In this paper I challenge the scholarly consensus that presidents benefit little by speaking to the public. I suggest that the effect of presidential rhetoric on public opinion should be examined within a framework that acknowledges the centrality of political parties in American politics, and the important role presidents take in relation to them. Drawing from existing work on presidential rhetoric and issue ownership, I contend that by “going public” presidents shape views of the parties and thus position themselves as leaders of the party system. I test this proposition on economic rhetoric using content analysis of all major presidential addresses from Eisenhower to Clinton coupled with survey data on public concerns with the economy from 1956 to 1999. I demonstrate that by talking about the economy presidents increase public interest in economic policy and attach to their party a positive image of a party that can handle economic policy effectively.

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Ever since Theodore Roosevelt declared the presidency a “bully pulpit,” it has been a truism that presidents—or skilled ones, at least—can shape public opinion to their advantage. It is taken for granted, and evidenced by an extensive White House organization, that presidents have a duty to defend themselves publicly, to promote policy initiatives nationwide, and to inspire the population. However, studies find no apparent political benefit from “going public.” By speaking about policy, presidents rarely affect policy preferences of the public (Edwards 2003, 2009; Rottinghaus 2010), they fail to bolster their public standing (Edwards 2003. But see Druckman & Holmes 2004), and they usually respond to rather than affect the public agenda (Hill 1998; Peake 2001; Wood 2007, 2009a; Wood & Peake 1998; Young & Perkins 2005. But see Behr & Iyengar 1985; Cohen 1995). Why, then, do rational presidents invest resources in behavior that research shows has little or no apparent political benefit?

Missing almost entirely from this work is a consideration of the party system and how presidential rhetoric fits within that system. This neglect stems from a long-standing view that the modern American political system is characterized by weak political parties and independent presidents who operate without the constraints historically imposed by partisan politics (APSA Report 1950; Burnham 1982; Coleman 2003; Milkis 1993, 1999; Neustadt 1990). To compensate for the lack of an organizing tool in the political sphere, modern presidents have developed a direct connection with the public presenting themselves as above the fray of regular (partisan) politics (Kernell 1986; Lowi 1985; Tulis 1987). Ragsdale aptly describes this view when she writes (1995: 41):

> “The single executive image endures in presidents’ own words, public impressions, and press coverage. In their speeches, presidents offer the country the single executive image. They sponsor the dual notions of presidential omniscience and omnipresence. They suggest that they alone are linked to the American people, above politics, beyond party, and touched by God.” (emphasis by the author)

The view of political parties has since changed. Beginning in the 1990s, a significant body of work turned our attention to an apparent resurgent role of political parties in government, in the electorate, and of the party organization (see, for example, Coleman 1997; Green & Herrnson 2002; Hetherington 2001). Evidence of recent polarization of the American public further directed presidency scholars to reassess the relationship between presidents and the public. Milkis and Rhodes suggest that the administration of George W. Bush has led to the emergence of a new brand of presidential leadership. They conclude that “the time has come for a fundamental reconsideration of the relationship between the modern presidency and the American party system” (Milkis & Rohdes 2007: 461). Skinner (2010) broadens this argument and suggests that since 1980 we are witnessing a new brand of presidency that can be labeled “the partisan presidency.”

Focusing on presidential rhetoric, Coleman and Manna (2007) contend that during the entire postwar era presidents have maintained their association with the party system. They examine the rhetoric of four presidents during the postwar era (Eisenhower, Carter, Reagan, and W. Bush), and find that these presidents linked themselves rhetorically to the party system and employed party-related references across types of audiences and types of presidential communications. They conclude: “When presidents go public, they do not necessarily go there partyless.” (p. 422). Coleman and Manna, however, do not take the next step and address the effect of presidential rhetoric on public opinion or on partisan divisions within the public. If presidents are not partyless in their public actions, how do their actions affect the partisan public?

Drawing from the work on presidential rhetoric and issue ownership, I suggest that by “going public” presidents shape views of the parties and thus position themselves as leaders of the party
system. I examine this proposition using content analysis of economic mentioning in all major addresses of Presidents Eisenhower through Clinton coupled with data on public concerns with the economy from 1956 to 1999 and the perceptions of which party can handle this issue effectively. I show that by talking about the economy presidents increase the public interest in economic policy and attach to their party a positive reputation for handling economic policy.

**PRESIDENTIAL RHETORIC AND THE PARTISAN PUBLIC**

Early work on the public presidency was based on the notion that the growth of the "plebiscitary presidency" was a consequence of the decline of the political parties (Kernell 1986; Lowi 1985; Tulis 1987). Following the evidence of party resurgence, presidency scholars began to take note of the possible effect of partisan divisions on presidential communications. This work, however, focuses on limitations caused by partisan divisions rather than opportunities that partisan identities may offer for opinion leadership. In the latest edition of his seminal book, *Going Public*, Kernell dismisses the possibility that the strengthened partisan coalitions have "domesticated" going public "in the service of party interest." (Kernell 2007: 215-216). Rather, he points to the fact that the share of voters who identify with one of the major political parties remains at historic lows, and observes that voters today still display willingness to split their ballots. Because of this, he argues, politicians remain wary of relying on party labels in their public appearances.

Similarly, Edwards acknowledges that partisanship has proven to be resilient, and that party identification remains an important connection between the president and the public. He examines the effect of presidents’ speeches on their own public approval across different partisan groups and he finds that party identification “functions as only a partially effective perceptual screen” (Edwards 2003: 226). In contrast, Wood (2009b) examines the relationship between partisan views and presidents’ public issue stances and finds that the effect of presidential rhetoric is contingent on the strength of partisan divisions within the public. When partisan attachments are weak, presidents are more persuasive among the general public. In other words, presidents can better influence public opinion in a partyless world.

This analysis takes a rather simplistic view of political parties. Political parties lie at the heart of American politics and are central to understanding long term processes in our political system (Burnham 1970). They host the political debate and tie the moving parts of our system into a coherent and manageable structure. Parties serve as an organization tool, they provide essential shortcuts for political and policy preferences, but they are defined and evaluated along a substantive issue conflict (Brewer 2005; Claggett & Shafer 2010; Hetherington 2001; Pomper and Weiner 2002; Weisberg 2002).

Presidents are inseparable of that system and have a prominent role and interest in its development. Like other politicians, they compete to gain control over issues people care about, and they do so within the issue-oriented structure of political parties (Coleman 1996; Gerring 1998). Given their unique position at center stage, the presidents’ involvement in the issue-struggle significantly affects what issues are on the public agenda and the attachment of those issues to the political parties (Carmines & Stimson 1989).

This is illustrated by the politics of civil rights during the 1960s. When President Johnson took office in 1963, neither party was committed to the civil rights agenda. By the time he left the White House, the Democratic Party was widely perceived as the Civil Rights party. This change did not happen overnight, and several interests contributed to this important and still visible transformation (see, for example, Frymer 1999 and Valey 2004). The significant impact of President Johnson as a leader of this change, however, is rarely disputed. Publicly committing himself to civil rights...
legislation during both his tenure as the Senate majority leader and as Kennedy’s Vice President, Johnson, upon entering the White House, used the full powers of the presidency and his own legendary political skills to advance the civil rights agenda (Carmines & Stimson 1989: 42). In pressing members of Congress to pass the Civil Rights Acts; in repeatedly speaking to the nation saying that the Constitution, the principles of our freedom and morality, forbids racial discrimination; and in using executive power to deploy federal troops in order to protect the marchers in Selma or to inaugurate affirmative action within the federal civil service, President Johnson made it clear that the Democratic Party does and will represent the civil rights agenda. Indeed, Johnson’s successors and the Democratic Congressional party did not retreat from his move towards the racial left.

Despite the strong account by Carmines and Stimson, the bulk of work on issue evolution has focused predominately on congressional leadership or on presidential campaigns and elections. (See, for example, Adams 1997; Geer 1998; Layman & Carsey 2002; Lindaman & Haider-Markel 2002; Petrocik 1996; Petrocik et al. 2003-2004.) When it comes to the role of the person occupying the White House, the relative silence of the scholarly debate implicitly assumes that rhetorical efforts of presidents have little effect on how people understand party positions, at least until the next campaign begins in earnest.

Although presidential campaigns are central to the evolution of the issues associated with the parties, it seems insufficient to assume that the public is not responding to actions and events that occur between campaigns. The president is the most dominant figure in the American political sphere. The majority of Americans receives its news from popular news sources—national and local news broadcasts and newspapers—which overwhelmingly report the actions and decisions of the administration (Bennett 1990; Bennett et al. 2007; Gans 1980). Survey data indicate that most Americans are more knowledgeable about the president and his policies than any other political figure or institution in the United States. (See, also, Carpini & Keeter 1996). And, studies demonstrate that associating the president with a policy position alters patterns of public response (Mondak 1993; Mondak et al. 2004).

Presidents dominate the public agenda and are best positioned to define how the public views the political parties. Similar to the learning process that is found in studies of campaign rhetoric (Petrocik 1996; Petrocik et al. 2003-2004), I contend that Americans respond to presidential communications by associating the issue a president talks about with the party of the president. These associations serve as shorthand images of the parties that encompass a “bundle of particular policies about which information and opinions may be sparse” (Key 1961: 433). These images are mental pictures individuals have about the parties that are specific, enduring, and have a long term effect on partisan attachments and consequent political behavior (Baumer & Gold 1995; Brewer 2009; Matthews & Prothro 1966; Page & Shapiro 1992; Sanders 1988; Trilling 1976). I refer to these images as policy images of the parties and, following Petrocik and colleagues (2003-2004), I measure them using survey data on the handling reputations of the most important problem facing the nation.

**ECONOMIC POLICY**

The salience of economics, the unquestioned leadership of the president in implementing economic policies, and the role of economic policy in partisan politics, make this issue a best-test-case to examine the effect of presidential rhetoric on the issue-base, policy image of the parties. Over time, the modern presidency has accumulated responsibilities that made the office into the chief actor in the process of crafting and implementing economic policy. The president is perceived
as an authoritative source of information about the current and future state of the economy with near continuous access to the media and public. Presidents, therefore, have the need, interest, and ability to explain their policy decisions to the public, which makes the use of rhetoric in directing and justifying economic policies a central part of presidential activity. Presidents talk about the economy often and in a wide range of public appearances. In fact, unless there is an international crisis, presidents talk about the economy more than any other issue (Wood 2007). They turn to the public to announce a new economic policy, make frequent references about the economy and discuss possible economic policies in their public appearances. Wood (2007) finds that presidents’ references to the economy affect the public’s economic evaluations which in turn influence the approval ratings of the presidents. Does the effect of presidents on their own public evaluations also influence how their parties are perceived by the public?

During the postwar era, economics has served as a main issue dividing between the two political parties (Shafer & Claggett 2010). Unlike most domestic policy domains, economic issues have never been “owned” by a party. Rather, the choice of economic policies and the perceived performance on economic policy have served as the single most important factor in short and long term electoral changes. For example, the inability of President Carter to address the economic crisis of the 1970s and the lack of coherent economic policy during the administration of George H.W. Bush are both perceived as major causes in losing their bids for a second term. Similarly, the performance of an administration on matters of economic policy is often viewed as a primary predictor of electoral success of the incumbent’s party in midterm elections. It would not be an exaggeration then to state that the interaction between economic changes, the public mood and the economic policy positions of the parties, explains much of the dynamics in American politics (Mackuen et al. 1989).

DATA

The data I use are twofold: content analysis of presidential speeches that display the policy priorities of the presidents, and survey data that provide evidence of the public agenda and policy images of the parties. I collect economic mentions in presidential rhetoric in all major national addresses delivered between 1956 and 1999. During this time a total of 886 speeches were delivered: Inaugural Addresses (11), State of the Union Addresses (39), special addresses before a joint session of Congress (18), major national addresses (170), along with all presidential press conferences (648).

To assess the policy emphasis in each speech, I use computerized content analysis software, Concordance 3.2, that is especially suited for content analysis of political rhetoric. The advantage of this software is that it features a very elegant KWIC (Key Word in Context) capability allowing the researcher to create a unique dictionary for each search and easily view the “hits” within a desired context, be it a line or a paragraph.

Each speech is coded for the number of total words, as well as the number of “economic policy” words mentioned in it, as defined by a unique dictionary put together for this project. In creating the dictionary, I supplement the list of search terms used by Petrocik and colleagues (2003-2004) with key words from the issue categories of the Policy Agendas Project. This list was first applied to all speeches, and each word was examined for its relevance to economic rhetoric. A filtered list (listed in Appendix A) is then applied to each of the 886 speeches.

To account for the relative emphasis on policy issues, I create a normalized indicator of the percent of policy mentions in each speech (here and after the mentioning index). The highest mentioning index is about five percent, yet the majority of the speeches exhibit a much lower
mentioning index ranging between no economic references to about two percent of economic words (Mean=.84; Median=.61).

Figure 1 plots the percentage of economic mentioning in all major speeches (1a), and in each type of address (1b-1f). Figures 1d and 1e indicate that special addresses to a joint session of Congress and major addresses to the nation exhibit the highest dispersion of presidential emphasis on the economy. The only categories of speeches that surpass a three percent economic interest threshold are State of the Union addresses, addresses before joint sessions of congress and major addresses to the nation.

To gauge the policy agenda and policy image of the parties, I collect survey responses to the Gallup "Most Important Problem" (MIP) item. The Gallup MIP item asks respondents: "What is the most important problem facing the nation today?" This question directly addresses the public’s issue priorities, ignoring individual policy positions and preferences for solutions and, as such, is ideal for studying agenda correspondence (Jones & Baumgartner 2004). Provided that the coding is accurate, this open-ended question can identify issue dynamics, particularly by picking up new issues that are less likely to be included in a closed question. The MIP question is also one of the very few attitudinal survey questions to have been asked consistently since the beginning of public opinion polling making it a dynamic measure of policy concerns (Soroka 2002).

By considering answers to a follow up question of which party—Republican or Democratic Party—can do a better job of handling the MIP just mentioned, I further measure the policy image of the two parties. The rationale for using this measure as an indicator of the policy image of the parties is straightforward. "Handling" is the ability to resolve a problem of concern to voters. The history of attention, initiative, and innovation with regard to a particular problem leads Americans to believe that one of the parties is more sincere and committed to doing something about that problem (Petrocik 1996; Petrocik et al. 2003-2004). This produces a public reputation for policy and program interests, this public reputation is referred here as the policy image of the party.

While surveys containing the MIP item go further back, the follow-up question was asked as early as 1952 but more consistently only from 1956. Unfortunately, it was nearly dropped from the Gallup MIP surveys starting in 2000, and some of the few existing surveys in this latter period are not yet freely and fully accessible. To minimize gaps in the data, I then limit my data to all surveys between 1956 and 1999. During these years, there were 119 MIP surveys asking the follow-up question on handling including a total of 237,947 respondents. Ninety-five percent of respondents (224,445) mentioned a problem facing the nation (categorized by Gallup). Eighty-four percent (199,123) answered the follow-up question and identified a party they believe can best handle the issue.

Over a quarter of responses mentioned economic issues as what they saw as the most important problem. The dominance of this issue varies considerably over time – reaching highs of eighty percent during the economic crisis of the 1970s, and lows of ten percent during the civil rights era and the war in Vietnam – thus offering the most leverage to assess presidential influence (Appendix B lists the issues included in the economics category). When public interest is weighted by year, the average share of public interest in macroeconomics is 37%. Figure 2 illustrates the dynamics of public interest in macroeconomics by plotting the average public concern with economic issues in each year from 1956 to 1999.

Figure 3 further illustrates macro-level changes in the policy image of the parties by plotting the aggregate difference in economic handling reputation of the two main parties. Each individual
response is coded one (1) for Democratic handling, negative one (-1) for Republican handling, and both or neither party are coded zero (0). This is aggregated by averaging all respondents within each survey. The aggregation generates a mean of handling reputations: a positive rating indicates an overall advantage to the Democratic Party, and a negative rating indicates an overall advantage to the Republican Party.

[Figure 3 about here]

The figure clearly identifies two eras in the handling images of the parties. From 1956 until 1980, there was a clear and consistent Democratic advantage over the Republican Party, reaching more than fifteen percentage points in the 1970s. This changed starting in the early 1980s, when the positive image shifted interchangeably from one party to another, thus reflecting a more balanced party difference. The diminished amplitudes seem to further indicate that since the 1980s party competition and polarization of the party elites have increased (Bafumi & Shapiro 2009; Brewer & Stonecash 2007; Carsey & Layman 2006; Layman & Carsey 2002).

MODELS AND FINDINGS

The most straightforward method to assess the effect of presidential economic rhetoric on public opinion is to measure the difference between public opinion before a speech (pre-survey) and public opinion following the speech (post-survey). Arguably, if the president is able to influence public attitudes there will be a change in public opinion in the post-survey (Rottinghaus 2010). This method is also used in studies of agenda correspondence. Cohen (1995) examines the effect of policy statements in the State of the Union addresses on the public concern using post-MIP surveys as the dependent variable. Focusing on three policy domains—economics, foreign policy and civil rights—Cohen finds that increases in presidential attention leads to an increase in public concern with those policies.

Hill (1998) further accounts for the possibility that presidents may be responding to the public concerns rather than stimulating it. His empirical findings indicate mixed results. He finds that on foreign and economic policies, presidents both respond to prior public attention in their State of the Union addresses and affect future public interest. On civil rights policies, Hill finds support for only a one-sided effect of presidential rhetoric on public opinion.10

Both Cohen (1995) and Hill (1998), examine the effect of State of the Union addresses on the public agenda by including the public agenda after the State of the Union address as the dependent variable, while controlling for the most recent available survey before the address. In doing so, Cohen and Hill disregard any additional speeches delivered in the time frame between the pre and post surveys. This research design incorrectly measures agenda correspondence, because there are rarely two consecutive surveys with only one presidential address between them. For example, the available pre and post surveys to examine the effect of the 1992 State of Union address (delivered on January 28) on the public agenda are four months apart (11/21-24/1991 and 3/26-29/1992 respectively). During these four months nine additional speeches were delivered, including three major national addresses (11/27/1991, 12/23/1991, 12/25/1991) and six press conferences (12/5/1991, 12/19/1991, 12/25/1991, 12/26/1991, 2/14/1992, 3/11/1992). Compared to the State of the Union address, three of these speeches had a higher rate of economic mentioning index, and three had only a slightly smaller index.

By attributing the attitudinal effect to the State of the Union address, Cohen and others may be overestimating or underestimating its effect. Evidence of a positive change in public opinion may be a response to the State of the Union address, but may also be a response to other speeches or to the cumulative effect of several speeches. Similarly, evidence of no change in public opinion or a
negative change may be influenced by an insufficient focus of the president on the issue in those other speeches, rather than a negative response to the State of the Union addresses.

To avoid this misspecification and to better acknowledge the breath of presidential rhetoric, I calculate the average economic mentioning in all speeches between each pair of consecutive surveys. Each speech is first analyzed for its individual economic mentioning index, and then aggregated together with all other speeches delivered within the identified time frame to create an average of economic mentions between each pair of consecutive speeches.

To further assess the possible effect of only a few momentous speeches, perhaps aimed to boost public interest in the economy, I also estimate the effect of a simple count of the number of speeches with extensive reference to the economy. These significant economic speeches are defined as speeches which fall within the ninetieth percentile of economic mentioning — i.e., speeches with more than 1.8 percent economic mentioning. Overall, there are 89 such speeches during the examined period. Of the 119 surveys in the dataset, 74 follow no significant speech, 27 follow one, ten follow two, and ten follow three or more such speeches.

I expect that presidents will have a direct and positive effect on the public agenda and the policy image of their parties. Specifically, consistent with previous work (Cohen 1995; Hill 1998) I expect that when presidents talk more about the economy, public concern with the issue will increase (H1). This effect will be strong when the average emphasis of all speeches is measured and when only few significant speeches are examined (H2). I further expect that when presidents “go public” and address the economy, the public image of their party as the best party to handle the economy will improve (H3). Unlike agenda setting, however, a change in the policy image of the party may be more difficult to achieve with one or a few momentous speeches about the economy. Party policy image refers to well established beliefs about the parties and hence public response will be evident only following a more persistent effort from the president to address the issues of concern. Therefore, I expect that a simple count of major economic speeches will have no effect on the party policy image (H4).

Managing the Public Agenda

Figure 4 illustrates the strength of the relationship between public concern with the economy and presidential emphasis on the economy. During the 1950s and 1960s, there was relatively low public concern about economic issues, and presidents devoted little attention to this issue. This, however, changed starting in the early 1970s, when both the public and the president considerably increased their attention to the issue. A relative decline of both series is evident in the late 1980s, which is interrupted by a short increase in the early 1990s.

To estimate the effect of presidential rhetoric on the public agenda I follow the model used by Cohen (1995). The dependent variable is therefore the public agenda—concern with the economy—at the post survey. I include four independent variables: two objective conditions relating to the state of the economy, an indicator for times of war, and public agenda in previous survey. The two economic variables are the monthly rates of inflation and unemployment during the post-survey. When the economy is weak, people may feel more vulnerable economically and their attentions will turn in that direction. By including these two variables, the model also controls for the alternative explanation that presidents are responding to an increase in public concern rather than stimulating it. I expect that both variables will have a positive effect on public attention to economics — e.g., when the economy is not doing well (increased unemployment or inflation), Americans will increase their concern with it. If an effect of presidential rhetoric is still found, we
can attribute it to the president’s actions rather than to the weakening economy and the consequential public concern.

The war indicator controls for the possible effect a war may have on the public concerns. This indicator is coded 1 during the war in Vietnam (1965-1972) and the first Gulf War (1990-1991), and 0 otherwise. I expect that when the United States is involved in a war, public attention will turn from the economy to foreign relations.

Finally, I include the rate of public interest in the economy at the pre-speech survey (pre-survey). Cohen includes this measure to control for the possibility that the public agenda influences what the president decides to emphasize in his speech. In the present model, given the usually short time gap between surveys, this measure also controls for a gradual increase in public interest.

The model is formally summarized below:

\[
\gamma_{\text{Economic Agenda (post)}} = \alpha + \beta_{\text{Economic Mentioning (between pre and post)}} + \beta_{\text{Inflation (post)}} + \beta_{\text{Unemployment (post)}} + \beta_{\text{War (post)}} + \beta_{\text{Economic Agenda (pre)}} + \epsilon_t
\]

The coefficients are summarized in column 1 of Table 1. As expected (H1), economic mentioning has a significant, positive, and strong effect on the public agenda: a one percentage point increase in the presidential emphasis on the economy increases the public interest in economic issues by three percent. The two economic controls, inflation and unemployment, are positive and significant, supporting the expectation that when unemployment and inflation rise, so does the concern people have in the economy. The war indicator is, in contrast to Cohen’s findings, insignificant.

In model 2 I replace the average measure of economic mentioning with a simple count of major “economic” speeches (Table 1, column 2). The results reveal that this count has a significant and positive effect on the party handling reputation (H2) leaving all other variables little changed. For every additional significant speech, there is a one percent increase in the public interest. Presidents, therefore, seem to be able to affect the public agenda either by issuing few “economic” speeches (model 2) or by continuously referring to the issue (model 1).

In sum, both models confirm existing work showing that presidents have a significant and direct effect on the public agenda. While the causal arrow may work in reverse – i.e., presidents are responding to an increase in the public interest – by controlling for economic conditions, arguably the sources of public interest in the economy, the models support the role of the president. This is also supported by Hill (1998) and Wood (2007), who find that the relationship between the president and public agenda is a simultaneous one. Presidents may indeed respond to an increase in the public agenda, but once they decide to go public they have an independent effect on the agenda.

Leading the Policy Image of the Parties

Figure 3 above indicates that no party has “owned” economic policy for more than a decade. Until the Reagan administration, the Democratic Party has shown a significant advantage over the Republican Party yet the strength of its image has changed considerably. Starting from the Reagan administration, handling of the economy has fluctuated from one party to the other and showed only weak association with the parties.

I construct the party image variable as a percent of people reporting that the party of the president best handles the economy. This includes only people who identified either the Democratic or Republican Party as better able to handle the economy, thus excluding all who chose
a different party or who reported that both or neither handles the issue well. Converting party handling into a measure of the president’s party, allows for a longitudinal examination of change in the effect of presidential actions on party handling reputation regardless of the change in party control of the White House. This, however, eliminates the possibility of estimating a time-dependent model, because the measure of party handling under one-party control of the White House is not necessarily influenced by the handling reputation of the opposition party in the previous administration. Given the nature of the present analysis, this limitation is not a concern, as there is little theoretical support for the notion that past successes of presidents in influencing public opinion affect the ability of a future president to influence the public. When deciding to go public, presidents may be encouraged by past events in which they perceived that they were able to increase the public’s interest, but their current or future success will not be affected by these past events.

Considering the political nature of the explained variable—party handling reputation—the model shifts the focus from economic to political explanatory variables. First, given the high correlation between partisan attachments and how Americans evaluate the parties (Brewer 2009; Trilling 1976), I include a control for party identification. To align this variable with handling reputation, party identification is measured as the percent of people identifying with the president’s party (counting only Republicans and Democrats11).

Second, accounting for research showing that the popularity of the president increases the persuasiveness of his message (Cohen & Hamman 2003), I include the rate of presidential approval in the model. People who are supportive of the president are also likely to support his agenda and have a positive image of his party to handle this agenda (Brewer 2009). I therefore expect that approval will have a significant and strong effect on the image of the party.

Third, while the presidency is the bully pulpit of American politics, the debate over economic policy is, to a great extent, dependent also on congressional action. The ability of a president to push through his policy might be limited by an opposition Congress, in which case the president would be motivated to turn to the public in an effort to influence his fellow politicians. This is, arguably, the primary reason why presidents go public (Kernell 1997). To control for this effect, I include a measure of the strength of the president’s party in Congress. The variable is constructed as a continuous variable of the number of seats in the House held by the president’s party.

Finally, a president’s party may enjoy the support of the public based on election promises rather than presidential actions. Therefore, while a newly elected president may be facing tough economic conditions, he may enjoy a policy “honeymoon” in which the public views the president’s party as the right people to deal with the economy. I therefore include an indicator for the president’s first six months in office.

Similar to the analysis of the public agenda, I estimate two models of presidential effect on the party image. The first estimates the effect of all speeches calculated as average economic mentioning between two consecutive surveys. The second estimates the effect of delivering a major economic address calculated as a count of major economic speeches. Both models are formally summarized in the equation below:

\[
Y_{\text{Handling}(\text{post})} = \alpha + \beta_{\text{Economic Mentioning}(\text{between pre and post})} + \beta_{\text{Party ID (post)}} \\
+ \beta_{\text{Approval Rating (post)}} + \beta_{\text{Honeymoon (post)}} + \beta_{\text{Party in Congress (post)}} \\
+ \beta_{\text{unemployment rate (post)}} + \beta_{\text{Inflation rate (post)}} + \varepsilon_t
\]

Column 1 in Table 2 summarizes the coefficients of the first model. As expected, party identification and presidential approval are strong predictors of the reputations for party handling of
the economy. When there are more people identifying with the party of the president, that party’s reputation for handling the economy increases. Similarly, when more people approve of the president’s performance, it is also more likely that the support for the president’s party’s handling of the economy will increase. The presidential honeymoon, defined as the first 180 days of a president’s administration, is also significant. During the presidential honeymoon the president’s party is more likely to enjoy public support of its ability to handle the economy.

Most importantly, the effect of economic mentioning is significant and positively signed: a one percent increase in presidential emphasis on the economy is associated with three percentage-points increase in the handling reputation of the president’s party. This supports our primary argument (H3): When the president talks about an issue, he not only increases public interest in it (models 1 and 2), but he also associates the issue with his party (model 3).

Model 4 (Column 2, Table 2) further tests this relationship by estimating the effect of a count of significant speeches as the explanatory variable. In contrast to the significant effects found in both the percent economic mentioning model (model 3) and the significant speeches count effect on the public agenda (model 2), the effect of these economic speeches on the party reputation is not significant. This indicates that while a significant speech can stimulate change in the public interest in an issue, it takes more presidential action for the public to equate the president’s party with the issue (H4). In other words, the president can make an occasional public appeal to influence the public agenda, but he needs to repeatedly show his interest in the issue in order to gain party control over it.

CONCLUSION

Presidents are inseparable of the party system and their affect on it is consequential. In this paper I challenge existing work on presidential leadership of public opinion. I argue that this work fails to appropriately address the relationship between presidential rhetoric and partisan opinion. I find that presidents play an important role in shaping how the public views the political parties. In doing so, presidents position themselves as the leaders of the party system.

Adding to the current debate about presidential agenda setting, I extend the data to all major presidential speeches between 1956 and 1999 and match these speeches with survey data of public concerns. Focusing on economic policy, I find that presidential emphasis on the economy increases public interest in the issue. This effect is significant when we use an average of all presidential mentions to the economy and when we count major economic speeches. I conclude that presidents affect the public agenda both by continuously talking about the economy and by issuing few monumental speeches.

I further find that, by talking about an issue, presidents are able to change public perceptions about which party can better handle the issue which translate into policy images of the parties. To influence the image of the party, however, presidents need to continuously talk about an issue, rather than deliver few prominent speeches. Party images are strongly associated with partisan attachments and overall support for the president. Changing these images is slow and requires an intensive nationwide campaign on behalf of a major policy initiative.

By shaping how people view the parties, presidents go beyond managing the public agenda and contribute to the long-term process of restructuring mass opinion. The ability of a party to present a set of problems and associate itself with the reputation to handle that set of problems effectively is instrumental for changing core, relatively stable attitudes. Images of policy competence affect partisan attachments and voting behavior, thus serving as the crucial factors that trigger change in the American party system (Brewer 2009; Sellers 1965; Trilling 1976).
The paper focuses specifically on economic issues, the most voluminous and variable issue category on the public agenda. Given the importance of economic issues to voting decisions (Fiorina 1981), the findings should give presidents a strong incentive to exploit their power as the “Bully Pulpit” of American politics by continuously talking about the economy. By doing so, presidents may not change the immediate positions the public holds on current policy concerns, but they may change the public perceptions of which party can better handle these concerns. An improvement in such public perceptions would change attitudes in the long term and, in turn, increase the success of their parties in subsequent elections. Presidential rhetoric, in accordance with this view, does not fall on deaf ears, but on partisan ears, and its effect is consequential.

3 Elsewhere (***) I draw on existing work on party image and issue ownership to define the party policy image as the perceptions Americans have about the policy base of their parties. Policy image of the political parties does not involve the pictures Americans have of the groups associated with the parties, but focuses instead on policy interests. Unlike issue ownership, however, party policy images refer neither to the discrepancy between elite and mass evaluations of the parties nor to how partisans (elite or mass) position a party on each issue in the American public agenda. Instead, party policy images refer to the substantive evaluations of the parties: which party is associated with foreign policy, social welfare, healthcare, religion and morals, the environment, and so forth. Parties, especially in the American two-party system, will likely propose policies to address most issues of public interest. Yet, I show, the public usually has a clear image of which party is more competent in dealing with a particular issue.
4 For press conferences I include the complete text – both the presidential statement and the entire Q&A that follows the statement.
5 With respect to this project, two caveats related to content analysis software should be noted. First, while the focus of this stage is on counting issue mentions, these programs count words rather than issues. Yet, I argue that words do provide a clear indication of the presence or absence of an issue. Given that I compare the relative frequency of discussion of issues by presidents, rather than absolute measures of issues, this method seems justifiable. (For a discussion of the importance of selection of words in conveying policy priorities see Vaughn & Villalobos 2006). A second caveat is that a computer content analysis cannot identify implied or tacit references to policy. While the effect of this limitation can be reduced using a well-crafted list of search terms, some loss of policy reference is inevitable. Because I am looking for clear adoption of a policy stance, and am especially interested in how the public responds to that, focusing on explicit reference to policy seems, nonetheless, a reasonable approach.
6 Studies have noted a few potential pitfalls from using this question, mainly the possible bias resulting from tabulation of this open-ended question (Sotoka 2002), the variability of poll coverage across years (Jones & Baumgartner 2004), and possible confusion between saliency and importance (Wlezien 2005). Despite these weaknesses, the question offers a unique opportunity for longitudinal public opinion research. Indeed, it is perhaps the sole source for assessing the attention and interest of the public to issues on the public agenda (Jones & Baumgartner 2004). Additional problems mentioned in the literature are minimized here by limiting the data to Gallup polls, by using only questions with the same wording, and by using only first responses in multiple response questions.
7 It should be noted that, as the public agenda is measured here, it refers only to the primary concern of Americans, rather than the policy issues on the American mind. The MIP poll does not ask for the issues people care about but the issues people are concerned about. A person might therefore have strong interest in economic issues, but be mostly concerned about the contemporary foreign policy or civil rights. This makes it possible that parties are viewed in terms that go beyond current issue concerns. For example, one might argue that the Democratic Party was viewed as the party of social welfare during the post-New Deal era, yet because other concerns (foreign policy?) were more crucial, this image would not surface using the MIP polls. On the other hand, Americans are more likely to vote on the basis of issues that they perceive as important (Campbell 2003; Huthchings 2003; Iyengar 1990; Krosnick 1988; Popkin 1991).
For a party to survive the political struggle, then, it has to transform itself so as to be relevant to the crucial issues that people care about.

Indeed, the Democratic Party was viewed in terms of social welfare (supported by the MIP data presented below). But had they not had a favorable image on economic or foreign policy, they would not have been able to compete against the Republican Party. During the 1950s and 1960s, the Democratic Party actually struggled to present a strong foreign policy image, which they then lost due to Vietnam. They reemerged as a clean and fresh party in the late 1970s, and sunk once again through Carter's inability to deal with the economic crisis. During this time, the Democratic Party was still viewed as the party of social welfare. Other images, though, were more crucial for Americans at that time. By the 1990s, Americans sought relief in social welfare, and the party's advantage on this issue played an important role in the reemergence of the Democratic Party.

8 Respondents who did not select a problem are coded as missing. Several of the surveys recorded more than one MIP for each respondent without ranking the order of problems mentioned, therefore making it unclear what these respondents saw as “the most important problem.” More problematic, by not identifying a single problem for each respondent, it is impossible to identify which of the mentioned problems these respondents were referring to when they answered the follow-up handling question. To limit data loss yet avoid possible bias, I adjust the coding by accepting all multiple responses that fall within the same issue-category as described below. When the problems do not fall within the same category, the observation is dropped from the data.

9 The significant gap is largely explained by the unbalanced distribution of MIP surveys and sample sizes. Overall the data include more MIP surveys in the first twenty years and these surveys usually have a larger sample size than more recent surveys.

10 The findings of both Cohen (1995) and Hill (1998) are challenged by Young and Perkins (2005), who extend the data used by Cohen and Hill to include State of the Union addresses up to 2002. They conclude that when accounting for changes in television ratings and the rise of alternative viewing choices, namely cable television, the effect of presidential rhetoric on the public agenda is diminished.

11 There is a fundamental difference however between the two variables – handling and identification – when leaving out non-Republicans and non-Democrats. Party identification assigns a party ID value to the whole population without counting independents, thus leaving out a third of the population. Party handling, in contrast, assigns a handling reputation value based on respondents who chose either one of the two major parties as better able to handle the issue. This leaves out all respondents – Republican, Democrats, or independents – who see no difference between the two parties (because they see them as either equally incompetent or equally able to deal with the issue).
REFERENCES


# TABLES AND FIGURES

## Table 1: Effect of Presidential Rhetoric on the Public Agenda

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic issues as the most important problem facing the nation</th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic Mentioning (average of economic mentioning between surveys)</td>
<td>3.031*</td>
<td>1.265*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant Economic Speeches (count)</td>
<td>(1.430)</td>
<td>(0.725)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inflation Rate (post)</td>
<td>1.989*</td>
<td>2.113*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(post)</td>
<td>(0.815)</td>
<td>(0.820)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment Rate (post)</td>
<td>5.019***</td>
<td>5.089**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(post)</td>
<td>(1.480)</td>
<td>(1.518)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Agenda at previous survey (percent Economic Issues) (post)</td>
<td>0.427**</td>
<td>0.429**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.155)</td>
<td>(0.159)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War</td>
<td>-1.405</td>
<td>-1.451</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2.680)</td>
<td>(2.647)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>constant</td>
<td>-21.48***</td>
<td>-20.92**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(6.328)</td>
<td>(6.455)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.835</td>
<td>0.834</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Standard errors in parentheses

^ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001
Table 2: Effect of Presidential Rhetoric on the Party Image

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The president's party reputation for handling the problem mentioned</th>
<th>(3)</th>
<th>(4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent Economic Mentioning</td>
<td>2.975*</td>
<td>(1.283)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant Economic Speeches (count)</td>
<td>0.830</td>
<td>(0.564)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment Rate (post)</td>
<td>2.630***</td>
<td>2.769***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.710)</td>
<td>(0.732)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inflation Rate (post)</td>
<td>-0.141</td>
<td>0.0109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.354)</td>
<td>(0.339)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approval Rating (Post)</td>
<td>0.325**</td>
<td>0.326**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.116)</td>
<td>(0.115)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party ID (President’s Party)</td>
<td>1.070***</td>
<td>1.039***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.165)</td>
<td>(0.164)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party in Congress</td>
<td>-6.878</td>
<td>-3.810</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(16.25)</td>
<td>(16.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presidential Honeymoon (180 days)</td>
<td>9.308^</td>
<td>10.67*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5.323)</td>
<td>(5.284)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>constant</td>
<td>-41.87***</td>
<td>-41.64**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(12.21)</td>
<td>(12.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.675</td>
<td>0.669</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Standard errors in parentheses

^ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001
Figure 1 plots the percent of economic words in major presidential speeches from 1956 to 1999. Each speech was analyzed for its economic content using computer software, Concordance 3.2. The dictionary of words (Appendix A) is based on the one used by Petrocik and colleagues (2003-2004) and supplemented from words in the Policy Agendas Project.

Figure 1: Economic Mentioning in Major Presidential Speeches
Percent Economic Words in each speech by Address Type

A. All Speeches

B. Inaugural

C. State of the Union

D. Congress

E. Major to the Nation

F. Press Conferences

Number of economic words divided by total words in each speech. Counted with Concordance 3.2.

Data: Presidents speeches from 1956 to 1999
Figure 2 plots the share of economic concerns in the Public Agenda as collected from the Gallup Most Important Problem Surveys. All surveys were aggregated monthly. On average, economic concerns occupied about 37% of the public agenda, yet, as Figure 2 illustrates, this was not constant throughout the period examined.
Figure 3 plots the aggregate difference in handling reputations of the economic concerns as collected from the most important problem polls. Each individual response is coded 1 for Democratic handling, -1 for Republican handling, and 0 otherwise. A positive value indicates an overall Democratic advantage and a negative one a Republican advantage. The strength of the advantage is illustrated in the amplitudes of the graph.

Figure 4 plots the two series of interest together: the percent interest in economic issues on the public agenda (as collected from the MIP surveys) and the presidential emphasis on the economy (as collected from all major speeches). Both series are semiannually aggregated to reflect the average interest/emphasis in each year-half.
Appendix A – The Public Agenda Economics Issue Category

General Domestic Macroeconomic Issues (includes combinations of multiple subtopics)
Examples: the administration's economic plans, economic conditions and issues, economic growth and outlook, state of the economy, long-term economic needs, recessions, general economic policy, promote economic recovery and full employment, demographic changes, population trends, recession effects on state and local economies, distribution of income, assuring an opportunity for employment to every American seeking work.

Inflation, Prices, and Interest Rates
Examples: inflation control and reduction, anti-inflation programs, calculation of inflation statistics and price index statistics, consumer price index, food prices, cost of living, interest rates, bureau of labor reports on inflation, effects of inflation on business, general economic statistics.

Unemployment Rate
Examples: unemployment and employment statistics, economic and social impact of unemployment, national employment priorities, employment and labor market development, bureau of labor reports on unemployment.

Monetary Supply, Federal Reserve Board, and the Treasury
Examples: monetary policy issues, Federal Reserve's yearly monetary policy reports, Department of Treasury and Federal Reserve Board budget requests and appropriations, credit availability, national savings rate, relationship between fiscal and monetary policies, control of gold supply, gold reserve issues, savings bonds, treasury bonds.

National Budget and Debt
Examples: administration's yearly budget proposals, balanced budget act and enforcement, budget process, federal debt and deficit, deficit reduction and management proposals, budget projections, increases in the public debt limit, concurrent budget resolutions, impact of budget reductions on industries, states and communities, move trust fund accounts off-budget, move trust fund accounts on-budget, public debt issues, including retirement of public debt, changes in fiscal year status.

Taxation, Tax policy, and Tax Reform
Examples: state taxation of income, state and local income taxes, clarification of tax code, tax code reform, luxury and excise taxes, estate and gift taxes, corporate income taxes, collection procedures for federal taxes, administration tax proposals, income tax reform, tax treatment of charities, federal tax code reform and simplification, revenue acts, impact of taxes on business, multiple tax changes (excise and capital gains), general tax changes, charitable contribution deduction bills, domestic tax breaks for foreign businesses.

Industrial Policy
Examples: manufacturing strategy, technological capacity of industry, assistance to specific industries, national industrial policy, industry revitalization and growth, decline in U.S. industrial productivity, plant closings and relocation, industrial reorganization, commission on productivity, industrialization centers.

Price Control and Stabilization
Examples: economic stabilization programs, wage-price control and freezes, administered pricing programs, emergency price controls.
Appendix B – Economic Mentioning Search Terms

In assembling the dictionary, I used the list of search terms used by Petrocik and colleagues (2003-2004) and supplemented it with key words from the issue categories of the policy agendas project as well as additional words I found necessary to include. This list was then applied to all speeches, and each word was examined to see if it captured economic issues or was perhaps picking up issues not related to the topic. This stage was used to filter from the dictionary all words that captured non-relevant issues. The filtered list below was then applied to each of the 886 speeches included in the dataset.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>aliens</th>
<th>economic</th>
<th>income</th>
<th>surplus</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>anti-inflation</td>
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<td>incomes</td>
<td>surtax</td>
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<td>industrialization</td>
<td>tax</td>
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<td>economies</td>
<td>industry</td>
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<td>economist</td>
<td>inflation</td>
<td>taxed</td>
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<tr>
<td>bankruptcy</td>
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<td>economy</td>
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<td>employed</td>
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<td>epa</td>
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