Election Mudslinging, from the Bayou to the Swamp:
Assessing Agenda-Building in the 2019 Louisiana Gubernatorial Runoff Election

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Abstract

With John Bel Edwards as the only Democratic governor in the Deep South, President Trump supported Republican Eddie Rispone in Louisiana's 2019 gubernatorial election. This study uses a computational content analysis to understand the roles Edwards, Rispone, and Trump played in influencing press and public agendas during the runoff election, and how the association between Rispone and Trump affected the Rispone campaign's agenda-building effectiveness. Collected data totaled 11,000 items. Results suggest support for both campaigns at the first (salience) and third (network) agenda-building levels, while Rispone showed partial support at the second (tone) level. Further, Rispone messages stressing President Trump were less effective at the first and second agenda-building levels than were messages that did not mention the president. Findings offer theoretical contributions via association agenda-building and agenda-sharing, as well as and practical applications for public relations practitioners.

Introduction

The concept of influencers is documented both in scholarship (Childers et al., 2019) and practice (Wiley, 2020). This extends to politics, where actors influence press coverage and public discourse to benefit their political interests. While modern information ecosystems are saturated, organizations use influencers to cut through the noise to deliver messages. In finding influencers to cut through the noise, organizations must be careful of controversial personalities.

In 2017, President Trump thanked Linda Bean of L.L. Bean for her support in the 2016 presidential election. This led to backlash against the company necessitating a response. The company's statement minimized Bean's role in the company and acknowledged her political activism as not representing the company (Bryant, 2017). Data suggests 49% of respondents are less likely to use products endorsed by President Trump (Chini & Bronston, 2017). Politicians friendly to President Trump have also shied away from public associations. Boris Johnson distanced himself from President Trump during a 2019 NATO summit (Warrell et al., 2019). Due to Trump's lack of popularity in Great Britain (McGee, 2019), Johnson sidestepped associations, arguing for non-intervention between Britain and the U.S. (Swinford, 2019).

Morning Consult (2019) suggests endorsements by President Trump in the 2018 midterms reduced likelihood to vote for a candidate among Democrats and Independents. For Republicans, a Trump endorsement was the second-most incentivizing behind only the RNC (Easly, 2018). Such influence, however, is limited. Qiu (2018) suggests President Trump's endorsee win record is high in primaries, while lower in general elections. Of the Republicans he endorsed in 2018, 56% won a general election compared to Obama's 61% and Biden's 67% success rates (Kamarck, 2018). This supplements the perceived damage Trump associations had across elections in Kentucky, Alabama, Virginia, Kansas, and Wisconsin (Frank, 2019).

This study introduces association agenda-building, i.e., influencers as moderating variables to the agenda-building process. This research investigates if political campaigns influenced press and public agendas, but also how influencer associations impacted the agenda-building process. Addressing Louisiana's 2019 gubernatorial runoff election, this study assesses how an association with President Trump impacted a Republican campaign's ability to transfer object salience, sentiment, and networks to press and public agendas.

Literature Review

Democratic elections are about engaging voters and managing public image to a greater extent than opponents. This brings the relationship and reputation management tenets of public relations (Ferguson, 2018) into political spheres. Politicians, campaigns, political parties, and governments engage with the press, key publics, and stakeholders to achieve political or policy victories (Strömbäck & Kiousis 2019).

Political public relations is a merger of public relations functions with political interests. In U.S. elections, this is understood through how the 1960 Nixon-Kennedy debate helped Kennedy defeat the favored Vice President Nixon, or in the damage rendered to the Dukakis

presidential campaign's 1988 tank photo op. Utilizing image, reputation, and expectation management is a vital responsibility for political elites.

Agenda-Setting & Agenda-Building

Much scholarship in political communication is informed by the agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), asserting that the press transfer object salience from their agenda to the public's agenda. In essence, news coverage influences what issues and stakeholders the public thinks about. Political public relations takes its foundation from similar thinking, in the form of agenda-building theory. This framework supports the notion of the agenda-setting theory, but also asks who sets the press's agenda? The question opens the door for public relations practitioners in political, corporate, and non-profit organizations to proactively influence the press and the public agendas.

Through news management tactics, organizations provide pre-packaged content to news organizations, subsidizing information gathering costs, giving actors greater accessibility to influence press and public narratives (Arceneaux et al., 2019). Where agenda-setting is naturally occurring, agenda-building, as a conceptually distinct yet related framework, is purposeful; actors intend to strategically influence. This agenda-building influence is achieved by a transfer of object salience from the organization's messages to press coverage and public discourse. At the first level of the agenda-building theory, objects consist of issues and stakeholders (Albishri et al., 2019).

Understanding the tone or slant in which issues and stakeholders are mentioned is as important as salience. Second-level agenda-building addresses the transfer of issue and stakeholder attributes from public relations messages to press coverage and public discourse (Lan et al., 2020). This second level moves the conversation beyond "what is said" to "how was it said" (Zhang et al., 2017). Affective attributes are characterized as the tone with which an issue or stakeholder is presented (Albishri et al., 2019).

More recently, scholars have moved beyond salience and tone to use network analysis to map and investigate the systematic transfer of linked objects, i.e. intentional concurrent mentions of issues or stakeholders (Lan et al., 2020). This third-level of the agenda-building theory posits regular co-occurrence within public relations messages can be transferred to press coverage and public discourse. It is through such transfer that publics and stakeholders begin to perceive co-mentioned pairs, bundles, or systems of objects, as fundamentally linked (Myslik et al., 2019).

Agenda-Building in Elections

Agenda-building scholarship on elections is rich (Dunn, 2009; Kim et al., 2011; Kiousis et al., 2006; 2016; Lancendorfer & Lee, 2010). Looking at gubernatorial elections, Kiousis et al. (2006) found, in Florida's 2002 race, the Bush and McBride campaigns saw strong transfer of object salience to the press agenda and mixed transfer of object salience to public opinion. There was mixed second-level support for both campaigns transferring attributes to press and public agendas. In the 2002 Michigan election, Lancendorfer and Lee (2010) found support for the transfer of issue salience between the campaigns and press. The agenda-building relationship was reciprocal; while the campaigns influenced the press agenda, they were also had their agendas influenced by the Michigan press. In Virginia's 2005 election, Dunn (2009) found support for both directional and reciprocal first-level transfer of object salience.

To varying degrees, Kiousis et al. (2006), Dunn (2009), and Lancendorfer and Lee (2010) found support for agenda-building in gubernatorial elections. This study is unique from prior literature in that it studies a runoff election. A runoff election is a secondary election triggered

when no candidate receives the necessary majority votes to win the primary election outright. In Louisiana's primary Gubernatorial election, classified as a "nonpartisan blanket primary," "jungle primary," or "top-two primary," all candidates from all parties appear on the same ballot while all voters can cast their ballot for any listed candidate. The primary election ballot consisted of two Democrats, three Republicans, and one Independent. The two candidates with largest number of votes (Edwards at 46.6% and Rispone at 27.4%) were admitted to the runoff election while the remaining four candidates were considered defeated. In the end, Edwards won the runoff election with 51.3% of the vote to Rispone's 48.7%. At a national scale, a similar electoral model is illustrated in France's presidential election, which in 2017 and 2022 saw Emmanuel Macron faceoff against Marine Le Pen in similar runoff elections.

What those studies fail to do is account for external factors influencing the campaigns' capability to achieve an agenda-building effect. This study considers the intervening role of President Trump endorsing Eddie Rispone.

Association Agenda-Building

This paper posits the sub-concept of association agenda-building. Public relations is versed in the utility of mobilizing influencers to endorse brands. While endorsements matter, their impact is marginal (Lilleker, 2019). Only in close races, like Louisiana's gubernatorial runoff, can influencer marketing play significant roles in impacting outcomes (Travers, 2020). An endorsement is defined as the press, or other actor, intervening in an organization's effort to build or grow relationships with publics (Carroll, 2010). In politics, Becktel and Sweetser (2018) support the impact of endorsements on perceptions of candidates.

Opinion leader associations can be with political or non-political influencers. Frank Sinatra campaigned for Roosevelt and Kennedy, later chairing Reagan's inaugural committee. Rapper Shawn Diddy Combs supported Stacey Abrams while Taylor Swift endorsed Phil Bredesen and Jim Cooper. The Trump campaign stressed a friendship with Kanye West while the Biden campaign emphasized friendship with the Obamas. Not all associations, however, are endorsements, rather associations of proximity. During the gubernatorial election, Edwards used his role as governor to link himself to the popular New Orleans Saints and LSU football programs. Neither the Saints nor LSU officially endorsed Edwards, however, they became assets in his bid for reelection.

Lilleker (2019) suggests campaigns, understanding negative messaging can be harmful to a candidate's image, often ascribe third parties to be aggressors. Presidential campaigns often position vice-presidential candidates as "attack dogs" (Bonazzo, 2016). While attacks help mobilize party bases, it alienates opposing and undecided voters. It can be argued that President Trump's support may have galvanized Republican voters in Louisiana. It is unclear, however, what role an association with the president played for non-Republican voters. This study investigates if an association with President Trump affected the Rispone campaign's agenda-building power.

To that end, this study further diverges from traditional agenda-building scholarship to investigate *active public discourse*, rather than public opinion. Recent elections have laid bare substantial inaccuracies in public opinion polling, arguably from the "Shy Tory Effect" (Bethlehem, 2017) or the "Bradley Effect" (Kimball & Payne, 2019). Conversely, active publics (Grunig, 1978) are more likely to make their opinions public (Lee et al., 2014).

Campaigns have vested interests in engaging active publics because they have the greatest potential to become discussion influencers. They also have a predisposition to become

trend setters in a time where social media virality and "trending topics" have the capacity to knock campaigns off message and drive the narrative, i.e. set the campaign's agenda. Therefore, campaigns have vested interests in influencing active publics, via direct public engagement (Jiang et al., 2017) to influence aware publics and latent publics further down the line. That is, campaigns seek to turn active publics into advocate stakeholders, which can be utilized as additional capital or resources during an election when seeking to influence public opinion more broadly, which is comprised of advocate stakeholders, adversarial stakeholders, dormant stakeholders, and apathetic stakeholders.

Based on established scholarship, "active public discourse" refers to the published opinions of verbal, proactive publics (Patnaik, 2018). The term reflects not the entirety of public opinion, rather opinions expressed through public discussion. Both Lee et al. (2014) and Matthes, Knoll, and von Sikorski (2017) conclude that tendencies for breaking the spiral of silence span are prominent in computer-mediated environments, such as social networks, making the concept of active public discourse highly relevant to political public relations scholarship on platforms like Twitter. In support of research by Albishri et al., (2019), this would suggest that using public Tweets about election candidates, campaigns, issues, and stakeholders can serve as a viable source of data to understand agenda-building.

Hypotheses & Research Questions

Agenda-building literature in political public relations suggests the transfer of object salience (first-level) from political actors to both the press and public discourse agendas (Dunn, 2009; Kiousis et al.; 2006; Lancendorfer & Lee, 2010). Based on such knowledge, this study asserts and asks:

H_1: There will be a first-level transfer of object salience from the Edwards and Rispone campaigns and President Trump to the press and active public discourse agendas.

RQ_1: Will there be any first-level difference in transfer of object salience between the Rispone campaign's Trump-neutral and Trump-salient statements?

Likewise, such research has also found evidence to suggest a transfer of object attributes (second-level), namely affective attributes, from gubernatorial campaigns to both the press and public agendas (Dunn, 2009; Kiousis et al.; 2006; Lancendorfer & Lee, 2010). Based on such knowledge, this study asserts and then asks, the following:

H_2: There will be a second-level transfer of sentiment from the Edwards and Rispone campaigns, and President Trump, to the press and active public discourse agendas.

RQ_2: Will there be any second-level difference in transfer of sentiment between the Rispone campaign's Trump-neutral and Trump-salient statements?

Lastly, this study attempts to push beyond the framework of first- and second-level agenda-building studies to consider not only manifest and latent variables imbued within text, but also the network of cooccurrence between issues and stakeholders. Based on the theoretical and methodological approaches of Albishri et al. (2019) and Kiousis et al. (2016), this study asserts and then asks the following:

H_3: There will be a third-level transfer of network co-occurrence from the Edwards and Rispone campaigns, and President Trump, to the press and active public discourse agendas.

RQ_3: Will there be any third-level difference in transfer of network co-occurrence between the Rispone campaign's Trump-neutral and Trump-salient statements?

Methodology

This research applies computational social science to probe the areas of inquiry. A hybrid content analysis is used that merges human- and computer-based analysis to offset the weaknesses of each other. This approach applies a semi-automated coding approach via a lexicon-based algorithm for automated analysis. Such a methodological approach is growing in the literature (Su et al., 2017; Wiedemann, 2019).

Data Collection & Sampling

The Edwards and Rispone campaigns published no press releases during the runoff period; thus, emphasis was placed on the primary mode of public engagement, Twitter. Data consist of tweets by the Edwards (@JohnBelforLA and @LouisianaGov) and Rispone (@EddieRispone) campaigns, President Trump (@realDonaldTrump), regional press (*The Advocate*, *The New Orleans Advocate*, *The Acadiana Advocate*, and *The Bossier Press-Tribune*), and public uses of #LAGov, #TeamJBE, and #VoteRispone. Data were collected during the 35-day runoff election, October 13 – November 16 of 2019.

Coding Protocol

Data were coded in Microsoft Excel by keyword recognition. The lexicon included nine issues and 67 stakeholders. An initial lexicon was developed through a grounded approach by the lead author, a Louisiana native and political communication expert. The list was then refined through an inductive analysis of the Edwards and Rispone campaign materials. The list was further refined by a practicing journalist who covers Louisiana politics.

The nine issues included (1) Criminal Justice, (2) Bureaucracy, (3) Economy, (4) Education, (5) Environment, (6) Healthcare, (7) Civil Liberties, (8) Immigration, and (9) Campaigning. Stakeholder groups included (1) John Bel Edwards, (2) Eddie Rispone, (3) President Trump, (4) members the Republican and Democratic parties, (5) members of the Louisiana state legislative and executive branches, (6) national press, (7) state press, (7) Louisiana universities, and (8) special interest groups.

Table 1. Intercoder Agreement of Issues calculated through Hoslti's Method (1969)

Issues	Initial Lexicon	2nd Draft	3rd Draft	4th Draft
Criminal Justice	1.000	.977	.992	.993
Bureaucracy	.952	.977	.983	.986
Economy	.857	1.000	.983	.998
Education	.976	.953	.988	.995
Environment	1.000	1.000	.986	.993
Healthcare	.952	.930	.995	.995
Civil Rights	.830	1.000	1.000	1.000
Immigration	1.000	.977	.988	.995
Campaigning	.929	1.000	.971	.988
Mean Issue Agreement	**.944**	**.979**	**.987**	**.994**

The lexicon auto coded a sub-sample ($N = 500$) which was checked by four human coders. Where computers offer great reliability, they lack contextual accuracy. As such, the human coders did not check consistency, rather the accuracy of the lexicon. Understanding this,

standard tests for reliability (Krippendorff's α or Cohen's κ) are not suited to measure validity. As a stand-in, Holsti's method (1969) was used. A detailed overview of inter-coder validity for issues is presented in Table 1. Similar measures for stakeholders produced $M_1 = .999$, $M_2 = .998$, $M_3 = .997$, and $M_4 = .999$.

Data Analysis

R was used for analysis. Spearman's rho correlations assessed rank order correlations between mentions of issues and stakeholders in campaign messages with those by the press and public (Albishri, et al., 2019; Neil et al., Zhang et al., 2017). Cross-lag correlations then determined the directional nature of influence across time. Data were split into two time periods, Time$_1$: October 13 to October 30 (18 days), and Time$_2$: October 31 to November 16 (17 days).

For second-level agenda building, *SentinmentR* analyzed the dataset and applied sentiment polarity scores (Rinker, 2019). This package codes the sentiment using a lexicon considering both text and valence shifters. These include 1) negators (are not, cannot, should not), 2) amplifiers (considerably, extremely, really), 3) de-amplifiers (slightly, barely, kind of) and 4) adversative conjunctions (however, despite all that, that being said). Items are broken into sentences with positive and negative words being assigned values from -1 to +1. Clusters are constructed around words to consider proceeding and following text to account for valence shifters. Polarity per sentence is calculated, then the mean of the means is aggregated into averages per item. The package is highly reliable (Kawate & Patil, 2017).

Second-level data were not normally distributed, so a non-parametric test, the Mann-Whitney *U* test (or Wilcoxon rank-sum test), determined statistical differences. Where normal inferential tests look for p < .05 to denote statistically significant different means, this study rather looked for p > .05 to denote no significant difference in sentiment means. A nonsignificant difference meant that, on average, the sentiment of campaign messages corresponded with sentiment captured in press or public content. While unique, such interpretation is documented (Golan & Wanta, 2001; Kiousis et al., 2013; Lan et al., 2019)

For third-level agenda-building, a quadratic assignment procedure (QAP) determined networks of co-occurring issues and stakeholders in political, press, and public content. Relationships of distance between nodes are analyzed and compared in the networks of the other sources. This is a standard statistical approach (Albishri et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2017).

Results

Following data coding and preparation, basic descriptive statistics were determined. Of the $N = 11,118$ items analyzed, 1.78% ($n = 198$) were from the Edwards campaign, 2.30% ($n = 256$) from the Rispone campaign, .17% ($n = 19$) from President Trump, 7.96% ($n = 885$) from the press, and the remaining 87.79% (n = 9,760) from active public discourse.

Inferential Statistics

For H$_1$ (transfer of object salience to press and public agendas), Spearman's Rho correlation tests suggest multiple statistically significant relationships. For issues, agenda-building significance was present between only the Edwards campaign and the press ($r = .700$, p < .05) and public ($r = .833$, p < .01). All stakeholder correlations were statically significant.

Table 2. First-Level Agenda-Building Time-lag Analysis of Issues

	Edwards Time$_2$	Rispone Time$_2$	Trump Time$_2$	Press Time$_2$	PublicTime$_2$

Edwards Time$_1$	-			.703*	.720*
Rispone Time$_1$		-	.702*		
Trump Time$_1$			-		
Press Time$_1$	.771*	.797*		-	.979***
Public Time$_1$	.776*	.790*		.867**	-

A time-lag analysis determined who led the agenda across time within the statistically significant correlations. Results suggested a reciprocal agenda-building influence between the Edwards campaign and the press and public across time. Time-lag data for issues is presented in Table 2. At the stakeholder level, both the Edwards and Rispone campaigns, and President Trump, had reciprocal agenda-building influences with the press and public. Time-lag data for stakeholders is presented in Table 3. Overall, the data suggest partial support for H$_1$.

Table 3. First-Level Agenda-Building Time-lag Analysis of Stakeholders

	Edwards Time$_2$	**Rispone Time$_2$**	**Trump Time$_2$**	**Press Time$_2$**	**PublicTime$_2$**
Edwards Time$_1$	-			.559*	.524*
Rispone Time$_1$	.493*	-	.669**	.740***	.628**
Trump Time$_1$		.593**	-	.522*	.496*
Press Time$_1$	.679**	.666*	.594**	-	.779***
Public Time$_1$	.656**	.559*	.497*	.619**	-

For RQ$_1$ (first-level association agenda-building), at the issue level, Rispone messages not mentioning Trump showed positive correlations with the press (r = .711, p < .05) and public (r = .795, p < .05). Conversely, Rispone messages mentioning Trump showed no significant correlations with the press or public. At the stakeholder level, both Trump-salient and Trump-neutral messages were correlated with press and public agendas.

For H$_2$ (transfer of sentiment to press and public agendas), a Mann-Whitney U test suggests, out of three political actors, only the Rispone campaign (M = .114) showed no mean sentiment difference with the press (*Wilcoxon* = 108,452.5, p > .05). All three political actors showed significant differences in mean sentiment than public content. This suggests minimal support for H$_2$.

For RQ$_2$ (second-level association agenda-building), a Mann-Whitney U test suggests Rispone messages not mentioning Trump showed no significant difference in mean sentiment with both the press (*Wilcoxon* = 61,546.5, p > .05) and public (*Wilcoxon* = 627765.5, p > .05). While Trump-salient messages did not have a significant difference in mean sentiment from the press (*Wilcoxon* = 46906.0, p > .05), they did have a significant difference in mean sentiment than the public (*Wilcoxon* = 472,215, p < .001). This suggests Rispone's Trump-neutral messages had a stronger transfer of tone, specifically with the public, than did Rispone's Trump-salient messages. References to President Trump showed no second-level agenda-building differences with the press.

For H$_3$ (transfer of networks to press and public agendas), statistically significant relationships were found between both Edwards (*QAP* = .455, p <. 05) and Rispone's (*QAP* =

.650, p < .05) networks of issues and the press' network of issues. Only Rispone's issue agenda network was found to be significantly correlated with the public's issue agenda network ($QAP = .622$, p < .05). Further, Edwards ($QAP = .663$, p < .001), Rispone ($QAP = .798$, p < .01), and President Trump ($QAP = .653$, p < .01) all showed third-level network agenda-building influence with the press. Likewise, Edwards ($QAP = .650$, p < .001), Rispone ($QAP = .842$, p < .001), and President Trump ($QAP = 710$, p < .001) also all showed network agenda-building influence with public content. These findings suggest marginal support for H_3.

For RQ_3 (third-level association agenda-building), the data showed that the networks of co-occurrence for both issues and stakeholders in both conditions were statistically significant with the networks of both the press and public. This suggests no differences were present at third-level agenda-building between Rispone's Trump-salient and Trump-neutral messages. Overviews the agenda-building and association agenda-building findings are presented in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4: Agenda-Building Findings (H_1, H_2, H_3)

			Issues		Stakeholders	
			Press	**Public**	**Press**	**Public**
1st Level (H₁)	Spearman's Rho / Time Lag Analysis	**Edwards**	Partial	Partial	Partial	Partial
		Rispone	Rejected	Rejected	Partial	Partial
		Trump	Rejected	Rejected	Partial	Partial

			Press	Public
2nd Level (H₂)	Mann-Whitney U Test	**Edwards**	Rejected	Rejected
		Rispone	Supported	Rejected
		Trump	Rejected	Rejected

			Issues		Stakeholders	
			Press	**Public**	**Press**	**Public**
3rd Level (H₃)	Quadratic Assignment Procedure	**Edwards**	Supported	Rejected	Supported	Supported
		Rispone	Supported	Supported	Supported	Supported
		Trump	Rejected	Rejected	Supported	Supported

Table 5: Association Agenda-Building Findings (RQ_1, RQ_2, RQ_3)

			Issues		Stakeholders	
			Press	**Public**	**Press**	**Public**
1st Level (RQ₁)	Spearman's Rho / Time Lag Analysis	**Trump**	Not Supported	Not Supported	Supported	Supported
		No Trump	Supported	Supported	Supported	Supported

			Press	Public
2nd Level (RQ₂)	Mann-Whitney U Test	**Trump**	Supported	Not Supported
		No Trump	Supported	Supported

			Issues		Stakeholders	
			Press	**Public**	**Press**	**Public**
3rd Level (RQ₃)	Quadratic Assignment Procedure	**Trump**	Supported	Supported	Supported	Supported
		No Trump	Supported	Supported	Supported	Supported

Discussion

This study applies a political public relations (Strömbäck & Kiousis 2019) lens to investigate agenda-building influences in the 2019 Louisiana gubernatorial runoff election. It considers the communications of the John Bel Edwards (Dem.) and Eddie Rispone (Rep) campaigns, as well as President Trump, in terms of issue and stakeholder salience (first-level), sentiment (second-level), and networks of co-occurrence (third-level). It seeks to explain if, and how, these political actors were able to transfer object salience, tone, and networks to press coverage and public agendas.

The study also emphasizes President Trump as moderating the agenda-building effectiveness of Rispone's campaign. That is, it considers how the campaign's attempt to link itself to an influencer, President Trump as the leader of the Republican Party. As President Trump is controversial, with endorsements hurting both political and corporate brands, the study investigates if mentions of the president influenced the campaign's agenda-building impact.

Findings

The data suggest Rispone campaign messages stressing President Trump were somewhat less effective at the first and second levels of agenda-building. While networks of co-occurrence (third-level) were unaffected, the Rispone campaign's transfer of issue salience (full first-level support), and tone within active public discourse on Twitter (second-level partial support) were more effective when messages did not mention the president. This suggests that, despite his popularity among Republicans and Louisiana's conservative nature, President Trump's controversial nature was not beneficial to the public relations interests of the Rispone campaign. This serves as empirical support for the concept of association agenda-building.

More broadly, the findings suggest substantial support for first- and third-level agenda-building and minimal support for second-level agenda building. Analyzing first-level agenda-building, while the Edwards and Rispone campaigns did successfully influence both press and public issue and stakeholder agendas to varying degrees, such influence was bi-directional, i.e., reciprocal between actors. This suggests information subsidies are not unidirectional tools for campaigns to unilaterally "build" the agenda. Rather, they compete with other agendas in a larger information ecosystem filled with elite competition (Golan et al., 2019), coming from political elites, the press, and a range of publics. This illustrates a fluid, three-way interactive discourse between the political elites, the press, and the public. It suggests traditional, bilateral agenda-building in elections is limited by illustrating how election issues and stakeholders are the products of group negotiation and consensus, rather than being set by public relations efforts.

To articulate this another way, substantial evidence of first-level agenda-setting effects by the press and public were present. While the Edwards' campaign was able to influence the press and public agenda, it had its own issue and stakeholder agendas influenced by the press and public. Further, while the Ripsone campaign had its issue and stakeholder agendas set by the press and public, it showed no ability to build the agenda for either group.

Additional analysis showed a noteworthy differential trend in agenda-building influence between issue and stakeholder agendas. While agenda-building evidence was strong for the transfer of stakeholder salience (first-level) and networks of cooccurring stakeholders (third-level), such evidence was weaker for the transfer of issue salience and networks of cooccurring issues. This suggest that, in the context of this case, it was harder for the campaigns to build the agenda of issues than it was to build the agenda of stakeholders.

Contributions to Theory

This study makes two key contributions to the agenda-building theory. First, it offers the sub-concept of *association agenda-building*, conceptually informed by core public relations concepts (Arceneaux, 2019; Becktel & Sweetser, 2018; Carroll, 2010). This expansion to the agenda-building framework attempts to understand how linking to strategic opinion leaders, i.e. emphasizing public associations with key influencers, impacts the ability of an actor to influence press and public agendas. Specific to Louisiana's gubernatorial runoff election, data suggest association agenda-building effects may be more substantial at the first and second levels, i.e. salience and tone of objects, while the third level, i.e. networks of co-occurrence, was unaffected. While based here in political public relations, the framework of association agenda-building holds substantive theoretical value for the broader context of corporate public relations, namely in relation to the use of social influencers.

Second, agenda-building theory asserts that while the press may set the agenda for the public (i.e., agenda-setting), organizations using public relations tactics set the agenda for the press (Albishri et al., 2019; Lan et al., 2020). This suggests a one-way, directional flow of influence from organizations to key stakeholders. This data supports other studies (Dunn, 2009; Kiousis et al., 2006; Kiousis et al., 2016; Lancendorfer & Lee, 2010; Zhang et al., 2017) suggesting the reality of agenda-building is more of a multi-directional transfer of influence among organizational elites, the press, and the public, and where agendas are *negotiated* rather than *set*. Where the normative public relations perspective of "building the agenda" does not reflect the highly interactive nature of political public relations, political journalism, or participatory political communication in the 21st century, this study posits a moderated concept of "agenda-sharing."

This multi-directional, multi-stakeholder concept of agenda-sharing is particularly apt for the highly participatory nature of an online information ecology. Digital infrastructure, like social media, allow an ever-widening array of actors, publics, and stakeholders to insert themselves into online discourse. With the ubiquity of politicization in today's society, it is common to see more and more actors using their platforms to voice political sentiment and ideology. Indeed, Lan et al. (2019) showed the agenda-building influence of corporate CEOs during the Trump Administration on the travel ban, withdrawal from the Paris agreement, Charlottesville protests, and end of DACA. The further society moves from a centralized gatekeeping hierarchy in its information ecology, the more agenda-sharing will likely be present, spanning: political, corporate, press, and public actors.

Edwards and Rispone were generally matched for agenda-building influence spanning the three agenda-building levels. To that end, while Edwards was more capable of negotiating issues and stakeholder salience with the press and public, Rispone was minimally more successful at negotiating object tone and co-occurrence within mentions. Understanding that, in a race that was so close, the Rispone campaign stressed an association with President Trump that was less successful at the second level than were non-associated messages, it can be argued this was a lost opportunity for the Rispone campaign to out-pace the Edwards campaign, one what may have contributed to the campaign's eventual close loss in the gubernatorial race.

Practical Applications

This study's emphasis on association agenda-building offers a key insight for political public relations practitioners. Given the substantive conservative identity within Louisiana, and President Trump's sweep of the state in 2016, it would make sense from a communications

standpoint to leverage Eddie Rispone's link to the president, i.e. a heavyweight political influencer. Despite such thinking, the data suggest highlighting President Trump had a negative impact on the Rispone campaign's ability to effectively manage news coverage and online public discourse. This can likely be explained by the highly controversial and divisive personality of the president.

Winning elections in the United States often comes down to moving undecided, relatively moderate voters. Both the Republican and Democratic parties traditionally maintain a hold on their own voter bases, respectively to the left and the right. From here, they turn to a horserace mentality to sway undecided voters in the middle of the political spectrum. Based on Lilleker (2019), it can be argued that while President Trump's reputation, or brand, may have been effective in mobilizing Louisiana's conservative base for Rispone, it equally alienated undecided voters who either eventually chose to vote for Edwards, or to not vote at all.

Association agenda-building in this study targeted a key stakeholder, but such a phenomenon can equally stress issue-based linkages. Democrats are stereotypically viewed as warm and tender like a mother, while Republicans are stereotypically viewed as powerful and tough like a father (Rule & Ambady, 2010). Based on these perceived personality stereotypes, there are key issues to which Democrats link themselves (healthcare, environment, social equality, education, and social security) and other issues to which Republicans associate themselves (foreign policy, national security, immigration, economy, bureaucracy) (Kuhn, 2010). Beyond issues, and even modern stakeholders like President Trump, association agenda-building holds merits for understanding linkages to the invocation of political history, as a century and a half later the Republican Party still refers to itself today as "The Party of Lincoln" (Nelson, 2020).

Additionally, association agenda-building holds merit for the broader study of public relations, both in corporate and politics settings. First, corporations are increasingly taking strong stances on socio-political issues under the guises of "corporative activism," "corporate social responsibility," or "public interest communications." This includes, for example, Ben & Jerry's sale ban in the West Bank and Jerusalem (Ring & Federman, 2021), Netflix and McDonald's pulling service in Russia over the invasion of Ukraine (Dean, 2022; Telford & Jeong, 2022), and Dick Sporting Good's cessation of gun sales following the Marjory Stoneman Douglas school shooting (Caval, 2019). Practitioners must understand the agenda-building implications, positive or negative, surrounding the issues their organizations choose to associate themselves with.

Second, in a time where organizational linkages to social influencers are central strategies to both public and organizational communication, holistically understanding the individuals and repercussions a brand associates itself with is of mounting importance. Looking within the political world, politicians are increasingly becoming celebrities, highlighting the importance of their influence. The Obamas and Trumps are iconic examples. After their time in office, both families are still in the public spotlight, with their voices, i.e., endorsements, carrying substantial influence. Looking to the corporate world, similar public associations must be evaluated and managed. For example, various medical and pharmaceutical groups severed ties with Green Bay Packers and Minnesota Vikings quarterbacks Aaron Rodgers and Kirk Cousins over their anti-COVID-19 vaccine position.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While this study offers worthwhile findings, any insights must be considered compared to

the studies limitations. First, the data represents a snapshot in time of a runoff election; hence, findings and insights should not be over-generalized to characterize the entirety of the 2019 Louisiana gubernatorial election. Further, as this study made use of a computational content analysis, findings and insights are further limited to the snapshot in time they represent. That is, while correlational relationships are discussed, no cause and effect assertions can be reliably made.

Suggestions for future research would be to expand the contextual testbed to look at both a general election as well as a runoff election so that time-lag analysis can determine differences across not just time, but also phases of the election. A second suggestion for future research would be to emphasize an election that used a range of public relations materials. Of note, neither the Edwards nor Rispone campaigns published any traditional press releases during the runoff election, opting rather to using Twitter as their campaigns' main mouthpieces. As such, the findings and insights of this study are largely drawn from Twitter content which, again, limits the generalizability of findings. Lastly, a suggestion for future research would be to adopt a wider theoretical worldview for future studies that emphasizes a process of issue and stakeholder agenda negotiation between campaigns, the press, and public discourse. This will better align the study of agenda-building with the practice of political public relations.

Another limitation of this study was the narrow analysis of the runoff election only (17 days). While this time window is considered pertinent for research as a second "hot phase" of the election (Dunn, 2009), it does not consider what effect the primary election had in already setting the agenda in the subsequent runoff election. A recommendation for future research would be to sample from the primary campaign messaging and include this wider dataset in analysis. This would allow for an understanding of if and how the primary election may have influenced the campaigns' agendas, rather than the unidirectional agenda-building assumed in this study. Such a methodological framework would lend greater, more valid insights as to the agenda-building process.

An additional limitation of this study was the limited sample-size collected from President Trump, 19 tweets or .17% of the dataset. While this small sample presents with power issues for statistical analysis, findings on the agenda-building impact of President Trump still hold merit. Research on cascading network activation suggests elite political institutions, such as the U.S. president, have asymmetric capacities to influence discourse by the press, public, and other political actors or organizations. (Entman, 2003). The U.S. president is a highly influential figure, with the capacity to influence policy, markets, and agendas with a single speech, press conference, or event tweet. Evidence of this elite influence in corporate public relations is evident in the impact of Elon Musk's tweets on Tesla (Vercoe, 2021). Though the sample size of President Trump's tweets does impact the statistical ability to discern correlations, it is assumed the evidence presented in this paper is still of merit based on the disproportionate advantage the U.S. presidency has in influencing press and public agendas, even in the case of state-based elections.

Further, Entman and Usher (2018) suggest the information pump-valves embedded within digital infrastructure (platforms, analytics, algorithms, ideological media, and rogue actors) only exacerbate some of the agenda-building effects of super political elites. While this study's findings related to President Trump's agenda-building influence have merit, recommendations for future include means to expand his data sample, possibly expanding to include tweets by accounts largely under his influence or control at the time of his

administration, such as the President of the United States (@POTUS), White House (@WhiteHouse), the Republican National Committee (@GOP), or his reelection campaign (@TeamTrump).

Conclusion

With John Bel Edwards as the only Democratic governor in the Deep South, President Trump substantially promoted Republican Eddie Rispone in Louisiana's 2019 gubernatorial election. This study used a computational content analysis, via an agenda-building lens, to investigate the roles the Edwards campaign, Rispone campaign, and President Trump played in influencing the press and public's agendas during the runoff election. Further, the study sought to understand the agenda-building role the president played when mentioned in Rispone campaign messages. Findings suggest varying support for first (salience), second (tone), and third (network) level agenda-building by the Edwards and Rispone campaigns. Further, Rispone campaign messages stressing President Trump were less effective at the first and second agenda-building levels than were messages that did not mention the president. Such insights offer theoretical contributions to agenda-building scholarship and practical applications for the political public relations practitioner.

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