

## 7-3

## How Cable Ended the Golden Age of Presidential Television: From 1969 to 2006

*Matthew A. Baum and Samuel Kernell*

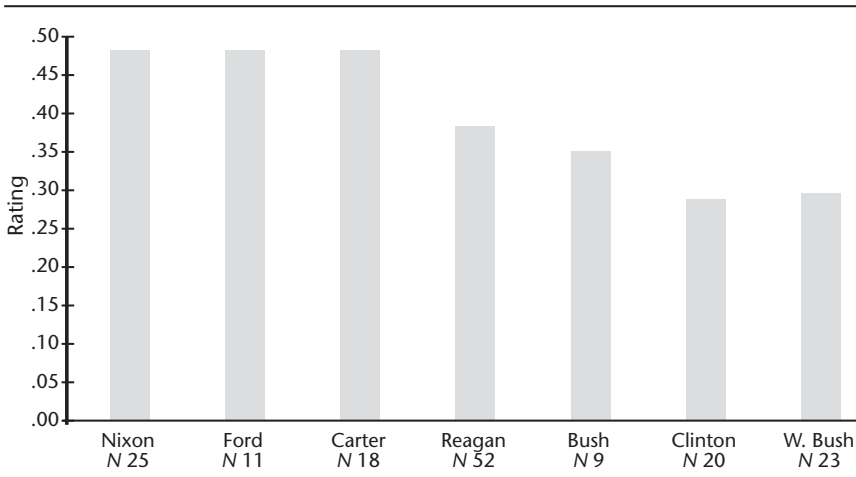
*Technological advances in communications and transportation during the twentieth century created numerous opportunities for presidents to go public. None, arguably, was more important than television. From the late 1950s on, virtually every home had at least one television set. President John Kennedy grasped the opportunity television afforded presidents when he conducted the first live televised press conference in 1961. From then until the rise of cable television, presidents pretty much enjoyed the prerogative to enter America's homes whenever they "asked" the networks for airtime. More recently, however, technology has turned against presidents' easy access to the public. In this article Matthew Baum and Samuel Kernell trace the growth of cable and satellite services and show that this trend is closely associated with the sharply declining audiences for presidents' national television addresses.*

"THE PRESIDENT IS not irrelevant here." Bill Clinton's response to a reporter's pointed question during a nationally televised, prime-time news conference on April 18, 1995, came across as little more than a desperate denial of the truth. Having seized firm control of Congress in the previous fall's midterm elections and now marching in step toward enacting their legislative program, the "Contract with America," congressional Republicans had given the nation ample reason to suspect that perhaps this Democratic president had indeed become irrelevant.

Many Americans had apparently already answered the question for themselves. Nielsen Media Research reported that only 6.5 percent of households with televisions watched the president assert his relevance. In March 1969, in contrast, when President Richard Nixon conducted one of his routine prime-time press conferences, all three networks broadcast it, and according to Nielsen, 59 percent of America's television households tuned in.<sup>1</sup> Figure 1 shows more systematic evidence of this trend. The average audience ratings depicted in the

Source: This essay summarizes, partially excerpts, and updates research originally reported in Baum and Kernell, "Has Cable Ended the Golden Age of Presidential Television?" *American Political Science Review* 55 (March 1999): 99-114

Figure 1. Average Percentage of Households Watching Prime-Time Presidential TV Appearances, 1969–2006



Source: Nielsen Media Research

Note: "Rating" is a commonly reported variable that Nielsen Media Research defines as the percentage of households owning televisions that are tuned in to an average minute of a given program.

figure, based on 158 televised, prime-time addresses and news conferences, show a steady downward trend, beginning with the Reagan presidency.<sup>2</sup>

Presidents appear to be losing their television audience at precisely the time when they most need it. Increasingly they have staked their leadership in Washington on their ability to attract the public's support for themselves and their policies (Kernell 1997). Whether measured by public appearances, number of speeches, or days of travel, each recent president has in some way matched or eclipsed his predecessors' efforts to communicate directly with the American people. Substantial research has also demonstrated "going public" to be a viable leadership strategy. Through speeches, popular presidents can influence public preferences on policy (Mondak 1993; Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey 1987) and elevate the salience of some national issues over others (Bartels 1993; Cohen 1995). As Bill Clinton conclusively demonstrated with his 1998 State of the Union address, a president's public appeals can also boost his standing in the polls (Brace and Hinckley 1993; Simon and Ostrom 1989; Ragsdale 1984).<sup>3</sup> More than ever, presidents act on Neustadt's (1960) early insight that good things happen to popular presidents. Given these benefits, it comes as no surprise to find that about a third of the White House staff is engaged in some aspect of public relations to promote the president and his policies with the American public.

If modern presidents lose their prime-time audience, they will have surrendered a political asset that will be difficult to replace by other means. The alter-

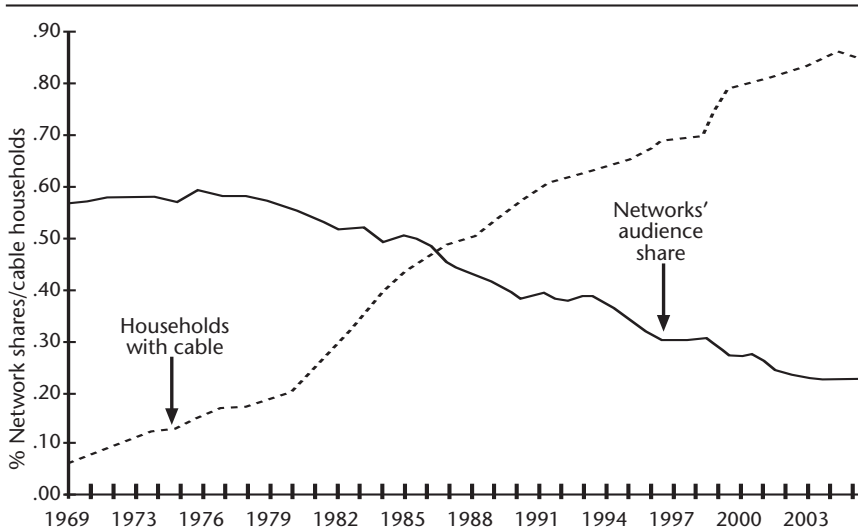
native of speaking to the American public through the news media is being closed off by increasingly unobliging journalistic practices. Presidents complain, with some justification, that the news media prefer to report unfavorable news about them (Groeling and Kernell 1998; Patterson 1996, Baum and Groeling 2004). More importantly, however, network television news no longer allows presidents to speak for themselves. The average presidential sound bite on the network evening news has shrunk from forty seconds in 1968 to less than seven seconds in 1996 (Center for Media and Public Affairs 1996; Hallin 1994). With reporters and anchors on camera more, and presidents less, how reporters and their editors decide to frame a story can greatly influence how the audience will consume it (Miller and Krosnik 1996). The finding that news coverage of a president's policy preferences generally fails to influence public opinion is therefore unsurprising (Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey 1987; Edwards 2005). Modern news practices offer presidents a poor substitute for direct appeals on television.

Why are modern presidents losing their television audience? This is the central question we seek to answer in this study. Past research has largely ignored audience ratings, and so the scholarly literature offers few answers. We investigate the question in two distinct ways: In the next section we examine survey responses to questions measuring individuals' consumption of presidential messages. The statistical relationships reported below offer suggestive evidence of the underlying opinion dynamics that account for the trend in Figure 1. The cumulative evidence indicates that cable (and, more recently, satellite) technology has allowed the public to become strategically discriminating in its viewing decisions. So, too, our evidence suggests, have presidents and network executives, as they appraise this increasingly fickle audience in deciding, respectively, whether to deliver and broadcast a prime-time press conference or address to the nation.

### The Utility of Watching the President

Twenty-five years ago, CBS, NBC and ABC enjoyed an oligopoly. As one network executive reminisced, "When viewers turned on the TV set, they had five choices, and the networks were three of them . . . [They] collectively accounted for about 90% of the television audience" (Lowry 1997). Between 1969 and 2005, the number of households subscribing to cable rose sharply from 6 percent to 83 percent.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, in 1983 cable subscribers received, on average, less than fifteen channels; today the average exceeds one hundred (*IT Facts*; Webster and Lichty 1991). As Figure 2 shows, both trends in cable subscriptions and programming choices have taken a heavy toll on the audience shares of the major networks.<sup>5</sup>

Figure 2. Network Audience Share and Households with Cable, 1969–2005



Sources: (1) Cable households data - *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, various years); (2) Networks' audience shares supplied by A.C. Nielsen.

Note: "% Network shares" refers to the combined prime-time Nielsen ratings of the three major broadcast networks (each rating point is equivalent to 1% of U.S. households); "Cable households" refers to the percentage of U.S. households subscribing to cable.

To appreciate how cable and other potential factors might erode the president's audience, we begin by stating the viewing decision using the standard utility model,  $PB - C$ . The "expected benefit" of consuming a president's message is made up of two terms:  $B$ , representing the potential benefit or value to the viewer of information that the president might provide, discounted by  $P$ , which is the probability that the president will actually offer credible information on a subject. When the viewing decision is stated in these terms, we can see that citizens who think politicians are crooks and liars will expect to derive little benefit from watching the president, regardless of what he has to say.

Against this expected benefit the viewer must weigh various costs, or  $C$ , and here is where cable programming enters the equation. Aside from the direct effort, or "transaction cost," of tuning in to the president's address, the viewer considers the "opportunity costs" entailed in watching the president rather than watching some other program or undertaking some other pleasurable activity. Back in the days when the several broadcast networks dominated the airwaves, they could manipulate viewers' opportunity costs by agreeing to suspend commercial programming and jointly broadcast the president's address. (They even used the same cameras.) This practice left voters with few programming alter-

natives. That, in turn, served the networks' purposes, in preventing serious audience erosion when commercial programming resumed, and the president's goal, by guaranteeing the largest possible audience.

The success of this practice depended, of course, on viewers' staying tuned throughout the president's appearance. Networks had little cause to worry. One study (Foote 1988) found sixteen of President Gerald Ford's nineteen television appearances commanding market shares as high as, or higher than, the regularly scheduled commercial programming the president's appearance had preempted. That even President Ford's notably uncharismatic appearances did not prompt viewers to turn off their televisions (or tune over to public or local independent programming) offers compelling evidence that during the pre-cable era, watching the president imposed minimal opportunity costs. Even those viewers who might have anticipated negligible benefit from watching President Ford nonetheless did so. Viewers behaved as if media critics were right in calling them "captives" of network television. Throughout our discussion we will enlist this term to characterize the predicament of this once-dominant class of broadcast viewers. As it concerns presidential television, a viewer's "captive" status results from the combination of limited channels, an unwillingness to turn off the television, and the networks' joint suspension of commercial programming during a presidential appearance.

Cable gives viewers choices, and for this reason, it makes watching the president costly. As the number of alternative programs increases, so too does the likelihood that one of them will prove more attractive than the president's message, prompting the viewer to change channels.<sup>6</sup> So, cable subscribers will be less likely to watch a presidential appearance than will those viewers who remain captive to the broadcast signal.

Although it is substantively important, this prediction is intuitive and does not need to be depicted formally to be appreciated. There is, however, a second, less-obvious hypothesis embedded in the utility calculus of watching the president, particularly when one of the prominent possible states is that of captive viewer. In Figure 3 we graph the probability of watching the president as a function of these cost-benefit comparisons. Because captive viewers will experience negligible opportunity costs in watching the president, they will tend to do so even when they anticipate minimal benefit. Cable subscribers, on the other hand, are free to move along Figure 3's curve, and so their assessment of benefit will heavily influence their viewing decision. The qualitative difference between captive, antenna-tethered viewers and cable viewers in the choice to watch the president should show up statistically in an interaction between cable access and those variables that reflect the attractiveness of a presidential appearance. Below we test this utility hypothesis in two ways: on individuals' self-reported viewing habits

and on aggregate trends of audience shares. Although they similarly confirm the model, each level of analysis offers distinct insights into the president's declining audience.

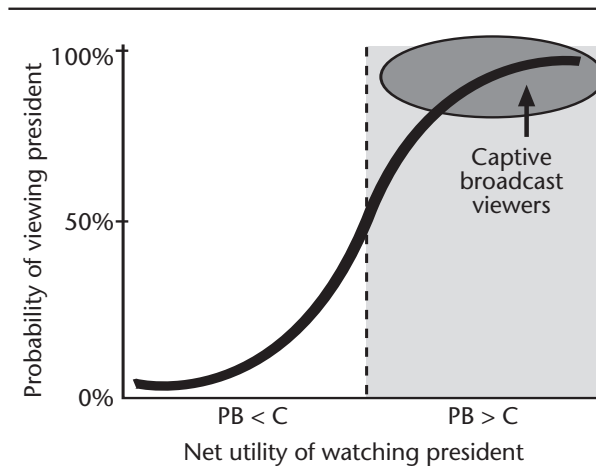
### Watching the 1996 Presidential Debates

For the vast majority of the American people television has emerged over the past few decades as the primary source of information about politics. For some it represents their sole means of becoming informed about the issues of the day. Newspaper readership, conversely, has declined steadily since the 1960s and in a way that suggests a massive substitution of television for newspapers as a source for civic information (Briller 1990; Lichty and Gomery 1992; Moisy 1996; Stanley and Niemi 1998).<sup>7</sup>

Reflecting the rise of alternative information technologies, recent American National Election Study (NES) surveys, which are the chief source of scholarly research on voting behavior in national elections, have queried respondents about their preferred sources of information about politics. The 1996 NES survey asked respondents if they subscribed to cable or satellite television service, giving us an opportunity to examine systematically its effect on political communication. The survey also asked respondents whether they watched the first and second presidential debates between President Bill Clinton and his Republican opponent, Bob Dole. Although debates represent a different kind of presidential appearance, we have little reason to suspect that they differ materially from the addresses to the nation and press conferences tallied in Figure 1. In recent years the American public has shown just as great an inclination to abandon presidential debates as other forms of televised presidential communication. More people typically watch the debates, but Nielsen (2006) reports erosion in the share of television viewers who tune in to them from more than half of those watching television to roughly a third in recent elections.<sup>8</sup>

We have hypothesized that respondents with cable will approach their viewing choices differently, since they enjoy numerous programming options unavailable to the broadcast audience and hence are more likely to engage in a cost-benefit calculation with respect to watching the president. In an extensive analysis of the covariates of debate watching reported elsewhere (Baum and Kernell 1999), we found a much stronger propensity to watch the debates among those cable subscribers who are highly informed about politics than among their poorly informed counterparts. Among broadcast viewers, this difference did not emerge.<sup>9</sup> The relationships displayed in Figure 4 closely follow the utility logic of viewing decisions depicted in Figure 3.<sup>10</sup> Among cable subscribers, reported

Figure 3. The Probability of Viewing the President as a Function of Expected Utility

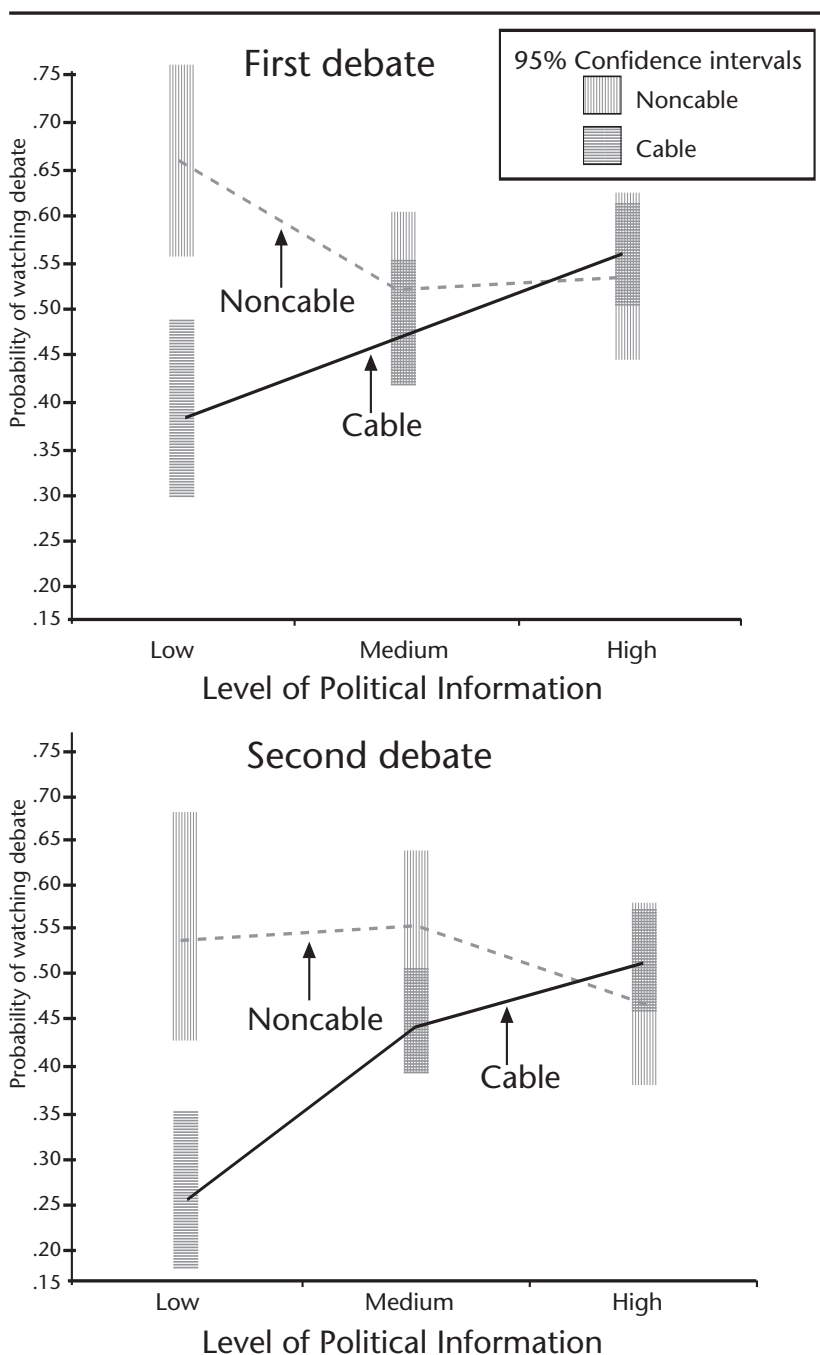


debate watching is strongly related to the respondent's level of political information. The differences between these low- and high-information respondents are eighteen and twenty-seven percentage points ( $p < .05$ ) for the first and second debates, respectively, and highly informed cable subscribers actually eclipsed their captive counterparts in tuning in to these events. Additionally, the differences between cable subscribers and nonsubscribers are greatest among the least-well-informed respondents. Poorly informed cable subscribers dropped out of the debate audience in droves, presumably because they changed channels in favor of entertainment programming.

Also as predicted, noncable respondents confirm their captive status by reporting watching the debates at about the same rate regardless of how politically informed they are. In neither debate did the percentage point differences of  $-.12$  and  $-.07$  between low- and high-information nonsubscribers reach the  $.05$  significance level. Nonetheless, the fact that subscribers and nonsubscribers trend in opposite directions across levels of political awareness presents an intriguing possibility: Why would the least politically informed broadcast viewers be the most likely to watch the presidential debates? Perhaps the answer lies in their greater overall exposure to television programming. If these poorly informed captive viewers watch more television, then more of them than their better informed counterparts might well have been tuned in when the networks (including Fox) preempted evening commercial programming to present the debates.

Unfortunately, the NES survey does not ask about overall viewing habits, and so we cannot directly control for the effects of overall exposure to television

Figure 4. Probability of Watching the 1996 Presidential Debates: Cable Subscribers versus Nonsubscribers



Source: Baum and Kernell (1999): Probabilities represent percentages derived from transformed logit coefficients.

programming on these relationships. Yet suggestive circumstantial evidence is available in the 1996 General Social Survey (GSS), which did include respondents' viewing habits and found the amount of time logged in front of the television to be inversely associated with education (Davis 1996).<sup>11</sup> Political information is highly correlated with education in the NES survey ( $r = .49$ ). Hence, more of our low-information respondents in Figure 4 might have watched the debates simply because more of them were watching TV when the debates aired.

Assigning the GSS respondents' television-viewing levels for the different educational categories to our low- and high-political-information, noncable NES respondents allows us to estimate these groups' different levels of exposure to television. By this estimate, our low-information respondents averaged almost an hour more of daily television viewing than high-information respondents—3.4 compared to 2.6 hours per day. Perhaps, then, the inverse relationship of political information and debate watching for noncable respondents is not so paradoxical. Tuning in to the debates might impose comparatively low opportunity costs for the captive viewers who, despite their typically poorer understanding of politics, are nonetheless drawn to it merely by virtue of their relatively heavy diet of television.

If, as these relationships suggest, the changing media marketplace frees uninterested viewers to abandon political programming, the effects should manifest over time in a steady decline of the president's audience ratings, as cable and satellite services offer more programming alternatives to more citizens.

### The President's Audience Ratings

As suggestive as the survey differences between cable and broadcast viewers may be, we need information over time to confirm that they are at the root of recent presidents' audience losses. The presidents' average audience ratings in Figure 1 are based on the 158 prime-time presidential addresses and press conferences for which we have Nielsen ratings data. These ratings reflect the percentage of households with television that are viewing the appearance.

Our key treatment variable is cable's share of the household audience. We could measure this in various ways, including, obviously, the percentage of households subscribing to cable, as shown in Figure 2. Instead, however, we have adopted a closely correlated indicator, Network Share, or the average share of the audience watching one of the three broadcast networks during prime time. This measure performs slightly better, we suspect because it takes into account not only the fast-growing share of homes wired to cable or sporting a satellite

dish but also the increasing number of viewing options available to subscribers. We also test a number of other situational variables that might contribute to the utility of viewing the president. Others have found the public's receptivity to the president's messages closely associated with its assessment of his job performance (Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey 1987; Zaller 1997). Hence we have added "Approve," the Gallup poll's familiar share of the public approving the president's job performance at the time of the television appearance. We take into account the effect of the economy on the public's receptivity to presidential appearances.<sup>12</sup> The variable "Bad Economy" is based on the percentage of respondents who answered "bad" when asked to forecast the next year's business conditions in the University of Michigan's monthly Survey of Consumer Sentiment.

This group of variables may reflect the viewer's assessment of the value or benefit of watching the president's address. On the cost side of the ledger, we have identified several variables that might influence these time-series relationships. During the Clinton administration, the networks began rotating coverage of some presidential appearances. Of the twenty Clinton prime-time addresses and press conferences for which we have audience data, only fourteen were broadcast by all three major networks. President George W. Bush has fared somewhat better, perhaps reflecting the crisis content of many of his addresses during his first term. During the first five years of his presidency only seven of his twenty-three appearances failed to receive full network coverage. Selective network broadcasts are a modern development that rarely occurred in past administrations. We suspect the change reflects the growing costliness to the networks of interrupting their commercial programming and finding large shares of their audience subsequently changing to a cable channel and not returning to the networks for the remainder of the prime-time evening. When a network opts out of covering a presidential event, it adds a major programming alternative to the menus of *both* broadcast and cable viewers. This sharply increases the opportunity costs associated with watching the president and should, according to our model, reduce his audience share commensurately. In a preliminary analysis we found the largest audience losses occurring when only one network carried an event, such as President Clinton's ill-starred press conference, with which we opened our discussion. Accordingly we shall represent these instances with a dummy variable, "One Network."

Media research (Webster and Lichty 1991, 154-157) identifies two other variables-represented in our analysis by "Summer" and "9 p.m."-relating to costs that systematically limit the size of the prime-time audience. For television producers, July and August are indeed "the dog days of summer." Longer days and vacations conspire to reduce the numbers of people watching television, and hence reruns become the staple. Similarly, whatever the season or day of the week, the

9:00 p.m.-to-10:00 p.m. time slot normally finds a television turned on in more households than at any other time of the day. If a president runs afoul of these preferred viewing times and seasons, fewer viewers will be watching TV when he appears.

In the first equation of Table 1 (whose results appear in the first two columns) we have regressed the 158 presidential audience ratings summarized in Figure 1 on these benefit and costs variables. For the most part, the relationships closely follow our expectations and parallel the survey results. The presence of viewing options is, again, a powerful predictor of the president's audience share. Presidential approval displays the correct sign and is significant; concern with the economy significantly increases the audience. International crises attract audiences; apparently, crises give viewers a special reason to learn what the president has to say. Two days after the attack of 9/11, a record 88 percent of America's households tuned in to see how President Bush planned to respond. The several schedule variables reflecting time of address, season, and number of networks showing the president are all significantly related to watching the president. The same structural features of the market mediate the president's audience rating as do so for commercial programming.<sup>13</sup> The one variable that fails to produce a statistically significant relationship for the full 1969 to 2006 series is the president's approval rating; more on this below.

Earlier we argued that variations in an address's expected benefit will have less effect on the viewing choices of those who remain dependent on the broadcast signal, for the simple reason that they have nowhere else to go. The ideal way of testing this hypothesis on marginal changes in the president's audience shares over time entails analyzing the relationships separately for cable and broadcast viewers. Unfortunately, Nielsen Media Research does not provide such partially disaggregated data for scholarly research. There is, however, another, indirect approach available. Note that Figure 2 shows neither cable penetration of households nor network audience shares changing greatly until the early 1980s. During the Nixon-to-Carter era, for example, the big three networks' share of the market declined only about one percentage point (from 56 percent to 55 percent), compared to a thirty-four percentage point decline (from 55 percent to 21 percent) for the 1981-2006 period. Consequently, presidents' audience ratings (see Figure 1) were both higher and more stable during the Nixon, Ford, and Carter presidencies than for more recent presidents. By estimating the equations separately for these two time periods, we obtain series with distinct mixes of cable and broadcast audiences. According to our model, stronger time-series relationships should occur for the second period, when far more members of the television audience possessed many more viewing options and consequently a meaningful choice whenever the president appeared on the screen.

Table 1. The Presidents' Audience Rating as a Function of Network Share, Political Setting, and Schedule

Independent variable	Equation 1 Full Series (N = 158)		Equation 2 Nixon-Carter (N = 54)		Equation 3 Reagan-W. bush (N = 104)	
	Coef.	Std. Error	Coef.	Std. Error	Coef.	Std. Error
Network Share	.51***	.05	-.57	1.25	.34***	.07
Approve	.00	.00	.19*	.10	.00	.00
Bad Economy	.08	.04	.11	.08	.12*	.05
Crisis	.06**	.02	.06	.03	.06**	.02
Summer	-.06***	.02	-.11**	.03	-.05**	.02
9:00 p.m.	.05***	.01	.06***	.02	.03*	.01
One network	-.08**	.03			-.10***	.03
Constant	.02	.04	.63	.73	.05	.04
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.05		.27		.43	

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

Source: Baum and Kernell (1999), updated through 2006 by authors. The above equations report OLS regression estimates of the full and partial time series of presidents' national audience ratings.

This is precisely what we find in the second and third equations of Table 1. Only the scheduling variables are statistically significant for both the first and second periods. This is perfectly consistent with our model, since these variables capture *whether* people are watching television, rather than their particular choice of programming. Moreover, "Network Share" is appropriately weak and insignificant during the early period, reflecting cable's limited penetration into American households. By comparison, the president's audience ratings during the Reagan-to-G. W. Bush era tracked all of the independent variables except, again, presidential approval ("Approve"). At first glance, it is surprising that this variable, which has proved so important to presidents' success in other settings, should drop out here. Below, however, we offer evidence suggesting that because it is so important, other actors incorporate the president's public prestige into their strategic decisions of whether ("One Network") and when ("9:00 p.m.") to broadcast the event.

## Conclusion

The textbook assessment that "television has brought about . . . the greater ease with which American presidents can communicate directly with the American

people” (Erikson and Tedin 1995, 235) increasingly represents the reality of a bygone “golden age” of presidential television. In the 1960s and 1970s, when more homes in America had televisions than had indoor plumbing and virtually all viewers (including early cable subscribers) depended on the networks for their programming, presidents possessed an enviable tool of persuasion. President Kennedy introduced the live, prime-time press conference in 1961 so that he could, as he explained to a reporter at the inaugural session, “speak directly to the American people.” Over the next several decades, direct appeals to the captive American audience became commonplace. In 1970 President Nixon delivered nine prime-time addresses to the nation. He and other presidents did not hesitate to take to the airwaves to exhort the public to write, call, and send mailgrams to their members of Congress in support of their policies. The urge to go public with a prime-time address was tempered only by the consideration that the president might wear out his welcome (Kernell 1997, 107).

What broadcast technology gave the president, cable technology appears to be taking away. In recent years, as the number of television households receiving cable has swelled, along with the programming alternatives it offers, the number of viewers who reach for their remote at the first sight of the president has grown steadily. That in turn has prompted the broadcast networks to reassess their willingness to surrender prime-time slots to the president. Rotating coverage is increasingly favored, and some presidential coverage requests have been rejected outright. Gone are the days when a president could “appear simultaneously on all national radio and television networks at prime, large-audience evening hours, virtually whenever and however the president wishes” (Minow et al. 1973).

The recent origin of this phenomenon necessarily renders speculative any assessment of its implications. We can reasonably conclude, nonetheless, that presidents’ diminished access to the national television audience will present future presidents with a serious strategic dilemma: How will they promote their policies to a citizenry that depends almost entirely on television for its news and information yet is increasingly unwilling to allow the president into their homes?

## NOTES

1 Over the years, A. C. Nielsen Company has established itself as the authoritative source and arbiter of television viewing habits. Two of Nielsen’s better known audience rating indexes gauge audience size as a percentage of households using television (HUT) and as a percentage of households owning televisions, which it calls “Average Audience Household” (AAH). The former is best suited for assessing a program’s performance in a given time slot and consequently is favored by network producers. The latter better measures a program’s overall audience penetration and allows program comparisons across time slots. AAH is the

Nielsen rating for an average minute of programming. For our study, we use AAH, which represents the percentage of those U.S. households possessing television that tuned into the president's address during an average minute of that program.

2 At least one of the four major networks (including Fox) broadcast each of these addresses and press conferences. Only since 1993 has a presidential address or press conference received less than full coverage.

3 Shortly after the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal broke into the news, President Clinton's political standing became so unstable that several newspaper and network surveys launched daily tracking surveys to monitor the president's pulse in public opinion. But then the president delivered a well-received State of the Union address, his polling numbers shot up to their highest levels ever, and the polling subsided. The results of the CBS/*New York Times* Survey are typical (Berke 1998).

4 The 2005 figure include satellite subscriptions. Henceforth we shall drop references to these subscriptions, which are functionally equivalent to cable and have been added to subsequent figures as "cable" subscribers.

5 Recently even the broadcast market has started to expand and offer viewers more choices. A fourth broadcast network, Fox, started up in 1991, and in 1994 UPN and WB entered the market.

6 During President Clinton's much-anticipated 1998 State of the Union speech, during the first days of the Lewinsky scandal, the fledgling WB network enjoyed its highest-rated program ever, when almost eight million viewers tuned in to a new series (Snow 1998).

7 Over the past decade, the Internet has begun to emerge as an important alternative to television as a source of political information. However, survey evidence (e.g., Pew Center 2002, 2004) suggests that for a vast majority Americans, television remains the overwhelmingly predominant source of news about politics.

8 Fifty-one percent of NES respondents claimed to have watched the first debate when it was broadcast on all four network channels, PBS, and CNN on October 6, 1996, and 47 percent reported watching the second debate ten days later. The Nielsen ratings, comparable to those in Figure 1, record much more modest audiences of 32 percent and 26 percent of households with television, respectively, for the two debates.

9 This variable represents the NES interviewer's estimate of the respondent's level of political information. Despite problems of reliability that would appear inherent in such a subjective measure, Zaller (1992) found that this variable, measured in the preelection interview, performs as well as or better than any other NES-based indicator of political awareness, including education, political participation, media exposure, interest in politics, and various informational indices he constructed (which we replicated).

10 Following a simulation procedure for generating significance levels developed by King, Tomz, and Wittenberg (2000), we have also plotted the 95 percent confidence intervals for each expected probability.

11 The 1996 General Social Survey asked respondents how many hours per day they watched television. Responses were coded 0 through 24 hours per day. Separating respondents by education level, those with less than a ninth grade education averaged fully two more hours per day of television viewing than their college educated counterparts—4.2 versus 2.2 hours per day.

12 We also tested the effects of various presidential scandals during this era. These events drive down a president's approval rating, which apparently accounts for their failure to yield significant statistical relationships in the multivariate analysis.

13 Although the scheduling of presidential addresses is constrained by events (e.g., a sudden international crisis) or obligations (e.g., the State of the Union address), they are not randomly distributed with respect to time and season. Instead, the address schedule represents a negotiated agreement between network executives and White House advisers and consequently may be partly endogenous to the equation.

## REFERENCES

- Bartels, Larry M. 1993. "Messages Received: The Political Impact of Media Exposure." *American Political Science Review* 87 (June): 267-285.
- Baum, Matthew A., and Tim Groeling. 2004. "Crossing the Water's Edge: Elite Rhetoric, Media Coverage and the Rally-Round-the-Flag Phenomenon, 1979-2003." Paper presented to the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, Ill., Sept.
- Baum, Matthew A., and Samuel Kernell. 1999. "Has Cable Ended the Golden Age of Presidential Television?" *American Political Science Review* 93 (March): 99-114.
- Berke, Richard L. 1998. "A Wild Ride, with No End Now in Sight." *New York Times*, January 30, A14.
- Brace, Paul, and Barbara Hinckley. 1993. "Presidential Activities from Truman through Reagan: Timing and Impact." *Journal of Politics* 55 (May): 382-398.
- Briller, Bert R. 1990. "Zooming in Closer on the News Audience." *Television Quarterly* 25 (Winter): 107-116.
- Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA). 1996. "Markle Presidential Election Watch: Report Card." [www.cmpa.com/politics/Elections/ewarchiv.htm](http://www.cmpa.com/politics/Elections/ewarchiv.htm).
- Cohen, Jeffrey, E. 1995. "Presidential Rhetoric and the Public Agenda." *American Journal of Political Science* 39 (February): 7-107.
- Davis, James Allen. 1996. "General Social Surveys, 1972-1999." [computer file]: Principal investigator, James A. Davis; director and co-principal investigator, Tom W. Smith. Chicago: National Opinion Research Center [producer]; Storrs, [Conn.]: Roper Public Opinion Research Center [distributor, 1996]. NORC edition.
- Edwards, George C. 2003. *On Deaf Ears*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Erikson, Robert S., and Kent L. Tedin. 1995. *American Public Opinion: Its Origins, Content, and Impact*. 5th edition. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Foote, Joe S. 1988. "Ratings Decline of Presidential Television." *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 32 (Spring): 225-230.
- Groeling, Tim, and Samuel Kernell. 1998. "Is Network News Coverage of the President Biased?" *Journal of Politics* 60 (November): 1064-1086.
- Hallin, Daniel C. 1994. *We Keep America on Top of the World: Television Journalism and the Public Sphere*. London and New York: TJ Press (Padstow) Ltd.
- IT Facts. 2004. [www.itfacts.biz/index.php?id=P1654](http://www.itfacts.biz/index.php?id=P1654) (original source: A. C. Nielsen).
- Kernell, Samuel. 1997. *Going Public*. 3rd edition. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press.
- King, Gary, Michael Tomz, and Jason Wittenberg. 2000. "Making the Most of Statistical Analyses: Improving Interpretation and Presentation." *American Journal of Political Science* 44 (April): 347-361.
- Lichty, Lawrence W., and Douglas Gomery. 1992. "More Is Less." In *The Future of News: Television, Newspapers, Wire Services, News Magazines*. Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press.

- Lowry, Brian. 1997. "Cable Stations Gather Strength." *Los Angeles Times*, September 2, F1.
- Media Monitor. 1991. Newsletter of the Center for Media and Public Affairs, Washington, D.C. Spring, 4.
- Miller, Joanne, and Jon Krosnick. 1996. "News Media Impact on the Ingredients of Presidential Evaluations: A Program of Research on the Priming Hypothesis." In *Presidential Persuasion and Attitudinal Change*, ed. Diana C. Mutz and Paul M. Sniderman. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Minow, Newton N., John Bartlow Martin, and Lee M. Mitchell. 1973. *Presidential Television*. New York: Basic Books.
- Moisy, Claude. 1997. "Myths of the Global Information Village." *Foreign Policy* 107 (Summer): 78-87.
- Mondak, Jeffrey J. 1993. "Source Cues and Policy Approval: The Cognitive Dynamics of Public Support for the Reagan Agenda." *American Journal of Political Science* 37 (February): 186-212.
- Neustadt, Richard E. 1960. *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents*. New York: John Wiley.
- Nielsen Media Research. 2006. *Nielsen Tunes in to Politics*. New York: Nielsen Media Research.
- Page, Benjamin, Robert Shapiro, and G. Dempsey. 1987. "What Moves Public Opinion." *American Political Science Review* 81 (September): 815-831.
- Patterson, Thomas. 1996. "Bad News, Period." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 29 (March): 17-20.
- Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. 2002. *Biennial Media Consumption Survey*. Princeton Survey Research Associates (April).
- . 2004. *Biennial Media Consumption Survey*. Princeton Survey Research Associates (April).
- Ragsdale, Lyn. 1984. "The Politics of Presidential Speechmaking, 1949-1980." *American Political Science Review* 78 (December): 971-984.
- Rosenstone, Steven J., Donald R. Kinder, Warren E. Miller, and the National Election Studies. 1997. *American National Election Study, 1996: Pre- and Post-Election Survey [Computer file]*, 2nd release. Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies[producer], 1997. Ann Arbor, Mich.: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 1997.
- Simon, Dennis M., and Charles W. Ostrom Jr. 1989. "The Impact of Televised Speeches and Foreign Travel on Presidential Approval." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 53 (Spring): 58-82.
- Snow, Shauna. 1998. "Morning Report: Arts and Entertainment Reports from the Times, National and International News Services and the Nation's Press." *Los Angeles Times*, January 22, F50.
- Stanley, Harold W., and Richard G. Niemi. 1998. *Vital Statistics on American Politics, 1997-1998*. Washington D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press.
- Webster, James G., and Lawrence W. Lichty. 1991. *Ratings Analysis: Theory and Practice*. New Jersey and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Zaller, John, R. 1992. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1997. "A Model of Communication Effects at the Outbreak of the Gulf War." In *Do the Media Govern? Politicians, Voters, and Reporters in America*. Ed. Shanto Iyengar and Richard Reeves. Thousand Oaks: Sage. 296-311