

## “Going Public” in Comparative Perspective: Presidents’ Public Appeals under Pure Presidentialism

ALEXANDRA G. COCKERHAM, AMANDA DRISCOLL, and JOAN V. JOSEPH

*The notion of “going public” has its origins in the U.S. presidency, yet we have little sense of how direct public appeals fit into the broader portfolio of presidential powers. We debut a new data set that includes 24 presidents from 18 countries throughout the Western Hemisphere, and show that the frequency of presidents’ public appeals varies with both their partisan support in the legislature and their status as a newcomer. In so doing, we situate presidents’ public appeals as an underappreciated source of executive influence in the study of comparative presidentialism.*

Keywords: presidential power, going public, Latin America, presidentialism

Just weeks after his reelection in 2012, President Barack Obama was back on the campaign trail. In place of electoral votes, Obama sought to rally public opinion around tax increases for the wealthiest 2% of Americans, a measure he promised would ensure continuity in entitlement spending and keep the country from plunging over the looming “fiscal cliff.” With congressional negotiations hamstrung and a strong majority of the public on his side of the issue, Obama “went public” on the tax increase, capitalizing on his electoral momentum to rally public support for his proposal. This signaled a noted departure from his first administration, during which President Obama had prioritized coalition building within the halls of Congress, to frustrating results and mixed success. According to noted

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Washington insiders, the president's plan to "go public" posed a viable threat to his opponents, who openly credited Obama's ability to build rapport and sway public opinion as a distinct political advantage (Dickerson 2012). At the same time, critics were quick to insinuate that President Obama's return to the campaign trail only belied his weakness as a leader of his party, and waning political influence on Capitol Hill.<sup>1</sup>

Presidents' abilities to connect with the public are of utmost political importance. Even when not seeking immediate reelection, presidents are uniquely situated to both cultivate and respond to public opinion and concerns (cf. Druckman and Jacobs 2009; Edwards 2003; Vaughn and Mercieca 2014). As one of the only officials elected via the national constituency, presidents serve as a focal representative of the nation as a whole, even though the public expectations of presidents often exceed what formal powers would alone permit. This tension is especially acute in pure presidential systems, in which the constitutional separation of origin and survival of the political executive demands constant negotiation and compromise across independent branches of government (Mainwaring and Shugart 1997; Shugart and Carey 1992). As the focal leader of the nation, presidents can leverage their unique connection to this nationwide constituency to attempt to influence their negotiations with the legislative branch.

Although American and comparative scholars have recognized this fact, only rarely have presidents' plebiscitarian powers garnered explicit empirical scrutiny. Broad literatures theorize the effects of presidential powers on policy making, considering the effects of unilateral actions and vetoes (Cameron 2000; Carey and Shugart 1998; Negretto 2004; Palanza and Sin 2013; Shair-Rosenfield and Stoyan 2018), legislative authority and partisan support (Bolton and Thrower 2016; Calvo 2014; Carey 2009; Morgenstern 2002; Shugart and Carey 1992), and presidential personality and charisma (Barber 1992; Kernell 1984; Neustadt 1960; Pluta 2015; Weyland 1999a; 1999b) on presidents' legislative success, political influence, and legacy beyond their term in office. While extant research provides a rich understanding of the nuances of institutional and legislative presidential powers, seldom are presidents' relationships with the national public the object of direct empirical consideration, and then only rarely in such a way that would allow for the evaluation of multiple or competing hypotheses.

We seek to situate presidents' direct public appeals in the broader portfolio of comparative presidential powers. We debut the Presidential Speeches of the Americas (PSA) data set, which is a data set and archive of appearances and speeches made by 24 presidents across 18 pure presidential systems of the Western Hemisphere. These data contain the records of presidents' speeches and public appearances as advertised on the official websites of the presidency, most of which contain the transcript of the presidential address. As a first look into these data, we investigate here presidents' propensity to go public, and explain the frequency of presidential speeches as a function of the institutional powers of presidential office and the legislature, presidents' partisan support in the legislature, and their positions as newcomers to the political scene. To preview our results, although we

1. Although our data suggest that the frequency of President Obama's public appeals declined gradually over time, many observers suggest that direct public engagement was a strategy distinct to his second term. Frustrated with frequent breakdowns and facing an even more hostile Republican delegation following the Tea Party's electoral victories of 2012, Obama coupled executive orders with direct appeals to the public to sidestep his opponents in Congress (Dickerson 2012).

find little evidence that the frequency of presidents’ speech making correlates with executive institutional powers, we find that presidents’ public appearances covary with the size and likely discipline of the president’s legislative delegation, suggesting that the power to directly engage with the public may substitute for other sources of presidential powers, in particular those that derive from presidents’ support in the national legislature. At the same time, and consistent with theorized expectations identified in extant work, we find some evidence that direct appeals are more commonly made by political outsiders. In what follows, we briefly review extant work on going public, and presidential powers in comparative perspective, delineating our hypotheses regarding their expected covariance with the frequency of presidential addresses. We then introduce the Presidential Speeches of the Americas data set and archive, before turning to our empirical analysis.

### Going Public and Presidentialized Populism

When Kernell (1984) famously coined the phrase “going public,” he sought to explicate a marked shift in presidential strategy throughout the policy-making process in the U.S. separation of powers system. Adopting a macrohistorical explanatory lens, Kernell identified the direct engagement of the public and public opinion as a distinct and emergent trend deployed by presidents in the context of interbranch bargaining. Prior to World War I and President Herbert Hoover’s administration, presidents were by and large party leaders and legislative elites; presidential policy was the result of interbranch negotiations and backroom deals composed of “beltway” coalitions, largely removed from the view or influence of the voters or wider public. Under this regime of “institutionalized pluralism,” presidential success in the policy-making and electoral process alike hinged on the president’s ability to negotiate, bargain, and build coalitions among elites and across institutions. With this same institutional and political environment in mind, Neustadt (1960) famously identified the most important power a president could possess was the “power to persuade,” to simultaneously navigate the waters of Congress, the bureaucracy, interest groups, and state governments. In the insular world of backroom deals and elite bargaining, public influence and input were both marginal and marginalized: although elections allowed for routinized public consultation, the currency of policy making in this institutionalized, pluralist world was elite compromise and coalition building.

Kernell (2007) credits the popularizing of candidate selection via open and party primaries as a central explanatory factor, which brought a new kind of presidential candidate to the forefront—an outsider with few connections to Washington, for whom connection to the broader public as opposed to national party elites was of primary importance for both their election and policy influence. These changes to the electoral rules and weakening of the traditional parties also ushered in an era of divided party government, further straining the bargaining relationship between presidents and members of Congress in the policy-making process. As the “institutionalized pluralism” of the early twentieth century gave way to the “individualized pluralism” of the 1980s and 1990s, Kernell documents the expansion of the direct presidential appeal to the public as a credible

alternative to the backroom legislative coalition building. Modern American presidents live and die by their connection to the public—their electoral campaigns take root years in advance, and many attempt to maintain said political momentum with ongoing direct public appeals throughout their administration. Though Ronald Reagan is the classic example of a president who rose to power outside the party establishment, more contemporary examples abound. Take, for example, President Obama’s public appeals about health-care reform following his 2008 election. In the wake of his unprecedented grassroots mobilization, President Obama pivoted his efforts to the activation of public support for the Affordable Care Act (ACA), rebranding the grassroots electoral organization that once shared his name, “Organizing for America.” The mobilization of the public around the ACA incited a contentious firestorm around the issue of health care; members of Congress would later report being inundated with phone calls from constituents, who implored them to either support or reject the president’s controversial health-care bill (Dreier 2011; Urbina 2009). Direct public appeals, so the story goes, enable U.S. presidents to apply indirect pressure on members of Congress, thereby improving the chances of the presidents’ preferred policy being adopted into law. This is one example among many of a president deploying his uncommon rapport with the public to improve his bargaining position with Congress.<sup>2</sup>

Although the academic literature on going public is largely insular in its application to the American presidency, theorizing presidents’ connection to the public as an important source of political influence is not itself unique. Work on populism across the developing world identifies the rise of anti-establishment rhetoric and the lack of institutionalized parties as two key facilitating conditions for the emergence of populist leaders. Throughout the presidential systems of modern Latin America, populism evokes strong historical referents to caudillo-like strongmen who consolidated power from the earliest years of independent statehood and throughout the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> At the root of the populists’ influence is their own reputation, charisma, and personalism; they seek rule through an unmediated connection to the unorganized and underrepresented class of “the people” en masse and may consolidate their rule through repression, redistribution, or some combination thereof. To populists, institutional constraints are largely peripheral, epiphenomenal, and often intentionally marginalized: the institutionalization of parties and the separation of powers are secondary priorities to the cultivation of electoral devotees who will legitimate the populist leader’s unchecked power and political authority.

From the literature on going public in the U.S. case, to the classificatory coverage of the Latin American populists, several commonalities emerge. Both literatures consider direct plebiscitarian appeals to be presidents’ attempts at mobilizing public

2. With his overt rejection of the mainstream press and his ubiquitous presence on social media, President Donald Trump has signaled that continuous and direct communication with the public will be a mainstay in his administration.

3. Weyland (2001) notes that the definition and conceptualization of *populist* morph in accordance with the historically situated empirical referent: populists of the early twentieth century were associated with import substitution industrialization, whereas populists of the late twentieth century would be described as more neoliberal in economic orientation. Ultimately, it is their plebiscitarian political style that distinguishes them from other party elites, and the economic orientation of their policy choices is an instrumental means to consolidate political power.

opinion, drawing public attention to both themselves and their preferred political priorities. Presidents leverage their electoral connection with the nationwide constituency in order to sidestep the negotiations that the institutional separation of powers imposes, applying indirect pressure to legislative coalitions. The leaders who most often use these ploys come to power as political outsiders, whose political ascent is facilitated by presidentialism, weakened party systems, and poorly institutionalized party structures. Yet at the same time, both strains of research construe populism and presidents’ plebiscitarian orientation as a personality trait or leadership style (Barber 1992; Neustadt 1960), with scholars accommodating, extending, and refining the contours of concepts when deemed appropriate and necessary (Barr 2009; Roberts 2007; Seligson 2007; Weyland 1999a; 2001). Though presidential appeals to the public are widely acknowledged to be strategic in nature (Pluta 2015; Stuckey 1997; Weyland 1999b), a plebiscitarian orientation as a leadership style has tended to orient the focus of research to case studies of exemplary individuals, rather than considering this a behavioral tactic that might be strategically deployed in response to a change in the political and institutional landscape (cf. Windsor et al. 2018).

These facts mark our point of departure. Taking inspiration from Kernell’s (2007) characterization of the U.S. presidency, we measure the frequency of presidents’ direct public appeals in which they aim to promote themselves and their policies before their respective publics. In so doing, we reorient the discussion of presidents’ idiosyncratic leadership personalities or facilitating conditions, to one behavioral manifestation thereof.<sup>4</sup> As research on the U.S. presidency has suggested, we expect that presidents will tactically appeal to the public in response to changes in the bargaining environment, which may vary across countries and over time as a function of institutional, personal, and political factors. More generally, we seek to situate presidents’ direct public appeals into the broader portfolio of presidential powers.

## Presidential Powers: Statutory Prescriptions, Parties, and the Public

Institutionalist theories of presidential power prioritize the structural facets of presidential influence laid out in constitutions and legal statutes, treating the strategic activation of public relations as a residual source of political control. The body of research on presidential powers across modern Latin America has focused predominantly on institutional features of the presidency and party system that shape presidents’ influence in the policy-making process (Mainwaring and Shugart 1997; Shugart and Carey 1998). Among the most studied are those presidential powers that grant presidents legislative or lawmaking authority, either to unilaterally enact their most preferred policy via decree authority, or to reactively limit legislative activity via the presidential veto. Though Carey and Shugart

4. To be clear, we do not purport to measure the concept of populism, nor can we speak to whether presidents directly attempt to sway public opinion to undermine traditional parties, the legislature, or other political institutions. Though one of the defining traits of populists is their anti-establishment orientation and rhetoric, absent a measure of anti-establishment speech content we simply have no way to judge. The extent to which our measure accurately predicts cases of populism is an open empirical question, though one we leave for future research.

(1998) initially observed that presidential decree authority may be either constitutionally defined or delegated implicitly, research has since underscored the wide variance in the extent to which decree authority and veto power are deployed in practice, and to variable success. Of particular note is how these institutional mechanisms are conditioned by the broader legislative and partisan context in which they are deployed (Calvo 2014; Negretto 2008; Shair-Rosenfield and Stoyan 2018).

As with the institutional presidency, Latin American legislatures are also acknowledged to vary considerably in both their constitutional powers and their influence on the policy-making process (Morgenstern 2002), which will likely affect the president's transaction costs involved in working with the legislature. This literature identifies partisan powers as a second dimension of presidential power, stressing the largely informal powers derived from a president's connection with his or her party in the national legislature, and the extent to which he or she can count on a stable majority of disciplined copartisans within a coherent legislative delegation (Carey 2009; Morgenstern 2002). Where presidents enjoy a strong base of disciplined legislative support, constitutional instruments of unilateral action may be superfluous and unnecessary, and direct public consultation may matter little in the face of complete and unwavering legislative support. Where partisan powers are severely lacking, due to high legislative fragmentation, low party discipline, rampant party switching, or some combination thereof, presidents may be hamstrung by their own legislative delegation, and frustrated in the policy-making process (Shugart 1998).<sup>5</sup> Among Latin American scholars, plebiscitarian strategies and appeals are often construed as an attempt by presidents to circumvent recalcitrant legislatures, just as direct democracy may undermine representative institutions (Altman 2010). Though this research implicitly invokes the support of the public in its reference to legislative seat share, only rarely are presidential appeals to the public construed as a viable source of presidential influence; instead, scholars stress the institutional foundations of presidential power. This logic leads us to advance the following two hypotheses:

H1: Public appeals will be less frequent where presidents enjoy strong constitutional powers.

H2: Public appeals will be less frequent where presidents enjoy strong partisan powers in the legislature.

Next, the literature on going public in the United States, as well as the Latin American variant of presidentialized populism, identifies the emergence of the "outsider" anti-establishment candidates as a critical explanation for the frequency of public appeals. Though often construed as a matter of personality or personal leadership style (Barber 1992; Neustadt 1960), in other contexts it is construed as a result of a poorly institutionalized party system or weakened party structure (Weyland 1999b). If direct public appeal is an especially important resource for political neophytes, we would expect that political outsiders would

5. Some research suggests there is an inverse relationship between these two dimensions of presidential power—constitutionally powerful presidents are most often those who lack strong congressional support, whereas presidents who enjoy strong partisan powers have little in the way of constitutionally delineated policy-making authority (Mainwaring and Shugart 1997; Negretto 2008; Shugart 1998).

be more prone to make direct public appeals and appearances. These observations motivate our third hypothesis:

H3: Public appeals will be more frequent where presidents are political “outsiders.”

### Measuring “Going Public”

To test these hypotheses, we set out to devise a measure that would be comparable both across countries as well as over time, taking inspiration from the going public concept originally developed in the U.S. context (Kernell 2007). Based on our evaluation of presidential websites, we inductively created a catalog of possible informational features through which the institutional presidency might communicate with the public that could be readily found across administrations and over time. Over the course of 4 weeks in the summer of 2016, a trained undergraduate coded all of the websites of the presidencies of all pure presidential systems throughout the Western Hemisphere. In the Supporting Information Appendix, we detail our coding instrument and summarize the resulting data. With the exception of Cuba and Nicaragua, the office of the presidency across all pure presidential systems we considered maintained their own website, which served as a conduit for communicating presidential policy priorities; the cabinet makeup and governmental composition; as well as presidents’ plans for public appearances, notable accomplishments, and travel schedule. By way of example, we recorded whether there were links to news media and appearances (and if so, the frequency with which they were updated), whether the office of the presidency appeared to cultivate a social media presence and through which venues (Twitter, Facebook, Picasa, etc.), and whether the president appeared to make regularly scheduled addresses (such as the Brazilian *Café com o Presidente* [Coffee with the President] radio program, President Franklin Roosevelt’s fireside chats, or President Hugo Chávez’s *Alo Presidente!* televised talk show). In total, our coder recorded information for 25 different informational parameters through which the president might publicize her work, priorities, or positions to the public.

We elected to focus on presidential public appeals via speeches and related public appearances (press conferences, regularly scheduled addresses, interviews, etc.). This measure had the advantage of maximizing the availability of data across countries and over time, while replicating closely Kernell’s (2007) going public concept in its original form. Whereas studies in American politics often measure going public based on televised appearances to the national constituency, we include in our analysis any speech made to the public, irrespective of television broadcast or scope of public audience.<sup>6</sup> All cases included several major public appearances (akin to the presidential State of the Union Address in the United States), but in no case was this the only sort of presidential address or engagement reported. Instead, all country archives we report on below included a mix of major and minor presidential addresses. As to the question of nationally televised addresses, our

6. Kernell (2007) distinguishes major and minor addresses on the basis of both their scope and length: major addresses exceed 1,000 spoken words and address a national audience whereas minor addresses are shorter and directed toward subconstituencies or smaller groups. We include both types of presidential appeals in our analysis shown here.

coding of a random sample of the PSA data (discussed at length in the Supporting Information Appendix) reveals that in most instances, it was impossible to determine whether the speech had been televised.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the advent and widespread use of the Internet by the public allows for a double-barreled approach to presidential publicity: not only might presidents communicate directly with citizens via public appearances or broadcast speeches, but their online presence allows for said messages to be advertised and disseminated even more broadly, chronicled into perpetuity in a self-curated archive. This means that potentially any public appearance by the president may reach a national constituency and beyond, and the office of the presidency can continue to foster this connection to the public via widespread dissemination via the Internet.<sup>8</sup>

Our research team set out to collect presidential speeches in the early days of July 2016, an effort that extended into September 2016.<sup>9</sup> Our aim was to collect as much information as possible, harvesting presidential speech archives for as long as they were made available online. Most sitting presidents maintain an online archive of presidential activities and speeches, and in several countries online archives were also available for previous presidential administrations through the Wayback Machine Internet archive. The format of available data on speeches and public appearances varied across countries and over time: although the most common format of data was the speech transcript (82% of cases), in other cases speeches were made available via streaming audio or video files, were accessible via YouTube broadcast, or were simply listed as a public appearance.<sup>10</sup> In the cases in which only a third-party description of the presidential address was available, we relied on the summary or title to identify instances of presidential communication directly with the public.<sup>11</sup> For each speech or public appearance, we collected the date, location, title, and full text whenever possible.<sup>12</sup> These data jointly constitute the

7. As shown in the Supporting Information Appendix, we coded a random sample of more than 1,500 speeches for their content, audience, and broadcast medium. To the question of speech medium, our coders indicated “Not indicated” 68% of the time.

8. Indeed, the institutional infrastructure attuned to presidential publicity is likely endogenous to the causal dynamics we describe. Namely, presidents for whom direct public appeals are a critical political tool will likely have better institutional mechanisms for diffusing these sorts of information, including (but not limited to) a presidential press corps or communications team; staff members dedicated to public outreach and communication; and teams of experts to design, maintain, and cultivate an active presence on the Internet.

9. In the 2 years that followed, we continued to locate additional records and expand the collection of the PSA data set to include Bolivia, Nicaragua, and additional records from Honduras and Brazil.

10. The PSA data set contains the transcripts of presidents' addresses in Bolivia, Chile, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Panama, and most (between 81% and 99%) of the speech transcripts of presidential appearances in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, and the United States. In Peru, the PSA data set contains transcripts for 242 of 806 presidential appearances, roughly 30% of the total. For four remaining countries (Guatemala, Honduras, Paraguay, and Uruguay), virtually no speech transcripts were available. We collected the plain-text version of the speeches whenever possible, except in Ecuador and Bolivia, where the full text of the presidential appearances is available in .pdf or .doc format.

11. Though presidential surrogates are often deputized to speak on behalf of a commander in chief, we exclude from the PSA and analysis below all public addresses and speeches made by officials other than the president, such as the vice president, presidential spouse, or press secretary, as best we could identify them. For additional information, please see the Supporting Information Appendix.

12. All observations in the PSA data set contain the title of the presidential appearance, 99% of which contain the date. Location was available for about 20% of the observations, most readily in Brazil, Colombia, and the United States. For additional details, please see the Supporting Information Appendix, and the online PSA data archive.



Presidential Speeches of the Americas (PSA) data set and archive, which is publicly available at [www.psa-dataset-archive.com](http://www.psa-dataset-archive.com). For the purposes of the analyses that follow, we collapsed all observations (including those observations for which no transcript was available) into a monthly count of presidential appearances.

An overview of the data contained in the PSA data set is shown in Table 1. In the majority of cases, presidential websites are organized by administration, with a continuous time-serial record of all presidential speeches and activities beginning in the month following inauguration, up until the present day or the end of the presidential term. Our data contain 24 presidents elected in 18 different countries, covering a time period that spans from 1998 until 2016. For six presidents (Chávez, Rafael Correa, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Evo Morales, Obama, and Daniel Ortega), this includes speeches and appearances for multiple consecutive terms in office; for three more presidents who served multiple terms (Michelle Bachelet, Juan Manuel Santos, and Danilo Medina), we

**TABLE 1**  
Data Availability in the Presidential Speeches of the Americas Data Set and Archive

<i>Country</i>	<i>Years</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Months</i>	<i>President (Administrations)</i>
Argentina	2007–2015	1,543	97	Fernández de Kirchner (1, 2)
Bolivia	2012–2016	1,160		Morales (2, 3)
Brazil	2016–2017	174	3†	Temer
Chile	2014–2016	852	29	Bachelet (2)
Colombia	2015–2016	301	8	Santos (2)
Costa Rica	2010–2014	133	45	Chinchilla
Dominican Republic	2012–2016	32	47	Medina (1)
Ecuador	2007–2016	685	115	Correa (1, 2)
El Salvador	2009	65		Funes
Guatemala	2016	288	9	Morales
Honduras	2003–2008, 2015	119	24†	Maduro, Zelaya, Hernández
Nicaragua	2009–2016	161	81†	Ortega (2, 3)
Panama	2003–2016	581	84	Moscoso, Torrijos, Martinelli
Paraguay	2016	10		Cartes
Peru	2011–2016	806	61	Humala
United States	2009–2016	3,283	91	Obama (1, 2)
Uruguay	2000–2016	849	93	Batlle, Vázquez Mujica
Venezuela	1998–2012	1,524	165	Chávez (1, 2, 3, 4)

*Note:* Original compilation by the authors. “N” refers to the number of public appearances per country. “Months” describes the number of consecutive months for which presidential speech data were analyzed for the multivariate analyses herein described. Original and updated source information is available in the Supporting Information Appendix.

†Our original data collection efforts only included an abbreviated time span for Brazil (2016), Honduras (2003–2004) and Nicaragua (2010–2016). We have since endeavored to collect more extensive data in these cases, and we make the more complete time series available in the PSA data set and archive. However, our analyses of speech frequency are based on the more limited time frame in these three cases.

have data for only a single term. Although in many cases only a single administration was available per country, we have observations from multiple presidents in Honduras, Panama, and Uruguay. The column “N” reports the number of observations per country; the column “Months” in Table 1 reports the number of country-months we analyze in the sections that follow. In our Supporting Information Appendix, we report on the results of coding a 10% random sample of the PSA data, which demonstrates the consistency of the data we have collected with the original conceptualization of going public, and characterizes the broader data set in terms of content and speech orientation. To summarize briefly here, we find that 71% of speeches pertained to substantive policy, with most of the rest being classified as ceremonial or pertaining to international affairs. For additional information, please see the Supporting Information Appendix.

## Explaining the Frequency of Direct Public Appeals

Whereas we have theorized the frequency of presidents’ public engagements with reference to institutional and partisan considerations, we collapsed all observations in the PSA data set into a monthly count of presidential speeches, such that we could track the covariance of presidential speech making with our explanatory variables.<sup>13</sup> The resulting data set is an unbalanced cross-sectional time-series data set of the number of public addresses made by the president in a given month.

The cross-sectional variance of the frequency of direct presidential appearances is shown in Figure 1. The heatmap shows the cross-sectional distribution of the monthly average number of presidential appearances as reported in the online press archives of the office of the presidency. Though not shown here in the interest of space, President Obama averaged 36 public speeches and appearances per month over the course of his two terms in office. As a point of reference, Kernell (2007) reports that major public appearances by U.S. presidents have largely held constant over time, with presidents Hoover through George H. W. Bush averaging approximately five major appearances per year. Minor appearances, by contrast, have grown steadily over time, with a considerable increase in minor appearances coinciding with the Reagan administration in the early 1980s. Since then, U.S. presidents have averaged roughly 10 major and minor presidential addresses per month (Kernell 2007, 115–23), though President Obama appears to be an outlier in this regard. Looking comparatively, our map suggests that contemporary U.S. presidents, with their average number of appearances per month hovering around 10, would appear typical among their presidential peers across the hemisphere. The hemispheric median

13. For the countries for which time-series data were made available, we filled in monthly gaps in our data with zeros if there was no record of public appearance in a given calendar month. If the online archive began (or ended) in the middle of a presidential term, we coded all preceding (or following) months as missing. In several countries and time periods, the publication of presidential appearances via the Internet was so inconsistent and intermittent that we had little reason to believe the information made available online was a credible representation of presidential public appearances on the whole. For this reason, we exclude Paraguay, El Salvador, and Panama between 2004 and 2010, and Honduras after 2004. The data from Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Brazil (2017) were collected after September 2016, and so are not included in the analyses of speech frequency reported below.

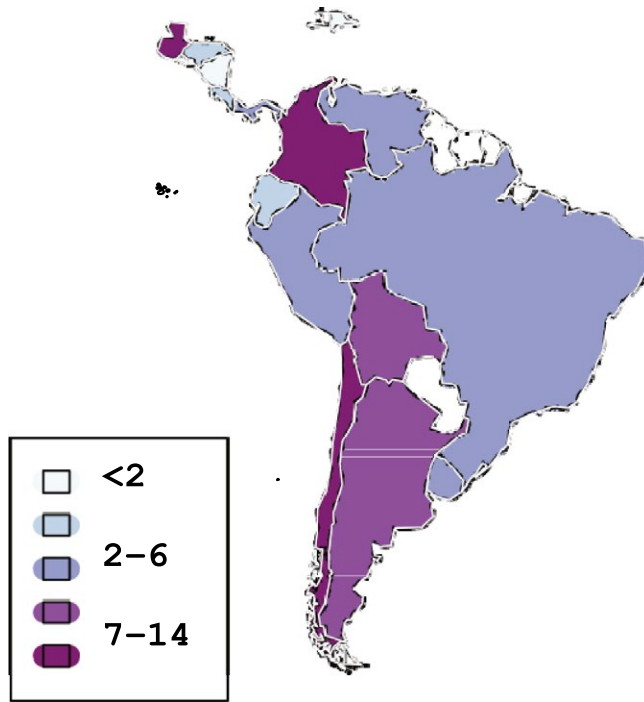


FIGURE 1. Cross-Sectional Variance of Average Monthly Speech Frequency.

*Note:* Not shown: United States. Countries shown in white, including Paraguay and Mexico, have not been included in the Presidential Speeches of the Americas data set due to unavailability of data.

number of speeches per month is 7, though the data skew positive, with a mean of nearly 12. Not only would President Obama appear to be an outlier among U.S. presidents, but he would be on the high end of the spectrum in comparative perspective as well. Although the presidents of Argentina, Chile, and Colombia in our data also appear quite active, President Obama shares the distinction of having the highest number of presidential appearances with President Santos of Colombia, with 56 public appearances in a single calendar month.<sup>14</sup>

Figure 2 gives a finer-grained visualization of the cross-sectional variance in our data, as well as some insight into the sort of time-serial variance our data collection effort has captured. Though we focus on a subset of four countries here, the complete array of monthly average speech frequency for all the countries in our analysis of speech frequency is shown in Figure 1 of the Supporting Information Appendix. The top two panels report the monthly average speech count for Presidents Chávez and Correa of Venezuela and Ecuador, respectively. Chávez and Correa are oft-cited examples of classic populist leaders

14. Though not included in the analyses here, Bolivian president and noted populist Evo Morales meets or exceeds this figure six times in the PSA data set, in the months preceding and following the 2014 national elections.

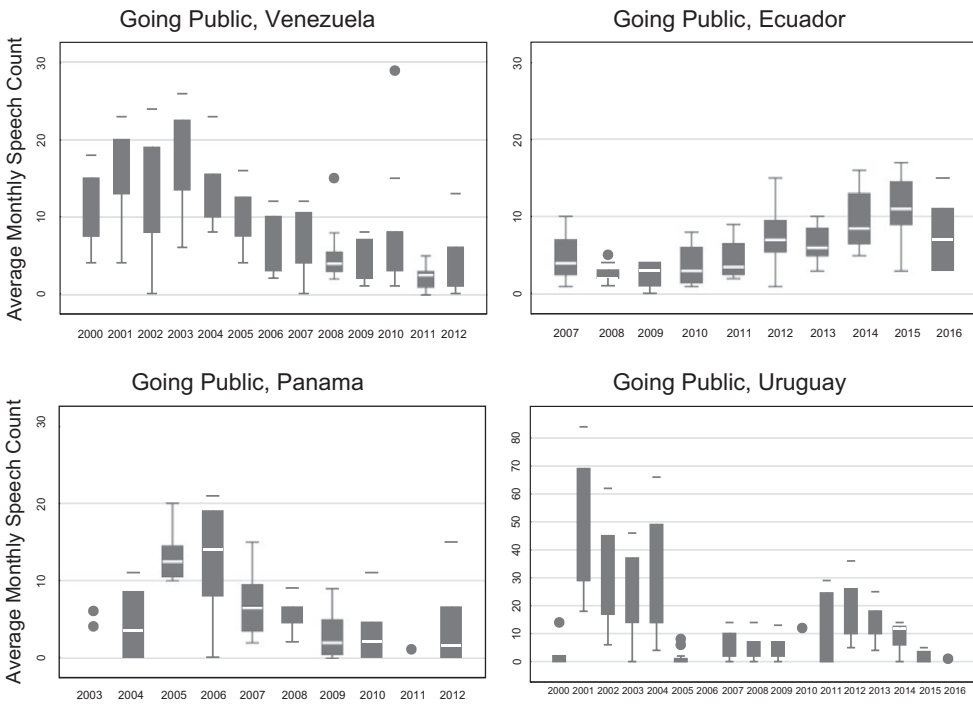


FIGURE 2. Cross-Sectional Variance of Average Monthly Speech Frequency.

Note: Cross-sectional time series of monthly average number of speeches and public appeals, 2000–2015.

in contemporary Latin America: Widespread disillusionment with the political establishment fueled their rise to power, which they cultivated and maintained with their outsider status, personal charisma, and “new socialism” redistribution plans. Once in office, their respective brands of “citizen’s revolutions” prioritized state-led redistribution and plebiscitarian mobilization over the republican edicts of checks and balances grounded in strong institutional separation of powers.

Despite these similarities and decidedly populist reputations, our data make clear that this characterization obscures a more dynamic strategy of public activation and appeals. The box plots reveal the extent to which either leader appealed to the public varies considerably over time. After he first gained office in 1999, Chávez’s public addresses and appeals peaked early in his first administration, and then declined steadily over time. This peak followed in the years after the constitutional assembly of 1999, in which Chávez succeeded in scaling back institutional checks to presidential power, while expanding the formal influence of the office of the president. Though we cannot say whether the shift in institutional power led to a diminishing need for direct public appeals, it would certainly seem plausible that his direct public appeals aided his efforts at constitutional reforms. President Correa, by contrast, was slow to galvanize the public with his citizen’s revolution and throughout the constitutional revision process in 2007 and 2008, though he became increasingly more active in the public arena as his support

and majority in the legislature eroded. President Correa’s public appearances and speech making gain momentum following his 2011 referendum, in which he sought to curtail the formal independence of the press and judiciary, causing further splits and defections from his legislative coalition (“Correa” 2011).

The bottom two panels of Figure 2 display the cross-temporal variation in presidential public addresses for Panama and Uruguay. In both cases, our sample includes multiple presidents, including Presidents Mireya Moscoso, Martín Torrijos, and Ricardo Martinelli of Panama and Presidents Jorge Batlle, Tabaré Va’squez, and José Mujica of Uruguay. In both cases one thing is clear: While we see considerable variance in presidential appeals across countries and over time, there are also considerable differences across individual presidents. Our cross-sectional research design leverages differences in institutions and political environments more *across* countries than within them, yet the pronounced differences within these two cases suggest that within a single institutional environment, there is still substantial leeway for differences in individual presidents’ publicity strategies, as extant research has suggested.

### Multivariate Analyses

Moving into the multivariate analyses, we collected a number of variables to measure our concepts of theoretical interest as they pertain to formal and legislative powers of the executive.<sup>15</sup> We include two measures of the president’s constitutional powers—*Decree Power* and *Legislative Initiative*. We chose to examine these proactive powers because they are institutional mechanisms that are constitutionally stipulated and offer the president the opportunity to shape policy via unilateral action or proactively set the legislative agenda (Shugart and Carey 1998).<sup>16</sup> *Decree Power*, which is based on our own coding of national constitutions, is an ordinal variable measuring the scope of presidential decree authority, which ranges from a minimum of 0, indicating no decree authority, to a maximum of 3, indicating decree authority without caveat. The intermediary values correspond to presidential decree authority that requires either legislative (1) or ministerial (2) approval. *Legislative Initiative* is an ordinal variable that captures executives’ capacity to propose legislation. Taken from the Varieties of Democracy data set (v.6), this measure is based on expert surveys of executive behavior, aiming to capture not only the institutional ability but also presidential proposal of legislation in practice (Coppedge et al. 2016). At its maximum, this variable indicates that the president can initiate legislation in a wide variety of policy areas, including some that may be exclusive to the president, whereas a minimum

15. Summary statistics and source information for all of our explanatory variables are available in the Supporting Information Appendix.

16. Though presidential veto power is an oft-studied constitutional power of presidents of considerable political consequence (Cameron 2000; Kernell and Kim 2006; Palanza and Sin 2013), we focus instead on proactive, as opposed to reactive (veto), powers.

value corresponds to presidents who are legally prohibited from introducing legislation (Coppedge et al. 2016).<sup>17</sup> While the president's constitutional power is likely to be important, the flip side of this coin is the legislature's institutional power as defined by the constitution. *Bicameralism* is a binary variable that equals 1 if the legislature in a given country is bicameral, which we expect would impose veto points in policy making as well as transaction costs on coalition formation.

We also hypothesized that the partisan preferences of the legislature will influence presidents' incentives to appeal to the public. It is likely that presidents will choose to go public more often when the legislature is a more formidable adversary—either because of ideological divergence between the two branches, or due to a weak and undisciplined legislative coalition. To capture the preference convergence between the two branches, we include an indicator for *Unified government*, as well as the *Presidential Seat Share*. The *Presidential Seat Share* is the proportion of seats controlled in the lower chamber of the legislature by the party of the president, taken from the Database of Political Institutions (Cruz, Keefer, and Scartascini 2016). To capture the likely coherency and discipline of the president's voting coalition in the legislature, we include a measure of a *Closed List* electoral system. Extant research shows legislators who are elected via closed-list electoral rules are more likely to vote in line with their party, either due to increased ideological cohesiveness or more readily enforceable mechanisms of party discipline owing to party leaders' control over ballot access and nominations (Carey 2009; Morgenstern 2002). Accordingly, we expect that the effect of the *Presidential Seat Share* will be conditioned by the electoral rules under which legislators are elected: Lacking incentives to toe a party line, the legislative collective action problems to coordinate behavior are thought to be more acute as the coalition grows larger (Cox and Morgenstern 2001). In closed-list systems, by contrast, we anticipate that the president's public appeals will be less frequent as the size of her delegation grows, as she may reasonably expect support from a large and relatively disciplined (or cohesive) legislative voting bloc. To capture this conditional relationship, we include an interaction term between these two variables.

Finally, the literature on populism casts populists as anti-establishment political outsiders, who capture hearts and minds of voters as a decided break with the political past. Capitalizing on mistrust of mainstream politicians or weakened party systems, the literature suggests these outsiders deploy direct public appeals to circumvent institutional constraints. To capture a president's outsider status, we coded the biographies of all 19 presidents in our data set of speech frequency to identify the first date of relevant political experience.<sup>18</sup> We coded the biographic profiles of presidents as reported by Encyclopedia Britannica, which provided relatively coherent and comparable biographical information across all executives in our data set. In identifying presidents' first foray into

17. The original variable in the Variety of Democracies (VDEM) data set collects expert assessments on a wide number of metrics pertaining to democracy and governance. We have inverted the original VDEM scale for the ease of interpretation, such that higher values denote stronger executive proposal powers of legislation.

18. To reiterate, we analyze here a subset of the total presidents for whom data are available in the PSA data set and archive, excluding those administrations for which data were unavailable (or cross-temporally very sparse) at the time of initial data collection.

politics, we recorded the year in which they made their first professional debut in the national political arena. Among other things, the sorts of experiences we identified included the establishment of political parties, the nomination to various cabinet posts or party leadership positions, or the election as deputies or senators to other national elected offices. Subtracting the year in which the speech was made from the year of first political activity, the resulting variable *Years Active* ranges from 0 to 49, with a mean of 19 and a median of 17, and is a direct measure of the years of political experience of the elected leader whose behavior we consider.

There are several additional considerations for which we control. We acknowledge that presidential speech making may vary considerably in tandem with electoral concerns, or public opinion more broadly. Though there is considerable disagreement as to whether presidents attempt to shape public opinion through speech making in the U.S. case (Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier 2004; Druckman and Lupia 2000; Edwards and Wood 1999), it is clear that public approval of the president may well be influential in presidential speech making. We make no comment on the direction of this relationship, but simply control for *Public Approval* to account for these possibilities there is some sort of relationship here. Next, we include *Election Season*, a binary variable for each of the 12 months preceding a presidential election, which we anticipate would result in increased public appeals. To measure public approval, we use the monthly presidential approval ratings from the Executive Approval Database (v. 1.0), made available by Carlin et al. (2016), while the electoral calendar was identified using the Database of Political Institutions (Cruz, Keefer, and Scartascini 2016).

Last, we include two variables to account for exogenous changes in the political environment to which presidents would likely respond. First, we control for economic conditions within each country by including the monthly change in the consumer price index (*Inflation*). Next, the frequency with which presidents make public statements and then include them on their presidential websites is likely a function of the *Internet Penetration*, or the annual percent of the population who can access the Internet at home. Additional information on all of the variables analysis is shown in the Supporting Information Appendix.

## Results

As our outcome variable is number of speeches given in a month, we use an event count model.<sup>19</sup> We choose negative binomial regression—rather than Poisson regression—due to evidence of overdispersion (i.e., that the variance of the dependent variable exceeds its mean), and include clustered standard errors for each presidential administration.<sup>20</sup> In

19. We also explored the possibility of a global time trend in our data, perhaps owing to the increased use of the Internet over time. The results of a Dickey–Fuller test reject the null of a unit root at the 0.01 level, meaning that our dependent variable is stationary. This test indicates that our dependent variable shows no global time trend that might confound our analyses.

20. The results of our likelihood ratio test indicate that negative binomial regression fits the data better than a Poisson model ( $\chi^2 = 2,070$ ) and that this observed difference is statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ).

the Supporting Information Appendix, we also report the results of a hierarchical linear model, as well as the results of a negative binomial model that clusters standard errors at the level of the country. The results are largely robust to the changes in model specification.

Our first model (column 1) displays only the explanatory variables that pertain directly to our hypotheses. In Model 2 (column 2), we add both *Election Season* and *Public Approval*, to account for the probability that presidents will make speeches in response to declining public support, or when seeking office. Finally, Model 3 (column 3) displays our fully specified model with the remaining control variables. For the most part, the effects of our variables of interest are consistent across all three models, suggesting our claims are robust to a variety of controls (Table 2).<sup>21</sup>

Please recall that we hypothesized that presidents' speech-making propensity would be inversely related to both their constitutional and partisan powers. In the case of constitutional powers, our results are mixed: We find evidence that the institutional structure of the legislature correlates with presidents' propensity to make speeches. The

**TABLE 2**  
**Regression Results**

	<i>Dependent Variable: Monthly Speech Count</i>		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
<b>Constitutional Powers</b>			
Decree power	-0.142 (0.233)	-0.128 (0.193)	-0.299 (0.189)
Legislative proposal power	-0.227 (0.243)	-0.389** (0.192)	-0.319 (0.231)
Bicameral	1.446*** (0.286)	1.343*** (0.261)	1.257*** (0.366)
<b>Partisan Powers</b>			
Unified	-0.156 (0.227)	0.002 (0.188)	0.089 (0.212)
Presidential seat share	1.759*** (0.611)	1.326** (0.614)	1.390* (0.712)
Closed list	1.310** (0.509)	1.101*** (0.381)	1.054** (0.420)
Presidential seat share × Closed list	-2.057*** (0.722)	-2.024*** (0.681)	-1.703** (0.810)
<b>Outsider Status</b>			
Years active	-0.041*** (0.012)	-0.033*** (0.011)	-0.031*** (0.011)
<b>Controls</b>			
Approval		-0.020*** (0.005)	-0.019*** (0.006)
Election season		-0.176 (0.116)	-0.146 (0.141)
Inflation			-0.129** (0.062)
Internet penetration			0.0004 (0.006)
Constant	1.907*** (0.464)	3.197*** (0.632)	3.101*** (0.686)
Observations	954	928	890
Log likelihood	-3,105.516	-2,952.529	-2,788.052
$\theta$	1.496*** (0.085)	1.839*** (0.115)	1.970*** (0.129)
Akaike information criterion	6,229.031	5,927.059	5,602.105

Note: \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

21. In our Supporting Information Appendix, we show the ways in which our results are sensitive to the stepwise exclusion of each of the countries in our study. Please see the Appendix for additional details.



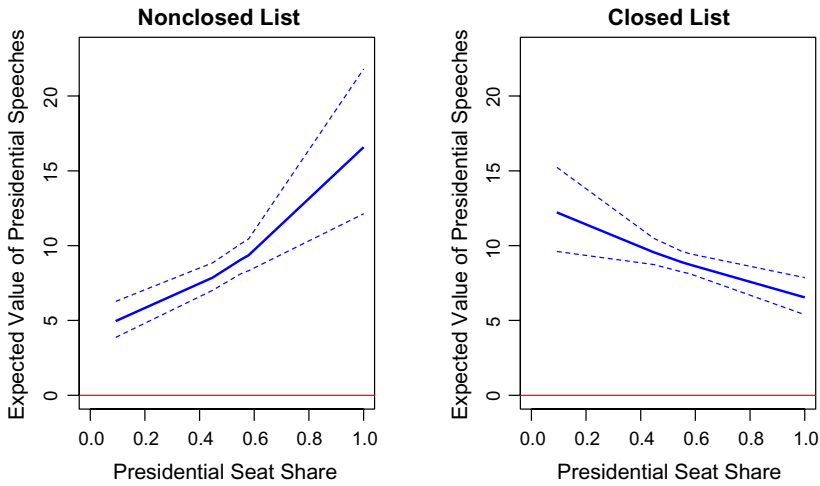


FIGURE 3. Expected Value of Presidential Seat Share, Conditional on Electoral System Type.

presence of a *Bicameral* legislature is both positive and statistically significant across all of our models, implying that presidents who must obtain a majority support in multiple legislative bodies more frequently make direct public appeals than presidents who face a single-chamber legislature.<sup>22</sup> The average number of speeches per month for presidents facing bicameral legislatures (18.42) is more than double that of presidents whose legislature is composed in a single chamber (7.24), a pattern that is robust in our multivariate models. Consistent with the bargaining context argument described by Kernell (2007), presidents who must secure the support of not only a unicameral chamber, but also the approval of a Senate, make on average more direct appeals to the public. However, we find little evidence for a statistical relationship between presidents’ constitutional powers and their propensity to go public. Though the coefficients are all consistently negative, as we would expect, none of the coefficients approach conventional levels of statistical significance in ways that are invulnerable to controls. As such, we cannot reject the null hypothesis of no effect with respect to presidents’ constitutional powers.

Turning to our hypothesis regarding partisan powers, we find support for our expectation that presidential speech making is inversely related to partisan powers. We find evidence to suggest that the size and stability of the presidents’ legislative delegations also correlate with presidents’ public appeals in ways we hypothesized, with the effect of *Presidential Seat Share* being conditioned by the electoral system type. Building on the work of Shugart and Carey (1992), Carey and Shugart (1995), and Carey (2009), we hypothesized that presidential speech making would increase with the size of the president’s legislative coalition when legislators were elected in candidate-centric systems (nonclosed list), owing to the need to wrangle legislative support from a potentially undisciplined legislative caucus. This is consistent with extant work on legislative party discipline

22. In our Supporting Information Appendix, we show that this generalization is dependent upon including the United States (or President Obama) in the analysis.

and minimal winning coalitions, where research characterizes legislative coalitions in candidate-centric electoral systems as both unruly and unstable, which can frustrate presidential agendas even in times of unified government (Carey 2009; Cox and Morgenstern 2001; Morgenstern 2002; Shugart and Carey 1992). Conversely, in a more partisan-centered system (closed list), we hypothesized that the president's speech making would decrease with the size of his legislative coalition, as presidents in these systems are more often assured a stable base of legislative support (Carey 2009).

We find support for our hypothesis of said conditional effects. The coefficient for *Presidential Seat Share* corresponds to those cases in which legislators are elected in candidate-centric (nonclosed list) systems is positive and statistically significant in all models, suggesting that as the size of the presidents' party increases in candidate-centric systems, presidents more often engage the public directly as their legislative coalition increases.<sup>23</sup> Substantively speaking, presidents whose legislative delegation would face relatively higher personal vote-seeking incentives (relative to their closed-list elected counterparts) make on average approximately five additional speeches per month. The negative coefficient on the interaction term between *Presidential Seat Share* and *Closed List*, by contrast, suggests that the converse dynamic is at play in closed-list electoral systems: where legislators are incentivized to toe the party line, presidents' propensity to engage with the public diminishes as the size of their legislative coalition grows.

Figure 3 makes clear the dynamics of this conditional relationship, where we plot expected number of speeches as a function of both *Presidential Seat Share* and *Closed List* electoral system. We simulated the expected number of presidential speeches using the results in Model 2 of the negative binomial regression, and the varying slopes across the two panels evince the conditional relationship between presidential delegation size and the electoral system type. Figure 3 makes clear that these differential effects are statistically different from zero across all levels of these variables, suggesting that the motives for presidents to go public are qualitatively dependent upon the electoral system by which legislators are elected, and in ways that are consistent with what theory would lead us to expect (Carey and Shugart 1995; Shugart and Carey 1992).

Turning now to our hypothesis relating to presidential outsiders, the results are also in support of our hypothesis (however, we show in the Supporting Information Appendix that these results are sensitive to the inclusion of Venezuela). Extant research on populism throughout the Americas has stressed that direct public appeals are the tool of political outsiders, especially those newcomers to the political system who seek to upend traditional party structures. Though our data are just one small insight into a much richer theoretical dynamic, they provide one of the first truly comparative and systematic evaluations as to whether or not this may be the case. As extant research has suggested, but to our knowledge has never systematically shown, we find a negative and statistically significant correlation between the number of years a president has been active in politics and the frequency with which he or she makes public appearances and speeches.

23. Our sensitivity analysis in the Supporting Information Appendix suggests that these results are partially due to the inclusion of Ecuador (or President Correa) in our pooled analysis. Please see the Appendix for additional details.

This is consistent with the vision of going public to be largely a tool of political outsiders, including neophyte politicians who come to power outside of the traditional party structures.

To be sure, we acknowledge the limits to the claims made herein. First, lacking exogenous or randomly applied treatments, we make no claim regarding causality, and we recognize the inherent endogeneity endemic to this sort of observational research design. Second, although we took multiple precautions in our construction of our speech frequency data set, excluding cases where time-serial data availability appeared problematic, and removing instances of deputies speaking on behalf of a president, we are ultimately constrained by what data were made public by presidents and their staff responsible for maintaining their online archives. Indubitably, the curation of these online archives is subject to innumerable other (likely endogenous) dynamics, with country-specific data-generating processes that we do not fully understand. Third, we also acknowledge the provisional nature of these findings so as to not overstate our claims: our sensitivity analysis (reported in detail in the Supporting Information Appendix) reveals that the claims made herein are sensitive in several regards to the particular configurations of cases included in any given analysis. Accordingly, we interpret our results as one earnest attempt to empirically evaluate going public in comparative perspective, and introduce the Presidential Speeches of the Americas (PSA) data set and archive in the hopes that we will not be the last to consider this sort of research question.

## Discussion

We set out to fill an important lacuna in the research on comparative presidentialism, to systematically consider how presidents’ direct public appeals serve as one resource among many that presidents may use to advance their policy agendas. To that end, we introduce and publicize a new data set and archive of presidential speeches, the Presidential Speeches of the Americas data set and archive. This data set and archive includes records of (and in most cases transcripts of) more than 12,500 presidential speeches, made by 24 presidents in 18 pure presidential systems throughout the Western Hemisphere. It is available to the public and may be found on the website [www.psa-dataset-archive.com](http://www.psa-dataset-archive.com).

In the analysis above, we sought to explain the frequency of presidents’ public engagements as a function of institutional, partisan, and individual-level factors. The results shown above support our contention that presidents use direct public appeals as a strategic tool, in response to changes in the institutional and political environment. Extant research has largely explained the frequency in presidential public appeals with reference to psychological factors and personality traits—in both the United States and elsewhere, a president’s tendency to directly appeal to the public is construed as a distinctive characteristic of an individual’s leadership style, most commonly found among outsiders and political populists. Our approach here is novel, in that we reorient the discussion and study away from psychological explanations of personality traits, to a power of the executive office that may be deployed more or less in response to changes in the institutional

and political environment. Our statistical analysis of a subset of the PSA data suggests that presidents' direct appeals to the public might serve as a substitute for other sorts of presidential powers, either those derived from their support in the legislature or those granted to the executive in constitutional texts.

These results underscore the advantage of considering going public in a comparative perspective, wherein variance in institutional and partisan support can be empirically considered. It is perhaps no surprise that scholars of the American presidency focus their analyses on the differences across individual presidents, as the constitutional powers of the U.S. presidency are largely constant over time, and the partisan powers within this relatively consolidated two-party system imply there is minimal variance on that dimension as well. Shifting our focus across countries and over time, we see that beyond individual personality traits,<sup>24</sup> institutional and political contexts offer substantial explanatory power as well.

We leave for future research a more in-depth exploration of the impact of presidential appeals on public opinion and policy making more broadly. Americanists have debated the president's ability to sway public opinion; some argue that going public has little effect on the popular support or sentiment (Edwards 2003; Simon and Ostrom 1989), yet others contend that presidents can sometimes influence public opinion under specific circumstances (Brace and Hinckley 1992; Ragsdale 1984; Vaughn and Mercieca 2014). These differences aside, there is considerable evidence that presidents' connection to the public is a powerful tool for setting the agenda and coordinating the public's attention on the president's priorities. As with constitutional powers that grant presidents the ability to proactively move or set a status quo, future research ought to consider the possibility of this coordinating effect in presidential systems outside of the United States, to better map the bounds of presidential influence in this respect. This research situates presidential appeals to the public into the broader portfolio of presidential powers, which have long been fodder for discussion and study for students of comparative democratic institutions. Whereas Shugart and Carey (1992) and Mainwaring and Shugart (1997) sought to differentiate presidential powers according to their constitutional and partisan variants, we propose a third dimension of presidential powers, one that captures an executive's attempt to cultivate a relationship with the public. Though this is a first cut at exploring this dimension in more depth, we believe it to be a unique opportunity to shed light on this underappreciated dimension in the context of comparative presidential powers more generally. Future research may evaluate the extent to which these public appeals are effective in qualitatively altering the bargaining environment, or improving the president's policy-making influence vis-à-vis their legislative counterparts. We hope that the Presidential Speeches of the Americas data set and archive may prove a valuable resource to do so, such that we are not the last to explore this sort of question.

24. We do not discount the validity of the claims made by others who have come before us regarding differences between individual presidents. While our own focus is the institutional and contextual explanations that might tap into strategic deployment of going public, we leave the examination of individual differences between the presidents for future research.

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## Supporting Information

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