

The Contemporary Presidency: “Going Local” to Reform Social Security

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Presidents have turned increasingly to local media to build support for their policy initiatives, as evidenced by President George W. Bush's recent and unprecedented efforts to reform Social Security. In this article, we examine local newspaper coverage of the president's reform tour and the success he had “going local.” We find that local newspapers tended to be positive, but mostly descriptive, in their coverage of the president's reform tour. Local news stories not only differ from national coverage but also from each other: a newspaper's size and location affect the content of local news coverage of the presidency. We conclude with an assessment of the usefulness of a “going local” governing strategy in light of these findings.

Leading the media, public, and Congress through speeches is at the core of presidential governance. But just as the modern political environment requires presidents to appeal for support through speeches, presidents are increasingly unable to cultivate it. Presidents who attempt to lead the nation are faced with a public that tunes out the president's prime time addresses (Baum and Kernell 1999) and news media whose attention to presidential addresses is fleeting (Peake and Eshbaugh-Soha 2003). As a

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result, presidents have difficulty setting the media's agenda (Edwards and Wood 1999; Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2005) or moving public opinion (Edwards 2003).

The difficulties presidents face moving the nation have not been lost upon recent chief executives. Instead of appealing to the nation, as Ronald Reagan did successfully in 1981 (Kernell 1997), presidents have increased their domestic travel to garner public support for legislative proposals. Since the Carter administration, each president has traveled more extensively than his predecessor (Keen 2001). George W. Bush has continued this trend (Cohen and Powell 2005), with an average of nearly ninety domestic trips during each of his first three years, compared with only sixty during President Clinton's first three years in office. Bush has used domestic travel specifically to build support for his top policy initiatives: tax cuts in 2001 and the war in Iraq in 2003.

Whether presidents travel to address audiences in the all-important swing states, to influence opposition legislators who represent the local audience (Kiefer 2001; Cook 2002), or simply to generate news coverage, the reasons for adopting a local strategy begin with one expectation: local media are more responsive than national media to the White House's efforts to generate positive news. They will cover presidential speeches and do so more favorably than the national media will. Journalists, White House insiders, and some political scientists (Graber 2002) hold this as conventional wisdom and as one of the primary reasons for the increase of presidential domestic travel.¹ Arguably, this strategy provides presidents with a promising opportunity to lead the public and Congress in support of their policy initiatives.

President Bush's unprecedented "Social Security Reform Tour" (Edwards 2007)² provides a unique opportunity to assess the quantity and quality of local newspaper coverage of the presidency. Was local news coverage of the president's tour more positive than national news coverage? Was the White House able to generate substantial local news coverage of the president's policy and did newspapers come to endorse the president's policy proposal? How did the local news coverage change from place to place, by congressional district, or through time?

We expect that local news media will cover presidential trips favorably and that the White House will be rewarded with extensive local coverage of the president's efforts. But because the motivation behind positive local coverage is to attract readers with news of an extraordinary event, we expect that these stories will not be overwhelmingly substantive. Ultimately, therefore, the president may receive extensive and positive coverage but if it lacks significant insight into the president's policy, his strategy of going public locally may be unlikely to affect public opinion or generate congressional support.

1. Recent research on newspaper coverage of President Bush's 2001 trips confirms this conventional wisdom (Barrett and Peake, forthcoming).

2. Edwards (2007, Chapter 6) has called this "perhaps the most extensive public relations campaign in the history of the presidency."

Local Media Coverage of the President

Conventional wisdom holds that presidents visit communities throughout the United States because the national press is increasingly less likely to report on their activities (Cohen 2004) and local newspaper coverage of presidents is more positive than national coverage (Graber 2002). These claims, also supported by journalists and White House insiders, make sense. First, to a local community, a presidential visit is a unique event to local reporters and the newspaper's readers. This alone should lead to considerable coverage of the president in the local media. Second, local media's ability to cover the president differs from that of the national media. Local newspapers lack the resources that national newspapers have (Kaniss 1991). Because of this, local newspapers will rely more on what the White House provides them at staged media events, contributing to more extensive and positive coverage. In addition, local reporters typically have less experience in public policy than national correspondents, which should contribute to a more descriptive, less analytical, take on the president's visit.

Resources—based on the size of local newspapers and their type of ownership—may also produce differences in local coverage. Local newspaper reporters with more resources should be able to write more extensively about a visit and analyze the complexities of policies, whereas local newspapers with fewer resources should offer shorter, but positive, stories about the president. Corporate ownership encourages editors and reporters to think more about the business and profit sides of news coverage (Bennett 2003, 110), resulting in more soft and less hard news coverage of policy issues and politicians. If this expectation holds true, corporate newspapers should generate more descriptive and positive coverage of the president's travels to increase sales, whereas independent newspapers—more interested in journalistic practices of reporting objectively—should produce more substantive and negative stories. In other words, corporate newspapers should be more responsive to the conditioning effects of resources, and their limits, than independent-run newspapers. Overall, the president should expect positive coverage from local reporters, but a lack of substantive coverage may also limit the president's ability to move public opinion at the local level, and thus limit the aggregate effect of a "going local" strategy.

President George W. Bush's Social Security Reform Tour

Unprecedented in scope, President Bush's recent Social Security reform tour presents a golden opportunity to examine the success of a going local strategy. In part to build public support for his policy preferences and pressure members of Congress to support him, Bush engaged in a tireless effort to communicate his preferences for Social Security reform. His campaign-style speeches—labeled "conversations"—on Social Security reform involved a panel of hand-selected individuals predisposed to support the president's ideas and screened by White House staff to ensure that the president would receive mostly positive comments from those on stage. Local and national officials of both

political parties also joined the president on center stage, with local newspapers, and, to a lesser extent, national media covering the president's visits.

President Bush devoted much of the first half of 2005, from February 3 (the day after his State of the Union address) through the middle of August, to campaigning for reforms in Social Security policy. He targeted specific areas of the country to demonstrate and build support for his Social Security reform plan and pressure Democratic legislators to support it (see the Appendix for a complete list of trips and newspapers). By going local to states in which he performed well in the 2004 election and which also elected a Democratic senator or representative, the president hoped to build enough public support for his plan that these legislators would have to support the president's plan, lest they face retaliation from the voters on Election Day. He was following a similar, yet more expansive, strategy that may have helped marshal support for his tax cuts in 2001 (Cook 2002).³ To build public support in the first place, and then pressure legislators, presidents first must generate positive and substantive local news coverage, a necessary, but perhaps insufficient, condition for the success of a going local strategy.

Along with the expectations stated above, we also think the following factors specific to Bush's Social Security reform tour will reveal variation in newspaper coverage of the president. First, the president's Social Security reform tour may be broken down into three phases. Phase one consists of the first month of presidential travel. These trips took place right after the president's State of the Union address in which he launched, before a national audience, his intent to reform Social Security policy in the United States. Multiple stops in the same day, new ideas, and likely substantial national news coverage of the president's speeches suggest that the president put the most effort into these speeches. Moreover, because they meet a fundamental criterion of being news—novelty—media coverage is likely most extensive in this time period.

Phase two involves additional travel and speeches on the part of other administration officials, between March 3 and April 30, 2005. The vice president and other members of the president's Social Security reform team joined the president on their own tour around the country. It is this time period that the White House and the Social Security Administration labeled the "60 stops in 60 days" reform tour. This phase presents conflicting expectations for media coverage. On the one hand, the novelty of the president's speeches may have diminished by March, but this concerted effort may have framed the tour differently. In other words, additional administration resources may have sustained media coverage of this tour, continuing its novelty in the eyes of local and national media. Furthermore, the additional "resources" provided to local and national reporters by what other administration officials are saying around the country could enhance the substance of both types of newspaper coverage.

Phase three involves the continuation of administration officials' and presidential visits across the country. Presidential trips were fewer in number than during the other phases and occurred after the end of the official tour, which surely signaled the end of any

3. Edwards (2002) disputes the success of Bush's 2001 campaign to build congressional and public support for tax cuts through domestic travel. All of the Democratic senators who represented states Bush visited, except Senator Zell Miller of Georgia, voted against his version of the tax measure, even though all but one voted in favor of a subsequent compromise bill (Cook 2002).

remaining novelty to the Social Security reform tour. It is likely that we should witness much less coverage in the national news and even more descriptive coverage by local newspapers in this time period. Local reporters will have less analytical context in which to place their stories; coverage might also be increasingly negative as reporters who do cover the story look for new angles, possibly even covering Washington's expectations that the reforms are dead and that no vote is impending in the year of the president's unprecedented Social Security reform tour.

Coding Newspaper Coverage of the President

Our sample is limited to local and national newspaper coverage of President Bush's Social Security reform tour from February 3 through June 14, 2005. We select newspapers, not only because the availability of local television news programs is limited but also because newspapers influence the agenda of television media more so than vice versa. Arnold (2004, 246) notes, after all, that local newspapers affect the agendas for all other local media, not the other way around (see Mondak 1995). Examining one medium also lends consistency to our findings.⁴

Data Sources

We rely primarily upon www.newseum.org as our source guide to local coverage of Bush's tour. Newseum.org provided images of each local newspaper's front page and a Web link to each newspaper. We used the electronic version of each front-page story that matched the printed version. In the few instances when newseum.org was incomplete or the electronic version of the paper did not match the print story, we turned to Lexis-Nexis, an electronic database that archives news coverage from dozens of media outlets, or the actual newspaper, which we obtained by contacting the newspaper's circulation office. We only include stories written by a staff reporter, not those stories derived from an Associated Press wire report or a similar news service. We analyzed only a single front-page story from each local newspaper. When multiple stories were present on the front page, we chose the story that focused on the policy angle of the president's visit.⁵ To assess quantity of news generated by the president's tour, we selected a random sample of eight newspapers from a list provided by Arnold (2004).

We selected the *Washington Post* as a national newspaper with which to compare local coverage of the president's Social Security reform tour because of its national reputation for strong daily coverage of American politics and the presidency. We

4. Shaw and Sparrow (1999, 328) make a similar justification for examining newspaper coverage of the 1992 presidential election campaign.

5. In most cases, local newspaper coverage was more extensive than a single front-page story. In many cases, there were multiple front-page stories and additional stories inside the newspaper. We focused on only the front-page story for two reasons. First, national newspapers usually covered Bush's trips with a single article. Focusing on one front-page local article allows us, therefore, to make a one-on-one comparison with comparable attention by a national newspaper. Second, readers are likely to pay most attention to the front-page story, which is, therefore, of most importance in gauging local coverage of President Bush.

retrieved stories relevant to the president's tour from www.washingtonpost.com that were also in the print version of the newspaper. After the first few days of the tour, the *Washington Post* did not place stories related to the president's trip on the front page, so we also code "A section" stories from the *Post* on the president's tour.

Coding Decisions

Vinson (2003, 10) provides a basic framework that we draw upon for coding local newspaper coverage of national politicians (see Arnold 2004). First, we code the amount of local and national coverage as the number of words and sentences in each story. We count sentences because they are easily identifiable and require no subjective interpretation by coders. If a statement begins with a capital letter and ends with a period, it is a sentence. Some sentences may contain more than one idea, meaning that one sentence could contain positive and negative or descriptive and substantive elements. When a sentence contains one or more contradictory ideas, we count each idea as a separate sentence. Key words such as "although," "but," "yet," "even though," or "despite" indicate contradictory statements in a single sentence.

We also code the number of stories generated by the president's travels. Our sample includes eight newspapers selected randomly out of a sample of eighty-eight provided by Arnold (2004): *Boston Globe*, *New York Times*, *Lancaster New Era* (Pennsylvania), *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, *Fresno Bee*, *Rocky Mountain News* (Denver), and the *Journal Record* (Oklahoma City). We searched Lexis-Nexis for "Social Security" in "headline" according to the day of and after the president's visit.⁶

Next, we code what is actually covered, a story's substantive information. We examine the number and percentage of sentences in a story that focus on local content, attribution of sources, the topic of the speech, and its relative descriptive or substantive content. In determining whether a sentence is substantive or descriptive, we considered the extent to which the reader may learn about politics, the president, his strategy for communicating to the media or public, or his policies. If a reader is likely to learn about these things from a sentence, then the sentence is substantive. In contrast, if a sentence discusses the atmosphere of the speech or describes the audience, the president's appearance, or the nature of his travel, then the sentence is descriptive. Typically, statements of support from an expert or politician are substantive, whereas statements of support or opposition from audience members, unless detailed and informative, are descriptive. We also code the source to whom a journalist attributes a paraphrase or quotation, the extent to which a local news story focuses on local interests, and the number of sentences in which the newspaper mentions Social Security.

Third, we code the evaluative content of the story or how a story is reported or its tone or relative level of favorability toward the president. We have coded tone based on the number of positive or negative sentences. Positive sentences include descriptions of an applauding or enthusiastic audience, an upbeat assessment of the president's remarks by

6. Lexis-Nexis provides several search criteria options, including "headline, lead paragraph(s), terms" and "headline" only. We chose the latter, but note in the findings section our results for using the more inclusive former search criteria.

an audience member, or statements in support of the president by political allies. Negative statements include reports of public protests, negative analysis of the president's remarks by a group representative or political opponent, or statements that place the visit in a context that frames the White House negatively.⁷

Other Variables

Among many other factors, a newspaper's audience is likely to affect its evaluative content. First, location should affect local coverage. An area that is mostly supportive of President Bush is likely to affect the tone and substance of newspaper coverage (Barrett and Peake, forthcoming). To approximate the level of support for Bush among a newspaper's readers, we measure presidential support at the congressional district level for the community serviced by the newspaper.⁸ Second, to account for editorial slant that may affect news coverage, we examine a newspaper's endorsement of Bush in the 2004 election and how it may affect a newspaper's coverage of the president's policies. We also determine whether or not a newspaper endorsed the president's policy plan. Third, we assess the presence of media fatigue associated with the president's trip—whether news coverage declines as the number of presidential visits increases. That is, we assess the coverage (its tone, substance, and length) over the three phases identified above. Fourth, we explore whether the size of the newspaper matters—the level of newspaper resources, as the number of readers, measured as weekly circulation numbers as published by each newspaper, using the most recent edition of *Editor and Publisher*. Finally, we compare the effects of ownership—do independent newspapers cover the president's visits differently from chain newspapers?⁹

Findings: Describing Newspaper Coverage

Table 1 compares local and national newspaper coverage of President Bush's Social Security reform tour. These results support our basic expectations: local coverage is longer and more positive, descriptive, and local than national coverage. Although not statistically significant, local newspapers average over 900 words and 49 sentences in their coverage of the president's Social Security reform tour. The *Washington Post*, in contrast, averaged 867 words and just over 43 sentences per article covering the president's trips.¹⁰ Tone and percentage of descriptive sentences both produce statistically significant results, with local newspapers being substantially less negative and more descriptive (and there-

7. We calculate tone as follows: tone equals positive sentences minus negative sentences divided by the total number of sentences, multiplied by 100.

8. When a newspaper serves multiple congressional districts, we compute an average of Bush's share of the vote for the districts.

9. Independent newspapers are defined as those papers owned locally, independent of a major newspaper chain or media conglomerate.

10. Our sample of *Post* articles does not include several reports on President Bush's efforts to persuade Congress or congressional hearing activity because we limit our examination to coverage of the president's visit, not other matters related to Social Security reform.

TABLE 1
Average Comparison of Local and National News Coverage

<i>Newspaper</i>	<i>Words</i>	<i>Sentences</i>	<i>Tone</i>	<i>Descriptive</i>	<i>Attribute: President</i>	<i>Policy</i>
Local paper (total)	903	49.2	5.1	26 (50.4)	12.3 (42.8)	30.8 (60.8)
Small paper	822	44.7	10.3	24.3 (52.6)	12.4 (45.9)	27.4 (59.8)
Large paper	996	54.4	3.3	27.9 (47.8)	12.2 (33.3)	34.6 (62.0)
Supportive district	945	51.9	10.3	26.8 (48.6)	13.0 (47.0)	36.8 (69.4)
Unsupportive district	867	46.8	3.1	37 (52.0)	11.7 (39.0)	25.5 (53.3)
Independent newspaper	865	47.0	6.4	20.9 (44.5)	12.7 (27.0)	34.3 (73.0)
Corporate newspaper	922	50.3	4.5	28.6 (56.9)	12.1 (24.1)	30.4 (60.4)
<i>Washington Post</i>	867	43.5	-6.4	16.0 (30.9)	7.6 (43.9)	30.9 (70.5)
Comparison of means tests (local versus <i>Washington Post</i> coverage)						
<i>F</i> statistic	0.17	1.03	5.24	7.70	0.02	1.56
<i>p</i> value	0.68	0.31	0.03	0.01	0.88	0.22

Note: Tone equals positive sentences minus negative sentences divided by the total number of sentences, multiplied by 100. Percentages of total average number of sentences are in parentheses. For attribution to the president, percentages are based on total attributed sentences. The cutoff between small and large papers is estimated based on an average weekday circulation of each newspaper of 170,000.

Total N is 44, with 30 local newspaper articles and 14 *Post* articles, 11 independent newspapers, and 18 small newspapers.

fore less substantive) than national coverage. Much of the tonal differences between local newspapers and the *Post* occur because the *Post* articles tend to be much more negative, not that local newspapers tended to be much more positive. Local newspapers also report on the policy aspects of Social Security reform and attribute more statements to the president than the *Washington Post* does, although these differences are not statistically significant.

Table 1 also reveals differences across small and large local newspapers. Generally, local newspapers are quite similar, regardless of size. Each offers roughly the same percentage of descriptive and policy-specific sentences. The percentage of sentences which large and small local newspapers attribute to the president is similar as well. Tone and length differ substantially, however. Small local newspapers are more positive than large ones,¹¹ suggesting that a presidential visit is even more novel to a smaller community than it is to a larger city.¹² Large local newspapers also devote more space to covering

11. The relationship between the dummy for large papers and tone is negative (Kendall's tau $b = -.28$, $p = .07$). The relationship is stronger when raw circulation numbers are used to measure size (Pearson's $r = -.44$, $p = .02$).

12. This may also be because small newspapers serve less urban communities. Urban communities tended to support John Kerry in the 2004 election. As a result, large newspapers served audiences less predisposed to support Bush. Circulation correlates negatively with Bush's district vote in 2004 (Pearson's $r = -.56$, $p = .001$).

TABLE 2
Average Comparison of Local and National News Coverage

<i>Newspaper</i>	<i>Words</i>	<i>Sentences (Stories)</i>	<i>Tone</i>	<i>Descriptive (%)</i>	<i>Attribute: President (%)</i>	<i>Policy (%)</i>
<i>Local paper</i>						
Phase 1	944	55.4 (9)	3.4	29.6 (53.8)	14.6 (40.0)	44.0 (73.1)
Phase 2	865	46.4 (16)	8.2	22.9 (45.6)	11.8 (46.0)	27.6 (60.9)
Phase 3	951	47 (5)	8.5	29.4 (59.5)	10.0 (36.0)	17 (38.6)
<i>Washington Post</i>						
Phase 1	938	49 (6)	-5.5	19.3 (35.5)	5.3 (32.4)	37.3 (74.6)
Phase 2	827	40.3 (6)	3.0	15.7 (31.2)	9.3 (47.9)	28.7 (70.9)
Phase 3	715	34.7 (3)	-20.1	7.7 (20.2)	8 (44.2)	21.3 (68.2)

Note: Phase 1 was the initial, enthusiastic, and novel phase (through March 2); Phase 2 consisted of an administrationwide effort to advertise and build support for the president's plan (March 3-April 30); and Phase 3 occurred after the official "60 stops in 60 days" tour (May through August).

the president's visits than small local newspapers do, primarily because they have more resources to devote to covering a national politician such as the president.¹³

The ownership of the local newspapers matters only slightly to newspaper coverage of the presidency. As expected, corporate-owned newspapers tend to be more descriptive than independent newspapers. Yet, even though their front-page coverage is slightly longer and covers Social Security about 13 percent less than independent newspapers, independent newspapers are more positive in their coverage of the president's travels. It is unclear from these results whether independent newspapers clearly offer an independent and more critical voice than corporate newspapers, as expected (see Bennett 2003, 110).

Overall support for the president—measured by Bush's congressional district vote share in the 2004 election—also matters to local news coverage. Although local newspapers covered the president more positively than negatively regardless of district-level support, newspapers located in a supportive district were three times more positive in their coverage than newspapers located in an unsupportive district, a substantial difference. Newspapers in supportive districts also tended to devote more sentences (in total and those attributable to the president) and words to the president's visit than newspapers in unsupportive districts. Surprisingly, newspapers in unsupportive districts, despite being less positive than newspapers in supportive ones, offer mostly descriptive coverage.

Coverage of the president's tour also has a dynamic component to it, as evidenced by differences in amount and tone of coverage across the tour's three phases. According to Table 2, Phase 1 generated more, but less positive, coverage than Phase 2. Indeed,

13. Being a large paper correlates positively with words (Kendall's tau $b = .30$, $p = .06$).

TABLE 3
Quantity of Newspaper Coverage of President George W. Bush's Social Security Reform Tour

<i>Coverage Dates</i>	<i>Number of Headlines</i>	<i>Number of Stops</i>
2/3-5/2005	26 (16)	5
2/8-9/2005	5 (4)	1
2/10-11/2005	4 (0)	2
2/16-17/2005	8 (6)	1
Phase 1 averages	4.78 (2.89)	
3/4-5/2005	8 (5)	2
3/10-12/2005	5 (3)	4
3/18-19/2005	4 (3)	2
3/21-23/2005	5 (4)	3
3/30-31/2005	6 (5)	1
4/5-6/2005	4 (3)	1
4/15-16/2005	2 (1)	1
4/18-19/2005	3 (2)	1
4/26-27/2005	8 (6)	1
Phase 2 averages	2.81 (2.00)	
5/3-4/2005	3 (2)	1
5/19-20/2005	1 (0)	1
5/24-25/2005	1 (1)	1
6/2-3/2005	3 (2)	1
6/14-15/2005	2 (2)	1
Phase 3 averages	2.00 (1.17)	
Total assoc. with trips	98 (65)	
Avg. per trip	3.27	
Total for 2/3-6/16/2005	290 (194)	
Avg. per day	2.90	

Note: "Coverage dates" lists the day of and after a presidential visit. Numbers in parentheses represent the sample's total excluding stories from the *New York Times*.

positive local coverage increased over the course of the president's travels, just as the policy focus of local stories declined through Phase 3. Taken together, positive coverage is associated with less policy-related content, although this may have contributed to the overall ineffectiveness of the president's strategy in wooing public and congressional support for his reform plan. The *Washington Post's* coverage follows a different trend: length, descriptive statements, and policy references all decline through each phase, or as the number of trips overall increases. Although the tone of coverage was more positive during the middle phase, the *Washington Post* concluded its coverage of the president's Social Security reform tour with a few negative articles that tended to focus on the president's inability to move the public, or Congress, on Social Security reform.

The White House had modest success generating news coverage on the president's Social Security reform tour. Based on our random sample of newspaper coverage of the president, we find that media responded to the president's travels in a predictable fashion (Table 3): the novelty and enthusiasm characteristic of Phase 1 contributed to the most newspaper coverage, while news coverage declined after this first wave of trips and, not

surprisingly, diminished substantially after the first two days of five visits and speeches. The average number of "headlines" associated with the president's trips (3.27) is modestly greater than the average number of headlines generated per day throughout the tour (2.90)¹⁴ and compares favorably with the average headline count of 2.89 stories coded from a randomly selected set of dates not coinciding with a presidential visit.¹⁵

Discussion: A Successful Strategy?

It is not surprising that coverage of President Bush's Social Security reform tour is mostly positive, yet descriptive. This finding is consistent with previous analysis of this and other attempts by President Bush to go local (Edwards 2007; Barrett and Peake, forthcoming). It is also consistent with the style of the president's visits: President Bush typically responds to questions asked by supportive audience members, not skeptical partisans or members of the national media (see Herman 2004). Limiting the possibility for a negative story in this way tends to increase the likelihood that local newspapers, which have fewer resources than national newspapers, will cover the president's visit in a mostly positive way.

At the same time, the White House's selection of travel destinations is not entirely behind the mostly positive, yet descriptive, local coverage. Although the White House targeted primarily "red states,"¹⁶ the president visited sixteen—over 50 percent in our sample—congressional districts where he lost the district-level popular vote, some by a substantial margin, ranging from sixty-three percentage points in Cleveland to only two percentage points in Hopkinsville, Kentucky.

We find little evidence that the White House either selected locations based on a newspaper's endorsement of the president's plan or that the president's visit led to a newspaper endorsement. Of the thirty local newspapers that we examined, only four endorsed the president's plan, and they did so the day that the president visited. Nine newspapers rejected the president's plan outright, while seven gave no clear indication of support or opposition. The remaining ten newspapers either criticized the president's choice to "preach to the choir" or, most frequently, applauded the debate but withheld support until the president provided specific details. We found no evidence that any of these newspapers later changed their position.

Undoubtedly, this going local strategy was predisposed to generate positive local news coverage, and it did: even newspapers located in districts that did not support Bush in 2004 generated positive local coverage of his visits. But it was not necessarily the areas or newspapers that the president targeted that encouraged this. Rather, the makeup of local news production, its available resources, and the White House's ability to influence

14. Counting stories produced using the "headlines, lead paragraph(s), terms" search parameters on Lexis-Nexis reveals similar but predictably higher averages per trip: 12.8 (Phase 1); 5.5 (Phase 2); 3.8 (Phase 3); and 7.4 overall average per trip.

15. These dates are: February 22-25, March 25-28, and May 9-12, 2005.

16. Only six of the thirty visits occurred in 2004 election year "blue states," with only two of these to states where Bush lost the popular vote by more than five percentage points (New York and New Jersey).

it seem a more plausible explanation. The combination of positive and descriptive coverage—whether the White House intended this or not—may have contributed to the overall lack of success that the president has experienced with his Social Security reform tour. If the president were to invite more criticism, by presenting clear specifics and White House memoranda or fact sheets that could argue why the president’s point of view is superior, he might invite more negative coverage (particularly in districts that do not support him), but also more substantive coverage. The risk is higher, but so is the potential payoff.¹⁷ As it stands, without detailed and substantive positive coverage by local newspapers, presidents may simply be unable to convince the American people to support their policies through a going local strategy.¹⁸

Conclusion

Presidents increasingly turn to local media for positive coverage. We find much support for the expectation that local newspaper coverage of the president will be mostly positive when compared to a baseline of national newspaper coverage. In terms of quality, local newspaper coverage is descriptive and lengthy, and tends to rely on the president’s own words in crafting a story. Resources shape local newspaper coverage, as witnessed by variation in local newspaper size and content of coverage. President Bush’s trips also generated a greater quantity of news coverage when compared with the average number of stories on days in which he did not campaign for his policy reform. Each of these factors bode well for presidents who seek a receptive outlet for their policy messages from local newspapers.

Nonetheless, we do not see positive coverage translating into greater public or congressional support for the president’s policy goals. At least for George W. Bush’s Social Security reform tour, the net result of the president’s strategy bore little fruit. Public support for the president’s handling of Social Security dropped throughout his Social Security reform tour, with a 41 percent approval rating before, but a 29 percent approval rating *after* his administration concluded its sixty-day tour to promote reforming Social Security (Table 4). There seems to be no relationship, therefore, between positive local news coverage (as we have found) and public support (as the White House would expect). As of this writing, moreover, no Social Security reform bill has emerged from committee in either chamber of Congress, and a floor vote is even less likely in the near term.¹⁹ Using local media as a conduit to a disinterested public may not be the best

17. Indeed, many of the newspapers that chose not to endorse the president’s plan (nor oppose it) claimed that they had not seen enough information. These newspapers would applaud the effort to discuss the issue, but bemoan a lack of facts. This suggests that, by providing specific details, the president risks convincing these newspapers to oppose his policies, but also gives the president an opportunity to give them reason to support it.

18. We recognize that the essence of local coverage for President Bush’s Social Security reform could be a function of the president’s desire to avoid discussing specifics of Social Security reform. Only future research can ascertain whether this claim is generalizable.

19. According to an Associated Press report on November 9, 2005, Senator Charles Grassley (R-IA), chair of the Senate Finance Committee, which has primary jurisdiction over Social Security reform, indicated

TABLE 4
Public Support for George W. Bush's Handling of Social Security

<i>Date</i>	<i>Approve</i>	<i>Disapprove</i>	<i>No Opinion</i>
1/7-9/2005	41	52	7
2/4-6/2005	43	48	9
2/25-27/2005	35	56	9
4/1-2/2005	35	57	8
4/29-5/1/2005	35	58	7
5/20-22/2005	33	59	8
6/24-26/2005	31	64	5
7/22-24/2005 ^a	29	62	9

Gallup/CNN/*USA Today*: Do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling . . . Social Security?

a. Based on what you have heard or read, in general, do you approve or disapprove of George W. Bush's approach to addressing the Social Security system?

choice, after all, as newspaper circulation (Edwards, Wattenberg, and Lineberry 2005, 202) and readership (Bogart 1989, 81) have both summarily declined since the late 1960s.

Indeed, if presidents do not translate positive local coverage into achievement of their policy goals, what are they to gain from a going local strategy? Should we conclude that a going local strategy is ineffective? President Bush surely deserves credit for raising the issue of Social Security reform and influencing the public, media, and congressional agendas with his tour. And just as we agree with George Edwards (2007, Chapter 7) that Bush's signature attempt to reform Social Security through a going local strategy was a failure, our analysis suggests that this failure was not due to a lack of positive and voluminous local newspaper coverage. Rather, the president's efforts to lead the public and Congress failed despite setting the agenda on Social Security reform and despite positive local newspaper coverage.²⁰ Our analysis offers additional evidence for Bush's failure, that descriptive coverage, however positive and voluminous, does not provide enough substance to persuade the public or Congress.

The issue itself also seems relevant. Attempting to alter significantly a bedrock of American public policy was not a sure bet from the beginning. Few legislators, even those of his own party, were predisposed to support the president. Perhaps going local on a more popular policy—or at least one that was not as controversial—such as tax cuts, would produce a more favorable result. Despite having little success moving public support for his first-term tax cut plan (Edwards 2006, 206), President Bush was victorious in Congress (see Cook 2002). Whether or not this can be attributed to the effectiveness of that going local strategy is a topic for future research. Indeed, it remains

it was highly unlikely that his committee would discuss the issue again until 2009, after the next presidential election. Grassley acknowledged that he could not even build consensus among Republicans (Dalrymple 2005).

20. It would be a stretch, however, to say he was unable to influence local opinion or the opinion of targeted members of Congress regarding Social Security reform, as we do not have local-level opinion data or clear positions (through a roll call vote) of individual congresspersons.

to be seen whether a larger sample, across numerous policy issues and administrations, will reveal that local media coverage of the president is positive and whether this positive coverage is a boon to presidential governance despite a lack of substance.

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Appendix

Stops on the President's Social Security Reform Tour

<i>Location</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Headline</i>	<i>Newspaper Used</i>
Great Falls, MT	2/3/05	President makes his pitch	<i>Billings Gazette</i>
Fargo, ND	2/3/05	Crowd pleaser	<i>Forum</i>
Tampa, FL	2/4/05	Bush pushes his plan	<i>Tampa Tribune</i>
Little Rock, AR	2/4/05	Bush rips foes of Social Security plan	<i>Arkansas Democrat Gazette</i>
Omaha, NE	2/4/05	Nebraskan isn't sold yet	<i>Omaha World Herald</i>
Detroit, MI	2/8/05	Presidential appeal	<i>Detroit Free Press</i>
Raleigh, NC	2/10/05	Opponents gear up to take on president	<i>News & Observer</i>
Blue Bell, PA	2/10/05	Bush grabs "third rail" in Mont. Co.	<i>Morning Call</i> (Allentown)
Portsmouth, NH	2/16/05	Bush makes his case in NH	<i>Union Leader</i> (Manchester)
Notre Dame, IN	3/4/05	Mr. Bush goes to South Bend	<i>Times</i> (NW Indiana)
Westfield, NJ	3/4/05	Two from Paterson cheer, jeer Bush plan	<i>Herald News</i>
Montgomery, AL	3/10/05	"Let's fix this system," Bush says	<i>Montgomery Advertiser</i>
Louisville, KY	3/10/05	Pitch for "investor class"	<i>Herald-Leader</i> (Lexington)
Shreveport, LA	3/11/05	Bush builds support for plan	<i>Times</i>
Memphis, TN	3/11/05	Looking for converts	<i>Commercial Appeal</i>
Orlando, FL	3/18/05	Bush barnstorms Orlando	<i>Orlando Sentinel</i>
Pensacola, FL	3/18/05	Bush touts reform ideas	<i>Pensacola News Journal</i>
Tucson, AZ	3/21/05	Crowd rallies for Bush	<i>Arizona Daily Star</i>
Denver, CO	3/21/05	Whistle-stop for Social Security	<i>Rocky Mountain News</i> (Denver)
Albuquerque, NM	3/22/05	Bush makes his case: president tells ABQ audience	<i>Albuquerque Journal</i>
Cedar Rapids, IA	3/30/05	Bush pushes for overhaul; Social Security ideas touted	<i>Gazette</i> (Cedar Rapids)
Parkersburg, WV	4/5/05	Bush pushes agenda in Parkersburg visit	<i>Charleston Gazette</i>
Kirtland, OH	4/15/15	Ohio a model for reform, Bush says	<i>Plain Dealer</i> (Cleveland)

(continued)

<i>Location</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Headline</i>	<i>Newspaper Used</i>
Columbia, SC	4/18/05	"I'm just warming up," Bush tells SC leaders	<i>State</i>
Galveston, TX	4/26/05	Presidential visit: real assets, not IOUs	<i>Daily News</i>
Canton, MS	5/3/05	Bush sells reform plan at Canton plant	<i>Clarion-Ledger</i> (Jackson)
Milwaukee, WI	5/19/05	Bush's vow on Social Security battle: "As long as it takes"	<i>Journal Sentinel</i>
Greece, NY	5/24/05	President persuades with gentility	<i>Democrat and Chronicle</i> (Rochester)
Hopkinsville, KY	6/2/05	Bush: Social Security "is a flawed system"	<i>Courier-Journal</i> (Louisville)
State College, PA	6/14/05	A pitch at PSU	<i>Patriot-News</i> (Harrisburg)

Note: "Date" is the date of the president's visit. The newspaper headline is for the day after the president's visit.