

**Strategically Speaking:  
A New Analysis of Presidents Going Public**

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## **Abstract**

A new approach to studying the presidency has recently emerged from the formal theory of American politics that is being applied to a variety of presidential activities including vetoes, unilateral action, and appointments. We use the phenomenon of presidential public activities to illustrate the contribution this new approach for our understanding of the presidency. We argue that it is a mistake to undertake an analysis of presidential activities like public speeches without considering both the political environment – specifically the preferences of important congressional actors – and the policy change being pursued (i.e., the location of the status quo policy). Abstracting away from the idiosyncratic features of individual presidents and embedding presidential public activity in the larger separation of powers system illuminates three different logics undergirding public activity, namely changing legislator preferences, claiming credit for the passage of legislation, and making veto threats credible. Examining presidential activity without accounting for the different possible motivations for going public or the fact that presidents are a single actor in the policymaking process operating under both institutional and political constraints risks overestimating presidential influence. We conclude that the new approach to the study of the presidency can illuminate important theoretical insights and improve empirical analysis.

## Introduction

A new approach to studying the presidency has recently emerged from the formal theory of American politics. The traditional approach, which has produced a rich and insightful literature, tends to study the presidency in isolation. In important ways, this method limits the literature's effectiveness. Studying the president in isolation is methodologically problematic for two reasons. First, the basis for presidential choice is difficult to theorize about in isolation because it is simply one individual maximizing his preferences, an approach that emphasizes the idiosyncratic features of particular presidents. Second, because so many variables are relevant, scholars face a degrees of freedom problem: the number of theoretically relevant variables is larger than the number of cases that a given scholar can undertake. This makes it hard to infer systematic principles.

The new literature has three methodological characteristics that differentiate it from the traditional approach. First, it relies to a varying extent on formal models. Second, it embeds the president in the separation of powers system. In the context of environmental constraints, such as the United States Congress, these works typically derive their theoretical power by showing how any president would behave relative to changes in the environment. Third, the approach tends to generate evidence by studying an activity the president does over and over again, such as the veto over legislation,<sup>1</sup> appointments to regulatory agencies or the courts,<sup>2</sup> the budget process,<sup>3</sup> dealing with the bureaucracy,<sup>4</sup> or issuing executive orders.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cameron 1999, Ingberman and Yao 1991a, 1991b, Kiewiet and McCubbins 1988, Krehbiel 1999, Matthews 1989, McCarty 2000, McCarty and Poole 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Cameron, Segal, and Cover 1990, 1992, Snyder and Weingast 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Kiewiet and McCubbins 1988, 1991, Canes-Wrone 2001a, 2001b, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Ferejohn and Shipan 1989, McNollgast 1989, 1995, Moe 1985, 1987, 1989.

<sup>5</sup> Howell 2003, Moe and Howell 1999.

The main advantage of this approach is that the formal models generate predictions about how changes in presidential behavior follow from various changes in the environment, and the approach has yielded interesting new results. For example, the literature on veto power provides a far more nuanced view of how the veto power works, particularly the way presidents use uncertainty about their actual policy preferences to gain power over the legislature (e.g., Cameron 1999, Ingerbman and Yao 1991a, 1991b, Matthews 1989) and conditions under which the veto power constrains pork spending (McCarty 2000). Kiewiet and McCubbins (1988, 1989) demonstrate that the president's veto power in budgets is asymmetric; that is, the president wields more power when he wants to spend less than the legislature than when he wants to spend more.

To date, however, scholars have applied the new approach nearly exclusively to the more formal powers of the president, such as the veto, appointments, or the budget process (see, however, Canes-Wrone 2001a, 2001b, 2005). Presidents, however, have evolved a variety of strategies beyond their formal powers to gain influence over the policymaking process. One important tool emphasized in the literature is the president's ability to "go public," that is, use the natural media attention centered on the president's office to publicize particular policy issues and legislative vehicles or provisions to address those issues (Kernell 1986).

In this paper, we apply the new approach to the issue of a president's going public. The approach yields four conclusions. First, going public is more nuanced and multifaceted than previous treatments suggest. Presidents may go public to change legislator preferences, to try to claim credit for the passage of legislation, and to make veto threats credible. Each distinct strategy has different impacts on policy outcomes.

Second, accounting for the range of incentives that motivate public presidential activity is necessary to determine the influence of presidential public activity on policy outcomes. In particular, the new approach shows that it is hard to disentangle the effect of public presidential appeals without knowing the “location” of the status quo policy and the preferences of the president vis-à-vis the other relevant political actors. The incentive to go public to give the appearance of leadership (credit-claim) confounds our ability to interpret the influence of presidential public activities.

Third, a closer analysis of the different motivations for public activity suggests that under some circumstances, private presidential activities, such as the assurance of support on a key bill or pork project, may be just as or more useful than public statements. In fact, it seems likely that presidents simultaneously use both public and private means of influence to achieve their policy objectives. Disentangling the independent effects of public and private presidential activity is both challenging and consequential. Without accounting for presidential private activities, we are likely to overestimate and misunderstand the influence of the president’s public influence both formally in empirical models (due to omitted variable bias) and informally in our impressionistic analysis.

Finally, the model shows that the president will not necessarily choose to go public on his highest priority issues. Standard wisdom suggests that the president will go public on the issues he most values (i.e., her highest priorities). We demonstrate that this wisdom is false. The reason is that, even though these issues are the most important, he may have no leverage in Congress over them. The model shows that the president will choose to go public over those issues for which he has the greatest leverage, taking into account congressional preferences and the location of the status quo. Put simply, going public on an issue of lower priority may yield more

utility for the president than attempts to influence a higher priority issue over which he has little leverage. This may help explain why presidents focus on different issues in office than they did while campaigning.

The outline of the paper is as follows. Section 1 recounts our current understanding of public presidential activity. In Section 2 we draw on Krehbiel's (1998) pivotal politics model to study the effects and mechanisms of going public. In the final sections we discuss the implications of the models and conclude.

## **1. Going Public: What it Means and What we Know**

A prominent institutional feature of the presidency is that presidential preferences are defined by a single individual. Given the relative ease this implies for the press of covering the presidency, the president may use his uniquely prominent position to influence policy outcomes.

Kernell (1986) defines this strategy of "going public" as:

a class of activities in which presidents engage as they promote themselves and their policies before the American public... What these policies have in common is that they are intended principally to place the president and his message before the American people in a way that enhances his chances of success in Washington (1986, viii).

Going public is a strategy by which a president promotes himself and his policies (e.g., a nationally televised presidential address, a trip to China, or even a White House ceremony that decorates a war hero (Kernell 1986, viii)) with the aim of influencing the public's perception on an issue so as to affect Congressional action. Although it is hard to infer precisely the mechanism(s) of presidential influence, the mechanism Kernell offers involves a presidential appeal for voters to pressure members of Congress to do what the president asks. Kernell illustrates the influence of public presidential activity using the politics surrounding the Kemp-

Roth tax bill of 1981, where President Reagan made televised appeals imploring voters to “contact your senators and congressman” and “tell them of your support for this bipartisan proposal.” The response of voters who called their representatives (and representatives’ subsequent support for the bill) is taken as evidence of both what it means for a president to go public, and the influence that the president can exercise on policy outcomes.

Kernell’s conception of going public to induce new member preferences is the most common among scholars (Barrett 1998, Bond and Fleisher 1990, Canes-Wrone 2001a, 2001b, 2005, Covington 1987, Edwards 1989, Kernell 1986, Riegg 1999). There is much less agreement on how a president’s proclamation influences Congress (Lewis 1997, Mouw and Mackuen 1992), and why it works sometimes but not others. Some scholars assume, following the example of the Kemp-Roth bill, that the president appeals directly to voters to call their representatives and force the representatives to change their position. Alternatively, Canes-Wrone (2001a, 2001b, 2005) argues that going public increases an issue’s salience for voters in a representative’s district, forcing representatives to heed the preferences of their districts rather than interest groups. Yet another possibility is that the president uses public activity to increase his public esteem, which in turn somehow translates into increased presidential influence over Congress across a range of issues (Bond and Fleisher 1990, Brody 1991, Edwards 1989, Rivers and Rose 1985). Common to all of these explanations is the notion that, by going public, the president attempts to directly influence the voting behavior of Congress in a manner desirable to the president.

A second possibility is that presidents go public to credit claim – which is to say that they go public only on those policies on which they are likely to be “winners.” Presidents would do so to give the appearance that they are powerful and that the policy’s eventual enactment is a

direct result of presidential influence and prestige. As a result of this prestige, the president will improve his re-election chances, bolster his legacy, or exert more influence over Congress as a result of increased popularity. Although Bond and Fleisher (1990), Fett (1992), and Mouw and Mackuen (1992a, 1992b) all suggest this possibility, they also all dismiss the prominence of this strategy. In the only systematic empirical work that takes into account the possibility of credit claiming Canes-Wrone (2005) finds no evidence of credit-claiming behavior in federal budget negotiations.<sup>6</sup> It remains an open question, however, whether presidential behavior in federal budget negotiations is generalizable to the larger class of public presidential activities.

A final motivation for going public, advanced by Ingberman and Yao (1991a, 1991b), is that presidents go public as a commitment tool (see also Cameron 1999). By “drawing a line in the sand” of public discourse, presidents define the conditions under which they will veto a bill. Since the president publicly articulates his demands, failing to veto an unacceptable bill becomes very costly for the president, as so doing suggests that the president is weak or fickle. Thus, by increasing the cost of accepting legislation short of their public statements, presidents make their veto threat more credible.

Although there are three distinct reasons for the president to go public, they are not exclusive. In the next section we use simple game-theoretic models to clarify the effects and mechanisms of going public.

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<sup>6</sup> Canes-Wrone (2005) finds that presidents are less likely to go public on issues on which they are eventually successful. While Canes-Wrones’ evidence does not support the prevalence of presidential credit claiming behavior in the federal budget, Canes-Wrones’ work is an example of need to examine the possibility of credit-claiming behavior by the president.

## 2. Making Sense of Presidential Public Activities with a Simple Formal Model

Game-theoretic models are a useful tool for specifying how presidential public activities influence policy outcomes because they can identify both the mechanism of presidential influence as well as the conditions under which this influence may be exercised. We use the benchmark model provided by Krehbiel's (1998) pivotal politics theory to illustrate possible conceptions and consequences of going public rather than individually modeling each of the possible strategies underlying the decision to go public.<sup>7</sup> Although there are some costs to pursuing this research strategy – the models are consequently abstract and employ fairly strong assumptions -- this approach permits a direct comparison of the various strategies of going public within the context of a common model. We intentionally “black-box” most of the underlying micro-foundations to make the more general point that public presidential activity cannot be conceptualized either as a single strategy, or as having a uniform impact on policy outcomes.

The pivotal politics model of policymaking is a useful tool for analyzing presidential policy influence because it incorporates some of the central institutional features of president-legislative interaction: a legislature operating under the filibuster rule with the ability to override a presidential veto with a 2/3rds vote. The relevant actors are: the president, the median legislator, the member pivotal for overriding a presidential veto (the veto-override pivot) and the member pivotal for invoking cloture (filibuster pivot).<sup>8</sup> The preferences of actors are assumed to be uni-dimensional; all potential policies can be described by a point on a line (e.g., a scale that ranges from “liberal” to “conservative”). For purposes of exposition, we assume that the

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<sup>7</sup> Although other models of lawmaking exist (e.g., conditional party government (Rohde 1991), our interest is not to get involved in determining which is the proper model of lawmaking. Rather, given a model of lawmaking, it is ambiguous how to interpret presidential public activity.

<sup>8</sup> Although there are clearly median members (and members pivotal for overriding a presidential veto) in both the House and the Senate, we follow Krehbiel (1998) in focusing on only one member. So doing is substantively inconsequential and simplifies exposition.

president prefers policies in the “right hand side” of the policy space (implying that the president is relatively conservative and the filibuster pivot is relatively liberal).<sup>9</sup> Some policies naturally will be too conservative and others too liberal and the actors often have to choose between a policy that is more liberal than they would like and a policy that is more conservative than they would like. In deciding which of these non-ideal policies a political actor will support we assume players prefer policies that are closer to their ideal policy (termed an “ideal point”). Technically, this means that the players’ utility functions are strictly decreasing functions of Euclidean distance and that player  $i$ ’s utility for proposal  $X$  given  $i$ ’s ideal point  $i$  can be expressed as:  $U_i(X) = -|I - X|$ . We denote the location of the players’ ideal points by their first letter (i.e., P, M, V and F). Finally, maintaining the assumptions of the pivotal politics model, we assume that each player knows: the preferences of every player, the location of the policy ( $X$ ) and status quo ( $Q$ ), and that every other player possesses this knowledge (i.e., the game is one of perfect information). Figure 1 depicts one possible representation of this description.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Play in the pivotal politics model begins with Nature exogenously choosing a status quo policy  $Q$  for consideration (on the extreme left in our example in Figure 1). Having been given a policy to consider, the median member of Congress then decides which policy  $X$ , if any, to propose. Unless 60 senators approve of the proposed policy a filibuster is assumed to occur. If cloture is not invoked, the policy  $X$  is killed and the status quo  $Q$  persists. If cloture is invoked, the policy passes. The member pivotal for invoking cloture (either the 60<sup>th</sup> most liberal or the 60<sup>th</sup> most conservative senator) decides whether to vote for cloture based upon the relative proximity of the status quo and the proposed legislation to her most preferred policy  $F$ . If  $X$  is

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<sup>9</sup> The results for a “left hand” president are analogous (although the ordinal ordering of the other players becomes  $V$

closer to F than Q, the filibuster pivot votes to invoke cloture and the policy passes the senate and if Q is closer to F than X then cloture is not invoked and the proposal is effectively killed.

If policy X is not subject to a successful filibuster than the president receives the bill. If the president chooses to sign (not veto) policy X, it becomes law and the game ends. If the president vetoes the policy, Congress is given the opportunity to override the veto. The president, like the senator pivotal for invoking cloture, makes his decision to veto based upon his comparison of the status quo and the proposed policy. In the case in Figure 1, the president favors the bill X to the status quo Q since X is closer to P than Q. Even though the proposed bill is more liberal than the president's ideal policy it is better than the more liberal status quo policy. If the president favors the status quo to the proposed policy and vetoes the policy, the member who is pivotal for overriding the president's veto (termed the veto-override pivot) chooses whether to vote to override the presidential veto. If the member votes to override the veto proposal X becomes law, if not, the status quo Q persists. In either case following the vote the game ends.

The (sub-game perfect Nash) equilibrium policy outcome for the pivotal politics game depicted in Figure 1 depends upon the location of the status quo Q relative to the players' ideal points. To clarify the intuition of the pivotal politics model's equilibrium predictions consider the political situation described in Figure 1. If the status quo is between the ideal points of the filibuster pivot and the president as in the case of  $Q_1$ , the status quo cannot be changed. If the median legislator proposes a bill attempting to move the policy away from F a filibuster cannot be stopped. Since the filibuster pivot prefers the status quo to the proposed bill she, and the 39 senators to the left of her, will not vote to invoke cloture. Alternatively, if the status quo policy

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< M < F).

is as  $Q_2$  depicts, any attempt by the median legislator to change the status quo to a more moderate policy (i.e., further from both  $V$  and the president's most preferred policy  $P$ ), will result in a presidential veto. Given the choice of whether to override the veto, the veto-override pivot will choose not to override the veto because she prefers  $Q_2$  to any more moderate proposal. As these examples illustrate, since policy change is impossible when the status quo policy lies between  $F$  and  $V$  (or  $P$  if  $P < V$ ), Krehbiel calls this region the "gridlock" region.

If, as in the bottom scenario in Figure 1, the status quo  $Q$  is more liberal than the most preferred policy of the filibuster pivot  $F$  (i.e.,  $Q < F$ ), one of two things will happen. If  $2F-Q$  (i.e., the point at which the filibuster pivot is indifferent between  $q$  and the proposal  $X = 2F-Q$ ) is more liberal than  $M$ , the median legislator will propose the policy  $X = 2F-Q$ . This proposal is the closest that the median legislator can move the status quo to her ideal policy  $M$  while ensuring that the filibuster pivot will vote to invoke cloture. Since  $P > M$ , the president clearly prefers the more conservative policy  $X$  to the liberal status quo  $Q$  he will sign the proposal into law. If  $2F-Q > M$ , although the median legislator could get the policy proposal  $X = 2F-Q$  past a senate filibuster for the reasons given above, she has no incentive to propose such a conservative policy. Since the median legislator maximizes her utility at her ideal point, she will propose  $X = M$ . Since the filibuster pivot was willing to vote for cloture for the more extreme policy  $X = 2F-Q$ , she will certainly vote to stop a filibuster on the policy proposal  $X = M$  which is closer to her most preferred policy. Finally, since the proposal  $X = M$  moves the status quo closer to the president's most preferred policy  $P$ , the president signs the proposal into law.<sup>10</sup>

Similar logic explains the predictions if  $Q > P$ .

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<sup>10</sup> Here we see why we use the solution concept of sub-game perfection. If we used only Nash equilibrium, an equilibria to the game have  $P$  veto any proposal that was not  $2F-q$  (which the president prefers to the policy of  $x = M$ ). Although this is a Nash equilibrium, it is supported by the president's threat to veto a bill that makes her better-off (i.e.,  $x = M$ ) to try to secure the better policy (i.e.,  $x = 2F-q$ ). However, the veto results in an outcome that is

Restating results derived elsewhere (see Krehbiel 1998), Table 1 summarizes the equilibrium policy outcomes for the pivotal politics model for every possible realization of  $Q$ .

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE.]

Having briefly described Krehbiel's pivotal politics model of lawmaking, we now use the model to demonstrate when presidents have an incentive to go public for three possible motivations. By embedding public presidential activity within the pivotal politics model we can specify the impact of presidential influence on lawmaking and uncover predictions about the effect of public presidential activity on policy outcomes for each of the motivations.

## **2.1 Going Public to Change Congressional Preferences**

The first, and the most common, interpretation of presidential public activity is that public activity may affect congressional preferences. Congressional preferences may change for several reasons. Going public may enable the president to provide preference-relevant information about policy outcomes to the representatives and/or constituents. This information may change perceptions about the policy or status quo.<sup>11</sup> Alternatively, presidential activity may change the induced preferences of re-election centered congressman by mobilizing inattentive publics (Arnold 1990) or by changing the saliency of the issue to constituents (Canes-Wrone 2001a).

To illustrate the president's use of going public to influence congressional preferences, we alter the pivotal politics model to allow the president to go public immediately following the realization of  $Q$ . We assume that going public perturbs the ideal points of the other players towards  $P$  by  $\epsilon$  (which is assumed to not exceed the distance between the player's ideal point and

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inferior to either proposal (i.e.,  $q$ ) for the president.

<sup>11</sup> Of course, for this information to be non-cheap talk, the constraints outlined in Krehbiel (1992) must be satisfied.

P). In other words, going public draws the ideal points of the median legislator (for example) either closer to P or exactly to P. There is no reason to suspect that public presidential activity affects legislators equally. It is possible, if not probable, that presidential appeals are more effective for supporters. If so, public presidential activity should have the most influence on those legislators from electorates where presidential support is high.

Since our primary aim is to illustrate how predictions regarding both when presidents go public and the consequences of public activity on policy outcomes depends on the motivation underlying the presidential decision to go public, we assume that public appeals are consequential (i.e.,  $\varepsilon \neq 0$ ). We seek to evaluate when presidents should go public and the policy consequences of such activity assuming that such activity is consequential.

### *Who Is Targeted?*

Assuming that the president is able to alter congressional preferences by going public, it is necessary to identify whom the president would like to influence. Figure 2 presents an example of why this is important. The first case in Figure 2 depicts the policy outcome when the president does not go public. The second case shows the outcome assuming that the president goes public and changes the preferences of the other actors. As is clear from Figure 2, if the status quo lies in the interval of  $[2M-F, F]$ , it is more important for the president to influence the preferences of the filibuster pivot than the median voter.<sup>12</sup> While the president's public activity has shifted the preferences of F, M, and V, the only preferences that matter in this example are those of the filibuster pivot. The president's activity can shift M and V all she wants but if the

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<sup>12</sup> Alternatively, if  $q < 2M-F$ , influencing the preferences of the median voter is more important for the president because the median voter determines the location of the policy change. In other words, given our assumption of P's location, the effect on the veto pivot should exceed that on the median, which exceeds that on the filibuster pivot; that is,  $\varepsilon_V > \varepsilon_M > \varepsilon_F$ .

filibuster pivot does not vote to invoke cloture, the bill will die and the status quo policy will prevail.

[INSERT FIGURE 2]

Given the ideological distance between the president and the filibuster pivot, it may be the case that the president lacks a strong base of support in the state of the filibuster pivot. This raises the important possibility that the member pivotal for invoking cloture may not be “persuaded” by public appeals from the president. Private presidential activities such as the assurance of support on a key bill, pork project, judgeship, or even an invitation to a White House social gathering may be more influential than the president’s public pressure. In fact, it seems likely that presidents simultaneously use both public and private means of influence to achieve their policy objectives.

The case of Rep. Margolies-Mezvinsky (D, PA-13) and the August 5, 1993 vote on Clinton’s 1994 deficit-reduction bill illustrates the need to account for private actions in assessing presidential influence. As Margolies-Mezvinsky represented a historically Republican district (in 1994 registered Republicans outnumbered Democrats by more than two to one), it is unlikely that the district would be swayed by presidential appeals.<sup>13</sup> Since it was unclear whether the budget would pass, President Clinton was lobbying members individually by phone. Although Margolies-Mezvinsky was planning to vote against the bill -- in fact, the press release explaining her vote against the bill was already written -- interviews with Margolies-Mezvinsky and her Policy Advisor Amy Sobel reveal that the personalized phone call was decisive in changing her vote. Sobel recalls that “That conversation [with the president] is a tough conversation, and it’s easy to say ... ‘I’d say “No” and I’d turn down my party.’ But I think that

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<sup>13</sup> Apple, R.W., Jr. 1994. “Feeling the Consequences of One Vote,” *New York Times* pg. A22, 9/27.

in the end it is much tougher.”<sup>14</sup> Margolies-Mezvinsky recalls the conversation with President Clinton thusly: “He said what would it take, and I said well frankly ‘We don’t deal with entitlements. I want a conversation about entitlements.’”<sup>15</sup> In exchange for a talk on entitlements to be held in her district, Margolies-Mezvinsky decided to change her vote.

Disentangling the independent effects of public and private presidential activity is both challenging and consequential. Without accounting for presidential private activities we are likely to misestimate and misunderstand the influence of the president’s public influence in both empirical models (omitted variable bias) and in our impressionistic analysis. Although some private activities may be unobservable to scholars, activities such as presidential visits and invitations represent potentially important measures of attempted presidential influence that should be accounted for in attempts to assess public presidential activities affect on legislative outcomes.

### *Which Issues?*

The issue illustrated above in Figure 2 was one where the president gained from going public. For other issues the gain from presidential public activity may be minimal. Consider once again the example in Figure 2. There are two status quo policies equidistant from the most preferred policy of the median member of Congress. In both cases, the pivotal actors would benefit from changing the extreme policy to something more moderate. In fact, it is likely that the president would campaign on both issues, pledging to bring the policy more in line with the majority of the public. In the case of the policy on the left, Q’, the president believes that the policy is too liberal and out of step with the preferences of most of the electorate. In the case of

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<sup>14</sup> Hershey, Sarah. 2004. “Women in Congress: Making Difficult Decisions,” Princeton University: manuscript.

<sup>15</sup> Hershey, Sarah. 2004. “Women in Congress: Making Difficult Decisions,” Princeton University: manuscript.

Q'', the president argues that the policy is too conservative and needs to be moved to the left. The president has no incentive to go public on Q'' since bringing preferences closer to his ideal point will not change the policy outcome.<sup>16</sup> While the president may have campaigned on changing both Q' and Q'', once in office, the president has an incentive to go public only on Q'. The location of the status quo policy and the preferences of congressional actors, rather than the president's private preferences dictate his decision whether or not to go public.

Indeed, for a range of issues on which the president likely campaigned, there is likely to be little benefit from public (or private) activity even if we assume that presidents are always able to change congressional preferences. When the status quo policy is inside the gridlock interval resulting from the perturbed Congressional preferences, the president knows that his public activities cannot change policy outcomes. Consequently, presidents will focus on issues like Q' in Figure 2 where policy change is possible. Although many issues may be out of line with the preferences of the median voter, issues will not be publicized or pursued by the president if legislation is impossible.

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE.]

Table 2 summarizes the equilibrium outcomes for the model described above conditional on the location of the president and status quo. The shaded outcomes denote the conditions under which the president can affect policy by going public. So long as the status quo does not lie between the presidentially-perturbed gridlock interval, the president can influence policy outcomes by going public. Figure 3 makes this comparison explicit by depicting the equilibrium policy outcomes conditional on the location of the status quo Q and the preferences of the players. The x-axis denotes the location of the status quo as well as the preferences of the

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<sup>16</sup> He also will be indifferent between the eventual policy proposed by the median member of Congress and the status quo. We discuss this below.

political actors. The y-axis depicts the equilibrium policy resulting from the game given the status quo on the x-axis. The figure reveals that, even if we assume that going public permits the president to change congressional preferences in a favorable manner, it is not always the case that presidents can influence policy outcomes by going public.<sup>17</sup>

[INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE.]

This analysis illustrates the need for knowledge about the location of the status quo policy.<sup>18</sup> For some status quo policies and for some assumptions about who is targeted by the president's public activities, the president's actions will not produce policy change. For example, if the status quo policy is to the left of the filibuster pivot,  $Q < F$ , presidential attempts to change the median member's preferences  $M$  to  $M + \varepsilon_M$  are inconsequential unless  $2F - Q < M + \varepsilon_M$ . In this case, the president would be better off attempting to influence the preferences of the filibuster pivot from  $F$  to  $F + \varepsilon_F$ . In other words, given the nature of lawmaking, the relative influence of legislators on the policy outcome and therefore the president's decision to go public depends on the location of the status quo.

Even if we assume that public presidential activity can always change congressional (induced) preferences, we are still likely to observe public presidential activity only in some circumstances. While the conventional wisdom suggests presidents go public on issues they care about the most, these examples suggest that presidents instead go public on those issues where they are likely to have an impact.

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<sup>17</sup> Although the president may go public to influence congressional preferences and induce policy change, it is also possible for the president to go public to prevent change. Figure 6 illustrates this possibility by depicting the equilibrium outcome (Y axis) resulting from every possible status quo (X axis). Figure 6 reveals that although no policy change results if  $Q$  lies between  $F + \varepsilon_F$  and  $V + \varepsilon_V$ , if  $Q > V$ , the president does better by going public because so doing pre-empts policy change by moving  $V$  closer to  $P$ , thereby making a status quo that normally could be changed unchangeable.

<sup>18</sup> Canes-Wrone (2001a, 2001b, 2005), for example, does this by using appropriations data where the status is known exactly from one year to the next.

## 2.2 Going Public to Credit-Claim

The pivotal politics model outlined earlier predicts that only those status quo policies that lie outside the “gridlock interval” of  $[F, V]$  (or  $[F, P]$  if  $P < V$ ) can be changed. Furthermore, Congress can change the status quo regardless of presidential public activity in these circumstances. If  $Q$  is located outside the gridlock interval, say to the left of  $F$ ,  $M$  will propose a bill that will make the member pivotal for invoking cloture (i.e., the filibuster pivot in this case) indifferent between the status quo and the bill. This bill will escape the filibuster, pass with a majority in the legislature and go to the president for his signature or a veto. While the bill is more liberal than the president would like, it is better than the alternative  $Q$  and he will sign it.<sup>19</sup> Policy change will occur in the absence of presidential activity.

Even though policy change is inevitable, this does not necessarily imply that presidents have no incentive to go public. In fact, we might expect presidents to go public and publicly push for an issue so that the president can take credit for the inevitable policy change.<sup>20</sup> The possibility that presidents may go public without affecting policy outcomes has important implications for measuring and interpreting the influence of presidential public activities. If presidents go public for the purposes of credit-claiming, then a correlation between policy change and presidential public activity does not indicate evidence of presidential strength and influence; if presidents are credit-claiming we should observe public presidential activity and successful policy change even if the presidents have no policy impact.

The case of homeland security legislation illustrates this point. Up until the president’s announcement of his plan for a new homeland security department in the spring of 2002, the

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<sup>19</sup> Some might suggest that a veto threat could bring the proposed bill closer to the president’s position. We deal with this case in the next section.

administration had been cool to the idea of a new cabinet department for this purpose.<sup>21</sup> The administration argued for the adequacy of the existing Office of Homeland Security created by executive order and they lobbied members of Congress to hold off on legislation creating a new department.<sup>22</sup> Despite the administration's efforts, serious efforts were undertaken in both chambers to pass legislation creating a new department. The proposed legislation had widespread support and looked like it might pass. The president subsequently presented his own proposal that mirrored closely the legislation being worked on in congressional committees with the exception that his proposal asked for more executive control.<sup>23</sup> Politicians and pundits speculated that the administration's efforts were an attempt gain some control over the creation of the department and take credit for its creation.<sup>24</sup> Although President Bush and his subordinates talked about homeland security almost daily after he announced his plan, it is unlikely that its enactment was due to these pronouncements. Instead, the legislation seemed inevitable given public demand. His proposal and public activity can be interpreted partly as an attempt to "get out ahead" and claim credit for the eventual success of the legislation.

This is not to imply that presidents go public only to take credit for something they know is likely to happen with or without their public statements. Rather, our point is simply that it is hard to disentangle true influence from credit-claiming. A correlation between public statements and legislative success is not enough. One way to get around this problem is to identify what the

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<sup>20</sup> Obviously if the electorate knew presidential motivations then credit-claiming would be ineffective.

<sup>21</sup> Mullins, Brody, "Dems Push for Homeland Defense Agency, Despite Bush's Protests," *Government Executive Magazine*, October 25, 2001, on-line edition.

<sup>22</sup> Mullins, "Dems Push for Homeland Defense Agency, Despite Bush's Protests." *Government Executive Magazine*, October 25, 2001, on-line edition.

<sup>23</sup> Bumiller and Sanger, "The President, as Terror Inquiry Swirls, Seeks Cabinet Post on Security." *New York Times*, June 6, 2002, p. A1.

<sup>24</sup> Bumiller, Elisabeth, and Alison Mitchell, "Bush Aides See Political Pluses in Security Plan," *New York Times*, June 15, 2002, p. A1.

status quo policy is relative both to the preferences of key political actors and the proposal under consideration.

### 2.3 Going Public to Make a Veto Threat Credible

A third and final explanation for why presidents might go public is that presidents do so to increase their bargaining strength.<sup>25</sup> Public activity may increase the president's bargaining strength even if the (induced) preferences of members of Congress are unchanged. Thus, if by going public, the president effectively binds himself to a policy position, it may make his veto threat more credible (Ingberman and Yao 1991a, 1991b). As Schelling explains,

The power to constrain an adversary may depend on the power to bind oneself; that in bargaining weakness is often strength, freedom may be freedom to capitulate, and to burn bridges behind one may suffice to undo the opponent (Schelling 1960, 22).

In other words, presidents may go public to threaten to veto a bill unless it is sufficiently favorable. Going public puts the president's prestige on the line. This works to the degree that breaking the threats is seen by the public as weakness. Put simply, for a president's veto threat to influence policy, it must be costly for the president to renege on his threat.

Instead of assuming that going public moves Congress  $\epsilon$  closer to P, assume that going public entails naming a distance D for which the president threatens to veto every policy that is more than D away from P. Assume also that if the president goes public and does not veto a policy that does not satisfy his threat, he incurs a cost K – perhaps representing the loss of presidential prestige.

[INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE.]

To understand the equilibrium outcomes, consider the example in Figure 4 where the president is more moderate than the member pivotal for overriding a presidential veto (i.e.,  $P < V$ ).

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<sup>25</sup> For a more skeptical view of this approach see Covington (1987) who argues that public activities can impede executive-legislative bargaining.

Consider two status quo policies equidistant from the most preferred policy of the median member of Congress. Consider first the status quo  $Q'$ . Since the status quo is too conservative for the actors, M proposes a bill at her ideal point since a policy at her ideal point is preferred by the president to the status quo policy. Although the veto-override prefers the status quo to this policy, since the president prefers the proposal (at least weakly) to the status quo, the president will sign the bill. Since the resulting policy is more liberal than his most preferred policy, one might wonder why the president would not threaten to veto any proposal that is not his ideal point. The answer is that such a threat is just “cheap talk” to Congress because Congress knows that even though there exist proposals that the president prefers more, the president still prefers the current proposal to the status quo.

The only way to make a presidential threat to veto the bill credible in the case of perfect information is to artificially make it costly to accept the proposal of the median legislator. This is where a public veto threat enters. If the president publicly threatens to veto a bill that does not satisfy certain requirements, he has imposed a cost  $K$  on himself if he does not follow through. The median legislator now knows that since it will be costly for the president to renege on his public veto threat, he will have an incentive to follow through on a threatened veto. Consequently, the president will be able to move the proposal closer to his most-preferred policy  $P$  by an amount equal to the self-imposed cost of reneging on the threat  $K$ .

Notice, however, that for  $Q'$  in Figure 4, there is no reason to issue a veto threat. While the president would be better off with a more conservative policy outcome, a threat is useless since the filibuster pivot will not vote to invoke cloture on a proposed bill closer to the president. As in the previous cases, the choice of strategy depends fundamentally on the location of the status quo policy and the preferences of congressional pivots. Indeed, the example of  $Q'$  in

Figure 4 is the only case where a veto threat makes sense for the president. The president must be more moderate than the member of the legislature pivotal for overriding a presidential veto and the status quo policy must be more extreme than F. If the status quo policy is located to the left of F, the preferences of the filibuster pivot dictates the location of the bill proposed by the median member of Congress and the median member could not move it closer to the president's position even if she wanted to. Table 3 makes this point explicit by computing the equilibrium policy outcome assuming that the cost of reneging K is sufficient to make the threat credible.

[INSERT TABLE 3]

As Table 3 shows, there is only one configuration of player preferences and the status quos in which going public to make a veto threat credible affects the outcome. Only when the president is located between the median member and the veto-pivot does going public to threaten a veto make any sense and it only make sense of the status quo policy is outside the region of [F,P]. Although we have no idea of how frequently this particular combination arises in the real world, since going public to make a veto threat credible makes sense for only one configuration of preferences and status quo locations, the results should make us at least a bit suspicious as to the robustness of this explanation of the public presidency.

Possible examples of this strategy include President Eisenhower's 1959 address where he lays out the "minimum requirements" for an acceptable labor reform bill and President Bush's now infamous "no new taxes" pledge (Lewis 1997). Both prominent examples are moderate Republicans arguably located inside the veto pivot, consistent with what we have argued above. In Eisenhower's case, actors knew that a labor reform bill was necessary. Eisenhower feared that a bill would be produced short of what he wanted. His public pledge to veto anything without his minimum requirements was an attempt to get a better bill than he expected by

making credible his threat to veto the bill. Bush's intention with his "read my lips" pledge was similar. Given the budget deficit, both Bush and Congress recognized a need for a change in fiscal policy that likely would involve measures to increase revenue and cut spending. Bush's pledge to not raise taxes was an attempt to force Congress to produce a bill with more spending cuts and no tax increases. If faced with a choice between the status quo and a bill that raised some taxes without any public pledge, Congress believed Bush would have to sign it. By publicly committing to no new taxes, however, Bush hoped to tie his own hands and limit his ability to negotiate away from his publicly stated position. Congress, however, called his bluff and he reneged on his promise at great cost to himself. It is an exception that illustrates the rule.

### **III. Discussion & Conclusion**

Our paper builds on the innovative work of Kernell and others who recognized the possibility of presidential influence on policy outcomes via public activity. We have used Krehbiel's model of lawmaking to understand the nature of presidential influence on policy outcomes through public speaking. We highlight two main points.

First, presidential public activity is more nuanced and multifaceted than is commonly believed. We provide three possible reasons a president might go public. In each case, the president uses her power and visibility to draw attention to an issue, but for a different end. First, the president may go public in an attempt to alter the public's perceptions of the issue or the constituencies that are active on the issue. Either way, the purpose is to alter the pressures facing members of Congress and hence their (induced) preferences. When the president carefully chooses the issue with the right combination of status quo and congressional preferences, he can use the subsequent preference changes to his advantage. Second, the

president may go public on an issue to claim credit for legislative action that is likely to take place in any event. In this case, although the president's action does not affect legislation, his visibility is aimed towards receiving political credit. Finally, the president may go public as a way of raising the costs of backing down, thereby establishing a credible veto threat. The model shows that the environmental configurations that allow this to work are relatively narrow.

[INSERT TABLE 4 HERE.]

The results summarized in Table 4 reveal the importance of the lawmaking environment on the motivation for and impact of public presidential activity. When these differing strategies for public presidential activity make sense depends critically on the location of the status quo policy and the preferences of the key actors. Put simply, president will use the strategy of going public for different reasons in different political configurations. For some configurations, there are several different, often overlapping, motivations for public presidential activity. Three implications for future work results.

First, the multiple motivations for public presidential activity means that we must be precise in what we mean by going public in order to assess the true policy consequence of public presidential activity. Looking at the extent to which public activities correlate with policy change does not necessarily indicate presidential influence. Care is needed to prevent overestimating the impact of presidential public activity by giving credit to the president where it is not due (credit-claiming).

Second, a careful examination of presidential public activities reveals numerous situations where private actions such as promises of campaign support, pork projects, or help with an administrative agency are likely to at least as influential as public activity. There is no reason to believe that the districts of members of Congress are equally receptive to presidential

appeals or that moderate members of Congress are the ones that need to be persuaded in order for legislation to be enacted. Presidents use negotiations removed from public view in place of public activities or concurrently with them to persuade important members of Congress to support their program. This makes estimating the impact of public activity on legislative behavior difficult since we could attribute influence to the president's public activities that are more appropriate attributed to their other bargaining techniques.

A third important implication follows from this analysis of the president's motivation for going public to alter congressional preferences. A major question in the literature is why presidential policy priorities in office differ from those of the presidential campaign. Although nothing commits a president to his campaign promises (and perhaps post-election activity reveals "true" priorities), our analysis yields an additional explanation. In the campaign, the president chooses the policy preferences that maximize his chances of being elected given status quo locations. Once elected, presidents must interact with Congress and face congressional constraints. The president therefore chooses issues for public attention not only on the basis of his true preferences but also on the basis of where he can have the largest impact, regardless of his personal preferences. Of necessity, the president thus makes different choices when he needs to consider his leverage over Congress than when he can ignore it.<sup>26</sup>

In conclusion, this paper applies a new approach to the studying the presidential practice of going public. It illustrates how modeling the president as one actor in a larger separation of powers system yields interesting insights that might be missed when studying presidential choice in isolation. In particular, it shows how changes in the political environment should lead to changes in presidential behavior across presidencies. By modeling presidential public activity it has made clear certain assumptions in the literature about how going public works and has

highlighted when presidents will go public for different reasons given the issue involved and the preferences of key political actors.

This new approach has typically been applied to the more formal powers of the president but it is equally applicable to other presidential activities the president does repeatedly such as make campaign trips, distribute grants (Shor 2003), design administrative agencies (Howell and Lewis 2002), make decisions about the use of military force (Howell and Pevehouse 2002), and decide whether or not to pander to electoral interests before an election (Canes-Wrone 2005, Canes-Wrone, Herron, and Shotts 2001).

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<sup>26</sup> See Canes-Wrone (2005)

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**Table 1. Equilibrium Outcomes for the Pivotal Politics Model**

Location of the President	Location of Status Quo (Q)	Equilibrium Outcome
$P > V$	$Q < F$	$\min\{2F - Q, M\}$
	$Q \in [F, V]$	Q
	$Q > V$	$\text{Max}\{2Q - V, M\}$
$P \in [M, V]$	$Q < F$	$\min\{2F - Q, M\}$
	$Q \in [F, P]$	Q
	$Q > P$	$\text{Max}\{2Q - P, M\}$

**Table 2. Equilibrium Outcomes for the “Traditional” Going Public Model**

Location of President	Location of Status Quo (Q)	Equilibrium Outcome
$P > V$	$Q < F + \varepsilon_F$	$\min\{2(F + \varepsilon_F) - Q, M + \varepsilon_M\}$
	$Q \in [F + \varepsilon_F, V + \varepsilon_V]$	Q
	$Q > V + \varepsilon_V$	$\max\{M + \varepsilon_M, 2Q - (V + \varepsilon_V)\}$
$P \in [M, V]$	$Q < F + \varepsilon_F$	$\min\{2(F + \varepsilon_F) - Q, M + \varepsilon_M\}$
	$Q \in [F + \varepsilon_F, P]$	Q
	$Q > P$	$\max\{M + \varepsilon_M, 2Q - P\}$

Note: Shaded outcomes indicate scenarios where the president exercises influence over the outcome by going public with a bargaining strategy.

**Table 3. Equilibrium Outcomes for the Bargaining Model**

Location of President (P)	Location of Status Quo (Q)	Outcomes
$P \in [M, V]$	$Q < F$	$\min\{2F - Q, M\}$
	$Q \in [F, P]$	Q
	$Q > P$	$\max\{M, P - K\}$
$P > V$	$Q < F$	$\max\{2F - Q, M\}$
	$Q \in [F, M]$	Q
	$Q > V$	$\max\{2Q - V, M\}$

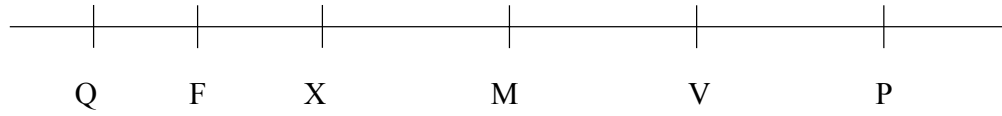
Note: Shaded outcome indicates the scenario where the president exercises influence over the outcome by going public with a bargaining strategy.

**Table 4. Incentives for Going Public**

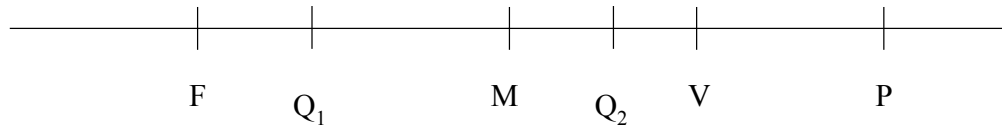
<b>Location of President</b>	<b>Location of Status Quo (Q)</b>	<b>Go Public For</b>
$P > V$	$Q < F$	Credit-Claiming, Preference Change
	$Q \in [F, F + \varepsilon_F]$	Preference Change
	$Q \in [F + \varepsilon_F, V]$	
	$Q \in [V, V + \varepsilon_V]$	Preference Change
	$Q > V + \varepsilon_V$	Credit-Claiming, Preference Change
$P \in [M, V]$	$Q < F$	Credit-Claiming, Preference Change
	$Q \in [F, F + \varepsilon_F]$	Preference Change
	$Q \in [F + \varepsilon_F, M]$	
	$Q \in [M, P]$	
	$Q \in [P, V - \varepsilon_V]$	Veto Threat, Preference Change
	$Q > [V - \varepsilon_V, V]$	Credit-Claiming, Preference Change, Veto Threat
	$Q > V$	Credit-Claiming, Preference Change, Veto Threat

# Figure 1: When Can Policy Be Changed?

*Basic Setup of Pivotal Politics Model*



*Policy Change Impossible*



*Policy Change Possible*

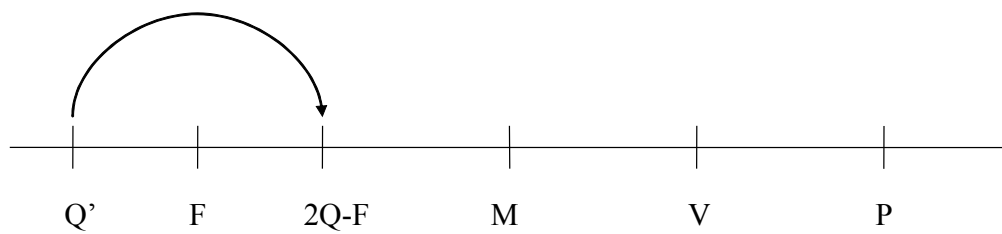
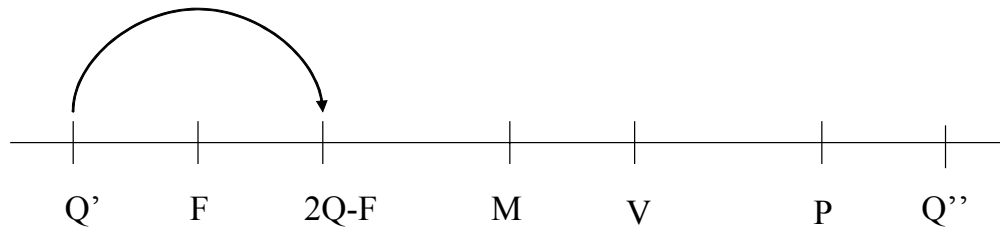
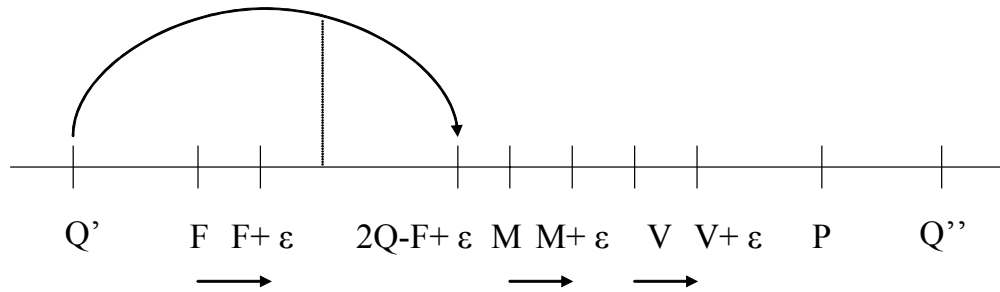


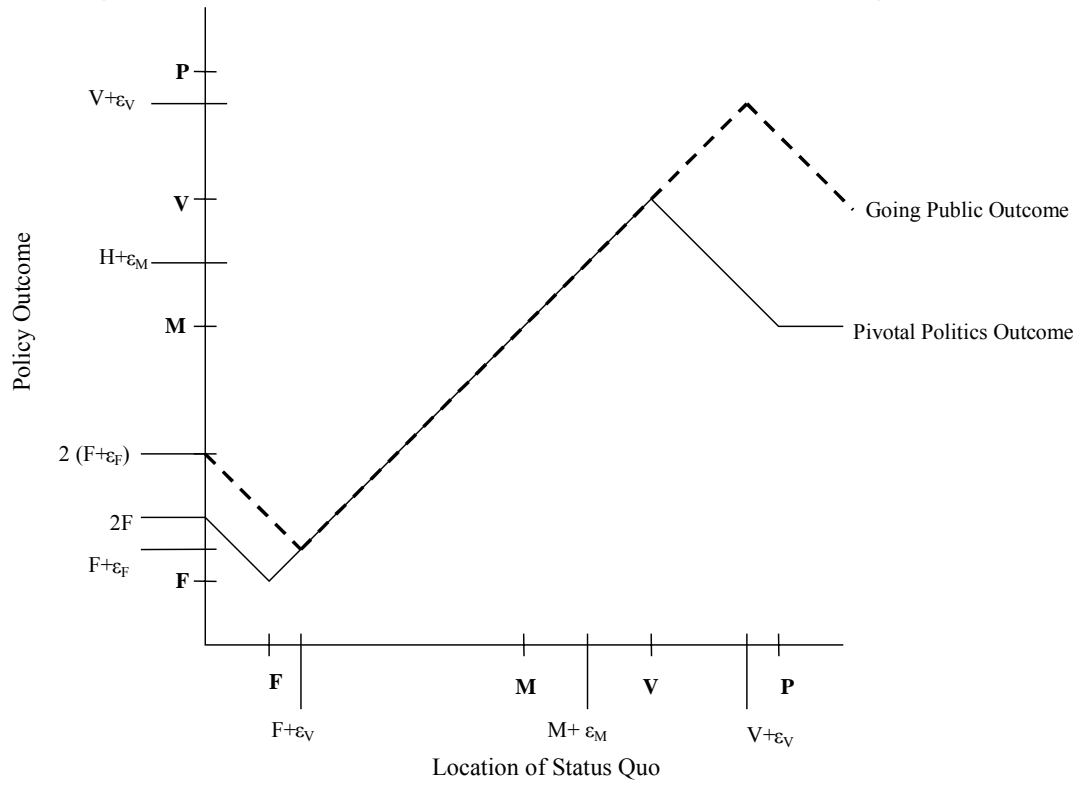
Figure 2: Targeting Specific Actors and Issues  
*President Does Not Go Public*



*President Goes Public*

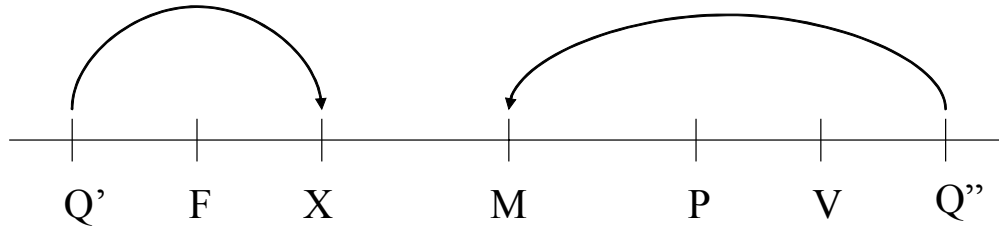


**Figure 3. Presidential Influence from Going Public**



# Figure 4: Costs Make Veto Threat Credible

*No Public Veto Threat*



*Public Veto Threat*

