

## Popular Presidents Can Affect Congressional Attention, for a Little While

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*Does the president have the ability to set the congressional agenda? Agenda setting is a prerequisite for influence, so this is an important element in understanding presidential–legislative relations. We focus on the State of the Union address and show that popular presidents can, indeed, cause Congress to shift attention to those topics most emphasized. The impact is tempered by divided government and time, however. No matter the state of divided government, however, popular presidents can direct congressional attention, at least for a little while. Unpopular presidents, by contrast, are irrelevant.*

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**KEY WORDS:** agenda setting, presidential–congressional relations, presidential approval, divided government

### Presidential Popularity and Congressional Attention

When a popular president announces a major policy initiative in the State of the Union (SoU) address at the beginning of a new congressional session, committee chairs follow suit. Popular presidents set the congressional agenda because their use of the bully pulpit can be expected to mobilize voters. Further, since the SoU is an important event within the annual cycle of work within the executive branch, congressional leaders know that those federal agencies favored by mentions in the SoU will likely follow up with new initiatives, pushing for congressional action. Committee chairs have a choice: Get on board or move away. They move away from presidential initiatives when the president is of the other party, when the president is unpopular, and as the SoU fades into memory as the months of the calendar click by. Presidential influence on the congressional agenda can be great if the president is popular and this popularity effect can be so strong as to affect members of the rival party. But even the most popular president can expect the impact of a single speech to fade over time. The power of the most public of presidential speechmaking occasions is great, but conditional and fleeting.

In this paper we show that presidential power to set the congressional agenda is conditional on presidential approval, shared party control of the White House and the houses of Congress, and timing. We test our argument by modeling the effect of mentions of particular issue areas in the SoU on the number of congressional hear-

ings in those same areas in the subsequent period. Using time series cross-sectional analyses, we find that mentions by popular presidents move congressional attention to the prioritized topics, but that the effect dissipates over time. Further, the impact is greater in the House than in the Senate, and depends on divided versus unified control of the presidency and each chamber of Congress. Popular presidents affect House attention in the short term for the House during divided government, with a stronger and more lasting effect when the House is controlled by the party of the president. In the Senate, a popular president can have a short-term impact under unified party control, but not under divided control. Presidents without strong approval ratings in the public lose any agenda-setting influence in Congress no matter which party controls a majority.

Our paper makes several important contributions to the literature on presidential–congressional relations. Most importantly, we reinforce findings from the literature that influence is highly conditional on popularity. Faced with an initiative from a popular president, congressional leaders find it to be in their electoral interest to address the same issues, even if they may not enact the legislation favored by the president. They may not rubber-stamp his initiatives, but neither do they ignore them, on average. On the other hand, any powers of the president to influence the congressional agenda disappear completely when presidents lose their popular luster. Faced with policy initiatives by unpopular presidents, congressional leaders are free to follow completely unrelated initiatives of their own. This affects allied party leaders as much as those from the rival party, as no congressional committee leader has an electoral incentive to bind himself or herself to a president who has become an electoral liability.

Finally, the effect of any single speech, even the most visible one of the yearly political cycle, cannot be permanent, and we document important trailing-off effects as the months go by. Our best estimate is that the agenda-setting effect of the SoU lasts for approximately three months and that after that congressional (and most likely presidential) attention moves on to other topics as events require. This is an unsurprising finding but one with important methodological implications, as we show powerful effects for a three-month period but no effects when we use data organized, as is common in the literature, on an annual basis. Therefore, using common techniques, one could wrongly conclude that presidential agenda setting is less powerful than it really is. Popular presidents can affect the congressional agenda in each chamber, even under divided control, for a little while. Unpopular presidents lack even a short-term ability to affect the congressional agenda.

The short-lived effect of the SoU has many implications. The SoU is typically delivered in January and has its greatest impact in the months immediately following. Later in the year, not only has the speech faded but also the president may or may not have followed up on the policy priorities outlined in the speech. Most importantly, political developments will have continued to develop and Congress naturally will have turned its attention to those issues that are the focus of debate. When we combine these significant short-term effects and the null long-term effects into an annualized model as is common practice in many statistical analyses, we find very weak effects overall. This, we believe, is misleading. There is no

reason to expect that the SoU would affect attention the following October or November: Its effect is properly understood to be a short-term one, at best. So our paper has important substantive findings about divided government, popularity, and presidential influence in Congress, but also an important methodological lesson: Timing matters.

These findings also help explain a possible anomaly in the literature: The president has previously been found to have more ability to affect the congressional agenda—the bills Congress considers—than legislative output—bills passed into law. Our findings show the fleeting nature of presidential influence even at the agenda-setting stage. Given that the passage of legislation takes considerable time, one reason for the lower presidential influence on legislative outputs may simply be timing. By going slowly, Congress not only gives itself time to consider legislation in detail but also buys itself distance and independence from the president.

The rest of this paper takes the following form. First, we discuss the conditional relationship between the president's SoU and congressional attention through the lens of agenda setting. Next, we present the data and time series cross-sectional models used to test the hypotheses derived from this conditional relationship. Following the analyses we conclude by discussing the implications of the conditional agenda-setting power of the president on our understanding of policymaking, reaching both theoretical and methodological conclusions.

## Conditional Relations

### *Presidential Agenda Setting*

As John Kingdon wrote, “[p]residents can dominate the congressional agenda” (1995, p. 4). His interviews with lobbyists and other political actors often noted the power of the president in agenda setting. Empirical evidence further supports this claim: There is a clear pattern of presidential influence on the congressional agenda especially in the case of domestic politics (Edwards & Wood, 1999). While the agenda-setting process is messy, Baumgartner and Jones (2009) note that the president is the single actor with the greatest power over it, compared to other Washington policymakers. Looking at major presidential initiatives from 1953 through 1996, Edwards and Barrett (2000) find that, while the president may not see the legislation passed, it is virtually guaranteed a space on the agenda: They note that “from 1935 to 1996 the president obtained agenda status for 97.6 percent of his legislative initiatives!” (p. 120). Scholars looking at law-making success have found that the president and Congress have complex relations, with the president not necessarily succeeding in gaining the legislation they seek. With regard to simply putting an item on the congressional agenda, however, these scholars suggest a high likelihood of success (see also Kingdon, 1995, pp. 26–28; Neustadt, 1990). Whether this is through an indirect strategy of appealing to the public, which, in turn, puts pressure on congressional leaders (see Kernell, 1997), or through a direct approach, presidents clearly seek to affect the congressional agenda. Here, we find that their success in

doing so is highly conditional based on their own popularity (e.g., Canes-Wrone & De Marchi, 2002; Cummins, 2010) and on the power of their party in Congress (e.g., Edwards & Barrett, 2000; Edwards, Barrett, & Peake, 1997).

While presidents have many tools to affect congressional attention, the SoU is the most comprehensive of them and provides an unparalleled opportunity to set not just the congressional agenda, but the public one as well. In fact, the indirect effect of the speech, by affecting the attentive public and the media, is probably the most important aspect of its effect on Congress. The speech itself is the result of important bureaucratic negotiations within the executive branch, suggesting that those favored with attention during the speech will indeed follow up with congressional visits and public activities. This means that the speech may be seen as an indicator of executive priorities more broadly. Further, the importance of going public in the policymaking process is well documented (Bevan, John, & Jennings, 2011; Canes-Wrone, 2001, 2006; Cobb, Ross, & Ross, 1976; Cohen, 1995; Corrigan, 2000; Domke, Graham, Coe, John, & Cooperman, 2006; Fett, 1992; Kernell, 1997; Light, 1999; Tedin, Rottinghaus, & Rodgers, 2011).

Others have looked at more sustained efforts by the president to influence Congress. Edwards and Barrett (2000), for example, look at major legislative initiatives, based on CQ reports. Mayhew (1991) similarly looks at "major" legislation. Certainly, a simple mention in the SoU is not equivalent to these important priorities. But the SoU is of interest in many ways. The speech is the culmination of considerable work within the executive branch, hardly something taken lightly by the president and his closest staff. Cummins (2008), for example, assesses whether presidents typically follow up on their priorities in the speech and finds that, with some exceptions, they do. (President Reagan, for example, spoke often about prayer in the schools but did not follow up with legislative proposals that may not have been constitutional.) Fett (1992) stresses the willingness of the president repeatedly to mention the same issue across a legislative session as an indicator of presidential priority. The SoU is certainly not the only possible indicator of presidential initiative, but it is an important one.

But why should the Congress care about what the president wants? We believe there are two logics, one institutional and one electoral. Institutional parameters are clear: Committee chairs from the opposite party as the president have little incentive to make the rival president look good. Further, House and Senate differences in internal operation make any institutional processes likely more powerful in the House than in the upper chamber. Ideological distance and partisan difference can mean different issue priorities, as Bond and Fleisher (1990) have demonstrated. In the case of shared control, a committee leader seeing a popular president announce a major initiative within a policy domain falling under their purview may want to participate in shaping the subsequent legislation. Whether the precise substance of the legislative action is close to what the president wants is beyond the scope of this paper. But incentives would be strong for a copartisan committee chair, seeing presidential focus on their issue domain in the SoU, to schedule hearings and to encourage policy changes in a domain where it is now apparent that changes may be possible.

The electoral impact of presidential proposals may be more powerful than the institutional effects. First, consider presidents with low levels of popularity. No congressional leader, no matter from which party, will tie his or her own fate to that of such an actor. Rather, even members of the presidential party may follow agendas completely unconnected to that of the president. Rather than engage in the same issue-domains, we expect congressional leaders simply to ignore presidents who are unpopular. Now, where presidents command high levels of popularity among the voting public, roles are reversed. Popularity is linked to issue priorities, so when popular presidents emphasize, say, the state of the economy or environmental initiatives, committee chairs will follow suit. This may be for many reasons, but the key element here is the presidential ability to force others to follow their lead. Here again, a congressional leader may seek to deflect a presidential proposal by affecting its content in important ways; whether they want to rubber-stamp or revise any presidential initiative, congressional leaders must engage with the president, as they know that an initiative coming from a popular White House leader is better dealt with than ignored. So we see electoral and institutional incentives working in the same way.

Previous literature supports our common-sense expectations that popularity and shared control affect presidential agenda-setting powers. For example, lowered popularity weakens agenda-setting power according to Light (1999). Other studies offer important insights for our own conditional model demonstrating that presidential approval has a strong effect on the president's success in Congress, but that those effects vary from year to year and depend upon the partisanship of Congress (Bond, Fleisher, & Wood, 2003). Popular presidents generally receive more support from their own party in Congress and, as a result, have more of their own agenda passed (Bond & Fleisher, 1990). Approval has been shown to be a significant component in determining whether Members of Congress act on the president's public agenda (Barrett & Eshbaugh-Soha, 2007; Brace & Hinckley, 1992) and other empirical evidence even points to legislative success (Bond et al., 2003; Canes-Wrone, 2001; Canes-Wrone & De Marchi, 2002).

#### *Partisanship and House-Senate Differences*

Presidential effects on congressional attention depend not only on the popularity of the president but also on institutional factors within Congress, in particular, party control. Previous studies have found that presidential persuasion is far weaker during divided government with success highly tied to the party composition of Congress (Edwards & Barrett, 2000; Edwards et al., 1997; see also Bowling & Ferguson, 2001). Under unified government, it would be no surprise that a president enjoying wide popularity would be able to lead members of his own party to schedule hearings and consider bills furthering his publicly stated agenda. Under divided control, but high presidential popularity, the SoU may or may not be a powerful element of the bully pulpit.

Important differences distinguish the internal structures of the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate, and these go beyond the issue of shared partisan

control with the presidency. In the House, the majority matters. Congressional committee chairs have a great deal of power in determining congressional attention (Shepsle & Weingast, 1987). Whether one considers the position of a congressional committee chair from the perspective of conditional party government (Rohde, 1991) or from that of cartel theory (Cox & McCubbins, 2004), both perspectives suggest an important role for partisanship and for leadership control over committee agendas. In both cases, chairs call hearings on the basis of adherence to the needs of the party caucus and leadership. As the leader of their party, the president's agenda is also a party agenda (Aldrich, 1995; Rohde & Aldrich, 2000). This conceptualization of the SoU as the party agenda stresses the size of party effects concerning this particular agenda-setting tool, so suggests a clear relationship to divided-government status (Coleman, 1999).

The Senate, on the other hand, offers fewer opportunities for the leadership to control the actions of individual senators. Norms of the Senate allow for greater individual power; the size of the body being considerably smaller, debates are structured to allow more individual participation; a tradition of holds and individual obstructionism allows individual members to stop items from being discussed if they object; in sum, numerous differences distinguish the House from the Senate (see Binder & Smith, 1996; Matthews, 1960; Smith, 1989, 2014). These differences suggest a greater ability of copartisan leaders of the House to provide support to a popular president than may be possible in the member-oriented Senate.

Finally, by separately analyzing the House and Senate, we can clearly code each body separately by whether it is controlled by the same party as the president, and assess separately the ability of the president to affect the agenda of each chamber. We expect a greater impact on the House and for popularity to affect influence in both chambers. These revisions to previous theories can help clarify why agenda-setting effects are more common than legislative influence, and the conditions under which divided-government effects are strong. Edwards and Barrett (2000), for example, note significant divided-government effects; we show that these effects depend on the chamber and are dependent on levels of popularity. Barrett and Eshbaugh-Soha (2007) measure presidential success on major legislation (using Mayhew's major laws) and, like us, find that popularity, unified government, and timing (e.g., honeymoon effects) are key explanations. Our study, reaching similar conclusions, focuses on a different aspect of the process (agenda setting) and uses a different notion of timing.

### *Timing*

One important but often overlooked conditioning factor that affects presidential agenda-setting power is timing. Congressional attention is pulled in many directions by many factors, from events, public opinion, the electoral cycle, and the generally shifting nature of the public agenda (see Canes-Wrone & De Marchi, 2002; Canes-Wrone, Brady, & Coogan, 2002; Erikson, MacKuen, & Stimson, 2002; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005; Mayhew, 1974; Stimson, 1989). As a result, the effect of the SoU is likely to decline after it is given as new events and new issues come to the

forefront. These dynamic factors serve to weaken the impact of the SoU on congressional attention, even if the president may have other means at his disposal to influence those at the other end of Pennsylvania Ave. and may continue to use these over the ensuing months (Edwards & Wood, 1999; Wood & Peake, 1998). Presidents recognizing this fact often choose to pursue short-run policy goals helping guarantee some continuing success (Light, 1999).

While the president may have various tools that allow him to remain relevant to the Congress over the entire year, we cannot expect the priorities laid out in the SoU to remain constant over the entire calendar. As the speech comes only once a year, it seems plain that its impact might be stronger in the period immediately following it rather than in the period, say, leading up to the next one. These inherent dynamics help further explain the inconsistent findings relating to presidential approval and legislative success discussed and accounted for by Bond et al. (2003) in their model allowing for the effect of yearly approval to vary over time and demonstrating a strong connection between approval and success. Following from this previous work, we expect that any effect of the SoU on the congressional agenda should be most apparent in the period immediately following the speech.

### *Hypotheses*

The ideas outlined above suggest several hypotheses concerning the effect of the SoU on congressional attention. The most fundamental relates to political parties, namely, that the president, as a party leader, has significant agenda-setting power in Congress during unified government (Aldrich, 1995; Coleman, 1999; Cox & McCubbins, 2004; Rohde, 1991; Rohde & Aldrich, 2000).

*Hypothesis 1: The effect of the SoU on congressional attention is stronger during unified government than under divided government.*

Leaders are only effective as long as they have support. In politics, support is directly tied to public approval, suggesting that popular presidents are also the most effective leaders (Brace & Hinckley, 1992; Kernell, 1997). While the effects of popularity on policy are debatable (e.g., Canes-Wrone & De Marchi, 2002), popularity adds to the agenda-setting power of the president (Light, 1999).

*Hypothesis 2: The effect of the SoU on congressional attention is higher for presidents with higher approval ratings than for presidents with lower approval ratings.*

Timing also plays an important role in the SoU. While a tool for expressing the president's agenda for the next year, events, debates, and public opinion can quickly and sometimes dramatically change the course of politics (Stimson, 1989; Wood & Peake, 1998). Presidents recognize this fact and often choose to pursue many immediate policy goals in order to take advantage of the agenda-setting power of the SoU. Due to the drop-off in the signal of the SoU over time and the president's own penchant for pursuing many short-run goals, the effect of the SoU is therefore strongest the closer it is to its reading.

*Hypothesis 3: The effect of the SoU on congressional attention is strongest immediately following its reading.*

Finally, we also argue that the body of Congress that the president is influencing will have an effect on the attention of Congress. The House, with agenda control embedded within the majority leadership, should act directly in line with its leadership. In the Senate, we should see more muted effects: While the majority members will want to follow the president's lead, the power of all 100 members of the Senate to be independent of agenda control should make results in the body less cohesive than the House.

*Hypothesis 4: The effect of the SoU on congressional attention should be greater in the House than in the Senate.*

### Data and Methods

The data we use to test H1–H4 are drawn from the Policy Agendas Project (PAP) ([www.policyagendas.org](http://www.policyagendas.org)), supplemented by Gallup presidential approval data compiled by James Stimson. Our analysis covers the period 1953–2005 and uses 19 different major topic codes that encompass the full range of activities of the U.S. federal government. With consistent topic codes for all the databases included in the PAP, it is a simple matter to see if increases in presidential attention correlate with subsequent increases in congressional attention, measured in this case by hearings. We accomplish this by employing a time series cross-sectional design,<sup>1</sup> with each year as the time value and each major topic treated as an individual panel for a total N of 1,007 (54 – 1 years (T) × 19 major topics (n)) observations.

#### *Congressional Attention*

We focus on congressional hearings as our measure of congressional attention, in line with previous scholarship (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009). Hearings may or may not be followed by legislation but are an important indicator of attention and that is our focus. Edwards and Barrett (2000) follow Edwards et al. (1997) in using legislative hearings to measure if a bill was on what Mayhew (1991) calls the “ ‘much talked about’ stage.” As congressional hearings may or may not be held on a matter of interest to the committee leadership, it is a good indicator of what is being discussed. Note that our focus on the percent of all hearings means that we do not count an issue as high on the congressional agenda merely because a single hearing was scheduled; with 19 major topics, and over a thousand hearings per year on average, we are looking for fluctuations up or down in levels of attention. Another advantage to the use of congressional hearings as an indicator of attention is that they cover the full range of congressional activities. The dependent variable is the percentage change in the number of hearings on a given topic as compared to the previous year. The use of a proportional change variable in our model is for theoretical reasons. The simple count of hearings increases over time during the period of our study. It also follows a zigzag pattern due to the two-year cycle of congressional work. We use a

percent change rather than a simple difference because some topics have many more hearings on average than others. As we are using a long-term series where attention to topics may make major changes, we wanted to make sure our measure would capture changes in the level of attention over time, making a percentage change measure appropriate. An increase of 10 hearings from a base of 100 is less of a shift in attention than an increase of the same size from a base of 20. Our measurement reflects this.<sup>2</sup> Formally, the measure is generated using the following equation:

$$p\Delta Hear_{it} = \left( \frac{Hear_{it} - Hear_{it-1}}{Hear_{it-1}} \right) \times 100 \quad (1)$$

where:

$p\Delta Hear$  = proportional change in hearings from the period prior

$Hear$  = the count of hearings

The proportional change in hearings was calculated by taking the number of hearings at time  $t$  minus the number of hearings at time  $t - 1$  all divided by the number of hearings at time  $t - 1$  for each of the 19 topic codes,  $i$ , over the 54 year span of the data and then multiplying by 100 to make interpreting coefficients more direct. We use two sets of data on congressional attention for analysis. The first is all hearings held between 1953 and 2005 in the House; the other reflects the same time period in the Senate.

### *SoU*

To test the effect of the SoU on congressional hearings, we include a measure of the percentage of mentions in each SoU<sup>3</sup> devoted to each policy topic. The PAP classifies each “quasi-sentence” in the SoU by topic; a quasi-sentence constitutes an expression of a single policy idea or issue (see Volkens, 2002). Typically, this is a sentence, but occasionally, presidents give a list of ideas within the same sentence, so the PAP distinguishes separate thoughts in this way. We focus on the percent of attention rather than the raw number of mentions because the individual SoUs vary dramatically in length. For example, in 1981 Carter’s written address contained 1,412 specific policy mentions, while Nixon’s 1973 written address contained just 37.<sup>4</sup>

Note that we use a change variable for the dependent variable as described above, and therefore it might be expected that we should use a change variable for SoU mentions. However, in this case, we have an unusual circumstance where this is not theoretically justified. We noted above that we expect the impact of the SoU to fade away as the months go by, and indeed our results show that this occurs. The president does not stop making policy pronouncements or legislative initiatives when the SoU is delivered; this activity continues all year long. Therefore, when the SoU does occur, we expect that the absolute level of attention to the various topics will affect shifts in congressional attention. One might expect that shifts in SoU mentions would affect shifts in congressional attention, but this implies that members of Congress recall what the president did last year. We suspect not. Therefore, if the president devotes 10 percent of the speech this year to a topic, congres-

sional leaders respond to that absolute level of attention, not to a calculation about whether this was higher or lower than in the previous year. Their own scheduling of hearings, on the other hand, is subject to inertial effects based on organizational culture, interest-group lobbying, and other factors that make it reasonable for us to model them making adjustments up or down from a baseline established in the previous year (see Adler & Wilkerson, 2012). Thus, we test the effect of levels of attention by the president in the SoU on changes in congressional attention. This is driven by theoretical and not statistical reasoning.<sup>5</sup>

Further, we model the speech as affecting hearings, not the other way around. In fact, a test for the impact of hearings on the content of the SoU in the following period shows no effect, as we expect. So we move forward with a model predicting change in congressional attention by lagged presidential attention.

### *Divided Government*

The relationship between the SoU and congressional hearings is conditional based on a series of three factors. The first of these factors is divided government. We have a separate divided-government variable for each model, and we calculate these separately for the House and Senate. In the House model, the variable is whether or not the House and the presidency are held by different parties. If they differ, this is coded as a 1. If the party of the House and the party of presidency are the same, this is coded as a 0. This coding is repeated for the Senate.<sup>6</sup> While there are other possible conceptualizations of divided government, we argue that if an effect for divided government across all issues does exist, it would occur on the institutional level due in large part to how congressional committee chairs are assigned by the majority.

### *Presidential Approval*

According to H2 above, we expect SoUs from presidents with higher presidential approval ratings to have a stronger effect on congressional hearings than presidents with lower approval scores. We use the level of presidential approval in the month of the speech as our measure of presidential approval in order to closely tie approval to the SoU as argued by H2.<sup>7</sup> We use the average January estimate for Gallup presidential approval polling from 1953 to 2005, using all polls with an end date between January 1 and February 7. The amount of data we have to estimate the polling ranges from one poll in the early part of the series to as many as six at the end of the series. We use the polling related to the president giving the speech. As a result, three years (1961, 1977, and 1981) use the last available polling data for each respective president, in December of the previous year.<sup>8</sup>

### *Time*

SoU speeches are typically delivered in late January of each year. We therefore test separately for shifts in the proportion of congressional hearings during the three following months (February, March, and April) and for the period from May through

the end of the congressional session in December. We also test for the effect across the full year of congressional hearings. Alternative models for the month, two months and six months following the SoU, as well as a three-month moving measure of SoU mentions, were also tested and are presented in the online appendix.<sup>9</sup> The three-month model specification was chosen for this paper's presented analyses as it proved to be the point where a slight decline in the effectiveness of the SoU on congressional attention was first evidenced. We do not claim that three months is a set cut point where the SoU's effect will automatically begin to decline, or that we should automatically expect there to be a decline after three months. Rather, what we show here is a difference between the early point in the year versus later points in the year. We therefore test three models of congressional attention: February–April, where we expect the effect to be strongest; May–December, where we expect no effect; and for the full year, a combination of the two, which is of interest methodologically because it runs the risk of producing a false null finding.

#### *Conditional Effects*

As stated in the hypotheses, the effect of the SoU on congressional attention is expected to differ based on divided government, the president's approval level, and the amount of time that has passed since the SoU. A conditional hypothesis requires the use of an interaction term or terms to be properly tested, as the underlying relationship is modified by the other factor(s) expressed in the hypothesis. Therefore, we make use of two multiplicative interaction terms: percent mentions  $\times$  divided government and percent mentions  $\times$  presidential approval. Including both interaction terms along with their constitutive terms allows us to investigate separate effects for the SoU at various levels of approval and during both divided and unified governments.

#### *Controls*

We also include several control variables to account for the specific characteristics of congressional hearings. Hearings are heavily affected by the election cycle with the number of hearings always higher in the first year of a new Congress than the second. The pace of legislative work within a two-year Congress is that there are typically more hearings in the first session (year) of a Congress and fewer hearings (but more laws) in the second session. To account for this, we include a dummy variable coded 1 for the first year of a two-year Congress and 0 in the second year.

To further account for time-dependent patterns in the number of hearings from year to year independent from a two-year congressional cycle, we include a lagged count of hearings in the model. This measure captures how the more hearings there were in the previous year, the greater the negative proportional change in hearings is likely to be. The proportional change in hearings therefore exhibits negative autocorrelation, where a positive proportional change in hearings is followed by a negative change, which, in turn, is followed by a positive change, and so on. Including the lagged count of hearings further corrects for this issue.<sup>10</sup>

Public opinion, specifically public priorities, plays a prominent role in determining both presidential and congressional attention to issues (e.g., Bevan & Jennings, 2014; Jones, Larsen-Price, & Wilkerson, 2009). As both Congress and the president may respond to public priorities in similar ways, we include a control for public priorities measured as Gallup's "most important problem" (MIP) question in our models. This variable is measured on the yearly level<sup>11</sup> and is included as a lagged variable to account for public priorities in the previous year affecting congressional activity in the current year.

Finally, we also include the lagged percentage of *New York Times* stories by policy topic to account for events that affect both the president and Congress.<sup>12</sup> This variable captures the aggregate level of attention to each issue area highlighting those issues that the public deems important and that have a high number of events surrounding them.

### *The Separate Models*

The PAP includes the month of each congressional hearing, so we are able to make a separate calculation for hearings in the February–April period and in the May–December one, in effect creating six models, three for the House and three for the Senate. Similarly, the lagged *New York Times* stories variable is measured as the count of stories by issue area for the three months prior to the SoU, or October through December. The lagged hearings variable is calculated with respect to the difference between the number of hearings in the February–April period compared to the same time period in the previous year. The remaining variables are the same in each version of the model. Of course, appropriate adjustments are made for the May–December model, and then again for the full-year model to these same variables.

Table 1 gives summary statistics for the continuous variables in the February–April model, giving the mean, standard deviation, median, minimum, and maximum for five variables: the proportional change on the number of hearings, the percent of SoU quasi-sentences per topic per year, presidential approval, percentage of attention in *The New York Times* per topic per year, and the percent per topic per year on the Most Important Problem measure.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics for Continuous Variables, February–April Model

	Mean (SD)	Median	Minimum	Maximum
Congressional Hearings	20.83 (112.11)	0.00	–100.00	2,200.00
SoU	5.26 (8.10)	2.20	0.00	59.44
Presidential Approval	57.97 (12.30)	58.00	27.00	83.25
<i>New York Times</i>	5.26 (6.20)	2.92	0.00	39.64
Most Important Problem	4.58 (9.93)	0.52	0.00	78.78

*Note:* Congressional Hearings is a proportional change variable, the others are percentage variables, with SoU, *New York Times*, and Most Important Problem varying by topic and year, while Presidential Approval varies only by year.

SoU, State of the Union.

## Analyses

We begin first with testing related to the House. Our tests of the conditional relationship between the SoU and congressional hearings are presented in Table 2. Figure 1 presents the marginal effects of percent mentions in the SoU on the proportional change in congressional hearings over different levels of presidential approval for divided and unified governments in the three-month model, the May–December model, and the yearly model.

Table 2 presents a clear picture of the conditional relationship between SoU mentions and shifts in congressional attention in the House. Because we present a model with interaction terms, interpreting the results requires looking at the constitutive terms as well as the interactions. The cumulative effects of all these terms, as well as their combined statistical significance, are made clear in Figure 1. In each of the six graphs, we present the marginal effect of the percent of mentions in the SoU devoted to a given topic on the proportional change in congressional hearings on that topic, by level of presidential approval. The y axis presents the marginal effect size, while the x axis presents the approval levels; the hash marks along the top of the x axis denote observed approval levels under each condition; and finally, the solid line is the marginal effect, and the dashed lines represent the upper and lower 95 percent confidence intervals.

The results in Figure 1 illustrate a variety of important effects. First, approval matters most, regardless of party control, in the first three months after the SoU. Under both unified and divided governments, presidents with job approval ratings

**Table 2.** Presidential Effects on Congressional Attention, House

	February–April	May–December	Full Year
	Coef (SE)	Coef (SE)	Coef (SE)
SoU <sub>t</sub>	–1.34 (2.74)	–1.93 (3.70)	–3.40 (3.69)
Divided Government <sub>t</sub>	0.61 (7.52)	8.56 (18.84)	4.35 (10.51)
Presidential Approval <sub>t</sub>	0.06 (0.31)	–0.65 (0.75)	–0.30 (0.42)
SOU <sub>t</sub> × Divided <sub>t</sub>	1.65 (0.97)	–0.51 (1.21)	–0.39 (1.18)
SOU <sub>t</sub> × Approval <sub>t</sub>	0.05 (0.04)	0.07 (0.05)	0.10 (0.06)
First Year of Congress <sub>t</sub>	12.01 (6.46)	99.21 (17.19)*	53.91 (10.58)*
Hearings <sub>t–1</sub>	–2.97 (0.26)*	–2.19 (0.34)*	–0.93 (0.15)*
New York Times <sub>t–1</sub>	0.75 (0.50)	1.66 (0.70)*	1.30 (0.64)*
Most Important Problem <sub>t–1</sub>	–0.46 (0.58)	–0.69 (0.61)	–0.40 (0.46)
Intercept	49.71 (21.29)*	61.80 (51.07)	32.08 (29.03)
Overall R <sup>2</sup>	0.13	0.16	0.15
Wald chi <sup>2</sup>	138.82 (0.00)	106.33 (0.00)	82.79 (0.00)
N	1,007	1,007	1,007
Wooldridge test	0.55 (0.47)	0.86 (0.37)	1.09 (0.31)

*Note:* The dependent variable is proportional change in the number of congressional hearings on a topic, with SoU measured as the percentage of the mentions in the president’s speech that year. Panel corrected standard errors are used.

Postestimation tests using Wooldridge’s (2002) method indicated no evidence of panel autocorrelation in any of this paper’s models with the failure to reject the null hypothesis of no panel autocorrelation.

\* $p < 0.05$ , two-tailed.

SoU, State of the Union.

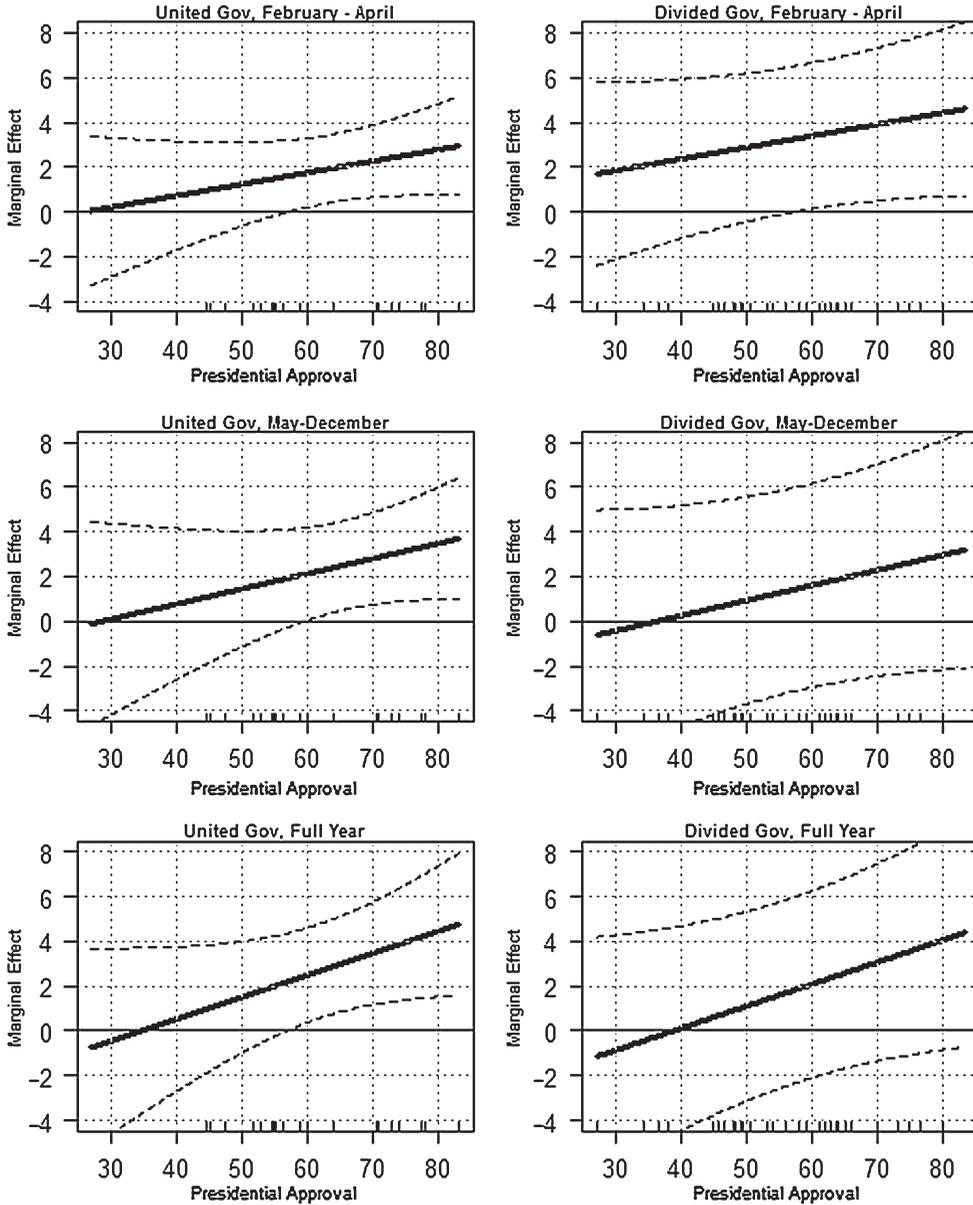


Figure 1. Predicted Effects on Congressional Attention by Approval, Divided Government, and Time, House.

Note: The figure presents predicted probabilities from Table 2.

of at least 60 percent have a positive and significant impact on congressional hearings in the House. Second, the SoU of popular presidents continues to have agenda-setting effects throughout the rest of year, but only under unified government. The SoU of even the most popular president who governs under divided government has no impact on the congressional agenda once the summer months begin. Thus,

popular presidents who govern under unified government can expect to have a strong and enduring impact on the House congressional agenda. Those presidents who do not govern with a job approval rating of at least 60 percent, however, will be delivering the SoU with no discernible impact on the congressional agenda regardless of party control.

H1 states that the effect for the SoU on congressional attention should be stronger during unified government. For the House, this depends on the time frame. In the short term, popular presidents have strong effects on the House no matter if the government is divided or unified. For unified government, this effect remains over the rest of the year, while it disappears in the case of divided government. Thus, we disconfirm H1 in the three-month model but confirm it for the full-year test.

H2 is clearly confirmed; presidential approval is clearly associated with success. H3, regarding timing, is also confirmed; the three-month model is always the best performing, with the twelve-month model significant only for the case of unified government in the House.

The results also show that unpopular presidents have no significant negative effects on congressional attention (that is, the upper-bound of the confidence interval never crosses zero in Figure 1). This suggests that popular presidents can have a significant influence in Congress and that unpopular ones are simply irrelevant.

We now turn to the Senate. The analysis and model here are the same as those in Table 2 and Figure 1, except for the hearings in question (this time Senate committee hearings) and the divided-government variable (which is assessed in terms of the Senate). The tests of the conditional relationship are in Table 3, while the marginal effect of the SoU on hearings across approval is in Figure 2.

The results in the model and from Figure 2 show a different story than that in the House but one that reflects the nature of the Senate. First, H1 is confirmed in the first three months: The power of the SoU in unified government is greater than during divided government. In Figure 2, significance of the marginal effect starts at about 58 percent for the top left figure (united, February–April), while significance for divided government between February and April does not appear until around 80 percent, a reality that has only occurred once, when George W. Bush gave the 2002 SoU address to a divided Senate following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Similarly, we see the strong effect of the approval measure in the three-month model, as popular presidents can move a Senate that shares their policy preferences, giving some credence to H2. However, unlike in the House, the effect of the SoU dissipates in both cases of unified and divided governments, and the slopes of both effects flatten out, confirming H3.

Finally, we find support for H4, especially after the first three months. While the president has some immediate power in the Senate under unified government, these effects dissipate throughout the year. The Senate leadership has less agenda control relative to the House. Therefore, these results are in line with expectations.

Several controls were also included in both models in order to account for the particular characteristics of congressional hearings and events. The first-year dummy variable is positive and significant in the full year and May–December

Table 3. Presidential Effects on Congressional Attention, Senate

	February–April	May–December	Full Year
	Coef (SE)	Coef (SE)	Coef (SE)
SoU <sub>t</sub>	-3.56 (3.61)	0.25 (2.25)	0.32 (1.77)
Divided Government <sub>t</sub>	-7.22 (11.98)	-5.34 (16.85)	-10.78 (11.49)
Presidential Approval <sub>t</sub>	0.03 (0.50)	0.69 (0.68)	0.67 (0.47)
SoU <sub>t</sub> × Divided <sub>t</sub>	0.23 (1.28)	0.24 (0.86)	0.88 (0.62)
SoU <sub>t</sub> × Approval <sub>t</sub>	0.10 (0.06)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.00 (0.03)
First Year of Congress <sub>t</sub>	4.71 (11.93)	94.64 (15.19)*	48.08 (10.56)*
Hearings <sub>t-1</sub>	-4.07 (0.46)*	-1.79 (0.23)*	-0.75 (0.10)*
New York Times <sub>t-1</sub>	0.66 (0.75)	0.01 (0.49)	0.24 (0.42)
Most Important Problem <sub>t-1</sub>	-0.28 (0.65)	0.20 (0.48)	0.05 (0.33)
Intercept	67.79 (32.86)*	-7.92 (44.31)	-14.00 (29.63)
Overall R <sup>2</sup>	0.10	0.15	0.10
Wald chi <sup>2</sup>	90.97 (0.00)	130.22 (0.00)	93.70 (0.00)
N	1,007	1,007	1,007
Wooldridge test	0.04 (0.85)	2.73 (0.12)	0.02 (0.88)

Note: The dependent variable is proportional change in the number of congressional hearings on a topic, with SoU measured as the percentage of the mentions in the president's speech that year. Panel corrected standard errors are used.

Postestimation tests using Wooldridge's (2002) method indicated no evidence of panel autocorrelation in any of this paper's models with the failure to reject the null hypothesis of no panel autocorrelation.

\* $p < 0.05$ , two-tailed.

SoU, State of the Union.

models but is not significant in the three-month model. This indicates that the number of hearings is higher in the first year of a new Congress than in the second, but that there is no significant difference in the number of hearings in the first three months following the SoU in either year. Accounting for this cycling effectively smoothed the data by accounting for a clear seasonal, two-year pattern. This factor may also explain why the overall model fit is greater in the full-year and in the May–December model than in the three-month model. A significant portion of that variance explained is in the zigzag pattern of the number of hearings per year; this pattern simply does not occur during the February–April period.

The lagged hearings count is negative and significant in all six models. This result demonstrates that the more hearings in the previous year, the greater the negative proportional change in hearings in the current year. However, the removal of this variable in a separate version of the model not reported here did not alter the inferences of the marginal effects for any of our hypotheses.

Most Important Problem (MIP) is negative and but not significant in each of the models. This indicates that an increase in public concern about an issue does not lead to an increase in attention by members of Congress on that topic in the same time period. The MIP variable used in this model is lagged, although alternative analyses using a contemporaneous variable do not show positive change in the effects of public opinion on the proportional change of public opinion from year to year.

The *New York Times* variable is positive but marginally significant in only two of the six models. The generally weak connection between *New York Times* stories and congressional hearings is likely due to the broad nature of this measure. However, by

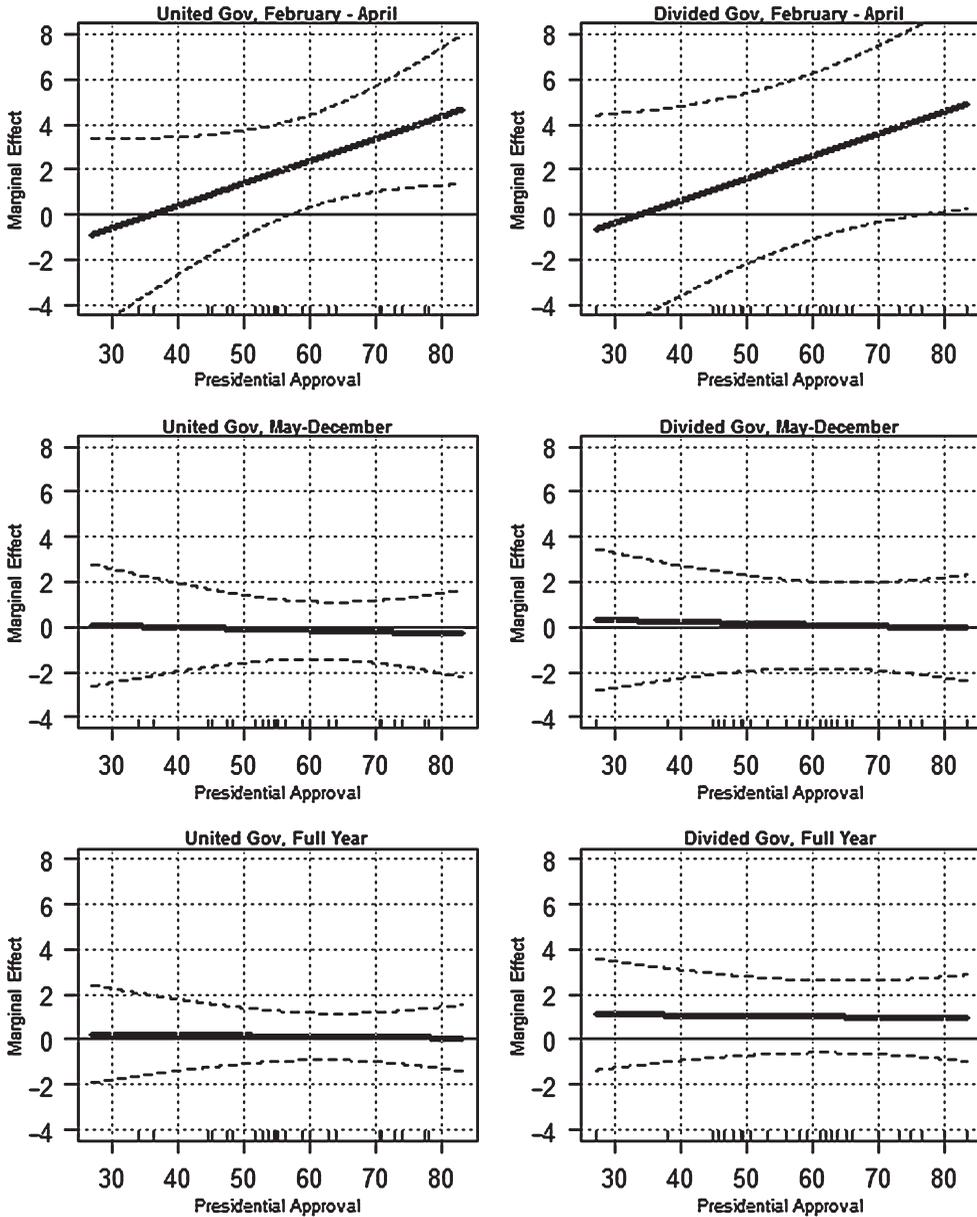


Figure 2. Predicted Effects on Congressional Attention by Approval, Divided Government, and Time, Senate.

Note: The figure presents predicted probabilities from Table 3.

controlling for this variable we can be certain that large attention-changing events, such as 9/11, are not being solely attributed to the president. Overall, we find in the Senate that a popular president can have a significant short-term effect but only in the short term. Further, his chances for influence are much lower under divided government than during unified control of the White House and the Senate.

## Conclusion

Through an analysis of 54 years of presidential–congressional relations, and covering all domains of domestic and foreign policy, we have shown the very contingent and temporary nature of presidential influence on the congressional agenda. SoU mentions can have dramatic effects on congressional hearings with the right conditions, namely, high approval. In the House, the priorities of the president remain an important part of the congressional agenda under unified government. As time passes in divided government with the House and throughout the Senate, however, the effect of the SoU quickly declines, even for presidents with high approval ratings. The loss of effect does not mean that the president has no recourse after the SoU. Presidents have other forms of agenda-setting powers at their disposal. What the results mean is that the power of the SoU only lasts for a certain period, and the speech only has a powerful agenda-setting capacity when it is given by a highly popular leader. Unpopular presidents are simply irrelevant as congressional committee chairs choose their issue priorities for the coming session of Congress.

Moreover, we find some support for a divided-government hypothesis; presidents enjoying unified control of government are more effective in the House directing congressional attention to their priorities for the rest of the year, once we control for approval. However, in the first three months following the SoU, the president can at least direct attention to topics that a divided government will then deal with. In the Senate, we find mixed results, with both presidents of high approval briefly moving a Senate that shares their party and one that does not. This may be because unpopular presidents move no one in Congress, no matter what the party. Overall, our results suggest just how important a popular president can be in Congress, even one controlled by the rival party.

Perhaps the most surprising effect we show here is the short-lived effect of even the most popular presidents on the congressional agenda outside of the House under unified government. This may be more of a statement about the literature and about available data than about the influence of the president. With a speech in January, it should be no surprise that this will have a greater impact in the period immediately following. By summer, new developments may have overtaken the priorities listed by the president six months before, and these may be affected even by his own actions. By the fall, the speech may have been completely forgotten. The data bear out this interpretation.

By looking at presidential popularity in the same model as unified government, it is clear that unpopular presidents will have little effect, even if they enjoy unified government. On the other hand, a popular president, even one lacking control of one or both houses in Congress, can certainly draw national attention to issues immediately after presenting the SoU. Members of Congress might assert their party's greater ability to address the issue, but the data presented here suggest that the president can indeed affect the congressional agenda, if he is popular enough, even under divided government, at least for a little while.

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## Notes

1. In our analyses, we use a time series cross-sectional model with panel corrected standard errors. This model is appropriate for analysis here as we are not concerned with variation between topics (e.g., the differences between the proportion of hearings on agriculture and trade) but rather the general trend in cases. Postestimation tests of our analyses both in the paper and the appendix did not reveal any concerns over serial autocorrelation.
2. Breitung panel unit-root tests showed our dependent variable to be stationary across all panels with lamda values of  $-11.57^{***}$ ,  $-8.77^{***}$ , and  $-7.32^{***}$  for the three months, May–December, and full-year models, respectively, in the House; and  $-7.69^{***}$ ,  $-8.39^{***}$ , and  $-5.07^{***}$  for the three months, May–December, and full-year models, respectively, in the Senate, comfortably ( $p < 0.000$  percent) rejecting the null hypothesis that at least one panel contains a unit root.
3. Two years, 1953 and 1961, contain two SoUs, one from the outgoing and one from the incoming president. In these years, we have included the outgoing president's SoU alone to match the historical norm. Until 1989, the norm was for outgoing presidents to offer a speech either orally or in a written form with no SoU from incoming presidents (except in 1953 and 1961). Since 1989, incoming presidents have offered an SoU-type speech after they first take office with no speech offered by outgoing presidents. Officially, the address offered by an incoming president is not called an SoU as that responsibility technically belongs to the president who held office during the past year. However, the speech offered by incoming presidents both fulfills the same purpose and is commonly referred to as an SoU.
4. Other specifications were also considered including both a change and proportional change variable. However, these models lead to considerable missing data problems because many topics have no mentions in any given year, rendering missing any proportional change calculation for the following year. Models using change measures did, however, produce the same general inferences as what we present here. We also ran models using a lagged proportional SoU, but there were no differences between models with or without the lagged SoU variable. The results for the lagged proportional SoU model are presented in Online Appendix S1.
5. Indeed, in our statistical findings, replacing the percent attention variable in the SoU with a percent-change variable, we have null results. But we have no reason to think that congressional leaders would be calculating these percent-change values; our theory strongly suggests they are responding to levels of attention in the current period alone.
6. Alternative divided-government measures were also tested. The first was coded 1 if the House of Representatives was of a different party than the president. The second was coded 1 when one house of Congress was of a different party than the president, 2 when both were, and 0 otherwise. These models were poorer fitting but did not alter this paper's inferences. Given our concern about party effects on scheduling hearings, the separate treatment of each chamber makes more theoretical sense.
7. A measure of presidential approval for the period following each SoU was also tested and led to the same inferences as the results presented here.
8. To test for the potential that the use of a single survey house may bias the estimates of the marginal effects, we also ran the model with a smoothed average yearly approval measure. This measure was created from data compiled by James Stimson over the years 1953 and 2005 and contains data from over 20 polling sources (though the series is only Gallup polling between 1953 and 1980 due to the lack of polling by other houses in this period). The data were smoothed using James Stimson's WCalc5 application in order to account for potential outliers and variations between houses. The

results do not change when using the smoothed measure versus the average monthly Gallup opinion polling. See Stimson (1989) for more information on smoothing of public opinion polling and [http://www.unc.edu/~jstimson/Software\\_files/Wcalc5.pdf](http://www.unc.edu/~jstimson/Software_files/Wcalc5.pdf) for more information on WCalc5.

9. As these alternative analyses further indicate the SoU is most effective in the first two months and continues to decline in the six-month, yearly, and end of the year models. The slightly lower effect in the one-month model compared with the two- and three-month models is no doubt due to hearings scheduled prior to the reading of the SoU lending further support to its effect on congressional attention.
10. The exclusion of either the congressional first-year dummy or the lagged hearings variable does not alter any of the main inferences in the models. The exception is that excluding lagged hearings led to a negative effect for the lagged *New York Times* variable, which we believe likely picks up some of the effects of excluded lagged hearings variable.
11. While it is possible to compile and recode MIP data to match PAP major topic codes for a shorter than yearly time frame, this produces several issues. In particular, many major topics receive little to no attention through the MIP question even on the yearly level, and this issue is only compounded with shorter time intervals given our time series cross-sectional setup.
12. A contemporaneous version of this variable was also tested and led to the same inferences. *New York Times* data come from the PAP and are coded according to the same topic categories.

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### **Supporting Information**

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web-site:

**Appendix S1.** Tests using lagged State of the Union (SoU) measure.

**Appendix S2.** Temporal testing.