

# Introduction

## The President and the Public Revisited

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The outcome of presidential election campaigns often depends on the rapport that candidates can establish between themselves and their publics. Electoral success may hinge on the winner's ability to convince prospective voters that he or she is the best choice to solve the country's major problems. Accordingly, scholars of presidential elections and practicing politicians often focus their attention on the strategies that candidates use to persuade the public that they are politically astute, trustworthy, empathetic, and "presidential," and that they espouse solid political programs that they will and can execute. Analysts scrutinize what candidates told their audiences and how they framed their appeals. They want to know what channels they used to communicate their messages to the public and how the public responded. Such matters have always intrigued students of American government, although they have not been the main focus of scholarly attention.

The desire to provide richer insights into the interactions between Americans and their presidents during elections but also during other phases of the president's term led to the 1982 publication of a volume of essays titled *The President and the Public*.<sup>1</sup> The rationale for the book was the inadequacy of readily available scholarly information about a broad array of issues relating to communication between the chief executive and average Americans, despite general acknowledgment that the issues deserved attention. Accordingly, the volume thrust the limelight on the public's expectations about the presidency, people's perceptions about the president's style and performance in office, and media portrayals of the presidency, along with neglected aspects of the electoral connection.

Why is linkage between the president and the public sufficiently important to devote an entire book to it? There are many reasons. Foremost is the fact that this linkage is a crucial element of democratic governance. Democracy, by definition, means government by the people. In large societies, where

the duties of governing have to be delegated to representatives of the electorate, communication is necessary between the principals and their agents. Within the modern American system, that means the president at the national level.

Most Americans consider the president the public's chief national representative. He or she is the only public official elected to serve the entire nation rather than territorially limited constituencies. The framers of the Constitution had planned otherwise. They thought that legislators would be viewed as the chief representatives of the public. They did not expect that the president would become the single most powerful actor in the government, taking a leading role in generating and executing domestic and foreign policies. The president's prominence in these governmental activities now makes him the key official to whom publics turn when they are concerned about political developments and public policies.

Indications that the leader of the country keeps in touch with the nation are important to make people feel that the government belongs to them, even when linkage amounts to little more than sporadic, often purely symbolic, contacts. Signs that the president enjoys public approval for his actions lend them the aura of procedural correctness that makes them acceptable. They are the tokens that signify legitimacy.

This is why presidents often "go public" to pass their legislative agenda. They appeal for demonstrations of public support to show that large constituencies throughout the nation support their plans. Congress often yields to such demonstrations of popular support, partly because defiance of the people's will creates unfavorable images that Congress members prefer to avoid, and partly out of fear that constituents will deny their votes to legislators who oppose and obstruct a president backed by the public.<sup>2</sup> Like members of Congress, journalists are loath to anger their audiences. Going public may therefore have the additional benefit of short-circuiting adverse media criticism of the president's proposals.

Even if presidents are disinclined to continuously stay in touch with the public, political necessities tend to force them to communicate with their national constituencies. The news media cover the presidency far more amply than other branches of government. That focuses public attention on the president, forcing him to communicate with the public to create and maintain an image that reassures people that the government is in capable hands.

Presidential scholar Richard Neustadt calls the president's ability to use the White House as a bully pulpit to address and persuade nationwide audiences his main political weapon.<sup>3</sup> Presidents need popular support to govern. They must be able to rally the public when major policies, such as conserving energy or going to war, require willing cooperation from large numbers of people. The symbolic significance of public support makes it important even when policies do not require direct public action. If presidential programs face

major congressional opposition, then public speeches allow the chief executive to focus public attention on the issues in question and gather public support for his stands. Presidential appeals for support are likely to be effective, especially if the president is popular. It also helps that the public pays more attention to news by and about the president than to news about other politicians.

Of course, the most pressing reason for linkage is the fact that presidents depend on the vote of the national electorate for their initial election to office and for reelection to a second term. Campaigning for office necessitates communicating effectively with the publics whose votes the president seeks. Winning election to a first term requires presidential candidates to persuade voters that they are a good choice; for reelection, they must convince their constituents that they have performed well.

Is it useful to revisit issues pertaining to the interactions of presidents and their publics and to put together a sequel to the earlier volume? I believe it is. These linkages remain extraordinarily important and are an ever-present challenge for the president as well as the public. I am therefore delighted that two keen analysts of the presidency—Lori Cox Han and Diane J. Heith—have assembled a collection of essays that sheds fresh light on linkage issues and problems as they present themselves at the start of the twenty-first century.

Specifically, it is important to cover changes in the linkage relationship brought about by the passage of time. The political climate has changed substantially in the intervening decades, and major new information technologies have transformed political communication. Fireside radio chats by Franklin D. Roosevelt differ in impact from John F. Kennedy's more casually scripted televised news conferences that bear no resemblance to George W. Bush's blogs. It also is important to broaden and deepen the study of the interface between presidents and their publics. Topics absent from the first volume need to be added, issues analyzed need to be explored in greater depth and with more sophisticated methods, and entirely new developments need to be acknowledged.

Furthermore, to systematically study the political behavior of American presidents and their publics requires time to allow for comparisons of an array of presidents. Presidential studies have always been plagued by the fact that there were only a few presidents available for comparison in a particular era. If one takes 1960 as the start of the television era of political communication, then only five presidents were available for comparison in 1980, including John F. Kennedy and Gerald Ford, whose terms were abbreviated. By 2004, that meager number had nearly doubled.

The current volume makes major contributions to filling gaps in the story about the president's image and the public's reactions. Like the earlier volume's authors, the current contributors devote considerable time to discussing why and in what ways linkage is important. But they devote more attention to developing and testing specific hypotheses, and they use a broader array of

quantitative and qualitative methods. These more intensive approaches produce more precise findings than before, though much room remains for further refinement.

Michael Genovese's chapter on the president as a pop culture icon is one of many excellent examples of the focus on recent developments. The mere fact of honing in on entertainment offerings as an important form of political communication is innovative and still unduly rare. Depicting the president as a pop culture icon is even rarer because it documents a sea change in the treatment of presidents in films. Fawning hero worship, as in films about former presidents Abraham Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and John F. Kennedy, has given way to often sneering cynicism, as in films about Richard Nixon. Former presidents who appear in films and videos are no longer the revered leaders of the nation, blessed with super-human virtues and devoid of most major human failings. They have been transformed into ordinary human beings, warts and all, and some of the warts, such as corruption, dishonesty, and shamelessly self-seeking behaviors, are large, inviting scathing condemnation or merciless ridicule.

Changing the character of presidential images may have profound consequences. In this case, the new images may have contributed to the precipitous decline in trust in government that surfaced during the Nixon administration's Watergate scandal. The decline has persisted since then, although trust has increased periodically, as during the Reagan administration and the country's involvement in hostilities with Iraq.

Genovese's study also is novel in employing an exceptionally broad comparative approach that ranges across the entire history of presidential portrayals in films. In the process, Genovese raises important questions about the likely impact of films and video presentations on images of the person occupying the presidential office. There seems to be close correspondence between the character qualities and the skills attributed to nonfictional and fictional presidents. The favorability of their images rises and falls together as art imitates life, and vice versa.

## PERSISTENT PAST PROBLEMS

Political life is a seamless web in which patterns of the past persist side by side with patterns of the present and harbingers of the future. Clean breaks are rare. So it is with relations between presidents and their publics. They are a blend of perennial and new issues that embeds the seeds of the future. Many of the situations that defied accurate measurement in 1980 still do so. For example, contributors to the earlier volume used public opinion polls and surveys to discern how Americans view their president and what they like or dislike about him. Although polling methods have improved

since the 1980s, poll results remain problematic as accurate measures of the views of various publics.

Most detrimentally, in polls and surveys researchers still decide which questions to ask and how to frame them. Their choices determine the subject matter around which respondents' answers revolve and the criteria by which the issues in question will be appraised. For instance, when pollsters assess the public's confidence in the president by asking how certain they are that the president can lower health care costs or ensure air travel safety, it matters that these two problems were raised. Reported confidence levels might be higher or lower if the poll questions revolved around unemployment or global warming. It also matters which word choices the poll offers. Respondents may be willing to call the president's achievements "very good" if that is the highest rating used in the poll but may balk at choosing the top spot if it is labeled "outstanding" or "excellent."

It remains difficult to judge the dimensions of the opinions reported by polls. Pollsters rarely ask how strongly people feel about the matters at hand, or why they feel the way they do. They hardly ever inquire about changes in contingencies that might alter opinions. When pollsters ask for evaluations of a president's job performance, it is generally unclear which criteria the respondents used to make their judgments. In fact, there are indications that responses may be largely tied to overall political conditions. When times are good, or when presidents are involved in major, seemingly successful foreign ventures, they often receive favorable evaluations, irrespective of the contributions they have made to these conditions. When situations turn sour, presidents frequently suffer the blame, even when the turn of events was completely beyond their control. A disastrous, worldwide economic downturn became "Hoover's depression," while a spectacular economic boom was credited to lucky incumbent Bill Clinton. If ratings of presidential performance are largely context dependent, then comparisons among presidents continue to be problematic.

The concluding section of the earlier book raises as yet unresolved perennial questions about the capacity of average Americans to judge presidential performance accurately, given the complexity of modern American politics. It remains unclear and debatable whether they get enough sound political information from the news media to meld it into meaningful images about what the president is doing or might be doing under the prevailing circumstances. If the information base for judgments is seriously flawed or underused, then are the heuristics that people use to facilitate judgments sufficient to reach sound conclusions? For example, is there enough information so that citizens can judge the quality of the president's performance by monitoring the views of trusted leaders or brief reports about unemployment fluctuations?

Good communication channels between presidents and their publics remain a prerequisite for satisfactory linkage. In the twenty-first century, as in

the waning years of the twentieth century, adequacy of communication channels remains a major problem, particularly for upward message flows from various publics to the president. Presidents attempt to gauge public opinions through watching general public opinion polls and special polls run by the executive branch. But the information extracted from polls is marred by the weaknesses outlined earlier. Direct messages from various publics via petitions and letters and now e-mail and other Web-based messages are tools used almost exclusively by elites. Even then, most messages intended for the president miss their target because the human capacity to listen and absorb is out of synch with the overabundance of information seeking a hearing. When millions of e-mails arrive at the White House each year, it is not surprising that only a tiny proportion will ever come to the president's attention.

While downward messages fare better than upward ones, data remain sparse about the quality and truthfulness of presidential messages and their effects on average people and various elites. The problem is confounded by the fact that journalists paraphrase most presidential pronouncements rather than allowing people to hear what the president said and extract their own meanings. Frames used in news reports often distort or destroy what the president meant to convey. Withdrawal from a humanitarian intervention that the president depicts as a courageous decision to serve American interests, for instance, may be transformed by hostile news media accounts into an act of cowardice and national shame. Depending on the framing, the action redounds to the president's credit or discredit.

Media framing tends to prime media consumers' memories so that they judge presidential messages against the backdrop of the primed situation. For example, when news consumers were primed with visions of the disastrous Vietnam War by stories that compared it to Operation Iraqi Freedom, they were likely to associate the operation with failures in Vietnam, counteracting the president's optimistic predictions. In fact, peoples' images of the president depend less on what he says or actually does and more on how media elites judge him in news stories transmitted to members of the public. Matthew Baum and Tim Groeling provide excellent illustrations of the impact of framing in this volume by demonstrating that the tenor of media coverage shaped the rally phenomenon in the two recent wars that pitted the United States against Iraq.

## THE NEW BALL GAME

Reading the earlier work and its current sequel makes it clear that many fresh winds are blowing when it comes to communications between presidents and their publics. Again, as with problems carried over from the past, I shall sample only a few. One major change since the Nixon years concerns the mood of

the country. Political elites, including journalists as well as the public, have become far more negative in their evaluations of government, including the presidency. Interactive talk shows, cable television, and the Internet provide many new outlets for voicing opposition to the president. Of course, these venues also provide presidents with many more opportunities to win supporters. But supportive messages have always carried less weight than attacks.

The public's increased skepticism about political life has had important consequences. On the good side, public servants now are viewed in a more realistic light as human beings with flaws as well as virtues. That realization clears the air for fruitful communication, because it whittles down expectations to levels that are achievable. Increased skepticism is bad if the pendulum swings too far and all public officials become suspect. That seems to be happening as more and more people take Lord Acton's dictum that power corrupts as an infallible prediction rather than as a statement of possibilities. Skepticism turned into cynicism becomes an insurmountable barrier to good communication between presidents and their publics. Disillusionment with public officials, especially presidents, also is harmful because it may keep the president from serving as a symbol of reassurance in times of crisis. As Murray Edelman has pointed out, a frightened public takes comfort in times of crisis in the thought that the person at the helm of state is fully capable of coping with looming calamities.<sup>4</sup> That reassurance keeps political life on a more even keel.

Interestingly, while there has been an increase in partisanship and a decrease in civility in the current climate of combative politics, there has actually been a decline in emphasizing partisan alignments during elections. Presidents now try to appeal to publics across party lines, as Sharon Jarvis and Emily Balanoff Jones document in this volume by examining party labels used in presidential acceptance speeches from 1948 to 2000. Acceptance speeches may not be the best barometer of reduction of partisan mentions because presidents want to be seen as unifiers at the start of their term. However, numerous other developments suggest that the phenomenon may indeed be pervasive because it reflects changing political conditions. The growing numbers of television stations along with Web sites allow candidates to reach out to the public and to raise money for their campaigns without help from their party. Minimal assistance from the party leaves presidents less beholden to it and free to ignore their party in their public discourse.

Technological developments have produced some of the greatest changes in the interrelation between presidents and their publics. The swiftness and ease of air travel allows presidents to personally visit widely scattered locations at home and abroad without major disruptions of their normal schedule. Cable television and the Internet have markedly changed election and reelection strategies. Continuous campaigns have become a permanent feature of the political scene. The president appears on television screens in the nation's living rooms on a daily basis, often morning, noon, and night. In fact, presidents

almost seem to govern more by appearance than by accomplishment. In the image game, adept use of photo opportunities may count more than words, and censoring disturbing pictures may avoid a crisis.

Web sites give presidents opportunities for exposure on their own terms rather than being at the mercy of journalists beyond their control. On the negative side, Web sites carrying messages hostile to the president have multiplied as well. Presidential messages have benefited from employing well-trained communication and public relations experts. Since the 1980s, the art of spinning the news has progressed greatly, largely due to advanced social science research. There is more emphasis on political symbolism and on a quick rebuttal of negative publicity.

New technologies, especially the Internet and cable television, like CNN 'round-the-clock news programs, also have shrunk the time available for presidents to analyze situations, assess public opinions, and develop responses accordingly. When hasty decision making abounds, often based on incomplete information, public deliberations about the wisdom of policies are reduced to Monday morning quarterbacking laments.

Overall, relationships with the press have become more routine. However, the professionalization of message construction and dissemination has not abated critics' complaints that too much of the news is primarily infotainment and that too many presidential messages are intentionally vague or even deceptive to protect the president's image. Nonetheless, most people claim to feel moderately well informed and able to perform essential civic functions such as voting intelligently and participating in political discussions.<sup>5</sup> Continuous campaigns have raised the problem of overexposure of the president, which may breed inattention, boredom, and even contempt. The fears of scholars such as Neil Postman, that overexposure and humanization of the president will trivialize the presidency, may be well grounded.<sup>6</sup>

## SOME UNFINISHED BUSINESS

The linkage problem that concerns me most is the inequality of access to linkage. It is often mentioned only in passing, and little has been done to assess its full impact. Communicating with top officials and gaining a hearing is primarily a right enjoyed by socioeconomically privileged members of society. The least privileged are largely left out. This inequality defies eradication, because it springs from a system where most opportunities are open to everyone, but the ability and motivation to seize them is greatly enhanced by upper-class status. The lack of socioeconomic advantages during childhood and adolescence becomes a major handicap to success in life.

Election systems, including primaries and the Electoral College procedure, further increase inequalities. Single-district election arrangements that



are almost universal in the United States drown out the voices of millions of members of losing parties. Low voter turnouts, especially by socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, explain why most presidents usually are the choice of only one-fourth to one-third of the electorate. To make matters worse, the Electoral College procedure allows a candidate to become president despite losing the popular vote. That raises serious questions about whether citizens' voices are receiving equal consideration so that majority rule prevails in the end. The Electoral College procedure gives populations in smaller states more political influence than their fellow citizens in larger states, increasing the advantaged positions they already enjoy because the Senate represents states equally, irrespective of population size.

Another form of distortion of communication between presidents and their publics comes from presidential secrecy. As perennial leaks and periodic investigations make clear, presidents conceal much information or spin it to the point of distortion for political reasons unrelated to national security concerns. The executive branch strives mightily to control information by limiting the release of political data. That leaves the public in the dark about many important matters that it needs to know to reach sound political judgments.

Assessments of the president's success in leading public opinion are plagued by unrealistic expectations and faulty assumptions. Pundits and even scholars routinely characterize presidents as weak, unpopular persuaders if they fail to gain approval from large majorities of Americans. That ignores the fact that people have well-formed opinions on many issues that run counter to those of the president. Once people have made up their minds, it is difficult to change them. Success in persuasion should therefore be assessed in terms of the numbers of people who were still receptive to the president's arguments. Except for totally new issues about which the public knows little and partisan divides that have not yet emerged, the numbers of people open to persuasion usually are quite small.

The ability of political leaders to persuade their constituents is limited, at best. Presidents live within the nexus of their historical periods, which may or may not provide opportunities for opinion leadership. Moreover, leaders cannot be too far ahead of the public. It may require a substantial period of time to overcome culturally ingrained attitudes, such as race and gender prejudices or the reluctance to become embroiled in military activities in distant parts of the world. Even a superb orator such as President Franklin D. Roosevelt knew that he could not easily overcome the American public's reluctance to enter the Second World War. Therefore, he proceeded gradually from small breaches of American neutrality to increasingly massive interventions in the conflict.

Finally, it remains an unresolved philosophical question whether linkage encourages pandering. According to the dictionary, pandering involves seeking benefits for oneself by catering to the weaknesses and vanities of others.

Phrased in political terms, should leaders take their cues from the public and try to accommodate public wishes? Should they shun policies that are likely to be unpopular, even when they are convinced that the policies are sound, though unlikely to win public approval? Such questions deserve more attention, because pandering is common and new communication technologies make pandering increasingly easy and effective.

In sum, establishing sound relationships between presidents and average Americans remains as challenging as ever. *In the Public Domain: Presidents and the Challenges of Public Leadership* presents important analyses of the dynamics of linkage interactions. It updates many of the findings in the earlier volume and adds much that is new and important. But it definitely is not the last word. It still leaves many important areas, such as linkage inequalities, untouched, and many of its final findings will become merely interim statements as time marches on. The ultimate satisfaction for its talented contributors will be to see their work spark yet another volume a few decades hence. If that volume lives up to the quality of the current one, then it will be an important contribution to understanding crucial facets of the American presidency.

## NOTES

1. Doris A. Graber, *The President and the Public* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1982).

2. Samuel Kernell, *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership*, 3rd ed. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1997).

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4. Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964).

5. Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Attitudes toward the News: Internet Sapping Broadcast News Audience," <http://people-press.org> (accessed June 11, 2000).

6. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1984).