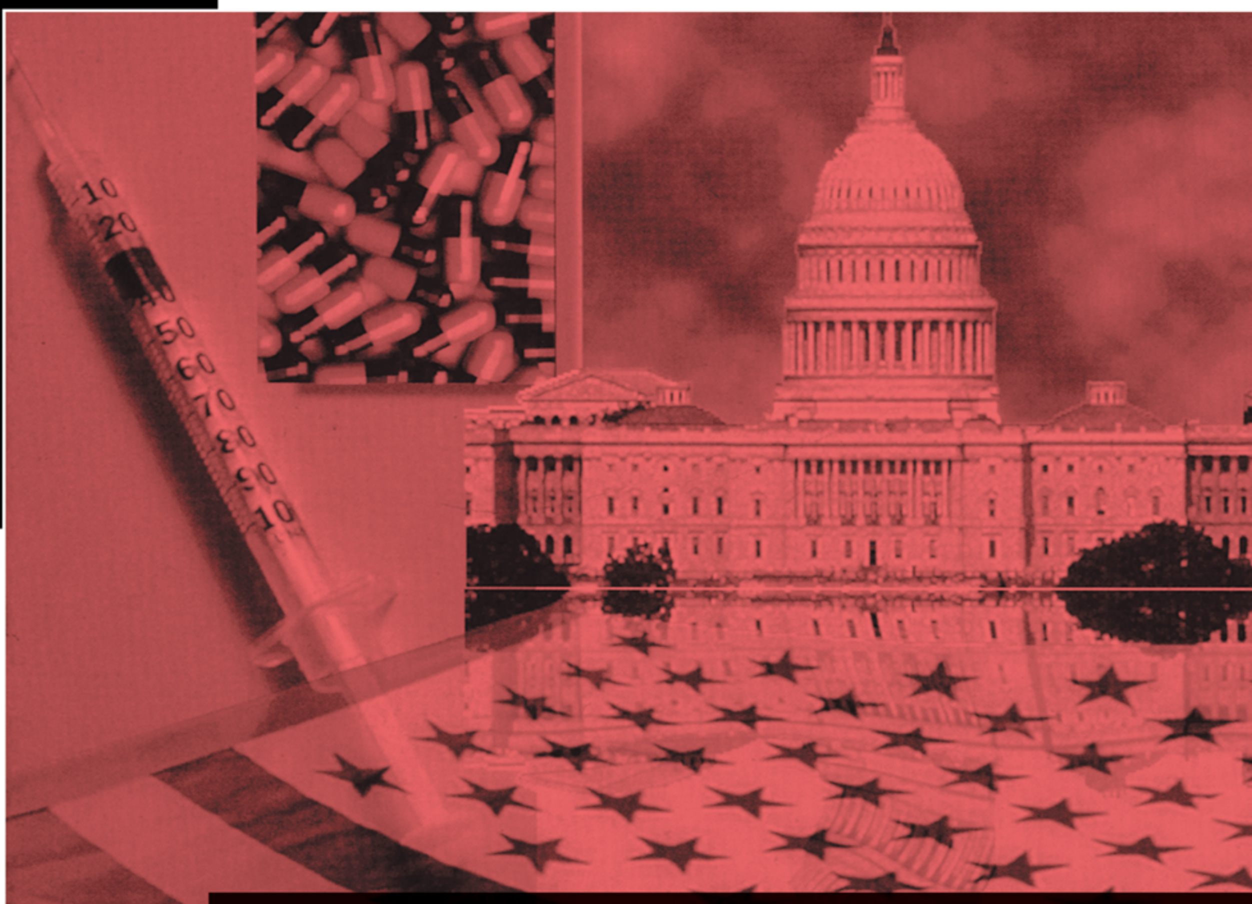
THE MEDIA, THE PRESIDENT, AND PUBLIC OPINION

A LONGITUDINAL ANALYSIS OF THE DRUG ISSUE, 1984-1991



WILLIAM J. GONZENBACH

THE MEDIA, THE PRESIDENT, AND PUBLIC OPINION

A Longitudinal Analysis of the Drug Issue, 1984–1991

THE MEDIA, THE PRESIDENT, AND PUBLIC OPINION
A Longitudinal Analysis of the Drug Issue, 1984–1991

William J. Gonzenbach
The University of Alabama

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

First Published by
Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Publishers
10 Industrial Avenue
Mahwah, New Jersey 07430

Transferred to Digital Printing 2009 by Routledge
270 Madison Avenue New York, NY 10016
2 Park Square Milton Park, Abingdon Oxon OX14 4RN

Cover design by Kevin Kall

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gonzenbach, William, J.
The media, the president, and public opinion : a longitudinal analysis of the drug issue, 1984–1991 / William J. Gonzenbach.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-8058-1689-5 (acid-free paper).—ISBN 0-8058-1690-9
1. Drug abuse—Governement policy—United States—Public opinion. 2. Narcotics, Control of—United States—Public opinion. 3. Public opinion—United States. 4. Drugs and mass media—United States. 5. Presidents—United States 6. United States—Politics and government—1981–1991. 7. United States—Politics and government—1989– I. Title.
HV5825.G623 1996
362.29'12'097309048—dc20 95-20856
CIP

Publisher's Note
The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original may be apparent.

Contents

Preface

The objective of this book is to examine the drug issue from mid-1984 to mid-1991 with a broadened conceptualization of agenda setting to determine how drug-related issues and events, both real and fabricated, and the primary agendas drove the issue over time. Four questions are examined based on this objective. First, how did the media structure interpretations of drug issues and events? Second, how did the president structure public relations interpretations and presentations of issue and event information over time? Third, what were the interactions of the drug-issue agendas of the presidents' public relations agendas, the media, and the public while controlling for the policy agenda and a real-world measure of the severity of the drug problem? Finally, how did the relationships of these agendas differ during the Reagan and Bush presidencies?

A descriptive analysis of the media content indicates that the media's picture of the drug issue was cyclic and structured by drug issues and events, both real and politically contrived. The *preproblem* stage (July 1984–May 1986) was structured by drug-related events of sports heroes, the arrest of John deLorean, the death of DEA agent Enrique Camarena Salazar, and the political issue of President Reagan's drug-testing policy. In the *discovery* stage (June 1986–December 1987), media coverage was structured by the events of Len Bias' death and the political issues of Reagan's war on drugs, which focused on the political issues of testing, military use, and visible internal and external administrative actions. In the *plateau* stage (January 1988–January 1990), media coverage was structured around the very real-world issue of drug-related violence and crime and the very politically driven events of Colombia, Manuel Noriega, and President Bush's plan, war, and drug czar. Finally, in the *decline* stage (February 1990-June 1991), the media's coverage was structured by drug-related violence and crime and the political events surrounding Mayor Barry, the drug lords of Colombia, the indictment of Manuel Noriega, and the transition of power in the drug czar's office. The media content indicated a tone of success for the government's efforts, but objective measures indicated that the drug problems continued.

A descriptive analysis of the content of presidential public relations activities indicated that the presidents' efforts were also cyclic; however, unlike the media, they were structured more heavily by an emphasis on issues concerning the drug problem as opposed to specific drug-related events. The preproblem stage was structured by the drug-related issues of education/prevention, U.S. administration, international administration, military use, and U.S. enforcement. Although the media focused heavily on sports, testing, Salazar, and deLorean during the preproblem stage, the president's major thrust of education/prevention seemed to relate more closely to Nancy Reagan's antidrug education crusade.

In the discovery stage, presidential public relations activities were structured by the issues of U.S. administration, education/prevention, testing, international administration, and demand. The president's priorities during this stage roughly matched the media's issue agenda of testing, U.S. administration, and international administration, although not in that order. The media tended to highlight the issue of testing much more heavily, and focused on the use of the military and on Len Bias' death, which the president only addressed as a secondary focus in his efforts.

In the plateau stage, presidential public relations activities were structured by the issues of U.S. administration, education/prevention, international administration, violence, demand, funding, and AIDS. The presidential priorities during this stage roughly matched the media's agenda of violence, Noriega, Columbia, Bush's plan, Bush's war on drugs, and the drug czar; however, the media tended to focus more heavily on the event aspects of the drug issue whereas the presidents, to a degree, tended to deal with the drug problem in a broader, issue format.

Finally, in the decline stage, presidential public relations activities were structured by the issues of education/prevention, U.S. administration, political use of the drug issue, international administration, violence, and funding. As in the plateau stage, presidential priorities during the decline stage roughly matched the media's agenda of violence, Colombia, Noriega, and the drug czar, but again the media tended to focus more heavily on the event aspects of the drug issue, whereas the president tended to deal with the problem in a broader, issue format.

The analysis of the interactions of agendas over time, based on ARIMA modeling and Granger causality tests, indicates the effects of real-world cues and policy on public opinion, the effect of public opinion on the media agenda, and the effect of the media on presidential agenda—an agenda that followed rather than led. The study finally indicated differences in the relationships of the agendas in the time frames of the Reagan and Bush administrations; however, these differences were not due to differences in the presidents, but rather were the result of the mounting drug problem and the resulting media and public concern. Reagan and Bush's agendas were both driven by the media's agenda, although Bush appeared to react a little more quickly than Reagan.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author offers his deepest appreciation to the following individuals for their assistance in this project: My wife, Lisa, and daughter, Alexandra, for their patience and kindness; Dr. Maxwell McCombs, Dr. Jennings Bryant, and Hollis Heimbouch for their editorial guidance and expertise; Dr. Robert L. Stevenson for his research vision and friendship; Dr. Donald Shaw for his insights into agenda setting; Professor Philip Meyer for his significant contribution to the project's conceptualization; Dr. Gary D. Gaddy for his patience and assistance with data analysis; Dr. Charlotte Mason for her vision of research methods; Barbara Semonche, Sue Dodd, and David Sheaves for their assistance in data collection; and Lana Harrison, NIDA, Joseph Gfroerer, NIDA, and Peter Sutton, Cambridge Reports, for their assistance with the project.

William J. Gonzenbach

Introduction

"The drug problem illustrates how issues rise and fall almost capriciously on the agendas of news organizations, politicians and the public" (Barrett, 1990, p. 1). This was certainly the case of the drug issue from 1984 to 1991. Richard Nixon was incorrect in 1973; the United States had not turned the corner on drug addiction. The drug problem continued, in varying degrees, and caught the attention of the press, the president, and the public, in varying degrees, in the second half of the 1980s and early 1990s. A study of issue agendas in the United States indicates that drugs "have generally not been on the systemic agenda in this century, except for two periods: the late 1960s, and the late 1980s," and that "the second period corresponds to a much greater preoccupation with the problem than the first" (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993, p. 153).

The first major surge of national attention to drugs under President Reagan in the 1980s came with his emphasis on interdiction, enforcement, and punishment rather than education, and a similar tactic by President Bush followed his election in 1988. Others concurred with this view that the rise and fall of the issue relates to the concern and emphasis the president has given to the issue, as exemplified by the two presidents' wars on drugs (Barrett, 1990; Shannon, 1990). Others speculated that the issue was driven by the media: "Lacking any objective evidence of a drug epidemic, we must look to the media themselves to determine why the drug issue received such a concentrated amount of coverage in such a short time" (Kerr, 1986). Finally, others theorized that the public can only accommodate a limited number of agenda items, which, like billiard balls, can be knocked by the break of events from the table, and thus rely on the focus of the media, political leaders, and interest groups for their survival on the public agenda (Shaw & McCombs, 1989). This book examines the drug issue from mid-1984 to mid-1991 with a broadened conceptualization of agenda setting to determine how drug-related issues and events and the primary agendas drove the issue over time.

Agenda research has had two main research traditions since the 1980s: *agenda setting,* a process examined mostly by communication researchers through which the mass media communicate the relative salience of various events and issues to the public, and *agenda building,* a process examined primarily by political scientists and sociologists through which the policy agendas of political elites are influenced by a variety of factors, including media agendas and public agendas (Rogers & Dearing, 1988).

Rogers and Dearing's agenda-setting model (see Fig. 1) offers a broad conceptualization of the agenda process and incorporates three main components: media agenda setting, in which the main dependent variable is the media's news agenda; public agenda setting, in which the main dependent variable is the content and order of topics in the public agenda; and policy agenda setting, the distinctive aspect of which is its concern with policy as a response to both the media agenda and the public agenda. The model also comprises three other components: influence agents, such as gatekeepers, influential media, and spectacular news events; personal experience and interpersonal communication about the issue of concern; and real-world cues about the importance of an issue, which offer an objective measure of the severity of the issue devoid of the *fictions,* or the representations of the issue created by people (see Lippmann, 1922).

Agenda setting, a term used henceforth to refer to the entire agenda process, is by definition a time-related process, yet the seminal work of presidential voting in Chapel Hill, North Carolina (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), and many other investigations of the agenda-setting process were based on cross-sectional data analyses that could not capture the essence of time in the agenda-setting process (Rogers & Dearing, 1988). Agenda setting often has been approached as a nonprocess because it has been generally treated as one part of the general quest by mass-communication scholars for media effects.

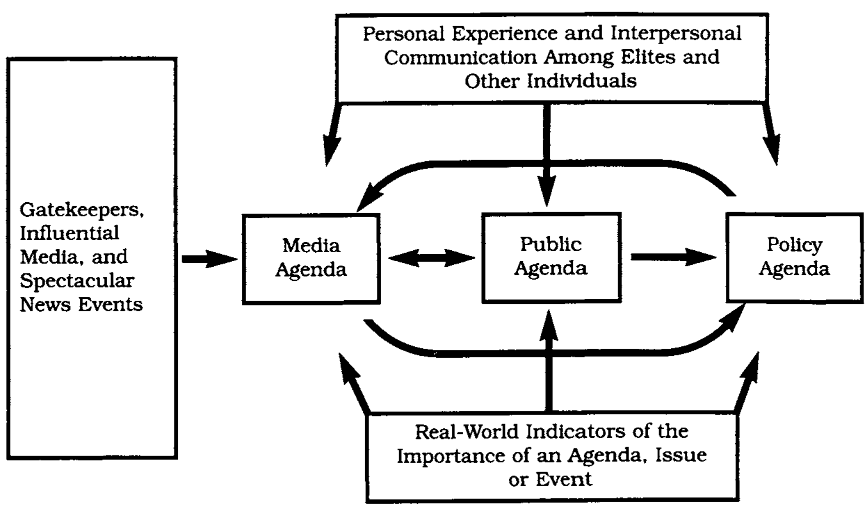


FIG. 1. Rogers and Dearing's (1988) agenda-setting model. Reprinted by permission of Sage Publications, Inc.

Another methodological approach, though rare, that developed at the same time as the early cross-sectional studies was trend analysis, which used longitudinal data to examine the trend in opinion and its relationship to the media over long periods of time (Brosius & Kepplinger, 1990a; e.g., Funkhouser, 1973). These studies were methodologically weak in that they tended to rely on an "eyeballing" of the data, yet offered the foundation for the examination of agenda setting as a time-related process. Later studies of the agenda-setting process employed panel designs with cross-lagged correlation analysis (e.g., Shaw & McCombs, 1977; Sohn, 1978; Tipton, Haney, & Basehart, 1975), but these studies failed to address many of the important mathematical properties of a time-related process, such as stationarity and autocorrelation (Kessler & Greenberg, 1981), and only focused on the agenda-setting process at a few points in time.

Stationarity means a time series has no secular trend, or that there is no systematic increase or decrease in the level of the series as it drifts upwards or downwards over time. Most of the time series encountered in the social sciences do have secular trend and therefore are *non*stationary. *Autocorrelation* means that observations of one variable from different points in time are correlated, or some observation Y_t (an observation in a series at some point in time) is predicted by a previous observation in the series Y_{t-1}. These concepts are covered in much greater detail later in this volume; however, these definitions should provide the necessary basis to understand the concepts.

In the late 1970s, researchers began to use time-series analysis that incorporated regression methods, some of which addressed the important mathematical properties of a time-related process such as autocorrelation within the series, to examine the relationships of agendas over time (e.g., Behr & Iyengar, 1985; Watt & van den Berg, 1978, 1981; Winter & Eyal, 1981). However, these methodological approaches did not fully model the mathematical time-related components of the time series, thus offering findings that may have been confounded by autocorrelated time processes (McCleary & Hay, 1980).

Finally, agenda-setting research turned to ARIMA (Autoregressive, Integrated, Moving Average) modeling to address the numerous problems and issues of autocorrelation in time-series analysis (e.g., Dearing, 1989; Gonzenbach, 1992; Rogers, Dearing, & Chang, 1991). In one of these few ARIMA studies, Rogers et al. asked how this agenda-setting process works over time and stated that a broader conceptualization of agenda-setting research that "considers influences among various agendas while focusing on issue competition, the role of new information about an issue, and changing media interpretations is likely to be more useful in explaining the development of an issue through the agenda-setting process" (p. 7). The study expanded on Dearing's (1989) study of the agenda-setting effects of the polling agenda about AIDS and analyzed the AIDS issue in the 1980s using 91 consecutive monthly time intervals to illustrate what they called a broadened agenda-setting perspective. The study explains how a social issue could remain on the national agenda for years because of the "interplay of a) constantly new