The Politics of Presidential Agendas

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Past research holds that if presidents are to increase their success in Congress, they must set the policy agenda in their favor. But what determines the propensity of presidents to propose or support different policies? Because presidents influence the agenda-setting stage of the policy process, presidents develop their yearly domestic policy agendas in anticipation of each policy's success or failure in Congress. After all, presidents want to emphasize their strengths to achieve their goal of policy enactment in Congress. From this assumption, I devise a typology of long-term and important presidential policies, and argue that political limitations and fiscal constraints influence the president's yearly domestic policy agenda. I show that presidents offer different types of policies as part of their yearly domestic agendas given Congressional makeup and the federal budget deficit.

The president's agenda is of immense importance to American politics. Several argue that presidents have substantial influence over the agenda-setting stage of the policy process (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Cobb and Elder 1983; Kingdon 1995; Schattsneider 1960). Others maintain that the way presidents package their agenda explains much of their eventual success or failure in Congress (Bond and Fleisher 1990; Edwards 1989; Jones 1994; Light 1999; Neustadt 1990). The implication of these works is that presidents anticipate the contextual environment and, when it is favorable, will be successful in Congress. Edwards (1989: 146) argues that the president may be successful given a strategically packaged agenda and a favorable contextual environment, while the "the president's greatest influence over policy comes from the agenda he pursues and the way it is packaged" (Bond and Fleisher 1990: 230).

Despite scholarly consensus that agenda setting is important to American politics and presidential-Congressional relations, previous research relies on the assertion that agenda setting is important to presidential relations with Congress (Bond and Fleisher 1990; Edwards 1989), without providing empirical support for if and how presidents strategically package their domestic policy agendas. Indeed, these works do not answer one important question: what determines the president's propensity to propose or support different types of policies?

Two scholars have explored the determinants of the president's policy agenda. Light (1999) notes that information, expertise, and political capital are a premium in the president's agenda decisions, and that presidents have the most potential to shape the legislative agenda early in their tenure. He shows how these factors influence the types of policies on the president's agenda, without confirming his inferences through hypothesis testing (see King 1993). Peterson (1990) also studies the president's agenda. He analyzes the contextual environment and its impact on whether presidents prefer large or small, and new or old policies. Although he finds that the Congressional environment is important in the president's agenda decisions, seemingly relevant variables such as the federal budget deficit are statistically insignificant.

The underlying premise of agenda-setting research is that the president should be able to package policy priorities so as to increase the likelihood of their adoption. Doing so may require presidents to assess the probability that a proposal will be successful depending on contextual circumstances, such as Congressional makeup. Nevertheless, Peterson (1990: 207-08) finds little impact of the contextual environment on presidential policies, bringing into question the conventional wisdom that presidents can package their agendas strategically to increase their success in Congress (Bond and Fleisher 1990; Edwards 1989). With this in mind, I rely on agenda-setting and anticipative reactions theories to argue that fiscal and political factors should affect the content of the president's yearly domestic policy agenda from 1949-2000. Lacking any readily available data source to test this argument, I also advance a new policy typology that categorizes domestic policies across both time and importance dimensions. I use the number of yearly policies for each policy type (*major, minor, incremental,* and *meteoric*) as dependent variables in four separate analyses. To account for the yearly changes in the political environment, I offer a time-series analysis of several hypotheses. I argue that presidents seek to optimize their domestic policy preferences, and because their success depends on broad legislative cooperation, presidents anticipate the reaction of Congress

and support or propose different policies accordingly in their yearly domestic policy agendas.[1]

THEORY

Three areas of theory—presidential goals, agenda setting, and anticipative reactions—provide a useful framework for discussing the determinants of the president's domestic policy agenda,[2] including a justification for why a time-importance policy typology is useful for assessing the president's strategy in determining his yearly domestic policy agenda.

Presidential Goals

The guiding force behind the president's actions while in office is goal achievement. Presidents essentially have three goals—policy enactment, reelection, and historical recognition (Light 1999)—that they hope to achieve while in office. Of primary concern to presidents when they submit their domestic policy agenda is the enactment of that agenda. Although reelection and historical recognition may influence the policies presidents propose or support, presidents need a policy record on which to run and be reelected, and by which they may be remembered historically.[3] Reelection and historical recognition are also term-specific goals—presidents pursue reelection during their first term and strive for a legacy in their second. Policy enactment pervades the president's entire tenure and helps presidents in the achievement of their other goals.

Agenda-Setting

To meet their policy goals, presidents need to emphasize an important source of political power, influence over the policy agenda. Scholars have long echoed E. E. Schattschneider's (1960) proclamation that presidents are key actors in expanding the scope of conflict and affecting the "definition of alternatives." Neustadt (1960) agrees when he writes that legislators need priorities from the president. Baumgartner and Jones (1993) also imply that the president's national stature allows him to set the national policy agenda. Similarly, Kingdon (1995: 23) claims that "the president can single handedly set the agendas, not only of people in the executive branch, but also of people in Congress and outside the government." Even though Edwards and Wood (1999) show that presidents have some difficulty setting Congress' agenda across several policy areas, Edwards and Barrett (2000) demonstrate that presidents can secure agenda space for nearly all of their significant initiatives.

Presidents who secure agenda space for their policies tend to increase their policy success in Congress. Covington, Wrighton, and Kinney (1995) show that presidents have greater success on initiatives that are on rather than off their agenda. Edwards and Barrett (2000) find that over 60 percent of the president's initiatives passed either the House or the Senate, even though just 42 percent became law. Clearly, a president's first step in achieving his policy goals is framing the available alternatives. But because the partisan makeup of Congress drives the success of presidential initiatives (Edwards, Barrett, and Peake 1997), presidents must consider the politics of Congress—and the contextual environment—when figuring their yearly domestic policy agendas.

Anticipative Reactions

To optimize policy goal achievement through Congress, presidents must anticipate what impact the contextual environment may have on their eventual legislative success as they support or propose different types of policies. Undoubtedly, "the president's program really (is) presidential," (Peterson 1990: 33), and a president usually only consults with legislators after they decide on a policy's content (58). But according to EOP and Capitol Hill staff, presidents anticipate the likely success of any policy item before they decide to support or campaign actively for it (61). Presidents typically consider Congressional makeup and other contextual factors when they decide to propose different types of policies (Peterson 1990: 208; Rivers and Rose 1985). Acting rationally and strategically, presidents consider those factors that will influence a policy's success and support or propose policies that are most likely to pass Congress.[4] Indeed, the rule of anticipative reactions holds that presidents who face an opportune environment will advocate

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[1] I examine only domestic policies for three reasons. First, both Light (1999) and Peterson (1990: 27), upon whom this project builds, restrict their analyses to domestic policy. Second, there seem to be different factors that explain domestic and foreign policies, with presidents being more successful on foreign policy roll-call votes, at least through the 1980s (Bond and Fleisher 1990), suggesting that perhaps the political and fiscal variables would have different, if any, hypothetical impacts on foreign policies. Third, foreign policy may be more likely to be event-driven (Wood and Peake 1998) than domestic policy, which typically gestates over years in Congress before the president has an opportunity to influence its success or failure (Jones 1994). Foreign policy, or those policies not included in this paper's analysis, includes national security (such as military expenditures or war), foreign aid, and foreign trade.

[2] Anticipative reactions are an important aspect of power across institutions. Anticipated reactions help explain the behavior of many political actors, including Supreme Court Justices (Epstein and Knight 1998; see Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995). Members of Congress also act strategically when interacting with the bureaucracy (Arnold 1979), in anticipation of the public mood (Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995) and "inattentive publics" in their policy decisions (Arnold 1990), and when they select agendas, which in turn shape legislative outcomes (Mouw and MacKuen 1992). Moreover, anticipative reactions explain legislators' reaction to presidential policy overtures (Sullivan 1988, 1991).

[3] Another strategy, used by President Clinton, is to oppose Congressional legislation. Although this strategy may benefit the president's reelection success, such a strategy does not help presidents enact policy.

[4] A note of clarification: I am not arguing that presidents act strategically by supporting policies simply because they will pass Congress. Knowing which policies will succeed is not only difficult months before a vote, but also unlikely because it could require presidents to alter their policy preferences. Covington (1987) shows that presidents rarely act strategically in this sense.

more expansive policies; presidents who face a set of constraints will advocate less expansive legislation.

PRESIDENTIAL POLICY TYPOLOGIES

One way to consider whether presidents react to the contextual environment as they propose their yearly domestic policy agendas is through a policy typology. Scholars commonly use typologies to reduce the specifics of many policies into broad categories. Both Light (1999) and Peterson (1990), for example, group presidential policy initiatives according to size, either large or small, or age, whether new or old. Peterson (1990) uses these policy types as independent variables to explain the level of conflict between the presidency and Congress. Light (1999) uses these categories as dependent variables and shows how policy type varies across presidents' yearly domestic agendas. Light's policy typology allows him to describe the agenda styles of each president.

Light (1993:185) also speculates about another aspect of presidential policies—the long-term dimension—from which he argues that agendas have changed over time: Since Kennedy "the prospects for long-term (domestic) policy have decreased." Consequently, "short-term-itis" means that "presidents may be wise to invest in short-term policy, not only because of electoral pressures and a dwindling supply of long-term proposals, but because of the declining probability that any long-term policy can be successfully implemented, whether in its first year or its tenth" (Light 1999: 276). Light's basic insight into long-term policy suggests a typology with which to test the propensity of presidents to support or propose different policies relative to the contextual environment.

A New Presidential Policy Typology[5]

My reading of "short-term-itis" reveals two dimensions to presidential policies: time and importance. Along the time dimension, *long-term* policies are those that will have a lasting impact regardless of the extent of their impact. They "lead toward more lasting reform" and are "permanent" (Light 1999: 257). Because these policy solutions focus on the length of time it takes to solve a problem, *long-term* policies are not necessarily *important*. A *long-term* policy may be permanent, but the program may not address a pressing societal need. Johnson's proposal for bail reform, for example, was *long-term* in that it permanently altered bail standards and their regulation, but was not a pressing need; it was not deemed important (Mayhew 1991).

The focus of *important* policies is on solving society's "principal" problems. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 is clearly *important* because it sought to remedy years of dis-

crimination by protecting the suffrage of minorities. That the Voting Rights Act is also *long-term* in its permanence suggests that time and importance are distinct yet relevant dimensions of presidential policy. Indeed, *important* policies could also be *short-term* if their intended impact is immediate, or if the government's involvement in the problem is temporary. Another example illustrates the distinction between time and importance policy dimensions. George W. Bush's second tax cut plan used legislation in the form of immediate child credit tax rebates (*short-term* by time) to attack a principal problem (an *important* problem), the state of the economy.[6]

These dimensions assess two important facets of presidential policy. They capture important policies outlined by Mayhew (1991), but also account for the possibility that government may not be actively involved in some important policies over time or that some policies that are not initially important could have a sustained impact on government and society. Moreover, they allow me to test the president's reaction to political and fiscal conditions and assess what affects the president's propensity to propose or support different policies. To account simultaneously for both time and importance dimensions of presidential policy, I define *long-term* and *important* policy features in simple, quantifiable, and replicable terms, and combine them in a policy typology.

Time Dimension. There is a clear time dimension to most policies. Most, if not all presidential requests for legislation propose a time frame for implementation or for funding. *Long-term* policies are permanent or are active at least until another statute, amendment, or court decision overturns them, and those programs with funding for four years or more. *Long-term* policies also include legislation lacking a sunset clause or those bills that have a sunset date that is more than four years away. *Short-term* policies are those bills with funding for or those that expire in less than four years. I code this dimension according to how long the president intends for the item to be policy with four years being the cut-off for a *long-term* or *short-term* or short-term policy.

Four years is a reasonable decision rule for coding the duration of policies. Most policies that advocate significant behavioral change take about four years for policy outputs to conform to statutory objectives (Mazmanian and Sabatier 1989: 279). These are *long-term* policies, consistent with Light's observation that *long-term* policies lead to "more lasting reform." Other, *short-term* policies may achieve conformity earlier, in part because they only require moderate or incremental changes in policy (278-281). Anticipating the difficulties of policy implementation and the time it will take for them to realize the benefits of their *long-term* policy proposals, presidents may be less willing to propose *long-term* policies within a sub optimal political environment,

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[5] I do not argue that this typology is better than the new-old/large-small typology studied by others. This typology simply presents an alternative policy-coding scheme to test the impact that contextual variables have on the propensity for presidents to propose or support agenda policies.

[6] This is one among many examples that demonstrates a policy program may have both time and importance components (see coding decisions below).

but instead advocate *short-term* policies that are easier to pass. In addition, coding at four years similarly weights recent and past proposals. Gary King (1993: 393) wondered if "short-term-itis" might simply be a function of "our necessarily limited memory," the idea that *long-term* policy has declined because we have not yet seen the full extent of recent presidents' policy endeavors. This clear coding rule means that all policies are held to the same standard, and they are not coded one way as they are passed and another way after we know what impact they have had.

Importance Dimension. All policies are not created equally. Some are modest funding increases in a federal agency; others are massive statutes that shift the distribution of income or the number of voting-eligible participants in civil society. Some policies have a greater impact on government and society and require political commitment to become law. Clearly, some policies are more important than others.

I code *important* policies according to their impact on society *or* the amount of money the president requests or Congress authorizes for the policies. When agenda items are costly, they are *important*.[7] Although imperfect, dollar amount is a plausible indicator of an agenda item's potential impact on government and society. A spending increase of $75 Billion, for instance, is more important than an increase of $75 Million simply because the larger increase will have more impact on individuals, the economy, or government spending.

Another aspect of importance is a statute's impact on people or institutions at the time of passage. To code policies that lacked any clear monetary request or authorization, I created my own list of *important* policies based on my interpretation of a policy's importance. I coded a policy as *important* if it affected civil rights, voting rights, or the regulation of society. The Voting Rights Act of 1965, for example, is *important* due to its fundamental impact on minorities and social equality. The line-item veto and a balanced budget amendment have profound constitutional effects on government. Morality policies, such as abortion or desegregation, also have had important effects and were coded as such. *Important* policies finally include the creation of government agencies and departments, as their creation typically coincides with a significant and important shift in governmental policy.[8]

My judgments about non-monetary policies prove consistent with past research that has coded important legislation. In comparison with Edwards, Barrett, and Peake (1997) and Mayhew's (1991) accepted lists of important legislation, I coded only five policies as important that they did not, whereas they coded two policies as important that I did not.[9] At the very least, my coding decisions of non-monetary, *important* policies have high face validity.

Policy Categories. Crossing time with importance aspects of presidential policies produces four policy categories: *major, incremental, meteoric,* and *minor* (see Table 1).[10] This typology is advantageous because it breaks down presidential policies into four exclusive categories. Moreover, it allows for *important* policies that may be temporary and *long-term* legislation that could become *important* after its enactment and implementation. The dimensions also capture most domestic policies for a given year and provide a healthy N unavailable by specific policy area such as education or energy.

Major policy has both *long-term* and *important* components. The line-item veto, Medicare, and the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1970 are *major* policies. They were slated to be active for more than four years and when applicable, had substantial allocation of funds. Presidents are likely to propose or support these policies only when political and fiscal environments are favorable.

Minor policies are *short-term* and *unimportant*. Examples of these are Reagan's 1981 short-term spending cuts and Carter's extension of CETA in 1977. Certainly those who benefited or were hurt would consider these policies *important*. But *minor* policies do not meet my fiscal criterion for importance nor are they slated for more than four years. *Minor* policies are the least expansive of the policy types and should not be affected much by political and fiscal constraints. Nevertheless, presidents might advocate more of these when they face a hostile Congress and a swollen budget deficit.

Incremental policies are *long-term* and *unimportant*. Many of Carter's children's programs—such as Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) expansion, mandatory school lunches, and supplemental food programs—are *incremental*. These programs were given sufficient legislative life (EITC was made permanent in 1978) to be coded *long-term* but were not designated initially to receive significant funding. Presidents who advocate *incremental* policies will face similar difficulties as when they pursue *major* policies. Moe's (1989) logic should also apply to these policies: the minority party will

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[7] One billion dollars provides a baseline for determining whether I code a policy with a monetary component as important. One billion constant dollars in 1948 equals $1.3 Billion in 1960, $3.3 Billion in 1980, and $7.5 Billion in 2000. Dollar amounts are generally those requested by the president. I used dollar amounts authorized by the passed bill when the president did not clearly request an amount.

[8] For example, environmental regulation became important in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The federal government responded by passing the Clean Air and Water Acts and creating the Environmental Protection Agency to implement these important policies.

[9] This difference lies, in part, on their coding of legislation and my coding of presidential policies: sometimes passed legislation turned out to be less important than the president's proposal. For example, Johnson proposed his anti-poverty, model cities program as a *major* policy, but did not pass as a *long-term* continuation of funding. Truman proposed a permanent, but modest tax cut in 1951; he vetoed a GOP-inspired bill that eventually became law. Moreover, Edwards, Barrett, and Peake (1997) did not code the Jury Selection Act of 1968 or the Child Protection Act of 1966 important, presumably because these Acts were not discussed frequently by the news media. Nevertheless, I coded them as important because they affected the selection of juries (framed by Johnson as akin to civil rights legislation) and improved the safety of children by regulating the labeling of products that could be harmful to children.

[10] Garry Young deserves credit for naming most of these policy types.

want to limit the *long-term* influence of the majority party by resisting legislation that will be on the books when it is in control of government.

Meteoric policies are *important* in that they fulfill a pressing need but are not slated for a long existence. Johnson's 1966 amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act are *meteoric* because he requested $2.2 billion for one year. Ford's one-year tax cut package designed to stimulate the failing U.S. economy is also *meteoric*. This policy was substantial not only in amount (at least $6 billion in tax relief to industry alone) but was specifically geared to address a particular and immediate problem. Although they are *important*, *meteoric* policies are less likely to be proposed in response to the fiscal (the size of the budget deficit) or political (the president's approval ratings or conditions of unified government) environments, but advocated when problems arise that require an immediate response.

Coding Decisions

I coded these policy types from the *Public Papers of the Presidents*, 1949-2000. Light (1999: 5) finds that the best place to look for the president's agenda is in the State of the Union address, a visible and constitutionally mandated indication of the president's domestic agenda (see Cohen 1995; Kessel 1974; King and Ragsdale 1988; Light 1999; Peterson 1990: ch. 2; Ragsdale 1998). Light (1999) also observes that presidents work for a policy's passage. The State of the Union address is often an unspecific laundry list. For a policy to be part of the president's active agenda, therefore, presidents had to demonstrate commitment by reiterating support for a policy in another address or message.[11] Again, presidential policies must be emphasized in at least two presidential messages and are first mentioned in the State of the Union Address or similar "Administrative Goals" speeches delivered after inauguration.[12]

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[11] Although presidents pursue private strategies of influence (Covington 1987), it is likely that presidents will at least mention their policy preferences in multiple speeches if they are concerned with their adoption. My coding rule follows Peterson's (1990: 324) policies that are "medium" or "highest" priorities. Highest priorities for Peterson include requests in policy-specific messages to Congress, letters to the Speaker of the House or President of the Senate, or in nationally televised addresses. Presidents request medium priorities in the State of the Union Address, budget or economic messages, or in letters to other members of Congress.

[12] This coding scheme differs slightly from other attempts to code presidential initiatives. Light (1999: 241) uses OMB records for his data through Carter, but switches to analyzing "State of the Union and Inaugural messages coupled with *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* for each year" because OMB clearance data became unavailable after 1980. (King and Ragsdale (1988) also report Light's data in their compilation of presidential data.) Ragsdale (1998: 382-83) adds to Light's data, by using SUA alone for Truman, Eisenhower, Bush, and Clinton. Yet, as I argue in the text, the SUA is a laundry list of requests from federal agencies and departments, requests that the president does not intend to push in Congress (Walcott and Hult 1995). Although Edwards, Barrett, and Peake (1997) used CQ Almanac to code legislation that the president opposed or supported and Edwards and Barrett (2000) used CQ

≡ TABLE 1
POLICY TYPOLOGY

	Long-term	**Short-term**
Important	**Major** *Clean Air Act* *Medicare* *Line-item veto*	**Meteoric** *Education Amends (1966)* *Tax Cut (1976)*
Unimportant	**Incremental** *EITC (1977)* *School Lunches*	**Minor** *CETA (1977)* *Spending Cuts (1981)*

Note: Example policies in italics.

A president's legislative agenda includes policies generated and introduced from the White House or formal requests for legislation. It also consists of presidential support of congressionally initiated legislation. Including support for legislation leads to a more complete assessment of the president's domestic agenda (Light 1999: 5) and avoids excluding a policy that is generally considered part of a president's agenda. For instance, even though Reagan advocated a balanced budget amendment during his second term in office, he only "supported" Congressional efforts to attain its passage (*CQ Almanac* 1985). Moreover, because policies may be generated out of a variety of circumstances (Kingdon 1995), excluding one policy item simply because the president was not the first to "set the agenda" is not practical in the dynamic evolution of policies. If this decision rule were followed, Medicare could not be a part of Johnson's legislative agenda because he did not originate the idea for it (see Jones 1994).[13]

Policy is also diverse and complex. One program can have many policy components that may not share the same policy dimensions. For example, Eisenhower's 1956 agriculture program had nine "points." Some of these, such as his conservation reserve policy, were *important*, yet *short-term* and passed as part of the Agriculture Act of 1956 (PL 540). Another "point," his Great Plains policy, was *long-term*, yet *unimportant* and passed as part of milk program legislation (PL 465). To account for differences within and across policies and accurately code different aspects of

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Almanac to code presidential initiatives, I could not rely on their lists alone, as they exclude minor policies and focus only on important ones. Hence, coding the Public Papers of the Presidents provides the best opportunity to cover all presidential policies, whether *major, minor, incremental,* or *meteoric.*

[13] My agenda definition differs from Covington, Wrighton, and Kinney's (1995: 1004) who code "on" agenda items as only those proposals put forth by the president. Presidents often support Congressional legislation that they do not formally propose. The president's strategic calculus is theoretically the same, whether or not he formally proposes a bill. He can anticipate the Congressional response when he supports Congressional legislation, just as he does when he pushes his own initiatives.

them, I disaggregate policy programs into a program's component parts.[14]

HYPOTHESES

I establish several hypotheses from agenda setting and anticipative reactions theories to explain the content of the president's yearly domestic policy agenda. Hypothetically, presidents react to political and fiscal conditions and consider their commitments to other policies when they develop their domestic policy agendas.

Congressional Relations

The first component of the president's policy decision calculus is the Congressional environment. Anticipative reactions theory says that the president's expectations about how Congress will react to his policy agendas will shape his agenda decisions (see Arnold 1979: 73). Indeed, presidents have a greater likelihood of success when a majority of legislators support their policies.

Congressional Makeup. Two determinants of presidential success in Congress are ideology and party. Presidents are more successful in Congress under conditions of unified than divided government (see Edwards, Barrett, and Peake 1997). After all, presidents can count on support from same-party legislators about two-thirds of the time (Edwards 1989), regardless of the content of their policy agendas.

> H$_1$: *Presidents will offer more* major *and* incremental *policies and have a larger agenda when their party controls Congress.*

I use the standard divided government dummy variable to test this hypothesis.[15]

Because legislators are often cross-pressured by ideological predispositions (Bond and Fleisher 1990), party is not the sole determinant of legislative success. In some instances, such as Reagan's 1981 budget victories, legislators will vote their ideology rather than their party. Although conditions of unified government and *major* and *incremental* policies should be positively related, ideology should affect the president's agenda differently:

> H$_2$: *A liberal Congress will encourage more* major *and* incremental *presidential policies and a larger agenda, yet fewer* minor *policies.*

After all, a more liberal (or Democratic) Congress should support *important* and *long-term* policies because liberals tend to support larger government. Conservative (or Republican) Congresses, conversely, should encourage fewer of these policies.[16] A liberal Congress will even encourage *major* policies from a conservative president. For instance, Nixon pursued *major* policies, such as the Clean Air Act Amendments, because he anticipated their success in a liberal Congress.[17] A composite liberalism score calculated by the Americans for Democratic Action and "inflation-adjusted" by Groseclose, Levitt, and Snyder (1999), measures average yearly ideology for Congress.[18]

Public Approval. Presidential approval may also influence the content of the president's agenda. Despite evidence to the contrary (Bond and Fleisher 1990; Collier and Sullivan 1995), presidents, Washington insiders, and some researchers perceive public approval to be an important means of achieving legislative success (Edwards 1997; Neustadt 1990; Rivers and Rose 1985). Given the pervasiveness of public opinion polling in the White House (Edwards 1983) and high public expectations (Waterman, Jenkins-Smith, and Silva 1999), presidents are bound to be aware of their public standing. More popular presidents should be inclined to offer more *long-term* and *important* policies than less popular presidents, if only because they think that a stronger public standing gives them greater leeway to pursue such policies. In other words,

> H$_3$: *Higher approval ratings will lead to a larger legislative agenda, including more* major *and* incremental *policies.*

Approval is the yearly average of the president's Gallup approval ratings.

The Honeymoon. The third component to the president's legislative calculus is *when* he advocates a policy. Timing is

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[14] The original purpose of this project was to respond to King's (1993) call for replication. One coding decision I made was disaggregating policy programs into their component parts. For this reason, my total agenda items are more numerous than Light's (1999), yet they correlate with Light's (1999) list of requests at a moderately high level, r = .58, suggesting a reasonable replication of Light's data, noting that he only examined SUA or OMB clearance proposals.

[15] An alternative measure of presidential party seats is he minimum percentage of presidential party seats in either house of Congress. This measure performs similarly to the divided government dummy variable, but is not as elegant as the dichotomous measure.

[16] Of course, liberal members of Congress may oppose some major policies, such as tax cuts or deregulation. Most of the major policies enacted throughout this time period, nevertheless, resulted in an expansion of governmental power, whether though spending programs on poverty or Medicare, expansion of the federal bureaucracy through additional federal departments, or regulation of the environment. Because of this, the phrase, liberal congresses are more likely than conservative congresses to support major policies, is a more accurate statement, even though linear hypotheses are more consistent with the methodology I use.

[17] Another possibility is that more liberal presidents are more likely to propose more *major* policies or have larger agendas. Assuming that Democratic presidents are more liberal than Republican presidents, I ran each of the models (Tables 1-6) with a liberal/conservative dummy variable. This variable had no statistically significant impact, and its inclusion does not alter the findings as I currently present them. This finding actually strengthens my point that presidents anticipate the political and contextual environment when they propose or support a policy.

[18] Because the ADA uses different roll-call votes for each Congress and year and determinations of liberal of conservative may change, scales underlying the yearly ADA scores typically "shift and stretch." Groseclose, Levitt, and Snyder (1999) create an index that eliminates this problem, allowing scores to be compared (or combined) across chambers and a lengthy time series.

clearly important to presidential success in Congress. A newly elected president's arrival in Washington typically coincides with a perceived electoral mandate, goodwill from the public and media, and an air of bipartisan cooperation (Dominquez 2002). Presidents know that their political capital is high upon taking office (Light 1999), so long as they "hit the ground running" (Pfiffner 1988), they anticipate that their first years are most conducive to legislative success. The honeymoon also applies to a president's second term. As presidents become familiar with intricacies and peculiarities of the office, they learn how to manage more situations effectively. If presidents are reelected, Light (1999: 39) claims, "The first days of the second term offer the greatest opportunity for presidential effectiveness." Therefore,

H$_4$: *Presidential agendas will be larger, and presidents will offer more* major *and* incremental *policies during their first years of both terms.*

Honeymoon is a dummy variable: 1 for the first year of a president's first and second terms and 0 otherwise.[19]

Budget Constraints

According to Kingdon (1995), participants in the agenda setting process must not only take advantage of limited windows of opportunity to secure agenda space for their pet projects, but also acknowledge potential and existent constraints that could hinder their policies. One constraint noted by Kingdon (1995: 145), and one that is particular to the 1980s and early 1990s, is fiscal resources. Budget deficits, for example, have constrained social welfare programs since the Reagan Administration (Jones 1994: 179). Indeed, a prominent component to the president's decision calculus is the surplus or deficit of the federal budget. Presidential agenda items fight for scarce legislative agenda space. If that overall space is constrained by limited appropriations, presidents may offer fewer legislative proposals. Hence,

H$_5$: *Presidents will have a larger agenda and will advocate more* major *and* incremental *policies to the degree that the budget is in surplus.*

Deficits measure the yearly federal budget deficit (a negative value) or surplus (a positive value) in constant dollars, as a percentage of the annual Gross Domestic Product. Measuring the budget deficit proportional to GDP is logical because a large deficit in a booming economy may actually encourage presidential proposals, whereas the same size deficit in a recession might discourage presidential proposals. Presidents will determine their yearly agendas based on the previous year's deficit or surplus estimates.

The Impact of Other Policies on the President's Agenda

The propensity of presidents to support or propose different policies also depends on the other types of policies on the president's agenda. In a policy environment constrained by limited resources, presidents may have to ignore one policy type if they advocate another type of policy. An agenda replete with one type of policy may limit the president's ability to propose or support other policies that share one policy dimension (*major* and *incremental* policies both share a *long-term* time dimension; *major* and *meteoric* share an *importance* dimension; and *minor* policies share a *short-term* time dimension with *meteoric* and an *unimportant* dimension with *incremental* policies). Hypothetically speaking,

H$_6$: *Policies that share a policy dimension will be inversely correlated.*

Presidents will likely try to optimize their chances for policy success by balancing an agenda replete with *long-term* or *important* policies with short-term and unimportant ones. Presidents may therefore balance a heavily *major* or *incremental* policy agenda with several *minor* or *meteoric* policy programs (or vice-versa) to ensure at least some policy success. Hence,

H$_7$: *Policies that share neither dimension will be positively correlated.*

To test these hypotheses, I control for the number of policies of other types proposed that year. For example, the *major* policy model controls for the number of *minor, incremental,* and *meteoric* policies proposed or supported by the president for each year.[20] (I model a dependent variable—*major* policies—at time t with independent variables—*minor, incremental,* and *meteoric* policies—at time t.)

The president's previous domestic policy agenda may constrain the propensity of presidents to support or propose new policies in a year. More repeated policies mean that presidents have less agenda space and resources to devote to new policies. Hence, an agenda replete with past proposals limits the space that presidents may devote to new policies of the same type. (The *major* policy model controls for *major* policies that the president proposes again at time t, which he had also proposed during previous years of his term.)

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[19] Although the optimum time period may be the president's first 100 days (Dominguez and Byrne 2002; Frendreis, Tatalovich, and Schaff 2001), my unit of analysis is the year, making it impossible to differentiate at the 100-day cut-off. I code 1965 as Johnson's honeymoon. Although he invariably received good will from the public, media, and bipartisan support from Congress shortly after the Kennedy assassination, my justification for the honeymoon is in part electoral. Moreover, coding Johnson's honeymoon in 1965, his first year after his election to office, is consistent with other presidents' honeymoon periods. Because President Ford did not encounter an electorally justifiable honeymoon period, no honeymoon is recorded for his first year in office.

[20] Although controlling for total agenda items is a possible strategy, total items are collinear with each model's dependent variable, and they override any potential impact of the other hypothesized influences.

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≡ TABLE 2
THE DETERMINANTS OF MAJOR POLICY, 1949-2000

	Parameter Estimates	Standard Error	t statistic
Ideology	0.22**	0.07	3.35
Divided government	−0.53	0.75	−0.71
Deficit, $_{t−1}$	39.74*	28.01	1.42
Honeymoon	1.22*	0.91	1.34
Approval, $_{t−1}$	0.05*	0.03	1.68
Minor Policy	0.34**	0.13	2.66
Incremental Policy	−0.14*	0.09	−1.49
Meteoric Policy	0.39*	0.27	1.46
Repeat Major	−0.11	0.18	−0.58
Constant	−8.62**	3.04	−2.84
R-squared		.44	
Mean of dependent variable		3.37	
SEE		2.76	
Q(12)(critical χ^2 = 21.02)		10.10	

*p < .1, **p < .05 (one-tailed)
Note: No noise component. I also ran a count model for *major* policy, but a linear regression model is appropriate.

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≡ TABLE 3
THE DETERMINANTS OF INCREMENTAL POLICY, 1949-2000

	Parameter Estimates	Standard Error	t statistic
Ideology	0.27**	0.12	2.28
Divided Government	−1.27	1.29	−0.98
Deficit, $_{t−1}$	66.18*	48.85	1.35
Honeymoon	1.70	1.65	1.03
Approval, $_{t−1}$	0.04	0.06	0.68
Major Policy	0.31	0.28	1.10
Minor Policy	0.61**	0.22	2.80
Repeat Incremental	−0.44*	0.33	−1.33
Constant	−−9.57*	5.50	−1.74
AR1	−0.04	0.19	−0.21
R-squared		.38	
Mean of dependent variable		5.18	
SEE		4.02	
Q(12)(critical χ^2 = 21.02)		9.11	

*p < .1, **p < .05 (one-tailed)
Note: *Meteoric* policies are excluded because they induce autocorrelation in the model. Although statistically insignificant, the AR1 term is necessarily to account for the history of the dependent variable, and autocorrelation in the model.

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FINDINGS

The following discussion is based upon models of policy types—*major*, *incremental*, *minor, meteoric,* and *total agenda items*—as a function of Congressional makeup, budget deficits, honeymoon, public approval, and other policy types. These series are all stationary and devoid of higher-order autoregressive or moving average processes. Because of this, multivariate regression models are appropriate.

Major Policy

Several key variables significantly influence *major* policies (Table 2). First, a more liberal Congressional environment induces presidents to propose and support more *major* legislation, as Congresses were typically liberal (Groseclose, Levitt, and Snyder 1999) and advocated the expansion of government (Jones 1994) for most of this time period. Indeed, a 10-point increase in ADA liberalism leads to nearly two additional *major* policies on the president's yearly domestic policy agenda. From another perspective, one of the most liberal Congresses (1978) would encourage an additional four *major* presidential policies when compared with one of the most conservative Congresses (1954), *ceteris paribus*. Second, previous year's budget deficit affects *major* policies, with a higher budget deficit (as a percentage of GDP) contributing to fewer *major* policies. The president's approval ratings also increase marginally the number of *major* policies on his agenda. All else equal, a president with an average approval rating of 60 percent, such as Nixon in 1969, is expected to offer about 1 more policy than a president with an average approval rating of 40 percent (Bush in 1992). Finally, other policies affect the number of *major*

policies: *minor* policies share agenda space with *major* ones, while one additional *incremental* policy on the president's yearly agenda contributes to slightly fewer *major* policies.

Incremental Policy

Consistent with the incremental nature of policymaking in American politics, *incremental* policy is the most numerous type supported or proposed by presidents between 1949 and 2000 (see Appendix A1). Congressional ideology and the federal budget deficit have similar impacts on *incremental* policy as they exhibited in the *major* policy model. Moreover, an agenda replete with past *incremental* policies adversely affects the number of new *incremental* policies, even though a larger *minor* policy agenda allows presidents to offer more *incremental* policies per year.

Minor and Meteoric Policies

The two policy types least likely to be influenced by political and fiscal constraints are *minor* and *meteoric* policies. *Minor* policy, in particular, should not be influenced by the same factors that affect *major* policies because presidents should be able to advocate *minor* policies at any time and do not need to be strategic about their placement. Table 4 illustrates this point, as conditions of divided government and the size of the budget deficit do not influence, at conventional levels of statistical significance, the number of *minor* policies on the president's yearly domestic policy agenda at conventional levels of statistical significance. Nevertheless, the number of *major* policies increases the number of *minor*

≡ TABLE 4
THE DETERMINANTS OF MINOR POLICY, 1949-2000

	Parameter Estimates	Standard Error	t statistic
Ideology	−0.17**	0.08	−2.13
Divided Government	−1.04	0.82	−1.27
Deficit, $_{t-1}$	21.59	32.26	0.67
Honeymoon	−0.42	0.96	−0.44
Approval, $_{t-1}$	−0.01	0.03	−0.24
Major Policy	0.45**	0.16	2.79
Meteoric Policy	−0.05	0.31	−0.16
Incremental Policy	0.25**	0.10	2.46
Repeat Minor	0.19	0.28	0.66
Constant	9.46**	3.40	2.78
R-squared		.48	
Mean of dependent variable		4.22	
SEE		2.54	
Q(12)(critical χ^2 = 21.02)		7.94	

*p < .1, **p < .05 (one-tailed)

policies. Presidents tend to balance their agendas strategically to increase their overall success in Congress, and offering *minor* (those least difficult to pass) with *major* (those most difficult to pass) policies together should do so. Another statistically significant political impact on *minor* policies is Congressional ideology: a more liberal Congress encourages fewer *minor* policies, as most Congresses through this time period supported an expansive federal government (Jones 1994).

Because the *meteoric* policy series does not require any error correction and uses count data with a mean less than 3, I model this series with a Poisson distribution (Table 5). The *meteoric* policy model is the most simplistic of the models: only the president's repeated *meteoric* policies explain *meteoric* policies. One repeated *meteoric* policy on the president's yearly agenda leads to an average increase of 0.037 additional new *meteoric* policies.[21] This implies that presidents may have to repeat large dollar policies, even if they will only be effective for less than four years. Deficits, Congressional makeup, and public approval have no statistically significant impact on the president's *meteoric* policy decisions.

Total Agenda Items

As expected, Congressional makeup, deficits, public approval, and the president's honeymoon have positive effects on the president's complete domestic policy agenda

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[21] Parameter estimates from a Poisson distribution cannot be interpreted in standard, linear ways. One way to interpret is to aggregate over all observations, and calculate an average response:

$$\frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^{n} \frac{\partial E[y_i \mid \mathbf{x}_i]}{\partial x_{ij}} = \beta_j \bar{y},$$

where $E[y_i \mid \mathbf{x}_i]$ = .77 and x_{ij} = 0.4 (Cameron and Trivedi 1998: 82).

≡ TABLE 5
POISSON REGRESSION: METEORIC POLICY, 1949-2000

	Parameter Estimates	Standard Error	t statistic
Ideology	−0.01	0.02	−0.47
Divided Government	0.12	0.25	0.49
Deficit, $_{t-1}$	−2.02	10.02	−0.20
Honeymoon	0.35	0.25	1.37
Approval, $_{t-1}$	0.01	0.01	0.82
Incremental Policy	0.02	0.03	0.76
Repeat Meteoric	0.40*	0.08	4.76
Constant	−0.97	1.07	−0.90
Log Likelihood		−62.75	
LR χ^2, 7 df		45.99	
Pseudo R^2		0.27	

* p < .05 (one-tailed)
Note: EVIEWS 4.1 was used for the Poisson analysis.

≡ TABLE 6
DETERMINANTS OF TOTAL POLICY ITEMS, 1949-2000

	Parameter Estimates	Standard Error	t statistic
Ideology	0.46**	0.21	2.22
Divided Government	−6.45**	2.23	−2.89
Deficit, $_{t-1}$	224.97**	86.28	2.61
Honeymoon	6.40**	2.78	2.30
Approval, $_{t-1}$	0.17*	0.09	1.80
Repeat Total	−0.07	0.21	−0.31
Constant	−7.78	9.32	−0.84
R-squared		.39	
Mean of dependent variable		14.25	
SEE		7.45	
Q(12)(critical χ^2 = 21.02)		14.22	

*p < .1, **p < .05 (one-tailed)

(Table 6). First, a decline in the federal budget deficit leads to a sizeable increase in the size of a president's policy agenda. All else equal, a president facing a budget deficit of about $59 Billion (in 1978) will offer about two additional policies than a president facing a deficit of about $155 Billion (in 1988). When there is a larger pie (or when the pie is less constrained by deficits), presidents attempt to distribute more pieces by tackling more policy problems. Second, the president's first year in either term leads to over six more total policies relative to other years. Although the honeymoon period does not influence different types of policies on the president's agenda, presidents tend to offer more total policies because they anticipate greater success during the first years of their terms, regardless of policy type. Higher approval ratings encourage presidents to offer a marginally larger agenda. All else equal, a president with an average approval rating of 62 percent, such as Carter in 1977, is expected to offer about three more policies than a president

with an average approval rating of 42 percent (Johnson in 1968). Finally, presidents anticipate more legislative success when they have more party seats in Congress and when a liberal Congress is in the majority. Conditions of unified government and a 10-point increase in ADA liberalism lead to about six and four more yearly domestic policies, respectively. Presidents understand the importance of Congressional makeup to their legislative success and will offer more policies when Congress is likely to entertain them.

CONCLUSION

What determines the propensity of presidents to support or propose certain types of policy? This article finds that presidential agendas, which vary by temporal and importance dimensions of public policies, are functions of the president's contextual environment. The numbers of m*ajor* and *incremental* policy types as well as the president's total domestic policy agenda decrease in the face of budget deficits and unfavorable Congressional makeup. Conversely, presidential decisions to propose or support other, *unimportant* or *short-term* policies are not affected by the contextual environment, as presidents are seemingly free to propose or support these policy types whenever they wish. Although much research has inferred that presidents are more successful with small and less expansive agendas in an era of deficits and Congressional gridlock (Edwards 1989; Jones 1994;

Hargrove 1988), this study develops this linkage: presidents offer small and less major agendas when faced with political and fiscal constraints. Presidents may then be successful because they consider these constraints in the first place.

This article has implications for broader research on agenda setting. As scholars debate the president's ability to set the agendas of Congress, the media, and the public, this article indicates that the political environment in which presidents find themselves shapes heavily the policies on the president's agenda.[22] Since presidents most likely influence agendas when a policy is important to them (Edwards and Wood 1999: 342), knowing that presidents consider their contextual environment when they submit their yearly proposals helps us predict when presidents may attend to and possibly influence the direction of one type of policy and not another. In addition, this writing supports a condition that may be necessary for presidents to be able to influence their legislative success through agenda setting: presidents respond to their contextual environment and shape their agendas strategically prior to proposing them. Recognizing this encourages us to test the extent to which presidential agenda decisions do indeed affect the president's success in Congress.

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[22] Again, this conflicts with Peterson's (1990, 210) claim that personal negotiation, not contextual circumstance, is at work on large or new presidential policies.

APPENDIX

≡ TABLE A1
NUMBER OF POLICIES, 1949-2000

President	Year	Major	Incremental	Meteoric	Minor	Total
Truman	1949	8	7	5	5	25
	1950	2	3	1	3	9
	1951	1	2	1	6	10
	1952	1	3	0	6	10
Eisenhower1	1953	1	1	2	4	8
	1954	4	5	4	5	18
	1955	2	4	2	7	15
	1956	1	6	3	8	18
Eisenhower2	1957	3	8	1	6	18
	1958	2	5	1	6	14
	1959	1	11	1	3	16
	1960	2	4	0	2	8
Kennedy	1961	8	11	0	7	26
	1962	5	7	2	8	22
	1963	1	6	1	6	14
Johnson	1964	5	1	1	4	11
	1965	9	10	5	3	27
	1966	11	6	2	13	32
	1967	1	20	4	10	35
	1968	4	4	1	11	20

TABLE A1 (continued)

President	Year	Major	Incremental	Meteoric	Minor	Total
Nixon1	1969	2	13	2	3	20
	1970	8	3	2	4	17
	1971	7	7	1	6	21
	1972	3	5	2	2	12
Nixon2	1973	9	18	5	8	40
	1974	7	1	1	3	12
Ford	1975	1	3	3	1	8
	1976	2	6	1	0	9
Carter	1977	4	5	3	5	17
	1978	3	19	4	8	34
	1979	7	8	0	7	22
	1980	1	4	0	2	7
Reagan1	1981	1	2	1	7	11
	1982	4	3	0	5	12
	1983	5	2	1	5	13
	1984	2	0	3	3	8
Reagan2	1985	1	1	0	1	3
	1986	1	0	0	0	1
	1987	1	4	0	1	6
	1988	0	3	0	0	3
Bush	1989	7	4	2	10	23
	1990	0	2	0	1	3
	1991	2	1	1	0	4
	1992	3	6	2	2	13
Clinton1	1993	8	7	6	3	24
	1994	2	4	1	0	7
	1995	4	5	1	3	13
	1996	1	2	0	0	3
Clinton2	1997	3	3	3	0	9
	1998	1	0	0	2	3
	1999	6	3	0	1	10
	2000	2	1	1	4	8

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