Presidential Leadership and Legislative Polarization[*]

Benjamin S. Noble[†]   Ian R. Turner[‡]

January 2026

Abstract

Presidents go public to raise issue salience, but doing so risks polarizing lawmakers. Legislative polarization can manifest in different ways—some harmful and some beneficial to the president. This creates potential risks and rewards for presidential leadership. We consider this trade-off in a model of policymaking where two pivotal legislators must agree to change policy and a president can go public to support a policy. Going public activates the parties' bases and ties the president's reelection to policy outcomes. We characterize how and when the polarizing effect of presidential leadership benefits the president. In doing so, we also establish the logic of "defensive appeals" where presidents go public to tie themselves to a popular partisan issue and enforce co-partisan loyalty, even while alienating out-partisans. We provide empirical implications that characterize how the president's beliefs about the popularity of an issue, ideological polarization, and preference uncertainty affect the incentives to go public.

Keywords: Presidency; Presidential Leadership; Legislative Polarization; Formal theory
Word count: 11,670

> [B]y increasing the salience of an issue, a president can encourage
> Congress to enact legislation closer to his policy position...
>
> <div align="right">Canes-Wrone 2006, p.28</div>

> [P]residential leadership tends to result in wider gaps between the two
> parties in Congress...
>
> <div align="right">Lee 2009, p. 76</div>

Rhetorical leadership is a "defining feature of the modern presidency" (Howell, Porter and Wood 2020, 140). Presidents use the bully pulpit to raise the salience of issues, increase public support for their agendas, and influence congressional behavior (Canes-Wrone 2006; Kernell 1997)—providing an "antidote for 'gridlock'" (Tulis 1987, 4). Although this strategy can succeed—Reagan's 1981 push for income tax reform, Bush's efforts on No Child Left Behind, and Biden's passage of the Bipartisan Infrastructure and Jobs Act—many question its efficacy (e.g., Edwards 2003; Eshbaugh-Soha 2016). In contemporary American politics, characterized by increasing partisanship and polarization, going public tends to push legislators into their respective partisan corners rather than bring them together (Lee 2009). Far from advantaging the president, going public can be counter-productive. President Biden suggested as much during 2023 negotiations over raising the debt ceiling when he remarked to the press that, "one of the things that I hear some of you guys saying is, 'Why doesn't Biden say what a good deal it is?' Why would Biden say what a good deal it is before the vote? You think that's going to help me get it passed? No" (quoted in Yglesias 2023, *New York Times*). Yet, if going public is sure to backfire, why do presidents continue to give high-profile policy speeches? Is it possible that going public can help the president achieve her political goals—even if it increases legislative polarization over the issues she champions? And how does this tension shape a president's decision to go public in the first place?

To address these questions, we develop a model of presidential leadership and legislative polarization in which two pivotal legislators vote over two policy options: a left and right alternative.

<div align="center">1</div>

Legislators in our model are partisans; they have *ex-ante* opposed preferences over policy, and their roll call votes are determined by two factors: a baseline level of ideological polarization and a common preference shock drawn before the vote. The enacted policy also depends on the location of the status quo. If the preference shock is large enough to overcome ideological polarization, a new policy is enacted. If the preference shock falls within the gridlock interval, the status quo is locked in.[1]

To this model of legislative bargaining, we introduce a strategic, partisan President who can choose to "go public" before the preference shock is revealed. If the President stays silent, then the roll call vote is determined by the aforementioned factors. If the President chooses to go public, she raises the salience of the issue and induces legislators to consider the popularity of that policy (as in Canes-Wrone 2006) *among their respective party's base*. We consider three potential types of party base pressure. First, a *Rally Around the President* effect (cf. Canes-Wrone 2006; Kernell 1997), where both the Left and Right base support the President's position and induce legislators to move in the President's direction. Second, a *Partisan Retreat* (cf. Lee 2009), where party bases hold opposing positions and legislative pivots move in opposite directions. Third, *Backfire*, where both parties' bases, and thus legislators, become less supportive of the President.

Additionally, going public changes the odds that the President wins reelection, an outcome that affects the payoffs of all players given the importance of partisan control of the White House for policymaking and electoral success (e.g., Lebo and O'Geen 2011; Lee 2016). If the President stays silent, she is reelected or replaced by an out-party challenger with equal probability given that she has not associated herself with the issue. If the President goes public, her reelection is tied to the policy outcome: if her preferred policy is in place after going public, she wins reelection; otherwise, she loses. This electoral feature also affects the legislative pivots' incentives to ensure the President succeeds or fails on policy.

Our model brings together previously isolated features of the going public literature and re-solves existing tensions. First, going public *always* expands the gridlock region (similar to Lee

---

[1]Specifically, we adapt the dynamic legislative bargaining model from Gehlbach (2021), based on Dziuda and Loeper (2018).

2009) *but* that can sometimes help the President achieve legislative success (similar to Canes-Wrone 2006). Key to this result is the fact that even under a Rally Around the President, when both lawmakers become more supportive of the President's position, the co-partisan becomes even more supportive than the out-partisan. This increases both *effective* polarization and presidential success.

Although this Rally effect is likely to occur for some issues (e.g., national security, infrastructure), growing legislative and public polarization can induce legislative polarization over presidential priorities (Lee 2009). In this case, the President's decision to go public depends on the location of the ex-ante status quo. When the ex-ante status quo is unfavorable (i.e., it is not aligned with the president's spatial preference), going public is unlikely to help her. Raising issue salience makes it harder to persuade the out-party pivot to vote for her preferred policy and decreases the likelihood she wins reelection. However, when the ex-ante status quo favors the President (i.e., it is aligned with her spatial preference), she need only ensure that her co-partisan pivot will not vote to change the policy. Here, going public can advantage the President. It ties her to a popular base issue, increases co-partisan commitment to protecting the policy, and increases the odds of reelection. This result, which we refer to as a "defensive appeal," is a second key contribution: the President goes public not to persuade the out-party pivot to support her policy, but, rather, to express support for a popular base issue for electoral gain. This result helps explain, for example, Bush's successful defense of, and further funding for, the 2007 Iraq troop surge.

Finally, when the President expects a Backfire, she is wary of going public—but interestingly, this option is not foreclosed if the status quo is favorable and the size of the base's backfire is sufficiently small. Our third contribution is to highlight that when ideological polarization is high, or the value of holding the White House is large, legislative co-partisans may be more likely to support the President when she goes public, even while bucking the party's base. This case helps us understand how Clinton was able to secure ratification of NAFTA in 1993 despite strong Democratic base opposition.

Our results contribute to the literature on presidential leadership and going public, outlining

conditions where rhetoric can promote both polarization and legislative success. We also highlight how polarization and policy shape presidents' decisions to go public. Our model nests the established views of going public (Canes-Wrone 2006) within a broader framework that accounts for a presidency facing an increasingly polarized Congress and public. Further, our results resolve a tension between polarization and presidential success, developing a new logic of defensive presidential appeals, focused on blunting co-partisan defection. Finally, our results speak to the importance of the status quo in shaping presidents' decisions to go public (cf. Lowande 2021). Broadly, our model helps disentangle the observationally-equivalent influence of ideological polarization (Poole and Rosenthal 2006; Sinclair 2006) and strategic polarization resulting from presidential leadership (Lee 2009, 2016), and provides implications for future empirical work on the rhetorical presidency.

Related Literature.   Presidents are motivated by electoral, policy, and legacy goals (Light 1999). Yet presidents have no formal agenda-setting or legislative power. They must persuade others to help them advance their goals (Neustadt 1990). To achieve these goals, presidents have increasingly adopted a strategy of "going public," promoting their objectives to Americans in an effort to raise issue salience, change public opinion, and pressure lawmakers to act (Canes-Wrone 2006; Edwards 2003; Kernell 1997). However, frequent divided government and increasing polarization have arguably limited the efficacy of this strategy (Cameron 2002). Presidential efforts to lead may well be met by greater support from co-partisans and increased resistance from the out-party (Lee 2009). Presidents, then, face a trade-off between raising issue salience to build support versus generating opposition to their proposals.

Our model builds on a formal-theoretical literature that considers presidential policymaking in the shadow of separation-of-powers and interbranch oversight (Prato and Turner 2023; Turner 2020). In this vein, our model is most similar to the pathbreaking work of Canes-Wrone (2006), in which a president can choose to raise the salience of an issue and induce a unitary legislator to adopt a representative voter's ideal point. In equilibrium, the President only goes public when the voter's ideal point is closer to their own than the legislator or the status quo. However, the

lack of party labels in this model leaves open the question of *who* the representative legislator and voter are. Under increasing polarization, we would expect an out-party legislative pivot to be less sensitive to the President's appeals, and an out-party voter to have preferences that diverge from the President. Although we consider similar dynamics, our innovation is to inject partisanship into the model by adding partisan lawmakers and associated party bases with (possibly) divergent issue preferences. These modeling choices allow us to analyze cases where going public helps the President as well as those in which going public causes partisans to retreat to their partisan corners (as in Lee 2009). By nesting the spirit of the Canes-Wrone (2006) model within a framework of party competition, we can make predictions about when the President goes public as we vary elite and mass polarization as well as the relevant veto pivot.

Our model of legislative policymaking also builds on the pivotal politics framework (Krehbiel 1998) by considering whether policy changes as a function of the preferences of two veto pivots. In particular, we begin with a static, simplified legislative bargaining framework from Dziuda and Loeper (2018), in which legislative voting is a function of unidimensional preferences and a stochastic shock. Our contribution is less focused on legislative polarization per se, and instead focused on the addition of a strategic executive who can raise the salience of an issue before the preference shock is revealed, which further perturbs legislative preferences. This setup is related to a growing formal literature on presidential unilateral policymaking (e.g., Foster 2022; Howell 2003; Noble 2023*a*), which highlights presidents' first- and second-mover advantages. Although presidential power is weaker in our model than in models of unilateral action, the ability to raise issue salience grants the President a first-mover advantage. Like unilateral action, the use of rhetoric is not without risk.

Finally, our model helps disentangle the effects of ideological (Poole and Rosenthal 2006) and strategic polarization (Lee 2009)—two forces which are difficult to observe in practice. In the context of our model, we are able to independently manipulate these two components that drive roll call voting and generate comparative statics about how they shape presidents' decisions to go public. In our model, strategic polarization resulting from executive leadership always expands the

gridlock region—even if lawmakers are completely non-polarized and both party bases support the President's position. This outcome is driven by the degree to which party bases differentially support the president as well as legislators' electoral incentives to support or oppose the president. Further, our model highlights the importance of the status quo in going public (cf. Canes-Wrone 2006; Lowande 2021), allowing us to introduce the idea of defensive appeals. That is, a president going public to raise the salience of an *ex-ante* favorable status quo to take a salient position for electoral gain and prevent defection among co-partisan lawmakers. We encourage empirical scholars to consider the status quo when refining theories of presidential leadership.

A Model of Going Public

Primitives and sequence of play.   We study a policymaking game with three strategic players—an incumbent President P, a left legislative pivot L, and a right legislative pivot R—and a non-strategic challenger who may replace the President.[2] The game tracks a single policy outcome, $x \in \{-1, 1\}$, where the left legislator has an ex-ante preference for $x = -1$ and the right legislator has an ex-ante preference for $x = 1$.[3] We assume that the incumbent President always prefers $x = -1$ and is therefore aligned with the left legislator. The game begins with an ex-ante status quo policy, which is either *favorable* to the President $x^{sq} = -1$ or unfavorable $x^{sq} = 1$. The status quo is only changed if both parties vote for a new policy.

At the beginning of the game, the President chooses to go public $s = 1$ or stay silent $s = 0$.[4] By going public, the President politicizes the agenda and brings public attention to the policy-making process. This extra attention raises the salience of the issue and forces lawmakers to consider the issue's popularity (Canes-Wrone 2006)—specifically among their party's base. The degree

---

[2]These two lawmakers "represent" their parties in that they are the left and right pivots necessary for policy change. However, they can represent myriad pivots (e.g., filibuster, veto, etc), one on the left and one on the right, depending on context. The key is that some legislators are pivotal.

[3]The discrete policy space simplifies analysis and exposition, but is not crucial for the core qualitative results. The discrete left and right policies are a reduced form way to capture expectations over possible left and right policies. Under a more complicated representation with ranges of feasible policies, the trade-off between policy and electoral payoffs remains for the President, which is a core driver of the results.

[4]We assume the President has a monopoly over going public. Although lawmakers go public, the President is a uniquely salient agenda-setter (Beckmann 2010; Edwards 2003). We situate the President as a first mover to focus on the effects of rhetorical leadership rather than incentives to credit-claim post-hoc.

of support or opposition for the President's position among a party's base puts pressure on the respective lawmaker to support or oppose the President. The value of $\beta_i \in \{\underline{\beta}_i, \overline{\beta}_i\}$ for $i \in \{L, R\}$ where $\underline{\beta}_i < 0$ and $\overline{\beta}_i > 0$ represents the pressure from the party's base to support ($\beta > 0$) or oppose ($\beta < 0$) the President.

Further, $\overline{\beta}_i$ and $\underline{\beta}_i$ are common knowledge, but the President does not know the realizations of β_L and β_R when she makes her decision to go public. She learns whether each party's base ultimately supports the proposal only after going public. The only restriction we make is that $\beta_L > \beta_R$ so that L is more supportive after the President goes public than R.[5,6] Note that both β_L and β_R could be negative, in which case the left base's reaction to the President is "less negative" than the right base. When the President goes public there are three possible reactions from the party bases that influence their respective legislator's incentives:

1. *Rally Around the President*: Both legislators become more supportive of the President's preferred policy, but the left legislator becomes even more supportive than the right legislator ($\beta_L > \beta_R > 0$).

2. *Partisan Retreat*: The left legislator becomes more supportive of the President and the right legislator becomes more opposed to the President ($\beta_L > 0 > \beta_R$).

3. *Backfire*: Both legislators become less supportive of the President, but the right legislator becomes even more opposed than the left ($0 > \beta_L > \beta_R$).

Table 1 summarizes the probability distributions over these possibilities: scenario (1), *Rally Around the President*, is realized with probability p; scenario (2), *Partisan Retreat*, is realized with probability q; and scenario (3), *Backfire*, is realized with probability $1 - p - q$.

Following the President's choice to go public, the legislative process begins. Prior to simultaneously voting over policy, a common preference shock θ is drawn from a Uniform distribution

---

[5]We could allow $\beta_R > \beta_L$, however, we find this assumption unrealistic and omit it to focus on what we see as the core tradeoffs presidents face when going public.

[6]We use the terminology of "support" to represent the fact that β_i dictates the threshold needed to vote in favor of or against the president's preferred policy. When $\beta_i > 0$ the resulting threshold makes it less likely that legislator i will vote against the president and when $\beta_i < 0$ the resulting threshold makes it more likely that legislator i will vote against the president. We interpret these dynamics as capturing legislator i's support for the president's policy interests.

	$\beta_R > 0$	$\beta_R < 0$
	Rally Around the President	**Partisan Retreat**
$\beta_L > 0$	$\mathbb{P}\{\beta_L > 0, \beta_R > 0\} = p$	$\mathbb{P}\{\beta_L > 0, \beta_R < 0\} = q$
	Both party bases more supportive	*Left party base more supportive*
	Left base more than Right base	*Right base less supportive*
	Not possible	**Backfire**
$\beta_L < 0$	$\mathbb{P}\{\beta_L < 0, \beta_R > 0\} = 0$	$\mathbb{P}\{\beta_L < 0, \beta_R < 0\} = 1 - p - q$
	$(\beta_L > \beta_R)$	*Both party bases less supportive*
		Right base less than Left base

Table 1: Probability Distribution over Party Base Reactions to the President Going Public

over $[-\psi, \psi]$, $\psi > 0$, that may lead the legislators to cooperate on policy. We think about this preference shock as stemming from the informational environment revealed after politicians begin working on a policy area. The baseline level of legislative polarization, which we refer to as *sincere polarization*, depends on a common knowledge parameter $z > 0$. As z increases so does sincere legislative polarization, increasing the probability of gridlock and making it more difficult, all else equal, for preference shocks to be realized that lead the legislators to vote for the same policy. In short, more ideologically polarized politicians may be less responsive to new information. We assume that $\psi > z$ to ensure there is always positive probability that θ could be drawn such that both legislators agree on policy.[7] In short, the legislative process begins by θ being realized and observed by all players. The legislators then simultaneously vote for $x = -1$ or $x = 1$, denoted by $v_i \in \{-1, 1\}$, $i \in \{L, R\}$. Changing the status quo requires that both legislators vote for the new policy (i.e., agreement is required).[8]

Once x is chosen, an election takes place. If the President does not go public then she wins the election with probability $1/2$. If instead she chose to go public, then she wins the election if

---

[7]If $z < \psi$, no preference shock could lead the legislators to agree on policy, and the President would have no incentive to go public. While such issues exist, we set these aside to focus on cases where going public is at least a possibility. We could alternatively allow for asymmetric shocks or asymmetric polarization, which would then lead to one legislator being unaffected by the shock while the other could be affected by the shock. This would be straightforward to incorporate into the analysis, but we focus on this symmetric case because it allows for clear analysis of how the President's incentives to go public are shaped by the political environment

[8]Given the strength of modern party voting, do presidents need the out-party pivot? Here, this assumption either reflects (i) the idea that presidents rarely have a filibuster-proof majority, and for non-reconciliation policies, need some out-party support, or (ii) that the right pivot can represent the cross-pressured, right-most, same-party legislator needed to pass a left reconciliation bill. However, if only the left pivot mattered (e.g., there is only one legislator), the dynamics of model would change such that the president would be more likely to go public, especially when the status quo is unfavorable.

and only if the policy outcome aligns with her interests, i.e., $x = -1$. Otherwise, if $x = 1$ after $s = 1$, the Challenger takes office. In effect, we are assuming that presidents are rewarded for fulfilling their promises and punished for failing to uphold them; however, if they do not take a position, then voters have a harder time attributing responsibility or blame for policy in that issue area. This assumption follows a large empirical literature which argues, either implicitly or explicitly, that legislative success benefits the President and their party (e.g., Bond and Fleisher 1990; Canes-Wrone 2006; Cohen 2013; Lebo and O'Geen 2011; Lee 2016)[9] and that politicians are held accountable for the positions they take (Mansbridge 2003; Sulkin 2011).[10] The President and the legislators also care about who holds the White House in the future, and lawmakers have incentives to work for, or against, the President depending on ideological and partisan alignment (Lee 2009). To capture this dynamic, we add a common parameter $\delta > 0$ for each strategic player that depends on who wins the election. The President and the left party each receive δ only if the President wins reelection. In contrast, the right party receives δ only if the challenger wins reelection. This parameter captures, for the President, the benefits of winning reelection and, for the legislators, the benefits of having a co-partisan president in office.[11] After the election, the game ends and payoffs are realized.

---

[9]We acknowledge that there are cases in which policy success harms incumbents' electoral prospects through e.g., thermostatic backlash (Grossmann and Wlezien 2024). We could adapt the model to consider policy-motivated presidents who are electorally penalized for changing the status quo, but our intent is to resolve a puzzle in the literature where success is thought to benefit the President.

[10]This $1/2$ probability is not key to our results. In the Appendix, we consider two extensions in which we relax this assumption and consider two cases: one in which a president's re-election probability when staying silent varies across the $(0, 1)$ interval and one where the president's election is determined by the policy outcome regardless of whether she goes public. We could also allow for asymmetry in the probability that the President is reelected following retention of the status quo or changing the status quo: e.g., the probability she is reelected is higher when she gets the status quo changed from 1 to -1 versus when the status quo is already -1. This would alter the strength of the incentives discussed below, but would not alter the core insights. The key is that the probability of reelection is higher than the baseline from staying silent when the President achieves legislative policy success and lower than that baseline when she goes public but her least-preferred policy is implemented.

[11]This payoff is a reduced-form way to represent a second-period of policymaking where the parties are advantaged in policymaking with a co-partisan president and where the losses incurred by the other side are normalized to zero.

Payoffs. The parties payoffs are given by the following functions:

$$u_L(\theta_t, z) = x(\theta - z - s\beta_L) + \mathbb{I}_I \delta,$$

$$u_R(\theta_t, z) = x(\theta + z - s\beta_R) + \mathbb{I}_C \delta,$$

where $\mathbb{I}_j$ is an indicator function that takes the value of one when politician $j \in \{I, C\}$ wins the election and zero otherwise. These payoff functions reflect the fact that L is ex-ante aligned with policy $x = -1$ and R with policy $x = 1$, and both want their co-partisan president to win the election. Further, the misalignment between parties is increasing in sincere polarization, z. When the President goes public, the party's base is activated such that β is salient to legislators' induced preferences. The Incumbent president's utility is given by:

$$u_I(s_t, x_t) = -x - cs + \mathbb{I}_I \delta,$$

where $\mathbb{I}_I$ is defined as above. The Incumbent pays a cost, $c > 0$, of going public that represents the opportunity costs of focusing on that policy issue at the expense of alternative uses of time and resources.

Equilibrium. We study pure strategy subgame perfect equilibrium (SPE). A strategy for the Incumbent includes the choice to go public and strategies for the legislative parties specifying how they will vote given s, θ, and β_j, $j \in \{L, R\}$, which are all common knowledge at the time of voting. SPE requires that all players are best responding at each subgame given other players' strategies.

Model Discussion

Our model incorporates several stylized facts from literature on legislative policymaking and going public. We begin with a pivotal politics setup (Dziuda and Loeper 2018; Krehbiel 1998) in which lawmakers have polarized preferences, z. However, lawmakers can be induced to vote in the same direction when information is revealed during the policymaking process (e.g., from hearings: Ban, Park and You 2023). We capture the potential for information to shape preferences through ψ,

which bounds the size of the informational preference shock, θ. We might expect a larger ψ for novel areas, like AI regulation, versus long-standing issues, like immigration. If the President stays silent, these two factors determine how lawmakers vote.

If the President goes public, she raises the salience of issues, which perturbs lawmakers preferences, indirectly through public opinion and directly through collective electoral incentives to support the President. Here, we reconcile arguments in Canes-Wrone (2006) and Lee (2009) to incorporate two party bases (represented by β_i), whose policy preferences are independent. Their support for the President's position may align with, or diverge from, their legislative parties, as described in Table 1. Legislative parties also value having a co-partisan in the White House. In our model, this incentive is represented through δ, a common payoff the President and the parties gain when their side wins the policy debate, and thus, reelection. Ultimately, we nest several conceptual models of presidential leadership within a unified framework, allowing us to derive a broad set of implications about when presidents are likely to go public.

Equilibrium Analysis

We begin by specifying the gridlock regions when the President stays silent and when the President goes public. We then turn to the question of when the President goes public. Finally, we investigate differences in the President's strategy depending on the location of the status quo and discuss some of the model's empirical implications.

Legislative Gridlock

In this section we characterize legislative gridlock, the ex-post interval of the parameter space between the two pivots where policy change is not possible. This interval depends on whether or not the President has gone public. When the status quo is favorable to the left party, $x^{sq} = -1$, policy change occurs if and only if it benefits the left pivot (i.e., the left pivot would vote for $x = 1$). In contrast, when the status quo is favorable to the right party, $x^{sq} = 1$, policy change occurs if and only if the right pivot would vote for $x = -1$. Thus, we can compute the general gridlock region by characterizing when the left pivot would vote for $x = 1$ and the right pivot would vote for $x = -1$.

In general, the left pivot votes for $x = 1$ if and only if:

$$v_L^*(s) = 1 \iff \begin{cases} \theta > z & \text{when } s = 0, \\ \theta > z + \beta_L + \frac{\delta}{2} & \text{when } s = 1. \end{cases} \tag{1}$$

Analogously, the right pivot votes for $x = -1$ if and only if:

$$v_R^*(s) = -1 \iff \begin{cases} \theta < -z & \text{when } s = 0, \\ \theta < -z + \beta_R - \frac{\delta}{2} & \text{when } s = 1. \end{cases} \tag{2}$$

Combining Equations (1) and (2) yields the gridlock regions when the President stays silent and when she goes public. Proposition 1 characterizes these regions and Figure 1 provides a graphical example.

Proposition 1. *In equilibrium, the gridlock region is $(-z, z)$ when the President stays silent and $\left(-z + \beta_R - \frac{\delta}{2}, z + \beta_L + \frac{\delta}{2}\right)$ when the President goes public.*

There are two main effects that impact legislators' induced preferences. First, when the President goes public the salience of the policy issue increases and the legislators are pressured by their bases. Formally, this is captured by the activation of β_L and β_R. When $\beta_j > 0$, it moves legislator j's threshold to vote for $x = -1$ to the right, indicating that the legislator has become more amenable to the President's preferred policy. If instead $\beta_j < 0$, legislator j's threshold moves to the left and the legislator is now more strongly opposed to the President's preferred policy. Second, by tying her electoral fortunes to the outcome of the legislative process, the lawmakers now consider how much they value having a co-partisan President in office (i.e., δ is now relevant). This strengthens (weakens) the incentive for the left (right) legislator to vote for $x = -1$, all else equal. Thus, when the President goes public, she affects the legislators' preferences through a mobilized party base (β) and by tying her election to the policy outcome (δ).

Figure 1 illustrates some key legislative dynamics (assuming $z = 1$). First, consider the case when the president stays silent. The gridlock region is $(-z, z)$. For any shock θ in that interval,

12

President Stays Silent:

$$-3 \qquad -2 \qquad -1 \qquad 0 \qquad 1 \qquad 2 \qquad 3$$

Rallying Around the President:

$$-3 \qquad -2 \qquad -1 \qquad 0 \qquad 1 \qquad 2 \qquad 3$$

Partisan Retreat:

$$-3 \qquad -2 \qquad -1 \qquad 0 \qquad 1 \qquad 2 \qquad 3$$

Backfire:

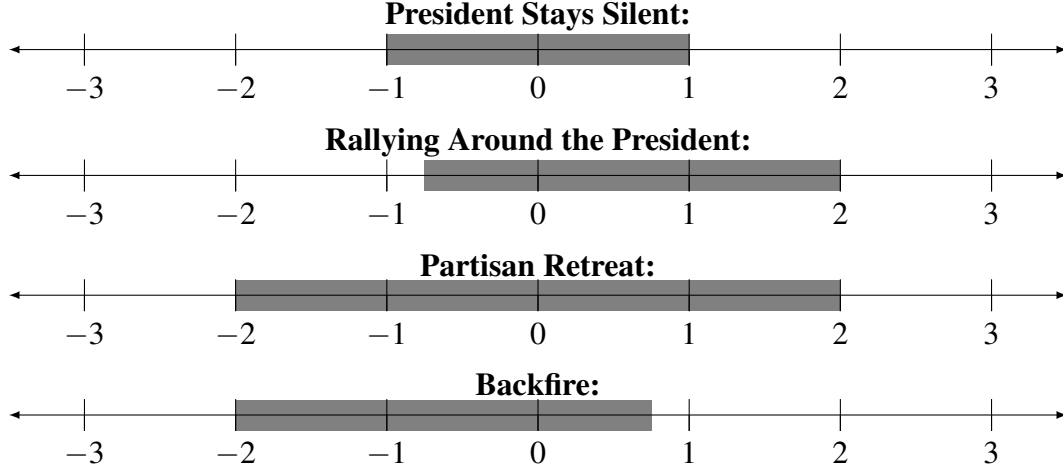$$-3 \qquad -2 \qquad -1 \qquad 0 \qquad 1 \qquad 2 \qquad 3$$

Figure 1: Gridlock Regions in Different Political Environments

Note: If θ is realized in the gray shaded region then there is gridlock. If θ is realized to the left (right) of the region both parties vote for $x = -1$ ($x = 1$). Rallying Around the President implies that $\beta_L = \bar{\beta}_L > 0$ and $\beta_R = \bar{\beta}_R > 0$. Partisan Retreat implies that $\beta_L = \bar{\beta}_L > 0$ and $\beta_R = \underline{\beta}_R < 0$. Backfire implies that $\beta_L = \underline{\beta}_L < 0$ and $\beta_R = \underline{\beta}_R < 0$. In this figure $z = 1$, $\bar{\beta}_L = 0.75$, $\underline{\beta}_L = -0.5$; $\bar{\beta}_R = 0.5$, $\underline{\beta}_R = -0.75$, $\delta = 0.5$.

policy does not change. For any $\theta < -1$, both legislators vote for $x = -1$ and for any $\theta > 1$, both legislators vote for $x = 1$. Relative to sincere polarization, Rallying Around the President privileges the President in that it makes it more likely that both legislators will vote for $x = -1$ (i.e., it makes it more likely that θ is realized such that both legislators benefit from $x = -1$). In this example, and unlike when the president stays silent, the right pivot would now vote for $x = -1$ for some set of $\theta > -1$, represented by the rightward shift of the gridlock interval. The left pivot is also more unwilling to vote for $x = 1$, not doing so unless $\theta > 2$. Under Partisan Retreat, when going public pushes the legislators to their partisan corners, the President benefits when the status quo is already in her favor since a larger shock ($\theta > 2$) is required to induce the left pivot to vote for $x = 1$. However, it harms the President's chances at a policy win when the status quo is unfavorable by requiring a shock of $\theta < -2$ for the right pivot to choose $x = -1$. Backfire cuts against the President's interests in that it makes it less likely that either legislator will vote for $x = -1$.

One key feature highlighted by Proposition 1 is that going public *widens* the overall gridlock region—even when bases rally around the President. For the co-partisan pivot, both their party

base ($\bar{\beta}_L$) and the electoral incentives (δ) push in the same direction, raising the threshold at which they would vote against the president. For the out-partisan, their party base induces them to become more supportive of the president (although less so than the left party's base as $\bar{\beta}_L > \bar{\beta}_R$), but the electoral incentives cut against supporting the president. Therefore, the out-partisan is cross-pressured and will not move as far in the same direction as the co-partisan. The result is that the gridlock region expands, and that expansion can be asymmetric. Analogously, when going public backfires, out-partisans move more strongly against the President than do co-partisans. This model feature helps resolve a tension in the literature on going public: raising issue salience can both increase the President's legislative success (Canes-Wrone 2006) while at the same time, effectively polarizing lawmakers (Lee 2009). The core insight is that "effective polarization" is not synonymous with partisan retreat. Gridlock can expand even when legislators move in the same direction, so long as that movement is asymmetric.

Going Public

Whether the President goes public depends on her beliefs about which political environment will result from raising the salience of the issue as well as the favorability of the status quo, which defines the relevant veto player. If the status quo is favorable to the President, then the left pivot is the relevant veto player as policy change requires that the left pivot benefit from voting for $x = 1$, which requires a sufficiently large, positive preference shock. When the status quo is unfavorable, the right pivot is the relevant veto by similar logic. Accordingly, we analyze going public for a favorable and unfavorable status quo.

The President's expected utility from going public with an unfavorable versus favorable status quo is given by:[12]

---

[12]The numbered equations follow from $\theta \sim U[-\psi, \psi]$.

$$EU_P(s=1|x^{sq}=1) = \underbrace{p\left(\frac{\delta}{2} - \frac{(2+\delta)(2z-2\overline{\beta}_R+\delta)}{4\psi}\right)}_{EU_P(\text{Rallying Around the President})} + \underbrace{(1-p)\left(\frac{\delta}{2} - \frac{(2+\delta)(2z-2\underline{\beta}_R+\delta)}{4\psi}\right)}_{EU_P(\text{Partisan Retreat+Backfire})} - c, \tag{3}$$

$$EU_P(s=1|x^{sq}=-1) = \underbrace{(p+q)\left(\frac{(2+\delta)(2(z+\overline{\beta}_L)+\delta)+2\delta\psi}{4\psi}\right)}_{EU_P(\text{Rallying Around the President+Partisan Retreat})} + \underbrace{(1-p-q)\left(\frac{(2+\delta)(2(z+\underline{\beta}_L)+\delta)+2\delta\psi}{4\psi}\right)}_{EU_P(\text{Backfire})} - c.$$

$$\tag{4}$$

When the status quo is unfavorable and the President desires policy change—the political environment in which going public is typically thought to be beneficial—her incentives to go public depend on whether or not doing so will increase the likelihood that the right legislator will support $x=-1$. With probability p, a Rally Around the President occurs. However, the right legislator only becomes more supportive of the President's preferred policy if $\delta < 2\overline{\beta}_R$. Otherwise, the right legislator's incentive to deny the President electoral victory dominates pressure from the party base. With probability $1-p$, either Partisan Retreat or Backfire occurs, and the right pivot becomes less supportive of the president's policy.

When instead the status quo is favorable, the President's incentives to go public are dictated by the desire to defend the current policy. As long as the left pivot does not benefit from voting for $x=1$, the final policy will remain $x=-1$. Thus, as long as $\theta \leq z+\beta_L+\frac{\delta}{2}$ after the President goes public she knows that $x=-1$ will remain final policy. With probability $p+q$ going public leads to a more demanding threshold for the left pivot to vote for change since $\overline{\beta}_L > 0$ and the lawmaker prefers to have the incumbent win reelection (δ). With probability $1-p-q$ the threshold for policy change is less demanding so long as $\delta < -2\underline{\beta}_L$; otherwise, the threshold is more demanding. The logic here is similar to that for the right pivot under a Rally. Even under a Backfire, if $\delta > -2\underline{\beta}_L$, the left pivot's incentive to protect the President electorally dominates pressure from the party base to oppose her policy.

The President's reservation utility for staying silent, again for both an unfavorable and favorable

15

status quo, are given by:

$$EU_P(s=0|x^{sq}=1) = \frac{\delta}{2} - \frac{z}{\psi}, \qquad (5)$$

$$EU_P(s=0|x^{sq}=-1) = \frac{\delta}{2} + \frac{z}{\psi}. \qquad (6)$$

In both cases the President's expected payoff for staying silent is increasing in δ. However, when it comes to sincere legislative polarization z and preference uncertainty ψ the President's incentives for staying silent differ across status quos. When the status quo is unfavorable, the President's expected utility for staying silent is decreasing in z and increasing in ψ. That is, as sincere polarization increases, it is less likely policy change will occur, whereas more uncertainty about the size of the preference shock makes it more likely. When the status quo is favorable, these dynamics are reversed—although the logic is same, the implications for the President are opposite given that she wants to defend, rather than change, policy.

In either case—an unfavorable or favorable status quo—the President goes public if and only if $EU_P(s=1|x^{sq}) \geq EU_P(s=0|x^{sq})$. For an unfavorable status quo this condition is satisfied when:

$$c \leq \bar{c}(1) := \frac{2p(\bar{\beta}_R - \underline{\beta}_R)(2+\delta) + 2\underline{\beta}_R(2+\delta) - \delta(2+2z+\delta)}{4\psi}. \qquad (7)$$

If instead the status quo is favorable the President goes public if and only if:

$$c \leq \bar{c}(-1) := \frac{4\left((p+q)(\bar{\beta}_L - \underline{\beta}_L) + \underline{\beta}_L\right) + 2\delta\left(1+z+(p+q)(\bar{\beta}_L - \underline{\beta}_L) + \underline{\beta}_L\right) + \delta^2}{4\psi}. \qquad (8)$$

Comparing the conditions in Inequalities (7) and (8) leads directly to Proposition 2, which characterizes the President's decision to go public conditional on the status quo.[13]

Proposition 2. *In equilibrium, the President is always more likely to go public when the status quo is favorable (i.e., $\bar{c}(-1) > \bar{c}(1)$), which implies that:*

---

[13]When we say the President is more or less likely to go public in equilibrium, we mean in the sense of set inclusion: the President is more (less) likely to go public if she will go public for a wider (narrower) range of costs.
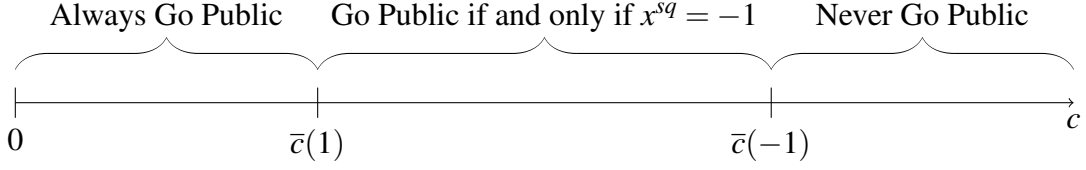
Figure 2: When the President Goes Public Conditional on Opportunity Costs

- *If $c \leq \bar{c}(1)$ then the President always goes public.*

- *If $c \in (\bar{c}(1), \bar{c}(-1)]$ then the President goes public only when the status quo is favorable.*

- *If $c > \bar{c}(-1)$ then the President never goes public.*

In equilibrium, the President takes into account the gridlock regions from Proposition 1 and how going public will potentially affect her chances at getting her preferred policy. This depends on the current status quo, baseline legislative polarization, and the probabilities of inducing a rally effect (p), partisan retreat (q), or backlash ($1 - p - q$). Ultimately, the opportunity costs of going public must be low enough relative to these factors in order for the President to find going public beneficial. In particular, the existence of $c \in (\bar{c}(1), \bar{c}(-1)]$ implies that the President's incentives to go public are *stronger* when the status quo is favorable. This result cuts against the strongest version of the going public theory: that presidential appeals are primarily targeted toward persuading out-partisans and changing policy. If this theory were supported, we would expect presidents to go public more often when the status quo was unfavorable. Yet we find the opposite, a result more consistent with theories of party branding and legislative cartels (Cox and McCubbins 1993) in which the President can induce compliance among co-partisans by setting the agenda. Here, we would expect presidents to go public more often when the status quo is favorable, thereby taking a salient position defending a popular partisan issue and limiting defection among fellow partisans who share a collective interest in maintaining party unity. We discuss this strategy more fully, and provide real-world examples, below.

17

Dynamics of Going Public

We now turn to discussion of the key qualitative implications that follow from our analysis. First, we discuss how the President's beliefs about the legislative reaction affect her propensity to go public. We discuss both general predictions with respect to the President's beliefs and discuss each political environment—Rallying Around the President, Partisan Retreat, Backlash—with respect to previous theories of going public as well as their empirical implications. Second, we illustrate how sincere legislative polarization affects the President's incentives to go public. Finally, we discuss the relationship between preference uncertainty and going public.[14]

President's Beliefs and Going Public

Presidents rarely know the exact implications of their public appeals. Although presidents might have expectations about how the public, and thus lawmakers, will respond to their proposals, they cannot know for sure. Proposition 3 provides empirical predictions for how the President's incentives to go public respond to her beliefs about what sort of political environment her appeal will produce. After discussing Proposition 3, we focus on each political environment individually to isolate the key considerations and empirical implications.

Proposition 3. *All else equal:*

- *When the status quo is unfavorable, the President is (weakly) more likely to go public when the probability of a Rally Around the President effect (p) increases, and (weakly) less likely to go public if increases in the probability of Partisan Retreat (q) or Backlash ($1 - p - q$) are facilitated by decreases in p.*

- *When the status quo is favorable, the President is (weakly) more likely to go public when the probability of either a Rally Around the President effect (p) or Partisan Retreat (q) increases, and (weakly) less likely to go public if the probability of Backlash ($1 - p - q$) increases.*

---

[14]The "weakly" qualifier in the results to follow refers to the scenarios in which $\bar{c}(1)$ and/or $\bar{c}(-1)$ are negative. In those settings the comparative statics have no effect on presidential behavior. Thus, the directional predictions refer to the settings where one or both cost thresholds are strictly positive so that presidential behavior is affected by changes in the parameter of interest.

Proposition 3 predicts that the more confident the President can be that her public appeals will lead both legislators to rally around her, the more likely it is that she will go public. This prediction holds for both status quo settings—unfavorable and favorable. Figure 3 provides an illustrative example of how the opportunity cost thresholds, $\bar{c}(1)$ and $\bar{c}(-1)$, respond to changes in p. Although this result is not surprising, we highlight it as evidence of the external validity of our model. Given that we capture this core implication from the existing literature, we have more confidence in our other predictions when we consider alternative political environments where at least one side is unlikely to support the President when she goes public.

As the probability increases that going public causes partisan retreat or backlash, the status quo is key to the President's behavior. When the status quo is unfavorable, increases in q (Partisan Retreat) or $1 - p - q$ (Backlash) may have no effect on the President's behavior. However, if either scenario is due to a decrease in p (Rallying Around the President), then Proposition 3 predicts that the President will be less likely to go public. That is, if the policy area is one where the President can be relatively sure that either Partisan Retreat or Backlash will occur at the expense of any potential Rally effect then she will be less likely to use her bully pulpit. On the other hand, when the status quo is favorable an increase in the probability going public causes Partisan Retreat makes the President more likely to go public, analogous to an increase in p. This also implies that any time the probability of Backlash $(1 - p - q)$ increases the President is less likely to go public since either p or q (or both) must have decreased. These dynamics further highlight how the status quo affects presidential incentives: when the status quo is favorable, the President is more likely to go public when she is likely to cause either a rally effect or partisan retreat; when the status quo is unfavorable, any reduction in the likelihood of a rally effect is sufficient to weaken the President's incentives to make public appeals.

Proposition 3 provides a general interpretation of how going public is affected by the President's beliefs about the resulting political environment. However, to further isolate the empirical implications of our model, we now focus on the limiting cases—when the President knows for sure that her public appeals will lead to a Rally effect $(p = 1)$, Partisan Retreat $(q = 1)$, or Backlash
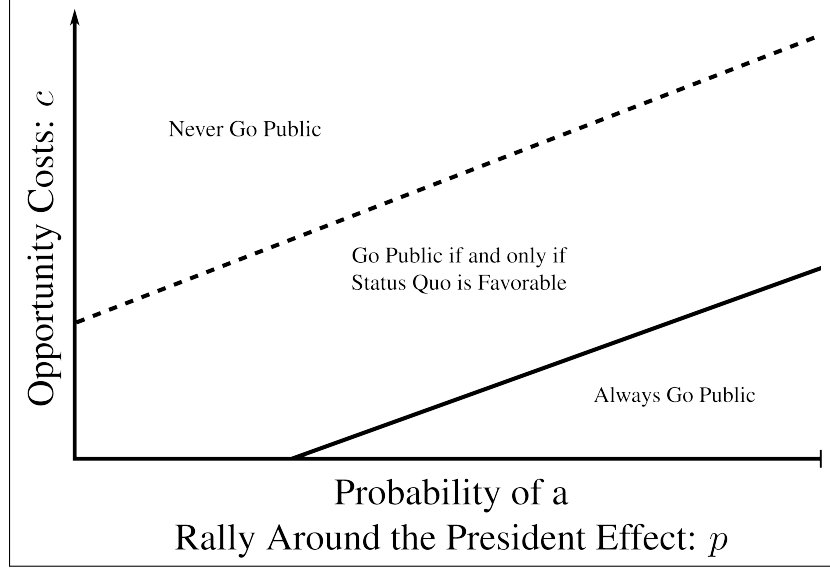
19

Figure 3: Example of When the President Goes Public as a Function of the Probability of a Rally Around the President Effect

Note: The solid line is $\bar{c}(1)$ and the dashed line is $\bar{c}(-1)$. Parameters are fixed so that $q = 1/3$; $\underline{\beta}_R = -1/2$; $\overline{\beta}_R = 3$; $\underline{\beta}_L = -1/4$; $\overline{\beta}_L = 3.5$; $\delta = 1/4$; $z = 1/2$; $\psi = 5$, and p increases left-to-right from 0 to $2/3$ on the x-axis (since $p + q \le 1$).

$(p = q = 0)$. To do so, we compute cost thresholds for going public under each scenario: $\bar{c}^p(x^{sq})$ for Rallying Around the President, $\bar{c}^q(x^{sq})$ for Partisan Retreat, and $\bar{c}^b(x^{sq})$ for Backlash.[15]

Rallying Around the President

First, we consider the case of a rally. This scenario is most similar to Canes-Wrone (2006), in which the President will go public if and only if the representative voter's ideal point is closer to the President than that of the median lawmaker and/or the status quo. Although our model incorporates partisan legislators and partisan voters, we recover a similar result. When the status quo is unfavorable, the cost threshold is increasing (i.e., easier to satisfy) in $\overline{\beta}_R$. As the out-party base's ideal point approaches the President's, the President is more willing to go public given its effect on the out-party pivot's preference. The President's incentive to go public when the status quo is favorable is also increasing in $\overline{\beta}_L$. This difference, $\bar{c}^p(-1) - \bar{c}^p(1)$ is also decreasing in $\overline{\beta}_R$; the status quo becomes less important to the President's decision to go public as the out-party base becomes more supportive. However, $\bar{c}^p(1)$ is *not* strictly positive, meaning the President does not

---

[15]We use b for $1 - p - q$.

always go public in this beneficial scenario. This result is driven, in part, by δ, suggesting that if the out-party pivot highly values winning the White House, even strong issue popularity among the out-party base may not induce the out-party pivot to support the President for fear of giving her "a win." Empirically, the president should be more likely to go public, irrespective of the status quo, the more support a given issue receives among the public.

Illustration: Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (2021). In running for president in 2020, President Biden promised to invest in America's infrastructure—a rare issue with bipartisan public support. A 2019 Pew poll found that a majority of both parties, 57% of Republicans and 64% of Democrats, supported increasing infrastructure spending. This seven-point partisan gap was the smallest of any of the 13 issues Pew polled (with the exception of veterans benefits). Given this reservoir of public support, President Trump had also tried to advance an infrastructure bill during his first term. However, his efforts failed given disagreement between the congressional parties about the size, scope, and design of the legislation. Taken together, the underlying conditions mirror those of a potential rally in our model. Both party bases supported the presidents' positions ($\beta_R = \overline{\beta}_R$ and $\beta_L = \overline{\beta}_L$), but legislators were not inclined to agree on the solution without further intervention (i.e., $z > 0$).

President Biden took advantage of this situation on March 31, 2021 when he gave a major address announcing his infrastructure investment plan. In the speech, he repeatedly evoked themes of bipartisanship, expressing a belief that "the American people will join this effort—Democrats, Republican, and independents" and promising "good-faith negotiation with any Republican who wants to help" (Biden 2021). Over the summer, the president worked with both parties to reach an agreement. For his efforts, Biden was rewarded with a statement released by Sen. Bill Cassidy (R-LA), and signed by a bipartisan group of 20 other lawmakers, in which they stated they were "proud to advance this bipartisan proposal" and emphasized that they were "happy to have President Biden's support" (Cassidy 2021). In August, 19 Republicans joined 50 Democrats to pass the bill through the Senate. In the wake of the vote, Senate Minority Leader McConnell (R-KY) praised Biden and his approach, saying that "the president deserves a lot of credit," noting the bi-

partisan nature of the issue: "Infrastructure is popular with both Republicans and Democrats...And if you're going to find an area of potential agreement, I can't think of a better one than infrastructure" (Doherty 2021). This statement, from an otherwise combative opposition leader, suggests that President Biden was effective in shifting the gridlock interval by raising the salience of a bipartisan issue that would not have otherwise received congressional action.

This description of events, while not causal, are consistent with the Rally Around the President case in our model. Polling showed that infrastructure was a bipartisan issue. When President Biden prioritized it in 2021, he raised its salience, activated the party bases, and passed a large, liberal spending bill with Republican buy-in. Beyond infrastructure, we expect this Rally equilibrium to occur on other issues with broad, bipartisan support or for policies that are prioritized in the wake of major crises. For example, the post-9/11 AUMF and the 2020 CARES Act fit both of these criteria. By contrast, that same Pew (2019) poll found a 44-point gap (29 versus 73) between Republicans and Democrats on environmental spending. That distribution makes for a poor Rally candidate and may explain why President Biden could not attract Republican support for the Inflation Reduction Act, which included a number of environmental provisions.

Partisan Retreat

Next, we consider a partisan retreat, a situation most similar to that described in Lee (2009). A key result is that $\bar{c}^q(1)$ is strictly negative: presidents never go public when the status quo is unfavorable and they are certain of a partisan retreat. Although we often think about presidents going public to persuade out-partisans, our model reveals the limits of this strategy and, comparing between Rally and Retreat, how it is dependent on the anticipated reaction from the out-party's base. Yet, $\bar{c}^q(-1)$ is strictly positive—presidents *always* have an incentive to go public when the status quo is favorable. Here, going public can deter defection among the President's co-partisans. The logic is: when the status quo is unfavorable, R is the relevant veto pivot, and under partisan retreat, going public makes it harder for a preference shock to induce R to cooperate, lowering the odds of policy change and the President's reelection. However, when the status quo is favorable, L is the relevant pivot. Going public raises the threshold at which the left pivot would defect. Here, the President

associates herself with a popular issue and makes it less likely it will be reversed, increasing her chances of reelection.

Illustration: The Iraq War Troop Surge (2007). As the 2006 midterm elections approached, support for the Iraq War had reached a new low. In a March Pew Research Center (2006*b*) poll, less than half (49%) of Americans believed the U.S. would succeed in Iraq, and only 30% thought Bush had a clear plan for successfully ending the war. In response to this declining support, Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) framed the midterm elections as a referendum on the war. Democrats were forceful in their opposition, but even some Republican lawmakers were becoming skittish. Sen. Bob Corker (R-TN) denied ever saying the U.S. should "stay the course" in Iraq (Levey, Hook and Simom 2006), and Sen. John Warner (R-VA) argued that the situation was "drifting sideways" and a new strategy may be needed (Associated Press 2006). Yet, the congressional agitation to wind down the war clashed with President Bush's commitment to the status quo—maintaining a U.S. presence to help end sectarian violence and stabilize the Iraqi government. In December, the Bush administration finalized a plan for a brief troop surge in Iraq, but this led to more Republicans speaking out. For example, Senator George Voinovich (R-OH) released a letter to Bush in which he said the administration should "develop a comprehensive plan for our country's gradual military disengagement from Iraq." Senator Dick Lugar (R-IN) urged Bush to consider "a downsizing" (Bresnahan 2007). Yet these Republicans were not only at odds with the president, but with their base as well. Although topline polling looked dire, the aggregates hid a large partisan split. On the question of whether to bring troops home, a December Pew Research Center (2006*a*) poll showed that 68% of Republicans wanted to stay the course as compared to 29% of Democrats. Even more relevant, 67% of Republicans favored the president's plan for a troop surge while 85% of Democrats opposed (USA Today 2007).

The dynamics of the troop surge contain the ingredients of a partisan retreat. Here, the president and his party's base are aligned on policy; the opposition party legislator and their base are stridently opposed; and the co-partisan legislator is wavering. As predicted by our model, President Bush went public several times. First, he delivered a major televised address on January 10, 2007

in which he defended the status quo, arguing, "to step back now would force a collapse of the Iraqi government, tear the country apart, and result in mass killings on an unimaginable scale" (Bush 2007*b*), an argument he continued in his subsequent State of the Union Address. Although Bush could unilaterally initiate the surge, he needed supplemental funding from Congress to sustain it. Democrats were willing to provide that funding, but they included a provision in the proposed bill to impose a timeline on withdrawal—something Bush stridently opposed. In a subsequent address, the president blamed Democrats for setting "an artificial timetable" that would "undercut our troops" (Bush 2007*a*). The presidents rhetorical efforts were successful. Although the funding bill with timelines passed the House and Senate, it attracted only token Republican support and was never close to overcoming a veto. Senators like Voinovich and Lugar voted against imposing timelines despite their previous, publicly expressed support for the idea. Republican loyalty forced Democrats to abandon this strategy. In the end, the House and Senate passed a new version of the bill that provided the funding Bush had wanted to maintain the status quo: continued U.S. involvement in Iraq without any timetable for withdrawal.

Ultimately, President Bush succeeded in his defensive appeal. He secured the needed funding for the surge without any withdrawal provisions—despite initial push-back from his own congressional party. In terms of other defensive appeals, one might also consider President Trump's 2018 renewal of FISA Section 702 over initial Republican hesitation and President Obama's 2015 efforts to stop a bipartisan effort to approve the Keystone XL Pipeline. By contrast, presidents will not go public when the status quo is unfavorable and they think doing so will repel the other side and threaten progress. This behavior is exemplified by Biden's insistence (quoted earlier) that going public during the 2023 debt ceiling negotiations would be counter-productive. Similarly, President Biden refrained from giving a major national address about the CHIPS Act until *after* it was signed, perhaps because doing so would have imperiled the bill.

Backfire

Finally, we consider a backfire, a case where the President knows that going public will cause both co-partisans and out-partisans to become more opposed to her policy position. Although this

political setting may be relatively unlikely, analyzing it can provide insight into how presidents' expectations of a potential Backfire may constrain position-taking. Similarly, it can outline cases when presidents might go public on broadly unpopular issues. The value of $\bar{c}^b(1) = \bar{c}^q(1)$, and, as such, the President will never go public when the status quo is unfavorable and she is expecting a Backfire. However, the value of $\bar{c}^b(-1)$ is sometimes positive, implying that there are regions of the parameter space in which the status quo is favorable and the President profits from going public—even when doing so is certain to Backfire. The logic is similar to why the President will not always go public under a Rally: by attaching her electoral prospects to an issue, she provides a cross-cutting incentive for the co-partisan legislator to support her position even while turning the base against her. These results help explain why we might occasionally see a divergence in mass-elite behavior. Empirically, we should expect presidents to be more willing to go public on unpopular policies in today's partisan and polarized environment, when control of the White House is especially important for a party's broader goals.

Illustration: North American Free Trade Agreement (1993).   When President Clinton took office in 1993, he was inheriting a trade deal his predecessor, Republican George H.W. Bush, had signed just one month earlier, alongside the leaders of Canada and Mexico. Yet, it fell to Clinton to secure congressional approval—which posed significant political risks. Until late in the 1992 campaign, Clinton hedged as to whether or not he supported the deal, saying "he doubted he could support something Bush negotiated" (Behr 1993). And with good reason. In a poll taken after the first presidential debate, minorities in both parties (just 30% of Democrats and 43% of Republicans) thought the agreement would be good for the U.S. (Gallup 1992). On the one hand, supporting the deal would be a formal ratification and accelerant of the "trade liberalization that was already taking place" (Villarreal and Fergusson 2017), which Clinton believed would help cement his identity as a "New Democrat" willing to oppose labor and "strengthen his presidential credentials" (Behr 1993). However, it would also invite backlash from his political base, potentially imperiling his early presidency.

Together, these ingredients set the stage for a potential backfire. Minority support in both par-

ties implied that $\beta_L = \underline{\beta}_L$ and $\beta_R = \underline{\beta}_R$, but the president wanted to go public to formally ratify a free-trade status quo he viewed as favorable. The question was whether doing so would raise the salience enough that congressional Democrats would vote "yes" to defend the president's reputation. Throughout 1993, Clinton mounted an intense public relations campaign to bolster support including a White House event in September where he was joined by three former presidents: Bush, Carter, and Ford. On November 13th, days before the House would vote, Clinton dedicated a full radio address to the issue, highlighting the stakes of defending the status quo, saying "American workers should be very concerned if we vote NAFTA down, walk away from Mexico..." and asking, "Are we going to maintain our lead in the global economy...or are we going to retreat into a shell of protectionism" (Clinton 1993)? In addition, Clinton worked behind the scenes to persuade reluctant Democrats, and he secured new side agreements to protect some labor and environmental interests. These tactics worked: the agreement passed 234–200 in the House and 61–38 in the Senate, with a mix of Democratic and Republican support. However, this success came at the expense of, not due to, public support for the agreement. Overall net approval for NAFTA *declined* marginally throughout 1993 (Bowman, Foster and Brown 2008), and Clinton advisor George Stephanopoulos reflected in a 1999 memoir that NAFTA was "a stick in the eye of our most loyal labor supporters" (quoted in Shapiro 2022). However, contemporary accounts emphasized the importance of NAFTA to Clinton's *political* prospects. For example, a *New Yorker* essay argued that "the political consequences of a rejection of NAFTA would be even more severe than the economic ones...dealing a devastating blow to President Clinton" (Blumenthal and Judis 1993). In 2016, one journalist reflected on the process calling NAFTA's passage nothing more than "arm-twisting a lot of reluctant Democrats" (Rosenberg 2016). Together, these accounts suggest that Clinton succeeded by tying himself to the policy and pressuring congressional Democrats to support him politically rather than appealing to, or building, public support.

Clinton's ratification of NAFTA serves as a rare example of a successful backfire. Although the agreement had minority support among both parties' bases, Clinton was able to use a mix of public speeches and private negotiations to raise issue salience and pressure reluctant Democrats
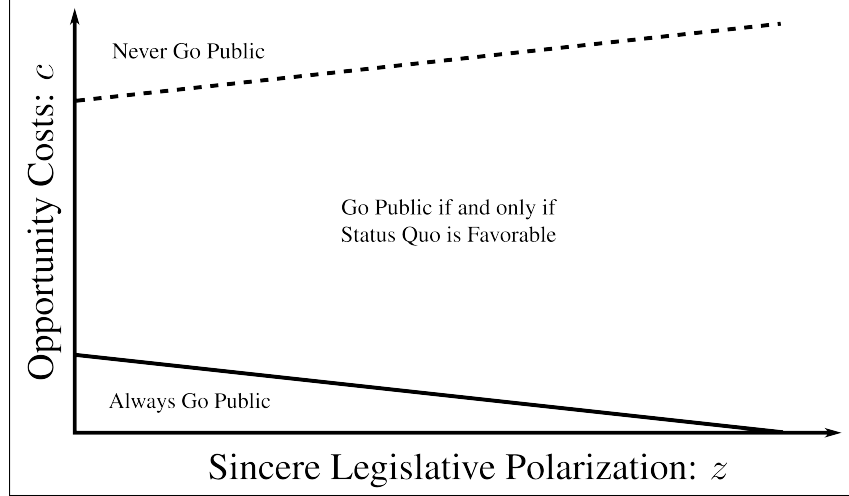
26

Figure 4: Example of When the President Goes Public as a Function of Legislative Polarization

Note: The solid line is $\bar{c}(1)$ and the dashed line is $\bar{c}(-1)$. Parameters are fixed so that $p = 1/3$; $q = 1/3$; $\underline{\beta}_R = -1/2$; $\overline{\beta}_R = 3$; $\underline{\beta}_L = -1/4$; $\overline{\beta}_L = 3.5$; $\delta = 1/4$; $\psi = 5$, and z increases left-to-right from 0 to 5 on the *x*-axis.

to support him in defending the low-tariff, free trade status quo that had been developing since Reagan took office.

Sincere Legislative Polarization and Going Public

Partisan polarization is a fundamental feature of the modern Congress. Our next result predicts how the President's incentives to go public respond to changes in legislative polarization (*z*).

Proposition 4. *All else equal, as sincere legislative polarization z increases, the President is (weakly) more likely to go public when the status quo is favorable and (weakly) less likely to go public when the status quo is unfavorable.*

Proposition 4 highlights an asymmetry in the President's incentives to go public. As Congressional polarization increases the President is both more likely to go public when the status quo is favorable—reward for a defensive public appeal—and less likely to go public when the status quo is unfavorable—deterrence from an offensive public appeal. As Congressional polarization has increased, our model would predict that going public should occur more often in defense of a favorable status quo rather than to persuade the parties to take up policy change away from an unfavorable status quo. Thus, the overall prediction in terms of how much we should observe pres-

idents going public, as a function of legislative polarization, is crucially shaped by the nature of the status quo.

Preference Uncertainty and Going Public

The likelihood that information will come to light and shape legislators' policy preferences varies across issues. New policy areas (e.g., regulation of artificial intelligence, the rise of China) lack well-worn partisan cleavages, and lawmakers may be more open to new information uncovered during the legislative process. On the other hand, lawmakers have more hardened preferences over issues like healthcare and immigration and are unlikely to observe new information that radically changes their preferences. Our next result offers predictions about the President's propensity to go public across policy areas with different levels of policy-related preference uncertainty. Figure 5 provides a graphical example of how the opportunity cost thresholds, $\bar{c}(-1)$ and $\bar{c}(1)$, respond to increasing preference uncertainty.

Proposition 5. *All else equal, the President is (weakly) less likely to go public as preference uncertainty ψ increases.*

Our model predicts that the President is less likely to use her bully pulpit to influence legislative policymaking on issues with high levels of policy-related preference uncertainty, all else equal. This is true regardless of the status quo, though, again, she is always more likely to go public when the status quo is favorable. This can represent both an inter-temporal prediction and a cross-sectional one. In the former case, Proposition 5 predicts that the President will be more likely to go public as a policy issue becomes better understood over time, which reduces policy-related preference uncertainty, or equivalently, the likelihood of a large information shock during the legislative process. In the latter case, Proposition 5 predicts that the President will be less likely to go public on new or volatile policy areas for which there are high levels of policy-related preference uncertainty relative to issues that are well-known or have otherwise low levels of preference uncertainty. Put differently, presidents may prefer a wait-and-see approach with policy areas where preferences are more malleable, rather than risk their reputation on a position that could easily be
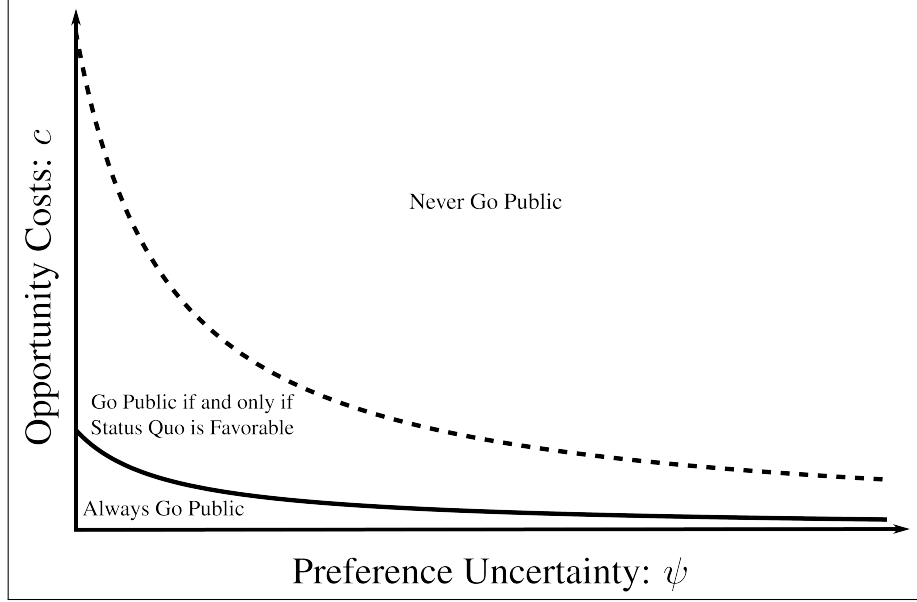
28

Figure 5: Example of When the President Goes Public as a Function of Preference Uncertainty

Note: The solid line is $\bar{c}(1)$ and the dashed line is $\bar{c}(-1)$. Parameters are fixed so that $p = 1/3$; $q = 1/3$; $\underline{\beta}_R = -1/2$; $\overline{\beta}_R = 3$; $\underline{\beta}_L = -1/4$; $\overline{\beta}_L = 3.5$; $\delta = 1/4$; $\delta = 1/4$; $z = 1/2$, and ψ increases left-to-right from 0.5 to 5 on the x-axis.

undone when new information comes to light. Interestingly, the difference between the cost thresholds also decreases in policy-related preference uncertainty, implying that the President's behavior is less sensitive to the status quo as preference uncertainty increases.

The Role of Electoral Strength

We have treated the President's probability of reelection after staying silent as fixed at $1/2$. However, the President's relative electoral strength matters for her incentives. When the President's baseline reelection strength is constant across status quo policies, $\rho(-1) = \rho(1)$, or she is favored when the status quo is unfavorable (i.e., $\rho(-1) \leq \rho(1)$), the main insights of the baseline model hold. If the President is more likely to be reelected when the status quo is favorable (i.e., $\rho(-1) > \rho(1)$) then it is possible she could be *more* likely to go public when the status quo is *unfavorable* (i.e., $\bar{c}^\rho(1) > \bar{c}^\rho(-1)$). Here, when the President is in a relatively weak electoral position and the status quo is unfavorable, she will be more likely to go public on issues that carry relatively high levels of policy-related preference uncertainty—e.g., new or highly complicated policy areas.

This highlights a "gambling for reelection" dynamic: the President's baseline reelection probability when staying silent is relatively low since the status quo is unfavorable ($\rho(1) < \rho(-1)$), so going public is worth it to try to secure reelection by getting the right pivot to agree to change policy (cf. Downs and Rocke 1994). The status quo still matters for the President's incentives to employ her bully pulpit to manipulate legislative polarization, but now her relative electoral strength shapes how those status quo-sensitive incentives manifest.[16]

If Reelection Always Depends on Policy

We also consider the case where the president wins if and only if the policy outcome at the end of the game is $x = -1$, irrespective of her choice to go public.[17] This change only affects the analysis when the president stays silent. First, the gridlock region when the president stays silent is larger: $\left(-z - \frac{\delta}{2}, z + \frac{\delta}{2}\right)$, implying that policy change is more difficult when the president stays silent. This, in turn, provides stronger incentives to go public when the status quo is unfavorable and weaker incentives to do so when the status quo is favorable. Thus, the president is more likely to go public when the status quo is unfavorable and less likely to do so when the status quo is favorable, compared to the baseline model. However, it is still the case that the president is more likely to go public when the status quo is favorable than when it is unfavorable, holding the electoral environment fixed. Taken together, the core dynamics of the model do not change—presidents still face fewer costs to go public when the status quo is favorable—however, this electoral regime attenuates the gap between the cost thresholds.

Discussion and Conclusion

By raising the salience of an issue, do presidents increase their odds of legislative success or polarize lawmakers? To resolve this tension, we developed a game-theoretic model incorporating several stylized facts about presidential leadership and congressional responses. We focus on the importance of mass and elite partisanship as well as polarizing effects of presidential leadership

---

[16]Formal details can be found in Appendix A.4.
[17]Formal details can be found in Appendix A.5.

through parties' collective reputations (Lebo and O'Geen 2011; Lee 2009, 2016; Noble 2023*b*).

We make two contributions. First, we find that going public can simultaneously increase presidential success and legislative polarization. Even when both parties' bases support the President, the gridlock region is larger when the President goes public versus when she stays silent. This dynamic—which harmonizes findings from Canes-Wrone (2006) and Lee (2009)—is driven by (i) higher support for the President among the co-partisan public and (ii) co-partisan (out-partisan) lawmakers' strategic incentives to promote (oppose) the President's policies for electoral benefit. However, our model is flexible, allowing the popularity of the President's position to vary independently for party bases. Here, we make our second contribution: when party bases' preferences diverge (or when both oppose the President's policy), the status quo is key to understanding when presidents go public. We introduce a novel strategy of "defensive appeals": presidents may go public when the status quo is favorable because raising issue salience encourages constraint among a co-partisan pivot and benefits presidents electorally, even while alienating an out-party pivot. Conversely (and in contrast to some theories of going public), when the status quo is unfavorable, presidents are unlikely to raise issue salience. Doing so makes policy harder to pass.

Like all models, we cannot capture every relevant consideration. We focus on policy, an important element of party branding (Cox and McCubbins 1993; Lee 2016) and electoral success (Lebo and O'Geen 2011), but it is not the only driver of presidential speechmaking. For example, presidents might go public only to signal a policy position or to mobilize a core constituency—even if doing so will dampen the prospects that policy passes. A related limitation is that we consider a president's choice to go public or stay silent on a single issue and dimension. Yet, presidents strategically choose among issues and rhetorical arguments. Future work can deepen our theoretical understanding of going public by exploring these dynamics.

Ultimately, our model incorporates several features of presidential leadership and legislative polarization, harmonizing a core tension in the existing literature and introducing new insights about how the status quo conditions presidential appeals. Although scholars and journalists typically frame presidential speeches in the context of out-party persuasion, our results suggest that as

elite and mass polarization increase, presidents may instead be targeting fair-weather friends.

References

Associated Press. 2006. "Warner to Bush: Include Dems in Iraq debate.".
   URL: *https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna16052399*

Ban, Pamela, Ju Yeon Park and Hye Young You. 2023. "How Are Politicians Informed? Witnesses and Information Provision in Congress." *American Political Science Review* 117(1):122–139.

Beckmann, Matthew N. 2010. *Pushing the Agenda: Presidential Leadership in US Lawmaking, 1953–2004.* Cambridge University Press.

Behr, Peter. 1993. "Clinton's Conversion on NAFTA." *The Washington Post* .
   URL: *https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/business/1993/09/19/clintons-conversion-on-nafta/3a5b9cb5-dfc8-4b5c-9ae6-30781f0a99fc/*

Biden, Joe. 2021. "Remarks by President Biden on the American Jobs Plan.".
   URL: *https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/03/31/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-american-jobs-plan/*

Blumenthal, Sidney and John Judis. 1993. "NAFTA Gotcha." *The New Yorker* .
   URL: *https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1993/11/22/nafta-gotcha*

Bond, Jon R. and Richard Fleisher. 1990. *The President in the Legislative Arena.* University of Chicago Press.

Bowman, Karlyn, Adam Foster and Fowler Brown. 2008. *Polls on NAFTA and Free Trade.* American Enterprise Institute.

Bresnahan, John. 2007. "GOP senators demand Iraq withdrawal.".
   URL: *https://www.politico.com/story/2007/06/gop-senators-demand-iraq-withdrawal-004677*

Bush, George W. 2007*a*. "President Bush Discusses the Iraq War Supplemental.".
   URL: *https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/04/20070416.html*

Bush, George W. 2007*b*. "President's Address to the Nation.".

    URL: *https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/01/20070110-7.html*

Cameron, Charles M. 2002. "Studying the Polarized Presidency." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 32(4):647–663.

Canes-Wrone, Brandice. 2006. *Who Leads Whom?: Presidents, Policy, and the Public*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Cassidy, Bill. 2021. "Cassidy, Senators' Joint Statement, Framework on Bipartisan Infrastructure Deal.".

    URL: *https://www.cassidy.senate.gov/news/press-releases/cassidy-senators-joint-statement-framework-on-bipartisan-infrastructure-deal/*

Clinton, William. 1993. *The President's Radio Address November 13, 1993*. U.S. Government Publishing Office p. 1978–1979.

    URL: *https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-1993-book2/html/PPP-1993-book2-doc-pg1978.htm*

Cohen, Jeffrey E. 2013. "Everybody Loves a Winner: On the Mutual Causality of Presidential Approval and Success in Congress." *Congress & the Presidency* 40(3):285–307.

Cox, Gary W. and Mathew D. McCubbins. 1993. *Legislative Leviathan: Party Government in the House*. University of California Press.

Doherty, Erin. 2021. ""The president deserves a lot of credit": McConnell praises Biden on infrastructure bill.".

    URL: *https://www.axios.com/2021/08/11/mcconnell-praises-biden-infrastructure*

Downs, George W. and David M. Rocke. 1994. "Conflict, Agency, and Gambling for Resurrection: The Principal-Agent Problem Goes to War." *American Journal of Political Science* pp. 362–380.

Dziuda, Wioletta and Antoine Loeper. 2018. "Dynamic Pivotal Politics." *American Political Science Review* 112(3):580–601.

Edwards, George C. III. 2003. *On Deaf Ears: The Limits of the Bully Pulpit*. New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press.

Eshbaugh-Soha, Matthew. 2016. *Going Public and Presidential Leadership*. Vol. 1 Oxford University Press.

Foster, David. 2022. "Anticipating Unilateralism." *The Journal of Politics* 84(2):1176–1188.

Gallup. 1992. "Gallup/Newsweek Poll 1992-305050: Post-First Presidential Debate, 1992 [Dataset].". Roper #31089480, Version 3. Gallup Organization [producer]. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research [distributor]. Access Date: Jul-29-2025.

Gehlbach, Scott. 2021. *Formal Models of Domestic Politics*. 2nd ed. Cambridge University Press.

Grossmann, Matt and Christopher Wlezien. 2024. "A Thermostatic Model of Congressional Elections." *American Politics Research* 52(4):355–366.

Howell, William G. 2003. *Power without Persuasion: The Politics of Direct Presidential Action*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.

Howell, William G., Ethan Porter and Thomas J. Wood. 2020. "Rethinking Public Appeals: Experimental Evidence on Presidential Performances." *Journal of Political Institutions and Political Economy* 1(1):137–158.

Kernell, Samuel H. 1997. *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership*. Washington, D.C: CQ Press.

Krehbiel, Keith. 1998. *Pivotal Politics: A Theory of U.S. Lawmaking*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lebo, Matthew J. and Andrew J. O'Geen. 2011. "The President's Role in the Partisan Congressional Arena." *The Journal of Politics* 73(3):718–734.

Lee, Frances E. 2009. *Beyond Ideology: Politics, Principles, and Partisanship in the U. S. Senate*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lee, Frances E. 2016. *Insecure Majorities: Congress and the Perpetual Campaign*. Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press.

Levey, Noam N., Janet Hook and Richard Simom. 2006. "GOP's Solidarity on War Is Cracking.". **URL:** *https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2006-oct-20-na-iraqpol20-story.html*

Light, Paul. 1999. *The President's Agenda: Domestic Policy Choice from Kennedy to Clinton*. The John Hopkins University Press.

Lowande, Kenneth. 2021. "Presidents and the Status Quo." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 16(2):215–244.

Mansbridge, Jane. 2003. "Rethinking Representation." *American Political Science Review* 97(4):515–528.

Neustadt, Richard E. 1990. *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents*. New York, NY: The Free Press.

Noble, Benjamin S. 2023*a*. "Energy versus safety: Unilateral action, voter welfare, and executive accountability." *Political Science Research and Methods* 11(3):468–482.

Noble, Benjamin S. 2023*b*. "Presidential Cues and the Nationalization of Congressional Rhetoric, 1973-2016." *American Journal of Political Science* .

Pew. 2019. "Little Public Support for Reductions in Federal Spending.". **URL:** *https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/04/11/little-public-support-for-reductions-in-federal-spending/*

Pew Research Center. 2006*a*. *Growing Number Sees Iraq Becoming 'Another Vietnam'*. Pew Research Center.

URL: *https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/legacy-pdf/297.pdf*

Pew Research Center. 2006*b*. "Pessimism Grows As Iraq War Enters Fourth Year.".

URL: *https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2006/03/16/pessimism-grows-as-iraq-war-enters-fourth-year/*

Poole, Keith T. and Howard L. Rosenthal. 2006. *Ideology and Congress*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.

Prato, Carlo and Ian Turner. 2023. "Institutional Foundations of the Power to Persuade." *Working paper* .

URL: *https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/4w9af/*

Rosenberg, Paul. 2016. "Own up to NAFTA, Democrats: Trump is right that the terrible trade pact was Bill Clinton's baby.".

URL: *https://www.salon.com/2016/10/02/own-up-to-nafta-democrats-trump-is-right-that-the-terrible-trade-pact-was-bill-clintons-baby/?utm$_s$ource = websiteutm$_m$edium = socialutm$_c$ampaign = ogshareutm$_c$ontent = og*

Shapiro, Walter. 2022. "1989-2001: America's Long Lost Weekend." *The New Republic* .

URL: *https://newrepublic.com/article/166758/america-1989-2001-foreign-policy-lost-weekend*

Sinclair, Barbara. 2006. *Party Wars: Polarization and the Politics of National Policy Making*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Sulkin, Tracy. 2011. *The legislative legacy of congressional campaigns , Tracy Sulkin*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Tulis, Jeffrey. 1987. *The Rhetorical Presidency*. Princeton University Press.

Turner, Ian R. 2020. "Policy Durability, Agency Capacity, and Executive Unilateralism." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 50(1):40–62.

USA Today. 2007. "USA Today/Gallup Poll # 2007-01: Politics/Terrorism/2008 Presidential Election/Iraq, Question 38 [USGALLUP.07JAN05.R21].". Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

Villarreal, M. Angeles and Ian F. Fergusson. 2017. "The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)." *Congressional Research Service* .

Yglesias, Matthew. 2023. "Opinion — It's Great to Have a President Who Knows When to Shut Up." *The New York Times* .

URL: *https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/07/opinion/joe-biden-presidency.html*

Online Supporting Information:

Presidential Leadership and Legislative Polarization

A Proofs

A.1 Legislative Gridlock

Proposition 1. *When the President stays silent the gridlock region is $(-z,\ z)$ and when the President goes public the gridlock region is $\left(-z + \beta_R - \frac{\delta}{2},\ z + \beta_L + \frac{\delta}{2}\right)$.*

Proof. To characterize the gridlock regions it is sufficient to characterize when the left party would vote for $x = 1$ and the right party would vote for $x = -1$ because those are the cases when they are pivotal for policy change. Suppose the President did not go public. Then party L votes for policy $x = 1$ if and only if:

$$1(\theta - z) + \frac{\delta}{2} > -1(\theta - z) + \frac{\delta}{2},$$
$$\theta > z.$$

The right party votes for policy $x = -1$ if and only if:

$$-1(\theta + z) + \frac{\delta}{2} > 1(\theta + z) + \frac{\delta}{2},$$
$$-z > \theta.$$

Thus, the gridlock region when the President stays silent is $(-z, z)$.

Now suppose the President went public so that β_L and β_R are activated (i.e., $s = 1$). The left

party votes for $x = 1$ if and only if:

$$1(\theta - z - \beta_L) > -1(\theta - z - \beta_L) + \delta,$$

$$\theta > z + \beta_L + \frac{\delta}{2}.$$

The right party votes for $x = -1$ if and only if:

$$-1(\theta + z - \beta_R) > 1(\theta + z - \beta_R) + \delta,$$

$$-z + \beta_R - \frac{\delta}{2} > \theta.$$

Thus, the gridlock region after the President goes public is: $\left(-z + \beta_R - \frac{\delta}{2}, \ z + \beta_L + \frac{\delta}{2} \right)$. ∎

A.2 Going Public

Proposition 2. *the President is always more likely to go public when the status quo is favorable (i.e., $\bar{c}(-1) > \bar{c}(1)$). If $c \leq \bar{c}(1)$ then the President always goes public, if $c \in (\bar{c}(1), \ \bar{c}(-1)]$ then the President goes public only when the status quo is favorable, and if $c > \bar{c}(-1)$ then the President never goes public.*

Proof. Consider first the President's expected utilities for staying silent conditional on the status quo, where the derivations follow from $\theta \sim U[-\psi, \psi]$.

$$EU_P(s = 0 | x^{sq} = 1) = \int_{-\psi}^{-z} (1) d\theta + \int_{-z}^{\psi} (-1) d\theta + \frac{\delta}{2},$$

$$= \frac{\delta}{2} - \frac{z}{\psi},$$

$$EU_P(s = 0 | x^{sq} = -1) = \int_{-\psi}^{z} (1) d\theta + \int_{z}^{\psi} (-1) d\theta + \frac{\delta}{2},$$

$$= \frac{\delta}{2} + \frac{z}{\psi}.$$

Now consider the President's analogous expected utilities for going public, again conditional on

the status quo (the derivations again follow from $\theta \sim U[-\psi, \psi]$):

$$EU_P(s=1|x^{sq}=1) = p\left(\int_{-\psi}^{-z+\overline{\beta}_R-\frac{\delta}{2}}(1+\delta)d\theta + \int_{-z+\overline{\beta}_R-\frac{\delta}{2}}^{\psi}(-1)d\theta\right)$$

$$+ (q+(1-p-q))\left(\int_{-\psi}^{-z+\underline{\beta}_R-\frac{\delta}{2}}(1+\delta)d\theta + \int_{-z+\underline{\beta}_R-\frac{\delta}{2}}^{\psi}(-1)d\theta\right) - c,$$

$$= p\left(\frac{\delta}{2} - \frac{(2+\delta)(2z-2\overline{\beta}_R+\delta)}{4\psi}\right) + (1-p)\left(\frac{\delta}{2} - \frac{(2+\delta)(2z-2\underline{\beta}_R+\delta)}{4\psi}\right) - c,$$

$$EU_P(s=1|x^{sq}=-1) = (p+q)\left(\int_{-\psi}^{z+\overline{\beta}_L+\frac{\delta}{2}}(1+\delta)d\theta + \int_{z+\overline{\beta}_L+\frac{\delta}{2}}^{\psi}(-1)d\theta\right)$$

$$+ (1-p-q)\left(\int_{-\psi}^{z+\underline{\beta}_L+\frac{\delta}{2}}(1+\delta)d\theta + \int_{z+\underline{\beta}_L+\frac{\delta}{2}}^{\psi}(-1)d\theta\right) - c,$$

$$= (p+q)\left(\frac{(2+\delta)(2(z+\overline{\beta}_L)+\delta)+2\delta\psi}{4\psi}\right) + (1-p-q)\left(\frac{(2+\delta)(2(z+\underline{\beta}_L)+\delta)+2\delta\psi}{4\psi}\right) - c.$$

Incentive compatibility requires that $EU_P(s=1|x^{sq}=1) \geq EU_P(s=0|x^{sq}=1)$ and $EU_P(s=1|x^{sq}=-1) \geq EU_P(s=0|x^{sq}=-1)$ to go public (conditional on the status quo). When the status quo is unfavorable, $x^{sq}=1$, this requires that:

$$p\left(\frac{\delta}{2} - \frac{(2+\delta)(2z-2\overline{\beta}_R+\delta)}{4\psi}\right) + (1-p)\left(\frac{\delta}{2} - \frac{(2+\delta)(2z-2\underline{\beta}_R+\delta)}{4\psi}\right) - c \geq \frac{\delta}{2} - \frac{z}{\psi},$$

$$\frac{2p(\overline{\beta}_R-\underline{\beta}_R)(2+\delta)+2\underline{\beta}_R(2+\delta)-\delta(2+2z+\delta)}{4\psi} \geq c.$$

Define the threshold above as $\overline{c}(1) := \frac{2p(\overline{\beta}_R-\underline{\beta}_R)(2+\delta)+2\underline{\beta}_R(2+\delta)-\delta(2+2z+\delta)}{4\psi}$. When the status quo is favorable, $x^{sq}=-1$, incentive compatibilty requires that:

$$(p+q)\left(\frac{(2+\delta)(2(z+\overline{\beta}_L)+\delta)+2\delta\psi}{4\psi}\right) + (1-p-q)\left(\frac{(2+\delta)(2(z+\underline{\beta}_L)+\delta)+2\delta\psi}{4\psi}\right) - c \geq \frac{\delta}{2} + \frac{z}{\psi},$$

$$\frac{4\left((p+q)(\overline{\beta}_L-\underline{\beta}_L)+\underline{\beta}_L\right)+2\delta\left(1+z+(p+q)(\overline{\beta}_L-\underline{\beta}_L)+\underline{\beta}_L\right)+\delta^2}{4\psi} \geq c.$$

Define this threshold as $\overline{c}(-1) := \frac{4\left((p+q)(\overline{\beta}_L-\underline{\beta}_L)+\underline{\beta}_L\right)+2\delta\left(1+z+(p+q)(\overline{\beta}_L-\underline{\beta}_L)+\underline{\beta}_L\right)+\delta^2}{4\psi}$. To verify that $c(-1) > c(1)$ note that:

$$\overline{c}(-1) - \overline{c}(1) = \frac{p(\overline{\beta}_L-\underline{\beta}_L+\underline{\beta}_R)(2+\delta)+q(\overline{\beta}_L-\underline{\beta}_L)(2+\delta)+\delta(\underline{\beta}_L-\underline{\beta}_R+\delta)+2(\underline{\beta}_L-\underline{\beta}_R+\delta+z\delta)}{2\psi},$$

which is greater than zero for all $0 < p < 1$, $0 < q < 1$, $\underline{\beta}_R < \underline{\beta}_L < 0 < \overline{\beta}_R < \overline{\beta}_L$, $\delta > 0$, and $\psi > z > 0$. Thus, the President will always go public for a wider range of costs when the status

41

quo is favorable. This further implies that when $c > \overline{c}(-1) > \overline{c}(1)$ it is not incentive compatible for the President to go public regardless of the status quo; when $c \in (\overline{c}(1), \overline{c}(-1)]$ it is incentive compatible for the President to go public if and only if the status quo is favorable, $x^{sq} = -1$; and when $c \leq \overline{c}(1) < \overline{c}(-1)$ it is always incentive compatible for the President to go public regardless of the status quo, which completes the result. ∎

A.3   Dynamics of Going Public

A.3.1   President's Beliefs and Going Public

Proposition 3. *All else equal:*

- *When the status quo is unfavorable, the President is (weakly) more likely to go public when the probability of a Rally Around the President effect (p) increases, and (weakly) less likely to go public if increases in the probability of Partisan Retreat (q) or Backlash (1 − p − q) are facilitated by decreases in p.*

- *When the status quo is favorable, the President is (weakly) more likely to go public when the probability of either a Rally Around the President effect (p) or Partisan Retreat (q) increases, and (weakly) less likely to go public if the probability of Backlash (1 − p − q) increases.*

Proof. When the status quo is unfavorable $\overline{c}(1)$ is increasing in p:

$$\frac{\partial \overline{c}(1)}{\partial p} = \frac{(\overline{\beta}_R - \underline{\beta}_R)(2 + \delta)}{2\psi} > 0,$$

which implies that the President will go public for a wider range of costs as p increases. When the status quo is favorable $\overline{c}(-1)$ is also increasing in p:

$$\frac{\partial \overline{c}(-1)}{\partial p} = \frac{4(\overline{\beta}_L - \underline{\beta}_L) + 2(\overline{\beta}_L - \underline{\beta}_L)\delta}{4\psi} > 0,$$

which again implies the President will go public for a wider range of costs as p increases. Note that $\overline{c}(-1)$ and $\overline{c}(1)$ can be negative, in which case the President's incentives are unaffected by changes in p. This accounts for the "weakly" designation in the result. Otherwise, the President is more likely to go public as p increases (in the sense of set inclusion).

When the status quo is unfavorable $\overline{c}(1)$ is unaffected directly by q:

$$\frac{\partial \overline{c}(1)}{\partial q} = 0.$$

However, if an increase in q comes from a decrease in p then the comparative static above for p kicks in, implying that $\bar{c}(1)$ decreases (since it is increasing in p). Thus, an increase in q decreases $\bar{c}(1)$ when that increase comes from a decrease in p. If instead the status quo is favorable then $\bar{c}(-1)$ is increasing in q:

$$\frac{\partial \bar{c}(-1)}{\partial q} = \frac{4(\bar{\beta}_L - \underline{\beta}_L) + 2(\bar{\beta}_L - \underline{\beta}_L)\delta}{4\psi} > 0,$$

which implies that when the status quo is $x = -1$ the President is more likely to go public when q increases (in the sense of set inclusion). Again, because the cost thresholds can be negative we note that this relationship is "weak" in the sense that changes in q do not change the President's incentives when the threshold is negative.

Finally, if the probability of Backlash increases, i.e., $1 - p - q$ increases, then either p, q, or both p and q must have decreased. When the status quo is unfavorable there is no effect on the President's incentives to go public unless p decreases (following from the first set of comparative statics above). If instead the status quo is favorable and $1 - p - q$ increases then the President's incentives to go public are weakened in that either p or q (or both) must have decreased. The comparative statics above illustrate that when p or q decrease and $x = -1$ the President is weakly less likely to go public in the sense of set inclusion (the "weakly" again following from the fact that when the thresholds are negative local changes in the parameters do not affect presidential incentives). Combining all of these comparative statics completes the result. ■

A.3.2 Legislative Polarization and Going Public

Proposition 4. *All else equal, the President is (weakly) more likely to go public when the status quo is favorable and (weakly) less likely to go public when the status quo is unfavorable.*

Proof. First, consider the case when the status quo is favorable, $x^{sq} = -1$. We have:

$$\frac{\partial \bar{c}(-1)}{\partial z} = \frac{\delta}{2\psi} > 0,$$

so $\bar{c}(-1)$ is increasing in z. Now, when $x^{sq} = 1$, we have that:

$$\frac{\partial \bar{c}(1)}{\partial z} = -\frac{\delta}{2\psi} < 0,$$

so $\bar{c}(1)$ is decreasing in z. Finally, for $\Delta \bar{c} := \bar{c}(-1) - \bar{c}(1)$ we have:

$$\frac{\partial \Delta \bar{c}}{\partial z} = \frac{\delta}{\psi} > 0,$$

so $\Delta\bar{c}$ is increasing in z. We say that the President is weakly more likely to go public because the cost thresholds can be negative and in such a case the President's behavior does not respond to local changes in z. ∎

A.3.3 Preference Uncertainty and Going Public

Proposition 5. *All else equal, the President is (weakly) less likely to go public as preference uncertainty ψ increases.*

Proof. Consider first an unfavorable status quo. In this case, the comparative static for $\bar{c}(1)$ with respect to ψ is given by:

$$\frac{\partial \bar{c}(1)}{\partial \psi} = -\frac{2p(\bar{\beta}_R - \underline{\beta}_R)(2+\delta) + 2\underline{\beta}_R(2+\delta) - \delta(2+2z+\delta)}{4\psi^2},$$

which is positive when $\bar{c}(1) < 0$ and negative when $\bar{c}(1) > 0$. Thus, the President is weakly less likely to go public as ψ increases in the sense that there are no effects on her incentives when $\bar{c}(1) < 0$ and when $\bar{c}(1) > 0$ it is decreasing in ψ. Now consider a favorable status quo. In this case, the comparative static is given by:

$$\frac{\partial \bar{c}(-1)}{\partial \psi} = -\frac{4((p+q)(\bar{\beta}_L - \underline{\beta}_L) + \underline{\beta}_L) + 2(1+z+(p+q)(\bar{\beta}_L - \underline{\beta}_L) + \underline{\beta}_L)\delta + \delta^2}{4\psi^2},$$

which is again negative whenever $\bar{c}(-1) > 0$ indicating that the President is weakly less likely to go public (in the sense of set inclusion) as ψ increases (noting that the "weakly" follows from the same reason as above). Thus, overall, any time the President's incentives are affected by local changes in ψ (i.e., when $\bar{c}(x^{sq}) > 0$) she is less likely to go public in the sense of set inclusion (i.e., she goes public for a smaller range of opportunity costs). ∎

A.4 Extension: The Role of Electoral Strength

In this section, we derive analogous results to the main model where instead of $Pr(\text{reelection}|s = 0, x^{sq}) = \frac{1}{2}, \forall x^{sq} \in \{0,1\}$ we have that $Pr(\text{reelection}|s = 0, x^{sq}) = \rho(x^{sq}) \in (0,1)$. This change does not affect the gridlock regions or the President's expected utilities for going public. However, it does affect the President's reservation utilities for staying silent because now the election is not a coin flip. If $\rho > 1/2$ we say the President is *electorally strong* while if $\rho < 1/2$ we say that she is *electorally weak*.

the President's new reservation utilities for staying silent, given an unfavorable and favorable

status quo respectively, are given by:

$$EU_P(s=0|x^{sq}=1) = \delta\rho(1) - \frac{z}{\psi}, \tag{9}$$

$$EU_P(s=0|x^{sq}=-1) = \delta\rho(-1) + \frac{z}{\psi}. \tag{10}$$

Just as before, incentive compatibility requires that $EU_P(s=1|x^{sq}) \geq EU_P(s=0|x^{sq})$ in order for the President to go public given a status quo of x^{sq}. $EU_P(s=1|x^{sq}=1)$ and $EU_P(s=1|x^{sq}) = -1$ remain unchanged from Equations (3) and (4) from the main text. Thus, when the status quo is unfavorable the President goes public if and only if:

$$p\left(\frac{\delta}{2} - \frac{(2+\delta)(2z-2\overline{\beta}_R+\delta)}{4\psi}\right) + (q+b)\left(\frac{\delta}{2} - \frac{(2+\delta)(2z-2\underline{\beta}_R+\delta)}{4\psi}\right) \geq \delta\rho(1) - \frac{z}{\psi}, \tag{11}$$

which is satisfied when:

$$c \leq \overline{c}^P(1) := \frac{2p(\overline{\beta}_R - \underline{\beta}_R)(2+\delta) + 2\underline{\beta}_R(2+\delta) - \delta(2+2z+\delta-2\psi+4\psi\rho(1))}{4\psi}. \tag{12}$$

If instead the status quo is favorable, $x^{sq} = -1$, the President goes public if and only if:

$$(p+q)\left(\frac{(2+\delta)(2(z+\overline{\beta}_L)+\delta)+2\delta\psi}{4\psi}\right) + b\left(\frac{(2+\delta)(2(z+\underline{\beta}_L)+\delta)+2\delta\psi}{4\psi}\right) - c \geq \frac{z}{\psi} + \delta\rho(-1), \tag{13}$$

which is satisfied as long as:

$$c \leq \overline{c}^P(-1) := \frac{2p(\overline{\beta}_L - \underline{\beta}_L)(2+\delta) + 2q(\overline{\beta}_L - \underline{\beta}_L)(2+\delta) + 2(2\underline{\beta}_L + \delta + \delta z) + \delta(2\underline{\beta}_L + \delta + 2\psi - 4\psi\rho(-1))}{4\psi}. \tag{14}$$

First, suppose that $\rho(-1) = \rho(1) = \rho$. In that case we have that $\overline{c}^P(-1) > \overline{c}^P(1)$ so that the President will go public for a wider range of costs when the status quo is favorable, the same as in the main model. Moreover both $\overline{c}^P(-1)$ and $\overline{c}^P(1)$ are decreasing in ρ. This is intuitive: the more likely it is the President will win reelection without going public the less likely she is to go public and tie her reelection to the legislative outcome, which is inherently risky. In addition, $\frac{\partial\overline{c}^P(-1)-\overline{c}^P(1)}{\partial\rho} = 0$ illustrating the fact that the difference between the cost thresholds for going public across favorable and unfavorable status quo is constant in ρ.

Now, suppose that $\rho(-1) \neq \rho(1)$ so that the President's ex ante electoral strength differs across status quo policies. In that case, the ordering of the cost thresholds can flip. Proposition 6 characterizes the relevant conditions.

Proposition 6. *Define $\rho(x^{sq}) := Pr[reelect|s=0,x^{sq}]$ and $\overline{c}^P(x^{sq})$ as the maximum c such that the*

President will go public given $\rho(x^{sq})$ and x^{sq}.

- *If the President is electorally weak, $\rho(x^{sq}) < 1/2$, then she is always less likely to go public than in the baseline model (i.e., $\bar{c}^p(x^{sq}) < \bar{c}(x^{sq})$). If instead the President is electorally strong, $\rho(x^{sq}) > 1/2$, then she is always more likely to go public than in the baseline model (i.e., $\bar{c}^p(x^{sq}) > \bar{c}(x^{sq})$).*

- *If $\rho(-1) \leq \rho(1)$ then $\bar{c}(-1) > \bar{c}(1)$ so that the President is always more likely to go public when the status quo is favorable.*

- *If $\rho(-1) > \rho(1)$ then there exists a level of preference uncertainty $\psi^* > 0$ such that when $\psi < \psi^*$, $\bar{c}^p(-1) > \bar{c}^p(1)$ so that the President is more likely to go public when there is a favorable status quo and when $\psi > \psi^*$, $\bar{c}^p(-1) < \bar{c}^p(1)$ so the President is more likely to go public when there is an unfavorable status quo.*

Proof. Follows directly from comparisons of (1) $\bar{c}(-1)$ and $\bar{c}^p(-1)$ and $\bar{c}(1)$ and $\bar{c}^p(1)$ which yields the first bullet point after plugging in the appropriate value of ρ (either less than or greater than $1/2$); (2) $\bar{c}^p(1)$ and $\bar{c}^p(-1)$ fixing $\rho(-1) \leq \rho(1)$ which yields the second bullet point; (3) $\bar{c}(-1)$ and $\bar{c}(1)$ when $\rho(-1) > \rho(1)$ which yields the third bullet point.

For the third bullet point, we have that $\bar{c}^p(-1) < \bar{c}^p(1)$ whenever:

$$\psi > -\frac{\delta(\underline{\beta}_L - \underline{\beta}_R + \delta) + (\delta+2)p(\bar{\beta}_L - \underline{\beta}_L - \bar{\beta}_R + \underline{\beta}_R) + (\delta+2)q(\bar{\beta}_L - \underline{\beta}_L) + 2(\underline{\beta}_L - \underline{\beta}_R + \delta + \delta z)}{2\delta(\rho(-1) - \rho(1))}. \tag{15}$$

Otherwise, $\bar{c}^p(-1) > \bar{c}^p(1)$ as in the main model. Define ψ^* as the RHS of Inequality (15). This yields the statement in the third bullet point. ∎

A.5 Extension: Reelection if and only if $x = -1$

In this section we alter our assumptions about the president's reelection probabilities. In particular, we assume that the president wins reelection if and only if policy ends up favorable, $x = -1$, irrespective of whether or not she goes public. Otherwise, we retain all other aspects of the model.

First, the gridlock regions when the president stays silent are altered since now the president wins reelection only when $x = -1$. When the president stays silent party L votes for policy $x = 1$ if and only if:

$$1(\theta - z) > -1(\theta - z) + \delta,$$
$$\theta > z + \frac{\delta}{2}.$$

Party R votes for $x = -1$ if and only if:

$$-1(\theta + z) > 1(\theta + z) + \delta,$$
$$-z - \frac{\delta}{2} > \theta.$$

Thus, the gridlock region when the President stays silent in this altered political environment is:

$$\left(-z - \frac{\delta}{2}, z + \frac{\delta}{2} \right).$$

The gridlock region when the President goes public is unaltered from the baseline. This is because in the baseline when the President goes public she only wins reelection if $x = -1$, which is the same as in this environment.

Now we can characterize the cost thresholds for the President to go public given that she will win reelection if and only if $x = -1$ whether or not she goes public. Consider the President's expected utilities for staying silent, conditional on the status quo:

$$EU_P(s = 0|x^{sq} = 1) = \int_{-\psi}^{-z-\frac{\delta}{2}} (1+\delta)d\theta + \int_{-z-\frac{\delta}{2}}^{\psi} (-1)d\theta,$$
$$= \frac{\delta}{2} - \frac{(2+\delta)(2z+\delta)}{4\psi},$$

$$EU_P(s = 0|x^{sq} = -1) = \int_{-\psi}^{z+\frac{\delta}{2}} (1+\delta)d\theta + \int_{z+\frac{\delta}{2}}^{\psi} (-1)d\theta,$$
$$= \frac{(2+\delta)(2z+\delta) + 2\delta\psi}{4\psi}.$$

The President's expected utilities for going public are the same as in the baseline model since the electoral dynamics are identical in that case. Incentive compatibility requires that $EU_P(s = 1|x^{sq}) \geq EU_P(s = 0|x^{sq})$ for the President to go public. When the status quo is unfavorable this requires that:

$$p\left(\frac{\delta}{2} - \frac{(2+\delta)(2z - 2\overline{\beta}_R + \delta)}{4\psi} \right) + (1-p)\left(\frac{\delta}{2} - \frac{(2+\delta)(2z - 2\underline{\beta}_R + \delta)}{4\psi} \right) - c \geq \frac{\delta}{2} - \frac{(2+\delta)(2z+\delta)}{4\psi},$$
$$\frac{(p(\overline{\beta}_R - \underline{\beta}_R) + \underline{\beta}_R)(2+\delta)}{2\psi} \geq c.$$

Define this threshold as $\overline{c}'(1) := \frac{(p(\overline{\beta}_R - \underline{\beta}_R) + \underline{\beta}_R)(2+\delta)}{2\psi}$. Now suppose the status quo is favorable.

Then the President goes public if and only if:

$$(p+q)\left(\frac{(2+\delta)(2(z+\overline{\beta}_L)+\delta)+2\delta\psi}{4\psi}\right)+(1-p-q)\left(\frac{(2+\delta)(2(z+\underline{\beta}_L)+\delta)+2\delta\psi}{4\psi}\right)-c\geq\frac{(2+\delta)(2z+\delta)+2\delta\psi}{4\psi},$$

$$\frac{((p+q)(\overline{\beta}_L-\underline{\beta}_L)+\underline{\beta}_L)(2+\delta)}{2\psi}\geq c.$$

Define this threshold as $c'(-1):=\frac{((p+q)(\overline{\beta}_L-\underline{\beta}_L)+\underline{\beta}_L)(2+\delta)}{2\psi}$. As in the baseline model we have that $c'(-1)>c'(1)$ so that the President is willing to go public for a wider range of costs when the status quo is favorable.

We can also compare these thresholds to those from the baseline model. In that case we find that $c'(-1)<c(-1)$, implying that the President is willing to go public for a wider range of costs in the baseline model when the status quo is favorable. This follows from the fact that the reservation utility for staying silent is higher in this altered environment than in the baseline model, which follows from the fact the gridlock region for staying silent is larger in this extended model. Thus, when the status quo is favorable, and harder to change given the expanded gridlock region, the President is less likely (in the sense of set inclusion) to go public than in the baseline model. When the status quo is unfavorable the President is willing to go public for a wider range of costs in this altered environment compared to the baseline: $c'(1)>c(1)$. Again, this follows from the reservation utilities for staying silent. In this case the reservation utility is lower than in the baseline model; again because the gridlock region when staying silent makes policy change more difficult.

It also follows that $c'(-1)-c'(1)<c(-1)-c(1)$, implying that the "gap" between the status quo dependent cost thresholds is smaller when the President wins reelection if and only if $x=-1$ than in the baseline model. That is, there is a wider range of costs where the President goes public if and only if the status quo is favorable in the baseline model. This makes sense given that the expanded gridlock region when staying silent in this extended model provides relatively weaker incentives to go public when the status quo is favorable and relatively stronger incentives to go public when the status quo is unfavorable than in the baseline model. Overall, while the thresholds to go public are slightly different the same dynamics manifest from the baseline model: the President is more likely to go public when the status quo is favorable.