

STUDIES IN COMMUNICATION, MEDIA, AND PUBLIC OPINION

A series edited by Susan Herbst and Benjamin I. Page

Who Leads Whom?

Presidents, Policy, and the Public

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THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS Chicago and London

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To David A. Wrone

The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637
The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London
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Printed in the United States of America

15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07 06 1 2 3 4 5

ISBN: 0-226-09280-1 (cloth)
ISBN: 0-226-09282-8 (paper)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Canes-Wrone, Brandice.

Who leads whom? : presidents, policy, and the public / Brandice Canes-Wrone.

p. cm.—(Studies in communication, media, and public opinion)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-226-09280-1 (cloth : alk. paper)—ISBN 0-226-09282-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Presidents—United States—Decision making. 2. Political leadership—United States. 3. Public opinion—United States. I. Title. II. Series.

JK516.C37 2006

352.23'6'0973—dc22

2005008995

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

Incentives for Policy Pandering

What are a president's incentives to enact a popular policy when he has information that indicates the policy would produce a bad outcome for society? Work on presidential responsiveness to public opinion does not answer this question. Most of the existing work examines the level of and/or variation in responsiveness rather than whether presidents will pander in the sense of following current opinion when they believe it is misguided. For instance, Robert Erikson, Michael MacKuen, and James Stimson (2002a; 2002b) find high responsiveness yet do not analyze how the level is affected by a president's incentives to disregard current opinion when he deems citizens to be misinformed. The amount of responsiveness is also assessed by scholars such as Jeffrey Cohen (1997) and Lawrence Jacobs and Robert Shapiro (2000; 2002a), who argue the level is low. Likewise, Jeff Manza and Fay Lomax Cook (2002) propose that responsiveness should be greatest for unpopular presidents but do not examine the extent to which this greater responsiveness reflects pandering.

The strand of research that is perhaps most conceptually related to the topic of pandering derives from V. O. Key's (1961) discussion of latent opinion, or the opinion that citizens can be expected to have once they learn the consequences of policy choices. According to Key (1961), and more recently John Zaller (2003), politicians may rationally choose an unpopular policy if they believe that latent opinion supports it.¹ In other words, presidents may have incentives not to pander to current opinion when they believe it is misguided. Yet this line of work still leaves open many questions about politicians' incentives. For example, is it the case that presidents almost always care about latent opinion? Or, consistent

1. The work of Arnold (1990) and Fiorina (1981) is also consistent with this perspective.

with Manza and Cook (2002), are unpopular presidents particularly likely to cater to current opinion and disregard latent opinion?

The theoretical analysis of this chapter answers these and related questions. The analysis is based on the logic of a formal theory that I developed with Michael Herron and Ken Shotts (Canes-Wrone, Herron, and Shotts 2001), which I call the Conditional Pandering Theory.² The model itself is rather technically complex. Thus, unlike chapter 2, which extended a relatively simple model and therefore outlined a full set of assumptions, this chapter does not take the reader through such a detailed description. Indeed, I invoke no formal notation; I simply describe the intuition of the theory.

The Conditional Pandering Theory has two primary contributions. First, it generates predictions about the conditions under which a president who believes that citizens are misinformed will nonetheless cater to this mass opinion. Second, the theory produces hypotheses about overall congruence between the president's policy choices and public opinion. In other words, in addition to explaining variation in the likelihood of policy pandering, the Conditional Pandering Theory also explains variation in presidential responsiveness more generally.

The chapter proceeds as follows. I first present the theory in three sections: an outline of the conceptual background; a discussion, with hypothetical examples, of the policy incentives induced by this framework; and a statement of the general results. I then return to the literature on political responsiveness. Comparing the Conditional Pandering Theory to this work highlights the contributions of the theoretical analysis, both in terms of understanding policy pandering as well as overall congruence between presidents' policy choices and public opinion.

THE CONDITIONAL PANDERING THEORY

Conceptual Background

Policy Information

The primary goal of the theory is to assess whether presidents who have information that suggests a popular policy would not serve citizens' interests will pander to current opinion. The theory accordingly analyzes the policymaking of a president who has better information than the electorate does about the expected consequences of various policy options.

2. I focus on what we call the basic theory in Canes-Wrone, Herron, and Shotts (2001).

The president and voters are aware of this informational asymmetry, which, as mentioned in the introduction to part 2, the literature refers to as "policy expertise."³

The specific nature of the expertise takes the following form. There are two possible policy options that the president may choose and two sets of circumstances or "states of the world." Each of the policy options will succeed, in the sense of producing a good outcome, in exactly one of the sets of circumstances. The citizens have information indicating which set of conditions exists, but the president's information is better than theirs is.

For example, the president could face a decision over whether to send in troops to a foreign crisis that could affect U.S. security. In one state of the world, the crisis will not resolve without American intervention, and the optimal decision is to authorize the use of force. In the other state of the world, the crisis will be settled independently of American intervention, and the optimal policy is to keep the troops home. The public may believe that the crisis requires American assistance and therefore favor dispatching the military, but the president's intelligence could suggest that such assistance is not needed. The president therefore cannot simultaneously follow public opinion and endorse the policy he believes is in the national interest.

The president in the theory knows that the electorate will be attentive to the policy process. That is, the electorate learns the policy choice of the president and he is aware of their attentiveness when making his choice. This assumption comports with the normative concern that motivates the theoretical analysis: namely, that on salient issues a president may be motivated to placate the mass public even when he believes doing so will ultimately harm societal welfare.

While citizens are assumed to pay attention to the president's policy decision, he cannot credibly convey to them all of his policy information. Otherwise, he could simply report it and not face a decision between pandering and choosing a policy he believes will produce a good outcome. This assumption reflects contexts in which presidents have information that is too technical for the average citizen given her attention span for politics, is classified, or is not observable for some other reason. For example, during a time of high inflation, a president could have data that suggests the economy would recover more quickly without price controls, but he might not be able to persuade the citizenry of this fact.

3. As discussed in more detail in the introduction to part 2, the assumption of policy expertise is not meant to suggest that presidents always have more information than the public does. Instead, the assumption concentrates the analysis on the question at hand, which is whether presidents have the incentive to utilize expertise when they have it.

Alternatively, a president could have intelligence indicating that a foreign leader is involved in illegal activity such as drug trafficking but be unable to reveal the information without endangering undercover agents.

The purpose of assuming that a president cannot transmit all of his policy information to the electorate is obviously not to claim that a chief executive can never convince a reticent public to support his policies.⁴ Instead, the purpose of the assumption is simply to focus the theory on analyzing the incentives for policy pandering, a behavior which by definition occurs only when the public and president do not agree about the optimal course of action. Once a president has shifted mass opinion to favor his position, the concern about policy pandering naturally becomes irrelevant.

Chapter 2 discussed how presidents have a greater ability to alter citizens' preferences about foreign affairs in comparison with domestic affairs. I was careful to note, however, that even on foreign policy issues presidents cannot universally command public support for their positions. In international as well as domestic affairs, a president may be forced to choose between following public opinion and supporting the course of action he believes would best serve society. Notwithstanding this applicability of the theory, in the empirical analysis I allow that a president's greater ability to alter citizens' preferences about foreign policy may cause pandering to be less likely in this domain.

Actors and Interests

The theory revolves around the actions of three types of players: a president, challenger, and electorate. This president wants to hold office as well as enact policies that are successful in the sense of producing good outcomes for voters. Scholars routinely claim that a president's behavior is also affected by his desire for a favorable historical legacy (e.g., Moe 1985; Skowronek 1993), and the policy motivation reflects this desire. Presidents are limited to serving two terms, and first-term presidents are assumed to discount the future. That is, given the choice between enacting a good policy now or in a subsequent term, they would prefer to do so right away.

The other actors include an electoral challenger and an electorate. The challenger's motivations are analogous to those of the incumbent president. He wants to hold office and enact policies that will give him a positive historical legacy.

4. However, it is worth underscoring that the literature suggests a president's ability to craft public opinion is more limited than commonly presumed (e.g., Edwards 1983 and 2003; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000).

Voters want to elect the candidate who will choose successful policies.⁵ The theory assumes that the citizenry has common interests and accordingly analyzes it as a single representative voter; this assumption is adopted in other theories that analyze informational differences between the mass public and elected officials (e.g., Fearon 1999; Persson and Tabellini 1990). The purpose of abstracting from ideological or distributive differences is obviously not to suggest that they are unimportant. Indeed, the first half of the book focused on such differences, and they are accounted for in the empirical analysis of subsequent chapters. The purpose of abstracting from these types of conflicts here is to focus the Conditional Pandering Theory on the question at hand, which is whether informational differences in and of themselves give presidents perverse policy incentives.

Congress is not a player in the theory. The primary reason for this abstraction is to maintain focus on the matter of presidential pandering to public opinion. However, in the empirical examination, I control for factors related to executive-legislative bargaining.

Policy Competence

The Conditional Pandering Theory assumes that the president's ability to enact successful policies depends on his competence or quality. Thus while all presidents are presumed to have more policy information than the electorate has, different chief executives do not necessarily have the same level of expertise. These assumptions reflect that a president's policy information depends on institutional as well as personal factors. All inhabitants of the Oval Office have at their disposal a vast bureaucracy headed by personal advisors. Chief executives differ, however, in their ability to manage this apparatus, a skill Fred Greenstein (2000) refers to as "organizational capacity."

In the theory, the incumbent president and challenger may be either "high quality" or "low quality" in terms of policy competence.⁶ High-quality

5. In assuming that voters have policy motivations, I am not claiming that the American electorate is well informed about all salient policy issues. Rather, I am maintaining that voting is influenced by candidates' positions. The degree to which this influence is direct or, instead, depends on heuristics (e.g., Lupia 1994; Popkin 1991; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; Zaller 1992) is a matter outside the theoretical analysis.

6. This role of competence is one of the key differences between the Conditional Pandering Theory and the theory developed in Maskin and Tirole (2004). In Maskin and Tirole, all elected officials have the same level of competence. (Officials differ primarily by whether their preferences are congruent with those of voters.)

executives learn the state of the world with perfect accuracy, whereas low-quality ones do not. The candidates do not necessarily have the same level of competence, and each candidate's level is his private information.⁷

Voters' Beliefs

Voters do not initially know whether the incumbent or challenger is more likely to choose better policies. They only have an initial perception about the competence of each candidate. The electorate may initially believe that the incumbent is more competent than the challenger, that the two candidates are similarly competent, or that the challenger is more competent. Regardless of the initial perception, the electorate updates its beliefs about the incumbent's competence by observing his policy choice and any policy outcome that occurs.

Policy Resolution

A policy "resolves" in the theory when the electorate learns whether the choice was indeed in their interests. In other words, a policy resolves when voters learn whether it will succeed or fail. This concept of policy resolution does not rest on any claims that policies necessarily have one, final outcome but, rather, reflects that voters may learn more about the likely consequences of policies after they are enacted. The concept is therefore related to Key's (1961) notion of latent opinion.

In the Conditional Pandering Theory, the president does not know when a policy will resolve at the time that he enacts it. He only knows the probability that it will resolve prior to the upcoming election. One may interpret this assumption as reflecting that a president commonly does not know whether voters will learn the consequences of a policy choice by the next election; citizens may or may not acquire information that causes them to update their beliefs about whether the choice was a good one. I assume in the theory that the policy decision itself does not affect the likelihood that voters learn before the next election whether the enacted option is indeed in their interests. In other words, each option is associated with the same likelihood of resolving before the election.⁸

7. The key assumption is simply that high-quality presidents have better information than low-quality ones, not that the information of high-quality presidents is perfect.

8. The formal model in Canes-Wrone, Herron, and Shotts (2001) examines the consequences of allowing the president's choice to affect the probability of policy resolution prior to the election. The most significant effect of this change is that the president can have the incentive, under certain circumstances, to enact a policy that is not only unpopular but also that he believes will produce a bad outcome.

Action

The Conditional Pandering Theory analyzes actions that take place during two presidential administrations separated by an election. In each administration, the president is responsible for choosing a policy. As described above, the optimal choice corresponds to the given set of circumstances about which the incumbent president has information the public lacks. The two administrations face potentially different sets of circumstances.

Prior to any activity by the president, challenger, or electorate, the incumbent president observes a policy signal, which gives him expertise about the way in which the policy choice is likely to affect the policy outcome. After learning this information, the president proceeds to endorse a policy option. Voters then either learn whether the option will produce a good outcome or, instead, discover that this information will not be revealed until after the election. At the time of the election, the citizenry decide whether to retain the president for a second term or to replace him with the challenger. This decision is based on their beliefs about which candidate is most likely to enact policy in their interests. In the second administration, like the first, the president in office observes information about the optimal course of action and proceeds to endorse a policy option.

Behavior

The theory assumes that each actor maximizes his or her interests. In addition, the players update their beliefs about the optimal policy choice and the president's level of competence whenever possible.⁹

Policy Incentives

The assumptions of the Conditional Pandering Theory produce a relatively intricate set of policy incentives. I describe them by highlighting the ways in which the structural conditions influence the likelihood that the president chooses to endorse the popular policy option. In the theory, the president and electorate either agree about the appropriate course of action or have different beliefs about which policy should be selected. When their beliefs conform, the president's incentives are straightforward.

9. In the formal model that motivates the logic, the equilibrium concept employed is what is called "perfect Bayesian." The concept requires that the players' strategies comport with their updating of beliefs according to Bayes's Rule and that this updating incorporates the fact that each player will maximize his or her self-interest.

His desire for reelection and a positive historical legacy induce him to choose the popular policy, which he expects will produce a good outcome. It is when the president thinks a popular policy will ultimately fail that his incentives can be more complex. In this circumstance, he faces motivations to pursue the option he believes will succeed, but he can also have motivations to pander to public opinion.

The incentives for pandering are related to the electoral motivations. When the president is not running for reelection (i.e., when he is in his second term), his desire for a positive historical legacy induces him to support the policy he believes to be in citizens' interests even if it is currently unpopular. Of course, in reality American presidents who are serving a second term may behave as if they are running for reelection. For example, a chief executive could want his vice-president or another fellow partisan to succeed him. As a result, in the empirical analysis I allow that second-term presidents may not behave like first-term ones. Specifically, I separately examine the behavior of first- and second-term presidents.

Although the incentives for pandering derive from the president's electoral motivations, voters in the theory paradoxically want to elect a candidate who is unlikely to pander to them. Their interests are best served by having a leader who will choose the optimal policy, regardless of whether it is popular. The president's incentive to pander to public opinion derives from the electorate's uncertainty about whether the president or challenger is most likely to choose good policies. Voters only have an initial estimate of each candidate's level of competence and update their estimate of the president's competence immediately after his policy decision. At that point, they increase their assessment of him if he chooses the policy they believe to be in their interests, regardless of the accuracy of that belief.

The president thus faces two types of tradeoffs when his information implies citizens are misinformed about the optimal course of action. The first tradeoff concerns the distinction between short- and long-run public opinion. Immediately after the president enacts a popular policy, voters think more highly of him. However, as soon as the outcome of the policy becomes known, their evaluations depend entirely on whether it succeeded or failed. The president's concern about short-run public opinion thus encourages him to enact the popular policy, while his concern about long-run public opinion encourages him to pursue the policy he believes will produce a good outcome. The second tradeoff involves the president's desire for a strong historical legacy. Under certain conditions, this desire may propel the president to choose an unpopular policy that he believes will produce a good outcome. Under other conditions, however, the president would prefer to choose the popular policy in order to get

reelected for another term, during which he could establish a favorable legacy.

Precisely when will the president's optimal strategy be to exercise policy leadership as opposed to pandering? I describe these incentives as a function of his popularity relative to that of his challenger. This relative popularity can be divided into three main categories: highly popular, unpopular, and marginally popular. The first category refers to situations in which the incumbent's relative popularity is high enough that voters would reelect him even if he enacted a policy that lacked public support and they did not learn the consequences of the policy. The unpopular category encompasses the inverse set of circumstances. In this case, the president's relative popularity is low enough that he would not be reelected if he supported a popular policy that did not produce an outcome prior to the election. Marginally popular presidents are the ones whose relative popularity is between these two thresholds. In this category, if voters did not learn before the election whether the president's choice was a good one, they would reelect him if and only if he had chosen the option they initially supported.

I first describe the policy incentives for highly popular presidents. One might suppose that electorally motivated presidents always have the incentive to increase their popularity by pandering to public opinion. However, the Conditional Pandering Theory predicts that a highly popular president will not pander. Such an incumbent will lose an impending election only if voters realize beforehand that he has made a bad policy choice. Therefore, he has the incentive to support policies he believes will succeed. By doing so, he minimizes the probability that a policy failure occurs before voters cast their ballots.

For instance, assume a highly popular president faced public pressure to allow fewer legal immigrants into the country, and he had information suggesting such a reform would negatively affect the economy. If the president were to impose the restrictions on immigration, his popularity would increase immediately after enacting the policy. However, voters already have high evaluations of his competence relative to that of his likely challenger, and if the economy were negatively affected by the reform, voters would substantially decrease their assessments of his competence. His optimal strategy is thus to avoid the temptation to pander to public opinion.

Given highly popular presidents' incentives to avoid policy pandering, one might expect unpopular presidents to be strongly motivated to engage in this behavior. After all, an unpopular incumbent cannot retain his position unless he improves voters' perception of him, and pandering would increase this perception right after the policy decision is

announced. An unpopular president's optimal strategy, however, is to exercise policy leadership. These presidents fall into two subgroups. In the first, the president is so unpopular that regardless of his policy decisions, he will be removed from office. Given this lack of electoral motivations, the incumbent's desire for a strong historical legacy induces him to pursue the program he believes will succeed. The second subgroup concerns presidents who, while unpopular, may still retain office if they can prove their policy competence to voters. For these presidents, the best way to demonstrate such competence is to endorse an option that succeeds before the election. An unpopular incumbent's electoral incentive is therefore to choose the option recommended by his policy information and hope voters learn his judgment was sound before casting their ballots.¹⁰

Consider the case of an unpopular president who is deciding whether to deploy U.S. troops to fight anti-U.S. rebels in another country. The president believes the rebels could pose a danger to U.S. interests and has information suggesting the operation could be accomplished without a loss of troops. The public, while it does not support the rebels, believes they do not pose any danger and would prefer not to send troops because of fears of casualties. If the president wages the mission and it is accomplished without casualties, voters' evaluations of the president's competence will rise dramatically. If, on the other hand, the president follows public opinion, his popularity will increase slightly until voters learn whether the decision was a good one, but the increase is not sufficient to win him reelection. Moreover, if the president panders to public opinion and voters learn before the election that the lack of military engagement has harmed American interests, then the pandering actually decreases his prospects for reelection.

The Conditional Pandering Theory thus finds that highly popular and unpopular presidents do not engage in policy pandering. The only presidents who do so are marginally popular ones, and even they do not always pander. For example, given a sufficiently high probability that voters will learn before the election whether a policy choice succeeded, even marginally popular presidents want to exercise policy leadership. In this circumstance, voters will likely base their electoral decisions on the policy outcome, not the choice in and of itself. Presidents therefore want to endorse the option most likely to produce a good outcome.

10. It is worth underscoring that the initial configuration of presidential beliefs and public opinion influence voters' reactions to policy outcomes. Thus, for instance, a president can receive a larger boost in (personal) popularity from backing an unpopular policy that produces a good outcome than a popular one that does so.

It is only when voters are unlikely to learn before the election whether a policy choice succeeded that a marginally popular president will pander.¹¹ Under these circumstances, the increase in approval the incumbent receives from promoting a popular policy makes him likely to win reelection. The behavior still augments the possibility of a policy failure before the election and, in expectation, detracts from his historical legacy. However, because voters are unlikely to learn about the policy failure before they cast their ballots, the boost in popularity overwhelms these drawbacks. The president wants to pander now and hopefully create a favorable historical legacy in the next term.¹²

Employing again the example of a chief executive who faces public pressure for immigration restrictions that he believes would harm the economy, assume now that he is marginally popular. If the economic effects are unlikely to take hold before he faces a contest for reelection, the president has the incentive to pander to public opinion. Voters will approve of his policy choice immediately after he makes it, and they probably will not learn about the associated costs until after the ballots are cast. If instead, however, the economic effects are likely to occur immediately, the president's electoral incentive is to exercise policy leadership. If voters are likely to learn before the election that their interests have not been served by the immigration restrictions, he will want to avoid being associated with such a policy.

General Results

The description of the incentives suggests five general propositions about a president's likelihood of pandering to public opinion when he believes the mass public is misinformed about the optimal policy decision. These propositions are:

Proposition 1: Policy Leadership from Ahead. When a president is highly popular and believes the mass public misapprehends the optimal policy decision, his incentive is to exercise policy leadership.

Proposition 2: Policy Leadership from Behind. When a president is

11. In the formal model, even if a president is marginally popular and his policy options are unlikely to produce an outcome before the election, his optimal strategy is not to pander if he knows the optimal policy choice with certainty.

12. In the formal model, the strategy of pandering involves what game theorists call a "mixed strategy equilibrium." That is, the president panders with a given probability that is less than one and voters reelect him with a probability less than one. The reason that the president does not always pander is that he wants to give voters the impression he is not simply catering to current opinion but instead choosing the policy he believes will produce a good outcome for society.

unpopular and believes the mass public misapprehends the optimal policy decision, his incentive is to exercise policy leadership.

Proposition 3: Policy Leadership Early in Term. When voters are likely to learn before the next election whether a president's policy choice produced a good outcome and he believes the mass public misapprehends the optimal policy decision, his incentive is to exercise policy leadership.

Proposition 4: Policy Leadership Absent Electoral Motivations. When a president lacks electoral motivations and believes the mass public misapprehends the optimal policy decision, his incentive is to exercise policy leadership.

Proposition 5: Conditional Policy Pandering. When a president has electoral motivations, is marginally popular, and when voters are unlikely to learn before the next election whether his policy choice produced a good outcome, he has an incentive to pander to public opinion.

The propositions highlight that presidents can have incentives to cater to public opinion at the expense of pursuing good public policy but only under a restricted set of conditions. When a president is relatively popular or unpopular, when voters are likely to learn the outcome of an enacted policy before casting their ballots, and when a president lacks electoral motivations, his optimal policy behavior is to endorse the option he believes will succeed even if it lacks public support. Only if none of these conditions hold will a president have the incentive to pander to public opinion at the expense of citizens' interests.

These results offer some justification for the concern that presidents' monitoring of public opinion could encourage policymaking that places citizens' passions above their interests. Under routine conditions, a president's attention to current opinion gives him the incentive to appease citizens even though he believes they are misinformed about the optimal course of action. It is not the case, however, that he will categorically cater to public opinion. Under a multitude of circumstances, he is motivated to pursue the policies he believes will advance societal welfare even if they are not in line with public sentiments. Moreover, this willingness to buck current opinion is not exclusively a function of nonelectoral factors such as the president's desire for a strong historical legacy, his character, or an ability to craft public opinion. Electoral motivations induce a chief executive to exercise policy leadership under a variety of circumstances. For instance, when the president is highly popular or unpopular, and when voters are likely to learn whether his policy choice was a good one, his electoral incentive is to enact the policy most likely to be successful even if it lacks public support at the time.

The Conditional Pandering Theory not only generates predictions

about presidents' incentives to pander to public opinion; it also generates predictions about variation in the overall amount of congruence between presidents' positions and public opinion. This overall policy congruence is akin to what is often characterized as "presidential responsiveness" in the literature. That is, the congruence reflects that an executive decision is aligned with current opinion. The president may simply agree with the public about the optimal course of action, or he may be pandering in the sense that the term is employed here.

The Conditional Pandering Theory predicts that whenever the president and public favor the same policy option, the president simply endorses this option. As a result, variation in the probability of policy congruence is entirely a function of variation in the probability of pandering. The following proposition summarizes this relationship.

Proposition 6: Policy Congruence and Policy Pandering. Variation in the probability of policy congruence between the president's position and public opinion is determined by variation in the probability of policy pandering.

The proposition implies that policy congruence should be most likely when the president is marginally popular, is running for reelection, and voters are unlikely to learn before the election whether his policy choice was a good one. Of course, because the president and citizens may simply agree about the optimal course of action, policy congruence can still occur if the president is not electorally motivated, if he is highly popular or unpopular, and if the electorate is likely to learn before voting whether his choice succeeded. Congruence should be less common in these circumstances, however, because pandering should not transpire.

RELATED LITERATURE

As mentioned at the start of the chapter, most work on presidential responsiveness to public opinion does not analyze the extent to which such responsiveness is in voters' interests. Still, a detailed comparison between the Conditional Pandering Theory and the literature is informative. First, the findings of the theory can be juxtaposed with the arguments of the few studies that explicitly address the possibility of a president's catering to current opinion at the expense of citizens' interests. In addition, the findings can be contrasted with prior predictions regarding the overall level of congruence between the president's positions and public opinion.

I classify the existing studies into five groups, which reflect five different perspectives on the relationship between presidential policy decisions