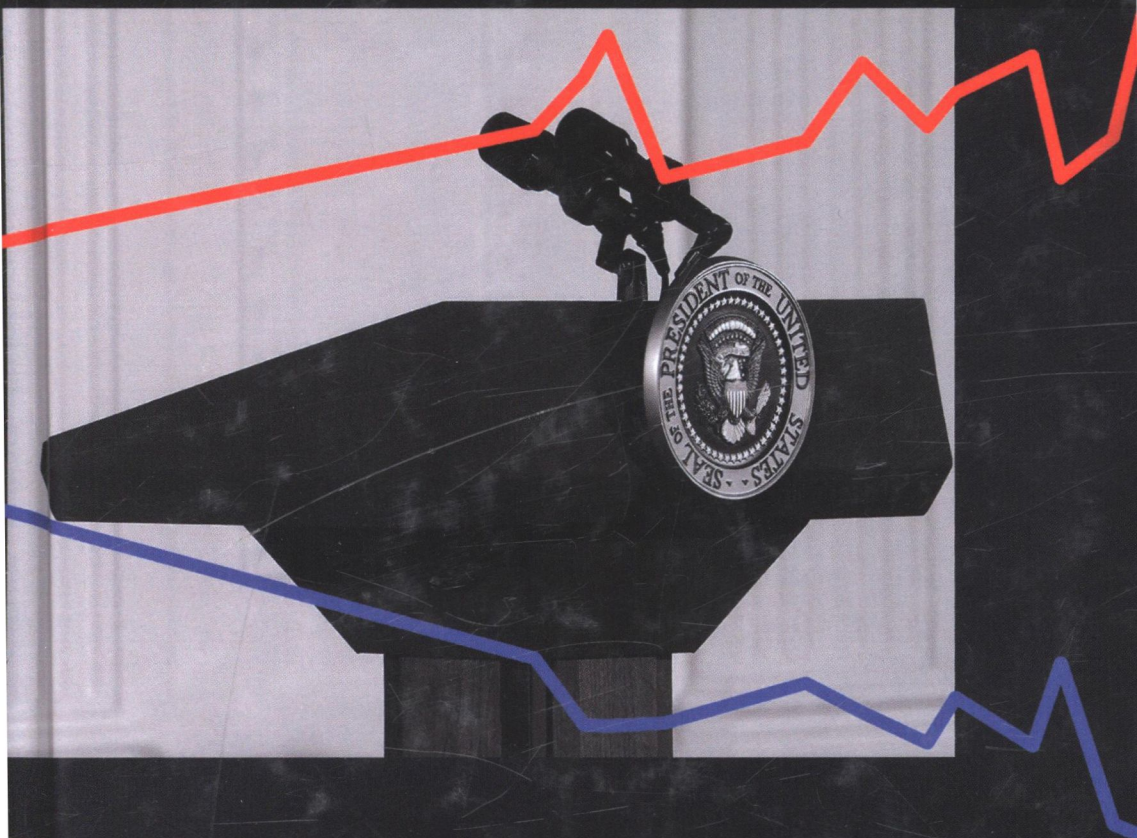


The Party Politics of Presidential Rhetoric

Amnon Cavari



By bringing together two bodies of literature – the presidency and political parties – this book makes two important contributions. First, it addresses the gap between presidential public actions and the perceived limited effect they have on public opinion. By examining the short-term effect of speeches of presidents on the entire public, the long-term effect of the speeches on their partisans, and on the reputations of their parties for handling policy, the book shows that presidents are effective leaders of public opinion. Second, the book adds to the scholarly interest in how political parties are viewed by the electorate in terms of policy substance. It suggests that Americans possess coherent reputations of the parties for handling policy challenges, and that these reputations contribute to the party identifications of Americans. The effect of presidents on the reputations and, in turn, party attachments position them as leaders of the party system.

Amnon Cavari is Assistant Professor of government at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya, Israel, and is the founder and head of the American Public Opinion toward Israel project at the IDC.

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AMNON CAVARI

Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya



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By bringing together two bodies of literature – the presidency and political parties – this book makes two important contributions. First, it addresses the gap between presidential public actions and the perceived limited effect they have on public opinion. By examining the short-term effect of speeches of presidents on the entire public, the long-term effect of the speeches on their partisans, and on the reputations of their parties for handling policy, the book shows that presidents are effective leaders of public opinion. Second, the book adds to the scholarly interest in how political parties are viewed by the electorate in terms of policy substance. It suggests that Americans possess coherent reputations of the parties for handling policy challenges, and that these reputations contribute to the party identifications of Americans. The effect of presidents on the reputations and, in turn, party attachments position them as leaders of the party system.

Amnon Cavari is Assistant Professor of Government at the Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya, Israel. His research focuses on the American presidency, public opinion and political parties and the interrelationship between them, and on American elite and mass attitudes toward Israel. He is the coeditor of the 2012 Presidential Election: Forecasts, Outcomes and Consequences and is the founder and head of the American Public Opinion toward Israel project at the IDC.

To Inbal

Acknowledgments

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I dedicate this book to Inbal Unger Cavari. Inbal never seconded our decision to move to Madison away from our families and friends and then back to Israel to renew our lives here. Her love and encouragement made my work easier. Her critique and advice made my work better. Our four children – all born while I was working on this project – Jonathan, Itamar, Naomi and Avital made it all worthwhile. Now they can finally cheer, “Daddy finished his book!”

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Presidents, Public Opinion, and the Political Parties

I achieved results only by appealing over the heads of the Senate and House leaders to the people, who were the masters of both of us.

(Theodore Roosevelt 1926)

On August 5, 2015, President Obama addressed the nation on the nuclear agreement with Iran, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, signed by the United States, five additional countries, and the European Union. The president appealed directly to the American people: “Today I want to speak to you about this deal and the most consequential foreign policy debate that our country has had since the invasion of Iraq.” The timing of the speech and its intention were very clear – to pressure Congress when, in the words of the president, it “decides whether to support this historic diplomatic breakthrough or instead blocks it over the objection of the vast majority of the world.” Echoing the view of President Theodore Roosevelt from nearly one hundred years ago, Obama called Americans to contact their representatives in Congress: “Remind them of who we are. Remind them of what is best in us and what we stand for so that we can leave behind a world that is more secure and more peaceful for our children.”

The speech was part of an orchestrated campaign to pressure members of Congress to support the deal with Iran, which – following the Nuclear Agreement Review Act of 2015 (signed into law on May 22) – needed to undergo a sixty-day review in Congress and eventually be voted on. The Obama administration understood that it was an uphill battle. Despite the administration’s enthusiasm about the deal, most Americans showed strong skepticism about it. According to a Pew study during the

week after the deal was struck, among the 79 percent of Americans who have heard about the agreement, just 38 percent approved it. Forty-eight percent disapproved it. This skepticism, however, carried a strong partisan dimension. Seventy-three percent of Republicans disapproved of the agreement, whereas 58 percent of Democrats have been supportive of it. Within each party group, the stronger your ideology – liberal or conservative – the stronger your position was, in favor or against, respectively.¹

Speaking to the American people was a tool to pressure members of Congress to support the deal and avoid an embarrassing vote against the deal. Given the partisan balance in Congress – Republicans holding 247 seats in the House and fifty-four seats in the Senate – and the unprecedented campaign of Republicans against the agreement, the president's campaign needed to at least maintain the support of his fellow Democrats in the Senate to fend off a vote against the deal (Republicans lacking a filibuster-proof majority).

By the end of the sixty-day review period, in September 2015, public support has remained unsupportive. Among people who heard about the agreement, only 27 percent approved the agreement. Yet again, attitudes were extremely partisan – even more so than two months earlier. Support among Democrats remained essentially the same (55%); Republican opposition climbed to 82 percent; and a majority of independents (52%) disapproved of the agreement.² In Congress, Republicans failed to garner the support they needed from Democrats and no action was made, in effect giving a green light to the administration to implement the agreement.

In talking to the American people, President Obama was following the practice of almost every president since the turn of the twentieth century. Presidents make routine public remarks, issue well-crafted national addresses, travel across the nation, and appear on radio and television talk shows. They invest time and resources in these actions because they believe that they need to lead the public and that they are able to do so (Kernell 1986). However, recent studies suggest that in spite of their efforts, presidents rarely succeed in changing public opinion (Edwards 2003, 2009, 2012). Why then do presidents – rational actors who manage their time and resources carefully – invest in a behavior that allegedly offers them little political gain?

¹ Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Political Survey, July 2015.

² Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Survey, September 2015.