

A Systematic Study of the President's Effect on Public Opinion:
The Bush Administration

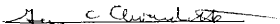
by Kelly Hartline

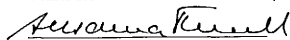
Submitted to the
Office of Honors Programs and Academic Scholarships
Texas A&M University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for

1998-1999 University Undergraduate Research Fellows Program

April 15, 1999

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Abstract

Systematic Study of the President's Effect on Public Opinion: The Bush Administration

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Since the legislative branch is responsible for policy-making, the president's success at passing policy depends on his ability to persuade Congress. Because congressmen are responsive to their constituents, one of the ways presidents can persuade Congress is by obtaining public support. In attempts to obtain support, presidents make appeals to the American public, otherwise known as "going public." These appeals began with Theodore Roosevelt's administration and have been employed more frequently with each successive president. However, the effectiveness of "going public" is highly speculative. In this study, I examined four issues about which President Bush went public: the Persian Gulf Crisis, War on Drugs, North American Free Trade Agreement, and the Balanced Budget Act of 1990. I determined how successful Bush was at going public by comparing the frequency of his appeals to changes in public opinion. The results show that the president's attempts to change public opinion were relatively unsuccessful, except for when he addressed the nation as a whole.

Introduction

The greatest challenge every president faces is obtaining and maintaining public support. Public support is one of the president's most valuable resources because it enhances his chances of success with fellow politicians in Washington. With public support, the president can more effectively lead the nation by persuading Congress to pass his policies. Congress is very responsive to public opinion because its members are held accountable by their constituents during elections. Therefore, the key to a president's success is his ability to gain public support so that he can persuade Congress to pass his policies. This is especially true under the conditions of divided government that characterize contemporary politics.

Recently, Samuel Kernell theorized that presidents can obtain public support and successfully persuade Congress by "going public." "Going public" occurs when the president promotes himself and his policies in Washington by appealing to the American public for support (Kernell 1997, 2). There are several ways the president can go public. For example, he can make prime-time nationwide addresses, speak at business luncheons, visit schools, hold press conferences with foreign dignitaries, and host dinners at the White House. By going public, the president is not trying to gain the votes of the American public, but rather the votes of its representatives in Washington.

Going public has only recently become a prominent form of presidential communication, even though it originated during Theodore Roosevelt's administration. Unlike the last half of the century, going public was used infrequently during the first half of the century, largely because the presidents were confined to Washington and obliged to speak to the nation through newspapers (Kernell 1997, 2). Yet some of these

presidents were able to obtain public support by going public. Their attempts increased confidence in going public as a means of gaining public support.

Theodore Roosevelt was the first president to enunciate the principle of going public by describing the presidency as a "bully pulpit" (Kernell 1997, 2). He used the "bully pulpit" to make public appeals for his Progressive reforms. Another president who attempted to go public was Woodrow Wilson. However, unlike Theodore Roosevelt's "bully pulpit," Wilson's whistle-stop tour to gain support for the League of Nations treaty was unsuccessful. Finally, Franklin D. Roosevelt is often remembered for his nationwide "fireside chats." He used these public addresses to convince Washington's politicians of his continuing national mandate for the New Deal. Each of these presidents' campaigns to obtain public support were significant largely because they were rare (Kernell 1997, 2).

The advancement of technology has allowed modern presidents to reach the public much easier than their predecessors. Developments in transportation and mass communications provide the president many opportunities to directly address the people of the nation. As a result, for the last half of the century, presidents have been going public routinely. In fact, each president goes public more frequently than his predecessor, and this trend is likely to continue.

Despite the increase in going public and its popularity among presidents, there is no evidence that going public is truly effective at gaining public support. If it is not effective, presidents are wasting valuable resources, like time and money, that could be used in a more efficient way (Edwards 1997, 93). Furthermore, if going public is

ineffective, presidents either need to find a more reliable way of gaining public support or find another way to persuade Congress to pass their policies.

The objective of this paper is to determine whether the president can increase public approval by going public. I will do this through a systematic study of several domestic and foreign policy issues during the Bush administration. An examination of President Bush's administration is relevant to determining the effectiveness of going public for several reasons. First, Bush is a modern president whose administration came late enough in the century that it could benefit from all of the technological advancements that make going public possible. Also, Bush served as Vice President under Ronald Reagan, who was often heralded as the "Great Communicator." In this position, he would have experienced and learned from Reagan's successful and unsuccessful attempts at going public. Finally, because of the recent development of the George Bush Presidential Library and the resources available at the Center for Presidential Studies, there is an unprecedented collection of documents, polls and transcripts from Bush's presidential administration that are readily available for analysis.

For this study, I will examine four issues about which Bush went public: the Persian Gulf Crisis, War on Drugs, North American Free Trade Agreement, and Budget Act of 1990. These issues represent most of the issues that every president addresses during his administration: foreign and domestic, general and specific. By comparing his addresses on these issues to the corresponding changes in public opinion, I will be able to determine whether President Bush was able to obtain and maintain public support by going public.

The President and the Public

A considerable amount of literature exists on the president's ability to lead public opinion. This literature examines the nature of public opinion, the president's ability to manipulate public opinion through activities like delivering speeches or taking international trips, and the president's ability to lead public opinion on policy issues.

Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro address the nature of public opinion in their book, *The Rational Public*. Whereas many people believe that public opinion is unstable, unpredictable, and whimsical, Page and Shapiro established that this could be true of individual opinion, but not collective opinion. In fact, collective public opinion has characteristics largely different from the opinions of individual citizens. Whereas individual opinions are often inconsistent, largely because individuals cannot easily ascertain policy implications (Edwards 1997, 94), Page and Shapiro found that the public holds stable and sensible opinions about public policy and that these opinions change reasonably in response to new information and changing circumstances (Page and Shapiro 1992, 2, 383). Furthermore, changes in public opinion happen slowly, are modest, and usually occur at the margin. Sharp, rapid changes in public opinion are rare and generally only occur in response to dramatic events (Page and Shapiro 1992, 54, 385).

Whereas Page and Shapiro emphasize the short-term stability of American's policy preferences, William Mayer's *The Changing American Mind* emphasizes long-term changes in public opinion. In a comparison of public opinion in 1960 and in 1988, Mayer found that American public opinion changed enormously on an impressive array of issues. For example, the public has recast its views on race, gender, and sexual mores.

Mayer also observed sharp swings in opinion regarding defense spending and the Soviet Union. Furthermore, public opinion reflected a gradual decline in the popularity of business and government (Mayer 1993, 111).

Even though Mayer argues that public opinion lacks long-term stability, he acknowledges that the American public has remained constant on some issues. For instance, there is still widespread disapproval of homosexuality and extramarital sex. Additionally, Americans still advocate marriage and support hiring on the basis of merit rather than preferential treatment of women and minorities (Mayer 1993, 112). Despite the public's consistency on some issues, Mayer concludes that public opinion has demonstrated significant long-term changes on a variety of issues and that the American mind is not the same today as it was in 1960 (Mayer 1993, 112).

Taken together, this literature suggests that public opinion is more likely to experience long-term, gradual changes rather than short-term, abrupt changes. Also, public opinion is not capricious but behaves rationally in response to changes in information and events. Furthermore, the public is more stable on some issues than others.

The nature of public opinion is both beneficial and detrimental to the president and his attempts to obtain public support by going public. On one hand, the stability and rationality of public opinion mean that the president can obtain support through the presentation of new information or alteration of circumstances. On the other hand, because of its stability, fluctuations in public opinion are rare. Therefore, the president has the potential to move only a small portion of the public from opposition to support by going public (Edwards 1989, 145; Page and Shapiro 1992, 65). Nevertheless, it is

important to note that even a modest shift in public opinion can be the key to the president's success in Washington (Edwards 1989, 136).

In addition to changes in information and circumstances, public opinion is also affected by less dynamic factors such as political party identification and a general positivity bias (Edwards 1997, 105). For example, individuals who align themselves with the president's political party are predisposed to support him and his policies. Likewise, those who are not members of the president's party are generally predisposed to opposing his policies. This phenomenon of predisposed support is also reflected in Congress: congressmen of the president's party are more likely to support his policies than congressmen who are not of his party. Therefore, under conditions of divided government, public support is necessary to the president's success because it allows him to persuade congressmen from the other side of the aisle to favor his policies.

Similar to party identification, America's positivity bias, a tendency to evaluate public figures and institutions positively, is another predisposing factor that affects public opinion towards the president (Edwards 1997, 106). The positivity bias is most likely to influence public opinion towards the president and his policies during ambiguous situations such as the beginning of the president's first term. As a result, the president could potentially have an easier time obtaining public support for his policies during the beginning of his administration than later in his administration.

One final characteristic of public opinion is that issue saliency is directly related to issue coverage. In other words, heightened coverage of an issue increases the issue's salience and increases the probability that individual opinions about the issue will be activated (Jacobs and Shapiro 1994, 528; Page and Shapiro 1992, 8). As a result, the

president may be able to change public opinion by bringing his policy issues to the public's attention.

In Jeffrey E. Cohen's "Presidential Rhetoric and the Public Agenda," a time-series regression analysis of presidents' State of the Union addresses was used to show that by simply mentioning an issue, the president is able to heighten public attention and concern with the problem (102). He also notes, however, that even though the president can set the public's agenda, it will not stay that way for long if he does not repeatedly rally the public and institutionalize the mobilization process (102). This temporary success in setting the public's agenda can even create a false sense of power for the president (102).

Going public is an attempt by presidents to increase issue saliency and obtain public support, even though they are limited by the nature of public opinion. Because of the constraints of public opinion, the president's success at going public depends on several factors. For example, in order for the president to effectively go public, the public must pay attention to the president's address, understand what he says, remember his message, and let their congressmen know that they support the president's position. Without all of these steps occurring, the president will be unable to gain support in Washington for his policies.

Although the president can increase understanding and gain support by going public about an issue, this strategy is not always successful. For example, in a study that explored viewers' reactions to President Reagan's speeches, Roberta Glaros and Bruce Miroff found that even an eloquent and articulate president had difficulty mobilizing support (25). Glaros and Miroff speak of the public's selective perception towards the president as an explanation for Reagan's difficulty in obtaining support. In their study,

they observed that the viewers chose from two alternate value systems and images of America, and evaluated the president by these standards. Even though the viewers all watched the same public addresses, their perceptions of the addresses were profoundly influenced by their value systems and their predispositions towards the president.

The viewers who held the same values as Reagan and were knowledgeable of his policies were predisposed to support him and his agenda. They easily identified with the themes and values expressed by the president. Furthermore, his addresses validated their self-images and strengthened their approval of him. For the viewers who were inattentive towards politics, Reagan's addresses increased issue saliency but decreased their trust, support, and approval of him and his policies. Finally, for the politically attentive viewers who did not hold the same values as Reagan, identifying with his themes and values was very difficult. Unlike the supporters, Reagan's addresses alienated the opposers and renewed their criticism of his policies.

Reagan was unsuccessful at obtaining the support of the opposers and had difficulty influencing the viewers who were uninterested and uninformed about politics (44). His addresses seemed only to reinforce the viewers' value systems and predispositions towards him. This partly explains why the president has the potential to move only a small portion of the public at a time (Edwards 1989, 135, 143; Page and Shapiro 1992, 65).

Of course, the results from Glaros and Miroff's study beg the question of *whether* the president ever actually leads the public or just responds to public opinion. In other words, does he direct or facilitate public opinion? Jacobs and Shapiro found strong evidence that the president facilitates public opinion by examining Kennedy's 1960

presidential campaign. They show that Kennedy polled the public for issues that were most important to them and then campaigned heavily on those issues, thus heightening issue concern and creating an ambiguous leader-follower relationship (537).

In contrast to Jacobs and Shapiro's claim that the president follows public opinion, Bruce Miroff speaks of the president's ability to lead public opinion in his article "The President and the Public: Leadership as Spéctacle." Because the public can be difficult to lead through speeches, presidents have started to use spectacles to obtain public support. Presidential spectacles are staged events covered by mass media and designed to present the president as a decisive, tough, courageous, prudent, and personal leader (275-276).

Spectacle has risen as a form of presidential leadership partly because of the increase in mass media coverage and the president's rise to primacy in the political system (Miroff 1995, 276). In presidential spectacles, the contemporary president is the star performer and portrayed as "the spectacular representation of a living human being." He is assisted by a team who can either enhance or detract from the president's spectacle, depending on whether they underscore his strengths or underscore his weaknesses (Miroff 1995, 277). Finally, carefully executed gestures are used to convey the meaning of the president's actions to the public. These gestures can be used to overshadow facts and results to make the president appear more powerful than the results of his actions indicated (Miroff 1995, 278).

According to Miroff, President Bush engaged in two main spectacles during his administration: the foreign affairs spectacle and the domestic affairs spectacle. His foreign affairs spectacle was highly successful. Even though there were many flaws in Bush's foreign policy, his foreign affairs spectacle portrayed him as masterful, confident,

and decisively in charge (Miroff 1995, 288). His foreign policy team, including people like Colin Powell, Brent Scowcroft, and Richard Cheney, magnified Bush's power with their popularity as military subordinates (Miroff 1995, 288). Finally, Bush's military actions in Panama and the Persian Gulf contributed to his ability to lead the public by creating exciting drama as part of his foreign affairs spectacle (Miroff 1995, 288).

In contrast to his foreign policy spectacle, President Bush's domestic policy spectacle was a failure. Bush came across as an uncertain, awkward man, especially in the realm of economic policy (Miroff 1995, 289). His economic team only magnified his weaknesses by epitomizing inaction and indecisiveness. Finally, several small gestures also worked against Bush by conveying to the public that Bush was entirely removed from their economic problems.

Even though neither going public nor leading by spectacle is guaranteed to obtain public support, the president may find it easier to obtain support for general rather than specific policies (Edwards 1989, 131). Whereas general policies tend to appeal to widespread values, specific policies are often too intricate and complicated for the public to understand or to care about. (Edwards 1989, 131).

The president may also find it easier to lead the public in foreign policy rather than domestic policy. Whereas domestic policy directly affects the public, is more salient to the people, and can be easily criticized by the president's opponents, foreign policy is complex, specialized, and distant (Edwards 1997, 116-118). Because of the differences in nature of foreign and domestic policy, the public seeks leadership from the president on foreign policy issues much more so than on domestic policy issues.

Although an enormous literature focuses on the president's ability to influence public opinion by "going public," there is also reason to doubt the president's ability to change public opinion. First, many studies assume that presidential rhetoric has an impact on public opinion, even though this assumption has not been proven (Edwards 1996, 207-209). Second, studies such as Glaros and Miroff's research on viewers' reactions to the president indicate that the president may have more difficulty in obtaining public support by going public than conventional wisdom holds.

Third, in his paper "Gauging the Public Response to Presidential Leadership" Lee Sigelman argues that all prior research establishing the president's ability to lead public opinion has been based on fallacious statistical methods. The basic problem is that the research gives an estimate of public support for a policy, given presidential advocacy of the policy, but not of public support for the policy, irrespective of presidential advocacy (Sigelman 1980, 428). He suggests that instead, surveys be taken that first ascertain individuals' policy preferences and then mark changes in these preferences when the individuals are informed that the president holds a strong opinion contrary to their own (430). *Although surveys using this method displayed very little public reluctance to changing their opinions and deferring to the wishes of the president, the shortcomings in prior research "mean that the conclusions that have been drawn . . . are of questionable validity" (432).*

Finally, analyses of prior presidents show that their attempts to obtain public support by going public were unsuccessful. In his paper "Presidential Rhetoric: What Difference Does It Make?," Dr. George Edwards, director of the Center for Presidential Studies, examines Ronald Reagan's administration to determine whether the president

can lead public opinion. If the president could lead public opinion, it would most likely be evident during Reagan's administration because he was viewed as a strong leader by the public and was labeled the "Great Communicator" for his exceptional communication skills. However, despite Reagan's supposed communication skills, Edwards found that he was unable to induce lasting changes in American policy preferences (Edwards 1996, 214). In fact, whenever Reagan tried to change or mobilize public opinion, he typically met with failure (Edwards 1996, 214). As a result, the popularity that Reagan experienced was probably caused by the pre-existing tide of conservatism that existed before Reagan took office, not his ability to lead public opinion (Edwards 1996, 212).

Through this systematic study of President Bush's ability to change public opinion, I hope to determine whether going public is an effective way of gaining public support or if it is an ineffective expenditure of the president's valuable resources. Given the popularity and increased use of going public, a conclusive determination of its effectiveness would have significant implications for the field of political science, political parties, and the presidency itself.

Hypotheses

Because of the multiple factors that influence the president's ability to effectively go public, President Bush was probably unsuccessful in obtaining public support. In fact, it is likely that all of his attempts at going public will be ineffective except for his nationwide addresses. These addresses may be more successful because the president is able to directly address the nation without interference. Furthermore, because nationwide addresses are infrequent and usually broadcast during prime-time, the public is more

likely to listen to the president, giving him unobstructed access to the largest audience possible.

The frequency with which Bush addresses an issue will also have little to no effect on public approval or disapproval. In contrast, the audiences he addresses may influence his ability to change public opinion. For example, he may have more success in changing public opinion if he focuses on addressing the general public rather than Congress or the press exclusively. This could be due to the stability of public opinion, the spin of the media, or the complexity of executing the steps necessary for going public to be successful. However, determining the cause of President Bush's ability or inability to change public opinion is beyond the scope of this paper.

Although I hypothesize that Bush will be generally unsuccessful at obtaining support by going public, I also hypothesize that his efforts to obtain support will greatly increase issue saliency because the more coverage an issue receives, the more salient it becomes. Finally, what little success Bush experiences will depend on the issue addressed. He will have the most success with the issues in the following order, from greatest to least success:

1. Persian Gulf Crisis
2. War on Drugs
3. North American Free Trade Agreement
4. Budget Act of 1990

Bush will have the most success obtaining support for the Persian Gulf Crisis because it is a foreign policy issue for which the public tends to defer to the president. Similarly, the War on Drugs will be a comparatively successful issue because it is general and not complicated by specificity. It will be less successful than the Persian Gulf Crisis,

however, because it is a domestic issue and the public does not follow the president as willingly on domestic issues as on foreign issues. The North American Free Trade Agreement, a foreign policy, economic, and specific issue, will be less successful than the War on Drugs because of its specificity and economic focus. Similarly, the Budget Act of 1990 will be least successful because it is domestic, economic and specific by nature.

Methods and Measures

Given time and resource constraints, I was unable to examine every issue considered by the Bush administration. Instead, I analyzed Bush's success at obtaining public support for four issues about which he went public: the Persian Gulf Crisis, War on Drugs, North American Free Trade Agreement, and Budget Act of 1990.

The Center for Presidential Studies maintains a comprehensive collection of President Bush's public addresses. I used this database to examine all of the addresses in which Bush discussed one of the four issues of concern. These sources provided complete details on Bush's attempts to go public, including who he addressed and which issue was of primary focus. For each address, I recorded the date and time, whether his comments were initiated or in response to a question, and the number of paragraphs Bush spoke about each issue. I coded Bush's frequency as the number of paragraphs that he spoke about the issue because this would provide a highly accurate assessment of his level of focus on each issue at any given time.

I also coded for the type of audience he addressed, differentiating between reporters, press conferences, the general public, Congress and congressmen, the nation as

a whole, foreign persons, and the military. I made distinctions between each of these groups because the president's success at obtaining public support may depend on whom he addresses. For instance, comments Bush makes at a press conference may be more likely to be covered by the press and received by the public than comments made to a random group of reporters. These audience types were not selected arbitrarily, but were taken directly from each address I examined.

After coding Bush's addresses, I analyzed the Gallup polls taken throughout his administration to determine the effect he had, if any, on public opinion. Gallup took public opinion polls one to four times a month for all four years of Bush's presidency. It also took issue polls at random to obtain the public's opinion about specific matters. The frequency of the Gallup polls make it a good measure for changes in public approval, as does its world-renowned accuracy for gauging public opinion.

I compared the president's effect on public opinion through a graphical analysis of each question. Percentages of approval were graphed on the y-axis while the dates of the polls served as the time-line marked on the x-axis. The president's frequency of address was also marked on the y-axis to compare its fluctuations to changes in public opinion. To graphically represent the frequency with which Bush spoke about each issue, I calculated the number of paragraphs spoken between each poll and used this as the frequency measurement. For example, if Bush dedicated 300 paragraphs to the Persian Gulf Crisis between January 3, 1991 and February 2, 1991, then frequency would be plotted at 300 paragraphs for February 2.

Although graphical analysis is an efficient way to interpret the president's effect on public opinion, I encountered a few difficulties. First, some questions were polled

infrequently, leaving large time gaps between the measurements of public opinion. In these situations, a summation of Bush's frequency of address between the two distant polls would inaccurately portray his effect on public opinion. For example, if a question was asked once every two years, a summation of all the paragraphs spoken during this time would be enormous. As a result, it would appear that Bush's frequency of address had skyrocketed while public opinion may increase only slightly or even decrease. Therefore, in these situations I did not calculate all of the paragraphs between polls, but rather the paragraphs from the last five or six polls, which generally covered the past five or six months. This method better reflects the president's effect on public opinion.

Another difficulty was that only one question about the Balanced Budget Act of 1990 was asked while Bush was going public to push the bill through Congress. By the time Gallup started to poll the public's approval, the bill had already been passed into law. As a result, evidence about Bush's ability to gain public support for the act is inconclusive. However, I measured changes in public opinion regarding the federal budget deficit throughout Bush's administration. By looking at polls beyond Bush's attempts to go public, I will be able to draw conclusions regarding his ability to not only obtain, but also to *maintain* public support.

Additionally, public opinion is heavily influenced by media coverage. Since the president's usual mode of communication with the public is via media, his ability to reach the public and convey his message is dependent on media subjectivity. The media can spin the president's messages positively or negatively. Similarly, the media may not cover the president's addresses, thus preventing them from reaching the public. Since the president constantly depends on the media, its interference in his ability to obtain public

support also constantly remains. However I did not analyze the effect that media coverage of the president had on public opinion for two reasons. First, I acknowledge in my analysis that media coverage is a constant factor in the president's ability to successfully go public. Second, this paper seeks to examine the relationship between presidential addresses and public opinion, not media coverage and public opinion.

Finally, because polls are taken every few weeks, it is difficult to determine the president's direct and immediate effect on the public. However, even though an ideal measure of the president's effect on public opinion would be to take polls after each of the president's addresses, these polls may reflect higher, unstable approval ratings compared to the polls taken every two weeks. Although the president needs to obtain public support, he also needs it to remain stable long enough to persuade Congress with it. Therefore, polls taken every two weeks are reasonable sources of measurement because they reflect more stable trends in public opinion than those taken daily.

Results

I will present the results of the president's success at going public by issue. Each question will be examined individually and analyzed according to its graphical representations. For each issue, with the exception of NAFTA, I will analyze the results of the "most important problem" and "approve of the way Bush handles" questions first, so that Bush's relative success with an issue can be easily compared to his success with other issues. These questions were not included in the analysis of NAFTA because data was unavailable.

The “most important problem” question identifies what issue the public thinks is the nation’s most important problem. It is a measure of issue salience and compares public concern about an issue to other issues. In contrast, the “approve of the way Bush handles” question measures public opinion towards the president and his policies on issues. For example, if the public supports Bush’s policy on an issue, approval of the way he handles that issue would most likely increase.

The poll dates that are aligned along the y-axis are coded for brevity. A month abbreviation is the first segment, followed by the dates the poll was taken and the last two digits of the year in which it was taken. For example, “mh3689” represents the poll that was taken from March 6 to March 9, 1989. Additionally, the polls are ordered chronologically from the poll in which the question first appeared to the one in which it last appeared.

The legends of the following graphs will contain several words whose meanings also need to be defined. “App” or “appro” represent public approval. Likewise, “disapp” represents public disapproval. “Talk” represents the frequency with which Bush addressed the issue. For the qualitative questions, “NT” means “not too” and “Not” means “not very.” Finally, “talk” indicates the number of paragraphs that Bush spoke about the issue.

Only the frequency of the president’s addresses is compared to changes in public opinion for each question. After analyzing the results of the president’s frequency on public opinion, I will also examine the effect of audience type on public opinion.

Persian Gulf Crisis

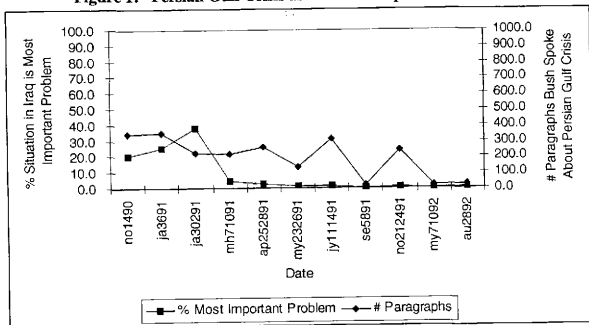
Upon reviewing the polls, I selected the most relevant questions pertaining to each of the four issues, in addition to the “most important problem” and “approve of the way Bush handles” questions. For the Persian Gulf Crisis I analyzed responses to the following questions: “Do you approve of sending troops to Saudi Arabia?,” “Do you favor going to war with Iraq?,” “How closely have you followed the situation in Iraq?,” and “Do you think the situation in Iraq was worth going to war over?”

Each of these questions is relevant to analyzing Bush’s success at obtaining public support for involvement in the Persian Gulf Crisis. For example, approval ratings for the decision to send troops to Saudi Arabia reflect the president’s ability to change public opinion on a more specific policy. On the other hand, changes in support for going to war with Iraq demonstrates the president’s ability to change public opinion about a more general policy. Similar to the “most important problem” question, measuring how closely the public follows the situation in Iraq also gauges issue salience. Finally, public opinion about whether the situation was worth a war is similar to the information that is provided by the “support going to war” question. However, unlike the previous question, this question measures the president’s success at both obtaining and maintaining support because this question gauged public opinion before, during, and after the war.

The American public considered the Persian Gulf Crisis to be its most important problem immediately after the United States entered the conflict. Concern about the conflict augmented its status as the nation’s most important problem in the months leading up to the war, but it did not reach its highest point until after United States’ troops began fighting against Iraq. When it did peak, 37.7 percent of the public considered it to

be the nation's most important problem. Out of the four issues examined, this was the highest percentage received for the nation's most important problem status. Figure 1 compares the frequency of the president's addresses about the Persian Gulf Crisis to the change in its level as the nation's most important problem.

Figure 1: "Persian Gulf Crisis as the Most Important Problem"

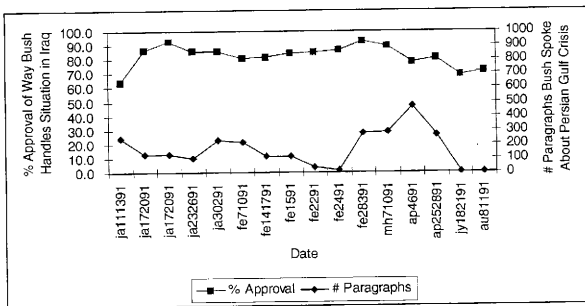


From this graph, it is evident that Bush's speeches may have influenced public opinion before the conflict, but clearly had no effect after the conflict began. For example, immediately after the conflict began, Bush spoke very little about the crisis, yet its status as the most important problem skyrocketed. Furthermore, after the United States' victory over Iraq, the Persian Gulf Crisis's status as a problem slumped to four percent and quickly became the nation's least important problem, despite Bush's continued use of the crisis to appeal for support on other issues. Based on when the issue declined in importance, it seems likely that the issue's rapid decline was because the war had ended.

In this case it appears that public opinion did not change in response to Bush's attempts at going public, but rather to changes in the circumstances and events surrounding the conflict. The most definitive evidence for this is the simultaneous decrease in Bush's frequency of address and increase in the issue's status as most important problem. While this increase did not correlate well with Bush's attempts at going public, it did correlate well with the events of the conflict.

Similar to the "most important problem" results, Bush was also unable to obtain public approval for the way he handled the crisis situation through his attempts at going public. Here again it seems that public opinion responded to circumstances and events more than to Bush's addresses. Figure 2 compares the frequency of Bush's addresses to public opinion about how he handled the situation.

Figure 2: "Approval of the Way Bush is Handling Situation In Iraq"

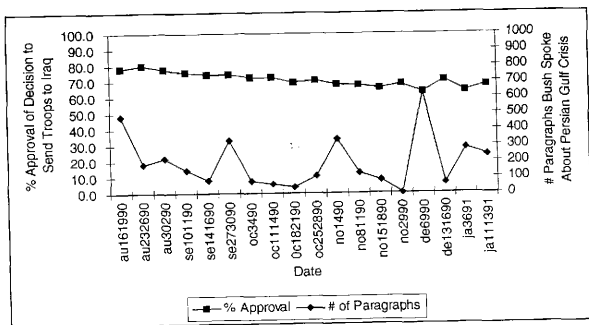


This graph depicts an interesting inverse correlation between public approval and Bush's addresses, with the exception of a slight variation between February 22-28 and after July 18, 1991. Although this inverse correlation does not mean that the public responded negatively to Bush's addresses, it does mean that Bush was unsuccessful at obtaining public approval by going public.

This graph reveals another interesting phenomenon: after Bush's nationwide address on February 27, his approval rose six percent. A similar level of approval was observed in the next poll, after Bush had made two more nationwide addresses. He continued to go public and, even though he did not address the nation as a whole again, considerably increased his frequency of addresses. However, despite his efforts, Bush experienced a twelve percent decrease in approval by April 4, 1991. This could mean that the president may be more effective at going public through nationwide addresses rather than other kinds of addresses. Although, it could also mean that the Persian Gulf Crisis was no longer an issue for the American public because the war was over.

Responses to the question of whether the public approved of the United States' decision to send troops to Saudi Arabia against Iraq also demonstrated an inability of the president to gain public support by going public. Figure 3 compares the frequency of the president's addresses to public opinion on the issue.

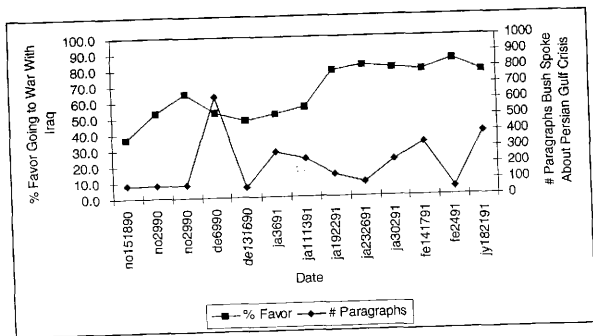
Figure 3: “Approval of Decision to Send Troops to Saudi Arabia Against Iraq”



This graph depicts a steady, gradual decline in public approval, entirely unaffected by the president’s addresses. In fact, when Bush’s frequency reached its highest point, public approval reached its lowest. Similar to previous observations, I believe that in this situation public opinion changed in response to events and circumstances. More specifically, this graph only reflects changes in public opinion in the five months before the conflict started. Therefore, it is possible that the sustained deployment of inactive troops was such a strong influence on public opinion that it was unaffected by the president’s attempts to increase support.

The results from the question “Do you favor or oppose going to war with Iraq?” further validate the president’s inability to obtain public support by going public. They also provide more evidence that public opinion is responsive to changes in events and to the president’s nationwide addresses. The results are portrayed in Figure 4.

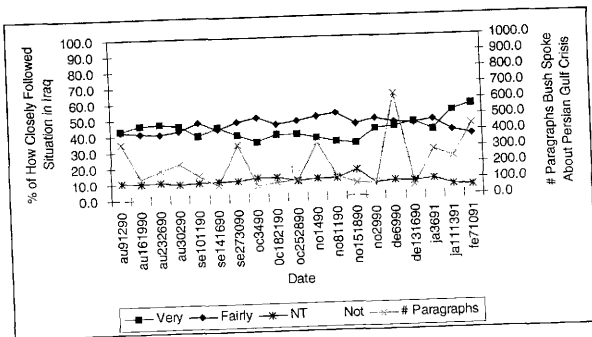
Figure 4: "Favor Going to War with Iraq"



Public opinion was unresponsive to Bush's addresses until the conflict began. It then jumped 20 percent, even though Bush's addresses decreased by nearly 50 percent. This dramatic increase in public opinion also followed immediately after Bush's first two nationwide addresses on the Persian Gulf Crisis. It is difficult to determine the cause of the increase in public approval because the events of the conflict and the president's nationwide addresses are inseparable. However, it is evident from this graph that a combination of changes in events and presidential addresses to the nation was successful at obtaining public approval to go to war against Iraq.

Similar to nationwide addresses, the president seems to have more success with increasing issue saliency than obtaining public support. Like "Most Important Problem," issue salience was also measured through the question "How closely have you followed the situation in Iraq?" Responses to this question are compared to the frequency of the president's addresses in Figure 5.

Figure 5: "How Closely Have You Followed the Situation in Iraq?"

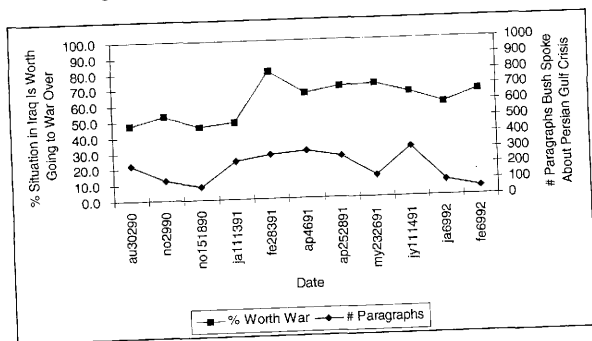


Although this graph only shows slight variations in public opinion, it is evident that the president's addresses contributed to issue saliency. Every time there was a rise in the frequency of the president's addresses, it was followed by an increase in the percentage of people who felt they had followed the situation in Iraq very closely. However, it is important to note that public opinion did not increase in proportion to the president's increase in frequency. For example, when Bush's level of frequency doubled shortly before the conflict started, public saliency did not double as well. In fact, for such a dramatic increase in going public, the corresponding increase in saliency is curiously minimal. However, the president's dramatic increase in addresses could have caused the limited increase in saliency. For example, if individuals were not able to listen to most of Bush's addresses, they may have felt less informed about the crisis than if they were able to listen to a greater percentage of his addresses.

It is also important to note that issue saliency greatly increased after the conflict began. Although some of this could be attributed to Bush's continued addresses, this increase in saliency does not follow the same pattern as before. Therefore, other factors such as heightened media coverage or the "rally around the flag" effect may have contributed to this increase in saliency.

Finally, the results from the "worth war" question provide the best evidence for public opinion changing in response to the president's addresses. Although there is only a general correlation between public opinion and the president's frequency of address, compared to all other questions on the Persian Gulf Crisis, the results of this question portray Bush's ability to change public opinion the most favorably. Figure 6 depicts the president's success at changing public opinion.

Figure 6: "Situation in Iraq Is Worth Going to War Over"



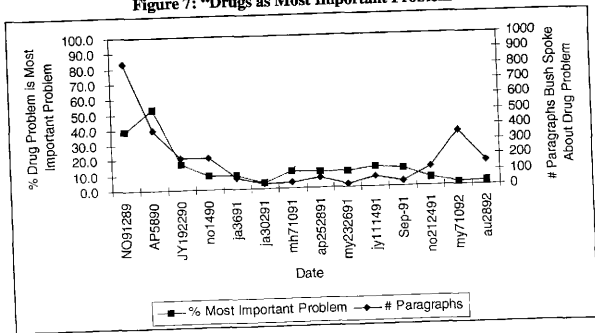
Similar to the results in previous graphs, an astronomical 30 percent increase in public support for going to war was observed after the conflict began. Once again, the beginning of the conflict coincided with Bush's first two nationwide addresses about the crisis, making it impossible to distinguish which event, or combination thereof, was responsible for the increase in approval. However, it is noteworthy that public approval for the war remained relatively high for a year after the conflict ended. Although this could be because of the United States' success, it could also be because Bush continued to use the Persian Gulf Crisis to appeal to the public for support on other issues. It is possible, then, that public approval was sustained because the nation was constantly reminded of the United States' victory over the destructive forces in the Middle East.

War on Drugs

In addition to examining the results of the "most important problem" and "approve of way Bush handles" questions, I looked at the results for the questions regarding Bush's progress with the drug situation and whether the drug problem was better, worse, or the same because of Bush. These questions measure the public's evaluation of Bush's performance on the issue and their results will indicate whether the public felt Bush's drug policies were effective.

Although the drug problem was never ranked as the nation's most important problem and it only averaged 4th overall, public response to this question appears to be directly affected by the president's frequency of address. The results are portrayed in Figure 7.

Figure 7: "Drugs as Most Important Problem"



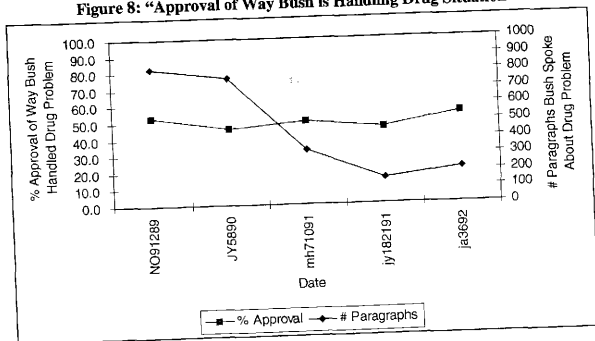
The War on Drugs was one of Bush's main policy issues at the beginning of his administration. However, as his administration developed and issues became more complex, the War on Drugs was set on the backburner. This graph shows that when the War on Drugs was an issue for Bush, it was also an issue for the public. Likewise, it shows that when Bush stopped talking about the drug issue, the public stopped focusing on it as well.

Unlike in the early years of his administration, public concern about the drug problem did not increase when Bush refocused on the War on Drugs during his 1992 campaign. In fact, the public was completely unresponsive to his speeches. This could be evidence that it is very difficult for the president to change public opinion on an issue during a campaign.

Bush had more difficulty increasing public approval of the way he handled the drug situation than he did with increasing concern about the drug problem. From the

results shown in Figure 8, it appears that Bush was unable to change public opinion on this question by going public.

Figure 8: "Approval of Way Bush is Handling Drug Situation"



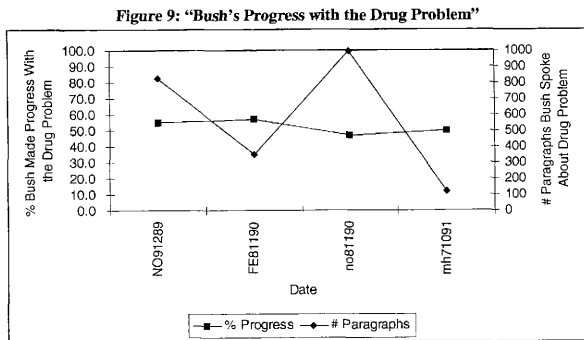
Regardless of Bush's level of focus on the drug problem, public approval of the way Bush handled the situation remained relatively constant. However, the slight increases in approval at either end of the administration could be attributed to Bush's heightened focus on the drug problem: in the beginning it was one of his prime issues and in the end a campaign issue. Yet overall, this graph indicates that the president was unable to change public opinion by going public.

Results from other questions also indicate that Bush was unable to obtain public approval by going public about the drug problem. For example, near the end of his administration, 14.5% of the public thought that the drug problem was better because of

Bush, while 48.1% thought it was worse and 32.9% thought it was the same, despite all his efforts.

Responses to the question “Has Bush made progress with the drug problem?” also reflected poorly upon the president’s ability to change public opinion by going public.

The results are shown in Figure 9.



This graph shows that the public was unaffected by the president’s addresses. In fact, when his frequency increases, public support decreases, and vice versa. This is most striking in November 1990 when Bush’s frequency of address triples and public support decreases ten percent. Also, in February of 1990, Bush’s frequency drops heavily, yet public support rises slightly. However, this increase in support could be in response to a nationwide address that Bush had made a week earlier.

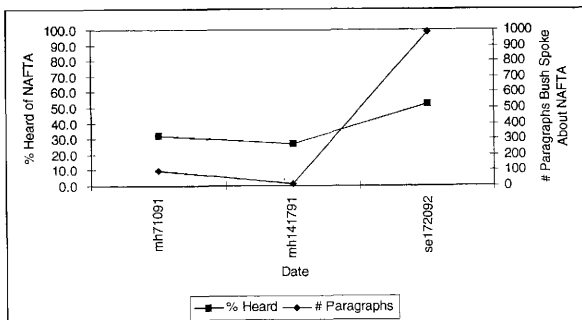
Although results from the War on Drugs do not reflect positively on the president's ability to obtain public support by going public, they do show that the president is able to increase public concern about an issue by going public. Changes in opinion regarding Bush's progress with the drug problem also indicate that the president may be more likely to obtain public support through nationwide addresses than through other forms of public addresses.

North American Free Trade Agreement

For the North American Free Trade Agreement, I examined the results of the following questions: "Do you think NAFTA is good for the U.S.?", "Have you heard of NAFTA?", "Do you approve of NAFTA?", "Which country will benefit most from the agreement?", and "Which country will be hurt most by the agreement?" These questions measure support for the agreement, issue salience, and Bush's ability to convince the public that NAFTA is a good policy.

Questions about the North American Free Trade Agreement provide similar results to the questions about the War on Drugs: Bush was very successful at increasing issue saliency and not so successful at obtaining support. For example, responses to the question "Have you heard of NAFTA?" increased in direct relation to the president's addresses. These results are displayed in Figure 10.

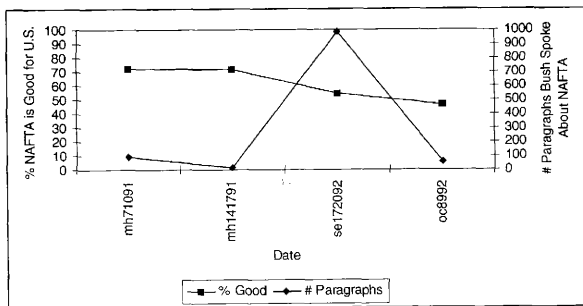
Figure 10: "Heard of NAFTA"



However, as seen before, an increase in issue saliency did not necessarily mean an increase in public support. For instance, near the end of Bush's attempts to obtain support for the agreement by going public, Gallup asked the following question: "Do you approve of NAFTA?" Even after all of Bush's efforts to lead the public on this issue, 57.1% of the public did not approve of NAFTA while only 33.5% did.

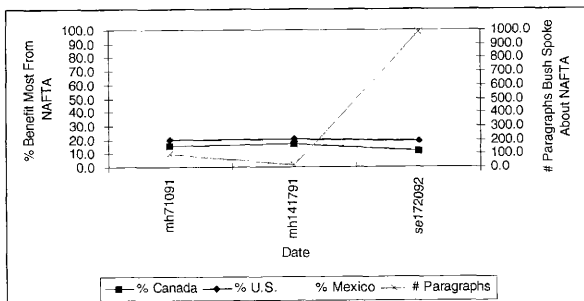
On the other hand, there were cases when an increase in issue saliency did translate as an increase in public approval. For example, when asked if NAFTA was good for the U.S., both issue saliency and the percentage of affirmative responses dramatically increased after Bush concentrated on going public about NAFTA. These results are shown in Figure 11.

Figure 11: “Do You Think NAFTA Is Good For the U.S.?”



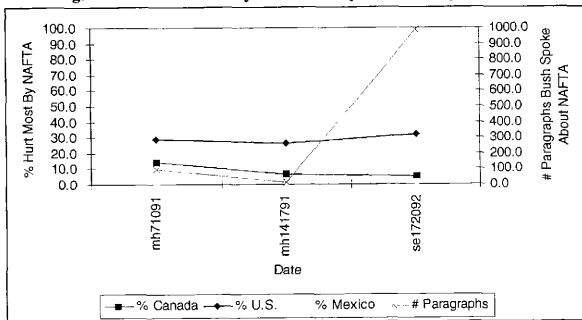
Like the other questions on NAFTA, Bush received mixed results on evaluations of his ability to convince the public that NAFTA was good for the United States. In response to the question “Which country will benefit most from NAFTA?,” public opinion about how the U.S. would be affected remained constant, as Figure 12 shows.

Figure 12: “Which Country Will Benefit Most From NAFTA?”



However, the results from the question “Which country is most likely to be hurt by NAFTA?” directly contradict the results from the previous question. Whereas public opinion remained constant about the United States’ possible benefit from NAFTA, responses indicating that the U.S. would suffer the most increased as Bush’s addresses increased. These results are depicted in Figure 13.

Figure 13: “Which Country Is Most Likely to Be Hurt by NAFTA?”



Results from the questions on NAFTA show that the president was able to increase issue saliency by going public and that in some instances, this increase in saliency led to an increase in public approval. However, the president was only partially successful in obtaining support for NAFTA by going public and increasing issue saliency. Whereas an increase in issue saliency seemed to help the president gain support in some areas, it also seemed to work against him in others, such as the question about which country would most likely be hurt by NAFTA.

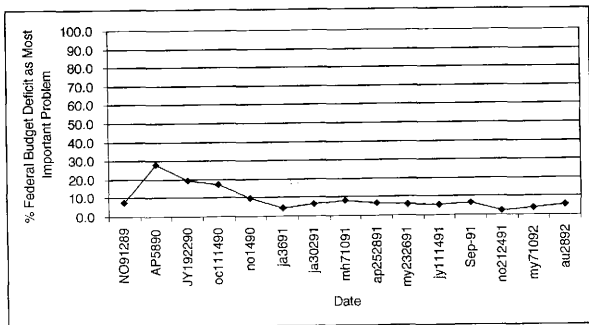
Balanced Budget Act of 1990

Because the Balanced Budget Act of 1990 was passed in November of 1989, Bush only talked about it during the first year of his administration. However, only one question about the Act was asked before it was passed. This alone may be indicative of the public's interest or salience about the issue. Regardless, it is difficult to determine Bush's effect on public opinion for the Balanced Budget Act of 1990 because polls were not taken. Therefore, I have used this issue to look at Bush's ability to *maintain* public support for an issue.

I used results from the following questions, in addition to those from the "most important problem" and "approve of the way Bush handles" questions, to determine Bush's ability to obtain and maintain support for the Balanced Budget Act and similar economic policies: "Has Bush made progress with the federal budget deficit?," and "Do you favor Bush's new plan?" These questions will indicate the public's opinion of Bush's performance on the issue and whether Bush was able to obtain support for his policy by going public.

The first "most important problem" question was asked the week after the Balanced Budget Act was passed. Originally, the federal budget deficit was only considered to be the nation's most important problem by seven percent of the public. However, as Figure 14 illustrates, public concern for the issue jumped to 28 percent by April 1990.

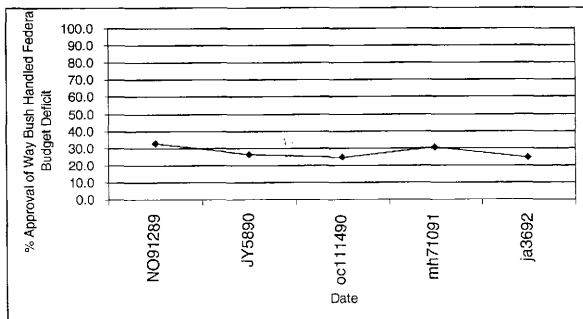
Figure 14: “Federal Budget Deficit as Most Important Problem”



Since Bush did not talk specifically about the *Balanced Budget Act of 1990* during the time period for which this question was measured, it is hard to tell what caused the changes in public opinion. However, it is interesting that during the first part of his administration, when the economy was an issue for Bush, it was also an issue for the public. Yet when the president turned his attention towards foreign policy in the Persian Gulf Crisis around January 1991, the public also turned its attention away from the deficit issue.

Similar to the results from the most important problem question, responses to the way Bush handled the deficit situation were also more positive at the beginning of Bush's administration. In fact, his level of approval for the way he handled the deficit situation was highest in November 1989, shortly after the *Balanced Budget Act* passed. Perhaps this was because of his frequency in going public, or perhaps it was due to factors like the public's positivity bias in evaluating its public officials.

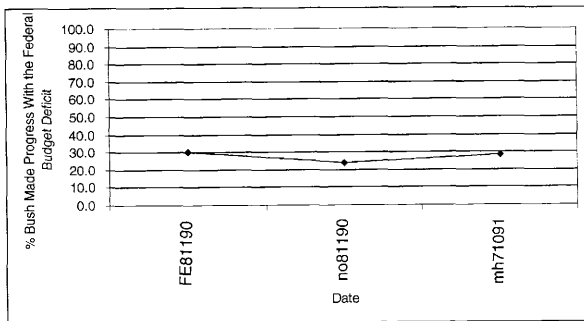
Figure 15: “Approval of Way Bush is Handling Deficit Situation”



This graph shows that Bush was unable to maintain or increase public approval for his handling of the budget deficit throughout his administration. This slight increase in public approval indicated in March 1991 could possibly be part of the reaction to the United States' victory in the Persian Gulf Crisis. Because of the president's success in the conflict, he may have experienced a general increase in public approval across several issues. However, as indicated on the graph, this increase in approval was temporary and eventually dissolved as the conflict in the Persian Gulf grew more distant. Bush may have also experienced difficulty in maintaining public support near the end of his administration because the campaign of 1992 brought forth candidates who targeted Bush's economic policy.

Similar results are observed in response to the question concerning Bush's progress with the deficit problem. Although Bush was never able to obtain a higher approval rating than disapproval rating, he did receive the most support directly after the Balanced Budget Act of 1990 passed.

Figure 16: "Has Bush Made Progress With the Federal Budget Deficit?"

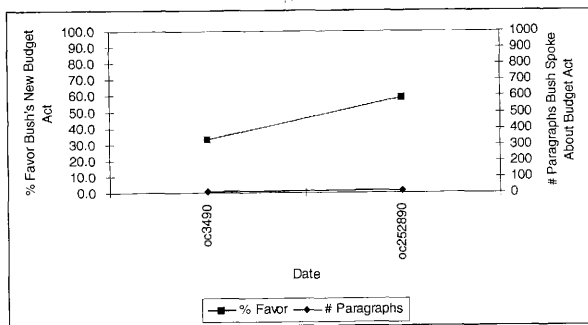


Like before, the increase in approval in March 1991 may have been the result of a general approval increase caused by the victory in the Persian Gulf Conflict. If this is the case, then the approval level shown for November 1990 probably more accurately represents Bush's long-term approval rating. Consequently, the results from this graph would provide further evidence that Bush was unable to maintain public support for his federal budget deficit policies.

The results from each of these graphs indicate that Bush was relatively unsuccessful at maintaining support for his economic policies regarding the federal

budget deficit. However, the one question asked while Bush was going public for the Balanced Budget Act of 1990 generated more positive results. In a matter of three weeks, public approval for Bush's Balanced Budget Act nearly doubled. Figure 17 reflects these results.

Figure 17: "Do You Favor Bush's New Budget Act?"



This increase in public opinion corresponded with a very minor increase of three paragraphs in Bush's frequency. It also occurred shortly before the bill passed and may therefore have been in response to an increase in media coverage. Regardless of the reason why public support increased between these two polls, these results alone make the president's attempts to obtain and maintain public support for his deficit policies seem successful. However, the other graphs show that his success in this area is short-lived and does not continue throughout the rest of his administration.

Audience Type

Contrary to my hypothesis, differences in audience types did not significantly affect public opinion on any question examined. Figures 18 and 19 provide examples of how audience type did not affect public opinion. These graphs compare changes in public support for going to war with Iraq to Bush's addresses to the press and public, respectively. Although changes in public opinion for every question asked were unaffected by the type of audience(s) Bush addressed, this question was selected to serve as an example because it is one in which Bush experienced both success and difficulty with changing public opinion.

I chose to use addresses to the press and public in this example because the majority of the president's addresses were directed towards one of these audiences. In Figure 18, "press" is defined as the number of paragraphs that Bush spoke about the Persian Gulf Crisis with the intent of speaking only to reporters. Even though reporters were present at nearly every time he goes public, this graph only represents the addresses that Bush geared towards the press, specifically.

Figure 19 examines the effect of addresses to the public on changes in public opinion. Similar to the addresses considered in Figure 18, Figure 19 includes only the addresses for which Bush intended to speak primarily to the general public.

Figure 18: "Effect of Addresses to Press on Public Opinion"

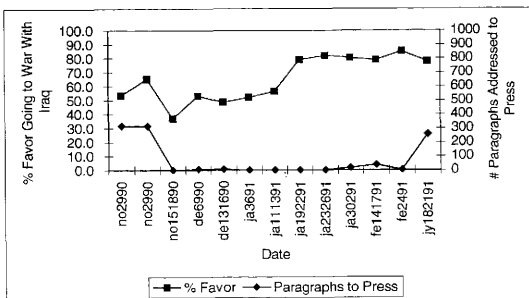
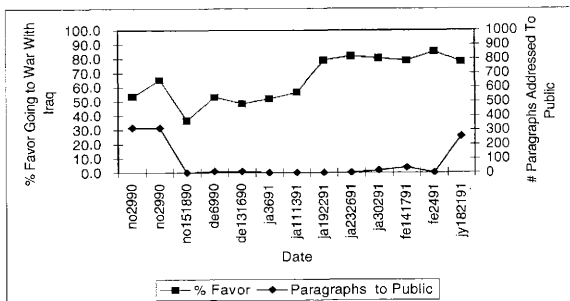


Figure 19: "Effect of Addresses to Public on Public Opinion"



Because these graphs are nearly identical, their results are similar. For example, Figure 18 shows that addresses to the press did not affect public support for going to war with Iraq. Likewise, Figure 19 indicates that addresses to the public also did not affect public support. Although it appears that changes in public support and addresses to the press/public are related in the beginning of the graph, this trend does not continue. From the end of November 1990 to the end of February 1991, Bush's addresses to the press/public were minimal while public support continually increased. Likewise, by July 1991 addresses to the press/public greatly increased while public support declined.

As discussed before, public support on this issue may have changed in response to developments in the crisis. Nevertheless, at the very least these graphs show that presidential addresses to the press/public are not as influential at changing public opinion as changes in events.

Discussion

The results from this study show that President Bush's success at changing public opinion was mixed. On one hand, he was mostly unsuccessful at obtaining public support for his policies and at increasing public approval of his performance on issues by going public. On the other hand, the results indicate that he was able to successfully increase the salience of all four issues by going public.

Similarly, the frequency with which Bush spoke about an issue did not effect public opinion about his policies or performance. However, it did effect issue salience: the more Bush spoke about an issue, the more salient it became. In contrast to the effect

Bush's frequency had on salience, the type of audiences he addressed did not affect public opinion at all.

With the exception of nationwide addresses, every time Bush went public he was relatively unable to obtain support for his policies or increase approval of his performance. Yet results from both the Persian Gulf Crisis and the War on Drugs suggest that his nationwide addresses caused some increases in public approval and support. These results seem to indicate that the president may be more successful at going public through nationwide addresses than through other types of addresses.

Like the nationwide addresses, President Bush was also more successful at changing public opinion about general policies than specific ones. For example, the percentage of approval for the way Bush handled the drug problem was as high in the end of his administration as it was in the beginning. Additionally, his percentage of public approval on the drug issue was consistently higher than his percentage of public disapproval. In contrast, approval for the way Bush handled the federal deficit problem gradually declined during his administration and his percentage of public approval on the budget issue never surpassed his percentage of disapproval.

Bush was also more successful at changing public opinion about foreign policy issues than domestic policy issues. For example, results from the Persian Gulf Crisis show that the magnitude of increases in public approval were greater for this issue than for any of the other three issues. Additionally, results from the War on Drugs show that the percentage of public approval of Bush's performance fluctuated between 45 percent and 54 percent throughout his administration. This suggests that the president had difficulty maintaining support for this domestic policy. Finally, the president was least

successful at obtaining support for the Balanced Budget Act of 1990. In fact, Bush was unable to ever obtain higher approval ratings than disapproval ratings for his budget policies.

Because it was easier for Bush to obtain public approval on general issues and foreign policy issues, he was most successful at obtaining support for his Persian Gulf Crisis policies. He was also relatively successful in obtaining support for his drug policies because of their generality. Bush was less successful at obtaining support for the North American Free Trade Agreement, partly because the issue was too complex and specific. Finally, Bush was least successful at obtaining and maintaining support for the Balanced Budget Act of 1990 because it was both a domestic and specific policy.

Taken together, the results of this study indicate that a president will be able to go public more effectively and use their resources more efficiently through nationwide addresses than other kinds of addresses. Additionally, since the president will be more successful at obtaining public support for general policies than specific ones, he would be most successful at changing public opinion through nationwide addresses that focus on general policies.

Finally, this study provides evidence that the president is generally unsuccessful at obtaining public support for his policies. However, it is possible that if Bush did not go public about these issues, public support for his policies and approval of his performance would have been much less than it was. Of course, because the president went public about these issues, it is impossible to measure how public opinion would have changed if he had never gone public. Additionally, some results from this study imply that public opinion is more responsive to changes in events and circumstances than

to presidential addresses. If this is true, then presidents should try and change public opinion through spectacle rather than by going public.

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