

# Presidential Influence Over the Systemic Agenda

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## *Abstract*

One of the most widely accepted sources of presidential power is agenda setting. Being able to affect the media's agenda on key issues—influencing the systemic agenda and “expanding the scope of conflict”—has enormous consequences for the president's ability to govern effectively. Yet the literature to date has not conclusively determined the extent to which presidents consistently set agendas, especially over the media, because it has not explicitly considered variation in agenda-setting influence by policy type. For these reasons, we test whether presidential public statements have increased the media's attention to three policy areas. Using Vector Autoregression (VAR) analysis, we demonstrate that presidents have some influence over the systemic agenda, at least in the short term, with policy type being an important predictor of presidential influence. Understanding when and why presidents may or may not be successful agenda setters is crucial to explaining the varying legislative impacts of presidential speech making.

Agenda setting has long been viewed as a vital source of power in American politics. Whoever controls the agenda affects which issues are debated, how they are framed, and who may participate. Much work on agenda setting holds unequivocally that presidents have this power, and that they are uniquely situated to affect the national agenda. John Kingdon (1984, 25), in his seminal study on Washington agenda setting, maintained that “no other single actor in the political system has quite the capability of the president to set agendas.” Baumgartner and Jones (1993, 241) surmised, “no single actor can focus attention as clearly, or change the motivations of such a great number of other actors, as the president.” After all, these scholars assert that Congress, the public, and the news media regularly look to presidents for leadership on the nation's most pressing issues.

Presidential influence over agenda setting arguably increases the president's ability to govern effectively. If the president dictates the issues that Congress debates each legislative session, he is more likely to succeed on his top legislative priorities (Bond and Fleisher 1990). Moreover, presidents who affect the systemic agenda—media attention to a policy or set of policies—may be able to “expand the scope of conflict” and enlist the public as an ally to further increase their leg-

islative success. The “going public” argument, which structures much of the research examining the political effects of presidential rhetoric, maintains that presidents can use their rhetoric to expand the scope of conflict, and use subsequent public pressure to increase their success in Congress (see Kernell 1997). Although research shows that increased presidential attention to issues before Congress increases the president’s success on those issues, it does not model the intervening impact that influence over the systemic agenda may have on the way in which presidential attention increases presidential success in Congress (Barrett 2004; Canes-Wrone 2001a; Fett 1994; Peterson 1990).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, because this research does not systematically differentiate agenda-setting effects by policy type, we are limited in our conclusions about if and when presidents may be successful agenda setters. Hence, we do not know conclusively whether presidents consistently influence the systemic agenda, or whether influence over the systemic agenda matters to the president’s ability to govern.

In this paper, we systematically test the ability of presidents to affect the systemic agenda of three policy issues. The success that presidents may have using their rhetoric to affect the systemic agenda has consequences for how presidents govern as they attempt to lead Congress and the public. Because policy affects political processes (Lowi 1972), we argue that the president’s success in affecting media attention to issues may differ depending on policy type. We select a range of policy areas that vary according to Gormley’s (1986) salience-complexity typology: civil rights, clean air, and agriculture. We use Vector Autoregression (VAR) analysis and monthly data from 1950 to 1998<sup>2</sup> to examine the extent to which presidential statements on these policies affect media attention to these issues, recognizing that congressional attention to policies may also affect both institutions’ attention to these policy types. We find some presidential influence over the systemic agenda in the short term; however, the president’s impact seems overstated by the classic model of agenda setting.

#### PRESIDENTIAL INFLUENCE OVER THE SYSTEMIC AGENDA

Two competing perspectives frame the president’s ability to influence attention to policy issues. One camp of scholars argues that as the central, national leader of the American republic, the president is most likely of any political actor to command the attention of the American people, the news media, and Congress, and thus influence the political agenda. Several scholars embrace the inherent ability of the presidency to lead the national agenda (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Cobb and Elder 1983; Kingdon 1984). Some quantitative evidence also supports presidential leadership of the issues considered important by the American public through State of the Union addresses (Cohen 1995; Hill 1998). Highly visible speeches appear to provide the best opportunity for the president to affect the systemic agenda.

The president has good reason to try to affect the systemic agenda. If presidents can increase the media’s attention to an issue, they may be able to “expand the scope of conflict” surrounding it (Schattsneider 1960) and secure additional

support from the public and Congress as they govern. Motivating the public through rhetoric first requires that presidents affect media coverage of a policy issue. After all, what the public thinks about—what is on their agenda—is typically influenced by the mass media (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). Because the president is the central figure in this model of agenda setting, he should have little competition from other actors or institutions in affecting media attention to an issue. This reasoning suggests an initial hypothesis:

*Presidents should affect the systemic agenda, even after controlling for congressional attention.*

Another camp of scholars argues that the presidency is limited in its public leadership capabilities. The president is one among many actors who may influence the systemic agenda or media attention to policy issues. He must compete with myriad entertainment choices on television and is often denied airtime for his national addresses, just as viewership of the president's national addresses has declined over time (see Baum and Kernell 1999; Edwards 2003). Presidents rarely lead public opinion, even on issues that are central to their policy agenda (Edwards and Eshbaugh-Soha 2001). They also have limited success setting the national policy agenda (Edwards and Wood 1999), even in foreign policy, where presidents had purportedly been the dominant actors (Peake 2001; Wood and Peake 1998). Moreover, the president tends to set the media's agenda only on specific, primarily domestic policy issues (Edwards and Wood 1999), but not consistently on the economy (Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake n.d.). Recent research even suggests that the president's influence over the public agenda through the State of the Union address may be time bound (Young and Perkins n.d.), and that presidents' nationally televised speeches only occasionally affect media attention to several policy areas (Peake and Eshbaugh-Soha 2003).

The weight of the quantitative evidence holds that presidential attention to issues only marginally affects the systemic agenda because presidents have difficulty competing with the many actors, such as interest groups, the public, or newsworthy events, that command the attention of the media or Congress. This research surmises, nevertheless, that two conditions likely encourage presidential influence over the systemic agenda. First, presidents must dedicate time and attention to an issue in order to have an impact on media attention to that issue (Edwards and Wood 1999). One of the preconditions of presidential agenda influence is presidential attention to the issue. If a president saturates his agenda with only one or two issues, the media—because the president is typically newsworthy—is most likely to respond. Hence,

*Presidents should influence media attention to policy issues to which presidents devote continuous attention.*

Second, an issue's level of media attention is important to presidential agenda setting. Specifically, an issue low in prior media attention provides increased

opportunity for presidential influence because presidents are most likely to command the attention of the media when they bring new attention to a policy issue (Peake 2001). Thus,

*Presidents should increase media attention to issues that are not already on the systemic agenda.*

At first glance, these camps of scholars appear to be arguing the direct opposite of each other: the president is or is not in a dominant position to affect the systemic agenda. Yet these studies do not consider explicitly the possibility that policy may affect the agenda-setting process, even though variation by policy typically affects political processes (Lowi 1972). Perhaps the range of policies examined by Baumgartner and Jones (1993), Kingdon (1984), and Cohen (1995) facilitates influence, whereas those policies examined by Edwards and Wood (1999) and Wood and Peake (1998) do not. Although these scholars do not explicitly recognize variance by policy area, nor justify their policy choices along these lines, it is likely that presidential influence over media attention varies by policy area (see also Flemming, Wood, and Bohte 1999). So that we may bridge the two competing camps of agenda-setting research, we select a range of policies based on a clearly conceived policy typology. By selecting a set of policies that vary by clear characteristics, we may be able to draw generalizations about which policies presidents may successfully influence through agenda setting.

#### *Policy Area*

The dynamics of agenda setting are contingent upon the issues under investigation (Edwards and Wood 1999, Flemming, Wood, and Bohte 1999). So that we may account for variation in policy area and ensure that we have a range of policies with which to analyze our expectations, we select three distinct policy areas from Gormley's (1986) salience-complexity policy typology. Moreover, we select policies that have not been explored by past research, so that we may build upon the existing body of evidence.<sup>3</sup>

Gormley (1986) argues that policy areas vary by salience and complexity, producing different incentives for actors to participate in policy debates. Policies that are salient push elected leaders to respond to public concern or face electoral consequences. A policy area's salience typically varies over time, but has the potential to affect a sizeable portion of the general population (Gormley 1986, 598). Because salience is dynamic, some policies will likely vary in their level of salience over time.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, presidents are most likely to affect media attention to a policy that falls into Gormley's salient category, because these are policy areas to which media are most likely to devote attention. Salient issues, by their very nature, should be seen as relevant by large audiences, and thus more newsworthy (Graber 2001). Technically complex issues encourage politicians to shun public leadership, and instead use the guidance of policy experts to inform their decisions. Complexity requires "specialized knowledge and training" (Gormley

1986, 598) to understand, after all, and is static over time. Complex issues dissuade presidential influence over the systemic agenda in part because presidents will likely not talk about them in the first place.

We have selected three policies that fit into Gormley's (1986) salience and complexity typology. First, civil rights policy, being salient yet not complex, encourages action from presidents. Civil rights policy is not complex because it is relatively easy to understand. Typically, one does not need "technical expertise" to consider race in a college application, for example. If an applicant falls into a preferred minority category, then the admissions staff will consider race as part of the application.<sup>5</sup> Civil rights policy is also salient because citizens usually have an opinion about it, whether voting rights, busing, or affirmative action (Page and Shapiro 1992, 70), and it concerns a sizeable portion of the population (Gormley 1986). Hence, the media are likely to focus on salient issues, as they provide the best opportunity for the media to appeal to a sizeable portion of the public and most easily increase their ratings. Because civil rights policy is salient yet uncomplicated, presidents should be able to affect media attention to it.

Second, being salient, yet complex, clean air policy provides mixed incentives for presidential leadership. Complexity encourages bureaucrats to implement, and presidents and legislators to adopt, air pollution regulations beyond the public's gaze. One must have substantial training and expertise to know, for example, whether emissions from an oil refinery off the coast of southern California exceed federal and regional clean air standards for carbon and sulfur dioxide. Technical debates like these are not attractive to public discourse. Yet the level of pollution in the air affects a sizeable portion of the population and therefore is salient (Gormley 1986), even though environmental policies follow episodic cycles of attention (Downs 1972). Although the public consistently favors environmental protection, it is rarely intensely in favor of it (Dunlap 1989), allowing politicians to ignore the environment if public concern is low. When environmental policy is salient to the public, presidents have incentives to discuss, adopt, and encourage the implementation of clean air regulations. Because presidential leadership on issues often depends on a lack of prior media attention (Peake 2001), the episodic salience of clean air policy may provide presidents with an opportunity to increase the media's attention to clean air policy, in spite of its complexity.

Third, the farm program is not salient, yet it is complex. Farm policy is not usually salient because changes in government payments to farmers rarely affect consumer prices substantially.<sup>6</sup> Agriculture is a complex industry, in which farmers not only have to make decisions about fertilizers and crop production, but also about if and how much payment to accept from the government for their commodities. Farm policy requires experts to set government payment levels, calculate future target prices, and assess the policy's potential impact on the economy. Being a technically complex (Meier 1995, 134) yet not salient policy, it is unlikely that most presidents will dedicate attention to farm policy, presidential attention necessary to affect media attention to it. When presidents do attend to farm policy their agenda influence is likely to be negligible.

*A Model of Presidential Agenda-Setting*

Presidential attention is our primary independent variable. Theoretically speaking, the president may have influence over others' attention to policy issues because the president is the central figure in American politics. On the other hand, presidents have much difficulty competing with the many actors who can command the attention of the public or Congress. Even though the weight of the quantitative evidence holds that presidential attention to issues only marginally affects the systemic agenda, we leave open the possibility that the president is an adept agenda setter, that congressional attention or media attention to a policy may affect presidential attention, that the relationships between the institutions are reciprocal, or that no relationships exist at all.

Media attention to a policy issue is our primary dependent variable. Being able to influence the systemic agenda and then "expand the scope of conflict" is an enormous asset for presidents. Influencing what the public thinks about arguably increases the president's likelihood of success in Congress, according to the "going public" model. If he is successful influencing the public, the president must first affect media attention to a policy issue. Of course, media attention to an issue may itself attract attention from either the president or Congress. The media may also report on events that require a presidential or congressional response. We account for these reciprocal relationships in our analysis.

Congress influences the systemic agenda at times (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Edwards and Wood 1999; Peake 2001). Legislative entrepreneurs can frame issues and publicize them through congressional committees or other means, potentially affecting other institutions' attention to those issues. Hence, we treat congressional attention as a control variable, one that is not central to the president's ability to affect the systemic agenda, but which may nevertheless influence presidential or media attention to that policy issue.

Finally, the political environment within which presidents govern may affect their ability to affect the systemic agenda. To be consistent with our parsimonious methodology (see below), we account for the president's political environment with his job approval ratings. Typically, presidents give more speeches when they are popular (Hager and Sullivan 1994), which gives them more opportunities to reach an often disinterested and disengaged citizenry. Popular presidents also have success affecting public opinion (Page and Shapiro 1985), so that

*An increase in a president's approval ratings should increase the likelihood that the president will be able to increase media attention to an issue.*

In sum, our analysis of presidential influence over the systemic agenda models three institutional and one exogenous control variables. So that we may bridge the two competing camps of agenda-setting scholars, moreover, we select a range of policies based on a clearly conceived policy typology. Our aim extends beyond the ability of presidents just to affect the systemic agenda, i.e., set the media's agenda. If we find that presidents have difficulty increasing media atten-

tion to policy issues, then the argument that presidents typically expand the scope of conflict to bolster their efforts in Congress may not be valid in the context of the “going public” argument.

#### DATA AND METHODS

##### *Presidential Attention*

We measure presidential statements on policy as the number of pages in the *Public Papers of the Presidents* devoted per month to civil rights, clean air, or agriculture policy. Each volume of the *Public Papers* has a subject index from which we compiled a list of key words related to each policy area (see Appendix). We then reviewed each entry to ensure that each page related to either civil rights, clean air, or agriculture policy. Counting pages allows differentiation between a brief mention of a policy (that may take one page) and a concerted effort by presidents to make a policy point (an address consisting of multiple pages). Coding pages, therefore, is appropriate given the importance our argument places on presidential attention to specific policies.<sup>7</sup> We code spoken words and written documents, both of which are public statements. We include national speeches, such as the State of the Union, which are most likely to be heard by the public and reported by the media (Cohen 1995) and minor speeches that are typically not televised. We code press conferences as well because presidents use them as a forum for expressing their policy positions (Eshbaugh-Soha 2003; Grossman and Kumar 1981).<sup>8</sup>

##### *The Systemic Agenda*

The systemic agenda is represented by media attention to policy issues. One way to measure this is by counting the number of magazines and other periodicals pertaining to a policy issue (see Baumgartner and Jones 1993). The number of articles listed in the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* devoted to policy areas each month<sup>9</sup> is our measure of media attention to a policy issue.<sup>10</sup> Each volume of the *Reader's Guide* has subject headings from which we compiled a list of key words related to each policy area (see Appendix). Media attention also represents the probability that the public is attentive to an issue because the public tends to be more thoughtful of an issue during months or years when the media cover the issue (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). More articles published on an issue indicate that the public will be aware of that issue, meaning that we are also justified in making claims about the public's reaction to presidential attention to policy issues (see Edwards, Mitchell, and Welch 1995).

##### *Congressional Attention*

Congress may determine its own reasons for supporting or opposing presidential positions, independent of media or presidential attention to an issue. Indeed, much legislation is congressionally based, with many major pieces of leg-

isolation originating and evolving in congressional committee hearings (Jones 1994). Congressional attention could limit the president's influence over the systemic agenda, or it could actually drive the media's attention to the issue. Hence, more congressional hearings should increase congressional influence over the systemic agenda. The Congressional Information Service (CIS) provides a measure of congressional attentiveness to specific policies. We examine the number of days Congress spends in committee hearings on a policy area, consistent with previous research (Edwards and Wood 1999; Flemming, Wood, and Bohte 1999), with one month as the unit of analysis. Key words used to identify the number of hearing days for each policy area are listed in the Appendix.

### *Presidential Approval*

The president's standing with the public has the potential to affect the relationships between presidential, media, and congressional attention to public policies. Popular presidents are more likely to affect the public's opinion on an issue (Page and Shapiro 1985). Moreover, Congress is more likely to listen to popular presidents (Neustadt 1990) and the news media may pay more attention to a president who has the support of the American public. We include the monthly average of Gallup's presidential approval ratings as an exogenous variable in our models, with the idea that the variable represents the political context that may condition the success of presidential appeals.

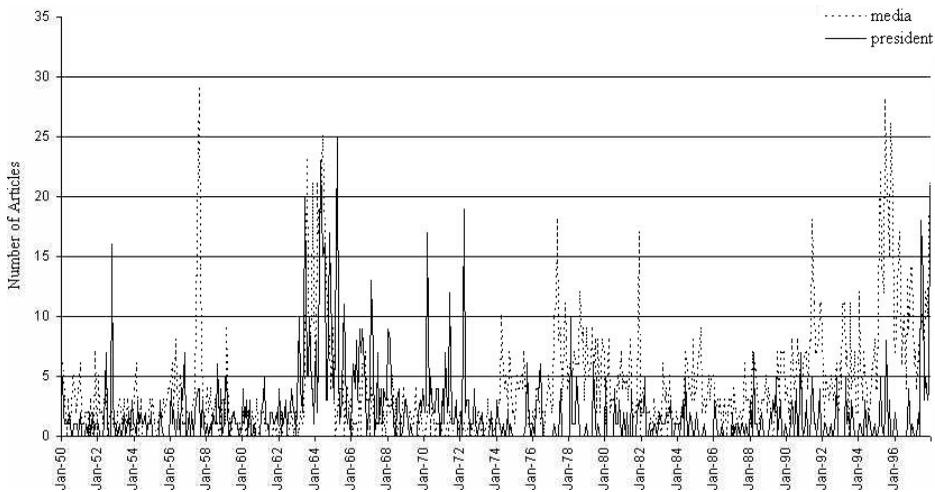
### *Time Period*

We examine the impact that presidential attention may have on the systemic agenda over the second half of the twentieth century, from 1950-98. We begin our analysis in 1950 in part because most analyses of presidential speeches begin in 1949 or later (Hager and Sullivan 1994; Kernell 1997). Although speeches became an important part of the president's governing strategy during the Franklin Roosevelt administration (1933-45), presidents did not consistently use them until the beginning of the television age in presidential politics, roughly 1950. Moreover, the key exogenous variable in our analysis, presidential approval ratings, is not available consistently by month until around 1950. We also truncate the clean air policy model at 1968 because clean air policy was not a policy of substantial federal interest until the late 1960s. Even though domestic farm policy is clearly less important during the first than the second half of our time period, we analyze it over the entire time series because it is periodically important to Congress.

### *Statistical Methods*

We test our hypotheses using Vector Autoregression (VAR) methodology. VAR (Freeman, Williams, and Lin 1989; Simms 1980) helps us evaluate the causal directions of the relationships between presidential, media, and congressional attention to the issues, while controlling for the context represented by presiden-

FIGURE 1  
*Presidential and Media Attention to Civil Rights Policy, 1950-1998*



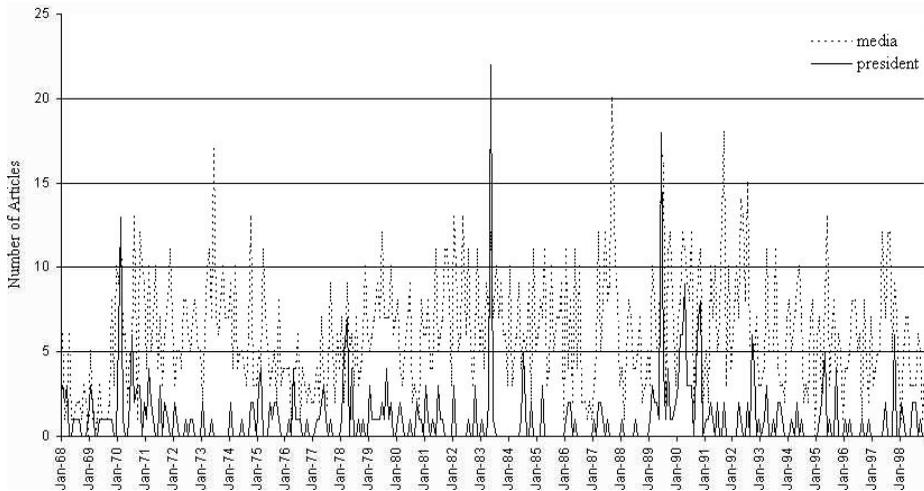
tial approval. We select VAR (instead of other causal modeling alternatives, such as three-stage least squares) because we want to examine the determinants of institutional attention without making our variables a priori exogenous. We do not impose parameter restrictions and identify a unidirectional equation system because we are unsure theoretically who influences whom. Because of this, the most stringent test for presidential influence on the systemic agenda allows for the plausibility that media or congressional attention determines presidential attention to the various issues.

VAR is a multivariate extension of the Granger (1969) approach to causal inference. Each dependent variable is regressed on lagged values of itself and other dependent variables in the system. VAR provides an excellent control for history, by taking into account several lags of all of the endogenous variables in the system.<sup>11</sup> We determined lag lengths empirically using methods based on Simms (1980).<sup>12</sup> VAR evaluates relationships by conducting joint hypothesis tests for the blocks of lags associated with each variable. In sum, the VAR model is essentially a series of regression equations where each endogenous variable in the system is set equal to lagged values of itself and all of the other variables in the system.

#### FINDINGS

This section assesses the degree to which presidents are able to affect media attention to civil rights, clean air, and domestic farm policy issues. One of the conditions that we suspect must be present for presidential influence is attention to each policy area. The time plots in Figures 1, 2, and 3 show not only variation in attention across policy areas, but also periodic and perhaps sufficient attention to

FIGURE 2  
*Presidential and Media Attention to Clean Air Policy, 1968-1998*

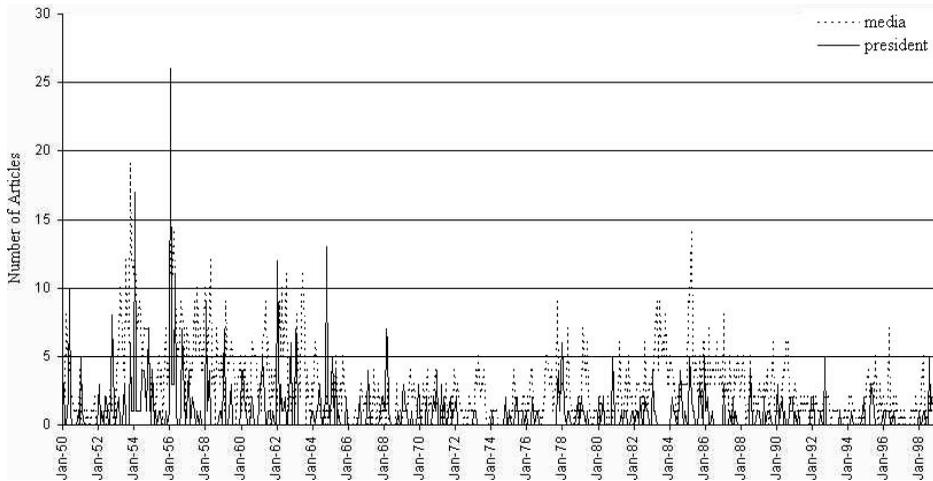


civil rights and clean air policies. Because the media do not always cover civil rights and clean air policies (according to Figures 1 and 2), i.e., because these policy issues are not always high in prior media attention, presidents should increase the media's attention to these issues, consistent with our expectations. Nevertheless, presidential attention to domestic farm policy, however frequent in the 1950s, has waned considerably in recent years, suggesting a limited presidential role in affecting attention to this issue. Even though we notice that it is low in prior media attention, we do not expect influence because presidents do not speak about it much anymore and it is not a salient policy area according to Gormley's (1986) typology.

Our VAR findings are straightforward as presented in Tables 1, 2, and 3. The Moving Average Response (MAR) graphs supplement our interpretation of the table results. Regarding civil rights policy (Table 1 and Figure 4), presidents have had mixed success increasing media attention. On the one hand, presidential attention to civil rights policy causes media attention to civil rights policy (in Granger's 1969 approach to causal inference) at a lag of one month (Table 1). The MAR graph confirms this relationship. There is a slight positive, short-lived response when presidential attention to civil rights increases by one standard deviation.<sup>13</sup> The relationship is reciprocal, however, as media attention to civil rights policy also causes presidential attention. Additionally, Congress is primarily responsive to both the president and the media on civil rights, and does not influence either.

Much of the presidential leadership of, and responsiveness to, media attention to civil rights policy is a function of a few key presidential administrations.<sup>14</sup> Specifically, President Johnson's attention to civil rights policy causes media

FIGURE 3  
*Presidential and Media Attention to Farm Policy, 1950-1998*



attention to civil rights. This is not surprising given Johnson’s dedication to civil rights legislation in his public speeches and statements. Gerald Ford was also able to increase media attention to civil rights policy, perhaps due to his vocal opposition to busing during the mid 1970s. Finally, whereas Kennedy responded to and led media attention to civil rights policy, Ronald Reagan responded to the media’s

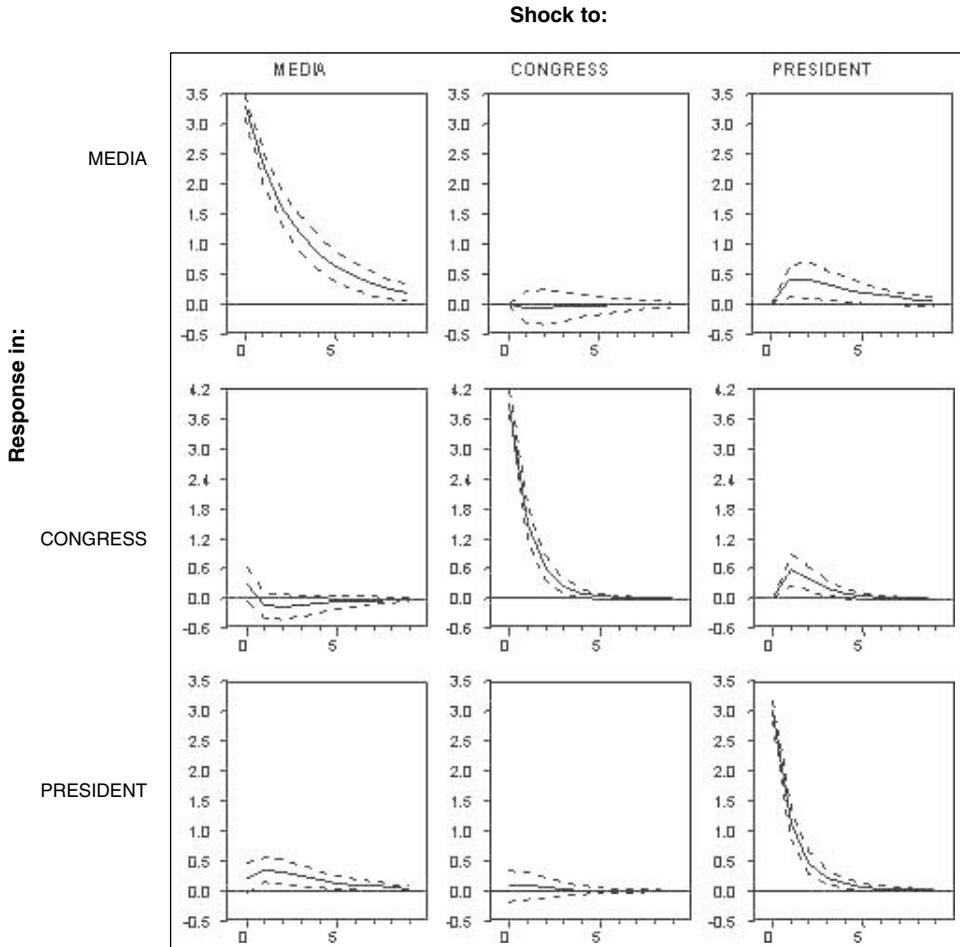
TABLE 1  
*Block Exogeneity Tests for Presidential, Congressional, and Media Attention to Civil Rights Policy, 1950-1998*

<i>Independent Variable</i>		<i>Dependent Variable</i>	<i>p-value</i>
President	→	President	0.000
Congress			0.582
Media	→		0.004
President	→	Congress	0.000
Congress	→		0.000
Media	→		0.015
President	→	Media	0.003
Congress			0.571
Media	→		0.000

N = 587

Presidential Approval is included as an exogenous variable in this system, and it is only significant when the president is the dependent variable. The arrows indicate that the independent variable causes (in Granger’s 1969 scheme) the dependent variable at a significance level of .05 at a lag of one month.

FIGURE 4  
*Moving Average Responses for Civil Rights Policy*



“Media” is monthly articles in the *Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature* related to civil rights policy. “President” is the monthly number of pages devoted to civil rights policy issues in the *Public Papers of the Presidents*. “Congress” is the monthly hearings days devoted to civil rights policy in the *Congressional Information Service* committee hearings database. Each chart represents the response by the row variable over 10 months to a one-standard deviation shock in the column variable. Dashed lines are 95% confidence intervals.

interest in civil rights policy issues, particularly the 1984 extension to the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which Reagan eventually signed.

Clean air policy provides additional evidence that the president can affect the systemic agenda (see Table 2 and Figure 5). Presidential attention to clean air policy causes the media’s attention to it. Unlike civil rights policy, media attention

TABLE 2  
*Block Exogeneity Tests for Presidential, Congressional, and  
 Media Attention to Clean Air Policy, 1968-1998*

<i>Independent Variable</i>		<i>Dependent Variable</i>	<i>p-value</i>
President	→	President	0.000
Congress			0.122
Media			0.379
President		Congress	0.055
Congress	→		0.000
Media			0.107
President	→	Media	0.030
Congress			0.057
Media	→		0.000

N = 373

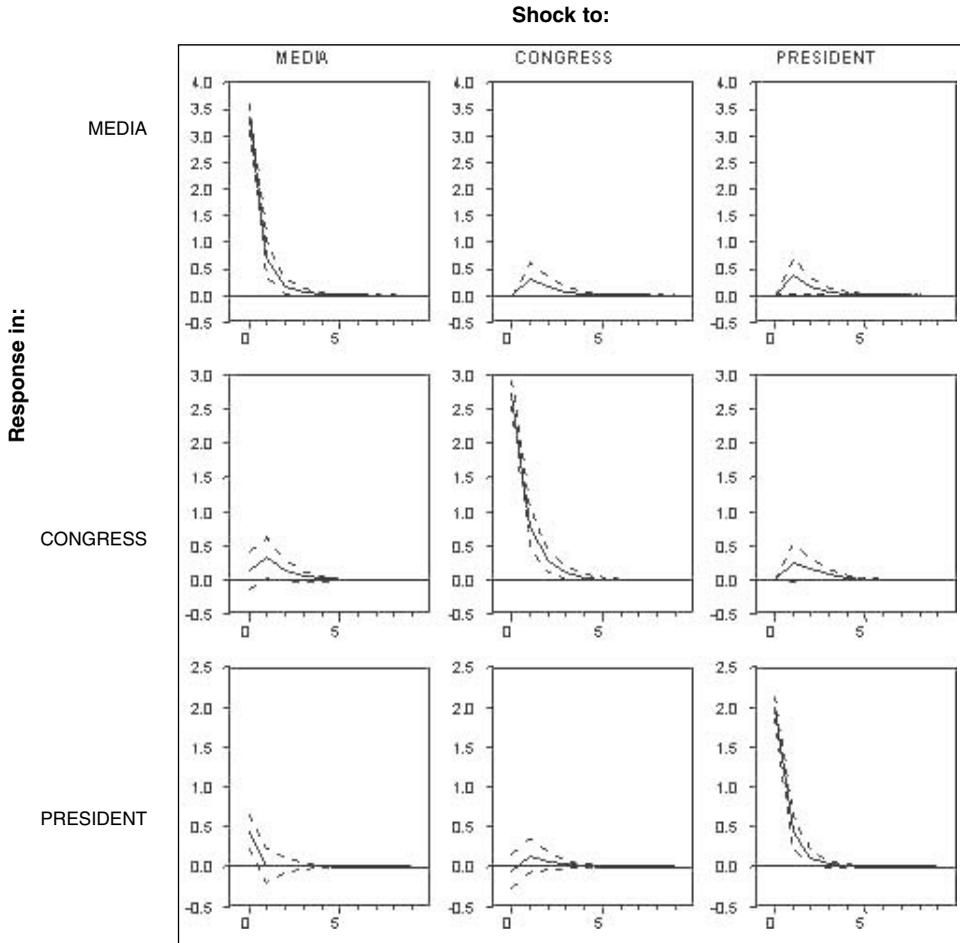
Presidential Approval is included as an exogenous variable in this system, and it is only significant when the president is the dependent variable. The arrows indicate that the independent variable causes (in Granger's 1969 scheme) the dependent variable at a significance level of .05 at a lag of one month.

does not reciprocally influence presidential attention to clean air. Theoretically this is expected, as clean air policy, unlike other salient policies (like civil rights policy), is episodic in nature (Downs 1972), and presidents are best situated to affect media attention to the issue when it is not already newsworthy. According to our results, presidents have been able to seize the clean air policy agenda as their own before the media could again begin the air pollution debate. Both President George H. W. Bush (1989-93), who made clean air regulations a top priority of his administration, and President Clinton, who often raised the air pollution issue in criticism of congressional budget cuts related to environmental protections, had specific impacts on media attention to clean air policy. Nevertheless, the president's impact on media attention to clean air policy is particularly short lived according to Figure 5. We attribute this finding to the complexity of clean air policy. A complex issue is simply less likely to sustain media and public attention, even if it is also salient.

Surprisingly, presidents have some influence over institutional attention to domestic farm policy. Attention to farm policy is typically a product of institutional inertia, whereby previous attention to agriculture causes current attention. Yet, as was the case in civil rights and clean air policies, presidential attention causes congressional attention to domestic farm policy. Table 3 also suggests (at a lower level of statistical significance) a reciprocal relationship between congressional and presidential attention to farm policy.

Presidents are not successful increasing media attention to farm policy, according to the Granger F-tests in Table 3. As evidenced in the MAR graph, rather, the president is highly responsive to increased media attention to farm policy (Figure

FIGURE 5  
*Moving Average Responses for Clean Air Policy*



“Media” is monthly articles in the *Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature* related to civil rights policy. “President” is the monthly number of pages devoted to civil rights policy issues in the *Public Papers of the Presidents*. “Congress” is the monthly hearings days devoted to civil rights policy in the *Congressional Information Service* committee hearings database. Each chart represents the response by the row variable over 10 months to a one-standard deviation shock in the column variable. Dashed lines are 95% confidence intervals.

6). This might reflect the nature of media attention to this issue. The media become interested when natural disasters (e.g. droughts) affect farmers, which then requires a presidential response. Indeed, only President Kennedy affected media attention to domestic farm policy, while Presidents Eisenhower, Nixon, and Ford were highly responsive to the media’s attention to agriculture policy.

TABLE 3  
*Block Exogeneity Tests for Presidential, Congressional, and  
 Media Attention to Domestic Farm Policy, 1950-1998*

<i>Independent Variable</i>		<i>Dependent Variable</i>	<i>p-value</i>
President		President	0.081
Congress			0.075
Media	→		0.003
President	→	Congress	0.028
Congress	→		0.000
Media	→		0.013
President		Media	0.124
Congress			0.062
Media	→		0.000

N = 587

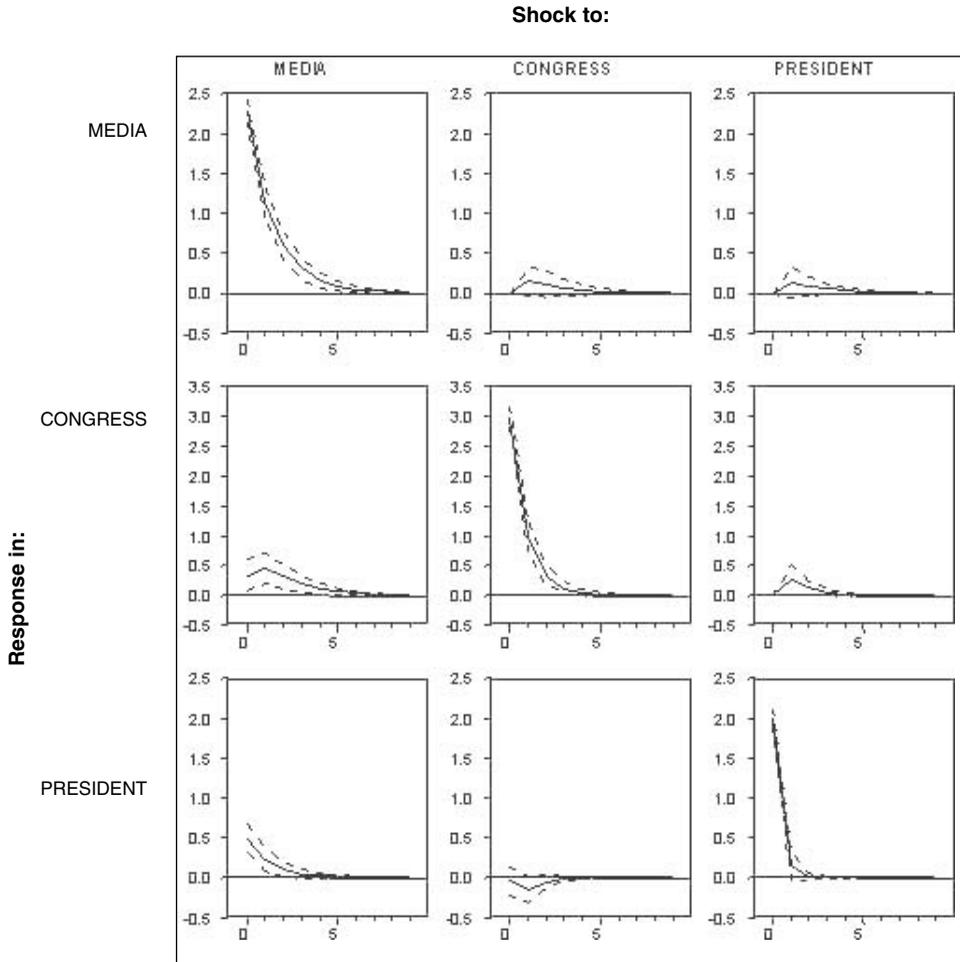
Presidential Approval is included as an exogenous variable in this system, and it is only significant when the president is the dependent variable. The arrows indicate that the independent variable causes (in Granger's 1969 scheme) the dependent variable at a significance level of .05 at a lag of one month.

As we have theorized, the nature of domestic farm policy limits presidential leadership of the systemic agenda. Because domestic farm policy is not characterized as a salient policy, the media, and therefore the public, is unlikely to pay attention to federal price support and surplus programs except in the most unusual of agricultural recessions. Moreover, the complexity of agriculture policy typically means that experts, not the president or the media, will debate farm policy outside of public view. We find support for these expectations in Table 3 and Figure 6.

#### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We set out in this paper to test the relationship between presidential attention and its impact on the systemic agenda in three policy areas. Principally, we find some impact of presidential attention on the systemic agenda, consistent with the expectations of the classic model of agenda setting. Yet we also find variation by policy type. When a policy falls under Gormley's salience category, presidents typically have influence, as is the case with civil rights and clean air policies. The media attended to these issues only episodically, however, further enhancing the opportunity for presidential leadership of the systemic agenda. This is consistent with quantitative research that establishes a low level of prior media attention as an important condition for presidential agenda-setting influence (Peake 2001). Previous quantitative research that focused on consistently salient issues (e.g. the economy or crime) has found only marginal influence (Edwards and Wood 1999; Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake n.d.).

FIGURE 6  
 Moving Average Responses for Domestic Farm Policy



“Media” is monthly articles in the *Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature* related to civil rights policy. “President” is the monthly number of pages devoted to civil rights policy issues in the *Public Papers of the Presidents*. “Congress” is the monthly hearings days devoted to civil rights policy in the *Congressional Information Service* committee hearings database. Each chart represents the response by the row variable over 10 months to a one-standard deviation shock in the column variable. Dashed lines are 95% confidence intervals.

Additionally, complex issues frustrate presidential attempts to influence media attention because presidents often find the bully pulpit an ineffective forum from which to explain sophisticated policies (Corrigan 2000). The results suggest, however that as long as the issue is also salient, such as with clean air,

complexity primarily limits the length of time that the president may sustain his influence over the systemic agenda.

Policy area, as we demonstrate, is an important predictor of when presidents may influence the systemic agenda and when presidents speak. Combined with previous research on presidential influence over media attention, this finding suggests the following relationship between speeches and presidential influence over the systemic policy agenda. Presidents must devote significant attention to an issue to affect media attention to it, a condition required for presidential leadership of the systemic agenda (Edwards and Wood 1999). Presidents speak more on issues classified as salient, just as they influence media attention to these issues more than those that do not fall into Gormley's salient category. Therefore, presidential attention and policy type covary—policy type influences the president's decision to speak about an issue, which also affects his chances for increasing the media's attention to the issue. The president's political environment—modeled as the president's approval ratings—only influences the domestic farm policy model, and does not typically increase his likelihood for agenda-setting influence. Moreover, the effects of presidential leadership on issues vary by administration: presidents who devote substantial attention to a policy area that is not previously newsworthy have the best chance of increasing the media's attention to that policy issue.

Even though we find some support that presidents affect the systemic agenda, it presents an important caveat for presidents who hope to parlay increased attention to an issue into legislative support for that issue. At most, presidents have about three months to use heightened media attention to civil rights policy to their advantage in Congress (Figure 4). Just as presidents act strategically and may only "go public" when the public's issue position is closer to theirs than it is to Congress's or the status quo (Canes-Wrone 2001b), presidents must also be strategic in their timing of public speeches to influence legislation, because most legislative battles last many months. Ronald Reagan may not have been successful in 1981, for example, if he had only given one national address on the economy and then left Congress to act on its own. Reagan used a strategy of repeated efforts at public leadership. Recent research suggests that these "follow up" speeches helped Reagan maintain public attention to the economy over several months and use it to influence his success over economic policy (Peake and Eshbaugh-Soha 2003).

With that said, increasing media attention to a policy issue in the short term is meaningless if the public does not already agree with the president. Actually moving public opinion is a much more difficult mountain to climb (Edwards and Eshbaugh-Soha 2001), even though it may be a presidential goal when going public (Collier and Cohen 1999). Moreover, variation by policy type indicates that scholars cannot assume that because presidents have affected media attention on one policy area, they will necessarily do so on another.

Nevertheless, our results do not preclude the feasibility of a "going public" strategy. Future research must examine the linkages between presidential statements, the systemic agenda, and a president's legislative success. We have pro-

vided some preliminary evidence that presidential speeches may “expand the scope of conflict” by increasing media attention to a policy issue, which may then increase a president’s legislative success on some policy issues. But this paper is one of many projects needed to ascertain the extent to which going public—as Kernell conceives it—is a feasible governing strategy for presidents. Future research must examine more closely a broad range of policy-specific national addresses. These addresses should have the greatest effect, according to Kernell’s model, on media attention to an issue. Moreover, if going public is found lacking as a governing strategy, then future research must also solve the conundrum that surrounds the president’s quest to use public speeches to increase his success in Congress.

APPENDIX  
*Keywords Index*

	Reader’s Guide	Public Papers of the Presidents	CIS Index
Civil Rights	Desegregation; Racial Discrimination; Blacks (Negroes); Discrimination; Segregation; Civil Rights; Busing; Integration	Civil Rights; Desegregation; Discrimination; Integration; Voting Rights; Segregation; Racism; Affirmative Action; Busing	Civil Rights; Discrimination; Desegregation; Segregation; Voting Rights; Affirmative Action; Integration; Busing
Clean Air	Acid Rain; Air Pollution; Clean Air; Clean Air Act; Emissions Credits; Smog	Air Pollution; Clean Air; Clean Air Act; Conservation; Environment; Environmental Protection Agency; Pollution; Pollution Prevention; Regulation	Air Pollution; Clean Air
Agriculture	Agriculture; Agricultural Administration; Farm Legislation; Price Supports	Agriculture; Agricultural Adjustment Act; Butter; Corn; Cotton; Wheat; Farms; Farming; Price Supports	Agriculture; Agricultural Act; Farm Payments; Price Supports

*Notes*

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<sup>1</sup>Recent scholarship has adopted Kernell's argument—that presidents affect the public through their rhetoric, which increases their success in Congress—to explain the impact of the president's speeches on his legislative success, but only assumes that presidents can increase media attention to an issue through their rhetoric. When Canes-Wrone (2001a) built her model, for example, she assumed that presidents can influence public attention to an issue; she actually finds that media attention or public importance data have no statistically significant impacts on the president's yearly budgetary success. Barrett (2004) makes a similar assumption. These claims are much like those made by agenda-setting scholars before them, who argue that presidents are likely to affect the national policy agenda, without providing systematic evidence that they do so (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Kingdon 1984).

<sup>2</sup>For reasons discussed in our data section, our clean air policy series begins in 1968.

<sup>3</sup>Education, crime, and the economy are "salient" domestic policies examined by previous research (Edwards and Wood 1999; Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake n.d.).

<sup>4</sup>For instance, Gormley (1986, 601) argues that "working conditions and terms of employment are also highly salient," even though employment tends only to be covered by the media when it is unemployment. Furthermore, policies are salient "when a necessity is imperiled—the air we breathe, the water we drink," but environmental issues rarely make a top-five list of the most important issues during a presidential election. In short, we borrow from Gormley's (1986) typology in that we use his basic types, but recognize that the media does not always cover these policies throughout our time frame.

<sup>5</sup>Of course, there are aspects of civil rights policy that may be complex. But in the context of a typology, complexity is a relative, not absolute concept. Hence, civil rights policy is less complex than clean air policy; for the purposes of our research, it is an uncomplicated policy area.

<sup>6</sup>This is not to say that agriculture policy is not salient to certain politically relevant constituencies (e.g. those from farm states). Rather, agriculture policy rarely achieves national salience, especially in comparison to the environment or civil rights. According to Gallup's "Most Important Problem" series, for example, farm policy has been important to more than 4% of the American public only once since 1956.

<sup>7</sup>Coding paragraphs is another method, although the number of paragraphs is only marginally different from the number of pages devoted to a subject (Barrett 2004).

<sup>8</sup>To avoid counting superficial statements or proclamations related to a policy area, we do not count statements that are one-half page or less.

<sup>9</sup>Another measure of media attention in the agenda-setting literature is network evening news coverage archived at Vanderbilt University. These data have some advantages over magazine articles, but are unavailable earlier than the 1960s and are therefore unhelpful for our time frame. The seminal quantitative work on agenda setting, Baumgartner and Jones' (1993) *Agendas and Instability in American Politics*, used *Reader's Guide* data for similar reasons.

<sup>10</sup>A sample of our *Reader's Guide* data for civil rights policy correlates with a sample of *New York Times* Index stories on civil rights at Pearson's  $r = 0.61$  (<http://www.policyagendas.org>). Moreover, a visual inspection of Gallup's MIP data shows a visual correlation with our media attention data by policy area. The Pearson's  $r$  between media attention to civil rights, and the percentage of respondents who noted that race relations was the most important problem facing the nation, is 0.57

<sup>11</sup>History plays a large role in the dynamics of agenda setting (Edwards and Wood 1999; Wood and Peake 1998). VAR modeling accounts for the historical dynamics of endogenous variables (Freeman, Williams, and Lin 1989) and provides an internal control for history by including multiple lags of each variable in all equations so that VAR disturbances are random with respect to time. Thus, problems of specification error, such as the exclusion of presidential activity not accounted for in our attention measures (presidential initiatives presented to Congress) are of minor concern.

<sup>12</sup>An AIC criterion test deemed a one-month lag appropriate after testing lags of 1 through 10.

<sup>13</sup>The MARs are simulated responses (row variable) to one-standard-deviation increases in the column variable; they indicate the degree and direction of a response. The MAR's use standardized data and the graphs indicate that a one-standard-deviation increase in media attention leads to a variable response by the president. Substantively, this means that five articles in a month leads to one to two more page mentions by the president in a month.

<sup>14</sup>We make note of a few statistically significant presidential-media relationships, but do not include tables by administration due to the space required to do so. With VAR, moreover, it is not

appropriate to include presidential control variables in the model. We also recognize that some of the relationships stated for one-term presidents are suggestive because they do not meet the typical minimum N for VAR analyses: 50.

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