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Power play: The agenda dynamics of the United States president, House of Representatives, and Senate

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Abstract

Scholars of agenda setting have tried to untangle the relationship between the president and Congress. However, many studies treat Congress as if the House of Representatives and the Senate had one unified agenda. In this study, we examine the agenda-setting relationship between the president and the House and Senate as separate institutions with their own agenda-setting mechanisms to examine whether attention in one institution acts as a signal about policy problems for the other institutions. Examining the period of 1956 to 2017, we use Vector Autoregression to find the president dominates the agenda-setting space, though the precise inter-institutional agenda-setting dynamics differ across issues and are not the same between the president and the House and Senate. Consequently, scholarly understandings of the congressional–presidential relationship must consider the independent relationships that presidents have with each chamber to understand the agenda-setting power of the president.

KEYWORDS

agenda setting, congress, president

Attention to a policy area is a necessary, though not sufficient, prerequisite to policy change. Politicians are constantly bombarded with problems that require attention: established concerns, such as inflation and national security, compete with emerging issues, such as a tornado or rising unemployment. The scholarship on agenda setting, which is defined as the ability to create "the list of subjects or problems to which governmental officials are paying some serious attention" (Kingdon, 1995), emphasizes the importance of a political actor being able to influence the institutional agenda (Baumgartner & Jones 1993; Cobb & Elder, 1972; Edwards & Wood, 1999; Kingdon, 1995; Light, 1999). Yet policy change often requires many actors to put the same issues on their agendas. Scholars of agenda setting influence have tried to understand how attention to an issue by one institution affects other institutions' decision to pay attention (Delshad, 2012; Edwards & Wood, 1999; Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2004; Lovett et al., 2015; Peake, 2001; Rutledge & Larsen-Price, 2014; Taylor, 1998). These patterns of how attention in one institution influences others are important to examine as agenda setting is a key source of power in the early

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phase of the policy making process. In the United States, national policy making requires the president, the House of Representatives, and the Senate to all pay attention to the same issue.

Most prior studies of the agenda setting relationship between the legislative and executive branches have examined the House of Representatives and the Senate using one unified agenda. The House and the Senate have different institutional structures and electoral incentives, which may affect their relationship with the president. Members of the House and Senate approach policy making differently, as the differing sizes of the chambers and the constituencies create different abilities to specialize across issue areas. The committee structure in the House allows members to specialize more narrowly, while members of the Senate must be conversant on a wider range of topics. This specialist versus generalist approach may shape their relationships with the president, making the study of their independent dynamics critical. Further, previous studies indicate that agenda attention dynamics are distinct among the House and the Senate. This leads us to anticipate different agenda setting relationships between the president and the House and Senate, demonstrating the necessity of separating Congress into its branches.

These dynamics also reflect how an institutions' actions communicate information about policy problems. All policy makers must decide what to pay attention to, and attention from other actors can be a significant signal, shaping a policy maker's perception of the importance and urgency of a policy area. The information processing perspective highlights the challenges associated with attention allocation (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). In this framework, decision makers are boundedly rational and struggle to process signals about policy problems in an environment that is oversupplied with information (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). Consequently, decision makers rely on heuristics about what information or signals to be attentive to (Jones, 2001; Simon, 1983), which can result in policy disasters if they ignore critical information about policy problems (Fagan, 2023; Jones, 2001). At the institutional level, the cost of deciding to whom to pay attention can be a form of policy friction (Jones et al., 2009; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). The amount of friction in the policymaking process that is associated with the search for information varies across political actors (Jones et al., 2003). The costs of processing signals certainly differ across the House, the Senate, and the presidency, resulting in different levels of influence for each, making it even more important to examine the House and Senate relationships to the president separately.

This paper considers whose attention has the power to influence others and examines how those dynamics change across policy areas. To do this, we use Vector Autoregression to examine agenda-setting relationships between the president, the House of Representatives, and the Senate. Our work contributes to the literature on agenda leadership in the United States in several important ways. First, we explore the way structural differences between the two chambers of Congress shape the information processing dynamics resulting in different agenda-setting relationships with the president. Second, we improve upon prior studies by examining the full spectrum of policy areas. Prior studies have largely focused on a smaller range of issues, such as macroeconomics, health care, foreign policy, the environment, and crime (Edwards and Wood, 1999; Peake, 2001; Rutledge & Larsen-Price, 2014; Wood, 2007), or have focused on highly specific and technical issues (Delshad, 2012; Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2004). By examining the full range of policy areas, organized into topics derived from the US Policy Agendas Project coding scheme, we bridge these two approaches by examining policy areas across the spectrum of issue salience. We find presidential influence on the House and the Senate agendas in the greatest number of policy areas, but that the presidential agenda is also influenced by the House of Representatives and the Senate, though the Senate's influence is more constrained.

AGENDA SETTING BETWEEN THE PRESIDENT, HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, AND SENATE

Agenda setting is an opportunity for presidents to shape the policy process and is one of the president's most strategic powers (Edwards, 1989), as the power to make policy proposals and shape debate

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convey an advantage for achieving policy outcomes (Beckmann, 2010). Scholars of policy making and the presidency both highlight how "no other single actor has quite the capacity of the president to set the agenda" (Kingdon, 1995, p. 23) and that "no other single actor can focus attention as clearly or change the motivation of such a great number of other actors as the president" (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993, p. 241). Scholars posit that Congress defers to the president at the agenda setting stage (Moe, 1994) because the unitary nature of the executive makes it easier to put forth a proposal, while Congress must overcome its collective action problem. Presidents use this unitary advantage to shift the policy priorities of the public as well, building coalitions of support among constituencies in hope to build public support (Kernell, 1993) both as a means to exert influence in Congress and maintain an ability to claim credit for accomplishments. The president's role in agenda setting has been stated to be his greatest source of influence (Bond & Fleisher, 1990). From an information processing perspective, the president has an advantage in transmitting signals about policy to other actors, as presidential actions generate considerable attention (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993). Given this theoretical advantage, it is important to review the results of existing inter-institutional agenda setting studies (Edwards & Barrett, 2000; Edwards & Wood, 1999; Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2004; Lovett et al., 2015; Rutledge & Larsen-Price, 2014). Edwards and Barrett demonstrate descriptively that presidential proposals have a better chance at being considered by Congress than congressionally-initiated proposals (Edwards & Barrett, 2000), while studies that test a causal relationship provide somewhat mixed results.[1] One of the earliest studies by Edwards & Wood, (1999) shows no presidential influence on the congressional agenda in foreign policy, and only shows influence in one of three domestic policy issues: education. Peake (2001) delves into the dynamics in foreign policy and identifies presidential influence over the congressional agenda in relation to Caribbean and Central American policy issues. Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake (2004) examine civil rights, clean air, and farm policy to find that the president influences congressional attention in civil rights and farm policy. Rutledge & Larsen-Price (2014) find consistent support for presidential leadership of Congress at the agenda stage across the six policy areas in their study, perhaps due to their focus on presidential policy messages, in contrast to other studies that utilize keyword searches of policy areas in the *Public Papers of the President* (e.g., Edwards & Wood, 1999; Peake, 2001).[2]

Presidents do, however, face limitations on their agenda setting abilities. Every item the president chooses to pursue erodes their political capital, which, while replenishable, is a precious resource (Light, 1999). Further, presidential involvement in many issues has become institutionalized, requiring attention on a routine basis, potentially dulling the impact of presidential attention signals about policy problems. This routinization of attention also crowds the president's agenda, potentially making them less responsive to other political actors' signals (Edwards & Wood, 1999; Wood & Peake, 1998). Presidents are further constrained by the need to respond to emergencies. Whether in their role as Commander-in-Chief or Diplomat-in-Chief, in foreign affairs emergencies, or as Consoler-in-Chief, in domestic emergencies, exigent circumstances require the president to revise their plans at a moment's notice, altering their policy agenda (Genovese, 1979; Light. 1999). Additionally, others have observed that presidential leadership at the agenda setting stage varies by issue, with greater leadership coming in some policy areas than others (Larsen-Price & Rutledge, 2013; Peake, 2017).

Policy friction also plays in the agenda setting process. As an institution focused on an individual, the president's action presents a clear signal to others that there is a policy problem. This clarity, combined with the speed of unitary decision making, means that the policy friction is lower, with lower decision-making costs. The House and the Senate are collective decision-making institutions, requiring multiple people to act in order to send a signal. Cooperation is not only harder to obtain, but the actions of participants can conflict, muddying the message, making it more costly to act and producing a signal that is harder to interpret. For example, in the 1994 State of the Union Address, Bill Clinton directed significant attention to health care reform, signaling his serious intent to reform the policy area. In the very next month, 30 days-worth of congressional hearings were held across an array of House and Senate committees. The president's attention in that State of the Union address sent a strong signal to members

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of Congress. This is but one example of the president's advantage generating attention to an issue. This advantage leads to the first hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 1.** The president has a significant influence on the agendas in the House and Senate in more policy areas than either chamber of Congress.

Congress also has the potential to influence the presidential agenda, though the challenge is greater. Members of the House and Senate are attuned to their constituents, holding hearings and introducing bills in response to the public's perception of policy problems (Jones et al., 2009). These electoral incentives make it desirable for Congress to control its own agenda (Taylor, 1998) and to influence the president. Congress does have an advantage: the ability to monitor policy problems. The committees in the House and Senate are well positioned to monitor problems as members develop specialized knowledge necessary for problem identification (Sinclair, 1986). However, the routine nature of congressional attention at the agenda setting phase often garners less attention from other political actors, making signals of policy problems weaker, such that presidents may not recognize congressional actions as signals of policy problems. Past studies of presidential-congressional agenda setting influence have shown some evidence of congressional influence (Peake, 2001; Rutledge & Larsen-Price, 2014), but others have shown no congressional influence on the president (Edwards & Wood, 1999; Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2004). These mixed results make it challenging to conclude whether Congress has a sustained impact on the presidential agenda. The principles of the information processing perspective would suggest that the weaker and more costly policy signals produced by the House and Senate will have less influence on the president, resulting in them having influence over the president's agenda in fewer policy areas. This leads to our second hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 2.** The House and the Senate will have influence over the president's agenda in fewer policy areas.

An additional question that existing research does not address is whether the president has the same inter-institutional agenda setting relationship with the House and Senate, as most studies have measured congressional attention with a unified agenda. The House of Representatives and the Senate are distinct institutions, each with their own structures, rules, and agenda setting dynamics (Edwards & Barrett, 2000; Lovett et al., 2015). These institutional differences may result in different information processing capacity and signaling ability. The House of Representatives has a number of advantages over the Senate in producing clear policy signals. First, the majority party in the House of Representatives has substantially greater power to decide which issues get attention, due to the power of committee chairs to call hearings (Cox & McCubbins, 2005; Rohde, 1994; Shepsle & Weingast, 1987). Because committee chairs play a leadership role on their issues, their attention may create a meaningful signal for presidents. The Senate is an institution shaped by individual power, where much of the business has been agreed to by unanimous consent, giving an agenda setting role to minority senators (Evans & Oleszek, 2000; Yackee, 2003). Second, the larger membership of the House allows for greater division of labor and specialization, as each member is involved in fewer issues. The larger number of issues that Senators are involved in, as measured by their bill introductions, led Sulkin (2005) to conclude that different structures, incentives, and norms within the institutions lead to differences in the legislative agenda setting behavior among senators and representatives.

Finally, the two chambers process information differently, allowing the House to have an advantage in producing policy signals. In their study of American institutions, Jones and Baumgartner found that hearings in the House are slightly more punctuated than Senate hearings (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). Policy punctuations are a sudden, substantial increase in attention and can signal policy problems that may capture the attention of other political actors. The fact that sudden shifts in the House's attention are larger than the sudden shifts in the Senate's attention may mean that the Senate's ability to send

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policy signals is weaker (Lovett et al., 2015). A sudden increase in attention in the House may result in a clearer signal of a policy problem for the president to pick up, influencing the president's agenda more strongly than the Senate. This leads to our third hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 3.** The House of Representatives will influence the agenda of the president in a greater number of policy areas than the Senate.

The final aspect that must be considered is differences across policy areas. Policy process scholarship has demonstrated that policy friction varies by policy area, even within the same type of government activity (Jones et al., 2009; Larsen-Price, 2012). For example, Jones et al., (2009) demonstrate that issues that are publicly salient are more likely to receive investigative congressional hearings at the agenda setting stage. This suggests that certain issue areas have an advantage in capturing politicians' attention because of public concern (ibid). Issue salience may shape policy signals, as attention to a publicly salient policy area may create a stronger agenda setting signal than attention to a less salient policy area. Public salience may also raise the decision-making costs associated with ignoring the attention paid to the issue by other political actors. This leads us to our fourth hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 4.** Publicly salient policy areas are more likely to have significant inter-institutional agenda setting relationships than lower salience policy areas.

Determining the precise salience of issues can be challenging as salience shifts over time in response to policy problems (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005; Wlezien, 2005). One approach to identifying salient issues, proposed by Gormley (1986), is to categorize those issues that "affect a large number of people in a significant way (598)" as high salience issues. That definition still provides some challenges as some policy areas affect a great number of people, but don't actually command public attention, such as infrastructure. Consequently, we define high salience as those policy areas that significantly affect the public *and* to which the public pays attention. Under this conceptualization, salience plays a significant role in agenda setting because the public expects elected officials to be responsive to their concerns in high salience issues (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2006). As a result, members of the House and Senate, and the president have strong incentives to try to influence each other's agendas in highly salient policy areas. We have categorized our 10 policy areas as either high or low salience (see Table 1). The issues that are identified as high salience are economy; social welfare; defense; international relations; law, crime, and families; and energy, environment, and technology, as governmental decisions about the economy, welfare policy, and foreign affairs, including the military, affect the lives of the vast majority of Americans and regularly feature in public rankings of salient issues (Wlezien, 2005). We include energy, environment, and technology, as this includes gas and energy costs, which can influence election outcomes when prices rise, indicating the importance of the issue to the public (Decker & Wohar, 2007). Low salience issues are infrastructure; civil rights; agriculture, labor, and immigration; and government operations. These are all issues that scholars and policy makers recognize as important but are less routinely on the agenda of the American public (Soroka & Wlezien, 2010).

Many past studies of agenda setting influence have also included the effect of the media and/or the public.[3] We have chosen to focus on the relationship solely between the president, the House of Representatives, and the Senate because our aim is to understand the agenda setting relationship within the formal institutions of government. Political actors outside of government certainly play important agenda setting roles, as they can bring new attention to issues (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993) and provide vital information that triggers the re-prioritization of issues in government (Boydstun, 2013; McCubbins & Schwartz, 1984), but it seems critical to focus on the relative agenda setting power that the actors in the formal policy making process have on each other before adding outside actors.

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TABLE 1 Policy Agendas Project macro topic areas.

Policy Agendas Project macro-topic	Policy Agendas Project legacy topic codes	Salience level
Economy	Macroeconomics (PAP Topic 1) Banking, Finance, and Domestic Commerce (PAP Topic 15)	High
Social welfare	Health (PAP Topic 3) Education (PAP Topic 6) Social Welfare (PAP Topic 13)	High
Defense	Defense (PAP Topic 16)	High
International relations	Foreign Trade (PAP Topic 18) International Affairs and Foreign Aid (PAP Topic19)	High
Energy, environment, and technology	Environment (PAP Topic 7) Energy (PAP Topic 8) Space, Science, Technology, and Communications (PAP Topic 17) Public Lands and Water Management (PAP Topic 21)	High
Law, crime, and families	Law, Crime, and Family Issues (PAP Topic 12)	High
Infrastructure	Transportation (PAP Topic 10) Community Development and Housing Issues (PAP Topic 14)	Low
Civil rights	Civil Rights, Minority Issues, and Civil Liberties (PAP Topic 2)	Low
Agriculture, labor, and immigration	Agriculture (PAP Topic 4) Labor (PAP Topic 5) Immigration (PAP Topic 9)	Low
Government operations	Government Operations (PAP Topic 20)	Low

METHODS AND DATA

Data

Our measure of presidential attention is an extension of presidential policy message data created by Rudalevige (2002) and originally extended by Rutledge & Larsen-Price, (2014) and Larsen-Price and Rutledge (2013). This measure is constructed from the *Public Papers of the Presidents* housed in the American Presidency Project at the University of California at Santa Barbara (Woolley & Peters, 2022).[4] We have content coded presidential policy messages to Congress[5] beginning in 1956 using the Policy Agendas Project coding scheme (Larsen-Price & Rutledge, 2013; Rutledge & Larsen-Price, 2014). We extended this data through the end of the Obama administration on January 19, 2017. Policy messages are a good indicator of presidential policy attention for a few reasons. Although measures such as the State of the Union Address fit the purposes of other studies (e.g., Cohen, 1995; Light, 1999), the list of policy messages submitted to Congress is best for this study. Each year, the State of the Union address is supplemented with additional messages from the president to Congress. Such messages are voluntary, whereas the State of the Union has become an expectation of the modern presidency (Rudalevige, 2002; Rutledge & Larsen-Price, 2014). The voluntary nature suggests that the president will focus on only his most important legislative priorities, as opposed to the "shopping list" included in the State of the Union (Light, 1999). Further, the president specifically sends these messages focused on policy to Congress in order to influence the agenda. This contrasts with the broader contents of the *Public Papers*, which contain many different types of documents, potentially obscuring policy influence due to the non-policy documents.

Our data for the House of Representatives and Senate comes from the US Policy Agendas Project (Jones et al., 2023). To measure the agenda of the House and Senate, we pulled the number of hearings in each chamber in each month across each major topic code.[6] Congressional hearings are a good indicator of agenda-setting attention as hearings are a key part of problem identification, and prior studies

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have shown the number of hearings to be a good indicator of the amount of attention that members of Congress are dedicating to an issue (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Jones et al., 2009).

All data is content coded using a policy topic coding scheme derived from the US Policy Agendas Project.[7] The US Policy Agendas Project collects indicators of government activities across political institutions and non-governmental actors and codes them according to a coding scheme including 20 major topics and 220 subtopics.[8] In the major topics, there is considerable variation in the frequency of government action, particularly in the presidency. Given this variation and the challenges associated with presenting and discussing the results of 20 different policy areas, we combined the major topics into 10 macro-topics. These topics encompass all 20 PAP major topics, combining similar policy areas into the same macro-topic. Table 1 shows the crosswalk between the PAP major topic areas and the macro topics used in this study, as well as the salience level of the policy area.[9]

Our data for the president, House of Representatives, and the Senate are aggregated at the monthly level from 1956 to 2017. Monthly data allows us to examine inter-institutional agenda-setting dynamics, while allowing time for the friction in the decision-making process to work its way through. Rutledge & Larsen-Price (2014) argue that the institutional friction in policy areas between the president and Congress is higher than the friction of the media, which means that it can take longer for a reaction to appear. This monthly aggregation seems to be confirmed by studies that used weekly units of analysis, as the appropriate lag specifications were typically 4 or 5 weeks (Edwards & Wood 1999; Peake, 2001). We also include in our models a control for unified government. The presence of co-partisans in the majority in the House and Senate can significantly shape the contents of the president's agenda (Light, 1999; Lovett et al., 2015). The unified government variable is coded 1 when the president, House, and Senate are of the same political party, and 0 otherwise.

Methods

This paper tests agenda setting influence between institutions using Vector Autoregression (VAR). Many of the existing studies of agenda setting leadership have utilized vector autoregression (Edwards & Wood, 1999; Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2005; Flemming et al., 1997; Larsen-Price & Rutledge, 2013; Rutledge & Larsen-Price, 2014; Wood & Peake, 1998). Vector autoregression is a technique that can determine the direction of Granger causality between two or more independent series (Brandt & Williams, 2007; Freeman et al., 1989; Sims, 1980). With VAR, each dependent variable is regressed against lagged values of itself and the other dependent variables, allowing us to conduct joint hypothesis tests across our sets of variables (Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2004).[10] Vector autoregression is useful in our analysis for several reasons. First, because VAR specifies variables as endogenous to one another (Wood & Peake, 1998), it allows us to examine the potential effects that the president, House, and Senate have on each other. Using VAR, we are able to detect whether these relationships are unidirectional or bidirectional without imposing that assumption on the data a priori, as might be required in other structural equation approaches (Brandt and Williams, 2007; Flemming et al., 1997). Second, while the main dependent variables are modeled endogenously, VAR also allows us to explicitly include exogenous variables, which allows us to control our analysis for alternative explanations. Finally, VAR is useful because of the ability to specify the appropriate lag length to factor in the potential influence of history and inertia in the agenda setting relationships. Following the work of Wood (2007), we report the relationships that are significant at the 0.10 level. We determined lag length empirically using a BIC criterion test, as established by Sims (1980).[11] A limitation to Granger causality tests is that the coefficients provide information on the direction of causality, but not the substantive magnitude of the significant impact. To account for this, we also provide impulse-response function (IRF) figures, which allow us to observe the substantive response in the dependent variable to a one standard deviation (SD) shock to the independent variable.

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RESULTS

In this section, we present results by policy area, before evaluating the hypotheses. Table 2 shows the VAR Granger tests for attention to the policy areas of economy, social welfare, international relations, defense, and law and families. Table 2 reports the *F*-statistics and *p*-values, focusing on the *p*-values, as the *F*-statistics are not directly interpretable for effect size. *p*-values are significant, indicating that an independent variable Granger causes attention in the dependent variable if the *p*-value is less than 0.10 and are marked with an arrow (Rutledge & Larsen-Price, 2014; Wood, 2007). Additionally, we examine effect size through impulse response functions as they help to determine the substantive magnitude of the agenda setting effect.[12] In an impulse response function, we model the effect on the dependent variable of a simulated one standard deviation shock to the independent variable. This means that in all figures, the first institution listed in the title of the panel is the one that is shocked and the second is the response. This response is expressed as a proportion of a standard deviation (SD).

The first column of Table 2 features the economy, where we see a significant reciprocal relationship between the president, House, and Senate, with all three influencing the attention of the others. However, when we look at the magnitude and the direction of effects in Figure 1, we see that the effects are different. The effect of presidential attention on the House and Senate is positive, meaning that an increase in presidential attention results in an increase in attention in the House and Senate, with the one standard deviation increase in presidential attention resulting in a 0.75 SD increase in the House of Representatives and a 0.47 SD response in the Senate.

However, the response of the president to the House and Senate is negative; when the House and Senate pay attention to the economy, that Granger causes presidential attention to decrease by −0.44 standard deviations in response to the House and −0.21 in response to the Senate.

We see somewhat similar findings in social welfare policy, the second column of Table 2, which shows that the president Granger causes increased attention in the House and Senate, but while there

TABLE 2 Granger tests for attention leadership in economy, social welfare, international relations, defense, and law and families.

Independent variable	Economy	Social welfare	International relations	Defense	Law and families	Dependent variable
President	6.56→ (0.01)	14.39→ (0.00)	12.05→ (0.00)	3.83→ (0.05)	15.39→ (0.00)	Senate
House	9.58→ (0.00)	20.81→ (0.00)	5.67→ (0.02)	10.67→ (0.00)	19.66→ (0.00)	
Senate	7.62→ (0.00)	17.47→ (0.00)	10.29→ (0.00)	7.63→ (0.00)	18.75→ (0.00)	
President	10.65→ (0.00)	8.74→ (0.00)	22.10→ (0.00)	15.10→ (0.00)	8.73→ (0.00)	House
Senate	3.70→ (0.05)	8.17→ (0.00)	0.56 (0.46)	0.11 (0.74)	5.67→ (0.02)	
House	7.33→ (0.00)	8.25→ (0.00)	11.08→ (0.00)	7.63→ (0.00)	7.16→ (0.00)	
House	7.57→ (0.01)	3.24→ (0.07)	0.07 (0.80)	0.42 (0.52)	1.82 (0.18)	President
Senate	4.37→ (0.04)	2.57 (0.11)	0.06 (0.81)	3.08→ (0.08)	0.00 (1.00)	
President	13.76→ (0.00)	6.91→ (0.00)	0.04 (0.96)	3.23→ (0.04)	1.17 (0.31)	

Note: The numbers reported are *F* statistics, with *p* values in parentheses. The results present evidence suggesting that attention by one actor is associated with a response in the dependent variable. The arrows indicate the direction of the significant relationships with $p < 0.10$. These VAR contain a 1-month lag.

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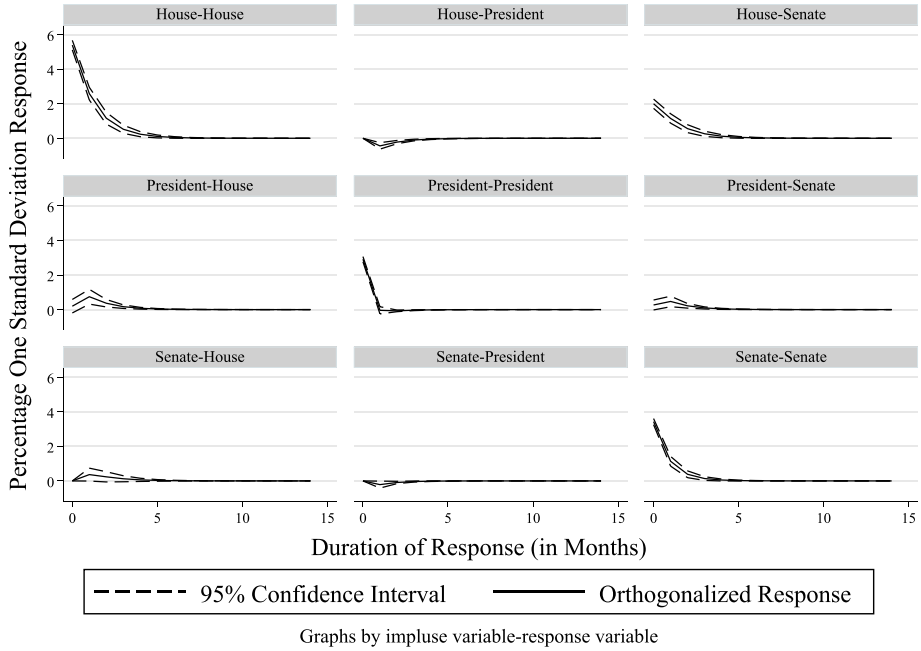

FIGURE 1 Economy impulse response function.

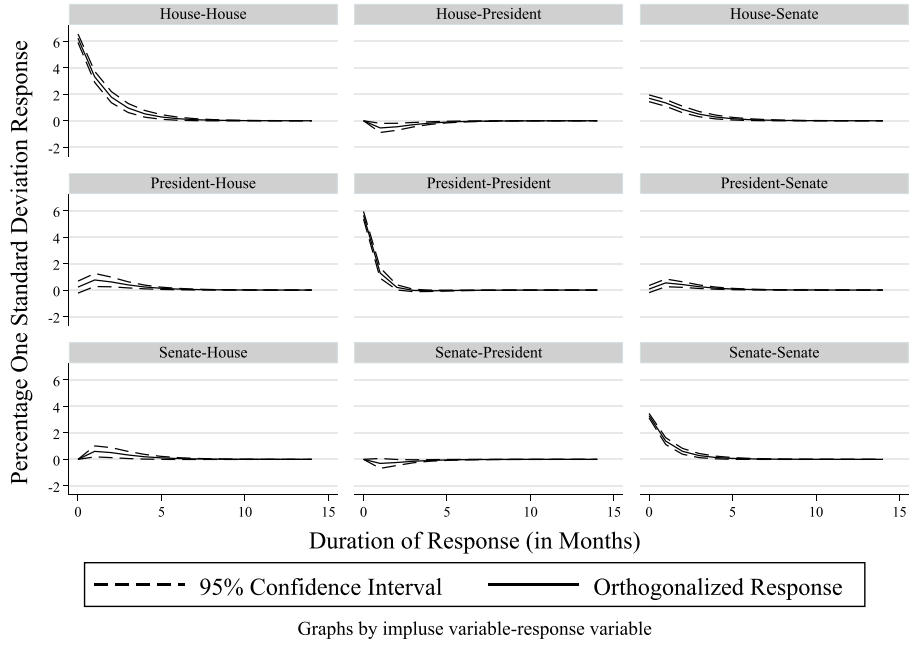

FIGURE 2 Social welfare impulse response function.

is a statistically significant relationship where the House affects the president, there is not an agenda-setting relationship in which the Senate affects presidential attention. Figure 2 shows that the president has a statistically significant and positive effect on attention in the House and Senate, 0.76 SD and 0.54 SD respectively, but that only the House of Representatives influences the president, again producing a −0.54 SD response.

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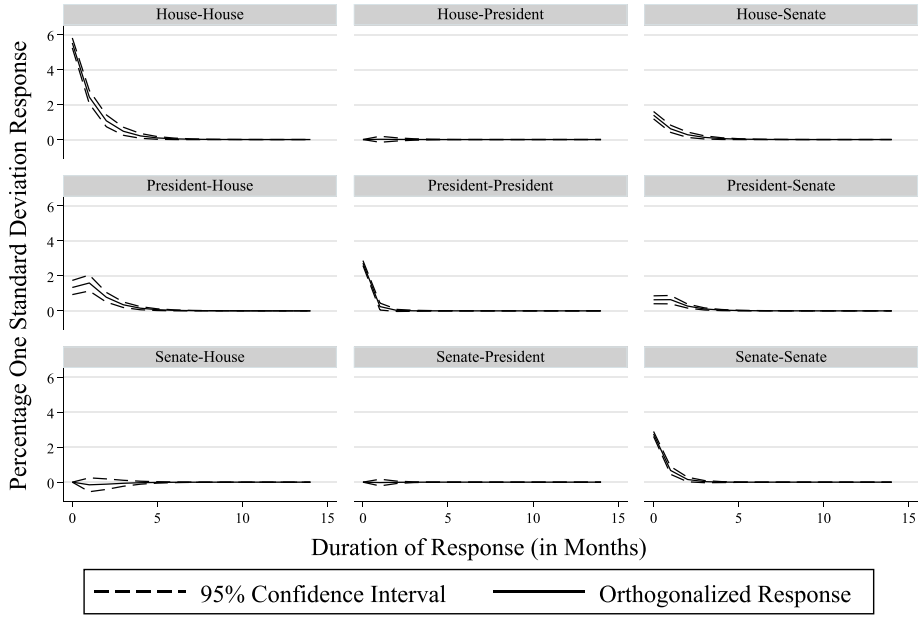

FIGURE 3 International relations impulse response function.

The agenda setting dynamics in international relations are dominated by the president. In the third column of Table 2, the president has a statistically significant effect on attention in the House of Representatives, with Figure 3 showing that it is again a positive effect, with a one standard deviation shock in presidential attention producing a 1.59 SD response in the House. In the Senate, Table 2 also shows that the president Granger causes attention, with Figure 3 showing that a simulated 1 standard deviation shock produces a 0.64 SD response. However, neither the House nor the Senate influences the president's attention in international relations.

Defense policy, which is the fourth column of Table 2, shows presidential attention Granger causes attention in the House of Representatives and the Senate. Figure 4 shows that a one standard deviation shock in the presidency produces a 1.05 SD response in the House and a 0.39 SD response in the Senate. As for presidential responsiveness, Table 2 shows a statistically significant relationship in which the Senate Granger causes attention in the presidency. Yet when we look at the impulse response function in Figure 4, we can see that the effect is not statistically significant, as the confidence intervals include zero. In the fifth column, law, crime, and families, we see that the president Granger causes attention in the House of Representatives and the Senate with neither chamber influencing the president. Figure 5 shows that the president evokes a 0.47 SD increase in attention in the House and a 0.36 SD response in the Senate.

Table 3 shows the Granger tests for agriculture and labor; energy, environment and technology; civil rights; infrastructure; and government operations. The first column of Table 3 shows the relationship on agriculture and labor policy. This area shows the sustained role for the president that we have seen in the prior policy areas, influencing the agenda for both the House and Senate, with Figure 6 showing the 0.74 SD response in the House of Representatives and 0.41 SD response in the Senate. However, in agriculture and labor policy, we see the return of the negative agenda-setting influence between the House and the president, where a one standard deviation shock in the House produces a −0.31 SD response in the president. Energy, environment, and technology, the second column of Table 3, shows the other emerging pattern: presidential agenda-setting influence of the congressional agenda without congressional influence of the presidential agenda. Figure 7 shows that a one standard deviation simulated shock in presidential attention results in a 1.36 SD response in the House of Representatives and a 1.16 SD response in the Senate.

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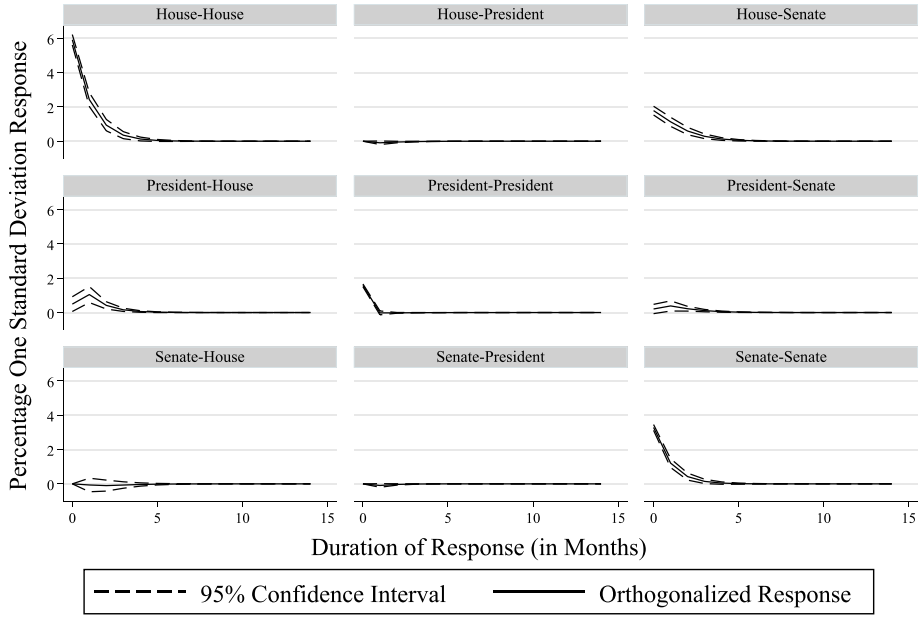

FIGURE 4 Defense impulse response function.

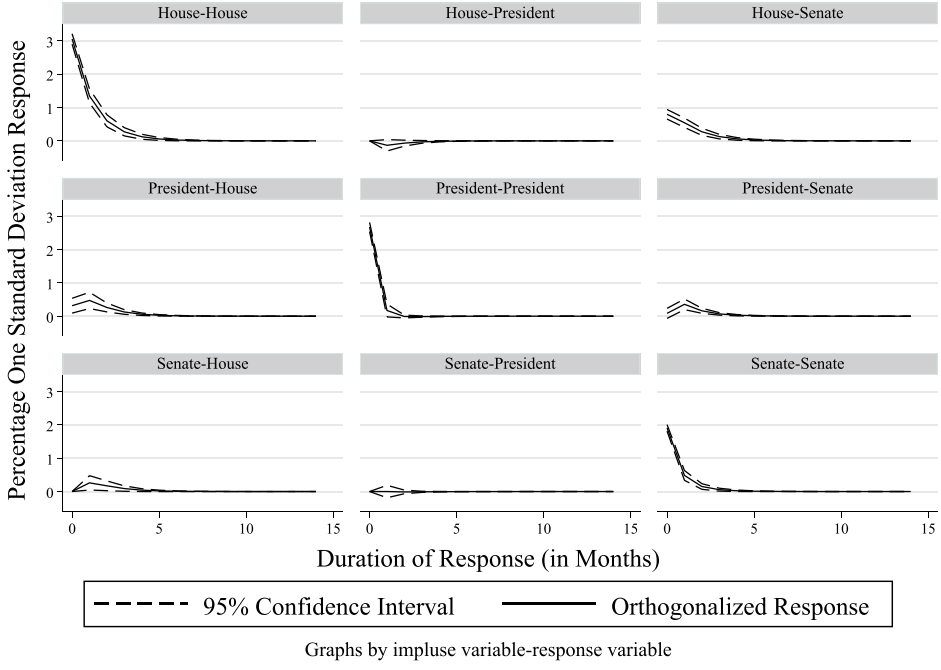

FIGURE 5 Law and families impulse response function.

Civil rights, which is shown in the third column of Table 3, show a different pattern. In this area, the president is not shown to Granger cause attention in the House or the Senate, but the House does influence presidential attention. When we examine Figure 8, we see that the House agenda-setting

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TABLE 3 Granger tests for attention leadership in agriculture and labor, energy, environment and technology, civil rights, infrastructure, and government operations.

Independent variable	Agriculture and labor	Energy, environment, technology	Civil rights	Infrastructure	Government operations	Dependent variable
President	13.00→ (0.00)	18.89→ (0.00)	0.24 (0.62)	15.19→ (0.00)	13.96→ (0.00)	Senate
House	5.06→ (0.02)	29.89→ (0.00)	0.42 (0.52)	18.79→ (0.00)	5.46→ (0.00)	
Senate	8.63→ (0.00)	25.15→ (0.00)	0.31 (0.73)	17.69→ (0.00)	11.37→ (0.00)	
President	20.91→ (0.00)	13.48→ (0.00)	0.03 (0.86)	2.32→ (0.10)	13.29→ (0.00)	House
Senate	12.14→ (0.00)	7.06→ (0.01)	1.90 (0.17)	2.41→ (0.09)	1.10 (0.34)	
House	18.13→ (0.00)	10.28→ (0.00)	0.97 (0.38)	2.66→ (0.03)	7.39→ (0.00)	
House	3.51→ (0.06)	0.00 (0.98)	4.15→ (0.04)	2.46→ (0.09)	3.49→ (0.03)	President
Senate	0.05 (0.82)	0.77 (0.38)	0.11 (0.74)	1.51→ (0.09)	0.87 (0.42)	
President	2.58→ (0.08)	0.61 (0.54)	2.12 (0.12)	4.24→ (0.00)	3.10→ (0.02)	

Note: The numbers reported are *F* statistics, with *p* values in parentheses. The results present evidence suggesting that attention by one actor is associated with a response in the dependent variable. The arrows indicate the direction of the significant relationships with $p < 0.10$. The VAR for Agriculture and Labor, Energy, Environment, Technology, and Civil rights contain a 1-month lag. Infrastructure and Government Operations contain a 2-month lag.

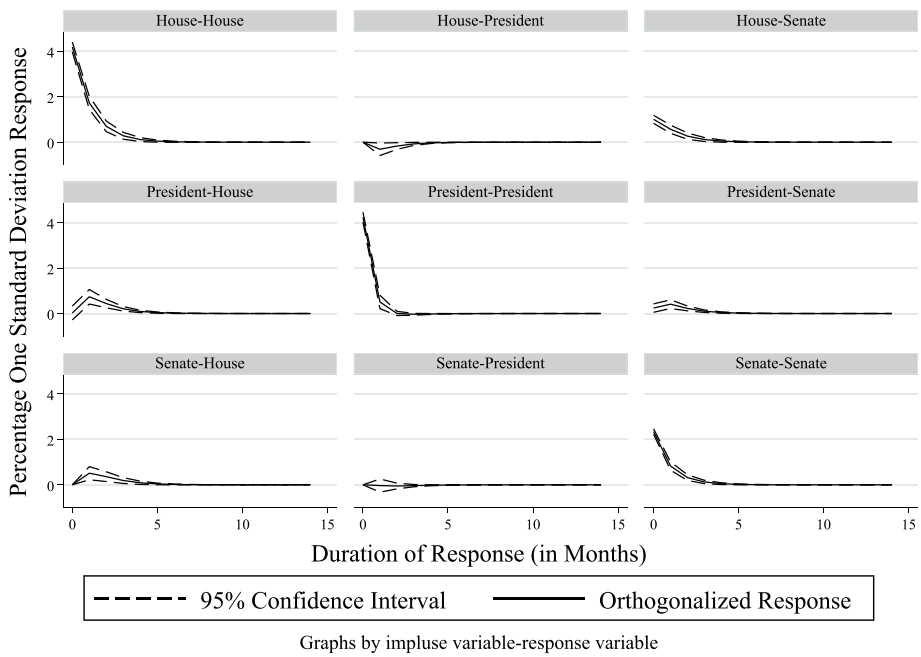

FIGURE 6 Agriculture and labor impulse response function.

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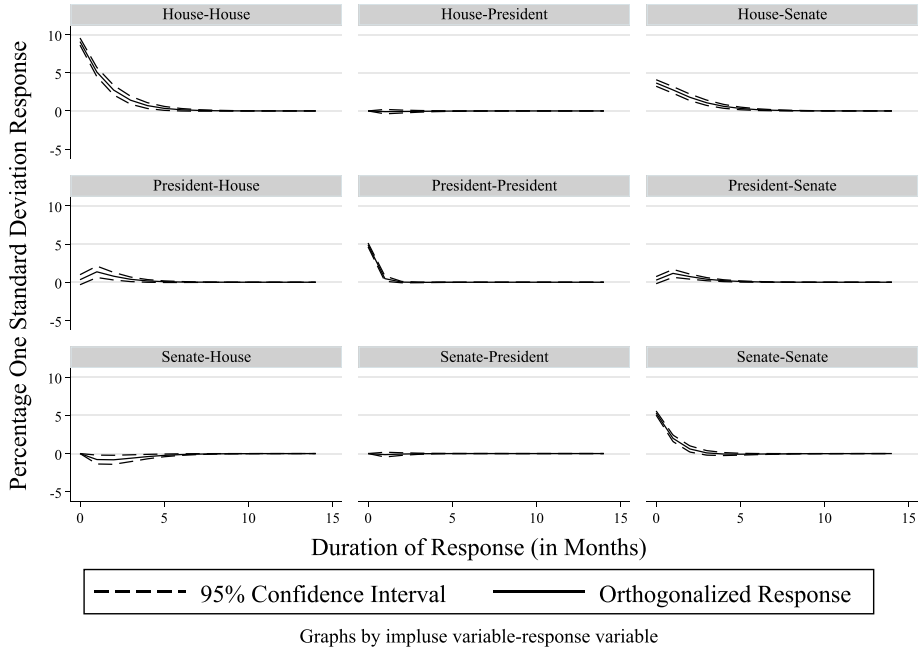

FIGURE 7 Energy, environment, and technology impulse response function.

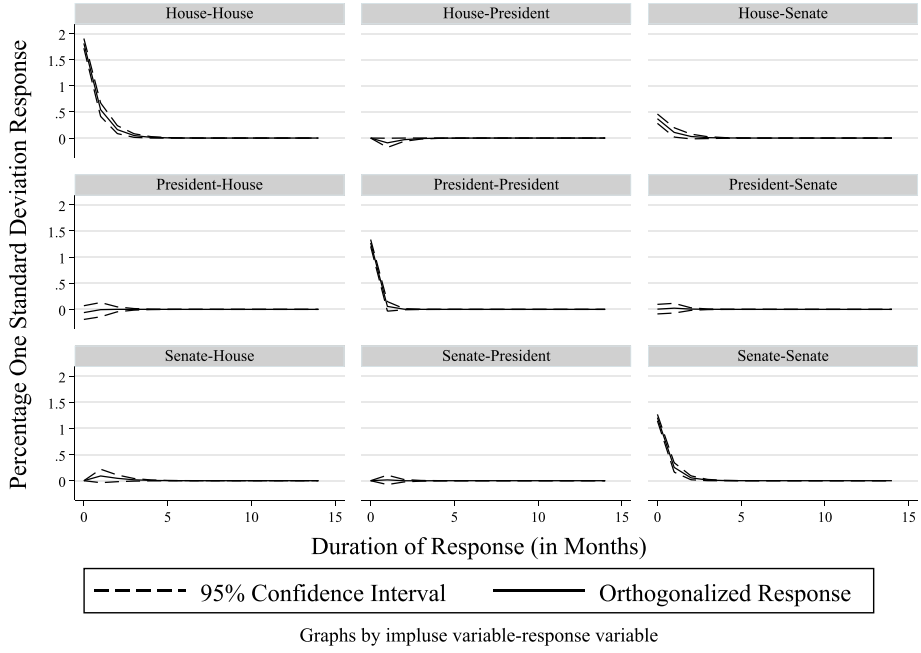

FIGURE 8 Civil rights impulse response function.

influence is negative, as a one standard deviation shock to attention in the House produces a small −0.09 SD response in the presidency.

The fourth and fifth columns of Table 3 contain infrastructure and government operations. These two policy areas required a 2-month lag,[13] in contrast to the 1-month lag specification for all the prior

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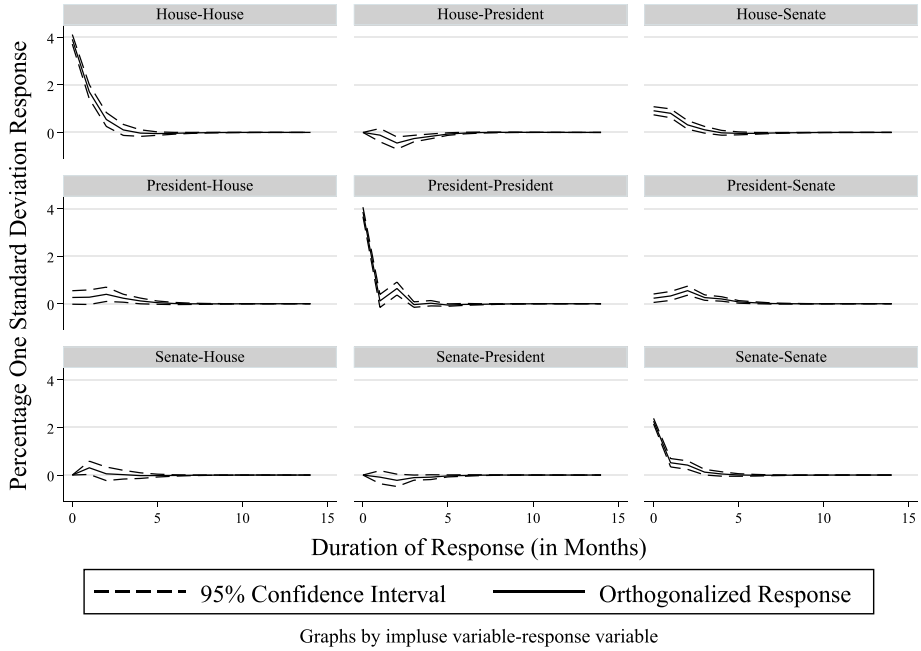

FIGURE 9 Infrastructure impulse response function.

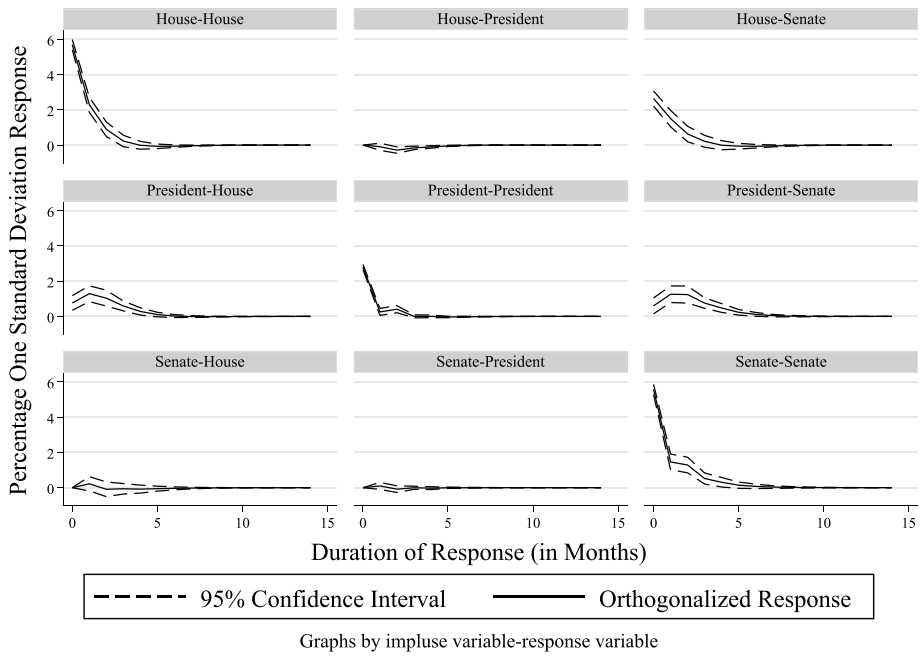

FIGURE 10 Government operations impulse response function.

policy areas. Despite that, these policy areas largely follow a familiar pattern to prior results: the House and Senate are both responsive to the presidency, and the president is only responsive to the House of Representatives. In infrastructure, it initially appears that the Senate also Granger causes presidential attention, but the IRF is not statistically significant. Thus, in Figure 9, we see that a one standard deviation shock in presidential attention to infrastructure produces a 0.4 SD increase in the House and the same

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size presidential shock produces a 0.55 SD increase in Senate attention, while a one standard deviation shock in the House of Representatives produces a −0.45 SD decrease in attention in the president. In Figure 10, government operations, a one standard deviation shock in presidential attention produced a 1.29 SD response in the House and a 1.26 SD response in the Senate. We also see the negative agenda-setting influence of the House on the president, as a one standard deviation shock in House attention produces a −0.29 SD decrease in presidential attention.

When we examine these results considering the hypotheses, we see considerable support for Hypothesis 1. The president has a significant and positive effect on policy attention in the House of Representatives and the Senate in 9 out of 10 policy areas. This suggests that, from an information processing perspective, presidential attention provides a clear signal that a policy problem needs to be attended to by the legislature, and in most policy areas, both the House and Senate respond to the president's attention by increasing their own attention to the issue area, though the substantive effect of the Senate's response tends to be smaller.[14]

We also see support for Hypothesis 2, which proposed that the House and Senate would have less influence over the president's agenda. Compared with the president's influence, the influence of Congress is evident in far fewer policy areas. The House influences the president's agenda in six policy areas and the Senate influences the president's agenda in only three policy areas. These observations also support Hypothesis 3, which stated that the House of Representatives would have a greater impact on the president's agenda than the Senate. We see that in only one policy area do both House and Senate Granger cause attention in the president: the economy. The House Granger causes presidential attention in five other policy areas: social welfare, agriculture and labor, civil rights, infrastructure, and government operations. The Senate results are more mixed, as the tests of Granger causality show a role for the Senate in defense and infrastructure, but the impulse response functions are not statistically significant. Importantly, across all the policy areas that either the House or Senate have a Granger causal relationship with the president, the substantive effect is negative, which is consistent with the work of Rutledge and Larsen-Price. The consistency of the results for these hypotheses merits further discussion in the following section.

One hypothesis we did not find support for was Hypothesis 4, which suggested that high salience policy areas would show more inter-institutional agenda setting. We posited that the high salience issues were the economy, social welfare, defense, international relations, law and families, and energy, environment, and technology because these are the issues that most directly affect the public and that the public tends to pay the most attention to. When it came to the president's ability to influence the agenda of the House and Senate, the policy area doesn't seem to play a substantial role, as the president had a positive effect on the agenda in all areas except civil rights. However, the size of the effect does vary across policy areas, suggesting that the relationship between issue salience and presidential influence requires closer examination. With the chambers of Congress, both the House and the Senate influenced the president's agenda around the economy, and the House Granger caused presidential attention to social welfare policy, but all the other policy areas that were statistically significant in the House were low salience policy areas. This deserves greater discussion in the next section.

DISCUSSION

In this paper, we sought to better understand the dynamics of agenda influence between the president, House of Representatives, and the Senate from 1956 to 2017. Specifically, we examined how these institutions use each other's actions as signals of policy problems, to see if attention by one institution routinely influences the attention of the others. We used vector autoregression to determine Granger causality, examining agenda setting relationships in 10 categories that span the breadth of policy making to examine differences by policy areas. Our findings highlight the power of the president to signal policy problems through action and the importance of disaggregating the House and Senate, as the strength of the signal resulting from action in the House has more agenda setting influence than signals from the Senate. The nature of attention in a policy area and the information signal that the attention produces clearly varies across policy areas; however, our expectations as to the role of issue salience were not supported.

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A substantial challenge for policy makers is deciding what issues to pay attention to. This study demonstrates that, in part, decision makers ease the burden by looking to their closest policy making neighbors for help. The House and the Senate routinely look at signals from the president; the president takes some signals from the House of Representatives and looks only to the Senate on the economy. We find that the president is the dominant agenda setting actor because they are uniquely positioned to, through their attention, signal that there is a policy problem, shaping the attention of the legislative branch. While this analysis does not allow us to directly measure the size of the signal that the president sends, we can measure and compare the size of the response. In some policy areas, such as energy, environment, technology, and government operations, presidential attention provokes a greater than 1 SD response in both the House and the Senate. In other policy areas, such as international relations and defense, the president produces a greater than 1 SD response in the House, but a more modest response in the Senate. This indicates that the influence of presidential signals is significantly dependent on the policy area, making generalizations about agenda setting influence challenging. Interestingly, the range of response sizes to presidential attention from the House shows greater variation than the Senate. In the House, international relations provoked the largest response, at 1.59 standard deviation, while the smallest significant response was in infrastructure, where a 1 SD shock produced only a 0.40 SD response. In the Senate, the range of response sizes is narrower: the largest response is 1.26 SD, while the smallest significant response was only 0.30 SD. The important commonality across all these policy areas is that the response from the House and Senate is always positive, meaning that an increase in presidential attention leads to an increase in attention in the House and Senate. The literature on presidential policy making has long stated that the president has the ability to direct attention (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Kingdon, 1995) and our results confirm this expectation.

However, the differences between the House of Representatives and the Senate are not limited to the size of the president's agenda-setting influence. We also demonstrated that the House has more influence on the president than the Senate. We theorize that the larger membership of the House and the emphasis on division of labor through the committee structure allows individuals to specialize in fewer policy areas. Those characteristics seem to be influential, as the House significantly influences the president's agenda in a greater number of policy areas than the Senate. Interestingly, the effect of both the House and Senate on the president is routinely negative, indicating that when the chambers increase their attention, it decreases presidential attention. Rutledge & Larsen-Price (2014) also detected this pattern of negative agenda setting from Congress to the president. They theorized that this might be a function of the president's need to constantly reprioritize their attention as presidents have a wide portfolio of policy areas they are expected to manage and limited attention. We would agree with that theory, adding that, in lower salience policy areas where House attention is most often significant, attention from the House of Representatives may become a signal that the policy problem is being addressed, freeing the president to focus elsewhere. Given the range of policy areas in which the president influences the House's attention, it is reasonable to suspect a sequencing dynamic, where the president raises the issue, and once the House responds, the president retreats, as their initial signal of the policy problem has been successful. The Senate's influence on the president was limited to the economy, indicating that the Senate's attention to a policy area does not have the same impact on the president as the House. Perhaps this is because of the smaller role for specialization in the Senate, but perhaps it is also because of the longer electoral time horizons. The president influences senatorial behavior, but senators can take their time considering an issue, such that their behavior doesn't send clear signals to the president that a problem has been solved or that it requires presidential attention.

The final issue at the heart of this study was the idea that there are significant differences across policy areas shaped by issue salience. We did not find a clear role for issue salience. Presidential influence in the House and Senate was present across most policy areas, and the magnitude of effects does not seem to sort into high and low salience issue areas. In the chambers of Congress, the role for salience is further muddled. Two high salience policy areas show legislative influence: the economy and social welfare. The economy was the only policy area in which there were reciprocal agenda-setting relationships between all three actors. Yet effects on the president are minimal and negative, −0.44 SD in the House and −0.21 SD in the Senate. The economy is an incredibly salient issue to voters, often forming the basis of electoral decision making (Erikson & Wlezien, 2012). Social welfare shows a reciprocal attention dynamic between

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only the House and president. This policy area also contains a great deal of voters' concerns, as it covers areas like health care, education, and Social Security. The importance of these issues to voters mean that all politicians want to be attentive so that they can claim credit for their accomplishments. However, there are also four low salience policy areas in which the House affects the president's agenda: agriculture and labor, civil rights, infrastructure, and government operations. These issues show similar negative agenda-setting dynamics, and while the size of the effects is smaller than the effects for the high salience issues, infrastructure (peak response: −0.45) produces a nearly identical response in the presidency as the economy (peak response: −0.44). These results seem to indicate that attention in the House of Representatives sends a signal to the president that an issue is being handled, regardless of the issue's level of salience.

One aspect of the inter-institutional agenda setting relationship that is outside the scope of this study, but ripe for future examination, is the dynamic between the House and the Senate. The involvement of both chambers in the legislative process makes it unsurprising that there is agenda setting influence between the chambers. However, only half of the macro topics show the theoretically expected significant, positive reciprocal relationship between the House and Senate. Most other policy areas show a positive agenda setting influence for the House over the Senate, with no corresponding influence from the Senate. The one exception was energy, environment, technology, which shows the interesting dynamic of a positive agenda setting relationship from the House to the Senate and a negative agenda setting influence from the Senate to the House. This raises two interesting questions: why do some policy areas have reciprocal dynamics while others have unidirectional relationships, and why is the House more likely to have a significant effect than the Senate? The results of this study highlight the need to examine the House and Senate as separate institutions; however, as our goal was to examine their relationship with the president, we leave the task of developing a more nuanced theory of intra-institutional dynamics to future scholars.

Another avenue for study that might be fruitful is to examine agenda-setting dynamics at the PAP major topic level. This might allow for the finer-grained study of policy areas; however, it presents significant challenges due to the considerable variation in presidential attention, particularly in lower-salience policy areas. It was these data challenges that led us to utilize macro-topics, as zero-inflated data require special consideration. There is an important theoretical distinction between when presidents do not pay attention to an issue, versus how much attention they pay to an issue. Our analysis of civil rights offers some preliminary insights as to what we might find in this kind of fine-grained analysis. It was one of the few areas where there was not a significant role for the president in agenda setting. When we examine the frequency of presidential attention (Appendix, Table A1), we see that presidents pay very little attention to this issue area on average. It may be due to this lower average attention that we are not able to identify an agenda setting relationship. This is an important nuance in understanding presidential attention to policy and consequently the president's role in agenda-setting dynamics. This study, by separating out the relationship between the president and the House and Senate, represents an important step in understanding agenda-setting dynamics.

Endnotes

[1] Most scholars establish only Granger causality. Granger Causality (1969) demonstrates the potential direction of causality because one of the fundamental assumptions is that one event cannot cause another if it occurs after the resulting event.

[2] For a discussion of the potential pitfalls of keyword search-based identification methods, see Baumgartner et al. (2002).

[3] For studies that have included media, see Edwards and Wood (1999), Peake (2001), Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake (2004), Delshad (2012), Lovett et al. (2015). For studies that have included public opinion, see Wood (2007) and Delshad (2012).

[4] American Presidency Project at the University of California at Santa Barbara. 2020. https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/. Accessed July 1, 2020.

[5] The *American Presidency Project* provides a filter for these policy specific messages, including a filter for specific recipients, as part of the data search engine on the website. We used this filter to isolate just those messages that were intended for Congress.

[6] Hearings Dataset. The Policy Agendas Project at the University of Texas at Austin. 2020. www.comparativeagendas.net. Accessed July 1, 2020. The data used here that were originally collected by Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones, with the support of National Science Foundation grant numbers SBR 9320922 and 0111611, are distributed through the Department of

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Government at the University of Texas at Austin. Neither NSF nor the original collectors of the data bear any responsibility for the analysis reported here.

[7] The Policy Agendas Project at the University of Texas at Austin. 2020. www.comparativeagendas.net. Accessed July 1, 2020.

[8] This project utilizes the U.S. Policy Agendas Project legacy coding scheme. In 2014, there were minor revisions to the U.S. coding scheme to help with cross-national comparisons, however, as the data of this project is internal to the United States, the use of the legacy coding scheme is valid.

[9] Summary statistics for each macro topic area are available in the Appendix (See Table A1).

[10] See Edwards and Wood (1999) for a fuller discussion of VAR and why it is appropriate in these kinds of studies of interinstitutional agenda setting.

[11] A BIC criterion test indicated that a 1-month lag was appropriate in all policy areas except Infrastructure and Government Operations. In those policy areas, a 2-month lag was indicated.

[12] IRF results in the body of the paper are presented using graphs. Because shocks can appear quite subtle on graphs, we also provide tables of impulse-response function peak values and confidence intervals in the Appendix (See Tables A2 and A3). We reference these statistics throughout the paper.

[13] This 2-month lag structure was determined by the lag diagnostics discussed in footnote 10.

[14] One might reasonably wonder if these results were driven by unified government, as we did control for that in our analysis. As a robustness check, we ran a complete analysis excluding the unified government control variable and the significance and the direction of our results remained the same.

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APPENDIX A

TABLE A1 Summary statistics by each issue area.

Macro topic	President	House	Senate
Economy	1.17	7.68	5.95
	(3.02)	(6.19)	(4.39)
Social welfare	2.01	8.29	5.33
	(6.06)	(7.57)	(4.44)
Defense	0.79	7.26	4.16
	(1.59)	(6.63)	(4.20)
International affairs	2.23	7.53	4.07
	(2.75)	(6.57)	(3.37)
Energy, environment, and technology	1.81	13.83	10.97
	(5.04)	(11.18)	(7.78)
Infrastructure	1.10	4.95	3.28
	(4.06)	(4.36)	(2.79)
Civil rights	0.31	1.80	0.99
	(1.28)	(1.90)	(1.30)
Agriculture and labor	1.35	5.37	3.11
	(4.46)	(4.74)	(2.83)
Law and family	0.82	3.31	2.34
	(2.69)	(3.49)	(2.26)
Government operations	1.05	7.67	9.71
	(2.91)	(6.61)	(7.14)

Note: The values presented are the mean value of the attention measure for each issue area that corresponds to each of the agenda series. The standard deviation is presented in parentheses. The values are reported monthly.

TABLE A2 Impulse-response function values for attention leadership in economy, social welfare, international relations, defense, and law and families.

Policy area	Relationship	Peak response	Lower bound	Upper bound
Economy	President-House[a]	0.75	0.32	1.17
	President-Senate[a]	0.47	0.17	0.78
	House-President[a]	−0.44	−0.63	−0.25
	House-Senate[a]	1.15	0.87	1.42
	Senate-President[a]	−0.21	−0.42	−0.01
	Senate-House	0.37	−0.01	0.74
Social welfare	President-House[a]	0.76	0.27	1.25
	President-Senate[a]	0.54	0.25	0.83
	House-President[a]	−0.54	−0.89	−0.20
	House-Senate[a]	1.35	1.09	1.61
	Senate-President	−0.31	−0.68	0.07
	Senate-House[a]	0.60	0.19	1.02
International relations	President-House[a]	1.59	1.14	2.05
	President-Senate[a]	0.64	0.40	0.88
	House-President	0.01	−0.16	0.19
	House-Senate[a]	0.62	0.41	0.82
	Senate-President	−0.02	−0.21	0.17
	Senate-House	−0.15	−0.55	0.25

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TABLE A2 (Continued)

Policy area	Relationship	Peak response	Lower bound	Upper bound
Defense	President-House[a]	1.05	0.58	1.51
	President-Senate[a]	0.39	0.09	0.68
	House-President	−0.09	−0.19	0.01
	House-Senate[a]	1.13	0.87	1.40
	Senate-President	−0.09	−0.20	0.01
	Senate-House	−0.10	−0.42	0.22
Law and families	President-House[a]	0.47	0.23	0.72
	President-Senate[a]	0.36	0.20	0.52
	House-President	−0.13	−0.31	0.04
	House-Senate[a]	0.54	0.40	0.68
	Senate-President	−0.01	−0.07	0.04
	Senate-House[a]	0.26	0.05	0.48

[a]An impulse-response function that is statistically significant with confidence intervals that do not include 0.00.

TABLE A3 Impulse-response function values for attention leadership in agriculture and labor, energy, environment and technology, civil rights, infrastructure, and government operations.

Policy area	Relationship	Peak response	Lower bound	Upper bound
Agriculture and labor	President-House[a]	0.74	0.42	1.06
	President-Senate[a]	0.41	0.22	0.61
	House-President[a]	−0.31	−0.59	−0.04
	House-Senate[a]	0.57	0.39	0.75
	Senate-President	−0.05	−0.18	0.07
	Senate-House[a]	0.51	0.22	0.80
Energy, environment, and technology	President-House[a]	1.36	0.62	2.11
	President-Senate[a]	1.16	0.64	1.68
	House-President	−0.09	−0.38	0.20
	House-Senate[a]	2.75	2.32	3.18
	Senate-President	−0.14	−0.45	0.17
	Senate-House[a]	−0.82	−1.41	−0.22
Civil rights	President-House	−0.01	−0.14	0.13
	President-Senate	0.02	−0.07	0.12
	House-President[a]	−0.09	−0.18	−0.00
	House-Senate[a]	0.11	0.02	0.20
	Senate-President	0.02	−0.07	0.11
	Senate-House	0.09	−0.04	0.22
Infrastructure	President-House[a]	0.40	0.10	0.70
	President-Senate[a]	0.55	0.36	0.74
	House-President[a]	−0.45	−0.70	−0.19
	House-Senate[a]	0.80	0.62	0.99
	Senate-President	−0.22	−0.48	0.04
	Senate-House[a]	0.30	0.03	0.58

(Continues)

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TABLE A3 (Continued)

Policy area	Relationship	Peak response	Lower bound	Upper bound
Government operations	President-House[a]	1.29	0.84	1.74
	President-Senate[a]	1.26	0.79	1.73
	House-President[a]	−0.29	−0.47	−0.11
	House-Senate[a]	1.50	1.04	1.97
	Senate-President	0.10	−0.10	0.30
	Senate-House	0.22	−0.19	0.63

[a]An impulse-response function that is statistically significant with confidence intervals that do not include 0.00.

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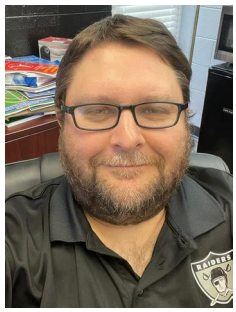

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