

# Knocking on the President's Door: Changing the Way We Understand Presidential Responsiveness

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## Abstract

Despite numerous contributions by scholars to the discussions of presidential responsiveness, few studies have offered an understanding of this topic that goes beyond executive actions and public opinion. This study breaks away from this norm by directly addressing presidential responsiveness in terms of citizens' behavior. More specifically, the theory argues that because presidents care about their legacy and due to the fact that civil unrest and violence send public cues that the chief executive might not be effectively leading, presidents are responsive to citizens' behavior that threatens their presidential power. Focusing on racial and ethnic minority issues, I examine the relationship between citizens' behavior and governmental institutions by analyzing presidential letters, public statements, press conferences, memorandums, executive orders, State of the Union addresses, and protest data that range from 1955-1992, covering the modern presidency from Dwight Eisenhower to George H. W. Bush. The results support the theory that presidents are responsive to threatening political behavior conducted by citizens. However, this effect is restricted to presidential public statements and the impact is short-lived. For more grandiose modes of presidential actions, such as executive orders or State of the Union addresses, citizens are most successful in eliciting a response from the president when their unconventional political behavior is followed by racial and ethnic issues encompassing a larger portion of the public agenda.

**Keywords:** presidential responsiveness, minority issues, race and ethnic politics, political participation, public opinion.

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“No effort to list the president’s opportunities to use the prestige of his office to further civil rights could be adequate; from fireside chats to appearances at major events, the list is endless. All that is needed at the outset is a firm resolve to make the presidency a weapon for this democratic objective; the opportunities would then arise by themselves.”

—**Martin Luther King, Jr.**

Since the early twentieth century, racial and ethnic minorities have descended upon the south lawn gates of the White House and at Lafayette Park in massive numbers, hoping to garner the president’s attention. Citizens’ appeals for political change have not been restricted to Washington. Voices for change have come from throughout the nation in both small and large numbers. The tactics that minorities use to appeal for change have also varied, ranging from institutional to extreme political action. Though citizens have continuously knocked on the president’s door by making appeals for political change, one must pose the question of whether or not he is answering. Put another way, does the president respond to citizens’ mass political behavior? If the president is responsive to political action, which political tools are most effective at obtaining the executive’s attention?

The literature on presidential responsiveness offers little insight into answering this question. Instead of examining citizens’ behavior, the literature on presidential responsiveness has largely been shaped by studies of public opinion. The results that stem from these studies are conflicting, with some arguing that the president responds to public opinion (Geer 1996), others stating that it is the public that is responding to the president (Cohen 1995; Hill 1998; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000), and a few who claim that presidential responsiveness is conditional on particular issues (Canes-Wrone and Shotts 2004; Canes-Wrone, Herron and Shotts 2001).

Unfortunately, an examination of the political participation literature does not provide any additional information on whether citizens’ behavior affects presidential responsiveness. Studies of political behavior have analyzed governmental responsiveness to political actions

by examining Congress or local political offices (McAdam and Su 2001; Lohmann 1994; Burstein 1998; Katznelson 1990). However, even with regard to Congress and local government, Burstein, Einwohner and Hollander (1995) remind us that there is still very little we know about the effectiveness of unconventional political behavior (also known as protest activity) and bringing about social change.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, studies of presidential responsiveness in terms of citizens' behavior have garnered little attention.

This paper attempts to fill this void by providing insight into the way that the president perceives and acts upon various forms of unconventional political behavior, such as boycotts, demonstrations, riots, and other modes of political protest. This study moves scholars beyond public opinion to offer a theory of presidential responsiveness that incorporates citizens' actions and their effect on government. The theory argues that threatening, unconventional political behavior that expresses a racial or ethnic minority concern has the ability to place race on the public agenda. When racial or ethnic issues increase in importance on the public agenda, external pressures are then placed on a president's professional reputation and public prestige. These threatening, unconventional political events give the impression to the public and opportunistic politicians that the president is not effectively leading, which in turn lessens his presidential power. Thus, to address this threat to his power the president responds to threatening political actions by sending a signal that he is attentive to the concerns of the public. Focusing on racial and ethnic minority issues, I examine the relationship of citizens' behavior and governmental institutions by analyzing presidential letters, public statements, press conferences, memorandums, executive orders, State of the Union addresses, and protest data that range from 1955-1992, covering the modern presidency from

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<sup>1</sup>I am not strictly defining unconventional political behavior as unusual or uncommon modes of political action, though they are rarely used in comparison with other actions citizens implement to influence government. Unconventional political participation, as used in this chapter, can also be referred to as non-institutional, extra-institutional, non-electoral, or simply political protest. The syntax is unimportant. The title "unconventional" attempts to convey that these forms of political action are unrelated to the electoral process. Similar to Barnes and Kaase (1979), I view conventional political participation as modes of political behavior that are directly or indirectly related to the electoral process.

Dwight Eisenhower to George H. W. Bush. The empirical findings support the theory that it is not public opinion per se, but rather the threat of political action leading to a racially conscious public perception that brings about presidential responsiveness.

## **Incorporating Citizens' Actions into a Theory of Presidential Responsiveness**

Citizens engage in political actions with the hope that government will respond to their concerns. The possibility of obtaining a response from government is what makes the study of political behavior relevant. Nearly forty years ago, Sidney Verba and Norman Nie made this point, “responsiveness is what democracy is supposed to be about and, more specifically, is what participation is supposed to increase” (1972, 300). Nearly forty years later, political scientists who study political behavior have been slow to embrace this point. This is especially true for unconventional modes of political behavior, which are actions that racial and ethnic minorities heavily employ. Yet, how political institutions respond to racial and ethnic grievances of political protest over time has rarely been defined and methodologically examined. Arguably, this is most notable in the presidency.

Examining presidential responsiveness in terms of political actions in no way constitutes the norm for those who study the presidency. As stated earlier, often scholars examine presidential responsiveness in terms of public opinion, as opposed to political behavior (Cohen 1995; Hill 1998; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Canes-Wrone and Shotts 2004). Yet, signals sent to the president by public opinion are by nature biased towards results that favor the survey's population majority.<sup>2</sup> When examining public opinion on racial and ethnic issues, it is clear that during the modern presidency the majority of citizens did not have a preference to support minority issues. Kinder and Sanders (1996, 17) argue that there is a strong divide

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<sup>2</sup>This is extremely problematic when one attempts to examine minority attitudes, considering that some authors argue that data on black political attitudes was not available to students of public opinion until the 1980's (Smith 1987).

between the views of minorities and non-minorities on racial and ethnic issues. Using data from a 1986 National Election Study, the authors show that minorities and non-minorities have drastically different preferences on issues of equal opportunity, federal programs that assist minorities, and affirmative action. None of these issues obtained a majority favorable view amongst non-minorities. Thus, it is not surprising that scholars have found little evidence to support the notion that presidents are responsive to public concerns over racial and ethnic issues that are seen in public opinion polls.

Looking at civil rights issues, which are a subset of minority issues, Cohen (1995, 67) finds that the president was unresponsive to public opinion on this topic. Hill (1998), looking at data from 1953 to 1989, finds that the president was not influenced by public opinion views on civil rights; rather citizens are responsive to civil rights issues when the president addresses this topic in his State of the Union speech.

Though these scholars implied that the president is unresponsive to minority issues, there has been much legislation and attention paid to racial and ethnic concerns in the modern presidency. It is questionable to conclude that the president did not play a role in the ascension of minority rights by responding to public demands. The conflict between historical outcomes and public opinion studies could rest on the difference in analyzing presidential responsiveness through public opinion or citizens' political actions.

Minority issues are a good medium with which to understand presidential responsiveness in terms of citizens' political actions as opposed to public opinion. Scholars have examined presidential responsiveness in terms of various issues that include, but are not limited to, budgetary analysis (Canes-Wrone and Shotts 2004), income redistribution (Hicks and Swank 1984), and defense (Wlezien 1996). Similar issues to the ones mentioned above lend themselves to public opinion studies because there are few political activities that are conducted by citizens to address these concerns.<sup>3</sup> Citizens' perceptions on minority issues, on the other

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<sup>3</sup>This could serve as a strong explanation as to why there is a lack of scholarly work that systematically

hand, are observed through both public opinion and political actions. More specifically, unconventional political behavior has been an important resource for marginalized citizens to voice their concerns. Unfortunately, the president has not always responded to these minority concerns. Thus, one must ask, what are the characteristics of unconventional political behavior that garner the president's attention on racial and ethnic issues?

The work of Neustadt (1990) can offer some insight into this question. A president's professional reputation and public prestige are key to his power and influence. Neustadt (1990, 54) shows that the ability of the president to bargain and obtain what he wants depends heavily on what others think about him. The author adds that it is not reputation or prestige, in and of themselves, but rather these factors can either facilitate or drastically risk the president's power of persuasion. Aware of this fact, the president is strategic in how he presents himself and how individuals or events shape his image. In this way, the president is engaging in reactionary behavior, making strategic choices that respond to changes in public perceptions (Brace and Hinckley 1993).<sup>4</sup>

Thus, I posit that threatening, unconventional political behavior that revolves around racial or ethnic issues has the ability to place race on the public agenda. When these issues increase in importance on the public agenda and are preceded by political protest, this places external pressures on a president's professional reputation and public prestige. These extreme forms of citizens' behavior give the impression to the public and opportunistic politicians that the president is ignoring American concerns, which in turn lessens his presidential power. Thus, to address this threat to his power, the president responds to threatening political actions to send a signal that he is attentive to public demand.

The interaction of public opinion and unconventional political behavior is essential for the success of minorities' political protest activities. Unconventional political actions are different

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connects citizens' unconventional political behavior to presidential actions.

<sup>4</sup>Ostrom and Simon (1988), as well as Simon and Ostrom (1985), also speak to the the strategic nature of the president and reactionary behavior to public perceptions.

from conventional modes of political behavior insofar as their incorporation into the inner workings of democratic institutions. While conventional modes of political action are directly linked to the electoral process, unconventional political behavior lacks this connection. Thus, non-electoral modes of political behavior require an enforcing mechanism. Public opinion serves as a latent enforcing mechanism that places external pressures on the president to respond to unconventional political behavior that addresses minority concerns.

Often the interaction of unconventional political behavior and public opinion is examined through theories of movements. Scholars argue that movements change public opinion in a way that is critical for policy success (Burstein 1979; Burstein and Freudenburg 1978; Burstien 1985; Burstein 1999; Costain and Majstorovic 1994; Page and Shapiro 1983; McAdam and Su 2001). Burstein writes that “equal employment opportunity legislation was adopted as the result of social changes that were manifested in public opinion, crystallized in the civil rights and women’s movements, and transformed into public policy by political leaders” (1985, 125) . The effect that the interaction of political behavior and public opinion has on government, however, is not limited to movements. And understanding unconventional political behavior solely through theories of social movements belies the potential impact that non-movement forms of protest have on presidential actions. Several hypotheses follow from this discussion.

*H<sub>1a</sub>: The president will respond to citizens’ political actions on racial and ethnic concerns that demonstrate a high level of threat.<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup>While the president could potentially be opportunistic when citizens’ request that he address a particular issue, the theory presented here does not argue against the conception of an institutionalized presidency. On the contrary, Ragsdale and Theis’ (1997) claim that the institution of the Presidency both controls and constrains presidential behavior is correct. This theory looks to examine the president’s individualistic preference to preserve his presidential power in an institution that imposes constraints. Furthermore, the theory assumes a presidency-centered approach, where the presidency is viewed as an institution in which external forces (i.e. interest groups, congressional leaders, political parties, etc.) heavily dictate presidential actions. Krause and Cohen (1997) show that these external factors are more likely to determine the president’s actions in the modern presidency. In many ways, unconventional political actions act as an external pressure that looks to threaten his presidential power. When presented with such threats, the president responds by addressing these issues.

*H<sub>1b</sub>: The interaction of unconventional political behavior and public opinion will have a greater impact on presidential responsiveness than when citizens actions are conducted alone.*

*H<sub>2</sub>: Political behavior will lead to greater presidential responsiveness in both movement and non-movement periods of time.*

Because I am addressing minority issues during the modern presidency, I also expect different responses from Democratic and Republican presidents. Since the 1960s, the Democratic party has made a strong effort to make minority issues a major component of their party platform (Carmines and Stimson 1989). Some have argued that racial and ethnic minority issues have been the greatest factor in explaining the transformation of political parties during this period of time (Pomper 1989). Consequently, not only will Democratic presidents have to address threats to their presidential power, but they will also be pressured to uphold the positions taken in their party's platform. In this case, the Democratic party will push for favorable legislation on racial and ethnic minority issues. Thus, Democratic presidents will be expected to be more responsive than Republican presidents to minority demands. Hypothesis 3 expresses this claim.

*H<sub>3</sub>: Democratic presidents will demonstrate greater responsiveness than Republican presidents on minority issues.*

Unconventional political behavior relating to minority issues provides a way to understand presidential responsiveness in a new manner, one that links political actions to public opinion. In addition, by testing the theory presented, I am able to discern the characteristics of unconventional political behavior that garner the greatest amount of presidential responsiveness.

# Defining and Measuring Minority Actions and Minority Presidential Responsiveness

A potential problem for studies addressing minority issues is the uncertainty of which topics should be included into categories relating to the concerns of marginalized groups. Results can often be manipulated by simply defining or redefining the terms minority, minority issues, or minority presidential responsiveness. Thus, it is important to establish working definitions of these concepts that are broad enough to encompass all forms of racial and ethnic concerns, while also narrow enough not to include any topic in which an obscure minority connection can be made. To this end, great care is given in defining the dependent and independent variables.

## Dependent Variable

Minority presidential responsiveness is not an easy concept to define nor measure. The role of the president is complicated and multifaceted, and it involves interacting with interest groups, congressional leaders, governors, judges, and the public as a whole. Consequently, there are many ways to simply define responsiveness. Activities such as presidential press conferences, executive orders, executive agreements, State of the Union addresses, presidential vetoes, and even legislation that is signed into law, all offer insight into a president's policy agenda. When we combine this complication with the task of outlining minority issues, defining minority presidential responsiveness becomes a difficult endeavor. Thus, in order to capture an overall description of presidential responsiveness I analyze six ways the president can respond to citizens' behavior: (1) Presidential Memoranda (2) Public Statements (3) Press Conferences (4) Presidential Letters (5) Executive Orders and (6) State of the Union Addresses. While all of these modes of responsiveness reveal the independence and discretion bestowed to the president, they can be divided into two categories: direct and

substantive presidential responsiveness.

Direct responsiveness includes an active response by the president. Executive orders and memoranda fall in this category. *Executive orders*, in particular, showcase the president's independence because they are acts that do not require the approval of Congress in order for these decisions to be invoked. In addition, Congress rarely challenges these orders. Moe and Howell (1999), looking at roughly a twenty-five-year time period (1973-1997) that included approximately 1000 orders, found that executive orders from the president have only been challenged 37 times by Congress. Out of the 37 challenges, only 3 were successfully overturned. The extremely low percentage of executive orders that were challenged shows the formidable power of the executive to act unilaterally. This illustrates the power of the executive order.

Not only is the executive order a powerful resource for the president, but executive orders that deal with issues of race and ethnicity have become more frequent in the modern presidency. Executive orders that address racial or ethnic minority issues became more prominent in the early 1940s with Franklin Roosevelt's establishment of the Fair Employment Practice Commission in 1943. After Roosevelt, Harry Truman took it upon his part to issue an executive order that would desegregate the military. Dwight Eisenhower worked to integrate schools with an executive order that provided assistance for the removal of an obstruction of justice within the state of Arkansas. John F. Kennedy issued similar orders for the state of Alabama. Lyndon Johnson, probably the most notable crusader of minority executive orders, put forth executive orders that allowed for equal employment in federal hiring. Some argue that the establishment of affirmative action in federal employment did not arise from the Civil Rights Act of 1964, but rather stemmed from executive orders that Johnson issued (King and Ragsdale 1988). Jimmy Carter issued various orders that facilitated the entrance of immigrants and refugees into the United States. And even Richard Nixon, whom some might argue hindered minority opportunities (Bonastia 2000), issued an

executive order to coordinate a national program for minority business enterprises.

The *memorandum* is also an effective mode of direct responsiveness. A memorandum is a pronouncement by the president issued to one of the federal agencies that either conveys information on an issue or directs a course of action. It is more than just a simple letter or note. Phillip Cooper states that “as a practical matter, the memorandum is being used as the equivalent of an executive order but without fitting into its existing legal requirements” (2002, 83). Throughout the modern presidency, presidents have used memorandums to direct federal agencies in the administration on racial and ethnic issues. For example, Richard Nixon sent a memorandum to the heads of all federal departments directing them to make “every reasonable effort to insure that the Federal Government is an equal opportunity employer” (Woolley and Peters 2008). Likewise, Gerald Ford sent a memorandum to all federal agencies stressing the importance of his minority business development program. As these examples show, the presidential memorandum is a good measure of responsiveness that lacks the publicity of a public statement, but at times, carries the power of an executive order.

If direct responsiveness can be viewed as presidential action, then substantive responsiveness can be thought of more as presidential rhetoric. Public statements, State of the Union addresses, letters, and press conferences are considered substantive presidential responsiveness. These acts are termed “substantive” because the president is not directly acting upon an issue, but rather is acknowledging that a problem exists on that topic.

Presidential *public statements* include all of the speeches, addresses, and signing statements of the president. Public statements reveal the immediate response that presidents have to a particular protest event or cluster of protest events in a particular week or month. Public statements do more than just acknowledge an event occurred; they often indicate how the president plans to address the grievances. With the inclusion of the signing statements, we are also informed about the way presidents interpret a bill or how he plans to

implement legislation. Thus, the variety of statements a president can make is extensive, ranging from Lyndon Johnson's statement marking the anniversary of the League of United Latin American Citizens to George H. W. Bush's signing statement on the Civil Rights Act of 1991.

The *press conference* can be viewed as a place where the president sets the agenda. The presidential press conference only refers to the remarks made by the president before the press corps renders questions. Thus, when the president makes remarks in this venue, he is not merely responding to a question but offering prepared comments that address a current situation. While press conferences can be viewed as another venue for presidential rhetoric, similar to public statements, the regular interaction with the press makes this a venue where news is routinely disseminated to the public. It is less of a response to a particular event or grouping of events, but rather a place to keep the public informed about the actions of the administration. An example of this is Jimmy Carter's press conference on January 17, 1979, in which he discussed the administration's plan to address the economic needs of disadvantaged minority groups.

*Presidential letters* are among the best sources of information for revealing personal relationships or offering insight into closed-door discussions. Presidents send letters for various reasons, which includes many circumstances that range from addressing a public situation to expressing condolences for the death of a popular public figure. Presidential letters can be especially insightful into issues of race, because they provide information about private interactions that the president might not want to publicly address. For example, the consequence of the Supreme Court decision to integrate the public school system is a situation that President Eisenhower rarely discussed publicly, but was forced to address privately. In a letter sent to Governor LeRoy Collins on March 31st, 1956, President Eisenhower addressed the governor's proposition to meet with the attorneys general. Eisenhower writes:

*Your telegram of March twenty-second, in which you suggest that a conference of Southern Governors and Attorneys General be called by me to review 'the South's present problems in the whole field of racial relations,' has had my thoughtful attention...I am deeply cognizant of the difficult adjustments confronting some localities in complying with the school decision of the Supreme Court. It seems to me, however, that the progress already made in certain regions of the South before and since this decision is a clear indication that we can look forward to even greater progress if we can look to moderate and responsible leadership supported by a spirit of patience on the part of all of our people. (Woolley and Peters 2008)*

Arguably, the most grandiose mode of substantive responsiveness is the *State of the Union address*. Typically, the State of the Union address is given at the beginning of a year. During the address, the president puts forth his legislative proposals for the upcoming year and discusses major issues that are currently affecting the nation. While State of the Union addresses are not direct actions like executive orders, these speeches reveal much about how the president responds to citizens' political behavior. State of the Union addresses allow presidents to be strategic in their actions (Cohen 1995; Ostrom and Simon 1988). Presidential speeches not only allow the president to react to national events, but also to manipulate these events (Simon and Ostrom 1985).

Since executive orders, memorandums, public statements, press conferences, presidential letters, and State of the Union addresses reveal a considerable amount of autonomy in the president's decisions, it is likely that individual characteristics will be reflected in his actions. Moreover, because these forms of executive behavior are autonomous, both sole credit and blame can be discerned from his behavior. Hence, these direct and substantive responses are approaches the president can use to help or hinder threats to his presidential power. If the president responds to issues that address discrimination, immigration, education of underprivileged students, welfare programs, or assistance for low-income families by using any of the direct or substantive approaches highlighted previously, this is defined as presidential

Table 1: Frequency of Responsiveness to Racial and Ethnic Minority Concerns by Various Presidential Actions

	Letters	Press	Statements	Memorandum	SOU Address	Orders
<b>Eisenhower</b> (1955 - 1960)	4	2	12	0	81	4
<b>Kennedy</b> (1961 - 1963)	9	10	17	2	23	9
<b>Johnson</b> (1963 - 1968)	13	17	37	3	67	8
<b>Nixon</b> (1969 - 1973)	6	1	16	4	32	5
<b>Ford</b> (1973-1976)	3	2	4	3	27	3
<b>Carter</b> (1977-1980)	4	8	17	7	76	17
<b>Reagan</b> (1981-1988)	3	3	13	2	66	8
<b>Bush</b> (1989-1992)	0	5	18	1	29	5

*Notes:* Data on presidential letters, press conferences, public statements, memoranda, and executive orders were compiled by the author using the Presidential Public Papers. Data on the State of the Union Address was compiled from the *Policy Agendas Project*.

Letter = Number of presidential letters

News Press = Number of press conferences

Statements = Number of occasions a public statement was made, including Signing Statements.

SOU Address = Number of sentences in the State of the Union Address

Orders = Number of executive orders

minority responsiveness.<sup>6 7</sup> Table 1 shows the distribution of minority responsiveness by president across the six modes of presidential action.

<sup>6</sup>Expanding minority issues beyond civil rights is an important aspect of this analysis. Minorities not only marched for issues of civil rights but they also protested on issues of poverty as seen by the Poor People’s March and Demonstration in May and June of 1968 (Mars 1969). Nick Kotz writes that even the great leaders during the heart of the Civil Rights Movement believed “that the problems of civil rights and poverty were inextricably connected” (2005, 300).

<sup>7</sup>There are other ways to measure presidential responsiveness that are not used in this study. For example, Canes-Wrone and Shotts (2004) examine presidential responsiveness in terms of policy congruence, in which congruence is measured by whether or not the president’s budgetary proposal on a given issue is the direction preferred by the mass public.

## Independent Variables

The independent variable in this study is a measure of citizens' unconventional political actions. Thus, I define minority unconventional political behavior as "collective behavior that uses some set of ethnic markers (such as skin color, or nationality) as the basis for membership in a group that also articulates a grievance (such as protest against discrimination)" (Olzak 2007, 2). In order to understand and measure *threatening* unconventional political behavior, I go beyond simply examining whether or not a protest event occurred to explore the content of political behavior. When an individual demonstrates or marches, the success of his or her political actions hinges upon the size of the group, the length of time the behavior was conducted, and the political organizations involved, among other factors. This is the content of political actions, and this content is often overlooked in studies of political behavior. This content, however, matters in terms of presidential responsiveness. More specifically, I posit that the content seen in threatening political action is a strong determinant of presidential responsiveness to behavior on minority issues. I conceptualize threat as political actions that involve any of the six definitions that follow: (1) political actions that last longer than a day, (2) political actions that involve more than one hundred individuals, (3) political actions that garner a police presence, (4) political actions that lead to an arrest, (5) political actions that involve individuals carrying weapons, and (6) political actions that involve death. I measure this concept by transforming the six definitions given above into binary variables, and then summing across the binary variables to calculate a threat score. Thus, any given protest event can have a threat score that ranges from 0 to 6. In Figure 1, I take all of the protest events that occurred in a particular quarter and aggregate their threat score. Not surprisingly, the highest level of threat occurred during the mid-1960s, the height of the civil rights era. Since that time, the level of threat has fluctuated between moderate to very little.

To thoroughly test the theory presented, I account for other possible explanations of presidential responsiveness towards minority unconventional political behavior. For instance, it is

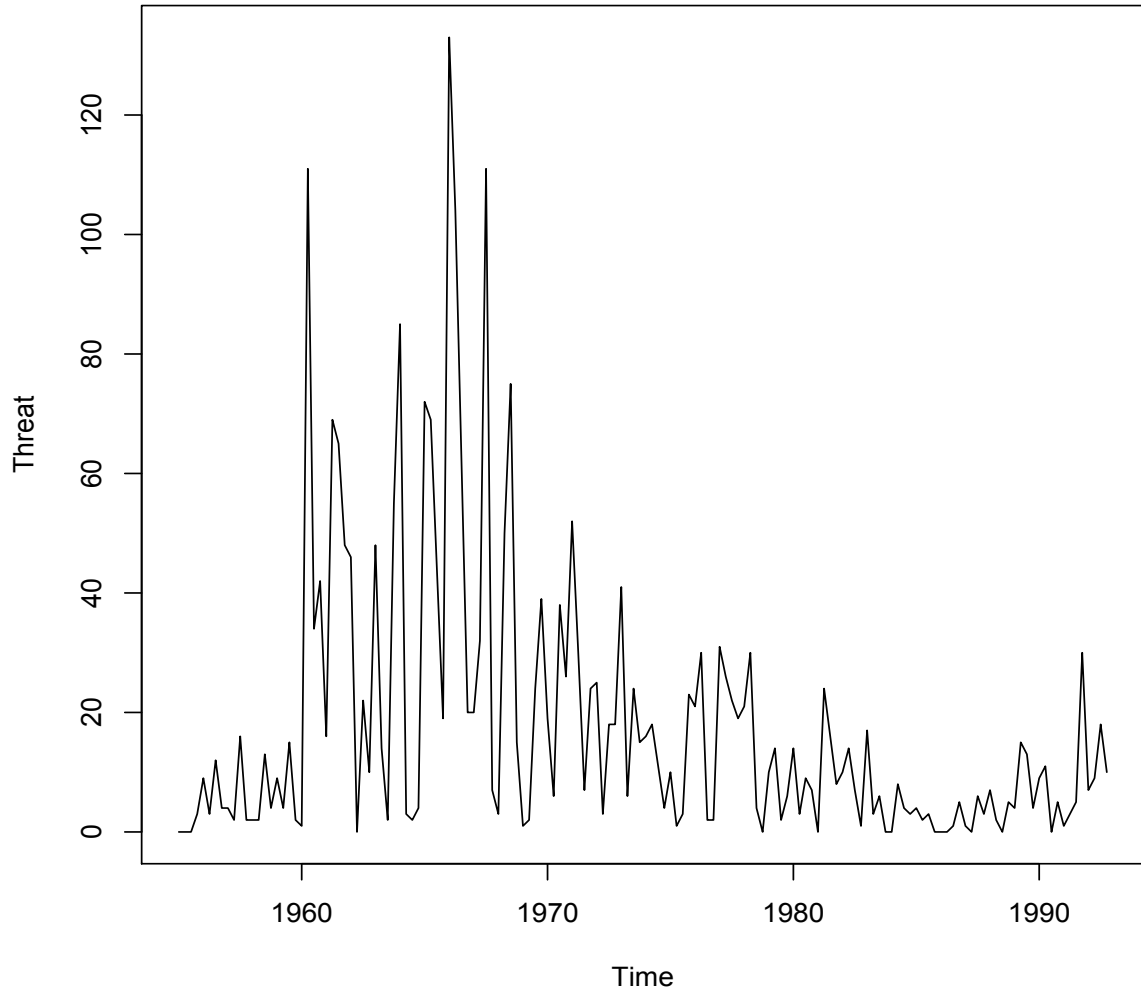
possible that presidents are responsive to any form of unconventional political action, regardless of whether these activities include some level of threat. To account for this possibility, I include the total number of unconventional political events for each year. Other characteristics of unconventional political action might also explain responsiveness. For example, a well-established interest group, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) or the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), backing a particular event could send a signal that the issue citizens are protesting is an important topic that should garner attention. In addition, an interest group might be able to indirectly lobby the president by putting pressure on his political party. To account for the effect that interest groups might have on presidential responsiveness, I include an interest group variable, which captures the percentage of unconventional political events that were backed by a minority coalition.

The theory tested here revolves around the idea that threatening unconventional political behavior is conducted in one time period, after which race rises in importance on the public agenda, and the ascension of race on the public agenda is followed by a response from the president. The theory implies that at times it is neither political actions nor public opinion in and of themselves that garner the president's attention, but rather the interaction of these two variables. To measure the oscillation of minority issues rising and declining on the public agenda I use the Gallup Poll's "Most Important Problem" series. The variation in race coming on and off the public agenda is captured by the change in the percentage of individuals who feel that race-related concerns are the most important problems facing America today.

Any effect that stems from political protest could also be an artifact of major social movements. In turn, this would mean that political protest is restricted to influencing presidential actions during specific periods of time. To account for this possibility, I include a dummy variable for the Civil Rights Movement (1955-1968).

Figure 1:

**Degree of Threat in (1955–1993)**



Finally, there are institutional constraints seen in government that could further hinder the activities of the president. Divided government, in particular, can potentially put constraints on the president's actions. To account for the effect of divided government, I include a dummy variable that indicates whether the president's party is in control of Congress. I also include a dummy variable for election years. Overall, the control variables as well as the variable of interest should provide a more nuanced understanding of presidential responsiveness to racial and ethnic minority concerns.

## Data and Methods

Unfortunately, data on presidential responsiveness to minority issues are not readily available. Consequently, I compiled an original data set on presidential actions. To obtain information on presidential responsiveness that stems from memoranda, press conferences, presidential letters, and presidential statements, I conducted content analysis on the *Federal Register*, volumes of the *Public Papers of the Presidents* series published by the Office of the Federal Register, and information found in the *American Presidency Data Project* (Woolley and Peters 2008). Information was obtained for the time period 1955-1992. If at any time in an executive order, memorandum, press conference, presidential letter, or presidential statement the president addresses a racial or ethnic concern, this document is coded with a "1"; otherwise, the document is coded with a "0". The total number of documents in which the president responds to racial and ethnic concerns is then aggregated by quarter. The State of the Union address is measured slightly different from the other forms of presidential action. Since the president only offers the State of the Union address once per year, responsiveness is measured by the number of sentences that discuss issues of race or ethnicity in a given year. Information on the State of the Union address, is obtained from the *Policy Agenda Project*.

Data that analyzes unconventional political behavior rarely has information on the different forms of political behavior that were conducted. Typically, these collective political actions are grouped together and called “protest events.” In addition, scholars of participation rarely collect data that contains information on the reasons citizens engaged in political action. To address these two issues, I use a subset of data collected by Olzak (2007). The data contains information on different forms of unconventional political activity that include rallies, picketing, boycotts, strikes, sit-ins, unlawful demonstrations, riots, and imprisonment. The data also focuses on minority issues. Consequently, the data is sufficient for providing information on various types of political action as well as minority grievances.

## **Methods**

This investigation will proceed as a two-stage analysis. In the first stage of the analysis I examine the influence that unconventional political behavior has on public opinion. Public opinion is the dependent variable and is measured as the percentage of individuals who feel that race is the most important problem facing America. Because the dependent variable has an upper and lower bound between the interval (0,1), OLS could yield fitted values that fall out of this range. While some might remedy this problem by transforming the dependent variable so that it assumes values of the real line (and later model the mean of the transformed responses as a predictor based on one’s independent variables), this approach faces the problem of offering poor inferences that are based on the normality assumption since proportions typically display asymmetry (Ferrari and Cribari-neto 2004). Thus, it is appropriate to use a beta model.

In the second stage of the analysis I take a unique methodological approach to analyze presidential responsiveness. There are six different categories of the dependent variable, which all take the form of event counts. In any given year, the number of times that the president addresses a racial or ethnic concern is fairly low. Moving from a yearly analysis

to a quarterly analysis reveals even a fewer number of counts. Thus, it is expected that, in a quarterly analysis of minority presidential responsiveness, there will be a large number of zero's present in the dependent variable. This could potentially lead to "zero-driven" overdispersion (Zorn 1998).

Another problem that the model must address is the behavior of the lag structure. A priori, there is no good reason to specify the exact timing between when a protest event began and when a response was given by the president. Rather than restrict the model so that the protest will have a constrained effect at a particular lag, I distribute the lags to analyze the lasting impact of unconventional political behavior. In doing so, I argue that political protest that occurs in the present will continue to have an effect on future governmental action, though the impact is geometrically decreasing. To capture this concept, I use a Poisson model with geometrically distributed lags. To account for the distributed lags, the systematic component of the Poisson is slightly altered and  $\mu_t = \exp(X\beta')$  takes the following form:

$$\begin{aligned} \mu_t = & \exp(\beta_0 + \beta_1'\omega_t + \sum_{i=1}^N \delta_1^i \beta_2 \text{threat}_{t-1-i} + \\ & \sum_{i=1}^N \delta_2^i \beta_3 \text{public agenda}_{t-1} + \\ & \sum_{i=1}^N \delta_3^i \beta_4 \text{threat}_{t-1-i} * \text{public agenda}_{t-1}) \end{aligned}$$

where  $\delta_1, \delta_2$ , and  $\delta_3$  are constrained decaying parameters,  $0 \leq \delta \leq 1$ , and  $\omega_t$  is a vector of control variables. Apart from this adjustment in the systematic component, the Poisson remains the same. As a robustness check and to account for the overdispersion that is seen from the large number of zeros, I calculate the standard errors with a Huber White Sandwich

Estimator (White 1994).

Because the State of the Union address is given only once a year, I must take a different approach in examining this form of responsiveness. The State of the Union address is thus analyzed with a Poisson autoregressive model (PAR) of order  $p=1$  on yearly data. In addition, threatening unconventional political behavior is only lagged by one year as opposed to distributing the lag structure, as seen in the geometrically distributed Poisson model.

## Results

### Unconventional Political Behavior and Public Opinion

While the overall objective of this paper is to provide insight into the link between citizens' political actions and presidential responsiveness, it is also important to offer an understanding of the connection between unconventional political behavior and public opinion. One facet of the theory argues that political behavior interacted with public opinion is able to elicit a more significant response from the president than when citizens' actions are ignored by the public. Implicit in this argument is the notion that unconventional political behavior is able to influence public perceptions. Some might question whether the issues expressed in minorities' unconventional political behavior are salient enough to increase the public's attention on racial or ethnic concerns. This uncertainty hinges upon the formation of public opinion.

The formation of public opinion has been characterized by some as being shaped by political elites (Zaller 1992). Yet, Lee's (2002) work brings the elite theory into question. He argues that the influence that stems from the connection between citizens' political behavior and their policy preferences is stronger than the one seen between elites and citizens' preferences. Lee writes "Movement-specific, non-elite attachments on the whole have an earlier and stronger impact on the public's racial policy preferences than do partisan, elite

Table 2: Factors that Influence the Emergence of Racial and Ethnic Concerns on the Public Agenda

	Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	Pr(> z )
(Intercept)	-2.975	0.3451	-8.622	0.0000
Minority Congressional Leaders	-0.025	0.0116	-2.199	0.0278
Unconventional Political Behavior	0.011	0.0039	2.824	0.0047
Periods of War	0.223	0.1669	1.337	0.1812
Economic Indicator (Unemployment)	0.015	0.0574	0.263	0.7929
Precision Parameter ( $\phi$ )	17.893	2.308		
Log-Likelihood Ratio	27.22			
$N$	152			

attachments” (2002, 69). While Zaller argues for a top-down formation of public opinion, Lee’s work posits a bottom-up conception. Table 2 examines the effect that both elites and citizens’ political actions have on the importance of race on the public agenda to determine if unconventional political behavior is able to sway the public’s interest.

The results of Table 2 show that minorities’ unconventional political actions have a significant impact on the public’s perception of race. When a higher level of threatening political actions are conducted, then a larger percentage of the nation feel that racial or ethnic concerns are the most important problem facing America today. For example, if ten unconventional political events, all of which addressed minority concerns and displayed some level of threat, occurred in any given quarter, then this would result in a 12.5 percent increase in the number of individuals who feel that racial or ethnic concerns are the most important problems facing America today.

The number of minorities in Congress also influences public perceptions about race. However, it is a negative relationship. As a larger number of minorities obtain a congressional office, fewer individuals feel that racial or ethnic concerns are major problems for the nation. Each additional minority representative in Congress, in any given quarter, results in

a 2.6 percent decrease in the nation feeling that race is the most important problem facing America.

Other potential explanations for changes in national attitudes toward race are insignificant. One might expect that national events such as war or the state of the economy might deter public attention away from race relations to focus on these broader topics. In spite of this assumption, the country being at war or economic factors such as unemployment does not influence public opinion in regards to racial or ethnic minority issues.

The results in the first stage of the analysis indicate that threatening, unconventional political behavior is able to mobilize public opinion on racial and ethnic minority concerns. This bottom-up affect is sustained even when accounting for the influence of minority congressional leaders and the deterrence of other national concerns. When unconventional political behavior is able to mobilize public opinion it serves as an enforcing mechanism for presidential responsiveness.

### **Unconventional Political Behavior and Presidential Responsiveness**

Given that citizens' threatening, political actions are able to influence public opinion, I turn to the connection between political behavior and presidential responsiveness. I begin the analysis by examining substantive modes of presidential responsiveness in Table 3. Apart from the impact that the Civil Rights Movement had on presidential letters, periods of movements are statistically insignificant. This result suggests that the success of the Civil Rights Movement did not occur simply because a movement took place, but rather because there was a deeper mechanism that brought about change. Even controlling for the influence of movements in the State of the Union address model, the interaction of citizens' unconventional political behavior and public opinion still had an impact on presidential responsiveness. These results add support to Hypothesis 2.

The dummy variable for Democrats provides interesting insight into a president's po-

Table 3: Substantive Presidential Responsiveness

	Letters	Press	Statements	SOU Address
constant	0.728 (2.691)	-5.233 (2.983)	0.994 (1.459)	3.26 (.303)
Events	0.0135 (0.017)	-0.002 (0.017)	0.007 (0.010)	-.0055 (.004)
Democrat	1.213** (0.543)	1.809*** (0.525)	0.610* (0.304)	-1.50*** (0.035)
Interest Groups	0.034 (0.028)	0.060* (0.029)	0.039* (0.020)	0.013 (0.008)
Election Year	0.976* (0.475)	-0.473 (0.534)	-0.137 (0.263)	.338* (.153)
Divided Government	1.118* (0.525)	-0.4108 (0.475)	-0.233 (0.287)	-1.21*** (0.293)
Civil Rights Movement	1.275* (0.619)	-0.831 (0.728)	0.578 (0.346)	-.055 (0.328)
$Threat_{t-1}$				.0024 (.0029)
$Public\ Agenda_t$				-.0029 (.014)
$Threat_{t-1} * Public\ Agenda_t$				0.00006*** (.000004)
$Threat_{(\sum_{t-1})}$	-0.067 (0.071)	0.046 (0.064)	0.031** (0.0140)	
$Public\ Agenda_{(\sum_t)}$	0.018 (.198)	0.061 (0.140)	0.201** (0.072)	
$Threat_{(\sum_{t-1})} * Public\ Agenda_{(\sum_t)}$	.0034 (0.0622)	-0.0046 (.0707)	0.0084 (.0052)	
$\delta_1$	0.863 (.536)	0.831 (.113)	0.112 (1.074)	
$\delta_2$	0.153 (3.93)	0.826 (.228)	0.912 (0.221)	
$\delta_3$	0.015 (2.052)	0.601 (0.947)	0.734 (.106)	
$N$	152	152	152	38

Notes: Data on presidential letters, press conferences, and public statements, was compiled by the author using the Presidential Public Papers. Data on the State of the Union Address was compiled from the *Policy Agendas Project*.

Letter = Number of Presidential Letters

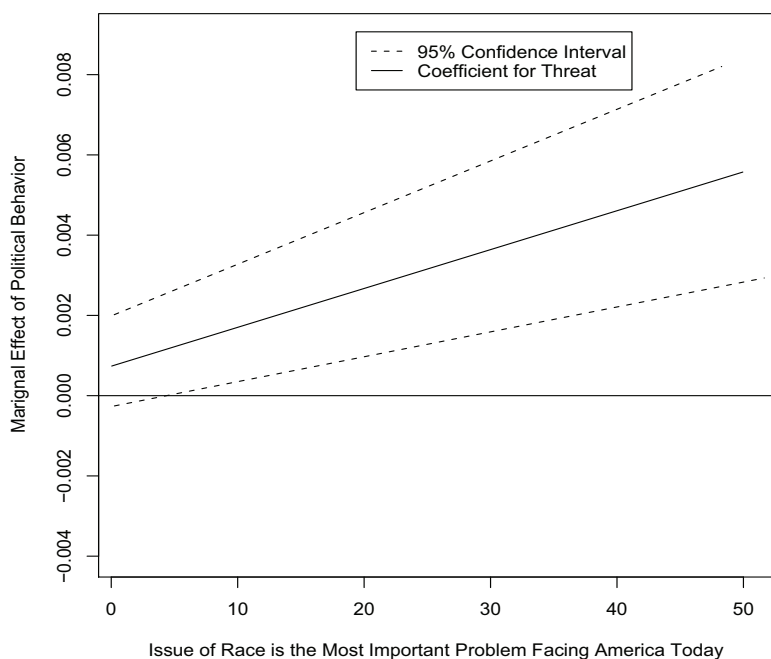
News Press = Number of Press Conferences

Statements = Number of occasions a public statement was made, including Signing Statements.

SOU Address = Number of sentences in the State of the Union Address

litical party and responsiveness to minority issues. The coefficients on presidential letters, press conferences, and public statements are all positive and statistically significant, indicating that Democratic presidents are more likely than Republican presidents to offer rhetoric that addresses a minority concern. This result provides partial support for Hypothesis 3. Ironically, the coefficient for Democrats in the State of the Union Address model is negative, indicating that Republicans are significantly more likely to address minority concerns. Indeed, the fact that Republican presidents are more substantively responsive, in arguably the most significant mode of presidential rhetoric, is an interesting finding. While this result does not support Hypothesis 3, it presents a counterintuitive finding that offers insight into how different presidential types address racial and ethnic concerns.

Figure 2: **Marginal Effect of Threatening Political Actions on the Number of Sentences in the State of the Union Address**



The variable of interest, threatening unconventional political behavior, does influence the number of public statements the president makes on minority issues. When the level of threatening unconventional political behavior is not followed by race increasing on the public agenda, an increase in the level of threat increases the mean number of public statements by 3 percent in a given quarter, holding other variables constant. Thus, if the threat level exhibited by protest in a quarter reaches 12.5, the average level of threat in the data, then we should expect to see a 37.5 percent increase in the average number of public statements that address minority issues. However, this impact is short-lived. By the second quarter, the effect of threatening unconventional political behavior is negligible, as indicated by the low value on  $\delta_1$ . These results provide partial support for Hypothesis 1a.

Hypothesis 1b, concerning the interaction of political behavior and public opinion, is validated by the results in the State of the Union address and Executive Order models. Unlike the results for presidential statements, minorities' unconventional political behavior and public opinion on race are either insignificant or not in the direction that is expected in the State of the Union address model. Conversely, the interaction term is both statistically significant and in the direction that is expected. Figure 2 shows the marginal effect of threatening political actions on presidential attention to minority concerns in the State of Union address, while varying the percentage of individual who feel that race relations is the most important problem facing America today. When the average level of threat in each year, 47, is not followed by the public viewing racial and ethnic concerns as a problem facing America, then the number of sentences in the State of the Union addresses that relate to minority concerns only increases by 5 percent. However, if unconventional political actions are followed by 8 percent of the nation feeling that race is the most important problem facing America today, then the number of sentences that relate to racial or ethnic minority concerns increases by 15 percent.

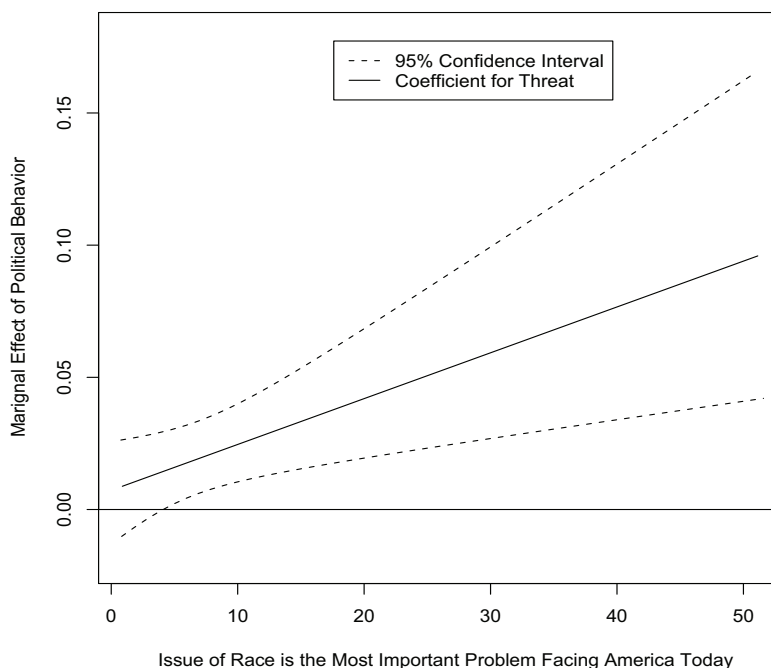
Though presidential rhetoric on minority issues does offer insight into a president's po-

Table 4: Direct Presidential Responsiveness

	Memorandum	Executive Orders
constant	-0.955 (4.463)	-3.883 (2.802)
Events	0.0419 (0.029)	0.004 (0.017)
Democrat	1.649** (0.591)	1.083* (0.462)
Interest Groups	-0.048 (0.063)	0.001 (0.034)
Election Year	-0.5626 (0.655)	-0.018 (0.363)
Divided Government	0.920 (0.597)	-0.938* (0.463)
Civil Rights Movement	-1.228 (0.949)	-1.163** (0.488)
$Threat_{(\sum t-1)}$	0.009 (0.012)	0.008 (0.006)
$Public\ Agenda_{(\sum t)}$	-0.054* (0.026)	0.073 (0.014)
$Threat_{(\sum t-1)}$	0.005	0.0019*
$Public\ Agenda_{(\sum t)}$	(0.0008)	(0.004)
$\delta_1$	0.737 (0.728)	0.009 (0.084)
$\delta_2$	0.019 (0.026)	0.831 (0.325)
$\delta_3$	0.166 (1.6243)	0.578 (0.7892)
$N$	152	152

Notes: Data on memorandum and executive orders were compiled by the author.

Figure 3: Marginal Effect of Threatening Political Actions on the Number of Executive Orders



tential agenda, substantive responses are simply words that offer the promise of action. An executive order, on the other hand, is a form of presidential legislation that indicates an active response to citizens’ political behavior. Table 4 shows that protest actions reflecting a minority grievance are not successful in producing an executive order that addresses minority concerns. The coefficients for both “Threat” and “Events” are insignificant. In spite of the null results of the protest variable, the interaction of threatening political protest and an increase of race on the public agenda is influential at producing presidential legislation in terms of executive orders. Figure 3 shows the marginal effect of threatening political actions on executive orders, while varying the percentage of individual who feel that race relations is the most important problem facing America today. Unconventional political behavior con-

ducted alone, where the level of threat is 13, increases the number of executive orders by less than 9 percent. However, if citizens' political actions are followed by the nation becoming moderately attentive to racial and ethnic concerns, 4 percent, then the expected number of executive orders seen in a quarter would increase by 20 percent.

## Discussion

There are numerous historical examples that support the findings in this work and shed light on the influence of political actions interacting with public demands. The relationship established between Martin Luther King, Jr. and Lyndon B. Johnson is an ideal case. President Johnson was a major supporter of minority rights and opportunities. Arguably, the most successful forms of legislation were achieved under his administration. However, a large number of threatening, unconventional political actions on minority issues occurred during his time in office. The events of Bloody Sunday that occurred in Selma were especially taxing on the president and threatened his presidential power, forcing him to act. In a conversation with Alabama senator Lister Hill, Kotz (2005) expressed President Johnson's frustration:

[Johnson states] if every time [Martin Luther King] wants to march, I go in and tell the judge, 'I want you to enjoin the local officials,' it may look like I'm stirring up these marches... But if you don't, you get a lot of killings, and they say, 'What did you do? [Johnson pauses and continues] 'And you didn't do anything.'

[Senator Hill responds] You've got a hell of a dilemma

[Johnson answers] Yes, I do (290)

The actions seen in Selma were followed by a ten percentage point increase in the number of individuals who felt that racial issues were the most important problem facing America today. Later that year, President Johnson issued an executive order that provided for the coordination by the Attorney General to enforce Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This was a clear example of direct responsiveness.

Similar events that occurred in the Chicano Movement also provide a good historical example that supports the findings in this work. Looking to mimic the success of the Civil Rights Movement, Latinos engaged in a high number of unconventional political actions in the 1970s. On August 29, 1970, one of the largest protests for Mexican rights occurred in Los Angeles, California. This occurrence was perhaps the most violent event in Mexican-Americans' struggle for equal opportunity. When the protest was over, 40 were injured and three were dead. One of the dead was Ruben Salzaar, an esteemed journalist who often reported on the Mexican-American plight. His death galvanized the Latino community as a whole (Escobar 1993). These events were shortly followed by an increase in the public's awareness of racial and ethnic concerns. The next year, 1971, President Nixon exhibited substantive responsiveness in his State of the Union address by stating that the "For the...Mexican-American, and for those others in our land who have not had an equal chance, the Nation at last has begun to confront the need to press open the door of full and equal opportunity, and of human dignity." (Woolley and Peters 2008). It was the first time in the modern presidency that a president directly mentioned Mexican-Americans and addressed their struggle for equality during the State of the Union address.

For the...Mexican-American, and for those others in our land who have not had an equal chance, the Nation at last has begun to confront the need to press open the door of full and equal opportunity, and of human dignity.

## Conclusion

This work has shown that the president is responsive to citizens' preferences that revolve around racial and ethnic minority issues. However, this response varies drastically by different modes of presidential action. Presidential public statements are the most susceptible to threatening forms of citizens' behavior, while presidential letters, press conferences, and memoranda seem immune from citizens' demands. For more influential modes of presidential responsiveness, such as State of the Union addresses and executive orders, citizens' political actions require an enforcing mechanism. Public opinion serves as this mechanism. The interaction of threatening political behavior followed by racial and ethnic issues encompassing a larger portion of the public agenda hinders a president's professional reputation and public prestige. In an attempt to strategically send a signal that he is an effective commander, the president responds to threatening, unconventional political behavior through either substantive or direct actions.

Finally, these findings potentially portray the president as being an opportunistic leader who is trying to protect his power and prestige, as opposed to an altruistic executive who genuinely wants to support the views of marginalized groups. Did President Lyndon B. Johnson issue a large number of executive orders because he genuinely was concerned about racial and ethnic issues or was it due to the fact that external pressures stemming from threatening, unconventional political behavior was greatest under his administration? This study brings this type of question to the forefront. Nevertheless, whether the president is responding because he sympathizes with minorities' struggles or he has a selfish agenda, the reality is that simply knocking on the president's door is not always enough to solicit a response on minority concerns. In the end, individuals will probably have to use the door-bell of public opinion to reach him.

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