

Attitudes Toward Delegation to Presidential Commissions

DAVID R. MILLER and ANDREW REEVES

We examine attitudes of the public toward delegation to presidential commissions. In four survey experiments across a range of contexts, we compare the public response to the creation of a commission to that of a direct presidential action. We find that there is no significant difference in the approval garnered for taking action alone or delegating the decision to a presidential commission. This is true whether this is at the policy formulation stage or implementation stage. Additionally, we do not find that policies formed by commissions are seen as any more effective than those policies formed by the president alone.

Keywords: presidential commissions, delegation, policy process, public opinion

Presidents have numerous tools at their disposal through which to address public policy demand. They may work with Congress to pass legislation (Bond and Fleisher 1990; Edwards 1990), manage the activity of bureaucracy (Lewis 2008), or employ unilateral action (Howell 2003). Additionally, presidents sometimes address policy priorities by creating commissions to investigate issues and propose policy options. Past presidents have created commissions to examine a diverse array of policy issues, from Ronald Reagan's Commission on Drunk Driving, to George H. W. Bush's Commission on Aviation Security and Terrorism, to Barack Obama's Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues. Typically, these commissions produce a set of recommendations upon which presidents may act.¹ Cynics have long argued that presidential commissions are not serious responses to political issues but instead are a tool to dispense with complex or

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1. For most of the 20th century, there existed no formal definition of what constituted a presidential commission and therefore no formal count of how many were formed (Zegart 2004). The enactment of the Federal Advisory Committee Act in 1973 created a standardized record-keeping system where the General Services Administration (GSA) tracked advisory committees throughout the federal government—including presidential commissions. The GSA defines presidential commissions as “presidential committees” that are “established by Executive order or other direction by the president.” Other authors have referred to presidential commissions by other names and have proposed alternative criteria for what constitutes a presidential commission (e.g., Flitner 1986; Wolanin 1975). In this article, we use the phrase “presidential commissions” and utilize the GSA's definition as a basis for our understanding of what presidential commissions are—committees created by the president himself to provide advice for a specific policy issue.

controversial policy problems while creating the appearance of taking action on the policy (Flitner 1986; Graham 1985; Marcy 1945). However, others have asserted that presidential commissions increase the quality and efficacy of policy proposals by delegating part of the policy formulation process to experts who deliberate and fact find (Flitner 1986; Wolanin 1975; Zegart 2004). In this sense, commissions may encourage the formation of elite consensus and confer credibility on policy proposals in the view of Congress and the public (Flitner 1986; Marcy 1945; Tama 2011; Wolanin 1975; Zegart 2004). Yet other research finds a potentially limited role for procedural policy mechanisms to influence public opinion (Smith and Park 2013; Christenson and Kriner 2017), which may stem from generally low levels of knowledge about even basic political phenomena (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996).

Extant research has examined the motives behind the creation of presidential commissions with two general approaches. Some utilize qualitative interviews with past members or presidential aides and case studies to understand why presidents form commissions (Flitner 1986; Kitts 2006; Marcy 1945; Tama 2011; Wolanin 1975). Others draw on quantitative methods to assess how commissions influence policy outcomes (Smith, Leyden, and Borrelli 1998; Tama 2011; 2014; Zegart 2004). These analyses assume that presidents carefully consider how their actions could affect public opinion before deciding on a specific action. However, practical limitations of observational data present obstacles to examining causal claims made about the relationship between presidential actions and the responsiveness of public opinion. For example, Wolanin (1975, 145–46) asserts that presidents can use commissions to build public support for their policy proposals but suggests that this mechanism cannot be systematically tested because “no measures of [commissions’] success in this realm are available. Changes in public attitudes reflected in opinion polls are not very useful, because factors other than commission reports cannot all be identified or held constant. . .” We address this challenge by following research that leverages survey experiments to examine public responsiveness to institutional behavior, thereby gaining insights into the strategic calculations of institutional actors with respect to public opinion (Reeves and Rogowski 2016).

We consider whether the public views the creation of presidential commissions as an effective way to address pressing issues or whether they see commissions as political lip service, an attempt by presidents to appear to take action without actually doing anything. Because presidential commissions often rely on deliberation by a group of experts, we also consider that the public may view proposals of committees as more effective than those proposed by the president alone.

This article proceeds as follows. First, we discuss the competing perspectives on the purposes of presidential commissions, particularly as they relate to public opinion. Second, we describe our empirical approach to evaluating public responsiveness to presidential commissions through a series of survey experiments across a range of issues. Third, we present our results. We find that the public evaluates the president more favorably when he takes action on important policy issues but that there is no significant difference in how the public evaluates the president when he chooses to take direct presidential action or delegates the policy to a commission. This is true at both the policy formulation and implementation stages. Further, we do not find that policies formed by commissions are viewed as more effective than

those policies formed by the president alone. This suggests that presidential commissions are effective in allaying public demand for presidential action and therefore are useful tools to pay political lip service to an issue for which the president does not wish to expend political capital. Finally, we conclude by suggesting avenues for future research into the president's ability to influence public opinion and the effect of expertise on citizen attitudes.

The Public and the Formation of Presidential Commissions

Presidents face tremendous political pressure to take actions on a vast array of issues. The public holds presidents accountable for a wide range of outcomes ranging from war and peace and the state of the economy (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000) to shark attacks (Achen and Bartels 2016), local spending (Kriner and Reeves 2012), and natural disasters (Gasper and Reeves 2011). Presidents strive to accomplish goals associated with their campaign promises in an effort to secure their legacy and, at the same time, are forced to address a myriad of unforeseen issues, which may come to dominate their time and political resources (Edwards 2003). Throughout a presidential administration, responding to public demand is an omnipresent force in presidential decision making. This is in part because presidential approval is a currency that enables the president to achieve legislative goals (Canes-Wrone and de Marchi 2002; Kernell 2006). Presidents have an arsenal of tools to address pressing issues. A president might speak directly to the American people by way of the bully pulpit, push legislation in Congress, or take unilateral action through a number of means, including executive orders. A number of studies have examined whether the public has attitudes toward the tools that presidents employ (Christenson and Kriner 2017; Lowande and Gray Forthcoming; Reeves and Rogowski 2015; 2016; Reeves et al. Forthcoming).

Scholars, journalists, and political practitioners have long sought to explain why presidents utilize commissions. Intent may vary with each commission or each policy area for which the president is deciding. As one observer notes, presidential commissions, "are whatever their creator wants them to be" (Kaplan 2016). One set of explanations views commissions as a means to pay political lip service for policy issues that presidents feel compelled to address but for which they do not actually want to take action. Commissions may provide a means of "pretending to give an issue grave attention while in fact evading the deep thoughts and hard choices it entails" (Kaplan 2016). Indeed, one popular perception is that "most commission reports wind up unread on dusty shelves" (Thomas 2008). A second class of explanations views commissions as a means to lend credibility to policies in the eyes of the public. Presidents create commissions to handle policy issues because commissions provide benefits to the president such as expert fact finding, enhanced policy credibility, and increased issue salience. Below, we elaborate on each of these explanations and present empirically testable expectations associated with each.

Presidential Commissions as Paying Political Lip Service

According to one view, "In Washington, presidential commissions are where problems go to die" (Cillizza 2011). Presidents might utilize commissions to pay lip service to

an issue for at least two reasons. First, presidents might see commissions as a means to conserve resources for other purposes. Though presidents have a finite reservoir of resources with which they fulfill their constitutional obligations and pursue their own electoral, policy, and legacy goals (Kriner and Reeves 2015; Moe and Howell 1999), the demands placed on the president and the executive branch have continued to increase over time (Cohen 1999; Moe and Howell 1999; Neustadt [1960] 1991). As a result, the president must selectively allocate resources to a subset of items on the policy agenda, even though there might be more items worthy of action than the president can accommodate. For those policy issues into which the president does not wish to invest resources but for which the public demands action, the president might create a commission to examine the issue and report back with policy proposals; thus, the president essentially delays action and delegates the policy formulation process to a commission, enabling him to conserve his own resources for other activities.

Second, presidents might see commissions as opportunities to “evade their responsibilities” when confronted with a complex or controversial policy issue (Wolanin 1975, 12). Presidents, as risk-averse politicians, prefer to engage with policy issues for which they expect a net positive payoff (Hood 2011; Weaver 1986). However, the president, as chief executive, must often engage with policy issues that are controversial or otherwise potentially deleterious for his reputation. Unlike members of Congress, the president cannot cite collective action as the reason for his failure to act (Aldrich [1995] 2011; Cox and McCubbins 2005; Olson [1965] 2000). Rather, the president, as chief executive, is expected to “do something about everything” (Neustadt [1960] 1991, 7) and often accrues blame for negative events both within (Fiorina 1981; Krosnick and Kinder 1990) and outside of his control (Achen and Bartels 2016; Gasper and Reeves 2011; Healy, Malhotra, and Mo 2010; Kane 2016). Thus, even when the president would prefer not to act on a given issue, he is often compelled to act to fulfill the public’s expectations. Given the tendency for policy issues to fall out of the news cycle and out of the public consciousness (Bosso 1989), commissions might then offer presidents a mechanism by which they can respond to immediate policy demands without taking any direct action in expectation that the policy demand will have faded away by the time the commission offers its recommendations.

If presidential commissions effectively satisfy the public demand for action, then we should expect that the public response to the creation of a commission will mirror that of a more direct presidential action. Additionally, because the commission is merely a preliminary step to taking action and not a policy itself, citizens should express similar evaluations of the credibility and effectiveness of policies proposed and enacted by the president whether they are the product of presidential action alone or of a presidential commission. If presidential commissions fail to satisfy these conditions, then the public may view them as lip service and react ambivalently to the president who tries to employ them.

Presidential Commissions as Lending Policy Credibility

Alternatively, a president might create a commission to lend credibility to the policies that it proposes and to facilitate the acceptance and implementation of those policies.

Presidential commissions can serve as important policy formulation tools because they pool the knowledge and resources of outside experts to develop policy alternatives, which might be more effective than what the federal government would execute otherwise (Flitner 1986; Wolanin 1975). Presidents can also use commissions to incorporate many perspectives on a given set of issues and foster elite consensus that makes it easier for the president to build support for the implementation of the commission's policy proposals within Congress and the executive branch (Flitner 1986; Tama 2011; Wolanin 1975).² Additionally, presidents can utilize the commission's credibility to build public support for its policy proposals and subsequently mobilize that public support to pressure Congress to act on the proposals (Canes-Wrone and de Marchi 2002; Wolanin 1975).

There are two mechanisms by which presidential commissions may influence the public's evaluations of the president's policies and his handling of those issues. First, as Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) demonstrates, many citizens prefer depoliticized decision making, and presidential commissions embody this notion of "stealth democracy." Generally distrustful of the motives of elected officials, citizens may perceive policy proposals made by presidents themselves to be motivated by political calculations rather than concern for good public policy. Wolanin (1975, 38–39) suggests that commissions embody the public's normative ideal for policy making and thus confer the commission's proposals with credibility and legitimacy. This is because they are typically composed of a diverse set of experts who are likely without strong political motives and because they reach conclusions through an objective, fact-driven process (see also Boswell 2008; Flitner 1986). Though presidents can handle policy issues on their own, citizens may look more favorably on policies emanating from commissions than from the Oval Office.

Second, when presidents create presidential commissions, citizens may express higher levels of support for the president and evaluate the policies proposed by the commissions more favorably because citizens prefer efficient and technocratic government (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002), which commissions represent. Motivated by dislike of partisan conflict and inaction (Carson et al. 2010; Harbridge and Malhotra 2011; Ramirez 2009), citizens in the United States and in other democracies profess to prefer policy making by unelected policy experts to elected officials because they expect the decisions to be more expedient and effective (Coffé and Michels 2014; Font, Wojcieszak, and Navarro 2015; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Rapeli 2016). Additionally, citizens might view the proposals as more legitimate and credible because of the expertise of a presidential commission (Druckman 2001a; 2001b; 2001c; Fox and Jordan 2011). Therefore, the president could generate more public support for his policy by delegating the policy formulation process to a presidential commission because citizens perceive the commission to be more competent and their recommendations to be more efficacious.

2. Flitner (1986) and Wolanin (1975) suggest that presidents sometimes form commissions not for purposes of expertise or fact finding, but to lend credibility to policy proposals which the president prefers *ex ante*. In such cases, presidents strategically select commission members who share the president's policy preferences, such that presidents can comfortably predict the outcome of the commission while imbuing his own preferred policies with additional credibility and legitimacy. However, our focus on the effects of the creation of presidential commissions on public opinion does not depend on the motivation of the president. Whether presidents create commissions for fact finding or for strategic window dressing (Wolanin 1975), we are concerned with the reactions of citizens to the actions of the commissions.

We consider two stages of the policy-making process during which presidential commissions might enhance the credibility and legitimacy of a president's initiative. First, in the policy formulation stage, if the president appoints a commission to investigate an issue rather than acting directly, then the public might evaluate the president more favorably and expect the policies proposed by that commission to be more effective than policies the president would have proposed and implemented otherwise. Second, at the policy implementation stage, if the president implements the recommendations of a commission as opposed to offering the same policy proposals without the advice of a commission, the public may evaluate the president more favorably and expect the adopted policies to be more effective than had the president independently implemented the same policy.

Data and Methods

Determining public attitudes toward institutional actions is challenging. Public opinion polls seldom ask respondents about their views on presidential commissions directly. Further, even if there was a continuous time series of attitudes toward each and every presidential commission, presidents do not randomly decide which issues to refer to advisory groups. Every presidential commission is the product of political calculations that have convinced the president that a commission should be formed. It is likely that the response of the public is factored into these decisions, and the calculation of this public response to the reliance upon a presidential commission is the focus of this study. As a result, an observational analysis modeling mass public opinion as a function of the creation and actions of presidential commissions³ would be biased due to the selection effects of the observed commissions. Additionally, aggregate measures of presidential approval may be too crude a measure to identify the true effect of commissions. These barriers, which are difficult or impossible to overcome with observational data, present challenges to drawing inferences concerning the effect of presidential commissions on public opinion.

One way to address such barriers to inference is through experimental approaches, such as survey experiments (Druckman et al. 2006; 2011; Gaines, Kuklinski, and Quirk 2007). Using survey experiments, researchers can devise real or hypothetical scenarios related to their areas of interest and systematically vary one or more components of the scenarios across treatment conditions. Then, given the random assignment of subjects to each of the researchers' treatment conditions, scholars can draw inferences concerning the effect of a given experimental manipulation by comparing the response of subjects in the treatment and control groups.⁴ Thus, survey experiments can help researchers overcome each of the barriers to inference highlighted above; with survey experiments, we can tailor scenarios and response questions to our substantive topics of interest and hold constant all

3. For example, in an examination of the dynamics between Congress and the president, Groseclose and McCarty (2001) finds that presidential approval falls after a veto is issued.

4. The ability to use survey experiments to draw inferences depends upon the design and implementation of the survey experiment; see Gaines, Kuklinski, and Quirk (2007) for a careful critique of the use of survey experiments in political science.

components of the survey vignette that are not manipulated across groups. This allows us to assess subjects' responses to different scenarios that would be mutually exclusive in the real world.

In our study, we use survey experiments to assess whether citizens evaluate the president's handling of given policy issues and policy proposals adopted by the president more favorably when the president handles those issues alone or when the president creates a commission to examine those issues. We constructed four survey experiments based on real-world instances in which President Obama created commissions to examine policy problems and later adopted policy proposals put forth by the commissions. Across each of the four experiments, subjects were presented with a contemporary policy problem and provided information concerning how President Obama addressed the problem.⁵

We designed our experiments to account for two contours of the political environment that could condition the effect of presidential commissions on public opinion. First, we consider public reactions to presidential commissions at two different stages—at the stage of policy formulation and the stage of policy implementation. When deciding to address an issue at an early stage, the president can choose to either act independently to address the issue or to delegate the issue to a commission. Later, when the president implements a new policy, he can do so either independently or with the endorsement of the previously appointed commission. While these two stages of the policy-making process are not independent, they are distinct. At the state of policy formulation, the president chooses how to address an active policy problem and appeals to citizens' prospective expectations of how the president's choice of process might affect the policy problem. At the stage of policy implementation, the president has already developed a policy and is working to bolster the support for these actions by the public. Because citizens use both prospective and retrospective evaluative processes to form political opinions (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000), we design two of our survey experiments to describe instances in which President Obama created a commission to address a policy problem. We tailor the other two experiments to describe instances in which the president proposed new policies that were developed by a commission.

Second, we consider how different issue contexts might affect attitudes toward decisions to delegate to commissions. We based our survey experiments on issues drawn from the social and national security issue domains. Specifically, we create vignettes based on presidential commissions created by President Barack Obama to study the issues of cybersecurity, the National Security Agency's (NSA) surveillance programs, the prescription opioid epidemic, and police–community relations. We select a range of issue policies because, as numerous studies show, the public may evaluate presidential action differently depending on the context in which the president acts (Krosnick and Kinder 1990;

5. We designed our survey experiments to avoid deceiving our subjects. While deception in social science experiments is sometimes necessary, many scholars assert that deception can corrode researchers' degree of control in an experimental setting and therefore should be avoided when possible (Dickson 2011). To avoid deception, we designed our experimental manipulations to change the framing of President Obama's actions and not the actual circumstances under which the president took those actions. For example, in our police-shootings experiment, President Obama created the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, and the commission proposed several new policies to improve police–community relations including the independent investigation of police-involved shootings. Each of our vignettes presents accurate information concerning the federal government's adoption of this proposal and vary only in the specificity that we provided to the subjects concerning how this proposal was formulated and enacted.

Reeves and Rogowski 2016; Tesler 2012). For example, research has long shown that the public is more deferential to presidential action in matters of national security than on domestic policy issues (Canes-Wrone, Howell, and Lewis 2008; Wildavsky 1966). Additionally, different issues are easy or hard, in that citizens better understand and have more firmly established opinions regarding some issues but not others (Carmines and Stimson 1980). Whereas social issues, such as drug use and criminal justice, are thought to be easy issues that prime standing citizen preferences (Meier 1994; Nicholson-Crotty et al. 2009), national security issues are often classified as hard issues that citizens do not readily understand and often do not have clear opinions about (Kelleher and Wolak 2006; Kertzer 2013). Because citizens' own abilities to understand easy and hard issues vary, their preferences for presidents consulting commissions may also vary as a function of issue complexity.⁶

Each of our four survey experiments conform to a general structure (see Appendices A and B in our Supporting Information for vignette and question wording). However, because the format of our vignettes varies for experiments presented at the policy formulation and implementation stages, we discuss the survey experiments set at each stage separately. First, for our two policy formulation stage surveys—focusing on the prescription opioid epidemic and cybersecurity—each respondent is presented with a vignette that describes the policy problem. The experimental manipulations in each survey experiment alter how President Obama has responded to the problem. Subjects assigned to the control group are given no information about how the president responded to the policy problem. Subjects assigned to the presidential-action condition were told that the president responded to the problem by taking action by himself. For example, in the opioid overdose epidemic survey experiment, respondents were told that the president “will present new policies to expand access to opioid addiction treatment programs.” Respondents assigned to the commission condition were told that the president has created a commission to investigate the policy problem. For example, respondents in the cybersecurity survey vignette are told that the president has created the “Commission on Enhancing National Cybersecurity” and has asked the commission to “recommend policies to strengthen cybersecurity.” In the final commission-with-expertise condition, respondents were also provided with information about the credentials of some of the commission's members. In the case of the cybersecurity survey experiment, subjects were told that the president appointed “former National Security Advisor Tom Donilon” to chair the commission, and “Sam Palmisano, the former CEO of IBM,” to serve as vice chair.

Second, for each of our two policy implementation stage surveys—the independent investigation of police shootings and reform of the NSA's surveillance programs—each respondent was presented with a vignette that describes a new government policy that has been implemented to address a contemporary policy problem and a brief justification

6. Though no extant studies have examined whether Americans hold different procedural preferences for easy and hard issues, Wojcieszak (2014), using a national survey of Spanish citizens, finds that citizens have different procedural preferences for easy and hard issues. While citizens preferred processes reflecting direct democracy over representative democracy for easy issues, such as abortion laws, they preferred representative democracy over direct democracy for hard issues, such as economic policy. These findings might suggest that, as perceived policy complexity increases, citizens prefer policy processes that draw on more policy-specific expertise (see also Font, Wojcieszak, and Navarro 2015).

for the new policy. The experimental manipulations for these survey experiments alter who the respondent was told is responsible for the new policy. Subjects in the control group were told only that the “federal government” instituted the new policy. Subjects in the presidential-action condition were told that President Obama implemented the new policy himself. For example, in the independent investigation of police shootings survey experiment, subjects were told that the president “called on local law enforcement agencies to require independent criminal investigations” when police-involved shootings occur. Subjects in commission condition were told that a presidential commission created a policy that President Obama has implemented and that the commission provided the justification for the new policy. For example, in the reform of NSA surveillance programs survey experiment, subjects were told that the new policies adopted by President Obama were “based on the findings of the Review Group on Intelligence and Communications Technology.” Lastly, subjects in the commission-with-expertise condition were given the same information as subjects in the commission condition and were also provided with information about the credentials of some members of the commission. In the case of the reform of NSA surveillance programs survey experiment, subjects were provided with the names of each of the five commission members, as well as one current or former job held by each commissioner pertaining to national security and civil liberties.

After each of the four surveys, subjects in all experimental conditions were asked to evaluate President Obama’s handling of the policy problem described in the vignette using a 4-point scale and to respond to several questions that measure the subjects’ expectations of the effectiveness of President Obama’s policies.⁷

Each of the four survey experiments was fielded separately on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) between August 2016 and January 2017 while Barack Obama was president.⁸ While MTurk samples are not nationally representative, several studies have demonstrated that studies using MTurk samples can reliably recover average treatment effects as effectively as more commonly used convenience samples (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012; Mullinix et al. 2015). We recruited approximately 1,000 respondents for each of our experiments. After excluding the subjects who failed our screening question,⁹ we obtained samples ranging in size from 838 to 912 respondents for each of our

7. Most of the questions asking subjects about their expectations of the effectiveness of the policies also use 4-point Likert scales, though a few are structured dichotomously. While we present our experimental results below using differences-in-means tests, we also modeled our dependent variable using an ordered logistic regression. We also recoded respondents’ answers as a dichotomous indicator of approval and modeled them using logistic regressions. The results obtained by using differences-in-means tests closely mirror those obtained using other methods.

8. We conducted all four of our experiments in August and September 2016 but realized we had made a programming error with respect to the cybersecurity experiment. In early January, while Obama was still president, we ran the corrected cybersecurity survey experiment. To the extent we could compare the results of the cybersecurity experiments from late summer and January, they were substantively similar. We present here the results from the cybersecurity experiment fielded in January 2017.

9. Specifically, we presented respondents with a list of 17 prominent news sources at the beginning of the survey, prefaced by two paragraphs. In the last sentence of the first paragraph, we instruct respondents to ignore the question to follow and to select two specific news sources as the answers. In the second paragraph, we ask respondents to select one of the following news sources as the source they turn to when a major news event occurs. Berinsky et al. (2014) demonstrates that respondents who pass screening questions are typically more attentive than survey respondents who do not and therefore are more likely to uptake treatment effects.

experiments. We collected basic demographic information, such as gender, education level, and partisan affiliation from each subject, which we used to conduct randomization checks across our treatment groups (see Appendix C in our Supporting Information).¹⁰

Results

Policy Formulation Stage

First, we examine the results of our survey experiments in which respondents were presented with a policy problem and were randomly assigned to a condition where no presidential action is specified or conditions where the president formulates a policy proposal independently, delegates the task of policy formulation to a commission, or delegates the task of policy formulation to a commission where members' expertise is emphasized. Figure 1 presents the results of our opioid addiction survey experiment, in which respondents were asked to evaluate President Obama's handling of the opioid epidemic (left panel), whether they thought the policy would be effective (middle panel), and whether the new policy would result in decreased death rates (right panel). For each dependent variable, we plot the differences between the mean response in each treatment condition and the control condition. The bars around each estimate are the 95% confidence intervals for each of the differences in means.¹¹

Subjects in each of the three treatment conditions evaluated President Obama's handling of the opioid addiction crisis more favorably and perceived the president's actions to be more effective than subjects in the control condition. Respondents' approval of the president's handling of the crisis were measured by a 4-point scale, ranging from *strongly disapprove* (1) to *strongly approve* (4). Whereas the mean approval of President Obama's handling of the opioid addiction crisis was 2.39, or nearly halfway between "disapprove" and "approve," the mean approval level of subjects in the presidential action condition was 0.31 points higher—much closer to "approve" than to "disapprove"—and statistically distinguishable (at the 95% confidence level)¹² from the mean level of approval expressed by subjects in the control group. Similarly, the mean approval levels for subjects in the commission and commission-with-expertise conditions were 0.40 and 0.36 points higher, respectively, than for subjects in the control condition—again much closer to "approve" than to "disapprove"—and again statistically

10. Though we expect randomization to yield treatment groups that are identical save their treatment assignments, scholars are encouraged to conduct tests to verify that the randomization mechanism worked properly for a given experiment (Gerber et al. 2014; but see Mutz and Pemantle 2015). For each of our four experiments, we collected demographic information from respondents that included gender, age, party identification, political ideology, level of education, race, and income. Using these demographics, we conducted χ^2 tests of independence for each characteristic across each of the four experiments, and, for all but one of our χ^2 tests of independence, we failed to reject the null hypothesis of independence of treatment assignment and respondent demographics. In the case of our one χ^2 test of independence in which we reject the null hypothesis—the distribution of gender in the cybersecurity experiment—we reran the analyses in an ordered logistic regression framework, including a control variable for gender (Gerber and Green 2012; but see Mutz and Pemantle 2015), and obtained substantively similar results.

11. All differences-in-means tests presented are two tailed and do not assume equal variances.

12. Unless stated otherwise, all null hypothesis tests are conducted at the 95% confidence level ($\alpha = .05$).

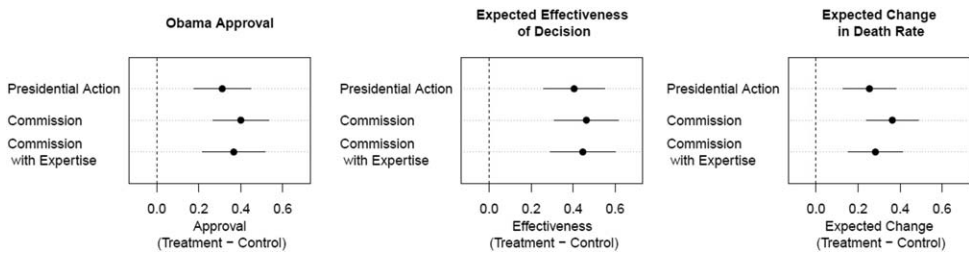


FIGURE 1. Evaluations of President Obama's handling of the opioid addiction crisis and the effectiveness of his actions.

Notes: In each panel, dots represent the mean difference in response among subjects receiving treatment specified on the x axis, compared to the control condition. Bars represent 95% confidence intervals around the mean difference. As evidenced in the top panel, subjects in all three experimental conditions evaluate President Obama's handling of the opioid addiction crisis more favorably than subjects in the control group. Further, as evidenced in the lower two panels, subjects in all three experimental conditions also perceive President Obama's actions to be more effective than subjects in the control group. However, we observe few meaningful differences among treatment groups.

distinguishable from the mean level of approval expressed by subjects in the control group.¹³ Similarly, subjects in each of the three treatment groups expected President Obama's actions to be more effective and for the death rates associated with opioid overdoses to decrease more sharply than subjects in the control group. The differences between the control group and subjects in each of the three treatment groups are statistically distinguishable. Thus, we conclude that the public evaluates the president and the president's policies more favorably when the president responds to a public policy problem than when the president takes no action.

In order to determine whether the policy mechanism the president uses to respond to public policy problems—acting alone or delegating to a presidential commission—conditions citizens' evaluations of the president's handling of the problem and the efficacy of the actions the president takes, we compare the responses of subjects in our treatment conditions. Specifically, to assess whether delegation to presidential commissions enhances the public's approval of the president's handling of a problem and perceptions of the effectiveness of the president's actions, we compare the responses of subjects in our presidential action condition to those of subjects in our commission and commission-with-expertise conditions. Using differences-in-means tests to compare the presidential action treatment with the two different commission treatments, we find that the approval of the president's handling of the issue and view of the effectiveness of the policies are not statistically distinguishable among the different treatment groups. For example, when asked to express on a 4-point scale whether they thought it was likely that President Obama's actions would reduce the number of deaths from opioid overdose, where answers ranged from *not at all likely* (1) to *very likely* (4), subjects in the presidential action condition provided a mean response of 2.19. The mean response was 2.25 among subjects in the

13. Due to space restrictions, we report the numerical mean response and 95% confidence intervals for the mean response for each treatment group's response to each question and the $|t|$ statistics associated with each hypothesis test we conduct in Appendix D of our Supporting Information.

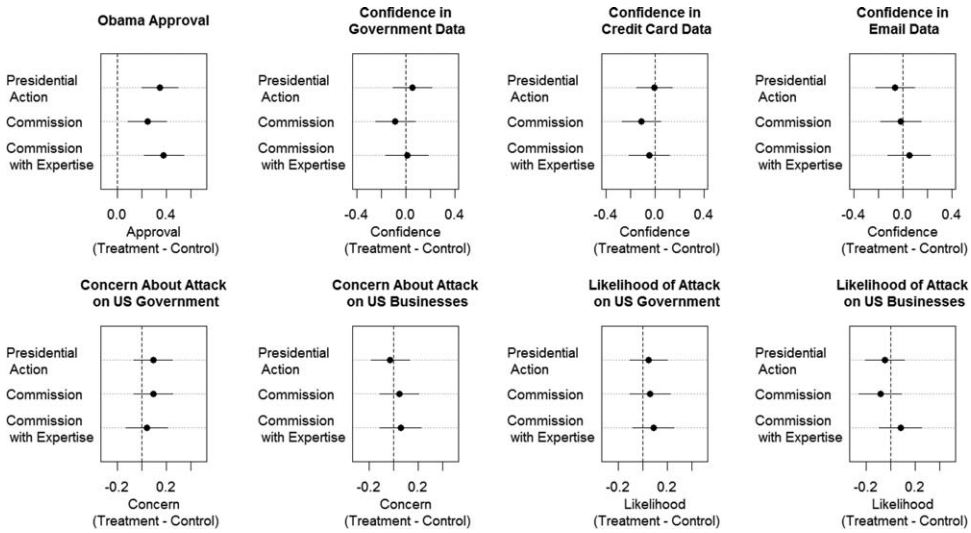


FIGURE 2. Evaluations of President Obama’s handling of cybersecurity and the effectiveness of his actions.

Notes: In each panel, dots represent the mean difference in response among subjects receiving treatment specified on the x axis, compared to the control condition. Bars represent 95% confidence intervals around the mean difference. Looking at the first panel in the first row, subjects in all three experimental conditions evaluate President Obama’s handling of cybersecurity more favorably than subjects in the control group. However, looking at the other panels, subjects in all three experimental conditions generally do not perceive President Obama’s actions to be more effective than subjects in the control group.

commission condition and 2.23 among subjects in the commission-with-expertise condition. None of these are statistically distinguishable from each other.

Next, we turn to the results of our cybersecurity survey experiment, which also focuses on the use of presidential commissions at the policy formulation stage. Figure 2 presents the results from this survey experiment, in which respondents were asked to evaluate President Obama’s handling of cybersecurity (first panel, first row) and to respond to seven questions concerning their perceived effectiveness of President Obama’s actions (remaining panels). Similar to our results in the opioid addiction experiment, we find that subjects in each of the three treatment conditions evaluated President Obama’s handling of cybersecurity more favorably than subjects in the control group. While the mean approval of Obama’s handling of cybersecurity among subjects in the control condition was 2.42—again nearly halfway between “approve” and “disapprove”—the mean approval ratings among subjects in the presidential action, commission, and commission-with-expertise conditions were each between 0.25 and 0.38 points higher—much close to “approve” than to “disapprove”—and are statistically distinguishable from the mean approval level expressed by subjects in the control group. However, in contrast to the results from the opioid addiction experiment, respondents in the treatment conditions generally did not perceive President Obama’s actions to be more effective than

subjects in the control condition. Looking at the remaining seven panels in Figure 2, which correspond to questions asking respondents to express their confidence in the security of personal data maintained by the U.S. government, credit card companies, and e-mail providers, respectively, and their expectations for future cyberattacks, subjects in the three treatment conditions did not express opinions that are significantly different from subjects in the control group.

However, as with our analysis of the opioid addiction experiment, in order to assess whether the use of presidential commissions enhances citizens' evaluation of the president and increases public support for the president's policies, relative to the president acting alone, we examined differences among the treatment groups. Using differences-in-means tests to compare the responses of subjects in the presidential action treatment with the responses of subjects in the commission and commission-with-expertise treatments, we again find that the mean responses of subjects between these treatment conditions are not distinguishable from one another.¹⁴ For example, while subjects in each of the three treatment conditions expressed higher mean levels of concern about a cyberattack against the U.S. government along a 4-point scale ranging from *not at all concerned* (1) to *very concerned* (4) than subjects in the control group, the mean level of concern expressed by respondents in the presidential action condition (2.98) is not statistically distinguishable from the mean level of concern among subjects in the commission condition (2.98) and the commission-with-expertise condition (2.93).

The results of both of our survey experiments framed at the policy formulation stage suggest that citizens evaluate the president's handling of an issue more favorably and sometimes evaluate the effectiveness of his action more positively when the president takes action in response to a public policy problem. However, we do not find evidence that the public responds more favorably to any particular type of presidential action (e.g., the president acting alone or delegating the issue to a commission). Further, we find that these patterns hold for both of our treatments in which President Obama utilizes a presidential commission. Our results at the policy formulation stage suggest that presidential commissions are a policy mechanism by which presidents can pay lip service to a policy

14. Though we uniformly use $\alpha = .05$ to conduct all hypothesis tests, we note that three pairwise comparisons among our treatment conditions in the cybersecurity experiment yield t statistics that approach the quantile of the t distribution at which we would reject the null hypothesis of no difference in means at the 95% level and are sufficiently large to reject the null hypothesis of no difference in means at the 90% level. First, the point estimate for approval of President Obama's handling of cybersecurity for subjects in the commission-with-expertise condition (2.80) was marginally higher than that of subjects in the commission condition (2.67) with an $|t|$ statistic equal to 1.70. Second, the point estimate for confidence in the government's ability to keep records of personal activity secure for subjects in the presidential action condition (2.33) was marginally higher than that of subjects in the commission condition (2.19), with a $|t|$ statistic equal to 1.89. Third, the point estimate for the perceived likelihood of a cyberattack on U.S. businesses in the next 12 months among subjects in the commissions-with-expertise condition (2.94) was marginally higher than that of subjects in the commission condition (2.78), with a $|t|$ statistic equal to 1.86. However, we suggest that these findings of near distinguishability are not notable for two reasons. First, only two other pairwise comparisons among treatment conditions across all four of our experiments (see endnote 15) yield a marginally distinguishable difference, and thus in almost all cases we find that subjects' appraisals of President Obama's handling of issues, and their evaluations of policies, are not influenced by the means with which President Obama took action on these issues. Second, when we adjust our differences-in-means tests to account for multiple comparisons with the Bonferroni correction, or the less restrictive Benjamini-Hochberg correction, our p values exceed $\alpha = .10$ for each of our marginal findings (Gerber and Green 2012; Shaffer 1995).

problem, increasing public support for themselves and their policies relative to taking no action. In fact, we find that proposing a commission to study a problem is just as effective to proposing an actual policy. Meanwhile, we find no evidence that commissions confer policies with additional credibility.

Policy Implementation Stage

Next, we examine the results of our survey experiments in which respondents are informed of a new policy and are randomly assigned to a condition where the policy was implemented by the federal government, the president, the president with the endorsement of a commission, or the president with the endorsement of a commission whose expertise is emphasized. First, we examined the results from our experiment concerning the independent investigation of police-involved shootings. Figure 3 presents the results from this survey experiment, in which respondents were asked to evaluate President Obama’s handling of police–community relations (first panel, first row) and to respond to

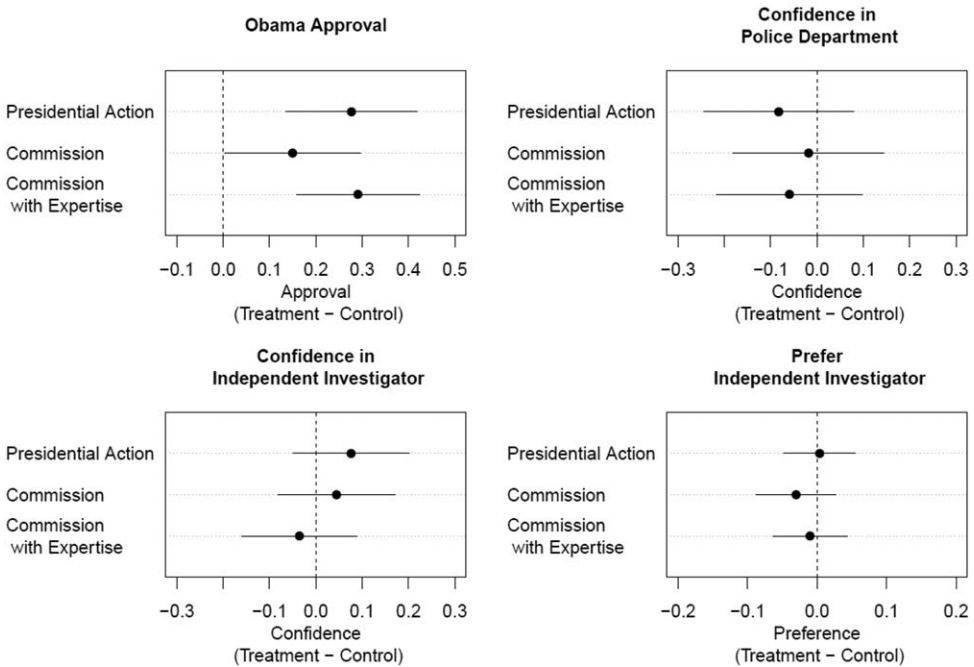


FIGURE 3. Evaluations of President Obama’s handling of police–community relations and the effectiveness of his actions.

Notes: In each panel, dots represent the mean difference in response among subjects receiving treatment specified on the x axis, compared to the control condition. Bars represent 95% confidence intervals around the mean difference. Looking at the first panel in the first row, subjects in all three experimental conditions evaluate President Obama’s handling of police–community relations more favorably than subjects in the control group. However, looking at the other panels, subjects in all three experimental conditions do not perceive President Obama’s actions to be more effective than subjects in the control group.

three questions concerning their perceived effectiveness of the new policy (remaining panels). Similar to the results from the policy formulation surveys, the mean approval of President Obama's handling of police–community relations, on the same 4-point scale as used in the previous two experiments, was significantly lower among control group subjects as compared to subjects in treatment conditions. While the mean level of approval among subjects in the control group was 2.82, the mean levels of approval within each of the three treatment groups were between 0.15 and 0.27 points higher, and these effects are statistically distinguishable from the control group. However, when we compare the mean levels of approval among the treatment conditions, we find that the mean level of approval expressed by subjects in the presidential action condition is not statistically distinguishable from the mean levels of approval expressed by subjects in the commission and commission-with-expertise conditions.^{15,16}

Turning to the responses to the remaining three questions presented in Figure 3, we see that the responses of subjects in each of our three treatment conditions are not statistically distinguishable from subjects in the control group. For example, the mean level of confidence in investigations of police-involved shootings conducted by independent investigators, measured along a 4-point scale from *not at all confident* (1) to *very confident* (4), among subjects in the control group is 2.98 and is not statistically distinguishable from the levels of confidence expressed by subjects in the presidential action (3.05), commission (3.02), and commission-with-expertise (2.94) conditions. Additionally, we find limited evidence that direct presidential action marginally increases views of efficacy of the policies compared to the commission and commission-with-expertise commissions. This further suggests that commissions do not lend credibility to presidential policies.¹⁷

We now turn to our last survey experiment, which details reforms made to the NSA's surveillance programs after intelligence leaks made the programs public in 2013.

15. The t statistic associated with the differences-in-means for the comparison between the presidential action condition and the commission condition, $|t| = 1.69$, approaches the quantile of the t distribution at which we would reject the null hypothesis of no difference in means at the 95% level and is sufficiently large to reject the null hypothesis of no difference at the 90% level. However, as we explain in footnote 14, the overwhelming majority of pairwise comparisons we conduct across experiments do not yield distinguishable differences among treatment groups, and, when we correct for multiple comparisons, our p value exceeds $\alpha = .10$.

16. We note that the t statistic associated with the differences-in-means comparison between the commission condition and the commission-with-expertise condition, $|t| = 1.98$, is sufficiently large to reject the null hypothesis of no difference in means at the 95% level, suggesting that subjects in the commission with expertise condition evaluated President Obama's handling of police–community relations more favorably than subjects in the commission condition. After adjusting for multiple comparisons using the Bonferroni correction, we fail to reject this null hypothesis ($p = .29$), but, using the less conservative Benjamini-Hochberg correction, we fail to reject this null hypothesis at the 95% level, but reject this null hypothesis at the 90% level ($p = .07$). While we expressed no theoretical expectations a priori for differences between the commission and commission-with-expertise treatments, and the few distinctions we identify between these conditions are not robust to adjustment for multiple comparisons, these results suggest that citizens may sometimes evaluate presidential commissions more favorably when they are staffed with relevant experts, and we encourage researchers to further explore the role of expertise in citizens' evaluations of presidential behavior.

17. Comparing the mean level of confidence in investigations conducted by independent investigators among subjects in the presidential action condition to the same mean level of confidence among subjects in the commission-with-expertise condition, we obtain a difference-in-means test statistic of $|t| = 1.77$, which approaches but fails to meet conventional levels of statistical significance.

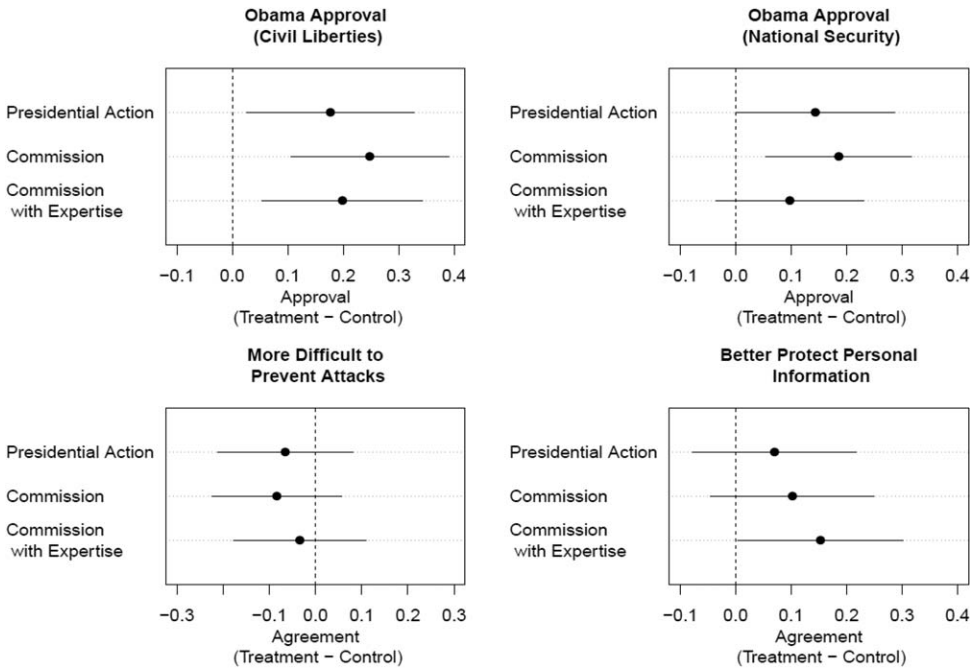


FIGURE 4. Evaluations of President Obama's handling of National Security Agency surveillance and the effectiveness of his actions.

Notes: In each panel, dots represent the mean difference in response among subjects receiving treatment specified on the x axis, compared to the control condition. Bars represent 95% confidence intervals around the mean difference. Looking at the first panel in the first row, subjects in all three experimental conditions evaluate President Obama's handling of police–community relations more favorably than subjects in the control group. However, looking at the other panels, subjects in all three experimental conditions do not perceive President Obama's actions to be more effective than subjects in the control group.

Figure 4 presents the results from this survey experiment in which respondents were asked to evaluate President Obama's handling of civil liberties and national security (top row) and to respond to two questions measuring how they expected President Obama's reforms to affect counterterrorism operations and individual privacy. When asked their approval of President Obama's handling of civil liberties with the same 4-point scale used in our previous experiments, subjects in the control group expressed a mean level of approval of 2.75, which is closer to "approve" than to "disapprove." The mean level of approval of the president's handling of civil liberties within each of the treatment conditions was between 0.17 and 0.25 points higher than that of the control group, and all of the differences between the treatment conditions and the control group are statistically distinguishable. Differently, when subjects were asked to express their approval of President Obama's handling of national security along the same 4-point scale, mean levels of approval among subjects within each of the treatment groups were between 0.10 and 0.19 points higher than the mean level of approval among subjects in the control group.

Only two of the treatment conditions—presidential action and commission—had mean levels of approval which were statistically distinguishable from the mean level of approval for the control group. However, as the mean levels of approval for both questions was closest to “approve” for the control group and the treatment conditions, the substantive effect of the treatments on the mean levels of approval are small. Further, when we compare differences in mean approval ratings for both civil liberties and national security among the treatment conditions, we find that, for both questions, the mean approval ratings expressed by subjects in the presidential action condition are statistically indistinguishable from those expressed by subjects in both the commission and commission-with-expertise conditions.

The panels in the bottom row of Figure 4 present subjects’ perceptions of the effectiveness of the president’s reforms. For both of our effectiveness questions, subjects in each of our treatment conditions generally do not perceive the president’s reforms to be more effective than subjects in the control group or subjects in our other treatment conditions. For example, when asked to express their level of agreement that the reforms would make it more difficult to prevent terrorist attacks along a 4-point scale, the mean level of agreement among subjects in the control group (2.32, which is closest to “disagree”) was statistically indistinguishable from the mean levels of agreement among subjects in each of the treatment groups. Differently, when asked to express their level of agreement that the reforms would protect their personal information from abuse by the American intelligence community along the same 4-point scale, the mean level of agreement among subjects in the commission-with-expertise condition (2.81, which is closest to “agree”) was statistically distinguishable from the mean level of agreement among subjects in the control group (2.65, which is also closest to “agree”), but the mean levels of agreement in the other treatment conditions were not statistically distinguishable from that of the control group.¹⁸ However, the mean levels of agreement among subjects in each of our treatment groups were indistinguishable from one another.

Thus, the results obtained by our two survey experiments framed at the policy implementation stage mirror the results of our survey experiments framed at the policy formulation stage. Generally, subjects evaluate President Obama’s handling of police–community relations and of national security and civil liberties more favorably when our vignette identifies President Obama, as opposed to the more vague “federal government” as the person who issues the policy proposal presented. However, we find no support for our expectations that subjects in the commission and commission-with-expertise conditions would express higher levels of approval of the president’s handling of the issues than subjects in the presidential action condition, and that subjects would expect proposed

18. Though the t statistic associated with the differences-in-means comparison between the control condition and the commission-with-expertise condition, $|t| = 2.02$, is sufficiently large to reject the null hypothesis of no difference in means at the 95% level, we fail to reject this null hypothesis when accounting for multiple comparisons using either the Bonferroni correction or the less conservative Benjamini-Hochberg correction ($p = .26$ for both corrections). Because our hypotheses are focused primarily on the relative differences among the treatment groups, rather than the differences between the control group and the treatment groups, the results drawn from this question—that the mean level of agreement for one of the treatment groups was distinguishable from the mean level of agreement for the control group, but that the mean levels of agreement among the control groups were not distinguishable from one another—conform with, rather than conflict with, the findings from our other experiments.

policies to be more effective when informed that the president's policies were based on the recommendations of a commission, rather than in the absence of such a commission recommendation.

Discussion

This article examines how the public responds to presidential delegation to presidential commissions. The results indicate that if a president announces that a pressing issue will be addressed by a presidential commission, the public will have an improved view of the president's handling of that issue. We consistently find that the magnitude of this increase in approval is indistinguishable from that received by taking more direct action. These findings, across four different issues, suggest that presidential commissions may be quite effective in quelling the public appetite for action on a particular topic. We find very little evidence that presidential commissions cause citizens to view a policy as more efficacious. While our survey experiments remove elite discourse, presidential commissions, on their own, lend no additional credibility to presidential policies.¹⁹ Though not the focus of this study, it is notable that in most cases respondents viewed outcomes to be the same whether presidential action was specified or not.

Our results highlight both the benefits and limitations of survey experiments. While previous scholars have struggled with identifying the public response to presidential commissions, we have leveraged survey experiments to better isolate the effects. We continue to be concerned with issues of external validity. Attitudes toward any political phenomenon may be highly dependent upon the elite rhetoric (Zaller 1992; Kriner and Reeves 2014) or the context (Druckman 2001b) surrounding it. If the president and his copartisan elites tout the credibility of a commission's report, then perhaps confidence in the proposals will increase among the American public. For example, our findings suggest that respondents were marginally more likely to see police reforms as efficacious when the president himself introduced them. That could be because respondents viewed Obama as being well qualified to introduce reforms given his unique vantage point as the country's first black president. Differently, if elite rhetoric focuses on the commission as a tactic by which the president can avoid taking action, perhaps there would be a backlash against it. The roles of context and elite rhetoric are avenues for future research that could be explored observationally or through additional survey experiments.

Understanding the calculus of presidential decision making is challenging. Members of Congress debate their positions and then take numerous roll call votes. Presidents decide behind closed doors about what to do. We usually never observe the menu of options that the president is considering. We do not know whether the president is

19. Our findings do not examine whether presidential commissions confer credibility and legitimacy on the president's policies in the eyes of Congress and other political elites. Several scholars (e.g., Flitner 1986; Tama 2011; Wolanin 1975) detail concrete instances in which the use of presidential commissions helped to persuade other elites to support or acquiesce to presidential policy proposals. While it is reasonable to speculate that commissions have a persuasive effect on political elites, examining the causal effects is a difficult task because the president strategically decides when to use and how to structure commissions such that he maximizes their persuasive potential.

considering whether to issue an executive order, form a commission, or propose a piece of legislation for a particular policy demand. We only observe the outcome. Short of archival documentation of the decision, which is rare among recent presidents, scholars are hard pressed to understand how public opinion influences the perceived costs of these trade-offs. Current observational approaches provide limited insights into these questions. Despite their limitations, survey experiments provide an approach to estimate the costs of different approaches to policy challenges.

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