

# Cable and the Partisan Polarization of the President's Audience

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*Presidents' audiences have been shrinking over time. Prior research suggests that the rise of cable television is to blame. We investigate whether this shrinkage is occurring disproportionately among those the president most needs to persuade—disapprovers of his performance. Analyzing both A. C. Nielsen's audience ratings and self-reports of speech watching from 32 postspeech surveys, we find that as the share of households subscribing to cable has grown, the statistical relationship between the president's approval rating and the percentage watching his televised speeches has strengthened commensurately for each group of party identifiers. Consequently, as presidential approval ratings have polarized during the past two decades, so too has the partisan composition of presidents' audiences, a phenomenon unknown during the broadcast era. Modern presidents thus find themselves increasingly preaching to their party choir and losing the capacity to influence public opinion more broadly.*

In January 1998 President Bill Clinton found his presidency embroiled in scandal over allegations that he had an affair with intern Monica Lewinsky. The administration immediately went into damage control, culminating in a hastily arranged television address in which the president emphatically asserted, "I did not have sex with that woman." Shortly afterwards, as Clinton polished his upcoming State of the Union address, new evidence surfaced that squarely contradicted his claim. Allies and adversaries alike urged him to postpone the speech while Congress investigated charges, which now included lying to the American people. But Clinton pressed on and delivered his State of the Union address as scheduled to a large, rapt prime-time audience.<sup>1</sup>

1. Nielsen Media Research estimated just over 53 million viewers watched the speech.

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The next day's news accounts quoted pundits and politicians of every partisan persuasion proclaiming that the president had "hit a home run." Their judgments appeared to be confirmed by the president's poll numbers that turned upward over the next two weeks.<sup>2</sup> A CBS/*NY Times* survey team, which had gone into the field just after fresh evidence of Clinton's affair surfaced, nimbly scheduled post-speech reinterviews with those respondents who had previously expressed an opinion on Clinton's job performance. In the second interview, respondents were asked if they had watched the speech and, if so, what they thought of it and the president. This two-wave panel created a kind of quasi-experiment in which watching the speech served as the treatment. Over 40% of Republican detractors in the first survey switched to approval after watching his address. This compares to a 10 percentage-point gain among their counterparts who said they had skipped the speech. Similarly, more than 50% of the president's Democratic and independent disapprovers who watched the speech changed to approval (Kernell 2007).<sup>3</sup> Through rhetoric President Clinton appears to have converted a large number of his critics and helped rescue his presidency.<sup>4</sup>

Few presidential addresses can be expected to move public opinion so dramatically.<sup>5</sup> Yet evidence of *some* effect abounds in the research literature. Druckman and Holmes (2004) conducted an experiment in presidential agenda setting by exposing subjects to excerpts of presidents' State of the Union addresses. Those who watched the presidential segments weighed issues the president had introduced more heavily than did the control group in subsequently answering questions about the president's job performance.<sup>6</sup> Rosenblatt (1998) relied on pre- and postspeech panel surveys to demonstrate President Ronald Reagan's success in changing public opinion about U.S. military involvement in Lebanon and Grenada. In a nationally televised address, just four days after 241 U.S. marines were killed in a bombing in Lebanon and one day after the U.S. invasion of Grenada, the president defended his actions. Among respondents who reported watching the speech, a fifth more switched to approval of the Grenada invasion, and 13% more endorsed his decision to keep troops in Lebanon. Assessments by those respondents who missed the speech did not move much—up three percentage points for Grenada actions and down six points for Lebanon policy.

These studies point to another important relationship. Just as President Clinton scored his strongest gains among his disapprovers, so, too, did Reagan in public support for military involvement in Lebanon and Grenada. Some of Reagan's biggest gains in support were from his detractors. He saw a 5% increase in approval of keeping troops in

2. Gallup polls showed a 10 percentage point gain in approval the week after the speech.

3. "Untreated" respondents who had missed the speech also upgraded their assessments—by 30 and 39 percentage points for the president's partisans and independents respectively. Perhaps gains among these respondents reflect the speech's generally favorable reception by the news media as well as reports from their social network.

4. A year later, Clinton's approval rating among Republicans remained a few percentage points higher than it had been prior to the speech, while he continued to gain support among his partisans and independents.

5. Edwards (2003) assembles evidence of minimal effects.

6. Outside the lab, Ragsdale (1984, 1987) demonstrated that presidential speeches affect people's approval ratings of the president and Cohen (1995) found that when presidents focus on issues in their state of the union addresses, public concern about these issues increases.

Lebanon among supporters who watched the speech. Meanwhile, he enjoyed a 12% gain in support for troops in Lebanon among his detractors who watched the speech (Rosenblatt 1998).<sup>7</sup> The president's critics are susceptible to his persuasion—if, of course, he can gain their attention. Therein lies the challenge that has recently arisen for presidents.

Specifically, the challenge takes the form of cable television. From 1971 to 2009 the share of television households connected to cable (or satellite) services grew steadily from 6 to 88%. The number of nonpremium cable channels increased commensurately to over a hundred for the typical cable household. The growth of cable's market share is closely associated with the overall decline in presidents' prime-time audiences (Baum and Kernell 1999, 2007). When President Richard Nixon gave a prime-time address, he could expect to routinely draw over half the nation's households. Presidents Clinton and George W. Bush could only expect to attract under a third.<sup>8</sup>

Evidence from research on cable viewers' news consumption suggests that erosion of the president's audience might be skewed in a direction that limits his access to his naysayers, whom the above research shows are susceptible to his appeals. Cable offers a broad spectrum of news and opinion, giving subscribers the opportunity to pick and choose their news to an extent traditionally unavailable to broadcast viewers. Cable viewers frequently exercise their option by selecting news programs they find congenial with their prior beliefs and opinions (Pew 2008). Numerous political scientists have suggested that selective exposure to news may account for the growing polarization of public opinion (Mutz 2006; Cohen 2008; Prior 2007).<sup>9</sup> Cable viewers may apply similar standards in consuming information from the White House. If so, presidents may also find their audience eroding disproportionately among those viewers whom presidents most need to persuade—citizens who disagree with their policies and disapprove their job performance.

Certainly, long before cable, presidents had cause to worry that their appeals might fall on deaf ears (Edwards 2003).<sup>10</sup> Individuals possess a number of cognitive mechanisms to ward off unwanted presidential communications. Selective inattention, distortion, forgetting, compartmentalization, and rationalization are familiar techniques in social psychology for limiting the effects of discrepant information. Yet, unlike avoidance of treatment, these second-line defense mechanisms are not foolproof. With the rise of cable television, however, viewers gained a powerful tool for shutting out presidents—their television remote.

7. On approval of the Grenada invasion about 11% more of both approvers and disapprovers who saw the speech endorsed the invasion.

8. For Bush, even that number is inflated by the more than 82 million viewers who tuned into his speech on the September 11 terrorist attacks.

9. Mutz (2006, 230) observes, that as "news consumers increasingly have the ability to customize their news environments to their own tastes, the likelihood [increases] that news will simply reinforce existing views and produce a subsequent polarization of partisan groups."

10. Franklin Delano Roosevelt reportedly reined in the frequency of his "fireside chats" concerned that too many national radio broadcasts might bore the public. Half a century later, as President Jimmy Carter prepared for his fifth nationally televised speech on the energy crisis and rampant inflation within an 18-month period, his communications consultants sought to dissuade the president from delivering yet another prime-time address that would likely be ignored (Kernell 2007).

In this article we investigate whether cable viewers are dropping out of the president's audience according to their prior assessments about him. We begin in the next section by developing a model of the president's audience as comprised of two types of viewers—*captive* viewers tethered to the broadcast antenna and *liberated* cable viewers. When confronted with appearance of a president who has preempted their program, these types approach their decision to watch the president differently. Unfortunately, the individual-level data necessary for directly comparing the choices of cable and broadcast viewers are unavailable. We restate the model stochastically to estimate its implications on the overall size of the president's audience; this revised model takes into account the proportion of the potential audience at the time of the speech tethered to the broadcast antenna and the propensity of cable viewers to base their decision to watch a president in part on their evaluations of his job performance. We then assemble self-reported speech watching responses from thirty-two national opinion surveys drawn shortly after presidential addresses between 1971 and 2008. These data allow us to partially disaggregate the time series by respondents' party identification. This offers several advantages over a fully aggregated time series for testing the robustness of our findings and exploring the implications of these for partisan polarization. The results reveal a relationship between presidential approval and rates of speech watching that are consistent with the expectation that some cable viewers base their decision to watch a speech on their job performance evaluation of the president. In the final section we pose important implications of the findings for American politics. Partisans will increasingly sort themselves in and out of the president's audience. As presidents' audiences shrink and become more polarized, nationally televised presidential appeals will lose their effectiveness as instruments of presidential leadership.

### Captive and Liberated Viewers

Consider the television audience as comprised of two types of viewers: those limited to the broadcast signal and cable subscribers. In a definitive study of viewing habits during the broadcast era, Bogart (1972, 85) describes a "passive" viewer, one who watches prime-time television regardless of available program choices. The share of television households watching television during prime time hardly budged from the early 1950s to the 1970s "despite drastic changes in the kinds and qualities of programs offered [and] the advent of color."<sup>11</sup> He concluded, "if they want to watch television, they will . . . watch *something* rather than turn on the radio."

When it comes to watching presidents, Baum and Kernell (1999) refer to broadcast viewers as *captives* because whenever they liked, presidents enjoyed easy and full access to the huge prime-time audiences.<sup>12</sup> Faced with the stark choice of either watching the

11. Bogart (1972, 85) added that even for April viewing rates were invariant over the two decades despite the fact that during the latter years, reruns dominated network schedules, a circumstance that was not present in the 1950s and early 1960s.

12. Until the late 1990s, broadcast viewers held few options when presidents interrupted their favorite prime-time program. Beginning in the mid-1990s broadcast viewers in many markets found

president or finding some other pleasurable activity, few viewers opted for the latter course. Nielsen's audience diaries, recorded at 15-minute intervals, reveal negligible audience erosion during Presidents Nixon's and Gerald Ford's prime-time addresses (Foote 1988). Rather, viewers patiently watched the president and awaited resumption of entertainment programming. Network practices assured presidents a captive audience by shutting down competition during their addresses. Under the watchful eye of the Federal Communications Commission, the networks acceded in unison to a president's request and agreed to share camera "feeds" of the president speaking in order to discourage viewers from checking out other channels. This informal "yellow flag" rule, a fixture until the mid-1980s, minimized the disruption a presidential address would have for the remainder of the evening's programming and assured presidents huge audiences.

Then, inexorably, came cable.<sup>13</sup> From the early 1970s, cable averaged an annual 4% growth in market share. *Liberated* from the broadcast networks and their insistence that they watch the president, many cable viewers bolted at the appearance of the president on the screen. Presidents' audiences shrank; no longer assured their prime-time audience would return to their programming after the address, the "yellow flag" rule frayed as individual networks reneged on their standing agreements and collectively they began challenging the president's need for access to prime time.

We can represent the decline of the president's audience with Equation 1. At any given time the percent watching the president is simply the percent of broadcast viewers watching television weighted by their share of the overall television audience plus the percent of cable viewers watching weighted by their market share:

$$\% \text{Watching} = (x \cdot \% \text{Broadcast}) + ((x-y-z) \cdot \% \text{Cable}), \quad (1)$$

where  $\% \text{Cable} = 100 - \% \text{Broadcast}$ .

Research reported above suggests that  $x$  will be invariant with respect to political considerations; whatever schedule features set the size of the prime-time audience will determine the share of households that watch the president's address.<sup>14</sup> The audience rating for presidential addresses among cable viewers ( $x-y-z$ ) will be significantly smaller for both nonpolitical ( $y$ ) and political ( $z$ ) reasons. Many viewers will miss a president's speech simply because they are tuning into one of the cable channels that will not carry

increased programming options. In addition to a profusion of local UHF channels, Fox broadcast network expanded dramatically during the late 1990s and a couple of fledgling networks (CW and UPN) attracted affiliates covering about two-thirds of the market for a limited program schedule before declaring bankruptcy and combining into a new network in 2006. Moreover, one of the four national networks would on occasion balk at surrendering prime time to a president (Kernell 2007). With the development of UHF and in 2009 digital broadcasts, the average viewer enjoys access to more independent broadcast channels. However, only the Fox network attracted significant audiences.

13. We include satellite (DBS) and all land-line services (i.e., DSL) under the rubric "cable."

14. The  $x$  term will vary by season, day, and time slot, as well as the popularity of the programs on the channels the president is preempting. In fact, this variable may include a systematic political component, for which we have no systematic information. As networks retreated from automatic coverage in the 1990s, we know anecdotally that they negotiated the schedule of presidential addresses to minimize damage to new programs' ratings and avoid interruption of "sweep" weeks, the intensely competitive period where ratings set the next term's advertising rates (Kernell 2007). We found no instances where the audience grew because of the president's speech.

the president's speech. With cable programming winning over half the prime-time market, this term will largely account for the serious erosion in presidents' audience ratings.<sup>15</sup> While the plethora of programs may alone account for the general decline of presidents' audiences, it is the attrition that reflects viewers' political considerations ( $z$ ) that most interest us here. We hypothesize that a substantial share of cable viewers will assess whether to see what the president has to say or to change channels. Those who oppose his policies or who disapprove his performance in office will be more likely to reach for their remote to find another program. If this conjecture is correct, this term—unlike  $x$  and  $y$ —will vary significantly according to the president's public standing and other partisan considerations.<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately, the data requirements for filling in the figures for this simple descriptive model are unavailable. We do not know, for example, the share of cable and broadcast viewers who watched any one presidential address—much less, viewing rates over a number of speeches.<sup>17</sup> Fortunately, the model of viewer types responding differently to presidents in deciding to watch an address has straightforward implications for overall audience ratings for presidents over time that we can test. Rather than asking “are cable viewers more likely than broadcast viewers to key on their evaluations of the president's job performance in deciding to watch or not?” we instead hypothesize that if the answer is yes, we should find presidents' audience ratings becoming more sensitive to their approval levels as the composition of the audience has shifted from predominantly broadcast to predominantly cable viewers. We can represent this implication for marginal changes in presidents' overall audience ratings with Equation 2:

$$\% \text{Watching} = c + a \cdot \% \text{ Approve} + b \cdot \% \text{ Broadcast} - d \cdot (\% \text{ Approve} \cdot \% \text{ Broadcast}).^{18} \quad (2)$$

Assuming that broadcast viewers did not weigh presidential evaluations in their speech watching calculus—the absence of the  $z$  term for this type in Equation 1—the effect of approval should be inversely related to the broadcast share of the audience. In Equation 2, the effect of approval takes the form of a significant  $a$  coefficient combined with negative, offsetting  $d$  coefficient for the interaction term. Where 90% of viewers subscribe to cable, the impact of the interaction term will be negligible (as  $\% \text{ Broadcast}$  approaches zero). In the broadcast regime, conversely, these terms should largely cancel out, leaving the audience as a share ( $b$ ) of the broadcast audience plus some constant.

Earlier we cited research that showed the share of television households viewing their televisions as being largely unrelated to programming and more specifically, the

15. By 2009, Nielsen reports that 57% of prime time viewers (or 42.2 million households) are watching cable as opposed to broadcast programs (Gorman 2010).

16. Yet the circumstances that prompt the president to deliver the address might at times boost the audience's interest in hearing what he has to say. We will test this possibility below.

17. We began the investigation naively confident that either Nielsen reports or national opinion surveys would allow us to distinguish rates of speech watching between cable and broadcast viewers. We searched the codebooks of over 100 surveys archived and indexed at Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research, Roper (International Survey Library Association), and Pew survey archives, but failed to turn up any that contained both speech watching and cable access questions.

18. For convenience in interpreting the sign of the interaction term, we employ the percent of households still receiving the broadcast signal—i.e. 100% cable—at the time of the survey.



presence of the president on the screen. This in itself indicates that presidential evaluations did not influence viewers' propensities to watch a speech. More direct evidence on this score is contained in the only study to our knowledge that has examined the attitudinal covariates of watching a president's address. Welch (2000) analyzed archived national surveys drawn shortly after one of President Reagan's televised speeches by the president's chief political consultant, Richard Wirthlin.<sup>19</sup> He found that neither partisanship nor opinions toward the president's job performance significantly differentiate speech watchers from nonwatchers.

Time-series analysis of marginal changes in the distribution of aggregates may solve the data problem, but it introduces others. Any number of microprocesses could generate the same aggregate relationships. An obvious potential source of spuriousness is party identification—especially when scored in terms of identification with the “administration” and “opposition” parties—with both presidential approval and rates of speech watching. To control for this potentially confounding effect, we estimate the model in Equation 2 separately for each set of party identifiers. These partially disaggregated time-series data also provide a broader range of values of speech watching and presidential approval, especially during periods of polarization when partisans hold preferences that are both more homogeneous and distant from those of the other side. Finally, partisan figures allow us to examine the implications of the findings for partisan sorting of the president's television audience.

## Data

Television producers and advertisers have long accepted Nielsen Media Research as the authoritative source for the television audience ratings with which they plan programs and negotiate ad rates. In the course of monitoring audiences for commercial programming, Nielsen obtains audience ratings for presidents' prime-time addresses to the nation. Unfortunately, its reports do not break out audience statistics by viewers' party identification or access to cable. This limits our use of this variable, *Nielsen*, to estimating the model for only the fully aggregate speech watching series. We shall employ the standard Nielsen metric: the percent of households with televisions that are tuned to the president's address.

In order to develop data series of speech watching by party identification, we turn to national public opinion surveys archived at the Roper Center. We found numerous surveys that queried respondents about watching a recent presidential speech, but only

19. The surveys were taken in 1981 and 1982 when approximately one-fifth of television households subscribed to cable. The analysis does provide faint evidence of a partisan self-selection bias. A disproportionate share of self-described “strong” Republican respondents consistently said they viewed the president's addresses. One simply cannot know whether this reflects an early glimpse at discretionary viewing among members of the small cable audience, the special effort of Reagan enthusiasts to rearrange their television viewing schedules to catch his address, or even perhaps the impact of the speech itself in bolstering Republican respondents' ties to their party. We wish to thank Reed Welch for access to these data. We reanalyzed the relationships with somewhat different statistical models, and found relationships closely resembled those he reports.

19 contained all of the information suitable for this analysis.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, only one of these surveys occurred prior to 1990, the early era in cable's expansion for which baseline information is critical. To fill in this important gap in our time series we retrieved private surveys that Presidents Nixon and Reagan had sent into the field immediately after a nationally televised address. During this era, commercial polling firms may not have been interested in the audiences for presidential addresses, since virtually everyone who was watching television that evening stayed tuned to the president's address. But presidents and their consultants, who were keenly interested in how viewers responded to their messages, had good reason to monitor the television audience's response to their speeches. Fortuitously for our inquiry, all of these surveys began by asking respondents if they had seen the president's address. The consultants' reports for 13 of these surveys contained tabular data that allow us to recalculate percentages watching the speech for each set of party identifiers.

Together, these sources provide audience ratings among partisans for 32 televised addresses from April 1971 through January 2007.<sup>21</sup> Our main dependent variable, % *Watching*, is based on this compilation. The percent who reported watching the president in these surveys varies from a high of 79% in August of 1973 to a low of 32% in June of 2005.<sup>22</sup> (For more detailed information about these surveys, see Appendix A.)

One may reasonably suspect that respondents' self-reports inflate actual viewing.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, given the opportunity for more viewers to avoid presidential communications over time with the growth of cable, over reporting may be systematic. A comparison of self-reports and Nielsen ratings in Figure 1 bears out our suspicion. During the 1970s and 1980s the differences amounted to only a few percentage points, but over time the disparity between these measures increased significantly. The discrepancies are much larger for some addresses over others. Many more respondents said they watched President Nixon's speech in 1973. This might reflect viewers' confusion with the Watergate hearings that were also being broadcast during the daytime schedule during the week of

20. Some of these surveys proved inappropriate because either the question wording did not distinguish watching from other sources of familiarity with the president's message or the sample was prescreened in an earlier interview to identify likely speech watchers. A few surveys including all of Richard Wirthlin's private polls for President Reagan probed whether the respondent saw all or only part of the president's address; after testing a couple of alternative specifications, we simply collapsed these finer differences into a binary variable.

21. Questions on speech watching asked whether the respondent had watched or listened to a particular presidential speech. The questions included details on the subject or type of speech (e.g., "speech on the war in Iraq" or "State of the Union Address") and when it aired (e.g., "last night"). Party identification questions began with either "Generally speaking, do you usually" or "In politics as of today" and were followed by "consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, or an Independent?" The January 1997, January 1998, and June 2005 speech watching by party percentages combine information from pre- and postspeech surveys. Controls for differences in survey types were not significant. Appendix A provides additional information for each of these surveys.

22. Even this sharp decline in the president's television ratings probably understates the effects of viewer liberation on the president's audience. The survey organizations added a speech watching question during crises and on politically charged occasions when the speeches presumably attracted stronger viewer interest and, more importantly, when survey responses to the "watching" questions attracted widespread interest in the news media.

23. Prior (2007) finds evidence of over-reporting of television news viewing. Yet he also finds that marginal changes in these self-reports track the Nielsen ratings.



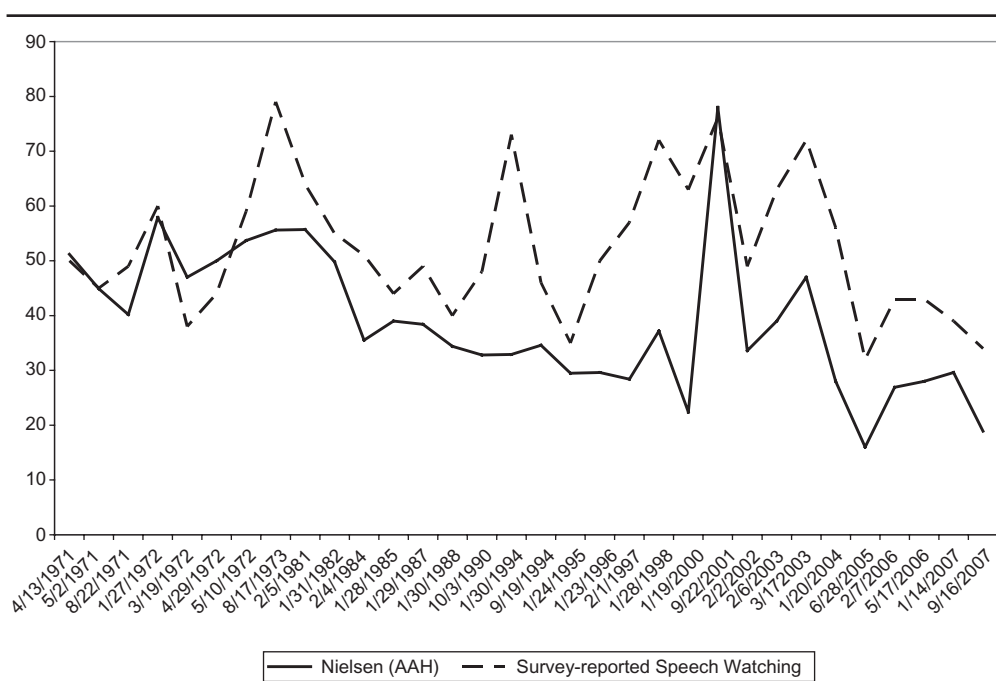


FIGURE 1. The Relationship between Nielsen Ratings and Watching Reported in Surveys.

the survey (Besen and Mitchell 1976). Overall, by controlling for the percentage of households with cable and inserting dummy variables for the Watergate speech and the State of the Union addresses in 1994 and 1998 to control for glaring discrepancies, self-report totals track the Nielsen ratings almost perfectly.<sup>24</sup>

To represent the president's reputation as a source, we enlist the percent who endorse his job performance for each set of party identifiers, *% Approve<sub>pid</sub>*, from the most recent Gallup survey taken prior to the speech.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, information on the rates with which partisans subscribe to cable is not available. None of our postspeech surveys include a cable subscription question. In that cable services are costly and early distribution targeted outlying suburban communities (Ports 1975), one might reasonably suspect that subscription rates might vary significantly across income and, hence, across partisan groups. To test this possibility we tabulated party identification with reported cable subscription for 11 surveys from the Roper archive that included both party identification and cable subscription questions. The results, reported in Appendix B, indicate little difference among partisans in cable subscriptions throughout the period under study. This allows us to assign the same values for *Broadcast* share of the audience for each partisan group. Finally, in preliminary analyses of the relationships, we employed

24. Specifically,  $\% \text{ Watching} = .44 + .96 \text{ Nielsen} + .29 \text{ Cable} + 22.72 \text{ Watergate} + 23.94 \text{ SOU1994} + 16.91 \text{ Lewinsky scandal SOU}$ . All of the terms except the constant are significant.

25. The longest time between the survey with speech watching information and the preceding Gallup approval rating was just under 90 days; the average time between surveys was just over a month.

dummy variables to test for the presence of statistically significant departures from the predicted shares of respondents watching a presidential address. Nine addresses were tested, but only three—Watergate<sup>26</sup>, Clinton’s State of the Union address in 1998 with which we opened this article, and Bush’s 2003 invasion of Iraq—boosted the audience significantly. We have added these dummy variables to adjust the estimates throughout the analysis.

## Findings

Our chief argument holds that use of presidential approval in deciding to watch the president differs for our viewer types: captive viewers ignore it while liberated viewers incorporate it into their utility calculus. If so, presidential evaluations will strengthen as a covariate of presidents’ overall audience ratings as the composition of the television audience shifts from predominantly broadcast to predominantly cable viewers. Below we test this interaction with both Nielsen audience ratings and the surveys’ self-reports.

### Nielsen

In estimating Equation 2 with Nielsen ratings, we test the overall decline in the president’s television audience as a function of liberated viewers’ critical appraisal of the president as a source. The statistical estimates presented in Equation 3 are wholly consistent with our expectations:

$$\text{Nielsen} = 3.54 + .75 \text{ Broadcast} + .39 \text{ Approve} - .009 (\text{Broadcast} \cdot \text{Approve}).^{27} \quad (3)$$

They confirm presidents’ declining audience shares (Baum and Kernell 1999, 2007) as a function of the steady migration of television households to cable. Setting approval at 50%, near its mean level, we find that for every percentage point decline in the broadcast audience, the president lost .3 percentage points of his Nielsen rating. These estimates closely match presidents’ observed audience losses since the early 1970s. By the end of the series, Bush’s predicted and actual audience shares differed only slightly at 28 and 29.5, respectively. This simple two-parameter model largely accounts for the halving of presidents’ audience ratings over the past several decades.

The estimates for Equation 3 also confirm the model’s critical prediction that as cable’s market share has grown, so, too, has the impact of presidents’ job performance scores on their audience ratings. Combining terms, Figure 2 plots the strengthening

26. As noted earlier, the self-reported speech watching for Watergate appears overinflated compared to the Nielsen ratings. We suspect that some viewers mistakenly conflated their watching of daytime coverage of Senate hearings on the Watergate break-in and cover-up that also aired that week (Besen and Mitchell 1976) with watching the president’s speech on Watergate.

27. All of the terms are significant at .001 and together they explain 69% of the variance in Nielsen ratings. To compare these estimates with the survey estimates presented in the next section we have limited these estimates to the same 32 observations. Not shown in this preliminary pass are equations introducing event dummies; these proved inconsequential in the statistical relationships for approval and broadcast.

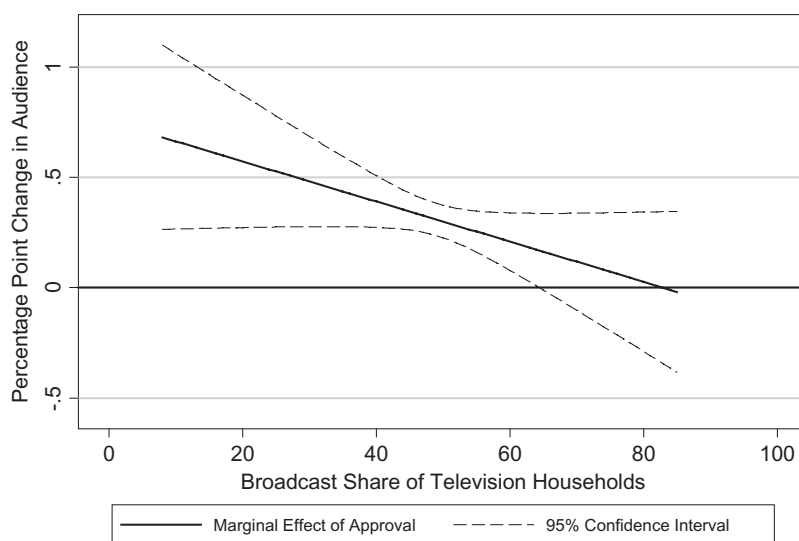


FIGURE 2. Marginal Effects of Approval across Different Audience Mixes.\*

\* Audience shares are A. C. Nielsen's "% of Households with Television Watching." Marginal rates derived from estimates in Equation 3. Solid line plots the effect of one percentage point change in approval on president's Nielsen rating. Figure created with Stata do file provided by Brambor, Clark, and Golder (2006).

effect of each percentage point change in the president's approval rating on his *Nielsen* rating as viewers shed their antennas for cable and satellite hookups. With 88% of households on cable (circa 2007), approval has its greatest estimated effect: each percentage point loss in approval cost the president about .6 of the Nielsen rating point. Based on Nielsen's formula for converting these household ratings into numbers of viewers, President Bush lost about 700,000 viewers for every percentage point decline in his approval during his last term in office. By contrast, when cable viewers comprised fewer than 10% of the television audience, evaluations of the president (specifically, Nixon) did not affect the president's audience rating.

### % *Watching<sub>pid</sub>*

In Table 1 we have estimated the model in Equation 2 separately for each set of party identifiers, *Watching<sub>pid</sub>*. Column 1 presents the relationships derived from the model; column 2 introduces dummy variables for events to take into account circumstances that might increase liberated viewers' propensity to watch a president's speech.<sup>28</sup> As with the Nielsen ratings, *Broadcast* and *Approve<sub>pid</sub>* exhibit similar relationships—significant positive coefficients for the stand-alone terms and a negative coefficient for the interaction parameter. They allow us to reject the counterhypothesis that these relation-

28. Those presented here produced a significant coefficient in one or more specifications in a preliminary analysis.

TABLE 1  
Speech Watching ( $Watching_{pid}$ ) by Approval and Broadcast Audience within Partisan Groups  
(Ordinary Least Squares)<sup>a</sup>

	<i>President's Partisans</i>		<i>Opposition Partisans</i>		<i>Independents</i>	
	<i>I</i>	<i>II</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>II</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>II</i>
<i>Approve<sub>pid</sub></i>	1.77*** (.46)	1.63** (.64)	.81** (.26)	.61* (.26)	.93*** (.20)	.58** (.22)
Broadcast	2.62*** (.51)	2.32 (1.30)	.71** (.23)	.46 (.28)	1.06*** (.29)	.34 (.38)
<i>Approve<sub>pid</sub></i> * Broadcast	-.03*** (.01)	-.028 (.016)	-.02** (.01)	-.01 (.01)	-.02*** (.01)	-.01 (.01)
Watergate (August 1973)		6.75 (22.04)		19.01 (9.41)		30.6** (10.5)
Lewinsky scandal State of the Union		17.12*** (2.62)		22.18*** (3.39)		20.3*** (2.67)
Iraq war (March 2003)		6.03 (5.25)		27.04*** (3.59)		23.3*** (3.04)
Constant	-88.77* (38.30)	-79.18 (52.68)	22.64** (7.33)	26.37** (7.55)	6.08 (9.14)	19.32 (9.97)
$R^2$	.36	.41	.30	.51	.34	.53

$N = 32$ ; standard errors in parentheses; \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

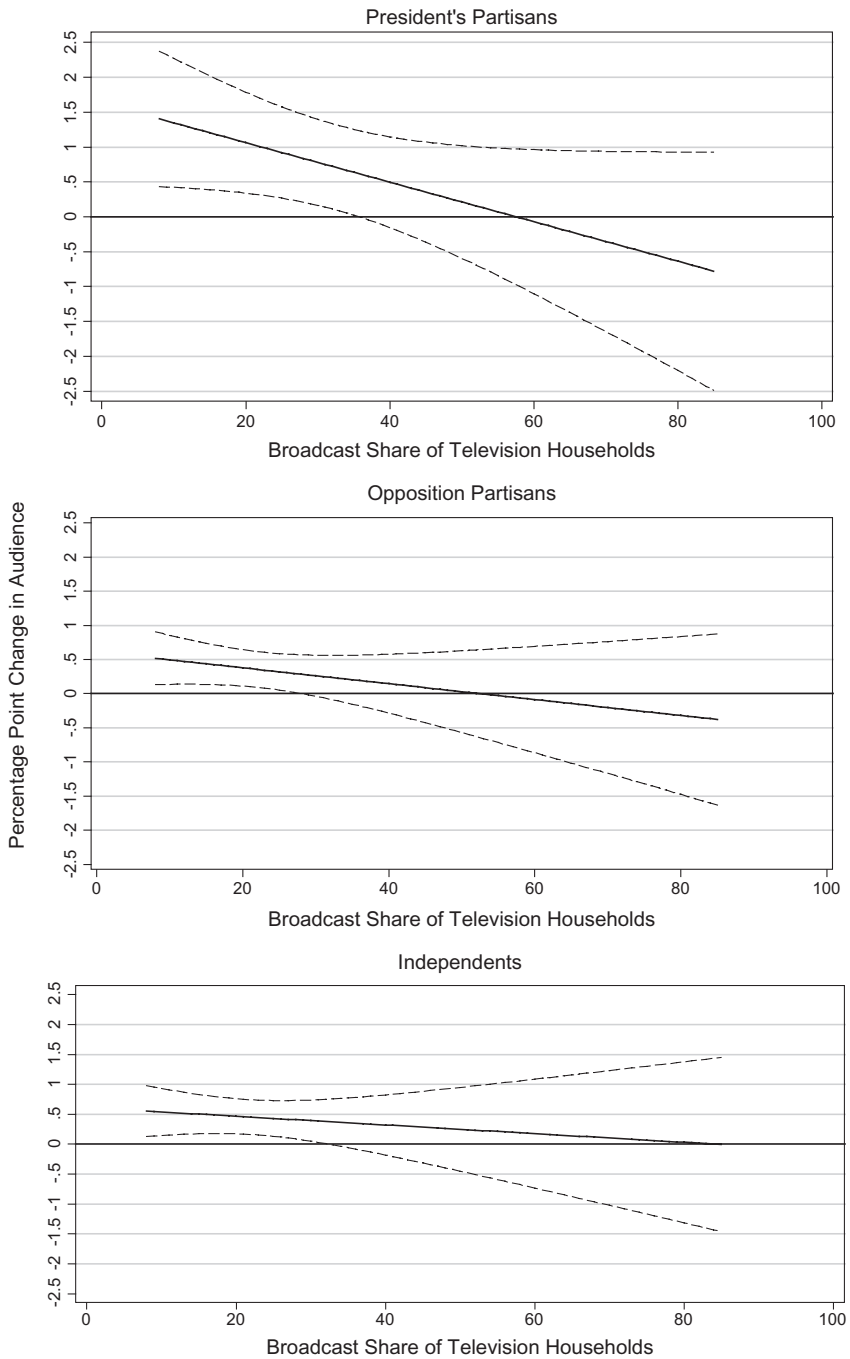
<sup>a</sup> Linear estimates yielded statistical relationships no worse than those based on the logged transformations of the percentage variables. Error rates reported are robust, calculated using Huber White corrected standard errors.

ships are simply an artifact of partisanship. Clearly, presidential approval appears to increasingly influence speech watching choices as cable's market share has grown.

Unsurprisingly, most of the surge in audience ratings during crises and other exceptional moments occurred among independents and opposition identifiers. With far more of the president's partisans normally watching, large increases in this audience were limited by ceiling effects. Moreover, two of the three dummy variables represent impeachment-grade presidential scandals that might well have held a special appeal for the president's detractors.<sup>29</sup>

To examine the strengthening marginal effect of approval, Figure 3 maps the combined coefficients for the direct and interaction terms in Table 1 (column II). As with the Nielsen ratings in Figure 2, a one percentage point change in the president's job performance rating has a greater effect on speech watching decisions across a broad range of approval ratings. Approval's impact strengthens most sharply among the president's partisans. By 2007 a one percentage point decline in approval among his party's identifiers costs the president 1.5 percentage points on average in the share watching his speech. For opposition identifiers and independents, a comparable drop in approval costs

29. We tested other events that produced weaker relationships, not so much because they were substantively insignificant, but rather because they were attended by a surge in presidential approval that captures the variance associated with the observation. When President Bush reported to the nation shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, he spoke to a rapt audience that had nearly universally suspended their criticism of his performance as president.



**FIGURE 3. Marginal Effect of Approval across Broadcast Regimes by Partisan Group\*.**

\* Solid line plots the effect of one percentage point change in approval on percent of group watching the president; dashed lines, the 95% confidence interval. Estimates derived from column II of Table 1. See Brambor, Clark, and Golder (2006).

the president half a point in the percent who reported watching his address. Each plot converges toward no marginal effect for audiences predominantly comprised of broadcast viewers. (Note that none of the estimates in which approval cross into negative effect territory are significant statistically.) Given that the president's partisans will be predisposed to approve their leader, disapproval will represent a more seriously considered judgment than it would for opposition identifiers, for whom it might represent a default opinion.<sup>30</sup> Future presidents will find their approval rating dictating the size and composition of their audiences to a degree no presidents in the past—even the recent past—were subject to.

### Implications

Over the past two decades, American politics has become increasingly polarized along party lines. Whether it represents emergence of strong, mutually antagonistic ideologies, or simply clearer party signals that allow citizens to sort themselves into party camps more correctly remains unclear. What is clear is that Democrats and Republicans disagree sharply on a variety of policy issues and in their assessments of politicians. One of the commonly cited indicators of partisan polarization is differences in presidents' approval ratings (Jacobson 2006). In Figure 4 we have subtracted opposition identifiers' job performance ratings from the levels recorded by the president's partisans. That the president would be more popular among his partisans should surprise no one. That the spread between these groups would extend beyond 50 percentage points should be. Figure 4 also reveals that the sharp differences of opinion Presidents Clinton and Bush elicited from partisan respondents are not without precedent. President Reagan was comparably polarizing during much of his administration.

The relationships reported here suggest that this most recent bout of polarization might be more consequential for presidents because approval has become a key ingredient in determining whether a viewer watches a president's prime-time address. During the Reagan years, we found, it did not much matter to the captive audience. Today, however, polarized approval ratings coupled with the strengthening effect of approval on watching has the potential to sort partisans' exposure to civic information as never before.

To test the effect of partisan sorting of viewers, we calculated predicted rates of speech watching for both sets of partisans (using column II, Table 1) and compared these estimates to respondents' self-reports of watching a recent presidential address. Clearly, we see in Figure 5 that the audience is polarizing along partisan lines. In 27 of the 32

30. Note that the slopes for the president's and opposition partisans cross below zero when broadcast viewers dominate the audience. We have no reason to suspect that approving the president somehow induces viewers to turn off their televisions. Although nowhere do the estimates of negative marginal effects approach statistical significance, we tested a variety of nonlinear functions to better depict convergence toward zero but not beyond. Simple logistic and quadratic transformations did not perform particularly well. Bifurcating the series at 1994 (a year for which the data set contains no surveys) and estimating the series separately with interaction terms generated slightly steeper slopes for the cable dominant era and nonnegative marginal effects that approached zero for the broadcast era. The presence of additional terms, however, reduced all coefficients to well below even generous significance thresholds, without appreciably improving the overall fit or significantly altering approval's marginal effects during the cable regime.



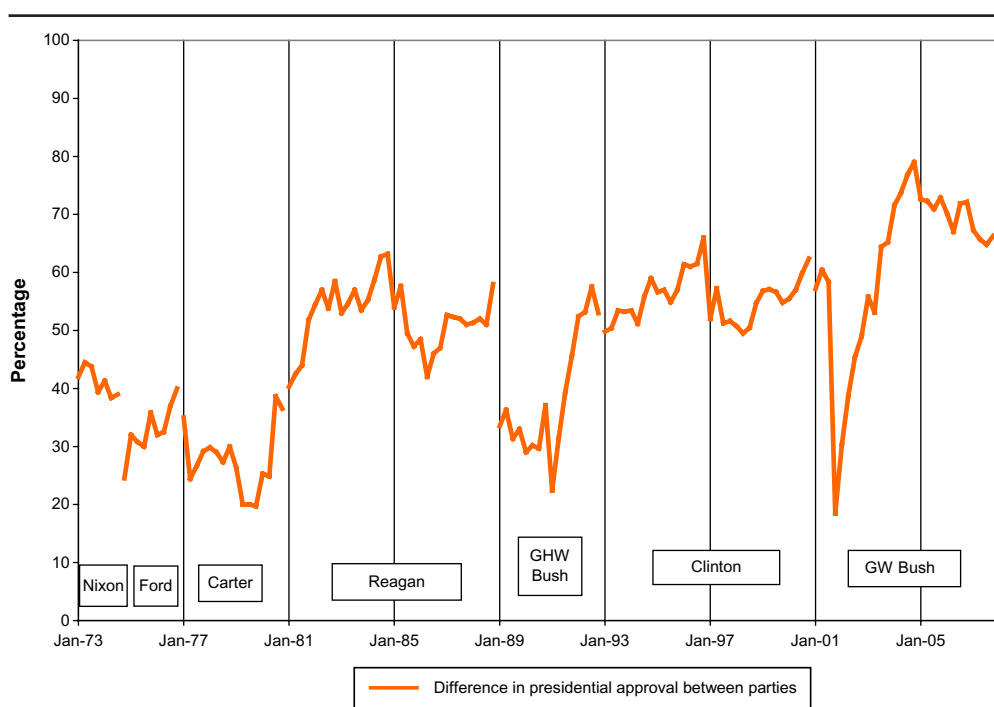


FIGURE 4. The Growth of Partisan Polarization in Approval Ratings.

Source: Gallup Polls.

surveys, more of the president's partisans said they watched the speech than did opposition identifiers.<sup>31</sup> The trend line of these differences (solid line in Figure 5) projects a partisan spread of about 12 percentage points in 2007. Note that the predicted partisan differences, based on the residuals from our estimated model, show no such trend toward polarization. Information on partisans' approval ratings and cable's overall market share wholly account for the polarization of the president's audience.

A closer inspection of Figure 5 reveals the critical importance of the mix of captive and liberated viewers in polarizing the president's audience. From the absence of partisan differences in shares viewing the president in the early years, one might erroneously conclude that political comity enveloped the era. Far from it, Figure 4 shows that Americans' assessments of President Reagan during his second term were just as polarized as those directed at Clinton and Bush. Yet these polarized source evaluations were not expressed in viewing decisions; just as many opposition identifiers tuned into Reagan's speeches as did his own partisans. The difference now, of course, is cable liberation.

31. Three of the five exceptions exhibit essentially no difference, leaving only two surveys in which a slightly greater share of opposition viewers claim to have tuned in. Bear in mind that these percentage differences are based on subsamples of a survey and may contain as few as 200 observations. Sampling error may well account for the several otherwise inexplicable instances where greater shares of opposition identifiers watch the president. The curvilinear relationship indicates that partisan sorting has been occurring at a higher rate than cable growth.

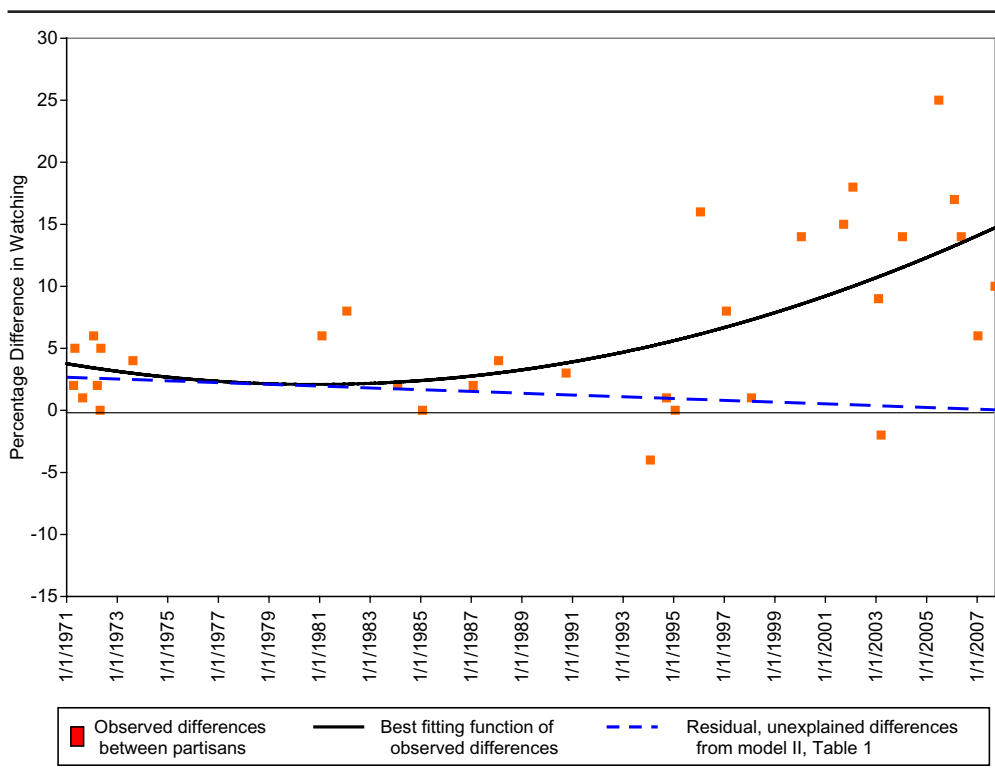


FIGURE 5. Polarization of the Presidents' Television Audience.

Presidents in the past did not have to worry much about access to the public. Today, presidents can expect a much smaller audience. For presidents who need to defend their policies and deflect criticism—and all at some point have undertaken a public address with one or both goals in mind—this shrinkage is occurring disproportionately among the wrong viewers—that is, among viewers the president needs to convert to his point of view. Preaching to the choir may, however, reinforce and energize the president’s base. If presidents were to redirect their addresses from persuasion to mobilization, and in doing so, play the part of “a divider, not a uniter” (Jacobson 2007; Cohen 2009), they would unwittingly abet the polarization that placed them in this bind.

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## Appendix A: Surveys Comprising Data

<i>Date</i>	<i>Speech Subject</i>	<i>Nielsen Rating</i>	<i>Poll Sponsor or Firm</i>	<i>% President's Party Watching</i>	<i>% Opposition Party Watching</i>	<i>% Independents Watching</i>
Apr. 1971	Vietnam	0.512	Opinion Research Corp.	52	50	53
May 1971	press conference	0.449	Opinion Research Corp.	50	45	39
Aug. 1971	economy	0.402	Opinion Research Corp.	49	48	53
Jan. 1972	Vietnam peace negotiations	0.579	Opinion Research Corp.	66	60	61
Mar. 1972	school busing	0.47	Opinion Research Corp.	41	39	37
Apr. 1972	Vietnam	0.5	Opinion Research Corp.	46	46	46
May 1972	Vietnam	0.537	Opinion Research Corp.	62	57	64
Aug. 1973	Watergate	0.556	Gallup	82	78	80
Feb. 1981	State of the Union (SOU)	0.557	Richard Wirthlin	75	69	60
Jan. 1982	SOU	0.498	Richard Wirthlin	68	60	48
Feb. 1984	SOU	0.355	Richard Wirthlin	53	51	51
Jan. 1985	SOU	0.39	Richard Wirthlin	45	45	42
Jan. 1987	SOU	0.384	Richard Wirthlin	52	50	35
Jan. 1988	SOU	0.344	Richard Wirthlin	42	38	37
Oct. 1990	budget agreement/ tax increase	0.328	Time/CNN	50	47	47
Jan. 1994	SOU	0.329	Gallup/CNN/ <i>USA Today</i>	71	75	72
Sept. 1994	Haiti	0.346	CBS/ <i>New York Times</i>	45	44	50
Jan. 1995	SOU	0.295	Gallup/CNN/ <i>USA Today</i>	33	33	34
Jan. 1996	SOU	0.296	ABC News	62	46	44
Jan. 1997	SOU	0.284	CBS News	61	53	57
Jan. 1998	SOU	0.372	CBS News	73	72	73
Jan. 2000	SOU	0.224	Gallup /CNN/ <i>USA Today</i>	71	57	61
Sept. 2001	terrorist attacks	0.72	CNN/ <i>USA Today</i>	86	71	73
Jan. 2002	SOU	0.336	<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	60	42	55
Feb. 2003	SOU	0.39	CBS News	69	60	60
Mar. 2003	Iraq invasion	0.47	<i>TNS Intersearch/ABC News/Washington Post</i>	72	74	72
Jan. 2004	SOU	0.28	CBS News	70	56	44
June 2005	war on terror progress report	0.16	Gallup/CNN/ <i>USA Today</i>	47	22	28
Feb. 2006	SOU	0.269	Kaiser Family Foundation	56	39	39
May 2006	immigration reform	0.28	CBS News	48	34	47
Jan. 2007	Iraq	0.296	<i>USA Today</i> /Gallup	43	37	38
Sept. 2007	Iraq	0.189	CBS News	40	30	34

## Appendix B: Cable Subscriptions across Partisan Groups

In this appendix we consider and reject the possibility that differences in cable subscription across partisan groups plays a role in understanding differences in viewing patterns. To test the possibility of such a difference, we searched Roper's database for surveys that asked questions about both cable subscription and party identification during the period of our study. This produced observations for 11 of our speech years. We then fit a logarithmic line through these data points and used it to estimate cable by party for the rest of the speech years. The figure below graphs these estimates against households with cable. They reveal only slight and inconsistent differences in cable subscription by partisan affiliation over time and these estimates correlate highly (all above .97) with our existing households with cable data used in the previously reported analyses.

