed a “beat” to cover the president’s every word and action, and Americans have become accustomed to looking to the president as the principal policy maker and representative of the country.

Most research on the public presidency focuses on the direct and often unmediated appeals that modern presidents make to the general public. For example, these analyses track the frequency and type of presidential speeches and travel (e.g., Simon and Ostrom 1989). What makes the “public presidency” public, though, is not only its outward-oriented activities but also its emergence as the representative of the country. Citizens look to the president as a symbol of America, and his actions serve as a general expression of citizens’ preferences. A favorite pastime of the media involves comparing the president’s policies with public support. Whether the president’s policies respond to public opinion is now a routine question.

Although the press now routinely covers and discusses presidential responsiveness to public opinion, the Framers of the US Constitution explicitly positioned the president to be independent of public opinion. The president was to be politically free to pursue what policies and administrative decisions he believed best furthered the country’s overall interests. Most notably, the Electoral College made the selection of the president dependent on the independent judgement of the electors rather than on the popular vote. The president also received separate constitutional authority to free him from the risk in a parliamentary system of having the legislative branch bring him down through a vote of “no confidence.” The Framers held a particular definition of “representation” in mind when they designed the president’s role—he would represent the country through his independent decisions and as a symbol of the country who would, for example, welcome visiting heads of state.

This chapter examines the president’s emergence as a “representative.” It reviews different definitions of representation and examines research into the modern definition of presidential representativeness—the president’s responsiveness to public opinion. We also highlight a number of complications that studies of responsiveness face, including the questions of whether citizens even possess “real preferences,” what specific aspects of preferences leaders respond to, whose preferences they consider, and whether citizens’ preferences merely reflect those of elites.

DEMOCRATIC REPRESENTATION AND RESPONSIVENESS

The term democracy comes from two Greek words: “demos,” meaning people, and “kratos,” meaning rule. Hence, democracy is rule by the people. In its purest Athenian form, democratic government ensures citizens equal opportunities to directly participate in proposing and deciding on all laws. Modern democracies rely, instead, on a system of representation. In formal terms, the electoral system constitutes an institutional mechanism for hundreds of thousands of American citizens to select representatives who go to Washington, DC, on their behalf (see Urbinati 2006, 3).

The significance of electoral representation is open to divergent interpretations. The populist interpretation expects elections to foster government responsiveness to the citizens’ preferences. Dahl (1971), for instance, insists that “a key characteristic of a democracy is the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens.” Elections create a concrete institutional mechanism for inducing responsive representatives through two linked processes: elected officials who are unresponsive to their constituents can be removed, and those who are intent on retaining their seats are motivated to respond to citizens’ preferences so that they will not be removed (Dahl 1989).

The populist definition of representation—where the representative serves as a delegate for his or her constituents—faces, however, several sharply different alternative interpretations. The “trustee” view insists that representatives are elected to be responsible for (rather than to) citizens. Their job is to advance citizens’ interests rather than respond to their often ill-informed wishes. As Burke (1949) explains in an often-cited speech to the electors of Bristol during the 1774 election to the British Parliament, “Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.” Elections, in this trustee view, are a “method” for leadership selection: voters choose among competing candidates and then retreat to allow the deciders to make policy (Schumpeter 1947).

Pitkin (1967) reminds us that there are several other conceptions of “representation” that are not directly tied to elections. Representation can also occur, for example, through objects (e.g., flags or crowns) or people (e.g., heads of state) that “stand for” a body of people. People often salute flags or give them respect, for instance, because of what they symbolize. Leaders can create new forms of symbolic representation; “ground zero” in New York City, for instance, has been defined as standing for American resolve to fight terrorism. Individual leaders like modern presidents often attempt to construct an image of themselves as standing for the country’s deepest shared commitments.

Indeed, the tendency to equate representation with democracy is relatively recent. For much of recorded history, a king or other ruler was authorized by heredity, by a divinity, or by some other higher power to serve as a representative. There was no expectation that rulers would respond to the wishes or wants of those who lived within their territory.

There are, then, competing conceptions of representation. A key feature differentiating these contending interpretations is whether and to what extent representatives *respond* to the expressed opinions of citizens. According to the populist definitions of representation, evidence that the decisions of elected officials correspond to their constituents' preferences indicates responsiveness which is required for adequate representation. By contrast, others have conceptualized representation in terms of symbols or independent judgement, assuming little or even no correspondence between the substantive policy decisions of government officials and the preferences of citizens.

Much recent work investigates whether and to what extent presidents respond to national public opinion—that is, whether their policies correspond with the policies or general ideology favored by most Americans. At its core, this growing body of research focuses on defining the *nature* of the public presidency: genuinely populist as presidents often claim or symbolic leaders and independent trustees that are unresponsive to Americans.

THE PRESIDENT AND PUBLIC OPINION

Scholars employ two general approaches to empirically studying opinion representation or responsiveness (Wlezien and Soroka 2007). One perspective focuses on the relationship between the public's policy preferences and system-level (collective) policy outcomes (rather than the individual actions of representatives). The other (dyadic) approach looks at the relationship between an individual representative, such as a member of Congress or the president, and his or her constituents' attitudes.

These studies, of course, vary in their focus and include explorations into the responsiveness of general public policy, of specific legislators, and of the chief executive. The extent to which the chief executive—in the US context, the president—responds to the public's preferences is of particular interest when it comes to questions of how democracies function.

As the most public and influential government official, the president's connection to public opinion is particularly important in sorting out normative debates about representation and empirically examining whether he is a leader or a follower of public opinion (Rottinghaus 2006, 720). The answer has significance for assessments of the policy-making process. As Canes-Wrone (2006, 192) observes, "The relationship between a chief executive and his or her public can significantly affect the ways in which formal institutions operate in practice."

Research on presidential representation tends to focus on national public opinion because of the national basis of his constituency. Wlezien and Soroka (2007, 12) explain that "U.S. Presidential responsiveness to public preferences is conceptually quite simple: The president represents a national constituency and is expected to

follow national preferences.” Analyses often explore the association between national opinion on various policies and presidential policy proposals or policy statements in his public speeches.

Presidential Understanding of Public Opinion

For a president to respond to the public’s preferences, he must possess some knowledge about those preferences. Although various methods are available—including assessing constituent letters and interest group activities (Herbst 1994; Lee 2003; Rottinghaus 2007)—public opinion surveys from representative samples of voters constitute the most straightforward method for measuring citizens’ preferences. Manza and Cook (2002a) explain, “Prior to the 1930s and the development of modern survey research, there were few direct ways to discern public attitudes on specific policy questions (Converse 1986). Since the mid-1930s, however, and especially in recent decades, the volume and sophistication of polling data and survey research has increased dramatically.”

The increase in information about citizens’ preferences affects the incentives and expectations of the president (e.g., Jacobs and Shapiro 1994, 2000). Specifically, since most presidents presumably hope to be reelected (when eligible), secure a place in history, and/or affect policy, it behooves them to be informed about citizens’ opinions (since citizens vote and evaluate, and their evaluations affect the president’s policy power; e.g., Kernell 1997). The assumption of journalists and researchers is that “greater information [about public opinion] facilitates responsiveness by giving political leaders the capacity to make reasoned judgments about where the public stands” (Manza and Cook 2002a; also see Geer 1996; Wlezien and Soroka 2007).

The political incentives to track public opinion create significant motivations for representatives—particularly presidents who have a massive constituency and relatively abundant resources—to develop private polling operations that give them control over the survey’s content and access to information that may not be widely accessible (Jacobs and Shapiro 1995; Eisinger 2003; Heith 2004).

The Rise of Presidential Polling

Private presidential polling as a routine part of White House operations started in earnest with John Kennedy and then sharply increased in its amount and quality in the 1960s. The expansion of the White House’s public opinion apparatus is most plainly evident in the number of its polls. Louis Harris supplied fifteen private polling reports to the Kennedy White House, often by relying upon ad hoc arrangements such as “piggy-backing” questions on surveys sponsored by other clients. Oliver Quayle, whom Harris had recommended to replace him when he became a pollster for major media organizations, provided most of the 110 surveys that Lyndon Johnson received. Nixon escalated the number of private surveys to 173, relying on a stable of trustworthy pollsters who had Republican “bona fides” to conduct his research, including established firms like Opinion Research Corporation and new

upstarts—Robert Teeter (who later co-directed a polling firm that worked for the *Wall Street Journal* and directed George H. W. Bush's 1992 campaign) and Richard Wirthlin (who polled for President Reagan). Wirthlin conducted at least 204 private surveys for Reagan, although more probably remain to be publicly released by the Reagan Presidential Library.

We do not have archival records of subsequent presidential polling. Partial archival records, interviews, and journalistic accounts suggest, however, that private polling remains a substantial operation and that it continues to be closely integrated into the White House's decision making.

There have been two changes in the extent and purpose of presidential polling since Kennedy. First, there has been an expansion of presidential polling not only in terms of the number of polls but also in terms of the amount of information collected and the sophistication of the instrument design (Jacobs and Shapiro 1995). Second, there has been a shift from polling on the public's policy preferences to polling also on its non-policy evaluations related to personal image and appeal (Jacobs and Burns 2004)—a potentially potent basis for appealing to voters that connects with more symbolic forms of representation that Pitkin (1967) examined.

Are Citizens' Preferences Real?

The focus on public preferences for more or less of something is sensible insofar as it echoes both theories of political strategy and assumptions of democratic theorists of representation. Numerous empirical studies of responsiveness point to Downs's (1957) median voter theorem as a starting point. The studies seek to explore the extent to which representatives adopt issue positions that correspond with those of the typical (e.g., median) voter (e.g., Page and Shapiro 1983, 175; Riker 1996, 5; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000, 13; Manza and Cook 2002a, 2002b). In this sense, candidates act responsively for strategic reasons; they try to adopt favorable positions on particular policies. They are political marketers who are highly attuned to consumer demands and intent on pinpointing and then emulating (i.e., moving in a congruent direction) the policy preferences of voters.

That citizens have well-defined directional preferences on various issues also is a standard starting point for democratic theorists. Bartels (2003, 50) explains that "Most liberal democratic theorists . . . assume as a matter of course that citizens do, in fact, have definite preferences and that the primary problem of democracy is to assure that a government will respond appropriately to those preferences." Bartels points to Miller's (1992, 55) statement as an example: "democracy is predominantly understood as involving the aggregation of independently formed preferences."¹

Yet, research on public opinion formation calls this basic assumption into question. Citizens may lack the information and motivation to form even basic

¹ For example, Canes-Wrone (2006, 23) begins her work on the relationship between presidents, policy, and citizens with the premiss that "the electorate . . . [is] assumed to have these types of well-ordered preferences."

preferences in the first place. Bartels (2003, 48–9) nicely summarizes this perspective: “many citizens ‘do not have meaningful beliefs, even on issues that formed the basis for intense political controversy among elites for substantial periods of time’ (Converse 1964: 245) . . . [even if] citizens have ‘meaningful beliefs’ . . . those beliefs are not sufficiently complete and coherent to serve as a satisfactory starting point for democratic theory.” If this is the case, “public opinion . . . cannot constitute an independent causal factor” (Manza and Cook 2002a).

We see four possible reactions to these questions about whether there is a tangible, sensible, and relatively autonomous set of public preferences for policy makers to follow. First, the challenge to citizen competence might lead to the conclusion that presidential responsiveness to public opinion is unrealistic and, indeed, not possible because of the absence of “meaningful beliefs.” The correlations of public opinion and policy that do occur might well be spurious. Wlezien and Soroka (2007, 11) explain that correlations do “not mean that politicians actually respond to changing public preferences, for it may be they and the public both respond to something else . . . All we can say for sure is that the research captures policy responsiveness in a statistical sense.” Instead of responsiveness, observed relationships could stem from the reverse—where it is the representatives shaping or manipulating their constituents’ preferences—or from another exogenous factor such as outside interest groups or world events (e.g., Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Bartels 2003, 9; Jacobs and Page 2005).

A second, contrary, reaction is to lower the stringent standards for independent, well-defined policy preferences. Given the everyday demands on citizens and the unevenness of citizen cognitive capacity, individuals can use shortcuts to form preferences. For instance, the latest news reports on rising unemployment might provide a cue for voters that leads them to be supportive of government programs to retrain laid-off workers (Sniderman, Brody, and Fetlock 1991; Popkin 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). In other words, citizens may harbor reasoned preferences even if they are not based on an intense scrutiny of facts and logic.

Third, one could argue that although most individuals lack coherent preferences on specific policies, they do have a general sense of whether they want “more” or “less” government (i.e., general ideology). This is the track taken by Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002, xxi, 289–91), who explain that “political leaders regularly ignore expressed public preferences on [specific policies] . . . knowing that the preferences arise from a weak grasp of the central facts.” Instead, “it is the general public disposition, the mood, which policy makers must monitor” (also see Kingdon 1984, 69, 89–91; Zaller 1992, 1998).

The fourth approach, and the one we endorse, opts for a middle road or what Manza and Cook (2002a) call a “contingent view” (also see Hill and Hurley 1999). On some specific issues—particularly salient ones—the public is likely to possess reasoned and consistent opinions to which representatives have an incentive to respond. On other issues, the public’s views may be more diffuse in which case their specific policy opinions will be less meaningful. However, even in these latter domains, constituents’ preferences are best construed not as the direct product of elite manipulation, but rather as reflecting numerous influences including their values,

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background, and interpersonal associations, as well as elite influence (and, under some conditions, manipulation). This view comports with recent research on public opinion that identifies clear limits to elite influence and portrays citizens as systematic (but not infallible) in the ways they process information and construct preferences, even though they may not regularly hold definitive, independent preferences (Page and Shapiro 1992; Chong 1996; Price and Tewksbury 1997; Brewer 2001; Druckman 2001; Edwards 2003; Chong and Druckman 2007a, 2007b, forthcoming; Druckman and Nelson 2003; Althaus and Kim 2006).

The notion of public opinion as contingent and variable in its degree of consistency and rationality revises much of the theoretical and empirical debate about representation. The tendency to define representation as a binary choice between elected officials who respond or do not respond to public preferences faces two challenges. First, as Pitkin suggests, representation has long existed without reference to public preferences or the expectation of popular sovereignty. Second, and more directly connected with the nature of public opinion, the formation of citizen policy preferences is not monolithic as a process or in terms of its outcomes. On salient issues on which the collective public has reached reasoned preferences and maintains them consistently, the potential for responsiveness is real. Without these conditions, responsiveness will be more difficult.

PRESIDENTIAL RESPONSIVENESS

We now turn to a review of five major and exemplary bodies of research that examine the *extent* and *nature* of presidential representation (also see, e.g., Jacobs 1992; Jacobs and Shapiro 1995, 2000; Cohen 1997; Burstein 2003). These works show how the president responds to what he knows about citizens' preferences.

First, Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002, i) offer a comprehensive model of American politics, exploring "interactions between citizen evaluations and preferences, government activity and policy, and how the combined acts of citizens and governments influence one another over time." Part of their model involves an investigation into presidential responsiveness to public opinion (from 1956 to 1996). To measure public opinion, they rely on an aggregated, global measure of policy liberalism that combines more than 1,500 survey questions; the measure captures the public's domestic policy leanings. Erickson et al. measure presidential policy activity or output by using the policy positions (as measured by interest group ratings) of legislators from the president's party who also tend to support presidential proposals (297). They report a strong relationship between presidential behavior and aggregated public opinion, suggesting a high level of responsiveness, both across presidents and within presidential terms. The authors conclude that "for the presidency... a shift in *Mood* yields an almost immediate shift in *Policy Activity*... Like

antelope in an open field, [presidents] cock their ears and focus their full attention on the slightest sign of danger” (emphasis in original) (2002, 319–20).

Second, Canes-Wrone (2006) offers a more nuanced depiction of presidential responsiveness (also see Canes-Wrone and Shotts 2004). She constructs a formal theory to derive hypotheses about the conditions under which presidents will respond to the public. This leads to the prediction that “policy congruence between a president’s positions and public opinion should be more likely the sooner the president faces a context for reelection” (2006, 159). She also expects increased congruency by unpopular presidents if the president’s popularity rises as an election approaches (i.e., the relatively unpopular president’s popularity is trending upward); in contrast, popular presidents follow the public when their popularity drops (i.e., is trending downward, in the face of a pending election) (2006, 159). To test these predictions, Canes-Wrone uses annual observations on numerous budgetary issues from the Nixon to the Clinton presidency. She measures public preferences with survey questions that asked citizens whether spending should be increased, decreased, or not changed on a given issue, and presidential activity with the president’s proposed budgetary change on the issue. When a majority of the public agrees with the president’s preference (e.g., both want increased spending on the issue), there is congruence (i.e., responsiveness); otherwise there is incongruence.

Canes-Wrone’s research strongly supports her predictions—the president’s congruence with national public opinion is much more likely as an election approaches, particularly among popular presidents when their popularity is, however, decreasing, or, alternatively, with unpopular presidents when their popularity happens to be on the rise. She also finds that responsiveness in the second term, where reelection is not possible, declines (e.g., there is not an election proximity effect): without the prospect of facing an upcoming election, the fear of being punished by voters disappears as does the motivation to maintain favorable public approval. Canes-Wrone’s findings usefully shift research from whether or not the president is responsive to investigations of the conditions under which the president responds. Moreover, her finding that responsiveness depends on the interaction between electoral cycle *and* presidential popularity suggests some revision to other responsiveness studies (e.g., Geer 1996; Cohen 1997; Manza and Cook 2002a, 2002b).

Hers of course is not the final word as suggested by a third body of recent research. Rottinghaus (2006) uses a distinct dataset and finds slightly different dynamics than Canes-Wrone. Whereas Canes-Wrone uses budget proposals to measure presidential action, Rottinghaus looks at presidential rhetoric. He performed a content analysis on a sample of public statements by presidents from Eisenhower through Clinton. For each statement, he recorded the policy discussed and the position taken. He links these data to issue-specific public opinion survey questions from at least one year prior to the president’s statement. He investigates how often and when the president takes a congruent (i.e., responsive) position to a majority of the public (also see, e.g., Page and Shapiro 1983, 1992; Jacobs and Shapiro 1995). Rottinghaus (2006, 724–5) emphasizes that, unlike policy proposals made to Congress (which may reflect political compromises in anticipation of congressional response), politics is less likely

to intercede on presidential positions as expressed in rhetoric (i.e., stated positions may more accurately reflect the president's true preference since political compromises may be less relevant). Also, the public's opinions are more likely to be meaningful on various issues rather than "arcane and not well understood" spending questions (also see Wlezien and Soroka 2007). Rhetoric also has the advantage of capturing the public persona of the president (Rottinghaus 2006, 720).

Consistent with others (e.g., Cohen 1997, 1999; Erikson, McKuen, and Stimson 2002; Canes-Wrone 2006), Rottinghaus (2006, 725) reports a high degree of responsiveness with 70 percent of the cases displaying a match between the president's positions and the prior opinion of the majority of the public. He also reports that the level of congruency has remained fairly constant over time and does not vary based on the importance of an issue. In contrast to Canes-Wrone, Rottinghaus reports marginal differences between first- and second-term presidents—"second-term presidents are as affected by public trends as first-term presidents" (2006, 727).² Thus, despite the impossibility of being reelected, second-term presidents respond as if they were running; this presumably stems from concern about "their historical legacy [and] helping to elect their successor" (Rottinghaus 2006, 729). The different findings, by Canes-Wrone and Rottinghaus regarding second-term responsiveness are intriguing, suggesting possible differences across types of presidential behavior (e.g., budget proposals versus rhetorical position taking). Each study offers a substantial advance to our understanding of the conditions that promote or prohibit responsiveness (e.g., it depends on the type of responsiveness, venue of responsiveness, election cycle, popularity, etc.).

A fourth body of research extends a long-standing social science exploration of the role of information in decision making by investigating the *type* of information on public opinion that presidents decide to collect and use. Instead of exploring the conditions of responsiveness, Druckman and Jacobs (2006) investigate the type of public opinion to which presidents respond (also see Stevens 2002). Specifically, they ask: when do presidents rely on the public's opinion about specific policies (e.g., increase or decrease welfare spending) as opposed to the public's general support for more or less government (i.e., general ideological predilection)? (Rottinghaus and Canes-Wrone use the former type of data while Erickson et al. use the latter.)

Druckman and Jacobs argue that prior work that fails to consider multiple types of opinion may lead to misleading conclusions; for example, if a president tracks issue-specific opinions, then an empirical analysis looking only at aggregate trends may lead to faulty conclusions about responsiveness. Of even more importance is that the alternative measures of opinion carry distinct normative implications, with the issue-specific measures corresponding "with a populist version of democracy where policymakers exhibit respect for citizen competence" and the aggregate measure

² He also finds that presidents "with above average popularity in the first half of their second terms are significantly *more likely* to make congruent statements than when their popularity is below average" (2006, 728). This is the opposite of what Canes-Wrone finds. Rottinghaus also reports some intriguing variations in responsiveness based on communication media (e.g., television statements in the first term are less likely to be congruent).

treating citizens as if they are “relatively limited in their capacity to understand particular issues” (Druckman and Jacobs 2006, 454).

Druckman and Jacobs focus on Nixon’s presidency and use a presidential action variable analogous to the one employed by Rottinghaus—that is, issue positions as expressed in public statements (also see Hobolt and Klemmensen 2006). On the public opinion side, Druckman and Jacobs turn to Nixon’s own private opinion polls that they collected from presidential archives. These data have numerous advantages. For example, prior to deciding whether to respond to public opinion, presidents decide whether to monitor opinion in the first place. They make decisions about which data to collect, which itself provides an indication of responsiveness (also see Burstein 2003).³ These data also reveal the specific types of data presidents collect, which, as we will discuss, suggest that presidents respond to multiple dimensions of opinions and not just directional issue preferences (e.g., they also respond to image perceptions). Finally, private polls offer unparalleled access into the inner workings of the president’s decisions; these are the data that the president actually receives when deciding whether or not to respond (rather than publicly available data that may not match what the president sees).

Druckman and Jacobs find that when opinion data on specific policies were collected and thus available, the president relied on them and not on the general ideology data. On less important issues, however, the president often chose not to collect policy-specific data and instead relied on general ideology data. In short, presidents respond to different types of public opinion data on salient and less salient issues (also see Wlezien 2004).

The four bodies of recent research that we have reviewed all examine one interpretation of representation—whether elected officials respond to the policy preferences of citizens. The findings suggest that under varying political and institutional conditions presidents behave or give the appearance of serving as the public’s delegate, responding to their wishes: their level and type of responsiveness vary depending on the electoral cycle, popularity, issue salience, and venue. These results appear to contradict the hopes of the Constitution’s Framers and a range of political thinkers (from Burke to Schumpeter) that presidents (and perhaps other elected officials) would pursue their own judgement independent of public opinion.

The fifth body of research widens the conception of representation to examine the efforts of presidents to “stand for” citizens through static symbols and through their efforts to fashion particular impressions of themselves as embodying attractive values and traits. Recognizing that citizens’ evaluations of presidential performance depend in substantial ways on what citizens think about the president’s image—including performance traits such as strength and competence (e.g., Funk 1999)—Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier (2004) explore how presidents work to improve image perceptions.

³ For example, Rottinghaus’s analyses are limited to the issues on which public survey organizations collected data, which presumably include only salient issues. Thus, his finding that salience does not moderate responsiveness may be a function of his focus on issues already salient enough to warrant data collection.

Using data from the Nixon administration, the authors show that the president significantly responded to the public's image perceptions. For example, Nixon increased his public comments on foreign affairs (i.e., he emphasized foreign affairs) when polls revealed the public's decreasing ratings of his performance traits. He specifically increased his comments on dovish diplomatic policy to counter the slide in the public's evaluations of his competence, while he emphasized both diplomatic and hawkish military policy to bolster the public's perceptions of him as strong. That Nixon used this approach to boost perceptions of his performance attributes was echoed in his own campaign's internal deliberation. For example, Nixon instructed his team to use his "major accomplishments: Cambodia, the Middle East, and the Vietnam Speech . . . [to] get across the courage, the independence, the boldness . . . of the President [and allow them] to come through" (excerpt from Haldeman 1994, Dec. 3, 1970). (Druckman and Holmes 2004 show that such foreign policy emphasis does in fact enhance impressions of the president's strength.)

This finding accentuates the importance of considering broad conceptions of representation. Presidents not only respond to the public's directional issue preferences, but they also react to changes in the public's perceptions of the president's persona. This is akin to a form of symbolic representation with responsiveness to preferences about image and not substantive policy. Interestingly, it also reveals the inherent link between image and issues insofar as presidents use issues (e.g., foreign policy efforts) to build image (Jacobs and Shapiro 1994). They do this via issue emphasis and not taking a policy position *per se*, with the goal of influencing (or manipulating) citizens' perceptions. In short, they respond to public opinion about their image by emphasizing specific issues in an attempt to shape subsequent public perceptions.

The vibrant and wide-ranging research on the president's different forms of responsiveness has made important contributions to the study of political representation in general and the investigation of the public presidency. It also raises significant questions for future research. The different data used in these studies in terms of the independent variable (i.e. the types of public opinion information) and the dependent variable (e.g., budgetary proposals, rhetoric)—accentuate the importance of attending to possible variations across types of presidential behaviors.

Future work can also contribute by examining whether citizens actually possess preferences in the first place. Indeed, nearly all studies of responsiveness, including the ones discussed here, largely conceive of preferences as the individuals' *directional* predilection such as their support or opposition for a specific policy, or their liberal or conservative leanings. For instance, individuals have a preference to either increase or decrease taxes, extend or limit abortion rights, or for more or less government in general (in the case of Erikson et al.'s aggregated approach). Researchers then gather available survey data on the public's policy preferences and explore the degree to which outcomes reflect the direction of their preferences, implicitly assuming the preferences exist and are coherent.⁴

⁴ Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002, 13–14) list policy agreement, along with competence and control, as three attributes citizens want from government.

CITIZENS' PREFERENCES AND DIMENSIONS OF RESPONSIVENESS

One of the most daunting challenges for research on presidents as political representatives is accounting for the multiple dimensions of representation and of public evaluations. From the perspectives of citizens, an individual's evaluation of the president might consist of a combination of negative and positive evaluations of the president on different dimensions. An individual, for instance, may believe that the president holds the correct position on reducing welfare spending but lacks strength as a leader. If this individual supports both the welfare position and leadership skills, his or her attitude toward the president will depend on the relative magnitudes of that support for each discounted by the relative salience or weights assigned respectively to the welfare position and the policy attribute of leadership strength (Enelow and Hinich 1984; Nelson and Oxley 1999; Druckman and Lupia 2006; Chong and Druckman 2007a). Even this illustration is relatively simple; the public often holds views about more than one policy or individual personality trait (i.e. they are also concerned about taxes and a foreign war as well as perceived honesty and empathy). A key element in this complex and multidimensional evaluation by citizens is the relative weight they assign to particular policies and personality traits; this helps to simplify their evaluation and make it more manageable.

The nature of citizen evaluations of presidents has an important implication for presidential representation. There are multiple dimensions of public opinions and evaluations to which the president can respond. Conventional studies—including all of those discussed above—look only at one of these elements: directional issue positions. Yet, there are others, including image and salience.

As we have mentioned, voters, and consequentially politicians, including the president, care about more than issues (e.g., Page 1978; Popkin 1994). They also expect officeholders to hold certain personal qualities including leadership skills, competence, trust, and empathy (Funk 1999). Voters prefer officeholders who possess each of these traits, and thus, responsiveness on image may be more salience based. For example, if citizens highly value competence, the president might work to develop expertise in certain areas (e.g., Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier 2004). Failure to consider image responsiveness could lead one to conclude that a corrupt politician is “responsive” if he or she takes congruent issue positions.

Officeholders also may vary their responsiveness to issues or images that voters find more or less salient. For example, imagine that citizens care overwhelmingly about tax cuts—all other issues are far less important. Then, if the president takes a position that differs from citizens' preferences on tax cuts but that matches citizens' opinions on dozens of other low-salience issues, the conclusion might be that the president is generally responsive, even if he completely ignores taxes as an issue (e.g., failure to take action on an issue may mean the issue is not included in the data analyzed for responsiveness). Yet, on the tax issue that really matters, he is not

responsive. Although analyses of representation often do not consider the interaction of responsiveness and salience, the little research that has been done reports that presidents are more directionally responsive on salient issues. This research does not, however, explicitly take account of whether the president focuses on the key issues in the first place (although see Hobolt and Klemmensen 2006)—that is, presidents may be initially unresponsive, perhaps as they attempt to reframe issues before moving into line with intense public concerns. A full account of responsiveness and representation requires attention to the multiple dimensions that make up citizens' opinions. The idea that citizens' preferences consist of multiple elements also is consistent with the public opinion data presidents tend to collect in their private polling operations. They do not only track directional issue positions, but they also carefully follow salience and image (e.g., Jacobs and Burns 2004).

Whose Preferences?

The president represents a “national constituency” and thus might be expected to “follow national preferences” (Wlezien and Soroka 2007, 12). Empirical studies, including those discussed above, operationalize public opinion by taking the majority view on an issue (e.g., Rottinghaus 2006) or the average percentage of the public supporting a policy (e.g., Druckman and Jacobs 2006). Although this approach is of obvious normative importance, it may neglect how responsiveness works in practice.

Ample evidence shows that distinct subgroups of citizens, particularly the wealthy and educated, participate in elections and a range of other political activities at far higher rates than others (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995). Moreover, a growing body of research supplies systematic evidence of the influence of the economically advantaged on government actions. One study of income-weighted preferences and roll-call votes cast by US Senators in the late 1980s and early 1990s finds that Senators are consistently much more responsive to the views of affluent constituents than to the views of the poor (Bartels 2005). Another study reports that the American political system is a great deal more responsive to the preferences of the rich than to the preferences of the poor (Gilens 2005). A third study suggests that the policy stands of foreign policy decision makers are most influenced by business leaders, with the general public exerting no consistent significant effect and policy experts largely serving as conduits for the views of other elites, including business (Jacobs and Page 2005).

Although presidents present themselves as the symbol of the nation, the reality is that they are prone to privilege discrete segments of the country—especially those who are already advantaged. In one recent paper, Druckman and Jacobs (2007) investigate this type of segmented representation by pinpointing the groups to which Reagan responded during his presidency. Reagan's goal was to construct a new conservative coalition—one that would expand Barry Goldwater's economic libertarianism to include social conservatives (especially born-again Protestants and

Baptist fundamentalists), “supply-siders” who favored sharply lower taxes (even at the risk of higher budget deficits), and more general philosophical conservatives. Druckman and Jacobs examine the relationship between Reagan’s publicly stated positions and the issue positions of these groups as revealed in Reagan’s private polls. The authors find that Reagan responded to certain subgroups on issues of particular appeal to these groups. For example, on issues involving family values and crime, Reagan took policy positions that correlated only with those taken by fundamentalist Baptists and Christians (and not the general public). Similarly, on defense spending, Reagan responded particularly to the opinions of conservative Republicans, and on economic issues, he staked out positions consonant with those of high-income groups (e.g., more likely to be supply-siders).

These results suggest that presidents respond differentially to specific subgroups, based on strategic considerations. Moreover, these subgroups vary across not only economic but also political dimensions (also see Cohen 2006; Rottinghaus n.d.). Along these lines, Edwards (2004) shows how the very institutions of electing the president (i.e., the Electoral College) further contribute to politicians ignoring numerous groups; for example, despite its intent, the Electoral College fails to protect the interests of small states or racial minorities (in terms of ensuring presidential attention).

Future work needs to further identify which subgroups (e.g., different income groups or ideological conservatives or liberals) matter most to a particular president and then isolate the distinct opinions of those groups. Identifying influential subgroups has normative implications in terms of who is and is not being represented. The reality of representation is that all preferences are not treated equally.

Who Responds to Whom?

A good deal of democratic theory and research on political representation starts with the premiss that the public possesses “independently formed preferences” (Bartels 2003, 50; also see Miller 1992, 55). This flies in the face of a massive amount of research showing that the preferences of citizens depend in part on elite action and rhetoric (e.g., Druckman and Lupia 2000). And, of course, presidents have incentives to shape public opinion given the purported relationship between opinion and policy outcomes (e.g., Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Manza and Cook 2002a, 2002b), the possible electoral consequences of public opinion, as well as the potential importance of the public’s approval of the president for the president’s power and policy-making success (e.g., Neustadt 1960; Edwards 1976).

While some suggest that “presidential drama,” such as the occurrence of a major speech, can impact public opinion (e.g., Brace and Hinckley 1993), more recent evidence suggests this may not be the case (e.g., Edwards 2003). Presidential initiatives—such as pushing for a war—also can affect public opinion, although the president himself is limited in this sphere as well (e.g., Howell and Pevehouse 2007). It may be that modern presidents’ most potent tool for shaping public opinion is their own rhetoric (e.g., Tulis 1987).

There are several ways in which presidential rhetoric might influence public opinion. Most straightforwardly, the president may impact the public's basic policy preferences. For example, a president may use his speeches to persuade Americans to change their attitudes toward immigrants. The president also might influence the public's agenda by pushing them to believe certain issues are more important than others. Cohen (1995, 1997) shows that from 1953 to 1989, the issues which the president discusses most in his State of the Union addresses are subsequently the issues that the public views as the most important to the nation (also see Lawrence 2004). Canes-Wrone (2006) argues (although does not explicitly show) that presidents can and do influence the salience the public assigns to each issue even though they do not shape directional issue opinions.⁵ This type of presidential agenda influence differs from elite responsiveness to issues salient to the public (i.e., presidential responsiveness on salience, as discussed). Rather than addressing issues seen as important, the president seeks to strategically push citizens to prioritize some issues over others in ways that benefit the president.

Priming constitutes a related type of influence. In this case, presidential emphasis on a given issue (e.g., health care) or image (e.g., trust) leads citizens to then privilege that issue or image in their evaluations of the president (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Druckman 2004; Druckman and Holmes 2004). For example, when the president emphasizes health care, citizens subsequently evaluate the president based on his health care position. Another example is when President Bush's speeches highlight the threat of terrorist attacks. If Americans focus on the threat of terrorist attacks, they support aggressive policies (including restrictions on civil liberties) and offer more positive evaluations of the president.

Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier (2004) offer evidence that presidents work to strategically prime advantageous issues and images by emphasizing domestic issues on which the citizens share their preferences. For instance, if the public generally agrees with the president's position on welfare spending, the president will focus his remarks on welfare so that citizens subsequently also focus on welfare when evaluating the president (and give him high ratings since they agree with his welfare position). Interestingly, in finding that the president focuses on issues where the public agrees with his position, Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier also report that the president pays little or no attention to the actual salience (e.g., national importance) of the issue. In other words, the president emphasizes issues that work to his advantage—issues on which the public agrees with his positions—rather than issues that the public necessarily sees as inherently important.⁶

The possibility of the president shaping public opinion raises important questions about representation and how it should be studied. The normative implications of presidential influence depend on the nature of that influence. As Page and Shapiro

⁵ Canes-Wrone (2006, 30–2) incorporates the possibility of very limited presidential influence on citizens' preferences (e.g., the president exerts influence only when he shares the public's policy preferences).

⁶ Another means of presidential influence is framing (e.g., Edwards 2003; Entman 2004), which, as Chong and Druckman (2007b) explain, is closely linked or perhaps even synonymous with priming.

(1992, 356) explain, “To the extent the public receives useful interpretations, and correct and helpful information . . . the policy preferences it expresses can be considered more ‘authentic,’ or ‘enlightened’ . . . to the extent that the public is given erroneous interpretation or false, misleading, or biased information, people may make mistaken evaluations . . . and may express support for policies harmful to their own interests or values.” Presidents who enlighten or educate public opinion enhance the likelihood of substantive representation working insofar as it facilitates responsiveness to “authentic” preferences. But presidents who successfully mislead—or consciously manipulate—undermine representation by debasing the foundation of responsiveness (i.e., public opinion).

This accentuates the importance of continued research into the conditions under which presidents can influence public opinion. Recent research suggests that presidents—particularly in recent years—face various hurdles to exerting an impact. In his exhaustive study of the impact of presidential rhetoric on public opinion, Edwards (2003, 241) concludes that “presidents typically do not succeed in their efforts to change public opinion.” Edwards points to a number of factors that limit even charismatic presidents including: citizens’ predispositions, competition from many other actors including the Congress, interest groups, and outside events, a dependence on the media to echo their messages, and the need to get citizens’ attention in the first place. This insight is consistent with work on opinion formation that highlights various moderating variables that constrain elite influence (e.g., Chong and Druckman 2007b).

The evolution of the media also presents new challenges to presidents who hope to influence public opinion. Not only is it more difficult for presidents to gain access to national audiences via the media, but even when they do address the country at large, fewer and fewer citizens pay attention, given all the alternatives available in a new media age (e.g., Baum and Kernell 1999). The result is a decreased ability of the president to influence and/or lead the public. Cohen (2008, 187–8) explains that “the new media age has also affected the style of presidential leadership . . . they look more and more to narrower groups, such as special interests and their partisan bases” since these are the only groups they can reach. Cohen (2008, 289) continues, “Presidents might be responsive to the policy preferences of the target group, as presidents adjust their public stance to more closely match the group that they are trying to mobilize.”

These changes obviously have implications for whose preferences the president responds to (as previously discussed). It also complicates the relative impact of the president, the Congress, and the media in responding to and influencing citizens’ preferences. As Edwards and Wood (1999) demonstrate, it is often the president who is reacting to the media and world events, rather than vice versa (also see Hill 1998; Howell and Kriner 2007). Whether and how this relationship has changed in recent years remains an open question.

Two pressing topics in need of more study, then, include identification of the specific conditions under which presidents influence citizens’ preferences and the concomitant normative implications of this influence, and a more thorough understanding of how changes in the media shape responsiveness.

CONCLUSION

Presidential representation varies across dimensions and levels of salience. In addition to responding to the public's *policy preferences*, presidents make choices about the extent to which to devote their attention to certain issues—potentially depending on the *salience* of these issues to the public. Representation may extend beyond policy issues to symbols and the president's *perceived personality*. Moreover, representation may be selective rather than responsive to the entire constituency. *Differential representation* may lead to particular presidential attentiveness to certain segments of the country (e.g., high-income earners and social conservatives). Finally, presidents may exercise influence on the policy preferences of citizens and, especially, the salience that is attached to particular issues or personality traits.

Presidential representation is much more complicated, multidimensional, and dynamic than investigations of whether the public's policy preferences align with the president's policies capture. One potential implication is that presidents enjoy significant leeway in shifting the nature of their representative relationship with Americans from policy to non-policy. The result, if this occurred, would be to expand the president's discretion and reduce policy responsiveness, at a substantial cost to popular sovereignty.

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[AQ1] Please check author Zaller (1998) is not cited in reference list.