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Has Cable Ended the Golden Age of Presidential Television?

MATTHEW A. BAUM and SAMUEL KERNELL *University of California, San Diego*

For the past 30 years, presidents have enlisted prime-time television to promote their policies to the American people. For most of this era, they have been able to commandeer the national airwaves and speak to "captive" viewers. Recently, however, presidents appear to be losing their audiences. Two leading explanations are the rise of political disaffection and the growth of cable. We investigate both by developing and testing a model of the individual's viewing decision using both cross-sectional (1996 NES survey) and time-series (128 Nielsen audience ratings for presidential appearances between 1969 and 1998) data. We find that cable television but not political disaffection has ended the golden era of presidential television. Moreover, we uncover evidence that both presidents and the broadcast networks have begun adapting strategically to this new reality in scheduling presidential appearances.

"The President is not irrelevant here." Bill Clinton's response to a reporter's pointed question during a nationally televised prime-time news conference on April 8, 1995, came across as little more than a desperate denial of the truth. Having seized firm control of Congress in the previous fall's midterm elections and now marching in step toward enacting their legislative program, the "Contract with America," congressional Republicans gave the nation ample reason to suspect that perhaps this Democratic president had indeed become irrelevant.

Many Americans apparently had already answered the question for themselves. Nielsen Media Research reported that only 6.5% of households with televisions watched the president assert his relevance. In March 1969, in contrast, when President Richard Nixon conducted one of his routine prime-time press conferences, it was broadcast by all three networks and, according to Nielsen, was watched by 59% of America's television households. Figure 1 offers more systematic evidence of this trend. These average audience ratings, based on 128 televised, prime-time addresses and news conferences, show a steady downward trend, beginning with the Reagan presidency.[1]

Presidents appear to be losing their television audience at precisely the time they most need it. Increasingly they have staked their leadership in Washington on their ability to attract the public's support for themselves and their policies (Kernell 1997). Whether measured by public appearances, number of speeches, or days of travel, each recent president has in some way matched or eclipsed his predecessors' efforts to communicate directly with the American people. Substantial research has shown "going public" is a viable leadership strategy. Through speeches, popular presidents can influence public preferences on policy (Mondak 1993; Page et al. 1987) and elevate the salience of some national issues over others (Bartels 1993; Behr and Iyengar 1985; Cohen 1995). As Bill Clinton conclusively demonstrated in his 1998 State of the Union address, a president's public appeals also can boost his standing in the polls (Brace and Hinkley 1993; MacKuen 1983; Ragsdale 1984; Simon and Ostrom 1989).[2] More than ever, presidents act on Neustadt's (1960) early insight that good things happen to popular presidents. Given these benefits, it comes as no surprise to find that about one-third of the White House staff is engaged in some aspect of public relations in promoting the president and his policies with the American public (Grossman and Kumar 1981; Maltese 1994).

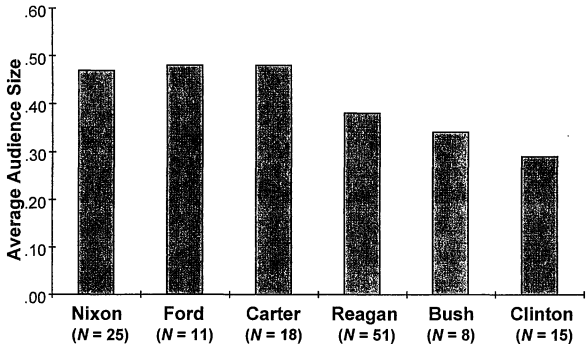
If modern presidents lose their prime-time audience, they will surrender a political asset that will be difficult to replace by other means. The alternative of speaking to the American public through the news media is being closed off by increasingly unobliging journalistic practices. Presidents complain, with some justification (Brody 1991; Groeling and Kernell 1998; Grossman and Kumar 1981; Patterson 1996), that the media prefer to report unfavorable news about them. More important, however, network television news no longer allows presidents to speak for themselves about their policies. The average presidential sound bite on the network evening news has shrunk from 42 seconds in 1968 to less than 7 seconds in 1996 (CMPA 1996; Hallin 1994). With reporters and anchors on camera more, and presidents less, how reporters and their editors decide to frame a story greatly influences how the audience will consume it (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Miller and Krosnik 1996). Given this, the finding (Page et al. 1987) that news coverage of a president's policy preferences generally fails to influence public opinion is unsurprising. Modern news practices require presi-

Matthew A. Baum is a Ph.D candidate in Political Science and Samuel Kernell is a Professor of Political Science, University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, CA 92093-0521.

[1] At least one of the three major networks broadcast each of these addresses and press conferences. Only since 1993 has a presidential address or press conference received less than full coverage; four were broadcast by only two of the major networks and two by only one. Each of these partial broadcasts was carried live by CNN.

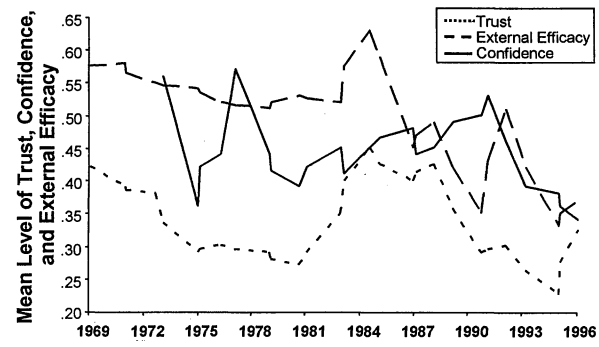
[2] Shortly after the Monica Lewinsky scandal broke into the news, Clinton's political standing became so unstable that several newspapers and networks launched daily surveys to monitor the president's pulse in public opinion. After the president delivered a well-received State of the Union address, his polling numbers shot up to their highest level ever, and the polling subsided. The results (Berke 1998) of the CBS/*New York Times* Survey are typical. Two days after the Lewinsky coverage began, this survey recorded that 56% of a national sample approved President Clinton's job performance. The day before the State of the Union address, his rating held steady at 57%. When the same question was asked of a national sample the day after the address, his approval rating was 73%.

FIGURE 1. Average Percentage of Households Watching Prime-Time Presidential TV Appearances, 1969–98



Source: Nielsen Media Research.
Note: "Average Audience Size" refers to Nielsen's measure of Average Audience Household (AAH), which is the percentage of households owning televisions that are tuned in to an average minute of a given program.

FIGURE 2. Trends in Political Disaffection, 1969–96



Source: National Election Studies and General Social Surveys, various years.
Note: See Appendix for question wording and coding of scales. All scales are normalized to the 0–1 interval.

dents to rely on direct appeals on television even as their audience shrinks.

Why are modern presidents losing their audience? This is the central question we seek to answer in this article. Because past research has largely ignored audience ratings, the scholarly literature offers few answers to this question. Two common explanations favored by politicians and pundits are pervasive public cynicism and the growth of cable and satellite television. These are quite different kinds of causes—the first is profoundly political, and the latter is purely technical—but during the past several decades both have been trending sharply in a direction that could well account for presidents' audience losses. Moreover, both could be working in tandem, as increasingly disaffected and "plugged in" citizens reach for the remote as soon as the president comes on the screen.

We test these possible causes, and others, with both individual survey data on reported viewing and with aggregate time-series data on presidents' audience shares since 1969. The results are quite consistent for both levels of analysis. The trend closely follows predictions based on the individual-level survey relationships; moreover, directly estimating the time-series relationships essentially replicates the survey analysis. The cumulative evidence indicates that cable technology has allowed the public to become strategically discriminating in its viewing decisions. So, too, our evidence suggests, have presidents and network executives, as they appraise this increasingly fickle audience in respectively deciding whether to deliver and broadcast a prime-time press conference or address to the nation.

POLITICAL DISAFFECTION, CABLE, AND TELEVISION VIEWING

In recent years, students of public opinion and political participation have paid considerable attention to the low esteem with which Americans have come to regard their national political leaders (Bennett 1986; Dionne 1991; Miller 1974; Nye et al. 1997; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Robert Putnam (1995, 66) sums up the prevailing sentiment: "By almost every measure, Americans' direct engagement in politics and government has fallen steadily and sharply over the last generation, despite the fact that average levels of education . . . have risen sharply throughout this period . . . Not coincidentally, over this era, Americans have also disengaged psychologically from politics and government." A careful inspection of several frequently cited measures of public regard for politicians, shown in Figure 2, confirms Putnam's claim. The biennial *Trust in Government* and *External Efficacy* scales of the National Election Study (NES) and the annual General Social Survey (GSS) questions measuring *Confidence in the Federal Government* all track steadily downward during the same period that Americans appear to have been "disengaging" from presidential television appeals.

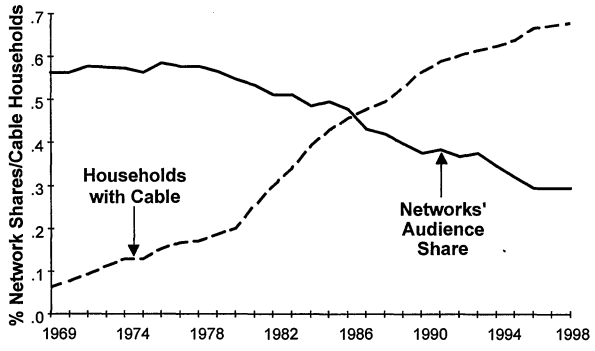
Confronted with this troubling trend, scholars and pundits alike have pondered what, if anything, such attitudes portend for American politics. Along with steadily declining turnout in national elections (from 61% of the eligible electorate in 1968 to 49% in 1996), some observers detect that citizens are "tuning out" of politics more generally. "Cynicism is epidemic right now," writes worried *Washington Post* columnist David Broder (1994): "It saps people's confidence in politics and public officials. . . . If the assumption is that nothing is on the level, nothing is what it seems, then citizenship becomes a game for fools and there is no point trying to stay informed." Perhaps an increasingly distrustful citizenry is changing channels whenever a president comes on the television screen.[3]

The second possible cause is cable television.[4]

[3] Capella and Jamieson (1997, 240) link rising cynicism to declining newspaper consumption. In a similar vein, Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995) argue that negative campaigning alienates the electorate from the political process and depresses turnout.

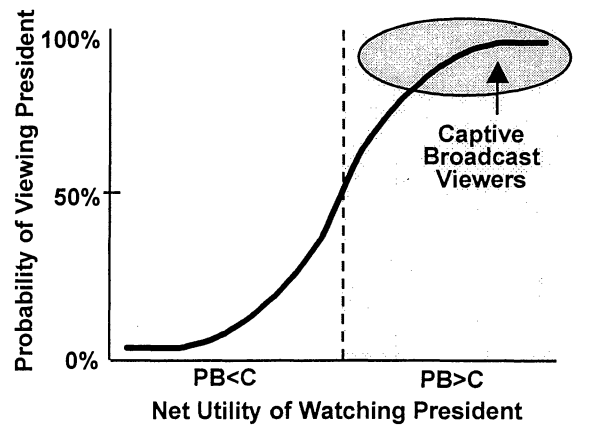
[4] We shall drop references to satellite subscriptions, which are

FIGURE 3. Network Audience Share and Households with Cable, 1969–98



Sources: (1) Cable households data—*Statistical Abstract of the United States*, various years; (2) network's audience shares—supplied by A.C. Nielsen (see Appendix).
Note: "% Network Shares" refers to the combined prime-time Nielsen ratings of the three major broadcast networks (each rating point is equivalent to 1% of U.S. households); "Cable households" refers to the percent of U.S. households subscribing to cable.

FIGURE 4. The Probability of Viewing the President as a Function of Expected Utility



Twenty years ago, CBS, NBC, and ABC enjoyed an oligopoly. As one network executive reminisced, "when viewers turned on the TV set, they had five choices, and the networks were three of them . . . [and they] collectively accounted for about 90% of the television audience" (Lowry 1997). Since 1969, the number of households subscribing to cable has risen sharply, from 6% to 68%. Moreover, in 1983 cable subscribers received, on average, less than 15 channels; the latest figures place the average at more than 45 (Lowry 1997; Webster and Lichty 1991). As Figure 3 shows, trends in both cable subscriptions and programming choices have taken a heavy toll on the audience shares of the major networks.[5]

To appreciate how political disaffection, cable, and other possible causes may have eroded the president's audience, we begin by stating the viewing decision with the standard utility model, PB-C. The "expected benefit" of consuming a president's message is comprised of two terms: B represents the potential benefit or value to the viewer of information that the president may provide, discounted by P, which is the probability that the president will actually offer credible information on the subject. Stated in these terms, citizens who think politicians are crooks and liars will expect to derive little benefit from watching the president, regardless of what he has to say.

Against this expected benefit, the viewer must weigh various costs, C, and here cable programming enters the equation. Aside from the direct effort, or transaction cost, involved in tuning in to the president's address, the viewer considers the opportunity costs entailed in watching the president rather than some other program or undertaking some other pleasurable activity. Back in the days when the several broadcast networks dominated the airwaves, they could manipulate viewers' opportunity costs by jointly agreeing to suspend commercial programming and broadcast the president's address. (They even used the same cameras.) This practice, which left voters with few programming alternatives, served the networks' purposes in preventing serious audience erosion when commercial programming resumed and the president's goal by guaranteeing the largest possible audience.

The success of this practice depended, of course, on viewers staying tuned throughout the president's appearance. Networks had little cause to worry. One study (Foote 1988) found that 16 of President Gerald Ford's 19 television appearances commanded as high, or higher, market share as the regularly scheduled commercial programming that was preempted. That even President Ford's notably uncharismatic appearances did not prompt viewers to turn off their set (or tune over to public or local independent programming) offers compelling evidence that watching the president during the pre-cable era imposed minimal opportunity costs. Even those viewers who might have anticipated negligible benefit from watching President Ford nonetheless did so. Viewers behaved as if media critics were right in calling them captives of network television. Throughout our discussion, we will enlist this term to characterize the predicament of this once dominant class of broadcast viewers. As it concerns presidential television, a viewer's "captive" status results from the combination of limited channels, an unwillingness to turn off the set, and the networks' joint suspension of commercial programming during a presidential appearance.

Cable gives viewers choices and thus makes watching the president costly.[6] As the number of alternative

functionally equivalent to cable and have been added to subsequent figures as "cable" subscribers.

[5] Recently, even the broadcast market has started to offer viewers more choices. A fourth broadcast network, FOX, started up in 1991, and UPN and WB entered the market in 1994. Most of the networks' loss of audience share, however, appears to have been fueled by the growth in cable subscriptions, with which, as Figure 3 suggests, the networks' audience losses are correlated at −.93.

[6] Of course, these costs can be mitigated by video recording of a presidential broadcast or alternative programming, but for many

TABLE 1. Logit Analysis of Likelihood of Watching 1996 Presidential Debates, as a Function of Cable and Political Disaffection

Independent Variables	First Debate		Second Debate	
	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.
Cable	−.158	.122	−.344**	.123
Political Disaffection				
Trust	.027	.044	.049	.044
External Efficacy	.129	.081	.061	.080
SES Characteristics				
Age	.029***	.003	.024***	.003
Education	.074**	.025	.084***	.025
Family Income	.002	.010	.011	.010
Gender	.156	.114	−.163	.113
White	.031	.161	−.009	.157
Constant	−2.521***	.422	−2.348***	.416
Pseudo R^2	.04	(N = 1,378)	.04	(N = 1,379)

Note: Heteroscedasticity-consistent (robust) standard errors were employed. **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

programs increases, so does the likelihood that one of them will prove more attractive than the president's message, prompting the viewer to change channels.[7] Therefore, cable subscribers will be less likely to watch a presidential appearance than will those viewers who remain captive to the broadcast signal. This prediction can be operationalized for both the survey and time-series analyses, and we test it thoroughly below.

While substantively important, this prediction is intuitive and does not need to be depicted formally to be appreciated. There is, however, a second and less obvious hypothesis embedded in the utility calculus of the viewing decision, particularly when one of the prominent possible states is that of the captive viewer. Figure 4 graphs the probability of watching the president as a function of these cost-benefit comparisons.[8] Since captive viewers will experience negligible opportunity costs in watching the president, they will tend to do so even when they anticipate minimal benefit. Cable subscribers, however, are free to move along Figure 4's curve, so their assessment of benefit will weigh more heavily on their viewing decision. The qualitative difference in the viewing choices of the captive and cable audience should show up statistically in an interaction between cable access and those variables that determine the attractiveness of a presidential appearance. Here again, the hypothesis can be easily operationalized for individual survey and aggregate time-series relationships.

WATCHING THE 1996 PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

For the vast majority of the American people, television has emerged over the past few decades as the primary source of information about politics. For some it represents their sole means of becoming informed about the issues of the day. Newspaper readership has declined steadily since the 1960s, and in a way that suggests a massive substitution of television for newspapers as a source for civic information (Bower 1985; Briller 1990; Moisy 1996; Stanley and Niemi 1994).

Increasingly, the NES surveys have queried respondents about their preferences among the various news technologies. The 1996 election survey asked respondents if they subscribe to cable service, which gives us an opportunity to examine systematically its effect on political communication (Rosenstone et al. 1997). The survey also queried respondents as to whether they watched the first and second presidential debates. While debates represent a different format for presidential appearances than the national addresses and press conferences tallied in Figure 1, we have little reason to suspect that this will alter viewing decisions. In recent years the American public has shown just as great an inclination to abandon presidential debates as other forms of televised presidential communications. While more people typically watch the debates, Nielsen Media Research (1993) reports an erosion in the debate audience comparable to that presented in Figure 1 for other presidential appearances.[9]

Reflecting political scientists' interest in voters' attitudes toward government, the NES survey includes numerous questions that tap this concept. One is the frequently cited Trust in Government index (henceforth *Trust*), which was designed with political cynicism in mind (Miller 1974); but this variable typically performs less well than the simpler, two-question *External Efficacy* index (Bennett 1986; Citrin 1974; Rosenstone

viewers the prospect of programming a VCR is intimidating and hence imposes formidable transaction costs (Norman 1988).

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

[8] Aldrich and Nelson (1984) present the rationale of the S-curve and the logit analysis that follows for binary choice models.

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

and Hansen 1993) in predicting various forms of political engagement.[10] We test both below.

In Table 1, we begin our examination of the effects of *Cable* and political disaffection on debate watching. With cable, trust, external efficacy, and debate watching all related to respondents' life circumstances, we have included five demographic variables in the equations to control for this potential source of spuriousness.[11] Political disaffection may, as many believe, politically deactivate the American citizenry. But in this limited sphere it appears irrelevant to the decision to watch presidential candidates debate one another. Cable performs better. The signs are correct for both debates, and in the second, the relationship is both stronger and statistically significant. This is consistent with the previously noted audience shrinkage in the second debate. As the debates' curiosity value diminished, and as President Clinton's commanding 16-point lead in the polls in mid-October appeared increasingly insurmountable, cable viewers disproportionately dropped out of the debate audience.[12]

In Table 2 we test whether these relationships for cable endure under extensive controls.[13] Each of the 39 control variables in Table 2 is associated either with various forms of political participation, based on Rosenstone and Hansen's (1993) exhaustive multivariate inventory, or with consumption of various news media.[14] This latter set of variables controls for the possibility that some individuals may subscribe to cable as a means of avoiding politically relevant programming. If so, then the relationships may reflect the apolitical tastes of people who subscribe to cable rather than the direct effects of alternative programming proposed by our model.

Equations 1 and 2 in Table 2 identify a number of correlates of debate watching.[15] Most of the control variables are associated with our dependent variable in the expected direction.[16] People who expressed either weak or no affiliation with one of the political parties, were uninformed about politics, were uninterested in the presidential campaign (or in other 1996 campaigns), were not contacted by a political party, did not intend to vote, or disapproved of President Clinton were less likely to watch one or both presidential debates than were their more politically active and interested counterparts.[17] Similarly, respondents who reported following news on talk radio, local television, or network television were more likely to watch one or both debates (although in the last instance the relationships do not quite reach .05 significance). This pattern is reversed, however, for newspaper consumption, which appears in these relationships to substitute for television as a source of news and information.[18]

The relationship that most interests us here is, of course, cable. Rather than weakening under massive controls, it actually strengthens for the first debate—increasing in magnitude and nearly achieving statistical significance—while remaining virtually unaffected for the second debate. Setting all other variables at their mean values, cable subscribers are less likely to have viewed the first debate by seven percentage points (.56 to .49, $p < .08$) and the second by nine points (.52 to .43, $p < .02$).

[10] There is suggestive evidence, however, that news consumption may be more sensitive to trust than are other forms of participation. Cappella and Jamieson (1997, 155–7) report that cynical respondents are less likely to watch a special network program on the health care crisis. In addition, Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) found that for many forms of participation, *external* efficacy is a stronger predictor of participation than *internal* efficacy (which is less related to political disaffection). Therefore, while we include a measure of internal efficacy in our full model specification, our investigation focuses on external efficacy. (Internal and external efficacy are defined in the Appendix.)

[11] Trust and external efficacy are coelated at only .31, so multicolinearity and dilution of the estimates are not a problem. Nonetheless, we tested them separately to confirm that removal of either disaffection measure did not appreciably strengthen the remaining variable.

[12] Among our NES respondents, the self-reported decline in viewership was five percentage points for cable subscribers but only 1% for broadcast viewers.

[13] The presidential debate literature concentrates on the effect of debate exposure on candidate evaluations and voting (Hickman 1984; Lowry 1996; Popkin 1994) rather than the determinants of watching debates. In the absence of guidance from the literature, we are treating debate watching as a low-threshold form of political participation.

[14] See Rosenstone and Hansen (1993, 273–5, Appendix D, Table D-1). In several instances, our operationalization differs modestly from theirs. We excluded several variables that seemed inappropriate, for either election-specific reasons or because the variable seemed highly unlikely to affect debate watching.

[15] Because logit coefficients are nonlinear and therefore difficult to interpret, we follow standard practice of translating logit coefficients into probabilities (Gujerati 1995) in our discussion of the theoretically relevant relationships.

[16] The reader should bear in mind in examining these relationships that the primary purpose of the extensive list is to test cable and political disaffection (i.e., trust, external efficacy, and internal efficacy). Because many of the control variables are highly correlated with one another, their relative effects on our dependent variable may be somewhat stronger than is suggested by our results.

[17] Many of the interest/knowledge variables—including perceived closeness of the campaign (*Close Election*), *General Campaign Interest* (i.e., overall interest in all the 1996 political campaigns), level of *Presidential Campaign Attention*, and *Interest in Public Affairs*—code the respondent's estimate of his or her level of interest in, and attention to, politics and the political campaigns (see Appendix). Since these questions were asked *after* the two presidential debates, there is almost certainly a degree of endogeneity between these variables and debate watching. To eliminate reverse causality, we limited these regressions (not shown) to the subgroup ($N = 613$) of respondents interviewed before the first debate. The relationships are weaker, suggesting, indeed, the presence of reverse causality, but all maintained the interactions reported in the text. (Moreover, because we are using these variables primarily as controls, the "true" direction of causality is of limited importance for our purposes.)

[18] Holding all other independent variables constant at their mean values and converting the coefficients into probabilities, we find that respondents who reported higher levels of reading newspapers were less likely to watch the debates by six percentage points (.53 to .47, n.s.) for the first debate and by eleven points (.50 to .39, $p < .01$) for the second. On closer inspection we find that the simple, bivariate correlations between newspaper reading and debate watching are significantly positive. Only under the extensive controls in Table 2 do the signs reverse. Perhaps these relationships tell us that while most people who avidly read the newspaper are also more inclined to follow politics on television, once we control for this appetite for political information, heavy reliance on newspapers reflects some readers' preference for the print media over television.

TABLE 2. Logit Analysis of Likelihood of Watching 1996 Presidential Debates

Independent Variables	Equation 1 First Debate Coef. (Std. Err.)	Equation 2 Second Debate Coef. (Std. Err.)	Equation 3 First Debate Coef. (Std. Err.)	Equation 4 Second Debate Coef. (Std. Err.)
SES Characteristics				
Age	.027 (.024)	−.071 (.024)**	.026 (.024)	−.072 (.024)**
Age^2	−.0001 (.0002)	.0008 (.0002)***	−.0001 (.0002)	.0008 (.0002)***
Education	−.019 (.035)	.024 (.036)	−.024 (.035)	.022 (.036)
Family Income	.016 (.014)	.026 (.014)	.015 (.014)	.026 (.014)
Gender	.251 (.140)	−.212 (.143)	.268 (.140)*	−.216 (.144)
White	−.075 (.205)	.038 (.200)	−.104 (.208)	−.003 (.204)
Asian American	−.621 (.533)	−1.299 (.607)*	−.638 (.536)	−1.348 (.617)*
Native American	−.539 (.463)	1.357 (.590)*	−.526 (.475)	1.328 (.600)*
African American	−.358 (.233)	.131 (.231)	−.362 (.236)	.157 (.235)
Attend Religious Services	.028 (.044)	−.023 (.044)	.036 (.044)	−.015 (.044)
Employment Status	−.058 (.177)	−.161 (.178)	−.017 (.178)	−.145 (.179)
Home Owner	−.322 (.165)*	.094 (.163)	−.318 (.165)*	.112 (.163)
Years in Current City	−.001 (.003)	.000 (.003)	−.001 (.003)	.000 (.002)
Southern Resident	.075 (.147)	−.171 (.146)	.059 (.148)	−.205 (.148)
Political Group Membership	−.020 (.046)	.018 (.043)	−.026 (.046)	.014 (.043)
Political Attitudes and Behavior				
Political Information	.094 (.083)	.223 (.086)**	—	—
Contacted by Political Party	.317 (.147)*	.140 (.150)	.320 (.149)*	.148 (.150)
Economic Evaluation	−.038 (.118)	−.162 (.120)	−.012 (.120)	−.131 (.121)
General Campaign Interest	.225 (.131)	.422 (.135)**	.217 (.132)	.406 (.136)**
Presidential Campaign Attention	.489 (.092)***	.498 (.093)***	.493 (.092)***	.513 (.092)***
Follow Public Affairs	.036 (.099)	−.173 (.098)	.039 (.101)	−.165 (.100)
Care Who Wins Presidency	.212 (.187)	.157 (.185)	.201 (.188)	.172 (.190)
Close Election	−.086 (.069)	−.009 (.069)	−.092 (.070)	−.015 (.070)
Partisanship	−.002 (.078)	.079 (.078)	.011 (.079)	.093 (.079)
Party Affect	.002 (.027)	.045 (.027)	−.001 (.027)	.048 (.027)
Candidate Affect	.002 (.027)	−.036 (.028)	.001 (.027)	−.044 (.028)
Vote Intention	.314 (.199)	.633 (.203)**	.334 (.204)	.644 (.213)**
Feelings toward Clinton	.007 (.003)*	.005 (.003)	.008 (.003)**	.006 (.003)*
Feelings toward Dole	.003 (.003)	.005 (.003)	.003 (.003)	.004 (.004)
Feelings toward Perot	−.002 (.003)	−.006 (.003)*	−.002 (.003)	−.007 (.003)*
Political Disaffection				
External Efficacy	−.051 (.096)	−.091 (.097)	−.043 (.096)	−.091 (.097)
Internal Efficacy	.015 (.058)	−.036 (.060)	.007 (.059)	−.034 (.060)
Trust	−.017 (.055)	−.007 (.056)	−.019 (.055)	−.007 (.056)
Media Consumption Habits				
Network TV News (Days/Week)	.052 (.029)	.050 (.030)	.048 (.029)	.047 (.031)
Local TV News (Days/Week)	.090 (.029)**	.055 (.030)	.090 (.030)**	.054 (.031)
Newspaper (Days/Week)	−.038 (.025)	−.066 (.026)**	−.037 (.025)	−.065 (.026)*
Read Magazines	.214 (.150)	−.088 (.150)	.190 (.151)	−.107 (.150)
Listen to Talk Radio	.310 (.146)*	.174 (.144)	.326 (.147)*	.201 (.144)
Internet Access	−.013 (.172)	.071 (.169)	−.007 (.174)	.102 (.168)
Cable	−.258 (.146)	−.344 (.145)*	—	—
Interactions				
Cable × Med. Political Info.	—	—	.375 (.241)	.903 (.272)***
Cable × High Political Info.	—	—	.702 (.266)**	1.203 (.293)***
No Cable × Low Political Info.	—	—	1.153 (.301)***	1.311 (.346)***
No Cable × Med. Political Info.	—	—	.542 (.278)*	1.354 (.289)***
No Cable × High Political Info.	—	—	.619 (.298)*	1.019 (.317)***
Constant	−4.631 (.868)***	−2.894 (.884)***	−5.001 (.891)***	−3.443 (.906)***
Pseudo R^2	.17 (N = 1,244)	.18 (N = 1,245)	.17 (N = 1,244)	.19 (N = 1,245)

Note: Heteroscedasticity-consistent (robust) standard errors were employed. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

We hypothesized above that respondents with cable approach their viewing decision differently than nonsubscribers. Since they enjoy viable programming options, they will have reason—unavailable to the captive audience—to weigh carefully the benefits of watching the president. With the political attitude and behavior variables as a group providing the strongest relationships in Table 2, we searched among these variables for the predicted interactions with cable (discussed above in conjunction with Figure 4). In nearly every

instance, we found them. The strongest and most consistent interaction occurs between cable and *Political Information*.[19] This variable represents the NES interviewer's estimate of the respondent's level of political information. Despite problems of reliability that would appear to be inherent in such a subjective measure, Zaller (1990, 1992) found that this variable, measured in the preelection interview, performs as well as or better than any other NES-based indicator of political awareness, including education, political participation, media exposure, interest in politics, and various informational indices he constructed (which we replicated).[20]

Equations 3 and 4 in Table 2 reveal that the interactions between cable access and level of political information are highly significant and consistent across the two debates. These relationships can be more easily assessed in Figure 5, where the coefficients have been converted into expected probabilities. Following a simulation procedure for generating significance levels, developed by King, Tomz, and Wittenberg (1998) and Tomz, Wittenberg, and King (1998), we also plotted the 95% confidence intervals for each expected probability.[21] The relationships displayed in Figure 5 closely follow the utility logic of viewing decisions depicted in Figure 4. Among cable subscribers, reported debate watching is strongly related to the respondent's level of political information. The differences between these low- and high-information respondents are 18 and 27 percentage points ($p < .05$) for the first and second debate, respectively,[22] and highly informed cable subscribers actually eclipsed their captive counterparts in tuning in to these events.[23] In addition, the differences between subscribers and nonsubscribers are greatest among respondents who are the least well informed. The absence of any overlap in the confidence intervals for low-information subscribers and nonsubscribers confirms the predicted differences between these two groups' viewing decisions. Poorly informed cable subscribers dropped out of the debate audience in droves, presumably because they changed channels in favor of entertainment programming.

Also as predicted, nonsubscriber respondents confirm their captive status by varying less in their propensity to watch the debates across categories of political information. In neither debate did the percentage point differences of $-.12$ and $-.07$ between low- and high-information nonsubscribers reach the .05 significance level.[24] Nonetheless, the fact that subscribers and nonsubscribers trend in opposite directions across levels of political awareness presents an intriguing possibility. Why would the least politically informed broadcast viewers be the most likely to watch the presidential debates? Perhaps the answer lies in their greater overall exposure to television programming. If these poorly informed captive viewers watch more television, then more of them than their better informed counterparts may well have been tuned in when the networks (including FOX) preempted evening commercial programming to present the debates.

Unfortunately, the NES survey does not question overall viewing habits, so we cannot directly control for the effects of those habits on these relationships. Yet, suggestive circumstantial evidence is available in the 1996 General Social Survey (GSS), which does question respondents' viewing habits and finds them inversely associated with education.[25] Given the significant correlation between political information and education ($r = .49$), more of the low-information

[19] When the interactions reported in Table 2 were respecified, we also found that cable subscribers vary more in their likelihood of watching the debates across different levels of presidential campaign attention and general campaign interest. For the former variable, as subscribers' self-reported attention level varied from low to high, their probability of watching increased by thirty-four percentage points (from .27 to .61), compared to twenty-three points for nonsubscribers (from .39 to .62). The comparable differences for general campaign interest were eleven percentage points (from .39 to .50) and five points (from .51 to .56), respectively. These interactions arise for the first debate and were weaker in both instances for the second debate.

[20] Zaller thoroughly evaluates the issues associated with using this subjective rating. He compared the performance of the interviewer's estimate of the respondent's level of political information with numerous indices constructed from direct knowledge questions in NES surveys and found that the interviewer's assessment performed as well as most scales constructed from ten to fifteen direct knowledge questions (Zaller 1992, 338). He also looked for, but failed to find, evidence of a systematic bias in favor of higher status individuals, such as white males. We also compared the interviewer's estimate with several direct knowledge scales that we constructed from various survey items, similar to those employed by Zaller (1992). To our surprise, none performed better than the interviewer's appraisal.

[21] This technique involves conducting repeated simulations of a given model to estimate expected values for each β coefficient, as well as expected probabilities derived from transforming these coefficients. Inspecting these confidence intervals allows us to assess whether differences in the expected probabilities (y) of watching the debates, as the value of our key independent variable (cable) varies, are statistically significant.

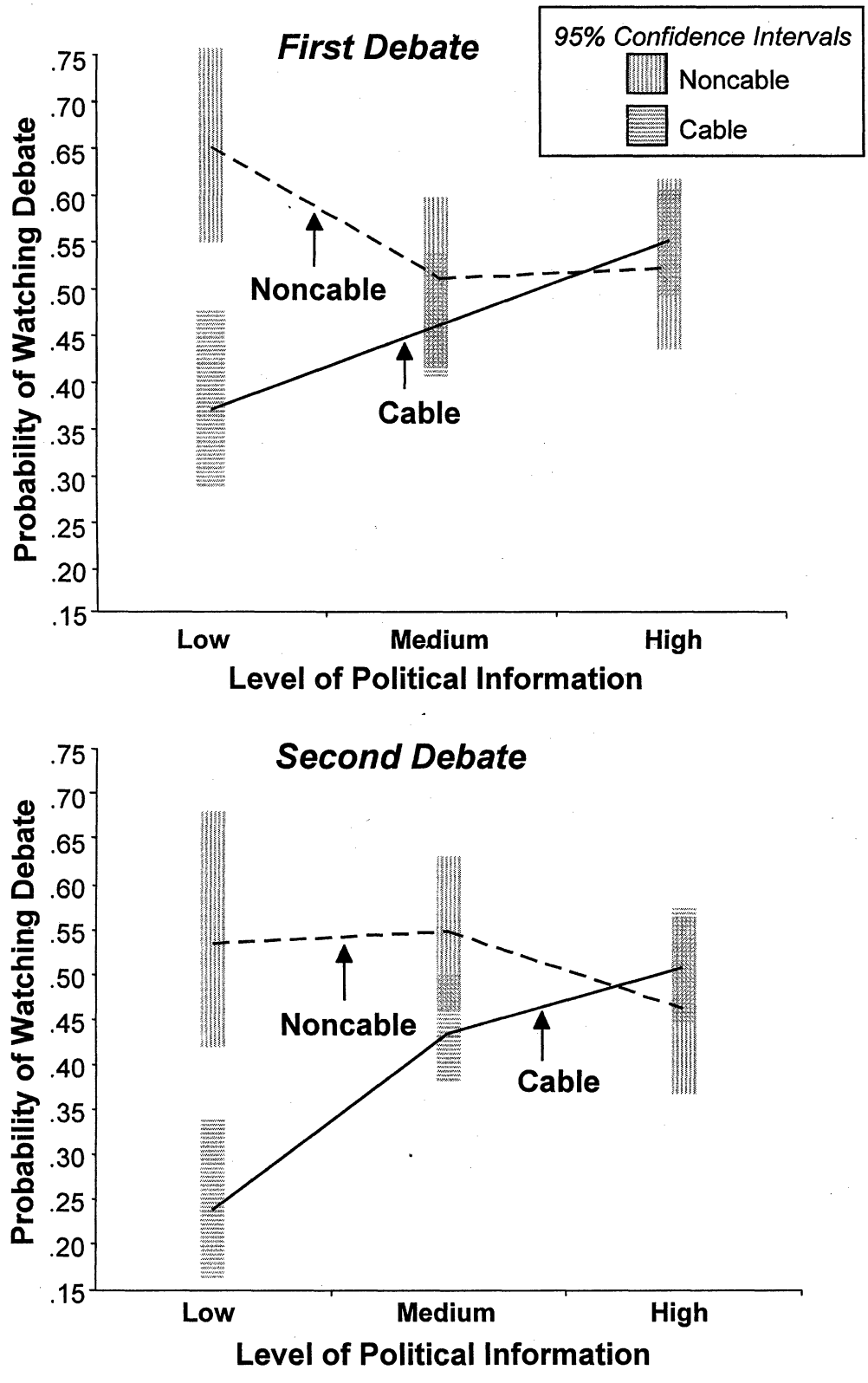
[22] Employing the King, Tomz, and Wittenberg (1998) simulation technique, the 95% confidence intervals around these predicted differences are .05 to .29 percentage points for the first debate and .15 to .38 points for the second debate. Because neither of these confidence intervals includes the possibility of zero effect (as they *do not* run from negative to positive), we may conclude that variations in political information *do* produce statistically significant differences in the probability that low- and high-information subscribers will watch the debates.

[23] We found the same pattern repeated in other interactions, particularly with respect to *Care Who Wins Presidency*. Although the differences are small and statistically insignificant, their consistent presence across debates and these interactions suggest the possibility that some relatively small share of respondents actually subscribe to cable in order to increase their access to political information provided by C-SPAN, CNN, and other cable news channels.

[24] Again employing the King, Tomz, and Wittenberg (1998) simulation technique, the 95% confidence intervals around these predicted differences are $-.26$ to .03 percentage points for the first debate and $-.23$ to .09 points for the second debate. Because these confidence intervals each include the possibility of zero effect (as they run from negative to positive), we may conclude that variations in political information *do not* produce statistically significant differences in the probability that low- and high-information nonsubscribers will watch the debates.

[25] The 1996 General Social Survey (Davis 1996) asked respondents the number of hours per day they watched television. Responses were coded 0 through 24 hours per day. Separating respondents by education level, those with less than a ninth grade education averaged fully two more hours per day of television viewing than did those who were college educated—4.2 versus 2.2 hours.

FIGURE 5. Probability of Watching 1996 Presidential Debates: Cable Subscribers versus Nonsubscribers



respondents in Figure 5 may have watched the debates simply because more of them were sitting in front of their television. Assigning the GSS respondents' television viewing levels for the different educational categories to our low- and high-information noncable NES respondents allows us to estimate these groups' different levels of exposure to television. The results are striking and appear capable of explaining the differences in debate watching in Figure 5. Low-information respondents average almost an hour more of daily television viewing than do high-information respondents—3.4 compared to 2.6 hours. Perhaps, then, the inverse relationship of political information and debate watching for noncable respondents is not so paradoxical. Tuning in to political television may impose comparatively low opportunity costs for these captive viewers, who, despite their typically poorer understanding of politics, are nonetheless drawn to it by their greater overall exposure to television.

Among the 1996 NES survey respondents, the changing media marketplace, rather than rising political disaffection, appears to be eroding the president's capacity to speak directly to the American public. If so, this should be reflected over time in a close association between the national profusion of programming alternatives, principally from cable, and the president's declining audience ratings.

THE PRESIDENT'S AUDIENCE RATINGS

We opened our inquiry by identifying growing national political disaffection and cable television as potential sources for the president's declining audience shares. As suggestive as these survey relationships may be, we need to confirm them at the cross-temporal level before concluding that cable and not political disaffection is the root cause of the president's audience losses. The average audience ratings in Figure 1 are based on 128 of the 152 prime-time presidential addresses and press conferences for which we have Nielsen data. These ratings reflect the percentage of households with television that are viewing the appearance, averaged over every minute of the program. (The Nielsen rating method and these data are described more fully in the Appendix.)

In Figure 3, the president's Nielsen ratings are correlated with the annual trends in cable subscription rates and network prime-time market shares at −.87 and .85, respectively. With these two market share trends correlated at −.93, we shall employ only the networks' average share of the prime-time audience. This variable better encompasses various trends in the television market, including the number and appeal of recently added cable and broadcast channels, which have eroded the public's dependence on the "big three" networks. In addition, as in the individual-level analysis, we represent political disaffection with both the trust and external efficacy scales.[26]

Time-series analysis also gives us an opportunity to test the effects of situational variables that may well alter the benefit and cost of viewing the president but that elude analysis with a single survey. In addition to political disaffection, the president's job performance rating has been found (Page et al. 1987; Sigelman and Rosenblatt 1996; Zaller 1997) to gauge the public's receptivity to presidential communication. Moreover, the public may find some topics of presidential appearances more compelling than others. To investigate audience sensitivity to the likely content of a message, we created two dummy variables, one for diplomatic and military crises abroad (*Crisis*) and one for White House *Scandals* (Watergate, Iran-contra, and President Clinton's various sex scandals). Finally, to assess the effects of the economy on the public's receptivity to presidential appearances, we included *Bad Economy*, a variable indicating the percentage of respondents answering "bad" when asked to forecast the next year's business conditions in the monthly University of Michigan Survey of Consumer Sentiment.

On the cost side of the ledger, we identified several variables in addition to the availability of alternative programming that may influence these time-series relationships. During the Clinton administration, the networks began rotating coverage of some presidential appearances. Of Clinton's 20 prime-time addresses and press conferences, only 14 were broadcast by all three major networks. When a network opts out of covering a presidential event, it adds a major programming alternative to the menus of *both* broadcast and cable viewers. This sharply increases the opportunity costs associated with watching the president and should, according to our model, reduce his audience share commensurately. In a preliminary analysis we found the largest audience losses occurring when only one network carried an event, such as the Clinton press conference with which we opened our discussion.[27] Accordingly, we shall represent these instances with a dummy variable, *One Network*.

Media research (Webster and Lichty 1991, 154–7) identifies two other variables relating to cost that systematically affect audience size for all prime-time programming. For television producers, July and August are, indeed, the dog days of summer. Reruns, more hours of daylight, and vacations conspire to diminish the television audience during these months. Whatever the season or day of the week, the 9:00–10:00 p.m. slot normally attracts more viewers than any other time. If a president runs afoul of preferred viewing times and seasons, then fewer viewers will be watching television. To capture the effect of the smaller summertime audience and less desirable evening time slots, we have created two dummy variables, *Summer* and *9:00 p.m.*

The first equation in Table 3 regresses the presi-

[26] This required that we interpolate values for years between elections. We also tested the GSS annual confidence in government scale (see Figure 2) and found it performs no better. We therefore rely upon the more frequently cited NES trust and external efficacy scales.

[27] Adding a separate dummy variable in Table 3 for those events covered by two of the three networks did not produce a significant relationship.

TABLE 3. OLS Analysis of Presidents' Audience Share as a Function of Network Share, Cynicism, Political Setting, and Schedule

Independent Variables	Full Series (N = 128) Coef.	Std. Error	Nixon-Carter (N = 54) Coef.	Std. Error	Reagan-Clinton (N = 74) Coef.	Std. Error
Network Share[a]	1.117***	.162	−1.777	2.084	.755**	.239
Trust	−.003	.354	1.097	2.360	.366	.566
External Efficacy	−.626	.425	−2.510	4.441	−.177	.490
Approve[a]	.152*	.074	.193	.118	.032	.127
Bad Economy[a]	.107*	.051	.100	.131	.217**	.071
Crisis	.112**	.042	.035	.074	.147**	.050
Scandal	.003	:052	.035	.096	.080	.083
Summer	−.178***	.042	−.251**	.085	−.131**	.047
9:00 p.m.	.164***	.032	.137*	.058	.202***	.046
One Network	−.924***	.129	—	—	−.941***	.115
Constant	.317	.307	−.585	1.577	−.341	.411
Adjusted R^2	.68		.14		.75	

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.
[a]Because percentage variables are bounded between zero and one, all percentage-based variables were transformed into natural logarithms.

dent's audience ratings on the full array of explanatory variables. For the most part, the relationships closely follow our expectations and parallel the survey results. The presence of programming options is, again, a powerful predictor of the president's audience share, while political disaffection is not. Presidential approval and concern with the economy display the correct sign and are significant. International crises—though, surprisingly, not presidential scandals—attract audiences, presumably because crisis events give viewers a special reason to learn what the president has to say. The schedule variables—summer, 9:00 p.m., and one network—reveal the president's audience shares to be bound to the same structural features of the market as commercial programming.

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

Earlier we argued that variations in an address's expected benefit will have less effect on the viewing choices of those who are dependent on the broadcast signal for the simple reason that they have nowhere else to go. The ideal way of testing this hypothesis on marginal changes in the president's audience shares over time entails analyzing these relationships separately for cable and broadcast viewers. Unfortunately, Nielsen Media Research does not provide such partially disaggregated data for scholarly research. An indirect approach is available, however. Note that in Figure 3 neither cable penetration of households nor network audience shares changed much until the early 1980s. During the Nixon, Ford, and Carter eras, for example, the network share of the market declined only about two percentage points (from 56.3 to 54.6) compared to a decline of twenty-five percentage points (from 54.6 to 29.3) for the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton eras. Consequently, presidents' audience ratings (see Figure 1) were both higher and more stable during the Nixon, Ford, and Carter administrations than for more recent presidents. By estimating the equations separately for these two periods, we obtain series with distinct mixes of cable and broadcast audiences. According to our model, stronger time-series relationships should occur for the second period, when far more members of the television audience possessed many more viewing options and consequently a meaningful choice whenever the president appeared on the screen.

This is precisely what we find in the second and third equations of Table 3. Only the scheduling variables are statistically significant for both periods. This is perfectly consistent with our model, since these variables capture whether people are watching television, not their choice of programming. Moreover, *Network Share* is appropriately weak and insignificant during the early period, reflecting cable's limited penetration into American households. By comparison, the president's audience ratings during the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton eras track all the independent variables, except scandal, which fails in every specification, and presidential approval, which significantly influences the full series. At first glance it is surprising that the latter, which was such an important factor in the first period, should drop out here. Below, however, we offer evidence suggesting that because it *is* so important, other actors incorporate the president's prestige into their strategic decisions of whether (one network) and when (9:00 p.m.) to broadcast the event.

STRATEGY AND CHOICE IN PRESIDENTIAL PROGRAMMING

Earlier we noted that presidents and networks are strategic actors who may individually or jointly manipulate the broadcast schedule to serve their particular audience goals. Presidents presumably want to attract

TABLE 4. Logit Analysis of Likelihood of a Presidential Address or Press Conference in the 9:00 p.m. Hour

Independent Variables	Coef.	Std. Error
Approve[a]	14.024**	5.539
Years in Office	−.786***	.243
Press Conference	−.603	.555
State of the Union	5.641***	1.607
1969–80	7.166*	3.269
Approve × 1969–80	−16.144**	6.115
Years in Office × 1969–80	.764*	.377
Constant	−5.955*	2.675
Pseudo R^2	.37	(N = 129)

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.
[a]Because percentage variables are bounded between zero and one, all percentage-based variables were transformed into natural logarithms.

as many viewers as possible; the networks want to minimize audience losses during their prime-time programming. In the days of oligopoly (and an assertive Federal Communications Commission), the networks could accommodate the president and adhere to an informal rule that resembles auto racing's "yellow flag," at the sight of which competitors tacitly agree to stay in place until road hazards are cleared. That is, the networks suspended competition by jointly broadcasting the president's message. They also accommodated the president by effectively allowing him to set the schedule. As one former FCC chairman summed up: "He [the president] and he alone decides" (Minow et al. 1973).

Now that viewers have liberated themselves by subscribing to cable, however, network deference has become riskier. Broadcasters may lose their viewers to cable channels for the rest of the evening (Webster and Lichty 1991). And where the viewers go, so go advertisers. Consequently, White House requests for airtime, which once triggered automatic compliance, now occasion serious negotiation. Below we consider the strategic ingredients in networks' decisions to broadcast a presidential appearance.

9:00 P.M. Schedule

A presidential appearance in the choicest slot probably represents the joint, negotiated decision of White House representatives and network executives. The process begins with a request for airtime. Why would a president ever prefer a slot other than the one that promises the largest audience? Generally, of course, he will not, but occasions do arise to constrain his options. President Carter, for instance, conducted a news conference late in the evening to announce a breakthrough on the Camp David accords between Israel and Egypt. The networks either agree to a request or propose another time or day. If our suspicion is correct that networks are increasingly reluctant to surrender the 9:00 p.m. slot, prudent presidential strategists will come to regard it as a scarce resource to be husbanded for special occasions, when the president needs to command the largest possible audience.

Table 4 offers some evidence that the 9:00 p.m. slot is strategically rationed. Coming at the beginning of each new session of Congress, the *State of the Union* address affords the president a unique opportunity to set the agenda for Congress and the nation. The first step in that effort lies in attracting an audience. Given the constitutional origins and high visibility of this address, network executives may have little alternative to accommodating the president's 9:00 p.m. request. Press conferences, in contrast, provide a less inviting format for the president to communicate a particular message to the public. Though *Press Conference* fails to achieve statistical significance, the negative sign suggests they are less likely to occupy the 9:00 p.m. slot.

Without strong expectations about the kinds of political considerations that would motivate presidents and network executives to agree to a 9:00 p.m. schedule, we tested a number of variables and specifications. Two that exhibited stable and significant relationships are the president's approval rating and his number of *Years in Office*. Because the networks' cost of surrendering a 9:00 p.m. slot increased sharply with the growth of alternative programming options, these variables should be especially telling since the 1980s. Accordingly, we employed the same break in presidencies as in Table 3 by creating a dummy variable for the 1969–80 period and interacting it with these political variables. Comparing the intercept constant with the dummy, the relationships confirm that, ceteris paribus, Nixon, Ford, and Carter, as a group, were more likely to receive a 9:00 p.m. slot than were Reagan, Bush, and Clinton. Even more strategically revealing are the significant interaction terms of these eras with presidential approval. During the past 18 years, but not in the 12 before, the availability of the 9:00 p.m. slot varies with both the president's approval rating and his length of time in office. We do not know whether a popular president is more likely to ask for the best slot or whether the networks are simply more accommodating. Similarly, the significant inverse relationship with the number of years in office may reflect the effort of newly elected presidents to hit the ground running, as Reagan aides commonly referred to the president's first-year strategy. Eventually, events intrude to dictate the circumstances and timing of presidential appearances. Also, network executives may find it more difficult to resist the efforts of a new president to launch his policies than a lame duck, whom everyone in Washington is beginning to ignore.

Number of Networks

When the three major networks dominated the market, all could broadcast a presidential address or press conference without any of them suffering a competitive disadvantage. Consequently, there were few instances when national networks rejected a president's request for airtime (Rutkus 1976). Now, however, the networks' advertisers and audience have plenty of alternatives, and the yellow flag rule no longer confines their losses. In late 1987 and early 1988, the big three refused to broadcast addresses by President Reagan on

two separate occasions, an unprecedented rebuke for the Great Communicator.[28] In June 1992 President Bush was denied network time for an evening press conference, and six of President Clinton's appearances (through January 1998) failed to attract full network coverage. Both directly and in this way indirectly, the growth of cable television jeopardizes the president's capacity to go public.

Although the recent origin of partial network coverage limits our ability to examine its strategic quality, the early evidence is highly suggestive. In the equation below, we employ a logit specification to estimate the number of networks carrying an address as a function of President Clinton's approval rating. *Networks* is coded 1 if all three major networks broadcast an address or press conference, 0 otherwise.[29] Despite the limited number of observations, the coefficient on presidential approval is significant at the .035 level, in the predicted direction (standard errors are in parentheses).

$$Networks = -7.6 + 17.9 * Approve$$

$$(4.01)\ (8.50)$$

$$(N = 20, \text{Pseudo } R^2 = .15).$$

Converting the approve coefficient to probabilities, we see that Clinton's prospects for winning full network coverage improved sharply as his popularity swung from its lowest to its highest levels.

	Approval	Probability of Three Networks
June 1993	39%	.35
February 1993	51%	.82
February 1997	60%	.96

In Table 3 we found that presidential approval did not directly influence audience ratings in the post-1980 period, but there is evidence of an indirect effect. There and in Table 4, presidents who enjoyed the public's approbation were more likely to receive full network coverage during the coveted 9:00 p.m. slot. To assess the indirect effect of presidential approval we reestimated the last equation in Table 3, excluding the scheduling variables. The result was that approve's coefficient jumped to .45 and became significant at the .01 level. In a world of politics governed by anticipated reactions to public opinion, the influence of the president's prestige upon his capacity to communicate to the American people appears to be ruled as much by the decisions of network executives as by citizens' propensities to favor popular presidents with their attention.

CONCLUSION

The textbook assessment that "television has brought about . . . the greater ease with which American presidents can communicate directly with the American people" (Erikson and Tedin 1995, 235) increasingly reflects the reality of a bygone golden age of presidential television. In the 1960s and 1970s, when more homes in America had television than indoor plumbing and virtually all viewers (including early cable subscribers) depended on the networks for programming, presidents possessed an enviable tool of persuasion. President Kennedy introduced the live prime-time press conference in 1961 so that he could, as he explained to a reporter at this inaugural session, "speak directly to the American people." Over the next several decades, direct appeals to the captive American audience became commonplace. In 1970 President Nixon delivered nine prime-time addresses to the nation. He and other chief executives did not hesitate to take to the airwaves to urge the public to "write, call, and send mailgrams" to their members of Congress in support of their policies.

What broadcast technology gave the president, cable technology appears to be taking away. In recent years, as the number of television households receiving cable has swelled, as have the programming alternatives it offers, the percentage of viewers who stay tuned to the president has steadily declined. Cable competition also prompted the networks to reassess their willingness to surrender prime time to the president. Rotating coverage is increasingly favored, and some requests have been rejected outright. Gone are the days when a president could "appear simultaneously on all national radio and television networks at prime, large-audience evening hours, virtually whenever and however the president wishes" (Minow et al. 1973).

According to evidence presented here, presidents have begun to recognize and react to these trends in audience and network behavior by strategically conserving their 9:00 p.m. appearances for the most important moments.[30] No president has stayed away from prime-time television as much as has Clinton early into his second term. During the 21 months after his second inauguration, he delivered only three national prime-time television addresses—two of them the obligatory annual State of the Union speeches and the other an equally obligatory apology for misleading the American people regarding a sexual relationship with a White House intern. The recent origin of this phenomenon necessarily renders speculative any assessment of its implications. We can reasonably conclude, nonetheless, that presidents' diminished access to the national television audience will present a serious strategic

[28] On October 14, 1987, the networks declined to broadcast Reagan's speech on aid to the Nicaraguan Contras, saying it contained nothing new. On February 2, 1988, the three networks declined to cover Reagan's address supporting the nomination of Judge Robert H. Bork to the Supreme Court, saying the speech was partisan and contained nothing new (Boyer 1988).

[29] Since we are seeking to explain network decisions, we have defined the variable more fully than in Table 3, where we were estimating its effects on audience ratings.

[30] Additional evidence of President Clinton's strategic response to this trend was apparent before the 1998 State of the Union address. When a senior advisor announced that "the State of the Union is no longer an evening, but a month" (Shogren 1998), he was acknowledging a novel strategy of dividing the typically monolithic message into a month-long series of carefully timed smaller leaks and announcements. Faced with sharply declining audience shares for presidential television, this strategy was intended to maximize media attention to the president's policy initiatives.

dilemma in the future. How will presidents promote themselves and their policies to a citizenry that depends almost entirely on television for its news and information yet is increasingly unwilling to allow them into their home?

APPENDIX

Nielsen Ratings

Over the years, A.C. Nielsen Company has established itself as the authoritative source and arbiter of television viewing habits. Two of Nielsen's better known indexes gauge audience size as a percentage of households *using* television (HUT) and a percentage of households *owning* televisions, which it calls average audience household (AAH). The former is best suited for assessing a program's performance in a given time slot and is favored by network producers. The latter better measures a program's overall audience penetration and allows program comparisons across time slots. AAH is the Nielsen rating for an *average minute of programming* (Beville 1985). We use AAH, which represents the percentage of U.S. households possessing television that tuned into the president's address during an average minute of that program. This is the index summarized in Figure 1 and the one employed in our analysis to investigate the president's declining audience share. As of December 1998, A.C. Nielsen estimated there were approximately 99.4 million households in the United States with at least one television. One Nielsen rating point is equivalent to 1% (or 994,000) of those households.

We identified 152 nationally televised prime-time addresses to the nation and press conferences from January 1969 through February 1998. Although we were frustrated in our efforts to compile a complete series, we assembled ratings for the great majority: 128 of the 152 identified addresses (83%).[31] These data are available on our website: *http://weber.ucsd.edu/~skernell/APSR.htm*. We wish to thank the following for supplying us with ratings information employed here: Professor Joe Foote, Vincent Nasso at A.C. Nielsen Company, David Giles at CBS's division of audience research, CBS News Librarian, Laura Kapnick, and Yuien Chin at NBC's News Archive.

NES Variables (Tables 1 and 2)

Social and Economic Characteristics.

Political Group Membership (v961458): Total number of groups in which respondent is a member and reports discussing politics "often" or "sometimes."

Employment Status (v960616): Dummy variable created from responses to the following question: "We'd like to know if you are working now, temporarily laid off, or are you unemployed, retired, permanently disabled, a homemaker, a student, or what? 1 = respondent works 20 or more hours per week, and 0 = respondent works less than 20 hours per week.

Southern Resident (v960108): Dummy variable coded 1 if respondent lives in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, or Virginia, 0 otherwise.

Media Consumption Habits.

Cable (v960241): "Do you have either cable or satellite television?"

Newspaper (v960246): Number of days per week respondent reads a newspaper.

Network TV News (v960242): Number of days per week respondent watches network TV news.

Local TV News (v960244): Number of days per week respondent watches local TV news.

Read Magazines (v961333): Dummy variable coded 1 if respondent read about the political campaigns in any magazines.

Listen to Talk Radio (v961155): Dummy variable coded 1 if respondent listens to political talk radio programs.

Internet Access (v961160): Dummy variable coded 1 if respondent has access to the Internet.

Political Disaffection. (*The full time series for the trust and efficacy measures are available on line at the following address: http://www.umich.edu/~nes/nesguide/gd-index.htm.*)

Trust: A Likert-type additive scale is constructed from four questions. (1) "How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?" (v961251, 1 = "just about always" or "most of the time," 0 = "only some of the time" or "never"). (2) "Would you say the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?" (v961253, 1 = "run for the benefit of all," 0 = "run by a few big interests"). (3) "Do you think that people in the government waste a lot of the money we pay in taxes, waste some of it, or don't waste very much of it?" (v961252, 1 = "waste some" or "don't waste very much," 0 = "waste a lot"). (4) "Do you think that quite a few of the people running the government are a little crooked, not very many are, or do you think hardly any of them are crooked at all?" (v961254, 1 = "not very many are crooked" or "hardly any are crooked," 0 = "quite a few are crooked"). Consistent with Miller's (1974) coding conventions, respondents who answered "don't know" to one of the four questions were assigned the mean level of "trust" from the other three questions. Those who responded "don't know" on more than one of the four questions were excluded.

Internal Efficacy (v961246): "Please tell me how much you agree or disagree with these statements . . . Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on." 1 = agree strongly, 2 = agree somewhat, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = disagree somewhat, 5 = disagree strongly.

External Efficacy: The external efficacy scale is constructed from two NES questions, which ask respondents whether they agree with two statements. (1) "People like me don't have any say about what the government does" (v961245). (2) "I don't think public officials care much what people like me think" (v961244). Each question was coded identically to *Internal Efficacy* (above). For the scale, responses from each question are recoded 0 if the respondent agrees, 1 if the respondent disagrees, and .5 for "don't know" or "neither agree nor disagree." Responses for the two questions are then added together, creating a scale running from 0 to 2, with 0 representing *lowest* efficacy.

[31] Frankly, we have found no completely reliable and exhaustive listing of presidential appearances on network television. In attempting to identify all televised presidential appearances, we reviewed news transcripts from all three major networks, which are available electronically from 1990 to the present, as well as Network News Indexes for CBS and NBC, which cover the entire range of our investigation. We also reviewed the Vanderbilt Television Archive index of network news, the *Public Papers of the President, Los Angeles Times* weekly listings of Nielsen ratings, and, where available, *Nielsen Client Notices*, which report ratings directly to subscribing networks. Due to sometimes contradictory reports, occasional errors, and ambiguous descriptions of network coverage, a few unscheduled presidential addresses may have eluded us.

Political Attitudes and Behavior.

General Campaign Interest (v960201): "Some people don't pay much attention to political campaigns. How about you? Would you say that you were very much interested, somewhat interested, or not much interested in following the political campaigns this year?" 1 = not much interested, 2 = somewhat interested, 3 = very much interested.

Presidential Campaign Attention (v961337): "In general, how much attention did you pay to news about the campaign for president—a great deal, quite a bit, some, very little, or none?" 1 = none, 2 = very little, 3 = some, 4 = quite a bit, 5 = a great deal.

Follow Public Affairs (v961134): "Some people seem to follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there's an election going on or not. Others aren't that interested. Would you say you follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all?" 1 = hardly at all, 2 = only now and then, 3 = some of the time, 4 = most of the time.

Political Information: (v960070): Interviewer assessed the respondent's "general level of information about politics and public affairs." 1 = very low, 2 = fairly low, 3 = average, 4 = fairly high, 5 = very high. For interactions, the five-point scale was collapsed to three categories: 1 = very low or fairly low, 2 = average, and 3 = fairly high or very high.

Care Who Wins Presidency (v960202): "Generally speaking, would you say that you personally care a good deal who wins the presidential election this fall, or that you don't care very much who wins?" 1 = "care a good deal" and 0 = "don't care very much."

Close Election (v960382): "Do you think the presidential race will be close or will one candidate [candidate name given if respondent names an expected winner] win by quite a bit?" 0 = win by quite a bit, 1 = don't know, 2 = will be close.

Vote Intention: Two questions were used (v960547 & v960548). (1) "So far as you know now, do you expect to vote in the national elections this coming November or not?" (2) "Who do you think you will vote for in the election for president?" 1 = Bill Clinton, Bob Dole, Ross Perot, or other; 0 = none (if will not vote for president) or "don't know."

Partisanship: Two questions were used (which are combined in v960420). (1) "Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?" (2) "a. Would you call yourself a strong Republican or a not very strong Republican? Or b. Would you call yourself a strong Democrat or a not very strong Democrat?" The resulting seven-point scale was then collapsed into a four-point scale, measuring intensity of partisan preferences, with 0 = independent-independent or apolitical, 1 = independent-Democrat or independent-Republican, 2 = weak Democrat or weak Republican and 3 = strong Democrat or strong Republican.

Party Affect (v961470, v961471, & v961472): "I'd like to know what you think about each of our political parties. After I read the name of a political party, please rate it on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means you strongly dislike that party and 10 means that you strongly like that party. If I come to a party you haven't heard of or you feel you do not know enough about, just say so." Each of three ten-point scales for the three parties running major candidates in 1996 (Democrats, Republicans, and Reform Party), ranging from 1 = strongly dislike to 10 = strongly like, were collapsed into five-point scales, measuring distance from the mean score of 5. The three scales were then added together to form a single fifteen-point scale, measuring intensity of affect (either positive or negative) toward the political parties.

Candidate Affect (v961473, v961474, & v961475): "And now, using the same scale, I'd like to ask you how much you like or dislike some political leaders. Again, if I come to a leader you haven't heard of or you feel you do not know enough about, just say so." The question was separately asked for Clinton, Dole, and Perot. (Coding is identical to *Party Affect*, above.)

Feelings Toward Clinton (v960272): "I'd like to get your feelings toward some of our political leaders and other people who are in the news these days. I'll read the name of a person and I'd like you to rate that person using something we call the feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the person. Ratings between 0 and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favorable toward the person and that you don't care too much for that person. You would rate the person at the 50 degree mark if you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward the person. If we come to a person whose name you don't recognize, you don't need to rate the person. Just tell me and we'll move on to the next one . . . The first political leader is Bill Clinton." 0 = strongly unfavorable feelings, 100 = strongly favorable feelings.

Feelings Toward Dole (v960273): ". . . How would you rate Bob Dole?" (Coding same as above.)

Feelings Toward Perot (v960274): ". . . How would you rate Ross Perot?" (Coding same as above.)

Economic Evaluation (v961477): "Would you say that over the past twelve months, the state of the economy in the United States has gotten better, stayed about the same, or gotten worse?" 1 = gotten much better, 2 = gotten somewhat better, 3 = same, 4 = gotten somewhat worse, 5 = gotten much worse.

Contacted by Political Party (v961162): "Did anyone from one of the political parties call you up or come around and talk to you about the campaign this year?" 1 = yes, 0 = no.

Time-Series Variables (Tables 3 and 4)

Network Share: The three major broadcast networks' (ABC, CBS, and NBC) average share of the prime-time (8:00–11:00 p.m.) television audience.

Approve: In Gallup Poll's presidential job performance rating, percentage approving at the time of each address or press conference.

Bad Economy: Percentage answering "bad" to the following question in the Survey of Consumer Sentiment's most recent monthly survey: "Now turning to business conditions for the country as a whole—do you think that during the next 12 months we'll have good times financially, or bad times or what?"

Scandal: A dummy variable assuming a value of 1 during Watergate, Iran-contra, and Clinton White House sex scandals.

Crisis: A dummy variable for significant international events compiled by Andrade and Young (1996, 596) through 1993 and by authors after that date.

Trust: NES "trust in government" scale. (See above for details.)

Confidence in the Federal Government: The annual General Social Survey asks respondents their "degree of confidence in the people running the executive branch of the Federal Government." The three categories of responses are 0 = a great deal, 1 = only some, and 2 = hardly any. For Figure 2, the scale is normalized to the 0–1 interval for purposes of comparison with the trust and external efficacy scales.

Summer: Dummy variable assuming a value of 1 during July and August, 0 otherwise.

9:00 p.m.: Dummy variable assuming a value of 1 for

appearances beginning between 9 and 10 p.m., EST, 0 otherwise.

Networks: Dummy variable assuming a value of 1 if all three major networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) broadcast the address or press conference, 0 otherwise.

1969–80: Dummy variable assuming a value of 1 for the Nixon, Ford, and Carter administrations, 0 for the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton administrations.

Press Conference: Dummy variable assuming a value of 1 for press conferences, 0 for other types of events.

State of the Union: Dummy variable assuming a value of 1 for State of the Union address, 0 for other types of events.

Years in Office: Number of years a given president has been in office.

One Network: Dummy variable assuming a value of 1 if one of the three major broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) carried the address or press conference, 0 if more than one network carried the event.

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