

# From the Briefing Room to Your Living Room: How the President Sets the Media's Agenda\*

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## Abstract

When do the president's words reach the public? Presidents aim to shape public opinion, but few Americans directly see or hear their messages, instead encountering them through the media. Thus, reaching the public is conditional on the president's ability to shape media coverage—an often ignored, but key, intermediate step in the flow of political information. We assess the White House's ability to influence the press in over 7,000 Daily Briefings from 1993–2024. We hypothesize, and find, that the White House can more effectively steer a briefing's discussion with longer opening statements and expert guest appearances, but this influence declines during divided government. We then show that on days when the White House has more influence in the briefing room, network news better mirrors the White House's language. Our results provide microfoundations of presidential media influence and have implications for the two-step flow of information.

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In May 2023, with government divided, President Biden and Speaker McCarthy (R-CA) were locked in a game of chicken over the debt ceiling—a game the president was losing. As the X-date neared, the White House faced increasing criticism from both the Republican House majority and the press. In the White House Daily Briefing on May 24th, Press Secretary Jean-Pierre could not escape combative questions about the default and the president's negotiating strategy. Toward the end of the briefing, one reporter plainly asked: “what do you say to congressional Democrats who feel cut out of the process and feel like Republicans have taken control of the narrative?” (The White House 2023). From there, things only got worse. That night, NBC news played a clip of the briefing in which Jean-Pierre called the crisis “manufactured,” but they gave the Speaker the last word. The segment ended with McCarthy saying, “we have to spend less than we spent last year. It is not my fault that the Democrats cannot give up on their spending” (NBC 2023). Here, the White House lost the messaging war. But other times, they succeed. For example, in 2021, during a period of unified government, the president raised the debt ceiling over Republican objections with little push-back from the press. Although many agree that “no other single actor in the political system has quite the capability of the president to set agendas” (Kingdon 1995, 23), as these examples illustrate, agenda-setting power is variable. Here, we ask: when is the White House able to set the media’s agenda? And which factors promote or limit their ability to do so?

Presidents rely on public support to achieve their goals, but generating that support is difficult. There is little evidence that public opinion changes in the wake of major presidential speeches (e.g., Edwards 2003; Franco, Grimmer and Lim n.d.; Howell, Porter and Wood 2020). However, this literature implicitly assumes the public hears what the president says. The reality is different. Only the most engaged and unpersuadable partisans directly consume presidential appeals (Kernell and Rice 2011); the persuadable audience can only be reached indirectly. To access this audience, presidents must transmit their messaging through the news media (Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2011; Franco, Grimmer

and Lim n.d.). This intermediate step would pose no problem for the president were the media simply an uncritical “conveyor belt,” as some have argued it once was (e.g., Bennett, Lawrence and Livingston 2008). Today, the press is more willing to question, contextualize, and distort the White House’s narrative (Baum and Kernell 1999; Baum and Potter 2008; Entman 2003; Groeling 2010). Thus, the White House both relies on and battles with the media to promote its messaging. Although most studies of “going public” ignore the media, studying its mediating role is key to understanding how the public receives the president’s messaging and the mechanisms contributing to the president’s persuasive abilities.

We examine the president’s ability to set the media’s agenda, which has important implications for public opinion and the president’s legislative success. First, we focus on a routine, institutionalized practice valued by both the White House and press: the White House Daily Briefing. Briefings support a “symbiotic” relationship between the White House and the media, as “each side needs the other” to advance its goals: “reporters must have information for their stories, and the White House must have publicity for their programs” (Kumar 2007, 181). However, each actor’s motivations lead to a dynamic power struggle over what is discussed. Where the White House seeks to promote its agenda, the press corps wants to ferret out novel information, demonstrate independence, and provide alternative viewpoints—all to satisfy consumer demand. While the White House may walk in with a plan, questioning from the press corps may knock the Press Secretary off message (Baum and Potter 2008; Groeling 2010; Kumar 2007).

We argue the president’s ability to influence what is discussed during the Daily Briefing—what we call “briefing agenda setting”—is a function of the White House’s strategic choices as well as the political environment. We focus on two strategies the White House can employ to control discussion: offering longer opening statements or inviting authoritative “special guest” speakers (e.g., national security officials). These strategies play to the press’s desire for novel and authoritative information and can keep the press on-

message. Second, we turn to a political factor that can dampen the White House’s ability to set the briefing agenda: divided government. When the president’s opponents control Congress, they can investigate the administration (Kriner and Schickler 2016) and frustrate the White House’s legislative goals (Cox and McCubbins 2005). This potent combination of authority and conflict incentivizes the press to ask questions that feature opposition arguments. Further, the press has a strong motivation to include opposition viewpoints in stories to promote democratic deliberation and inform the public (Entman 2003), which should be heightened when those actors hold institutional power.

To test these hypotheses, we collect transcripts from all White House press briefings held between January 27, 1993 and April 4, 2024. We use the Speaker Identity for Topic Segmentation (SITS) topic model (Nguyen, Boyd-Graber and Resnik 2012; Nguyen et al. 2014; Rossiter 2022), which measures participants’ agenda-setting power in turn-based, conversational contexts. This model identifies what is being discussed, who shifts the discussion, and when, allowing us to measure briefing agenda-setting as the proportion of each briefing that stays on White House-initiated topics. As expected, the White House has stronger agenda-setting power when it offers a longer opening statement and when it invites at least one special guest. However, this power over the briefing wanes during divided government.

Yet one might wonder: given that few Americans watch the Daily Briefing, does agenda setting in this context matter? We argue it does. The briefing is a routinized, informational subsidy around which the broader media develops news stories (Gershon 2012; Sigal 1973), and clips of the briefings are frequently aired on TV or promoted on social media. Therefore, the White House has an interest in the briefing agenda as it influences downstream news coverage. In our second study, we examine ABC, CBS, and NBC nightly news coverage between 2010–2024 and find that when the White House more effectively sets the briefing agenda, that night’s news broadcasts use language that better reflects the White House’s agenda.

Our findings contribute to the literature on presidential agenda setting (Cohen 1995; Canes-Wrone 2006) and influence over the media (Edwards and Wood 1999; Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2011). Where past studies focus on the link between presidential rhetoric and public reaction, we model an overlooked, but crucial, intermediate step: transmission of that message through the mass media. Our analysis of real-time briefing agenda setting and downstream coverage indicates that presidential influence over the media is conditional rather than absolute, as previously held. We conclude that one reason presidents struggle to lead the public is because they lose control of their messaging in the briefing room, and then, in subsequent news coverage. Although the daily briefing is not Americans' primary news source, what happens there matters for how presidents go public and their potential to shape American opinion.

## Presidents and the News Agenda

Presidents are strategic actors whose electoral and policy goals are achieved, in part, by passing a substantive agenda (Light 1999; Howell and Moe 2016, 2020).<sup>1</sup> Doing so requires coalition building (e.g., Edwards 2000; Miller 2023), and in these efforts, presidents have long pursued a strategy of “going public”(Kernell 1997; Pluta 2023; Tulis 1987).<sup>2</sup> Today, presidents have more direct access to the public than ever, but the public they face is more fragmented, polarized, and skeptical than in the past. To achieve their goals in this environment, presidents strive for ubiquity—to be omnipresent in both political and non-political spaces to attract attention and set the agenda (Scacco and Coe 2021).

While presidents may reach a few citizens directly, most people encounter presidential messages through the media (Cook 1998; Stuckey 2000). Yet, studies of going public

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<sup>1</sup>Akin to the concept of legislative enterprise (Salisbury and Shepsle 1981), we consider all White House communication efforts to be part of an “executive enterprise” where White House staffers participate as extensions of the president.

<sup>2</sup>Presidents can use unilateral powers to circumvent the traditional lawmaking process (Kaufman and Rogowski 2024; Moe and Howell 1999), however, these moves are often symbolic, unpopular, and easily reversed (Lowande 2024; Reeves and Rogowski 2022; Thrower 2017).

typically overlook this mediation, assuming that what the president says proxies for what Americans hear from him (but see Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2011; Franco, Grimmer and Lim n.d.). Unlike more direct channels, however, presidents risk losing control of their messages when the media conveys them to the public (Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2011). News organizations are not stenographers who pass on presidents' words verbatim. They are "both political and economic entities" that have an incentive to maximize their profits by gaining audience share (Napoli 1997, 207). Sometimes, these incentives mean news organizations will parrot or promote the president's message. At other times, they drive media organizations to contextualize, question, or oppose the president's message (Baum and Kernell 1999). Thus, accounting for the mass media's role in the flow of presidential information is critical to understanding the efficacy of going public.

In reporting on presidents, news organizations consider at least four key story features that create opportunities and risks for White House agenda setting: novelty, authority, conflict, and partisan balance (Groeling 2010). First, news organizations capture attention and increase audience share by broadcasting *new* information. Second, new information is even more appealing when it comes from authoritative sources who have insider knowledge. These two features often work to the White House's advantage. The president generates a continuous stream of new, and relevant, information, and he is one of the most authoritative actors in American politics (Gans 1979, 2004). Here, both the president and press benefit: the president's message is shared and the press attracts audience share. However, the other two features can cut against the president's interests. Conflict sells, which can motivate reporters to cover stories where others push back on the White House's message. Further, mainstream media outlets want to promote an appearance of partisan balance and independence. Featuring arguments from the president's opposition, (e.g., in Congress), can provide conflict, balance, and context to a developing story. Thus, news organizations are incentivized to both cover presidents while also providing coverage that may warp presidents' messages.

Although scholars are aware of both the president's dependence on the press, as well as the press's autonomy and incentives, few have directly examined the White House's ability to set the media's agenda (but see Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2011). To do so, we focus on the Daily Briefing. Substantively, the White House uses the event to shape press coverage of its priorities. The press uses it to learn information about the White House, inform its coverage, and source clips for television, Internet, and social media broadcasting (Kumar 2007). The degree to which either side can successfully set the briefing agenda in real time is relevant to understanding the production of the news Americans consume. The Daily Briefing offers methodological advantages as well. First, this setting permits us to observe a dynamic form of agenda setting given the back-and-forth nature of the question-and-answer format. Second, as part of the institutional presidency, each Press Secretary inherits existing structures and norms from previous administrations and press corps, facilitating over-time comparisons (Kumar 2007, 223). Third, the Daily Briefing is routinized and near-daily, meaning we can observe agenda setting in a context where presidents exercise less discretion over *whether* to speak. The Daily Briefing offers an important opportunity to learn about how the White House and press interact. Its frequency and stability facilitate comparisons across time.

## The Daily Briefing as a Fight to Set the Agenda

The modern Daily Briefing is typically led by the Press Secretary (or her designee) on weekday afternoons, allowing the White House to contextualize the president's words and actions from earlier in the day. It also provides an opportunity for the press to learn novel information "on-the-record" with audio and video it can use in its broadcast coverage. Even if the public is not tuning into the Daily Briefing, the White House sees it as a key opportunity to go public and amplify "information favorable to the president and his policies" (Kumar 2007, 239). As George W. Bush Press Secretary Ari Fleischer explained,

“I was talking directly to the people, not just the reporters in the room” (Fleischer 2020). Similarly, Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater expressed that “[n]ormally, there was one story each day that dominated the news and my briefing. My goal was to find some way to ‘advance’ that story...all with the aim of influencing the story so it reflected the president’s viewpoint” (Fitzwater 1995, 95; see also Cook 1998, 138).

Unlike other presidential opportunities to go public, the briefing is dialogue, not monologue. Although the Press Secretary may open with a statement, most of the briefing is dedicated to answering questions from a potentially hostile press corps. For example, Clinton Press Secretary Jake Siewert says, reporters “want some footage of them whacking around a White House official” (Siewert 2018), which will come at the expense of the agenda the White House hopes to promote. In this back-and-forth, George W. Bush advisor Dan Bartlett expresses the Press Secretary’s goal is the same as any presidential speech: “to, as much as possible, stay on the messages we want to in a press briefing” (quoted in Kumar 2007, 94).

This format creates the possibility that the White House will have to fight for, or may even lose, control of the agenda as the briefing unfolds. For instance, Peter Roussell, a Reagan Deputy Press Secretary, explained that when the press focuses on something the White House disfavors, “getting reporters off the story” becomes tantamount (Roussel 1999). Yet getting reporters back to the White House’s agenda can be difficult. The press secretary cannot stick to talking points and dodge all unfriendly press questions. As Bill Clinton Press Secretary Mike McCurry explains, refusing to engage with “off-message” questions can create the perception that the Press Secretary is “stonewalling, not being forthcoming,” eroding trust and collegiality between the press corps and the White House (quoted in Kumar 2007, 49). Given this cat and mouse game, we consider how the White House’s briefing agenda-setting ability will vary, subject to the press’s four incentives—novelty, authority, conflict, and partisan balance—and what strategies the White House

can take to maintain control over the briefing's agenda.

## Hypotheses

First, because the Press Secretary speaks first, she can make an opening statement with the goal of setting the briefing agenda. These statements are often lengthy and substantive, and they come from an authoritative official speaking on behalf of the president. Opening statements can provide novel information to attract reporters' attention, steer the discussion towards the White House's preferred topics, or preempt and reframe questions about disfavored topics. The opening statement creates a primacy effect: topics the Press Secretary raises take on added importance in reporters' minds and may steer them toward those topics instead of others (Miller and Campbell 1959). Accounts from former White House staffers and correspondents support this conception of the opening statement as an agenda-setting opportunity. For example, Roman Popadiuk, who served Presidents Reagan and H.W. Bush, said that an opening statement "calms the press down. They have to sit down and listen, because you might say something important... you're in control now" (Popadiuk 1999). Dom Bonafede, recounting his work as a correspondent for the *National Journal* during the Gerald Ford administration, echoed similar sentiments: "every day when [Press Secretary Ron] Nessen gets out there he determines, with his opening statement, what the news is going to be for that day" (quoted in Grossman and Kumar 1981, 33).

**Opening Statement Hypothesis:** The White House will have more success setting the agenda of the Daily Briefing when offering a longer, relative to a shorter, opening statement.

Second, the Press Secretary may invite other administration officials, such as cabinet secretaries, agency heads, and national security advisors, to make statements and answer questions. By featuring these guests, the White House can appeal to the press's interests in novelty and authority. While the Press Secretary thoroughly prepares for each briefing,

she does not have the same level of policy acumen or stature as other officials. By providing the press corps with opportunities to hear from, and question, these experts, the White House can draw journalists' attention to topics in these guests' realms of expertise rather than others (Cook 1998; Gans 1979). Mike McCurry argues that bringing in a special guest was an effective way to communicate the president's message because "it was more reliable and authentic" to have policy experts communicate the details of the White House's actions (Kumar 2007, 49).

**Special Guest Hypothesis:** The White House will have more success setting the agenda of the Daily Briefing when inviting special guests.

While these strategies may enhance the Press Secretary's briefing agenda-setting ability on any given day, there are political factors beyond the briefing room that may constrain the White House. In particular, divided government should decrease the White House's agenda setting ability given the potent combination of authority, conflict, and partisan balance the situation provides. Irrespective of the institutional distribution of power, the press often indexes elite opinion and brings opposition talking points to the briefing (Bennett 1990; Eshbaugh-Soha 2013). Doing so allows the press to pursue conflictual stories and provide partisan balance. However, when the opposition holds congressional power, they gain authority. Their messages are no longer empty threats; they provide insight into how the president's agenda may be stymied by obstruction, alternative policy proposals, or oversight (Barrett and Eshbaugh-Soha 2007; Bond and Fleisher 1990; Kriner and Schickler 2016; Noble 2024). The press will want to raise these combative comments or actions in the briefing as they directly bear on political outcomes. In unified government, when the opposition has less power, the press may be more responsive to the president and his party's message given their control of institutional power.

**Divided Government Hypothesis:** The White House will have more success setting the agenda of the Daily Briefing during unified government relative to divided government.

Finally, we argue that these fights to set the Daily Briefing's agenda matter for the news Americans consume. For the press corps, and the news organizations that employ them, time and resource constraints often mean they rely on the Daily Briefing as an informational subsidy to help them construct their coverage of the president and national politics. (Bennett 1990; Eshbaugh-Soha 2013; Gershon 2012; Grimmer 2013; Kumar 2003; Sigal 1973). For the White House, success of the briefing is measured by their ability to influence downstream news coverage. Mike McCurry said that "when you turn on your network news at night or begin to look at the Internet and see what the next day's newspapers will look like..." he could begin to assess whether the Daily Briefing had been effective (quoted in Kumar 2007, 57). Thus, when the White House is better able to set the agenda in the briefing room, subsequent media coverage should more strongly reflect the White House's message.

**Subsequent Coverage Hypothesis:** When the White House has more success setting the agenda of the Daily Briefing, downstream media coverage will better reflect the White House's messaging.

## Data and Measurement

To test our hypotheses, we need a measure of the White House's agenda-setting ability during the Daily Briefing. In this section, we explain how we operationalize our construct of briefing agenda setting using a corpus of press briefing transcripts and the Speaker Identity for Topic Segmentation (SITS) topic model.

### Press Briefing Transcript Data

We begin by collecting all White House press briefing transcripts available from The American Presidency Project as of April 9, 2024 (Woolley and Peters N.d.).<sup>3</sup> This corpus

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<sup>3</sup>While the vast majority of these transcripts are of formal Daily Briefings (5,168, or 71.7%), as described above, they also include events such as press gaggles as background briefings. However, all of these events

contains 7,203 transcripts from January 27, 1993 to April 4, 2024. Panel A of Figure 1 shows the number of transcripts in our dataset per presidential term. With the exception of Donald Trump’s first term in office, each presidential term includes over 750 briefings, held on most weekdays.<sup>4</sup>

Next, we transformed the transcripts into a dataset at the “speaking turn” level. We define a speaking turn as the sequence of uninterrupted speech by a given speaker, ending when another speaker begins speaking. For each speaking turn, we are interested not just in what was said, but also who said it. We classify all White House-affiliated speakers (i.e., Press Secretary, administration officials) as one speaking entity—the White House—and all other speakers as a second entity—the Press. The resulting dataset has 671,033 speaking turns, with an average of 93 speaking turns per briefing.

We use these data to measure the two White House strategies highlighted in our hypotheses—whether the White House offered a longer opening statement and whether at least one special guest was present.<sup>5</sup> Figure 1, Panels B and C respectively, visualize these features by presidential term. Over time, presidents employ longer opening statements, with the median opening statement by Trump and Biden being over twice as long as Clinton, Bush, and Obama. Guests peaked under Biden, who brought at least one guest to over 60% of briefings. All other presidents brought guests to less than half.

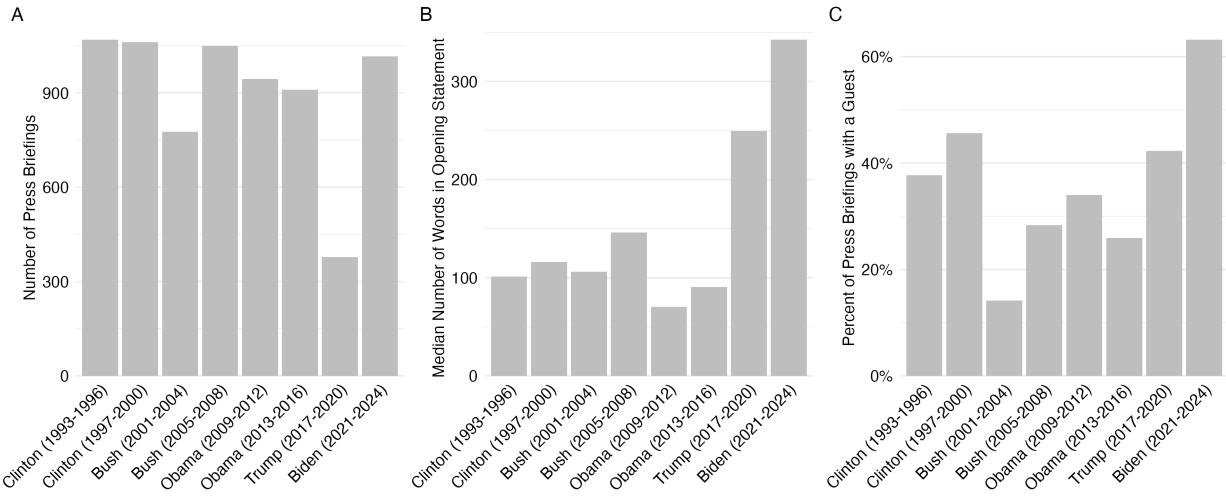
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constitute on-the-record dialogues between the White House and the press, and these other events often substitute for Daily Briefings (e.g., when the president is traveling). See Appendix A for details on these transcripts and the data collection process.

<sup>4</sup>Starting in the second year of Donald Trump’s first term, his administration broke with precedent and offered briefings irregularly, possibly due to Trump’s penchant for speaking directly with reporters in informal “pool sprays” (Breuninger 2018; Keith 2018). Regular daily briefings resumed during the Biden administration.

<sup>5</sup>Sometimes briefing transcripts start with pleasantries before the Press Secretary formally begins. We consider the opening statement as any White House speech before the first substantive press speaking turn. See Appendix C for coding details.

Figure 1: Key Features of Press Briefings by Presidential Term



Note: Figure visualizes features of the transcripts in our dataset. Panel A shows the number of press briefings per presidential term. Panel B shows median number of words used in the White House’s opening statement per presidential term. Panel C shows the percent of press briefings with at least one special guest per presidential term.

## Topic Model Estimation

To quantify the White House’s agenda-setting within briefings, we apply the Speaker Identity for Topic Segmentation (SITS) topic model to our speaking-turn dataset (Nguyen, Boyd-Graber and Resnik 2012; Nguyen et al. 2014; Rossiter 2022).<sup>6</sup> This model is similar to familiar topic models in political science, such as Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) and the Structural Topic Model (STM) (Roberts 2014). Like with LDA and STM, SITS estimates  $K$  topics (distributions over the corpus vocabulary) from a corpus of documents. SITS was constructed specifically for interactive, multi-speaker settings (Nguyen, Boyd-Graber and Resnik 2012; Nguyen et al. 2014). In these settings, each interaction—here, each Daily Briefing—is similar to LDA and STM’s “documents.” Also like LDA and STM, SITS is a mixed-membership topic model, where each document is assumed to contain a mixture of the  $K$  topics. The model estimates a distribution over the  $K$  topics for each briefing to understand what was discussed. Unlike these other topic models, SITS also estimates where shifts in what is being discussed occur. Specifically, for each speaking

<sup>6</sup>See Appendix C for details on the model estimation. We estimated the model with  $K = 50$  topics.

turn in a briefing, SITS estimates the probability that a shift has occurred in what is being discussed (i.e., a “topic shift”). All speaking turns between one topic-shifting turn and the next belong to a given topical “segment” of the press briefing. In other words, all turns within a segment share a similar distribution over the  $K$  topics. The longer the segment, the more the briefing sustained attention on the given discussion, perhaps despite one actor attempting to shift attention to something else. Our ultimate goal is to conceptualize how much the White House is able to control the discussion that unfolds in the briefing room. To do so, we use the identity of which speaker (the White House or the press) initiated each shift in the discussion and how long (how many speaking turns) the briefing sustained attention on that discussion. To summarize: each press briefing transcript is akin to a “document”; we identify at the speaking-turn level where shifts in the topics of discussion occur; all turns between shifts constitute a segment on a given set of topics; and we use who introduced each segment in order to understand who is setting the agenda at that moment.

Figures 2 and 3 provide examples of these parameters from a press briefing during the Obama administration on March 11, 2013. The figures show excerpted speaking-turn text from the briefing (the full text can be found in Appendix C). For each turn, the italicized text indicates the index of the speaking turn in the transcript, who is speaking, and whether another a shift in the discussion occurred. Next to each speaking turn’s text, we plot the estimated topic distribution from that turn. Recall we estimated the SITS model with  $K = 50$  topics. We visualize the densities for only the 15 topics that occurred with a proportion of .10 or more in our examples across Figures 2 and 3 (Appendix C presents the top words from all 50 topics that we used to create these topic labels). In these barplots, we also label the turns that shifted the course of discussion with “Shift.” Finally, we aid the reader by using bold text for words and phrases in the excerpted text that align with the topic model’s output. Broadly, Figure 2 provides an example of a fight for control: rapid shifts in topic where both the White House and the press raise topics

Figure 2: Examples of Rapid Press Briefing Topic Shifts

**3. White House (Shift):** ...I have no announcements to make. You obviously know much of what's on the President's schedule this week, including his visits to Capitol Hill... to discuss a range of priorities including, of course, conversations he's been having on budget-related issues, the need to **reduce our deficit** in a balanced way, but also immigration reform and the progress that's being made on that subject in a **bipartisan way**, efforts to move forward on actions to reduce gun violence -- **also efforts that involve both Democrats and Republicans**...increasing our energy independence, the need to do something about the pace of nominations being confirmed and considered in the Senate -- **Judicial nominations**, in particular -- as well as the need for Congress to take action on cybersecurity...

**4. Press (Shift):** ...So since we are on week two of the charm blitz --...the President is going to the Hill, but he's also speaking to Organizing for Action, which is the group that **grew out of his campaign reelection**...last week OFA sent out an email...calling Republicans obstructionists, **blaming them for the sequester, saying if only they had voted for closing tax loopholes** the public wouldn't be in this jam. So is there a mixed message there from the President...appealing to and speaking to Republicans ... and then going to OFA, **potentially...a more partisan address?**

**5. White House (Shift):** Organizing for Action, as you know, Jim, was established to promote the President's public policy agenda. It is certainly the President's position that **sequester** has been implemented because Republicans made a choice. Rather than go along with a balanced approach to deficit reduction, rather than go along with either a buy-down or the deal that has been on the table...And it is another reason why we should **engage with and move forward...with at least the potential for bipartisan**, balanced deficit reduction that deals with the sequester and the larger goal of more than \$4 trillion in deficit reduction over a decade...the President has put forward solutions that **represent compromise...getting our fiscal house in order** in a way that's balanced so that the burden is not borne solely by seniors and middle-class families.

**6. Press (Shift):** Washington is a place of optics, too, and is it **diplomatic** to be thinking of -- be speaking to a **partisan** group on the same day that he's speaking to --

**7. White House (Shift):** First of all, I think you're misrepresenting the group...it's focused on policy issues. And the President's policy agenda...consists of item after item that have had **bipartisan support** in the past, that should have bipartisan support in the future. I mean, there's nothing partisan about **deficit reduction**... the President is pushing for a balanced package that would achieve the goal of over **\$4 trillion in deficit reduction** over a decade. And that includes a proposal that produces significant savings from entitlement reform as well as savings from **tax reform**... In the wake of Newtown, I would argue that there's nothing partisan about **common-sense solutions to reduce gun violence** in America. The victims of gun violence aren't Democrats or Republicans, especially when they're children. And there ought to be -- and there is -- **a path forward** to reduce gun violence in America...

Topic Labels	17: Communications & Diplomacy	40: Ceremonial Activities
2: Congressional Procedure	22: Terrorism	43: Courts and Judicial Appointments
9: Afghanistan War & U.S. Military Operations	23: Media Relations	47: Levantine Conflict & Civilian Impacts
11: Legal Counsel & Document Requests	28: Electoral Politics	
13: Federal Budget	29: Violent Crime	49: Deficit Reduction
14: Iran Nuclear Program & Sanctions	30: Legislative Reform & Bipartisan Efforts	

Note: Excerpted text and barplots of the topic distributions at the speaking-turn level. The x-axis provides and the topic number associated with the topwords provided in Appendix C.

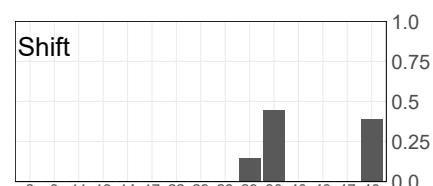
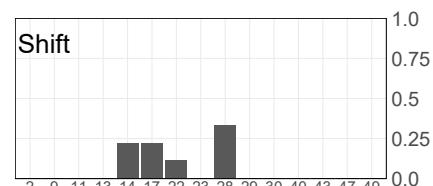
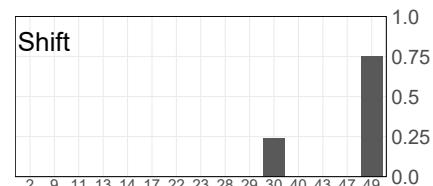
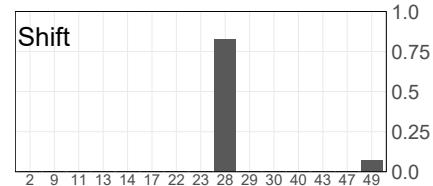
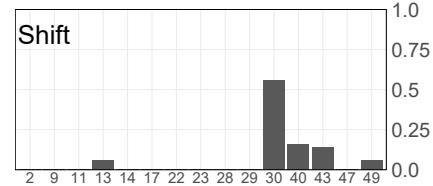
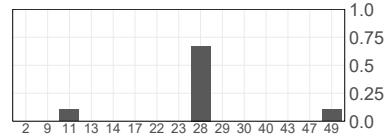


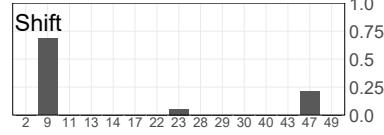
Figure 3: Examples of Winning Attention with Press Briefing Topic Shifts

### Press Shift Example

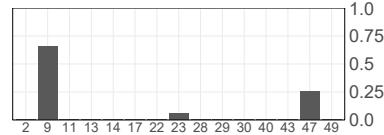
**23. White House:** ...there are organizations all...around the country that support policy agendas and policy areas. That's what this organization does. And I would refer you to them for more details on their efforts. They are not...engaged in **political campaigning -- winning elections or helping candidates win elections.** They're focused on the policy proposals...Mary.



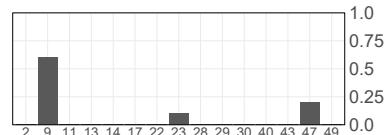
**24. Press (Shift):** Jay, over the weekend, **Afghan President** Hamid Karzai said the U.S. is encouraging **violence** in conjunction with the **Taliban** to prolong the U.S. presence in **Afghanistan**. He said the Taliban were killing Afghan **civilians** "in service to America." What was the President's reaction to hearing this?



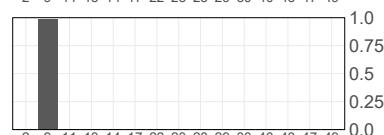
**25. White House:** I think Secretary Hagel and General Dunford spoke to this yesterday and made clear that any suggestion the United States is colluding with the **Taliban** is categorically false...The United States has spent enormous blood and treasure for the past 12 years **supporting the Afghan people** and ensuring -- in the effort to ensure stability and security in that country. The last thing we would do is support any kind of violence, particularly involving **innocent civilians**.



**26. Press:** Do Karzai's comments and this kind of mounting **tension** harm or impact U.S. plans to withdraw?

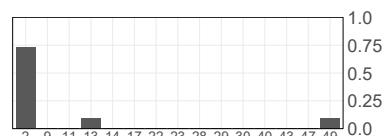


**27. White House:** The President has a policy that has been embraced by NATO, by our allies in the coalition, and we are pursuing that policy. That includes we've drawn down the **surge forces** and we're winding down our **troop presence in Afghanistan** as we build up **Afghan security forces** and turn over security lead to **Afghan security forces**. And that progress continues...



### White House Shift Example

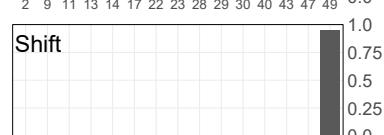
**53. White House:** We are engaging with Senate Democrats, with House Democrats, with Senate Republicans and House Republicans, as you know, on budget issues as well as on the broader agenda that we've been talking about --



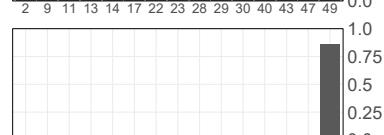
**54. Press:** But now that they're **drawing up** their **budget** --



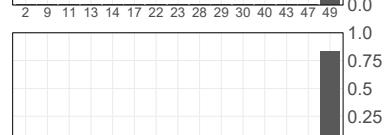
**55. White House (Shift):** I'm sure there are conversations going on, on that process....The broader effort underway here is to try to, through the budget process, achieve a compromise that allows for both **entitlement reform and tax reform** that produce the savings necessary to achieve that \$4 trillion-plus target over **10 years of deficit reduction**...And that is the President's goal: deficit reduction large enough to put our **economy on a fiscally sustainable path** so that the ratio of debt to GDP is below 3 percent for a period of time that would allow, concurrently, through investments and other policy decisions, allow the economy to grow...



**56. Press:** Is there going to be a goal -- obviously Paul Ryan has got a 10-year target. Is the President going to have a **target**, whether it's 10 years, 15, 20, whatever --



**57. White House:** The President will have a **target for deficit reduction** over 10 years, as he has consistently in his budget --



#### Topic Labels

2: Congressional Procedure	17: Communications & Diplomacy
9: Afghanistan War & U.S. Military Operations	22: Terrorism
11: Legal Counsel & Document Requests	23: Media Relations
13: Federal Budget	28: Electoral Politics
14: Iran Nuclear Program & Sanctions	29: Violent Crime
	30: Legislative Reform & Bipartisan Efforts

40: Ceremonial Activities
43: Courts and Judicial Appointments
47: Levantine Conflict & Civilian Impacts
49: Deficit Reduction

Note: Excerpted text and barplots of the topic distributions at the speaking-turn level. The x-axis provides and the topic number associated with the topwords provided in Appendix C.

on their respective agendas and neither sustain attention on their preferred agenda. On the other hand, Figure 3 provides examples from this briefing where the press and the White House successfully set the agenda, with the other speaker sustaining the line of discussion.

To demonstrate how the White House and the press compete for power over the agenda, Figure 2 begins on the third speaking turn in the briefing, after the White House and press exchange pleasantries. In turn 3, the White House opens the briefing by focusing on President Obama’s bipartisan efforts—referencing meetings with congressional Democrats and Republicans (topic 40), particularly on deficit-reduction efforts (topic 49) as well as several bipartisan policy priorities (topic 30), including calling special attention to the pace of judicial nominations (topic 43). In turn 4, the press corps pushes back, accusing the president of partisan behavior in an upcoming speaking engagement with Organizing for Action (OFA), a non-profit organization that grew out of Obama’s 2012 re-election campaign intended to promote his agenda. The model identifies this turn as a topic shift, and the barplots give insight into why—the press corps emphasizes the partisan nature of the president’s recent actions (topic 28). Then in turn 5, the White House subtly tries to pivot back to the bipartisanship framing (topic 30) of the deficit issues (topic 49). While turns 4 and 5 discuss the sequester issue (topic 49), they emphasize different framings in doing so, and the model captures these subtleties. In turn 6, the press corps tries to again establish discussion on the partisan nature of the president’s activities, and the model identifies this as a shift in discussion. Yet again in turn 7, the White House discusses the deficit issues (topic 49), but from the angle of bipartisan legislation (topic 30), and this time also works in discussion of gun control (topic 29). The briefing has yet to sustain attention on a shifted-to discussion point as the speakers push their talking points and desired issue framings. This example also illustrates that estimated “topic shifts” from the SITS model are not shifts in singular topics (e.g., from judicial nominations to nuclear weapon threats). Rather, any given speaking turn is a mixture of topics

from the topic model, and these mixtures constitute the state of the discussion. This allows the model to identify different framings of the same broad issue as topic shifts.

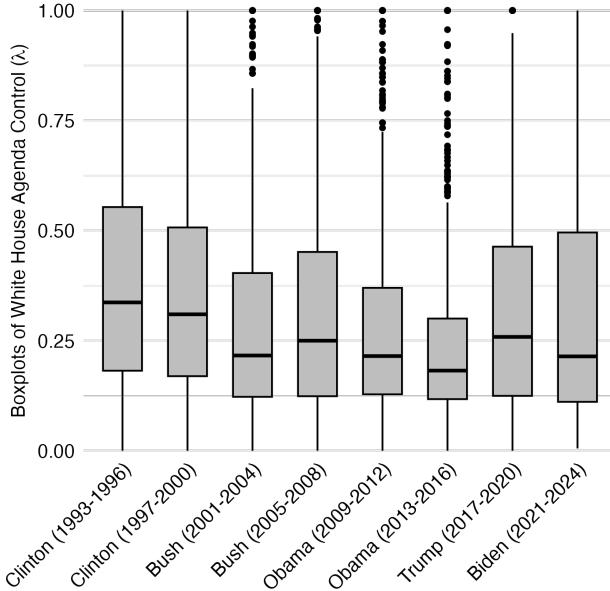
Figure 3 provides examples where the press and the White House each set the agenda for the briefing in real-time by shifting topic *and* sustaining attention on the topic for several speaking turns. Beginning only a few turns after Figure 2 left off, the White House is again defending the president’s engagement with OFA (turn 23) when the press shifts topic to recent comments made by Afghan President Karzai (turn 24). The White House and the press continue on this topic for six speaking turns, which constitutes a segment of the briefing. The press corps was speaking when the topic shifted, therefore they set the briefing agenda in this instance. We highlight that agenda-setting by the other party is not necessarily harmful for a given actor. Here, the White House is not being criticized on the Afghan War topic. Rather, this topic was not a priority they raised proactively as they did with bipartisanship in Turn 3, and the press’s agenda-setting in this instance is harmful to the White House mainly because the White House lost the opportunity to promote a more desired message.

Later in the briefing, while the press and the White House are discussing the federal budget (turns 53 and 54), the White House subtly shifts to the president’s deficit-reduction efforts (turn 55), and the press and White House discuss fiscal policy under this framing for 29 consecutive speaking turns. The White House set the agenda in this instance, winning the real-time power struggle. Next, we discuss how we use this model output to operationalize the White House’s agenda-setting ability for each press briefing in our dataset.

## Operationalizing Agenda-Setting During Briefings

We operationalize the agenda-setting ability of the White House in a given briefing by measuring the proportion of speaking turns occurring within topical segments introduced by the White House. Put differently, our measure accounts for the proportion of

Figure 4: White House Agenda Setting ( $\lambda$ ) by Presidential Term



Note: Figure visualizes boxplots of our agenda-setting measure ( $\lambda$ ) by presidential term.

speaking turns in the briefing (whether spoken by the White House or press corps) that fall under a topic shift set by the White House. Formally, let each briefing  $b \in [1, 7203]$  be divided into segments  $j \in [1, J_b]$  with a total number of speaking turns  $T_b$ . Let  $n_{b,j}$  be the length, in number of speaking turns, of segment  $j$ . Also let  $a_{b,j} \in \{\text{White House, Press}\}$  be the speaker who initiated the topic segment. Our measure of the White House's agenda-setting ability at the briefing level is the following:

$$\lambda_b = \frac{\sum_{j=1}^{J_b} \mathbb{1}(a_{b,j} = \text{White House}) \cdot n_{b,j}}{T_b}. \quad (1)$$

As a proportion,  $\lambda_b$ 's bounds are  $[0, 1]$ . The press's agenda-setting ability is  $1 - \lambda_b$ . Figure 4 presents boxplots summarizing  $\lambda_b$  by presidential term. The figure shows that the White House—across all five included presidencies—typically has less agenda control than the press. This makes sense in the briefing context—he press is comprised of several actors who each have opportunities to ask new questions while the White House is a singular actor who is often in the position of responding. Across our entire dataset, the median share of briefing content controlled by the White House is 24.6%. While every ad-

ministration has some instances of controlling the entire briefing, this is not typical. Figure 4 also shows variation within and across administrations. For example, Obama’s first term displayed nearly half as much agenda control as Clinton’s first term, with a median  $\lambda_b$  of .182 and .337 respectively. In Appendix C, we show that the variation within presidential terms is not driven by sustained peaks and valleys in the White House’s agenda-setting ability. Instead, briefing agenda setting fluctuates consistently within each presidential term. In what follows, we systematically examine the conditions under which the White House sees success in setting their agenda in the briefing room.

## Briefing Agenda Control, 1993–2024

To determine when the White House exercises greater or weaker agenda-setting ability within briefings, we specify a series of ordinary least squares regression models at the briefing level. In these analyses, our dependent variable  $\lambda$ , described above. Higher values are indicative of more agenda-setting success by the White House.

We regress our dependent variable on three key explanatory variables. The first, *Special Guest(s)*, is an indicator that takes on a value on 1 when there is at least one additional briefer present beyond the Press Secretary or her designee.<sup>7</sup> The second, *Log Opening Statement Length* is the logged word count plus one of the Press Secretary’s opening remarks before the first substantive press question. We expect both of these variables to increase the White House’s agenda-setting ability during briefings, and therefore, be positively associated with our dependent variables. The final independent variable, *Divided Government*, takes on a value of 0 any time the presidency, House, and Senate are controlled by the same party, and 1 otherwise. We expect this variable to be inversely related to the White House’s briefing agenda-setting.<sup>8</sup> Given the level at which divided govern-

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<sup>7</sup> Any White House speaker who does not speak first, has 3 or fewer turns, and speaks less than 50 total words is not included in this count. This procedure excludes White House aides who interject for one speaking turn or typos in a single speaker’s name.

<sup>8</sup>We exclude observations during lame duck periods as different political incentives may operate and to

ment is defined, we cluster standard errors at the two-year Congress level.

As each administration may vary in their ability to set the briefing's agenda, we include president fixed effects to isolate within-presidency change. To account for potential seasonality in political and media attention, we include month and day-of-week fixed effects, following Djourelova and Durante (2022). We also control for a large suite of political conditions, external events, and briefing features that could obscure the relationship between our key explanatory variables and briefing agenda control. Political conditions include: investigations into the executive branch, presidential approval, presidential and midterm elections, the first 100 days of a new administration, and the occurrence of Supreme Court arguments and decisions. External events include: news pressure, large-scale natural disasters, terror events like mass shootings and global terrorism affecting U.S. persons, inflation, and unemployment. Briefing-level controls include the length, which is often determined by the press.<sup>9</sup> We discuss the operationalization and source of each control variable in Table D2.

## Results

Table 1 provides evidence consistent with our hypotheses. In column 1, we regress  $\lambda$ , the proportion of speaking turns for which the White House set the agenda, on our three key explanatory variables with president, month, and day of week fixed effects, but excluding control variables. Here, we see that the presence of at least one special guest speaker is associated with a 0.090 increase in White House's briefing agenda setting. Put differently, this effect means the White House sets the agenda for about 9 percentage points more of the briefing, or about 3.1 additional minutes of conversation in the average 34 minute briefing. A longer opening statement also increases the White

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avoid the brief period during which a new Congress begins on January 3, but before the new president has taken office on January 20.

<sup>9</sup>By norm, the White House speaker continues the briefing until a designated wire reporter in the front row signals her assent to end the briefing (Kumar 2007).

Table 1: Correlates of White House Briefing Agenda Control

	(1)	(2)
Special Guest(s)	0.090*** (0.021)	0.070*** (0.016)
Log Opening Statement Length	0.035*** (0.003)	0.032*** (0.002)
Divided Government	-0.035** (0.010)	-0.044*** (0.004)
Investigation		-0.001 (0.010)
Presidential Approval		-0.000 (0.000)
Election		0.019 (0.018)
First 100 Days		0.003 (0.032)
SCOTUS Activity		0.005 (0.009)
Press Conf. Length		-0.001*** (0.000)
News Pressure		-0.000 (0.000)
Major Disaster		-0.002 (0.010)
Terrorism		-0.015 (0.019)
CPI		0.001 (0.004)
Unemployment		0.002 (0.002)
President Fixed Effects	✓	✓
Month Fixed Effects	✓	✓
Day of Week Fixed Effects	✓	✓
Num.Obs.	7071	5654
R2 Adj.	0.117	0.117
R2 Within Adj.	0.081	0.075

Note: The dependent variable is the standardized proportion of statements for which the White House set the agenda. Coefficients come from ordinary least squares models with standard errors clustered at the congress-level.

House's agenda-setting success. A one log-word increase is associated with 0.035 increase in agenda setting. Finally, divided government is associated with a loss of White House agenda setting of a similar magnitude in the opposite direction: -0.035. That is, when the opposition party controls at least one chamber of congress, the White House loses about a minute and a half of time on its agenda during an average briefing. The

effect sizes and substantive interpretations are similar when we include our full suite of controls in column 2. Other variables important to executive agenda-setting generally, like presidential approval and the first 100 days, are smaller in magnitude and are not statistically significant.

Here, we provide evidence consistent with our theory. The White House can take steps to increase its influence in the briefing by inviting special guests and by delivering longer opening statements. However, environmental factors, like divided government, constrain the White House's influence. Together, these findings expand our understanding of the White House's media influence—it exists, but it is not static, as previous research has assumed.

## Downstream Influence on the Nightly News

To this point, we have shown that both White House strategies and the balance of institutional power in Washington affect the White House's ability to set the agenda during the Daily Briefing. Next, we assess whether the White House's success in the briefing room matters for its broader ability to reach the public. Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake (2011) show that presidents must first affect the media's agenda to alter the public's agenda. Given that, we test whether the agenda-setting dynamics in the briefing room matter for downstream media coverage.

Specifically, we focus on network nightly news broadcasts because they are established media sources with broad-based appeal and their viewership is of particular interest to presidents. First, the half-hour nightly news programs on the three major broadcast networks—ABC, NBC, and CBS—regularly enjoy the largest audiences among *all* television news programs. Members of the public identify these networks as among the top five sources from which they regularly get news.<sup>10</sup> Even as more Americans receive their

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<sup>10</sup>In 2022, the three network nightly news broadcasts enjoyed viewership of between 7.6M (ABC World News) and 4.8M (CBS Evening News), while the most-watched cable news network (Fox News) garnered

news through social media, network nightly news programs maintain substantial presences on these platforms. They regularly post content from their broadcasts that users react to, comment on, and share (Eady et al. 2025; Klug and Autenrieth 2022; Wu 2025). As a consequence of this sustained presence, network nightly network news programs continue to play an important role in setting the issue agenda for the American public (Edy and Meirick 2019). Second, in a more fragmented media environment where consumers are apt to self-select into news sources that conform to their ideological priors, those who tune in to major networks are intentionally selecting a news source that is less partisan and are more ideologically moderate than those selecting partisan TV news sources (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013). This viewership is particularly important for presidents; existing research suggests that these individuals may be more persuadable than those who select into partisan news sources (De Benedictis-Kessner et al. 2019).

## Data and Methods

To assess whether the White House's briefing agenda setting influences network nightly news broadcasts, we leverage the GDELT Television News Ngram 2.0 Dataset, which provides a series of n-gram counts for ABC World News, CBS Evening News, and NBC Nightly News. We focus on shingled trigram counts (i.e., three word segments) as they strike an appropriate balance between less-informative single word and two-word segments versus sparser 4- and 5-word segments. For example, the four-word phrase "The White House said" would result in two shingled trigrams: "the white house" and "white house said." GDELT pre-processes their trigrams by resetting at punctuation. The resulting data is a network-day level matrix of trigram counts, thus containing the broadcast

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only 2.1M viewers during primetime (Naseer and Shearer 2023). Further, in a 2025 Pew Research Center survey, approximately one-third of respondents identified ABC, CBS, and NBC as sources from which they regularly receive news (36%, 30%, and 35%, respectively), comparable to CNN (33%) and Fox News (38%). Print and wire sources were indicated less frequency; for instance, only 21% of respondents identified the Associated Press and 19% indicated *The New York Times* (Coleman and Justine 2025).

content each day for each network.<sup>11</sup>

If the White House influences downstream coverage by setting the Daily Briefing agenda, we should see those trigrams re-used in the nightly newscast. To test this proposition, we use our SITS output to determine which briefing segments were introduced by which actor. That is, we assign all text spoken by either actor to the actor our model labeled as that segment’s agenda-setter. We then pre-process this text as in GDELT by constructing all shingled trigrams, breaking at punctuation. The output is a day-actor matrix of trigrams spoken under the agenda set by that actor (i.e., White House, press corps).

To operationalize downstream influence, we compute set Jaccard Similarity between the set of unique trigrams used by each actor in the Daily Briefing  $i \in \{\text{White House, Press Corps}\}$  and the set of unique trigrams used by the three major news networks  $j \in \{\text{ABC, CBS, NBC}\}$  in their nightly newscast on day  $d$  (cf. Eatough and Preece 2025; Hager and Hilbig 2020). This measure accounts for the intersection of unique terms between actors divided by their union. This results in a set of up to six unique measures of similarity on day  $d$ , indexed by  $i, j$  (e.g., White House/ABC, Press Corps/ABC, White House/CBS, etc.). For each network  $j$  on day  $d$ , we take the difference between the White House and Press Corps Jaccard similarity. Formally, our measure of downstream influence is the following:

$$\Delta J_{j,d} = \frac{|T_d^{\text{news},j} \cap T_d^{\text{WH}}|}{|T_d^{\text{news},j} \cup T_d^{\text{WH}}|} - \frac{|T_d^{\text{news},j} \cap T_d^{\text{press}}|}{|T_d^{\text{news},j} \cup T_d^{\text{press}}|},$$

where  $T_d^{\text{news},j}$  is the set of distinct trigrams for network  $i$  on day  $d$ ,  $T_d^{\text{WH}}$  for White House-controlled trigrams on day  $d$ , and  $T_d^{\text{press}}$  for press corps-controlled trigrams on day  $d$ . This measure captures downstream influence in the sense that it increases (decreases) on days when a nightly news broadcast uses more trigrams used by the White House (press corps) during the Daily Briefing—after accounting for the set of all trigrams that were used by

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<sup>11</sup>GDELT occasionally provides trigrams from multiple same-network, same-day broadcasts. For these days, we keep all unique trigrams associated with a given network.

either actor.

We measure downstream influence on all days on which a White House Daily Briefing occurred and at least one network aired a broadcast, beginning on July 14, 2010 and ending on April 4, 2024.<sup>12</sup> The final dataset contains 2,355 days, of which nearly all contain overlap for both actors. On average, the White House and newscasts have 26 shared trigrams. For the press corps, that number is 43.

In Table 2, we present the days on which the Obama, Trump, and Biden White House each had the most downstream influence relative to the press corps. Note, these days are outliers, so there are more shared trigrams than the average. For parsimony, we present a random subset of trigrams that contain one or fewer stopwords (all shared trigrams for these days can be found in Appendix E.1). Of particular interest is Trump's most influential briefing, which occurred in the wake of a scandal where the president had told a fallen service member's widow that her deceased husband "knew what he was getting into." The president's Chief of Staff, John Kelly, led this briefing, providing some background about his own son's death in combat. Although a response to scandal, the White House was able to use a special guest to set the agenda and influence downstream coverage. President Obama's most influential day came after the death of Osama Bin Laden, while Biden's came during the withdrawal from Afghanistan, where Press Secretary Jen Psaki defended the president's decision. This latter briefing also included a special guest.

We look at the same relationships for the press corps in Table 3. President Obama's weakest day came in the wake of the Benghazi attack. President Trump's came on the heels of the Parkland school shooting. During that briefing, the press corps quickly changed the topic to developments in the Russia investigation, and their questions about the shooting often revolved around the president's lack of policy action. Interestingly, Biden's least influential day was his first in office. Here, NBC news allocated over 20

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<sup>12</sup>As the GDELT dataset begins in 2010, we acknowledge that our results may not generalize across our full time series. However, we suspect any difference would further advantage the White House in an era without widespread internet to promote alternative narratives.

Table 2: White House and Network News Trigram Overlap

Date	President	Trigrams	Jaccard
05/04/2011	Obama	laden was killed, keep in mind, the united states, very graphic photos, that osama bin, stuff as trophies, graphic photos of, absolutely certain that, a propaganda tool, osama bin laden's, done dna sampling, not floating around, incitement to additional, bin laden is, need to spike	4.64
10/19/2017	Trump	let me tell, my first recommendation, that president obama, reason to enlist, call my family, cases we're talking, no perfect way, to four families, thought at least, on active duty, say to four, the best men, don't believe president, job and talked, my son's case	11.12
08/17/2021	Biden	the white house, the kabul airport, americans and afghans, the buck stops, decision to leave, assessments you're describing, and president biden, also taking responsibility, bloodshed that may, into specific intelligence, be happening right, every decision the, past couple of, he taking responsibility, last few days	4.62

Note: Overlapping trigrams between the White House and nightly newscasts for the day on which the Obama, Trump, and Biden White House had the most downstream influence relative to the press corps. This table presents a random subset of 15 trigrams that contain one or fewer stopwords per day. The full table is in Appendix E.1.

minutes of the newscast to airing the briefing, which induces considerable overlap. However, on this day, the press controlled a large number of trigrams given that the White House held a wide ranging conversation about the administration's priorities and was responsive to topical shifts.

Taken together, these descriptive results generally accord with our expectations. The White House has downstream influence on days in which they take a proactive posture on events, and especially when special guests are present. The White House has weak downstream influence when they are unable to get ahead of scandals and when they allow for wide-ranging discussion. We expect this dependent variable to be positively correlated with the White House's agenda-setting ability during the briefing ( $\lambda$ ). As some

Table 3: Press Crops and Network News Trigram Overlap

Date	President	Trigrams	Jaccard
09/12/2012	Obama	the state department, the white house, the president said, the libyan government, statement that came, make sure that, shoot first and, first and aim, a broader lesson, to shoot first, broader lesson to, things i've learned, romney seems to, governor romney seems, around the world	-2.41
02/20/2018	Trump	buy an ar-15, states that restrict, use of bump, individual took dozens, expect to come, fact that russia, russia didn't meddle, expect further action, the russia investigation, work that jared, taken place will, has every intention, place will affect, terms of whether, yet been determined	-10.05
01/20/2021	Biden	world health organization, pandemic under control, setting an example, biden planning to, oval office right, address the challenges, bring transparency and, also work for, work with members, helping to get, vital part of, that commitment today, of deep cleaning, since you gave, two big concerns	-17.43

Note: Overlapping trigrams between the press corps and nightly newscasts for the day on which the press corps had the most downstream influence relative to the Obama, Trump, and Biden White House. This table presents a random subset of 15 trigrams that contain one or fewer stopwords per day. The full table is in Appendix E.1.

days feature multiple briefings, we average  $\lambda$  across those briefings. We conduct this analysis for each news network separately and include the same set of controls and fixed effects as in the previous section. Given our day-level unit of analysis, we sum the total length of all opening statements and of briefings.

## Results

In Table 4, we provide support for our hypothesis. Across all networks, days on which the White House has stronger briefing agenda setting are also days on which network broadcasts are more likely to mirror the White House's language. For example, in the

first two models, we show (without, and with, controls), that a one standard deviation increase in  $\lambda$ , the proportion of speaking turns on which the White House set the agenda, is associated with 60% of a standard deviation increase in shared trigrams between ABC's nightly news coverage and the White House's agenda-set text (relative to the press corps). Substantively, this result is equivalent to a shift in 9 White House trigrams, representing a 35% increase over the mean. Results for the other two networks are similar in size, direction, and statistical significance.

One main concern arises from this approach. To what extent is this pattern driven by endogeneity and persistence in the news cycle? For instance, broadcast news networks may reference a salient, ongoing event on day  $d$  and  $d + 1$ , which the White House (or press corps) may also reference in day  $d + 1$ . In such cases, our framework would erroneously credit the White House (or press corps) with downstream influence on day  $d + 1$ . To account for this, we iteratively remove trigrams used by network news in days  $d - 3, d - 2$ , and  $d - 1$  from the briefing transcripts in day  $d$ . In these models, we additionally control for the number of unique trigrams spoken by each actor, which may be correlated with briefing agenda-setting and downstream influence, and we remove frequently used, but unmeaningful terms (i.e., stopwords). Our procedure constitutes a much harder test of downstream influence in that it requires that the White House or press corps promote *novel* trigrams on new stories. Our results, in Table E3, are robust to this harder test.

Our results provide evidence that agenda setting in the White House Daily Briefing is correlated with downstream news coverage on the three major nightly newscasts. When the White House is better at setting the agenda during the briefing, the major news networks adopt terms under the White House's agenda. To the extent that the White House affects the public through downstream influence on the news, their efforts to control the Daily Briefing seem well-justified.

Table 4: Similarity between White House Briefing Control and Broadcast News Coverage, 2010–2024

	ABC		CBS		NBC	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
WH Briefing Control	0.591*** (0.020)	0.607*** (0.029)	0.574*** (0.016)	0.576*** (0.021)	0.524*** (0.017)	0.466*** (0.021)
Special Guest(s)	0.077 (0.064)		-0.092+ (0.048)		0.042 (0.047)	
Log Opening Statements Length	-0.002 (0.021)		0.064*** (0.016)		0.028+ (0.016)	
Divided Government	0.213* (0.095)		0.069 (0.070)		0.149* (0.070)	
Investigation	0.047 (0.065)		0.041 (0.048)		0.023 (0.048)	
Presidential Approval	-0.001 (0.009)		0.005 (0.006)		-0.003 (0.006)	
Election	-0.055 (0.111)		0.106 (0.084)		-0.131 (0.081)	
First 100 Days	0.484** (0.152)		0.060 (0.114)		0.203+ (0.112)	
SCOTUS Activity	-0.082 (0.068)		0.019 (0.050)		-0.041 (0.050)	
Press Conf. Length	0.001 (0.001)		0.002** (0.001)		0.002** (0.001)	
News Pressure	0.000 (0.000)		0.000 (0.000)		0.000+ (0.000)	
Major Disaster	-0.012 (0.057)		0.001 (0.042)		0.040 (0.042)	
Terrorism	0.213 (0.178)		-0.004 (0.135)		0.114 (0.133)	
CPI	-0.075* (0.031)		-0.004 (0.023)		-0.054* (0.023)	
Unemployment	0.009 (0.016)		-0.027* (0.012)		-0.022+ (0.012)	
President Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Month Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Day of Week Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Num.Obs.	2317	1582	2266	1560	2299	1562
R2 Adj.	0.316	0.300	0.372	0.363	0.312	0.291
R2 Within Adj.	0.274	0.246	0.373	0.363	0.299	0.281

Note: Results come from ordinary least squares models. The dependent variable is the standardized day-level difference between the White House–broadcast news set Jaccard similarity and press corps–broadcast news set Jaccard similarity (higher values are associated with more White House influence).

## The White House Daily Briefing in 2025 and Beyond

The institution of the Daily Briefing, and the White House’s broader relationship with the press, remained fairly stable for most of the time period we examine. However, in 2025, the second Trump administration made substantial modifications to these long-

standing dynamics that may have important implications for our future understanding of presidents' media agenda setting. While it is too early for a comprehensive empirical study, here we provide a preliminary assessment of how they may alter the role of the Daily Briefing and the two-step flow of information from the president to the media and from the media to the public.

First, as during the latter part of the first Trump administration, the White House has departed from the norm of holding near-daily briefings, instead holding briefings only once or twice a week (Wu et al. 2025). At the same time, President Trump takes questions from journalists in pool sprays with greater frequency than his predecessors (Kumar 2025). At her inaugural Daily Briefing, Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt intimated that the frequency of daily briefings would diminish to accommodate President Trump's more direct style (Leavitt 2025). This shift, which substitutes pool sprays for Daily Briefings, suggests an even more direct role for the president in setting the media's agenda. However, because presidents can exercise the same first mover strategies in pool sprays (e.g., opening remarks, special guests) and they are subject to the same political forces (e.g., divided government), this change is unlikely to fundamentally alter the White House's ability to set the media's agenda.

Second, the Trump administration has altered the structure of the Daily Briefing as well as norms surrounding press access, both of which erode press independence. Where past Press Secretaries first called on a wire reporter, and deferred to the press on when to end the briefing, Karoline Leavitt calls first on an (often conservative) "new media" outlet and shows less deference to the press corps. Further, Leavitt has threatened to take control of the seating chart away from the independent White House Correspondents Association (WHCA), a move that the WHCA warned seeks "to exert pressure on journalists over coverage they disagree with" (Grynbaum 2025).

Beyond the Daily Briefing, the White House has limited press access and sanctions outlets whose reports they dislike (Hamilton 2025). For example, the White House took

away the WHCA's longstanding prerogative to make assignments to the press pool, diluted the presence of wire service reporters in the pool, and barred the Associated Press from presidential events in retaliation for its refusal to refer to the Gulf of Mexico as the "Gulf of America." Additionally, Trump has aggressively criticized, filed lawsuits against, and threatened media outlets who issue unflattering coverage him and his allies.

Taken collectively, these changes seem designed to heighten the White House's agenda setting power. Anecdotally, members of the White House press corps indicate that they have. For instance, when asked about Leavitt's increased emphasis on "new media" representatives, members of the White House press corps share that "the result has been an erosion of their independence... [that] has undercut the briefings as a space to relay accurate information to the American public and hold the president to account" (Wu et al. 2025). Beyond the US context, recent work on democratic backsliding in Tanzania shows that when the government adopts new regulations that restrict press freedom, news outlets critical of the government align their coverage more closely to the government's messaging (Adiguzel, Romero and Wibbels n.d.). Through this lens, our findings likely underestimate the ability of the second Trump administration to influence the media's agenda and downstream coverage of the president.

## Conclusion

Presidents routinely go public, yet they struggle to change public opinion (e.g., Cavari 2017; Edwards 2003; Rottinghaus 2010). As most people receive presidential messages through the media (Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2011), we argue that presidents exercise public influence by controlling the press's agenda. We leverage transcripts of the White House Daily Briefings to measure the tug-of-war between the president and press to shape the day's news agenda. Consistent with expectations, we find that the White House has more success setting the agenda when it delivers a longer opening statement and

when it brings special guests to the briefing. However, White House agenda-setting declines during divided government when the opposition has more authority and news appeal. Then, we show that briefing dynamics are related to the downstream news coverage Americans consume. Nightly news broadcasts better mirror White House's agenda on days the White House has stronger agenda-setting in the briefing room. Together, these results show that the White House's influence over the media, and thus what the public is likely to learn about the president, is conditional on strategic choices and political context.

This research contributes to our understanding of presidential agenda-setting and going public (Cavari 2017; Cohen 1995; Canes-Wrone 2006; Kernell 1997; Rottinghaus 2010) by providing novel theory and evidence about White House media agenda-setting. Although some scholars have considered this two-stage process (Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2011; Franco, Grimmer and Lim n.d.), we highlight the conditional nature of this influence. Our study is also one of the first (but see Meyer-Gutbrod and Woolley 2021) to quantitatively examine the White House Daily Briefing—a unique form of going public that is interactive, institutionalized, and routine. Finally, this study helps us understand how the president's agents exercise executive branch power (see also Rudalevige 2021).

We have considered some, but not all, factors affecting White House agenda-setting in the briefing room, and there are others that should be considered in future research. For example, the White House may have more success setting the agenda on topics where it is more empowered (e.g., foreign policy) or on those that are more technical (e.g., environmental permitting). Scandal magnitude and duration likely limit the White House's briefing agenda-setting ability as well. Additionally, as the second Trump administration makes modifications to the Daily Briefing and its general posture towards the press, future scholars should examine how these modifications affect the White House's ability to set the press' agenda and shape subsequent coverage. While we have emphasized the president's motivation to influence the media's agenda in our work, it is important to

keep in mind that strong presidential influence over the press is not normatively desirable. The people, who are the ultimate sovereigns in the United States, depend on a free and independent press to learn about the president and exercise accountability (De Tocqueville 1835).

Presidents rarely influence public opinion directly, yet they are key actors in American politics who attract constant press attention. This coverage can benefit presidents—but only when that coverage aligns with the narratives they want to promote. Given that the media has commercial incentives to deviate from what presidents want, the White House must spend time and resources attempting to set the press's agenda. Although few people watch the back-and-forth between press secretary and press corps, events in the room matter to those present given the consequences for how the White House is portrayed to the public.

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## A Press Briefings Dataset Creation

On April 9, 2024, we downloaded all available press briefings from the The American Presidency Project maintained by UC Santa Barbara. We downloaded 7,226 documents classified as "Press Briefings" by the Project. After removing duplicates and clearly misclassified documents, we were left with transcripts for 7,203 press briefings. While the vast majority of these briefings are formal Daily Briefings (5,168, or 71.7%), they also include transcripts of other interactions between administration officials and reporters such as background briefings and press gaggles. We retain all documents classified as Press Briefings because they share important structural similarities—namely they are on-the-record contexts where the White House convenes members of the press corps to engage in dialogue with an administration official and in which the White House later posts the transcript of the dialogue to its website (from which the American Presidency Project obtains its Press Briefing documents). Additionally, we retain all documents because the White House may replace a traditional Daily Briefing with an alternative press dialogue, such that that dialogue becomes the de facto "daily briefing" for that day (e.g., when the president is away from the White House, informal gaggles with the Press Secretary or her designee often take the place of a traditional briefing).

The documents were located at the following link at the time of data collection: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/app-categories/press-office/press-releases/press-briefings>. In addition to downloading the HTML of each individual press briefing, we collected the following metadata provided by The American Presidency Project for each briefing if available—date, title, start time, end time, president, and citation.<sup>13</sup>

We used information provided within each press briefing transcript to create a dataset at the speaking-turn level. Our dataset describes the speaker and the speaking turn's text for each turn in each press briefing. The press briefings refer to the White House Press Secretary by name when they are speaking. When other guests or White House officials are present and speaking, their identity is also typically associated with their speaking turns in the transcript. Because our goal is to understand the agenda-setting ability of the White House as a strategic player in the briefing room, we consolidate all White House speakers identified as "White House." Differently, when the speaking turn is a question or comment from the press, the transcript typically denotes the speaker with a "Q," and thus we almost always do not have access to the identity of the individual speaker.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, all press speaking turns are attributed to a collective "Press" actor.

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<sup>13</sup>While the metadata associated with the transcripts downloaded from American Presidency Project was largely parsed correctly, there were some limited instances of missing or invalid information in the time cells. Most of these cases were prompted by the transcripts provided by the White House's website, from which the American Presidency Project collects its documents, not including that information. In cases of missing or invalid information about time, we filled in missing values by referring back to the original White House document to see if it was present but not parsed correctly, reviewing videos of the briefings on CSPAN or YouTube (when possible), and reviewing the text of the briefing and associated news articles for context clues. Our dataset includes non-missing values for time in 98% percent of cases.

<sup>14</sup>The press is also occasionally denoted in the following ways: "Q", "THE PRESS", "PRESS", "REPORTER", "PRESS CORPS", "QQ", "QUESTION", "AUDIENCE", "Female", "Male", "CNN", "CBS" and rarely by name.

## B Text Preprocessing

Our main inquiry pertains to the conditions under which the White House, relative to the press, controls the agenda of press briefings. Therefore, we associate each speaking turn with one of these two “speakers”—the White House or the press. We define each “speaking-turn” in our dataset as all consecutive words spoken by either the White House or the press. For example, when the White House has a guest speak in the briefing, the Press Secretary and the guest may speak consecutively. This would be considered one speaking turn by the White House in our data. In our dataset, 333,019 speaking turns were taken by the press (i.e., “Q”, see Appendix A). An additional 338,140 speaking turns were taken by White House officials or guests (1,663 unique identities)<sup>15</sup>.

We preprocess the text by removing all transcript annotations (e.g., “(Laughter),” “(Cross-talk),” “(Inaudible)”), punctuation, symbols, and numbers. We also split hyphenated words into separate tokens. We tokenize the text at the word level and remove a common list of 175 English stopwords. We also remove titles and names of the speakers in the dataset as well as names of the following individuals: the five presidents included in our data, all Press Secretaries who served under those presidents, other White House staff who appeared frequently as speakers (more than 150 times), a list of notable White House correspondents, a list of news outlets sourced from White House Correspondents Association seating charts, and approximately 836 common first names from the babynames package (those that are assigned to over 0.1% of babies in a given year), however, we manually review and preserve a small subset of homonyms like summer and major and those that are also important country or province names like Alberta. We remove speaker names because we want the model to create coherent topics that are not necessarily time-specific. If briefings during both the Biden and Clinton presidencies used similar language to discuss the economy, we do not want the model to determine these are two distinct topics *only* because a different president’s name was invoked during the discussion.

We determine whether there is a special guest by seeing if there are two or more unique non-press speakers. If so, someone other than the press secretary spoke during the briefing. However, oftentimes White House aides will interject with a short speaking turn to alter the Press Secretary of something. Therefore, we devised a coding rule to remove such instances from counting as a special guest speaker. Our decision rule was that a special guest could not be someone who 1) had three or fewer turns, 2) spoke less than 50 total words, and 3) did not speak first.

We then implement stemming. After stemming, we remove tokens with less than four characters. Finally, we remove extremely rare and extremely frequent terms. We remove terms mentioned less than five times (19,645 tokens) or more than 50,000 times (30 tokens) in the entire corpus.

Our final document-term matrix has 671,033 speaking turns and 16,963 unique tokens. There are an average of 93.2 speaking turns per press conference, and an average of 17.3 tokens per speaking turn after the preprocessing steps.

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<sup>15</sup>While this is the count of unique identities from the transcripts, there were often typos or small distinctions in speaker names, making an exact count difficult to achieve.

## C SITS Model Estimation

We use a topic model equipped to measure the latent agenda-setting power of the two key players in press briefings—the White House and the press (Nguyen, Boyd-Graber and Resnik 2012; Nguyen et al. 2014; Rossiter 2022). The model defines agenda-setting power the corpus level. The data generating process of a conversation, according to this model, posits that a speaker’s latent agenda-setting power determines the probability any given speaking turn shifts the topic or not. Speakers with high agenda-setting abilities are more capable of changing the topic when speaking. Because of this relationship between topic changes and agenda-setting, we use the SITS topic model to estimate these parameters, in addition to topics, in our corpus.

To estimate the model, we use a publicly available Java software written by Viet An Nguyen (Nguyen et al. 2014). The software implements a Gibbs sampler. The starting values for the sampler are randomly assigned. We run 50,000 iterations, discarding the first 45,000 as burn-in iterations. Because of the large size of this corpus, we retain every 1000<sup>th</sup> iteration of topic assignment parameters after burn-in (rather than all 5,000), and describe topics using the mode of the five sampled values. Finally, we do not estimate turn-level topic shifts for speaking turns with less than 5 tokens.

We select hyperparameter values according to advice in the literature. Griffiths and Steyvers (2004) recommend  $\alpha = 1/K$  and  $\beta = .1$ . Additionally, we choose a noninformative, uniform prior ( $\gamma = 1$ ) over speaker agenda-setting parameters. Finally, we primarily choose  $K = 50$  using our domain expertise and our desired granularity of topics. The press briefings will have major topics in common across the five presidencies (e.g., education policy), but the briefings will also have topics unique to the political moment (e.g., Covid-19 response efforts). We wanted to capture both. However, the topics themselves are not our primary interest. Our primary goal is modeling topics appropriately such that we identify *topic shifts* that occur within a briefing.

We ran three chains of the K=50 model with different starting values. We average turn-level shift parameters across the three chains. If this averaged turn-level shift parameter, which is a probability, is greater than .5, we consider the speaking turn a topic shift. We identified one chain that had better topic cohesion than the others. We use this chain for any topic-related analyses.

To measure the length of the White House’s opening statement, we determined where the first substantive press turn occurred and considered all White House speech before that point as their opening statement. The briefings often start with pleasantries between the White House and the press (e.g., exchanging “Good morning”), therefore, we consider the first press turn that used at least five tokens *after* our preprocessing steps that removed such pleasantries to when the briefing exchange began.

### C.1 Topic Shift Example

Below, we provide the full text from the excerpted examples in the paper.

- Turn 3. (Shift) White House: We’ll see. I like the idea in theory, anyway. I have no announcements to make. You obviously know much of what’s on the President’s

schedule this week, including his visits to Capitol Hill on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday to meet with Senate Democrats on Tuesday, House Republicans on Wednesday, Senate Republicans on Thursday and House Democrats also on Thursday. While he's there he will want to discuss a range of priorities including, of course, conversations he's been having on budget-related issues, the need to reduce our deficit in a balanced way, but also immigration reform and the progress that's being made on that subject in a bipartisan way, efforts to move forward on actions to reduce gun violence – also efforts that involve both Democrats and Republicans. Other items that are on his list of priorities include increasing our energy independence, the need to do something about the pace of nominations being confirmed and considered in the Senate – judicial nominations, in particular – as well as the need for Congress to take action on cybersecurity. With that, I'll go to Jim.

- Turn 4. (Shift) Press: Thanks, Jay. So since we are on week two of the charm blitz – on Wednesday, as you mentioned, the President is going to the Hill, but he's also speaking to Organizing for Action, which is the group that grew out of his campaign reelection. And I'm wondering whether there's potentially a mixed message there. Because last week OFA sent out an email saying that – calling Republicans obstructionists, blaming them for the sequester, saying if only they had voted for closing tax loopholes the public wouldn't be in this jam. So is there a mixed message there from the President, on the one hand appealing to and speaking to Republicans on the issues you just mentioned, and then going to OFA, potentially a partisan – a more partisan address?
- Turn 5. (Shift) White House: Organizing for Action, as you know, Jim, was established to promote the President's public policy agenda. It is certainly the President's position that sequester has been implemented because Republicans made a choice. Rather than go along with a balanced approach to deficit reduction, rather than go along with either a buy-down or the deal that has been on the table since the President tried to negotiate it with Speaker Boehner last year, they said, no way, no how, and the choice they made was to allow sequester to be implemented. Let's be clear about that. And that is not a position that we'll take a different view on. It is also the case that sequester is here; it's being implemented as a result of the choice made on Capitol Hill by Republicans. And it is another reason why we should engage with and move forward – engage with Republicans and Democrats on the Hill and move forward with at least the potential for bipartisan, balanced deficit reduction that deals with the sequester and the larger goal of more than \$4 trillion in deficit reduction over a decade. That's the nature of the conversations the President has been having with Republican lawmakers, including in his dinner with Senate Republicans last week, including in his lunch with Chairman Ryan and Congressman Van Hollen. And I'm sure it will be one of the topics that he raises in his meetings on the Hill this week. So I think that as the President said in his inaugural address, we should not believe that we need to resolve all of our differences before we can move forward on common – working together, taking action together to achieve results for the American people; meeting on common ground, putting forward solutions

that represent compromise, much as the President has put forward solutions that represent compromise, whether it's on immigration reform or legislation that deals with gun violence or balancing – getting our fiscal house in order in a way that's balanced so that the burden is not borne solely by seniors and middle-class families. I think there's a great deal of consistency in what the President has proposed and what he's been saying for many, many months now.

- Turn 6. (Shift) Press: Washington is a place of optics, too, and is it diplomatic to be thinking of – be speaking to a partisan group on the same day that he's speaking to  
–
- Turn 7. (Shift) White House: First of all, I think you're misrepresenting the group. As I understand it, as I've read about it, it will not take a position in elections; it's focused on policy issues. And the President's policy agenda, which Organizing for Action has been designed to promote, consists of item after item that have had bipartisan support in the past, that should have bipartisan support in the future. I mean, there's nothing partisan about deficit reduction. In fact, you might even say it's more of a priority for Republicans than Democrats. And yet the President is pushing for a balanced package that would achieve the goal of over \$4 trillion in deficit reduction over a decade. And that includes a proposal that produces significant savings from entitlement reform as well as savings from tax reform. There's nothing partisan about comprehensive immigration reform. There's a bipartisan effort underway in the Senate right now – Democrats and Republicans pushing forward an effort to produce legislation that would achieve that bipartisan goal. In the wake of Newtown, I would argue that there's nothing partisan about common-sense solutions to reduce gun violence in America. The victims of gun violence aren't Democrats or Republicans, especially when they're children. And there ought to be – and there is – a path forward to reduce gun violence in America, much as the President laid out, that respects our Second Amendment rights. As you know, nothing the President has proposed, whether it's executive action or legislative action, would take a single firearm away from a single law-abiding citizen.
- Turn 23. White House: No, the organization – look, there are organizations all over Washington and around the country that support policy agendas and policy areas. That's what this organization does. And I would refer you to them for more details on their efforts. They are not, as I understand it, again, based on news reports, engaged in political campaigning – winning elections or helping candidates win elections. They're focused on the policy proposals. The President speaks to the DCCC and the DNC and the DSCC. He'll speak to other outside organizations that have policy agendas. And that's entirely appropriate. And the President is pursuing a policy agenda, as I noted earlier, that is inherently bipartisan, that is embraced by a majority of the American people both in general, as we saw in the election, and in the specifics. And the President obviously believes that engaging the American people in our policy debates is very important. That's what the election was all about. And he believes that when the American people are engaged in these debates, the

outcomes of the debates are better for the American economy and for the middle class. Mary.

- Turn 24. (Shift) Press: Jay, over the weekend, Afghan President Hamid Karzai said the U.S. is encouraging violence in conjunction with the Taliban to prolong the U.S. presence in Afghanistan. He said the Taliban were killing Afghan civilians "in service to America." What was the President's reaction to hearing this?
- Turn 25. White House: I think Secretary Hagel and General Dunford spoke to this yesterday and made clear that any suggestion the United States is colluding with the Taliban is categorically false. Secretary Hagel addressed these questions directly with President Karzai in their meeting. The United States has spent enormous blood and treasure for the past 12 years supporting the Afghan people and ensuring – in the effort to ensure stability and security in that country. The last thing we would do is support any kind of violence, particularly involving innocent civilians.
- Turn 26. Press: Do Karzai's comments and this kind of mounting tension harm or impact U.S. plans to withdraw?
- Turn 27. White House: The President has a policy that has been embraced by NATO, by our allies in the coalition, and we are pursuing that policy. That includes we've drawn down the surge forces and we're winding down our troop presence in Afghanistan as we build up Afghan security forces and turn over security lead to Afghan security forces. And that progress continues. There is no question that there have been a number of difficult security incidents, and there have been comments by President Karzai with which we've disagreed. But our policy has not changed. And what's important to remember is we went into Afghanistan because we were attacked from Afghanistan. We went into Afghanistan – and the President made sure that we refocused on this goal when he reviewed Afghan policy upon becoming President – in order to go after those who attacked the United States, go after those who killed Americans, to go after al Qaeda central, which had taken haven in Afghanistan. And that remains the principal objective of our mission in Afghanistan: to defeat – to disrupt, dismantle and ultimately defeat al Qaeda in the Afghanistan region; to, in service of that goal, build up – train and build up Afghan security forces so they can take over security for their country; and to provide the space necessary for the Afghan government to increase stability in that country and to allow us to continue to go after al Qaeda, which is, again, our primary objective.
- Turn 53. White House: We are engaging with Senate Democrats, with House Democrats, with Senate Republicans and House Republicans, as you know, on budget issues as well as on the broader agenda that we've been talking about –
- Turn 54. Press: But now that they're drawing up their budget –
- Turn 55. (Shift) White House: I'm sure there are conversations going on, on that process. We are engaged in our own process. And the President had lunch with

Chairman Ryan last week, and I know they talked about his budget, which I believe is going to be released very soon. The broader effort underway here is to try to, through the budget process, achieve a compromise that allows for both entitlement reform and tax reform that produce the savings necessary to achieve that \$4 trillion-plus target over 10 years of deficit reduction, to put our economy on a fiscally sustainable path. And that is the President's goal: deficit reduction large enough to put our economy on a fiscally sustainable path so that the ratio of debt to GDP is below 3 percent for a period of time that would allow, concurrently, through investments and other policy decisions, allow the economy to grow, to become more energy independent, for the middle class to strengthen and grow. I think this is one of the things that – because I suppose that your question gets at this – is that the President has always believed that deficit reduction is not a goal unto itself. The whole purpose of deficit reduction should be part of an overall policy objective of strengthening the economy, having it grow faster, having it create more and better jobs for the middle class. And that's the President's objective. And that's why he has always, throughout these budget debates and going back to when he first took office, made sure that the proposals he's put forward keep the number-one objective in mind, which is economic growth and job creation, not deficit reduction solely for the purpose of reducing the deficit.

- Turn 56. Press: Is there going to be a goal – obviously Paul Ryan has got a 10-year target. Is the President going to have a target, whether it's 10 years, 15, 20, whatever –
- Turn 57. White House: The President will have a target for deficit reduction over 10 years, as he has consistently in his budget –

## C.2 Estimated Topics

Below, we show the 15 FREX topwords for each of the 50 estimated topics. Recall, each topic is a distribution over all unique words in the pre-processed corpus. In our corpus, the vocabulary is 16,963 words. Most of the words will have a probability of zero in the topic's distribution and only a handful of words will be meaningful indicators that a discussion is on a given topic.

Also recall SITS is a mixed-membership topic model, so each text is a mixture of the 50 topics. For example, consider just one segment in which the model predicts the White House set the agenda and attention was sustained on that discussion for several speaking turns. Most topics will have a probability of zero in any single segment because only mixture from a handful of topics will be needed to explain the content. Perhaps it is a mixture of Topics 1 and 13 in which the White House is talking about education policy and the budget. Or, it may be a mixture of Topics 1 and 34 in which the White House is discussed their response to a natural disaster in terms of aid to resume schooling.

Topic 1 student, school, teacher, colleg, child, educ, welfar, classroom, poverti, parent, graduat, borrow, district, incom, children

Topic 2	vote, senat, floor, mcconnel, caucus, lott, major, daschl, filibust, democrat, impeach, pelosi, reid, schumer, republican
Topic 3	maliki, iraqi, baghdad, iraq, sectarian, sunni, anbar, reconstruct, shia, insurg, victori, bremer, provinc, allawi, forc
Topic 4	intellig, classifi, inform, declassifi, benghazi, surveil, leak, fisa, gather, interrog, techniqu, sourc, commiss, oversight, assess
Topic 5	vessel, anthrax, airlin, aircraft, passeng, carrier, postal, fish, spill, monumet, airspac, ocean, pipe, riser, ship
Topic 6	ukrainian, ukrain, zelenskyy, putin, russia, vladimir, crimea, russian, invas, separatist, kyiv, territori, impos, sanction, escal
Topic 7	emiss, carbon, greenhous, opec, energi, gasolin, price, climat, petroleum, fuel, pollut, electr, coal, solar, clean
Topic 8	serb, milosev, bosnian, qaddafi, bosnia, kosovo, libyan, serbia, peacekeep, libya, unprofor, dayton, sarajevo, kosovar, serbian
Topic 9	afghan, afghanistan, karzai, taliban, troop, mission, combat, command, kabul, presenc, forc, drawdown, uniform, train, armi
Topic 10	prescript, solvenc, medicar, tobacco, drug, senior, cancer, social, smoke, retir, beneficiari, addict, cigarett, opioid, veteran
Topic 11	counsel, email, privileg, letter, subpoena, document, testifi, testimoni, lawyer, memo, inquiri, archiv, juri, file, client
Topic 12	investig, justic, secret, alleg, prosecutor, pardon, comey, snowden, depart, crimin, indict, charg, trial, prosecut, independ
Topic 13	billion, budget, spend, estim, dollar, surplus, discretionari, fiscal, project, earmark, offset, assumpt, deficit, revenu, score
Topic 14	iranian, iran, iaea, sanction, enrich, nuclear, obtain, uranium, plus, behavior, verifi, complianc, intern, acquir, centrifug
Topic 15	arafat, saudi, palestinian, arabia, abba, ireland, east, peac, arab, isra, settlement, jerusalem, crown, barak, israel
Topic 16	abort, marriag, discrimin, court, lawsuit, legal, statut, litig, constitut, amend, tortur, appeal, affirm, execut, rule
Topic 17	phone, convers, readout, regular, contact, updat, call, touch, spoke, spoken, communic, consult, read, team, brief
Topic 18	tariff, nafta, trade, japanes, japan, steel, export, agreement, canada, apec, framework, doha, fast, gatt, canadian
Topic 19	ceil, shutdown, default, veto, bill, debt, shut, congress, fund, rider, supplement, attach, budget, republican, limit
Topic 20	brazil, summit, asia, pacif, asean, indo, partnership, global, australia, india, indonesia, bilater, hemispher, argentina, prosper
Topic 21	nigeria, africa, nigerian, african, mandela, pope, sudan, egypt, ethiopia, contin, kenya, egyptian, zimbabw, uganda, ghana
Topic 22	laden, osama, musharraf, pakistani, qaeda, 11th, terrorist, terror, plot, pakistan, attack, enemi, septemb, counterterror, threat
Topic 23	twitter, stori, media, journal, newspap, tweet, editori, quot, apolog, fals, articl, transcript, book, anonym, televis

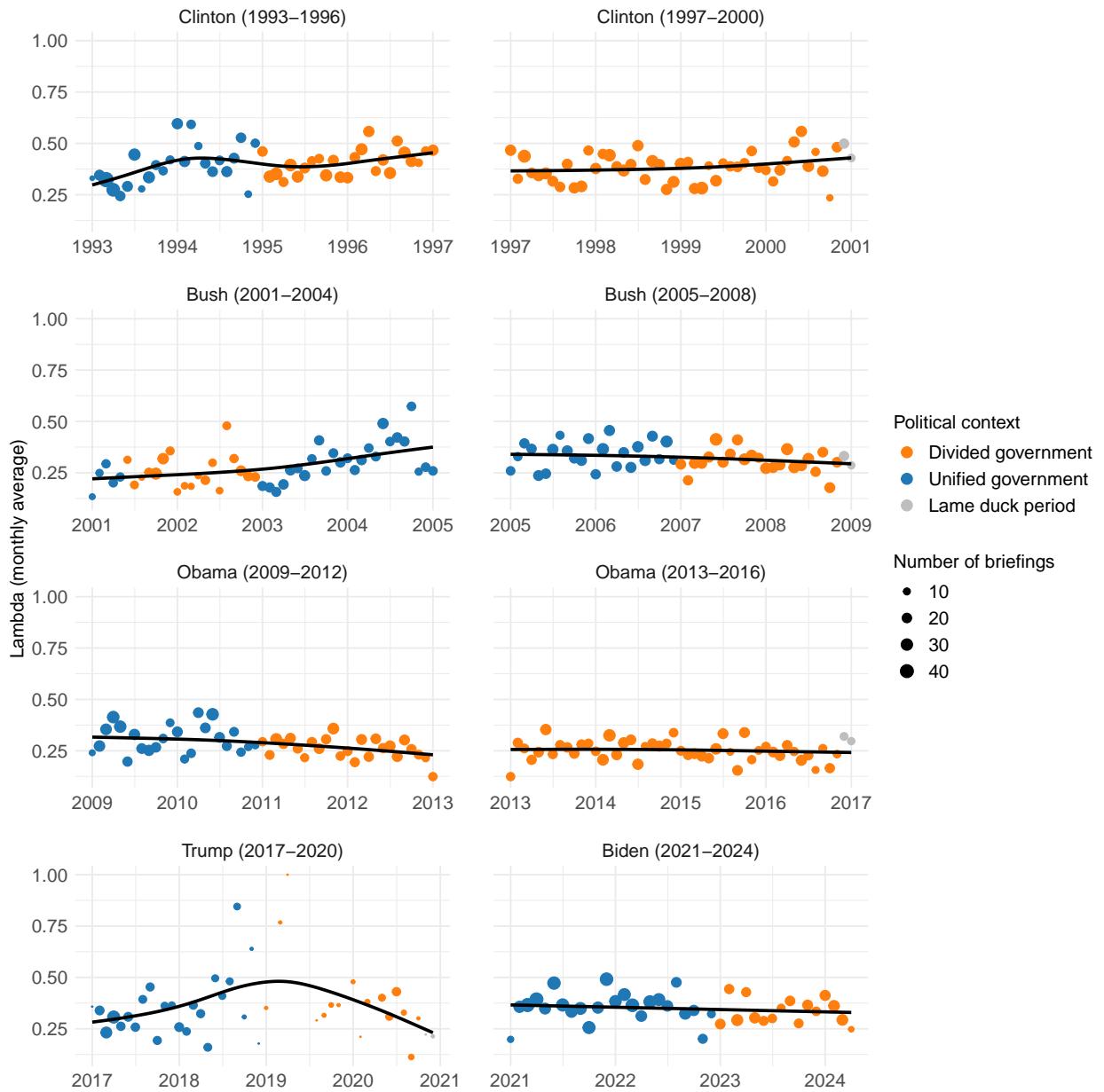
Topic 24	migrant, mexican, border, asylum, mexico, deport, migrat, immigr, patrol, illeg, daca, traffick, colombia, refuge, alien
Topic 25	taiwan, chines, china, beij, hong, kong, vietnam, jiang, vietnames, lama, dalai, philippin, strait, currenc, relationship
Topic 26	valu, acknowledg, observ, advoc, profession, illustr, argument, pretti, vari- eti, kind, genuin, articul, guess, interest, testament
Topic 27	korean, korea, missil, peninsula, treati, denuclear, ballist, jong, nuclear, pro- lifer, india, nonprolifer, south, dprk, reactor
Topic 28	voter, romney, poll, ballot, campaign, mitt, reelect, race, candid, elect, trail, elector, fundrais, primari, midterm
Topic 29	assault, polic, firearm, crime, shoot, hate, victim, violent, racial, tragedi, flag, antisemit, ferguson, sexual, newtown
Topic 30	legisl, reform, congress, comprehens, bipartisan, pass, immigr, congression, piec, prioriti, forward, move, propos, enact, senat
Topic 31	cyber, cybersecur, agenc, comput, technolog, sector, ransomwar, space, in- ternet, nasa, entiti, digit, licens, actor, softwar
Topic 32	manchin, yeah, inflat, ahead, incred, healthcar, lower, forget, maga, childcar, sinema, breath, histor, tiktok, compon
Topic 33	isil, assad, syrian, syria, fighter, airstrik, coalit, opposit, insid, counter, de- grad, turkey, extremist, yemen, kurdish
Topic 34	fema, hurrican, storm, disast, puerto, rico, flood, orlean, louisiana, flint, mis- sissippi, leve, earthquak, rebuild, florida
Topic 35	vaccin, dose, virus, mask, variant, booster, infect, covid, omicron, coron- avirus, ebola, outbreak, pfizer, unvaccin, symptom
Topic 36	hussein, saddam, chemic, inspector, disarm, destruct, mass, unscom, reso- lut, weapon, biolog, council, disarma, inspect, annan
Topic 37	cuban, cuba, guantanamo, castro, aristid, haitian, haiti, venezuela, detaine, prison, venezuelan, burma, griner, detain, gitmo
Topic 38	yeltsin, greec, greek, chernomyrdin, german, chechnya, sweden, europ, ger- mani, merkel, franc, membership, nato, european, moscow
Topic 39	tomorrow, speech, schedul, tonight, trip, thursday, preview, wednesday, ra- dio, monday, friday, travel, saturday, tuesday, tune
Topic 40	ceremoni, medal, attend, recept, commemor, queen, dinner, museum, lun- cheon, lawn, arlington, tour, celebr, wednesday, wreath
Topic 41	golf, basebal, birthday, nice, rahm, gentlemen, sport, knee, gift, sleep, daughter, basketbal, pete, ladi, laugh
Topic 42	sens, notion, differ, easi, problem, realiti, complex, percept, honest, solv, realli, somehow, defin, somewhat, perspect
Topic 43	nomin, vacanc, nomine, garland, bench, qualif, appoint, qualifi, judici, suprem, judiciari, confirm, robert, court, fill
Topic 44	review, recommend, deadlin, decis, option, timelin, date, process, soon, timet, final, evalu, wait, decemb, januari
Topic 45	unemploy, growth, forecast, quarter, rate, inflat, economist, recess, economi, stimulus, recoveri, creation, econom, grow, trend

Topic 46	insur, enrol, afford, obamacar, health, care, premium, coverag, websit, medicaid, preexist, uninsur, marketplac, repeal, qualiti
Topic 47	hama, gaza, hezbollah, lebanon, ceasfir, rafah, lebanes, israel, isra, casualti, civilian, houthi, rocket, hostag, innoc
Topic 48	bank, financi, mortgag, bankruptci, chrysler, bailout, transact, taxpay, lend, auto, loan, tarp, investor, regul, foreclosur
Topic 49	class, sequest, deficit, balanc, revenu, trillion, reduct, wealthiest, wealthi, code, middl, entitl, compromis, loophol, millionair
Topic 50	minimum, wage, worker, manufactur, workforc, busi, infrastructur, invest, labor, small, innov, competit, bridg, broadband, hire

### C.3 Intrapresident Variation in Agenda-Setting

Figure 4 in the main text shows substantial variation across presidential terms. Figure 5 shows  $\lambda$  overtime for each term by averaging  $\lambda$  within each month's briefings. For example, it appears that Bush's agenda-setting ability during his first term steadily increases during the period of unified government that began in 2003, relative to the White House's agenda-setting ability during a period of divided government earlier in his term. Likewise, it appears Obama's agenda-setting ability steadily declines during his first term during the period of divided government that began in 2011, relative to when the White House enjoyed unified government earlier in his term.

Figure 5: Intrapresident Agenda Setting ( $\lambda$ ) by Presidential Term



Note: Figure visualizes monthly averages of our agenda-setting measure ( $\lambda$ ) by presidential term with a Generalized Additive Model (GAM) line to show the smoothed, nonlinear trend.

## D Control Variables

Table D2: Control Variables: Names, Descriptions, and Sources

Name	Description	Source
<i>Political Conditions</i>		
Investigation	Indicator for whether an investigation of the executive branch is ongoing.	Kriner and Schickler (2016)
Presidential Approval	Most recent Gallup poll approval rating.	Gallup
Elections	Indicator for whether the day is between Labor Day and Election Day in a midterm election year or a presidential elections year.	Author coding
First 100 Days	Indicator for whether the date is within the first 100 days of a new presidency.	Author coding
SCOTUS Activity	Indicator for whether the Supreme Court heard arguments or released a decision on that day.	Spaeth et al. (2024)
<i>External Events</i>		
News Pressure	Median length (in seconds) of the first three news segments on nightly news broadcasts (ABC, CBS, NBC)	Vanderbilt Television Archive
Natural Disaster	Indicator for natural disasters with >\$25M in inflation-adjusted insurance claims. Missing or no damage both coded as 0 by source.	EM-DAT; Reeves (2011)
Terrorism	Indicator for public mass shootings with $\geq 4$ fatalities or for major terrorist attacks affecting U.S. persons ( $\geq 10$ casualties or major/catastrophic damage)	The Violence Project; Marsh (2023); UMD Global Terrorism Database
Inflation	Monthly consumer price index	Bureau of Labor Statistics
Unemployment	Monthly unemployment rate	Bureau of Labor Statistics
<i>Briefing-Level Controls</i>		
Briefing Length	Duration of press briefing in minutes	Author coding

## E Broadcast News Leadership

### E.1 Overlapping Trigrams

#### White House and Network News Trigram Overlap

**Obama (05/04/2011):** bin laden was, osama bin laden, what was your, there is no, laden was killed, it was him, keep in mind, you saw them, that we are, the united states, killed osama bin, you see the, sure that very, very graphic photos, that osama bin, going to be, out this stuff, we discussed this, is going to, floating around as, shot in the, trot out this, head are not, you will not, so there is, that's not who, did you see, stuff as trophies, this stuff as, graphic photos of, an incitement to, absolutely certain that, walking on this, dna sampling and, we killed osama, a propaganda tool, is important for, to spike the, in mind that, reaction when you, doubt that we, osama bin laden's, done dna sampling, as a propaganda, somebody who was, why the president, that we have, this was him, out of the, laden is dead, he could be, are not floating, for us to, when you saw, we don't need, and so there, your reaction when, don't need to, it is important, was your reaction, i don't think, who was shot, not who we, not to release, who we are, that the president, not floating around, will not see, incitement to additional, there will be, bin laden is, that we killed, that this was, on this earth, important for us, that very graphic, need to spike, this earth again, and i don't, us to make, certain that this, was shot in, mind that we, in the past

**Trump (10/19/2017):** he knew what, what he was, he wanted to, me tell you, that was the, he was getting, let me tell, knew what he, was the message, tell you what, chief of staff, where he wanted, when he died, what do i, least that was, my first recommendation, to say to, not call my, and my son's, tried to express, took this job, and he said, the white house, it's nice to, that's what the, who was my, not a negative, was where he, he was doing, best men on, like to call, that president obama, i thought at, believe president obama, that he's a, the burden on, you that president, we're talking about, said to me, that a member, exactly where he, there's no reason, he was where, wanted to be, would have listened, what the possibilities, a fallen hero, reason to enlist, with when his, asked me about, just to simply, congress would have, president trump about, make that phone, at the white, i was on, to simply say, was my casualty, what the president, call my family, family members are, he was my, cases we're talking, was on active, not do it, call that parents, the phone call, no perfect way, tell you that, and i said, to four families, absolutely stuns me, have listened in, to the families, exactly what he, thought at least, when i was, because we're at, was getting into, can do to, a member of, be with when, phone call that, on active duty, in any event, say to four, message that was, do to lighten, at least that, what he wanted, stuns me that, to be with, you what my, me about previous, there's no perfect, knew what the, in his way, was just to, and when he, perfect way to, a negative thing, i took this, to do it, by the best, he's a brave, trump about how, the president earlier, because he was, nice to do, on these families, that's not a, exactly the people, me that a, said to him, that was just, in my opinion, about how to, nothing you can, he asked me, on that conversation, he not do, surrounded by the, not a criticism, i said to, the people he, by joining that, that phone call, he said to, was not a, burden on these, you what i, and i thought, and he was, this job and, with exactly the, the best men, we're at war, to

president trump, it stuns me, you can do, when his life, wanted to do, four families the, the president tried, don't believe president, when he was, was he not, he was killed, that was not, not the phone, when i took, job and talked, a lot of, from the president, members are looking, with the president, no reason to, the message that, he said he, some of the, to see the, to tell you, if you have, and on that, and if you, for the first, to see you, we have to, one of them, give you a, was surrounded by, on this earth, my son's case, son's case in, the name of

**Biden (08/17/2021):** afghans who helped, helped the u.s., to the airport, to get out, tens of thousands, with the taliban, this was a, is he taking, who helped the, out of the, the white house, but is he, of afghan women, want to get, out of afghanistan, buck stops with, who are now, now that the, have informed us, the united states, the ground in, provide the safe, that they will, the state department, intend to hold, taliban have informed, be able to, what is he, are prepared to, the decision to, i want to, the kabul airport, take over and, the safe passage, not just the, he taking ownership, americans and afghans, stops with him, president biden had, the taliban have, it's going to, the buck stops, the taliban to, to get the, them to that, civilians to the, to complete the, and afghans who, to get into, on the ground, to hold them, decision to leave, that they are, at camp david, could take over, they are prepared, president biden is, the airport and, hold them to, just the decision, safe passage of, of thousands of, going to be, here in the, as he said, is that when, any bloodshed that, americans to get, as we move, assessments you're describing, with respect to, had to be, and so are, white house disregard, and president biden, that happened during, did the white, intelligence and push, also taking responsibility, happened during the, are going to, the fact that, happening right now, for every decision, bloodshed that may, change the fact, go into the, into specific intelligence, are my colleagues, time for the, responsibility for the, be happening right, parties here responsible, don't want to, taking responsibility for, the same time, united states government, i am also, to do that, the past couple, and for any, other parties here, the rest of, also don't want, see what the, respect to afghanistan, every decision the, i also don't, i'm not actually, am also taking, but i also, fact that there, we'll wait for, and we'll wait, not actually familiar, the president and, a lot of, with george stephanopoulos, with the intelligence, couple of days, they're going to, that there are, for any bloodshed, at the same, states government took, that intelligence and, past couple of, so are my, more quickly than, to get that, he taking responsibility, he's taking responsibility, for the chaos, to stand up, chaos at the, 20 years of, stand up for, at some point, years of american, had to stand, it was time, people had to, tears in afghanistan, gave 20 years, war in afghanistan, was time for, we gave 20, the last few, what we are, the war in, hear from the, last few days, to hear from, over the past, the biden administration, i think we, there is no, they are moving

#### Press Corps and Network News Trigram Overlap

**Obama (09/12/2012):** the state department, we have a, the other hand, in the city, the united states, the film that, at the white, the city of, the white house, the president said, on the other, the libyan government, on the ground, with the libyan, do you think, that the statements, is you can't, seems to have, tendency to shoot, you make are, than what i, and as president, to have a, statement that came, make sure that, to say that, thought

through the, shoot first and, one of the, think it was, first and aim, there's a broader, be learned here, a broader lesson, that it's important, are backed up, for you to, you think it, before you make, to shoot first, backed up by, sure that the, it's important for, ramifications before you, the statement that, broader lesson to, that the president, and that you've, i've learned is, distance itself from, learned is you, make are backed, things i've learned, romney seems to, was a statement, governor romney seems, important for you, around the world, in the first, and that is

**Trump (02/20/2018):** the white house, white house is, does the president, be able to, in las vegas, buy an ar-15, be an age, tougher on russia, starting from scratch, have any ideas, an age limit, to come up, he doesn't have, president have any, in the election, i can tell, tell you that, you that the, the president have, can tell you, but that's something, how to deal, to listen to, first bought an, for us to, that hasn't yet, to do about, fallen by the, as you know, i was trying, any ideas on, help from the, weapons and killing, that's part of, come up over, deranged individuals getting, the president hasn't, on the table, we're going to, for the idea, lives of 17, very clear that, you're taking my, and it certainly, clear that russia, laws in place, us to discuss, part of a, bought an ar-15, president hasn't said, is that something, those who buy, we expect further, individual took the, that's after a, supports not having, meddled in the, from scratch here, couple of weeks, hold of weapons, age limit for, what is he, have to be, was a teenager, there should be, some support for, or is he, i think that's, ideas at all, of the students, the idea of, the president offered, and that we, and the president, on the broader, after a deranged, of a lot, who buy an, the wake of, i know there, ideas of his, and he doesn't, it's very clear, that restrict that, not what i, of weapons and, stocks and that, of bump stocks, to before you, states that restrict, up over the, have an impact, he has to, by the wayside, has to listen, but the president, use of bump, is he specifically, the students and, that russia didn't, action on that, florida was a, individual took dozens, about the fact, in the coming, words out of, you mentioned a, ideas on how, expect to come, teenager when he, trying to before, i think we, the fact that, president doesn't support, to address this, that he's been, took dozens of, something that's on, on how to, in the wake, from the trump, further action on, wasn't with help, lot of the, support for the, know there are, that we are, have fallen by, what i said, there are currently, any ideas at, president supports not, the president believe, but i can, the use of, dozens of lives, that's on the, could you explain, of 17 people, deranged individual took, want to make, fact that russia, 17 people at, going to do, bump stocks and, a lot of, over the next, a teenager when, the broader problem, the coming days, should be an, with help from, the shooter in, he specifically doing, broader problem of, if he has, my words out, russia didn't meddle, expect further action, was trying to, people at parkland, president wants to, think that's certainly, taking my words, that's not what, that has taken, the valuable work, he doing about, been tougher on, going through that, the russia investigation, said that the, implemented the sanctions, congress passed last, that jared is, addressed many times, work that jared, valuable work that, the sanctions which, as we've addressed, taken place will, you that nothing, we're going through, has every intention, a number of, does he not, i believe that, with a number, do his job, process that has, why hasn't the, hasn't the president, one of the, a little bit, that has to, a process that, doing it again, has taken place, and we're going, i can't answer, you have a, to do his,

their access to, the end of, interfered with our, is he doing, the president has, has been tougher, of doing it, our election and, passed last year, place will affect, there's a process, doing about it, access to classified, he not need, we've addressed many, not need classified, with our election, able to do, the chief of, or not we, doesn't have any, have over the, terms of whether, on mental illness, that something that, which the president, in place in, yet been determined, in certain states, whether or not, banning bump stocks, hasn't yet been, the president is, to have fallen, doesn't support the, democrats and republicans, that would suggest, would suggest that, of whether or, that federal policy, the president wants, make that federal, of those accessories, president offered some, in terms of, use of those, suggest that he, place in certain, can't answer whether, will affect the, nothing that has, that nothing that, affect the valuable, information to do, jared is doing, a full clearance

**Biden (01/20/2021):** the fbi is, make sure that, needs to be, involved in the, the assault on, the president is, in the future, in the next, picking up the, part of the, when it comes, it comes to, this is a, for him or, the united states, you that i, thank you for, i just want, i told you, in his inaugural, but it was, white house and, about it until, the white house, president of the, two weeks ago, the new president, it was private, to the senate, all of us, has to be, you can see, it until i, we're going to, i talk to, and president biden, former president trump, talk about it, until i talk, and for the, and we will, the oval office, a sense of, and at the, all of you, to bring the, on the ground, less than a, a lot of, in the last, you have to, going to be, to move forward, across the country, is going to, need to be, in this country, world health organization, the federal government, but he is, president biden said, all the way, around the world, and you can, know that we, not be the, to show that, americans in the, he wants to, with each other, i want to, talked about the, of the steps, the president has, getting to work, and center for, he talked about, you all know, there will be, his inaugural address, covid relief package, he going to, paris climate agreement, front and center, they're going to, one of the, is he going, it is an, on behalf of, focus in the, the american people, to ensure that, in the white, democrats and republicans, a little time, he was sworn, with the american, as well as, for all of, are in the, when it is, for the american, was a reflection, the course of, it is hard, even when it, is getting the, a reflection of, be quite involved, the role of, expect him to, team in place, is hard to, pandemic under control, on is getting, try to get, it was both, extensive parts of, of you play, return briefings with, the only one, over that time, your understanding on, next few days, day and the, we witnessed two, to deliver on, quickly those confirmations, briefings with our, in a dependable, of senior staff, the world on, also track progress, as we are, and ambassadorships to, do those regularly, to the cabinet, led to that, stranger to the, of congress from, the expectations of, to share with, the desire to, world on trips, early calls will, those relationships and, to bed every, that we announced, and i will, here of senior, for 36 years, to make that, to get through, he received a, be very involved, have more to, to read out, questions as possible, and in a, congress from both, days where we, you in the, power of truth, is president biden, will he be, in the coming, back to government, members of congress, for the president, choosing to any, will be with, a common goal, him when he, assistance for the, will president biden, the state department, will be on, to release the, that i would, lot of comments, who are desperate, to preview for, getting our national, the opportunity to, house and at, and when should, i should say, number

of ways, would say he, and having more, that with the, delivering the best, the next few, get his cabinet, saturdays and sundays, setting an example, what is your, out for you, read out for, to do is, of this podium, letter in the, on the federal, to address the, to get to, of a pending, our democracy and, and the course, he goes to, want to do, indication of a, and i was, of setting an, with our health, quickly in the, preview for you, during the course, we are eager, ambassadorships to be, the challenges and, on getting the, has assistance for, this role as, can also track, it is not, to respond at, from president trump, of our choosing, to discuss on, sworn in today, importance of setting, respect for the, of ways to, and i expect, share that with, agenda moving forward, his decision on, that i come, home who are, in the oval, the power of, was both generous, he served with, when he was, respond at a, going to discuss, not planning to, the public so, to this podium, disagree for extensive, people on behalf, right to respond, with the public, be days where, topic he discussed, getting on the, there are a, you expect him, discuss the important, like to move, how quickly those, more to share, i will note, relationship with canada, short time ago, at home who, hope to have, work for the, get to those, his objective and, have a question, we all are, security team in, on friday with, we reserve the, whole team here, he would say, both in the, the coming days, on trips to, do is not, american people to, to share the, a dependable way, party today during, information to the, to do those, i know some, funding for vaccine, that he wakes, on the capitol, an indication of, issue he goes, accurate information with, biden planning to, with all of, of the members, for you or, deliver on in, you gave me, not talk about, desire to get, today during the, do you see, so i don't, is not just, the members on, these daily briefings, i noted earlier, we want to, sides of the, i would expect, weeks ago today, oval office right, on in this, his first call, issue that he, that was a, the paris climate, team here of, letter from president, getting the pandemic, coming out here, transparency and truth, what we plan, meeting the expectations, people at home, and public health, goes to bed, calls will be, at a time, and with the, say he works, american people and, power of this, at this point, call will be, many of the, you and with, role of a, there for 36, ways to combat, let me ask, the issue he, as you noted, of delivering the, to his inauguration, president were standing, expect additional nominations, he discussed with, free and independent, getting onto their, i also work, plan to do, both generous and, was sworn in, deep respect for, to sit down, we'll have more, podium having served, members on both, when will president, for you at, and that's something, a short time, the day and, been discussing that, he be in, a topic he, when should we, leaders to sit, is your understanding, address the challenges, our team is, her way to, be picking up, ago today on, with him when, coming days and, to bring transparency, as his decision, i don't have, planning to release, but we have, center for the, that we can, bring transparency and, to the american, if the president, before he was, was reading the, gave me the, we'll try to, rebuild those relationships, partners and allies, also work for, as we all, people to make, and independent press, interests of the, him not planning, to get his, information with the, is front and, facing in the, manner of our, you at this, quite involved in, president biden's view, provide us the, he served there, do you expect, be on friday, we plan to, prime minister trudeau, for extensive parts, his early calls, the president were, be in that, said it was, our choosing to, making on getting, we have a, of engagement and, decision on the, today on the, this podium having, monday through friday, president biden planning, served there for, not

fully done, pipeline that we, for the role, anything to read, which is sharing, and even when, on her way, in this role, officials and public, he was reading, covid relief measures, he wakes up, the issue that, i have a, of the american, the country together, he's going to, than a day, talk about the, you talk about, the deal in, is to move, can convey on, was designed with, put in place, and a sense, parties of what, spent eight years, for getting the, to announce his, that he believes, i spent a, rejoining the paris, pick up where, as we continue, this would be, a little technical, models to the, little time with, you in terms, getting this covid, was his reaction, nancy pelosi and, our health experts, of the process, want to know, appropriate in order, impacting red states, any wiggle room, president biden have, had an incredible, the relief they, to meet the, what are you, president biden plan, work with members, have that commitment, said he felt, to do that, oil and gas, a call or, gave a primetime, be with partners, terms of a, any tools off, in here to, been president of, relief they needed, submitted that to, red states and, you just mentioned, republicans take a, unity and bringing, details as well, you or advance, just skipped over, resolve of the, covid and what's, inaugural address and, american people can, people the relief, the vice president, noted a little, sense of some, and has he, together is to, and there is, get them in, were necessary to, want to pick, iran must resume, with regards to, and chuck schumer, conversations with foreign, of some joy, he had an, he was coming, see a need, get it done, laid out as, spent the day, we need to, change being one, are the next, was asking questions, importance of unity, been in office, it was designed, designed with the, can do their, of both parties, president has asked, states and blue, a vital part, a day now, has asked us, an incredible sense, has an impact, his view is, that means getting, or level of, address and the, place as of, country together is, negotiations with mitch, presidency to be, give you all, would expect his, and get going, roll up his, a primetime address, as of today, give us some, helping to get, about how to, that you did, means getting this, is too high, the people they, in terms of, in place as, speak with the, preparations for getting, reviewed by our, how long are, does president biden, to pick up, long are you, as you know, with members of, has not been, he believes that, we are confident, view is that, vital part of, as the vice, to conduct the, his presidency to, that were necessary, that the way, get through this, and that's vitally, i can convey, is some debate, that to the, in the world, relief package through, has the legal, for you in, that you took, his focus is, was the emotion, and republicans take, does the administration, of his presidency, president has made, that you just, the brazilian president, take it now, what it was, with the number, by our team, a couple times, president biden promised, students or level, eager to get, don't have anything, predict for you, partner to president, going to leave, is a discussion, the administration still, states was one, and it will, continue to do, that commitment today, pelosi and chuck, the leases will, conversations with each, of how congress, to president obama, the climate crisis, like for him, to leave the, whether he has, not had a, suffering of the, us some color, is there any, for their relationship, under the deal, what will be, to roll up, asking questions about, only countries in, some debate about, about what it, is not on, keeps us safe, the beginning of, has not had, of deep cleaning, and the leases, biden promised to, incredible sense of, biden plan to, we are only, table in the, there is some, does he think, i noted a, we are in, specifics of how, had a seat, the way to, impeachment to them, level of testing, not on politics, i will just, states continues to, and covid and, the table in, was a vital, out as his, an important role, order for that, all of our, playing

an important, from our health, continuing to conduct, about unity in, clear that he, being one of, always has an, he think that, he felt like, a vital step, president biden wants, desire to roll, to the people, wants a theme, proposal is too, share from our, there any wiggle, parties to get, is a conversation, climate change being, spent a little, bring the country, agreement is a, both parties of, is that the, united states was, he has the, his desire to, beginning of the, what are the, he plan to, the world's largest, of the world's, how to move, what is the, so that means, as i noted, asked us to, it was like, to work with, that always has, in order to, announce his specifics, people they represent, he was asking, about the measures, just like the, on president trump's, the price tag, he spent eight, to know all, reported that you, he also said, leaders will be, white house ready, to share from, deal in order, he spent the, also said he, question about it, a final package, preference is to, be reviewed by, it as an, was one of, know all the, unity in his, ready and safe, to get it, to the u.n., the day with, as an example, was like for, to speak with, plan to speak, of the united, price tag on, here as the, be one of, order to meet, i just skipped, comes to iran, it was laid, and safe for, of what will, since you gave, important role as, going to cut, sleeves and get, he been president, process for us, is a vital, members of both, the last few, what was his, president's proposal is, to predict for, room on that, plan to work, convey on climate, going to continue, here at home, them in here, that keeps us, was laid out, of unity and, biden have any, focus is not, trillion as a, is the expectation, was coming home, of a call, that was the, no question about, wiggle room on, united states continues, 30 days for, in order for, business of the, his family and, as a starting, for less than, at the beginning, if president biden, off on that, countries in the, tag on the, house ready and, role as a, what i can, get to work, biden wants a, his first term, as he noted, first foreign trip, it is on, congratulations on your, on the campaign, two big concerns, big concerns for, solving the problems, is on getting, term to speak, noted on the, to work and, on your new, concerns for pro-life, don't have any, on getting to, problems of the, only seven hours, foreign trip yet, about his political, political plans moving, first term to, his political plans, the problems of, he noted on, to speak more, will not be, so i also, even when it's, his first foreign, is to bring, president biden is, just about the, he works for, but his objective, with me today, truth back to, here with me, works for the, role as well, and then the, i work for, share the truth, standing here with, hard to hear, i hope to, work for him, to make sure, of when he, going to take, forward with a, is a great, so what are, at this time

## E.2 Downstream Influence, Additional Models

In Table E3, we conduct a robustness test in which we iteratively remove trigrams used in network news in days  $d - 3$ ,  $d - 2$ , and  $d - 1$  from the briefing transcripts in day  $d$  before constructing our similarity measure. This ensures that neither actor is “credited” with downstream influence on an ongoing news story that appeared on the previous three nights’ nightly news coverage.

We also remove stop words including letters and stop words from the quanteda package, and a very small set of additional words: abc, cbs, nbc, senior administration official, senior administration officials, nbc nightly news, abc world news, and cbs evening news. We do so to ensure the relationship is not driven by the presence of frequently used, but

unmeaningful words.

These results replicate those in Table 4.

Table E3: Relationship between Agenda Control and Broadcast News Coverage

	ABC (1)	CBS (2)	NBC (3)
WH Briefing Control	0.165*** (0.040)	0.144*** (0.041)	0.180*** (0.042)
WH Unique Trigram Count	-0.000 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)
Press Unique Trigram Count	-0.001* (0.000)	-0.001 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)
Special Guest(s)	0.017 (0.068)	-0.049 (0.069)	0.077 (0.070)
Log Opening Statements Length	-0.011 (0.024)	0.078** (0.025)	0.018 (0.025)
Divided Government	0.365*** (0.099)	0.260** (0.101)	0.220* (0.103)
Investigation	-0.009 (0.067)	0.024 (0.068)	-0.045 (0.069)
Presidential Approval	0.004 (0.009)	0.001 (0.009)	-0.000 (0.009)
Election	0.005 (0.115)	0.120 (0.120)	0.049 (0.119)
First 100 Days	0.369* (0.158)	0.375* (0.162)	0.413* (0.164)
SCOTUS Activity	-0.087 (0.070)	0.069 (0.071)	0.086 (0.073)
Press Conf. Length	-0.000 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)
News Pressure	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Major Disaster	-0.042 (0.059)	-0.115+ (0.060)	0.017 (0.061)
Terrorism	-0.064 (0.184)	0.240 (0.193)	-0.072 (0.193)
CPI	-0.070* (0.032)	0.003 (0.033)	-0.011 (0.033)
Unemployment	0.022 (0.017)	0.000 (0.017)	-0.009 (0.018)
President Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓
Month Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓
Day of Week Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓
Num.Obs.	1582	1560	1562
R2 Adj.	0.091	0.049	0.033
R2 Within Adj.	0.036	0.038	0.031

Note: Results come from ordinary least squares models. The dependent variable is the standardized day-level difference between the White House–broadcast news Jaccard similarity and press corps–broadcast news Jaccard similarity with the previous three day’s news trigrams removed (higher values are associated with more White House influence).