

Blue Ribbons, Black Boxes: Toward a Better Understanding of Presidential Commissions

AMY B. ZEGART

University of California, Los Angeles

Presidential commissions usually are thought to tackle domestic policy issues, with little effect. This essay challenges the conventional view by finding greater commission variety and systematic differences in the ways presidents utilize commissions in domestic and foreign affairs. The essay classifies commissions into three ideal types: agenda commissions, which generate support for the president's initiatives and target a mass audience; information commissions, which provide new facts and thinking about policies and target government officials; and political constellation commissions, which seek to foster consensus among competing interests and target commission members themselves. Specific hypotheses comparing how presidents use commissions in foreign versus domestic policy are developed and tested with a data set of all presidential commissions from 1981 to 2001.

The delegation of political power has long been a central concern of political science. When, and why, do elected officials voluntarily give some of their own authority to others? In the past 20 years, this question has spawned a vast and sophisticated literature about the institutional presidency (Moe 1985; Hart 1995; Walcott and Hult 1995; Burke 2000), about congressional control of the bureaucracy (McCubbins and Schwartz 1984; Moe 1989; Aberbach 1990), and about the internal organization of Congress (Weingast and Marshall 1988; Krehbiel 1991; Cox and McCubbins 1993; Schickler 2001). Yet, surprisingly little has been written about a third set of institutions in the delegation universe: presidential commissions.

For most, the term “presidential commission” conjures up a particular image: a blue ribbon panel of distinguished civilians, appointed directly by the president, that defuses, deflects, or delays presidential action on some controversial domestic issue

Amy B. Zegart is assistant professor of policy studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. She is the author of Flawed by Design: The Evolution of the CIA, JCS, and NSC as well as numerous articles about American national security agencies.

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without producing much in the way of substantive policy change. The Warren Commission on Kennedy's Assassination, the Kerner Commission on the 1967 race riots, and the Lockhart Commission on Obscenity and Pornography all come to mind. Although these kinds of commissions are as old as the Republic (George Washington appointed his first in 1794 to help defuse the Whiskey Rebellion in Pennsylvania), and although they receive the bulk of attention in the popular and scholarly literature (Epstein 1966; Drew 1968; Popper 1970; Lipsky and Olson 1977; Flitner 1986), they constitute a surprisingly small share of the commissions actually used by presidents and their appointees. Most presidential commissions are not used principally to deflect blame or give the appearance of "doing something." Most are not created solely by the president, but by legislation or executive directives from presidential appointees. And many—nearly 200 in the past 20 years—have been used to examine foreign, not domestic, policy issues.

This article seeks to better understand when and why presidents choose to use commissions. It asks two central questions: (1) what functions do presidential commissions serve? and (2) what differences exist in how presidents use commissions for foreign and domestic policy issues?

In part one of the article, I examine the presidential commission literature, highlighting four current limitations. In part two, I begin to address these limitations by developing a conceptual framework of commission types. The aim is to lay the foundation for more systematic analysis of commissions across presidents and policy domains. In part three, I suggest six exploratory hypotheses about differences in how presidents use commissions in foreign and domestic policy. Part four tests these exploratory hypotheses with a data set of all ad hoc presidential commissions from 1981 to 2001 and offers some thoughts about future commission research.

The Literature

Presidential commission scholars appear to agree on one thing: the field is an under-tilled area of inquiry (Marcy 1945, 2; Dean 1969, 101; Sulzner 1971, 438; Petracca 1986, 83; Campbell 2001, xiii). As David Flitner notes, "There have been but a handful of books relating to commissions in this century" (1986, 4).

On most other issues, consensus within the literature remains elusive. While individual work offers insights about how commissions solve collective action problems (Mayer 1985), how they serve presidential interests (Wolanin 1975), or how they enable legislators to minimize agency problems when it comes to overseeing the bureaucracy (Balla and Wright 2001), the literature as a whole appears to be less than the sum of the parts.

Much of the problem stems from data limitations. As Mark Petracca observes, scholars have been able to conduct systematic analysis of commissions only since 1972, when passage of the Federal Advisory Committee Act created requirements for government disclosure of commission activities (1986, 83). Four specific limitations arise as a result.

First, no standard definition of a commission exists. In reality, at the most basic level, there are two broad types of commissions: *continuing* commissions and *ad hoc* or temporary ones. Both types advise executive branch agencies and officials, but the similarities largely end there.¹ Continuing commissions, like the EPA's National Drinking Water Advisory Council (Balla and Wright 2001) and the Agriculture Department's Advisory Committee on Small Farms, operate for a long and often indefinite period of time. By contrast, ad hoc commissions such as the Special Panel on Military Operations at Vieques and the Attorney General's Task Force on Violent Crime operate for a short and often specified period of time. While continuing commissions are frequently created by statute, ad hoc commissions are often created by an executive official (the president or other cabinet members) without legislation. Continuing commissions typically arise in response to demands from interest groups and are constituted by them. Ad hoc commissions serve a wider array of functions and have fewer membership requirements for interest group representation. Where continuing commissions often work close to the day-to-day operations of government agencies—setting agency priorities, recommending agency guidelines and procedures, and monitoring agency behavior (Bledsoe 1997)—ad hoc commissions tend to operate farther away from the daily affairs of policy making.²

This study examines only ad hoc commissions. This is not to say that continuing commissions are unimportant, only that they are likely to arise for different reasons and operate in different ways than ad hoc commissions. Continuing commissions pose numerous intriguing questions, particularly for congressional scholars concerned with legislative behavior, congressional delegation, and principal agent problems. While it is hoped that future research will address these issues more fully, they lie beyond the present work.

The second limitation of the literature exists within the realm of ad hoc commissions. Not all presidential commission studies use the same selection criteria. For example, Carl Marcy's classic work on presidential commissions from 1900 to 1940 includes all interagency groups and other boards comprised entirely of federal officials, so long as they are created at the president's direction (1945, 27-36). Yet, Thomas Wolanin's seminal study of presidential commissions from 1945 to 1972, which professes to "pick up where Marcy left off" (1975, 6), excludes them because they do not contain any private citizens. Conversely, Wolanin's study includes commissions created

1. It is important to note that many government regulatory agencies such as the Federal Trade Commission and the Securities Exchange Commission are called "commissions," but are not considered commissions anywhere in the political science literature. The reason is that they are policy-making, not advisory, bodies. Where continuing and ad hoc commissions advise executive officials, these agencies actually create, administer, and enforce policy within their domains. They inspect, examine, license, prosecute, regulate, and even adjudicate. Indeed, regulatory agencies have attracted such attention among bureaucracy scholars precisely because their discretion to make policy raises vital questions of political control and accountability.

2. Unfortunately, scholars rarely specify exactly which kind of commission they are examining, leading to some confusion and at times to conclusions that may be premature. For example, in his exhaustive survey of all commissions from 1972 to 1984, Mark Petracca (1986) finds that commissions created by Congress require representation of certain interests much more frequently than do commissions created by presidents. What could this mean? Petracca concludes that the presidency must be more responsive to powerful business interests, because only weak interest groups would lobby for a required seat at the table. This may very well be true. However, it is also possible that Petracca's data simply reflect the fact that commissions created by presidential directive are more likely to be ad hoc commissions, while commissions created by statute are more likely to be continuing ones.

by statute (1975, 7), while Marcy's study excludes most of them (1945, 26).³ The upshot is that both works make valuable contributions when taken alone, but less so when taken together. Because of definitional differences, the two major studies cannot be easily cumulated, their findings cannot be directly compared, and their conclusions cannot easily be extended to cover longer periods of time.

This study seeks to aid in the study of presidential commissions by creating a relatively broad definition according to three precise criteria.⁴ First, presidential commissions must be ad hoc. Operationally, this means they must last no longer than four years—the duration of a single presidential administration—and they must focus on a discrete task.⁵ By discrete, I do not mean to suggest that commissions must have a narrow scope of inquiry. Rather, the condition is only that the scope of inquiry be well defined in advance. Thus, the Brownlow Commission of 1937,⁶ the two Hoover Commissions,⁷ and the more recent Hart-Rudman Commission⁸ all undertook sweeping examinations of governmental organization, yet all would qualify under this definition because their purview was quite clear from the outset.

Second, commissions must be official. They must be created either by the president in an executive order, directive, or instruction; Congress; or by action from another executive branch official. Thus, kitchen cabinets or other informal advisory parties would not qualify. Third, commissions must be corporate bodies that function at least partly outside the government. In operational terms, they must have at least three members, of whom at least one must be a private citizen.

It can be argued that commissions created by the president's executive branch subordinates should not carry the same weight, or be placed in the same category, as those created by legislation or direct presidential action. However, evidence strongly suggests that presidential commissions created by other executive branch officials are no less important, or systematically different, than commissions created by these other more

3. Only commissions created by Congress *at the insistence of the president* qualified for Marcy's study.

4. Wolanin's work is the starting point. Within the literature, he sets forth the clearest and most rigorous criteria for inclusion in his presidential commission study. However, four of his criteria are so narrowly tailored that they exclude a great deal. First, Wolanin does not count commissions created by executive branch officials other than the president. Second, he requires that all members of a commission be appointed by the president. Third, he requires the commission be terminated not more than three years after its creation. Fourth, he specifically excludes White House conferences and citizen mobilizations even if they fit all of his criteria. I broaden all four criteria. I include commissions created by other executive branch officials. I more realistically extend the time frame for ad hoc commissions from three years to four. I include commissions in which not all members are appointed by the president, as well as White House conferences and citizen mobilization efforts (Wolanin 1975, 7-10).

5. The Federal Emergency Management Agency's Security Practices Board of Review, for example, which lasted less than a year but which focused on a broad array of general security advisory activities, would not qualify.

6. The Brownlow Commission, as it was popularly called, was officially listed as the President's Committee on Administrative Management. It was the first body to recommend an increase in the size and role of the White House staff, concluding, "the President needs help."

7. Both Hoover Commissions were named after their chairman, Herbert Hoover. The first lasted from 1947 to 1949. The second began in 1953 and ended in 1955. Both undertook a comprehensive examination of executive branch departments, agencies, and other bodies.

8. The Hart-Rudman Commission, which lasted from 1998 to 2001, was chaired by former Senators Gary Hart and Warren Rudman and was charged with examining U.S. foreign policy threats and recommending new strategies and organizational overhauls after the end of the Cold War.

well-known mechanisms. For example, president-created commissions of the past 20 years have included many that do not appear to have been of central importance to administration policy or politics. Examples include the Honorary Committee for the Department of Labor 75th Anniversary Year, the President's Commission on Compensation of Career Federal Executives, the President's Commission on the Celebration of Women in American History, and the President's Commission on Americans Outdoors, which reviewed public outdoor programs. Compare these commissions to some of those created by other executive branch officials during the same period: the Human Embryo Research Panel, which was established by the Department of Health and Human Services in 1994 to address the moral and ethical issues raised by funded human embryo research and to recommend guidelines about how to govern and review the conduct of federally funded research; the Overseas Advisory Panel, established by the secretary of state in response to the 1998 Al Qaeda bombings of two U.S. embassies in Africa to consider the future of the U.S. government's overseas presence and make recommendations about how to improve security; the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography, a controversial commission that was established in 1985 to highlight the relationship between pornography and antisocial criminal behavior; and the U.S. Commission on National Security in the 21st Century, established by the secretary of defense in 1998 to examine U.S. national security challenges and options after the Cold War—the most comprehensive review of U.S. national security policy since World War II. To be sure, to some degree the importance of a presidential commission lies in the eyes of the beholder. However, as these examples suggest, it would be a stretch, indeed, to argue that presidents have reserved to themselves (or the Congress) the creation of the most important commissions, while leaving the creation of lesser commissions to their subordinates in the executive branch.

Presidential commissions created by executive officials are comparable in other key respects, as well. They have addressed the same kinds of issues, included the same level of highly distinguished members, performed the same kinds of tasks, and carried the same prestige as commissions directly authorized by the president or mandated by statute. As Figure 1 illustrates, there is a rather striking substantive similarity between presidential commissions created by unilateral presidential action and those created by other executive branch officials. Even commission names appear to be used in much the same way regardless of creation mechanism. "National Commissions" of the past 20 years have included commissions created by presidents alone, by congressional legislation, and by other executive branch officials.⁹

9. Examples of "national commissions" created by unilateral presidential action include Reagan's National Commission on Space, Reagan's National Commission on Social Security Reform (more popularly known as the Greenspan Commission), and Bush's National Commission on America's Urban Families. National commissions created by legislation include Reagan's National Commission on Innovation and Productivity, Bush's National Commission on Financial Institution Reform, Recovery, and Enforcement (which was created in response to the collapse of American savings and loan institutions), and Clinton's National Commission on the Cost of Higher Education. National commissions created by other executive officials include Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education, Clinton's National Commission on the Future of DNA, and Clinton's National Commission on Mathematics and Science Teaching for the 21st Century.

<i>Policy Area</i>	<i>Commission Created by President</i>	<i>Commission Created by Other Senior Executive Official</i>
Agriculture	President's Council on Rural America, 1990 •Made recommendations about how federal government could improve rural economic development policy.	National Commission on Small Farms, 1997 •Made recommendations about how to ensure continued viability of small farms.
Defense	President's Commission on Strategic Forces, 1983 •Reviewed strategic modernization program for U.S. forces, esp. ballistic missiles.	United States Commission on National Security/21 st Century, 1998 •Reviewed early 21st century global security environment, developed national security strategy and implementation plan.
Economics	National Productivity Advisory Committee, 1981 •Recommended ways for government to improve national productivity and economic growth.	Commission on Workforce Quality and Labor Market Efficiency, 1988 •Recommended ways to improve quality of U.S. workforce.
Education	President's Education Policy Advisory Committee, 1989 •Advised president on objectives and conduct of U.S. education policy.	National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1981 •Established to defend, expand a student's right to excel; analyzed quality of learning and teaching in U.S. schools.
Space	National Commission on Space, 1984 •Set long-range goals and options for U.S. space program.	Advisory Committee on the Future of the U.S. Space Program, 1990 •Conducted major review of approaches to long-term management of U.S. space program.

FIGURE 1. Similarities of Presidential Commissions Created by Different Mechanisms.
Source: *Encyclopedia of Government Advisory Organizations*, 16th ed. (New York: Gale, 2002).

In short, not to include commissions created by other executive officials would miss a great deal of important activity from commissions that look, sound, and work just like the presidential commissions created by other mechanisms.

Why presidential commissions have arisen from these three different mechanisms is an important and intriguing question, but one that unfortunately lies beyond the scope of this study. Here, it is worth suggesting three possible avenues for future research. First, it may be that the use of commission creation mechanisms has changed systematically over time due to changes in the political institutional environment. For example, perhaps the ever-expanding demands on the president's time, and the growing complexity of policy issues, have led presidents to outsource commission creation and management to other executive officials now more than in the past. Or it may be that increasing party polarization and the predominance of divided government, among other factors, have forced presidents to involve Congress in commission creation now more than in the past. A second line of reasoning suggests that the use of commission creation mechanisms may be driven by commission function rather than changes in the broader political institutional environment: it may be that presidents resort to some creation mechanisms for certain purposes—using cabinet secretaries, for example, to launch commissions that provide information, and reserving to themselves the creation of commissions intended to shift public attitudes. A third possibility is that creation

mechanisms vary by policy domain, with fewer foreign policy commissions created by presidential action or statute than domestic policy commissions.

In any event, the point is that there are some compelling reasons why commissions created by other executive officials should be included in the presidential commission category. Indeed, it is fair to say that no cabinet secretary would create such an organization without the president's support.

The third limitation in the literature has to do with typologies. The list of commission purposes is long and well known. The conventional view is that presidents create commissions to deflect blame, buy time, and give the appearance of action on issues that are too politically charged, or too difficult, to solve. In addition, however, various scholars have noted that commissions are used by presidents to garner greater public support for a policy to which the president is already committed; show symbolic concern over a situation at the highest level of government; establish a fact base for others to use; respond to crises; deflect political heat from the president and allow passions to cool when issues become explosive; overcome the "stovepipes" and parochial thinking of the permanent bureaucracy; gather more information about a problem and its policy alternatives; forge consensus among the interests represented on the commission itself; and change the hearts and minds of men (Drew 1968; Wolanin 1975; Flitner 1986; Miller and McKinney 1993).

When lists get that long, greater analysis is in order. Some have provided it, classifying commissions into rough categories (Marcy 1945; Sulzner 1971; Wolanin 1975; Flitner 1986). But these categories have served more to label (unrepresentative) data sets than to lay the conceptual building blocks for further analysis. Particularly in contrast to the study of other presidential organizations (Wayne 1978; George 1980; Hess 1988; Walcott and Hult 1995; Ragsdale and Theis 1997), the lack of work advancing our conceptual understanding of commissions is striking.

Fourth and finally, studies of presidential commissions have given very little attention to foreign policy. Not one of Flitner's eight case studies of presidential commissions involves foreign policy issues. Wolanin's data set, which includes 99 commissions over a 25-year period, includes only two directly tied to foreign affairs.¹⁰ Popper starkly states that "commissions have not studied foreign policy or military strategy" (1970, 11), even though his own appendix, which features a partial list of commissions from 1945 to 1970, includes commissions that examined critical military manpower issues and foreign economic policy (1970, 66-67).

10. A cursory review of the relevant time period suggests at least ten more foreign policy commissions fit Wolanin's criteria but were not included in his data set. They are: the President's Amnesty Board (Truman); President's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services (Truman); President's Committee on Religion and Welfare in the Armed Forces (Truman); President's Commission on Internal Security and Individual Rights (Truman); Career Executive Board (Eisenhower); President's Committee for Hungarian Refugee Relief (Eisenhower); Commission on Government Security (Eisenhower); President's Task Force on Foreign Economic Assistance (Kennedy); President's Advisory Panel on a National Academy of Foreign Affairs (Kennedy); and the President's General Advisory Committee on Foreign Assistance Programs (Johnson). Given the fragmented nature of his data, Wolanin's data set is impressive—indeed, the most comprehensive survey in the literature. However, the absence of this many foreign policy commissions from Wolanin's work suggests that ensuring full representation of foreign policy commissions was probably not a principal concern.

Much of this tilt toward domestic policy commissions mirrors reality. For reasons I will discuss more below, there are many more domestic policy commissions than foreign policy ones. The highest profile commissions have almost always been those concerned with pressing domestic problems—such as social unrest, race relations, crime, and drug policy—the same problems that naturally seem to attract attention among commission scholars. What’s more, many of the most important and most publicized foreign policy commissions—such as commissions examining organizational reform of the Pentagon—have operated directly under the secretary of defense, falling outside the narrow presidential commission criteria of past studies.¹¹ But it would be a mistake to say that commissions have not examined major issues in foreign policy, particularly if we consider more recent presidents. Indeed, evidence suggests that even using the old narrow definition of presidential commissions, which excludes bodies created by other executive officials, we find that Presidents Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and Clinton appointed commissions to examine a number of critical foreign policy issues, including U.S.-Japan trade relations, U.S. policy toward Central America, industrial competitiveness, arms control, terrorism, chemical warfare policy, and strategic nuclear force posture. Expanding the definition of presidential commissions to incorporate bodies operating under another executive official, we find even more. Of the 668 ad hoc presidential commissions created between 1981 and 2001, 26 percent, or 172 separate bodies, were concerned with foreign policy issues.

In short, the recent data suggest that foreign policy commissions are significant in both number and importance. It seems fair to conclude that a more complete picture of the presidential commission landscape cannot be drawn without bringing them more centrally into view.

Developing a Conceptual Framework of Presidential Commissions

Before turning to the data, it is helpful to take a step back and ask, “what general types of ad hoc presidential commissions might there be?” Developing such a broad conceptual framework of presidential commissions promises to provide a basic foundation for understanding whether, how, and why presidents might use commissions differently in foreign and domestic affairs. In addition, it is hoped that the framework will be able to stand on its own, providing an analytic tool for future work on presidential commissions that will enable scholars to tackle a number of other questions not addressed here.

Flitner (1986) provides the best initial guide, classifying commissions into three broad categories: procedure-oriented, situation-oriented, or crisis-oriented. Procedure-oriented commissions examine government organization and processes to improve efficiency and overall effectiveness. According to Flitner, these commissions tend to perform “low-visibility, non-pressing tasks such as examining postal procedures, criminal code

11. Examples include the 1953 Rockefeller Committee (officially called the Committee on Department of Defense Organization), the 1969 Fitzhugh Committee (officially called the Blue Ribbon Defense Panel), and the 1998 Hart-Rudman Commission (the U.S. Commission on National Security in the 21st Century).

reform, Radio Free Europe and the celebration of the American bicentennial” (1986, 28). Situation-oriented commissions, by contrast, deal with more “widespread, controversial social phenomena . . . which may be perceived as immediate threats” to the general public (1986, 29). Examples of situation-oriented commissions are the Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice (the Katzenbach Commission), the Commission on Obsenity and Pornography (Lockhart Commission), and the National Commission on Marijuana and Drug Abuse (Shafer Commission). Crisis-oriented commissions, as the name suggests, are triggered by more specific and immediate events such as the Kennedy assassination (Warren Commission) or civil unrest in the 1960s (Kerner Commission).

This classificatory scheme is a useful start. For one thing, it groups commissions broadly according to the nature of the problem they address. In addition, it implicitly suggests a proactive/reactive distinction. Crisis commissions, by definition, arise in response to an event, whereas procedure-oriented commissions appear to take a longer-term, more proactive approach to improving government operations. Flitner’s typology also hints at a third distinction: target audience. He notes that procedure-oriented commissions “may be of considerable importance to some sectors,” whereas situation- and crisis-oriented commissions target a broader public audience (1986, 29).

Developing and making these three distinctions more explicit, we can create a more refined conceptual framework that groups commissions according to the principal functions they serve, the target audience they seek to influence, and the proactive/reactive nature of their existence. Doing so yields three commission ideal types. Let me underscore that not all commissions fit squarely into one of the ideal types. In reality, we know, commissions come in an endless array of sizes, shapes, and colors. Boards, task forces, councils, committees, groups, panels—ad hoc presidential commissions are called many things—arise for complex and various reasons, perform many functions, and serve multiple constituencies. However, the task at hand is not to capture reality, but to simplify it. My aim is to strip commissions down to their bare essence, to push for starker distinctions in order to gain analytic leverage about some of the systematic ways in which commissions operate across presidencies and foreign/domestic policy domains.

As Figure 2 illustrates, there are three core functions or tasks that commissions perform. The first function is the most widely known: commissions can influence the public agenda. In the proactive variant, *agenda commissions* try to draw attention to and support for new presidential policy initiatives. White House and other major government-sponsored conferences serve this purpose well. Other examples include the Reagan administration’s Presidential Commission on Drunk Driving, Clinton’s National Commission on Mathematics and Science Teaching for the 21st Century, and the Attorney General’s Commission on Pornography (the Meese Commission), which was created in 1985 to bring greater public attention to the social ills associated with pornography. Proactive agenda commissions seek to reach a wide audience. Their primary goal is to generate mass public attention and support for the president’s policies rather than influence narrow political constituencies or organized interests.

Reactive agenda commissions also target a mass audience, but they seek to respond to issues already in the public eye. These issues can be regular, high-profile policy debates

	<i>Core Function</i>	<i>Proactive Form</i>	<i>Reactive Form</i>	<i>Target Audience</i>
Agenda Commission	Influence public agenda	Generate attention, support for new presidential initiatives	Respond to issues already on agenda (avoid blame, stall, give appearance of action)	Mass public
Information Commission	Provide information	Provide new facts, analysis, ideas about current or future policy challenges, options	Assess what went wrong, lessons learned	Government officials
Political Constellation Commission	Alter constellation of political opposition	Foster consensus, cooperation among policy stakeholders	Break logjams between conflicting interests, solve collective action problems	Commission members and the organized interests they represent

FIGURE 2. A Conceptual Framework of Presidential Commission Ideal Types.

or more sudden and unexpected crises, policy scandals, or failures. Here, the task is to control political damage, defuse the issue to allow political passions to cool, deflect blame, or provide some sort of official administration response when the public demands it.¹² As Martha Derthick explains:

Expected to respond to every public misfortune, the President has found that he can always respond on the plane of symbolic politics if not the plane of action. He can appoint a commission. This has become one of the principal techniques by which he tries to fill the gap between that which he is held responsible for and that which he can actually do (1972, 630).

Examples of reactive agenda commissions are the Clinton administration's Bipartisan Commission on Entitlement Reform and Reagan's Presidential Commission on the Space Shuttle Challenger Accident.

Providing information is the second core task that presidential commissions perform. Whereas agenda commissions direct their efforts toward a mass audience, *information commissions* target a much more narrow band of government officials. Their goal is to improve policymaking not by drawing widespread attention to or support for an issue, or by removing an issue from the public agenda, but by providing new ideas, new facts, and new analysis to the policymakers who can make a difference.

In their proactive form, information commissions provide many kinds of information. They identify new policy problems looming on the horizon. They provide new facts

12. It is worth noting that defusing an issue can create real policy benefits; by creating a cooling off period, commissions can serve to create a less charged, more hospitable environment for policy change.

or analysis about existing problems. They generate new thinking about policy options. They take a new look at government organization, examining how different organizational structures and processes can improve the effectiveness of government efforts, lower the costs, or both. What distinguishes proactive information commissions is their forward focus. These commissions are meant to get in front of a policy problem, anticipating future developments and possible responses. One of the most significant proactive information commissions in recent years has been the U.S. Commission on National Security in the 21st Century (better known as the Hart-Rudman Commission after its cochairs, former Senators Gary Hart and Warren Rudman), which was created in 1998 to conduct a comprehensive review of U.S. national security challenges, strategic options, and organizational weaknesses after the Cold War's end. Other proactive information commissions include the Bush administration's Advisory Committee on the Future of the U.S. Space Program and the Reagan administration's Arctic Research Commission, which was created to develop an integrated national Arctic research policy.

In their reactive form, information commissions most commonly assess what went wrong, investigating past policy failures and recommending lessons learned for the future. These commissions are sometimes hard to distinguish from reactive agenda commissions. The difference lies in whether the commission's core task is to defuse the issue or gather information, and whether the target audience is the general public or policy insiders. Examples of reactive information commissions are the 1988 Commission on the Improvement of the Federal Crop Insurance Program—which determined why participation in the Federal Crop Insurance Program did not reach anticipated levels—and the 1983 Commission on Beirut International Airport Terrorist Act of 23 October, which investigated the terrorist bombing of a U.S. Marine barracks that killed 241 Americans.

The third core commission function is to alter the constellation of political opposition on a given issue. With *political constellation commissions*, the aim is to foster consensus, compromise, and cooperation in a policy domain. This can be done either by putting stakeholders on the commission itself, or by delegating authority from those stakeholders to the commission. Typically, political constellation commissions require representation of key and conflicting interest groups in a policy area, and their mandates explicitly call for consensus building among commission members. Negotiated rule-making committees of the Environmental Protection Agency, which seek to recommend consensus guidelines for new rules, fit in the proactive political constellation commission category. The reactive form of political constellation commissions deals with the same issues, but arises in response to a policy problem. Here, too, the idea is to break through logjams between conflicting interests and overcome collective action problems. Perhaps the best-known examples of reactive political constellation commissions are the three Defense Base Closure Commissions of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The conceptual framework above is meant to capture the diversity of presidential commissions as well as categorize it into some meaningful distinctions. The aim is to lay the foundation for understanding better why legislators, presidents, and other political officials use commissions in foreign and domestic policy. As we shall see in the discussion below, however, the conceptual framework is a critical point of departure; it is by no means the last or only word on the subject.

Exploratory Hypotheses

Armed with a broader definition and conceptual framework of commission types, we now return to the central delegation puzzle: why do presidents ever give some of their authority to commissions? There are a number of important and plausible hypotheses. For example, Republicans may use commissions with different frequency, on different issues, or for different purposes than Democrats. Presidents may be more likely to use commissions early in their presidency to provide quick action, or the appearance of quick action, on election issues. Alternatively, they may be more inclined to use commissions late in their terms in order to tie the hands of their successors. While these and other hypotheses bear investigating, this study focuses on six hypotheses that are all centrally concerned with whether, to what extent, and why presidents use commissions differently in foreign versus domestic policy.

Notably, the framework provides a useful point of departure by enabling us to make distinctions about commission usage across policy domains based on commission type. Indeed, the framework suggests a critical hypothesis: *presidents may use different types of commissions in foreign affairs than domestic policy*. The five other hypotheses developed in this section explore broad commission usage patterns in foreign and domestic policy, as well as the role that personal presidential experience plays in the creation of foreign policy commissions.

Foreign versus Domestic Policy

There are three critical differences between foreign and domestic policy that make the number and type of presidential commissions likely to vary. First, as Aaron Wildavsky notes, Congress gives presidents far greater latitude in foreign than domestic affairs. He writes:

The President's normal problem with domestic policy is to get congressional support for the programs he prefers. In foreign affairs, in contrast, he can almost always get support for policies that he believes will protect the nation—but his problem is to find a viable policy (1991, 29).

This is nothing new. Legislators have given deference to presidential prerogatives in foreign affairs since the nation's founding, and for good reason: the presidency, as an institution, is naturally better suited for the speed, secrecy, and consistency that foreign policy demands (Henkin 1972).

Self-interest is also at work (Mayhew 1974). As political scientists have pointed out since the 1950s, American citizens, particularly when it comes time to vote, usually care far more about domestic than foreign policy issues (Almond 1950; Rosenau 1961; Hughes 1978; Light and Lake 1985). "The prevailing consensus," Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida note, "is that the public possesses little information and only few, ill-formed attitudes about foreign affairs and is concerned deeply about these issues only when their

daily lives are directly affected.” As a result, they write, many believe that “such concerns are not terribly consequential in the voting booth” (1989, 125).¹³

In 1980, for example, against the backdrop of the Cold War, and the more immediate Iranian hostage crisis and Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, only a third of Americans viewed foreign and defense issues as “the most important problem facing the nation” (Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida 1989, 130). And in the 2000 presidential election, when exit pollsters asked which two issues were “most important” to voters in deciding how they cast their ballots for president, foreign policy ranked dead last. While 35 percent of voters listed moral values and 25 percent mentioned the economy, only 5 percent cited foreign affairs as a major factor in their vote (Los Angeles Times 2000). Congressional elections are even more local affairs. As one congressman bluntly remarked, “My constituents back home don’t care how I vote on Bosnia.”¹⁴

The second major difference is related to the first: interest groups are more plentiful and powerful in domestic affairs than in foreign policy. Analysis of interest groups that engage in Washington lobbying shows a striking disparity. In 1990, of the 9,138 lobbying organizations, professional associations, law firms, foreign governments, political action committees, and special interest groups registered in Washington, only 922, or 10 percent, were concerned with foreign policy (Zegart 1999, 239-40). Moreover, if campaign contributions are any indication, domestic policy groups appear to be more powerful than their foreign policy counterparts. In the 1992 congressional and presidential campaigns, for example, 94 of the top 100 campaign contributors were domestic policy groups. The top foreign policy contributor ranked just 43rd, behind the Plumbers and Pipefitters Union (Zegart 1999, 24).

Third, the structure of bureaucracy is different in foreign and domestic policy. While domestic policy agencies have more discrete jurisdictions, foreign policy agencies tend to overlap. U.S. environmental regulations may be handled by the EPA, but U.S. counter-terrorism policy is spread among nearly 100 different agencies, each with its own policy priorities, agendas, and turf. Because of these different structures, coordinating the bureaucracy, generating new ideas, and initiating new programs are harder and more fraught with problems in foreign affairs than domestic affairs.

Taken together, the conceptual framework and these three differences between foreign and domestic policy suggest the following exploratory hypothesis for the use of presidential commissions:

H1: The Domestic/Foreign Policy Domain Hypothesis: There are more presidential commissions in domestic policy than in foreign affairs.

Because members of Congress, interest groups, and voters are more attentive to and vested in domestic policy issues, the president must work that much harder to set his domestic policy agenda, to “sell” his domestic policy programs to them. Indeed, when

13. Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida (1989) take on this prevailing view, arguing that public attitudes on foreign and defense policy are in fact available and that they influence voter’s choices. See also Hurwitz and Peffley 1987; Baum 2002.

14. House member, confidential interview by author, August 2, 1995.

it comes to domestic policy, the president rarely has the only policy proposal in town. Congress plays an active role in generating competing policy proposals of its own. As a result, presidents have strong incentives to use agenda commissions that can rise above the noise, highlight the president's own proposals, and give them the imprimatur of a distinguished panel of outsiders. Presidents also have stronger incentives to use political constellation commissions. With so many organized interests on so many issues, forging consensus through commission participation offers an effective use of presidential authority.

In foreign affairs, by contrast, legislative deference, relatively weak interest groups, and an inattentive public give the president more room to maneuver. Here, the president can more easily initiate new policies and can more easily set policy priorities. A single speech, a trip by the secretary of state, an off-the-cuff comment about "not letting this invasion of Kuwait stand" on the White House lawn is often all that it takes. Bill Clinton may have needed an agenda commission to initiate his health care reform effort, but he launched intensive Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations with a few phone calls. The fact is, in foreign policy, presidents usually have alternatives to commissions that are lower cost, more direct, and easier to use.

The president also does not have the same political constellation demands in foreign affairs that he has in domestic issues. Although interest groups do exist, and although some are quite strong, their smaller numbers and weaker status make it less necessary for the president to forge consensus through commission activity. In fact, often the key stakeholders in U.S. foreign policy that require consensus-building efforts are international allies, not domestic interest groups. Bringing those foreign interests together can be done only by intensive international diplomacy.

That leaves us with information commissions. As we will see below, presidents actually have weaker incentives to use information commissions in domestic policy than foreign policy. This is primarily because domestic policy offers many more alternative sources of information. However, this dominance of information commissions in foreign affairs is unlikely to outnumber the agenda and constellation commissions in domestic policy, for two reasons. First, information commissions require more work on the part of the executive branch. With agenda and political constellation commissions, presidents derive most of the political benefits on the first day, when the formation of the commission is announced. While presidents and their appointees may still work with these commissions and even try to implement commission recommendations, the point is they do not have to; most of the political payoff has already been realized. With information commissions, by contrast, the political benefit more often comes at the end of the process, when presidents and their officials assess, digest, and if warranted, act on the information they receive. This back-end payoff structure increases the workload for presidents and their officials. As a result, presidents can take on only so many information commissions at any given moment. There is a more serious capacity constraint on the number of information commissions they can use.

The second reason has to do with politics. At the end of the day, presidents almost always prefer to focus more on domestic than foreign affairs if given the chance. Electoral incentives give them little choice. The greater attention paid to domestic policy

by legislators, organized interests, and voters compels presidents to direct their efforts, including commission activities, on policies closer to home.

The second hypothesis flows directly from the conceptual framework of commission types developed in part two:

H2: The Commission Typology Hypothesis: In foreign policy, presidents use information commissions more than any other type. By contrast, information commissions should be the least represented of the three types in domestic affairs.

Presidents are always in need of information. The key question, however, is what available information sources they have that might be preferable to forming a commission. In domestic affairs, the alternatives are plentiful. Congress does not just have more interest in domestic than foreign policy, it has more expertise. Members of Congress in the president's party can serve as useful policy partners, generating ideas, unearthing facts, and analyzing options in ways that also serve his interests. Interest groups, for their part, do not just provide incentives for action. They provide information about specific policy issues at low cost. As any Capitol Hill staffer knows, interest groups are often the best sources of policy information in town. Although some domestic policy issues attract greater interest group involvement than others, the relatively thicker and more powerful interest group environment in domestic affairs suggests that presidential information commissions would be less necessary.

In foreign affairs, by contrast, the president cannot rely nearly so much on Congress and interest groups for information. Instead, presidents are left with three alternatives to commissions: (1) their personal experiences; (2) the National Security Council (NSC) staff; and (3) the permanent bureaucracy. But a significant number of presidents, including Reagan, Clinton, and George W. Bush, have assumed office with little or no personal experience in foreign affairs. Fewer still have amassed the breadth of experience to cover the full range of foreign policy issues demanded by America's involvement in the world since 1945. The National Security Council staff has performed some critical information functions for the president since its creation in the Truman administration, but has remained small and perennially overburdened (Gelb 1980; Destler 1986; Walcott and Hult 1995; Zegart 1999). Anticipating long-term policy challenges and analyzing options that may lie years ahead usually is not high on the NSC staff's agenda. That leaves the permanent bureaucracy. But the high degree of interconnectedness between foreign policy agencies means greater bureaucratic competition and more stovepiping of ideas and approaches—precisely the kinds of problems that information commissions are created to solve. Given these alternatives, presidents have ample incentive to reach outside the government for information on foreign policy issues.

While the first two hypotheses treat all presidents alike, the next two reach outside the conceptual framework to explore how differences between individual presidents might affect the creation of foreign policy commissions.

H3: The Presidential Experience Hypothesis: Ceteris paribus, the less foreign policy experience a president has before assuming office, the more he will use foreign policy commissions; conversely, presidents who assume office with greater foreign policy experience will use foreign policy commissions less frequently.

As noted above, all presidents are expected to appoint more commissions in domestic policy than foreign policy. The question here is how much more. Hypothesis Three contends that the proportion of foreign policy commissions should vary by administration. This variance, however, should not be random. Rather, it is likely to be driven by the personal and professional experiences of presidents *before* they assume office. Presumably, the more experience a president has in a policy domain, the more knowledgeable he is about key issues, the more comfortable he is with setting the policy agenda, and the more likely he is to pursue that agenda without the external validation, information, or support of a commission. All else being equal, presidents with primarily domestic policy experience, such as former governors, should utilize a higher percentage of foreign policy commissions than presidents whose previous jobs and personal endeavors gave them greater experience in world affairs. Commissions, in other words, help to compensate for presidential inexperience.

The presidential experience hypothesis suggests a corollary:

H4: The Presidential Learning Hypothesis: As presidents gain greater experience in foreign affairs, they will use foreign policy commissions less.

Operationally, this means that we should see a decline in the percentage of foreign policy commissions used by all presidents between their first and second terms. Particularly for inexperienced foreign policy presidents, the first term provides a four-year window to gain greater policy knowledge, familiarity, and standing. If, in fact, foreign policy commissions are used to compensate for inexperience, then this on-the-job training should lead to a declining reliance on foreign policy commissions in the second term of an administration.

National Security versus International Economics

Although there are some notable differences between foreign and domestic policy, the distinction is admittedly a rough one. In reality, all domestic policy issues are not created equal. Presidents are given much greater latitude in some domestic policy issues—such as designating national monument sites for conservation—than others, such as welfare reform. The interest group landscape is also varied, fluctuating by time and by issue area.¹⁵ It is not just that some issues attract more groups than others. It is also that some issues attract more evenly matched groups than others. Thus, the accounting industry's dominance may have allowed it to elude aggressive government regulation for years, but the health care industry's interest group playing field is not nearly so one-sided (Baumgartner and Talbert 1995). Finally, bureaucratic agencies may overlap far more in foreign affairs than in domestic affairs, but that is not to say that all domestic policy issues are dominated by a single agency.

To sharpen and refine the insights, here we delve more deeply into the foreign policy world, distinguishing between two extreme ends of the policy spectrum: inter-

15. Many have noted the dramatic rise of public interest groups since the 1960s. For a review of the interest group literature, see Baumgartner and Leech 1998.

national economics and national security affairs. On one end, international economic issues appear to more closely approximate domestic policy issues, with greater congressional involvement in the policy process, greater interest group power, and less connected, overlapping bureaucracies. National security affairs lie at the opposite extreme. Here, we find more congressional deference to the president, weaker interest groups, and tightly connected, overlapping bureaucracies (Zegart 1999). These differences are not as stark within foreign policy as they are between foreign and domestic policy. Nevertheless, they suggest that we would likely see similar variation in presidential commission use.

Specifically, Hypothesis Five parallels Hypothesis One, asserting that we should find more commissions in international economic policy than in security policy, for all of the same reasons that lead us to predict more domestic commissions than foreign policy ones: a greater need to sell the president's policies to an engaged Congress, to mollify interest groups, and to appeal to a mass public that generally pays a good deal more attention to the state of the American economy than to national security affairs.

H5: The International Economics/Security Domain Hypothesis: Within the foreign policy realm, there are more presidential commissions in international economic policy than in national security affairs.

Commission typology patterns should also vary across the economic/security policy domains. If international economic policy resembles domestic policy issues in the ways described above, then we would expect to find a relatively greater use of agenda and political constellation commissions, and relatively fewer information commissions. By contrast, information commissions should be used more frequently in national security affairs because greater congressional deference, public indifference, and interest group weakness mean the president has fewer alternative sources of information at his disposal.

H6: The Foreign Policy Commission Typology Hypothesis: Within the foreign policy realm, presidents use information commissions more in national security affairs than in international economic affairs.

Examining Presidential Commissions from 1981 to 2001

As an initial test of these hypotheses, I compiled a data set of all ad hoc presidential commissions created from Reagan to Clinton. While this data set covers only 20 years, it spans the Cold War and the post-Cold War era, includes both Republican and Democratic presidents, and updates the latest related large-n study compiled by Mark Petracca in 1986.

Using the specific selection criteria noted earlier for determining ad hoc presidential commissions, I examined 7,300 advisory organizations entered in the Encyclopedia of Governmental Advisory Organizations (2002). After compiling the data set, I then coded each commission by policy domain (foreign or domestic policy) and by commission type. Coding by commission type was done by qualitatively assessing the Encyclopedia's description of each commission's origins, mission, duration, composition,

<i>Guiding Criterion</i>	<i>Agenda Commission</i>	<i>Information Commission</i>	<i>Political Constellation Commission</i>
Public salience of policy issue	High	Low	Low to medium
Scope of inquiry	Broad	Mixed	Narrow
Time dimension of policy problem	Immediate past or present	Near or distant future	Present or near future
Commission size	Large (avg = 36)*	Small (avg = 12)	Medium (avg = 15)
Commission membership	Well-known public figures	Experts	Organized interests

FIGURE 3. Guiding Criteria for Commission Typology Coding.

* Averages based on analysis of data from 1981 to 2001.

Note: The agenda commission average excludes one outlier—a White House small business conference that drew 20,000 participants. When the conference is included, the agenda commission average jumps to 127.

activities, and findings. While this kind of exercise inevitably requires judgment, five specific criteria guided the process: the public salience of the policy issue, the breadth or scope of the inquiry, the time focus of the effort (past, present, or future), the size of the commission, and its membership. As Figure 3 illustrates, these criteria enabled some clear distinctions between commissions. For example, commissions that address highly salient issues are more likely to be agenda commissions than information or political constellation commissions. Agenda commissions also naturally tend to have a broad scope of inquiry. Their purpose is to move major issues on or off the president's policy agenda. By contrast, political constellation commissions naturally focus more narrowly on the particular concerns of particular interests on particular issues, while information commissions fall in the middle. Time horizons also help to distinguish different types of commissions. Where agenda commissions are designed to provide the president political cover on current or recent issues, information commissions are far more likely to deal with policy issues that reach far into the future. Although presidents have strong incentives to pack agenda commissions with large numbers of distinguished members, information and constellation commissions should have fewer members in order to facilitate the gathering of information and the resolution of conflict between key interests. Finally, commissions comprised entirely of experts are very unlikely to be agenda or constellation commissions, while commissions that explicitly list membership as "interests affected by the policy" or that list specific membership requirements of organized interests fit much more easily in the constellation category. In sum, although these criteria cannot provide hard and fast coding categories, they do offer a set of guidelines that enable objective coding of the data.

TABLE 1
The Dominance of Domestic Policy Presidential Commissions, 1981-2001

<i>Administration</i>	<i>Number of Domestic Policy Commissions</i>	<i>Number of Foreign Policy Commissions</i>	<i>Admin. Total</i>	<i>Domestic Policy % of Total</i>
Reagan 1	111	56	167	66%
Reagan 2	131	40	171	77%
G. H. W. Bush	143	38	181	79%
Clinton 1	60	22	82	73%
Clinton 2	51	16	67	76%
Total	496	172	668	74%

Source: *Encyclopedia of Government Advisory Organizations*, 16th ed. (New York: Gale, 2002).

In addition, every effort was made to ensure as much accuracy and consistency as possible during the coding process. Commissions were coded blindly in two separate rounds, and discrepancies were resolved in a third review. While additional steps can be taken in the future—for example, analyzing media coverage surrounding the creation of each commission and performing textual analysis of actual commission charters—at this point the aim was to get a good first read, an exploratory probe to see whether the hypotheses warrant further investigation.

Examining the data set, we find strong support for the Policy Domain Hypothesis, which predicts more commissions in domestic than foreign policy. As Table 1 shows, there were 668 ad hoc presidential commissions created by the Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and Clinton administrations during the entire 1981-2001 period. Of this grand total, 74 percent were domestically oriented commissions. There is some notable fluctuation by president, with 79 percent of Bush’s commissions focused on domestic policy, compared to only 66 percent of Reagan’s during his first term. However, domestic commissions constituted at least two thirds of the total for every president.

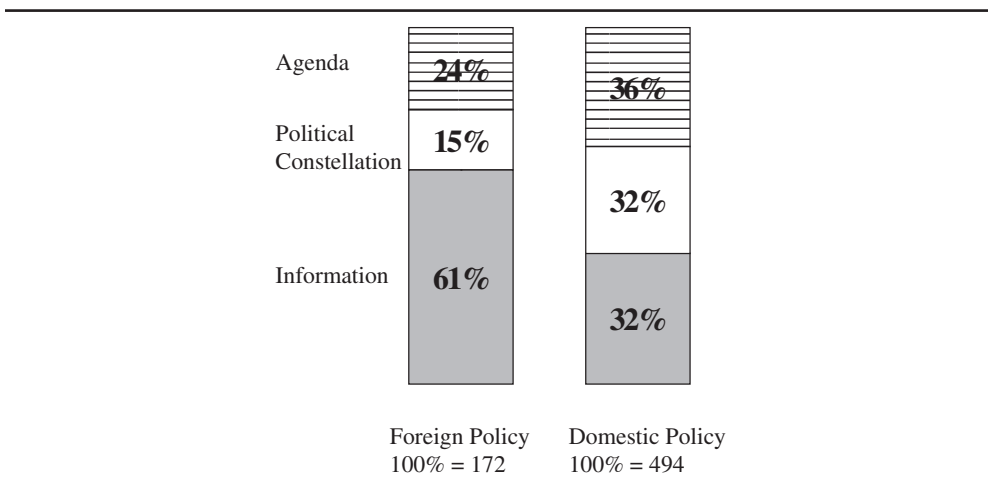


FIGURE 4. Breakdown of Commission Types in Foreign and Domestic Policy, 1981-2001.

Source: *Encyclopedia of Governmental Advisory Organizations*, 16th ed. (New York: Gale 2002).

TABLE 2
Use of First-Term Presidential Foreign Policy Commissions by Reagan, Clinton, and George H. W. Bush

<i>FP Experience</i>	<i>Administration</i>	<i>Number of Domestic Policy Commissions</i>	<i>Number of Foreign Policy Commissions</i>	<i>Admin. Total</i>	<i>Foreign Policy % of Total</i>
Inexperienced	Reagan 1	111	56	167	34%
Inexperienced	Clinton 1	60	22	82	27%
	Total	171	78	249	31%
Experienced	G. H. W. Bush	143	38	181	21%
Difference between inexperienced and experienced presidents		28	40	68	10%

Source: *Encyclopedia of Government Advisory Organizations*, 16th ed. (New York: Gale, 2002).

The data also lend strong support for the Commission Typology Hypothesis, which says that information commissions should be more prevalent in foreign than domestic policy. Figure 4 illustrates the breakdown of commission type by policy domain.

As we can see, information commissions represented the vast majority of foreign policy commissions. Of the 172 foreign policy commissions formed during the period, 61 percent were information commissions. By comparison, information commissions constituted just 32 percent of the 494 domestic policy commissions formed during the same 20-year period. Using a Z test of proportions (Mendenhall and Beaver 1994), we find this difference to be statistically significant ($z = 5.62, p < .005$).

The third hypothesis predicts greater use of foreign policy commissions by presidents who assume office with little foreign policy experience. Although the data set includes information for only three individual presidents, the three stand at opposite ends of the experience spectrum. Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton both were elected after serving two terms as governors—Reagan in California, Clinton in Arkansas. Reagan, an actor, never served in military combat. Bill Clinton did not, either, although he did his undergraduate work at the Georgetown School of Foreign Service, studied in England as a Rhodes Scholar, and served on the staff of Senator William Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Later, Clinton became a law professor at the University of Arkansas, and was elected the Arkansas attorney general before running for governor.

George H. W. Bush, on the other hand, came to office as one of the most experienced foreign policy presidents in modern American history. An international oilman by profession, Bush's public sector career included serving as a World War II Navy combat pilot, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, chief of the U.S. Liaison Office in the People's Republic of China (prior to American normalization), director of the Central Intelligence Agency, and vice president for eight years in the Reagan administration. Fred Greenstein's comment that "It is necessary to go back to Franklin Roosevelt to find

a chief executive with the rich governmental experience of George Bush" (2000, 160) is particularly true when it comes to foreign affairs.

In sum, although they represent a small subset of American presidents, Reagan, Clinton, and Bush do provide useful data points to test, at least preliminarily, the strength of the experience hypothesis.

Looking at the first terms of Reagan and Clinton, and Bush's single term, we do find some significant differences in their use of foreign policy commissions. Reagan, the least experienced foreign policy president, had the highest percentage of foreign policy commissions. Thirty-four percent, or more than one third, of Reagan's first-term presidential commissions focused on foreign policy issues. Foreign policy commissions constituted 27 percent of Clinton's first-term commissions. George H. W. Bush, the most experienced foreign policy president, used foreign policy commissions the least—appointing 21 percent of his commissions to examine issues related to international affairs. Taken together, the two inexperienced foreign policy presidents, Reagan and Clinton, used 31 percent of their first-term commissions for foreign policy issues, a ten-point increase over George H. W. Bush's foreign policy commission use. Here, too, a Z test for differences in proportions shows this difference to be statistically significant ($z = 2.38, p < .01$).¹⁶

Many factors undoubtedly influence the president's use of commissions. The president's own management style, party control of Congress, issue framing, and other environmental factors such as the flow of critical policy issues during a particular administration are among the most important. Nevertheless, those data suggest that presidential experience appears to play a key role.

As for the hypothesis that presidents use foreign policy commissions less as they gain foreign policy experience, the data again provide support. As Table 3 shows, both Reagan and Clinton used more foreign policy commissions in their first terms than their second terms. Clinton created 22 foreign policy commissions in his first term, compared to 16 in his second. While foreign policy commissions constituted 27 percent of Clinton's first-term commissions, they accounted for only 24 percent of the second-term commissions. Reagan's decline appears to be even more substantial. Reagan went from using 56 foreign policy commissions in his first term to just 40 in his second term. While foreign policy commissions constituted 34 percent of all commissions created during Reagan's first term, they accounted for just 23 percent of his second-term total, a drop of more than ten points.

Although only the Reagan decrease was statistically significant ($z = 2.07, p < .05$),¹⁷ closer examination of the data suggests that the Clinton and Reagan patterns are more

16. In the interest of completeness, Z tests comparing the use of foreign policy commissions were run on all of the presidential dyads. Doing so yielded one unexpected result: there was no statistically significant difference between Bill Clinton's and George H. W. Bush's use of foreign policy commissions ($z = 1.04$). However, the other dyads yielded the expected results. We found statistically significant differences in the use of foreign policy commissions between the less experienced Reagan and the more experienced Bush ($z = 2.63, p < .005$). We also found, as expected, no statistically significant difference in the use of foreign policy commissions when comparing our inexperienced presidents—Reagan and Clinton—to each other ($z = 1.07$).

17. Again, a Z test of differences in proportions was used. In Clinton's case, the difference between his first- and second-term use of foreign policy commissions proved statistically insignificant ($z = 0.411$).

TABLE 3
Declining Use of Presidential Foreign Policy Commissions between First and Second Terms, Reagan and Clinton

<i>Administration</i>	<i>Number of FP Commissions</i>	<i>Total Number of Commissions</i>	<i>FP Percent of Total</i>
Clinton 1	22	82	27%
Clinton 2	16	67	24%
Decline in # of commissions			
Between terms	6	15	3%
% Decline in commissions			
Between terms	27%	18%	
Reagan 1	56	167	34%
Reagan 2	40	171	23%
Decline in # of commissions			
Between terms	16	-4	11%
% Decline in commissions			
Between terms	29%	-2%	

Source: *Encyclopedia of Government Advisory Organizations*, 16th ed. (New York: Gale, 2002).

similar than we might suspect. Seen in percentage terms, Clinton's declining use of foreign policy commissions—from 22 to 16—represents a 27 percent reduction. The percentage decline in foreign policy commissions between Reagan's two terms is almost the same—29 percent. Moreover, the rate of reduction for both presidents was faster for foreign policy commissions than commission usage overall. While Clinton cut foreign policy commissions by 27 percent, he cut overall commission use by only 18 percent. In Reagan's case, the president actually *increased* his use of commissions overall, cutting substantially only in foreign affairs.

The findings are not as strong when it comes to Hypothesis Five. Recall that among foreign policy commissions, we expected to find a greater number devoted to international economic policy than national security issues. This turned out not to be the case. As Table 4 illustrates, executive officials created 172 foreign policy commissions between 1981 and 2001. Of these, 62 commissions could clearly be coded as national security commissions, 56 could clearly be coded as international economics commissions, and 54 did not clearly fit either of the two categories.¹⁸ If we exclude these 54 hybrid commissions, we find that national security commissions comprised 53 percent of the total, while international economic commissions constituted just 47 percent.

However, closer inspection suggests that the results were probably skewed by the end of the Cold War. To be sure, every time period contains a flow of specific events, a meta-cycle of policy issues that influence what commissions arise. However, the Cold War was not just any event or issue. It was a profound, sudden, and unexpected shift in

18. In particular, cultural, science, and space commissions, which had implications for both security and trade, fell into this excluded category. Examples include: the Commission on Broadcasting to the People's Republic of China, the President's Council for International Youth Exchange, the Panel on Large Scale Computing in Science and Engineering, and the Space Shuttle Operations Strategic Planning Group.

TABLE 4
The Number of International Economics versus National Security Commissions, 1981-2001

<i>Commission Policy Domain</i>	<i>Number of Commissions</i>	<i>Percent of Total</i>
National security	62	53%
International economics	56	47%
Total	118	
Uncodable commissions*	54	
All foreign policy commissions	172	

* Involved both security and international economic issues.

Source: *Encyclopedia of Government Advisory Organizations*, 16th ed. (New York: Gale, 2002).

TABLE 5
The Number of International Economics versus National Security Commissions, Adjusting for the Cold War's End, 1981-2001

<i>Time Period</i>	<i>Number of International Economics Commissions</i>	<i>Number of National Security Commissions</i>	<i>Total*</i>	<i>International Economic Commissions % of Total</i>	<i>National Security Commissions % of Total</i>
Entire period (1981-2001)	56	62	118	47%	53%
Cold War period (1981-1988)	40	25	65	62%	38%
Cold War's end (1989-1994)	11	21	32	34%	66%
Period adjusted for Cold War's end (1981-1988, 1995-2001)	45	41	86	52%	48%

* Total excludes 54 foreign policy commissions that involved both security and economic issues.

Source: *Encyclopedia of Government Advisory Organizations*, 16th ed. (New York: Gale, 2002).

the international system. Such a dramatic development quite naturally triggered a major rethinking of American national security policy—and an unusually high proportion of American national security commissions. As Table 5 shows, during the Cold War years of 1981 to 1988, international economics commissions substantially outnumbered national security commissions, 40 to 25. During that time, 62 percent of foreign policy commissions dealt with international trade and other economic issues, while only 38 percent handled national security issues. However, in the five-year period from 1989 (when the Berlin Wall fell) to 1994, the trend reversed. Here, nearly twice as many commissions examined national security issues as international economics—a trend that is statistically significant ($z = 2.78, p < .005$). With the fall of the Soviet Union, national security commissions arose to examine everything from the roles and missions of the armed forces to the structure and content of the U.S. military education system to the consolidation of military research facilities to ways of improving the effectiveness of the United Nations. If we adjust for this sudden upsurge in the use of national security commissions from 1989 to 1994, we find the expected pattern: more commissions focused on international economic issues than national security affairs.

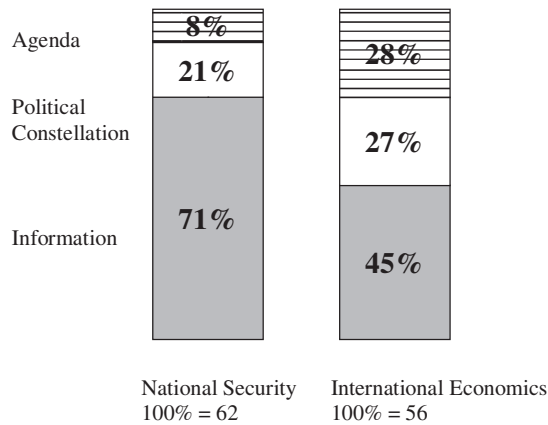


FIGURE 5. Breakdown of Commission Types in National Security versus International Economics, 1981-2001.

Source: *Encyclopedia of Governmental Advisory Organizations*, 16th ed. (New York: Gale 2002).

Finally, Hypothesis Six suggested we should find information commissions to be more prevalent in national security affairs than in international economic affairs. As Figure 5 illustrates, this pattern is what we find. Information commissions constituted 71 percent of all national security commissions, but just 45 percent of international economic commissions, a statistically significant difference ($z = 2.90, p < .005$).

In sum, this initial empirical analysis finds substantial support for five of the six hypotheses. In the past 20 years, presidents have appointed many more commissions for domestic than foreign policy issues. Within foreign policy, there is some, albeit weaker evidence that presidents have used commissions more for international economic issues than for national security affairs. The data provide strong support for the notion that presidents have employed different types of commissions in different policy domains. While they have used commissions to gather information in foreign affairs (particularly in national security), in domestic affairs they have used commissions primarily to influence the public agenda and alter the constellation of political opposition. Finally, presidents also appear to have relied on commissions to substitute for their own areas of personal and professional inexperience.

Conclusion

Presidential commissions are better known than understood. One of the principal problems of past commission research is that it has sampled on the dependent variable: scholars have focused almost exclusively on those commissions deemed “most important” based on press coverage, political controversy, and issue salience. The result is that we have developed a limited and distorted view of the commission landscape. Today, most think of presidential commissions as blue ribbon panels that defuse, deflect, and delay

presidential action on controversial domestic policy issues without producing much substantive policy change. Commissions are thought to arise by unilateral presidential action, focus on shifting issues onto or off of the president's agenda, and deal almost exclusively with domestic policy problems.

This article has challenged the conventional view. In reality, presidential commissions are frequently created not by the president alone, but by legislation and by the actions of other senior executive branch officials. Presidents use commissions not just to influence what the public thinks about them and their policies, but also to gather critical information for future policy decisions and to foster political consensus among organized interests serving on the commissions themselves. And far more often than we might expect, commissions arise to help the president on issues of foreign policy. Diversity, not uniformity, is the hallmark of the commission universe.

Admittedly, not all commissions are created equal. This study has treated each presidential commission alike, whether it was formed to celebrate the Labor Department's 75th anniversary, develop guidelines for new EPA regulations, or tackle critical issues such as the future of American ballistic missile programs. Why? Because the best prospects for generating meaningful insights about presidential commissions require first recognizing and grappling with their empirical diversity. The fact that presidents use commissions for both trivial and vital matters is not good or bad; it is reality. Only by contending with this reality rather than continuing to ignore it will the field advance. All commissions may not be created equal, but we first need to know what "all commissions" means before delving into what makes some commissions more significant than others and why.

Although this article has sought to emphasize the variety of presidential commissions, variety does not mean that all presidents approach commissions differently. Quite the contrary. Evidence from the Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and Clinton administrations suggests that different presidents are driven to use commissions in similar ways, and for the same reason: they make the president's job easier. Presidential commissions of all stripes constitute an important, and largely overlooked, aspect of presidential leadership.

In many ways this article has been the first step, not the last word. Much more work remains to be done. In particular, three avenues of future research stand out.

First, we need to develop a more robust theoretical understanding of why political officials delegate authority to presidential commissions. Among important questions to be answered are: what explains who creates a presidential commission? Why do legislators sometimes weigh in, jointly creating presidential commissions via statute only in some cases and not others? What circumstances lead presidents at times to outsource commission creation to other executive officials?

Second, it should now be possible to expand the empirical research to cover more presidential administrations. Doing so should make it possible to refine hypotheses about commission use by taking into consideration critical variables such as divided government, presidential popularity, and management style. In particular, greater empirical work should help clarify the extent to which commissions serve as complements for organized interests or substitutes for them.

Third, scholars should be able to gain more traction on how to measure commission impact. Commission researchers have struggled with this issue for years. While some see impact in terms of symbolism and long-term influence in a policy debate (Tutchings 1979; Miller and McKinney 1993), others judge impact more directly according to actual changes in public policy and the attention that presidents give to commission recommendations (Wolanin 1975). But if this article's conceptual framework is correct, it suggests that commission "success" should be judged quite differently—by how well commissions actually perform their intended core function. If a commission is created primarily to influence the agenda, for example, then should not the appropriate measure of impact be the extent to which it succeeded in that task? Information commissions seem more appropriately evaluated by Wolanin's criteria of policy change and presidential attention. Political constellation commissions, which aim to change attitudes among key stakeholders, might be more fruitfully judged by the degree of attitude change among those stakeholders as a result of their involvement. In short, the conceptual framework should lead to a more nuanced, and more accurate, measure of commission impact.

Ultimately, refining our theoretical models and reaching for greater empirical analysis promises to offer a more realistic view, and a better understanding, of the role of presidential commissions in American politics.

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