Congressional Agenda-Building:
Examining the Influence of Congressional Communications from the Speaker of the House

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This study explored the role of the Speaker of the House in shaping the salience of political issues and attributes in news media coverage and policymaking in 2007. Specifically, it analyzed 533 press releases, 433 news articles, and 47 daily Congressional calendars of business. Significant correlations were found supporting traditional first-level and second-level agenda-building linkages between Congressional communications and media coverage; whereas no relationships were found between issue or attribute salience in news releases and actual Congressional activities. Theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

With the growing complexity of today's political landscape, the role of public relations in political communication is rapidly accelerating in importance and consequence, yet the impact of public relations in government and politics is not a new phenomenon. As McKinnon, Tedesco, and Lauder (2001) write, "since the birth of American democracy, public relations practices have played a key role in shaping our politics" (p. 557). Further illustrating this point, Thurber (1998), when discussing trends in research on political consultants, asserts that "these analyses find that consultants with public relations backgrounds dominated the political world in the middle of this century and that political consultants were effective because they provided information and communication expertise to campaigns" (p. 146).

Despite the historical presence and growing ubiquity of political public relations efforts, our theoretical and conceptual understanding of their role in democracy and political communication is underdeveloped. The small body of literature that has explored the influence of political public relations has primarily focused on elections at the national level, such as the presidency (e.g., Johnson, Wanta, & Bordeau, 2004; Liu, 2006). While noteworthy, little empirical work has examined political public relations within the context of Congressional communications and its implications on policymaking outcomes.

In recent years, an increasing number of scholars have underscored the need for research on public relations effectiveness to go beyond outputs and include outcomes (e.g., Hon, 1998; Kim, 2001; Pratt & Lennon, 2001). To help address this void, the purpose of this study is to explore the impact of Congressional communications on the salience of political issues and attributes in news media coverage and policymaking by

adopting an agenda-building perspective. Specifically, we probe the impact of arguably the most influential position in Congress: the Speaker of the House.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

First-Level Agenda-Building & Information Subsidies

In contrast to traditional agenda-setting research investigating the relationship between the salience of political objects on the news media and public agendas (e.g., Hester & Gibson, 2003; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Weaver, Graber, McCombs, & Eyal, 1981), agenda-building scholarship considers the process of salience formation and transfer as one involving several groups, including government, political candidates, businesses, activist groups, and so forth. The reciprocal influence among these groups determines the salience of issues and other objects on various agendas. While the salience of issues has been the principal emphasis of such research, McCombs (2004) notes that in the abstract agenda-setting is about the transfer of salience from one agenda to another.

Specifically, he writes that:
> When the key term of this theoretical metaphor, the agenda, is considered in totally abstract terms, the potential for expanding beyond an agenda of issues becomes clear. In most discussions of the agenda-setting role of mass media the unit of analysis on each agenda is an object, a public issue. However, public issues are not the only objects that can be analyzed from an agenda-setting perspective (p. 69).

Thus, scholars have also explored agenda-building and agenda-setting relationships with a variety of objects besides issues, such as political candidates, foreign nations, corporate images, and products (e.g., Carroll & McCombs, 2003; Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Manheim & Albritton, 1984).

The use of information subsidies represents a key strategy for public relations practitioners who aim to shape the news media agenda. In outlining the role of information subsidies, Zoch and Molleda (2006) submit that "public relations practitioners generate prepackaged information to promote their organizations' viewpoints on issues, and to communicate aspects of interest within those issues, to their internal and external publics" (p. 284). Information subsidies can exist in multiple forms, including news releases, press conferences, political ads, interviews, and so forth, though most scholarly research has examined news releases. Several studies have documented the prominence of news releases in the process of agenda-building (e.g., Harmon & White, 2001; Harris, Fury, & Lock, 2006; Kiousis, Mitrook, Wu, & Seltzer, 2006; Turk & Franklin, 1987).

In one of the earliest pieces on information subsidy influence, Turk (1986) found that using news releases was effective in boosting the visibility of state agencies in Louisiana. A major finding from that study was that the preponderance of news releases received by media outlets were used in subsequent news content. In an election setting,

Kaid (1976) reported that news releases contributed to the successful agenda-building efforts of candidates in Congressional elections in Michigan. In some cases, she noted that information in news content was printed verbatim as stated in materials supplied directly by the campaigns. A number of studies have replicated these findings with gubernatorial races in other states (e.g., Evatt & Bell, 1995; Kiousis, Mitrook, Wu, & Seltzer, 2006; Lancendorfer & Lee, 2003).

While such research has scrutinized the impact of information subsidies from Congressional politicians at the regional level, few studies to our knowledge have probed their potential impact at the national level. This is a critical theoretical and empirical question to consider in light of the extensive research probing the impact of presidents as agenda setters (e.g., Gilbert, Eyal, McCombs, & Nicholas, 1980; Wanta, Stephenson, Van Slyke Turk, & McCombs, 1989).

In an analysis of State of the Union addresses, for example, Wanta, Stephenson, Turk, and McCombs (1989) found mixed evidence concerning the agenda-building power of the president. Moreover, most agenda-building research has been conducted during election campaigns. While crucial, understanding these processes in non-campaign settings is paramount for theory building and professional application.

When considering key players in the U.S. political system other than president, one of the most powerful individuals coming from the legislative branch of government is the Speaker of the House. As a result, this study examines the role of news releases in the agenda-building influence of this political office. This extension of agenda-building literature to the legislative branch of government is unique because of our emphasis in studying associations with national-level media content as well as policymaking activities. Based on the logic of first-level agenda-building, the following hypotheses are offered:

> *H1: The salience of issues in news releases from the Speaker of the House will be positively related to the salience of issues in news media content.*

> *H2: The salience of issues in news releases from the Speaker of the House will be positively related to policymaking activity regarding those issues.*

Second-Level Agenda-Building

In addition to object salience, the contemporary explication of second-level agenda-setting has connected the concept with framing by suggesting that the salience of attributes in news media content can wield substantial influence on the salience of attributes in public opinion (McCombs, 2004). By extension, the salience of attributes should also play an integral part in the process of agenda-building. Attributes are often defined as the properties, characteristics, or traits that describe objects (Kiousis, Bantimaroudis, & Ban, 1999). Although the relationship between second-level agenda-setting and framing has been extensively debated (de Vreese, 2003; Hester & Gibson, 2003; Scheufele, 2000), Chyi and McCombs (2004) conclude that "thinking of frames as

attributes of an object provides the theoretical link between agenda-setting and framing research…Salience is, of course, the central concept of agenda-setting theory" (p. 24). Mounting evidence suggests that public relations programs and activities play a vital part in shaping the salience of attributes (e.g., Zoch & Molleda, 2006). In a study of the 2000 presidential primaries, Tedesco (2001) observed strong linkages between the salience of audience strategy frames in news releases and national television news content. Elsewhere, Kiousis et al. (2006) found significant associations among the salience of candidate attributes in news releases, media content, and public opinion during the 2002 Florida gubernatorial race.

Summarizing the influence of public relations in framing, Hallahan (1999) contends that:

> In developing programs, public relations professionals fundamentally operate as *frame strategists*, who strive to determine how situations, attributes, choices, actions, issues and responsibility should be posed to achieve favorable objectives. Framing decisions are perhaps the most important strategic choices made in a public relations effort (p. 224, emphasis in original).

Previous research has identified a substantive and affective dimension to the salience of attributes (Ghanem, 1997). Substantive attributes deal with those elements in communication messages that help us cognitively structure various topics while affective attributes deal with the valence dimension of attribute salience. Six substantive attributes that have been consistently examined in the literature are the conflict, human interest, problem definition, responsibility attribution, moral evaluation, and consequence assessment frames (de Vreese, 2003, 2005; de Vreese, Peter, & Semetko, 2001; Entman, 1993; Hallahan, 1999; Iyengar, 1991; Knight, 1999; Price, Tewksbury, & Power, 1997; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Shah, Domke, & Wackman, 2001). Affective attributes refer to the positive, neutral, or negative tone associated with communication messages (Kiousis, 2005; McCombs & Ghanem, 2001). Based on the logic of second-level agenda-building, the following hypotheses are offered:

> *H3: The salience of substantive attributes in news releases from the Speaker of the House will be positively related to the salience of substantive attributes in news media content.*

> *H4: The salience of affective attributes in news releases from the Speaker of the House will be positively related to the salience of affective attributes in news media content.*

> *H5: The salience of affective attributes in news releases from the Speaker of the House will be positively related to policymaking activity regarding issues*

METHOD

This study employed content analysis to examine the interplay among Congressional communications, media coverage, and policymaking activity. To measure Congressional communications, news releases were collected from the Web sites of the

Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, from Jan. 1-Dec. 31, 2007. An entire year was selected to account for seasonal variation and to include times when Congress was both in and out of session. Media content was covered during the same time-period using *The New York Times* given its status as an elite national media outlet. Policymaking activity was measured by Senate and Congressional calendars of business because such calendars are available on a daily basis and thus allow measuring progression of various issues throughout the year.

The study relied on a constructed week sampling strategy to select the content for analysis. Riffe, Aust, and Lacy (1993) compared random, consecutive day, and constructed week sampling techniques used in content analysis projects and found that constructed week sampling is the most effective approach. Other studies reached similar conclusions (Stempel, 1952; Lacy, Riffe, Stoddard, Martin, Chang, 2001; Riffe, Lacy, Fico, 2005). This investigation, however, was interested in examining issues over the course of the year and as a result required samples from each month. Thus, the study used 12 constructed weeks—one for each month of 2007.

A total of 966 campaign and media messages were gathered for the investigation. Specifically, 533 press releases and 433 news articles were used in the content analysis. Calendars of business from 47 days were employed to estimate policymaking activity following the same constructed week procedures. The unit of analysis was the individual campaign/media message or calendar of business day summary.
The issues for examination were selected by scrutinizing several major public opinion polls throughout 2007 to ensure exhaustive consideration of possible issues. Among the specific polls consulted were the Gallup poll, CBS News poll, Pew Research Center poll, ABC News/Washington Post poll, Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg poll, and others (PollingReport.com, n.d.).

The final list of issues was the following:
- War/Iraq/Afghanistan
- Terrorism/National Security
- Foreign Policy/Diplomacy
- Government Efficiency/Policymaking
- Economy
- Fuel/Oil prices
- Poverty/Hunger/Homelessness/Unemployment
- Environment/Global Warming
- Immigration/Illegal aliens
- Healthcare/Medicine
- Education
- Ethics/Moral/Religion

Consistent with prior scholarship, salience was determined by the frequency of object and attribute mentions in Congressional communications, media coverage, and Congressional calendars of business. The use and conceptualization of the attributes in this study were based on previous research (McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-Escobar, &

Rey, 1997; McCombs, Lopez-Escobar, & Llamas, 2000). The substantive attribute agenda for issues in this study consisted of coding for the conflict, human interest, problem definition, responsibility attribution, moral evaluation, and consequence assessment frames for each topic mentioned (e.g., de Vreese, 2003; Entman, 1993; Hallahan, 1999; Knight, 1999; Scheufele, 2000).

The conflict frame was used in messages to describe issues in terms of disputes and confrontations among individuals, groups, and candidates. The human interest frame was used in statements to depict how issues directly affect specific individuals and groups. The problem definition frame was used in messages that identify causes and antecedents associated with various issues. The responsibility attribution frame was used in statements to indicate what individuals and groups are in charge of causing problems or providing solutions. The moral evaluation frame was used in messages to describe issues in ethical and normative terms of right and wrong. The consequence assessment frame was used in messages to identify outcomes and results linked to various issues. Finally, the affective attribute agenda was determined by the presence or absence of a negative (1), neutral (2), and positive (3) tone when an issue was mentioned.

Coder reliability was assessed with a randomly selected subsample of 68 news stories, press releases, and calendars of business. Intercoder reliability figures were .98 using Holsti's (1969) formula and .90 using Scott's pi. The latter figure helps protect against chance agreement among coders.

Data Analysis Strategy

Spearman's rho correlations operated as the chief statistical test comparing the campaign and media agendas regarding issue and attribute salience (e.g., McCombs & Bell, 1996; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Several scholars recommend the use of such non-parametric statistics when sample size is relatively small, as was the case here (e.g., McCall, 1994; Weaver, 1981).

RESULTS

Prior to considering the hypotheses, we report levels of issue attention among Congressional communications, media content, and policymaking activity to provide some backdrop for our findings. Table 1 reports levels of issue salience in *New York Times* stories, news releases from Nancy Pelosi, and Congressional calendars of business during 2007.

As shown in Table 1, government efficiency and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan topped the agendas for the Speaker of the House's messages, media content, and the legislative branch of government. At the other end of the spectrum, poverty received the least attention. Notably, the economy, which emerged as a major primary and general election issue in 2008, received lower levels of attention during the period examined for this analysis.

Table 1: Issue salience levels among news releases, media content, and Congress

Issues	Pelosi News Releases	New York Times	Congressional Activity
War / Iraq / Afghanistan	81	66	27
Immigration / Illegal aliens	17	15	30
Healthcare / Medicare	28	23	30
Government efficiency / Policymaking	103	68	35
Fuel / Oil prices	9	3	29
Economy in general	13	10	16
Ethics / Moral / Religion	16	12	5
Education	23	19	30
Poverty / Hunger / Homelessness / Unemployment	10	8	9
Environment / Global Warming	14	8	26
Terrorism / National Security	29	23	18
Foreign Policy / Diplomacy	58	48	9

H1 predicted a positive relationship between the salience of issues in news releases from the Speaker of the House and news media content in *The New York Times*. The data offer robust support for this hypothesis ($r_s = .99$, $p < .001$) as traditional agenda-building linkages appeared between Congressional communications and media coverage.

Shifting to policymaking activity, *H2* predicted that the salience of issues in news releases would be connected to the salience of issues in Congressional calendars of business. The data did not support this hypothesis.

Beyond first-level agenda-building relationships, this study examined attribute salience relationships among Congressional communications, media content, and policymaking activity. *H3* and *H4* predicted that the salience of substantive and affective attributes in news releases would be positively tied to the salience of those attributes in *New York Times* content. The data strongly supported the hypotheses for both substantive attribute salience ($r_s = .94$, $p < .01$) and affective attribute salience ($r_s = .82$, $p < .001$).

Collectively then, the evidence suggests that attribute salience relationships with news media content in political agenda-building are evident beyond presidential messages. Our final hypothesis, exploring the relationship between affective attribute salience in news releases and policymaking activity, was not supported by the data.

DISCUSSION

In summary, the study described here provides several theoretical and practical considerations related to the influence of first-level and second-level agenda building. The first level agenda building analysis evaluated relationships between the salience of

issues in press releases and the salience of issues in media coverage. The second level-agenda building analysis evaluated the relationships between attribute salience in press releases, including both substantive and affective attributes, and attribute salience in the media coverage. This study investigated the role of agenda building in Congressional communications—an area where little research has been conducted previously. The focus on the Speaker of the House allowed for investigation of arguably the most influential position in the U.S. Congress.

The study also included an additional step of evaluating the relationship between issue and attribute salience and actual legislative activities as tracked in Congressional daily calendars of business. This is an important step as it allows for evaluating public relations effectiveness and moves assessment from the level of communication outcomes to the level of policy outcomes.

The main theoretical implication of the study was the strong simultaneous support of both first-level and second-level agenda building. Kiousis and Wu (2008) explain that the media agenda cannot be taken as a given as was the case with previous agenda-setting work. The media agenda is constructed by a variety of players through various forms of information subsidies, such as press releases. This investigation explored this hypothesis and found strong support for it.

Through information subsidies, the Speaker of the House seems to wield some influence on the media agenda in terms of both issue salience, as well as substantive and affective attribute salience, based on the evidence gathered here. At the same time, this influence was limited to the media agenda; there was not any relationship found between issue or attribute salience in news releases and actual Congressional activities.

The study also provided important practical implications for public relations practitioners involved in political communications activities. Political communications are linked with media agendas in terms of both the issues being discussed and attributes being emphasized. This supports Hallahan's (1999) assumption that public relations practitioners can be referred to as "frame strategists"—influencing the portrayal of issues in the media. This, of course, can also translate into impact on other critical constituencies such as voters, donors, and volunteers. The application of first-level and second-level agenda-building theory to examining the salience formation and transfer processes among a wide variety of stakeholder groups offers great potential for future scholarship in areas such as issues management, reputation management, and crisis communication.

The study, however, was limited in scope. Its assessment of Congressional agenda building was restricted to media subsidies provided by the Speaker of the House. The research team was not able to gain access to press releases of other Congressional leaders. Thus, subsequent research should expand the scope of Congressional players involved from the House and the Senate, such majority and minority leaders, and others.

The media salience evaluation also relied only on *New York Times* articles. Consequently, future research should increase the number of media outlets and include newspapers, radio, television, and online communications such as blogs and discussion forums. Nonetheless, research on intermedia agenda setting suggests that patterns in news content across outlets is strikingly similar (e.g., Reese & Danielian, 1987). This inquiry was also limited to a one-year time span and as such did not include election periods. Subsequent research should be conducted during election times to retest the patterns observed here.

In terms of outcomes, Congressional activities involve a long process—a bill might require years to materialize. Thus, to better understand the influence of agenda building on Congressional activities, longer time-periods might be required for analysis. Finally, future research should incorporate the salience of issues and attributes in public opinion to complement media subsidies and media coverage. This will allow combining agenda building and agenda setting effects within in a single research design, as recommended by Kiousis and Wu (2008).

CONCLUSIONS

Strong correlations were found between the salience of issues and attributes in Congressional information subsidies and media coverage. These correlational results are noteworthy because only a small body of research has explored the impact of information subsidies from Congress. This investigation theoretically and empirically examines the agenda-building impact of the Speaker of the House as one of the most powerful individuals from the legislative branch.

Despite its implications, the study's scope and sample limit our ability to generalize its results to other political contexts. The investigation examined Congressional agenda building efforts only by the Speaker of the House and collected media coverage data from only one media outlet. Hence, future research should begin to explore potential agenda-building and agenda-setting effects from multiple forms of Congressional information subsidies through a diversity of media outlets and policymaking indicators. In closing, it is hoped this inquiry can serve as an opening gambit for additional research on the impact of Congressional communications in the broader area of political public relations scholarship.

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