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# Presidential Agenda Setting: Influences on the Emphasis of Foreign Policy

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Presidential power is significantly augmented by the ability to influence the political agenda. However, we know little about the factors leading presidents to pursue particular issues over others. In this analysis we examine the influences on presidential emphasis of foreign policy. Using a Poisson regression analysis of speeches over the period 1953-93, we find that a number of different contextual factors including approval, presidential influence in Congress, and international events affect presidential emphasis on foreign policy.

One of the most notable resources of U.S. presidents is their ability to influence the nation's political agenda. More than any other actor in the U.S. political arena, the president can focus the nation's attention—and its major political actors' attention—on a given issue (e.g., Kingdon 1995; Light 1991; Cohen 1995).

This influence may not extend directly to the actual policy alternatives chosen. However, given that a complex assortment of competing policy problems exists at any one time, and given that all or most of these policy problems will have advocates attempting to push “their” issue to preeminence, the ability to set the policy agenda alone gives the president considerable political leverage.

Given the president's importance in national agenda setting, what factors play a role in setting the president's agenda? That is, why do particular presidents choose specific policy items to emphasize at any one time at the expense of other issues? To date there has been little systematic exploration of this issue.<sup>1</sup> In the analysis that follows we examined presidential speeches

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NOTE: Our thanks go to Mark Card, Val Heitshusen, Debb Medved, *PRQ* editor Walter Stone, and the anonymous reviewers for their aid and thoughtful comments.

<sup>1</sup> One notable exception is Paul Light's (1991) *The President's Agenda*.

over the period 1953–93 to identify the factors that influence presidential emphasis on one general agenda item—foreign policy.

### DISCUSSION AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The agenda measure we utilized stems directly from a commonly accepted definition of agenda. This is the definition used by Light (1991: 2–3): “The President’s agenda is perhaps best understood as a *signal*. It indicates what the President believes to be the most important issues facing his administration” [author’s emphasis]. To find such a “signal” we turned to an obvious source: the actual words of presidents stated in speeches. Speeches provide the president with the best opportunity to influence the public because the president maintains complete control of the location, subject, and audience.

Using the *Public Papers of the Presidents* (various years) we examined all public presidential speeches and news conferences which occurred over the period 1953–93.<sup>2</sup> A speech was counted as a foreign policy speech if the sole substantive content of the speech dealt with foreign policy, war, diplomacy, foreign trade, or defense policy. Speeches analyzed included nationally broadcast addresses, occasions where the president spoke to groups outside the White House, and the formal statements given at news conferences. We chose these occasions because they represent instances where the president controls speech content. Accordingly, presidents use these types of speeches as a presentation forum for important policy objectives. Questions at press conferences, for example, were not included because presidents have little control over the subject matter of the questions being asked.

While our measure is quite simple, it has several advantages. First, from a practical standpoint, our measure is reasonably objective, replicable, and relies only on actions of the president, not presidential subordinates. Second, analyzing speech content provides a far more comprehensive agenda measure relative to more common legislation-based measures (e.g., Light 1991: 57). Looking at the president’s legislation priorities, for example, necessarily minimizes the importance of agenda items not normally translated into legislation (e.g., many foreign policy issues). Finally, given evidence that the content of presidential speeches affects the public’s agenda (Cohen 1995) and given presidential incentives for building public support (Kernell 1993), there is reason to believe that measuring speech content directly taps into the more general concept of the president’s agenda.

Nonetheless, our measure has several shortcomings. First, the category “foreign policy” is quite broad. We made no attempt in this analysis to distin-

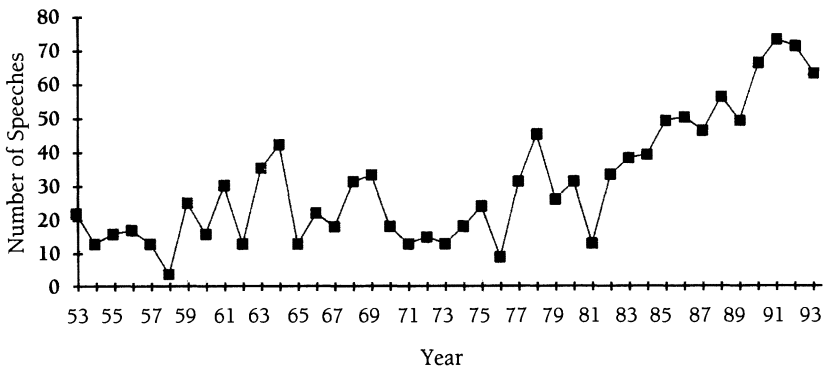
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<sup>2</sup> For other studies which analyze influences on presidential speeches see Ragsdale (1984) and Brace and Hinckley (1993).

guish among more specific categories of foreign policy. Doing so would be difficult given the tendency for presidents to discuss several related issues within a single speech (King and Ragsdale 1988: 260 n 1). Second, and for similar reasons, the measure makes no distinction regarding the relative conflictual or cooperative nature of the president's stance. Finally, we make no distinction for size and content of audience separate from the filters noted above. Given the media's tendency to monitor presidential speeches and report them to the public, the total audience for the president's message is larger than the audience hearing the actual speech. Additionally, we see the inclusion of minor substantive speeches as adding to a more complete picture of the president's agenda especially since the very few major foreign policy speeches tend to be event based.

Figure 1 presents the number of foreign policy speeches made in each year in the study. The figure indicates substantial variation across the forty-year period with the most speeches in a year being made by George Bush (seventy-two in 1991), the fewest by Dwight Eisenhower (three in 1958). The mean is thirty. Across time there is a general upward trend, beginning especially with Jimmy Carter. While Bill Clinton's first year saw a slight decrease from his immediate predecessor, the decline is fairly slight.<sup>3</sup> Finally, consistent with conventional wisdom, Bush focused extensively on foreign policy—aver-

≡ FIGURE 1  
PRESIDENTIAL FOREIGN POLICY SPEECHES, 1953–1993



<sup>3</sup> When developing the analysis subsequently reported we tested for the influence of time by including a simple time count variable (1 = Jan. 1953; 2 = Feb. 1953 ...). Interestingly the variable, while positive, proved statistically insignificant, and had marginal impact on the other estimates. We thus discount the possibility that the increase in

aging sixty-four speeches per year. Notably, however, the other “foreign policy president,” Richard Nixon, did not focus on foreign policy nearly to the extent of his immediate predecessors or any of his successors excepting Gerald Ford.

Given the variation across time and presidents, what various contextual and individual factors account for variation in presidential foreign policy agendas? As a dependent variable we used foreign policy speeches aggregated by month.<sup>4</sup> Possible explanatory variables include presidential approval, the level of presidential influence in Congress, international events, election politics, time in office, and personal factors.

### *Independent Variables and Data*

*Presidential Approval:* Public approval of presidential actions augments presidential power. High levels of approval improve a president’s chances for reelection (e.g., Fair 1978), boost the fortunes of fellow partisans in congressional elections (Jacobson 1992), and increase influence in Congress (Kernell 1993; Neustadt 1960; Edwards 1989; cf. Bond and Fleisher 1990). Approval may affect the president’s foreign policy emphasis in one of two ways. The strongest influence on presidential approval stems from the state of the domestic economy (Brace and Hinckley 1991). Declining levels of approval, therefore, may encourage presidents to focus on foreign policy in the hope of “diverting” the public’s attention from domestic ills. On the other hand, presidents may prefer to have high levels of political support before engaging in extensive foreign policy activity (e.g., Ostrom and Job 1986).<sup>5</sup>

To measure the effect of varying popularity on the foreign policy agenda we scored two variables, one for national approval of the president and one for the approval of the president among fellow partisans.<sup>6</sup> Both variables were

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foreign policy speeches over time stems substantially from an increase in public appearances by presidents over time and instead is accounted for by the variables in the model reported.

<sup>4</sup> Our aggregation is based on months because presidents have the ability to adjust their speech frequency and content in response to immediate or near immediate influences. We performed an analysis on data aggregated by quarter and found similar results.

<sup>5</sup> The “diversionary” hypothesis attracts considerable attention in the international relations literature. Recent examples include Morgan and Bickers (1992) and Levy (1989). Strictly speaking, both the diversionary hypothesis literature and the Ostrom and Job (1986) article focus on use of force as opposed to all types of foreign policy. For the purposes of this empirical exploration we treat all foreign policy as generic. We explore presidential use of “aggressive” versus “non-aggressive” foreign policy, in relation to presidential popularity, in a subsequent paper.

<sup>6</sup> The national approval and partisan approval variables are based on the standard Gallup question, “Do you approve or disapprove of the way [the incumbent] is doing his job as

lagged by one month to ensure causal direction. National approval measures the president's aggregate popularity among national respondents. Partisan approval, however, taps into the president's primary sub-constituency—the fellow partisans who form the base of the president's electoral coalition. We analyzed both variables to account for the possibility that presidents place different levels of importance on the approval of each constituency. Morgan and Bickers (1992), for example, found that partisan approval played a greater role in influencing U.S. use of force against other nations than did national approval.<sup>7</sup>

*Presidential Influence in Congress:* Influence in Congress is necessary for presidents to achieve successfully many of their domestic policy goals (e.g., Bond and Fleisher 1990). On the foreign policy front, however, the president has considerably more autonomy because foreign policy objectives rarely require direct congressional approval in the same way as domestic objectives. We assume that presidents prefer to achieve as many of their policy goals as possible. This suggests that presidents will pursue the goals that are most attainable. Thus emphasis on foreign policy should be directly, and inversely, related to the president's ability to influence Congress. Presidents with low levels of influence in Congress will seek to focus more on foreign policy issues than presidents with high levels of influence in Congress.

As a measure of influence in Congress we used Congressional Quarterly's measure of presidential success (*Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, various years). The presidential success score is the percentage of the time Congress voted in accord with the president's position on the vote. For example, in 1992, Congress sided with George Bush on 43 percent of the votes in which Bush took a clear position (*Congressional Quarterly Almanac* 1992: 3-B)<sup>8</sup>

*International Event:* The occurrence of international events that in some way affect the U.S. should affect presidential emphasis on foreign policy. Ma-

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president?" Approval scores for the years 1953-1988 were obtained from Edwards and Gallup (1990). The remaining years were completed using various issues of *Gallup Reports*. For months where more than one poll were reported the results were averaged. Data for months missing poll results were obtained by interpolating the immediate prior and post polls.

<sup>7</sup> While normative evaluations of presidential versus congressional power often point out that presidents ostensibly represent a national constituency, winning presidential candidates generally garner a narrow plurality of those voting. The primary component of that plurality likely belongs to the president's party. For a recent article that evaluates presidential attention to a sub-constituency (in this case for budget politics), see McCarty (1995). The correlation ( $r$ ) between party approval and national approval is .77.

<sup>8</sup> This is perhaps the most frequently used measure of presidential influence over legislation (see, e.g., Bond and Fleisher 1990).

major international events (e.g., the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait) should force presidents to place greater focus, at least temporarily, on foreign policy.

Thus to control for the impact of international events we used a dummy variable scored one for those months in which a major international event occurred and zero otherwise. The events used in this analysis are listed in Table 1.<sup>9</sup>

≡ TABLE 1

INTERNATIONAL EVENTS	
Korean Armistice	July 1953
Indochina Truce Signing	July 1954
“Big Four” Geneva Summit	July 1955
Marines in Lebanon	July 1958
Goodwill Trip	December 1959
U-2 Incident	May 1960
Bay of Pigs	April 1961
Cuban Missile Crisis	October 1962
Marines in Santo Domingo	April 1965
Hanoi/Haiphong Bombing	June 1966
Glassboro Summit	June 1967
Nixon Warning to USSR on Mideast	July 1970
Vietnam Ceasefire Proposal	October 1970
China Trip	February 1972
Moscow Summit	May 1972
Vietnam Peace Agreement	January 1973
Mayaguez Incident	May 1975
Camp David Accords	September 1978
Hostages Seized in Iran	November 1979
Soviets Invade Afghanistan	December 1979
Failed Hostage Rescue Mission	April 1980
Shootdown of KAL	September 1983
Beirut Bombing/Grenada	October 1983
TWA Hostage Crisis	June 1985
Achille Lauro Hostage Crisis	October 1985
Gorbachev Summit	November 1985
Air Strike Against Libya	April 1986
Panama Invasion	December 1989
Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait	August 1990
U.N. Approval of Force	November 1990
Desert Storm	January 1991
Ending of Desert Storm	February 1991
Missile Attack Against Iraq	June 1993

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<sup>9</sup> We sought to include those events that were reasonably precise and dramatic. To this end we used Hugick and Gallup's (1991) listing of rally points. Subsequent issues of

*The Impact of Election Politics:* A further possible influence on the nature of the presidential agenda is the proximity of an election. Presidents may wish to alter the content of their agenda to maximize positive electoral results. To test for this we used a dummy variable scored one for even years and zero for odd years.

*Time in Office:* Do presidents alter the content of their agendas as their presidency progresses? As presidents find the highly conflictual nature of domestic politics increasingly frustrating, and as they find the nature of international politics increasingly absorbing, they may turn their attention more and more to the foreign policy arena. To account for this we used a simple counter variable with the first month of each presidency coded one, the second month two, etc.

*Personal Differences:* Finally, we acknowledge that beyond context there remains the possibility of personality and personal preferences. Conventional wisdom holds that some presidents simply prefer some types of policy over others. Descriptions of George Bush, for example, often note his preference for foreign policy over domestic policy (e.g., Milkis and Nelson 1994: 378–79). We sought to determine, then, the effect of individual presidents on the foreign policy agenda beyond the above contextual factors. To do this we used dummy variables for the last seven of the eight presidents in the analysis (Kennedy–Clinton).

#### *Estimation*

Because our dependent variable—number of foreign policy speeches per month—is a count of events, standard OLS regression is inappropriate. Event counts are inherently non-linear and cannot be less than zero. While this mis-specification may be solved by using a logged dependent variable and OLS, doing so can introduce bias and inconsistency (King 1988). Consequently we use the Poisson regression model proposed by King (1988; 1989):

$$E(Y_t) = \lambda_t = \exp(x_t\beta). \quad (1)$$

In this case  $Y_t$  is the number of foreign policy speeches made in month  $t$ . These are the observable events generated by the continuous underlying process  $\lambda_t$ , an exponential-linear function of a vector of explanatory variables,  $x_t$ . Parameters and standard errors are estimated by maximizing the log-likelihood function:

$$\ln L(\beta | y) = \sum_{t=1}^n [y_t(x_t\beta) - \exp(x_t\beta)]. \quad (2)$$

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*Gallup Poll Monthly* were used for the remaining years. As can be seen from Table 1, the events used are similar to those used in other analyses (e.g., Brace and Hinckley 1992: 185–88).



**RESULTS**

Table 2 presents the estimates.<sup>10</sup> The results suggest that several of the contextual variables directly affect presidential emphasis on foreign policy. The substantive impact of the variables cannot be assessed in the same linear fashion as OLS coefficients. Like probit and logit estimates, the substantive impact of a particular variable must be assessed while holding the value of all other variables at some value.<sup>11</sup> This is done by plugging the parameter estimates from Table 2 and hypothetical values of the independent variables into equation (1) above. As a baseline, holding all variables at their mean values produces an expected number of speeches of 2.09.

Interestingly, the two popularity variables—national approval and partisan approval—affect foreign policy emphasis in contrary ways. Increases in na-

≡ TABLE 2  
POISSON REGRESSION ESTIMATES FOR PRESIDENTIAL FOREIGN POLICY SPEECHES

Variable	Estimate	Std. Err.
Constant	2.677*	0.050
National Approval	0.009*	0.005
Partisan Approval	-0.012*	0.004
Presidential Success Score	-0.025*	0.002
International Event	0.506	0.070
Election Year	0.070	0.069
Time in Office	-0.006*	0.002
Kennedy	0.614*	0.109
Johnson	0.486*	0.091
Nixon	0.016	0.160
Ford	-0.768*	0.100
Carter	0.519*	0.098
Reagan	0.777*	0.072
Bush	0.677*	0.095
Clinton	1.636*	0.120
Mean Log Likelihood 0.131		
n = 491		

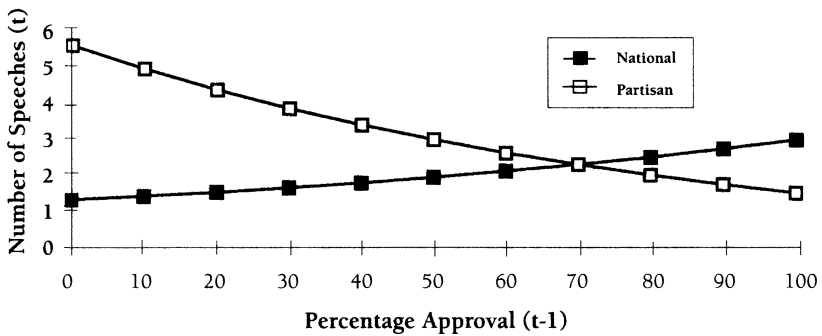
\* p < .05. Parameter covariance matrix computed using a heteroskedastic-consistent covariance matrix

<sup>10</sup> The ratio of the parameter estimate to its standard error is analogous to the t value in OLS. Estimates and expected values were obtained using Gary King's program COUNT currently available at the ftp site haavelmo.harvard.edu.

<sup>11</sup> Unlike probit and logit, however, the estimated impact assessed is not in regard to changes in the probability of y = 1 but instead is an estimate of the change in the number of speeches given a set change in some other variable.

tional approval lead to increases in foreign policy emphasis while increases in partisan approval lead to decreases in foreign policy emphasis. Figure 2 indicates the substantive impact of the two variables across hypothetical values. Each line represents the number of speeches predicted in month *t* given the stated value of the variable for month *t*-1 while all other variables are held at their mean value. For example, a national approval rating of thirty at *t*-1, with all other variables at their mean, produces an expected number of speeches of 1.64 at *t*. An increase in national approval from thirty to seventy—with all other variables at their mean—drives the number of speeches up to 2.36. The partisan approval variable produces a greater substantive impact on the number of speeches. For example, a decline in partisan approval from seventy to thirty results in a speech increase of 2.36 to 3.84.

≡ FIGURE 2  
 EXPECTED SPEECHES GIVEN HYPOTHETICAL APPROVAL LEVELS



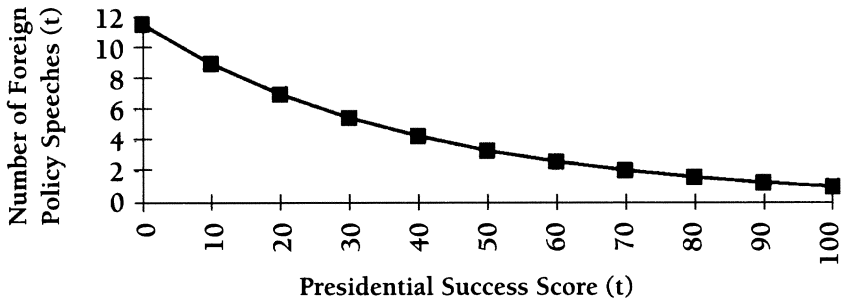
This finding is similar to that discovered by Morgan and Bickers (1990). They examined causes of U.S. use of force against other nations and found the same basic relationship: partisan approval was negatively related to the probability of the use of force while national approval was positively related to the probability of the use of force. Our dependent variable is a considerably broader measure than just the use of force. By counting all foreign policy speeches, our measure captures the complete range of foreign policy—aggressive and non-aggressive, conflictual and cooperative. The negative relationship between number of speeches and partisan approval is suggestive of a diversionary approach by presidents. Falling levels of support among a president’s electoral base may encourage that president to attempt to shift the attention of that base away from domestic controversies and toward foreign policy issues. The national approval finding, however, suggests a limit, or condition, under which presidents operate. A foreign policy focus designed to bolster partisan ap-

proval may still require minimum levels of national support. Once national support drops too far, presidents may have to turn to other areas—presumably domestic policy—in reaction (Morgan and Bickers 1992).<sup>12</sup>

Equally interesting is the effect of the president's congressional influence measure, Presidential Success. Recall that this variable is the extent to which Congress votes in accordance with the president's wishes on legislation in which the president takes a clear position. Figure 3 presents the substantive impact of different values of the variable with all other variables held at their means. The results indicate that presidents with greater influence in Congress focus on foreign policy less than those with less influence. For example, the model predicts that presidents with a success rate of 60 percent produce 2.62 foreign policy speeches monthly while a president with a success rate of 40 percent produces 4.30 speeches. Given that, in general, the realization of a president's domestic policy agenda requires high levels of congressional influence, it makes sense that presidents without that influence will turn instead to an agenda heavily composed of foreign policy items. The finding also reinforces the controversial "two presidencies" thesis. If it is true that presidents receive more congressional deference in the area of foreign policy than in domestic policy, presidents lacking in overall influence will likely turn to foreign policy.<sup>13</sup>

≡ FIGURE 3  
EXPECTED SPEECHES GIVEN LEVELS OF PRESIDENTIAL SUCCESS

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<sup>12</sup> Note also the similarity with the findings of Ostrom and Job (1986) and James and Oneal (1991). They found that national approval was positively associated with the use of force.

<sup>13</sup> There is a huge "two presidencies" literature. Examples include Wildavsky (1975), Shull (1991), and Fleisher and Bond (1988).

Not surprisingly, the international events variable is statistically significant and positively related to foreign policy speeches. With all variables set at their mean value, the expected number of speeches in a month with no international event is 2.01. Occurrence of an event drives speeches up to 3.34.<sup>14</sup>

We found no strong evidence that the presence of an election affects the content of presidential agendas.<sup>15</sup> Surprisingly, however, we found that time in office is *negatively* related to emphasis on foreign policy. Despite the conflictual, often frustrating nature of domestic politics, coupled with the “world leader, world stage” nature of foreign policy, presidential agendas shift away from foreign policy over the course of their administrations, once other factors like popularity and success are controlled. There is an interesting exception, however. Ronald Reagan’s agenda shows a remarkable evolution over the course of his administration. A test of the interaction between Reagan’s presidency and the time in office variable revealed a statistically significant and *positive* relationship. This pattern can be seen in Figure 1. In Reagan’s first year in office, 1981, he made just twelve foreign policy speeches. By 1984 the number is thirty-eight, and by 1988, Reagan’s last year, the number is fifty-five. The relationship holds even with a control for 1981’s speech-reducing gunshot injuries.

Finally, there remains the separate impact of each president. Each presidential dummy variable is statistically significant with the exception of Nixon. As Figure 4 indicates the expected number of foreign policy speeches is highest for Ronald Reagan (3.14).<sup>16</sup> The exception is Bill Clinton’s 7.4. Since only Clinton’s first year is in the data set this effect is probably overstated. Yet, Clinton’s first year was decidedly foreign policy oriented for a president who campaigned mainly on domestic issues and suffers from criticism of his foreign policy credentials.

Notably, George Bush’s foreign policy emphasis—while higher than most—is not as high as one might predict. As seen in Figure 1, Bush’s absolute levels

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<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that not all international events are completely exogenous events. For example, if the diversionary hypothesis is correct then the occurrence of some events are driven by factors like popularity (see, e.g., Morgan and Bickers 1992).

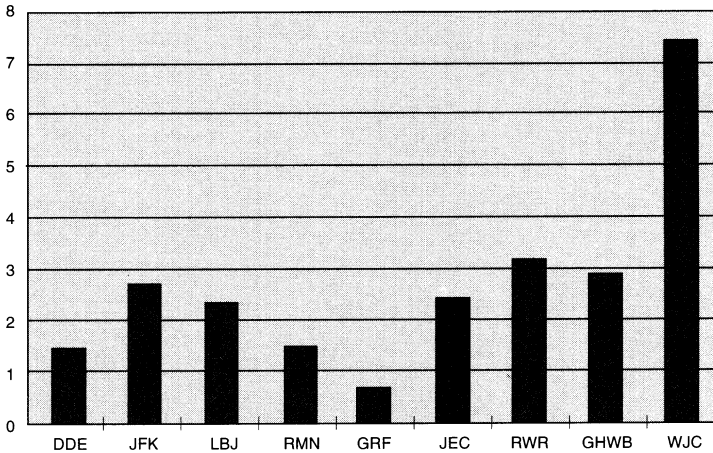
<sup>15</sup> We also tested an election variable with a time span shorter than the entire election year. The results were quite similar. Also, we received similar results with a variable scored on presidential elections only.

<sup>16</sup> Expected number of speeches for each president was determined as follows. Each of the variables, excepting the dummies for each president, were set at their means. Dummy variables for each president were set at zero. The effects of each individual were then determined by setting the president of interest at one. For Eisenhower all the seven presidential dummy variables (Kennedy-Clinton) were set at zero.

≡ FIGURE 4

EXPECTED MONTHLY FOREIGN POLICY SPEECHES BY PRESIDENT

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of foreign policy speeches were quite high. Indeed, he averaged 5.31 speeches per month over his term. However, once the effects of the independence variables are taken into account his expected speeches per month is 2.84. The driving factor for Bush appears to be the success variable. The mean success level for all presidents in the study is 69.2. Bush, however, suffered from extraordinarily low success rates. Indeed, in 1992 Bush experienced the historically low success rate of 43 percent. Plugging lower success rates into an equation for Bush yields dramatically higher expected speech rates. For example, 60 percent success yields an expectation of 3.57 while a success rate of 43 percent yields an expectation of 5.75.<sup>17</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

In his groundbreaking study of the policy process Kingdon (1995: 23) wrote, “no other single actor in the political system has quite the capability of the president to set agendas in given policy areas for all who deal with those policies.” In a political system characterized by policy complexity and policy competition, this ability potentially boosts presidential power to an extraordinary degree.

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<sup>17</sup>We are inclined to conclude that these results support the argument that Bush’s lack of influence in Congress contributed to his greater focus on foreign policy. Nonetheless, we admit that his well-known emphasis of foreign policy over domestic policy may have contributed to his low success rate.

However, the evidence presented here indicates that context heavily influences presidential choices of the composition of the agenda promoted. Our analysis of presidential emphasis on foreign policy—as measured by the frequency of presidential speeches devoted solely to foreign affairs—finds that factors such as presidential approval, the president's influence in Congress, and the occurrence of international events each affect the content of presidential agendas. These factors are only partially influenced by presidents. Approval levels depend largely on economic conditions and tend to decline over the course of presidential terms regardless of presidential actions (Brace and Hinckley 1992). Influence in Congress is highly dependent on the partisan and ideological composition of the two houses (Bond and Fleisher 1990). Many international events important to the U.S. occur without direct involvement or influence by the president but nonetheless affect the president's agenda (e.g., the shootdown of Korean Airline 007).

Consequently, the composition of presidential agendas is determined not so much by the individual characteristics of presidents but by factors largely outside the realm of presidential control. This is not to say that individual characteristics do not matter. Differences across presidents remain even after accounting for context. However, these differences are not particularly pronounced. Furthermore, the presidents often considered to be the most foreign policy oriented—especially George Bush—appear less so in the light of their approval and influence levels.

We believe that these findings have important implications for the study of presidential politics as well as for the study of domestic and foreign policy. For example, a large literature on presidential influence in Congress (e.g., Bond and Fleisher 1990) focuses extensively on “end-game” measures like presidential success scores. If decisions to endorse legislation are related to context in the same way that the president's agenda content is related to context, then our findings reinforce the argument that presidential endorsements of particular legislation—the basis upon which success scores are derived—are not exogenous decisions. Consequently, success scores are biased indicators of presidential influence because the positions taken themselves are affected by the same variables thought to influence actual success.

In addition the results suggest that presidents adjust their agenda in relation to factors not always directly related to the new policy areas of interest. Shifts away from domestic policy, for example, may actually be a reflection of *increased* domestic problems as a president seeks to shore up support among partisans. New emphasis on foreign policy may not reflect any particular increase in foreign policy problems, or any particular configuration of international interests, but simply an opportunity for a president to cultivate a image of power and influence in the wake of a declining ability to affect domestic policy.

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