CHAPTER 1

Introduction

CALLED THE "GREAT COMMUNICATOR" for his remarkable oratorical skill, President Ronald Reagan purportedly could sway the public to support him, using television to engage, motivate, and inspire the viewing audience.[1] Decades after the end of his presidency, journalists recall with nostalgia Reagan's mystic ability to connect emotionally with and thus lead the American people by saying "a few simple things passionately" (Packer 2010; see also Cannon 2004; Hansen 2004). Reagan's alleged public relations prowess has become the standard to which subsequent presidents are compared. The expectation of effective presidential leadership is furthered by contemporary presidents who have marshaled an extensive White House public relations operation to lead the public and news media (Kumar 2007). A failure of leadership for contemporary presidents, therefore, is often reduced to a failure of communication.[2] Despite this conventional understanding of presidential leadership that pervades Washington, D.C., systematic evidence of effective presidential leadership of the public proves illusive, even for the "great communicator" (Edwards 2003). In this book we are guided by the following puzzle: Why has presidential leadership of the public been unimpressive, even as the presidency retains substantial institutional tools to lead the public and news media?

The importance of this question is illustrated with two examples from both Reagan and Obama who, despite being perceived as powerful orators by their contemporaries, struggled in their efforts to lead the public. One of President Reagan's top policy priorities concerned relations with Central America. Reagan's public relations strategy centered on convincing the American people that the communist threat in Central America was real and that adequately funding the Nicaraguan Contras, an anti-communist guerilla force, was the best strategy to confront it. Reagan raised the issue many times with the American people, as he sought

congressional support to fund the Contras who opposed the communist Sandinista government of Nicaragua. President Reagan spoke on aid to the Contras in twenty-five speeches in 1985 and thirty speeches in 1986, the peak of his attention to the issue (Edwards 2003, 132). In addition to mentioning the issue regularly in his public statements, Reagan delivered eight nationally televised addresses on Nicaragua and the Contras during his presidency (Edwards 2003, 30–31), with four of these occurring before the disclosure of the Iran-Contra scandal in 1986.

Despite the extent to which Reagan spoke publicly about Central America, public opinion did not move toward Reagan's position. According to numerous polls reviewed by Edwards (2003, 52–54), support for aid to the Contras ranged between 22 and 42 percent during the period 1985 through March 1988, with opposition always substantially outweighing support. Moreover, the country consistently viewed Reagan's handling of Central America negatively, averaging nearly 61 percent disapproval between 1983 and 1988 (Edwards 2003, 55). Most telling of all, President Reagan considered his public leadership efforts on aid to the Contras a significant failure of his presidency. In his memoirs, the president writes, "Time and again, I would speak on television, to a joint session of Congress, or to other audiences about the problems in Central America . . . But the polls usually found that large numbers of Americans care little or not at all about what happened in Central America" (quoted in Edwards 2003, 53). Reagan believed his policy failed precisely because he was unable to lead the public on the issue.[3]

Like Reagan, President Barack Obama used his speaking skills and the "bully pulpit" throughout his first year in office (see Goldstein 2009; Hornick 2008) and especially as part of his effort to pass comprehensive health care reform. From May 2009 through March 2010, the Obama White House marshaled the full resources of its communications operation to build public support for health care reform. To sell reform, the president held a prime-time televised press conference, delivered a nationally televised address before a joint session of Congress, conducted a nationally televised town hall meeting, and travelled extensively throughout the nation delivering campaign-style addresses. All in all, the president mentioned health care reform in over 200 speeches during his first year

in office. In addition to the president's own efforts, members of the administration flooded news programs for months attempting to sell health care reform to the American people.

These efforts notwithstanding, the public did not move to support the president's plans for reforming health care. After his national address on September 9, 2009, for example, Obama received just a one-point increase in the percentage of Americans who felt he had explained his position but no other bump in public support.[4] Throughout the fall of 2009, as Obama went public on health care reform and the Senate debated it in committee and on the Senate floor, public support barely moved from a consistent baseline of 40 percent approval.[5] At the same time, Obama's handling of health care reform continued to decline, dropping to 43 percent after his nationally televised State of the Union address in January 2010.[6]

Given these failures to move public opinion, why did Presidents Reagan and Obama speak so frequently on these top policy priorities in the face of overwhelming evidence that their efforts were not paying dividends? Why have other presidents, such as Bill Clinton on health care reform in 1993 or George W. Bush on Social Security reform in 2005, devoted considerable communications resources to strategies that eventually failed? If the president's efforts in speaking are centered on moving public opinion, then the contemporary presidency is replete with anecdotes signifying that presidents are unwise to attempt to directly lead public opinion, whether or not these failures are a product of hubris (Edwards 2003, 5) or arrogance within the White House (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). Indeed, the cost of public relations may be too high, given the low level of payoff that has resulted.

Failure to lead the public has not deterred the contemporary White House in its public relations efforts, of course. The White House communications operation, buttressed by a staff of several hundred to assist with public relations, devotes substantial resources to impart the president's message, after all, including facilitating the delivery of hundreds of speeches, dozens of interviews, and formal and informal exchanges with reporters annually (Kumar 2007, 5). With all of this effort, surely the White House has achieved some return on its investment in public leadership, despite the lack of clear direct opinion leadership.

To be sure, President Obama's public efforts on health care reform are a clear illustration of the benefits of public leadership even in the absence of an increase in public support for top policy priorities. First, news coverage of health care reform was extensive, occupying a sizeable percentage of the weekly news hole through much of the second half of 2009.[7] Second, health care reform became a top priority of the American people, as a quarter of the public in September 2009 considered health care to be the most important problem facing the nation, up from just 9 percent in May (Jones 2009). Most importantly, the president scored a signature policy success when he signed health care reform into law on March 23, 2010.[8]

Our discussion contends that if presidential speeches do not affect public opinion, then going public should provide other important benefits for the president. Given the strong link between the media's and public's policy agendas (McCombs 2004)—and in light of the difficulties presidents encounter attempting to lead the public directly—our efforts to explore this topic center on presidential leadership of the news media. We argue that presidential leadership of the public occurs through increased news coverage of the president's policies. By affecting the news media's policy agenda, presidents may then influence the public's policy agenda. However, as presidents lament their inability to penetrate the "filter" or overcome the "noise" of contemporary presidential news coverage in the recent media age, it remains unclear whether presidents and their massive communications operation can indeed lead news coverage.

With this in mind, our study explores simultaneously presidential leadership of both the media and public agendas. Despite the common assumption that presidents can influence the public's agenda, there is only limited evidence to support this claim (Cohen 1995; but see Young and Perkins 2005). More importantly, prior research leaves uncovered the effects of the media in the president's relationship with the public despite the strong impact that media have on public concerns (but see Baum and Groeling 2010). Although there exists a larger body of literature on presidential agenda setting of news coverage (see Edwards and Wood 1999), this research does not simultaneously model the public's agenda and its impact on the president–media relationship, despite the working assumption that media are vital to reaching the public.[9] The media's importance

to the public presidency (see Cohen 2008) requires a study that accounts for both the media and public simultaneously in a model of presidential leadership.

Given this backdrop, we offer a fresh theoretical and empirical look at presidential leadership of the media and public. First, we argue that presidents may be using their institutional resources primarily to communicate their policy priorities through news coverage. If presidents can lead the media, then this presents a promising opportunity for indirect leadership of the public given the strong interrelationship between the public and news media. Second, we conceptualize leadership in a manner that reflects both leadership and responsiveness (Burns 1978; Geer 1996; Pitkin 1967). We then consider leadership in a way that accounts for the impact that presidents may have on the public and news media and how the public and media may also affect the president. Third, the presidents' efforts at public leadership are not geared so much at changing public preferences, that is, *moving* public opinion, but rather at influencing the issues the public considers important, that is, agenda setting. We test our claims across three strategies of presidential leadership most common to modern presidencies: focused attention, whereby presidents address the nation on television; sustained attention, whereby presidents discuss their priorities through a series of major and minor addresses; and going local, whereby presidents use domestic travel to affect local news coverage and local public opinion. In addition, we explore how presidential leadership differs across foreign and economic policy, two key policy responsibilities of modern presidents.

In this book, we ask the following questions: How successful are presidents as they attempt to lead the media and public agendas? Do presidents lead the media agenda, and does this leadership translate into indirect leadership of the public? Does simultaneously accounting for leadership and responsiveness alter our expectations and conclusions concerning presidential leadership of the public? How does this play out across different leadership strategies and policy areas? Although our focus is not on how presidential leadership affects legislation, presidents ultimately hope to make major changes in public policy, and their speeches are often geared to pressure Congress (Beckmann 2010; Kernell 1997). Thus, we

conclude the book with a discussion of the implications of our results on the prospects for going public and legislative victory.

THE PUZZLE OF PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP

Presidents speak more today than they have at any time in the modern presidency, an observation made by a number of scholars (including Hager and Sullivan 1994; Lammers 1982; Powell 1999). According to Ragsdale (2009), presidential speeches have increased noticeably since the Truman administration. Despite some variation, including Gerald Ford's extraordinary speech making during his election campaign of 1976, there is a clear upward trajectory in the number of presidential speeches over time, with presidents delivering over 400 speeches per year throughout much of the 1980s and 1990s. This is up substantially from the 1950s and 1960s, when presidents averaged 154 speeches per year. More recently, from 1974 to 2009, presidents average 351 yearly speeches. Without question, presidents engage frequently in public speaking to communicate their policy agendas to interested political actors and lead the national policy agenda (Barrett 2004; Eshbaugh-Soha 2006b; Kernell 1997; Whitford and Yates 2003, 2009).

The president's greatest institutional means to lead the policy agenda is through public relations. Behind these efforts at public leadership are considerable White House resources. Buttressed by a competent and flexible staff, the White House Office of Communications and the Press Office assist the president's efforts to communicate with the Washington media, regional and local media, and the American public (Hult and Walcott 2004; Kumar 2003, 2007; Maltese 1994; Walcott and Hult 1995). As Kumar (2007) shows, the president's communications operations are central to this development and potential effectiveness of presidential speeches. The Office of Communications (OOC) has become an indispensable part of presidential public relations strategy (Kumar 2007; Maltese 1994) and has grown along with the increase in presidential speeches since the 1970s. According to Kumar's (2007, 157–164) counts, the staff resources devoted specifically to the OOC have risen alongside the president's tendency to deliver more speeches.

Establishing the policy agenda is one of the primary tasks of the contemporary White House and is of particular purview of the communications office (Kumar 2007; Maltese 1994). The OOC acts as a liaison with

non–Washington-based media, a coordinator of information flows from the White House, and a "political tool for generating public support for administration initiatives" (Maltese 1994, 118). Its staff advocates for the president, defends his actions, coordinates publicity, and explains the president's many decisions (Kumar 2007, 6–32). Not to be outdone, the Press Office provides the official record of the president and is geared toward influencing (or at least communicating with) the Washington press corps. Kumar (2007, 199) identifies three roles for the press secretary: information conduit, constituencies' representative, and manager of the Press Office. Each of these roles is crucial as presidents seek to manage press operations to lead not only the news media but also the public. Whereas presidents undoubtedly hope to do much more with these offices than simply begin a conversation on policy—presidents also desire to build public support and sign legislation that they prefer—affecting the priorities of others in and outside of government is a critical and necessary focus of presidential leadership.

In short, the White House communications operation provides the organizational resources to manage effectively and efficiently growing expectations about presidential public leadership. As a result, presidents are able to deliver hundreds of speeches every year. There is thus plenty of opportunity for the media to cover the presidency if they choose to or for the president to influence the media through a communications strategy. The modern presidential communications operation is well positioned to set the policy agenda, especially—as was the case for both Presidents Reagan and George W. Bush, who are seen as having successful, first-term communication organizations—when one issue takes clear priority. Most importantly, White House staffers clearly believe that correct application of these resources can generate the public support presidents need to govern successfully. Martha Kumar (2007, 5) summarizes, quoting from President Clinton's press secretary Mike McCurry:

> I'd say 25 to 30 percent of the paid White House staff devotes at least two-thirds of its time to communicating and shaping the storyline. But the truth is, just about everybody who has any serious, consequential role at the White House, from the chief of staff on down, has to be mindful of, cognizant of playing a role in how are we going to communicate, how are we going to present our

message, how are we going to put our best argument forward? [After all], the modern presidency revolves around this question of how you use or how you penetrate the filter of the press to go directly to the American people, which is your ultimate source of political strength.

The empirical reality appears starkly different, however. Even as we have witnessed an increase in presidential speech making and an expansion of the institutional resources devoted to public leadership, presidents are no more successful leading public opinion. Whether Reagan's efforts to change opinion on government spending or taxes, Clinton's leadership on NAFTA (Edwards 2003), George H. W. Bush's support for clean air, or even Obama's litany of domestic policy priorities, public opinion simply does not move in the president's favor (Edwards 2010). At worst, it trends against the president's position (Wood 2009a). Figure 1.1 illustrates this using a broad measure of public support, the president's job approval ratings. Even as presidential speeches and institutional resources devoted to public communication and leadership have trended upwards over time, the president's approval ratings have trended downward.

Perhaps the best case examples to illustrate this are George W. Bush's efforts to reform Social Security in 2005 and his numerous speeches to maintain support for the war in Iraq in 2003. In 2005, the Bush White House marshaled the full range of resources available to the president's communications office, including his top administration officials from the vice president to the secretary of the treasury, in an intensive sixty-day public relations tour to build public support for the president's plans to reform Social Security. Public opinion on Social Security did not move in the president's favor. Rather, public support for the president's handling of Social Security was highest, at 41 percent, *before* he announced his intentions during his 2005 State of the Union address and dropped precipitously during his sixty-day tour, plummeting to 29 percent by the end of July 2005 (Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2006, 701). President Bush also campaigned extensively for public support on Iraq in 2003. Although his efforts generated voluminous news coverage, the public's support of his handling of Iraq dropped from a high of 76 percent at the start of the invasion to a low of 45 percent in November.[10]

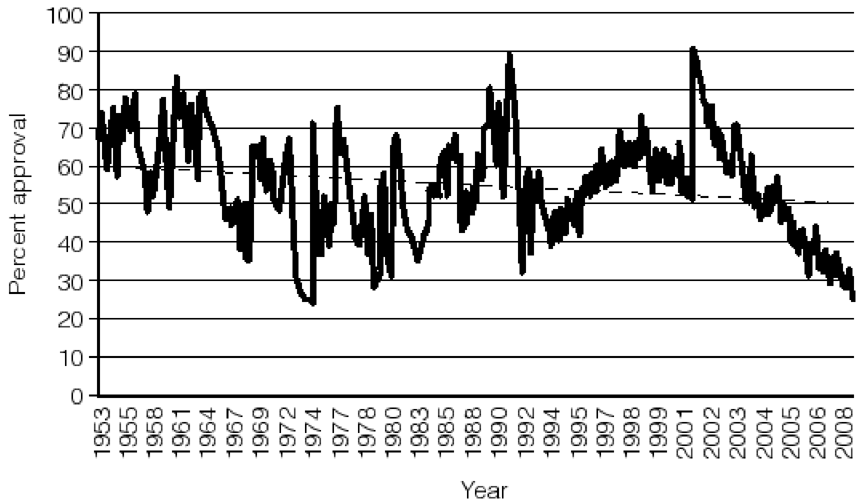

FIGURE 1.1. Presidential approval ratings, 1953–2009.

Source: The Gallup Poll

These difficulties concern not just the relationships between the president and public opinion but also the president's relationship with the news media. As presidents have devoted more resources to cultivate media coverage, news coverage of the presidency has declined in its amount and tone. Cohen (2008) documents a clear decline in the amount of presidential news coverage on both network television (see Patterson 2000) and as printed in *New York Times* (see Ragsdale 1997). For example, although the Obama administration witnessed a honeymoon of extensive news coverage, higher than both Clinton and Bush's first fifty days combined, it declined soon after the honeymoon faded (Rieck 2009b). Cohen (2008, 91) illustrates increasing negativity in presidential news, despite the president's best efforts to influence news coverage. Even focusing public relations on local media does not guarantee positive coverage. For example, President Bush's extensive domestic travels to affect local media coverage of the Iraq War led to an increase in negative news stories in 2003 (Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2008).

This is the puzzle of public leadership. Presidents increase their speech making over time but have no demonstrable positive impact on public

opinion. Even as they increase speech making and devote more resources to public leadership, most evidence shows that presidential news coverage has declined in amount and has become more negative. This could mean that presidents have to devote greater effort to public leadership even as they receive fewer payoffs. It also suggests that presidents may be waging a losing battle. Nevertheless, given the political and technological context of presidents in the era of twenty-four-hour news, presidents must penetrate the news to even think of reaching the public. Their efforts at speech making and communications, in general, are geared toward getting on the news. In an interview with George Stephanopoulos on January 20, 2010, President Obama reasoned that:

> In this political environment, what I haven't always been successful at doing is breaking through the noise and speaking directly to the American people in a way that during the campaign you could do. You know I'd just get, I wouldn't be here and I wouldn't be bogged down with how are we negotiating this provision or that provision of a bill. I could speak directly to people and hear from them.

Whether Obama's difficulties in leading public opinion can be reduced to a failure of communication, as so many of his predecessors have also claimed (Edwards 2003), it is clear that presidents expend innumerable resources with little payoff. We tackle the idea of presidential public leadership from another perspective: that presidents may yet achieve a minimum payoff from their public efforts, even if their primary goal of opinion leadership falls short. That is, if presidents can set the news agenda, they may lead the public's agenda, both of which may assist the president in achieving his larger policy goals.

EXISTING EVIDENCE

Given presidents' monumental efforts at public leadership and the myriad resources presidents bring from their institutional base to succeed, one might expect presidents to successfully lead the public through speech making. As we have already suggested, this simplified view is unlikely to be supported by the empirical record. Moreover, the existing political science literature presents a mixed picture, at best, of the president's success in leading the public. At worst, it shows that presidential leadership

of the public typically fails, even though public relations are at the core of the president's governing strategy. Because our theory hinges on the notion that responsiveness is an important component to studying presidential leadership, we review not only whether presidents successfully lead the public but also the extent to which presidents are responsive to the public.

Do Presidents Lead the Public?

The literature presents mixed evidence that presidents can lead the public, despite clear expectations that presidents should be capable leaders of public opinion. The reasoning behind an expectation for presidential leadership focuses on the president's institutional capacity to lead the public. As singular leader of the United States, with the "bully pulpit" at their disposal, presidents have the most frequent and consistent access to the media, and therefore the public, of any public official. By speaking often about a policy, presidents may be able to "expand the scope of conflict" (Schattschneider 1960), focus policy makers' attention on an issue (Baumgartner and Jones 1993), or increase an issue's salience (Druckman and Holmes 2004). In so doing, presidents may set the national agenda (Kingdon 1995) or prime the public to evaluate the president (Brace and Hinckley 1992) and his policies more favorably. Being able to lead the public is also central to "going public," with at least suggestive evidence that presidents can successfully lead the public through nationally televised addresses (Kernell 1997; Rottinghaus 2010).

Most scholarship is clear that presidents at least attempt to lead public opinion, whether or not it illustrates that presidents have been successful doing so. The people are the source of power for the "personal president" (Lowi 1985), and presidents are "active players in the game of public opinion" (Hart 1987). Increased resources available to the president buttress this claim. Moreover, technological advances have made public leadership more practical (Hager and Sullivan 1994; Lammers 1982). Although the goal of presidential communication is to generate political support (Stuckey 1991), its context and focus has undoubtedly changed over time with changing public expectations and media environments (Cohen 2010; Laracey 2002; Tulis 1987).