

More Baloney Than Bully

The (false) potential of the president's pulpit

By George C. Edwards III



Gerald R. Ford Museum

White House photo by Eric Draper

Ronald Reagan Library

Leading the public is at the core of the modern presidency. Even as they attempt to govern, presidents are involved in a permanent campaign. Politics and policy revolve around presidents' attempts to garner public support, both for themselves and their policies. This core strategy for governing is based on the premise that through the permanent campaign the White House can successfully persuade or even mobilize the public.

Commentators on the presidency in both the press and the academy often assume that the White House can move public opinion if the president has the skill and the will to effectively exploit the "bully pulpit." Equally important, the White House shares this premise. In *Politicians Don't Pander*, Larry Jacobs and Robert Shapiro found widespread confidence among White House aides in the 1990s in the president's ability to lead the public. Evidently President Clinton shared this view and felt that he could "create new political capital all the time" through going public.

The assurance with which presidents, scholars, and journalists accept the assumed potential of presidential public leadership belies our lack of understanding of that leadership. We actually know very little about the impact of the president's persuasive efforts because we have focused on the stimulus rather than the response.

One of the crowning ironies of the contemporary presidency is that at the same time presidents increasingly attempt to govern by campaigning, public support is elusive. In the century since Theodore Roosevelt declared the White House a "bully pulpit," presidents have typically found the public unresponsive to issues at the top of their agendas.

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Table 1

Average Levels of Presidential Approval

Nixon	1969-1974	48%
Ford	1974-1977	47
Carter	1977-1981	47
Reagan	1981-1989	52
Bush	1989-1993	61
Clinton	1993-2001	55

Note: Averages are based on responses to the Gallup question "Do you approve or disapprove of the way... is handling his job as president?"

Source: George C. Edwards III with Alec M. Gallup, *Presidential Approval* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); updated by the author.

Certainly one of the highest priorities of presidents is the public's support for themselves. Presidents believe that public approval increases the probabilities of obtaining the passage of legislation in Congress, positive coverage in the press, and even responsiveness in the bureaucracy. Consequently, they devote an impressive amount of time, energy, and money to getting it.

How well have they done? Table 1 shows that on the average, Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Carter did not even receive approval from 50% of the public. Even Ronald Reagan, often considered the most popular of recent presidents, averaged only 52% approval—a bare majority.

George Bush achieved the highest average approval, 61%. Yet when he needed support the most, during his campaign for reelection, the public abandoned him. He received only 38% of the popular vote in the 1992 election.

The fact that Bill Clinton enjoyed strong support during his impeachment trial should not mask the fact that he struggled to obtain even 50% approval during his first term and did not maintain such an average for a year until his fourth year in office. Moreover, Clinton's disappointing approval levels in his first two years occurred during the only period during his tenure in which he had a Democratic majority in Congress and thus the potential to make non-incremental changes in policy.

Presidents want support for their policies as well as for themselves. Even a brief examination of the experiences of two "great communicators," Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton, indicates that the presidential pulpit may be more baloney than bully.

One of Reagan's highest priorities was increasing defense spending, but in Figure 1, we find that public support for defense expenditures was decidedly *lower* at the end of his administration than when he took office!

The data become even more interesting upon closer examination. Support for increased spending was unusually high *before* Reagan took office. The Reagan defense buildup represented an acceleration of change initiated late in the Carter administration.

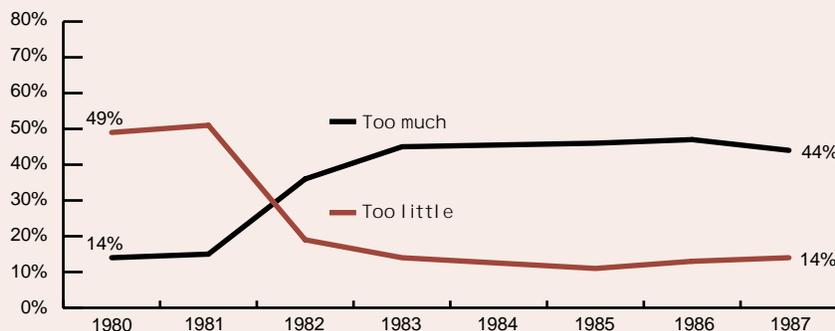
A number of conditions led to broad bipartisan support for the buildup in both the Carter and Reagan administrations, including the massive Soviet increase in strategic nuclear forces, a series of communist coups in Third World countries followed by revolutions in Nicaragua and Iran, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. American hostages held in Iran, Soviet troops controlling a small neighbor, and communists in power in the Western Hemisphere created powerful scenes on television and implied that American military power had become too weak.

Figure 1

Support for Defense Spending Dissipates Under Reagan

Question:

There is much discussion as to the amount of money the government in Washington should spend for national defense and military purposes. How do you feel about this—do you think we are spending too little, too much, or about the right amount?



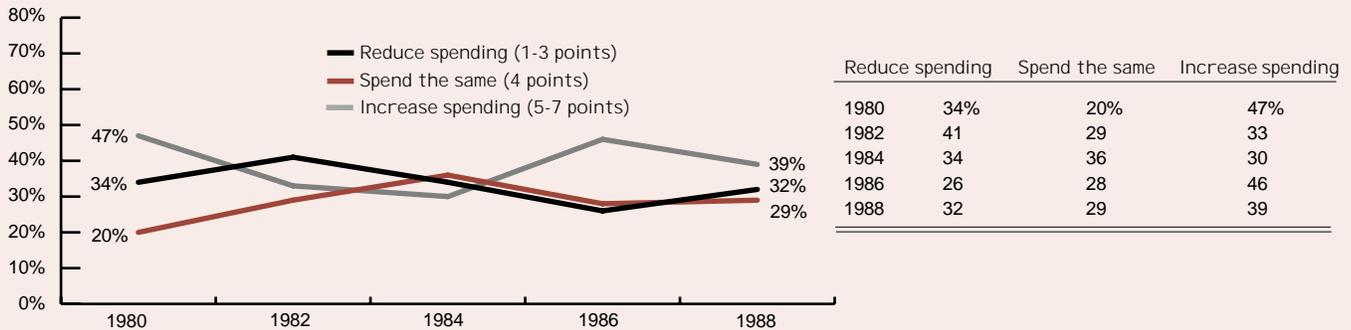
Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization, latest that of April 10-13, 1987.

Figure 2

No Mandate for Spending Reductions

Question:

Some people think that government should provide fewer services, even in areas such as health and education, in order to reduce spending [point 1 on a 7-point scale]. Other people feel that it is important for the government to provide many more services even if it means an increase in spending [point 7 on a 7-point scale]. Where would you place yourself on this scale?



Source: Surveys by the Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan, latest that of 1988.

Nevertheless, public support for increased defense expenditures dissipated by 1982, only a year after Reagan took office. Indeed, in his second term, a plurality thought the US was spending *too much* on defense. It is possible this decline was the unintended consequence of the military buildup that did occur.

The point remains, however, that while Reagan wanted to continue increasing defense spending, the public was unresponsive to his wishes. As a result, Reagan suffered another disappointment, as Congress did not increase spending in real dollars during his entire second term.

Interestingly, when Reagan's chief public relations adviser, Michael Deaver, wrote his memoir of the Reagan years, he presented quite a different picture of the president's leadership of the public on defense spending. According to Deaver, Reagan, distressed about the lack of support,

pulled me aside one day; 'Mike,' he said, 'these numbers show you're not doing your job. This is your fault; you gotta get me out of Washington more so I can talk to people about how important this policy is.' I did, and he would systematically add his rationale for more military

spending to nearly every speech, and eventually his message would get through to the American people.

One does not have to challenge the sincerity of the author's memory to conclude that such commentary contributes to the misunderstanding of the potential of the permanent campaign.

At the core of Reagan's domestic policy was limiting spending on domestic policy. For many programs, spending *is* policy. The amount of money spent on a program determines how many people are served, how well they are served, or how much of something (land, employees, vaccines, and so on) the government can purchase. Because, as he often declared, "government is the problem," Reagan was eager to limit government spending.

Figure 2 provides responses to a question on spending for government services that specifies, by way of example, health and education policy. As the figure shows, Reagan never obtained majority support for reducing spending. Only in 1982 did a plurality of the public favor it (despite the recession of that year). Indeed, support declined during his tenure, and in his second term pluralities actually favored *increasing* spending.

Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential election campaign kept a clear focus on the economy. On February 15, 1993, the new president addressed the nation on his economic program. Two days later he delivered a much more detailed address to the Congress. His proposals included spending for job creation, a tax increase on the wealthy, investment incentives, and aid to displaced workers.

In the same month he introduced his first major legislative proposal, a plan to spend more than \$16 billion to stimulate the economy. It immediately ran into strong Republican opposition. During the April 1993 congressional recess, Clinton stepped up his rhetoric, counting on a groundswell of public opinion to pressure moderate Republicans into ending their filibuster on the bill. The groundswell didn't materialize, and the Republicans found little support for any new spending in their home states. Instead, as described in the *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report* on April 24, they found their constituents railing against new taxes and spending. The bill never came to a vote in the Senate.

Figure 3 shows that public support for the president's economic plan peaked immediately following his February 17 speech and then dropped dramatically a few days later. During

the period when the president needed support the most and when he worked hardest to obtain it, it diminished to the point that by May a plurality of the public *opposed* his plan.

In September 1993,

Clinton delivered a well-received national address on the need for health care reform, which was to be the centerpiece of his administration. Yet the president was not able to sustain the support of the public. The White House held out against compromise with the Republicans and conservative Democrats, again hoping for a groundswell of public support for reform. But, as with the economic program, it never came.

In the meantime, opponents launched an aggressive counterattack, including

running negative advertisements on television. As Figure 4 shows, by mid-July 1994, only 40% of the public favored the president's health care reform proposal, while 56% opposed it.

Presidents typically cannot change public opinion. Even "great communicators" usually fail to obtain the public's support for their high priority initiatives. Moreover, the bully pulpit has proved ineffective not only for achieving majority support but also for increasing support from a smaller base.

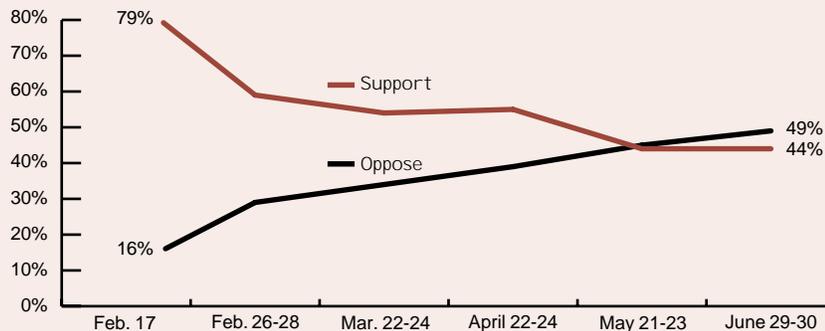
This finding poses a direct challenge to the faith many have in the broad premise of the potential of presidential leadership of the public. If presidents are not able to persuade, much less mobilize, the public, then they may be wasting their time and adopting governing styles that are prone to failure. At the very least, it is appropriate to rethink the theory of governing based on the principle of presidential success in exploiting the bully pulpit to effect changes in public policy.

Figure 3

Clinton's Economic Slump

Question:

Do you generally support or oppose President Clinton's overall economic plan?



	Support	Oppose
1993		
February 17	79%	16%
February 26-28	59	29
March 22-24	54	34
April 22-24	55	39
May 21-23	44	45
June 29-30	44	49

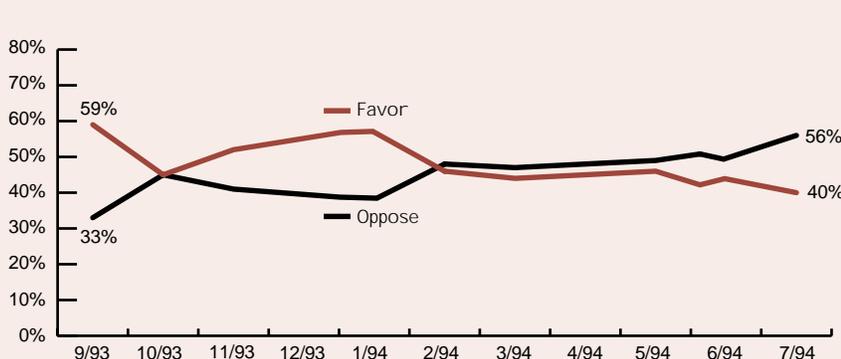
Source: Surveys by Gallup/CNN/USA Today, latest that of June 29-30, 1993.

Figure 4

Support for Clinton Health Plan Not Sustained

Question:

From everything you have heard or read about the plan so far... do you favor or oppose President Clinton's plan to reform health care?



	Favor	Oppose
1993		
September 24-26	59%	33%
October 28-30	45	45
November 19-21	52	41
1994		
January 15-17	56	39
January 28-30	57	38
February 26-28	46	48
March 28-30	44	47
May 20-22	46	49
June 11-12	42	50
June 25-28	44	49
July 15-17	40	56

Source: Surveys by Gallup/CNN/USA Today, latest that of July 15-17, 1994.