

Does Presidential Rhetoric Matter? Priming and Presidential Approval

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The public's approval of the president plays a critical role in determining the president's power and policy-making success. Scholars and pundits have thus devoted a large amount of attention to explaining the dynamics of presidential approval. Surprisingly, this work has overlooked one of the more important potential forces behind approval—that is, what the president himself says. In this article, we examine the direct impact of presidential rhetoric on approval. We do so by combining a content analysis of the 2002 State of the Union address with both a laboratory experiment and a nationally representative survey. We show that the president can have a substantial effect on his own approval by priming the criteria on which citizens base their approval evaluations. Our results add a new dimension to the study of presidential approval, raise intriguing questions about accountability, and extend work on priming and public opinion by introducing the idea of image priming.

Does presidential rhetoric affect presidential approval? Surprisingly, virtually no research has addressed this question—despite widespread recognition that presidents invest substantial resources to perfect their rhetoric (Edwards 2002), and clear evidence that approval fundamentally affects the president's power and policy-making success (Neustadt 1960; Canes-Wrone n.d.). In this article, we use a multi-method approach to demonstrate that presidents can use rhetoric to shape their own approval. What the president says matters for what the public thinks of him.

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We begin in the next section by discussing presidential approval and the effect rhetoric might have on approval. We then use a content analysis of a presidential speech, a laboratory experiment, and a nationally representative survey to test our expectations. We show that the president can influence his own approval by priming the standards on which he is evaluated. We also introduce the idea of image priming and explore how political knowledge affects issue and image priming (in different ways). Our results add a new dimension to the study of presidential approval, extend work on priming and public opinion, and raise intriguing questions about accountability.

The Study of Presidential Approval

Work on presidential approval constitutes one of the most progressive research endeavors in political science. The bulk of this scholarship focuses on aggregate trends in approval (Gronke and Newman 2003), documenting the causal importance of the economy, wars, media coverage, *inter alia* (e.g., Kernell 1978; Edwards 1990; Edwards et al. 1995; Nicholson et al. 2002). “Presidential drama,” such as the occurrence of a major speech, also can impact trends in approval (e.g., Brace and Hinckley 1993). This suggests that presidential *actions*—but not necessarily the content of what the president actually says, once he decides to give a speech—can affect approval (McGraw et al. 1995).¹

Other work explores the dynamics behind individual level approval (e.g., Mutz 1994; Edwards et al. 1995). For example, media coverage can influence individual level evaluations of the president (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder 1987). Gronke and Newman (2003, 22) explain, however, that, relative to research on aggregate trends, “it is surprising . . . that so little is known about the individual level determinants of presidential approval.” Another surprising aspect of scholarship on presidential approval is that it has not investigated how *presidential rhetoric* (i.e., what the president says) affects approval.² Edwards and Eshbaugh-Soha (2000, 4-5) explain that scholars “make numerous inferences regarding the impact of the president’s rhetoric on public opinion [but they] virtually never provide evidence for their inferences about the president’s impact. . . . [Many studies] have examined public evaluations of the president, but not the president’s influence on those evaluations.” In what follows, we fill these gaps by exploring how presidential rhetoric affects individual level approval.

1. Simon and Ostrom (1989, 76) examine how different types of speeches (e.g., foreign policy or economic) affect approval. However, they use a blunt characterization of content (i.e., they characterize each speech by its main theme), and do not investigate how the actual rhetoric in the speech affects individual level opinions. McGraw et al. (1995; also see McGraw 2002, 267-68) find that rhetoric from a fictitious congressional representative influences overall evaluations of that representative. An important related question concerns how the president, Congress, and the media influence one another (see, e.g., Edwards and Wood 1999).

2. In addition to showing that the action of giving a speech (but not necessarily the rhetoric within the speech) can affect approval, scholars show that popular presidents can sometimes sway opinions on policy and/or affect the public’s agenda (Cohen 1995; McGraw 2002, 267; Edwards 2003). None of this work directly examines the impact of rhetoric on approval, however.

Priming Approval

How might presidential rhetoric affect approval? We build on media effects research to argue that the presidential rhetoric shapes approval via *priming*. We next describe priming theory and how we propose to extend it.

What Is Priming?

Miller and Krosnick (2000, 301) explain that “[p]riming occurs when media attention to an issue causes people to place special weight on it when constructing evaluations of over-all presidential job performance” (Iyengar et al. 1984). Scholars have amassed a large body of experimental and survey evidence of media priming (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Krosnick and Brannon 1993; Miller and Krosnick 2000). For example, individuals exposed to news stories about defense policy tend to base their overall approval of the president on their assessment of the president’s performance on defense. Thus, if these individuals believe the president does an excellent (poor) job on defense, they subsequently display high (low) levels of overall approval. If, in contrast, these individuals watch stories about energy policy, they instead base their overall approval evaluations on what they think of the president when it comes to energy policy (see Iyengar and Kinder 1987). Notably, virtually all priming research focuses on the priming of *issues* as evaluative criteria—indeed, McGraw and Ling (2003) explain that prior research ignores how other evaluative ingredients—such as image perceptions—might be primed.

How Does Priming Differ from Persuasion?

Priming constitutes a distinct process from persuasion—the “notion of priming proposes quite a different mechanism by which the media may affect attitudes than the traditional persuasion approach presumes” (Miller and Krosnick 1996, 81; also see Berelson et al. 1954; Iyengar and Kinder 1987, 117; Johnston et al. 1992, 212; Riker 1996). Priming occurs when an individual changes the *criteria* on which he or she bases an overall evaluation (e.g., basing the evaluation on defense or energy), whereas persuasion involves altering what an individual thinks of the president on a given dimension (e.g., does the president do a good or poor job on defense policy?). Priming does *not* involve changing perceptions of how well the president is doing on an issue—it simply alters the issues on which individuals base their overall evaluations.

Our focus on priming follows a growing literature that shows how presidents strategically emphasize advantageous issues with the hope of making those issues salient in the minds of voters (e.g., Jacobs and Shapiro 1994; Murray 2001; Druckman et al. 2004). The president may also influence his approval by persuading voters that they should support his policies, or by convincing them that he is performing well on specific issues; however, Edwards (2003) shows that influence via persuasion is often quite limited.³

3. Nonetheless, we will explore the possibility of some persuasion as a tangential part of our study.

Priming Dynamics

Priming occurs, in part, because “people have neither the ability nor the motivation to comprehensively incorporate every potentially relevant issue into their presidential evaluations. As some issues are brought into the foreground of people’s thinking . . . others will be pushed into the cognitive background” (Miller and Krosnick 1996, 82). Priming theory does not suggest that individuals will assign weight to an issue in equal proportion to the emphasis the issue receives—for example, if the media or a campaign spends 30 percent of its time discussing defense policy and 70 percent of its time on energy policy, individuals will not subsequently base 30 percent and 70 percent of their evaluations on the respective issues (because there are a limited number of issues on which voters will focus). Rather, issues that receive the most *relative* attention are most likely to serve as the basis for overall evaluations, all else constant (Krosnick and Brannon 1993, 964). Along these lines, Miller and Krosnick (1996, 82) explain that “priming is likely to be *hydraulic* in nature: increases in the impact of some issues should be accompanied by decreases in the impact of other . . . issues” (emphasis added).

Of course, priming does not occur among all people at all times (e.g., Edwards 2003). Druckman et al. (2004) suggest that the success of priming depends on the particular context, source, and audience. For example, there may be an issue that carries such inherent importance that people will base their evaluations on that issue, regardless of priming (i.e., the issue trumps all other issues). Alternatively, Miller and Krosnick (2000) show that a source’s (e.g., the news’) credibility affects its ability to prime (also see Druckman 2001). In terms of audience variables, scholars have paid particular attention to political knowledge, with mixed results, some studies finding a stronger priming effect among the less knowledgeable, others studies finding a stronger effect among the more knowledgeable, and yet others finding no knowledge effect (e.g., Miller and Krosnick 1996, 94; also see Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Krosnick and Brannon 1993). Recently, McGraw and Ling (2003) found that the impact of knowledge depends on the issue, with more knowledgeable individuals susceptible to priming on relatively new issues but less knowledgeable people susceptible on older issues. Aside from knowledge, priming research also acknowledges that individuals will base their evaluations not only on issues emphasized by elites, but also on issues of personal importance (e.g., Iyengar 1991; Miller and Krosnick 1996, 82).

Extending Priming

We extend priming research in three ways. First, we investigate how the president himself—as opposed to the news media—can use issue emphasis to shape his own evaluations. This differs from prior work that focuses on the news,⁴ and, more importantly, it enables us to address our main question: does presidential rhetoric directly shape indi-

4. Some work shows that campaign issue emphasis can similarly work to shape the ingredients of vote choice (e.g., Johnston et al. 1992; Mendelsohn 1996).

vidual level approval? Evidence of *presidential* priming would be the first demonstration that presidents play a role in affecting their own approval via rhetoric.

Second, we investigate *image* priming. Research shows that perceptions of candidate personal characteristics or image play a considerable role in individuals' vote choices and opinions (e.g., Kinder 1986; Miller et al. 1986). Indeed, Funk (1999) demonstrates that when evaluating presidential candidates, citizens focus not only on issues but also on leadership effectiveness, integrity, and empathy. She (1999, 716) explains that which image criteria voters rely on will depend, in part, on candidate priming—yet, as she acknowledges, surprisingly, priming research has produced little empirical evidence that speakers prime these image characteristics (however, see Mendelsohn 1996; Druckman 2003, 2004).⁵ We remedy this by exploring how the president can prime his own image. Third, we build on prior work by testing for the moderating effect of political knowledge not only on issues, but also (for the first time) on image priming. We now turn to the specifics of our study.

Documenting Presidential Priming

To study whether, when, and how the president can prime his own approval, we need to first identify the rhetoric, and then propose an approach for studying its effect. We follow Cohen's (1995, 1997) and Hill's (1998) innovative studies that use the State of the Union address to study how the president sets the public's agenda (i.e., the public's most important problem). Specifically, in this initial study, we use President Bush's State of the Union address delivered on January 29, 2002. The State of the Union address is a "once-a-year chance for the modern president to inspire and persuade the American people" (Saad 2002), and to establish his agenda (Cohen 1997).

In some ways, the 2002 address was unique—Bush enjoyed extremely high pre-address approval (84 percent), and it was the first post-9/11/01 State of the Union address. However, in other ways, the speech was typical in that Bush addressed a divided audience. Citizens were moving their focus away from terrorism and homeland security toward more emphasis on the economy and the recession. According to a January 2002 Gallup poll, 35 percent named terrorism or related problems as the most important problem facing the nation compared to 33 percent who named some sort of economic problem (followed by education with 6 percent). Thus, the public exhibited some division—terrorism was not a trumping issue.⁶

We recognize using one speech by a popular president raises questions about over-time generalizability, and we hope ours is the first of many tests and that future tests

5. Iyengar and Kinder (1987) examine how priming shapes image perceptions (as a dependent variable), but not how image perceptions themselves affect overall approval evaluations.

6. In our analyses, this potential variance in the relevance (or salience) of different issues (e.g., terrorism or the economy) to overall presidential approval evaluations is of more importance than variance in overall approval. This is the case because we focus on explaining the weight individuals attach to different issues and images, rather than overall approval *per se*. Also, as we will discuss, for some of our empirical tests we use a more refined four-category overall approval measure as opposed to the two-category measure used in some mass surveys.

will examine other presidents. We see ourselves as similar to other initial studies that focus on one president (e.g., Jacobs and Shapiro 1994), or the impact of a presidential, politician, or news media statement on policy opinions (e.g., Sigelman 1980; Kuklinski and Hurley 1994, 1996; Nelson and Oxley 1999; Lupia 2002).

We study the impact of the address by combining three methods. First, we content analyze the address to identify the issues that the president attempted to prime. Second, we use a laboratory experiment to test for the success of presidential priming; we also discuss why an experiment constitutes an ideal method for exploring the impact of rhetoric. Third, we complement the experiment by using a nationally representative survey designed to measure the impact of the address.

Content of President Bush's 2002 State of the Union Address

Prior to Bush's address, analysts predicted that he would focus equally on terrorism/homeland security and the economy. For example, CNN predicted that Bush would "focus on war, economy," while MSNBC described Bush as preparing for a "balancing act . . . [dealing] with terrorism, recession" (also see Berke 2002). This made sense given the aforementioned national focus on terrorism/homeland security and the economy. However, Bush also had a strategic incentive to emphasize homeland security, as his issue-specific approval on security was substantially higher than on the (slumping) economy (Saad 2002). By using this strategy, Bush could prime people to focus more on his strengths and thus generate higher overall approval (see Riker 1996; Druckman et al. 2004).

To assess what Bush actually addressed, we content analyzed the speech. In so doing, we build on Cohen (1997), who analyzes State of the Union addresses from 1953 to 1989 by classifying all policy statements into one of four categories: foreign policy, the economy, civil rights policy, or domestic policy. Cohen's categories make sense given his historical coverage; however, we use a more timely set of categories for 2002. Specifically, media coverage prior to the address and the content of the speech led us to include two distinct categories relating to the 9/11/01 attacks—we include a category for the war in Afghanistan and a category for terrorism/homeland security. The war category includes, for example, statements about the ongoing war or developments in Afghanistan, while the terrorism/homeland security category includes such things as discussion of terrorism, homeland defense, airport security, and so on. Our distinction into two categories also follows Gallup, which treats these as distinct categories in its most important problem analyses.

In addition to these two categories, we follow Cohen (1997) by including an economy category, an "other" foreign affairs category (i.e., including statements not about the war or homeland defense), and an "other domestic" category. This fifth "other domestic" category includes discussion of domestic issues such as civil rights, education, social security, health care, energy policy, and so on. We fold civil rights into this category (whereas Cohen treated it as a separate category) because it is not an issue that has received recent national attention, and Bush devoted only one half of one line of his speech to civil rights.

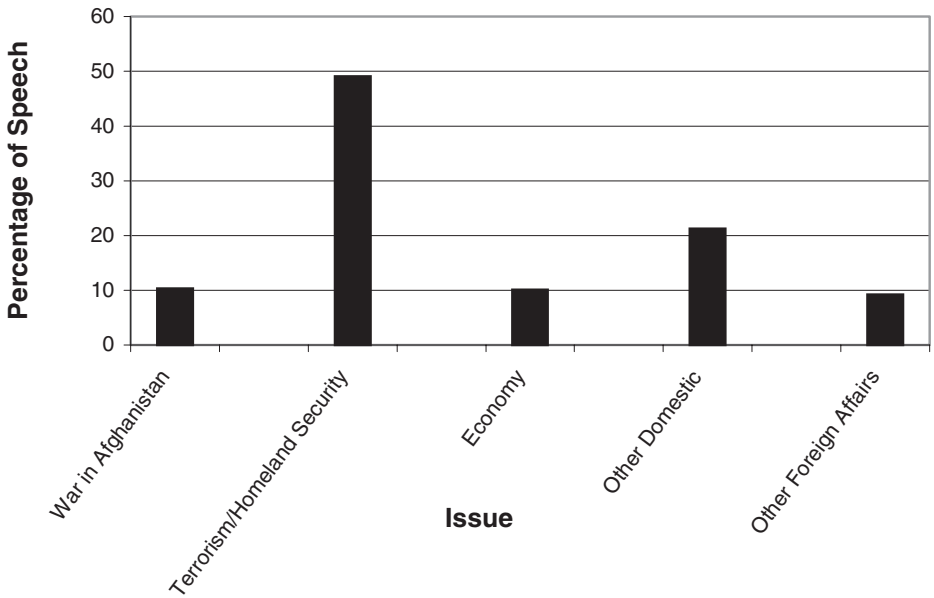


FIGURE 1. Issue Emphasis in the 2002 State of the Union Address.

In Figure 1, we display the percentage of lines of Bush’s address devoted to each of our five categories (out of all lines devoted to policies).⁷ Counter to some pre-address expectations, Bush did not “balance” the economy and terrorism; rather, in accordance with what we would strategically expect, he focused the bulk of the speech (49 percent) on terrorism/homeland security issues. In contrast, he devoted 10 percent of the speech to the economy and 10 percent to the war in Afghanistan, thereby devoting four times more attention to terrorism/homeland security than to the economy or the war. He also spent little time on other foreign affairs issues (9 percent). The 21 percent devoted to “other domestic” is a bit deceiving because this category includes a vast number of issues, none of which individually received more than 4 percent. Interestingly, education received only 2 percent despite being the most cited most important “other domestic” problem according to Gallup (Newport 2002).

In sum, Bush paid an inordinate amount of attention to the issue of terrorism/homeland security in an attempt to redirect the public away from its increasing focus on the economy and back to a focus on terrorism. The *New York Times* headline the day after the address stated: “Bush, Focusing on Terrorism, Says Secure U.S. Is Top Priority” (Sanger 2002b). Bush also drew a clear distinction between homeland secu-

7. We analyzed the official text of the address taken from the White House website. We had two experienced coders independently categorize each half line of text into one of 36 issue categories (or into a non-issue category that was subsequently ignored). We then aggregated these categories into our five categories of interest. The two coders agreed on the category placement of 83 percent of the lines coded. All disagreements were easily settled by the two coders or by an independent third party. Details are available from the authors.

urity and the ongoing war. Moreover, while not directly captured in our analysis, the tone of Bush's speech was one of promoting "strength" and "toughness." He emphasized that the United States would not stand for terrorism—as the *New York Times* reported two days after the speech: "Bush Aids Say Tough Tone Put Foes on Notice" (Sanger 2002a). This reflects the implicit foreign policy component of the terrorism issue (i.e., the terrorists are seen as foreign).

Priming Expectations

The documentation of priming entails showing that, relative to those who did not watch the speech, speech watchers placed more weight on the issues emphasized by Bush when constructing their overall approval evaluations. As explained, in contrast to persuasion, priming does not require that the watchers exhibit more positive evaluations *per se* (although we will investigate this as well; see, for example, note 21). Given the speech's focus, we thus expect that individuals who watched Bush's speech will be significantly more likely than those who did not watch to base their overall approval evaluations of Bush on their approval of how well he is performing on the terrorism/homeland security issue, all else constant. That is, Bush will prime a reliance on terrorism as an evaluative criterion.⁸

As mentioned, our focus on the priming of *issues* (such as terrorism) follows nearly all prior work; however, we also extend this work by looking for the priming of *images*. We focus on the aforementioned images identified by Funk (1999) that play a substantial role in presidential evaluations: leadership effectiveness, integrity, and empathy. We posit that Bush's use of a "tough" foreign policy-related issue will prime an increased reliance on leadership as an evaluative criterion. (Homeland security, at least implicitly, involves the protection of the United States against terrorists from abroad and thus has a foreign policy component.) Indeed, Druckman et al. (2004) argue that presidents emphasize foreign affairs issues with the hope of enhancing perceptions of leadership effectiveness. The logic here is that by discussing foreign affairs, the president comes across as the nation's "leader," and also can highlight strength, toughness, and leadership (also see Popkin 1994; DeRouen 2000). Bush's focus and tone make for an excellent test of this type of image priming. We thus expect that individuals who watched Bush's speech will be significantly more likely than those who did not watch to base their overall approval evaluations of Bush on their perceptions of Bush's leadership effectiveness, all else constant.

Finally, we explore the moderating impact of political knowledge. Recall that McGraw and Ling (2003) argue that with a relatively new issue, more knowledgeable people will be more susceptible to priming. This is the case because "the more knowledge one has about politics, the more quickly and easily one can make sense of . . . [a new issue] and the more efficiently one can store it in, and . . . retrieve it from, an elab-

8. Recall that priming theory does not suggest that individuals will be primed in exact proportion to the extent to which the issue is emphasized; rather, issues that receive relatively more attention will play a relatively larger role in evaluations.

orate and organized mental filing system” (Krosnick and Brannon 1993, 966; also see Miller and Krosnick 2000). Given our focus on the relatively new issue of terrorism, we thus expect a stronger issue priming effect for the more knowledgeable, all else constant. We also will test for knowledge effects with image priming to see whether it works differently—unlike a new issue, political knowledge does not seem necessary for individuals to connect their evaluations with images.

An Experimental Test

To examine the effects of Bush’s speech, we implemented an experiment. Experimental data enable us to control who watches the speech, and to measure responses immediately after exposure to the speech. We thus avoid both selection bias problems (because we randomly assign participants to watch the speech or not), and the use of a self-reported speech exposure measure (that can be unreliable; see Iyengar and Simon 2000, 151-52). Our measurement strategy ensures that any effects will be due entirely to exposure to presidential rhetoric and not subsequent news commentary, conversations with others, or other world events.

We acknowledge limitations in the generalizability of our experimental approach, and this is why, in the next section, we complement our experiment with data from a national survey. We also note that priming effects documented in analogous single-exposure experiments have proven to be highly robust across contexts and populations (Miller and Krosnick 2000, 313). It is important to keep in mind that this is a first test of a proposition that has evaded study, undoubtedly, in part, because alternative modes of inquiry have been unable to address it.⁹ Gronke and Newman (2003, 13) explain that the study of approval is “seldom the direct target of . . . experimental studies, but they [can] help us address some of the same questions that time series scholars are concerned with. . . .”

Participants, Design, and Procedure

We recruited participants from the University of Minnesota to participate in a study on information processing and political attitudes that would involve watching the State of the Union address. A total of 265 individuals participated in the study in exchange for \$7.¹⁰ We conducted the study in classrooms at the university, and we pro-

9. As Campbell and Jamieson (1990, 12) state, “it is extremely difficult to link rhetorical acts and effects causally.” Edwards (1996) elaborates that when it comes to presidential rhetoric, tests of the direct influences have been scarce—undoubtedly, in part, because common methods make it extremely difficult to assess causal propositions. An experimental approach is thus useful as a complement to the larger literature on presidential rhetoric that offers detailed descriptions of rhetoric (also see McGraw et al. 1995, 57).

10. The addition of more participants would provide little gain in statistical power for our main analyses; moreover, this number of participants far exceeds samples used in other noteworthy political communication experiments (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Kuklinski and Hurley 1994; Rahn et al. 1994; Nelson and Oxley 1999).

vided snacks for the participants so as to make the setting more natural and relaxed. We randomly assigned participants to either complete a questionnaire measuring approval before watching the State of the Union address ($N = 135$) or to watch the address and then immediately complete the questionnaire ($N = 130$). We showed the address live on NBC (i.e., the study took place on the night of the State of the Union—January 29, 2002), thereby enhancing the external validity of the experiment (i.e., participants watched a real, ongoing political event rather than an artificially compiled program). Also, we showed the speech without any pre- or post-address commentary.

The questionnaire asked participants a variety of questions about President Bush, including their overall approval, approval on an array of specific issues, and image evaluations. We also asked some basic demographic and political questions. If participants who completed the questionnaire after watching the address significantly differ from those who did so before the address, then we have evidence for the direct impact of presidential rhetoric. As is typical in these experiments, we do not measure prior approval evaluations of participants who watched the address because we suspect this would have biased subsequent evaluations. Moreover, prior evaluations are not necessary as the appropriate measurement approach is to make post-exposure comparisons across conditions (see Cook and Campbell 1979).

Importantly, all participants knew that Bush would be giving the State of the Union address—they knew a part of the study involved watching the address. Thus, any differences we find between the two groups will not be due to only one group anticipating the address and being primed by the event itself. We are not merely replicating the previously discussed work on dramatic events (e.g., Brace and Hinckley 1993). Moreover, as discussed, our hypotheses depend on an acute correspondence between Bush's specific rhetoric and audience reactions. The point is that if we find *relative* differences, they are not due to the simple existence of the event, but rather they stem from the rhetoric Bush employs.¹¹ We also note that, as is typical in experiments, aggregate factors such as the state of the economy are constant across conditions, and we thus do not need to control for such variables (see Cook and Campbell 1979).¹²

11. We follow Cohen (1997) by focusing on rhetorical *content*. However, it is possible that any effects we discover stem from other aspects of Bush's rhetoric or from nonverbal communication. This is an interesting issue but is not directly problematic for us because our general goal, at this point, is to investigate how presidential communication affects opinions. Also, we tie our hypotheses directly to rhetorical content, and thus, if we find support for them, it seems quite likely that rhetoric played the critical role. It is for this reason that we also feel confident in ruling out the possibility that simply watching any broadcast drives our results.

12. Our experimental sample ended up being relatively diverse, given recruitment from a university setting. Fifty-six percent of the participants were males, and more than 40 percent were over 21 years old. The main sample bias concerns the overrepresentation of Democrats—with 50 percent of the sample being Democratic, 27 percent being Independent/Moderate, and 23 percent being Republican. This bias limits the generalizability of the specific levels of approval and may mean that non-watchers focus on slightly different issues than the population at large. However, the bias does *not* threaten the generalizability of the causal processes—the impact of the rhetoric—which is our main concern. This is true not only because these processes have proven robust in other settings, but also because in reporting the results, we focus exclusively on the *relative* differences between speech watchers and non-watchers. While it may be the case that all the participants evaluated Bush more negatively than the general population, random assignment means that, on average, the two groups will possess the same (negative) bias toward Bush. Thus, any variation in the *relative* judgments of the two groups will be due to differences in speech exposure.

Experimental Priming Results

To test for priming effects, we examine the criteria on which experimental participants based their overall approval evaluations. The dependent variable is the participants' answer to the question of "How much do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling his job as president?" measured on a 4-point scale, with higher scores indicating higher approval (this is a standard approval measure; see, e.g., Miller and Krosnick 2000, 304). The independent variables come from three categories of variables that tend to affect evaluations: (1) approval of the president's performance in certain issue areas, (2) perceptions of the president's image or personality traits, and (3) political and social predispositions (Rahn et al. 1990).

We include issue-specific approval measures that reflect our content analysis. These include separate measures for how Bush is handling the war in Afghanistan, terrorism/homeland security, the economy, and education. We include education as the "other domestic" issue because, as mentioned, it was seen as the next "most important problem" after terrorism and the economy. Moreover, preliminary analyses suggest that this was the "other" domestic issue that most concerned our participants (i.e., according to an open-ended "most important problem" question).¹³ We measured the issue-specific performance variables in the same way as our overall approval measure, except that we made explicit reference to how the president handles the specific issue (e.g., "How much do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling the economy?"). For personality perceptions, we include separate constructed scales for perceived leadership effectiveness, integrity, and empathy (Funk 1999). For each of these measures, higher scores indicate a more positive evaluation of Bush.¹⁴

We include standard measures of party identification and ideology, both measured on 5-point scales, with higher scores indicating a movement toward Republican in the case of party identification and conservative in the case of ideology. We also include a control dummy variable measuring the participants' gender (0 = male, 1 = female). For ease of interpretation, we normalize all variables to a 0 to 1 scale and use OLS regression.¹⁵

The first column of Table 1 reports the results for all participants.¹⁶ It shows that both issue-specific approval and image perceptions mattered. All of the issue approval

13. We do not include an issue-specific approval for "other foreign affairs" because it was clear from open-ended questions and conversations that the participants did not see a distinguishable "other foreign affairs" issue.

14. Following Funk (1999), our leadership effectiveness scale took the average score for three standard questions that asked participants to rate the extent to which Bush can be seen as a "strong leader," "knowledgeable," and "commanding respect." Similarly, our integrity scale combined measures that asked the extent to which Bush is "honest" and "moral." The empathy scale used items asking about the extent to which Bush is "compassionate" and "in touch with people." All of the scales have coefficient alphas of .80 or higher. For interesting related discussions about presidential evaluations, see Cohen (1999) and Newman (2003).

15. The results are similar if we use an ordered probit model instead of OLS. We also checked for an agenda-setting effect (Cohen 1995, 1997; Hill 1998) such that watchers would be more likely to name terrorism/homeland security as the most important problem facing the country. We find a significant effect, with 30 percent of watchers listing terrorism first in their listing of up to three problems compared to 21 percent of non-watchers ($z = 1.77$; $p \leq .05$; using a difference of proportions test).

16. Because we have directional predictions, all reported p values throughout the article come from one-tailed tests (see Blalock 1979, 163; also see Nelson and Oxley 1999 for a similar approach).

TABLE 1
Priming Bush's Approval: Experimental Results

<i>Independent Variable</i>	<i>Data Set</i>		
	<i>Everyone</i>	<i>Speech Non-Watchers</i>	<i>Speech Watchers</i>
War approval	.19** (.05)	.34** (.08)	.09 (.07)
Terrorism approval	.14** (.06)	-.01 (.09)	.21** (.09)
Economy approval	.28** (.06)	.29** (.09)	.30** (.09)
Education approval	.12** (.05)	.20** (.08)	.07 (.07)
Leadership effectiveness	.17** (.07)	.03 (.10)	.24** (.11)
Integrity	.16** (.06)	.12 (.09)	.18* (.09)
Empathy	-.02 (.08)	-.04 (.12)	.03 (.10)
Party identification	-.01 (.06)	.02 (.08)	-.01 (.08)
Ideology	.09 (.06)	.08 (.09)	.10 (.09)
Gender	.01 (.02)	-.01 (.04)	.04 (.03)
Constant	.01 (.03)	.06 (.04)	-.03 (.05)
R ²	.72	.76	.72
Number of observations	207	101	106

Dependent variable: overall approval of Bush, with higher scores indicating higher approval.

Note: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. ** $p \leq .01$; * $p \leq .05$ for one-tailed tests.

measures are significant ($p \leq .01$)—the more a participant approved of Bush's performance on the war, terrorism, the economy, or education, the greater his or her overall approval of Bush. Among the image variables, perceptions of leadership effectiveness and integrity significantly affected overall approval evaluations ($p \leq .01$) in the expected direction. Perceptions of empathy, party identification, ideology, and gender are not significant, although ideology approaches significance ($p \leq .1$), with conservatives reporting significantly higher approval scores. We suspect that the insignificance of party identification and marginal significance of ideology largely reflects the cross-partisan support Bush enjoyed (Moore 2002).¹⁷ The significance of both issue-specific approval

17. It also may be due, in part, to the lack of variance in our sample—which, as mentioned, is not a problem for our analyses.

and image perceptions highlights that, in contrast to virtually all previous work, future studies of approval need to include *both* issues and image (cf. Miller and Krosnick 2000 on issues and Funk 1999 on image).

The next two columns in Table 1 report the results separately for those who did not and did watch the speech. The results support our expectations about both issue and image priming. The non-watchers based their overall approval evaluations on their issue-specific approval evaluations of the war in Afghanistan, the economy, and education ($p \leq .01$), but *not* terrorism. The image variables and demographics had no effect, although integrity perceptions approached significance ($p \leq .1$). In contrast, the watchers based their overall approval opinions on their issue-specific evaluations of terrorism and the economy, but *not* the war or education.¹⁸

This is consistent with the issue priming hypothesis—watching the address led to a significantly greater reliance on terrorism (i.e., the issue most emphasized in the address). To test whether terrorism played a statistically significantly greater role for speech watchers than for non-watchers, we re-estimated the first pooled model and included a dummy variable for experimental condition as well as an interaction between each variable and the condition dummy variable. We find that the terrorism coefficient is indeed significantly greater for the watchers than for the non-watchers ($p \leq .01$).

The speech also primed watchers away from a reliance on the war and education as evaluative criteria; this is not surprising, given the lack of attention these issues received (e.g., only 10 percent of the speech dealt with the war). The war coefficient is significantly greater for non-watchers than for watchers ($p \leq .01$), while the education coefficient is not significantly different between the two groups. That the speech primed watchers away from non-emphasized criteria is consistent with the aforementioned hydraulic effect such that non-watchers will base their evaluations on some criteria but that these criteria may fade for watchers due to the introduction of new criteria. The continued significance of the economy, however, suggests that sufficient economic salience among the participants prevented the speech from priming watchers away from the economy. As discussed, a non-primed issue can play a significant role in affecting evaluations when it is personally important to the evaluators, and it is not surprising the economy is an ingrained standard of evaluation for many individuals.¹⁹ In these senses, the results comport with what priming theory predicts.

The speech also primed people to rely significantly more on perceptions of leadership effectiveness ($p \leq .01$), consistent with the image priming hypothesis that foreign policy rhetoric and a “get tough” tone enhances the salience of leadership perceptions. The coefficient is (marginally) significantly greater for watchers than for non-watchers ($p \leq .1$). We believe this result constitutes the first causal evidence that, at least to some

18. Given our use of OLS and 1-point scales, assessing substantive effects is straightforward. For example, for watchers, a 10 percent increase on terrorism approval results in a 2.1 percent increase in overall approval. An analogous change for non-watchers would result in virtually no change (given the $-.01$ coefficient). It is this relative difference that indicates a substantial priming effect.

19. This explains why the economy rather than the war displayed significance across groups. Specifically, in open-ended responses to a most important problem question, 24 percent of participants named the economy as the most important problem compared to just 3 percent naming the war.

extent, political rhetoric can prime individuals to increase their reliance on image variables. That the speech also seemed to slightly increase a reliance on integrity is intriguing insofar as it is consistent with work showing that television appearances can increase the importance of integrity (Druckman 2003).²⁰

Overall, our results offer direct evidence that presidential rhetoric can affect *how* people form overall approval evaluations. The content of the presidential address leads people to focus on the issues emphasized in the address; also, foreign policy or analogous issue emphasis causes an increased reliance on leadership perceptions. Presidential approval depends on what the president says.

An obvious question is whether Bush's priming was successful in terms of enhancing his overall approval. We find that he was so but only marginally—the average approval score for the speech watchers, on the 4-point scale, is 2.76 (standard deviation of .86; $N = 126$), while the score for non-watchers is 2.62 (.91; 131) ($t_{255} = 1.31$; $p \leq .1$).²¹ This highlights the fact that shifting overall approval is challenging, and presidents only have so much power to do so. However, the result also shows that presidents, under some conditions, can move overall approval; for example, if the audience viewed Bush as superb on terrorism and horrid on the economy, successful priming would have had a larger effect on overall approval because terrorism plays a larger role for primed individuals. (Moreover, as noted, Bush had high pre-address approval, meaning that there may have been limits on the extent to which his overall approval could increase.) Regardless of the impact on overall approval, successfully altering evaluative criteria has substantial implications for what the public expects of the president, how the public holds him accountable, what policies the president addresses, and the president's role in each of these domains (see Jamieson 2000, 17). In short, presidential rhetoric can play an important role in affecting presidential approval—a finding that has previously evaded researchers.

Priming and Political Knowledge

To investigate the moderating effect of political knowledge, we asked participants five standard political fact questions (see Delli Carpini and Keeter [1996, 305-06], who demonstrate the validity of these questions) and then grouped them into low- and high-knowledge groups based on a median split. We then reran versions of the regressions in Table 1 separately for low- and high-knowledge participants. The regressions differ from those in Table 1, however, in that we also include a dummy variable called "Watcher" that distinguishes those who watched the speech from those who did not (i.e., it is a

20. Nonverbal cues also may have played a role in priming leadership effectiveness. With our data, we cannot distinguish between leadership being primed by foreign policy-related rhetoric (as we posited) or being primed by nonverbal cues. This is an important question for future research; most important for us is that verbal and/or nonverbal communication in the speech primed image.

21. We also find evidence that Bush successfully persuaded watchers to more positively evaluate his performance on certain issues. On performance on terrorism, the average score for watchers is 2.90 (.79, 123) compared to 2.67 (.88; 130) for non-watchers ($t_{253} = 2.24$; $p \leq .01$). We find no persuasion on the war or the economy, which is not surprising given that they received limited attention. As explained, priming and persuasion are distinct processes and each can occur in the absence of the other.

dummy variable for experimental condition), and interactions between “Watcher” and the three statistically significant primed criteria—war approval, terrorism approval, and leadership. If these interactions are significant for one knowledge group and not the other, then we would have some evidence that priming is conditioned on knowledge.

We present the results in Table 2. Low-knowledge participants differ in some marginal ways from high-knowledge participants. For example, they rely more on education

TABLE 2
Political Knowledge and Priming

<i>Independent Variable</i>	<i>Data Set</i>	
	<i>Low Knowledge</i>	<i>High Knowledge</i>
War approval	.28** (.12)	.47** (.11)
Terrorism approval	-.14 (.15)	.01 (.11)
Economy approval	.15 (.10)	.36** (.08)
Education approval	.16* (.08)	.08 (.07)
Leadership effectiveness	.09 (.13)	-.002 (.13)
Integrity	.27** (.11)	.16* (.08)
Empathy	-.04 (.12)	-.04 (.10)
Party identification	.01 (.08)	-.001 (.08)
Ideology	.14 (.09)	.06 (.09)
Gender	-.02 (.04)	.03 (.04)
Watcher	-.12 (.09)	.003 (.08)
Watcher*war	-.17 (.15)	-.41** (.17)
Watcher*terrorism	.23 (.20)	.27* (.15)
Watcher*leadership	.32* (.19)	.18 (.15)
Constant	.12* (.06)	-.03 (.05)
R ²	.70	.81
Number of observations	102	103

Dependent variable: overall approval of Bush, with higher scores indicating higher approval.

Note: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. ** $p \leq .01$; * $p \leq .05$ for one-tailed tests.

approval and less on economy approval, although these differences are not statistically significant (when tested with an interaction between knowledge and the given other variable). Of most interest is that the interaction between speech watcher and leadership is significant for low- but not high-knowledge participants, while the interactions with war approval and terrorism approval are significant for high- but not low-knowledge participants.

These results imply that the speech primed leadership perceptions only for low-knowledge participants, that it primed terrorism approval only for high-knowledge participants, and that it primed away from war approval only for high-knowledge participants. This is an intriguing result—it suggests that *issue* priming works on the *most* knowledgeable, but *image* priming works on the *least* knowledgeable. The issue priming result is consistent with McGraw and Ling's (2003) finding of a high knowledge effect on new issues; 9/11 terrorism and the war are relatively new issues. The image priming result suggests that, as mentioned, in contrast to issues, political knowledge may not be necessary for individuals to connect their image perceptions with the broader picture of presidential approval (see Miller and Krosnick 2000).

We are cautious in interpreting these results, however, because in three-way interactions between each criterion and knowledge, we find no significance (i.e., the coefficients between the two groups are not statistically distinct). Thus, at this point, the most we can say is that we have found an intriguing possibility in need of further research.

A Survey Test

Our experiment offers numerous methodological advantages, including an ability to randomly assign exposure and to measure all theoretically relevant variables. However, our reliance on a university-based sample in a relatively controlled setting raises questions about generalizability. We thus assess the validity of our experimental results by using a nationally representative CBS News/*New York Times* (2002) special topic survey.

The survey consisted of two waves. First, surveyors called respondents between January 21 and January 24, and asked them questions about Bush and ongoing political events (e.g., Enron). Second, surveyors called the same respondents after the State of the Union address on January 29, 2002, to ask them whether they watched or listened to the address and to assess their reactions.²²

Ideally, the survey would include all the items from our experimental questionnaire, which we designed expressly to test the priming hypotheses. The survey was not, however, designed to test for priming; as a result, we use what we believe to be the best available measures that enable us to offer a suitable test.

On the first wave poll, respondents were asked whether they approved or disapproved of (1) the way Bush is handling his job as president, (2) the way Bush is handling the campaign against terrorism, and (3) the way Bush is handling the economy.

22. A response rate is not provided in the survey documentation. For all reported analyses, we weight the data using the sample weight provided.

These dichotomous measures constitute a first wave (time 1) overall approval measure and issue-specific approval measures of terrorism and the economy. (All are coded so that 0 = disapprove, 1 = approve.) Respondents also reported if they thought Bush has strong qualities of leadership (i.e., a measure of leadership effectiveness, where 0 = no, 1 = yes), and they rated, on a 4-point scale, the extent to which they thought Bush cares about the needs and problems of people (i.e., a measure of empathy, with higher scores indicating increased empathy).

The survey did not include measures of war approval, education approval, or integrity. However, in the case of the war, we use a related item that asked respondents—on a 4-point scale—the extent to which they thought the war is going well. While this measure does not directly ask about Bush, it taps respondents' evaluations of war performance, and the war is clearly directed by Bush. (We assume that if a respondent believes the war is going well, he or she approves of Bush's performance with regard to the war.)

The survey also measured various control variables, including party identification (on a 3-point scale moving toward Republican), ideology (on a 3-point scale moving toward conservative), gender (0 = male, 1 = female), age (measured in four cohorts of 18-29, 30-44, 45-64, and 65 and over), education (measured at five levels as no high school, high school, some college, college graduate, more than college), and race (0 = white, 1 = non-white). We also control for sociotropic (3-point scale asking respondent whether the nation's economy is worse, about the same, or better than a year ago), and pocketbook (an analogous evaluation of their family's financial situation) economic evaluations that can play a role in shaping approval (Burden and Mughan 2003).²³ Unfortunately, the survey does not include sufficient political knowledge items for us to further explore the moderating role of knowledge.

The brief second-wave survey included items that asked respondents whether they watched or listened to the address that night, and—for the second time—whether they approved or disapproved of the way Bush is handling his job as president. We expect that, compared to non-watchers, watchers relied significantly more on terrorism and leadership in forming their second wave (time 2) overall approval evaluations, all else constant.

Survey Priming Results

To test our hypotheses, we regress the time 2 overall approval measure on the terrorism, war, and economic approval items; the leadership and empathy items; the demographics and other controls; and the time 1 approval question. As in the experiment, we separate watchers from non-watchers to see whether watchers rely significantly more on terrorism and leadership.

The availability of the time 1 approval item—asked only a few days earlier—is critical, as it allows us to test for any *change* in approval over those few days, and the

23. We did not measure sociotropic or pocketbook evaluations in the experiment because we did not expect these items to be primed (apart from the issue-specific economic approval measure).

sources of any such change. If the speech (or other intervening events) had no impact, then we would expect *only* the time 1 approval item to be significant because it captures the initial causes of that time 1 approval, and nothing else should have changed (assuming reliable measures). This differs from the experiment where there was no need to control for prior approval (due to random assignment), and we thus expected significant correlates (e.g., economy approval) even for non-watchers. If we find other significant variables for the non-watchers, it suggests that they were primed by the event of the speech or other intervening events, but not the content of the speech. (All respondents knew about the speech because the survey informed them of it.) If we find other significant variables for the watchers, but not the non-watchers, then we can surmise that this is due to the speech content (i.e., priming).²⁴

We normalize all variables to a 0 to 1 scale and use logit regression. The first column of Table 3 reports the results for both watchers and non-watchers. It shows, not surprisingly, that time 1 presidential approval plays a large role in determining time 2 presidential approval (in the expected direction; $p \leq .01$). We also see that other factors became significant by time 2, including leadership effectiveness (with more positive leadership perceptions leading to higher approval; $p \leq .05$), race (with non-whites becoming more positive in their approval; $p \leq .05$), and pocketbook and sociotropic economic measures (with more positive appraisals leading to higher approval; $p \leq .05$). While we are not clear on what primed race—and are a bit surprised by the direction of the result—we suspect the significance of the economic measures reflects a methodological artifact. Specifically, the first wave of the survey asked the approval question first, while the second wave of the survey asked it last, just a few questions after asking respondents whether they thought proposed tax cuts would be good or bad for the economy. This question ordering may have primed economic considerations for time 2 approval.

The next two columns report the results for the non-watchers and watchers separately. Consistent with the pooled regression, race continues to be significant ($p \leq .01$) but only for the non-watchers, while the pocketbook economic measure is significant for both groups ($p \leq .05$; the sociotropic measure is not significant for either group). Also, gender is significant for the watchers, with females offering more negative evaluations ($p \leq .05$).

More interestingly, for non-watchers, prior approval has a large impact ($p \leq .01$); this shows that, as expected, non-watchers continued to base their approval evaluations to a significant extent on the same criteria. In contrast, prior approval is not significant for the watchers, suggesting that the speech primed them to alter the criteria underlying their evaluations. In an interaction, the prior approval coefficient is significantly greater for non-watchers than for watchers ($p \leq .01$).

To which criteria did watchers turn? Consistent with our issue priming hypothesis, watchers turned to a reliance on their terrorism evaluations ($p \leq .01$). That they turned to this criterion that Bush emphasized is evidence that Bush's rhetoric primed the audience to base their approval evaluations on terrorism. Indeed, in contrast to the

24. We control for other differences between watchers and non-watchers with the time 1 approval and other items.

TABLE 3
Priming Bush's Approval: Survey Results

<i>Independent Variable</i>	<i>Data Set</i>		
	<i>Everyone</i>	<i>Speech Non-Watchers</i>	<i>Speech Watchers</i>
War approval	.70 (1.44)	4.37 (3.22)	−.83 (2.60)
Terrorism approval	.52 (.97)	−1.96 (2.61)	3.85** (1.25)
Economy approval	.02 (.57)	−1.35 (.92)	2.80 (1.90)
Leadership effectiveness	1.72* (.80)	3.77** (1.06)	−1.45 (1.70)
Empathy	.27 (1.48)	−.92 (2.60)	4.45 (3.15)
Party identification	.14 (1.25)	−.94 (1.37)	.56 (1.74)
Ideology	.05 (.97)	−.71 (1.14)	1.64 (1.51)
Gender	−.76 (.84)	−1.80 (1.34)	−1.94* (.97)
Race	1.96* (1.10)	6.78** (2.52)	.27 (1.22)
Education	1.37 (1.15)	1.70 (1.98)	.97 (1.40)
Age	1.52 (1.46)	2.79 (3.37)	1.34 (1.61)
Sociotropic economy	2.63* (1.55)	9.68 (7.51)	1.58 (2.93)
Pocketbook economy	1.64* (.96)	2.62* (1.56)	3.92* (2.17)
Time 1 approval	3.92** (1.04)	9.31** (3.28)	.34 (1.47)
Constant	−5.12** (1.82)	−10.55** (4.30)	−3.98 (3.19)
χ^2	48.07**	33.92**	35.11**
Number of observations	330	134	196

Dependent variable: time 2 overall approval of Bush, where 0 = disapprove and 1 = approve.

Note: Entries are logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

** $p \leq .01$; * $p \leq .05$ for one-tailed tests.

watchers, non-watchers did not rely on terrorism—the difference between the coefficients for the two groups is significant ($p \leq .05$). In short, *the survey replicates our experimental issue priming result.*

The image priming hypothesis does not fare as well. In fact, the results are somewhat perplexing, with the non-watchers significantly turning to perceptions of leader-

ship ($p \leq .01$), but not the watchers. (The coefficients significantly differ from one another; $p \leq .01$.) As mentioned, the non-watchers were reminded of the State of the Union address during the call back, prior to the approval question. It may be that knowledge of the *event* of the speech primed these respondents to think more about Bush as a leader (e.g., in line with research on presidential drama). If this is the case, however, it brings into question the image priming hypothesis that the *content* of the speech primes image.²⁵ In the end, our introduction and analysis of image priming raises numerous questions. Does rhetoric prime image? If so, when and which images are primed? What is the role of knowledge? We have offered one of the first direct tests of image priming, and we hope future research will refine the concept as it has with issue priming.

Most importantly, the survey confirms the result that the president can prime the issue criteria underlying his own approval evaluations. While the exact role of image in this process is unclear, we have concrete evidence that presidential rhetoric can matter when it comes to approval.

Conclusion

We find clear evidence that the president can use rhetoric to influence his own approval by priming the issues that underlie approval evaluations. We see three main implications for our results.

First, an enormous literature examines the individual and aggregate determinants of presidential approval, yet it ignores what may be one of the most intriguing factors—the president's own rhetoric. While our results say little about the impact of presidential rhetoric compared to other variables such as the economy, the fact that the president can influence his own approval at all is important. It suggests that a president can exercise direct control over what citizens think of him, and this creates strategic incentives that are understudied and poorly understood (see Kernell 1997, 223; Canes-Wrone n.d.; Druckman et al. 2004). Future work on individual level presidential approval needs to account for a new type of effect—the impact of presidential rhetoric.

Second, we believe our results raise provocative questions about accountability. In the ideal democratic system, elected officials respond, to some extent, to citizens' preferences. Whenever the elected officials themselves exert a significant influence on those preferences, it raises questions about elite manipulation as opposed to elite enlightenment of public opinion. In our case, we have little evidence in one direction or the other—does presidential rhetoric enlighten/inform or manipulate the public? The possibility that presidents shape the very criteria on which they are evaluated and ultimately held accountable makes these questions all the more pressing.²⁶

25. It also fails to explain why survey watchers were not primed, or why only experimental watchers were primed. Also, the dichotomous nature of the leadership variable contains little variance, with 87 percent of speech watchers believing Bush is a strong leader.

26. Even if priming the public to rely on certain criteria (e.g., the economy) instead of other criteria (e.g. foreign affairs) does not lead to substantial shifts in overall approval (e.g., the percentage of the public approving of the president), it still alters the nature of public expectations about presidential agendas (e.g., changes for what the president may be held accountable) (also see Cohen 1997).

Third, numerous public opinion scholars investigate the dynamics of issue priming, focusing on how the media prime their audience. We show that presidents also can engage in issue priming. Moreover, we have sought to extend priming work with one of the first direct tests of image priming. Nearly all prior work focuses exclusively on issues, reflecting a divide among public opinion scholars between those who study issue opinions and those who examine image perceptions. Our experimental results suggest that presidents can use certain issues/tones to prime image, and, interestingly, that political knowledge may moderate image priming in different ways than issue priming. Our survey results do not confirm these findings, however. We believe that political speakers can prime images, and we hope our mixed findings stimulate further work on the dynamics of image priming (also see Druckman 2003, 2004; Druckman et al. 2004).

We emphasize that this is a first study on the impact of presidential rhetoric on approval and on image priming. We hope future work will examine other speeches and presidents in an attempt to further identify moderators. Indeed, we believe that presidents face clear limits on their influence—undoubtedly, they can exercise influence only under certain conditions, and discovering these conditions is critical to understanding the normative implications of their impact (Edwards 2003; Druckman 2004). For example, like virtually all other political communication work, we do not explore the longevity of our priming effects (e.g., Kuklinski et al. 2000, 811; Edwards 2001, 21-27; Edwards 2003). This is important because presidents often care more about the long run and may be able to withstand short-term changes in approval; moreover, there is some evidence that media effects such as priming may be fleeting (see Druckman and Nelson 2003; Edwards 2003).²⁷ On the other hand, even if the effects are short-lived, they can—under certain circumstances—be important in affecting presidential action and policy making. Another extension would involve looking at the impact of post-address commentary, and looking at presidents who do not enjoy such high pre-address approval. This latter extension is particularly important given Miller and Krosnick's (2000) finding that the speaker's trustworthiness moderates priming (also see Druckman 2001). Finally, future work that looks at different presidents should also account for variations in their rhetorical styles.

In sum, scholars and pundits have long been interested in the president's ability to influence and lead public opinion. We find that, when it comes to his own approval, the president can have an impact via priming. The over-time and across-context extent of this influence and what it means for theories of presidential leadership await further research.

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27. We thank George Edwards for emphasizing this point to us.

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